THE PLEASURE IN PARADOX: THE NEGOTIATION BETWEEN AGENCY AND ADMIRATION IN THE DISNEY FAN COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

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With one of the largest and most dedicated fan bases, the Disney Company enjoys a strong following with adults. A portion of these fans purposefully and pointedly incorporate the Disney brand into their everyday lives making it their chosen lifestyle. Through social media, they have formed a tight knit community that, for many, has become the nexus of their social lives. Disney fandom, however, is not so straightforward and fans face conflicting pressures as Disney, their fellow fans, and their own personal desires attempt to influence their behaviors and fan practices. Disney pressures fans to unquestioningly promote it, consume as much of its products as possible, and to convince others to do the same. The fan community gatekeeps what it means to be a Disney fan and pressures fans to conform to social norms that can suppress individual expression. Fans themselves want to be completely dedicated to both Disney and their community but simultaneously independent and uninfluenced by both. Rather than choosing any one influence, they find a way to accommodate all parties by situating themselves in a paradox that enables them to continue being fans. They are both independent from and dependent upon Disney, they keep community unity through rejection and angst, and they are able to be better community members and Disney fans by pursuing their own self-interests. Using participant-observer ethnography, this dissertation explores the world of these fans to understand how they negotiate agency between the conflicting pressures. Each chapter highlights a paradox fans manage as they establish themselves in their identities as Disney fans. From these paradoxes, I demonstrate that media fandom, particularly with Disney, is not as simple as straightforward admiration and instead, is a complex process that requires careful navigation.

For all my cheerleaders

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The Disney Company is one of the most powerful and influential media corporations in the world. It also has one of the most loyal and dedicated fan bases, the majority of whom are adults. As scholarship has shown (e.g., Henry Jenkins, Matt Hills, Jonathan Gray), media fandom is increasingly viewed in a positive light, and participating in a fandom community is seen as empowering and an act of personal agency. However, Disney fandom in adults is still commonly viewed, both in the academic and popular realm, negatively and as what cultural theorists Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer would describe as a "duped" practice, or when media companies create "false needs for consumer goods that we neither want nor need, yet we purchase anyway, which results in our own repression" (Wiedenhoft 49). Fields interested in media fan activity, such as fandom studies, media studies, and cultural studies, discuss the Disney Company widely with a wealth of scholarly publications across these fields. But Disney fans are underrepresented in these conversations, especially when compared to the amount of research published about other fan groups like *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, and *Star Trek*. Often Disney fans are not considered or are discussed as being under Disney's control and therefore duped, "repressed," or stuck in its "stranglehold" (Budd 3, Wickstrom 100). Little work has been conducted to understand them beyond this and so, misunderstanding and stigma remain.

In this dissertation, I focus on adult Disney fans to bring their perspectives, experiences, and thoughts into the larger discussion of media fandom in order to promote a better understanding of their fandom and practices. I observed, interacted with, and interviewed adult women and men who identify as dedicated Disney fans to understand how they perceive, navigate, and negotiate their identities as fans, customers, and community members when they partake in their fandom practices. These fans exemplify many common fan practices that occur

online and on social media and affirm much of the current scholarship analyzing media fan practices: they are driven by the love of a media franchise and actively incorporate experiences connected to that franchise into their daily lives; it propels them towards others of the same tastes and, as a result, they form friendships, community, and, for some, a family. Understanding their experiences and views will build upon our understanding of media fan practices at large and expand current knowledge of fandom communities.

Their experiences as dedicated fans of the Disney Company, however, complicate and resist the notions of agency and self-empowerment much scholarship applies to fandom practices. Unlike other media franchises, fans deeply and personally connect to the company itself, not just its products. The fans closely follow, care about, and are emotionally impacted by the Disney Company's decisions and actions, even though they rarely affect fans' lives. Many also believe the Disney Company cares about its customers, and by extension them, and that its core motivation is to provide happiness to all its customers. Questioning or critiquing Disney in any serious way can cause distress for or incite anger in dedicated fans and have thus brought about the stigma that they are duped and part of a "cult." Through this study, I do not deny patterns of subservience and denial, but instead, I seek to explain them and to demonstrate they are more complicated than commonly believed.

Stemming from Jenkins' notion that "fandom is born out of fascination and some frustration," I uncover the processes of desire, joy, fulfillment, frustration, helplessness, angst, devotion, manipulation, and compromise experienced by adult members of the Disney fan community (*Participatory Culture* 14). Through their, and my own, experiences, thoughts, words, and actions, I argue that fandom is not necessarily a straightforward expression of love, but instead it subjects fans to various pressures that are often at odds with one another. Some, but

not all, of these pressures include gatekeeping from other fans, suppressing critique of the Disney Company and its actions, conforming to established community norms of expected behavior, keeping up consistent participation in a fandom rooted in consumption of expensive products and experiences, conflicting interpretations of how to "be" a fan, and choosing between the needs of the self and the needs of the community, amongst many more. These warring pressures force fans to make decisions, both macro and micro, consciously and subconsciously, to stabilize their identity as a fan and to continue participating as a member of the fandom community.

As I observed and interacted with these fans throughout this study, I found that they succeeded in negotiating conflicting pressures by applying cognitive dissonance as a coping mechanism and, as a result, existed comfortably in a paradox. Most, I found, were often unaware of their dualism and instead saw it simply as the way to exist as a fan. While foregrounding their own experiences and voices, each chapter in this dissertation uncovers a different paradox demonstrating what Jenkins describes as a "complex set of negotiations between individual, community, and corporate interests" ("Afterword" 362).

Methodology

For my research, I employed participant-observer ethnography over a two-year period between 2016 and 2018 using qualitative interviewing and analysis. I participated in the Disney fan community through membership in over fifteen Facebook groups, visited the Disney parks (both Florida and California) six times, attended Disney fan conferences four times, and attended eight Disney fan meetups, one in-person and seven virtually on Facebook Live. I engaged in online conversations in the Facebook fan groups daily, watched multiple Disney fan videos on YouTube weekly (including the feature-length fan-made documentary *The Dreamfinders*), and listened to over three hundred different episodes of various fan-made podcasts (see Appendix C).

I also purchased and used Disney merchandise, such as clothing, keychains, and toys, and joined D23, the official Disney fan club, for the year 2016.

I identified and interviewed ten prominent members of the Disney fan community, with most interviews lasting between one and four hours. I identified my interviewees through their visibility on Facebook, YouTube, iTunes, and the podcast app Stitcher. These platforms show metric data on user behavior and rank programs and groups by popularity and usage. This enabled me to identify those who frequently participated in the fan community and had already demonstrated comfort in discussing their fandom publicly. From there, I was able to choose potential interviewees as well as observe overall trends in tastes and behaviors of the community at large.

Because so many people consider themselves fans of Disney, I created four criteria to identify the most dedicated fans of the Disney brand and therefore who were most appropriate for this study: 1) those who purposefully integrate the Disney brand into their daily lives, 2) are highly active in social media Facebook groups (the center of Disney fan socialization), 3) express their fandom through participatory acts like creating podcasts, vlogs, or crafts, and 4) center their emotional fulfillment and social lives within the Disney fan community. This study does not seek to represent every single Disney fan and every facet of the fan community. The Disney fan community consists of hundreds of thousands of individuals, so one study cannot encapsulate it entirely. However, I do hope to provide an overview of the general trends occurring within Disney fandom and to encourage others to dive more deeply into the subjects of fandom, the Disney Company, and online group interactions.

I purposefully did not approach this study objectively. While not as fervent a fan as many of my participants, I am a Disney fan myself. I believe my own experiences, thoughts, and

feelings regarding my fandom to be of benefit to this dissertation. First, I am able to explain many of the 'whys' of this fandom through a critical and analytical lens. I understand and can communicate the nuances inherent in negotiating Disney fandom and the pressures many fans face. I am also able to articulate how it feels to be on the receiving end of Disney's hegemony, an occurrence many fans are unaware is happening. Second, and most importantly, I also believe this has empowered me to discuss these fans with respect and care. I understood they may have felt vulnerable being interviewed for an academic endeavor and I was able to create a safe space that encouraged sharing. I also understand how deeply personal their fandom is to them and take that seriously in my analysis, descriptions, and word choice. When observing, interviewing, and researching people, we must remember first and foremost that they are people. My participants opened themselves and their lives to me, some spending hours of their time to support me in this project. I will not cater my analysis to purposefully show them in a positive light, but I do approach them with respect and understanding, something other scholars and journalists have not previously done.

Theoretical Frameworks

For my analysis, I draw from three frameworks that focus on processes of negotiation, agency, and devotion. First and foremost, I pull from Matt Hills' notion of fandom as "neoreligiosity" that states "while religion and fandom are arguably different realms of meaning, they are both centered around acts of devotion, which may create similarities of experience" (117). Except for organized worship of a deity or deities, Hills observes that fandom communities, especially those with devoted and fervent members, provide the same experiences as being part of a religious group, including shared devotion. Fandom can be deeply meaningful for fans in multiple ways, similar to being a member of a religious group, and a fan community

can provide emotional, spiritual, and social fulfillment that greatly enriches a fan's quality of life. This experience is similar across many media fandoms like *Star Trek*, *Harry Potter*, and *Doctor Who*. Disney fandom provides the same experiences for its fans as the other media franchises provide for theirs; however, Disney fandom diverges in an important way, particularly in regards to neoreligiosity: Disney has imbued morality and ideology into its brand and marketing which fans eagerly adopt. As media scholar Chris Rojek notes, "Disney's films and parks support a specific moral order which is heavily moralistic…" (121). Historian John Wills expands upon Rojek's argument: "Disney thus represents far more than simply 'good entertainment.' Disney exerts powerful influence over our education, our values, and our lifestyle choices…[it] intrinsically shapes our world…It combines artistry, business, and family values…[and] impart[s] a range of traditional and progressive values" (5-6). Disney fans themselves adopt the language of religiosity. They describe going to a Disney park as a pilgrimage and share that attending a D23 convention felt like "a church service for the Disney parks faithful" (Renshaw 12). For devoted fans, Disney is not just a media brand to be consumed, but a way of life that prescribes how to act, how to think, and how to live.

Second, I draw from Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony which is "characterized by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent…that force will appear to be based on the consent of the majority" (75). Or to put it more succinctly, hegemony is a dominant power who, "manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules" (Gramsci 80). It is a relational process, Gramsci argues, by which a power imbalance is created and maintained by a dominant group. Consent to dominate must be granted by the subordinate group, though, and the dominant group must convince them it is worthy of this power in some form, be it through leadership, education,

or economic success. Consent can be revoked, and power taken away, so hegemony can be a perpetual process lasting as long as the subordinate group remains convinced.

There are few studies on the Disney Company that do not utilize the theory of hegemony, and with good reason. As media scholar Meyrav Koren-Kuik observes,

> Disney's perpetual success with consumers cannot be exclusively attributed to shrewd marketing and merchandising strategies; it must include Disney's illustrated ability to repeatedly create enticing invitations for immersion within an array of products across numerous media, a model that ensures wide consumer appeal. (147)

The Disney Company is powerful and influential because it has mastered the process of control and consent in a myriad of ways and fans enthusiastically choose to give consent. Many fans I observed in this study unwaveringly believe the Disney Company cares for them on a deep, personal level and in turn, give their undying loyalty, often to the detriment of their social lives. The sacrifices they make daily, both socially and financially, are a testament to the reciprocity of the relationship and Disney's hegemonic control.

Lastly, my analysis is informed by Henry Jenkins' notion of participatory culture in which a culture, group, or community "embraces the values of diversity and democracy through every aspect of our interactions with each other—one which assumes that we are capable of making decisions, collectively and individually, and should have the capacity to express ourselves through a broad range of different forms and practices" (*Participatory Culture* 2). More simply put, it is a community that is formed through fan participation in which everyone's contributions are valued and add to the overall well-being of the community. Participatory culture is at the heart of media fandom and is foundational to most scholarly research focusing on fandom.

As media scholar Kristen Barton notes, “being a fan allows us to express ourselves [and] it helps us connect with like-minded people” (6) The fan community is central to my participants’ enjoyment of the Disney brand and expressing their fandom with like-minded people provides much of the neo-religious fulfillment they desire. It works because each person is expected to participate, and their participation is valued; it is what makes fans feel like they are part of a community. Many of the fans I studied for this dissertation have gained such fulfillment by participating that they have purposefully made it the locus of their social lives.

Literature Review

Underlying every observation, experience, and interaction, I asked, “Why are these fans so devoted to Disney and each other?” “Where do the boundaries between the self, Disney, and the community lie?” and “How do fans respond when difference, conflict, or adversity challenges their Disney ethos?” Helping me answer these questions and analyze my vast amounts of data is a wealth of scholarship under the larger umbrella of media studies. Media studies houses most scholarship on the Disney Company as well as fandom studies in which this work is grounded.

Fandom Studies

Works focusing on media fans, fan activity, and fan community formation (including this one) are indebted to Henry Jenkins, who is considered the founder of fandom studies. With his foundational work, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Jenkins launched a new framework for understanding fan activity—that it can be a positive endeavor psychologically, socially, and culturally. Media scholar Jonathan Gray describes this as the “fandom is beautiful” approach (1). Jenkins, along with other scholars such as Janice Radway, argued against the prevailing notion that media fan activity towards entities like *Star Trek* and

romance novels demonstrated deficiency of character in fans. Instead, they posited, it is a healthy practice that enhances the lives of those who participate.

While Jenkins' work has evolved over the decades to include some critique of fan practices, his analysis has primarily focused on the positive, especially fandom as a conduit for agency and activism. "I was less eager to focus attention on conflicts within fandom—around gender, race, class, religion, politics, generation—not wanting to air the community's dirty laundry in public" Jenkins shared in a *Textual Poachers* retrospective (*Textual Poachers* xxix). He has, and still, believes "utopian imagination" is at the core of media fandom and therefore its "utopian aspects" should not be downplayed (Jenkins *Textual Poachers* xxix). This approach is attractive, particularly to scholars who consider themselves to be fans, and it does important work to fight against the stigma that has been, and with Disney fans still, applied to fans and fan activity. But, by avoiding the "dirty laundry" it omits and ignores the complexities, pressures, and challenges of being a fan, all of which are part of the experience and therefore important to understand.

Fandom and media scholar Matt Hills takes a more critical stance arguing that Jenkins' and other contemporaries' positivistic model creates a good/bad binary positioning scholarship either for or against (and in most cases for) fans, fandom practices, and fandom communities (Hills xii). He argues that too much focus has been given to fan cultures, namely specific fan cultures, limiting our understanding of the process—it ignores the development of fan culture and assumes it was predetermined. He believes it undervalues analysis of the 'fan' as a subject of study, ignoring the complexity of fandom practices (Hills xiii-xiv). Joining Hills, Mark Duffett, along with many second-generation fandom scholars, argues that hegemony, commodity, and consumption have been, but should not be, ignored in fandom studies. He argues, "Fandom does

not escape or resist commodity culture. Instead, consumption facilitates contact with media products…fandom primarily is about consumption" (Duffett 21). But he also affirms the complexity of the issue and continues Hills' warning not to ignore the fan as a three-dimensional and complicated subject:

> However, to see fandom as primarily about consumption is to forget, first, that fans often like things for free, and, second, that they are always more than consumers. They are more than buyers and their transactions are pursued with a cultural interest that goes beyond merely practicing the process of buying. (Duffett 21)

This adds important depth to the experience of being a fan, namely consumption, which is, for better or worse, at the heart of fan expression and participation. It also, importantly, highlights power dynamics that exist between producer and consumer such as hegemony, which is essential in any study of Disney. It presents a more holistic approach but shifts some attention away from fan agency and independence.

Concurrent with Hills', Duffett's, and the second generation's consumer-focused analysis, John Storey, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington broadened discussions of who and what should be included in fandom studies. With *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, they added a layer of complexity to the discourse by introducing the notion of "anti-fans" and hate into fandom studies scholarship. They argued that fandom studies should not just focus on those who unite over what they love, but also incorporate "a spectrum of dislike, distaste, and hate both within fan cultures and in closely related anti-fan cultures" (Gray et al. 15). They, along with other fandom scholars such as Derek Johnson, Melissa Click, Vivi Theodoropoulou, among many more, argue that fandom is not insular and anti-fandom, hate, and infighting have influence and impact on fandom and fan practices. Johnson, specifically, uses the

notion of anti-fandom to explain what he labels "fan-tagonisms" or rivalries between fan groups, like *Star Trek* versus *Star Wars* fans or Red Sox versus Yankees fans, as well as disharmony within fan groups. He describes this as "ongoing struggles for discursive dominance…[and] struggle over interpretation and evaluation" that occur within fan communities (Johnson 286). Johnson's analysis is key in understanding current fan groups, Disney fans in particular as I will discuss in chapter two, because infighting and argument over interpretation and control of the narrative is an integral and common part of fan interaction. This framework is opposite of Jenkins' original positivist approach: here the "dirty laundry" is an inherent part of being a fan. Their work importantly fleshes out fandom communities and provides depth and dimensionality to fan practices often overlooked in the positivistic models. With the increase in the use of technology, especially social media, interpersonal dynamics have changed and can shift rapidly, as this study will show. An unfortunate result is that infighting and rivalries, while not as pleasant, are part of the complexities of being a fan in the twenty-first century. The anti-fan approach closes the gap between the positive, the power imbalance, agency, and the negative, all of which are key components to understanding the complexity of Disney fan activity.

Finally, with the proliferation of technology, social media, and the ability to be a content creator, fans have found creative and incredible ways to express their fandom outside of corporate hegemonic control.[1] Cosplay, digital remixes, vlogs, blogs, and arts and crafts are just a few of the fan activities flourishing through online interaction and are entirely outside of corporations' control. Francesca Coppa observes that the current wave of fandom studies centers on this, referring to it as "fandom is the future" approach (79). She reiterates the import of

[1] A content creator is anyone who creates and shares media content for others to view and/or experience. This can be vlogs, podcasts, songs, videos, etc. It is usually used in reference to amateurs, but as the ability to earn money as a content creator grows, the line between professional and hobbyist is becoming increasingly blurred.

community and sharing that make fandom and fan practices rewarding: "Being in fandom can change a person, who in taking on the identity of 'fan' may also come to take on additional identities—that of a writer, blogger, film-maker, organizer, activist, etc…this vocational way of engaging in culture is just boatloads of fun: this century's equivalent of the sing-a-long, the backyard show, the community dance" (Coppa 78). Coppa's, as well as current fandom scholarship, completes the narrative Jenkins began in the 1980s and allows for the incorporation of first and second wave approaches, by highlighting the use of technology and social media in fandom practices. It looks toward the future and argues fandom is positive, it is also complicated; sometimes it is in service to consumerism, sometimes it encourages independence and agency. This study takes this approach and views Disney fandom as an encapsulating, complicated lifestyle that requires a multi-faceted approach in analysis to which each of these scholars lends aid and support.

Disney Scholarship

Surprisingly, fandom studies and Disney scholarship have not coalesced as much as one would assume, considering the amount of scholarly interest in both subjects. As I will soon discuss, this is changing with current and upcoming scholarship, but until recently Disney fans have been underrepresented in academic scholarship.[2] I have found studies on Disney generally fall into one of three areas: Disney's films, Disney and identity politics, and Disney as a company. Scholarship focused on Disney's films investigate the history of its films and/or utilize textual readings of the films, television shows, musical scores, and animation and thus fall outside the scope of this study. Analysis of Disney and identity politics, such as race, gender, and class, are moderately helpful in understanding the subjects of this study. Watching Disney

[2] They are well represented in online journalism and are regularly written about, usually in local new sources in Florida and California where the parks are located.

movies is one of the main activities that attract audience members into becoming dedicated fans and is one that supports them continuing their fandom in between park visits. The messages relating to gender, race, and class that Disney imbues in its movies have been and will continue to be regularly consumed by these fans. These messages may affect fans' expression of their fandom and impact their views of themselves and others. Two collections are particularly helpful in understanding the messages in Disney movies: *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality and Disability* edited by Johnson Cheu and *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* edited by Elizabeth Bell. They both provide an excellent range of scholarship on Disney and identity politics and have supported my overall understanding of the messages fans may have received from Disney and psychologically embedded.

Studies analyzing Disney as a company are highly informative to this dissertation because most focus on hegemony and show the many ways Disney attempts to exert influence and control. They also inform about important aspects of the relationship between Disney and its customers including marketing, merchandising, globalization, customer service, and park experience which affect the fans in this study. Much of the scholarship today rests on the shoulders of a publishing boom of Disney monographs in the 1990s (there are more scholars today publishing on the topic, but most scholars currently writing on Disney tend to do so in article form). Two impactful works from this era are *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom* edited by Eric Smoodin and *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America* by Stephen Fjellman.

Disney Discourse is an essay collection that took an interdisciplinary and multi-faceted approach to investigating how Disney functions as a company, its rise to power, and its global

impact. It contributed to the early discourse looking at Disney as a company and laid important groundwork by investigating how the Disney Company functions, from which later leading scholars, such as Janet Wasko and Alan Bryman, built upon. In *Vinyl Leaves,* Fjellman applied a thorough, lengthy, and systematic analysis to every part of Disney World looking through the lenses of political economy, urban planning, and cinematically structured space. With this work, he emphasized an important line of inquiry that many have followed: application of control through physical space and architecture, and through that, the control of people. Some have criticized Fjellman as being too thorough because he literally leaves no stone unturned in Disney World, but his approach demonstrates the depth and breadth of inquiries possible with Disney. As I will discuss in chapter one, visiting and spending time in the parks is the favorite activity in which Disney fans engage and one that attracts them to and keeps them in their fandom. So, understanding the power Disney exerts through its parks is key to understanding a major aspect of its hegemony.

One of the most prolific studies on the Disney Company focused exclusively on audience reception and the appeal of Disney around the world. In Janet Wasko's *Dazzled by Disney: The Global Disney Audiences Project*, Wasko, with other researchers, interviewed college students in Australia, Brazil, Denmark, France, Greece, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Norway, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States to understand how they viewed and consumed Disney products and the brand. Unsurprisingly, they found across all interviews, the Disney Company is universally recognized and viewed positively. But what specifically resonated with students and how they viewed the company's invasive marketing techniques varied greatly and provided valuable insight into the globalization of a monolithic media brand. Concurrently, Wasko released her solo groundbreaking monograph on the Disney Company, *Understanding Disney:*

The Manufacture of Fantasy. In this work, Wasko takes a top-down view, arguing that "to understand the Disney phenomenon, it is crucial to understand Disney, the corporation. In other words, to understand Disney's brand of fantasy, we must understand how it is manufactured and marketed, and by whom" (Wasko *Understanding Disney* 28). With this work, she pushed against the view that scholarship on the Disney Company was "an irrelevant, frivolous 'Mickey Mouse' occupation" (Wasko *Understanding Disney* 3-4). While much of the research presented in these books is outdated, they provide fantastic models of analysis to follow and established approaches and lines of inquiry that are foundational for anyone researching Disney as a company and its audiences.

Building upon the foundation established by the first cohort of the 1990s, Alan Bryman's *The Disneyization of Society* brought an important new lens through which to study Disney—its impact and influence on all aspects of social, economic, and cultural life. In this book, Bryman argues that the methods and principles employed by the Disney Company to create an enjoyable experience at its parks have seeped into every aspect of society, whether we realize it or not. He systematically demonstrates how Disney's influence can be seen in retail stores, restaurants, banks, architecture, interior design, and merchandising. His work shows us how powerful Disney's hegemony is and how much it can affect the way we live our day-to-day lives whether we want it to or not.

Along with those who critically analyze Disney, there are a few scholars who have written with the purpose to praise Disney and those who have written intending to eviscerate it. In both *From Walt to Woodstock: How Disney Created the Counterculture* and *Multiculturalism and the Mouse: Race and Sex in Disney Entertainment*, cinema scholar Douglas Brode positions himself directly in defense of Disney arguing that Walt Disney and his films were ahead of their

time. He believes they had cultural impact unacknowledged by other scholars such as promoting diversity and starting the counterculture revolution of the 1960s. He argues "[Walt] Disney's films possess more 'sociopolitical daring' than those of any other commercial filmmaker from Hollywood's golden era" (Brode *From Walt to Woodstock* xi). His work has had little impact on Disney scholarship because of his bombastic approach and unrepentant biased position. In a scathing review, Smoodin notes that Brode "flattens [Walt] Disney out just as much as those who dismiss him for his right-wing ideologues," and he "produces a history of absolutes." ("Reviewed" 89). He asserts that Brode shows a "limited understanding," gives "almost no acknowledgment of the last twenty years of Disney scholarship," and writes from his own experiences with Disney films in "hopes to make those experiences universal" (Smoodin "Reviewed" 89).

Conversely, media scholars Henry Giroux and Grace Pollok seem to have made it their mission to verbally destroy Disney.[3] In their book, *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*, they argue that Disney is an "unbridled corporate power" that employs "systematic attempts …to form powerful monopolies that wipe out competition, stifle dissent, and exercise enormous influence over the shape and direction of children's culture—and increasingly over public life" (Giroux and Pollok 28). Giroux continues this criticism in many of his journal publications stating that Disney has a "cutthroat commercial ethos" ("How Disney Magic"). Giroux and Pollok conduct important research and analysis looking into how media consumption shapes children and affects their long-term mental health. But their writing on Disney is so visceral they lose credibility, even if their arguments are sound. Entertainment scholar Tanya Nitins notes that their work is well written but "alarmist" and quickly becomes "tiring" because

[3] They are not the only authors to heavily criticize Disney. Popular fiction writer Carl Hiaasen took a break from fiction to write an entire book on the ways he believes Disney is destroying the world.

it takes a "moral high ground" that weakens and discredits much of their argument (176). Brode, Giroux, and Pollok act as a cautionary tale for this dissertation. Brode's extremism alerts me to check my own biases as a fan to ensure they are not affecting my analysis or arguments towards unwarranted praise. Giroux and Pollok warn me not to go too far in my criticism of Disney, which admittedly is an "easy target."

As previously mentioned, since Smoodin, Fjellman, Wasko, and Bryman, scholarship on Disney as a company has grown exponentially and now includes thousands, if not tens of thousands, articles, chapters, and monographs. There has not been an evolution of thought similar to fandom studies, but instead, scholars have taken these themes and added depth and breadth to the established scholarship. Almost every topic connected to the Disney Company imaginable has been studied, topics such as Disney's legal battles, its technological advances, its glocalization in France and China, its approaches to animal husbandry, and scholars have even researched its methods of trash disposal.

In the noise of the overwhelming amount of Disney scholarship, two recent studies have powerfully influenced my research and thinking in regards to hegemony, Disney, and its marketing. "In the Window at Disney: A Lifetime of Brand Desire" shows the synergistic, high-pressure, psychologically manipulative marketing techniques Disney employs in its Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutiques. These boutiques offer "princess makeovers" done by "fairy godmothers" that transform girls into "the princess of their dreams" (Bennett and Schweitzer 26). These experiences are brilliant from a marketing standpoint: they are immersive and utilize special effects making the experience "magical," prey upon girls' insecurities and use those insecurities to pressure parents into upgrading to the bigger (and more expensive) princess package, and encourage hyper-genderized performance through a post-makeover catwalk. From a

psychological and childhood development standpoint, it is distressing. Bennet's and Schweitzer's work lays bare the multiple levels of raw manipulation and pressure Disney employs in these boutiques. Their work shows the lengths Disney will go to maintain control and maximize profits that are more expertly hidden elsewhere.

In tandem, Mathew J. Bartkowiak addresses the stealth of Disney's hegemony in "Behind the Behind the Scenes of Disney World: Meeting the Need for Insider Knowledge." Bartkowiak investigates the appeal of backstage tours and how Disney uses them to keep hegemony with fans and reassert hegemony with skeptics and critics. He argues that the feelings of "rebellion, curiosity, and taboo" experienced by customers going backstage provide cultural capital that appeals to a wide variety of customers (Bartkowiak 951). He shows how adroit Disney is at predicting customer behaviors and desires and then providing specific tours to fulfill those desires, even finding ways to appeal to those hostile to the brand. Bartkowiak's research demonstrates Disney is always finding ways to exert influence; influence of which the fans in this study are highly susceptible.

Some attention has been given to fans recently but mostly in the realm of independent media production. In 2015, a group of Disney vloggers funded and produced their own feature-length documentary, *The Dreamfinders* (2016), telling Disney fans' stories from their own perspectives. It focuses entirely on their experiences with Disney and the meaning it brings to their lives. 2016 also saw the publication of Scott Renshaw's *Happy Place: Living the Disney Parks Life*, which takes a similar approach to *The Dreamfinders* (2016). Renshaw interviewed Disney fans and writes their stories, while incorporating his own. Though both of these act as vehicles for fan expression, they do not add to the scholarly conversation about Disney.

However, they are valuable resources for this study and any study interested in Disney fans, so I have treated them as primary sources.

There is an emerging cohort of new scholars studying Disney fans from an academic perspective, with whom I count myself among. In the last three years, four theses and dissertations have focused, in part or in whole, on the perspective of Disney fans.[4] David Giles' *The Magic of the Magic Kingdom: Folklore and Fan Culture in Disneyland* most closely aligns with this study. Giles has similarly observed the lack of representation Disney fans have in scholarly research. His work investigates fan activity but limits his study to Disneyland in Anaheim, California, and to three case studies of specific fan behavior: the urban legend of ash scattering on the Haunted Mansion ride, Disney pin trading, and Disneybounding; the latter one of which make an appearance in this dissertation. In *Disney Film Genres and Adult Audiences: A Tale of Renegotiated Relationships*, James Mason argues that Disney films constitute their own film genre and investigates how adults who enjoy the movies renegotiate their relationships with the films as adults. Murphy Morgan observed Facebook fan groups, similar to my methodological approach, to trace the Disney fan community's reaction to a hateful Facebook post that went viral. It stereotyped childless millennial Disney fans as leeches who detract from families' experiences at the parks. Morgan discovered that the Facebook groups did not react and affirms what my own research has shown: the Disney fan community values and encourages childless millennials to be part of the fan community. Lastly, in *Interrogating Tales as Old as Time: The Subversive Power of Disney Fan Remixes,* Daniel Perlino investigates the ways fans appropriate Disney media and revise and remix them to make a new creation. His study overlaps

[4] These are only the studies that have been uploaded onto ProQuest, the dissertation and thesis search engine. So, there may be other dissertations and theses relating to Disney fandom that are not accessible through a database search.

with the final chapter of this dissertation and similarly investigates the boundaries of fan agency and expression along with the murky boundaries between adoration and copyright infringement.

Chapter Summaries

This dissertation is divided into three chapters that each focus on a different paradox I observed as fans negotiated their identity as an individual, as a community member, and as a loyal customer to Disney. Specifically, I focus on the pressures and influences that affect relationships and how fans navigate those pressures. Most importantly, I look into what being a fan means to them personally and why they choose to weather these pressures. Ultimately, I demonstrate that they find peace by settling into a both/and paradox in which they are simultaneously independent as participatory creators but also dependent on their peers and under Disney's hegemonic control. In each chapter, I pair my experiences and observations with the voices of the fans, incorporating their direct quotes from interviews, fan-made videos, and posts from Facebook and Twitter. I ground these experiences with the scholarship and theoretical frameworks previously discussed to help explain the phenomenon of Disney fandom and to show how fandom is a "part of the fabric of [their] everyday lives" (Gray et al. 9).

In chapter one, I introduce these fans, explain their love for Disney and the fan community, and investigate the power dynamics present in their relationship with the Disney Company. I argue that they have agency and independence in their fandom but are simultaneously subservient to Disney. Regardless of each fan's path to their fandom, they share a similar love of Disney and actively choose to incorporate it into their daily lives in a variety of ways, all of which contribute to their overall happiness. The community of Disney fans online adds depth and meaning to their fandom and provides a source for friendship, acceptance, and support. For many, being a Disney fan as an adult has brought conflict into their social lives.

Often friends, family, and coworkers do not understand and ostracize or shame them. The community of fans they find online on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and podcasts provide the outlet they need as well as meaningful social acceptance. Fans value these safe spaces and protect the haven they have found through rules and community guidelines that provide a barrier of safety that enables the community to thrive and grow.

Absent from these spaces is the Disney Company itself, which has a very different relationship with fans, one of paternalism and hegemonic control. Disney employs a variety of ways to attract and keep dedicated fans through the use of benefits and commodification of fan trends. Through its products, services, and experiences Disney provides the reciprocity needed for fans to agree to a subordinate position. Disney's services, which admittedly can be incredible, make fans feel cared for and provide a consistency and dependability on which the relationship relies. But Disney is far from perfect and often falls short of what fans need in the relationship, compelling them to find other venues outside of (and sometimes in defiance to) Disney's paternalism. In these actions, fans find their power, agency, and happiness through creativity and self-expression. However, their independent acts as fans are still in promotion of Disney and therefore fulfilling their subservient role; and so, they exist in a paradox. As dedicated fans, everything they do moves them deeper into their relationship with Disney and serves its desire for loyal consumers who happily proselytize on its behalf. But the choice to be an adult Disney fan takes courage, sacrifice, and thoughtful choice. Some face external adversity daily and so, being a Disney fan is an independent choice they continue to make daily. Also, how they enact their fandom, where, when, and with whom is entirely their choice and outside of Disney's control, resulting in a vibrant fan community of diverse expression. These are all choices they

actively make in pursuit of happiness and to live what is colloquially referred to as their "best life."

In chapter two, I investigate how fans react to and cope with vast differences of opinion regarding what it is to "be" a Disney fan, especially when those interpretations are in direct opposition. I argue that the ability to leave and form new community groups initially seems to herald the destruction of the Disney fan community—the more groups splinter off, the less united the community is. But I also demonstrate how the ability to splinter is the savior of the Disney fan community. Instead of choosing to conform or leave, the capability to form new social media groups provides a way for "rogue" fans to continue participating in the fan community by expressing themselves as they see fit in their own created safe spaces, free of gatekeeping or derision.

Facebook has been a great benefit to the Disney fan community, allowing individuals to create groups that others can join no matter the physical location. Each group can set its own rules for membership and social interaction allowing administrators complete control over the virtual environment. Fans are safe in these protected spaces. They find freedom from the "real world" social stigma they experience and are beyond Disney's direct influence. Here they express their fandom with enthusiasm and commune with other fans. These groups empower the fan community but also are the very modes causing its own turmoil. User control in these spaces allows echo-chambers to form with little room for contradiction. Members who disagree either break away or are evicted from the community at the slightest provocation. Group administrators have the ultimate power to evict members who do not fully conform to their particular set of social rules and conversely, members can leave instantly and easily if they disagree. Fans who refuse to conform commonly form or join niche Facebook groups of fellow refugees. Here they

share the love of Disney, but their experience with and anger at rejection is what unites them causing what I have labeled "angst fans." Using the case study of two splinter groups, *Disney Snark* and *Mouse Rants,* I show how angst, resentment, and hate have become tools of unification and friendship for the rejected, evicted, and rogue fans.

Chapter three completes the story that began in chapter one and chapter two by showing how the participants in the community simultaneously navigate competing and overwhelming pressures from Disney and fellow fans. The participatory culture of the Disney fan community encourages individual creation and celebrates those who share their creations. Many have found this to be the most satisfying aspect of community membership and embrace participation, often spending enormous amounts of time and money on their projects. This is most clearly seen in the media creations of podcasts and YouTube videos, both easily made and shared due to technological advancements. These are not only popular for fans to create, but equally popular for other fans to consume, resulting in a market for fan-made media creations. A few fans have been so successful that they have become minor celebrities within the fan community and are able to earn a substantial income from their Disney fandom. As other fans try to mimic the success, either in popularity or income, they face pressure to conform to their audiences' desires. Conversely, they face pressure from Disney whose legal team applies a carrot-and-stick method with creators—become popular and Disney will send you gifts and perks but cross an undefined boundary and you will receive threats from their legal team. So, participating in the Disney fan community is a complex negotiation between following the independent creative voice, wanting to cater to fellow fans, but also not incite Disney's proverbial Sword of Damocles. In this chapter, I explain why fan creators even place themselves in this situation and how they navigate

between the competing pressures to keep themselves, other fans, and Disney happy without sacrificing their personal integrity.

Terminology

Throughout this study, I will use certain terminology which may not be clear to those outside of fandom studies or the Disney fan community. First, there is a Disney-specific term often used by the company's marketing team that fans have adopted and use regularly. "Disney Magic" refers to a transcendent experience that occurs while consuming a Disney product or experience. It is when the consumer feels they are surprised or awed as if they are truly experiencing magic. It can be used for most Disney consumer experiences but is most often used to refer to activities within the Disney parks.

Second, there are terms I use that that will have specific meaning to this dissertation alone. When I refer to the term 'adult,' I not only mean in terms of legality, such as those older than the age of eighteen, but also those who are independent income earners and make their own financial decisions. Disney fandom and being active in a participatory culture is a financial commitment. There are costs involved with consuming Disney products (particularly visits to the parks) and expressing fandom through creating media and crafting items. Those who may still be financially dependent upon parents or on a fixed income will be limited in their ability to express their fandom and thus their activities influenced by factors outside the parameters of this study.

Most importantly, throughout this work, I use the terms fan, fandom, community, and dedicated fan to characterize my subjects and their social activities. Generally, I follow the lead of Matt Hills who contests the idea of rigidly defining the term 'fandom' or 'fan' because it "is never a neutral 'expression' or singular 'referent'; its status and its performance shift across cultural sites" (Hills xii). The parameters defining who or what is a fan and who is part of

fandom or the fan community can be a hotly contested subject within and outside the realms of media fandom (as we will see in chapter two). However, in this dissertation I use the terms to specifically refer to the subjects of this study—adults who intensely love Disney and have adopted their fan activities as a lifestyle. I use the term dedicated to illustrate the heightened level of affinity and dedication my subjects have for the Disney Company. To describe these fans as dedicated is my attempt to avoid the more charged descriptions like “fanatic,” “cult,” and “obsessed” that can contain judgment, bias, and stigma. It is also my attempt to distinguish these fans from more casual fans and to signify their dedication to Disney and to a lifestyle centered on Disney.

Lastly, throughout this work, I refer to the Disney Company in the singular as if it is one entity that makes decisions unilaterally. It is not and consists of hundreds of companies of varying sizes with hundreds of thousands of employees. Some of its subsidiaries are as large as the media giants Marvel, Fox Entertainment, and Lucasfilm while some as small Kapow Software, a small automation software company in South Carolina. Under the direct Disney umbrella, it has numerous departments with vastly different functions that include "Media Networks, Parks and Resorts, Studio Entertainment, and Consumer Products & Interactive Media" ("Fiscal Year 2016 Report"). I do this in part from the Disney Company's own lead. It not only brands itself as one entity but expressly refers to itself in that way internally. Starting in 2009, each annual report states that "the terms 'Company' and 'we' are used to refer collectively to the parent company and the subsidiaries through which our various businesses are actually conducted" ("Fiscal Year 2016 Report"). While each aspect of the business is segmented and discussed, throughout every report, it does not waver in referring to all aspects and components as if they are part of one entity. This is clearly seen in its synergistic branding and marketing

where it does not distinguish between its media products, such as movies and television shows, and its parks. Furthermore, this is how the public and the fans see it. When something notable happens, good or bad, the public does not discriminate between the parks, the hotels, the studios, etc. Instead, it is simply something that happened with Disney. For example, in 2016 when a child was killed by an alligator at a Walt Disney World hotel, the public and press did not view it as a failing of that particular resort, the resorts department of the company, nor the groundskeeping department—they blamed the Disney Company as a whole. So, since the Disney Company sets the corporate narrative that it is a singular entity and it is perceived as one monolithic company, I refer to it as such throughout this study.

Race, Class, and Gender

While I do not focus on race, class, or gender much in this study, and instead choose to focus on the fans' personal experiences and relationships, it is important to acknowledge the influence these factors have on the Disney fandom community and thus influence who I observed and interviewed. It could easily be argued that Disney is one of the most accessible brands in the world (largely due to its capitalist and imperialist marketing endeavors), but inequality in the realms of race, class, and gender have limited, and sometimes dictated, who is able to be a fan and comfortably participate in the fandom community.

The largest barrier to Disney fandom is the cost. Disney products can be found almost everywhere at every price point, even at "dollar stores" throughout the United States. However, to be a devoted Disney fan and active member of the Disney community is a consistently expensive endeavor. Since nearly all fandom activity takes place online, the lowest threshold for community membership is access to a computer or phone and Wi-Fi. Beyond that, to actively contribute and participate in this community not only means consuming Disney products but

visiting the parks, which is unaffordable to many people. As I will discuss in chapter one, the majority of discussion and sharing in the online fan groups focuses on visits to the Disney parks, particularly Disney World in Florida. Sharing stories, pictures, and videos from trips is the primary subject that connects fans and enables them to build friendships and a community. But an increasing number of people cannot afford a trip to a Disney park, let alone several per year as many devoted fans do.[5] And the expense continues to increase. Each year, the Disney Company raises prices, and each year those increases "price out" a certain percentage of income levels. Len Testa, author of *The Unofficial Guide to Walt Disney World*, explains that Disney purposefully does this to dissuade lower-income customers from visiting the parks. The company has found that those in the lower-income brackets do not spend as much money or time in Disney parks as those in higher income brackets, and so it increases the prices to exclude lower-income earners and maximize the number of high-income earners who visit (Testa).[6] So, while all that is minimally needed to participate in the Disney fan community is access to the internet, full participation is affected by income leaving some fans unable to fully participate as they desire.

Race, ethnicity, and culture have not overtly excluded fans or groups from loving Disney or enjoying its products. In recent years, Disney has pointedly incorporated stories beyond the traditional Euro-centric fairytale, attracting new demographics with each new production. This does not negate the decades of exclusion of non-European stories targeted to white-, middle- and upper-class families. There is no direct instance of racism easily observable in the fans I studied, and there is a variety of ethnicities and cultures represented in Disney fandom, but Disney's

[5] As of 2016, a typical day in Disney World costs $738.52 per person (Sehlinger and Testa 67).
[6] On average this increase has been 5% per year (Sehlinger and Testa 63).

focus on white, European storytelling has encouraged racial barriers resulting in a predominantly white customer base.

Surprisingly, of the fans I encountered in every sphere of Disney fandom, roughly half presented as heterosexual cis-gendered men. Considering the extra stigma male Disney fans face, many people, myself included, initially assume Disney fandom is an activity dominated by women. This is not the case and heterosexual cis-gendered men are well represented in this fandom community. The extra stigma, though, does raise the question: if there was no stigma, would those numbers be higher? It is difficult to tell, but for the fans of this study, their love for Disney transcends any social stigma they face because of their gender.

Conclusion

This study does not seek to understand the entirety of Disney fandom or media fandom in general, but instead to demonstrate through case study ways in which fans navigate the murky waters of twenty-first-century fandom. I similarly do not posit that the interpersonal issues showcased here are entirely new or created by social media. Fans have always interacted and formed communities, media corporations have always utilized technology to sell, attract, connect with, and influence consumers, and fans have always fought with one another and had disagreements over how fandom should be exercised. So, as Jenkins observes, this is not an entirely new paradigm but instead "old concept(s) taking on new meanings" (*Convergence Culture* 6). What "The Pleasure in Paradox" demonstrates is that fans can, and do, reach happiness through a variety of paradoxical methods. In many instances, they exhibit feats of agency and independence that emulate the fandom studies attitude of "fuck yeah, fandom is beautiful!" and the belief that fans "can have, and [are] having, huge real-world effects" (Coppa 74, 77). In many others, though, they exemplify the pessimistic view within Disney scholarship

by submitting to pressures and allowing outside forces to "condition [their] most intimate perceptions and desires" and "[regulate] the meanings, values, and tastes" that form their personal identities (Giroux and Pollock 2). What their community and activities demonstrate, though, is that no single interpretation fully applies and so a new model is needed, one that integrates a nuanced approach and incorporates lived experiences, opinions, and feelings. This study provides this model by showing how complex fan community formation is and how fans combine seemingly disparate approaches to navigate, survive, and thrive in the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER I. THE FANS, THEIR COMMUNITY, AND THE NEGOTIATION OF AGENCY

> Just because I was indoctrinated as a child, I ignore all the bad parts about it, and yield fully to its influence over me does not mean I'm in a cult. I just like it ok?! Real life is stressful, and Mickey Mouse isn't.- Guy, "Adult Disney Fans are Weird (Hot Date)"

In March of 2017, a satirical video titled "Adult Disney Fans Are Weird (Hot Date)" went viral. In the video, a couple argues over where to spend their next vacation. When Guy reveals he only has and ever wants to exclusively visit Disney parks, the conversation instantly derails. With visible shock and horror, Girl listens to Guy pontificate on his love for and devotion to the Disney brand, reeling with disgust at the full realization of how deep his fandom runs. "Ew, I've had sex with you!" she responds, gagging as if she wants to vomit. She attempts several arguments to discredit his adult fandom of a "children's" company, telling him it is a waste of time and that Disney is a soulless corporation intent on brainwashing its customers. Her scorn is clear, and her negative reactions prompt him to defend his choice of fandom. With each attempt to explain or clarify his love of Disney to her, he alienates her further, perpetuating his frustration, and, as a result, becoming increasingly emotionally unstable. His irate and upset response to her lack of understanding or empathy encourages her to disconnect from and judge him. By the end of the sketch, his unyielding and cultish devotion to Disney causes her so much distress that she attacks him with a knife. His fandom to Disney was too much for her, his devotion too fanatic, and, for her, the only appropriate response was violence. It is clear to the audience this relationship is over and Guy's devotion to Disney is the cause.

While satirical, the video exemplifies the position in which many adult Disney fans find themselves: stuck between expressing and enjoying their love for Disney and fearing being

viewed with scorn and derision by those around them. Some Disney fans found the video funny, but many were not laughing. For them, the portrayal of an adult Disney fan as a mindless, unstable cult-follower was painful. It denigrated them, dismissed their personhood, and diminished their own personal sense of agency in their choice of fandom.[7] In the comments, one Disney fan responded, "I consider this an insult. Disney fans are people too, as a Disney fan we hate how people think of us as weird or one track minded" (Comments on CollegeHumor). Others agreed and many similarly voiced their discontent at having the obsessive, cult-like stereotype perpetuated. As a whole, though, the comments section of the video's YouTube page demonstrated the negative perception was not solely held by CollegeHumor with many commenters expressing scorn for adult Disney fans, calling them "creepy," "nuts," and a "legit cult" (Comments on CollegeHumor).

These two perceptions of Disney fandom, the external judgement citing cult-like mindless devotion and the internal belief that a Disney fan can be a whole, independent thinking person, may initially seem mutually exclusive and unable to coexist. What neither of these perspectives address, though, is that media fandom, particularly Disney fandom, are complex processes of negotiation between multiple entities that can encompass both extremes simultaneously. Both positions are used by Disney fans whether they are aware of it or not: the freedom of choice and enactment of agency they make by choosing to become a devoted fan of Disney, and a perpetual, continued choice of dedication and blind devotion even when faced with social consequences and Disney's glaring shortcomings. Instead of one or the other, they choose both, creating for themselves a cognitive dissonance and paradox where they are concurrently both free agents and devoted followers happily nestled within Disney's control.

[7] In my use of agency, I adopt Mark Duffett's definition of the ability to of an individual to act and behave as they choose (Duffett 23).

The focus of this chapter will not only be to explain this group of dedicated fans and the motivations for their intense fandom, but also will lay bare the complexities involved in negotiating agency between themselves and the Disney Company. As Disney scholar Janet Wasko observes, "Disney has engendered a fanaticism that few other companies enjoy" (*Dazzled by Disney* 57). This is no accident, but a careful, considered, and strategic long-term effort by Disney to exert influence and control to maximize profit in what media scholar Henry Giroux labels as a "cutthroat commercial ethos" (Giroux "How Disney Magic"). Most scholars who study Disney and control, like Mathew Bartkowiak, Susan Wills, Peter Steeves, Susan Bennett, and Marlis Schweitzer, agree and provide stark evidence to the many ways the Disney Company manipulates and exerts influence to achieve hegemonic control, or control which seems natural, normal, and acceptable to the fans, so they are happy to relinquish their agency (Harrington 145). Fans are either unaware of Disney's efforts to control or are indifferent and instead see themselves as powerful agents in their own happiness, or "finding something that gives you joy, and pursuing it with everything you've got" (Renshaw ix). Their own perception of themselves and their actions are in direct contrast to the negative external views and instead they see their choice to pursue Disney fandom, and the relegation of agency inherent within it, as empowering. Through an investigation into why and how these fans dedicate themselves to Disney, including the sacrifices they make to be Disney fans, this chapter will demonstrate how they find agency and independence through submission to Disney's hegemonic control, thus finding resolution and happiness.

While all chapters in this dissertation focus on this tension in some way, this chapter particularly focuses on those most ardent within the already passionate Disney fan community and who therefore demonstrate this tension clearly. In defining this group, I follow Janet

Wasko's lead who, in her study of Disney audiences, provides a useful, and detailed description of these fans:

> … [they are] zealous…who strongly, sometimes obsessively, adore anything Disney and arrange their lives accordingly. They have been profoundly affected by the Disney universe and proclaim their allegiance to The Mouse in numerous ways, from body adornments and life-style choices to club membership and on-line activities…[they] visit the parks often, own huge collections of Disney memorabilia, and decorate their homes in Disney themes…[they] are big consumers of Disney products and services and organize their important life events, such as birthdays and weddings around Disney. (*Understanding Disney* 196, 198)

This core of supreme fans infuses the Disney brand into every part of their lives and have made it into a lifestyle, blurring the lines between where they end and Disney begins. Some within the fan community have nicknamed them "pixie dusters" due to their complete and utter devotion to Disney—instead of having "drunk the kool aid" which is more commonly used, these fans have absorbed Disney's magic pixie dust. They are the most devoted of fans who choose to dedicate nearly every free moment and expendable dollar to their enjoyment of Disney and continually choose to place it on a pedestal, brushing away any and all criticism of themselves and the company. Their choice to idolize Disney more than all other sects of the Disney fan community most clearly highlights this tension because, with this group, fandom practices are most concentrated and have the highest stakes for the fans. Regularly, through news stories, social media, and their own experiences with the company, they are psychologically forced to choose between a reality in which the Disney Company is a capitalistic entity that may have only its shareholders' interests at heart or the fulfilling belief that there is a company that provides magic

and love for them and their family. These fans choose the latter, clinging, often desperately, to their magical view of the company resulting in a complex commingling of agency, in choosing to cling to Disney, and relegation of agency by wholly accepting Disney's messaging and marketing.

Much of the work in this chapter will seem to confirm the prevailing interpretation that these fans are duped and completely subservient to the will of Disney. But I will argue that it is a more nuanced process in which fans are not duped into the relationship, and instead, actively choose to join and relegate agency to the Disney Company in hopes of creating a better life. I will argue that, for them, giving up agency is an act of agency itself— a willful choice they continually make. This case study will not negate previous arguments, but instead will humanize them, and lay bare their motivation for doing something others view as escapism.

Compared to the other chapters in this dissertation, this one is more heavily based on my observations and own experiences due to the particular difficulty in this kind of analysis. I have found that most adult Disney fans do not deeply reflect nor self-evaluate their love for Disney and their fan practices. For them, dedication to Disney is a simple act of infusing their lives with something that makes them happy. They rarely critically ask themselves why or acknowledge Disney's power and attempts to control, and instead see it as what is colloquially called "living their best life." Also, many fans see themselves as somewhat unbiased and critical of the Disney Company when necessary. They equate criticizing the company from a consumer experience standpoint with being critical of the company itself and therefore, no matter how dedicated, feel they are not duped. Yet in nearly every instance, I have found that rather than looking at processes of capitalistic control, power, influence, and manipulation they only apply the consumerist lens, "Did I get my money's worth from my experience?" This invariably will

always result in a 'yes' due to their already positive predisposition to the brand as well as easily fulfilled expectations due to the desire to replicate the previous positive experiences at the parks. In fact, when confronted with a more critical approach many fans often become anxious, hostile, and/or defensive of the brand.[8] This dedication makes interviews on this subject nearly impossible as fans can quickly become enraged or shut down at even the hint that Disney may not have their best interests at heart. Furthermore, their fandom is so foundational to their lives and identities that conducting in-depth interviews to prompt them to think about their positionality with Disney may cause emotional distress. Therefore, I have opted to center my analysis on the observation of their social behaviors and my own participation in activities that they love most such as posting and interacting with each other in fan-created Facebook groups and visiting the parks

Fans and the Disney Magic

No singular profile can encompass the dedicated adult Disney fan. As American Studies professor Meyrav Koren-Kuik notes, "Describing the average Disney fan is impossible, as the body of Disney fandom does not consist of a specific demographic but encompasses a multigenerational global community" (147). They are from all walks of life with every background imaginable. Taken as a whole, it is an incredibly diverse fan base spread throughout the entire world. Due to proximity, regional search engine restrictions and limitations, and language barriers, my observations and interactions centered on those who live in the United States, which does have a strong median of white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, middle-class and upper-middle class adults. I found an equal number of parents as I did childless adults, though

[8] One student I taught was so upset that our class took a critical look at Disney's marketing that he wrote an aggressive note on an assignment. He shared his view that my motivations for analyzing Disney this way was because I was bitter and wanted others to be unhappy as well.

the childless adults had a wider range in economic status due to a higher disposable income than those with children. Connected to this, I also found those without children tended to visit the parks more often than those with families and were more likely to participate in media creation (like podcasts and blogs) and move to California or Florida to pursue their fandom full-time. A large portion of the Disney fan population is from the LGBTQ+ community with a high representation from gay men. Across all demographics there is a wide range of ages from those as young as twenty to those as old as seventy.

Each fan's particular attraction to Disney and its personal meaning in their lives varies widely. But unsurprisingly, most of their connection to the Disney Company began during childhood, growing up watching the animated movies and television shows which have long been easily, readily, and cheaply available. For those born around or after 1937, Disney movie releases were a consistent staple in the entertainment industry, with at least one movie released almost every year since *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937). Yearly, children would be able to enjoy the newest Disney movie as a major form of entertainment directed towards their demographic. With the invention of the VHS tape in the late 1970s and the introduction of the Disney Channel in the early 1980s, Disney movies became accessible to many homes and provided children with the ability to watch movies ad nauseum.[9] This is no accident and the Disney Company has pointedly targeted children in their advertising efforts as well as aggressively marketing to them as they grow to create lifelong customers who pass their brand loyalty on to their children, family, and friends (Giroux "How Disney Magic", James 20). And through the company's efforts, generation after generation of children have been encouraged and

[9] This has grown exponentially with the introduction of Disney Plus, which has made Disney's entire catalog of movies, television shows, and subsidiary entertainment available at any time for anyone with a computer, television, or smart phone.

able to have Disney be part of their daily lives, thus forming strong nostalgic connections between Disney movies and positive childhood memories.

The feelings of happiness and happily-ever-after nostalgic safety generated by watching these movies and shows had a deep impact on many, causing a desire to replicate those feelings in their adult lives. In a candid interview, Disney fans and *Mouse Rants* podcast co-hosts XXXXXXX and Simone DeMilo shared with me the importance of watching Disney movies while growing up. For XXXX, it ignited his lifelong love for Disney: "I was obsessed with the movies [as a child]. I watched the Disney channel and was a huge fan. It was the only cable channel we had. I was always a huge fan...and it never died out" (XXXX).[10] For DeMilo, the movies and tv shows became synonymous with her childhood, "I've always loved Disney everything...but I loved the movies first. I would just watch the movies on a loop over and over again. It's some of my earliest memories...Disney was a major part of my childhood as long as I can remember. I can't think about my childhood without thinking about Disney movies" (DeMilo). Many of the people I interviewed, myself, and even many I have met in my life who only casually enjoy Disney, share a similar experience. Media scholar and harsh Disney critic Henry Giroux acknowledges this powerful impact Disney media has on children that can continue into adulthood: "As one of the most influential corporations in the world, Disney does more than provide entertainment: it also shapes in very powerful ways how young people understand themselves, relate to others and experience the larger society" ("How Disney Magic"). And though he warns against this "swindle of fulfillment," and I do not want to downplay the problematic level influence and power Disney wields with children, I also want to highlight that

[10] XXXXXXXXX is the stage name for musician and *Mouse Rants* podcaster XXXXXXXXX. He requested in his interview to be referred to by that name when I quote him. He posts on social media under his real name, XXXXX, so when citing his Facebook posts I use that name.

watching Disney shows and movies as a child can provide comfort, a steadfast retreat, emotional balm, and pure pleasure that greatly contributes to happiness in both childhood and adulthood (Giroux "How Disney Magic").

Another crucial way they recreate the Disney magic at home is through Disney merchandise: filling their homes and closets with Disney products that express their love for the brand and create a Disney atmosphere. XXXX hangs Disney posters in his home, displays collectibles, and frequently listens to Disney music (XXXX). DeMilo collects Disney mugs and always carries "some sort of Disney bag" with her wherever she goes (DeMilo). Other fans, like *The Unofficial Guide to Walt Disney World* author Len Testa, have transformed their entire home into their own personal Disney World. His kitchen is modeled after the ride Space Mountain and his bathrooms were designed to mimic those on the Disney Cruise Line (Testa). For my own enjoyment, I have vintage Disney ride posters hanging on my walls, have a plethora of Disney t-shirts that I wear, have a collection of Disney souvenir pins displayed on my dresser, and find relaxation in playing immersive Disney video games like *Kingdom Hearts* and *Disneyland Adventures*. For these fans, and sometimes myself, nearly every dollar of disposable income is happily dedicated to Disney. I will discuss later in this chapter that Disney influences this behavior and "is constantly enforcing the will to consume [its products]" but it is important to remember that regardless of commercial value or usefulness, owning tangible memorabilia is a powerful tool fans use to create happiness in their everyday lives (Steeves 190, Muensterberger 4).

Enjoying fandom through merchandise is an expensive endeavor because Disney products and experiences often do not come cheap. Economic status still dictates the extent of how much a fan can spend on Disney merchandise and themed items, but that does not deter

them. Most budget and make sacrifices elsewhere to ensure they can make their yearly trip to Disney and some, unfortunately, build up a large amount of credit card debt. Others budget shop and buy their Disney items from Walmart or a "dollar store." A portion of this group, usually childless adults, either frustrated at their financial inability to go to the parks or their limited ability to travel there as much as possible, move to Florida to live their "Disney life." This way they can frequent Disney World as much as their schedule will allow, which can be several days a week every week of the year.[11] Others find creative ways to enjoy their fandom through crafting, cosplay, and content creation, which, depending on how they are approached, can be cheap or extremely expensive hobbies. And nearly all fans spend enormous amounts of time online interacting with the Disney brand in some way, be it through online window shopping, reading through the latest Disney news, or devouring fellow fans' videos, podcasts, and blogs. Either way, sacrifices, financial gymnastics, and keen problem solving are undertaken because Disney is the priority in their lives, so fans put all resources available towards having the brand as a lifestyle.

The Power of the Parks

The main venue through which fans create their Disney lives is by visiting the parks as much as possible. Many, like Guy in the CollegeHumor sketch, choose to only travel to Disney parks and no other vacation spots. I have found most dedicated fans spend on average two weeks per year visiting a Disney park, but some spend as much as thirty to forty days there (Ferretti). And, as I have previously mentioned, some want to visit so often, they uproot their lives and move to Florida or California so they can go as much as possible. Most, I have found, discover

[11] Often these moves are comparatively impulsive. Some, like Lou Mongello (who will be discussed in chapter three), find success in this risk. Others, like Kevin Kessler, do not. They give up careers and often struggle in low-paying entry level positions.

or enhance, their love of Disney through the parks in the holistic, encompassing, and enchanting atmosphere of "The Happiest Place on Earth." As literature scholar Susan Willis notes, "Disney's theme parks offer an invitation to adventure, a respite from the drudgery of work and an opportunity to escape from the alienation of daily life" (5). American Studies professor John Wills notes that in its parks, "Disney magically whisks people away from their daily toils and transports them to new worlds and places…. Disney amounts to a mass comfort blanket" (37). Similar to their experience with Disney movies, many first encounter a Disney park as a child on a family vacation. Physically being in the world of Disney, seeing beloved characters walking around, and experiencing favorite movies as a kind of physical reality is powerful for a child who already loves Disney movies. In her interview for the Disney fan documentary, *The Dreamfinders* (2016), Disney content creator Jenilyn Knopp observes:

> For a lot of people, the reason why we connect with [the Disney parks] the way that we do, the thing that happens that is real is we are actually stepping into our childhood. We all have practically been weaned on Disney and so, for us, this is something that we're recapturing: a time in our life, a state of mind that we have had since our days of innocence. And it's a beautiful thing to be able to go back to that. And this place, for whatever reason has an incredible power to bring that about. (Knopp)

I have found a similar sentiment in nearly all of my participants (as well as myself)—that trips to a Disney park when young had a lasting impact, encouraged lifelong fandom, imbued a desire to go back regularly as an adult, and a drive to recreate the incredible feelings experienced when young. Willis observes that this is "renewing the pleasure and satisfaction experienced as children" and of great import to adults who enjoyed Disney parks as children (2). In his interviews and research regarding park visits, journalist Scott Renshaw's findings mirrored mine:

that lifelong Disney fans' dedication often originates from "early exposure, with some special connections" to the Disney parks (Renshaw 41). Some of these experiences were simply enjoying the "magic" of the utopic and totalizing atmosphere where their favorite Disney movies and characters are made manifest. But for others, the experiences were powerful because they enhanced positive connections made with family members, particularly parents, that still resonate emotionally as adults. In his interview on *The Dreamfinders* (2016), professional podcaster Lou Mongello reminisces on the family connections made while visiting the parks:

> I think as a kid, it started to really become something special not just because of the attractions, but really because it was where I was making, year after year, consistently incredible memories that I still remember fondly to this day with my parents. So, it was always a very happy place for us and was a way to sort of get away and escape from reality. And, as I got older, I started going with my friends and then with my wife and then with my children, seeing it through their eyes—that feeling of it being a special place really was sort of magnified even more exponentially. (Mongello)

Sadly, for some it was the only time in their childhood that their family seemed to get along and make happy memories together. "I think the reason why I did grow so attached to [Disney World] though, was my family," Knopp explains, "I come from a broken family and my childhood wasn't the easiest one that you would hope for someone to have. Yet it seemed like when my family would come to Disney on our trips we just came together, and we were the family that we should've been every day" (Knopp). For others, like Disney YouTube vlogger John Saccacheri, their economic status did not allow many trips to Disney, making the few visits there extra special thus enhancing the family connection:

> I would consider us kind of a poor family growing up, but I didn't know it…I didn't know what vacation was. At about five or six years old, my dad said we have tickets…to Disney World. And I do remember watching the Wonderful World of Disney on tv and the Wonderful World of Color. And I was really excited about that and I had read all of the Disney books and so this was a big adventure. And I remember landing and seeing palm trees for the first time and thinking 'this is amazing!' And the next thing that I remember, and I do have, these memories are still there, I just remember being on my dad's shoulders on uh, [starts to tear up and laughs] I'm getting emotional about it because I'm stupid. [starts crying] I just remember crossing over the Seven Seas Lagoon to see the castle and it was just, it was life changing. [laughs] I can't believe that I got emotional about that…. I'm gonna (sic) always make that 'dad connection' with Disney. When I got back home from that trip, I remember having such a love of that world. (Saccacheri)

And for some families, like DeMilo's, cost placed a trip to a Disney park far outside the realm of the possibilities, keeping them from experiencing the "Happiest Place on Earth" until well into their 20s or 30s. Instead, they grew up coveting a trip to Disney—something that is widely considered to be a common childhood experience. "To be American is to do Disney," so the feeling of missing out on this experience as a child combined with their love for Disney makes visitation a priority as soon as they are financially able (Wills 6). The first visit as an adult, then, can be more impactful and powerful than if they attended the parks as children. For them, the desire has been fermenting for years and the realization of their dream a particular triumph. The impact of that first visit, so long prolonged, can have a powerful effect prompting a desire to deepen their relationship with Disney in their adult life (DeMilo, Ferretti).

For some fans, like myself, close proximity to a Disney park lessened the special, rarity of a trip many others experienced, and instead connected it to our childhood memories as a comforting ritualistic experience. Disney podcaster Ricky Brigante explains the local experience of growing up near Disney parks:

> I grew up in Miami and came up here to Orlando quite frequently with my parents. We went on sort of annual trips. And over the years I just grew a really, really big strong affinity for it all. You know, I remember some of my earliest memories sitting in a stroller in front of Cinderella Castle or watching the Main Street electrical parade or going on 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea. It's just definitely been a huge part of my life. (Brigante)

Instead of enjoying the Disney magic as a surprise, for regulars it is something dependable to look forward to, something to plan towards, something that builds excitement in a kind of tangible or achievable hope. Disney Institute General Manager Jeff James describes this as one of the reasons Disney is so successful in garnering repeat and loyal customers. The repeatable experience is a "promise" Disney makes to its customers "that they will always know what to expect" when visiting the parks and that promise means "exceeding expectations at nearly all points of contact" (James 17). This has always been a point of import for me (along with most of those connected to this study), who has visited Disney parks more times than I can count—somehow the same experience every time is wonderful and every time fulfilling. Knowing my favorite rides and experiences will be exactly the same every time I come back and will be just as enjoyable is a source of comfort and pleasurable anticipation. It may not be the excitement of a new experience, like others have when visiting for the first time, but the realization of that anticipation is fulfilling and drives me to come back time and time again.

Not every dedicated adult Disney fan experiences the park when young and does not necessarily develop fandom from the movies. Though they are a small portion of the fans I have encountered, there is a subset of fans who have embraced a Disney fan lifestyle because of how Disney made them feel as detached adults. Disney fan and podcaster Adam Ferretti never connected to the Disney brand or movies growing up, but instead he had a transformative experience when "forced" to go to Disney World as an adult by his romantic partner. The good feelings and positive atmosphere showed him a new way of being that prompted him to make Disney a lifestyle:

> As soon as I got into the Magic Kingdom, I smiled for the first time in years. I was a very sarcastic, down hipster. I never smiled ever. And when I went to the Magic Kingdom, I smiled continuously for five days. The real obsession started between that one and a trip six or seven months later. I was just researching everything about the history of the parks, and I realized that it's a really healthy hobby to have for somebody who is intrinsically down on everything. It's made me a more positive person. And I love it and it's a great hobby. (Ferretti)

Ferretti's, and the small subset of late-in-life fans, experience feeling happy in the "Happiest Place on Earth" for the first time as an adult is equally, if not more, powerful as those who experience this happiness as children. As Renshaw notes, "The assumption is that once you've reached a certain age, these Magic Kingdoms become something to be endured rather than enjoyed" (vi). But these fans show that belief is not true and the "utopian haven where mundane everyday reality could be forgotten" strikes a chord and attracts them towards a love for Disney (Koren-Kuik 146). It is this experience and these positive feelings that encourage them to come away from their parks experience solidified in their dedication and with hunger for more.

Regardless of how each fan comes to Disney, the common thread among all in this study is that visits to the parks are not enough. “I just feel like all my troubles are gone when I go to Walt Disney World and I don’t feel that anywhere else” shares DeMilo (DeMilo). The positive feelings and experiences Disney provides are unsatisfying as temporary phenomena and fans feel compelled to extend them into their daily lives. Renshaw explains, “Memories are Disneyland’s unbreakable souvenir, and for me, they spill into dreams and into days when I need to recall times of renewal and transition or moments of pure bliss…. The end of one visit generally finds me lamenting how long it might be until the beginning of the next” (vi). Not only do they want the Disney magic to never end, but they would feel a profound loss if it did. “I feel like I live Disney,” shares DeMilo, “Besides Disney, I don’t have any other lives. I feel like the majority of my life is living Disney” (DeMilo). For the participants in this study, this is the dream—to live Disney; that it is not simply an experience or feeling to be had temporarily when watching a movie or visiting the park. They want to extend it into the everyday as much as possible and infuse their daily lives with those positive and happy feelings. “[Disney World] is where I’d want to be more than anywhere else in the world. And I know that’s silly to some people…. This, to me, is like, this is my world” shares Saccheri (Saccheri). So, they proactively find ways to make every part of their lives more like their Disney experiences, full of happiness, magic, and safety.

The power and influence of the Disney parks does not just affect dedicated fans and is a subject of interest and fascination to many scholars. There is a reason, they explain, these visits can be so impactful during childhood and keep people returning even with increasing ticket prices each year (currently at $130 per day) or if they are only casual fans. Social historian John Findlay observes that the enclosed and controlled park atmosphere acts as a kind of therapy with curative powers that can give visitors exactly what they need emotionally. It enables guests to

participate in a temporary utopia that can be an emotional balm and can help cope with the struggles of life (Findlay 78). Many fans echo this view including Disney fan Bryan Francoeur who shared his feelings in his podcast:

> Even though we're adults, we can pretend [Disney World] is real for a little bit…. I think a lot of people struggle with anxiety and depression in their life. And, to find a place, to find almost a way of life, and to find an escape; I guess that's what it is really, an escape…. To be able to go down there and to have that escape. And, almost a rejuvenation, almost a start over…. It brings you happiness; it brings you joy. (Francoeur)

Wasko describes this as "a self-contained universe which presents consistently recognizable values through recurring characters and familiar repetitive themes" (*Understanding Disney* 3). Former Disney parks performer Ron Schnider further explains:

> We know exactly what's going to happen at every turn. Why do we keep going in there? Because it's so well done that a part of us, the suspension of disbelief, a part of us will walk in the door and say unconsciously 'I've never been here before.' It's so exquisitely done – the chill in the air, the lights, everything about it. It's like a child with a train set who puts his eye down next to the train as the train goes by so that he can imagine what it would be like if it was a full-sized train. (Schnider)

And philosophy professor Peter Steeves describes the parks experience as a "chasm between beliefs and perceptions.... experiences and reality… [that creates] a delicate balance, resulting in a sensation of security, coziness, and empowerment" (180). In his more technical analysis, philosophy scholar Sean Harrington states that Disney "provides media that in turn enables a self-administration of gratification…. that support the subject's fantasy life by ways of enjoyment, just as manufacturing machines offer physical support in the real" (2, 5). Some

scholars, like Wasko, Fjellman, and Steeves, even acknowledge that the totalizing, heavily controlled, utopic atmosphere is tantalizing even to them. Anthropologist Stephen Fjellman shared his own feelings when attempting to study Disney World: "I love [Disney World]! I could live there. I love its infinitude, its theater, its dadaism. I love its food, its craft, its simulations. It gets me to think, to remember, and to make up new fantasies" (16). Consensus among scholars is that Disney can create an attractive and emotionally fulfilling environment where visitors are "being lifted from their lives to form connections that in utterly simple ways make the world better" (Dolan 476). It is this deep connection to the emotion, the stories, and the ability to recreate a utopia that compels Disney fans to dedicate themselves to their fandom and to Disney.

The Fan Community

Equally important for these fans and a major foundation for their fandom is the fan community that has developed around the love of Disney and the love of visiting Disney parks. Fans' attempts at creating their Disney lives would not be complete without others sharing in their joy. They may come to their fandom individually, but by interacting with other fans and sharing their love for the company their enjoyment is enhanced and more than it could be alone (Duffett 23). In his study of fan communities that form specifically around brands, advertising strategist Douglas Atkin offers insight into why communities resonate so powerfully for fans:

> A community of like people…is a vital ingredient of the sense of belonging that most crave when they say they are looking somewhere to "feel at home." It can create an uncritical and celebratory environment in which the individual can feel confident enough to find and express himself. There is a "safe space" … where inhibitions normally felt among strangers are removed and the barriers to being you are broken with impunity. You may change the company you work for, your neighborhood, social club, and even

> your friends, to find a place where it is more possible to be yourself with people you consider to be more like yourself. (5)

As Atkins observes, fan communities are so much more than shared affinity and many fans do feel "at home" and refer to the community as their "home" or "family." It is because the community "offer[s] their members a sense of belonging in an otherwise lonely world…[and] a sense of welcome and strength of common bonds" (Duffett 242). A fan's experience as a member of the Disney fan community often is what solidifies their dedication and propels them towards making Disney a lifestyle.

Some fans meet in person at a Disney park or Disney related event, and many friendships are formed by the happenstance of waiting near each other in long lines or partaking in souvenir pin trading at one of Disney's designated stores. But, by and large, the fan community meets, interacts, and exists online through social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, through created media content shared on YouTube and podcast apps, and by Disney news blog sites written by fans for fans like The DIS and MiceChat. They commune mostly in Facebook community groups like *Disney Addicts Only, Crazy for Disney*, and *My Heart Belongs to Disney!* whose size can range from just a few people to over 200,000 members. They interact with one another on a daily, and sometimes hourly, basis because here fans find support, encouragement, refuge, and the joy of socializing with fellow fans. They share Disney facts, trip tips, personal stories, pictures, and they ask each other questions. The comments section for each post allows them to engage in conversation and make personal connections. As media scholar Henry Jenkins observes, "a man with a television is alone, but a man with a computer can belong to a community" (*Convergence Culture* 256). The initial friendships and bonds that form here stem from mutual joy and a shared passion for the Disney brand. They continue and grow as fans bond

through their interactions with many of the friendships becoming the center of fans' social lives. These relationships can be extremely fulfilling because they share a love for Disney, its ideals of love and friendship, and they "get" each other. Francoeur explains:

> This community of people is so accepting and so loving. I have never experienced that in my life…. This is a group of people that love Disney. They love what it's bringing to their life and they're not afraid to share it with other people. And they are so accepting of other people, no matter what the life you're from, no matter how much money you have. No matter who you love, what you love, they accept you and they are just glad they have somebody to talk to about this other passion...It's an incredible group of people that I have never experienced anything like. (Francoeur)

His experience is exemplary of the most fulfilling parts of fandom in general: interpersonal interaction and community. Though discussion is centered on sharing information related to Disney, it is somewhat inconsequential because it is the process that provides meaning. Coming together and sharing thoughts, opinions, and questions creates a social process that reaffirms group ties and makes the interactions fulfilling (Jenkins *Convergence Culture* 54).

Fan experience within the Disney fan community is especially fulfilling due to the loving, inclusive, and accepting nature of the Disney fan community, which strives to recreate the "Disney Magic" by imbuing their interactions with the Disney Company's marketed ideologies of love, friendship, and acceptance. Fans achieve this through purposeful curation of the online fan spaces. As I will soon discuss, most fans face some form of scorn, rejection, or ostracization for their fandom, and so the fan groups are a needed respite. They highly value these spaces and make concerted effort to protect them. Little effort is needed to do this due to Facebook's programming which allows moderators complete control of the group. Moderators set the groups

rules of what is acceptable discussion topics and behaviors, and they have the power to block and evict any user they see fit. "Trolls," naysayers, discontents, and the like can be weeded out quickly and efficiently keeping the group milieu intact. Generally, this results in conversations centered on Disney and Disney alone; other potentially divisive topics such as politics and religion rarely, if ever, come into the conversation or are shared on the page. This is partially due to the collective desire to keep that respite, and I have found avoidance of divisive topics is common in nearly all fan interactions, and control by the group moderators ensures the atmosphere will remain positive, happy, and safe.[12]

Online interaction is only a portion of fans' attempts towards fulfillment and they enjoy participating in their created community by scheduling meetups so that they can meet each other in person and build deeper friendships around their love for Disney. Sometimes it is a simple get together at someone's home, other times it is a meeting at the parks themselves. For some, in-person socialization with other fans has become so important that they have formed what they call Disney Social Clubs. These clubs are designed to create what Disney fans call their "second family" or their "Disney family" meaning those with whom they share familial bonds but are not blood relatives. Potential members are handpicked and endure a thorough vetting process to ensure they fit with the group and fully subscribe to Disney's ideologies (Nassarian). Once admitted they are members of a neo-familial unit that provides immense emotional, and sometimes financial, support and in return expects loyalty and adherence to their rules and club culture. As one club member describes it:

> Not everyone understands that love for Disney, so we felt like we needed to find other people that do understand. The one thing our second home was missing was our second

[12] This type of control does not always work and sometimes breaks down. The consequences of this are the focus of chapter two.

> family which is why we built this club…. We are looking for The Elite, The Best of the Best, the most dedicated and die-hard Disney fans around. Someone that knows the importance of being in a club and that respects the park as much as we do…. [Our club] is a family and our love for the park and having fun has expanded into something much more...We put roofs over other members heads, we help one another in financial trouble and drive hours on end to pick each other up. Anything you would do for your own family, is what we do in this club. (Nassarian)

For members, these clubs are the center and sometimes the foundation of their life because they empower and enable them to live a Disney life. By creating a neo-familial unit of chosen, committed members, they avoid the judgment and ostracization of being a Disney fan and provide for themselves a loving support system of people who understand them. Most groups have over 30 members and a full calendar of social activities that include going to the parks as well as more relaxed hangouts together, like an afternoon barbeque. Between club membership, Facebook groups, and a fan-created Disney dating website (www.mousemingle.com), fans need not look beyond their own fan community for friendship, family, romance, and the kinds of social fulfillment that many of us generally crave.

Cults and Neoreligiosity

Activities like the meetups and social clubs, as well as the infusion of the Disney brand into daily life, are highly misunderstood and behaviors that have earned the Disney fan community the label of 'cult.' Atkin views cults positively and in his book *The Culting of Brands* argues against the prevailing view of cults as something negative or to be disparaged. Defining cult as "a group or movement exhibiting a great devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing. Its ideology is distinctive and it has a well-defined and committed community. It enjoys

exclusive devotion (that is, not shared with another group), and its members often become voluntary advocates," he argues that "cults are normal, in fact an essential feature of a healthy culture, one that would atrophy without them" (Aktin xv, xix). Similarly, leading fandom studies scholar Matt Hills has no qualms using 'cult' to describe fan behavior, uses it as a qualifier to distinguish between different levels of dedication and devotion, and sometimes even uses it interchangeably with the word 'fan' (Hills ix). By these definitions, then it would be appropriate to label the Disney fan community as a cult and discuss their behaviors as cult-ish. However useful these approaches may be for analytical purposes they do not negate the very real sting fans feel when it is applied to them. Renshaw shares the pain involved in being viewed as such: "It's a struggle all fans of all kinds face, these reactions somewhere on the spectrum between dismissal and outright disdain" (46). Henry Jenkins observes that this is part of longstanding, hurtful stereotypes applied to media fans which he outlines as:

> …brainless consumers who will buy anything associated with [the subject of their fandom], who devote their lives to the cultivation of worthless knowledge…place inappropriate importance on devalued cultural material…are social misfits who are so obsessed [with the subject of their fandom] that it forecloses other types of social experience…are infantile, emotionally and intellectually immature…[and] are unable to separate fantasy from reality. (*Textual Poachers* 11)

While other fandoms, like *Harry Potter*, *Star Trek*, and *Star Wars*, have become increasingly acceptable to mainstream society, Disney fans still face these stereotypes and the moniker of 'cult' and because of it, often retreat further into the bosom of the Disney fan community where they are understood and accepted.

Unfortunately, due to the negative stereotypes and view of Disney fandom as a cult, many fans do not experience a positive reception when expressing their fandom to the people in their lives. Disney fandom as a grown adult is often frowned upon, with many fans finding themselves socially ostracized and criticized by family, friends, and co-workers. Choosing to share their fandom is risky and takes forethought, a conscious decision, and bravery. Some fans do experience positive reactions, but others experience a range of rejection from mild disdain to total repudiation. For example, when Disney fan Shannon McCarter told her grandparents she wanted to do a podcast on Disney, they were immediately distressed and accused her of doing drugs. To them, an adult loving Disney was so far outside of the norm their first assumption was that she was on drugs and her desire was a result of their usage (McCarter). Some, fearing rejection, never share their fandom with those in their lives and practice their fandom in secret. "There are fans who never 'come out'" fandom scholar Mark Duffett explains, "[they are] closet fans who pursue their passions in private and sometimes in secret. For various reasons such media enthusiasts may be ashamed to admit the direction or depth of their interest. They may love an object…not usually seen by others as appropriate for their gender or peer group" (Duffett 29). Shaming is particularly concentrated on cis-gendered, heterosexual male fans, who are often viewed as emasculated, a pedophile, mentally unstable, freakish, or psychologically defective. "Not to take away from [LGBTQ] people who have to come out to their families, but I am an electrician and a man who doesn't have kids," shares fan and Disney podcaster Dale Wentland, "There is a sense of [hiding and] coming out all the time" (Wentland). Wentland is not the only man to feel this way and uses the language of 'the closet.' In his discussion about embracing his own Disney fandom Renshaw shares that "it's not easy to come out of the closet as a nearly fifty-year old Disney parks junkie" (vi). Duffett observes that while fans in general can be subject to

stereotypes, men face more stigmatism than women: "…the social stereotype of media fandom itself has traditionally led to perceptions of male fans, in some fields, as socially inadequate and somehow defective in their masculinities. If a mature male fan loves a genre generally aimed at a female audience…he is perceived as especially suspect" (206). Publicly acknowledging Disney fandom is an unsafe practice that can result in loss of friends, family, and sometimes even risk physical harm. So, many feel they live in a kind of "closet" and have to carefully hide or strategically reveal their fandom with friends, coworkers, and family members. Feeling isolated, as a result, draws fans towards the Disney fan community, where they are not just accepted but celebrated. The painful contrast between their social worlds causes a cycle that self-perpetuates: the more fans are rejected, the more they flee into the Disney fan community; the more they flee into the Disney fan community, the more they are rejected. With the broad and general misunderstanding of their fandom, the increasingly close bond between fans, and fans' retreat into the fan community outwardly appears abnormal and affirms the belief that Disney fans are in a cult.

Admittedly, the label of 'cult' is not entirely unwarranted. Dedicated Disney fans display a trait commonly associated with cult-like behavior: a resistance to, avoidance of, and anger at any criticism aimed at the Disney Company. Throughout both of her monographs, Janet Wasko investigates this phenomenon at length:

> Disney fans typically defend the Disney image as sacred and untouchable…These feelings [of positivity] are seemingly hard-wired in Disney users and tend to override any misgivings about Disney enterprises… many Disney consumers refuse to consider the potential harmful effects of exposure to Disney…This combination of loyalty and sang-

> froid allows Disneyophiles to be impervious to negative implications, even when offered by trusted advisers. (*Understanding Disney* 205, *Dazzled by Disney* 49, 57)

This resistance is not necessarily because of the Disney Company itself, but the fans' connection of their personal identity to their fandom and Disney—because Disney, their fandom, and their community are so important to them, criticism feels like a personal attack (Renshaw 67). "Disney die-hards will respond to anything they perceive as an attack on the parks with a counterattack," Renshaw shares, "It was the 'America: Love It or Leave It' phenomenon in microcosm; there were those who considered criticism an act of hate" (65). For these fans, their relationship with Disney is "almost always intensely personal" so therefore criticism becomes intensely personal and triggers a defensive response (Renshaw 14).

Contributing further to the stereotype, many Disney fans sometimes speak of their fandom in religious terms. "This is my religion," states Disney fan George Reiger, "This is my life…Every cent I have goes to Disney" (qtd. in Wasko *Understanding Disney* 198). When attending a Disney fan conference Renshaw himself describes his experience as "a kind of church service for the Disney parks faithful: a retelling of the creation myths, a celebration of the creator's wisdom and benevolence and a chance for the institution to reinforce the idea that the leaders now entrusted with conveying the message were interpreting that message faithfully" (12-13). I have observed descriptions like this myself and have regularly seen fans describe Disney parks as places of pilgrimage, as "their Mecca," and heaven demonstrating that fandom may not only be personal, it is also sacred.

The connection of fandom to religion or spirituality is not exclusive to Disney fans and scholars have observed it to be a phenomenon across all types of fandoms. Mark Duffett explains why fans may feel this way: "Fandom is more than metaphorically connected to religion because

it contains several structural parallels: the development of a close attachment to an unobtainable other, a kind of moral orientation, a daily life devoted to interpretation and a community based on a shared if vague assumption of devotion… [Fans can] celebrate their conviction without having to justify their attachment or explain why rational comprehension seems irrelevant" (145). Matt Hills labels this phenomenon as neoreligiosity because fans draw upon the language of religion and have similar experiences of partaking in a religion, without actually being in a religion (Hills 117-118). Wills further explains:

> Fans buy into the fantasy world in a way resembling spiritual devotion. They worship the brand as if it is an alternative to religion. Disciples sport the couture of the mouse and maintain a naïve but cultish affinity with all that Mickey conjures. Disney World and Cinderella Castle resemble pilgrimage sites akin to Jerusalem or Mecca…Disney is the closest they get to a modern religious experience. The studio keenly supports such adoration…. The studio offers people a kind of generic new religion built around consumerism and media, with hopes of the "happily ever after" and a place where dreams come true. (112-113)

Not all scholars believe that fandom runs deeply into religious devotion, and some argue that the use of religious terms is simply due to a limitation within the English language and that "religious language could be no more than a convenience: a way to speak about experiences that are hard to directly express into words" (Duffett 145). Nevertheless, fandom for the Disney fans in this study does resemble that of a religious congregation, whether it is purposeful or not. The fans have deep devotion to Disney, "practice" their fandom daily and incorporate its practices

into their lives, and find communion with fellow devotees.[13] So, without these neoreligious elements, fandom would not interest most fans and the fan community would not exist.

Disney's Control and Influence

Thus far, I have demonstrated the attraction to Disney from the fans' perspective, but they are not alone in this consumer/producer relationship. "Disney, perhaps more than any other corporation, has created a marketing powerhouse" to aggressively court customers and attempt to influence fans as much as possible (Giroux "How Disney Magic"). The company is not just good at marketing and creating a brand image; it is an expert at manipulation and influence that "constantly enforce[s] the will to consume" (Steeves 190). According to entertainment scholar Mathew Bartkowiak, Disney aims "to get as close to possible in control and ideological influence" (957). Budd describes it as the "aggressive drive to control" (2). This type of control, one that inspires "an emotional connection…in which [fans] become more engaged and build a relationship with the company… [and] also become advocates for the brand" is not one that can be done through sheer force or blatant coercion (James 17). Disney wants your heart as much as it wants your dollar. Therefore, control must be given—control that convinces fans that they want to be subordinate and relegate agency to Disney's will, which is the consumption of as much Disney as possible (and preferably only Disney). This type of control philosopher Antonio Gramsci labels hegemony, and the wide consensus among Disney scholars is that Disney not only employs it but, like most everything else it does, aims to be the best.

Fans did not come to the conclusion that Disney can do no wrong independently and this belief is a leading indicator of Disney's success at hegemonic control. Despite increasing prices,

[13] A few fans have taken their fandom to a religious level and incorporated their love for Disney into their Christian religion. There are books that provide bible verses for people to read that are themed to the Disney parks and books investigating how Disney movies connect to Christian values.

decreasing services, dilution of the brand (with the addition of Marvel, Lucasfilm, and Fox Entertainment), concerns of safety, highly publicized labor disputes, instability in company leadership, and grossly inflated CEO pay, Disney fans continually choose to not just support the company but decry those who attempt even the smallest criticism.[14] Theater professor Maurya Wickstrom calls this "magical capitalism" in which Disney has used its brand of magic "as an alibi for their own corporate greed" and to distract away from any critique of the company or brand (118). Budd similarly describes this as the "Disney aura" in which there is a "deeply felt resistance to questioning the assumptions of an intensely pleasurable and reassuring mass cultural experience to which they become uncritically attached as children…that suggests denial, even repression" (2). In my observations and conversations with Disney fans, this is consistently true. Every single fan I interviewed I pointedly asked, "Is there anything Disney can do that will make you stop being a fan?" and every person thoughtfully answered in the negative: in their mind, there is nothing the Disney Company can do that would cause enough discontent for them to stop adoring the company and its products.[15] Some fans do bring criticism into their conversations and many feel they are unbiased because they criticize Disney. But I have generally found the criticism acceptable in Disney fan spaces focuses solely on the personal customer experience and not on any of the larger, problematic issues of which Disney is guilty. Fans evaluate their customer experiences with Disney and "criticize" through the lens "Did I get my money's worth?" And here they are honest; many will eviscerate a Disney experience if they feel it was not up to the usual standard they expect from the company.[16] However, their criticism

[14] Two highly publicized incidents have increased awareness that Disney parks and resorts may not be as safe as customers believe. In 2003, a mechanical failure due to maintenance neglect on the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad ride injured ten people and killed one. Tragedy struck at Disney World in 2016, when a two-year-old boy was attacked and killed by an alligator at one of the Disney resorts.

[15] As I will briefly discuss in the conclusion of this dissertation, this may be changing due to Disney's disappointing response to the COVID-19 pandemic and is a topic worthy of further study.

[16] I have found this type of criticism is highly concentrated on meals and food options at the parks.

focuses more on the disappointment that Disney has failed its own standards and rarely addresses issues with the company itself. Furthermore, their criticisms are often followed by a reaffirmation of their love for Disney, as if the expression of their negative experience somehow damaged the relationship. So, even in their criticism and negative experiences, Disney is still affirmed, and hegemony reigns.

Disney's hegemony is most clearly seen in the physicality of the parks where control can be observed in the landscape and architecture, which is a subject of interest to many Disney scholars like Susan Willis, H. Peter Steeves, Stephen Fjellman, David L. Pike, and Meyrav Koren-Kuik. In Disney parks, it is not just minds Disney attempts to control, but bodies as well. Customers willingly, and usually with great enthusiasm, enter into a Disney park, which Disney makes easy through its free trams, spacious exterior walkways, and numerous entrance turnstiles. But once through those turnstiles, visitors are, in essence, Disney's prisoner. There is only one main exit in each of the Disney parks which range in size from eighty-five acres to almost six hundred acres.[17] And while in the park, visitors are plied with incredible and distracting sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and experiences at every step. Disney makes it easy to enter the park, but it does everything it can to make it difficult to leave. As Steeves observes, "Every sense is manipulated in Disneyland in order to construct the desired illusions…freedom is exactly what the park is trying to eradicate" (180-181).

In his analysis of the underground architecture of Disney parks, David Pike conveys how each park is specifically designed to control and manipulate the visitor so they see only what Disney wants them to see and it goes to great lengths to maintain this control (Pike 48). He notes:

[17] Disney offers egress through the monorail system, but it is not clearly marked and often requires waiting in line.

> …nature is controlled to the point native species of plants and animals have been exterminated because they did not blend in…Even the famous Disney vocabulary—*cast members, onstage, imagineers, pixie dust*—like Orwellian doublespeak, renames any word that unvarnished might offer the wrong connotation. The movement of crowds and even their sightlines are rigorously if subtly channeled by cast members, by landscaping, by various conveyances programmed by the DACS to turn always to face each new sight from the desired vantage point…[18] (Pike 54)

Fjellman's analysis of Disney World echoes Pike's observations:

> Our movements are constrained with the promise, usually fulfilled, of rewards…. What is important is that our thoughts are constrained. They are channeled in the interests of Disney itself but also in the interests of the large corporations with which Disney has allied itself, the system of power they maintain, and the world of commodities that is their life's blood. Here in this hegemony of corporate power and the commodity form lurks Huxley's brave new world. Disney stories draw us further into the web…. We are told constantly how to feel about each WDW venue. They are called attractions; we are guests; Disney workers are cast members. Many are hosts and hostesses. The language for describing our experience is preempted by the Company. Everything is magical….We are drained of interpretative autonomy.[19] (13)

Here, though, Fjellman makes an important point as to why Disney's hegemony and manipulation is so readily accepted: reciprocity. Hegemony does not occur without consent, and there must be a reason why a group would submit to control. To gain consent, reciprocity is

[18] DACS: Digital Animation Control Center
[19] WDW: Walt Disney World

needed; some benefit must be provided, or at least a believable promise of reward or benefit. Disney is fully aware of the precariousness of this position as Koren-Kuik indicates:

> … [Disney has an] understanding of the reciprocal relationship the company enjoys with their consumer/fan base. Ensuring a quality product may be interpreted as a sign of Disney's recognition of fans' intelligence, and the fact that the conglomerate's continuous financial success depends on respecting fans by producing the type of convergence and immersion opportunities that exhibit aesthetic content quality…The Disney model does not take consumers/fans for granted: the recognition that fandom, as a collective, possesses both astuteness and the power to influence is an important component of Disney's reciprocal and interactive fandom model. (156)

Disney's own Disney Institute General Manager Jeff James discusses this at length in "The Heart Makes the Mouse: Disney's Approach to Brand Loyalty." "Disney has long been recognized for its ability to attract and retain guests and fans," he shares, "it is not by happenstance…people come back because it offers them some kind of benefit" (James 16-17). While he never uses the word "control" he does detail the many ways Disney purposefully and strategically employs benefits to ensure customer loyalty. In true Disney form, he applies Disney's "Orwellian doublespeak" and states that Disney's success boils down to how it creates "magical moments" for everyone who enters its parks (James 18). "When individuals first come to a Disney theme park, they are welcome guests," he shares "When they leave, they are cherished friends" (James 17). For fans, as I have discussed, this is true and incredibly powerful. They do feel Disney is their friend and cares for them and they feel they are the main beneficiary of the relationship. The reciprocity Disney gives is the reason they feel compelled to dedicate themselves to the

brand. Disney and its products give fans feelings of happiness, freedom, and love, and they feel them in abundance.

Case Study in Hegemony: Disney's Magic Bands

A major and recent example of Disney's hegemony is the new ticketing system the company launched in 2014. After billions in investment and years of development, Disney released a new ticketing program called Magic Bands. Instead of paper tickets, guests visiting Disney parks now receive a free souvenir Mickey wristband to wear that electronically keeps their ticket information, their room key, and their credit card information. Advertised as a new convenience for park-goers, it was a major change in Disney's use of technology and one that dramatically increased their ability to control. Each band, customizable on Disney's website, carries a radio frequency (RFID) chip that emits radio wave signals forty feet in every direction to receivers allowing it to transmit data continually as long as it is within range. Through these bands, Disney tracks each person's movement while on Disney property, noting where they go, how much time they spend there, and what they buy. It uses this information, along with the required My Disney Experience app (which also requires personal information to use), to profile their customers and data-mine under the banner of good customer service and convenience. Disney did not hide this and instead, it was spun as a customer benefit: that the data mined is used to make the parks better in the future ("Radio Frequency Technology"). Though how the data is used beyond "customer service" is not clearly stated and guests have no control over the data collected on them. Also, and arguably more importantly, it is almost impossible to opt-out. If you want to stay at a Disney hotel, you must have a Magic Band. If you go to a park, you must use the Magic Bands and the app. If you choose to opt-out, which is a difficult and prohibitive process, you are heavily penalized and cannot access most of the options available at the parks.

The company also designed the bands to psychologically manipulate customers into spending more money in the parks. In a press conference, Disney Parks chairman Thomas Staggs admitted that the company was aware the bands would result in guests spending more money than they intended, possibly up to forty percent more. He told the press it was because guests loved using the technology, however, journalists were quick to point out the new system removed nearly all barriers for spending money—instead of getting a wallet from a bag or pocket, pulling out cash or a card, swiping the card, and signing (or putting in a pin), guests simply tap their wrist to a scanner causing the buying transaction to last only a few seconds (Barnes, Palmeri). No money is touched and, in what former Disney employee Conor Brown describes as "dangerous," it truly feels like magic until the credit card bill comes long after the trip is over (Brown).

Compounding this, Disney has added layers of commodification to maximize the amount of money it can get from customers with the Magic Bands, again using the language of convenience and customer service. Don't like the color options for your free band? For $25-50 more Disney offers Magic Bands with characters and movies on them. Want to personalize it more? Add buttons and jewels for $8-25 each. You can also buy a keychain accessory for your Magic Band that can be converted into a Disney themed lanyard for only an additional $13-30. Want something different for your next trip? Disney offers a rotating selection so that you can buy a new Magic Band and accessorize it every single time you come (even though your old band still works). The possibilities are endless if you have enough money to spend, and customers do. With the Magic Band system, Disney has created for itself a self-perpetuating cash cow.

The convenience and benefits of the bands are how Disney is able to use such an intrusive system without much resistance. The benefits outweigh the costs of privacy and are so appealing, many customers are happy to pay the price and recommend it to others. For park visitors, particularly those with children, the bands are a godsend. With each park entrance ticket comes three ticketed FastPasses per day.[20] So, for a family of four going to Disney for five days, this would mean that the parents would have to keep track of sixty-six tickets for the trip. The loss of any one of these tickets could mean an afternoon ruined (by not being able to go on a Fastpass ride), and potentially hundreds of dollars spent replacing a lost entrance ticket. That convenience alone is enough for many guests to overlook or be indifferent to Disney's monitoring. Furthermore, the "free" wristband with name customization makes customers feel special and more prone to overlook the privacy invasion. They are receiving an item just for them; it is personalized, a keepsake, and more meaningful than a piece of paper. Before they have even entered the park, they have acquired their first souvenir.

American Studies professor Bonnie Miller recently took her own family to Disney World and experienced this tension between convenience and manipulation:

> I am always thinking about that [the monitoring] … As you walk through the parks, the bands track your every movement, from every ride you go on to every purchase you make. It feels like "Big Brother" is always watching, and one can only imagine how Disney will be using this information to target my money in the future. The convenience is great, but it comes at a cost…. For sure it was convenient. We didn't have to worry about losing room keys, carrying credit cards, or park tickets. But at the same time, it made the purchasing process at the parks "too" easy, such that no thought had to go into

[20] FastPasses are timed tickets that allow you to go to the front of the line and avoid the wait.

> buying a souvenir or a snack/beverage as you walked through the parks. It was just a swipe of the wrist. Reality set in, though, when the credit card bill came, but of course, we were home from the trip by then. (Miller)

Even though Miller was aware beforehand of the tactics Disney was using to coax her and her family to spend more money, she still fell into the trap, and I, myself, did too. I visited Walt Disney World in 2016 two years after the bands had been released. I had studied the Magic Band program extensively, lectured at two different universities on the various ways Disney used the bands for customer control and manipulation, and wrote a graduate seminar paper on the ways it used the bands to invasively monitor and data-mine. I thought I was immune to Disney's influence and marketing powers, but I was mistaken. Not only did I absolutely love using the Magic Band, but I also opted to spend $40 more for a special edition band instead of accepting the free one Disney offered because it featured my favorite ride. I also spent about fifty percent more than I had budgeted for souvenirs because it was so easy to buy. There was no waiting in any lines (because the Magic Bands made checkout immediate), everything I purchased was conveniently transported to my hotel room by friendly Disney cast members, and my credit card was not charged until after my trip was completed. Between not using my wallet to make purchases, not having to carry my purchased souvenirs with me all day, and no line item on my bank account to monitor each purchase, I was completely unaware how much I had purchased and how much money I had spent until well after my trip was over. But, even though I knew I was being manipulated, I loved it. It was so convenient and took the burden of worry off my shoulders. I left my wallet in the safe in my hotel room and did not have to worry about losing it, carrying a purse, being pickpocketed, or losing my park or FastPass tickets. I just had my wristband, my phone, and a water bottle and I could enjoy my day worry-free. Never have I

traveled and experienced such feelings of freedom or convenience. Even knowing that Disney tracked my every move through my Magic Band and uses that information to profile me for future advertisements, I would use it again. The convenience far outweighed my loss of privacy.

Agency, Community, and Participatory Fandom

While Disney does provide much for the fans in terms of emotional and even spiritual fulfillment, it cannot provide everything, especially friendship, community, and the satisfaction that comes from creative expression. Fans passionately love the brand and choose to put themselves under Disney's hegemonic control, but they also seek independent fulfillment by expressing their fandom as dictated by their own inclinations, talents, and social needs. For most, this is the enjoyment of participating in the online community—discussing Disney, building friendships, and sharing memories. Those more creatively inclined craft and make their own Disney merchandise from scratch; some are even able to make a living selling their wares on Etsy. Some cosplay and make their own Disney costumes and some produce media like videos, songs, blogs, and podcasts. All of it is welcome in the Disney fan community and all of it is encouraged, providing a safe, receptive space that celebrates individual contribution, however that contribution manifests. As Atkin observes, "Far from denying individuality, community enables it" (61). There are no expectations for how to engage or how much to engage, fellow fans are just happy when you do. Besides sharing a love for Disney, this is why fans are so drawn to the fan community: participation is valued on each person's own terms.

Coming together as fans, expressing fandom, and sharing talents is common amongst many media fan groups and is a prominent feature of the Disney fan community; it is the metaphorical glue that holds the community together. Henry Jenkins calls this participatory culture which he describes as a culture that "embraces the values of diversity and democracy

through every aspect of our interactions with each other—one which assumes that we are capable of making decisions, collectively and individually, and should have the capacity to express ourselves through a broad range of different forms and practices" (*Participatory Culture* 2). "Participation doesn't just mean being active, it is also about being part of a shared practice and culture" in which fans are accepted as individuals and are celebrated for what they contribute to the group. (Jenkins *Participatory Culture* 11, Jenkins and Purushotma 5). The prevailing sentiment is not just "the more the merrier," but also "you are special just the way you are." Considering fans' experiences outside of the fan community and the oft one-way relationship with Disney, it is no surprise they are active and enthusiastic in their participation and incorporate it into their everyday lives.

The participational aspect of their fandom diverges significantly from all of their other fan activities in one crucial way: Disney has no control here. All decisions made and actions taken are entirely from each fans' own independence and agency. Part of this is due to the ability to connect online. Duffett notes: "Now that the fan community can organize itself online in a particular way, people can distribute their own understandings and interpretations to each other without a need to be mediated through commercial channels" (242). When fans can find each other at the touch of a button, for free, there is no need to involve Disney. The supportive and encouraging structure also allows fans to develop their individual identity as a "fan" safely. As Atkin observes, fan communities allow people "to become more individual. A community of like people implicitly and sometimes explicitly endorses the individual" (4-5).

The support of individuality and the choice of independent expression is of great value to fans, so much so that, when pressed, fans have chosen it over Disney. In 2011, Disney finally overstepped and lost some of its hegemonic consent from fans. Due to the tragic growth of active

shooter threats, Disney prohibited costumes in the parks for adults, taking away an important mode of their fan expression. Not to be deterred from expressing their love of Disney and its characters, fans rebelled and adopted guerilla-style tactics to subvert these rules and enter the parks dressed in costume. In what eventually became known as Disneybounding, fans embody or replicate the costume of a character through creative, contemporary fashion ensembles. Characters' clothing styles, color palettes, and icons are slyly interpreted through regular "street" clothing pieces to make the wearer look like the character rather than be costumed as the character and explicitly break Disney's rule (Borresen). Instead of wearing the costume of Snow White's blue and yellow dress, one might wear a yellow sweater, a dark blue pencil skirt, and a rhinestone apple brooch. The ability to be stylish while emulating beloved characters without violating Disney's rules caught on quickly and became a popular way to dress in the parks. Many fans now plan their Disneybounding outfits along with their regular vacation planning of hotels, dining, and FastPasses. Its popularity has even transcended the Disney fan community and Disneybounding style tips have been featured by the Huffington Post, The View, and fashion monolith Vogue Magazine.

Another act of individuality and resistance, also starting in 2011, similarly manifested through clothing choice. Dissatisfied with the growing trend of casual/pajama wear being worn in the parks and Disney's acceptance and commodification of it, fashion designer Justin Jorgensen decided to push back, make a statement, and visit the parks dressed in beautiful vintage clothing (Sylvester). He made it an annual event, calling it Dapper Day in reference to the early 20th-century term meaning stylish. Other fans, either similarly irritated or who simply loved that style, quickly picked up the trend, joining in. Over several years it grew and became an international trend in all the Disney parks, a grassroots fan event in which many looked

forward to and planned for all year. There is now a large Dapper Day expo that attracts thousands of stylish fans who make and sell their wares at the conference each year ("*DAPPER DAY EXPO"*). Through the rejection of the Disney visitors' casual dress culture, they have created their own mini-retro empire of Disney fan vendors who support each other in their style and craftwork.

True to form, Disney immediately attempted to reapply its hegemonic control by commodifying the fans' creative resistance. Appropriating the inventiveness of Disneybounding and the fashionable, vintage styles from Dapper Day, Disney quickly started producing its own versions of both trends. The Disneybounding styles it distributed through many of its clothing outlets like Hot Topic and BoxLunch and its line of "vintage-style" clothing and accessories, starting at $108 per dress, is sold only at the parks and on Disney's website. Fans' overwhelmingly positive reception of these new products confirms that Disney was successful and regained consent.

Conclusion: "I Will Always Go Back"

Every two years, the Disney Company hosts the D23 Expo: The Ultimate Fan Event in Anaheim, CA. It is a three-day conference held across the street from Disneyland that caters exclusively to dedicated Disney fans in which "All the magic and excitement of the past, present, and future of Disney entertainment comes together under one roof" ("About the EXPO"). For a few hundred dollars per ticket, fans can experience information panels with celebrities and Disney movie producers, sneak peeks at upcoming movies and parks developments, Disney archives exhibitions, interactive activities, and, of course, exclusive shops. It is supposed to be an event that caters to passionate and dedicated fans, to reward them for their loyalty and offer them

something special and memorable. However, in recent years Disney has increasingly preyed upon expo attendees, capitalizing on their fandom and pushing their loyalty to a straining point.

The 2017 expo was a complete and utter failure. The company oversold tickets to the event and had overwhelming crowds of people inside and outside the event venue. Line management was non-existent, and each morning of the three-day event had a two to three-hour wait in the hot, July, California sun just to enter the building. Many attendees missed out on the morning activities, forcing them to choose between sleep or arriving by 6 am to get into the building when it opened at 9 am. Others decided to camp out, sleeping on the cement floor of the convention center basement so they could enter on time. Once inside, there was little to do resulting in massive lines, with hours-long waits for every activity, even entrance into the shops. For panels, fans were ushered into concrete basement rooms to wait with no employee present or explanation as to when they would be let into the panel. Several times rooms full of people were forgotten by employees and near-riots broke out when fans realized they had waited hours and missed the panel due to neglect or oversight. Disney miscalculated the room capacity for some of the panels and ran out of the promised free gifts that were supposed to accompany certain presentations. The event was so poorly run, with so few benefits, that even though it cost over $200 to attend, many fans, myself included, decided to not come back after the first day, even though we paid for three.

In most other situations, this catastrophe would not be tolerated and the company would have lost a major portion of its customer base, possibly crippling or killing the event permanently. But despite that it was a horrible experience, fans raved about the expo. While admitting the event was terribly managed and they had a horrible time, they concurrently sang Disney's praises and most were ready to purchase their tickets for the next expo. One podcaster

mused that no matter how bad the event was "I will always go back" simply because it was produced by Disney (Dave). This shows that there is something more to the relationship between Disney and its fans; it is not a simple producer/consumer relationship but much more. For fans, Disney provides something that garners extreme dedication and the benefit of the doubt no matter what it does.

When asked his opinion on why Disney could keep alienating fans without actually alienating fans, such as regular price hikes or the D23 failure, Disney podcaster Peter Mandel answered, "The answer to why is because [it] can" (Mandel). Besides its success at control and influence, Disney is a cultural and financial powerhouse rivaled by few. It could lose a significant portion of its customer base and still be wildly successful, so it can afford to strain its relationship with fans. Beyond this, fans are so dedicated that they would never abandon their devotion to Disney and the belief that the company cares for and loves them, even when they are on the receiving end of Disney's neglect or abuse. Many outside of Disney fandom are baffled by this dedication, but Janet Wasko offers a detailed explanation as to why this is. She has observed that in order to process the disconnect between their belief that Disney cares for them and the overwhelming evidence that Disney is a "cutthroat" capitalist enterprise, fans separate and compartmentalize Disney into two different entities: Disney the entertainer and Disney the business or "the good provider of fun and the bad overcommercializer" (Wasko *Dazzled by Disney* 331). Disney the business is free to do things that fans dislike and even makes them uncomfortable—it is a business and that is what businesses do. Furthermore, Disney the business funds Disney the entertainer and so, while its actions may be distasteful, it is all for the greater good. Conversely, Disney the entertainer is the creation of Walt Disney, the caring, supportive, paternal icon. This Disney exists to make fans happy and to bring them the Disney magic; it does

not sully itself with the dirt of capitalism, that's business Disney's job. Through this compartmentalization fans can exist in the cognitive dissonance that Disney may be both wonderful and horrible simultaneously (Wasko *Dazzled by Disney* 48, 57, 331).

So, are Disney fans duped or free agents in their fandom? Are they subservient or independent? Do they have free choice or is Disney's control so deep they only think they have a choice? The answer to these questions is yes. In the negotiation between their personal identity as a fan, their role as community member and participant, and their dedication to Disney, fans house what can seem like diametrically opposed views. And for them, it works. Disney is not a luxury for this group of fans; it is an emotional necessity viewed as or more important than food and shelter. Their dedication propels them to consent to Disney's hegemonic control resulting in the classification of cult. But, there is independence and agency (and arguably courage) in the choice to become a fan and how one enacts their fandom in day-to-day life. There are many areas for community, expression, creativity, and growth in which Disney has no purview or control. And there are instances where Disney takes a supportive rather than a dominant role. However, regardless of activity, Disney is still there, foundationally ingrained in all fan activity and, therefore, hegemony has worked. But, dedicated Disney fans do not see this as a problem as they have independently chosen to fully subscribe to Disney's doctrine and therefore the control seems natural and reasonable. Because of this, it is unclear where fan agency ends and Disney's control begins. Regardless, it is clear that these fans will always come back.

CHAPTER II. DISNEY-ANGST: NEGATIVITY AND EXPLICIT BEHAVIOR IN DISNEY FAN SPACES

> I think too much magic and pixie dust can make you just snap one day. You start out all bright-eyed and bushy tailed but slowly the madness sets in. -Jessica Giles
>
> No surprise but there are people out there who take great pleasure in being sadistic cocksuckers. Inflicting pain, physical or emotional, on others makes them feel strong and important when it only makes them look weak and impotent. They need to be called out every single fucking time. -Ken Carter

On April 10, 2017, the Disney centered, fan-produced podcast *Mouse Rants* released its 100th episode. While most podcasters utilize their 100th show to celebrate and highlight some of their best moments or use it to have a big extravaganza with invited guests and a special topic, host XXXXXXX decided to start what he called a "radio war" to publicly humiliate fellow Disney fan and *2 Men and the Mouse* podcaster Kevin Kessler.[21] XXXX released a two-part, eight-and-a-half-hour podcast that was exclusively dedicated to socially eviscerating Kessler because he had been one of the unlucky few to draw Skids's ire and subsequent wrath. Several women in the Disney fan community had privately complained to XXXX about Kessler's behavior towards them which they claimed included manipulation, emotional dependency, and sexual harassment. In response, XXXX went for the proverbial jugular. No area was off-limits in the podcast as XXXX exposed and mocked some of the most private and secret parts of Kessler's personal life. After ridiculing almost every aspect of Kessler's LinkedIn profile, XXXX staged a dramatic reading of personal messages between Kessler and the two women, messages that exposed a sexual fetish and offered it up for public mockery.[22] No prisoners were taken in this radio war as XXXX

[21] XXXXXXXXX is the stage name for musician and *Mouse Rants* podcaster XXXXXXXX. He requested in his interview to be referred to by that name when I quote him. He posts on social media under his real name, XXXX, so when citing his Facebook posts I use that name.

[22] The messages were supplied by the women with full knowledge of XXXXX intention.

criticized the other podcasts hosted on Kessler's *White Dragon Podcast Network,* playing audio clips from them and pausing intermittently to make fun of their poor quality, misinformation, boring content, and any other aspect XXXX and co-host Simone DeMilo felt did not meet their standards. The public scrutiny of Kessler continued online in the *Mouse Rants* Facebook group as members discussed the episodes after they posted. Joining Skids's criticism, many described Kessler as creepy, gross, and disgusting as well as openly making fun of his sexual fetish. Not a single person defended Kessler nor chided XXXX and the group for their treatment of him. Instead, they encouraged each other to further his humiliation. Some shared pictures from Kessler's Facebook page making fun of his appearance while some mocked his spelling and grammar. Others commented on his weight or shared how much they enjoyed Kessler's demise, and a few responded simply with "Jesus Fucking Christ."

While one might hope, partially for sanity's sake, that *Mouse Rants* is unique and an isolated phenomenon, but it is not. The incident between XXXX and Kessler exposes a subset of Disney fans that fandom studies scholar Derek Johnson describes as "disgruntled fan factions" and I have labeled "angst-fans" (Johnson 293). For several reasons that I will discuss in this chapter, these fans have become disenfranchised from the Disney fan community and have created for themselves spaces to vent their frustration and express hatred for other Disney fans, all while still praising Disney. These fans exhibit a paradox of ideologies where their fandom practices seem entirely at odds with the source of their fandom and their community. However, I argue that it is this paradox that enables them to be fans. They interpret their fandom entirely differently from the majority of Disney fans, an interpretation that incorporates aspects like drinking, cussing, arguing, "trolling," sex, and drugs that are in direct contrast to the Disney ethos they choose to follow. For them, conforming to Disney fan community norms, especially

the ones that enforce family-friendly behavior, is akin to suppression of who they are as three-dimensional individuals and therefore unacceptable.

The choice to enact their fandom as they see fit has placed them in constant conflict with the bulk of the Disney fan community and sometimes with each other. Deviating far from the norms of acceptable fan behavior, and being a small minority, angst-fans are forced to conform or flee the community, the latter being the preferred response. But, like other Disney fans before them, they have found community and respite by forming their own niche Facebook groups of like-minded fans. As sociologist John Curra observes, "marginal people may display a creative resistance to what they see as a social system that is not really for them" (4). The purpose of this chapter is to explain the creative resistance angst-fans employ to continue existing as Disney fans despite immense pressure from the larger Disney fan community to suppress and conform. I will profile how the angst-fan groups interpret and enact their fandom and build their, seemingly strange, subcommunities at the outskirts of the larger Disney fan community. Through an investigation into the causes and results of this conflict, this chapter highlights the consequences of the fans' cult-life behavior and gatekeeping. I will also show where the limitations of acceptance in the Disney fan community lie, even within the supposedly uncensored space of the angst-fan Facebook groups. The story of the angst-fans is not a pleasant one and is full of strife, resentment, and a lot of explicit language. But it also shows the determination of the fans to choose their mode of expression and the great import of keeping the integrity of their personal identity.

There is very little scholarship that investigates schisms and negotiations like the ones highlighted in this chapter. So, with the story of the angst-fans, I hope to expand our understanding of ingroup conflict that results from differing interpretations of how to be a fan.

The notion of hate and anger within the fandom community as something worthy of study is a newer concept put forth by Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington. In the 2007 essay collection *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, they introduced the concept of the "anti-fan," or "a spectrum of dislike, distaste, and hate both within fan cultures and in closely related anti-fan cultures," into the fandom studies discourse (15). Out of the five scholars who contributed essays on anti-fandom for that collection and the fifteen scholars who contributed to the 2019 *Anti-Fandom: Dislike and Hate in the Digital Age* collection, only one, Derek Johnson, discussed the kind of animosity, conflict, and negotiation exhibited by the Disney fans in this chapter. Much of my analysis is informed by his work and affirms his findings, but it will also build upon it by foregrounding my observations as to why angst-fans enjoy and bond over their hate.

With this chapter, I relied more heavily on my own participant-observer experiences in order to better understand and explain this group. The phenomenon of unity through hate and angst could initially be difficult for most people (myself included) to understand. So, I became a member of several angst-groups while continuing my membership and observations in the other Disney Facebook groups.[23] Simultaneous membership in both groups proved highly informative, especially in understanding why the angst-fans were so hostile. My own feelings as a member of the Disney fan community, witnessing the hate and fighting between groups which I considered myself a part of, I believe, bring insight to my analysis and throughout the chapter I incorporate them as part of the narrative.

For much of this chapter, it may be difficult to find empathy for or understanding of the angst-fans. Their behaviors, attitudes, and language are brazen, unapologetic, inflammatory,

[23] During my observations of the angst-groups, they were open to public membership. Since my research has concluded, some have disbanded and some became private due to the antagonism from other fans.

highly offensive, and, at times, seemingly cruel. It would be easy to dismiss them as bullies or attribute their behavior to anger issues. I do not deny that often their behavior is reprehensible for most cultural standards and is inappropriate for most situations. But, for them it works, and it makes them happy. It is the solution they have found to an impossible scenario: to deny who they are as individuals to fit in, or to deny their natures as fans and be alone. My goal with this chapter is not to excuse the behavior of any fan, regardless of which side of the schism they are on, but it is to make them understandable, and more approachable; to humanize them, and to demonstrate that, while it may seem horrific, some of their behavior has positive, affirming results that build a close-knit community of individuals who support one another.

The Consequences of Control

The spaces where Disney fans socialize can be near-sacred for them. As discussed in chapter one, many fans find their love for Disney is not understood by friends, family, and coworkers and they can face rejection and ostracization. The threat can be so great that some even "stay in the closet," hiding their fandom from those in their life and practicing in secret. Disney fan spaces, though, like those in Facebook groups, can be welcoming, accepting, and celebratory of each individual fan. In these kinds of community spaces, fans feel “unequivocal love, and absolute support in everything they [do]” (Atkin 5). Naturally, fans want to protect those spaces. Most Facebook groups are open to the public—you may need to request to join, but the group posts, comments, and content can be viewed by anyone with a Facebook account who knows the group’s name. This can expose groups to external entities, like internet “trolls,” who may threaten the peaceful, happy “magical” environment they carefully cultivate.[24] So, using the

[24] Facebook groups can be set to private and not be seen by the public, but this also prohibits fans from finding the groups, so they remain public to ensure new fans can find them and join.

tools Facebook provides in its programming, they place safeguards to minimize or eliminate any unpleasantness that may attempt to enter their safe space.

Anyone who has a Facebook account can start a social group, making it easy for fans to create these spaces for themselves. Facebook's programming then empowers them to create the protective barriers they feel are needed. It gives the creator the ability to set the terms of engagement and have total control. They decide the rules for posting and discussion within that group space, can delete posts and comments they do not like, can turn off comments and not allow anyone to add their thoughts or opinions to a post, can block new members from joining, and they have ultimate power to evict anyone they choose for any reason. The "owner" of the group, the moderator, can essentially mold the group however they desire without accountability to anyone—it is their group. Having this level of control has enabled the Disney fan community to thrive online and, so, it is no surprise the majority of their socialization occurs there. Thanks to the moderators, fans are attracted to the fan groups because they know they can relax, be themselves, and fully participate in the fandom community. As fandom scholar Matt Hills notes, "fans are fans because fan communities can exist and be entered" and, as such, the ease of creating groups has also allowed the participatory culture to flourish (xiv). There are hundreds, possibly thousands of Disney fan Facebook groups, each with a slightly different focus based on the administrator's tastes. Fans are often members of several, if not many, different Disney fan groups and participate in them all, so there is no competition for members between groups and instead all can amicably coexist.[25]

[25] A sampling of these groups shows a wide range of tastes, including those who love to run in Disney's yearly marathon, those who like to combine their love of comedy with their love for Disney, and those who share tips on how to maximize the rewards from their Disney credit cards.

Most of the time, this system proves to be a success as evidenced by the many Facebook groups, the large numbers of members, and the high levels of regular engagement within the groups. However, this is not always the case, and, in recent years, moderators have extended their power beyond its capacity and, as a result, caused division within the fan community. The powers that moderators employed to protect the community from external antagonists they also turned inward to enforce control within their groups in the form of gatekeeping. Through the power to curtail expression and evict, moderators, to varying degrees, enforce their vision of how fans should act in their group. As *Disney Snarks No Snowflakes*, moderator Nancy Toby states: "This isn't a democracy. This is a police state and it's mine" (Toby). Other moderators may not be so candid, but the message is clear: those who act outside the bounds can be chastised, silenced, evicted, and banned without due process or any recourse.

Generally, this has not affected most of the Disney fan community as the vast majority share a consensus on how to enact their fandom: to exemplify Disney's ideologies and ethos of happiness, inclusion, and family-friendliness. But a minority of fans, who I label angst-fans, do not prefer this saccharine "magical" atmosphere nor the subscription to the nebulous "Disney values" and approach their fandom differently. These fans privilege their own individual expression above Disney and the fan community and view their fandom as an extension of their personality. Unlike other fans, Disney is not connected to their personal identity; instead, they use their love for it as a way to express their personal identity. Their fandom cannot be enjoyed to the fullest if they do not incorporate all of themselves into their Disney activities, including the parts deemed unacceptable like drinking, cussing, arguing, teasing, sex, drugs, and even criticizing Disney. Hills recognizes this can sometimes happen and that, even in cult-level dedication, a "fan's sense of self is not subordinated to the [source of fandom] …[but] realized

through the process of attachment" (166). For angst-fans, how they enact their fandom is where their sense of self lies, not with Disney or the community. This approach provides an independence that protects them emotionally from other fans' scrutiny, allows them to comfortably criticize Disney, and empowers them to act however they want. The external influences so important to the other fans do not bear the same weight with angst-fans. So, even in the family friendly Disney fan space, they refuse to censor or curtail their behavior and language because it is part of who they are. As fan and author Jeff Baham notes:

> …people like to be treated like adults…. Adult Disney fans grew up with Disney but they don't want to talk about princesses. They want to talk about Trader Sam's [bar] and drinking cocktails. That is their definition of what it is to be an adult, and this is their version of being a Disney fan…[I] want to be acknowledged and treated like the adult I am. I am almost fifty and I don't make a secret that I love their chocolate martinis. You are who you are and you like what you like. (Baham)

Their behavior does not mean they do not love Disney as much as other fans—they participate in the online community the same amount, they visit the parks the same amount, they spend the same amount of money on Disney products, and they declare their love with equal fervency—they simply love Disney differently than most other fans. As Hills states, fans can "interpret media texts in a variety of interesting and perhaps unexpected ways" and in this instance, their behavior is considered very surprising and entirely unexpected; it is also considered unacceptable and is the source of constant conflict (ix). According to author and fan Len Testa they are not trying to be contentious; they only want to be themselves: "It's not so much rebelling, but people use profanity in real life, so maybe it's more real [to us.] We're not twenty-two-year-old WASPs living in Oklahoma" (Testa). But as Derek Johnson notes, "fans do not easily agree to disagree—

differing opinions become co-present, competing interests struggling to define interpretive and evaluative consensus" (288). Though these fans love Disney, it was irrelevant. Their interpretation was so deviant and such a threat to the community norms it was not tolerated, and many were banned from the groups.

Banning members who flout community norms was and still is a regular occurrence and topic of discussion in the groups.[26] This practice has become so common it is colloquially referred to as the "ban wagon" or the "ban hammer." Moderators frequently issue threats to ban people in what sociologist John Curra describes as using intimidation "to encourage an allegiance to conformity and conventionality" (14). In warning, some moderators even publicly post the names of members who were recently banned to encourage others not to step out of line. The ease and callousness with how quickly members were banned from groups shifted the feeling and culture for many fans in these spaces putting them on guard. The safety of the space remained, but now it was policed and enforced forcing many, sometimes even myself, to feel like they had to perform happiness to keep their membership. Conversely, I observed that the other fans, including myself, felt relief at the ability to eject the foul-mouthed fans. They no longer had to fear being called an "idiot" or "asshole" if another fan disagreed with them, read about drunken escapades in EPCOT's World Showcase, or listen to someone criticize Disney's new price hike as "money-grubbing." While the policing may have created an atmosphere of fear for some fans, for the majority of others it ensured they could continue to practice their fandom in peace.

Socially pruning membership in fan spaces is not unique to the Disney fan community. Struggles over interpretation and dominance are widespread across many fan groups in what

[26] This is largely due to angst-fans' repeated attempts to re-enter the groups to purposefully goad them, which I will discuss in greater detail later.

Hills describes as the "narcissism of minor differences" (Hills 61, Johnson 286). Fans argue and reject one another in attempts to legitimize their own fan practice as the "right" one and they value their own views over others', even if they are part of a tight-knit community (Hills 20, 61). The belief that their version of fandom is the right version becomes further entrenched when there is a majority consensus that confirms their view and, as a result, it becomes the "truth." Those with differing opinions are marginalized, antagonized, disputed, and rejected because "'true fan' status necessitate[s] appreciation of one aesthetic, one prescribed evaluative relationship with the [source of fandom]" (Johnson 285-286, 290). Johnson argues that being "right" or a "true fan" can be psychologically important for fans, especially when their views are affirmed as part of the consensus and in the majority. Consensus, for them, is protection and validation, which is especially important for fans who have already faced rejection and ridicule from those outside the sphere of the protected fan spaces. Membership in the majority, the one in the "right," provides feelings of protection, stasis, inclusion, safety, and belonging; feelings crucial for their ability to feel safe to be a fan (Johnson 294).

One would think the Disney fan community would have some qualms over the harsh rejection of other fans and the use (or threat) of banning to enforce community and group norms. Their fandom is rooted in acceptance and love and many have experienced being marginalized themselves. However, as I discussed in chapter one, Disney and the fan community are so deeply meaningful to them that any potential threat, great or small, is taken personally and, for them, warrants swift recourse. With their R-rated behavior, angst-fans are seen as a threat to the G-rated environment and their refusal to change a threat to the community. "Such hostile interpretive stalemates fragment online fan communities" and create moral dualisms between the groups, each thinking they are the "good" group, and the others are the "bad" group (Johnson

290, Hills 20). When this dualism occurs, they are splintered and view the others as outsiders who can easily be blocked out, rejected, marginalized, and ostracized.

Initially, I had a similar negative reaction to the angst-fans and equally found relief and safety in the protection of the moderators' ability to ban. Identifying with the majority of "regular" Disney fans and enjoying the utopic atmosphere, I personally found their behavior despicable. As a Disney fan myself, and as a sympathizer for all those who have been marginalized for enjoying their fandom, I felt this group exhibited a childish cruelty reminiscent of schoolyard bullies. I could not understand how they could share the same love and passion for Disney, go to the same events, and buy the same collectibles, yet be so offensive to other members of their community. My heart hurt for those who were unfortunate enough to catch their ire and I felt my resentment grow with each insult. I understood their desire to express themselves as adults, but their impudence and indifference to other's feelings lost any empathy I might have for them. Soon I would discover I had more in common with them than the mainstream fans, but early on in this study I was happy they were forcefully removed from the Facebook groups I frequented.

Unbeknownst to mainstream community members, though, this approach did not eliminate the problem of inappropriate behavior from other Disney fans, nor did it stem or deter it. Instead, by removing and condemning Disney fans who displayed inappropriate behavior, they created a proverbial Frankenstein's monster with those rejected forming contrary Disney fan communities on social media. Needing an outlet to express their devotion to Disney but finding only rejection from the main body of Disney fans, these "non-Disney" Disney fans utilized Facebook for themselves and created their own fan communities free from behavioral control. In these new spaces, Disney fandom was no longer mutually exclusive from cussing, name-calling,

and “adult” discussions. The terms “cunt”, “cocksucker”, and “motherfucker” are used frequently and in tandem with the common, G-rated nomenclature used by Disney fans like “magic,” “love,” and “happiness.” While these groups love Disney and focus many of their discussions on Disney, it is not what connects them. Instead, it is their frustration and conflict with the Disney fan community, as well as their willingness to vent that frustration, which attracts them to one another and bonds them together. It acts as catharsis, allowing members a place to release pent up anger, be entirely themselves, and find that they are not alone. David Jim, founder of the angst-group *Disney Truthers,* shares his feelings on his experience being rejected from the mainstream but accepted in his group:

> I’ve lost a lot of friends over this group. At first I thought about shutting down for good because of it, but then I realized the person they [mainstream fans] liked in me wasn’t really me. It was a façade of what I thought people would like me to be. I started this group to show the side of my (sic) that loves conspiracy theories, Disney scandal, and bloopers…basically being truthful about everything I believe Disney-wise. Some of my ‘personal’ friends didn’t like it so they left. Sucks (sic) but you guys are still here with me and it makes me appreciate you guys so much more because you like the real me. I didn’t wanna (sic) be that fake ‘Disney is perfect’ guy anymore and I took the risk and lost friends. I can always make new friends. Thanks for the continued support guys! (Jim)

The feelings of relief, acceptance and love are not just felt by the group creators but the members as well as *Mouse Rants* group member RJ Lucia Jr. shares:

> Ima (sic) get sentimental for a moment and your (sic) just gonna (sic) have to deal with it!!...I can’t express how happy I am to be accepted among people who share similar interests. There’s no judgement, no one cares how I’m dressed, how long my hair is, how

> many tattoos I have. You get the point. I've never been afraid to be me but growing up was a constant struggle of staying true. I'm glad I stayed tough, stuck it out and went left when the crowd went right. Even know (sic) I've not met any of you yet, I appreciate being a part of this. For fuck's sake I'm done now. Cheers ya (sic) bastards! (Lucia Jr.)

Without these groups and a place to enact their fandom as they want, these fans would be entirely disconnected—too unhappy and out of place with the rest of the community to continue as a member. But because of social media, they have been able to find each other and create a balance that allows them the freedom of (offensive) expression they need while being able to participate in their own Disney fan community.

Angst-Fans and Their Activities

The number of angst-groups is nowhere near the considerable amount of "regular" Disney fan Facebook groups, but there are enough that fans have options. In my observations, though, I found little diversity between the groups that can be found in the rest of the Disney fan community (this is most likely due to their focus of hating other Disney fans and using the space to vent). Joining *Disney Snark*, *Disney Snarks No Snowflakes*, *Disney Goofs & Dopes*, *Mouse Rants*, *Trash Talking Disney Trash Talkers*, or any of the other angst-groups will provide fans with nearly the same discussions and experiences. So, for this chapter I have chosen to highlight two of these groups in particular: *Disney Snark* and *Mouse Rants*. These two groups are exemplary of the angst-fan groups, have highly active members who frequently post, and the fans exhibit a strong sense of community. I have also chosen them because their interactions with each other demonstrate the challenges, consequences, and limitations of having a "free" space which, in 2017, caused these two groups to clash and become enemies. Their fandom activities and their fallout allow me to share a general profile of the angst-fans, the cultural norms they

have created for themselves, and the unique ways they have formed their communities through the paradoxes of uniting through hate and loving Disney through vulgarity.

Like the other angst-groups, both *Disney Snark* and *Mouse Rants* have no qualms about voicing dissonant, controversial, or negative opinions. There is little they do not critique and their comments range from complaints about Disney's prices to assessments of experience and product quality, but it is mostly focused on expressions of annoyance about mainstream fans' behavior. Also, like other angst-groups, members surprisingly still find ways to participate in the mainstream Disney groups. Some participate solely to act out their frustration and "troll" the other groups, gaining amusement at the irritation they cause and to see how quickly they can get themselves banned.[27] In angst-fan Cassie Sedacca's first trolling experience you can hear her excitement, "I did it! I made a trolling outrage post…I hope the comments are filled with butthurt!" (Sedacca). Others take a different approach and try to stay connected to the larger community through adaptation to community norms. With a space to vent in the angst-fan groups, the community in which they feel accepted, it is much easier to conform to the status quo elsewhere. They censor themselves and play the happy role to still keep their connections and friends in the mainstream fan spaces (though some struggle and still cannot contain their behavior and, as a result, get banned).[28] The *Disney Snark* Facebook group operates exclusively on Facebook with no organized outside or in-person contact. With over 3,600 members at the writing of this chapter, it is the largest Disney angst-group I have found. Creator Ashley Hudson does not moderate the group by herself and has a small team of moderators who manage the

[27] This is a major reason banning is still such a common occurrence and topic of discussion in mainstream groups.
[28] There are so many Disney groups on Facebook that getting banned from one does not impact their ability to find another.

group together.[29] *Mouse Rant*s is the social extension of Skids's and DeMilo's podcast of the same name and composes the hosts' fans and friends. XXXX limits and strictly controls who is in the Facebook group and so it is much smaller than the other angst-groups with under four hundred members. This group socializes almost exclusively on Facebook but also plans occasional in-person meetups at Disney World. Their discussions directly mirror those of the other angst-groups but also include responses to the weekly podcast, which, likewise, focuses on venting discontent about the Disney community.

Consistent across all Disney angst-groups, and particularly in the *Disney Snark* and *Mouse Rants* groups, is the paradox in which members find their community, solidarity, friendship, and unity by tearing other Disney fans down through mockery, confrontations, and insults between each other. These group pages are safe spaces to be unsafe—to voice your unfettered and unfiltered opinions regardless of who it might offend or the damage it might cause. Oft repeated is the warning that these are "no snowflake spaces" and that if "you get offended easily, you're in the wrong place" (*Disney Snark*). It is not uncommon to see someone being called a "cunt" or told to "fuck off." Heated arguments between members break out regularly and explicit language is the norm even in the tamest conversations. Most often, though, their social forces are united against other "pixie duster" fans who have exhibited behavior they deem irritating and insult worthy. Most behaviors, discussions, and attitudes considered normative in the regular Disney fan Facebook groups frustrate them to the extent they feel they must vent and find emotional release.

[29] Having a team of people with equal power in an angst-group has its own complications when there is a difference of opinion on how to run the group. As the creator, Hudson has ultimate power over the other moderators and occasionally has removed a moderator from the group and banned them.

In my observations of the angst-group discussions, there was a consistent pattern of how they interacted, socialized, and vented; almost always with the goal of showing empathy to one another and exhibiting solidarity. Family counselor Dr. Charity Kurz shares, "It is not just about the person venting, but equally important the person who is hearing the vent….[the] empathy validates a person's feelings" (Kurz). When an angst-fan's ire is triggered, they do not, nor want to, keep it to themselves and the angst-group is the perfect place to vent—they know they will find people to listen, validation of their negative assessment, empathy for their annoyance and frustration, and a chorus of like-minded cynics agreeing with them unquestioningly. Kurz and neuroscientist Brad Waters warn, this kind of venting is toxic and actually increases anger and frustration by "reinforcing negative responses to situations…[that] can reinforce our position all the more…The result is even more ammunition for getting angry next time…" (Waters). By venting in these groups and existing in a space created to vent it perpetuates and increases frustration and discontent. Though it can be toxic and infuse their lives with more angst, it is also rewarding because they are not alone and, as Waters observes, "The rush of venting and ranting can feel intoxicating" (Waters).

Most commonly, the source of fans' frustration comes from a post they see in another Disney group, usually one that is especially obtuse or more pixie duster than usual. Generally, the offending post is copied by screenshot and posted into the angst-fan page with an indicator as to what prompted the frustration. Some statements are short, sharing a simple, "Can you believe this person?!" sentimentality while others can be long, rambling, detailed rants lasting several sentences or even paragraphs. Nearly all are laden with expletives. For example, when expressing his annoyance at a pixie duster family who posted daily updates on their Disney fandom, an angst-fan shared one of their pictures with the comment, "I have no need to know

what these egotistical boils on the ass of humanity are up to every day of their miserable and annoying fucking life (sic). Help me put an end to it. Thank you in advance" (Traeger). His comment shows how little it takes for an angst-fan to be annoyed, in this case posting every day, and how disproportionate the response can be. Various posts in the mainstream groups annoy angst-fans, but there are several types that seem to commonly stoke irritation. The first kind is from fans who exhibit some form of ignorance, stupidity, or helplessness. This pertains to questions that are easily searchable online, like asking how much tickets cost in December; ones that seem obvious, such as posts that ask if it is hot in Florida in July; and ones that are considered stupid like questioning if the Haunted Mansion ride is actually haunted. Participating in these groups for several years, I too found myself regularly irritated by these questions and was tempted to "snark" in response, which would have resulted in a ban. I never posted about other fans myself, but being able to spend time in the angst-groups and see that I was not alone in my frustration was cathartic and strangely comforting.

Another type of post that provokes anger is what is viewed as unreasonable or entitled complaints, like when fans gripe about overcrowding in the parks during peak seasons. These are understood to be inherent parts of the Disney parks experience that fans weather in solidarity. Those that complain about them are seen as spoiled boors who force others to read about their entitled and unrealistic standards.[30] In response to one fan's entitled post, Disney travel agent and angst-fan Jillian Lassiter exclaimed, "Holy fuck. These entitled motherfuckers…ARE YOU INSANE" (Lassiter). But nothing causes more fury than posts requesting or sharing tips to dishonestly subvert Disney's rules and regulations. Sporadically, someone will request or share

[30] This type of negativity is allowed in the mainstream groups because it is something that hinders them in their love for Disney and, they believe, is caused by "customers," not other fans. By complaining in this way, they still reaffirm their love for Disney and so it is acceptable as long as it is not a frequent occurrence.

information on how to save money or time in the parks by deceiving Disney, breaking the rules, or by diminishing the experience of another park guest (e.g. cutting in line). These kinds of posts are often met with some disdain in the regular Disney groups but are verbally obliterated in the angst-groups, receiving the most amount of angry and abusive comments of all. In an ironic twist, the rebels of the Disney fan community seem to care the most about following Disney's rules.

Once a screenshot is posted, members of the group are expected to comment on the post in support of the poster by mocking the screenshot. This is where they show solidarity and provide empathy. Any pushback or counter argument is met with derision and the commenter often virtually shouted down in a barrage of explicit language and other verbal abuses. This rarely happens, though, as members share the same frustrations and usually receive their own enjoyment from commenting on posts and making fun of pixie dusters. It is why they are there, and they take great pride in their group membership and ability to provide support for other angst-fans. Curra observes that this happens when people experience communal outsider status, it "giv[es] them a sense of pride and significance" in their shared deviance (5). In describing the character of the members of her group, *Disney Goofs & Dopes*, Amy Davis declares: "we are the elite, the informed, the snarky, yet delightfully magical" (Davis). The only time I have observed a break from solidarity is on the very rare occasion someone crosses a boundary like mocking someone who is disabled or exhibiting bigotry towards a marginalized group. While angst-group spaces are meant to be "free" spaces, there are strict lines members are not allowed to cross. Further disenfranchising members of an already oppressed group is an important boundary for them, though casual sexism and racism are accepted and often found to be funny.

Besides sharing frustrations, both groups appear to bond over heated debate and argument amongst themselves. *Disney Snark* members particularly love debating and fighting about hot button, polarizing issues. Every Wednesday, the group hosts "Watch the World Burn Wednesday" (WTWB) in which those who feel inclined post a non-Disney controversial opinion like "homosexuality is a sin" or "guns should be banned" and then watch how heated the debate in the comments section becomes. As with everything else in the group, nearly anything is permitted, and members incorporate insults, name-calling, and foul language into their arguments. But there is an explicit understanding that nothing is to be taken personally on WTWB Wednesdays as it is an opportunity to blow off steam and get frustration (in general or with another member) out of your system. Those who take offense are scolded by other members and mocked until they back down or leave the group. In one instance a member chided the whole group, "I am appalled at some of the behavior today. Some of you guys need to chill the fuck out" (Jackson). She was not referring to the many vulgar and offensive posts that day, but instead was scolding several new members who had expressed offense at WTWB. Following the group mantra of "do not be offended," her post demonstrated the belief that in the *Disney Snark* page, being offended is the only behavior considered offensive. At midnight, WTWB Wednesday ends, all posts are closed, the slate is wiped clean, and like in Cinderella, everything reverts back to normal.

Each week hundreds of members participate enthusiastically in WTWB Wednesday and many members are so passionate about it they sporadically request that administrators require that all members must post on WTWB or else risk eviction. Occasionally, a member will post that WTWB has run its course and every time thus far has been overwhelmed with those posting in favor of keeping it. In defense of WTWB, many fans share how they have made friends with

people of opposite opinions through the debates, others share that they have really learned a lot about other sides of issues, and some say it has helped them learn how to articulate their opinions and become better debaters. As one member observes, “I like it. It’s one day a week to have random conversations about whatever and hear others (sic) opinions” (Seaver). But most importantly, members love the fuming. “I need to,” one member comments, “LET ME BURN SHIT DOWN PLEASEEEE” (Palomerez). Furthermore, administrators and several members have posted that they like WTWB because it helps them thin the membership and weed out those who do not understand the culture. As one active member summarizes, “WTWB was created to have debates with each other because we can handle it. Also helps thin the herd of whiners and assholes” (Jackson). Moderator Ashley Hudson shares “That’s part of the point [of WTWB] We drop members who can’t hang on Wednesdays” (Hudson “Why They Do WTWB”).

For *Mouse Rants* group members, they do not schedule a specific time to debate like *Disney Snark*, nor do they exhibit a similar need to fight with one another, but they do post divisive, hot button topics and ask for opinions and debate. XXXX himself does this along with other members and usually includes a caveat of “no judgment” along with the qualification that honest opinions truly are desired. “You guys have no fear of being booted or deleted here for your opinions. You can say whatever you want. We all have differing opinions and the only way to get along in this world is honest arguments and debate, not threatening people with the ban hammer like in pretty much every other group out there” (XXXXX “You Won’t be Booted for Your Opinions”). The debates can get heated (though not nearly as heated as WTWB) and similarly incorporate foul language. However, *Mouse Rants* members rarely insult each other or cut down other opinions as the *Disney Snark* members do. This is not an explicit rule but most likely because XXXX strictly controls the membership to those he knows, trusts, and likes. There

are no strangers for XXXX and members become personally acquainted quickly. This changes the interpersonal dynamic of debate—there is not the "hit and run" semi-anonymous, consequence-free commenting of the 3600 members of *Disney Snark*. In *Mouse Rants*, you know who you are debating and know that other people in the group, like XXXX, care about them. For example, in 2017, XXXX posted a request for discussion and debate on the extremely controversial topic of Donald Trump being incorporated into the Hall of Presidents in Walt Disney World. Members' opinions ranged greatly and there was vigorous debate, ripe with explicit language. But it was comparatively calm with few personal insults. Even when XXXX disagreed vehemently with one of the members, Danny Gribbin, Gribbin replied: "And yet I still love you like a brother"
(Gribbin). These debates do not end at midnight on Wednesdays, but, along with their other discussions, can last days, weeks, or even months as members think more on a topic, find new information, or share funny memes that might pertain to the subject.

Debate is not the only area in which these groups utilize division to cultivate unity and community. The *Disney Snark* group purposely uses its snark namesake to strengthen the bonds between members of the group through hazing new members. Besides the bonding that occurs over mocking mainstream Disney fans and WTWB, administrators will often require a snarky initiation of new members. They will publicly list "newbies" names, ask them to make fun of themselves to prove they belong or ask them to share something about themselves for others to mock. Those who participate are enfolded into the group quickly and those who take offense usually leave the group immediately, unhappy that they are the subject of ridicule. The few individuals who persist and argue back are usually "shouted down" through a barrage of insults from the group members that increases until they leave the group, or an administrator decides to remove them without their consent. Not only does this ritual act as a weeding mechanism

(similar to WTWB), removing those not suited to the group early on, thus securing its core character, it also functions as a minor act of hazing in which all have gone through the humiliating experience thus forming a stronger bond of solidarity than simple membership could provide.

Mouse Rants members do very little to actively foster a community environment beyond their mutual disdain for the Disney fan community and they seem content to continue on as such. However, hopeful members must gain XXXX' approval to be allowed in the group and those that post anything close to a pixie duster sentiment, who cannot "take a joke" or "take the heat," he removes making a de facto community of like-minded individuals. Once in the group, though, members often tease one another as a sign of affinity and affection that solidifies friendships and encourages the group mantra of "not giving a shit." Members are expected to laugh at themselves as much as they laugh at others with the most likable members often being teased the most. Teasing can be provoked, such as "calling out" someone's mistake on a post, or unprovoked, like making fun of someone's appearance or spelling. Similarly, members are expected to roast themselves when appropriate. XXXX leads by example and makes fun of himself for any flubs or mistakes he makes on the podcast. Co-host Simone DiMilo similarly mocks herself. "Ah! Fuck, I'm such an idiot" is a particular favorite she laughingly exclaims whenever she makes a mistake. The podcast hosts are also fair game as members freely tease them in the group and at meetups. XXXX can be particularly easy to tease. Sporadically, members will post pixie duster-like comments or memes with the sarcastic phrase, "XXXX, I know you'll like this" or "XXXX, this is for you" because they know it will annoy him and prompt a jovial response. The regular and unmitigated ribbing of all members creates an egalitarian atmosphere where not only is everyone equal, but also equally flawed. All members can be "taken down a notch" and must embrace

their shortcomings with good humor. The ability to leave one's ego at the virtual door creates an atmosphere of lighthearted comradery and enjoyment. But the amount of inter-group teasing pales in comparison to the more hostile mocking of mainstream Disney fans and the group's main focus remains fixed on venting their frustrations.

Much to my surprise, within the first year of conducting this study and engaging with the fan community daily, I found myself increasingly sympathetic to the angst-fans. I not only began to understand them but at times I was tempted to join them in ridiculing other fans. The more I engaged with the mainstream fans, the more I found their discussions lacking, repetitive, and emotionally draining. As I discussed in chapter one, they come to these spaces to find community and share their love of Disney and it is deeply rewarding and fulfilling for them. However, over time, particular patterns of behavior and expression developed resulting in a commonality that quickly became mundane. They count down the number of days until their next Disney trip, they share the latest news released by Disney's blogs website, they post selfies of them wearing mouse ears, and ask the same questions regarding appropriate park attire and the weather during their next trip. Though I participated in a variety of Disney groups, the conversations rarely varied and every post was met with ecstatic enthusiasm from each group regardless of how many times a similar post had come up that day, week, or month. Unlike their fan created podcasts and vlogs, which also lack differentiation and originality (and will be discussed in chapter three), these spaces do not have leaders or larger-than-life personalities driving the conversation. There are no differing opinions to ponder upon, no entertaining banter to listen to, no sound bites to enjoy; just a steady barrage of repeated Stepford Wives-esque posts over and over each day. The constant repetition of these questions and comments wears, saps, and pulls from the community without contributing much, causing frustration in many, including

myself. Over time, the intense happiness, the inability or refusal to acknowledge negativity, and the repeated conversational content wore on me, sowing small seeds of frustration and bitterness that slowly grew over time. I often found myself wanting to push back, to argue, or to express my discontent, but the threat of eviction caused me to stay silent. I knew that if I disagreed or posted anything viewed as negative or sarcastic, I risked permanent eviction from the group and the possible loss of friends.

The mainstream fan postings were increasingly amplified as Facebook's algorithms started displaying more Disney posts, compounding my exposure to the point where my entire Facebook newsfeed was dominated by Disney groups. Instead of seeing a little pixie dust, it was all I saw, and it became annoying and exhausting. After months of observing these groups, I could not help thinking, "This many people cannot be this happy all the time." Even when the United States went through one of its most tumultuous and dividing presidential elections in 2016, no evidence of it existed in the Disney fan groups and they continued as if nothing was wrong. "Going back home today!" would flash on my screen along with "498 days until our next trip!" and "Will it be busy on Christmas?" I found my sympathy for these fans waning as the same sappy happiness and the same kinds of posts repeatedly popped up on my Facebook feed every day.

I became angry at these fans and wanted them to show some crack in the happiness façade; to acknowledge somewhere that Disney was not perfect and that life isn't 'G' rated. It was not that critique never entered their narratives, but it was always discussed in terms of the consumer-experience and almost always returned to complete and utter devotion to Disney. Spending time in these spaces was emotionally exhausting, like I had to hide the adult portions of myself that enjoy drinking, cussing, critiquing, and sometimes getting into a heated debate or

argument. It became stressful worrying that if I cracked and exposed that side of myself I would be rejected and evicted permanently from the group.

Eventually, my loyalty shifted as I found catharsis in the communal anger and frustration of the angst-groups. These groups seemed to understand me and my frustration; they had experienced the same evolution of thought and come to the same conclusions that the pixie dusters could be oppressive and annoying. They too wanted to scream at the "Is it hot in July?" questions, scoff at the "Will it be crowded?" inquiries and roll their eyes at the "498 days until I'm home!" posts. They too had felt the pressure to be perfect and perfectly happy. They too had finally had enough and joined one or more of the angst-groups to vent. Spending time digitally amongst these "deviants" made me feel less alone and less like a freak. I felt relieved to be in a group with members who openly shared honest opinions about Disney and the fan community, albeit harsh and insensitive ones. These group members were able to balance critiquing Disney while still loving it and enjoying its products as part of their daily lives. They were able to be complicated adults who inhabited a range of behaviors from 'G' rated to 'R' rated. They were able to find community in one another and to find fault in other community members who relinquished independent thought and suppressed all non-happy emotion. As much as I originally abhorred their behavior, after a year spent amongst pixie dusters, their raw sass was a breath of fresh air.

Bullies or Victims?

Initially, it would seem that the angst-fans are simply bullies who enjoy tearing down other Disney fans. Their comments can be cruel, their witticisms cutting, and their observations emotionally hurtful. Their behavior fits all the tenets of adult bullying, which bullying expert Michael Weber defines as: exhibiting a need to put down the shortcomings of others (potentially

to distract from their own shortcomings), seeming to possess no remorse or compassion for those they ridicule, often exhibiting self-righteousness and/or arrogance in their mockery, caring little for anyone's feelings or pain but their own, and exhibiting their behavior in a place where it will be reinforced with little to no negative consequence (32-34). Furthermore, they have created a space to enact and celebrate this bullying which has resulted in their own echo chamber of reinforcement where this harmful behavior is encouraged. With this evidence, the classification of "bully" seems apt and applicable, but I argue that the angst-fans' behavior instead exhibits a much more complicated relationship with the mainstream fans in which the role of bully is misapplied.

First, the nature and construction of their Facebook groups bring into question whether angst-fans' behavior truly is bullying, or instead, a safe haven of much-needed catharsis from their own victimization. Though specific mainstream fans are the targets of the angst-posts, most never know they are the subject of ridicule or annoyance. A major aspect of the angst-groups is confidentiality. Initially, most of the groups could be viewed by the public but due to backlash from the Disney fan community, they eventually transitioned into being closed. Potential members now must apply, be screened, have their social media pages scrutinized, and sometimes fill out a questionnaire to ensure they are not a pixie duster who will cause trouble once admitted to the group. An enormous amount of effort and attention is paid to new applicants to make sure they will truly be a part of the group and not there as a spy or to leak information. Anyone found to be a spy will immediately be evicted from the group and banned.

Furthermore, the notions of "snitches get stitches" and "what happens in the group stays in the group" are readily and repeatedly enforced. Posts and information shared are not designed to leave the protected space of the group. For example, between 2016 and 2017, there were

fourteen different warnings posted in *Disney Goofs and Dopes* not to "snitch" or there would be consequences. There is a collective understanding, both implicitly and explicitly, that these groups are for the purpose of venting frustration and for cathartic release. When *Disney Goofs and Dopes* member Katie Gusto discovered a member had "snitched" to another Disney group she responded, "Yeah…We need to know who the snitch is…Ya (sic) know, stitches and all." (Gusto). XXXX has always been clear on this issue with the *Mouse Rants* members. In response to discovering a mole he posted, "As I've said in the past, there's only one thing that can get you booted from here: Snitching. Hey little bitches, couldn't handle a little bit of humor? So, you went and told on us to your little tiny friend? Fuckin' (sic) pussies" (XXXXX "Warning About Snitching"). Once inside these spaces it becomes clear they are not for the consumption of the Disney fan community but instead are to protect people from it.[31]

Second, many have fled here because of their own experience being bullied by pixie duster fans and feel they are the aggressors in the Disney fan community. Besides the oppressive evictions discussed earlier in this chapter, pixie duster fan group members have taken action both inside and outside of social media in an attempt to cause personal damage to the angst-fans. *Disney Snark* administrators Brian Mcgehee and Ashley Hudson have repeatedly gotten messages on Facebook from mainstream fans who have threatened them physical harm and legal action. One even called Child Protective Services on Hudson, complaining that she was an unfit mother because of her displays of vulgarity on the *Disney Snark* page. *Mouse Rants* contributor Jillian Lassiter was harassed at her work by another fan who contacted her boss in an attempt to

[31] The concern over privacy I found was limited almost exclusively to "snitching" or being a "tattle tale." Like other Disney Facebook groups, angst fans use their groups to attract like-minded fans and grow their community. This is why they keep their group status as 'public,' allow hundreds to thousands of members, and even share information about it on their own personal Facebook pages and websites. The issue to them was the breach of trust inherent in "snitching" and the unwanted drama and conflict that resulted from it.

get her fired due to her criticisms of the Disney fan community. And *Disney Snark* member Kathy Johnson had the police called on her twice by a mainstream fan because her commentary within the closed group was perceived as harassment.

Unfortunately, these stories are becoming a commonality for angst-fans and have caused a kind of protective paranoia among group administrators. All groups that I have been a member of regularly purge membership due to spies. They take it seriously and post aggressive responses in the groups. When finding out someone complained to Facebook, XXXX responded, "To whoever reported it, I feel sorry for anyone you fuck, you small cocked, whiny, whistleblowing, unable to please women, piece of shit" (XXXXX "Response to a Spy"). Some groups, particularly *Disney World Junkies*, will post asking members to join the angst-groups to spy and share screenshots of what is being posted. These spies then report back, sharing what they observed in the angst-groups consequently angering mainstream fans to action. Usually, members will complain to Facebook, and sometimes they will rally campaigns to get a large number of members to complain in hopes Facebook will disband the angst-group. And, as mentioned above, some will write harassing messages and take action in the "real" world against angst-fans. This further entrenches the angst-fan community as they regularly feel attacked by other Disney fans and sometimes have to unite for their own defense.

This does not mean that all angst-fans stay within the boundaries of the closed group. Some do "fight back" and will personally message pixie duster fans or will join pixie duster groups just to cause arguments. The *Mouse Rants* members, in particular, seem to enjoy a good fight when they feel threatened. However, they usually do so only when led by XXXXX, who has no qualms about taking his fight to the "real world" if he feels a line has been crossed. For example, a mainstream Disney fan started a blog called *Mouse Rants*, clearly plagiarizing the

podcast's name. XXXX and several *Mouse Rants* Facebook members personally contacted the creator to inform him he had taken a name already in use. The owner of the new blog wrote back an angry reply, stating he had no intention of changing the name and XXXX decided to go to war. After exhausting peaceful modes of communication, he finally posted in the *Mouse Rants* group, "Go do your thing" opening the floodgates of harassment upon the blogger with tens of *Mouse Rants* fans barraging him with aggressive and nasty emails (some of which were shared on the page for the members' entertainment). XXXX and his fans kept up a steady stream of comments and messages and after a few months, the blogger finally changed the name to *Mickey Rants*. Having won their fight, *Mouse Rants* members have mostly left the blogger alone, but they stay vigilant, at the ready for when they need to mobilize again to neutralize any threat to their protected space and identity.

Outward reaction and retaliation from the angst-groups are rare, though, because they value their protected space so highly. If there were too many complaints of harassment, Facebook may shut them down, cutting them off from their cathartic and community space. Ashley Hudson is so protective that, after discovering several posts had been leaked to other mainstream groups (and after battling spies since the creation of the group), she left a scathing post threatening to close the group altogether:

> You guys can make a choice. Right now. Because I'm so fucking done. Find me who sent the screenshots to someone's family member or I'm shutting this group down. Figure it the fuck out. Find me who did it. Or I'm done with this shit (sic). That's all the info you are getting. There are 3600 of you. Someone find me the fucker who did this or we can close the fucking group. (Hudson "Threatening to Close the Group")

Over one hundred and thirteen members replied to this post, and while no one admitted to knowing who the culprit was, most reiterated her sentiment describing the act as "low" (Richardson), "the fucking worst" (Watt), "fucking classless" (Musto-Trout), "shitty" (Fritz), and labeled the culprit as a "douche nozzle" (Mayo), "cumguzzling cocksucker" (Nash), and a "piece of shit" (Roo). The heated animosity towards the unnamed culprit demonstrates that, at least in group discussions, members overwhelmingly support the insular structure of the group and the belief that outsiders (particularly those being mocked) should never see their posts. While Hudson decided not to close the group and instead do yet another membership purge, the importance of secrecy was enforced and members reiterated their commitment to "no snitching" renewed.

Ultimately, the grand irony is that both the mainstream fans and the angst-fans harass each other and feel bullied by the other, with neither side perceptive to the cycle in which they are stuck. Instead, each side moves further into their entrenched echo chambers, neither wanting to understand or listen to the other side's perspective in what Johnson labels "antagonistic competition" (Johnson 286). They take turns attacking one another and retreating to places where their own views are amplified in their self-contained groups, thus furthering the divide and schism within the Disney fan community. Social Science researcher Alessandro Bessi observes how the retreat into echo chambers exasperates social division: "In online social networks, users tend to select information that adhere to their systems of belief and to form polarized groups of like-minded people…[and] select information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs…discussion with like minded people [in an echo chamber] seems to influence negatively users emotions and to enforce group polarization" (319). The more fans fight, the more they desire affirmation and so instead of working out their differences, they enter spaces that

encourage marginalizing the other group and viewing them as "bad" thus dehumanizing them and making the next attack all the easier.

Both sides participate in this cycle and are what psychologists David Rettew and Sara Pawlowski label "bully-victims" or those who oscillate between being a victim and a bully. Often these victims bully others because they have been victimized themselves and are attempting to fix what they believe to be a power imbalance (Rettew and Pawlowski 235-236). For mainstream fans, they bully because they are attempting to keep their dominance and power over the way Disney fans socialize in Disney fan spaces due to social ostracization outside of fan spaces. For the angst-fans, it is more complicated. They are reacting to rejection by the majority whose oppressive social norms are difficult for them to follow, albeit in a highly offensive manner that antagonizes. This does not mean they cannot unite and in the next chapter I will highlight an event that brought them together. But it also does not mean the angst-groups form a united front and a fallout happened in 2017 because *Disney Snark* and *Mouse Rants* displayed their own "narcissism of differences" and became enemies over the difference of the definition "snark."

Disney Snark vs. Mouse Rants

The seemingly minute differences between *Disney Snark* and *Mouse Rants* came to a head in July of 2017 when the two groups clashed, revealing a critical difference in angst-fan practices. XXXXXX and several prominent *Mouse Rants* community members discovered the *Disney Snark* group, happily joined, and enthusiastically began to participate in the many conversations occurring there. Initially, it would seem a match well met—they share similar frustrations with the Disney fan community, similar approaches to processing that frustration, enjoy a good debate, and both apply a more critical view to the Disney Company. At first, it was

a mutually beneficial partnership. For roughly two weeks, the two groups harmoniously coexisted within the *Disney Snark* Facebook page with *Mouse Rants* members consistently commenting and posting several times a day. But the relationship quickly soured when it became clear the two groups defined "snark" differently and arguments occurred between XXXX and several *Disney Snark* members. The first major argument occurred when a *Disney Snark* member complained her husband did not notice her haircut because he was playing video games. She shared she would withhold sex until he noticed, to which XXXX replied, "My wife plays video games with me. We are in our 30s. I would never talk shit about her for her hobbies. We wish you a happy and early divorce. I hope you get nothing!" (XXXXX "I Wish You a Happy Early Divorce"). While his reply might have been acceptable in the *Mouse Rants* forum, here he was alone in his critique. A flurry of *Disney Snark* members posted angry replies to this comment with several calling him an asshole and one stating "That's just mean." Surprisingly, XXXX did not engage, possibly knowing he was vastly outnumbered and/or that it was not worth his time and bowed out of the discussion with the cutting insult, "I guess this is a pixie duster group, my bad." (XXXXX "I Guess This is a Pixie Duster Group")

XXXX stayed a member of the *Disney Snark* group for a few more days and continued posting cutting insults and arguing with snark members. Finally, he and the other *Mouse Rants* members left the group, joining a new *Disney Snark* group spinoff *Disney Snarks No Snowflakes* where presumably no one would be offended by his comments. For the next week, the split was the topic of discussion in both groups, with each group feeling they were in the right and had behaved appropriately. Discussion on this topic eventually died, but there is no indication this feud will be forgotten. Every few months since, flare-ups occur with members of each group

expressing anger at the other. But, like all other kinds of posts, it stays within the group and tensions do not escalate further, even if resentment is still present.

While the cause of the fighting and ultimate schism between the groups seems small, the clash exposes important core differences between the groups that mirror angst-fans' difficulties with mainstream fans. For *Disney Snark*, their Facebook group is a page for commune and solidarity against the pixie dusters and "idiots" of the world; it is a place to complain and receive sympathy. XXXX broke this rule when he responded negatively to another member's post. For *Mouse Rants*, their group is formed around friendship and jovial roasting. Communication comes in the form of "give it as much as you can take it" in which there are no rules and solidarity comes from proving you have thick skin and can take ridicule. Sympathy rarely has any place and there is no expectation of solidarity.

The difference between *Disney Snark* and *Mouse Rants* is similar to the difference between the mainstream fans and the angst-fans. There is a major difference in view of how a Disney fan should act and conflict arises when one group does not act in that manner. The offending parties are then deemed worthy of eviction and ostracization and even further aggression. For the mainstream fans, no adult or explicit behavior should be allowed and those who break those rules are forced out, and possibly need to be punished. For *Disney Snark*, those who do not show solidarity with a member's angst are the outsiders and need to be argued out of the group. And for *Mouse Rants*, anyone who takes offense at anything is a sensitive pixie duster and needs to leave their space. In all instances, those who differ from the established behavioral norms open themselves up to negative consequences, including eviction from the group. And while most members of these groups hate the "ban wagon" they, in turn, enact it in their own

way on their own sites resulting in continued fracturing of the community with each group creating its own new niche interpretation of fandom.

Does siphoning oneself off from the majority create a community or fracture it? For the angst-fans, it is a little of both. Realizing they could not function in the larger world of Disney fandom, these angst-fans removed themselves and utilized social media to create a new social environment that best fit their personalities. Would they prefer to never have to do this? Probably. It is rare that a fan looking for community chooses to separate from the core group and venture out alone. It can be an isolating choice prompted, to some degree, by an existential conflict: hide and fit in, or fully be yourself and leave. Yet, once removed, they often find a home in a niche group with other like-minded individuals and create a new community. Here their approach to fandom is valued and they no longer need to contend with feeling othered or deviant.

In the larger picture though, the exodus could cause permanent change to the larger Disney fan community. Social media has made it easy for fan groups to break away and isolate themselves from other groups and approaches to fandom. Sub-groups form from other sub-groups as we have already seen (e.g. *Disney Snark* being created in response to pixie dusters and *Disney Snark No Snowflakes* being created in response to dissatisfaction with *Disney Snark*). The more these groups isolate, the less they are in contact with other views, approaches, interpretations, and philosophies towards Disney and Disney fandom. Their entrenchment in their fandom echo chambers exasperates the differences and further encourages separation from the rest of the fans.

This is a problem seen not just with Disney fans, or even other media fans, but in many communities. Social media has allowed us to create environments completely insulated with

those who think exactly like us, particularly in regards to politics and religion. If we do not agree with or like a stance or view, we leave and, through the preferences and settings, we can remove any and all traces of that opposing viewpoint. The algorithms then go to work, promoting posts, pictures, videos, and articles the software thinks we will agree with while further removing those which it thinks we will disagree with. The result is a rift that only seems to deepen the more we use social media. Ironically, it seems the very programs that are supposed to connect us to other people around the world are also helping us separate and isolate.

Conclusion: The Angst-Fan Paradox

Angst-fans rarely begin disgruntled and most truly attempt to participate in the mainstream community, but the oppression, rejection (or threat thereof), and overwhelming sanguine atmosphere often push them away and encourage feelings of isolation and alienation, thus prompting them towards separation from the nexus of the fan community. For other Disney fans and those outside of the fan community, angst-fans seem to be walking paradoxes, whose love for Disney and 'R' rated fan practices seem to be mutually exclusive. For angst-fans, it is how they survive in the larger world of Disney fandom. Commonly, to be a Disney fan in the Disney fan community is to subscribe not only to Disney's happy ideology but to some extent place yourself under Disney's control. However, angst-fans cannot exist as fans in the controlled environment that Disney and the fan community dictate. It is impossible for them because it denies so much of their personality and who they are as both an individual and a Disney fan. So, they must enact full agency, remove themselves from Disney and the fan community's control and influence, and act in direct contradiction to the family-friendly, 'G' rated utopian ideals in order to save and protect their own fan identity. In doing so, they disconnect their identities from Disney and the mainstream fan community. And instead, they honor themselves as complex

individuals who have no problem appearing contradictory because, frankly, they “don’t give a shit” what others think.

CHAPTER III. CONTENT CREATORS: FINDING THE BALANCE BETWEEN THE SELF, THE COMMUNITY, AND DISNEY

> "You. You are my friend. Whether we have met yet or not, you have proven to me that time and time again, and I am so grateful to you for that, by virtue of the fact that you are listening here, or you come to a meet of the month, or you tweet me, or you Facebook me, or you send me an email. Thank you so much."

These words, said in emotional earnest, are the parting words Lou Mongello says to his podcast listeners every week before he closes out each show. Long-time host of the *WDW Radio Hour*, Mongello purposefully channels the Disney ideology of inclusion and friendship with continual affirmations to his listeners like the one above. Mongello is generous with this positivity as well as with his time, hosting weekly Facebook live chats, organizing monthly in-person Disney-fan meetups, and responding to every listener email, even if it takes weeks or months. He has even established a hotline where fellow Disney fans can leave him phone messages, which he plays on the air at the end of every podcast, giving them a partial voice in the show and a way to speak to their fellow fans. In his podcasts and videos, Mongello seems tireless and unceasingly happy, his electric and charming personality making all around him feel special and loved, whether seeing him in person or on the screen of a computer. If the Disney brand were to have a physical human manifestation, it would be him.

Besides this, though, Mongello is special within the Disney fan community. He is not just a Disney fan but is *THE* Disney fan. His podcasting, vlogging, public speaking, and event planning for fellow Disney fans have enabled him to build an empire with his own dedicated following of fans. Through their website clicks, attendance at his speaking events, and podcast downloads, he has been able to transition his fandom into a career and earn a lucrative living as a professional Disney fan. Mongello represents the epitome of Disney fandom and is quite

possibly living the Disney fan dream. He goes to Disney World almost every day and makes money from researching and talking about Disney with other Disney fans. But even though he spends his days in the "Happiest Place on Earth", it takes a lot of hard work, constant research, and tireless energy. In order to maintain his media presence, Mongello works constantly and must continually engage with other fans contacting him through his website and social media. He also must make sure that his daily blog, weekly ninety-minute podcast, weekly two-hour Facebook live chat, and monthly meetups happen consistently, keep a high quality, and offer new and interesting content; otherwise, he risks losing the devoted fan base he has worked so hard to build and maintain.

