ABSTRACT

JAY BRITTAINE IRWIN. Not So Secret Transmissions: A Contemporary Analysis of Toxic Online Discourse. (Under the direction of Professor Franklin Cason).

The online reception for Star Wars Episode VIII: The Last Jedi, was notable in that the discourse amongst fans showcased high degrees of toxicity towards the cast and crew, and that a significant portion of these toxic posts was manufactured by political agents via troll accounts and bots. This incident showcases that spheres of fan engagement centered around popular culture texts are being targeted as vehicles to propagate toxic messaging. I argue that certain online discursive fandom environments are particularly vulnerable to manipulation from outside political actors in the contemporary era. Additionally, I also argue that political agitators can make these toxic talking points proliferate within these spaces by appropriating the paralanguage of the fandom, so researchers should dedicate resources to learning the paralanguage of fandom.

By doing this, scholars can gain a better understanding as to why certain paralanguages are chosen as dog whistles for toxic ideology.

I demonstrate this by showcasing how the toxic discourse surrounding The Last Jedi evolves upon the methodologies of prior toxic campaigns, like #Gamergate and the down-vote brigades surrounding Ghostbusters (2016). I point to pre-existing scholarly literature and journalism centered around this topic to highlight my claims. Finally, I conduct an online ethnographic observation of the Star Wars subreddit to demonstrate how specific fandom paralanguages were appropriate for toxic ends. Namely, paralanguage used to discuss characters like Rey (Daisy Ridley) and Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill).