

Costumors and Fan Communities.

The rise of dogmatism in the Star Wars fandom experienced through costuming.

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Disclaimer: *The views expressed in this document are mine and are not necessarily the views of my supervisory team, examiners or Middlesex University.*

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“

Pass on what you have learned. Strength, mastery. But weakness, folly, failure also. Yes, failure most of all. The greatest teacher, failure is. Luke, we are what they grow beyond. That is the true burden of all masters

*Master Yoda
Star Wars Episode VIII:
The Last Jedi - 2017*

Glossary

I will use some critical terminology that needs to be explained upfront to maximise your reading comfort.

501st Legion or 501st or Legion. known as Vader's Fist and abbreviated as the 501st, is the world's largest Star Wars costuming group. The group focuses on replicating costumes from the Imperial side of the franchise, ensuring they closely adhere to what is seen on screen. A comprehensive descriptive can be found in Appendices II and III.

Celebration. Star Wars Celebration is a fan-focused event that unites people worldwide to celebrate all things Star Wars. It is a massive festival dedicated to the SWU every two years. The event features exclusive panels with actors, creators, and special guests, as well as sneak peeks at upcoming Star Wars content. Attendees also have the opportunity to interact with costumed characters.

Costume Reference Libraries. Abbreviated **CRLs** are extensive documents created and published by the 501st Costuming Club. These libraries help members create costumes with the highest level of screen accuracy.

Costumor. I use this specific spelling to define my costuming community members and distinguish them from cosplayers. While much more will be discussed in the following chapter, the essence of the term relates to someone who creates costumes and acts, rather than plays, a character. This person is a costumed actor or costumor.

Fandom or The Fandom. I am referring specifically to Star Wars, where my Public Works take place, as opposed to fandoms that cover all and any other specific one across the spectrum, encompassing sports, entertainment, public figures...

SciFi. While science fiction is commonly known as sci-fi, the chosen spelling specifically refers to screenplay adaptations, particularly films and TV shows, as the framework for my research.

Star Wars Universe. Abbreviated as **SWU**, encompasses the transmedia material published in films, TV shows, animations, games, literature, and all materials relevant to world-building. Because it may refer to both the film and the brand, I have elected not to italicise Star Wars unless using the full title of the production.

The community or My community. I am referring to the broader costuming community—those who create and wear replica costumes, with a particular focus on those of the SWU in which my Public Works are deeply rooted.

Trooper. Members of the 501st predominantly use this term to refer to themselves, although its usage has expanded to include individuals from other costuming clubs.

Trooping. The act of attending events while in costume.

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Words cannot adequately express my gratitude to my wife for her unwavering support over the years, which has allowed me to become a better version of myself and given me the confidence to pursue my passion wholeheartedly. I am incredibly grateful to my son, Maximillian, who, despite being only 18, is a highly informed intellectual sparring partner on contemporary social issues, providing me with valuable insights and teaching me daily the true meaning of courage and resilience.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the thousands of costuming members around the world who have actively backed my Public Works, as well as the leadership of the 501st Legion, particularly Justin Sonfield, for his valuable insights and patience. I also extend my gratitude to Lucasfilm and Disney for keeping Star Wars alive for the tens of millions of fans globally, and of course, a heartfelt 'Thanks the Maker,' George Lucas, for creating a galaxy far, far away.

To David Hoolans, you are deeply missed.



Creative Interpretation: A clan of Two cross-over costumes.
Celebration Japan 2025
Father & Son

Navigation

Time is a valuable currency, and I appreciate your willingness to share some of yours with me.

Who Am I? I am a SciFi-holic, specifically screenplays. Since childhood, I have been passionate about SciFi, seeing it not just as entertainment but as a vehicle for social criticism. For me, SciFi writers serve as historians, using our history to envision new worlds and futures. This fascination brought me to China 22 years ago—a country focused on the future—making me feel like I am experiencing tomorrow firsthand. Over the past decade, these experiences have influenced my career as a creator of replica costumes for costumers and collectors worldwide. For an overview of my professional journey, please refer to my professional engagements summary in Appendix V.

Selected Public Works for this critique cover the last 10 years of my professional practice at the helm of KeepTrooping (Appendix I), the company I founded, drawing on the 15 + years I have been an active participant in the Star Wars costuming community.



Figure 1: graphic representation of where my Public Works exist.

Critical lens used for the critique: Analytic Autoethnography

Chapter 1 presents my selected critical lenses for critiquing my Public Works, chief among them autoethnography. It is also where I introduce three key authors in Fan Culture Studies as cornerstones of this critique.

Chapter 2 provides context for the work. It begins with a general overview of the past fifty years of global change, focusing on the evolution of entertainment and media, the impact of science fiction and Star Wars on popular and fan culture, and the progression of costuming toward near-professional levels.

Chapter 3 explores how fandoms have evolved into communities that resemble para-religious organisations, as seen in the rise of "Fundamentalism" in my community and its impact on how members engage with the original source material.

Chapter 4 Building on the previous chapter, this section examines working dynamics in more detail, emphasising how technology—especially social media—influences these relationships. It considers the role of expertise within the community, noting how certain members use their perceived authority to assert dogmatic views and reshape the community's structure.

Chapter 5 discusses how the conclusions from previous chapters apply to my community and, consequently, to Public Works operations. It further investigates how both external and internal tensions could threaten to create divisions within the community.

Chapter 6: The conclusion offers a broader reflection that summarises the key insights gained. I discuss my interpretation of these insights and explain how they have influenced my sense of agency, professional practice, and future direction.

Abstract

The study of SciFi-focused participatory fandom, particularly costume creation, is an emerging field that warrants attention, especially within a rapidly changing social landscape. The dissertation highlights the collaborative nature of participation and the increasing tensions it entails. I examine my existing works already in the public domain (Public Works) to assess the evolution of this community, focusing on how social media influences members' experiences and how participation may serve as a form of implicit religion in which online interactions resemble discussions in religious groups, particularly in the dogmatic interpretation of source material. This emergence of implicit religious structures gives rise to concerning forms of toxicity affecting participants' experiences. My insights suggest that such developments transform what was once a refuge into something more fraught. While dogma does not constitute toxicity in itself, its stasis and failure to recognise our changing context can quickly lead to systemic challenges amplifying toxic behaviours within an increasingly digitally mediated community. This work draws on a number of ideas to conceptualise and articulate the complexities of the sector, and among these are those provided by autoethnographic characteristics such as my position as both observer and participant, shaping and being shaped by the dynamics within the community I serve and with my Public Works grounded in their multidisciplinary complexity. It also aims to examine aspects of my community dynamics as a transdisciplinary meta-vision, helping to make sense of my Public Works in service to the community. Written in a constantly evolving period, this thesis, standing at the intersection of sociology, fan culture studies, media studies, and anthropology, serves as a historical and curated record for future studies of fandom's evolution, and attending to what emerges is greater than the sum of its parts.

Prologue

In a world of increasing chaos, just emerging from the shadow of a global pandemic, and facing the constant threat of new wars, “isms” (such as extremism, nationalism, despotism...) are steadily on the rise. Digital spaces have replaced the sense of community once found in physical interactions. Human society is undergoing a profound shift—some might even describe it as a new evolutionary path. As my resilience is tested daily, I have found solace in my lifelong passion for SciFi and Star Wars. What began as an escape from the harshness of reality, as it did for millions of fans worldwide, gradually transformed into a drive to bring characters from that galaxy far, far away to life. This passion, surprisingly, led me to a new professional direction in a field I knew nothing about fifteen years ago. After being a devoted fan for over 40 years, I became an active participant in the fandom as a costumor¹, ultimately turning my hobby into a professional pursuit. In doing so, I have had the opportunity to be at the forefront of a new and emerging profession, contributing to its practices and helping to lay the groundwork for its ethical development.

Fandoms are remarkable phenomena that spark connections among people who might never otherwise have crossed paths. They create a vibrant tapestry of human experience. For me, it takes place in a specific SciFi franchise, Star Wars, which resonates deeply across generations, uniting individuals from all walks of life, irrespective of age, gender, or beliefs, aligning with Renee Barnes (2022) innovative analysis ‘fandom seems to have become a common and ordinary feature of social life, cultivating emotional attachments that transcend thinking... whether it's a Star Wars movie or some other like or passion—when fellow fans meet, there's a deep, shared understanding, a kinship that can form instantly.’ (Barnes, 2022, p. 142). I have yet to meet anyone unfamiliar with Star Wars, even if their knowledge barely scratches the surface.

While I create highly detailed replicas of costumes to be worn at events, creating immersive experiences, others engage in passionate discussions about canonical lore and fan theories, showcasing their deep devotion to the franchise. Regardless, these dialogues and encounters instantly transform strangers into fellow congregants.

¹ I use this specific spelling to define my costuming community members and distinguish them from cosplayers. While much more will be discussed in the following chapter, the essence of the term relates to someone who creates costumes and acts, rather than plays, a character. This person is a costumed actor or costumor.

Fandom does not exist in isolation. In the past, devoted fans exclusively interacted through face-to-face meetings and slower modes of communication, lending those connections a certain weight and significance. Today, technological advancements and rapid communication have blurred the lines of our lives; fandom is no longer a separate refuge. Instead, it intertwines with our everyday realities, making it increasingly challenging to compartmentalise. As fans navigate this interconnected world, the boundaries between their political, societal, and religious beliefs and their fandoms begin to dissolve. I often lament the growing divisiveness in society, making it hard to ignore the rising tensions that seep into our shared passion as described by emerging scholars Ruth Tsuria (2021) 'Online communities, including fan groups, no longer exist in digital isolation. Religious, political, and ideological discourses now circulate through fan spaces, where boundaries between identity, belief, and entertainment are increasingly blurred.' (Tsuria R. & Yadlin-Segal A., 2021, p. 172).

Consequently, my Fandom can sometimes feel like a battleground, marked by external pressures that strain relationships. This shift fundamentally alters how fans interact and perceive one another within our communities, reminding us that while fandoms bring us together, they can also highlight the fractures in our society. Ultimately, the beauty of any fandom lies in its ability to unite us. Today, they also challenge us to confront the complexities of our lives. Finding a balance and fostering a sense of belonging while respecting diverse perspectives is crucial, something Simone Driessen (2024) illustrates masterfully in her work as she asserts that fan communities are no longer simply unified by shared affection but are increasingly sites of ideological tension and emotional negotiation as fans confront cancel culture.

The rise in online interactions and technological advancements prompted me to consider my role and contributions, central to this thesis at the crossroads of Media Studies, Fan Culture Studies, Sociology and Anthropology. Critiquing my Public Works in what some may view as an unconventional area for doctoral research may appear odd at first. However, once it is understood that my Public Works physically represent and engage with the complexities of human interactions within the phenomenon known as fandoms, their value as research becomes evident.

In this era of global uncertainty and heightened tensions—echoing the climate when the first Star Wars film premiered—fandom serves as a powerful cultural bridge. However, I also observe how media now leverages passionate fans to promote divisive narratives, using their engagement as a

springboard for social conflict, thus providing a unique transdisciplinary perspective as an insider, reflecting on theories proposed by scholars who may not have similar access. This work will serve as a case study to support and refine these theories. Writing from within the Star Wars fandom and following Matthew Hills (2002), I aim to make my work accessible without requiring advanced knowledge, while respecting the reader's intelligence.

I am grateful for being accepted into this programme. In my first year, I regained control over my Public Works, advancing my agency after years of struggle. This newfound confidence enabled me to innovate and enhance the community experience. It also changed my view from 'cosplayer' to 'costumor' (costumed actor), better defining my community, as I will explain in Section §2.3., yet sadly opening the door to new tensions as described in Chapter 5 Section §5.1.



Chapter 1: Critical Lenses On My Public Works

Completed Commission Costume ready for delivery.
Keepstrooping Studio Shanghai 2026
Boba Fett ESB

1.1 The Public Works



Fig. 1: graphic representation of where my Public Works exist.

My Public Works caters to a niche audience of Star Wars superfans and collectors, creating high-quality replica costumes for display or events. Many mistakenly view these as Halloween costumes, overlooking the dedication involved. As noted by Nicolle Lamerichs (2018), fan costumes are often misread as simple dress-up, when in fact they involve deep research, affective engagement, and skilled craftsmanship. These complex creations serve as a gateway to multidisciplinary practices and transdisciplinary thinking, blending the experiential, knowledge and physical realms.

When I first entered the field of high-level replica costuming, my practical skill set was negligible. I possessed no formal training in patterning, vacuum-forming, or digital fabrication, and little appreciation for the infrastructural complexity these practices entailed.

I did possess creativity and stamina, which are recurrent dispositions among propmakers. As Henry Jenkins observes, 'Participatory cultures attract those who are willing to invest affective labour in the service of shared imaginative worlds' (Jenkins, 2013, p. 44).

By the time I transitioned into the commercial dimension of my Public Works, I had accumulated a secondary repertoire drawn from prior professional experience. Unlike many makers, whose trajectories remain vertically anchored in craft specialisation, I imported multidisciplinary tools: graphic design, information technology fluency, project management, financial administration, marketing strategy, and cross-cultural communication protocols, to name the most prominent ones. This hybridity allowed me to reconceive costuming not merely as artefact production, but as a socio-technical system requiring integrated oversight. While I have never framed this work as a conventional business venture, the application of business logics proved essential to constructing resilient infrastructure.

Chapters 4 & 5 trace how toxicity, elitism, and opaque standards erode trust. My objective was to organise my Public Works to ensure reliability, satisfaction, and clarity for fellow troopers. This reorientation was and remains motivated by firsthand experience of systemic failure. When I began constructing my first armour costume, I, like many others, fell victim to unreliable vendors and transactions that resulted in financial loss, prolonged delays, or non-delivery of parts. These were not isolated incidents but open secrets, circulating through forums and by word of mouth as cautionary tales. As Nancy Baym notes, 'Informational support in fan communities often takes the form of warnings about whom to avoid' (Baym, 2015, p. 88).

The typical propmaker operates within a narrow band of the production chain, focusing, for instance, on mould generation, thermoforming, or 3D modelling while outsourcing ancillary tasks such as logistics, client relations, or brand management. The commercial aspect of my Public Works diverges radically. I maintain direct control over the entire value chain: prototyping, material sourcing, iterative testing, design direction, financial accounting, digital platform management, and in-person community engagement. All communication, creative direction, and strategic decision-making originate from a single node. This concentration of roles produces a coherent vision, but at the cost of extreme cognitive demands, in which transdisciplinarity is both necessary and somewhat expected.

Compounding this complexity is the need to operate across three linguistic registers—French, Chinese, and English—each with distinct cultural schemas and pragmatic expectations. As Deborah Tannen writes, 'Language is not a neutral conduit for meaning; it actively shapes how messages are interpreted and relationships are negotiated' (Tannen, 1990, p. 72).

Navigating these registers requires constant code-switching, not merely linguistically but culturally, as norms of politeness, critique, and collaboration vary significantly across contexts.

This mode of operation positions me on a broad horizontal plane, where disparate practices must be synthesised into a coherent whole. The metaphor of a jigsaw puzzle is apt: individual components—technical, aesthetic, logistical, interpersonal—must interlock seamlessly to produce an experience that feels intuitive to the end user. Yet this perceived ease is the product of relentless, often invisible labour. Generating such frictionless interaction requires what I term expansive creative problem-solving: the capacity to resist narrow, symptomatic fixes in favour of systemic diagnosis.

This approach entails identifying blockages not as isolated failures, but as symptoms of structural misalignment. Solutions are rarely corrective; they are adaptive. Flexibility becomes the operative virtue, permitting continual recalibration in response to emergent constraints. Pierre Bourdieu (1991) might frame it as a form of practical mastery—knowledge that is not codified but embodied, developed through immersion in the contingencies of practice.

My Public Works is defined not by specialisation, but by the orchestration of specialisations. This horizontal expertise is rare within the costuming community and, as such, both generative and destabilising. It enables innovation precisely because it resists the compartmentalisation that typically governs fan labour. Yet it also renders me vulnerable to the very complexity I seek to manage—a paradox emblematic of contemporary participatory culture itself.

I believe my Public Works are particularly well-suited for this program as they require the stewardship of a natural transdisciplinary (Adams, Maguire, 2023), someone who holds multiple perspectives and operates effectively within and across various sectors.

Costumers, as defined in the glossary, seek out these creations, especially hard-to-source items like footwear and gloves. Since 2015, I have developed an extensive range of soft parts and accessories for the SWU costuming community, meticulously replicating on-screen costumes to meet CRLs² requirements.

² **Costume Reference Libraries.** Abbreviated **CRLs** are extensive documents created and published by the 501st Costuming Club. These libraries help members create costumes with the highest level of screen accuracy.

My craftsmanship and unique order fulfilment system earned recognition from Andrew Liptak (2022) in his book, 'A History of Cosplay', who credited me with the professionalisation of the makers' community. Moreover, and possibly more important in my eyes, some of my Public Works have featured in Lucasfilm productions.

The dualistic nature of my Public Works is further amplified as they connect with a global community while also serving personal and local needs. These two areas coexist within the same community, addressing similar needs and goals, but they also express tensions through their overlapping practices. One aspect is the freedom found in a personal journey, while the other is bound by strict criteria set by the community.

I do not envision this thesis as a thorough exploration of the commercial side of costume-making as a business practice; these insights do not align with the societal nature of my critique. However, an essential and intriguing facet of the commercial aspect is the community's perception of expertise, which will be discussed in Section §1.2.3. As my community's demands on my Public Works grow more stringent, they affect not only my identity as a maker but also my ability to understand these changes and deliver the services expected of me.

This access also provides me with a unique insight into the mindset of community members as they create their costumes, enabling me to establish a direct connection with the civic nature of the research at hand. While the artefacts produced are purely physical, my community is decidedly digital. Necessity compels me to use tools familiar to the community, regardless of my personal preferences or views, as described in Chapter 4. It is precisely this digital nature that largely shapes the community's evolution in its current form, and the idea that it has attained a quasi-religious character will form the basis of the following chapters.

1.2 Critical Lenses

1.2.1 Informed by Autoethnographic Discourse

This thesis does not constitute a purely autoethnographic study, yet it is indelibly shaped by autoethnography's commitments and discourse. Norman Denzin argues, autoethnography 'privileges the emotional, the embodied, and the spiritual as sites of knowing' (Denzin, 2014, p. 33). This triadic framing of thought, feeling and spirit finds a striking analogue in fandom itself. Relationships to source material, to fellow participants, and to the collective journey evoke precisely these dimensions.

My Public Works have been, and remain, heavily influenced by the sum of my experiences and my passion for SciFi in general and Star Wars in particular. These experiences form the empirical substrate of this study. They are personal, yet they resonate beyond the individual, mapping onto broader patterns of fan labour, trust, and institutional evolution. Autoethnography, in this sense, functions not as a confessional narrative but as a diagnostic instrument.

The value of the present work lies in its capacity to illuminate a complex ecosystem from within. I am both subject and analyst, actor and architect: my public works are reciprocally constituted by and constitutive of the community they serve. Having participated in the community for five years prior to launching the commercial dimension of my Public Works, I possessed a dual vantage point: intimate familiarity with existing structures and acute awareness of their shortcomings as explained in Section §1.1.

Some scholars have raised concerns about the nature of autoethnography. Andrew Sparkes (2000) stated, 'Such work is located at the boundaries of disciplinary practices and raises questions as to what constitutes proper research' (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21). Autoethnography emphasises the self and thus has been criticised for being self-indulgent and introspective (Atkinson, 1997; Coffey, 1999). Others, such as Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner (2000), argue that the writer's subjectivity is a fundamental aspect that adds value to autoethnography.

Geoffrey Walford (2004) clearly emphasises the importance of differentiating between fiction and research, cautioning against the potential distortion that may arise from fictionalised representations of conversations and events.

To address this concern, the professional discussions utilised in this work have been meticulously documented and are readily accessible through the Public Works repository. Walford argues that claims in social research should be based exclusively on empirical data. Empirical data encompasses experimental observations and life/work experiences in this context.

This discussion touches on the traditional outlook in anthropology, where objectivity is prioritised through detachment from the subject matter to achieve the most objective results. However, this could not be upheld in contexts where the ethnographers became participant observers over time. Nevertheless, as Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2000) aptly noted, actual objective reality remains elusive, as our understanding of a phenomenon is constrained to its representations.

My extensive experiences have yielded expertise (see Section §1.2.3) widely acknowledged within the community, thereby validating the occurrences and knowledge derived from them. As a practitioner-researcher of my own work, I am both subject and object. At the core of practice knowledge is the idea that the practitioner is not merely an instrument of a paradigm, but an agent of change. Who the practitioner is greatly influences the quality of both their practice and their research within that practice.

It seems appropriate, then, to actively engage with Leon Anderson's (2006) analytic autoethnography. I intend to use the five characteristics explained below as the foundational tool to ensure I stay focused on the task while keeping it relevant. Anderson defines it as: 'Analytic autoethnography refers to research in which the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in the researcher's published texts, and (3) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena.' (Anderson, 2006, p. 377)

As I noted earlier, the Public Works I refer to span over the last 15 years spent in the costuming community, particularly that of the high-end replication of SWU costumes for collectors, costumers and cosplayers worldwide. They are embedded within a larger societal group, the Fandom, which is centred in the SciFi genre. Scholars such as Jonathan Gray and Cornel Sandvoss have described Star Wars fandom as a cultural cornerstone of digital fan communities.

Henry Jenkins, considered a pioneer in Fan Culture studies, also highlights Star Wars as pivotal in the evolution of participatory fan culture. Being part of these online groups allows members to regularly share their thoughts, discoveries, and updates about their favourite franchises.

My membership in the global costuming community officially began in 2012 when I finally joined the 501st³ (Appendix II and III), the world's largest and most definitive Star Wars costuming group. Each member is assigned a specific identification number; mine is TK20100⁴. Our online profile on the central platform indicates our status as active, retired, or discharged. It also displays the costumes each member has qualified for; the more costumes showcased, the more active a member may be considered. Active members boast an average of 3 to 5. I have thus far qualified for 55 costumes. While theoretically simple, gaining membership can often be lengthy, tedious, and filled with numerous obstacles. This can create barriers to access and contribute to the club's perception as unnecessarily elitist, as will be covered in more depth in Section §5.1.

Sub-groups exist within the Fandom and may have opposing views, as evidenced in Chapter 3. I previously used the word costumor to underline the distinction between some of my Public Works and what could be perceived as cosplaying, as explained further in Section §2.3. I will also emphasise how different sub-groups often clash when defining, creating and authenticating a costume. This leads me to postulate the differences between costumors and collectors, specifically in Section §5.1, and how it impacts my agency. I strive to ensure that my Public Works remain relevant by staying connected to my community and continuously evaluating every aspect of each artefact I present to the community, particularly regarding accuracy requirements.

This engagement has not only contributed to my recognition within the group but has also tested my sanity at times. It underscores the relevance of autoethnography as a critical lens. As an insider, I have become increasingly aware of the workings and rituals of the group, questioning my role in it, how it has shaped me, and how I am actively contributing to shaping it.

³ <https://501st.com/> Since 1997, the costuming organisation known as the 501st has spread the magic of the Star Wars genre worldwide through its authentic-looking costumes, and has become the leading force in fan-based charity events. The 501st, also known as 'Vader's Fist,' is truly dedicated to brightening the lives of those less-fortunate.

⁴ <https://www.501st.com/members/displaymember.php?userID=14917&costumeID=133> link to my public profile outlining the active status and the number of costumes approved thus far. An average trooper has about 5.

In her work, Sarah Stahlke Wall (2016) points out that evocative and analytic examples characterise contemporary autoethnography. She emphasises the importance of a balanced approach and acknowledges Anderson's five characteristics. They include creating a piece of work that clearly shows the author's presence in the written text. Since autoethnography can be expressed in various media, the author's presence should also be evident. This work is a critique of the last decade of my professional life.

I could not derive any useful insights and lessons without drawing on my own experiences. These form the foundational pillars on which I base my research. Denying my participation and trying to extract myself from its writing would compromise its truthfulness and delegitimise the insights, whatever they may be. Arguably, for me, the most crucial feature of Anderson's (2006) autoethnography is its emphasis on enhancing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena.

It is abundantly clear from any news cycle that many of today's societal norms no longer align with the reality of our modern society. They are still enforced to benefit an outdated view of the world and its perceived functioning. I believe in the significance of SciFi influences on the contemporary world and how we can draw from it to understand and address fundamental societal changes. Star Trek is best known as a champion of social issues and posing moral dilemmas since its early days. It is often credited, although wrongly, as the first inter-racial kiss on TV for the episode 'Plato's Stepchildren' (1968), in which Kirk (caucasian) kisses Uhura (African-American), which is precisely what made it so iconic, claims Matthew Delmont (2022). It is no wonder the advocacy of LGBTQ+ issues is paramount to its latest productions, *Discovery* (2017) and *Strange New Worlds* (2022), as David Haddon (2022) confirms.

Recent Star Wars productions, like *The Acolyte* (2024), have attempted to forge a deeper connection with contemporary societal issues. However, these efforts have met with less success than those of Star Trek and have elicited a noticeable backlash from a particular section of fans. Many embrace the idea that, despite the vastness of the SWU, diversity and a more inclusive perspective hold little value for the franchise's development, which I strongly disagree with.

My passion for Star Wars remains unwavering; the connection to the source material is much deeper and transcends any single iteration. My engagement with the Fandom, on the other hand, might shift if the community moves in a direction I disagree with. Thus, the evolution of fandom and its dynamics is a potent subject for investigation, particularly one with such an extensive reach and contribution as the SWU.

When I first joined the costuming community, my original intent was to share my passion and create memorable experiences for myself and those around me. It was a way to introduce a touch of joy into my often chaotic life, with an undeniable aspect of escapism. Fifteen years later, as I observe the world and the increasing societal divisions through what I have coined the Digital Dark Ages in Chapter 4, I find negativity seeping into the Fandom.

There was a time when SciFi served as a positive catalyst for the emergence of new communities through a strong and dynamic fandom. These social groups have now transitioned from the periphery to the mainstream, leading to challenges such as the emergence of factions, divisions and attendant social issues as seen in Chapter 5.

There is growing tension between those vehemently opposed to new content and only acknowledging the Star Wars: The Original Trilogy as the definitive work, and those welcoming new productions. This has been a significant factor in the emergence of toxicity in our community and a pillar of Chapters 3 and 4 of this work, covering the dynamics that have led to considerable friction between those who focus on costuming and those who see themselves as collectors.

While I constantly aspire to elevate my Public Works and remain an expert in my field, these new dynamics have greatly influenced the creation of specific costumes, which are less embraced due to their association with particular productions that some members of the community view negatively or bluntly oppose as blasphemy against the original material. While the Fandom has the potential to serve as a unifying force between strangers, the escalating societal divisions I am witnessing undermine the prospective bridge formed by the common language of fans.

This critique originates from within the group rather than from an external perspective. What follows offers a glimpse into that culture.

1.2.2 Investigating the Religiosity of Fandom

The notion of religiosity and fandom will be covered in more depth in Section §3.1. Due to the autoethnographic nature of this thesis and my goal to establish a connection between religious practices and fandom, I must begin by exploring my complex relationship with religion. I have always appreciated and respected the faith that inspired the creation of remarkable monuments. I do have an equally high distrust for any form of power structure emanating from it and what I perceive as a continuous interpretation and manipulation of sacred texts to maintain control over followers. The magnificent monuments that still stand for us to marvel at also bear the weight of absolutism and serve as reminders of control systems enforced to ensure strict adherence to a particular faith.

This work should not be approached or understood as a critique or an attack on any particular organised religion. Beyond its spiritual significance, I acknowledge that engagement in religious activities serves multiple purposes, including psychological, social, and ethical. By participating in practices such as attending church, reading sacred texts, and building religious communities, individuals can navigate life's complexities while fostering deeper connections to themselves and others. In today's world, religion remains a cornerstone of human existence, providing valuable resources for living meaningful lives. Religious practices can fulfil our fundamental human need for community as described by psychologists and researchers Pamela Ebstyne King and Chris Boyatzis (2020) 'Religion and spirituality...offer meaning, purpose, and social connection that can sustain persons through adversity.' (King & Boyatzis, 2020, p. 4).

My comparison to a religious practice aims to highlight that while fandoms can promote positive dynamics, they also exhibit concerning traits that require understanding. I have intentionally chosen to focus on the potential negativity of fandoms resembling para-religious organisations, as this perspective shaped my worldviews beyond my formative years: as people deepen their connection to their beliefs and values, they may become less critical and more blinded by their attachments to their ideals, rather than engaging in constructive reflection on the evolution of their beliefs and the realities of the world around them.

I must recognise my lack of academic background in theology (Appendix V). I do not intend to conduct extensive research on various religions, their history, nor am I examining the complex interplay between the secular and the sacred. Instead, I am using the notion of religion, as it is commonly understood, to explore the current changes and evolution in my community, my fandom and how these developments impact my Public Works.

In my experience, religion often involves a deep emotional relationship between the institution and its followers, sometimes prioritising emotions over rationality and leading to dogmatic views and potential conflicts within the community. I see similar parallels in the evolution of my Fandom. While these observations are based on my personal experiences and those of my specific community, they may apply to other fandoms to varying extents. In the words of the prolific researcher in fandom studies, Gregorio Fuschillo (2020) explains how fans 'attribute sacred qualities to media objects' and 'use religious metaphors to legitimise intense affective experiences' (Fuschillo, 2020, p. 348).

Religion is complex, intertwined with the sociological debate on defining, measuring, and operationalising religiosity. This broader perspective on the study of religion could lead to considering fandoms in religious terms, including their symbols, language, rituals, and emotional significance.

Implicit religion is 'an unrestricted personal quest for meaning in life based on real-life experiences' (Schools' Council Working Paper 1971: 34). The enduring nature of this comparison is due to the striking similarities between fan devotion and religious devotion. However, one main argument against this analogy is scholars' varying definitions of religion. Some scholars adopt a substantive understanding of religion, while others take a functional approach. This disparity risks oversimplification or selective interpretation of aspects that fit the comparison while overlooking those that do not.

Many refer to Emile Durkheim's (1912) functional approach which defines religion as any system of practices that unites a group into a single moral community, regardless of whether those practices involve belief in unusual realities. Durkheim's definition emphasises the social function of creating solidarity.

Paul Tillich (1957) identifies in religion the axiological function of providing orientation for a person's life, defining it as the dominant concern that organises a person's values. This functional approach enables atheistic forms of capitalism, nationalism, and Marxism to operate as quasi-religious systems. Bailey (1990) discusses the contemporary cultural shift away from conventional institutional manifestations of religiosity towards a more embracing of the implicit, emotional, symbolic, popular, anecdotal, and autobiographical aspects.

In this critique, I follow a more functional approach and explore the notion of implicit religion, as highlighted by Chris Klassen (2014), who advocates that when groups function similarly to explicitly religious organisations, they can be considered implicit religions. This comparison may not be perfect, but it serves as a starting point to explain how the Fandom has evolved to evoke such profound emotions and how they are channelled by the community and by outsiders to exert a certain degree of control as per Chapter 4.

Being a devoted fan now entails a participatory nature, as I will cover in Chapter 4. Fans from around the globe gather at Comic-Cons and other fan expos to express their devotion to their favourite fictional narratives. The latest Celebration (2025) took place in Tokyo, Japan. The next Celebration marking the 50th anniversary of Star Wars in 2027 will take place in Los Angeles, USA. Despite the distances, tens of thousands of people will make the pilgrimage so astutely described by Jenkins(2013) observes that fan conventions 'have long functioned as pilgrimage sites for fans...spaces where fans share knowledge, affirm each other's identities, and enter a temporary world built upon mutual passions' (Jenkins, 2013, p. 36).

I will never forget my first time at a Star Wars Celebration. Walking around the convention was an incredible experience. I truly felt a sense of community as people gathered together for their shared love of one franchise. My interactions with fellow troopers, community members, and clients during Celebration Tokyo 2025 highlighted how far my journey has come since those early days. It was a testament to how my work is regarded within the community, my opinions valued, my expertise sought, prompting my son to tell me: 'I never realised you are kind of famous.' to which I answered 'Only in the 501st'.

1.2.3 Competence and Expertise

In 2009, a colleague of mine entered my office holding a local Beijing magazine that featured an article about the 501st (Appendix II and III) local presence. Given my passion for the franchise, he suggested that I consider joining. This inspired me to embark on my costuming journey despite having no prior experience. At the time, I was leading a private design college based in Singapore with branches throughout the Asia-Pacific region. My expertise was in graphic design and multimedia; however, the school also offered departments in fashion, interior design, and product design. Although I had no prior experience in costume making, my environment was conducive to learning. I could rely on the expertise of my staff in the fashion and product design department and use the workshops to help me build my first props.

I also met a local member with extensive experience in costume-making; he became a valuable mentor during my early steps in this craft, something highlighted in Jenkins (2022) words 'In fan communities, mentorship from people more invested in the hobby is a powerful driver of skill acquisition. People often enter with little experience and learn collaboratively, drawing on peer expertise and shared resources, including workshops and maker spaces.' (Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022, p. 647).

Martin Broadwell (1969) introduced his vision of teaching/learning new skills, which has since been adapted to apply to competence more broadly. I usually define competence as the ability to perform a task successfully: I am competent if whatever I want to do has the expected outcome. Competency is pivotal in my Public Works, as I am constantly engaging with community members who expect me to be an expert and a reliable source of information. My expertise is not all-encompassing and is limited to specific areas. I can cut and glue plastic parts to build armour and understand the theories behind vacuum-forming and resin casting. However, I am not an expert in using the tools to create the armours and helmets; my expertise lies in garments and accessories, inherently making it the focus of my Public Works.

Broadwell's approach is especially significant as it is a roadmap for my growth within this community. It also emphasises that everyone begins at a point of not knowing what they do not know, which is called Unconscious Incompetence.

To mirror Dr Lauren Alex O'Hagan's (2023) own assertions 'In the beginning, I was a novice, unaware of what I didn't know—what some might call a stage of unconscious incompetence. Over time, through daily interactions, feedback, and emulating others in the community, I gained the skills and confidence to become unconsciously competent'

Rey Carr (2015)⁵ introduced a new terminology to describe the stages of competence, aiming to make it easier for laypeople to understand. In this new framework, the unconscious competence stage is referred to as the expert stage. Carr suggests that experts have achieved such a level of mastery that they no longer need to consciously think about what they do;

they are intuitively attuned to making the right decisions. Moreover, they embrace mistakes as valuable learning opportunities. In my experience, the more you know, the more you lose track of your expertise. With humility, I tend to undervalue the knowing, that is, when knowledge and experience are combined, and overvalue the number of others⁶ who have reached that level.

Much like my distrust of priests, I have an inherent reluctance towards those who claim to be experts, particularly given the transient nature of expertise. Continuous practice and keeping abreast of the latest developments in a field are essential; failing to do so can lead to a decline in one's knowledge. However, the title of expert tends to persist regardless. Expertise presents another paradox: while mastering a range of individual skills is vital for expertise in a specific area, achieving equal proficiency across all skills may not be necessary.

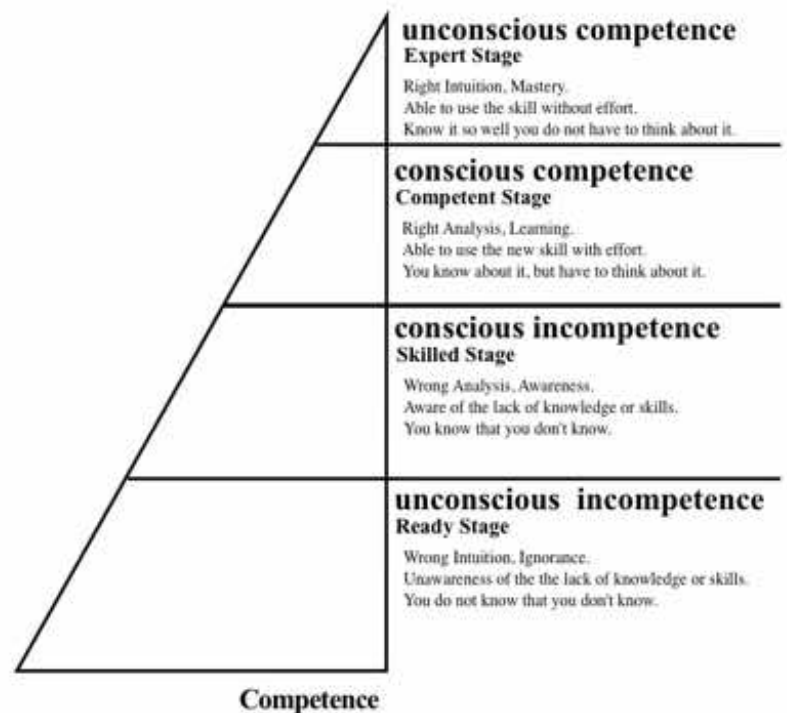


Fig. 3: Another possible visualisation of my learning acquisition journey, the pyramid of competence

⁵ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/pitfalls-moving-through-stages-learning-what-matters-most-rey-carr>

The issue of expert status is significant in my community, to the point that it will be essential for Chapter 4 when talking about the false prophets. When used appropriately, these statuses can have a tremendously positive impact. However, their misuse can have disastrous implications that affect the entire group, especially when combined with possible toxic behaviour; something Jenkins covers in his latest 2024 work by stating: ‘We began to see how toxic authority structures could re-emerge, especially when certain individuals claimed expert status without accountability or ongoing participation. These figures can stifle discussion, limit creative expression, and create exclusionary environments.’ (Jenkins & Jie, 2024, p. 73).

In the SWU costuming world, some characters have very little screen time but are nonetheless highly iconic. For years, Greedo had a CRL⁶ consisting of minimal details. In their quest to claim expertise, some individuals decided to review the existing CRL. It took several years for them to reach a final agreement on the new version, which was much more detailed than the original, making it much harder to create the costume. During this process, members who had started building that character could not register their costumes with the legion, resulting in some of those costume parts being unusable at a significant cost to the trooper⁷. I undertook a deep dive into the character to illustrate how some of the debated details were often based more on what was seen on set rather than what was shown on screen—a topic I will explore in greater depth in Section §5.1.

In China, where I live, the tradition of craftsmanship and expertise acquisition is deeply rooted in values of patience, discipline, and generational transmission of knowledge. Even in Traditional Chinese Medicine, apprenticeship has long been central, with knowledge passed from master to student through years of observation, repetition, and refinement, emphasising the Confucian ideals of respect for hierarchy and perseverance. In this context, expertise is often viewed as a lifelong pursuit. In my Public Works, being an expert is about recognising that thorough research is crucial to understanding a particular character’s costume and goes far beyond viewership in order to make informed decisions. In the past, I have often had to make significant changes to the costumes I produced because my research was not as comprehensive as that of others. For every mistake I made, I learned valuable lessons that I would not have otherwise acquired.

⁶ CRL is an extensive document created and published by the 501st Costuming Club. These libraries help members create costumes with the highest level of screen accuracy.

⁷ Members of the 501st predominantly use this term to refer to themselves, although its usage has expanded to include individuals from other costuming clubs

The concept of expertise is fundamental within a tight-knit community that is incredibly detail-oriented and has undergone significant evolution over the past 25 years. What once involved creating a costume that ideally resembled one seen on screen has transformed into the more complex task of producing ultra-detailed replica costumes.

This evolution requires adherence to strict guidelines and instructions, which can often feel like a catechism for newcomers, a topic I will explore in Chapter 5. Chapter 4 will cover how this evolution is deeply rooted in changes within our technological landscape and their impact on human relationships. Our mode of interaction within the community has shifted to predominantly digital interactions. Now, people worldwide can discuss and share their perspectives on the costume-making process and their interpretations of what is accurate.

New forms of online social currency, such as followers and likes, influence the notion of expertise. This can give individuals a false sense of expertise, something discussed by Zhang Wenbin (2024) in his Master's thesis. Digital platform metrics (followers, likes, reposts) increasingly confer perceived expertise in production-focused fan communities such as cosplay and digital art, detaching authority from demonstrated skill (Wenbin, 2024).

1.3 Pioneers Of Fan Culture Studies

Writing this thesis validates my expertise as an observer and critic of change within my community. It relies on peer publications and established research, particularly in participatory fandom and costume-making, which has gained traction over the last decade. Since 2018, numerous publications have emerged exploring group dynamics and the role of social media in fandom, including its toxic aspects. The bibliography reflects a wealth of contemporary references in this specific area. The field's newfound dynamism still largely rests on the contributions of leading figures such as Paul Booth, Matthew Hills, and Henry Jenkins, who connect fan culture with its participatory nature in both physical and digital realms.

Starting in 2010, Paul Booth's work focuses on transmedia participation. He explores how digital technology reshapes fan engagement, community boundaries, and power dynamics. He argued that new media influences fans' behaviour, transforming them from passive consumers into active producers. In 2013, he analysed the Doctor Who fandom, examining the generational tensions between classic and new fans. He asserts that while social media provides new participation platforms, old hierarchies persist: 'what we see in digital fan communities is not a break from earlier fan practices but a continuation of them...the communal ethos of fandom persists even as the medium changes.' (Booth, 2013, p. 67). Throughout his publications, Booth presents fan culture as a performance characterised by irony, parody, and self-awareness. He describes it as a ludic activity that allows fans to engage creatively, which he calls cultural play. He further explores the phenomenon of multi-fandom engagement (for example, Supernatural, Doctor Who, and Sherlock), arguing that fans construct hybrid communities that resist traditional fan hierarchies, a concept he calls fandom fusion.

Matthew Hills is one of the most influential thinkers in fan studies. In 2002, he published 'Fan Culture,' in which he critiques early fan studies, particularly the work of Jenkins and Fiske, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of fan identities as performative and contradictory. He argues strongly against overreliance on sociological or anthropological models, which often conceptualise fandom as a subculture or a cohesive community with fixed norms and boundaries. 'Fandom should not be conceptualised as a coherent subculture...fan identities are multiple, provisional, and often in tension with one another' (Hills, 2002, p. 34). He also examines the concept of temporal fandom, focusing on themes of nostalgia, continuity, and legacy.

He emphasises how rebooted series and newly produced materials have influenced the experiences of both older and newer fans, something at the very core of the changing dynamics in my community.

Furthermore, he argues that digital fandom does not promote democratisation but reinforces distinctions and elitism among fans. This aspect of fandom reveals the exclusionary and hierarchical practices that are particularly prevalent online, thus laying the groundwork for the emergence of toxic fandoms as covered in Section §4.3. He writes: 'digital fan spaces may reinscribe rather than remove established hierarchies of taste and knowledge' (Hills, 2013, p. 12). Finally, he introduces the concept of the fan world, which presents a more pluralistic and fluid understanding of fandom. Most notable is the introduction of the idea of always-on fandom, shaped by binge-watching, streaming, and affective waiting in the context of serialised television materials. In other words, he views fans as temporal, affective investors, either as temporary, recurring, or lifelong fans.

Jenkins is a foundational scholar in media studies, renowned for developing concepts related to fan and participatory culture. His work reframes fans from passive consumers to active participants in shaping media content, meanings, and communities.

He introduces the term 'textual poaching,' borrowed from Michel de Certeau, to emphasise how fans appropriate elements from media to create fan fiction, videos, zines, and more. His work has legitimised fan practices as significant sites of cultural production. In his recent work, Jenkins focuses on how young people use participatory media to engage in civic and political activities. This is referred to as participatory politics, which is distinct from traditional forms of political action but can sometimes overlap with participatory fandom.

He also introduces the concept of cultural acupuncture, which strategically uses cultural references to energise public discourse and activism. This approach enables symbolic reframing, linking fiction to politics, and provides people with new ways to discuss complex issues. Additionally, it promotes active participation, transforming fan communities into activist communities. 'Participatory culture can be a gateway to participatory politics...we can take symbols from popular culture and 'pin' them to urgent social issues — what I've called 'cultural acupuncture' (Jenkins & Jie, 2024, p. 10).

My Public Works are deeply rooted in a culture of craftsmanship firmly situated within the realm of fandom. They develop at the intersection of fan culture and media studies, relying on a strong sense of expertise to interpret source material for the benefit of the costuming community. This intricate relationship cannot be fully grasped from an external viewpoint alone; it also requires an insider's perspective, as reflected in the autoethnographic nature of this research. In the next chapter, I will explore the multi-layered context in which these works were created, as well as the factors that influenced the emergence and evolution of this innovative area.

Chapter 2: The Context



2.1 The Global Stage

As a species that spends its life making meaning, humans can never be separated from the context in which they interpret existence and their place within it. Meaning-making is always context-bound, shaped by historical events, cultural environments, and collective memories. As Clifford Geertz reminds us, human beings are ‘suspended in webs of significance that they themselves have spun’ (Geertz, 1973, p. 5).

In the 20th century, wars and conflicts significantly reshaped political borders and cultural consciousness. The impact of two World Wars, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War altered how societies, large and small, viewed themselves and their futures. These events sparked a desire for new experiences—through fantasy, increasingly available drugs, entertainment, or technology—as people sought escape and meaning amidst uncertainty. The clear distinctions of good versus evil and hero versus villain became subjects of cultural exploration and negotiation. In the following decades, especially after the 1960s, experiences transformed into a new economy. From music festivals to immersive media, people sought engagement with the possible, the daring, and the morally ambiguous.

What some viewed as liberation, others saw as chaos, showing that meaning is always contextual. For instance, one person's ‘freedom fighter’ may be another's ‘insurgent,’ highlighting how cultural and historical contexts shape perception. As such, practices of craftsmanship, creativity, and fandom are not mere hobbies: they reflect broader struggles and the human quest for meaning in uncertain times.

As a member of Generation X, I witnessed the rise of the internet, but I also remember life before technology and the physicality of social interactions. I am part of the transitioning generation that has experienced life in both analogue and digital realms. In the past half-century, I have seen remarkable technological advancements that continue to reshape our world at an unprecedented pace, creating curious uncertainty about the future. In their 1968 work, Will and Ariel Durant aptly capture this sentiment, stating that drawing conclusions from the past to the future is made more hazardous than ever by the acceleration of change.

I witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall on TV and heard the announcement of the end of the Cold War in 1991, coinciding with the abolition of apartheid in South Africa. It was a time of significant progress and hope for a brighter future for all, a hope solidified in me through the endless consumption of SciFi, mostly Star Wars and Star Trek.

The era in which I grew up has set the stage for our digital revolution, characterised by the 4th Industrial Revolution, which has resulted in a significant shift in our global mindset. Klaus Schwab (2017) states 'The Fourth Industrial Revolution is distinct from previous revolutions in its velocity, scope, and systems impact. It is evolving at an exponential rather than a linear pace... driven by the convergence of digital, biological, and physical innovations, where each new technology enables others.' (Schwab, 2017, p. 04). It would be irresponsible to address today's societal changes without examining contemporary history to uncover the roots and influences that have shaped our media consumption and its effects on us individually and collectively.

Today, we have access to movie theatres, a wide variety of traditional TV stations, and an increasing number of streaming services. These services provide continuous access to the world's most extensive entertainment library, allowing anyone to watch anything anytime on any device, echoing Hill's fan world theory of always-on fandom and aptly described by sociologist David McGowan (2024) 'With streaming, the fan no longer cultivates a personal archive but accesses content through aggregated catalogs and recommendation engines...this produces a paradox: the fan has unprecedented immediacy yet faces the ephemerality of content that can vanish from the platform' (McGowan, 2024, p. 62).

I have little doubt that the current global perception of our society, characterised by a division between the West and the East, with China currently portrayed as a central adversary, echoes the worldview of the late 20th century and is directly linked with media productions. The Creator (2024) perfectly illustrates how entertainment can leverage current geopolitical events to influence and shape audiences' mindsets.

In the 1980s, the United States became the leading force in film and music production, exporting its entertainment and cultural values worldwide. However, this soft power export did not lead to an equal exchange of diverse cultural influences from other countries. Instead, it created a one-sided dynamic that persists to this day.

What emerges on the artistic stage in the United States today, along with its changing political landscape, significantly influences the views, values, and norms of those who consume it domestically and internationally through the many digital delivery platforms. This kind of portrayal has fueled enduring mistrust and judgmental preconceptions that significantly impact international policies and societal development today.

Blockbuster films, as confirmed by Tom Shone (2004), such as the iconic space opera *Star Wars*, attracted massive audiences, relaunching a trend that many notable films from the 1980s followed by presenting a simpler dualistic view of the world, portraying the struggle between good and evil as an allegory for capitalism against communism and the West versus the Soviet Union. These morality tales likely influenced the worldviews and character development of avid filmgoers as they matured.

Television also played a pivotal role in shaping societal perceptions, as described by Jane Feuer (1995), with popular TV shows reflecting the same simplistic views of justice and morality, one of the most notable exceptions being *Star Trek*. I grew up being told through media and movies how devastating communism can be and just how incredible capitalism is.

If I had not spent the last 20 years in China witnessing its unbelievable changes, I would likely share the mindset of many of my peers back in the West. I believe that the binary understanding of the world promoted by the entertainment industry during the 80s and 90s significantly contributes to today's society's inability to embrace a more inclusive and diverse perspective on our species' evolution.

The US television landscape evolved in the 1980s, leading to the introduction of 24-hour programming, and news programming became an ongoing pursuit for breaking news, aimed at attracting more viewers and subsequently increasing advertising revenues, as Feuer (1995) noted again. During this time, advertisers began to heavily influence the content of news broadcasts, leading to the emergence of competing networks like Fox News, which vied for a larger share of advertising revenue.

This shift transformed journalism from reporting facts to gradually giving way to opinion-based entertainment presented as news. The media continue to play a fundamental role in disseminating conflicting messages.

While movies and TV shows reflect changes in societal norms, news outlets often cater to confirmation bias among older audiences. In contrast, the younger generation turns to social media to try to make sense of the world they live in.

Lisa Shwaiger and Daniel Volger, both working out of the University of Zurich, note that 'Participants expressed low trust in traditional news media, which they perceived as addressing older generations. They turned to social media platforms such as Instagram or Twitter for news awareness, while simultaneously acknowledging the partisan or superficial nature of such sources' (Schwaiger & Vogler, 2022, p. 205).

Another noteworthy development of the 1980s was MTV's launch, which revolutionised the music industry by offering 24-hour music programming. This move had a significant impact on radio, prompting it to adjust its format to compete with MTV's non-stop music and talk show offerings, which laid the groundwork for today's podcast culture. Moreover, the resurgence of reality TV shows on MTV contributed to the popularisation of today's influencer culture with shows like *The Real World*. Today's influencers, however, have gained significantly more power through their follower counts.

The recent pandemic has brought attention to the dangers of these platforms, as they have become breeding grounds for unchecked misinformation and opinions, contributing to the polarisation of society and fueling toxicity within fandoms, as will be covered in Chapter 4. In her work, Michelle Maresh-Fuehrer illustrates the dynamics of platform-mediated credibility and audience engagement and confirms 'early reality formats like MTV's *The Real World* laid the groundwork for influencer culture by transforming ordinary participants into media figures' (Maresh-Fuehrer, 2021, p. 144). During the COVID-19 pandemic, these same digital spaces became a source of political persuasion and misinformation.

The commercial availability of the Internet through dial-up networks only occurred in the early 1990s, as outlined in 'A Brief History of the Internet'(1999). It is remarkable to consider how far our society has come from those relatively underwhelming capabilities of the past. The rise of the internet has prompted significant shifts in entertainment. Joseph Menn (2003) explains how now-defunct Napster pioneered the concept of music subscription and compelled record labels to explore new avenues for selling their music while combating piracy, thus democratising access to

music for all. With the expansion of bandwidth came a new era in television, marked by Netflix's transition to streaming in 2007, paving the way for the subscription-based model.

Thomas Friedman (2016) reviews the 2007 boom, which heralded the release of the first iPhone but also marked the global launch of Facebook and Twitter (now X).

These two platforms significantly reshaped the internet landscape, human interactions and, to some extent, the fabric of our society. The pandemic swept across the world amid already strained global relations, and its aftermath left us with an even more divided society.

Our world, filtered through the digital lens, appears increasingly polarised, where the subtleties and nuances have been overshadowed by stark black-and-white views, wokeism, anti-wokeism, counter-culture and anti-counter-culture, most, if not all, seemingly being widely misunderstood by the masses. The media's influence on shaping our world is undeniable, and the technological progress of the past 40 years has been a catalyst for the propagation of our new reality.

Julian Petley, known for his work on free speech and censorship, explains how 'the pandemic acted as a catalyst for already-polarised debates...binary framings around 'woke' culture, scientific authority, and identity politics were amplified by digital platforms that incentivise confrontation rather than deliberation' (Petley, 2024, p. 398).

Today, the media, new and old, are used to enhance specific points of view. Operating within a binary reality implies that two opposing parties will always exist and oppose each other. Both sides utilise the same tools to promote their perspectives, and any interaction can be interpreted as a vote of support for a particular side. In Chapters 3 and 4, I will cover how this dynamic significantly impacts fan communities, and with its massive global following, Star Wars Fandom serves as a prime example of this phenomenon.

2.2 Star Wars Impact & Influences

Star Wars as the focal point of my personal and professional affinity for SciFi is where I physically express it. This is where I reach Pat Flynn's (2019) superfan status, merging devotional fan behaviour with corporate strategy and aligning fans' deep emotional investments with brand promotion. Mashable's deputy editor, Chris Taylor (2015), analyses the profound influence of Star Wars on our society, evidenced in popular culture through its visual aesthetics, iconic quotes, and captivating mythology. This societal impact can be felt worldwide, for example, in the teaching of 'Jedi', known as 'Jediism'⁸.

Tom De Castella (2014) reports that it was recognised as a religion⁹ in the UK in the 2001 census, with several 'churches' now established worldwide. The French fencing federation has officially acknowledged lightsaber duelling as a competitive sport. Like Taylor (2015), fans worldwide recognise the significant impact of Star Wars on the film industry, revolutionising filmmaking and pioneering groundbreaking innovations. Even after nearly 50 years, the Original Trilogy's practical visual effects continue to rival modern digital techniques.

Paul Duncan (2020) highlights how Lucasfilm's introduction of modern Real Visual Effects (RFX) set a new standard, leading to the development of computer-assisted VFX through Industrial Light and Magic (ILM)¹⁰, one of Lucasfilm's subsidiaries. The recent series *The Mandalorian* (2019) introduced the Infinity Stage, as Anthony Lund (2021) observes, utilising high-definition LED screens instead of traditional green screens combined with advanced lighting equipment, potentially rendering on-location shoots obsolete.

At the turn of the century, Ken Burns (2004) had already highlighted the profound impact that the 25 years following the release of Star Wars had on the film industry. Since then, its technological innovations and advancements in storytelling have continued to push boundaries within an expanding community that has both the means and the inclination to scrutinise and publicly criticise every decision made along the way.

⁸ <https://www.templeofthejediorder.org/>. Jedi, ministers, and leaders embrace Jediism as a true religion and sincerely believe in its teachings. Jediism does not base its focus on fiction but on the real-life experiences and philosophies that are the source of the myths which inspire our religion

⁹ <https://www.jedichurch.org/> The Jedi Church believes that there is one all powerful force that binds all things in the universe together. The Jedi religion is something innate inside everyone of us, the Jedi Church believes that our sense of morality is innate. So quiet your mind and listen to the force within you!

¹⁰ <https://www.ilm.com/> With nearly 2000 employees across 5 studios worldwide and one of the most comprehensive and advanced digital effects production pipelines in the entertainment industry

Lucas's impact on the film industry extends beyond his creative work and his investments in developing new technologies for the cinema. He also pioneered modern merchandising. Duncan, whom I met at Celebration Chicago in 2019, emphasises in his book Lucas's foresight in retaining full rights to merchandising production, which transformed Star Wars into a multi-billion-dollar asset. Ryan Lambie (2019) gives us an excellent example of this impact by recounting Kenner's Christmas 1977 empty toy box episode. Its significance and impact are best conveyed through the words of M. Francis (2023) 'Perhaps the most iconic moment in fan consumer history came in 1977, when Kenner sold empty Star Wars toy boxes with IOUs inside due to overwhelming demand. This shortage didn't alienate fans—it fueled a frenzy of adult collectors eager to get their hands on every figure.' (Francis, 2023, p. 153).

When Disney acquired Lucasfilm for US\$4.05 billion in 2012, it was revealed that the most valuable asset at the time of sale was merchandising, worth over US\$20 billion. Annual sales of Star Wars licensed products reach an estimated US\$3 billion, with figures reaching between US\$5 billion and US\$7 billion in years coinciding with a film release. Fueled by an immensely dedicated fanbase, Star Wars stands as one of the few media properties that thrive as an entity of its own, boasting a dedicated section in Disneyland, an unofficial holiday (May 4th), exclusive Star Wars conventions, and a plethora of streaming series. It set the standard for modern fandom by capturing children's interest early on and crafting timeless stories that foster lifelong devotion. The merchandising model of Star Wars has been in place since its inception and has played a significant role in shaping modern merchandising. The franchise's success is such that even non-fans purchase related items as gifts for their friends and family.

Brands worldwide pay substantial licensing fees to produce a wide range of products, from diapers to high-end jewellery, showing that the Fandom drives intense consumerism, or in the words of sociologist Neta Yodovich (2021): 'Star Wars commodities circulate beyond the boundaries of fandom... non-fans purchase Star Wars-branded items as gifts or novelty goods, relying on the brand's widespread cultural intelligibility.' (Yodovich, 2021, p. 768).

Lucas led the way in transmedia storytelling, recognising the need for new material to sustain merchandise sales while connecting fans to the Original Trilogy. Jenkins (2018) defines transmedia as a process in which critical elements of a fictional story are systematically dispersed across various media platforms to create a cohesive and coordinated entertainment experience.

According to Sean Guynes and Dan Hassler-Forest (2018), Star Wars remains one of the most prominent practitioners of transmedia, extending its narrative through novels, comics, video games, animated and live-action series, standalone and saga films, and interconnected storylines. This ever-expansive transmedia creation has allowed fans to deeply engage with the fictional universe, contributing to the franchise's enduring appeal across generations. As Matthew MacArthur notes in his 2017 article: "For many of us, this type of engagement kept Star Wars vibrant in our imaginations, especially during the long gaps between films. Another generation is now 'playing Star Wars,' albeit through different mediums."

The enduring appeal lies in its ability to create multi-generational connections through its seemingly timeless yet straightforward story. George Lucas artfully gathered, combined, and transformed various elements to create a tale that resonates across cultures and periods. The narrative taps into our innate familiarity with specific archetypal stories, presenting a historical lecture in the guise of a space opera.

This approach, combined with familiar character types and traditional storytelling techniques, makes the story and its characters immediately accessible to audiences of all ages. The inclusion of clear distinctions between good and evil, morally ambiguous characters, and a strong spiritual element contributes to the story's broad appeal. Despite this familiarity, the exotic setting of the story adds a layer of novelty to captivate the audience. Star Wars represents a generational evolution of the Hero's Journey, drawing on the foundations of earlier works such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *Dune*, and numerous others throughout history. Notably, both the 2001 adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* and the 2021 adaptation of *Dune*, released 20 years apart, launched significant fandom renaissances. Each emerged during years marked by the onset of new global conflicts, which heightened the stories' contemporary relevance.

Its remarkable ability to transcend generations sets it apart, serving as a bridge that connects them. At the risk of seeming like an unfit father, my son watched Star Wars for the first time when he was just 3. Now, at 17, he has seen everything released multiple times, being a fan himself. This shared experience has helped us forge a strong bond through our shared fandom, even though we live it differently. It provides him with comfort and, hopefully, some peace, serving as a temporary refuge or a place to recharge. Ironically, this is precisely how I would describe my interaction with Star Wars.

Star Wars expert Michael Kaminski, a Canadian-based independent researcher and journalist, furthers the argument, suggesting 'Star Wars has entered the realm of modern mythology... it is now the subject of university courses in myth and literature... any study of contemporary folklore must reckon with the Star Wars saga and its sprawling transmedia extensions.' (Kaminski, 2008, p. 02). Star Wars is a cultural phenomenon that clearly warrants a form of autoethnographic reflection, which I have chosen to review my Public Works.

The success of Star Wars underscores an essential lesson of SciFi echoed in Star Trek, The Matrix and many other productions: when executed effectively, it can present complex ideas and stimulate reflective thinking. Even as a six-year-old, I found myself morally inclined to support the rebels, while visually I was drawn to the Empire's imposing presence. This internal conflict, sparked by the narrative, is a testament to the depth and impact of the storytelling and accompanying visuals within the SWU.

The franchise's impact on filmmaking and the arts in general has been profound. It has driven significant advancements in special effects, sound design, and digital filmmaking while setting new standards for film production, franchise management, and transmedia storytelling. Its influence on popular culture, which both reflects and shapes cultural perceptions, beliefs and rituals, is evident in the contributions of phrases, symbols, and concepts that have shaped languages and cultural expressions. As will be explored in the next section, it is also part of a self-reinforcing loop involving active participation in costume making and wearing.

2.3 Understanding Fandom

Modern fandoms are often closely tied to individuals who are passionate about comics, science fiction, anime, gaming, and computers. These interests, once stigmatised as geeky or nerdy, have now formed the basis of geek culture, as discussed by Benjamin Woo (2018). By the early 2000s, geek chic became a global phenomenon, and it became socially acceptable for our generation to be knowledgeable about computers, indulge in gaming, and immerse ourselves in SciFi. I would point out that mindset evolution almost coincides with the release of *The Matrix* (1999), which captivated audiences similarly to the original *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977). Geek culture has been celebrated through films and TV shows. The cult British comedy *The IT Crowd* (2006-2013) and the long-running sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019), both made the geeks (and nerds) the true heroes. *The Big Bang Theory* thoroughly explored the concept of fandoms through numerous storylines and the involvement of special guests, including William Shatner (*Star Trek*), Mark Hamill (*Star Wars*), Katee Sackhoff (*Battlestar Galactica*), and Stan Lee (Marvel), among many others.

In 2008, *Iron Man* successfully brought Marvel Comics to the big screen, introducing what is now known as the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). This not only got millions of comic book fans to the films but also introduced the universe to hundreds of millions more worldwide, in some cases creating legions of new superfans in the most unexpected markets. Interestingly, a correlation can be drawn between these cultural phenomena and the surge in attendance at the San Diego Comic-Con, which drew 135000 visitors in 2019. *Star Wars Celebration* attracted more than 100000 visitors at the 2025 show in Tokyo. Cornel Sandvoss (2005) states that fandom is characterised by the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a specific popular narrative or text. Each of us has multiple areas of interest in which one can be considered a fan. We follow these areas to become reasonably knowledgeable and capable of engaging in informed discussions about them.

Jonathan Gray (2017) emphasises the modern aspect of fandoms, as most people are fans of something. Following continued technological, social, and cultural changes, fandoms have become an increasingly commonplace experience. For some, being a fan should be viewed along a spectrum, similar to the approach taken by Pat Flynn (2019) for marketing purposes. The more engaged, active, and financially invested a person is, the higher they ascend within their fandom pyramid. This model better captures the diverse behaviours and interactions associated with being a fan. At the upper echelon of the pyramid are the most dedicated enthusiasts, labelled as 'superfans' by Flynn, as seen on Figure 4, while the broader base represents more casual fans. My Public Works are closely related to superfans. Their spending does not solely focus on costumes; they often invest in collectables, screen-used props, autographs, and various forms of memorabilia. They are the ones willing to invest a significant amount of money to create a costume that is as accurate as possible, thus purchasing the necessary parts to meet the basic requirements for joining one of the costuming clubs within the Fandom.

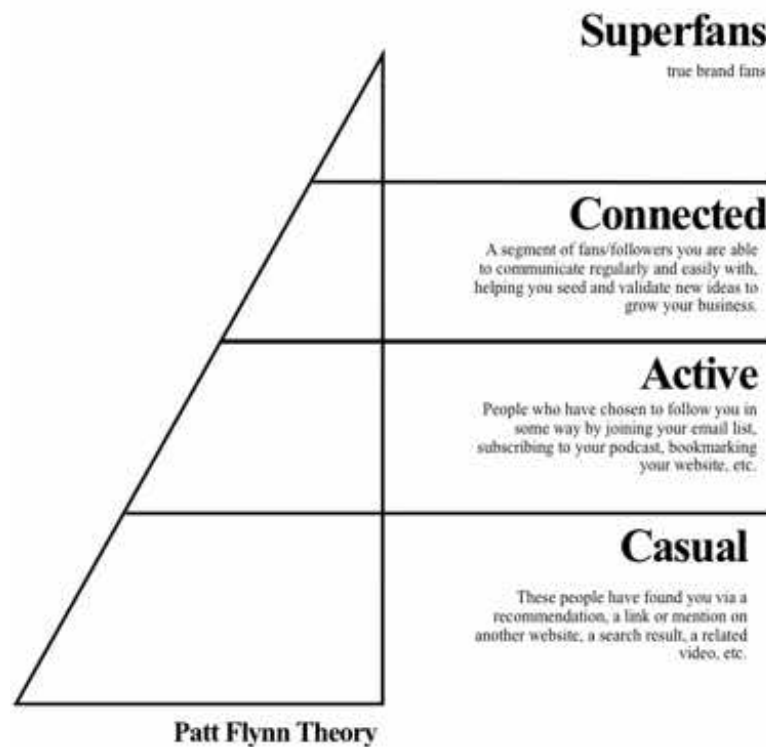


Fig. 4: Patt Flynn Superfan Pyramid for marketing engagement.

As seen on Figure 4, I am a superfan, dedicating considerable resources to crafting my costumes and participating in events, sometimes at significant cost. I remember flying from Shanghai to San Francisco solely to obtain an autograph from Mark Hamill. The flight took 17 hours and involved significant expenses for airfare and hotel accommodations.

Upon arrival, I waited over 3 hours before entering the room, where I had just a moment to get a glimpse at the legend and one signature in my book. The purchase of this autograph alone exceeded US\$500, but the actual travel cost is closer to US\$5000. While this may seem extreme to some, as a devoted fan, it is essential to seize such opportunities when they arise, a behaviour shared by most superfans on Figure 5.

There is no better place to observe the dynamics of fan engagement firsthand than by attending a Comic-Con. The layers of fan involvement are evident, from casual attendees proudly sporting their fandom t-shirts to more dedicated fans who immerse themselves in character cosplay obtained from local retail stores to fully engaged fans who participate in panels, seek autographs, and partake in advanced costuming activities.

While all cast is revered, Mark Hamill and the cast of the Original Trilogy have reached a status akin to near-holiness in the eyes of superfans, especially the first-generation ones like myself. Their appearances are considered highly significant, almost comparable to followers visiting the Vatican for a glimpse of the Pope or, in rare cases, having the opportunity to meet him. Having a picture taken with one of these stars is a rare and unforgettable experience that fans treasure as a holy experience. It serves as a reaffirmation of their fandom and, to some extent, their faith in their favourite franchise, as will be elaborated in Chapter 3.

This is Benjamin Priester's argument (2023) comparing originalist constitutional interpretation with the dynamics of media fandom 'fans engage in secular pilgrimage toward locations and objects linked to the saga...autographs and props function as totems, materially affirming the fan's bond with the narrative world.' (Priester, 2023, p. 58).



Fig. 5: Patt Flynn Theory mapped against the SWU Fandom.

However, it also highlights the commercialisation of fan culture, raising concerns about the authenticity of fan practices and the ethical implications of corporate involvement in these communities. While Duncan (2020) highlights how Star Wars revolutionised merchandising, I remain unconvinced that all products merit branding with its logo. Gray, Sandvoss, and Lee Harrington (2017) contend that fan cultures have become increasingly commodified, with companies actively cultivating and exploiting fan communities for financial gain.

On the other side of the consumerism spectrum, Booth (2013/2022) talks of 'Prosumption'—where fans simultaneously produce and consume media—is foundational to understanding digital-age fandom. These hybrid practices have dismantled traditional producer/consumer binaries, enabling fans to actively shape, reinterpret, and even co-create the content they adore. In maker-driven communities, such as prop and costume design, this often manifests in collaborative economies of trust, expertise, and reputation. Fan-makers who become known for their high-fidelity craftsmanship often gain near-celebrity status within niche circles.

This phenomenon has blurred roles, fostering more collaborative and reciprocal relationships between fans and creators. It cultivates a sense of agency and ownership among fans, particularly within costuming clubs. In these clubs, creators known as makers—like myself—dedicate their time to crafting the necessary components for fans to complete their costumes. In my niche, there are only a handful of other makers globally, which has allowed me to cultivate a loyal following among fans who prioritise my work over that of others.

Furthermore, makers and costumors are part of the broader fandom themselves. When participating in events, there is a palpable pride in belonging to a specific club, portraying a beloved character, and engaging with the general public. In this dynamic, clubs serve as creators while the public embodies the fans.

At the highest level, club members have the opportunity to interact officially with the actual franchise maker, Lucasfilm, receiving recognition or rewards for their support. Notably, at the 2007 Rose Parade, George Lucas requested the presence of the 501st (Appendix II and III). In *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015), the 501st flag appeared briefly on-screen. Fan Studies researcher Michelle Kent (2019) elaborates: 'what began as informal fan costuming grew into a formal partnership; Lucasfilm now draws on the 501st... as background talent in canon productions such as *The Mandalorian* (2019).' (Kent, 2019, p. 232).

In my particular agency, the collaboration with Lucasfilm involved producing shoes and gloves for several characters seen on screen, a rare moment of genuine pride. If fandoms can take on physical forms, such as creating costumes as shown in Figure 6, much of the core interaction and engagement has shifted to digital platforms. In his own PhD thesis at the University of Leeds, Alistair C. Stevenson argues that 'digital platforms facilitate fan identity work and interpretive exchange... fans display creative outputs online, forging hybrid communities that span virtual and material spaces' (Stevenson, 2022, p. 06).

In their work, Jenkins, Ford & Green (2020) explore how digital technologies have empowered fans to rally around social and political causes. They assert that fandom has evolved into a potent force for activism, as fans utilise their networks and media skills to drive change.

This shift towards fan activism demonstrates the increasing political importance of fandom and its potential influence in today's cultural and countercultural landscape. As has been covered earlier, this sentiment is reflected in the 501st's commitment to raising awareness and donations to support charities.

This ethos resonates with each club member, instilling a sense of social responsibility that inspires many to give back. Once I joined the organisation, I participated in numerous charity events, including those benefiting the Make-A-Wish Foundation. It became clear that I could combine my passion for costume-making with a small contribution to society.

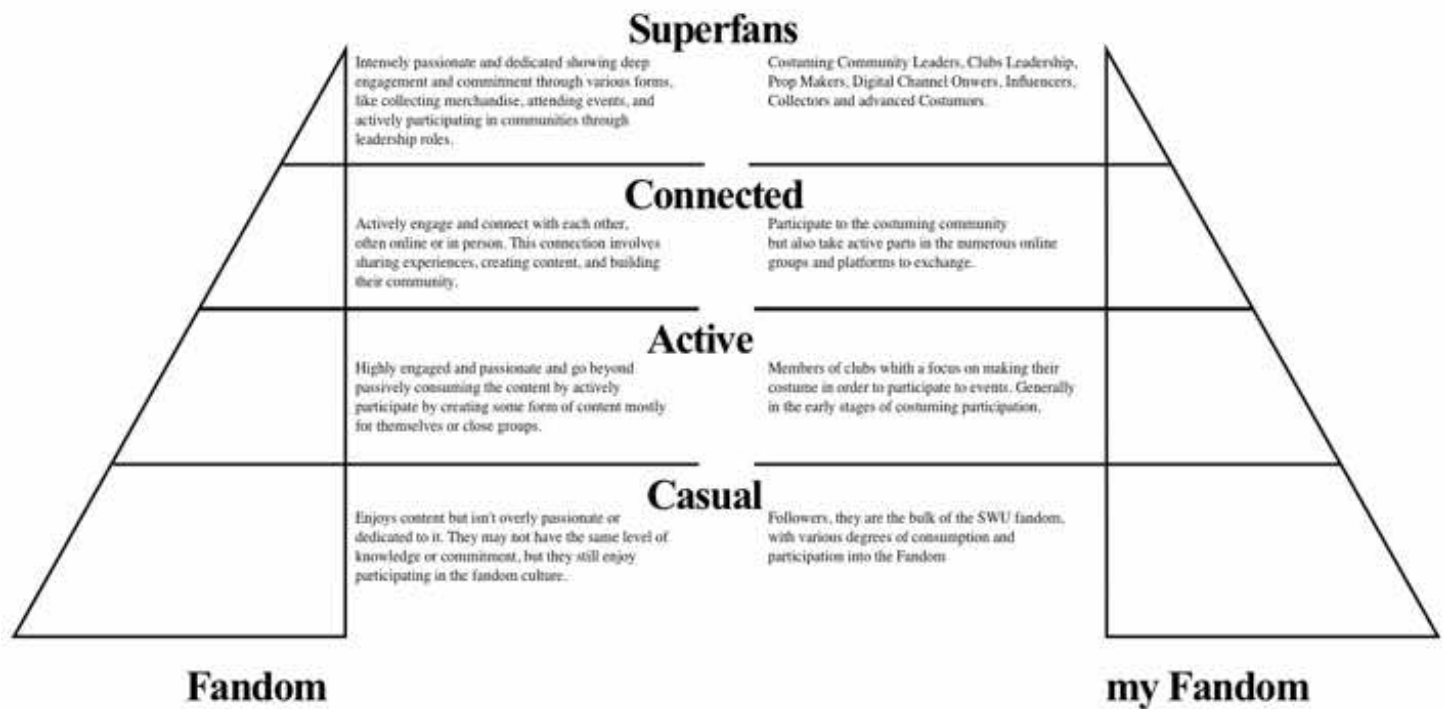


Fig. 6: The Pyramid of Fandom applied to my particular area of costuming.

A darker side (pun intended) to any fandom appears proportional to its size and participation. The rise of toxicity (Appendix IV) in fandoms, particularly alongside the growth of social media as covered in Section §4.3, has regrettably cast a shadow over what should be a communal celebration of passion.

Literature on toxic fandoms reveals a complex landscape where passionate engagement can foster both positive community-building and negative exclusionary behaviours.

While fans often demonstrate creative agency, Jenkins (2013) notes that such agency can lead to conflicts and negative actions when others do not acknowledge or appreciate their creations. The impact of digital platforms and media convergence on fan practices provides an arena that exacerbates these tendencies, dehumanising interactions among fans and, at times, conflicting with the creators themselves.

Simone Driessen, Bethan Jones and Benjamin Litherland (2024) offer an analysis showing how fandom's techniques underlie political communication in contemporary social media environments, showing that 'digital fandom platforms...have become sites of polarisation where moral gatekeeping...structure fan interactions — transforming celebratory spaces into arenas of contested authority' (Driessen et al., 2024, p. 61).

In what I call the Digital Dark Ages, which I cover in-depth in Chapter 3, social media amplifies toxic behaviours by facilitating extreme views. At the same time, the evolution of community dynamics can further support the exclusion of members who do not adhere to established community norms. Hills (2002) confirms how fans develop a sense of identity and community from their involvement in fan cultures, sometimes leading to exclusionary actions targeting those considered 'not genuine fans,' often through the gatekeeping policing to preserve the integrity of their fandom, which in turn can result in toxic behaviour such as bullying and abuse.

The Fandom can also contribute to a sense of entitlement or even elitism, as seen in the previous section, leading, but not limited to, misogyny, racism, homophobia, transphobia and general LGBTQ+ exclusionism. While participatory cultures empower fans, they also create environments where toxic behaviours can thrive, a key aspect of this work, which will be covered at length in Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

2.4 Cosplayer, Play Passion & Activism

The growing acceptance of openly expressing one's fandom has fueled the increasing popularity of cosplay. This cultural phenomenon originates in fandom, popular culture, and performance art, encompassing a range of activities, including convention attendance and participation in online communities. What once began as a curiosity in the early convention days evolved from being frowned upon by purist comic convention-goers, who saw it as a distraction from the main event, to becoming one of the show's main attractions. Visitors now anticipate a grand display of costumes.

Andrew Liptak (2022) explains that the term cosplay comes from Japanese journalist Nobuyuki Takahashi, who first used it after attending Worldcon in Los Angeles in 1984, as a less formal replacement for the word 'masquerade,' capturing the playful ethos of fan costuming. Some trace the root of cosplay to the masquerade balls of the early 1900s and the early days of pop culture conventions, which paved the way for the remarkable evolution of cosplay from a specialised pastime to a global sensation, as witnessed by journalist Laren Orsini (2015) and Liptak (2022). The more significant topic of discussion within the community centres on today's public understanding of cosplay and how it appears to lack a clear distinction between costume-making and wearing. For some, the notion of 'play', akin to acting out the character beyond just the costume, has been reduced to a mere game and not taken seriously.

As many understand it today, cosplaying is closely tied to Manga culture, including cartoons, anime, and game characters. However, it has often been stigmatised due to the sexualised nature of some characters and criticism from the public, particularly from the parents, as something that grown-ups should not partake in. This view is reinforced by the wordplay in cosplay, which suggests something childish or trivial.

'The term 'cosplay,' fusing 'costume' and 'play,' invokes associations with childhood pretence—in Western contexts where adult dressing-up is marginalised, this compounds the stigma serious cosplayers must negotiate.' (Seregina & Weijo, 2020, p. 144).

Adam Savage, known for his work on the TV show *Mythbusters* and the YouTube channel *Tested*, delivered a compelling TED talk¹¹ in 2016 on cosplay and its personal significance. He shared thoughts that strongly resonate with my experiences, stating, 'We're connecting with something important inside us. The costumes are how we reveal ourselves to each other.' I, too, very much enjoyed it when the costume I wear opens a two-way interaction between me and the public, who is, for however long it takes, actively participating in an exchange that takes them into a shared universe. For that moment, we are both living outside of the standard time and space, which is a powerful experience—one that historical re-enactors share.

As introduced in Section §1.2.4, Booth (2022) explores the performative aspects of cosplay, emphasising the crucial role costumes play in embodying diverse characters. Cosplayers often engage in rich storytelling, crafting intricate backgrounds and character developments that balance authenticity with creativity. In cosplay, maintaining fidelity to the source material while incorporating innovations is fundamental to the practice; fans not only don the attire of their favourite characters but also adopt their mannerisms and behaviours.

Paul Booth sees cosplay as 'an immersive performance art where character and self blend seamlessly.' (Booth, 2015, p. 124). This performance shifts the individual's role from spectator to active participant, enabling cosplayers to embody the essence of a character in a profoundly performative manner. This aspect of performance distinguishes cosplay from simple costume-wearing.

Anime cosplay communities, with their looser commitments to canonical fidelity, accommodate a wider spectrum of interpretive freedom. As Lamerichs notes, 'Cosplay thrives on multiplicity; no single embodiment invalidates another' (Lamerichs, 2018, p. 12). The Star Wars costuming clubs, by contrast, are structurally militarised. The 501st Legion mirrors the hierarchical, regimented frameworks of its source material—a structure that is not incidental, but constitutive. Officers in detachments and garrisons exercise varying degrees of disciplinary rigour.

¹¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/adam_savage_my_love_letter_to_cosplay?language=en TED is a non-profit that believes powerful ideas, powerfully presented, move us: to feel something, to think differently, to take action. It champions ideas through live events worldwide and advances ideas through free original content available online.

The sheer density of digital interactions, from dedicated forums, detachment groups, and garrison pages to social media presence, amplifies both solidarity and conflict. For some members, particularly those for whom fandom occupies a central identity function, the stakes of inclusion are existential. As Hills argues, 'When fandom becomes a master identity, boundary policing intensifies, because the self is experienced as permeable to the group's evaluations' (Hills, 2002, p. 103). In such cases, gatekeeping is an ontological defence.

Because of the nature of the source material, authentic cosplay is often defined as part of a fandom subculture created by young people with strong female participation, where costume interpretation is permitted, something my community strongly opposes, as will be covered in Chapter 5. Although some costumes demonstrate a high level of complexity and craftsmanship comparable to the projects I cover in my Public Works, there is a considerable difference in intent between a cosplayer's costume and a high-end replica costing upward of US\$5000, a sentiment shared by most members.

Moreover, from my perspective, and that of many members, putting on the costume means becoming that character. It goes beyond performative mannerism as it is crucial to embody and authentically portray the role. It is not just playing the part anymore; it is acting in ways to recreate the emotional connection the general public had with the on-screen version. As I stated in the navigation page, I consider myself and my fellow club members as costumed actors, which I call **costumors**.

Costumors find inspiration for their costumes in films or live-action TV series. The live aspect is crucial, as it involves actual human actors dressed in intricate costumes performing in front of a camera instead of animated ones. Piero Bockos¹² mentioned that his costuming activities are very different from cosplaying, as they require a nearly perfect replication of what has been shown on screen.

The patterns, materials, and colours are extensively studied, and there is minimal room for interpretation compared to costumes based on cartoons. Out of the hundreds of items I am currently producing for the community, none are derived from animation or comic sources.

¹² Fifty for 50 video interview of Peiro Tat-Twin recorded in Verona July 2024

The only two times I attempted to adapt a game character into a costume sparked debates and unpleasant interactions with community leaders, as exemplified in Chapter 5. Despite my expertise, my arguments proved inconsequential in the writing of the CRL.

Through franchises like Star Wars, many enter the costuming community, often well into adulthood rather than in their late teenage years. This shift highlights a compelling reason for adults to engage: it allows them to explore different aspects of their identities. Key motivations behind this phenomenon include escapism, fantasy fulfilment, and the desire for social connection, something alluded to by Richard Touse and Anita Salter when writing: 'adult cosplayers frame their practice as both fannish celebration and a way of crafting self and community... embodying boundary-crossing characters lets them re-make local spaces into affirming micro-cultures' (Rouse & Salter, 2021, p. 05).

Costumers also have unique and differentiated demographic profiles from cosplayers. The average age of our community members is 40 years old, with a 75% male majority as per the 2025 501st census. 'uniform fandoms... are framed as inclusive yet remain male-dominated, with high material and affective costs that confer prestige. Practitioners distinguish their accuracy-driven, embodied performance from the more playful, interpretive logic of cosplay' (Lamerichs, 2023, p. 106). Ironically, while constantly seeking new members, Star Wars costuming clubs such as the 501st (Appendix II and III) can often be perceived as closed communities with limited participants and no explicit goal of achieving mass membership. This makes it challenging for the general public to differentiate cosplayers from other costume-based activities.

As a result, the term cosplayer has gained enough traction to be used indiscriminately. Regrettably, the current public perception of what we do often undermines the intricate effort to faithfully replicate costumes and embody the characters we portray. Storm Walsh¹³ astutely noted that the terminology 'cosplay' has become so widely recognised among the general public that it is hard to change.

Will Brooker (2002) rightly uses the word obsessive to characterise my community. Members spend countless hours perfecting their costumes to the smallest detail, meticulously searching for the correct patterns, fabrics, and components, as Liptak (2022) confirms.

¹³ fifty for 50 video interviews Storm Walsh - recorded Amsterdam February 2024

Every screenshot is carefully analysed to identify precise stitching patterns, thread colours, and more, which I will discuss in Chapter 5. All these details are documented in CRLs¹⁴, comprehensive descriptive documents that outline the requirements for creating an approved costume. They are written by individuals or groups of members with the necessary expertise regarding a particular character.

As we will see in Chapters 4 and 5, the approval process can be lengthy. As mentioned in Section § 2.5, it is important to remember that the publication of a CRL does not signify its finality; anyone can challenge a CRL as long as they provide sufficient relevant visual evidence. If the 501st Legion reviewing committee approves these changes, they will be published alongside or in place of the existing requirements. Some of the items I create for the community can only be produced in batches due to impractical production requirements. For example, I have metal parts that require machining in a professional workshop, with a minimum order quantity. As a result, these batches end up in my warehouse, ready to be shipped. Still, my order quantity does not necessarily reflect the number of units shipped during a given period.

Consequently, some parts may linger on shelves for several months. During this time, there is always the risk that someone may invalidate a CRL and impose new requirements that render these parts obsolete. This situation can lead to significant waste of materials and investments, as I have experienced previously. In her own doctoral thesis, Lauren Debra Boumaroun expertly describes the situation as 'Cosplay production often occurs in semi-industrial contexts where fans invest heavily in batch manufacturing processes. Makers are frequently required to meet minimum orders, particularly for custom parts or machined components, leading to overproduction and storage concerns. This economic model becomes riskier when costuming standards—like CRLs—are updated, rendering previously acceptable items obsolete. Some makers report entire stock runs becoming unusable after regulatory changes by fan organizations.' (Boumaroun, 2023, p. 198).

The costuming community is known for its passionate and almost religious devotion. Ironically, as I advocate for a distinction in terminology, I recognise that by adhering to the prevailing dogma of the 501st community's fervent approach to costume detailing, I may unwittingly contribute to the emergence of an elitist mindset within our craft. This is not to be understood as deliberate

¹⁴ Costume Reference Libraries. Abbreviated CRLs are extensive documents created and published by the 501st Costuming Club. These libraries help members create costumes with the highest level of screen accuracy

gatekeeping to prevent others from joining the community. Instead, I recognise the necessity of redefining what I do and clarifying how my fandom expresses itself. This division also indicates the expectations imposed on my own Public Works by a community that is highly critical and extremely demanding of the costumes. However, this perspective does not fully reflect my journey within my Fandom or the inclusive nature I strive to embody as I reject any sense of toxicity (Appendix IV), a topic that is explored in Chapters 3 and 4.

2.5 The 501st And Costume Reference Libraries.

The majority of my Public Works activities occur within the costuming community, particularly Star Wars-focused groups, and primarily the 501st, which has emerged as the reference organisation. Appendices II and III provide further details about the 501st; however, it is essential to note that it is officially endorsed by Lucasfilm and functions solely on the goodwill of its members, refraining from commercial ventures. This means that my Public Works exist in a grey area where I am permitted to operate within the club's constraints, but not in an official public capacity like companies that have acquired licensing deals. I am not allowed to advertise outside the community or be overly public about the availability of my products, which directly affects how I communicate and interact with the community. I also participate in and support several smaller costuming clubs. These clubs, while smaller, share many traits with the 501st—including shared members and similar club dynamics. As such, experiences in one club often mirror those in others.

The 501st Legion is a worldwide volunteer group focused on creating and wearing screen-accurate costumes of Star Wars villains, as it centres on Imperial characters, requiring all costumes to meet strict guidelines informed by transmedia references. Since its founding in 1997, the 501st has grown into a global network of garrisons and detachments, with members taking part in charity events, hospital visits, fan conventions, parades, and movie premieres. While the Legion portrays villains, its motto is “Bad Guys Doing Good,” emphasising its dedication to service and outreach. Membership is open to anyone over 18 with an approved costume who follows the group's rules, committed not only to their craft but also to making a positive impact through fandom. The 501st Legion is organised in a military-style structure, both in terminology and function, which mirrors the Imperial military hierarchy from the Star Wars universe. In theory, this structure is meant to help manage its large, international membership efficiently and reinforces the in-universe roleplaying aspect of the group.

The Costume Reference Library (CRL) is crucial to the 501st Legion and related clubs like the Rebel Legion, acting as the standardised guide for accurate Star Wars costume building and the basis of membership acceptance. At the heart of the CRL and the Legion lies the concept of accuracy, which, paradoxically, is also the root of much dogmatism within fandom. These dynamics are shaping my Public Works and daily involvement.

CRLs serve to direct both aspiring members and approval officers as joining the club requires members to complete a costume according to CRL standards and have it approved through photo submissions. Each CRL outlines the specific criteria for a character, including background, version, materials, construction, and appearance, along with detailed reference images. Some CRLs feature optional advanced levels of accuracy, where opinions and dogmatism most often surface, as I detail in Chapter 5.

A dedicated team of Legion members authors CRLs, leveraging their expertise and hands-on experience in Star Wars costuming. Their primary role is to standardise guidelines, promoting universal standards of quality and authenticity. Drawing on official Star Wars resources such as production stills and original designers' notes, the CRL Team increasingly benefits from direct outreach to creators, which can uncover new details yet sometimes causes tension between on-screen appearances and official requirements, as outlined in Chapter 5. Community feedback is also integral. Experienced members provide insight and help verify authenticity when adding or updating costumes, making the CRL an ever-evolving resource that is shaped by new media, research, and community engagement. This dynamic process thus significantly impacts my Public Works and provides a useful example for examining the more rigid facets of the fandom in the chapters to come.

2.6 Precision & Belonging: Motivations Behind Replica Costuming

While chapters 3 and 5 interrogate the quasi-religious structure of fandom, the rise of gatekeeping, and the corrosive effects of toxicity, I must briefly introduce the psychological and sociocultural drivers that lead individuals to invest extraordinary amounts of time, money, and emotional labour into creating and wearing screen-accurate costumes as described in Section §2.4.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a starting point for understanding these investments. Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (2000) posit that human motivation is organised along a continuum from controlled (extrinsic) to autonomous (intrinsic), with optimal engagement arising from the satisfaction of three innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In costuming, one might argue that autonomy manifests as the freedom to select, interpret, and embody a character, which is clearly true in cosplay or when dealing with anime/animation characters as discussed in Section §2.4. However, Sections §2.5. and 5.2.7 also explain that autonomy is highly restricted for live-action characters in the costumor world, setting the stage for future tensions and potential toxicity, as covered in Section §4.4 and Chapter 5.

Competence, as approached in Section §1.2.3. emerges through the mastery of complex fabrication skills, and relatedness is fulfilled by participation in a community of practice. Yet, as Jenkins (2013) notes, participatory fandom often blurs these boundaries, with communal expectations and status hierarchies refracting personal motivations through collective norms. To further understand competence, we can turn to Albert Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which elucidates how costuming skills and standards are propagated through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. Members learn not only technical methods but also the community's evaluative criteria, absorbing unspoken rules about what constitutes acceptable accuracy.

As Baym and Burnett observe, 'Expertise in fan communities is often conferred based on visibility and participation, not exhaustive knowledge' (Baym & Burnett, 2020, p. 115). This dynamic creates feedback loops where recognition reinforces effort, embedding motivation within social validation structures.

These validation structures can become the foundational basis of what is often seen as elitism in costuming clubs. Bourdieu's (1991) concept of cultural capital illuminates how costuming functions as a system of distinction. Technical precision, material investment, and esoteric knowledge signal status within fandom hierarchies, converting labour into symbolic capital. As Christina Obmann (2021) notes in her thesis, 'While cosplay promotes itself as an inclusive activity, the perception of 'accuracy' often functions as a gatekeeping mechanism' (Obmann, 221, p. 35). In the 501st, this capital is formalised through Costume Reference Libraries (CRLs), which codify standards and regulate access, a process that mirrors Bourdieu's (1993) description of how cultural legitimacy is policed to maintain group boundaries.

This perceived elitism is further heightened when an aspiring or even existing member finds themselves at odds with the interpretation of CRLs and is temporarily barred from embodying a character. Adam and Galinsky (2012) discuss the act of wearing a meticulously crafted costume as engaging enclothed cognition, which they described as the systematic influence of clothing on psychological processes. For costumers, the garment is not mere apparel but a cognitive scaffold that shapes self-perception, emotional regulation, and behavioural enactment.

This aligns with Lamerichs' (2018) observation that 'Performance in cosplay is often treated as serious, embodied practice... stepping into character is transformative' (Lamerichs, 2018, p. 6). Such transformations facilitate escapism, offering temporary refuge from everyday stressors—a dynamic Baudrillard (1981) might characterise as the consoling allure of hyperreality. These experiences can bolster mental well-being by providing structured, purposeful engagement. Being denied participation may have equally negative effects, possibly exacerbating toxic behaviours between members.

Motivation extends beyond task completion into identity construction. As Hills argues, 'Fan identities are multiple, provisional, and often in tension with one another' (Hills, 2002, p. 34). For many, costuming is not a hobby but a constituent element of selfhood, interwoven with broader narratives of purpose and belonging. The 501st's motto Bad Guys Doing Good exemplifies how identity and social connection converge in philanthropic practice, transforming fandom into a vehicle for civic engagement (Kent, 2019). These connections fulfil relatedness needs identified by SDT, anchoring individual effort within collective meaning.

Dedication in this context is best understood as a normative commitment to precision. The pursuit of screen accuracy is not merely aesthetic but ethical—a devotion to honouring source material through craftsmanship. This mirrors the religious reverence described in Chapter 3, in which fidelity to the canon approaches doctrinal orthodoxy. Yet, as Godin (2024) notes, ‘Costumers are often expected to explain their design choices in exhaustive detail... refining the final product while reinforcing the community’s collective expertise’ (Godin, 2024, p. 8). Precision thus becomes both a personal discipline and a communal expectation.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I will delve into elitism and gatekeeping, which can distort motivation, transforming pride in craftsmanship into exclusionary posturing. When cultural capital is wielded punitively, it discourages newcomers and fragments communities—a process Proctor (2022) links to the weaponisation of canon in digital fandom spaces. Toxicity thus operates as a feedback loop: the more tightly accuracy is policed, the more precarious membership feels, amplifying both dedication and defensiveness among participants.

My community is sustained by a dense interplay of psychological needs, social learning, cultural capital, and identity work. While these motivations can foster deep fulfilment and communal solidarity, they are vulnerable to the same structural tensions that produce elitism and toxicity.

By situating motivation within the thesis’s broader critique of fandom as a para-religious, hierarchically structured social field, devotion to craft is never purely personal—it is always mediated by the communities we inhabit and the standards we inherit.

Against this backdrop, Star Wars Celebration functions as a vital counterpoint. Where digital platforms fracture attention, Celebration consolidates it. Fandom here is enacted physically, producing what Joseph Pine and James Gilmore (2011) term transformational experiences, moments that forge durable social bonds. Attendance operates as a pilgrimage; trooping as a profession of faith. The sacrifices involved, financial, logistical, and temporal, testify to our deep devotion. Official detachment photographs serve as collective affirmations of commitment, while ancillary gatherings enable more granular identity work: as costumers, makers, detachment affiliates, or garrison members.

These rituals extend beyond the convention floor. Racing shirts function as secular habits, visually marking affiliation. Detachment-side events rehearse specialised fandoms. The swag-trade evening functions as an internal orthopraxis, in which patches, pins, and coins circulate as tokens of cultural capital. If Celebration is fandom's Mecca, the club-organised bash is its high mass, and the informal nightly assemblies known as Lobby Con its post-liturgical fellowship. These moments repair the relational fraying produced by digital mediation, allowing misunderstandings to dissolve through presence rather than persist through pixels, as explained in Section § 4.3.

Chapter 3:
The Sacrosanct Star
Wars Fandom

Regimental Officers Costumes are deceptively hard to make
Hong Kong Comic-Con 2026
V. Rondia & S.Uy

Fandom, as noted so far, can be seen as a community of enthusiasts who share a passion for specific aspects of popular culture, in my case Star Wars. They sanctify these interests and express their devotion through various activities, symbols, and sentiments. While fandoms have expanded and become highly organised in recent decades, especially with the advent of social media, Michael Elliott (2018) offers a sociologically nuanced interpretation of this. He argues that Comic-Con and other such events have evolved into a global ritual of sacred significance, representing a holy experience within a secular world. The resemblance to religious devotion is striking. Every year, millions worldwide travel hundreds, sometimes thousands, of kilometres to attend their favourite conventions. Cultural studies and media ethnographer Kimberly Larsen confirms that 'Much like religious adherents, Star Wars fans make annual or biennial pilgrimages to Celebration... where rituals of devotion, collective identity, and storytelling affirm a sacred bond within the community.' (Larsen, 2019, p. 38).

As I write these words, I have just come back from our fandom biennial, the grand liturgy known as Celebration, which took place in Japan and welcomed over 100000 fans from all over the world. Similar to evangelical religions, fandoms have spread globally through what could be described as media missionaries, the export of one culture through the use of media, where Hollywood evangelises the world. Like religious beliefs, fandoms can be a tradition passed down through generations, as many Star Wars fans will agree. Through sharing this passion with our children, we aim to create a special bond. When my son was 3 years old, I introduced him to the SWU, not through the films, but through the special edition Family Guy cartoon. We connected over it, and it became one of his favourite shows to watch with me. When he turned 6, I decided to watch the Original Trilogy with him.

This was another fantastic experience, as he could recognise and name characters. This familiarity made the movie experience even more enjoyable for him. It helped him develop his fandom, something clearly expressed by Melissa Click and Suzanne Scott as they explain how Parents actively curate early fan experiences for their children, consciously selecting moments of introduction. These are more than entertainment preferences—they are sacred rites of passage, bonding rituals between generations.' (Click & Scott, 2018).

When fandoms intersect with other sources of identity, whether denominational, ethnic, or cultural, their ideological significance becomes even more potent. The unwavering dedication of fans across generations since its debut in 1977 is unparalleled. From its early days, fans have wholeheartedly engaged with the franchise, fostering the cosplaying phenomenon before it was given a name. As a global phenomenon, it can transcend any form of societal hurdle.

However, social, religious and economic associations within fandoms have meant that, historically, we may also find traces of a negative influence. I agree with McGuire's (1992) analysis that consensus and conflict are present in religions and fandoms. When religion is particularistic or exclusivist (the only true way), the potential for conflict is greater. This also extends to fandoms, exemplified by Berta Chin and Matt Hills, who asserted in 2018: 'fandom is not a utopian space; it is structured by negotiations over what counts as acceptable pleasure, who belongs, and how difference—race, gender, ideology—is managed, sometimes inclusively, sometimes through subtle exclusions.' (Chin & Hills, 2018, p. 415).

Shared interests and passions can create a sense of community and make individuals susceptible to negative judgment. Like religious communities, dedicated fans may encounter stigma and mistreatment due to their unwavering devotion to their favourite story. This mirrors the experience of feeling marginalised by society for practising one's religion devoutly.

This issue is masterfully portrayed in *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019), where each character discusses their experiences of being bullied for being geeks or nerds during their upbringing and far into their adulthood. For them, their cultural devotions replace traditional religious affiliations, yet both can attract ridicule from mainstream society. This sentiment resonates with many people worldwide. The societal stigma of being devoted or not is thoroughly documented in human history, with some finding it challenging to understand the depth of religious devotion in others and may view it as excessive.

They might wonder how individuals can dedicate so much time to their faith, echoing sociologist and anthropologist Meredith McGuire's assertion that 'In contemporary secular settings, intense religious commitment may be construed as irrational or obsessive, leading others to distance themselves socially from the devout...' (McGuire, 2019, p. 142).

This same phenomenon can be observed in the Fandom, whether you are an outsider or part of the community. Some fans may judge others based on their perceived level of engagement or dedication. This behaviour can be compared to the New Testament parable about donations to the temple (Mark 12:41-44). In this story, those who contribute more significantly are often praised and admired more than those who give less. Fans are expected to engage and invest in the fandom in admirable ways.

However, what is deemed acceptable can be subjective, varying from one group of fans to another. Casual fans may seek to distance themselves from a faction of fans who they believe have taken their enthusiasm for the show to extremes. Star Trek has a long history of contending with self-proclaimed 'true fans' who deeply immerse themselves in the fandom and look down upon others they feel are not devoting enough time to the show. On Saturday Night Live (1986), William Shatner, the original Captain Kirk from Star Trek, acknowledged this issue. The impact of internal fandom stigma on fans should not be underestimated, especially in the digital age, as we will uncover in Chapter 4. Whether it is perceived as toxic or not, this negative aspect of fandom is undeniably on the rise.

Once more, the Star Wars fan community sadly offers a clear example of the abuse, negativity, and even hatred that fans may encounter, as recounted by Jonathan Gray when writing about George Lucas who 'has repeatedly noted that Star Wars was made as a children's fairy tale... The hostility toward The Last Jedi and its actors—especially women and people of colour—shows how participatory culture can curdle into exclusionary toxicity.' (Gray, 2020, p. 225).

The parallels between fandom and religion become increasingly apparent as will be explored in sections §3.1 and §3.2. One should not, however, equate the two. Even as I acknowledge the anecdotal existence of the Church of Jediism, I do not classify my Fandom as a religion. However, an examination in the following Section §3.1 will reveal that both share notable characteristics and can sometimes give rise to quasi- or para-religion. In his 2024 publication, William Bainbridge examines how Star Wars fandom functions as a parareligion that offers meaning, ritual, and psychological solace in secular contexts, shaping beliefs and rituals as 'as secularization threatens the stability of traditional religions, Star Wars provides a case study of how key functions of religion may transfer to innovative organizations and subcultures... fans have turned Star Wars into a parareligion, providing them with a sense of the meaning of life and offering psychological compensators' (Bainbridge, 2024, p. 01).

The positive and negative aspects of fan culture and religion come to light, from the strong sense of community within a fan base to the division and animosity between members and non-members. For me, Star Wars fandom is a compelling example of popular culture mirroring religion, with a large and dedicated global following that faces external challenges and internal conflicts, potentially leading to segmentation, as discussed in Section §5.2. However, I must first discuss the quasi-religious nature of fandom in more depth in the next Section.

3.1 Religiosity & Fandom

To solidify the concept of the Fandom as a quasi-religious community, I must first explore the nature of religion and establish a clear framework for comparing it with the Fandom's activities, interactions, and overall organisation. While many scholars have since expanded on this topic, Glock and Stark's (1965) original work on religiosity is particularly insightful, as it outlines five dimensions of religiosity.

1. The **belief dimension** pertains to a specific theological outlook: believers accept the veracity of certain fundamental tenets and affirm a shared set of beliefs. In the Fandom, this can be likened to the concept of the canon, which serves as the definitive guide to what is considered correct and true—an idea often scrutinised by the most ardent fans —and will guide Section §3.3. The ongoing debates surrounding costume accuracy are fundamental to my practice; the quest for authenticity and absolute truth usually takes on a fervent, almost sacrilegious intensity among the most dedicated costumers and collectors, as I will explain further in Section §5.1

2. In the second dimension, emphasis is placed on **religious practices**, whether they involve public or private acts of worship, ritual, and devotion. In the Fandom, these aspects can be observed through active participation in conventions, online and offline club activities, the collection of memorabilia and toys, and the wearing of attire that signals one's affiliation, such as themed t-shirts.

Engaging in creating costumes and reenacting specific scenes from screenplays could be likened to a form of ritualistic worship, similar to the portrayal of live nativity scenes by churches during the Christmas period. Religious symbolism is also evident in language, with phrases like 'the one' being used extensively in various productions, eventually becoming part of the everyday vocabulary of all fans. Within that first episode of *The Mandalorian* (2019), the main character introduced a powerful creed with the phrase: 'This is the way.' which has been used ad nauseam by all fans, including myself.

Since 2015, I have opened my online shop one week per month under what I have called a wave. Since 2019, I have started announcing the opening of the shop as This is the Wave. The show also brought to life a beloved animated character, Bo-Katan, portrayed by Katee Sackhoff, the actress known for playing Starbuck in the 2004 revival of Battlestar Galactica. Upon hearing 'This is the way,' Bo-Katan identifies him as a fundamentalist within the Mandalorian faith. This resonated with me as it highlighted the broader Fandom dynamics, serving as a meta-commentary and perhaps a subtle critique of the Fandom through a clear allegory for its constant debates between purists and progressives.

3. **Experience**, as a crucial dimension, highlights the significance of feelings, perceptions, and sensations in religious encounters. When the supernatural is defined as phenomena beyond this world, it becomes evident that worldly fandom cannot be categorised as a religion. However, Durkheim (1912) characterises the transcendent as the ability to elevate individuals beyond their selves into a higher order linked to their community or society. By emphasising the subjective nature of these experiences, Durkheim focuses on the collective effervescence integral to the sacred experience, which involves an awareness of something greater than oneself. This is a phenomenon that the Fandom often embodies, sometimes verging on the worship of specific characters or equating their real-life actors with their roles. As I noted earlier in Section §2.4, this dynamic can also lead to the emergence of toxic behaviours between fans and creators, especially as the fandom expands and its membership grows, potentially creating divisive effects, which will be addressed in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

4. The fourth dimension involves an understanding of the fundamental **tenets of faith**, as well as rites, scriptures, and traditions. Engaging in a casual conversation with any Star Wars fan—even those new to the franchise—reveals this profound dimension embedded within it.

This knowledge transcends the films themselves, encompassing a broad spectrum of lighthearted trivia and behind-the-scenes anecdotes, all the way to the most obscure details accessible only through extensive reading of encyclopedias, showcasing the creation of legends and myths - mythologising, by the fandom. This dimension is particularly evident in fans who collect memorabilia akin to symbols of worship or relics and passionately recite facts about their favourite franchise. Due to my specific role, I frequently encounter challenges from fans, whether they belong to the costuming community or not, regarding my knowledge of the SWU. Even within the costume constraints, I have to debate and justify my choices of fabrics, colours, design patterns, materials, stitching types, and all the details that define specific costume parts.

This is particularly true when some people understand the creative process more than others. It led me to remove some costumes, such as the Original Trilogy Imperial officer suit in Feldgrau, a colour that is not universally agreed upon. As a fan, the amount of discussion surrounding this concept seems unwarranted to me, and often appears overly dogmatic in nature. As a maker, compliance with the orthodoxy is expected, and I have little choice but to engage with the tenets written by the 501st.

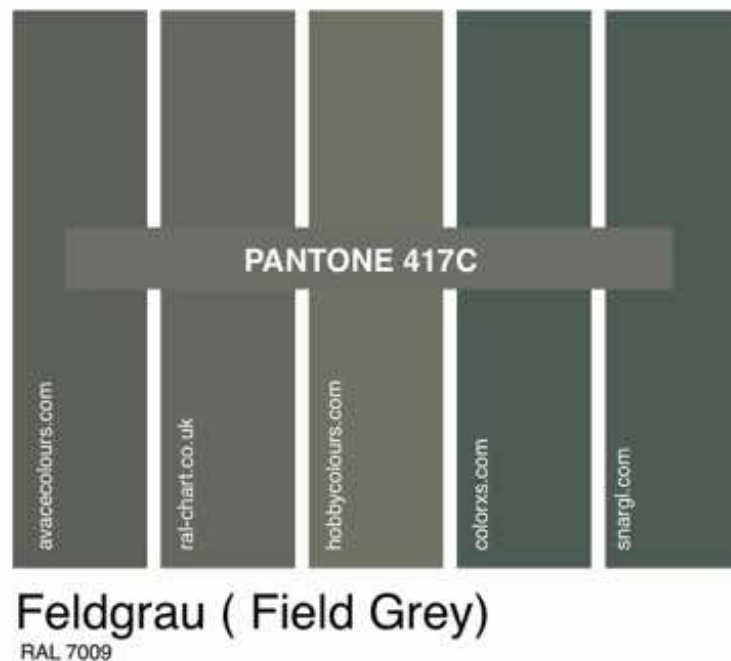


Fig.7: Field Grey the most enigmatic colour in the SWU

5. The final dimension pertains to the **consequences** of the other four dimensions, highlighting how they impact the daily lives of devotees and shape how others perceive individuals devoted to their faith. Not everyone expresses their passion in the same way, and the degree of influence varies from person to person. The significance of religious devotion can differ widely among individuals. This dimension relates to the fandom pyramid discussed earlier in Section §2.4, illustrating how much a particular fandom may influence one's life and daily experiences.

For someone like me, the evidence of my devotion is clear: it has become an integral part of my daily existence, furthering Click and Scott's assertion that many fans schedule family travel around events such as Comic-Con or Star Wars Celebration, embedding fandom into both holiday traditions and everyday routines. These practices represent devotion not as escapism, but as identity. (Click & Scott, 2019).

A parallel between the Fandom and a mode of religious life can be drawn. While exploring fandoms and their influences on contemporary society is a comparatively more recent scholarly endeavour, studying religious communities has a more prolonged historical presence in academia. Therefore, to build a robust argument, I will expand beyond these five dimensions and examine another aspect of religion: the sacred, which has been examined by many ethnographers and social commentators in the 60s and 70s. In his 2021 work, professor of sociology Michael Elliott argues against using fandom and religion interchangeably and advocates the use of sacred instead 'The sacred is not monolithic.

It appears in religious and secular guises alike. We should not expect every dimension of sacred experience to be equally present in fandom—some are more salient depending on the case, and a phenomenon can be sacred without exhibiting all dimensions' (Elliott, 2021, p. 107). He insists that the social sciences should devote more attention to popular culture, viewing it as a fundamental aspect of society that different people can revere in various ways. Elliott provides a guide for clearly identifying, observing, and measuring the presence or absence of the sacred among other fans. He outlines 7 dimensions for determining whether the sacred exists.

1. The sacred is **Not Ordinary** and holds great significance in the life of a fan. I must acknowledge that in my community, its importance and uniqueness may differ based on our position as members and where we stand in our own fandom pyramid. The dedication, time and effort can vary significantly. When I started, I spent nearly three years creating my first costume, investing hundreds of hours in its development and acquiring the skills and expertise needed to complete it. Theresa Winge (2020) writes 'Cosplay is a meritocracy of creativity...the hours invested in sewing, building, and learning specialized skills turn the costume into more than dress—it becomes a sacred artefact of the self, a marker of status within the community.' (Winge, 2018, p. 187).

2. The sacred is also **Holy**. The Fandom applies not only to media content or franchises but also to people and things. A relevant example in the Fandom is the world of collectables. Traditionally, this referred to individuals who collected toys, memorabilia, and autographs from actors. In recent years, it has extended to statues, life-size prop replicas, and original props used in productions, which are proudly displayed in collectors' shrines worldwide and shared through social media or discussion groups dedicated to these particular items. I made the boots for the character in the Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order commercial. One of my requests to the production team was to have a boot signed by the actress who portrayed the character sent back to my studio. Additionally, I have a replica of Darth Vader's glove that I had signed by Dave Prowse, the actor who portrayed Darth Vader in the Original Trilogy.

These, and many others, are prized possessions that I proudly display in my studio, much like Lincoln Geraghty evidence when writing 'The collector's shelf or room becomes a shrine—deeply personal, yet staged for others, especially online. Displaying memorabilia is both intimate devotion and public performance of fandom identity.' (Geraghty, 2019, p. 88).

3. The sacred is a powerful and **Unseen Force**. In this context, the Fandom often has little to offer regarding god-like power. However, the storytelling, characters, and symbolism in the stories can quickly act as an unseen force that helps shape a fan's life. Star Wars fans look towards the franchise's symbolism and the Force's role in binding the universe together. To some, it may seem anecdotal, while others will fully embrace this notion in their daily lives, even leading to the creation of the actual Church of Jedi, as mentioned in Chapter 2. Professor of sociology Adam Possamai observes how the Force, as portrayed in Star Wars, functions as a metaphysical concept for many fans and is sometimes recontextualised as a spiritual framework in daily life, giving rise to real-world manifestations such as Jediism. (Possamai, 2019, p. 162).

This point warrants further elaboration. The division between the sacred and the profane offers a rich framework for exploring human meaning-making. As Mircea Eliade (1957) notes in *The Sacred and the Profane*, humans have a tendency to categorise the world hierarchically, interpreting reality through oppositional lenses. The sacred signifies what is revered and transcendent, while the profane includes the ordinary and that which threatens the sacred order. These binaries reflect a cultural drive to impose meaning and boundaries on experience, particularly evident in online discourses.

In contemporary contexts, the profane is often neglected, as if the sacred could exist independently of it. Ironically, much of the hostility in modern discourse represents a distorted reassertion of the profane. To label someone as “profane” now often implies not just a distance from the sacred, but a condemnation for tainting what others deem sacred—whether religion, culture, or identity. Online, this manifests through angry, degrading language directed at those perceived to disrespect sacred values. This twist shows that the profane has reemerged as a volatile means of enforcing boundaries, allowing communities to reaffirm sacredness by verbally punishing its violators, something evidenced in Section §4.3.

4. The sacred is **Transcendent**; it lives as its own. This emerges from deep and complex sentiments and gives fans the certainty that their particular community is more significant than themselves, effectively allowing them to be and aspire to be a part of something enduring. While the Star Wars fandom may be too broad to be transcendent, parts serve as catalysts. Being a 501st (Appendix II and III) legionnaire is not a casual membership. The same can be said for other prominent costuming groups. Being part of the small community of prop-makers specialising in producing parts for the community also increases the sense of belonging to something beyond myself.

5. The sacred is **Inspiring** traced back to its Latin roots to move the spirit within or refresh the breath of life; it moves fans to change their behaviour. Nicolle Lamerichs explains how ‘Performance in cosplay is often treated as serious, embodied practice. For many, stepping into character is transformative: they navigate the con space with altered confidence, charisma, even a shifted moral orientation’. (Lamerichs, 2018, p. 6). By its inspirational nature, there is an evident overlap with other dimensions, each with its own ability to inspire. However, in this case, one can witness actual behavioural changes, whether periodic or permanent, short or long-term. Many have shared that wearing a costume is a conscious decision to act as the chosen character, whether distant or close to your original self. The most satisfying interactions I have ever had with the public while in costume involved being either a Wookiee or a zombie stormtrooper.

Although these two characters exist inherently at opposite ends of the spectrum—one being a cuddly, furry creature and the other a scary, undead character—both costumes allow for a greater range of acting and engaging with the public.

This is highly inspiring for me as an actor, for all the troopers witnessing the interactions, and for the audience participating in the experience.

6. The sacred provides **Meaning**; it is a source of values and purpose. This dimension is closely linked to the previous one as it connects behavioural changes to a more identifiable reason. Active participation in a fandom can give a fan new meaning or even a different way of life. Being a 501st member comes with a societal responsibility towards charitable work. In recent years, this has also extended to prop-makers like myself, who incorporate this dimension into our work, thereby bringing an additional purpose to our interactions with the community. Paraphrasing Liptak (2022) The 501st Legion (Appendix II) exemplifies how cosplay can transcend entertainment to become a structured, altruistic community—blending craftsmanship, performance, and charitable engagement on a global scale.

The 501st centres around the idea of 'bad guys doing good' by working with charities to advance society in a positive direction while utilising costumes to engage with people. This mission is crucial to many troopers, including prop makers. It is common for prop makers to contribute additional support to charitable actions. Since 2022, I have been making monthly donations to two charities—one in the U.S. and one in the U.K.—that support trans youth. Additionally, the logos of these two organisations are featured on my website. To further support the LGBTQ+ community, I have created a collection of imperial hats featuring the rainbow flag. When I meet openly LGBTQ+ members during my travels, I offer them these hats for free, allowing them to represent their community while in costume. It is also common for prop makers to engage with local clubs by providing donations that are not necessarily monetary but in-kind contributions that support the club's actions or assist members facing disasters or significant losses.

7. Finally, the sacred plays a crucial role in forming individual and collective **Identities**. 'Fan identity is lived at the intersection of race, class, gender, and age, and anchored in material practices—collecting, costuming, and the emotional economies of belonging.' (Click & Scott, 2019, p. 123). It operates within the context of various societal roles and identities, including occupation, marital status, race, age, and gender, influencing and being influenced by them. It also encompasses the intangible impact on an individual's emotions, as well as the tangible manifestations, such as collectables or other material representations.

My Public Works suggests that the dimensions of religiosity and the characteristics of the sacred are part of the Fandom and my community, thus making them an implicit form of religion. I distanced myself from the Catholic Church due to my refusal of a dogmatic view of life. This same mindset allows me to critically examine both my community and my Fandom to identify its darker side, which I would define as dogmatic **fundamentalism**.



Fig.8: The Star Wars Mecca event known as Celebration, and a 501st-only satellite event called the Swag Trade, where members exchange patches and merchandise.

3.2 Transgressions & Fundamentalism

Jaroslav Pelikan from Yale University is a widely recognised historian of Christian doctrine and defines dogma as follows: 'Dogma, in the usage of Christian theology, is a doctrine that has been formally declared binding by a competent ecclesiastical authority; it is not a matter for private reinterpretation by the faithful.' (Pelikan, 2003, p. 27).

In today's vocabulary, a dogma is a principle or set of principles laid down by an authority as incontrovertibly true, something all followers should accept as is. Alongside dogma, canon holds the utmost importance. In literary studies, the concept of canon has expanded to include the body of work by a particular author or any collection of writings recognised or accepted within a specific group. At its core, the idea of a canon emphasises the importance of shared reading experiences, ensuring that individuals draw from the same literary foundation when they engage in discussions. This notion naturally extends to fan communities, encompassing the written and visual works that feature the same group of characters and the entire narrative universe that resides within these works.

Star Wars boasts one of the most intricate canons in fandom. George Lucas is known for his meticulous approach to crafting backstories for every aspect of the franchise, whether they are characters, droids, or planets. This tradition is reflected in the book trilogy 'From a Certain Point of View,' which features 40 short stories delving into the backstories of background characters from the Original Trilogy films. Initially, the Star Wars canon encompassed films, novels, comics, and video games. However, the universe created by licensees expanded significantly, developing the non-canonical Expanded Universe, which grew extensively. Lucas Licensing established the Holocron continuity database to keep track of the vast fictional elements within the SWU.

In 2014, following Disney's acquisition of Lucasfilm, the official canon was restructured to encompass only six feature films: the Original Trilogy and Prequel Trilogy, as well as the animated film *The Clone Wars* (2008) and its companion animated series. Everything else, known as the Expanded Universe, was deemed non-canonical and rebranded as Legends. Post-acquisition, a new division of Lucasfilm was established to preserve consistency and continuity across all future projects in various media formats, ensuring a cohesive canon. This canon now includes a growing range of productions such as films, TV shows, comics, novels, and games, which sometimes incorporate elements from the old Expanded Universe into the new continuity.

In addition to Lucasfilm's official efforts to maintain the continuity of the canon, fans have taken it upon themselves to meticulously document their beloved universe through the creation and upkeep of the well-known Wookieepedia site. As of August 2024, the English-language version of the wiki boasts over 194,000 articles, making it the seventh-largest fandom in terms of article count.

Not all fans have accepted or embraced the new canon. Many have voiced dissatisfaction with abandoning the Expanded Universe or rejecting its integration, citing a perceived disloyalty to the original material and its interpretations. Furthermore, some fans firmly oppose recognising new productions as part of the official canon, leading to a subset of the fandom that acknowledges only some aspects of the official canon as accurate while dismissing the rest. Dogmatic fandom adheres strictly to established and agreed-upon canons. When disagreements arise regarding the various existing dogmas and canons, a more fundamentalist segment of the fandom appears, thus setting the stage for a schism not unlike that of the Christian faith.

In today's technological world, 'Disputes among fans related to casting, preservation of (and fidelity to) various canonical texts, alongside producer/author choices, are not new to fan communities. However, the 'mainstreaming' of fan cultures since the turn of the millennium has granted new possibilities, affordances and greater popular press attention to broader discursive and ideological conflicts within audiences and fan communities, especially on social media and other user-generated platforms.' (Proctor & Kies, 2018, p. 129).

I must then address the modern notion of fundamentalism, which is still associated with a type of conservative religious movement that advocates strict conformity to sacred texts. Religious fundamentalists have taken a progressively stronger stance on their way of life and beliefs; this includes a literal interpretation of religious texts and a commitment to conservative values. Modern Christian fundamentalists believe holy texts to be inerrant and often see the world from a Manichean perspective¹⁵. This perspective thus heavily influences their interactions. In Chapter 4, I share observations of how the current trend in social media platform interactions, where comments tend to be overly binary, affects fandom and reinforces the notion of **fundamentalism**.

¹⁵ A dualistic viewpoint, based on the foundational doctrine of conflict between light and dark, good and evil.

In my working process, exemplified in the appendices, my aim is always to develop a pre-production prototype costume that I feel comfortable sharing with the community through pictures. Although some of the comments dispensed can help refine an accurate costume, their nature, based on yes or no, reinforces the binary interactions people are increasingly accustomed to. It echoes the statements of religious studies experts Heidi Campbell and Ruth Tsuria (2021) in their statement that 'Online religious talk often takes a Manichean shape—endorse or reject—mirroring platform affordances that privilege binary signals (likes, shares, blocks) over sustained nuance.' (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021, p. 88).

In this light, fundamentalism can be understood as a reaction to external pressures driven by a profound fear of cultural 'annihilation', often stemming from modern secular influences. It embodies a cultural survival instinct in response to contemporary economic and cultural shifts. According to Giddens (2000), globalisation and its association with Western values, moral standards, and ways of life are perceived as a destabilising force. The dissemination of Western norms, such as gender and minority equality, freedom of expression, and the advancement of democracy, is seen as a threat to traditional authoritarian power structures and patriarchal dominance. This issue of cultural survival resonates with a segment of the Fandom that has rejected the productions created after Disney acquired Star Wars, claiming it ruined the franchise.

It is noteworthy that a significant portion of this backlash comes from the same group of fans who repeatedly criticise Kathleen Kennedy, the CEO of Lucasfilm, citing her perceived feminist agenda and the promotion of woke culture within the franchise, which is covered in Chapters 4 and 5. In the present context, reflecting on the past decade of culture war, counter-culture war, wokeism, negative nostalgia, and the global rise of right-wing movements, I would argue that fundamentalism is no longer confined solely to religious beliefs. It has permeated our society, becoming a standard model applicable to various social interactions. Moreover, it is often co-opted by different agendas, including its application to social interactions and fandom. I thus choose to use the term **fundamentalism**.

Stuart Sim is Professor of Critical Theory at the University of Sunderland. In his 2005 publication 'Fundamentalist World: The New Dark Age of Dogma', he presents an analysis of the rise of fundamentalism in various social aspects and proposes a universal agenda, which I believe can also be applied to fandoms:

1. Precise transmission of the rules to the next generation is essential.
2. Rules must be universally applicable without room for pluralism.
3. Fundamentalists deny history in a radical and idiosyncratic manner.
4. Embracing a nostalgic vision of a utopian past that never truly existed
5. Men hold dominance, govern, and establish the rules.

Disney's launch of its new Star Wars series, *The Acolyte* (2024), vividly illustrates the deep rift within the fan community, reminiscent of the division sparked by the release of *The Last Jedi* (2017). The series' announcement and its director and cast ignited intense online debates, encompassing a wide range of opinions in favour of and against the series, often rooted in arguments unrelated to its story. The multitude of conversations, comments, discussions, and their varying perspectives suggested that the Fandom has entered a new phase of evolution. This environment has allowed fandomalism to take hold. Given this parallel between religion and the Fandom, I should then be able to utilise Sim's model of five characteristics to assess the presence of fandomalism within the broader fan community.

The Acolyte (2024) created a significant debate regarding its adherence to the established canon. There were apparent disagreements about what should be considered part of the canon, with some dedicated fans recognising only the Original Trilogy as an acceptable canon and disregarding any subsequent content. While part of the cinematic universe, *The Acolyte* (2024) integrates elements, concepts, and characters from games or novels, prompting defensive reactions from fans unfamiliar with these materials. Critics often argue that one should only have to consume the available content to understand. They insisted that since only the Original Trilogy should be considered canon, all derivative content conforms to and is understood exclusively within that framework.

In a professional interview with Luke Dailey¹⁶, we discussed that generational fandom is not solely about age but also about each individual's introduction to the fandom, coinciding with the release of specific material. In this context, the Original Trilogy represents the first generation, the Prequels the second generation, and the Sequels the third generation. With Disney releasing a vast amount of content, some fans may have entered the universe through TV series such as *The Mandalorian* (2019), *Andor* (2022) or *Ahsoka* (2023).

¹⁶ Fifty for 50 video interview of Luke Dailey, Orbital FX, recorded in Durham July 2024

Consequently, different entry points into the Fandom can lead to varying perspectives on the canon. While most people have seen the Original Trilogy at some point, it would be inaccurate to assume that everyone believes it constitutes the only valid canon. Strong disagreements regarding the content being created, even at the level of character portrayal, reflect the deep divisions among fans. At times, categorical rejection of the views and ideas of directors, writers, or producers about a specific storyline, show, or script signifies a lack of tolerance for diverse perspectives.

Proctor (2018) notes how 'Fans themselves often stereotype other fans, especially if utopian visions of fandom are consistently projected onto narratives of inclusion/exclusion.' (Proctor & Kies, 2018, p. 136). These discussions often feature intense language, sometimes even escalating to direct verbal attacks on fans who embrace a more inclusive engagement. Upon delving into numerous online discussion threads, I observed alarming parallels with the imposition of rigid religious doctrines throughout human history. A section of the Fandom has rejected any form of pluralism, be it in the productions or, often worse, in the Fandom itself.

The Fandom is also characterised by a strong nostalgia, which fuels intense discussions. With the release of the Sequel Trilogy's first opus, fans debated whether there was too much fan service in creating a film so closely resembling the original *A New Hope* (1977). The strong resemblance still resonated with many fans, evoking warm nostalgia, ironically leading many to adopt a more exclusive view of the Fandom. The documentary *People vs. George Lucas* (2005) also expands on the nostalgia-stricken Fandom's visceral reaction to the release of the Prequel Trilogy.

However, as Luke Dailey noted in his interview, the second generation of fans enjoyed the Prequels just as much as the older generation had enjoyed the Original Trilogy when they were kids. This suggests that the issue was less about the quality of the films and more about an older generation of fans yearning to reconnect with their past emotional experiences.

The *Acolyte* (2024) introduces new content that addresses a previously unexplored period, shedding light on beloved characters, the Jedi, from a vastly different perspective. This challenges their traditionally revered and pure status in the canon, sparking questions about the sanctity of the Jedi order as cultural historian Sean Guynes (2018) explains 'The Jedi are mythic anchors for fandom. To reinterpret them—to ask whether they were always 'good'—disturbs a sacred narrative economy. For some, this feels like canon heresy.' (Guynes & Hassler-Forest, 2018, p. 237).

Fans familiar with the Expanded Universe have long pondered the rigidity of the order and its role in its eventual downfall. This contradiction is too complex to accept for a specific section of the Fandom. As they only recognise the source material as dogma, the new content does not align with the nostalgic perception of the Jedi that they have cherished for over 40 years.

Finally, the Fandom has traditionally been male-dominated. In the first three seasons of *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019), there were five main male characters for only one female character, reinforcing the perception of geeks and their fandoms as predominantly masculine. As I mentioned in Section §2.3, 75% of the 501st (Appendix II and III) members are male. Since Disney's acquisition and the subsequent leadership change at Lucasfilm, there has been a recurring complaint from a segment of the fandom—though I believe it is unfounded—that Kathleen Kennedy, the CEO, is promoting a feminist and 'woke' agenda.

Chapter 4 will expand, more specifically, when addressing the notion of for-profit clickbaiting. However, this complaint is often accompanied by the argument that it is not a rejection of strong female leadership roles but rather a critique of how they are portrayed, using characters like Princess Leia or Queen Amidala as examples of strong female characters. I believe their wider acceptance is more likely tied to the presence of male characters, which serves as a balancing factor that does not overshadow the patriarchal nature of the story. Leia starts as a Princess needing rescuing. Ironically, her taking charge and becoming the real leader is often overlooked.

Having only one female lead also often encourages fetishisation. In such cases, she is not just a character but represents femininity itself. This dynamic reduces her to an object of fascination rather than a multidimensional figure. Media theorists argue that a single woman in this position is often flattened, viewed through the male gaze of desire. In contrast, the representation of multiple female characters diversifies the portrayal and diminishes the fetishistic charge, allowing for richer representations of female agency. They can exist in relation not only to male counterparts but also to each other, embodying various identities and narrative functions. Princess Leia, as the franchise's primary female figure, became an icon but also a target for fetishisation, exemplified by her 'slave Leia' costume, which blended empowerment with objectification.

With the introduction of more female characters—Padmé Amidala, Rey, Jyn Erso, Ahsoka Tano—the narrative expanded. Femininity in Star Wars evolved from a single embodiment, allowing the franchise to explore women as leaders, warriors, politicians, mentors, and even villains but not without backlash from a subsection of the Fandom ‘Hostile sexism and symbolic racism were both significantly associated with reduced liking of newer, more diverse characters (e.g., Finn, Rey, Rose Tico), indicating that some fans reject these representations—not on textual or narrative grounds, but due to ideological resistance’ (Reysen et al., 2023, p.10).

The concepts of dogma and fundamentalism prompt me to explore the idea of truth and its direct impact on the dynamics of my Fandom. As I implied in Section §1.2.3, some individuals will assert their expertise based on their unique perspectives and relationships with a specific dogma, which may not align with those of others. Chapter 4 will examine how these perspectives are significantly influenced by the rise of digital fandom during the digital dark ages. However, I first need to understand what constitutes truth in this context.

3.3 In Search Of Truth

'What I told you was true, from a certain point of view. Many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our own point of view.'
(Kenobi, *Return of the Jedi*, 1983.).

The statement is arguably the most contentious quote from the Star Wars Original Trilogy. It is now recognised as a retroactive continuity (retcon), a literary device that alters the form or content of a previously established narrative. The broader lesson here is that truth is inherently subjective, shaped by our perspectives, biases, understanding, emotions, and preconceived notions of expertise. Truth is not a fixed concept; it can evolve and change over time. What was deemed accurate yesterday may become obsolete tomorrow, reflecting the progress and evolution that occur over time. As seen in Chapter 2 and Section §2.1, our collective reality, shaped by individual truths and experiences, undergoes daily fluctuations, sometimes occurring gradually or in dramatic shifts. Ultimately, it is an individual's choice to either embrace or resist these changes. Today's challenge lies in the rapid pace of change, making it difficult to adapt, however, the inability to accept or adjust to these changes does not diminish their reality. This creates a conflict between the comfortable truths (usually those based on the past and anchored in nostalgia) and the emerging ones that may be challenging to accept.

For some fans, 'From a certain point of view' is a selective approach to shielding themselves from the changes in the Fandom and clinging to what they perceive as the one accurate interpretation, the dogma to follow and preach. Cultural theorists Keidra Chaney and Raizel Liebler note 'For many fans, canon is less a record of official documents and more a personal narrative of legitimacy. When new material contradicts deeply held memories, fans often dismiss it using adages like 'from a certain point of view'—reaffirming their selective canon as the only authentic version.' (Chaney & Liebler, 2007, p. 52).

In the case of Star Wars, this may refer to the Original Trilogy in its original theatrical release rather than the enhanced 1999 version. The reluctance to embrace new material may stem from wanting to maintain a unique and somewhat papal status in a growing fan community. Rejecting certain aspects of the franchise can also serve as a defence mechanism in heated discussions, allowing individuals to falsely retain their sense of expertise within a narrower scope, exhibiting fundamentalist characteristics.

A subsection of fans frequently expresses frustration over Disney's influence on the Star Wars franchise and its perceived detrimental impact. However, another truth is that this sentiment has been consistent regardless of who is at the helm and only applies to that segment of the Fandom and not the entirety of it. Thus, the fandom is confronted with an existential crisis, a resistance to evolution where fundamentalism becomes the guardian of the sacred and the immutable.

Despite fans' desire for change, considering the enduring divisiveness within the community, especially in these times of oversharing on social media, it is not easy to envision a scenario in which a Sequel Trilogy directed by George Lucas would have been universally embraced. In 1999, George Lucas released the remastered Original Trilogy, which elicited a strong reaction from fans due to the added footage perceived as modifications to the original narrative. Some Star Wars enthusiasts, both at the time and in the present, have been vocal and staunchly opposed to any alterations made to the Original Trilogy, including portraying Jedi as anything other than benevolent priest protectors seen as heretics by many. When Lucas set out to create the Prequels, he openly acknowledged to his team at Lucasfilm. 'I told people at Lucasfilm that they're going to have to face the reality that I am making a film that nobody wants to see, but I want to tell that story. I am more interested in telling the story than I am in just doing a franchise where you tell the same story over and over again.'¹⁷

The release of the Prequel sparked an immediate and harsh backlash from the Fandom, directed not only towards Lucas but also towards the lead actors. Natalie Portman's career was almost derailed, while Jake Lloyd, Hayden Christensen, and Ahmed Best all faced significant criticisms, which took a significant mental toll on each of them, with Best admitting in 2018 that it nearly drove him to suicide. Amongst the chief grievances from unhappy fans, there is the quantification of the Force as an actual biological representation known as midi-chlorians, the extensive use of CGI, what was seen as poor directorial choices and dialogues, and, of course, the character of Jar Jar Binks. This dissatisfaction was often expressed through two scathing sentences: 'Lucas ruined Star Wars' and 'Lucas raped my childhood'¹⁸. However, as a new generation of fans who grew up with the prequels emerged, offering a revisionist history suggests that George Lucas has always been loved and appreciated for making the prequels.

¹⁷ <https://www.cultureslate.com/news/what-george-lucas-said-about-the-prequels-im-making-a-film-that-nobody-wants-to-see>

¹⁸ People Vs George Lucas (2005)

This resistance to change, the conflict of the sacred and the profane, means fans from earlier generations have expressed discontent, pointing fingers at George Lucas and Disney for what they perceive as ruining Star Wars legacy, some holding to the dogma of the Original Trilogy, others including the prequels as their truth. The overwhelming nostalgic tone of *Star Wars: Episode VII — The Force Awakens* (2015) may have responded directly to the prevailing disdain for the Prequel Trilogy among the first generation of fans. In 2019, Mark H. White conducted an online poll of over 5,100 self-identified Star Wars fans, revealing that the median age of first viewing was six years old, with 90 per cent of respondents having watched a franchise instalment before the age of 13. Many fans love this franchise, and their love for it is closely tied to childhood nostalgia and familial bonding, echoing a point already made in Sections §2.2 and §2.4. One's Truth of the franchise instalments is significantly influenced by age. Fans born in the 1960s and 1970s tend to hold the original films in higher regard than younger generations, while those born in the 1990s and 2000s are likelier to enjoy the sequels and prequels.

With more Star Wars content in production, Gen Z is becoming an increasingly important demographic for the franchise as it seeks to expand its influence and ensure a steady stream of profits. A study by Rasmussen¹⁹ on fandom across different age groups revealed that individuals between 19 and 39 generally regard Disney's Star Wars films as superior to the original. Conversely, those aged 40 and above are more inclined to view the Disney instalments as inferior. In her doctoral thesis at the University of West London, Lucy Louise Clarke rightly states, 'Older fans who grew up with the Original Trilogy tend to be more critical of Disney-era instalments, while younger audiences display stronger engagement with the Prequels and Sequels. This reflects insights such as those reported by Rasmussen (2022), which showed audiences under 40 rating Disney's Star Wars films more favorably than older demographics.' (Clarke, 2023, p. 142).

In my Public Works, truth comes from two main areas. As a costumor, I must replicate a costume identical to the one used on screen. It should be regarded as such by the general public and the community I belong to. I will discuss this in greater detail in Chapter 5. As a maker, truth involves following the guidelines established by my community, which are documented in the CRLs²⁰.

¹⁹ https://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/lifestyle/entertainment/march_2023/is_disney_ruining_the_films

²⁰ **Costume Reference Libraries.** Abbreviated **CRLs** are extensive documents created and published by the 501st Costuming Club. These libraries help members create costumes with the highest level of screen accuracy.

However, as will be seen later, individuals can reinterpret these truths based on their experiences, understanding, and perceived level of expertise regarding the particular character being developed or discussed. Victoria Godwin, Principal Editor of the *Journal of Fandom Studies*, elaborates 'Screen-accuracy functions as one axis of legitimacy. The other is procedural fidelity—costumers often cite CRLs as a type of canon, positioning them as sacred guidelines. Within these standards, fans replicate not only the costume but the community's codified truth about it' (Godwin, 2024, p. 6).

Two truths can coexist; one does not negate the other. While designing the boots for *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*, I used assets provided by the project lead from the game itself. The designer aimed to reflect the interior of the boot for consistency in costume design, adding a minimal edge to indicate the inner colour. Lucasfilm approved the boots I created for the official commercial, which, by community standards, are considered canon due to their involvement in an official Lucasfilm production. Upon examining the game's digital assets, I noticed a thin red line on the boots that likely would not appear in traditional production. Consequently, two versions of the same character might exist in the CRLs. If these characters were displayed together, few would notice significant differences in their costumes and armours.

However, since one truth is prioritised, the CRL presents it as the sole truth. While working on her thesis on cultural studies, Dava Simpson noted 'Despite two costumes appearing nearly identical to the public eye, internal standards prioritize one construction over another. These guidelines—enshrined in CRLs—function as authoritative documents, often resistant to reinterpretation, even when alternate versions display equal fidelity.' (Simpson, 2006, p. 84).

In my *Public Works*, where we have undeniable source material to reference for creating accurate costumes, there remains a question about whether we should aim for a representation of what we see on screen or a replica of what was used during filming, a topic discussed in much depth in Chapter 5. The concept of truth cannot be reduced to a simple binary system; it is complex and requires a much more nuanced approach. This brief introduction regarding truth sets the stage for understanding today's digital interactions and how they will impact fans' relationships. It has to be recognised that in entering, interpretation leads to dogma, selection leads to faction-building, and rejection leads to fundamentalism.

Fandoms tend to foster rigid belief systems, which can manifest in trivial debates such as what constitutes a true fan or campaigns against the perceived heresy of contemporary Star Wars narratives by Disney, Lucasfilm, or anyone involved in related projects. Terms like 'gatekeeping' and 'toxic' are now commonly employed within fan communities. At their worst, fandoms can mirror negative aspects of religious institutions, driven by the same 'sinful' inclinations: an attitude of superiority that places oneself above others, a desire for personal validation, and a tendency to seek control over others which, in our modern reality takes place in the digital realm supported by social media as the creed's amplifier in the Digital Dark Ages which is the focus of the next chapter.



Fig.9: Despite being an official publication with detailed pictures of Lucasfilm's own archives, the accuracy of the costumes pictured in this book remains contested by some.

A photograph showing rows of empty blue folding chairs with chrome frames, arranged in a large outdoor space. The chairs are in the foreground and recede into the background, creating a sense of depth. The ground is a light-colored, textured surface, possibly concrete or sand. In the far background, some people are visible, but they are out of focus.

Chapter 4:

The Digital Dark Ages

Waiting for the public to arrive for the panel on costuming
Celebration Japan 2025
empty chairs

Janet Gertz (2000) is an early advocate for data preservation, warning of the risks of a potential digital dark age. This refers to problems arising from obsolete file formats and physical media that require specialised hardware, which may no longer be available, leading to technological obsolescence. Kurt Bollacker (2010) also addressed the issue of data longevity, emphasising the importance of both the storage medium and the ability to interpret the information. More recently, Darrin Zhou and Eric Lau (2023) voiced their concerns about data loss by creating a webpage on the Michigan Daily website and also used archives of a now-defunct Geocities site to build a memorial page reflecting the appearance of the early web. Adrienne Bernhard (2023) compares preserving the Dead Sea scrolls to preserving digital media, underscoring the potential for data corruption and loss on these media, which, despite their modernity, have a limited lifespan. There is a genuine risk that recent and future digital content may become inaccessible, resulting in gaps in knowledge and history that can only be filled by unreliable human memory or word of mouth. Worse still, a false narrative which has been flooding our media could be preserved by a third party.

While many consider the Digital Dark Ages primarily as a data conservation issue, David and I approached it from the perspective of its impact on human interactions.

David was my best friend. We met in college, and despite the distance between us, we maintained a close bond, sharing a unique sense of humour and a love for SciFi, particularly Star Wars. He worked at the university from which we both graduated in Belgium, but sadly passed away during the COVID-19 pandemic. Compounding my grief was the fact that I learn of his passing from a Facebook post by someone I did not know, pushed by a faceless algorithm. In 2018, we discussed his frustration with teaching basic computer and Office skills to first-year university students. He could not help but notice how, as a society, we had gained unprecedented access to information, yet there was a general lack of skills to utilise it effectively.

We felt that the world, in general, was less well-informed. Having abundant information did not necessarily mean we were better off. Instead, it made it challenging to process. While some used it to become more educated, others used it to spread misinformation. We discussed at length Brandolini's Law, '—also called the Bullshit Asymmetry Principle—reminds us that the energy required to refute nonsense is orders of magnitude greater than that required to produce it. This asymmetry shapes how science denial, and fan-community myths, persist.' (McIntyre, 2021, p. 62).

Thus, if this exists in all areas of digital communications, narratives can spread quickly, and fan theories or claims can become established as truth within the communities, as I discussed in Section §3.3. Correcting them is challenging, especially once they've been emotionally internalised. We both agreed to refer to it as the rise of the Digital Dark Ages. Professor of Media Studies Siva Vaidhyanathan (2018) notes, 'We are in an epistemic crisis. Our communication infrastructure now rewards the loud, the manipulative, the performative—while sidelining the truthful and reflective.' (Vaidhyanathan, 2018, p. 186). I have observed this phenomenon in my community's digital interactions, which in turn directly affects my Public Works, beginning with the concept of expertise in my field.

4.1 Revisiting Expertise: False Prophets

It should be a common realisation that, as humans, most of us do not possess the same level of knowledge as experts in their respective fields. However, we often perceive ourselves as knowledgeable in certain areas, specifically when others recognise us and grant us the title, thus emphasising that expertise is frequently defined by others' perceptions rather than our actual knowledge. Among my family and friends, I am considered the go-to expert on all things related to Star Wars, and my opinions on the subject are highly regarded. Yet, the reality is that my expertise is confined to only a specific segment of the franchise: screenplay. Proficiency in one area does not translate to overall expertise in the subject matter, even if it is mistakenly regarded that way. Likewise, expertise in one domain does not imply expertise in all domains, as reiterated below.

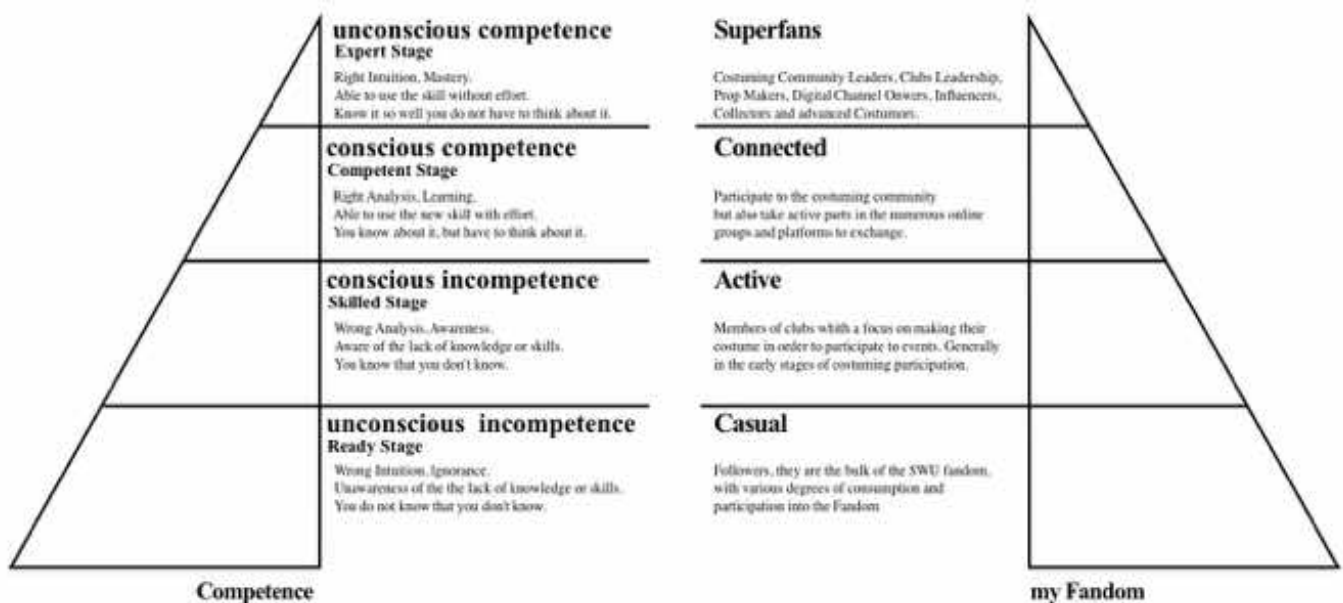


Fig. 10: One could see perceived competence as a result of mapping it to the pyramid of fandom.

Baym and Burnett pioneered the notion of fans as productive cultural intermediaries in digital and participatory contexts and explain that 'Expertise in fan communities is often conferred based on visibility and participation, not exhaustive knowledge. Many fans are seen as authorities on specific niches, even while admitting gaps in other areas.' (Baym & Burnett, 2020, p. 115).

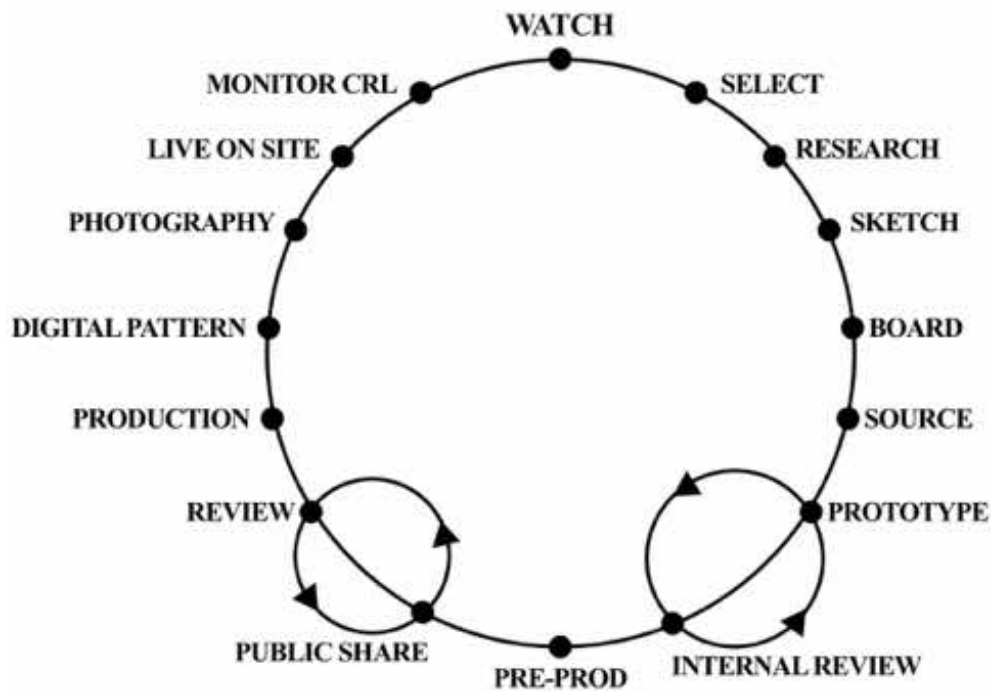


Fig11. The working process to release a new costume involves releasing either a single part or a complete set of parts.

Upon the introduction of the Acolyte (2024) character Qimir, who uses a unique metal to deflect a lightsaber, I was intrigued. This led me to delve into my encyclopedia in search of information on the alloy known as Cortosis. I discovered it appeared throughout the Star Wars Legends and the current canon, but it had never been showcased on screen. As I continued researching this, my expertise expanded. However, I noticed many self-proclaimed experts expressing discontent online, claiming that introducing a new metal tarnished the lore, adamantly arguing that lightsabers were unbeatable and nothing could surpass them, especially not a newly introduced metal. They were showcasing their ignorance of the much more considerable knowledge produced in transmedia while retaining a very fundamentalist attitude towards introducing this new form of weaponry. Knowledgeable individuals or experts with a comprehensive understanding of a particular subject tend to be more aware of their knowledge limitations. As introduced in Section §1.2.3, true experts tend to know what they do not know. They clearly understand the correlation between the vast amount of information available in their field and the acquisition of knowledge. As a result, they are better equipped to evaluate the scope of their expertise within this extensive body of knowledge.

Every time I decide to create a new costume, I undertake a thorough exploration of the character. This deep dive helps me acquire enough knowledge to confidently answer questions about the character and explain my design choices. The community expects me to justify every decision. However, even with extensive research, I cannot be sure that my designs are flawless.

This uncertainty arises from having different access to resources compared to others, and because my primary focus is on screen accuracy for costumers as opposed to that of collectors, which I will discuss in Section 5.1. When I share pictures of a pre-production item, I feel reasonably confident I have achieved screen accuracy. Still, I often receive comments and feedback pointing out potential flaws or areas for improvement. These interactions can lead to lengthy discussions as we work towards finding a common ground. In some cases, they may lead to unsolvable disputes with the answer left pending until the publication of the official CRL²¹. Godwin (2024) points out 'Costumers are often expected to explain their design choices in exhaustive detail. Posting a work-in-progress photo can invite a deluge of commentary and critique. These conversations not only refine the final product but also reinforce the community's collective expertise.' (Godwin, 2024, p. 08).

Hills explores expertise through what he terms 'subcultural capital' within fandom, highlighting how individuals accumulate social status, or 'fan capital,' by showcasing their knowledge, expertise, or dedication to a particular fandom. 'Fan cultural capital... is deployed in the legitimisation of one's tastes and in the status hierarchies of fandom... Fans compete to be 'better' fans, more knowledgeable, more connected.' (Hills, 2002, p. 46). This subcultural capital plays a significant role in shaping hierarchies within fan communities, where levels of commitment and authenticity can influence one's social standing.

The recognition of our skills and unique qualities by others naturally boosts our self-esteem and legitimises our pursuits. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in the digital realm, with likes, thumbs up, hearts, and general approval from followers serving as forms of validation. There is no reason to believe that a similar dynamic does not exist within the costuming community, where individuals seek approval from their peers based on the quality of their costumes.

²¹ **Costume Reference Libraries.** Abbreviated **CRLs** are extensive documents created and published by the 501st Costuming Club. These libraries help members create costumes with the highest level of screen accuracy.

In this space, many focus on cultivating an image of expertise in specific characters or mastering the necessary tools and techniques for completing costume projects, such as vac-forming, resin casting, and garment construction.

Social media's role in amplifying fandoms is critical, particularly regarding fans who leverage platforms to build expertise and influence. Sternheimer (2021) address the shift towards online influence, where fans can establish themselves as authorities in costume crafting, lore knowledge, and character portrayal.

Platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok provide a stage for cosplayers to demonstrate their expertise, build a following, and impact broader fan culture. Over the last 10 years, I have carefully built strong ties with the community and established a reputation for quality work and solid support for anyone purchasing items from my brand KeepTrooping (Appendix I). This reputation reflects my dedication to my daily work, ensuring that everything meets expectations, and it also comes with significant responsibility. I have developed a status as an expert costume maker, leaving me with very little room for error when adding items to my website.

This reputation was not a conscious decision on my part. It is the result of the quality of my work, aligning with the assertion that fans no longer merely consume media; they produce it, curate it, and share it with a global audience. In doing so, they gain cultural capital, especially when producing high-quality, screen-accurate materials. Their social media followers confer legitimacy, sometimes transforming fan labour into full-time reputation economies (Booth & Kelly, 2013, pp. 62–64).

The proliferation of misinformation on the internet has mistakenly led many individuals to perceive themselves as experts in specific fields. With modern algorithms in place, people often gravitate toward and embrace information supporting their beliefs, perpetuating inaccurate claims and content. With the potential to reach vast audiences, individuals feel emboldened to assert their opinions, often disregarding factual evidence. This phenomenon has fostered a sense of self-assurance in individuals lacking proper credentials or comprehensive education, contributing to the widespread belief in personal expertise.

The ease of sharing opinions online can lead people to believe that their views carry weight, despite a lack of extensive knowledge or credentials, according to Maverick, with 'Individuals with no formal training or expertise can accrue considerable social capital by stating bold or contrarian opinions that resonate with niche audiences, particularly when amplified by algorithms designed to maximize engagement.' (Marwick, 2021, p. 03).

Social sharing and 'likes' can further inflate that sense of expertise. Current algorithms used across the internet also provide us with content related to our preferences, thereby increasing our confirmation bias and leading us to feel more knowledgeable than we actually are. The Dunning-Kruger effect is a cognitive bias wherein individuals with limited knowledge or skill in a specific area tend to overestimate their competence and expertise without realising the full extent of their ignorance. This bias can create a feedback loop, as individuals who believe they are experts often struggle to accurately assess their own limitations, leading to a cycle of overconfidence.

In today's digital landscape, expertise is frequently perceived as synonymous with influence rather than knowledge. Whether they are referred to as influencers or KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders), individuals are observed with limited experience dispensing financial advice, setting fashion trends, and fitness enthusiasts whose expertise stems from carefully choreographed workout videos rather than substantial training or advising others on weight loss without having a proper dietitian degree.

Through skilful marketing and branding, some individuals elevate their profiles to the point where they amass enough followers to legitimise their opinions over factual information. This phenomenon has been masterfully exploited by controversial figures such as Andrew Tate²², Ben Shapiro²³, and Alex Jones²⁴ to promote their erroneous claims. Jason D. Nuechterlein, whose research focuses on digital misinformation and information literacy, confirms 'The mechanisms of online validation—likes, shares, followers—often give rise to a false sense of expertise.

The more an opinion circulates, the more legitimacy it seems to hold, particularly within algorithm-driven echo chambers.

²² <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-64125045> Who is Andrew Tate? The self-proclaimed misogynist influencer

²³ <https://encyclopedia.pub/entry/38083> Ben Shapiro Biography

²⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alex-Jones> Alex Jones Biography

This phenomenon, combined with Dunning-Kruger tendencies, amplifies misinformation through unqualified but confident influencers.’ (Nuechterlein, 2021, p. 226).

Studying the organisational structures within fandoms, especially the hierarchies based on expertise, can highlight how influence circulates. Fan leaders often rise to prominence through the consistent creation of high-quality content and effective community engagement. They wield significant influence over trends, narrative interpretations, and fandom conflicts, echoing Jenkins’ ideas on the ‘participatory hierarchy.’ In her essay “Conversation on Studying ‘Toxic’ Fans” (2018), Scott describes how regular and prolific contributors—through fanfic, fan art, event organisation, or social platforms—command interpretive authority, shaping both canon debates and community norms.

However, acquiring actual expertise is challenging, particularly in areas with limited academic exposure that might offer formal training to further one’s knowledge and skills. Sustaining expertise is an ongoing effort that demands continuous learning, updating, and upgrading of knowledge. It took me a decade to establish a reputable profile in the Star Wars costuming community and within the context of my Public Works. This continuous pursuit has led me to become one of the few members worldwide who have crafted over 50 approved costumes in the 501st (Appendices II and III), solidifying my status as an expert both as an individual creator and a reputable brand. Failing to maintain and develop my prop-making skills and deepen my knowledge of the SWU could cause my expertise to wane. If a person’s fan capital is associated with perceived expertise, they may assert a powerful, dominating perspective in their area, at least among their followers.

Individuals who knowingly lack expertise while manipulating public perception to exert influence for personal gain have the intent to deceive. To me, intent is how I would define false prophets. Social media influencers, such as the Tate brothers, may fit this profile. Within the broader Star Wars fandom, I can observe influential individuals using their platforms and followers to promote perspectives on the SWU that serve their interests. The intent behind this manipulation is clear, and I would categorise these figures as false prophets as well.

However, as will be discussed in Chapter 5, Section §5.1, even without nefarious intent, the consequences for the community can still be negative.

4.2 The Digital Flock

'Digital fandom marks a shift: fans no longer just consume; they negotiate, play, and retell. In digital spaces, fans gain unprecedented control over their own narratives.'
(Booth, 2015, p. 35).

The digital flock encompasses all fans who engage with content and interact online. As an individual consumer, I am part of this community. As a content creator, I contribute to it, even though my intended audience remains limited and without the monetisation scheme typically associated with. Participating in digital fandom is increasingly challenging, as it can negatively impact my daily life. Platforms like Facebook and Instagram require frequent interactions, and navigating the considerable amount of negativity can be mentally taxing. Society has a deep desire to share communal experiences, even in a digital world, and the same is true for religious congregations as discussed by Campbell and Tsuria when writing 'Religious adherents have shown a remarkable adaptability in utilizing digital platforms to cultivate community, participate in rituals, and sustain spiritual intimacy—demonstrating that communal religious expression remains a core desire, even when mediated by technology.' (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021, p. 95).

Engaging with fandom has never been easier. One of the main benefits of online fandoms is their ability to reach people worldwide. Fans from different backgrounds, languages, and locations can unite, overcoming geographical barriers to celebrate their shared creed. Jenkins discusses as early as 2006 'The capacity to search out like-minded people, to share creative responses and paraphernalia, to connect with traditions of cultural activity—all without being physically co-present—has transformed fan culture into a globally networked phenomenon.' (Jenkins, 2006, p. 03).

Online fandom comprises two essential components: creators and consumers, or the flock. Traditionally, creators are the driving force behind new videos, articles, pictures, and content. On the other hand, consumers provide the much-needed audience that creators rely on to share their work. Both roles are crucial in fostering a vibrant online fandom community as described by Suzanne Scott (2021) 'Fan communities today are sustained by affective alliances formed through social media. Each post, theory, or remix is not just expression—it is a relational node, tying fans into participatory networks where consumption and production blur..' (Scott, 2021, p. 122-123).

While creators generate content as passionate individuals or professionals, consumers spend their time digesting it. Content consumers may engage passively by simply scrolling through content or actively by sharing, liking, and commenting on the content they enjoy or dislike.

The dynamics of creation and consumption are greatly influenced by expertise, which either side of the equation may possess in part or whole. The Star Wars fanbase is known for its remarkable level of engagement. Derek Johnson, whose work focuses on transmedia narratives and participatory industries, further highlights how 'Star Wars fans are some of the most intensely engaged consumers of transmedia content, engaging in everything from books and animated series to collectible merchandise and video games. This expansive engagement stems largely from online platforms that facilitate discussion, debate, and dissemination.

Yet, this intimacy with a corporate product often comes at a cost, as fans wrestle with the tension between passion and commodification.' (Johnson, 2021, p. 205). Anyone sitting behind a keyboard may feel like an expert and have the tools that can make their voice heard and amplified, becoming a prophet, a saviour, a crusader, an agent of evil or the devil itself. These interactions can be misleading, especially given the significant influence of the Star Wars fanbase, which generates strong emotional connections among hundreds of millions of enthusiasts. It wields considerable sway and serves as an impactful influencer and critic.

Reboot phenomena, and narrative continuity specialist William Proctor clearly warns us that 'Online fandom, especially in the Star Wars universe, has increasingly blurred the boundary between creator and consumer. Fans engage not just in consumption but critique, often wielding perceived expertise to amplify opinions on social media. This democratization of commentary has allowed anyone to emerge as an influential voice, shaping reception and even production decisions.' (Proctor, 2023, p. 133).

Over the last three decades, Hollywood has increasingly shied away from taking risks, prioritising high returns and minimising potential losses. Consequently, film studios have leaned heavily on adapting beloved stories with built-in audiences, relying on established fandoms. The digital landscape has transformed the power dynamic between creators and their fans. Previously, studios, directors, and authors wielded significant control over their intellectual properties.

Today's online fandoms are passionate and vocal, capable of shaping storylines, inspiring character development, and even revitalising discontinued shows. Even traditional studios 'mitigate risk by turning to stories with built-in audiences—those with active fandoms that serve as evangelists and collaborators. These digital communities influence development choices, contribute to promotional efforts, and help resurrect or redirect content through social engagement.' (Jenkins et al., 2020, p. 121).

The impact of fandom in contemporary society has grown significantly, influencing global trends in consumption. The widespread use of social media and the expansion of the cultural industry have amplified this influence. Some digital entities seek to capitalise on the dynamics of the Star Wars fandom and its deep emotional connections to generate revenue through clickbait. While some creators produce relevant and enjoyable content, others have gained prominence through low-quality productions that fail to enhance the overall experience and, at worst, contribute to a divisive atmosphere, potentially intensifying emotions needlessly and promoting the idea of the community's toxicity.

The production of videos and posts heavily criticising every new Star Wars release, asserting that the franchise has lost its way due to efforts towards modern inclusivity and diversity, perpetuates a cycle of negativity that further fuels hostility within the fandom, which mirrors the rejection of inclusivity by the most hardened fundamentalist religious factions around the world. While their content is financially lucrative, it fosters a divisive atmosphere that distances more moderate and casual fans. Social media has normalised negative fandom behaviour, possibly even encouraging it. Because the internet was designed to allow anonymity, lack direct consequences, and empower people to react immediately without filters, toxicity has become a logical byproduct.

Fandom circles have long been using the # tool as a form of group activism, most notably in the #Boycott movement, where fans are called not to participate, and the more recent #NotMy hashtag, which indicates that a new production does not align with their previous fandom. When *The Last Jedi* (2017) was released, Kelly Marie Tran, who portrayed Rose Tico, was chased off social media due to harassment after the film's debut. It sparked the hashtag #RoseTicoDeservedBetter.

In his 2024 in-depth article, Seth Abramovitch covers how Gina Carano, known for her role in *The Mandalorian* (2019), faced significant backlash from a segment of the fan community due to her clashes with Disney's corporate culture. Her frequent controversies, stemming from contentious tweets and Instagram posts on topics such as COVID-19 vaccines, masks, Black Lives Matter, and the transgender rights movement, as well as her comments on the 2020 presidential elections, led to widespread criticism and sparked the then-Twitter campaign #FireGinaCarano.

The Boba Fett character's few appearances and limited lines in the films were still enough to elevate his status among a section of fans who embraced him as one of the most important characters of that era. Many original fans were disappointed by his limited presence in *Return of the Jedi* (1983), and many were less than impressed by what seemed to be his untimely demise in a scene that, in my opinion, felt extremely silly. This sentiment is mirrored in Will Brooker's (2020) words 'Boba Fett's cult status is a fascinating contradiction—he barely speaks, has limited screen time, and yet has inspired generations of devotion. Fans were divided when his unceremonious fall into the Sarlacc pit ended his arc in a scene many found anticlimactic, even farcical. Yet that very ambiguity helped him endure, open to reimagination.' (Brooker, 2020, p. 89).

Fett had been teased in the first season of *The Mandalorian* (2019) and appeared again in the second season, much to the delight of many. However, some fans began to comment negatively on his new appearance, particularly the colour scheme of his armour and helmet, lamenting that it was not the same as the original. I was fortunate to discuss it with the artist, Trevor Henley from Legacy Effects²⁵, who took on this challenge. It became clear during our conversation that the negative comments had a significant impact on him. Although he is justifiably proud of his work, it was undeniable that the extreme reactions from a dogmatic segment of fans regarding the colour scheme pushed him to disengage from the community. 'The reappearance of Boba Fett in *The Mandalorian* and later in *The Book of Boba Fett* was a moment of triumph for many, yet quickly devolved into critique from purist factions. Some fans harshly targeted changes in the character's armor—particularly color schemes—as deviations from 'canon.' These hostile responses were not only publicly visible but also emotionally damaging for those behind the scenes, several of whom chose to reduce or end their public-facing roles.' (Proctor, 2023, p. 173).

²⁵ Oscar nominated, Emmy winning FX Studio. Entertainment's most iconic creatures, characters, and visions brought to life by industry leading artists, designers, engineers & innovators. Interview on site in Los Angeles - November 2023

The release of *The Book of Boba Fett* (2021) led to significant disenchantment within the larger community regarding the novel, portraying a character many fans had strong expectations for. The near-redemptive nature of the character didn't resonate with many, as it clashed with their established dogma surrounding Boba Fett. If fans could not accept a new paint job on his helmet, it was unlikely they would agree to its near-redemptive story arc.

The major difference in how fans interacted with a specific character during the release of the Original Trilogy compared to today is the shift from physical interactions to digital ones. Back then, fans connected through in-person meetings, played with toys and created their own stories together. Today, much of this interaction has moved to the digital realm. 'Earlier generations of fans gathered at conventions, wrote zines, or traded action figures—forms of engagement grounded in physical presence. Today's fans connect in online forums, through memes and livestreams. This digital shift, while expanding access, has also abstracted interaction: we're more connected than ever, yet rarely face-to-face.' (Booth, 2021, p. 44).

The Redemption of Jar Jar Binks is a six-episode podcast from the TED Audio Collective that masterfully retraces the specifics of the fan backlash following the release of *The Phantom Menace* (1999). It examines how the emergence of online interactions during the early stages of the internet influenced people's responses through bulletin boards, forums, and various websites, emphasising the forgotten reality that there are real people behind the screens who may suffer severe consequences from what is often perceived as mere joking. In Section §2.1, I briefly mentioned how this creates a cycle in which toxicity may inadvertently incentivise our consumption, similar to the rivalries among 24-hour news networks vying for our focus to enhance their advertising revenues. As these networks transitioned from mere news reporting to opinion-driven content, the fabrication of outrage, a disconnect in reporting styles, and opposing viewpoints that challenge the truth became all too evident—all of which fuel divisions and ultimately seep into online interactions.

Even more concerning is the increasingly transactional nature of digital interactions, where, rather than fostering organic engagement, today's platforms optimise for data extraction and monetisation. 'This algorithmic curation alters the fan experience, subtly pushing communities from shared spaces of meaning-making to transactional loops of content delivery.' (Jenkins et al., 2020, p. 148).

There's no escaping the necessity of social media for connecting and engaging with the community, but it has its drawbacks. These platforms use algorithms to maximise user engagement—and profits—by promoting content that creates strong emotional reactions, keeping us online longer for advertising revenue. Fear and anger are potent triggers because they activate what psychologists refer to as the 'fight-or-flight-or freeze' response. Shoshana Zuboff exposes how corporations like Google and Facebook commodify human experience into behavioural data markets 'social media platforms are not neutral conduits for connection; they are designed to capture human attention and convert it into behavioral surplus for commercial gain. Engagement metrics do not reward meaningful conversation but prioritize emotional arousal—especially fear and outrage—because these emotions are proven to prolong user activity and increase ad revenue.' (Zubof, 2019, p. 245).

The techniques used by social media platforms to capture and retain attention are reminiscent of historical methods employed by religious institutions. Both rely on strategies that emphasise visceral and emotional experiences, reinforcing a cycle of dependence on the content provided. Michel Foucault (1977) examined how institutions wield power by inducing specific emotional responses, such as fear. He argued that these institutions employ technologies of power to control individuals by regulating their behaviours through fear and moral obligation. Similarly, media scholars contend that social media platforms utilise 'algorithmic amplification' techniques that promote divisive content to sustain user engagement for monetisation purposes. At the same time, our attention becomes a currency for influencers.

Consequently, it is natural for the false prophets highlighted in Section §4.1 to use these methods to profit from fans while increasing division, threatening to break the bridges formed by our shared fandoms. While fandoms can unite people regardless of race, gender, beliefs, and politics, heightened tension can as easily fragment these communities. External pressures can intensify this toxicity, driving fans to engage in increasingly negative interactions and become toxic themselves.

One significant aspect of being part of the digital flock is the tendency to lose the sense of personal connection, as I become merely part of a large group of digital individuals. In my experience, every face-to-face interaction with fellow troopers or fans has always led to good-hearted conversations, even in the face of disagreements, and never to open conflict.

Meeting someone or discussing a topic in person transforms the interaction, while being part of the digital flock often allows individuals to shed some of the social filters we have been taught are essential for engaging constructively with others. This can lead to dehumanisation in language and how we perceive the people or entities we interact with. I make it a point to sign my emails as Vincent to emphasise that I am a person. Despite being known as KeepTrooping (Appendix I), I want people to remember that, first and foremost, I am a trooper among them, hoping to better manage the potential of the flock's toxicity as explained in the next Section.

4.3 The Toxicity Of The Digital Flock

The boundary between our real and digital lives has blurred, and it is unlikely to be restored. Changes in society, seemingly unrelated to discourse dynamics, allow individuals to confront distressing topics. Consequently, global social issues shape community discussions. During the 2024 American presidential election, my Facebook timeline was filled with posts from the 501st, expressing support for or opposition to the Trump campaign. Although most posts came from the US, comments included a diverse mix from around the world, sparking tensions that sometimes led to individuals becoming estranged over differing political beliefs. I have strong opinions on the global political landscape, but I often refrain from sharing them online, as I find few meaningful outlets for discussion. Of course, I also worry about the impact of publicly sharing my personal views and how it could affect my Public Works. I fear I might alienate a portion of that community by expressing my feelings about the current situation.

In June 2024, to celebrate Pride Month, I changed my website logo to the colours of the pride flag and offered members a free imperial hat featuring the rainbow flag. Although I received no negative feedback and many people took up the offer, I still felt uneasy. The following month, I noticed a drop in transactions on my website, prompting me to wonder if these events were linked. I cannot confirm a direct connection, as other factors likely contributed to this decline. Economic uncertainty, stemming from election cycles, the Trump presidency, and ongoing instability in the U.S., may have led people to become more cautious. Natural disasters across the country also affected spending and sales. In June 2025, despite my usual display of LGBTQ+ support on my site, I noticed renewed enthusiasm in sales. I attribute this to the acclaimed conclusion of the final season of *Andor* (2023) and a strong interest in several new costumes from the series that I had just released.

The chaotic atmosphere surrounding the new presidential administration possibly influenced my community's mood. Regardless, I do see the potential of issues such as described by Jenkins (2020) 'Posting an opinion online—whether political or related to a fandom—can quickly escalate into broader professional consequences. Digital interactions are never isolated; algorithms amplify polarizing statements, and community reactions can bleed into real life. People have lost jobs, been doxed, or had professional relationships strained due to a single tweet or group post.' (Jenkin et al., 2020, p. 167).

The current trade war and tariffs imposed by the United States have created a greater sense of uncertainty and unease, which has directly affected my ability to operate. I am in a situation where I must spend significant time seeking new solutions to ship my products to concerned individuals in the United States. This effort comes at considerable trouble and cost, as I aim to avoid the unrealistically high tariffs that could nearly triple the cost of my products upon arrival. More importantly, beyond these logistical issues, I have to contend with the psychological impact of the constant risks that individuals face when purchasing items from abroad.

The fluctuating status of tariffs—changing from on to off and back again—means that it is never certain whether they will be implemented or if a package will be affected. Additionally, given the uncertain economic situation, rising prices of goods, and the impact on job stability, I anticipate that the participative nature of fandom will be tested, as people may be less willing to spend on their passions to ensure that their everyday lives remain stable. We will review more of these external pressure points in Section §5.2.1.

As mentioned in Section §4.2. The fandom has become increasingly divided on issues such as diversity and representation. This division has led to some fans rejecting and antagonising those who advocate for inclusion, be they fans or media creators. My Fandom, and by extension, my Public Works, constantly face this divisive nature, which can be psychologically devastating if not appropriately addressed.

In recent years, toxic behaviours have included personal attacks, harassment, and even threats of violence from fans towards other fans. It can be disheartening to see some fans taking their passion to an extreme by engaging in harassment and hostility toward creators, fellow fans, and even the actors involved. Misogyny, bigotry, racism, and hate speech are all indicative of toxic fan behaviour, often leading to disputes over media interpretations and character preferences. In her 2024 Variety interview, Kathleen Kennedy confirmed, 'Operating within these massive franchises now, with the influence of social media and the heightened level of expectations - it is daunting.' Kennedy further expressed, 'I believe many women who enter the Star Wars realm struggle with this reality more. Due to the predominantly male fan base, they often face intense personal attacks.'

According to Luke Skynet (2023), a 2018 study conducted by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 42% of Star Wars fans reported experiencing online harassment or abuse, with 23% of those targeted citing gender as the primary reason. The study also revealed that women were more likely than men to experience online harassment and were often targeted based on their views about Star Wars.' As I mentioned in Section §2.3, I need to recognise that 75% of the 501st costuming community identifies as male. Designing or producing garments for a biologically female body type is quite different from that of a male in terms of proportions, sizing, and the emphasis on specific body parts that are crucial for achieving the right fit. 'Costuming communities like the 501st reflect broader gender dynamics within fan culture. While Star Wars fandom has a substantial female following, institutional fan groups remain male-dominated, shaping design priorities and representation. Female fans and makers have often had to adapt or advocate for costumes that acknowledge different body types, creating space for inclusion through creative tailoring and unsanctioned builds.' (Scott, 2021, p. 158)

In 2024, I introduced a basic set of measurements that must be provided upon purchase to ensure the selected size is accurate. Troopers must also choose a body type—either masculine or feminine—so we can understand how the sizing and measurements will fit that particular trooper. As of 2025, I have also launched a fully tailored service that allows anyone to submit complete measurements, enabling us to create tailor-fitted costumes. This has addressed concerns regarding the design for female bodies and has enhanced our efforts to promote inclusivity, both in the real world and online.

The Last Jedi (2017) faced significant criticism from right-wing content creators, many of whom gained popularity by expressing dissatisfaction with the film. The YouTuber called 'Geeks + Gamers,' who now has nearly half a million followers, initially praised The Last Jedi. However, he later deleted the video and began criticising the film for financial gain, seemingly erasing his previous positive stance. Another popular (and contested) YouTube channel, Star Wars Theory, sparked controversy when interviewing pop psychologist Sadia Khan, who claimed that 'women do not even like Star Wars.' This statement garnered widespread attention from major media outlets, including Rolling Stone and NBC News. Despite initially endorsing Khan's perspective, Star Wars Theory faced opposition from female fans and others who vehemently disagreed that their love for Star Wars was somehow invalid. Proctor (2022) confirms 'The Last Jedi's release sparked a potent backlash, with the #NotMyStarWars hashtag crystallising a segment of fans who felt

betrayed by shifts in character arcs and representation. This discontent was amplified by YouTube channels—such as 'Geeks and Gamers'—that pivoted from praise to criticism as a strategic move to court algorithmic attention and monetize outrage. Gendered gatekeeping re-emerged, targeting female fans and creators alike, often through veiled and overt misogyny.' (Proctor, 2022, p.196).

The propagation of controversy for profit and the widespread use of clickbait tactics, as introduced in Section §4.1, have intensified divisions within the community. This has created an environment where misinformation flourishes and the voices of marginalised groups are stifled. Pete Fletzer and Nick Mielke, hosts of a popular Star Wars-focused podcast, expressed concern about the seriousness of the situation. They acknowledged that gatekeeping has become more pervasive, allowing harmful narratives to gain traction in mainstream conversations. A key point of their discussion was the influence of prominent content creators such as Star Wars Theory, whose large following often lends unwarranted credibility to their words, regardless of their accuracy or impact.

Traditional media also leverage these platforms to create news stories, drawing from various online debates and aggregating content to present it in a conventional format, whether print or broadcast. The danger here lies in the fact that they often select source materials that carry a similar weight, and minimal effort is made to verify the actual influence of the platforms or individuals involved. 'Mainstream journalism increasingly relies on social media posts, Reddit threads, and YouTube clips to construct narratives about fandom. These articles often center around a few vocal users, who are portrayed as representative of larger movements. The result is a feedback loop in which traditional outlets replicate the inflammatory style and selective sourcing of the very platforms they cite—thus distorting the scale, intent, and tone of actual fan discourse.' (Proctor, 2022, p. 147).

Toxicity can also arise internally when passionate fans engage in petty competitive arguments about who the biggest fan is or, as I have noticed recently with the release of *The Acolyte* (2024), who is a true fan. This often leads to hostility and negative behaviour directed towards the content itself and the perceived status within their fandom. This can question one's belonging and, consequently, the validity of any arguments presented.

It becomes a frustrating cycle: reasonable individuals are put off by toxicity (Appendix IV), leading to a decrease in their presence, turning it into an echo chamber with an increasingly toxic atmosphere. As mentioned above, the issue with modern communication technology is that it effectively removes the human element from our interactions. We lose a significant part of our ability to empathise because our communications are limited to written text, which overlooks the intricacies of face-to-face interaction. In my personal experience, conversations with friends and family who are Star Wars fans often lead to disagreements. Some people dislike the prequels, while others have issues with the sequels. Jokes are made, and those who disagree tend to laugh it off, helping to maintain a generally respectful atmosphere.

While I try to minimise my engagement with participatory politics within the community, especially on the KeepTrooping (Appendix I) platform, I am aware of the toxicity that can arise in this environment. In my Public Works, disagreements often stem from differing interpretations of materials, a lack of understanding of the creative process, or misunderstandings of the production realities for garments designed to be worn rather than filmed. My perspective on making props and costumes has significantly evolved since 2015, when I first began my professional practice. The impact of my community on my Fandom is clearer today than it was when I started this program, providing valuable insights and actionable insights that I will explore in the next chapter.

4.4 Tensions, Dogma, And The Spectrum Of Participation

Tensions within large-scale fan organisations are neither anomalous nor inherently destructive. As Jenkins observes, 'Participatory cultures are messy, contested, and often contradictory' (Jenkins, 2013, p. 22). The 501st Legion, comprising approximately 20,000 members across diverse linguistic, cultural, and political contexts, exemplifies this complexity. Given such scale and heterogeneity, friction is structurally inevitable. What distinguishes productive tension from toxic conflict is not the presence of disagreement, but the interpretive frameworks through which disagreements are negotiated.

Dogma, in this context, refers to the codified standards governing costume accuracy—most visibly articulated through the Costume Reference Library (CRL). Dogma itself is not intrinsically toxic. As Bourdieu notes, 'Symbolic systems... function as instruments of knowledge and communication, but also as instruments of power' (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 169). When dogma is deployed to delineate legitimate participation, it can foster cohesion; when weaponised to exclude, it curdles into toxicity. The critical variable is communicative practice.

Toxicity within the 501st manifests along two vectors: exogenous and endogenous. Exogenous toxicity arises from ideological commitments that exceed the bounds of Star Wars fandom. A powerful example is the recurring controversy surrounding expressions of inclusivity, such as Pride Month acknowledgements. During June, detachments frequently update social media avatars and issue statements affirming LGBTQ+ solidarity. While many responses are supportive, a subset expresses hostility, sometimes from members or past members. These reactions are not merely disagreements; they constitute challenges to the organisation's stated commitment to mutual respect.

Proctor argues, 'Fandom is increasingly a site where broader culture wars are waged, with canon functioning as a proxy for ideological purity' (Proctor, 2022, p. 204). The 501st's inability to consistently enforce its inclusive ethos exposes the limits of decentralised governance.

A more insidious, though less visible, form of exogenous toxicity concerns gendered representation. The circulation of sexualised imagery such as movie stills, behind-the-scenes photographs, or fan-created depictions of female characters often reflects and reinforces misogynistic framings.

While such posts may appear innocuous to some, they contribute to an environment in which women are objectified rather than recognised as co-participants. This dynamic risks alienating both prospective and existing members, subtly signalling whose presence is normalised and whose is conditional, a theme re-examined in Section § 6.2.

Endogenous toxicity, by contrast, emerges from intra-community disputes over interpretive authority. The 501st's operational model invites extensive deliberation regarding costume construction, wearability, and comportment. In principle, such discussions are generative; as Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) note, 'Communities of practice are sustained through ongoing negotiation of meaning' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98).

In practice, however, digital mediation transforms negotiation into antagonism. Asynchronous, text-based communication strips away paralinguistic cues, making intent ambiguous and increasing the likelihood of offence. Disagreements over minutiae can quickly escalate into personal attacks, eroding trust and discouraging participation.

Central to these tensions is a conflation of elitism with dogmatism. External observers often perceive the 501st's accuracy standards as elitist gatekeeping. Internally, however, these standards are frequently experienced as dogmatic commitments to craft integrity.

Although colloquially collapsed under the single rubric of "toxicity," the negative behaviours endemic to this community are neither monolithic nor equally distributed. Drawing on my dual positioning as trooper and prop maker, I categorise them within a four-dimensional structure:

Dogmatic Enforcement and Fundamentalism.

The first modality is the inflexible application of costume dogma—the insistence that a single, often collector-oriented, interpretation of screen accuracy is the only legitimate one. This mirrors religious fundamentalism in its resistance to pluralism. When Garrison Membership Liaisons (GMLs) deny approval for costumes that meet published CRL requirements but diverge from unstated set-accurate expectations, dogma mutates into exclusion. This is not mere rigour; it is what Sim (2005) describes as the denial of historical nuance in favour of a nostalgic, utopian orthodoxy as experienced by many troopers sharing their frustration with and something I am not immune to when making parts for troopers and for myself.

Elitist Gatekeeping.

Closely related is gatekeeping practised as a mechanism of status preservation. Plante et al. define fan elitism as ‘a constellation of self-inflation and other-derogation... significantly associated with pro-gatekeeping attitudes’ (Plante et al, 2020, p. 134). In the 501st, gatekeeping operates materially (cost, time, vendor access) and epistemically (tacit knowledge of CRL interpretation). This reproduces Bourdieu’s (1991) cultural capital logic, whereby access to the means of appropriating culture is unequally distributed among prospective participants.

Ideological Discrimination.

A third modality is discrimination justified through fannish identity. Backlash against LGBTQ+ visibility or diverse casting is frequently articulated as defending the canon while functioning as misogyny or homophobia (Gray, 2020; Reysen et al., 2023).

When such views are expressed without institutional censure, the 501st’s stated inclusivity is undermined, confirming Proctor’s observation that ‘fandom spaces can become staging grounds for broader culture wars’ (Proctor, 2022, p. 204).

Interpretive Weaponisation of the CRL.

Finally, the CRL itself—intended as a democratising tool—can be weaponised. Because CRLs are sometimes authored by collector-minded leaders emphasising set detail over screen impression, local GMLs may invoke higher standards that are never codified in the document. This creates what Obmann identifies as ‘accuracy functions as a gatekeeping mechanism’ (Obmann, 2021, p. 35). When collector-oriented detail is made de facto mandatory for basic approval, the CRL becomes an instrument of factional control.

Moreover, digital mediation amplifies ambiguity. In online spaces, commentary is readily construed as aggression, not because of inherent hostility, but because interpretation is filtered through the receiver’s affective lens. As Tannen observes, ‘Discourse is not transparent; meaning is negotiated through frames that are themselves culturally and emotionally conditioned’(Tannen, 1990, p. 48). I encountered this directly in a dispute over inclusivity and sizing. Only months later, at a convention, did a face-to-face conversation reveal our mutual misreading. Both of us had absorbed the exchange as more hostile than intended.

While the 501st publicly endorses inclusivity, member responses may vary, forcing digital administrators to routinely disable comments to prevent derailment. This dissonance was starkly illustrated at Star Wars Celebration in Japan, where my son excitedly recounted meeting a character he particularly liked. The encounter was warm and affirming, especially given their shared LGBTQ+ identities. Weeks later, I encountered the same individual online expressing transphobic rhetoric. Private online dialogue revealed no capacity for reflection. This fracture between embodied kindness and digital venom epitomises contemporary fandom.



Chapter 5: Impacts & Lessons

5.1 The Temple Of Costumors

I often joke that my film outings and extensive viewing of SciFi, especially Star Wars, are more about research than enjoyment. When a new production is released, I watch it multiple times. The first viewing is for my enjoyment and to immerse myself in the story, but I concentrate on the costume details in subsequent screenings. Much like a religious devotee, I also feel the need to constantly refresh my memory of the full content of the lore, new productions and old ones alike. Overall, the time I dedicate to watching these films, sometimes even frame by frame, is to ensure my expertise remains relevant. This method enables me to engage in meaningful discussions with the community, support my arguments on various elements, and recognise continuity in costumes across different productions. My Public Works demand that I stay current, informed and expert.

As I like to call it, the temple of Costumors, where all things costume are dissected for creation and is established on the foundations of CRLs as described in Section § 2.5. , which have historically emphasised sacred screen accuracy above all. However, this concept of accuracy has evolved significantly over the 25 years of the 501st's existence, leading to various interpretations and applications. With the increasing number of releases, broader access to social media, set pictures, behind-the-scenes shots, and a wealth of other resources, today's available information far surpasses what was accessible in the past, directly impacting the length of these CRLs, something Julia Witcher touches on in her master thesis 'it is the high-definition restoration that allows fans and scholars alike to dissect the smallest production details. From costume fabrics to set materials, the refined resolution enables continuity analysis and aesthetic judgment that were previously impossible.' (Witcher, 2020, p. 14).

Thanks to current digital media and 4K TVs, enthusiasts can now meticulously scrutinise every frame, becoming the inquisitors of the community in pursuit of the most minor details, leading to a division of this temple grounded in the definition of screen accuracy. To be considered screen-accurate, a costume must closely resemble what is seen in screenshots taken from actual productions, down to the most minor details. The goal is to be as close as possible to what is observed on screen. That approach focuses on what can be seen on screen, which is straightforward for some characters due to ample screen time and shot variety, but not always the case for others.

Some costumes may require additional visual information from set photos or reliable sources such as the designer or production team, leading some to naturally focus their understanding towards costume accuracy as those that were used on set.

A set-accurate costume reflects what is seen on the filming set, capturing details that may be more easily noticeable than their on-screen version. As a result, minor discrepancies can arise, primarily when multiple costume iterations are used in the same shoot or appear on screen. For example, the same character's vest may have pockets in one shot, not in another. Since not everything filmed makes it onto the screen, specific details may be more relevant to set accuracy than screen accuracy. The information used to assess set accuracy comes from three primary sources: pictures and behind-the-scenes videos taken on set, archive pictures from the actual costumes used, and interviews with the production crew and cast, where specific details are discussed. David Scott Diffrient supports my experience in stating: 'The delivery of behind-the-scenes information has nurtured an extensive culture of fans who avidly examine costume and set design for accuracy... These details, sometimes invisible on screen, serve as a touchstone for 'set-accurate' reconstructions—allowing superfans to go beyond what is shown in final edits and instead capture what was physically present on set.' (Diffrient, 2024, p. 510).

Thus, two opposing temples now exist in the quest for costume accuracy. One places value solely on what is seen on screen, acknowledging the potential for imperfections and variations due to post-production colouring and lighting adjustments.

The other insists that on-set items are most accurate, considering such reference material as the ultimate authority in determining costume accuracy. This approach can lead to more stringent guidelines, making entry into the community even more challenging. Ultimately, the community shares a common pursuit of accuracy as a point of pride. However, the lack of consistent interpretation of what constitutes accuracy has unfortunately led to barriers for some individuals looking to join and participate.

I often receive inquiries from individuals interested in specific costumes I am making, as well as costumes that I do not currently offer. In these conversations, I have noticed that when I express concerns that some of their requests may not align with the requirements of costuming clubs, they frequently clarify that their primary goal is not to join these clubs. Instead, they are focused on making a high-quality costume that accurately reflects their chosen character.

Their interest lies more in maintaining the continuity of the costume than in adhering strictly to sometimes conflicting accuracy standards. 'Costuming is often driven by the desire to faithfully embody the character's universe as the fan sees it, not necessarily to adhere to official standards. While accuracy is important, it's the emotional resonance and continuity that guide many creators.' (Godwin, 2024, p. 06).

While I see costumers as engaging primarily with authentic representations of a fictional universe, collectors tend to focus on precision—valuing exact reproductions and, in some cases, the acquisition of screen-used artefacts. These original production items carry a unique aura of authenticity, offering a direct material link to the moment of filming. Yet their scarcity and high market value, particularly in the case of Star Wars memorabilia, place them beyond the reach of most fans.

Replica work, by contrast, occupies a more complex and often contested space. Some companies operate under official merchandising licenses, which provide access to studio archives but also necessitate mass production to offset licensing costs. This can result in products that, while sanctioned, may sacrifice a degree of accuracy in favour of scalability. At the same time, a small number of independent prop makers, like myself, have built reputations as trusted sources for highly accurate replicas, grounding their work in careful study of screen-used originals. Their pieces often come with guarantees of lineage—sometimes enhanced by custom plaques signed by actors or designers associated with the original prop. These makers, much like myself, navigate a kind of liminal grey zone: neither fully commercial enterprises nor merely hobbyist efforts, but community-driven projects sustained by passion, expertise, and the shared cultural capital of fandom.

To this day, the aura surrounding screen-accurate replicas with significant monetary value for collectors appears confined to hard items such as armour, helmets, weaponry, and similar pieces. This is due to their ease of display and their immediate recognisability, which lends them strong visual appeal and symbolic presence. By contrast, items such as costumes, shoes, or gloves attract far less interest outside of a very niche demographic. For costumers who intend to wear such pieces, the incentive to invest heavily in screen-used clothing is limited, since these items are more fragile, less visually striking when displayed, and prone to damage through use.

The content of a particular CRL and the standards set for its publication may vary significantly depending on the author and the supervising authority. More notably, while CRLs are intended to detail the requirements for gaining access, the decision ultimately rests with the GML, the guardians of the dogma, who determine whether one has met the criteria. Unfortunately, the process can differ widely between GMLs and garrisons based on their philosophies, furthering notions of elitism and fundamentalism. The way some individuals engage with costuming and their pastoral role can impact the community.

Some may even develop a sense of superiority, believing they possess greater expertise in a specific area. Some interactions I have witnessed between the costuming community participants of different skill levels when creating costumes can be intense. Harsh comments are made under the guise of pursuing perfection, often disregarding the feelings of others or recognising their progress. It is crucial to remember that everyone begins their journey with varying levels of skill and understanding, which must be nurtured and developed. Competence and expertise emerge over time, as discussed in Section §1.2.3. I aim to guide with my Public Works, offering support without judgment to new and seasoned costume enthusiasts.

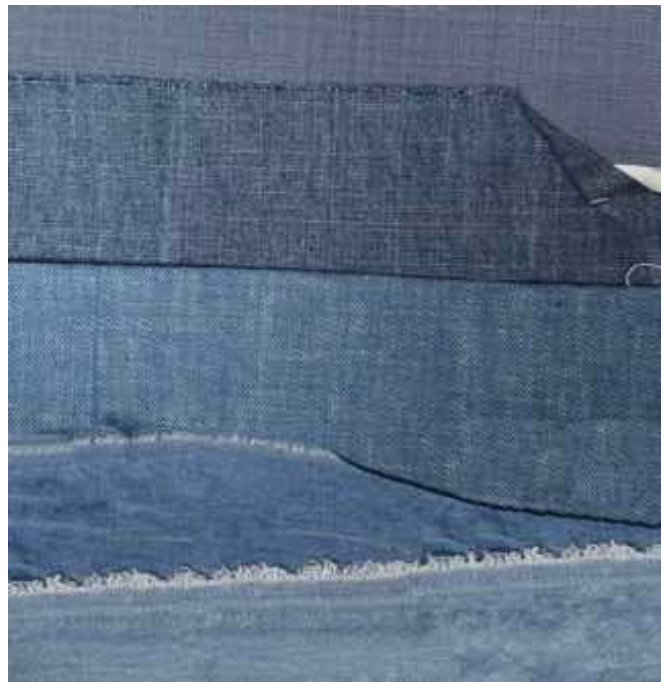


Fig. 12 When a CRL states "blue shirting material," interpretations can vary widely. Those who write CRLs are not experts in fashion or costume design, which can sometimes affect the terminology used.

In her doctoral thesis *Everyday Cosplay: Costume Adaptation and the Fan Fashion Industry*, Lauren Debra Boumaroun (2023) discusses in great length the process of making costumes not just from a maker's point of view but also as a participant and observes that 'While many strive for screen or CRL-level accuracy, these standards are sometimes challenged, with personal interpretation and emotional authenticity driving much of the creative process. Professional-level makers report that expectations from clubs can become burdensome, even as they help solidify credibility' (Boumaroun, 2023, p. 142).

While I am more meticulous than before when creating my costumes, I align with the 'what you see is what you get' philosophy, particularly when faced with the stark reality that only a tiny fraction of fans can discern and appreciate the details.

Some may even question the authenticity of the character portrayed due to what I refer to as residual memory accuracy. Fans often remember characters in ways that do not always align with their appearance. Sometimes, they forget some details or confuse them. This can lead to accurate costumes being questioned by others who may have a different memory. Pictures or toys can influence our memories. For example, despite Han's Hoth Parka being brown, many people remember it as blue due to lighting, colour correction, and photography. This might be attributed to playing with the original Kenner figurine, which featured a blue parka. Additionally, most people recall Chewbacca as entirely brown, overlooking his grey patches.

I have noticed a gradual increase in my ambition and expectations regarding my work as I have developed my expertise over time. Becoming more critical of my work has led to higher self-demands and increased time spent on research. Piero Bockos and Luke Dailey have noted that this journey is a logical path to personal growth. Gino Sabatino²⁶, one of the costuming community's most respected voices, believes that as individuals grow and become more demanding, the community changes in nature, a phenomenon I observe daily. I have been attempting to reconcile these differing viewpoints, stemming from the same source but yielding different interpretations, by analysing the profiles of the proponents. These perspectives coexist alongside one another, catering to different personas, 'As fans develop expertise—especially in craft-focused fandoms like cosplay and costuming—their ambitions often rise alongside their self-criticism. This process of refinement is deeply tied to identity formation, self-worth, and community standing... reshaping community ethos as standards evolve with increased mastery' (Lamerichs, 2018, p. 142).

On the one hand, the Screen Accuracy Dogma is important for costumers who aim to portray a character authentically to interact with the public. On the other hand, collectors' creed strives to possess the most accurate piece, identical in all details, materials, and colours to the one used on the set.

²⁶ Interviewed in San Francisco FanExpo November 2023

While they may or may not use it as a costume, what matters most is knowing that every detail is correct. This includes understanding the story behind it and being able to discuss it expertly. Both approaches have their merits, and as I have covered in Section §3.3, both methods are true to the original material referenced. The danger arises when fundamentalists push their agenda and infringe on others' beliefs, not allowing them the time or space to discover and grow on their own. The argument commonly made is that we should always strive for accuracy and ensure that any known details are incorporated into the dogma. Unfortunately, the definition of accuracy itself is being questioned, with some believing their truth supersedes that of others.

In my Public Works, I respect that these two truths coexist, each serving a legitimate purpose. Reconciling both aspects can be challenging, as it must satisfy the two different groups looking to acquire costumes from me. I have recognised that adhering to the precise standards mandated by the community's CRLs²⁷ is just the initial step. It compels me to adhere to a strict standard of accuracy that I only partially embrace on a personal level. However, it enables me to produce high-quality replica parts for the most discerning trooper. My primary focus, however, remains on screen accuracy for the costumers, as exemplified by the stormtrooper boots. In the original productions, they used black Chelsea boots painted white. Over time, the paint would crack and reveal the underlying black colour, which showed in behind-the-scenes pictures. From a costumor perspective, the ideal approach is creating inherently white boots using white leather. The shoes retain their white colour over time and require minimal maintenance.

While the characters may only show their shoes for a few seconds on screen, the costumed performer interacts with the public for days without a wardrobe department to fix problems on the spot. From a collector's standpoint, purchasing black boots and painting them white might be preferred. The usability and function do not always supersede the form if the boot is only intended for display. 'The divergence highlights differing goals: one rooted in static display, the other in dynamic interaction.' (Simpson, 2006, p. 87). If the primary role of a trooper is to embody the character they are portraying, they must immerse the public in the universe through the costume. As accurately as a collector might see black boots painted white with cracks revealing the underlying colour, this could lead the general public to question the authenticity of the entire costume. In their minds, stormtroopers should look perfect, and their shoes should not be cracked.

²⁷ **Costume Reference Libraries.** Abbreviated **CRLs** are extensive documents created and published by the 501st Costuming Club. These libraries help members create costumes with the highest level of screen accuracy.

The creation of the CRL often leads to spirited debates and discussions among its contributors. During their development team members may have strong disagreements. There can also be conflicts between the CRL team and the detachment leadership responsible for a specific character. Additionally, disputes may arise between the detachment managing the character and the Legion leadership responsible for approving the new CRL. This can result in overly detailed basic requirements or prolonged delays before a CRL is published for the community to embrace, causing some individuals to shift their focus to other projects. In some cases, a CRL may even be abandoned by the team.

Moreover, when reviewing an existing CRL, substantial changes may impact everyone with that particular costume. This can create differing opinions between the established CRL and its interpretation by the judges responsible for evaluating costume completion in prospective members. These GMLs operate independently within each Garrison. As a result, requirements may vary; for instance, the same costume might face additional demands from a particular GML due to their collector mindset, leading them to request different components or finer details.

These requests are often based on images or materials that do not necessarily appear on the screen, contradicting the Legion's core principle, which states that the CRLs define what is essential for costuming. In recent years, some Garrisons have unilaterally disregarded this authority, often imposing stricter requirements on prospective troopers.

The production of costumes, particularly clothing and footwear, is significantly influenced by evolving requirements. When I joined the 501st, many Imperial costumes were based on a black flight suit. Members could create various characters, especially the Imperial pilot, by combining this suit with jackboots, a belt, and gloves. Nearly 20 years later, a challenge arose based on behind-the-scenes wardrobe photos revealing that 2 different jumpsuits were used. Depending on the character, significant modifications to the jumpsuit were necessary. Unfortunately, this meant that neither jumpsuit option could be approved for all characters historically linked to the black suit, effectively requiring new troopers to buy three suits instead of one.

Since the imperial jumpsuit is commonly purchased, I produced a batch that was subsequently disapproved for the imperial pilot. My UK prop maker partner, known for their accurate armour and helmets, also bought these jumpsuits for clients, which have now become unusable.

To address the new standards and provide a versatile solution, I designed a jumpsuit that meets the original approval criteria. It includes replacement parts that allow recipients to easily modify the jumpsuit to portray their desired character. Once again, Boumaroun (2023) explains 'Because new releases and behind-the-scenes content continuously affect what qualifies as canon or accurate, makers must respond by redesigning or supplementing existing items. Several professional fan tailors I interviewed described the difficulties in keeping inventory viable when standards change.' (Boumaroun, 2023, p. 237)

Becoming a member of the 501st requires you first to create a costume that meets the basic level of approval. Over the years, several attachments have introduced tier levels for completion and accuracy, granting titles to troopers who achieve these higher levels. There is a sense of pride associated with reaching a certain level, but it also creates pressure for prospective members, especially when they see others in the higher tiers. It is clear that the higher the level you achieve, the more expertise you can claim regarding that particular character. In my numerous professional discussions with troopers at these advanced levels, it is undeniable that some of them possess a great deal of knowledge about the specifics of these characters.

Others have purchased the costume that meets the requirements, meaning they do not necessarily possess expertise on all aspects of that particular character's costume. Instead, they have merely acquired something that looks the part to access the higher level, whether due to peer pressure or to boast about being part of a specific group that has reached an upper tier. Christina Obmann (2021) talks about the emergence of a perceived form of elitism 'While cosplay promotes itself as an inclusive activity, the perception of 'accuracy' often functions as a gatekeeping mechanism, particularly in groups where strict standards for screen accuracy define legitimacy.' (Obmann, 2021, p. 35).

It can be challenging for someone to advance to a higher level with costumes that only meet the first tier without reinvesting in a completely new costume. While I do not see this as a significant issue, since many troopers have experienced similar situations, I understand that newcomers to the Legion may have different expectations when starting their projects. Many CRLs have been developed with an essential requirement that is more detailed than it was previously. As a result, the requirements are now more stringent, often demanding more time and effort to complete a basic costume.

While armour can be upgraded by adding or removing parts with enough skill and craftsmanship, it is not as easy for soft parts, such as clothing or shoes, which typically require purchasing new items.

This expectation shift has made achieving higher levels almost an immediate necessity rather than a gradual process, nearly preventing someone from registering at a basic level and upgrading parts later. Faced with increasingly demanding CRLs, many potential new members focus on the higher levels and how these will impact their costume-making from the outset. This has led the broader costuming community to view the 501st as an elitist group, due to the entrance requirements and the escalating costs associated with creating these costumes. 'Elitism in costuming communities manifests through unofficial hierarchies that elevate certain cosplayers as 'experts' while undermining the legitimacy of newcomers or those who approach the craft more casually.'(Obmann, 2021, p. 36). This perception is further fueled by a growing collector mindset among members, particularly those involved in writing the CRLs and approving costumes, as well as the character experts who discuss costume accuracy in online forums and costuming groups.

The majority of people outside the 501st will have difficulty noticing the minor details sometimes required for costumes, which often add little to screen accuracy and instead pertain more to set accuracy, thereby elevating the costume to a collector level. Ashley Lotecki, whose work has been cited in cultural studies, wrote that 'Most audience members are unfamiliar with the specifics of the character design and are instead drawn to the overall impression conveyed by the costume and the cosplayer's performance.' (Lotecki, 2012, p. 57).

This same perception can also affect existing members, leading them to leave the Legion as they no longer align with its evolving costuming requirements.

Scott (2018) notes that these departures don't always stem from rejection of the fandom itself, but often reflect broader tensions, including power struggles and the emergence of factions within the group. (Scott, 2018, pp. 211–215). As will be discussed in the next section, there is a clear threat of division, with some experiencing the rise of internal factions opposing one another.

5.2 Division & Schisms

For many fans, immersing themselves in fictional worlds provides a respite from everyday realities. The Fandom also grants empowerment by offering fans a sense of control over their engagement with source material. Many people who join the 501st seek a social outlet to express their fandom and live their passion by creating and wearing costumes at events, 'Fandom offers both a means of escape and a space for personal empowerment, where fans can actively reshape and reclaim cultural narratives.' (Hills, 2002, p. 104). However, internal and external factors are introducing new tensions, and I anticipate significant challenges for the community in the years to come. I have encountered customers who were once members of the 501st, some of whom are still active members, who are now branching out to build their costuming groups outside the structure of the 501st Legion (Appendix II & III). In Section §5.3, I will discuss my agency within the club within this evolving context. In this chapter, I will focus on some of the most visible pressure points impacting my community and my Public Works.

5.2.1 Media Amplification

The Fandom is a collective gathering of individuals enjoying a shared experience. However, divisive trends in our world are accelerating in both speed and scope, as I mentioned in Sections §3.3 and §4.1. The intensity, depth, and scope of these divisions have significantly increased, and the level of engagement necessary to disprove fallacies has increased tremendously. What remains is a strong binary framework incapable of addressing the complexities of our evolution. As discussed in Chapter 4, media platforms amplify these debates by using emotionally charged content to guarantee engagement through algorithmic and editorial choices to highlight content that elicits strong emotional responses, often favouring polarised or provocative posts that encourage users to react, comment, or share.

In the words of Nick Couldry, Professor of Media, Communications & Social Theory at the London School of Economics 'Media institutions act as holders of symbolic power in Bourdieu's sense, establishing the legitimate frames through which we interpret social reality. Contentious themes—particularly those involving race, gender, and identity—are not presented neutrally. Instead, they are coded to resonate differently across ideological lines, thereby maintaining attention economies while reinforcing the hierarchies of cultural legitimacy within specific fields.' (Couldry & Mejias, 2021, p. 88).

Religious institutions throughout history have utilised compelling, emotionally charged narratives about morality, sin, and salvation to engage and maintain followers' loyalty. Institutions create a dichotomy: believers versus non-believers, or, in media terms, the 'woke' versus the 'anti-woke.' This dichotomy fosters a sense of community within each group, fueling a cycle of engagement while reinforcing ideological divides. We have entered a cycle where our responses to this fear create a reaction, which is then exploited and amplified by the media to evoke further emotional responses on both sides of the divide. The more we engage, the more the cycle perpetuates, resulting in polarisation and affecting our societies and communities. Natalie Fenton goes further, observing how 'Media systems increasingly function like religious institutions in their deployment of binary moral narratives—good versus evil, us versus them, woke versus anti-woke. These emotionally driven frameworks foster community but also entrench ideological divisions.' (Fenton, 2020, p. 72).

5.2.2 Ideological Conflict

It is difficult not to notice how others express their beliefs, which may starkly contrast with our own and even the club's core values. Reconciling the 501st's mission to promote inclusivity becomes complicated when members publicly express admiration for right-wing movements that oppose these principles. During the last election cycle in the United States, a faction of members of the 501st openly supported Trump. While disagreeing with their views, I cannot ask people to suppress their true selves and beliefs. I must separate individual social beliefs from the group's collective identity.

In other words, I cannot forbid someone from joining the club simply because they do not share my beliefs; this would contradict the fundamental notion of the club's inclusive message. Participatory politics through fandom is a dangerous endeavour for the costuming community. When someone wears a costume and holds political banners to support a movement, regardless of my (dis)agreement with that stance, it may create conflicts. It is acceptable to express personal views, provided they are done as an individual. However, when someone does wear a costume, they represent not only themselves but also the entire club and, to some extent, the broader franchise. 'Costumes signal allegiance, authenticity, and in some cases, endorse the franchise itself. This raises concerns when political expression is attached, as the actions of one can reflect on the whole community or property..' (Lamerichs, 2021, p. 133).

There should be a clear separation between personal beliefs (which I refer to as 'church') and the identity represented by the 501st (analogous to 'state'). Some members, including myself, may object to mixing politics with costume-wearing, a concern that could be raised with the club leadership for review. The leadership would then have to decide whether to prevent such mixing or maintain the status quo. In either case, they risk alienating a segment of the membership.

As a company, Disney has adopted a more inclusive stance, aligning with societal evolution and generally adopting a more liberal approach. It is not hard to imagine a scenario where Disney or Lucasfilm intervenes with club leadership, requiring that individuals refrain from using their costumes to promote political events. Although coming from outside the club, such a request would lead to tensions within the membership.

'Media conglomerates like Disney have become increasingly invested in shaping not just content but community engagement. Their emphasis on inclusivity aligns with progressive public values but can trigger internal fan conflict when corporate standards are imposed on grassroots practices. Even indirect interventions—such as guiding club behavior—may catalyze dissent or splintering among fan communities, especially when tied to political sensitivities.' (Johnson, 2021, p. 198).

5.2.3 Influence of the Global Context

When Russia entered the war with Ukraine, members of the 501st were subjected to international shipping restrictions. Before the war, one prop maker was highly regarded for creating armour; however, as the pandemic and the conflict unfolded, his situation deteriorated. Shipping to and from Russia has become extremely expensive and complicated, making it nearly impossible for him to send his work outside the country, and he has now disappeared from the costuming scene. Within the Chinese Garrison, divisions have emerged on various issues arising from global events, as these occurrences affect our region, regardless of their location. Topics such as gender identity, which are generally less prominent here but central to discussions in the United States, have begun to emerge on local social media. This is primarily due to the spread of misleading information and reposts that originate from US-based content. Reality influences our community, our interactions and our growth as a group and as individuals, regardless of our localisation.

Because of what I see as a rise in transphobic discourse within my own Garrison and the lack of action by the local leadership to address it, I chose to only participate in events outside of those organised locally. How our community addresses broader societal issues and global tensions directly affects how its members remain engaged or not.

5.2.4 Internal Bureaucracy

Because of its size, the 501st is held together by a complex bureaucracy layered over a military-like structure which can increase frustrations among members who feel restricted by strict regulations. When Disney acquired Lucasfilm, it became clear that the 501st would play a vital role in promotional events. To prevent exploitation, Lucasfilm required compensation for troopers participating in commercial activities, which was set at US\$200 per trooper per day in my garrison. Another rule was introduced requiring prior casting based on specific physical criteria for character accuracy. For instance, Darth Vader had to be at least 1.98 meters tall, while stormtroopers needed to be between 1.77 and 1.82 meters. This led to some troopers frequently securing paid events, frustrating those who did not meet the criteria.

My local leadership later decided that while the per diem would remain, only US\$20 would be paid to each trooper, with the rest being a donation to charity. This decision caused discomfort among troopers who had to take time off work and travel extensively for events, leading some, including myself, to stop applying. The argument rested on the risks, such as damage to equipment, that should allow individuals to choose whether to donate part of their per diem, rather than a blanket decision affecting all. Thus, while external rules existed, internal decisions ultimately pushed some troopers away from participating.

5.2.5 Internal Politics and Power Struggles

In Belgium, the 501st is divided into the Belgium Garrison (North) and the FanWars Garrison (South), which do not necessarily interact with one another. In the southern region, a group called the Dark Trooper Squad has formed due to disagreements over the complexity of the costume requirements. Additionally, a third group, the Legion Du Sud, split from the 501st FanWars Garrison following internal conflicts that prompted them to establish their own club. Internal conflicts may escalate into broader regional or ideological divides within the organisation. For example, Project Mayhem (PM) reportedly began as an initiative by certain members to create an alternative space for those who felt marginalised within the official structure of the 501st. PM's origin story is much more salacious than its sanitised version.

It was formed as an unofficial group within the 501st by disaffected legion officers who were upset about their loss of power. PM primarily comprised the leadership from three garrisons: the UK Garrison, the Golden Gate Garrison in California, and the Redback Garrison in Australia. Since its formation, the objective of PM has been to discredit, remove, and replace the Legion Commanding Staff, to take control wherever possible, and to undermine the 501st's involvement in garrison affairs. The insurrection began with allegations of misuse of funds by the leaders of the UK Garrison, leading to backroom hearings and the ousting of the Legion Commanding Officer, who had been raising questions about accountability.

'Leadership roles may be pursued not for communal benefit but for perceived access to studios or event privileges. While framed as volunteerism, these positions sometimes involve unregulated discretion over funds, visibility, and organizational decisions, opening the door to both favoritism and misuse.' (Johnson, 2021, p. 203). This very public meltdown within the costuming community could have jeopardised the 501st's favourable standing with Lucasfilm.

5.2.6 Local Adherence

The fact that the 501st operates globally requires consideration of regional differences. Cultural and interpretive variations among these regions can sometimes lead to disagreements, adding operational pressure within the organisation. For instance, one area may strictly adhere to costume standards, while another may allow more flexibility in costume design or event participation. Some garrisons may impose additional requirements for a trooper's clearance or participation in an event. The UK Garrison has unique approval processes that may involve heightened requirements and scrutiny during submission.

In Germany, some judges impose additional requirements for specific costumes, particularly for pilots and officers, which adds complexity to the costume creation process. When local garrisons enforce additional requirements, it complicates my work. These requirements might necessitate different patterns, significantly impacting production costs and potentially deterring prospective troopers. I may not be aware of these extra stipulations, which often pertain more to collectors than to the costumers' experience.

5.2.7 CRL Development and Perceived Gatekeeping

Leaders at the upper levels of the club can also act as gatekeepers, which then creates tension over costume approvals. In 2024, to improve my Public Works contributions and better understand the process, I developed my first CRL for an obscure character. Choosing a lesser-known character helped avoid what I see as conflicts of interest.

The initial step was securing detachment approval. After positive feedback and contributions from some members in finding additional visual representation, the costume was introduced for Legion leadership approval. The committee narrowly approved it. After updating the suit and resubmitting images through five review cycles, the CRL was approved and published within six months, much faster than a typical 12-18 month cycle. The decision sparked backlash from some members who felt the costume was unworthy of the 501st, leading to an intense online debate. Many in the community were puzzled as to why this unknown character that no one anticipated received approval before others that had been in development for some time.

This raised concerns about the approval process of the CRLs, sparking debates about potential gatekeeping and excessive requirements. After my CRL was released, characters that had been pending for months were suddenly approved, with over 20 CRLs released in a month, which was unprecedented. This experience highlighted that individuals with specific agendas may not support new additions, while significant community discussions can compel action and accountability.

5.2.8 The Collectors' Mindset Influence

In section §5.1, I discussed the gradual differentiation between costumors and collectors and how this distinction may affect CRLs, which in turn influences potential members in their choice of costumes and their decision to join the community. An individual's relationship with costumes naturally evolves, impacting how they engage with the creation process and the source material. Many people's initial goal is to create an accurate representation of a character rather than a poor imitation. However, there tends to be less emphasis on the small details that a collector would prioritise.

As members gain access to more information, engage in discussions, and become more aware of their skills, they naturally reevaluate their costumes and decide whether they want to explore the finer details more deeply.

This growth should feel organic and avoid imposing such precision ‘too rigidly, risking alienating newcomers and creating tension between casual and committed members.’ (Lamerichs, 2021, p. 121).

Because the Legion membership is ageing, leadership roles are also evolving, with those entrusted with management sometimes forgetting their roots and the journey that led to their expertise, and instead imposing a distinctly collector-focused perspective on newcomers from the outset.

5.2.9 Creative Experimentation

Around the world, I am witnessing the emergence of new clubs formed by members of the 501st. These individuals still want to remain active in the costume community but feel that the 501st no longer aligns with their perception of what costuming is, seeking a more independent vision for their interpretation of the club, preferring to operate without centralised oversight. Generational differences are notable, as newer members often bring fresh ideas and challenge established norms. Questions are being raised regarding costume standards and the ability to engage in alternative projects, ‘New generations of fans tend to reject strict hierarchies and rigid canon adherence, instead seeking spaces that allow personal interpretation and innovation. This has resulted in the formation of alternative clubs and sub-communities.’ (Lamerichs, 2021, p. 130).

As mentioned earlier, some members may prioritise adherence to official costuming standards as costumers, while others may advocate for even stricter standards as collectors. There is also a desire for costumes that may not strictly adhere to traditional representations. For example, clubs like Star Wars Nomad²⁸, Burgundy Squadron²⁹, allow members to create costumes inspired by the SWU that do not have to represent specific characters. Meanwhile, the Dark Empire³⁰ is another costuming club that focuses on creative interpretations of Sith characters, allowing members to express their individuality in character representation.

²⁸ <https://www.starwarsnomads.com/en/a> fan group recognized by Lucasfilm Ltd. and dedicated to original characters of the Star Wars universe

²⁹ <https://www.burgundysquadron.com/> Burgundy Squadron is a Lucasfilm recognized costuming club comprised of Star Wars original characters with Rebellion/Resistance leanings.

³⁰ <https://thedarkempire.org/> The Dark Empire mainly focuses on the dark side of the Force.

5.3 Existence Outside The Community

'Othering and aggression between different fan communities/groups has become more central in the digital age... Fandom's affective relations of love, hate and ambivalence – frequently dramatically performed via social media – offer one window on these psychosocial processes.'
(Hills, 2017, p. 86).

During my professional interviews, which coincided with and informed my choice to undertake a doctorate, I was asked whether I needed to belong to the 501st for my Public Works to exist. I felt frustrated because I couldn't articulate a proper answer. This led to anxiety and reflection on my work, my role in the costuming community, and particularly my involvement with the 501st, making me question my dedication to Star Wars. Creating my first costume was a way to embrace my fandom. Still, it also represented a conscious choice to act against the expectations of my age and position as an Academic Director in a large educational group. A fellow member shared his reluctance to discuss his passion for costuming, fearing how clients would perceive him, as he felt that brands expect their representatives to maintain a particular image. Conversely, I have always felt comfortable as an outlier—different enough to be noticed, but not so much as to cause discomfort.

5.3.1 Belonging to the Community

Being part of the 501st highlights a form of fringe status; not all Star Wars fans engage in costuming, and only a few achieve the dedication I have shown through my Public Works. As I progressed within the community, my involvement in prop-making further distinguished me, as only a handful in the 501st have over 55 approved costumes, marking me as a unique figure. Ironically, despite my outlier nature, I belong to a community with a rigid structure sometimes resembling religious hierarchies and traditional societal frameworks. Few within the larger Star Wars fandom know about the 501st, and outside it, almost no one is aware of the organisation.

This lack of recognition highlights our uniqueness as a double-edged sword, with a sense of belonging to something truly special among members, and a lack of understanding by the public, thus increasing the risk of being viewed as ageing cosplayers. Liptak explains how, despite the 501st's extensive history and massive global footprint, their name recognition beyond core Star Wars fandom is surprisingly low.

Many members recount how often they're asked, 'What's the 501st?' when appearing in public, even at genre conventions. While the group is revered among superfans, they often must explain their legitimacy to casual fans and the general public, a dynamic that underscores both their elite status and their invisibility. (Liptak, 2022, pp. 183–184).

5.3.2 Influence on Public Works

Booth explains 'Fan communities often avoid endorsing individual creators, especially when those creators operate in quasi-commercial ways. The concern is not just over favoritism or exclusivity, but over liability—particularly if a maker fails to deliver a commissioned piece or engages in exploitative practices.' (Booth, 2021, p. 147).

Due to my approach to prop making and the reputation I have built, there is now a misconception that purchasing from me guarantees parts that are ready for approval out of the box. 'The assumption that acquiring gear from a known maker ensures immediate approval reflects a common misconception... While some fans rely on maker reputation, they may not realise the final stages—weathering, fitting, and adaptation—remain with the wearer. Communication gaps between CRL judges and makers persist, complicating alignment between production and approval.' (Godwin, 2024, p. 06). This expectation that any costume can pass approval without issues is unrealistic, especially since approval is not assured simply by claiming to have parts from a particular maker. However, the lack of a formal communication channel has caused a disconnect between the Legion and makers.

Troopers may approach me about necessary changes to costumes, often based on strict interpretations that may not align with the CRL. Additionally, changes can occur without informing the makers, leaving them unaware of updates and resulting in denied approvals despite the parts being accurate at the time of purchase.

5.3.3 Costumor & Prop Maker

As a costumor, I aim for accurate representations of characters, which I wear and share publicly. My work relies on the recognition from the audience; without events, my contributions lose meaning. If the audience does not recognise my portrayal, I cease to exist. Thus, my identity as a costumor is tied to the community, and disengaging from it limits my role. If I shift from authenticity to interpretation, my relationship with the costume changes, allowing me to exist, yet in a more superficial way, outside the necessity of public recognition and achieving a more personal gratification.

As a Prop maker providing costumes, my role is deeply connected to my community. Unlike those working directly in the entertainment industry, I focus on a smaller audience. If Disney were to enforce copyright restrictions on groups like the 501st, my work would be at risk. Lucasfilm has taught Disney the value of the costuming communities, as they facilitate authentic interactions through accurate character depictions, thereby enhancing the franchise's realism.

Creating these costumes is challenging and costly, yet club members undertake this work voluntarily, providing visibility to the franchise. Operating outside the 501st would hinder my Public Works. This approach prioritises detailed replicas that closely match on-screen versions. Being part of the community gives me access to vital information and opportunities to engage with troopers, helping me understand their concerns and expectations. Disconnection from the group could jeopardise my ability to deliver quality costumes. Moreover, trust is a crucial currency and a building block of successful interactions for prop makers. My active participation allows me to connect with troopers using my name, call sign, and matriculation number, showing my commitment to the community and fostering trust.

5.3.4 The Costumor–Collector Framework

Dogma, in itself, is not toxic. As Bourdieu notes, ‘Symbolic systems provide both a map of social reality and a program for its reproduction’ (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 164). In my Public Works, the CRL provides a shared schema to ensure visual uniformity. Yet problems arise when dogma is enforced without a common vocabulary for screen accuracy. Accuracy is not static; it evolves with technology and shifting production aesthetics. My community, however, struggles to reach a consensus on what constitutes fidelity.

The lack of a common conceptual framework generates recursive misunderstandings. Members often begin from a shared concern for accuracy while diverging sharply in their definitions of what accuracy entails and why it matters. Without explicit meta-discussion, these divergences remain latent, surfacing instead as interpersonal friction.

Communication is further complicated by linguistic plurality; English serves as the lingua franca, yet idiomatic variation introduces persistent ambiguity. As Tannen notes, ‘Meaning is not simply transmitted; it is jointly constructed, and cultural schemas shape how messages are interpreted’ (Tannen, 1990, p. 45). This is where my Costumor–Collector framework, introduced throughout this thesis, proves useful and, in my mind, essential to counter toxic behaviours.

The costumor prioritises wearable, audience-facing embodiment. Their benchmark is the screen grab—what viewers recognise. Their practice is curatorial. The collector pursues archival precision. Their benchmark is the production asset—what was physically used on set. Their practice is historical. These are not binary identities but poles on a spectrum. Individuals move between them as their skills and expertise evolve. My own trajectory mirrors this fluidity: I began as a costumor seeking public representation, gradually shifting toward a more collector’s mindset. Without this clarity, the CRL becomes a site of contention. Ambiguity generates exclusion.

In *Andor* (2022), Imperial Security Bureau officers appear in white jackets indoors and in light grey outdoors due to lighting constraints. The collector demands light grey; the costumor can accept white as functionally accurate. Yet the CRL debate persists, culminating in some members being denied clearance depending on the views of the person-in-charge.

Similarly, a character depicted on screen in a red-topped jumpsuit became a focal point of dispute when behind-the-scenes exhibits suggested a rust-orange hue. I initially produced the suit in red twill prior to the publication of the CRL. However, after it was published and indicated rust/dark red/orange material, as a requirement, the ambiguity of the language and the reference picture provided prompted refund requests from troopers unable to get clearance. One German trooper was denied registration; another in the U.S. was approved for the exact same suit. The same garment, the same CRL led to opposite outcomes.

These examples reveal how dogma calcifies into exclusion when interpretive authority is unevenly distributed, as seen in Section §4.4. Collector-oriented leaders, operating with privileged access to reference material, encode their preferences into CRLs. Costumors are left navigating contradictions. Jenkins warns, 'When participatory culture becomes stratified by unequal access to knowledge, it ceases to be participatory' (Jenkins, 2013, p. 112).

As I mentioned earlier, the costumor prioritises construction and performative embodiment. The collector emphasises acquisition and preservation. Crucially, these are not fixed identities but fluid dispositions. An individual may occupy a costumor position for one costume and a collector position for another, or shift along the spectrum over time following the change in their skills and interests.

I am aware that clarifying the Costumor–Collector framework would not resolve all tensions, but it would provide a foundation for more productive dialogue. By acknowledging their coexistence, the 501st could better frame member expectations. New members might be invited to locate themselves along the spectrum, understanding that their position is neither permanent nor prescriptive while providing a much-needed recognition for the work done. Moreover, it would also normalise changes, recognising that a member who begins as a costumor may, over time, embrace collector practices, and vice versa.

Ultimately, the challenge is not to eliminate tension but to render it intelligible. Toxicity, as explored in Chapters 4 and 5, flourishes in interpretive opacity; it diminishes when motivations are articulated, differences acknowledged, and communicative norms made explicit. By situating dogmatic commitment within a nuanced account, the 501st can transform friction into a resource for collective growth rather than a catalyst for fragmentation.

QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE

Costumors & Collectors

Screen Accurate	Mindset	Set Accurate
Wearing	Focus	Researching
Screengrabs only	Reference	Any and All Media
With Public	Interaction	With Source Material
Detailed but Realistic	Goal	Most Detailed
(m)Any Characters	Interest	Expert in one or two
Curators	Role	Archivists



Fig.13 Reference guide developed and used in my Public Works to illustrate and advocate the framework with a graphic style consistent to the brand visuals.

Chapter 6:

Reflections



16 detachments membership completed.

Celebration Japan 2025

V. Rondia

My analysis extends beyond the internal workings of a single costuming club, highlighting elements of value that transcend industry boundaries and connect to broader cultural, social, and economic meanings. My insights are not only relevant to practitioners in the field but also shed light on wider issues of meaning, exchange, and community by demonstrating how this sector contributes to the larger processes of cultural production and consumption. I recognise and appreciate the contributions of my peers, particularly those who have recently published works on fandom and costuming. Some of the cited scholars are actively involved in the costuming community, while others focus on its sociology and implications. As my critique not only validates but also reciprocally supports previous publications, my Public Works are legitimised as they add further weight, credibility, and evidence to the body of work that has come before me.

Fandoms have evolved from loose gatherings of enthusiasts into vibrant communities that often resemble religious organisations. This transformation has given rise to a form of para-religious culture. In these circles, devotion to a particular fandom doesn't merely entail enthusiasm, as it can approach a level of fervour and adherence often seen in religious movements. Rituals abound. In my community, members will spend weeks crafting detailed costumes, travel long distances to attend conventions, or pore over the source material with the same intensity that scholars devote to sacred texts. In the larger Fandom, debates over canon can spark passionate discussions, as members dissect every nuance and occasionally police others' interpretations, with the boundaries of orthodoxy and heresy carefully guarded. Identity and community remain central pillars. Emotional investment in the source material, as well as group aesthetics and values, shape a fan's sense of self and belonging. Sometimes, members treat the creator's intent as gospel, while at other times, fan interpretations are deemed equally—if not more—authoritative.

These tensions can give rise to schisms and divisions, not unlike those found among religious sects. Fundamentalism demonstrates both solidarity and division, underscoring how powerful shared narratives can be in forging human connection and identity—even in secular, contemporary settings.

6.1 Beyond Costumes, Experiences.

Scholars and psychologists have noted how social media alters human connection, a topic I discussed in Chapter 4. This shift makes opportunities for real-life interactions increasingly important. Big gatherings thus become rare chances for communal experiences. Seen this way, fan conventions are no longer merely commercial events, but vital spaces for reconnecting with our social nature. The certainty of meeting a beloved character, sharing a moment, or taking a photo encourages participation, much like attending worship services to meet fellow congregants and clergy. This underscores the costumor's responsibility in delivering authentic experiences. I have always seen this involvement as providing an immersive space for the public to create unique memories by interacting with their favourite characters in real life. My community aims to offer the public this authentic experience, wearing a costume not as a simple imitation but as an exact replica in both appearance and behaviour.

I now realise my Public Works align closely with the Experience Economy. Selling costumes is only a small part of a larger role: creating unique, memorable experiences for the public. My work is part of an industry focused on delivering immersive events and experiences, not just products or services. Pine and Gilmore (1998) outline four types of experiences organisations can use: Entertainment, Educational, Aesthetic, and Escapist. Walt Disney exemplifies the mastery of experiential offerings, with the company leading the way in creating immersive experiences around its intellectual properties, such as Star Wars. Disney's portfolio is as much about Escapism as it is about Entertainment, contributing to a cohesive and resonant brand.

Although Liptak (2022) credits me with professionalising prop-making, the field is still emerging and relatively niche. Yet, its contribution to the growing experience economy, especially at events like Comic-Con, is significant. A paradox lies in the fact that an evolving creative profession faces the orthodoxy imposed by the CRLs. The answer I am contemplating may rest with the creation of a guild.

Much like the Droid Builders Club³¹ and other satellite groups associated with the Star Wars costuming community, I think prop makers would benefit from forming a guild, guided by a more professional code of conduct.

³¹ Droid Builder's is a movement of individuals working together to inspire the imagination and change lives through a network of groups, national gatherings, training events and resources. [www.https://droidbuilders.info/](https://droidbuilders.info/)

This would create a positive buying experience for troopers, ensuring their purchases are delivered as promised. Additionally, such a guild could facilitate communication with various clubs about updating CRLs, thus preventing the endorsement of specific prop makers. Currently, there's a noticeable disconnect between the way CRLs are written and the involvement of prop makers. To avoid what I strongly perceive as conflicts of interest, I either wait for official CRLs to be published or commit significant time and resources to independent research, staying separate from build groups, so as not to influence decision-making or face accusations of manipulating the process for personal benefit, something that others have been accused of previously. A guild could also serve as a bridge for direct interaction with Lucasfilm, offering a more stable operating environment and increased visibility, albeit with likely more oversight on their part.

A common platform could bridge the gap between enthusiastic writers and prop makers, fostering a positive exchange of information in a neutral environment. This would allow contributors like me to share our experience and expertise in part-making, refocusing on the importance of visual accuracy. I recognise potential challenges: as I age and gain experience, I tend toward a detail-oriented collector's mindset, which I must resist in my Public Works to remain inclusive and lower participation barriers.

Some may be unwilling to adapt, either due to their work ethos or personal fundamentalism. Another challenge involves oversight and collaboration between clubs, guilds, and possibly direct involvement from Lucasfilm. Additionally, individual prop makers are often exclusive about their work, with competitors reluctant to share a platform. Existing personal relationships, positive or negative, may also influence dynamics.

6.2 The End Of Escapism?

I have noticed a significant slowdown in purchases, both through my Public Works and conversations with other prop makers in my community. This trend indicates a decline in costume-related activities and new memberships within our community. Many of my peers, who hold fundamentalist views, blame Disney for producing what they consider low-quality material, suggesting that fans are becoming bored. I disagree with it. The situation is much more complex and is intricately tied to the very fabric of our community, as well as how we now interact with each other in the digital space. The Fandom experience does not exist in isolation anymore. The sociopolitical climate significantly influences it.

This situation mirrors what Jean Baudrillard (1981) describes as hyperreality, where representations of reality become more influential than reality itself. In this context, online discourse has a greater impact on shaping perceptions of the Fandom than in-person interactions, exacerbating divisions and tensions. Fandom experiences a generational trauma, evident in the increasingly toxic behaviours experienced online. As a result, participation in the Fandom is changing, leading to a fundamental question: What will this para-religious structure look like in the next ten years? How will it evolve both online and offline? Further research in this area is essential.

Within the larger Fandom, a growing divide has tangible consequences. Digital interactions have led to heightened mental health concerns. Toxicity in fandoms has escalated, creating friction among individuals unlikely to meet offline. This too is a contributing factor to the rise of fundamentalism, producing uncomfortable experiences for many. The dogmatic nature of particular online discourse and reactions to new material reflects deeper societal issues. For instance, Princess Leia's role in the original trilogy is multifaceted: introduced as a damsel in distress, she quickly becomes a leader, surpassing the main male protagonist, a detail often overlooked by a large section of the first-generation male fans. Her appearance in the metal bikini in *Return of the Jedi* (1983) sparked a fetishisation labelled 'Slave Leia,' which persists today. In today's context, this phenomenon can be seen as fueling both toxic masculinity and feminist empowerment and firmly contributes to discussions rooted in culture-war and counter-culture war.

The Acolyte (2024) prompted negative responses from certain parts of the fandom who took issue with the show's writing, character development, and an alleged woke agenda. A significant point of contention was the large number of female characters in leading roles, which appears to disrupt the traditional narrative structure of the single woman that has contributed to established patterns of female fetishisation. Moreover, the portrayal of the male villain may have unintentionally increased discomfort in a subsection of ageing male fans, who typically show less tolerance for this kind of fetishisation of male characters.

My fandom is a place where I reclaim freedom from daily stress, immersing myself in an alternate, fictional reality that offers comfort and respite. Though some influencers argue otherwise, medical experts maintain that a balanced life is crucial for our health. For me, this balance includes moments of escape within my fandom. As real-life pressures encroach on this space, finding balance becomes increasingly difficult. When fandom, as a last refuge, comes under attack, it could spark an even greater backlash, ultimately signalling its demise as a place of escape.

6.3 Control In The Imperfect Pyramid

In the contextual Chapter, I referenced Flynn's (2019) Fandom Pyramid, which, in my opinion, oversimplifies fandom as a linear journey from casual to superfan. My experience reveals that the superfan top tier is much more intricate, resembling multiple overlapping layers morphing the model of a simple pyramid to a set of nested Russian dolls, thus furthering Booth's observation that 'Fan hierarchies are not flat but evolve as networks of nested engagement. As fans move from broader cultural fandoms into niche practices—like cosplay, collecting, or fan production—they often distance themselves from the mainstream. These micro-communities foster intense commitment, creating multiple, overlapping forms of identity and status within fandom itself.' (Booth, 2021, p. 84).

Remaining at the top of the pyramids requires work and maintaining a current skillset is not only about personal competence; specialists often face intense scrutiny. While this often fosters robust insights, accountability, and high standards, it can sometimes stem from personal agendas or narrow viewpoints. When ideological criticism takes precedence, defending one's work becomes a time-consuming distraction from productive contributions. Brandolini's Law, also known as the bullshit asymmetry principle, illustrates this point: it takes significantly more effort to refute misinformation than to create it.

Nonetheless, such scrutiny has made my Public Works more resilient and rigorous. Regular examination helps me refine my arguments and documentation, anticipate potential weaknesses, and enhance my communication. Challenges from fervent critics highlight the need for clear, precise explanations and strong justifications.

While frustrating, Brandolini's Law motivates me to present thorough evidence and prepare for anticipated counterarguments.

Michel Foucault (1977) noted the close link between knowledge and power—expertise often confers authority. In fan communities, such expertise is frequently self-proclaimed, facilitating gatekeeping. Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) concept of cultural capital further explains that those who have invested time in acquiring expertise may resist newcomers to safeguard their own status. Increasingly, certain individuals with minor status are adopting more rigid, fundamentalist stances, influencing the formation of new CRLs and raising ethical questions about their relationships with prop makers.

As mentioned in Chapter 5, costuming clubs must address these issues to prevent conflicts of interest and foster better relationships among clubs, makers, and troopers, an approach I championed at Tokyo Celebration 2025. In practice, the pursuit of expertise for power, recognition, and validation can be a risky trend within large fandoms, now evident in my own fandom. Here, power often derives from financial gains tied to fan content or from controlling standards and rules in niche areas, such as costuming.

Chapter 2 shows how Star Wars has fundamentally reshaped fandom and revolutionised the entertainment industry. What started as a pop culture sensation has become a cornerstone of contemporary culture. Even amid criticism from a fervent segment of fans, Star Wars thrives under Disney's direction, propelled by a steady flow of transmedia content. Each new release brings in fresh fans while reinforcing the views of long-time enthusiasts—some more rigid, others more welcoming. Still, meeting a character in person is a magical moment, only made possible by prop makers who are now under growing pressure to produce highly detailed work quickly to meet community expectations.

As I have gained more expertise, I am adopting some of the collectors' perspectives. Nonetheless, I remain a dedicated costumor at heart, as I believe deeply in the critical role it plays in creating immersive experiences for all. While I now view my own work more critically and aim for greater accuracy by leveraging my developed skills and up-to-date reference materials, I am also cautious. There is a genuine concern that if too many individuals with a collector's mindset assume leadership roles, the focus may shift away from costume-making toward collecting, ultimately risking a decline in membership to the detriment of the general public and the community.

6.4 Practice, Disruption, And The Ligne Claire Of Fandom

My own positioning within the Costumor–Collector spectrum illustrates the fluidity of these categories. While I frequently advocate for a costumor-oriented approach to simplifying entry requirements to broaden participation, my commercial practice increasingly aligns with the collector orientation. This shift reflects both temporal constraints and sustained dialogue with makers whose dispositions are firmly rooted in archivism.

Certain commissions require precisely the kind of archival research, material specificity, and detail-oriented execution that define collector practice. Yet, when wearing a costume, I revert to a costumor sensibility, prioritising embodied performance, audience interaction, and character representation.

This duality has proven disruptive, Jenkins notes, ‘Innovation in participatory culture often generates resistance precisely because it redistributes cultural authority’ (Jenkins, 2013, p. 78). By operationalising a rigorous code of ethics and elevated service standards within my commercial practice, I have inadvertently recalibrated community expectations. Not all participants welcome this recalibration, particularly those whose identities are bound to scarcity, difficulty, and exclusionary norms. Disruptors may be celebrated, but they are rarely uncontested.

Articulating the costumor–collector distinction publicly through interpersonal dialogue and social media has already amplified this disruption. Every interlocutor has affirmed the framework’s resonance, suggesting it offers a healthier vocabulary for describing the evolution of our community dynamics. The commanding officer of the Japanese Garrison, for instance, endorsed the model as a corrective to self-sabotaging representational practices and as having the potential to offer more constructive membership pathways.

A second, interrelated proposition concerns the institutional recognition of propmakers. Without their labour, costuming clubs would lack material infrastructure. Yet this labour remains structurally invisible, operating in what I term strategic opacity, a deliberate ambiguity that permits existence within legal grey zones.

A formal guild for replica prop makers could render this labour legible, granting both symbolic capital and institutional representation. As Bourdieu observes, 'Recognition is the central stake in struggles over classification' (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 243). A guild would not merely celebrate craftsmanship; it would secure a figurative seat at the table with rights holders such as Lucasfilm and Disney, transforming shadow practice into legitimate participation.

Ironically, such recognition is not universally desired. Some members, having endured significant hardship to achieve membership, expect analogous difficulties for all entrants, a dynamic Hills (2002) identifies as fan entitlement, wherein access is valorised precisely because it is restrictive. For now, my desire for positive change is limited by my ability to reach out to a community that has grown divided in the mediated world and where many lament its perceived complexity while wishing for the return of the fun times. While much remains outside my control, my Public Works provides me with a space for exploration and advocacy.

This is why I chose to anchor the visual identity of the commercial side of my Public Works in what I call the Ligne Claire des étoiles, evoking Hergé's Tintin. Beyond personal nostalgia, this choice responds to the widespread lament that costuming clubs have grown too serious, too political, too harsh.

Where some weaponise nostalgia to divide, I deploy it to remind participants of childhood wonder and adventure. In a cultural moment saturated with algorithmic rage, I believe such reminders are not frivolous; they are reparative.

"Your focus determines your reality."
Qui-Gon Jinn, Star Wars Episode I: The
Phantom Menace

“

*Your focus determines your
reality.*

*Qui-Gon Jinn,
Star Wars Episode I:
The Phantom Menace
1999*

Epilogue

When I first embarked on this project, I intended to explore and illustrate the profound impact of SciFi on individual and societal evolution. SciFi has long served as both a mirror and a guide, reflecting contemporary concerns while imagining alternative futures. Fandom can be a beautiful thing, and it has influenced my life since I was 6 years old. It has been an integral part of my formative years, shaping a strong visual aesthetic I still cherish today. It has sparked many internal discussions about the rights and wrongs of our society. It has likely played a significant role in developing my strong sense of empathy towards the world. It has prompted me to reflect on how we are evolving as a species and how we will address the challenges that lie ahead.

I chose to express my passion actively through the participative process of creating accurate replica costumes from the SWU. Understanding one's agency and its impact became a central theme of my writing experience, and autoethnography served as a masterful tool in analysing it. As my writing covers participatory fandom, I could not derive any valuable insights and lessons without drawing on my own experiences. Denying my participation and trying to extract myself from its writing would compromise its truthfulness and delegitimise the insights, making sure, as per Walford (2004), to ground them in actual research. As I now understand it, autoethnography is a powerful tool for transforming an insider's experience into knowledge that can benefit everyone. This approach, however, demands a careful balance: thorough research must complement personal insights, and one must be able to work through the discomfort that comes from recognising both what they do and do not fully understand. While discussing my research with a world-renowned designer, I was told of the evidence of the dogmatic nature of fandom. Yet, it reminded me that such evidence only exists because someone writes about it; unless it is clearly articulated, it remains an assumption.

Although fandoms can sometimes acquire para-religious qualities, I am convinced of their positive impact and their capacity to enrich our collective lives. My participation in my fandom is no longer solely about personal enjoyment but also about being embedded within a structured collective with its own set of rules (written or not) and expectations. My sense of belonging to the costuming community, much like the fandom itself, has faced challenges that have encouraged me to introspect and reassess my involvement in my Public Works.

I do not view this as something to dread or fear; I need to understand how my community is evolving and its direction, as I anticipate that the next few years will be more challenging than all previous ones.

The intensification of toxicity and dogmatism within the Star Wars costuming community precipitated a period of profound disillusionment, culminating in what can only be described as burnout. This erosion of affective investment was neither sudden nor total, but a gradual attrition of joy in participation echoed in Tufekci's "Algorithmic amplification does not merely surface content; it reshapes the emotional texture of online life, privileging outrage and polarisation (Tufekci , 2018, p. 134).

My own digital timeline became saturated with inflammatory discourse, much of it masquerading as fan journalism while functioning as click-driven outrage bait. Confronted with this manufactured hostility, I deliberately curated my environment, reducing my private follower count from approximately 2,000 to 400. Critics might frame this as a retreat into an echo chamber; I see it as the reclamation of agency.

Within fandom, where the primary objective is enjoyment of the source material, such boundary-setting is not escapism—it is self-preservation. Misalignment between personal values and community practice has necessitated withdrawal. In China, I have ceased active trooping due to the local leadership's failure to address homophobic discourse. Whether my absence impacts the group is immaterial; the act of withdrawal is itself a statement.

This autonomy, however, does not extend to my commercial platforms, which serve a global audience of over 11,000 followers. Here, I cannot police individual beliefs. My sole recourse is transparency. When prospective buyers inquire about my location, I explicitly state that I operate from China—a disclosure that occasionally results in lost sales, particularly from U.S.-based buyers exhibiting America First dispositions. I accept these losses as consonant with my commitment to a globally egalitarian ethos, meeting Jenkins's observation, 'Ethical participation in fan culture requires a willingness to forgo profit or popularity in defence of one's values' (Jenkins, 2013,p. 212).

While I have chosen not to foreground the commercial mechanics of my Public Works, their impact is undeniable. I occupy a liminal space: an insider in costuming clubs and prop-making circles, yet operationally distinct because I incorporate external business logics unfamiliar to most peers. Thus, disengagement carries different stakes. If I were to cease operations, the resulting vacuum would likely be filled by less scrupulous vendors, sometimes unmoored from community norms, driven solely by profit. This would replicate the very pathologies that initially motivated my alternative model.

At times, I have worried that my critique risks appearing hyperbolic or ungrateful. My Public Works and the community that sustains them have been indispensable, intellectually, emotionally, and socially. This necessitates rigorous critique, particularly as digital mediation reshapes interactional norms. The algorithmic turn toward outrage-as-engagement, where rage sells more effectively than sex sells, has exacerbated toxicity, rewarding confrontation over conciliation (Tufekci, 2018). Recent legislative responses, such as those of Australia, the United Kingdom and France, restricting under-16 social media use, signal growing recognition of these harms.

The insights gained from my research have better equipped me to confront these upcoming challenges. As a creator, I now embrace a sense of expertise and look forward to discovering and learning about the many things I do not yet know. As a costumor, I have gained a new sense of freedom in my expression outside the strict requirements of the costuming clubs. As a participant in fandom, I found it incredibly satisfying to research published work related to my own experiences. I discovered a growing interest in the subject matter, and much of what has been written closely aligns with my Public Works.

The Star Wars fandom exemplifies how popular culture can mirror religion, gathering a vast and passionate global community that faces both external challenges and internal conflicts. The costuming community, in particular, fosters the *anima*—the shared joy of collective experience—by reintroducing tangible, playful interactions into our increasingly digital lives. While some may view this playfulness as childish, I see it as a meaningful and educational activity. Additionally, fandoms can offer a moment of relief in our chaotic world, with the potential to alleviate social tensions and contradictions.





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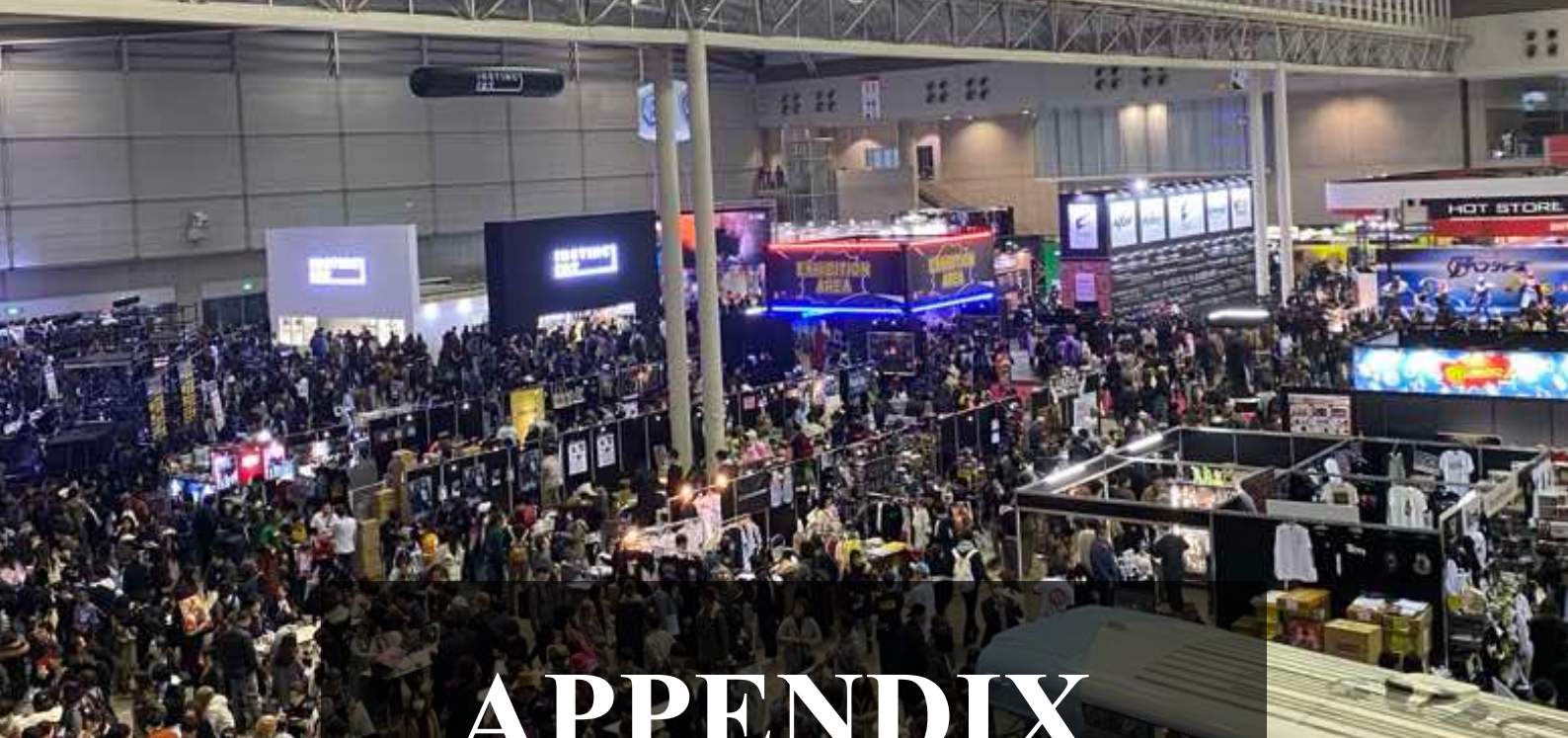
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APPENDIX



Celebration, the biennale Grand Messe of Star Wars Fandom where tens of thousands of fans gather to experience their favourite universe, meet with fellow fans, immerse themselves in experiential displays and encounters with costumers. Also, a chance to sometimes meet the actors who embodied and represent the best of the franchise, take pictures or get signatures to proudly display as holy relics of our devotion to the source material.





The 6-month process of making a 'simple' costume, Boba Fett from The Book of Boba Fett (2021) Episode 01, from deep-dive research to making the suit, carefully destroying it, ageing, weathering, to finally bringing it to Celebration London 2023.

I. Keeptrooping: The Full Story

To truly understand my craft, I create screen-accurate Star Wars costume replicas for collectors worldwide—costumes worn at events or displayed with pride. Unlike off-the-shelf Halloween costumes, my work demands around 200 hours each and a significant financial commitment, sometimes exceeding \$4,000 per costume. My collection's value surpasses \$100,000. Every costume is made to the stringent standards of the 501st Legion, a prestigious Star Wars costuming club with nearly 20,000 members globally. Members must complete at least one approved costume and participate in annual activities, with the 501st synonymous with quality across charity and fan events.

Costume approval is complex, requiring creation of a thorough Costume Reference Library (CRL), expert review, and often months of revisions before final approval. Once approved, costumes are further reviewed for each new maker. Earlier, finding armour parts was difficult—supply was sparse, delays were common, and creativity was essential. Many improvisations involved crafting from plastic bins (“garbage builds”), and knowledge-sharing depended on in-person expertise, a challenge far easier thanks to today’s online resources.

Prop makers have historically used a “Production Run” system: announcing a product, setting a price, and requiring a minimum number of buyers to proceed. If not enough orders came in, the run was cancelled. While this gave control over production and timing, it often led to delays or cancellations, with some props never delivered. Pre-order funds were sometimes misallocated, causing further issues. In 2016, a licensed company tried a similar pre-order system for Star Wars props. Despite initial excitement and credibility, they soon encountered significant delays, poor communication, and incomplete deliveries, with some orders taking years. Pre-order funds were used to finance future projects, eventually leading to cash flow problems, a class action lawsuit, bankruptcy, and rebranding under a new owner.

In 2014, after struggling to find Stormtrooper boots that fit, a friend in my Chinese garrison introduced me to a custom shoemaker. We adjusted the design for comfort and soon offered this service to others. When growing demand caused communication and logistics issues, I joined to help, using my background in design and marketing. I built an e-commerce site, warning my partner of an expected spike in orders.

Three days after launch, our PayPal account was frozen, and we couldn't access funds. Unexpectedly high order volume created logistical and financial challenges: we had to pay suppliers and ship items up front, even as payments were locked. Shipping became overwhelming—one Friday, I delivered 27 boxes to five post offices across Beijing. While I ran operations in Beijing, my partner's move and day job in Shanghai further strained our capacity. We wanted to remain small and reliable for the 501st community, prioritising trust and product quality above all.

To improve operations, I introduced “the wave” model: opening our shop for one week each month, allowing customers to place orders; then closing, producing, and shipping before reopening for the next cycle. This streamlined production ensured we met commitments and became popular among other prop makers. We outsourced shipping to a package forwarding partner, reducing delivery time from weeks to about 7–10 days. While more expensive, this gave us more time to focus on other tasks. Our current partner also manages our small inventory and all logistics.

As demand grew in 2015, I registered a company in Hong Kong to formalise our business and gain supplier leverage. This move also addressed legal concerns—especially after Disney's acquisition of Lucasfilm made our future less certain. By 2016, balancing full-time jobs, I shouldered extra work to manage increased shoe and glove offerings. We were thrilled when a US trooper wore our items at a White House “Episode VII” event, reaffirming our efforts. Realising we could offer more, we expanded to become a soft parts shop, avoiding armour due to established competition and the growth of 3D printing.

Inspired by “Rogue One” in 2016, we launched a full soft-parts line for several key characters. I personally travelled to Vancouver to collect tank trooper armour, ensuring timely assembly ahead of the China premiere. By 2018, our catalogue included more characters, with stormtrooper boots staying most popular. To ensure quality, I began assembling full costumes for registration before releasing any products. This became our standard procedure. I also moved operations to Shanghai for better quality control and personally managed packing and logistics. Focusing entirely on the business enabled closer customer engagement.

By 2019, our broad range allowed customers to complete unique costumes—even if sales were niche. That year, I supplied boots for the “Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order” global campaign. Despite Lucasfilm's approval, community standards later rejected the design over a disputed detail. Bound by NDA, I couldn't explain the approval, highlighting tensions in prop making. Commercial-specific costume pieces were only acceptable if a CRL existed for that version; they weren't valid for the game variant. 2019 was a turning point in the costuming community, marked by intensified scrutiny on accuracy. Enthusiasts obsessively focused on small details, and high-resolution streaming made minute examination of costumes possible. This led to growing elitism: accuracy improved, but standards became exclusionary, with minor updates rendering some costumes unusable for characters they once fit.

Personally, I began auditing my work annually as CRL changes became more frequent and subjective, sometimes hindering community cohesion. For example, minor modifications to the Imperial pilot jumpsuit split it into two distinct versions, making old jumpsuits obsolete for some roles. That year, others started copying and selling designs based on my costumes—known as “recasters” in the community.

While hard armour recasts are easier to spot, similarities in soft goods are common due to shared requirements, despite my original patterns. After being alerted by a customer that someone used my photos to sell copied costumes, I investigated and found the seller—based in Pakistan—was using my work and had likely obtained originals to reverse-engineer. I never sell outside 501st-affiliated countries, so someone in the community must have helped. I confronted him, presented evidence, and demanded he stop. He deleted his accounts but later targeted other costume lines. A second issue involved a 501st member in Macau, who tried to source and sell my B-grade items using my images, even charging more. I reported him to local leadership. By the end of 2019, my partner and I agreed I would buy his share and take full control, as remote collaboration and diverging priorities made joint management unworkable. We reached a fair settlement, not knowing what was ahead.

The next few years were turbulent, particularly in China. When COVID-19 emerged, Shanghai remained unaffected at first. By spring 2020, the government requested voluntary lockdowns. Most people, including myself, agreed it was necessary. I couldn't access my studio for three weeks, but operations continued. Afterwards, I realised changes were needed. To avoid shipping

delays if stricter lockdowns returned, I relocated inventory to my transporter's warehouse and handled packing and shipping from there. I also moved my office closer to home for digital work and prototyping, increasing resilience if specific city districts are locked down. I had already adopted an artisanal, decentralised production model, working with various local artisans who met our quality and CRL standards. By 2019, nothing was mass-produced or held in large inventory.

Throughout 2020 and 2021, staggered lockdowns allowed us to keep working, though supply chains and couriers often faced disruptions. Logistics worsened when China suspended all flights; shipping costs soared, and commercial cargo space disappeared.

Despite costs rising up to 300%, I refused to raise prices, prioritising support for the costuming community during a traumatic time. Even as life returned to normal, prices have remained high because companies see no reason to reduce them. While China's first COVID year was manageable, the second brought personal trauma, frustration over negative perceptions, and challenges as the virus spread again. Shanghai's lockdown in March, expected to last three days, ultimately stretched to three months, confining all residents inside.

During this time, a large Hollywood order provided a rare boost. After confirming details under my Lucasfilm NDA, I rushed production as new local COVID cases led to further lockdowns. Thanks to a trusted courier, the shipment reached Shanghai via a roundabout route before restrictions shut everything down. When the package was ready for shipment to Shanghai, a district lockdown halted access to the transporter's warehouse, affecting courier services. We rerouted the package to another city with a second warehouse; the shoes arrived, but the gloves were stuck in Shanghai. Fortunately, the general manager allowed the transporter to retrieve vital paperwork, enabling us to collect the gloves and reunite them with the shoes using a special regional permit for the truck. With the items consolidated, we faced another challenge: international shipping was suspended in Shanghai and Beijing. Thankfully, an airport in southern China was still operating.

We shipped the package there, then to Hong Kong, and finally to the US just in time. The process was stressful, but also a welcome distraction. During lockdown, we performed daily at-home nasal swabs and uploaded results, with weekly PCR tests in the compound—the only time we left our apartments. Anyone testing positive was sent to isolation.

By early summer, we were briefly released from lockdown, resuming daily life under strict surveillance and required to take PCR tests every two days, tracked by a QR-coded app. Green codes allowed access to public places, while red indicated imminent quarantine.

By autumn, a second national lockdown began, lasting nearly three months. Despite restrictions, I continued producing and shipping costumes, adapting routes to get packages through shifting airport closures. In December, restrictions abruptly ended as vaccination rates topped 90% and the threat diminished. This allowed the return to public spaces without QR codes or masks, though it felt surreal at first. From April to December 2022, I took nearly 300 COVID tests, largely confined to my apartment and worried about being sent to quarantine with my family. My son, now vaccinated three times, looked forward to us travelling again. A vacant unit across from my home inspired me to relocate my studio, ensuring easier access during future lockdowns. With a favourable lease, I moved my workspace for greater peace of mind.

In 2024, I launched the 50-for-50 Project: 50 registered costumes by my 50th birthday, while managing ongoing KeepTrooping projects—including our rebrand from Imperial Boots to reflect our expanded range. Freed from an old partnership, I quickly adopted “KeepTrooping”—a motto symbolising shared trooping experiences—rebranding the company and redesigning the website. I formalised our approach, improving communication, product displays, and operational structure. After a long pandemic pause, I resumed enhancement efforts in 2023. Inspiration returned at Celebration London after a prop maker recognised my impact. Motivated by this, I refined our quality, photography, and branding, seeking new partnerships and better materials.

I now oversee every stage—costume selection, prototyping, digital presence, content creation, and social media. I manage branding, admin, production schedules, supplier payments, and logistics. Strategic planning addresses both current challenges and future growth. Each complete costume undergoes rigorous testing. I participate in international events for feedback and camaraderie, reaffirming my commitment to building community through KeepTrooping.





From humble beginnings, where everything was done from kitchen tables to warehouses, and eventually a proper studio, the story of KeepTrooping is one that humbles me. It was never intended to be or become a traditional business. Even to this day, I do not see it as such, even though I have to function like one.



II. The 501st

The 501st is one of the most well-known and respected fan organisations within the Star Wars community. It exemplifies how fandom can extend beyond personal enjoyment into organised, impactful social participation. This group is dedicated to creating and wearing screen-accurate costumes of Star Wars villains, particularly Stormtroopers. Over time, it has become more than just a collective of fans; it operates with a military-like structure that mirrors the ranks of the Star Wars Imperial forces and engages in philanthropic activities that have a significant social impact.

Founded in 1997, the 501st is organised in a hierarchy that reflects the military ranks of the Galactic Empire. Members are divided into garrisons, outposts, and squads based on their location and size. This structure enhances the group's sense of identity and creates a pseudo-military organisation with leadership roles, regional divisions, and clear standards. Each member must adhere to strict costume guidelines to ensure a high level of authenticity that aligns with the Legion's motto, "Bad guys doing good." These standards foster a sense of belonging and achievement, reminiscent of passing initiation rites in traditional organisations. This hierarchy and organisation instil a sense of duty and belonging within the fandom that is uncommon, even in dedicated fan communities. Members often feel responsible not only to the group but also to upholding the Star Wars legacy, which amplifies their emotional investment in the fandom. This commitment to high standards gives the 501st considerable cultural capital within the Star Wars community, as they are often viewed as the epitome of Star Wars costuming excellence.

Participation in the 501st involves attending public events, conventions, parades, and charity fundraisers. Members treat these events like ritualistic gatherings, where wearing their meticulously crafted armour is akin to donning sacred garments. The presence of the 501st at these events is ceremonial and impressive; members march, pose, and interact with fans, often in character. This performative aspect of their participation resembles religious or military rituals, emphasising the group's shared identity and reinforcing the collective bond among members. The Legion also engages in "trooping" activities—charity events, visits to children's hospitals, and community fundraisers—where members appear in full costume to bring joy to fans and raise awareness for various causes. These activities have transformed the 501st from a fan organisation into a philanthropic force, with members often viewing their work as a duty. This

sense of duty aligns their participation with religious service activities, where members devote time and resources to support the larger community.

The social impact of the 501st is multifaceted. They raise awareness and funds for various causes by appearing at charity events, effectively translating fandom participation into real-world benefits. This aspect of service is a decisive factor in the group's identity, resonating with the concept of fandom as more than just personal enjoyment; it evolves into a vehicle for positive social change. The 501st's philanthropic efforts, which include supporting the Make-A-Wish Foundation and various local charities, provide a sense of purpose that extends beyond the SWU. This focus on charity and community service distinguishes the 501st from many other fan groups, elevating it to an organisation that embodies fandom's values and contributes meaningfully to society. Members frequently describe their involvement with the Legion as transformative, offering a sense of mission, pride, and fulfilment akin to that found in religious or altruistic organisations.

Belonging to the 501st is a significant aspect of many members' identities. Their intense dedication to costume accuracy and the group's mission of doing good while portraying "bad guys" creates a complex relationship between identity, values, and performance. Members often adopt both an in-character persona (as Imperial soldiers) and a real-world identity that is community-focused and philanthropic, blending fiction with reality in a way that blurs the boundaries between fandom and personal identity. The Legion's motto, "Bad guys doing good," is a powerful symbolic statement that adds depth to their activities. It reflects the complexities of the fandom experience, where members embody villains from a fictional universe yet use that identity for positive real-world impact. This duality parallels certain religious practices, where symbols of power or protection are utilised in the service of good, further enhancing the quasi-spiritual nature of their involvement.

The 501st exemplifies how fandom can transcend entertainment, transforming into a structured, mission-driven organisation that makes a real-world impact. With its organised hierarchical structure, ritualistic events, and philanthropic efforts, the Legion bears similarities to religious organisations in how it fosters identity, belonging, and a sense of mission among its members. This evolution from a fan group into a socially impactful community illustrates fandom's potential to create meaning, purpose, and connection on a scale that extends beyond individual

enjoyment, resonating with broader societal values. As a case study, the 501st highlights unique ways fandom can serve as a source of personal fulfilment and community service, making it one of the most compelling examples of fandom as a transformative social force.

The 501st Structure

Although the 501st Legion is a volunteer Star Wars costuming organisation, it adopts a **pseudo-military structure** to organise its worldwide membership. This structure helps maintain consistency, accountability, and a shared identity among thousands of members across continents. The system borrows terminology and hierarchy reminiscent of the Imperial military in Star Wars while being adapted to a civilian, hobbyist framework.

1. Central Legion Command

At the top of the structure is the **Legion Command**. This central leadership provides governance, sets policies, and ensures that Legion-wide standards (such as costume approval rules) are applied consistently.

- **Legion Commanding Officer (LCO)** – the highest elected officer, equivalent to a commanding general, who oversees the global organisation.
- **Legion Executive Officer (LXO)** – the second-in-command, assisting the LCO and stepping in as needed.
- **Legion Command Staff** – various officers responsible for specialised domains such as membership, operations, branding, charity, web presence, and detachments.

2. Garrisons, Squads, and Outposts

The 501st is divided geographically, much like military districts:

- **Garrisons** – Large, established regional units (e.g., German Garrison, UK Garrison, Florida Garrison). They operate as semi-autonomous bodies with their own commanding officers and staff.
- **Squads** – Subdivisions within garrisons, usually covering smaller territories or cities.
- **Outposts** – Similar to garrisons but for regions with fewer members; once they grow large enough, they can evolve into garrisons.

Each garrison or outpost has a **Commanding Officer (CO)** and **Executive Officer (XO)**, reflecting the chain of command.

3. Detachments

Detachments are **specialised units** that focus not on geography but on costume types. They act like regiments or technical corps in a military system:

- Examples include:
 - First Imperial Stormtrooper Detachment (FISD) – for stormtroopers.
 - **Flagship Eclipse Detachment** – for Expanded Universe and Sith Lords.
 - Jolly Roger Squadron – for TIE pilots.

Detachments oversee **Costume Reference Libraries (CRLs)** and advise members on accuracy. They also have their own command staff and forums.

4. Ranks and Officers

While the Legion is not a true army, members often refer to positions with **military-style rank terminology**:

- **Commanding Officer (CO)** – leader of a unit (Legion, Garrison, Outpost, Squad).
- Executive Officer (XO) – deputy to the CO.
- **Garrison Staff Roles** – officers responsible for Membership Liaison, Public Relations, Web/Tech, Charity, etc.
- **Detachment Commanders (DLs)** – leaders of costume-specialist detachments.

Unlike real militaries, rank is not permanent or hierarchical across the entire Legion: it reflects a **position of responsibility** within a unit, not an enduring title. Leadership roles are typically elected or appointed for set terms.

5. Practices and Culture

The military-like structure translates into a strong sense of discipline and ritual:

- **Chain of Command** – Members are expected to follow the reporting line: from individual trooper → squad leader → garrison CO → Legion Command.
- **Uniformity and Standards** – Costume approval is centralised to maintain screen accuracy, echoing military emphasis on regulations and inspection.
- **Trooping Orders** – Event participation is often organised like deployments, with sign-ups, briefings, and after-action reports.
- **Titles and Designations** – Each member is assigned an **ID number** (e.g., TK-42110), giving them an identity in the "Legion army."
- **Ceremonial Practices** – Change of command ceremonies, recognition awards, and commendations mirror military traditions, reinforcing hierarchy and belonging.

6. Outward Presentation

The military-like structure serves several functions:

- It strengthens **group identity** and immersion in the Star Wars universe.
- It ensures **operational efficiency**, allowing the Legion to coordinate thousands of appearances annually across countries.
- It conveys an image of **professionalism** to external partners (charities, Lucasfilm, event organisers).
- It fosters a sense of **ritual and belonging** among members, paralleling real military esprit de corps while remaining entirely symbolic.

Project Mayhem (Exerp From The Official 501st Reddit)

A bit on who or what Projekt Mayhem is, how they formed, their goals, tactics, and suggestions on how to stamp them out.

Projekt Mayhem is an unofficial group within the 501st formed by disaffected legion officers, upset at loss of power after the 2019 Feb election. PM was primarily made up of the leadership of three garrisons (UKGarrison, Golden Gate Garrison in California, and Redback Garrison in Australia) with supporters in other garrisons. "Founding members" are very proud of such a title. Since formation the objective has been to discredit, remove and replace LCS, take control wherever possible and failing this, remove ability for the 501st to step in regarding any of their garrison affairs or individual crusades. They make their own merchandise using LFL Star Wars IP, operate in their garrisons with impunity and purge anyone they consider a threat to their control. The 501st was and is unprepared to deal with the tactics and methods of Projekt Mayhem. The legion naively assumed that leadership of a garrison would never act this way, let alone coordinate with others to subvert the mission and ideas of the group.

Brigading is an online harassment tactic rallying a group against an individual or smaller group, in a sustained and organised way. Reddit and other online communities have rules against it, the legion has no such rules and it is Projekt Mayhem's main weapon. It is why the 501st boards are a festering wasteland, dominated by their voices. Anyone arrives to say anything off script? They coordinate off-forum to bring as many of their number as possible to tell this individual and anyone else watching that they're wrong. They change the subject, talk around the argument, play things off as jokes, discredit and counter question the OP, any number of diversionary tactics. The purpose is to bog relevant conversation and questions down in posts so that it is impossible to respond or resolve within a bog of endless aggressive posting. So many threads on the 501st boards die a death from being overly bloated with eager Projekt Mayhem acolytes. The LCOGs (either members of Projekt Mayhem themselves or sympathetic to PM) are either not prepared to handle this or do not want to handle this, and do not stop them. Wondering if someone is a PM member? Check their post history. Do they look like a brigadier? They're probably PM.

Another tactic is broad surveillance and cyberstalking across all available Social Media. Their network spreads information to PM members, and collects information on PM targets to be used in action taken against them. They do not care where the information comes from, public or private Social Media, closed groups for women or other minorities to speak freely, they take everything. It is insidious, prolific, and has caused multiple members of the 501st from historically vulnerable or protected characteristic groups to withdraw and leave the legion altogether.

Nowhere is safe, you are unable to talk freely of your experiences, ask for help or be critical. Projekt Mayhem have made the legion unsafe for these members or any individual who draws their eye. The 501st legion has no Social Media policy, yet they have historically punished PM-targeted members for Social Media activity and have let plenty of other Social Media based cases slide. They aren't subtle, making it clear that Big Brother is watching. But they'll cry about doxxing and play the victim as loudly as they can should anyone share any of their own incriminating words back at them, or reveal them for who they are.

Another key tactic is infiltration into vital areas of the legion, removing checks and balances to protect its members. As has already been discussed elsewhere on this thread, PM put forward jury members for 501st trials and try to sway or even recruit other jurors from those same trials. The turnout for voluntary jury duty is low, so the odds of PM getting in on a jury are high, and they know this. When it was mentioned that this throws speculation of jury rigging and trial tampering onto all 501st trials in at least the last year? That is very likely what's happened. The same names showing up to jury lists over and over again cannot be a coincidence. What chance of a fair trial does a PM target have if they are brought up on a PM member's charges, with a PM jury, and PM-friendly LCOGs? And PM members who get brought up on charges getting away not guilty? Extremely convenient. So this puts the entire justice system of the 501st into question. Who can you complain to? How is this fair? Who watches the Watchmen? Hearings are sealed up and you find yourself targeted if you speak of the details outside, with brigading demanding proof, knowing that sharing of details is cause for punishment which they will gladly serve you. As per tactic above, this is all recorded, passed along to the PM network for dissemination. As we have seen with the treatment of the LCO, whether you agree with her line of questioning or not, there is no member of the 501st too big that they would not go after. They will use all means, official and unofficial, to remove them, deny their appeals, and set about smear campaigns asap to stifle their calls for justice.

This is coordinated and brutal. Layers of followers doing whatever is needed to support and protect leaders. In return, followers are given PM protection, a free hand to do whatever they choose to whoever they want. They are not the smartest, the most creative or the most knowledgeable. The sole qualification is their loyalty and how brutally they can shut down anyone the PM kingpins consider a problem. Admittedly, watching lower-tier PM members squeal and roll on one another following the recent leak of a PM membership list has been something to see. Not quite as loyal when their safety net is revoked. "I am Jack's complete lack of surprise."

Projekt Mayhem have driven off entire departments of legion command staff. They orchestrated a VONC (vote of no confidence) for 2019's LCO, but did not expect him to resign before a membership vote could be triggered. This foiled an attempt to put forward a candidate of their own and seize control of the legion in a coup. The PM candidates were roundly thrashed in the 2020 elections this February by the LCO they recently managed to slyly remove. Prior to this, in 2019, practically the entire LMBO (Legion Merchandise and Branding Officers) staff walked after PM worked overtime to discredit their adherence to new LFL merch rules. The brigading was intense, prolonged and constant. Some even walked away from the legion. LMOs (Legion Membership Officers) and a few "good cop" LCOGs were pushed to resign at the hands of PM's constant attacks. In the instance of the resigning LCOGs, they were ashamed at the state of what the office had become through PM's influence. The others received their treatment for the simple crime of stopping PM members from doing whatever they wanted within their respective departments, because what they want regularly goes against legion rules.

Driving staff from positions and membership from legion discussion benefits them in the form of pushing through 501st charter changes while most members are not engaged due to the forums being a cesspit. Highlighting new proposals to raise membership engagement earns you a PM target painted on your back.

They do not want membership to be engaged. They want you to close your eyes and plummet with them into the ground, "calm as hindu cows", as Tyler Durden would say.

If you are a 501st member and actually want to try and fix the legion, talk about this in your garrisons, on the legion forums, with your friends. Have courage and do not allow yourself or important conversations to be shut down by these guys. Stop letting them run off members critical of them, because they do not have the best interests of the legion at heart and eventually you will run out of people trying to stand up to these guys. Eventually PM will be your legion. Pull your heads out of the sand, stop trying to heal the legion with hand holding and "we can do it"

plucky attitudes. Their skill is looking bigger than they are. Hold your leadership accountable if they are PM or sympathetic. You voted them in, they should represent YOU and NOT Projekt Mayhem's bullshit selfish ideals. Hold your LCOGs accountable, they are voted in now, you can vote them back out. Talk to your 501st legion council seat holders and have them push for charter changes to enable the 501st (with fresh and uncorrupt LCOGs) to fix this problem themselves before someone fixes it for them. Question new LCOG candidates to ensure things do not get worse with a freshly hatched batch of PM-brand "justice". Do not let them be squad leaders. Do not let them be detachment leaders. Do not let them be garrison staff. Maybe not every PM member knows the full extent of the machine they're part of, but they are part of it. Stop Projekt Mayhem. If you are sad at the state of the legion right now? Do something. Remove founding PM members from the Legion, cut the head off the snake.

The charter protects them, and is not fit for purpose. Fix it so that the above can happen. Talk to your councillors, show them that you have a voice and you DO give a shit.

VONC the LCOGs, get a team in who give a fuck and want to fix this, and aren't bought by PM. Stop tolerating intolerance, bullying and harassment within the group, or very soon you will not have a group left at all.

III. 501st Infographic

ED.2025

COMMANDING OFFICER: JUSTIN SONFIELD .USA.



EST.1997 LEGION STATS

FOUNDER: ALBIN JONHSON .USA.

27664 TROOPERS
69 COUNTRIES
108 GARRISONS
27 OUTPOSTS
16 DETACHMENTS



COSTUME FACTS

ORIGINAL: TK421
1977 ANH
1H 08MIN 11SEC



576
CHARACTERS

98%
REPLICA
ACCURACY

1700
AVERAGE
COST IN US\$

200
AVERAGE
BUILD HOURS
PER COSTUME

34040
COSTUMES
AVRG. 2.5 /TROOPER

5180
STORMTROOPERS
MOST MADE
DESIGNATION
"T1" (PILOTS)
5422



TROOPERS FACTS

1 TROOPER = 1 ID = TK 000 0 0

COSTUME
SENIORITY



MINIMUM
AGE

18

AVERAGE
AGE

45

OLDEST
TROOPER

80

ACTIVE
DUTY
TROOPERS

13652



221

FALLEN TROOPERS
Bucket Off

HONORARY
MEMBERS

589

1 GEORGE LUCAS
"THE MAKER"



STAR WARS TRANSMEDIA UNIVERSE

9

SAGA
MOVIES

2

ANTHOLOGY
MOVIES

16

ANIMATED
SERIES

7

LIVE ACTION
SERIES

480+

NOVELS
BOOKS

230+

COMPUTER
GAMES

500+

GRAPHIC
NOVELS



OUTPOSTS
GARRISONS

47% WWT
6470.USA

974.DE

WORLD
LARGEST
GARRISON
GERMANY

455.UK

234.FR

793.ES

13.RU

244.IT

290

GREATER CHINA
CHINA GARRISON
HONG KONG
TAIWAN GARRISON
MACAU OUTPOST

119.JP

131.CN

WORLD
SMALLEST
OUTPOST
INDIA

1

147.SG

453.AU

76.NZ

161.MX

211.BR

103.AR

711.CA

103.AR

IV. Star Wars Fandom Toxicity, Brief Overview Of Findings.

Based on my readings of various websites and my active participation in the online fandom, I have made several observations through discussions with community members worldwide, as well as my experience with the changing tone of this subject. I have investigated many articles dating back to the early 2010s with the objective of understanding the evolution of the fandom in a chronological manner. Some of the content I reviewed refers to events from my childhood, including the release of the original Star Wars films. This information has been cross-referenced with multiple sources, including recent interviews with George Lucas himself. I examined podcasts, video essays, and community interactions, gathering a broad range of non-academic materials, such as documentaries, essays, smaller journal articles, and Facebook comments. The aim was to explore the evolution of toxicity within the fandom, leading to this brief overview of my insights, which provide a perspective on the significance of these interactions and dynamics.

I must note that this research relies on material that may not be considered primary sources for academic work; however, it still offers valuable insights into my community. These insights are based on my firsthand observations. One exciting finding emerged from my analysis of Facebook posts and comments. My methodology involves not only reading the comments but also assessing their level of toxicity based on the content expressed. I evaluate whether comments are simple one-liners or more thoughtful, in-depth responses. Additionally, I consider the interaction counts—how many people reacted with likes, anger, or comments—compared to those engaging in textual responses. For each person interacting, I take the time to examine their profiles to understand their connection to the fandom.

Interestingly, I found a correlation between the length of comments and the commenter's connection to the fandom. In other words, when comments are short and mostly derogatory—especially concerning social issues rather than the content of the franchise—there's a greater likelihood that the commenter is not genuinely engaged with the fandom. However, if the issue pertains to actual SWU matters and the comment exceeds two sentences, the chance of that comment being made by a true fan increases dramatically.

From my investigations, I noticed that many negative comments on posts discussing suicidal issues raised by Star Wars production—particularly regarding Diversity and Inclusion—were written by individuals falling into several categories.:

The first category includes "ghost" profiles—fake accounts created by individuals, bots, or troll farms designed to boost click counts and push certain agendas. These profiles typically lack any significant content, such as pictures or personal information. The second category consists of profiles that appear genuine but are managed to resemble active users. These profiles may have a collection of pictures and content, but the images are often reused, and the profile picture may not match those displayed in the timeline. When exploring the friend list, one often finds the same type of profiles that lack genuine engagement, suggesting these too could be "ghosts" created to artificially inflate click counts or promote agendas.

The third category consists of individuals who appear to be actual users. However, I have observed that a significant majority of these profiles lean heavily toward right-wing views, as indicated by their posted content and shared images. Notably, none of these profiles demonstrates any visible connection to the Star Wars fandom.

A typical fan would at least share something related to Star Wars—such as a picture, meme, or celebratory message on significant dates—but these profiles show no such connections.

This leads me to hypothesize that, while they may understand the community dynamics, they do not identify as fans. Instead, they might be using this platform to promote their own social perspectives rather than representing the fandom. While I personally doubt these individuals have the foresight to plan this strategically, it reflects a deliberate effort to exploit the fandom for unrelated political agendas.

Finally, the fourth type of profile I encountered belongs to genuine users/fans. These profiles exhibit all the characteristics of active engagement, including sharing and posting pictures, consistent activity, and making connections—all indicative of a real person. Moreover, these individuals have a notable connection to the fandom, as evidenced by their posts about recent releases or various facets of the Star Wars universe.

Over the past two years, I have conducted this experiment many times on a wide variety of Facebook posts related to the Star Wars universe, and the insights have been consistently similar. Although I have repeated this experiment over 50 times in the past year alone with comparable

results, it is not sufficient to classify it as scientific research that proves anything definitively. However, it is an interesting exercise that highlights a potential misuse of the fandom by external elements. I believe there is a place for quantitative research in this area, and it would likely align with my preliminary insights.

When posts discuss Star Wars content, genuine fans with opposing views interact, sometimes more dogmatically than others; however, the majority of engagement occurs between true fans. Conversely, when a post involves both Star Wars and societal issues—particularly regarding diversity—the demographic of engagement shifts significantly. This can be explained by the theory that the Star Wars fandom is one of the largest and most dynamic in the world, boasting hundreds of millions of fans, many of whom are based in the United States.

In recent years, this fandom has been described and portrayed by both traditional and digital media as one of the most toxic. Given the number of fans and their dynamics, as well as the frequency of engagement, clickbait practices have been successfully used to generate revenue. Therefore, it is likely that click farms or troll farms are being employed to increase engagement through derogatory comments, prompting reactions that lead to even more interaction and profit. On the more concerning side of this engagement spectrum, it is not difficult to imagine lobbying groups or interest groups using similar tactics to promote their own social or political agendas within such a large community as Star Wars. They understand that as people engage, the buzz generated can amplify their message to a broader audience through traditional media and news outlets, effectively using the community to promote their own ideologies. In other words, the community becomes a pawn in a larger game.

1. Introduction

The analysis examines toxic behaviour within the Star Wars fandom, particularly concerning specific characters and sociopolitical agendas such as woke culture, feminism, and LGBTQ representation. The platforms analysed include Reddit, YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, and clickbait sites like ScreenRant, with a geographical focus on the USA and Europe. This report aims to explore the evolution of toxicity in the Star Wars fandom across three distinct timelines:

1. OT : 1977 to 1983 (Original Trilogy)
2. PT : 1999 to 2005 (Prequel Trilogy)
3. NE: Post-2015 (Disney Acquisition, New Era)

2. Timeline Analysis

1977 to 1983 (Original Trilogy)

The overall sentiment within the Star Wars fandom during the release of the Original Trilogy was largely positive. While some criticism did arise, it typically centred around minor plot details or character points rather than exhibiting strong toxicity.

At that time, media coverage was limited primarily to fan magazines, newsletters, and local fan groups, which did not demonstrate significant organised negativity. Key characters from the Original Trilogy, such as Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader, were well-received by audiences. Princess Leia, however, sparked a minor debate regarding gender roles. While some fans celebrated her portrayal as a strong female character, others perceived it as a departure from traditional roles. Nonetheless, these reactions were minimal compared to the controversies that would emerge in later years.

1999 to 2005 (Prequel Trilogy)

Between 1999 and 2005, which marked the release of the prequel trilogy, the rise of online platforms dramatically changed the landscape of Star Wars discussions. With the advent of forums and early Social Media, discussions moved into online spaces like Reddit and forums such as TheForce.net, where conversations became more heated. Characters like Anakin Skywalker, Jar Jar Binks, and young Anakin faced significant backlash, with Jar Jar, in particular, becoming the target of online vitriol. Many discussions turned toxic, as some fans alleged that his character perpetuated racial stereotypes. This divisive nature of the prequels led to an increase in negative fan discourse, often primarily led by male fans who felt protective of the Original Trilogy's legacy.

Post 2015 (New Era)

The landscape of fandom continued to evolve after Disney acquired Star Wars in 2015. The booming presence of Social Media platforms like Reddit, YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok further amplified fan discourse, resulting in increased organised backlash against certain characters and storylines. Rey, Finn, Rose Tico, and later Ahsoka became focal points of criticism. Rey frequently faced accusations of being a "Mary Sue," a term that sparked ongoing debates over strong female leads in the franchise. Rose Tico endured substantial harassment online, which fueled discussions about the intersection of racism and sexism within the fandom.

As the discourse evolved, conversations around "woke" culture, feminism, and LGBTQ representation became increasingly central. Many of the fanbase began to perceive Disney's approach to Star Wars as overly focused on political correctness, contributing to heightened toxic

behaviour in discussions. This was further exacerbated by clickbait websites like ScreenRant and various YouTube commentary channels, which often utilised inflammatory language that fueled negativity.

Interestingly, a noticeable distinction emerged between the reception of theatrical and streaming releases. Theatrical films like *The Last Jedi* and *The Rise of Skywalker* became lightning rods for toxicity, drawing considerable backlash. In contrast, streaming shows on Disney+, such as *The Mandalorian* and *Andor*, received a more mixed reception and sometimes generated less overt toxicity, even amidst controversy over new character portrayals.

2. Gender Dynamics in Toxic Interactions

Across various platforms like Reddit and YouTube, demographic trends reveal that the majority of negative and toxic interactions stemmed from male users. This behaviour was particularly noticeable in the backlash against perceived changes to Star Wars lore and challenges to traditional characters. A specific aspect of this phenomenon is the trend of male fans engaging in gatekeeping; they often criticised new characters and storylines, arguing that these diverged from what they deemed “authentic” Star Wars values. This gatekeeping behaviour intensified, especially in discussions surrounding strong female characters and inclusive narratives. In contrast, female fans tended to be more active in supportive communities and fan groups that embraced diversity and celebrated the feminist aspects of the new Star Wars content. This division showcased a clear disparity in the ways toxicity manifested across gender lines, highlighting differing responses to the evolving narrative landscape within the franchise.

3. Key Platforms and Metrics

Since 2015, Reddit has emerged as a significant hub for fan discourse, particularly within subreddits such as *r/StarWars* and *r/SaltierThanCrait*, which is dedicated to critiquing the Disney era of the franchise. These communities have revealed a high level of male participation, often resulting in toxic debates revolving around issues such as feminist agendas and the integrity of characters. YouTube has also played a pivotal role in this discourse, with various channels focusing on the culture wars surrounding fandom. Many male creators have taken to these platforms to criticise what they perceive as “woke” culture in Star Wars. The comments section on these videos often mirrors this sentiment, filled with negative remarks about feminist and diverse

character portrayals. Meanwhile, Facebook and TikTok have provided spaces for discussions that are more balanced, though they still experience significant backlash from male users in public groups and comments. TikTok, in particular, has allowed fans to create content that both celebrates and critiques the Disney era, leading to lively debates in the comment sections of these posts. Additionally, sites like ScreenRant and various clickbait platforms have fueled the conversation by extensively covering controversial topics. Articles discussing “woke culture” in Star Wars are frequently featured, often highlighting opposing viewpoints to attract reader engagement and stir fan outrage.

4. Findings Summary

There has been a noticeable rise in toxicity within the Star Wars fandom, particularly from the Original Trilogy to the Disney era, with a significant peak around the release of *The Last Jedi* in 2017. Social Media has largely fueled this escalation, which has amplified both support for and backlash against the newer content. In this environment, male fans are more likely to engage in toxic discourse, often focusing on gatekeeping and a desire to protect what they perceive as the traditional values of the SWU. On the other hand, while female fans are less frequently involved in toxic discussions, they actively participate in counter-discourse, advocating for the diverse directions taken by recent content.

Moreover, sociopolitical agendas such as feminism, diversity, and LGBTQ inclusion have emerged as significant flashpoints for toxicity during the Disney era. During this period, any new content perceived as challenging established canon or catering to what some label “woke” culture tends to incite strong reactions.