Mongello is one of hundreds of Disney fans who create media content for other fans to enjoy. He may be one of the very few to make money, but he is not alone in his fame and many Disney fan creators have become their own kind of celebrities within the Disney fan community. Mostly through podcasts, YouTube videos, and blogs these fans find satisfaction by creating media for others and fulfillment when they receive a response through "likes," comments, emails, and other feedback. It is an ironic and paradoxical way these fans connect with others—they create content alone and then, as they say, "send it out into the void" by posting it online. It is a one-way communication in which they reach out to other fans to see if they will reach back by commenting, subscribing, "liking," or messaging. The delayed, detached, and somewhat impersonal communication is their way to connect with other fans and participate in the fan community. For various reasons, which this chapter will explore, this method of participating works well for them and motivates them to continue.

As these fans create and share content, though, they unintentionally place themselves in a precarious position between the fan community and Disney who each try to influence them in

opposite ways. The fan community wants authentic content and opinions unhindered by corporate influence (even Disney's) and Disney wants content that promotes the brand and that directly influences fans to consume more. If creators give in to Disney and promote it, they can gain major perks in sponsorship from Disney and gifts that drastically offset the cost of producing their media content. If they appear to be "bought" by Disney and their opinions inauthentic, they risk losing their fan base, any potential revenue they might have earned from the fans, and risk losing their place in the Disney fan community entirely.[32] Complicating this is the fear that Disney's legal team will attack should they overstep and upset the company in any way. By expressing themselves as their own desires dictate, these fans place themselves in a quandary where it seems like no matter what, they will lose. So, instead of bowing to one pressure or the other, or possibly understanding the futility of their choice, these fans decide to choose themselves and make their own needs the priority. They ignore the pressures from both sides and instead let their love for Disney and the need for self-expression guide them in making the content that they want. Similar to the Disneybounders in chapter one and the angst-fans in chapter two, these creators find peace through a paradox: that in order to continue being an active participant in the Disney fan community and continue their fandom in general, they must place their needs ahead of and in contrast to the two most important parts of their fandom: Disney and their fellow fans.

This chapter completes the story started in chapter one and two by recentering the narrative back on Disney fans as individuals and independent agents. I focus on a group of leading content creators who primarily make podcasts, but also create content for YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and their own personal websites. These fans are exemplary of not

[32] As I will discuss later in the chapter, this is akin to lying or misrepresenting oneself which is not acceptable in the Disney fan community.

just a participatory culture, but also a successful one where individual creativity is rewarded, celebrated, and is a vessel which connects fans closer together. They also illustrate how participatory culture empowers individualism and through the encouragement of self-interest, enables fans to build their community. I will provide a profile of these content creators and through their words, explain why they create and share media content and what it means to them. I will also show how pursuing individual interests acts as a bonding agent between fans and builds community. However, the experiences they shared and I observed also demonstrate where the system of participatory culture breaks down and is sometimes even the source of conflict. By highlighting the pressures they face from both fans and Disney, I hope to complicate the more positivistic interpretation applied to participatory culture and demonstrate it not only has limits but can also be damaging to a community. Furthermore, I will share an incident where participatory culture was pushed too far and a group of fans shook the foundation of the very community they were trying to serve. Their story will show that even passionate Disney fans have limits as to what types of participation they will support.

Out of all the chapters in this dissertation, this chapter relies the most on interviews because I am not a content creator myself and have never felt compelled to create in the way these fans do (though I do enjoy listening to their creations). These creators were excellent interviewees for this project because, contrary to other fans, I have found them to be the most reflective and self-aware of their fandom and their hegemonic relationship with Disney. Content creators spend a lot of time pondering on their fandom because their content often includes self-examination that focuses on and deeply considers their fandom for Disney and their relationship with the company. I have found both their interviews and their media content provided rich insight into the process of participating in a fan culture that requires careful navigation.

The Creators and Their Content

As discussed throughout this dissertation, the Disney fan community thrives because it is a participatory culture or what Jenkins and Purushotma describe as "relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement…strong support for creating and sharing with others…members who believe their contributions matter…[and] members who feel some sort of connection to each other" (5). They also observe something I have experienced myself: "Not every member must contribute, but all must believe they are free to contribute and will be appropriately valued" (Jenkins and Purushotma 5). There is no minimum requirement to be considered an active member of the Disney fan community and I never once felt pressure to contribute nor saw anyone else pressured. But, when fans do contribute, in whatever form of artistic or creative expression, I saw that it was met with enthusiasm, positivity, and encouragement.[33]

Within the fan community, there is no dictation to what form your expression takes; how and when you participate is entirely up to you, fans are just happy you are there. Atkin argues that this is how fan communities build and why they grow, because "far from denying individuality, [fan] community enables it" (61). The group "explicitly endorses the individual" and so fans feel safe and encouraged to be themselves and even "to become more individual" than they were before they joined (Atkin 4-5). Of course, as the angst-fans in chapter two demonstrated, certain kinds of individuality and expression will not be tolerated, and this support exists only when fans work within community and group norms. What is acceptable as expression and individuality in the angst-fan groups will result in eviction from the mainstream groups and vice-versa. And there are very few Disney fan spaces where anti-Disney expression

[33] In this chapter, when referring to expression and contribution, I am not referring to socialization or personal communication but something fans create to express their fandom.

is tolerated.[34] So, when we speak of participatory culture and freedom of expression, it is not entirely the individual that is celebrated, but more so the individual who works within the rules. But within those parameters there is a supportive environment to pursue individuality and self-interest and that appeals to many fans.

Media, be it print, video, or audio, has always been a core mode of expression for fans. Across all types of media fandom, fans have consistently been early adopters of new technologies, especially ones in which they can express themselves by creating their own media (Jenkins *Participatory Culture* 3). Recent favorites among fans, that continue to grow in popularity, are making videos for YouTube and recording podcasts. With the increase in availability of affordable, sophisticated technology (particularly smartphones), the lowering cost of production, and the variety of platforms to upload content, the threshold to become a content creator and share media is extremely low and becoming easier and more affordable each day.[35] Disney fans have fully embraced media production of all kinds and actively produce content like YouTube videos and podcasts and often create content across both mediums.

For this chapter, I focused on the fans who produce podcasts. Podcasts are usually much longer than YouTube videos, require more thought and planning, and often prompt the podcaster to be contemplative about their fandom more so than in YouTube videos. Also, I found podcasters almost always make corresponding YouTube videos whereas those who make YouTube videos do not often make podcasts. I have found that podcasters are also the most useful content creators to study. Podcasting is centered around the podcaster's personality, which

[34] This is not entirely unique to Disney fan spaces, however other fandoms, like *Harry Potter* and DC Comics, can separate the creator from the creation and fans appear to have no qualms criticizing J.K. Rowling, Warner Bros. Studios, and DC. In fact, many fan groups enjoy discussion rooted in criticism of the creators.

[35] The recent launch of TikTok, a video sharing platform, is a perfect example of the growing ease with which consumers can make high production video content. The user-friendly interface and plethora of customization options make it incredibly easy for amateurs and novice creators to make and widely distribute content.

must be interesting and engaging enough to attract and keep listeners. Podcasters are not just providing information; they are also providing an entertainment experience and are showcasing themselves and their ideas as the entertainment. Over the course of this study, I have listened to at least one episode of every Disney fan podcast I could find and have been a dedicated listener to several that I personally enjoyed including *2 Men & the Mouse*, *Mouse Rants*, *Mouse Chat*, *Network 1901*, and *The Disney Hipster Podcast*. I also observed the podcasters' other media content including following their Facebook, Twitter and Instagram feeds, reading their blogs, and watching their vlogs. I conducted in-depth interviews with ten devoted podcasters who regularly produce new content and are consistent information contributors to the Disney fan community. Like their podcasts, my interviewees were thoughtful and thorough with their responses and more than several interviews lasted over three hours.

While the podcasters themselves greatly vary, representing a range of ages and locales, the content of their podcasts do not.[36] As popular Disney vlogger John "Big Fat Panda" Saccheri observes, "We all kind of regurgitate the same information" (Saccheri). Nearly all of the one hundred and twenty-two currently available focus almost exclusively on not just the Disney theme parks, but on Walt Disney World in Florida specifically, and many follow similar content formats. Most Disney podcasts are one to two hours long, release new episodes weekly, and start with a news segment updating listeners to the various happenings within the world of Disney. These segments vary in length depending on the amount of news released by the Disney Company that week, and usually include all aspects under the Disney Company umbrella, including movie, television, video game, and music news, along with the latest developments in the theme parks. They do not only touch on the big news, but can also include even the smallest

[36] Most podcasters are male and white.

events, such as a rock being painted blue in Tomorrowland. For Disney fans, no Disney news is too big or too small; it is all worth discussing. Once the news has been shared and discussed, podcasters commonly continue with the theme of the episode that they have chosen and researched prior to recording. The most popular theme is the Best/Worst list scenario in which they choose a subject such as queue lines or cheap meals and share their thoughts as to what are the best or the worst experiences within that category.[37] Other common themes include how to's (how to save money, how to save time), experience and restaurant reviews, trip reports (in which the podcaster reports back on a recent trip from a Disney property), answering listener questions, interviews with current or former Disney employees, and Disney history (usually micro-focused on one small portion of the park or one single ride).

A survey of Disney podcast episode listings will include most, if not all of the themes listed above and mirror much of the information that can be found online. While the lack of diversity initially may seem like it could be a problem for podcasters, it is somewhat inconsequential to their listener base. Unlike other types of podcasts, Disney fan podcasts' success does not rely on the originality of content as much as on the personality of the podcaster. As *Mouse Rants* host XXXXXXX shares, "A couple of good personalities, that's all you need for a good Disney podcast" (XXXX). In his discussion of fan created websites (pre-podcast boom) film scholar J. Hoxter observes this kind of occurrence, sharing repetitive, unoriginal content from a personal perspective, can be common in many different media fan communities:

[37] This particular subject often results in an avalanche of listener responses on the podcaster's Facebook page as people scramble to agree or, more often, disagree with the hierarchical choice posited by the Best/Worst list. This very well could be a tactic on the podcaster's part to encourage fan engagement as it reliably produces a large amount of discussion and argument in the comments section and is the most common theme chosen among Disney podcasters.

> Fans circulate and also consume particular types of information as a kind of personal/collective property. Fan websites present this information in largely standardized formats which are personalized by the individual fan primarily through the interpolation of autobiographical example… Fan sites endlessly rewrite from this finite base of factual knowledge, and they do so in the first person. (qtd. in Hills 91)

It is easy to find the information online through a simple search or Google alert, and dedicated fans are already actively visiting and consuming information directly from Disney (which has its own blogs, news sites, and YouTube channel). There is not much information or breaking news shared in the podcasts that the fans do not already know. Instead, they choose who they want to listen to and connect with. For some, it is Lou Mongello's contagious positivity, for others it is *Mouse Rants's* creative profanity or *Dis After Dark's* sauciness. Some want an insider's perspective and so they will choose *Sweep Spot*, and some may want to listen to the cultural analysis on *Modern Mouse*. Though the information provided on Disney fan podcasts may be almost the same, it is each individual podcaster's interpretation and analysis of that information that attracts other fans. E-commerce scholars Wan, Lu, Wang, and Zhao find that "if users perceive a high overlap between self-personality and content creators' personality, they will have a sense of identification with the content creators, which makes the users like the content creators more and want to build a relationship with them" (842). Rather than attempting innovation, Disney podcasters utilize their particular personalities and perspectives as the tool to attract and connect with other Disney fans. This approach acts as a kind of social filter where those similar to or who like the podcasters' personalities stay and those who do not go elsewhere, leaving a concentration of like-minded friends.

Building Community Through Disconnect

For many Disney fans, podcasting is part of the community building discussed in chapter one. As Mongello observes, "You're bringing the [Disney] experience to them, but they just wanna (sic) connect with you; they wanna (sic) talk with you and be in a room with other friends" (Mongello). Listening to podcasts is a casual social affair, the content feels unofficial and unassuming and podcasters often speak to their listeners as if they are old friends. Inside jokes develop, discussions wander off topic down "bunny trails," and often a good time is had by all. It is a strange kind of social event in which fans mingle, disconnected by time and space but brought together by a shared affinity and the comments section. Commerce professor Robert Yeates says this is one of the main factors why people in general love listening to podcasts: "[For podcasts] the listening experience has the potential to feel markedly more personal and intimate than a radio broadcast...they might be described by the idea of 'closeness through distance'" (226). Fans do not tune in to hear something new, innovative, or world altering; if that were the case most Disney fan podcasts would fail. Instead, they tune in to connect with the podcasters they like, be a part of the conversation, and build a relationship through consuming the content. Many fans and podcasters never meet or have any direct conversations at all, but through listening to a fellow fan, connections build even though they are technically disconnected.

This is a reason why many get involved in Disney podcasting and other media creation: it is a paradoxical form of intimacy that allows podcasters to engage and connect with other fans by "sit[ting] in your room by yourself and talk[ing] to yourself about Mickey Mouse for an hour a week and hop[ing] that people listen" (Mongello). As *Network 1901* podcaster and vlogger Dale Wentland shares: "I like podcasts because it's intimate. I like being personable in someone's ear" (Wentland). Described by many of the podcasters I interviewed as "talking into

the void," disconnection acts as a vessel that allows podcasters to make connections with other Disney fans. The separation and distance free many podcasters to be themselves and express themselves fully. Without any immediate interpersonal feedback, and with a format in which they completely control the conversation, they can indulge every whim and pour themselves wholly into it. Once finished, they release the recording online in hopes that others will like it and respond positively, thus making the connection. Though they may never know if that connection is made, the thought of its potential is sometimes enough. Fellow *Network 1901* podcaster and vlogger Shannon McCarter explains,

> I had a need to talk about [Disney] things and I had a need to talk with someone about them. And you can be yourself, you can talk like yourself and be who you are…There's so few people that I could relate to and be myself with. I used to keep diaries, but writing wasn't doing it for me. So, one day I set up a camera and I just started talking and it did it for me. And I kept doing it and now it's my catharsis. And I get to talk about what I want to talk about and somebody out there in the void who also doesn't have someone else to talk to will listen. (McCarter)

And for most, the experience of podcasting and projecting their thoughts into the void has changed them and their relationships positively. For the eminent *Inside the Magic* podcaster Ricky Brigante, podcasting was what alerted him to and eventually connected him with the Disney fan community:

> I didn't know anyone. I didn't honestly even realize there was a community. And I just sort of was a fan who was like 'hey I'm just gonna (sic) do this thing.' It became very quickly clear to me that there was in fact not only a community, but a really big community of people who had been Disney fans longer than I've been alive. And it was

> great to suddenly get in contact with these people…. That's been a huge part of this. It's not only a chance to bring the feeling of being in the parts outside of the parks but also get to know people who love it as much as I do. (Brigante)

Mouse Rants co-host Simone DeMilo echoes this sentiment regarding their podcast and the angst-fans: "We've made a ton of friends. We've made people who feel like they don't belong, belong. We're outcasts and they're outcasts and we accept them" (DeMilo). For McCarter, it has helped her own personal development: "It's made me more outgoing. I'm extremely introverted and shy. But I feel like podcasting and doing YouTube has made me put myself out there. It's nice to be able to talk to people, to talk about the things I don't get to talk about with other people. It really has helped me with overcoming shyness" (McCarter).

The paradox works because it is a safe way to build intimacy and friendships. It may seem like podcasters and content creators are "putting themselves out there" because the content is so focused on their personalities and opinions. It opens them up to critique, criticism, and the occasional "troll". Nevertheless, the disconnect acts as a protective barrier and safety net for both the creator and the audience, who may never actually meet or interact in real-time ever. Socializing, even in the Disney fan community, can feel risky, especially for people who are shy, introverted, or who have already experienced social rejection, as many Disney fans have. Even attending a Disney fan meetup can be incredibly intimidating when you do not know someone already in attendance and, for many, going by yourself can require bravery. I experienced this repeatedly throughout this study as all of my research was conducted solo and without any prior social connections. Several times I attended Disney fan events centered on socialization and friendship building by myself. Even though I knew I was there for research and I would be welcomed as a fellow Disney fan (and I consider myself a fairly confident woman), I was

intimidated and felt insecure at first. Those feelings never lasted long as Disney fans can be friendly and welcoming, but that did not negate the nervous feelings I had beforehand that deter many people from even attempting to socialize with other fans.

With media creation, content creators can take their time to script and edit their opinions. They are never "put on the spot" and are in control of their side of the disconnected conversation completely. Conversely, fans are in total control of when they receive the conversation and experience it entirely on their terms. If they respond, which many do, they decide when and how and can also take their time. There is no social awkwardness or having to find things to talk about. If they never meet and never speak in person, there is less opportunity for rejection. If the fans do not listen, the podcaster will never know and if the podcaster stops, there are other podcasts for the fans to enjoy; while they might be disappointed, they still can move on. It allows anyone to leave at any time for any reason with minimal hurt and drama and, if both sides do want to build a relationship it can occur slowly with these protections in place. It can be an incredibly attractive way to build relationships: there is no commitment or emotional investment required and very little vulnerability. While there may not be the depth many in person relationships have, it is safe and still ultimately fulfilling. What is important is that fans feel like they have socialized, as if they are building friendships, and are part of a community.[38]

Pixie Dust Perks

One benefit experienced by most podcasters as a result of their efforts at connection and community building is that they have found a modicum of stardom within the Disney fan community. They often receive a direct, in-person connection as they get recognized when they

[38] This social process is close to the parasocial relationships fans can build with celebrities they follow. However, those relationships are not reciprocal and often illusionary. The relationships discussed here are interactive and content creators share media with the purpose of connecting and building relationships.

go to the Disney parks. When filming the documentary, *The Dreamfinders* (2016), the well-known Disney podcasters and vloggers John Saccheri and Lou Mongello were repeatedly stopped during filming because fans in Walt Disney World recognized them, approached them, expressed their love and appreciation, and asked for autographs and selfies. “Thank you so much for all your awesome tips!” one fan gushes as she walks up to and hugs Saccheri, “This is the first time I’ve seen you in the parks and I had to come up and say thank you” (“The Dreamfinders”). After the encounter, he exclaimed, “That was awesome!... It makes my day!” (Saccheri). Even though it was a hindrance to production and cut into their on-camera interviews, being stopped by fans appreciating their work became a powerful theme of the film’s narrative as it demonstrated the power and positivity within the Disney fan community. Saccheri and Mongello did not see it as a nuisance but instead were happy to have yet another opportunity to meet other Disney fans and make connections. Other podcasters share similar experiences of being stopped in the parks, but not as often as the more famous icons. Most can visit incognito, but they do get occasionally recognized, like Len Testa: “I remember times just walking through the park where people would stop us and recognize us. It’s always gratifying to meet other fans who love the show” (Testa). And for some, like Josh Taylor, the acknowledgement and appreciation of their work can cause a reciprocal fan-reaction: “I’ve had a couple of people stop me at Disneyland. I always try to say hi and try to be accommodating…. We’re almost fans of them. We’re fans of them being fans of us. We don’t see ourselves above others. I want to go make friends and meet friends and build this community together” (Taylor Interview). Not only does recognition allow the podcasters to connect with their fans, but it is also direct, positive feedback in which they can see the impact their hard work has on the Disney fan community. And for most, that is a rewarding perk that makes the time, effort, and money worth it.

Some do not enjoy the recognition as much as others. Podcasting allows some anonymity as only the voice is showcased, and a few podcasters want to keep it that way. Explaining how he likes to keep some control over who he allows to take up his time and social energy, Jeff Baham observes that, "We definitely get recognized, which is fine, but I'd rather be anonymous…. It's great to meet people who like the show, though I also like to try to weigh who I am meeting and have control over how much they will be a part of my life" (Baham). Testa, similarly, does not always want to bump into fans: "When I go to the parks, I don't wear official shirts. If someone recognizes me that's cool, but generally, it's not something I'm looking for" (Testa). Of course, that doesn't mean they don't enjoy meeting fans and they each share that it can be enjoyable: "My window to [Disney] fandom has been opened. It's nice. I like it when people talk with me about things we love," says Baham (Baham). And Testa confirms, "It's just a hoot. It's always good; it's always nice" (Testa). So, regardless of the fact that some may not podcast or visit the parks seeking recognition or fame and may actively avoid it when fans do recognize them, the positivity and fulfillment of the fan-connection usually trump any desire for introversion and isolation, resulting in an enjoyable social encounter.

Besides the social gratification, there is the small chance that podcasters can earn money or other benefits from their content. Many platforms will pay creators on a scale depending on the amount of "likes" their content receives or how many times a video has been viewed. In other areas, like podcasting, popularity allows the creator to sell ad time to sponsors and the more popular the creator the more they can charge for ads. Most Disney fan podcasters, though, do not have a direct business interest in podcasting nor do it for money. Business reporter Philippa Goodrich shares that while the trend of podcasts is going up in general, they are rarely popular enough to gain ad revenue or sponsorships and so, "it's a medium for enthusiasts produced by

enthusiasts" (Goodrich). This does not deter podcasters in hoping for some compensation, though. Between equipment, production time, and server fees, podcasting can become quite expensive for those who take the hobby seriously and many podcasters are self-funded.[39] When asked how he pays for his podcast, Taylor laughs and says, "Christmas." Sobering a bit, he shares the struggle he and fellow podcasters Wentland and McCarter face in producing their three weekly podcasts on *Network 1901*. "We're completely self-funded. We fumble through things and figure it out. You front the money and hope everything works out…. Sometimes I have to hold myself back because I don't have hundreds of dollars to throw at it" (Taylor Interview). Many podcasters ask for donations via the crowdfunding websites Patreon or Bandcamp so listeners can help with the costs and directly support the shows they like. This form of funding is becoming increasingly common for content creators across all platforms, especially the creators who have smaller followings and cannot attract corporate sponsorship. Fans and listeners seem to accept this format and possibly are even happy to donate.[40] Partially this is because creators usually ask for smaller amounts (sometimes just a few dollars a month) and offer exclusive content to those who donate. But also, as Wan, Lu, Wang, and Zhao share, listeners want to ensure the health of the creators to whom they feel attached: "The person who is strongly attached to a particular target will be dedicated to the target and will strive to protect and preserve interactions with the target…an individual who is deeply attached to a person or object is more willing to invest in that target to sustain or strengthen the relationship with it" (839, 841). Both parties are invested in the success of the podcast, the creator who makes it and

[39] Upgrading from a smartphone to a basic podcast-ready microphone usually starts at over $125. For those wishing to produce a podcast of quality higher than smartphones, the initial investment can range from $300-2000 and requires a microphone, cables, an interface, and recording software.

[40] I have not seen any complaints in the comments sections so far, and each week many of the podcasters I listened to shared they gained a few more Patreon donations. Over the course of this study, the number of podcasters asking for Patreon donations increased until nearly all asked for it regularly. This leads me to believe that it is successful or at least not a cause of complaint.

the fans who enjoy it, and so fans are often happy, or at least feel obliged, to help cover some of the costs.

Beyond covering costs, there is also a desire to replicate Lou Mongello's success to earn a living from being a Disney fan. When asked, all my interview subjects said that they think most Disney fan podcasters have this hope. As Chris Sharps shares, "I think most podcasters go into it wanting to make money. It's that twenty-first century 'turning your passion into profit' thing. It also helps us pay for our Disney addiction" (Sharps). And according to Jeff Baham, host of *Moustalgia*, "I think that it's true [that Disney podcasters want to make money]. It's kind of like, why not? If you love something, why not try to make a living off of it? I think it is common for podcasters to want that" (Baham). But hoping to make money from a Disney podcast is a cursory desire and not a driving motivation. "I mean we want to make money because it would be nice to have it to help pay for our trips to the park or the operating costs," shares Dale Wentland, "it's true, generating new listeners and generating revenue is a goal for us. But it's not why we do this; it would just help. There's so many reasons why we love it. We want to make friends and we want to build a community" (Wentland). Shannon McCarter agrees, adding that it is too much work to be thought of as a viable career option: "If you go into it thinking 'I want to make money off this' you're going to fail. If you are making a Disney podcast, you love Disney. So, saying that they're in it for the money, it doesn't make sense. Money is a big draw, but if you want to make money there are easier ways" (McCarter). Baham echoes this sentiment but takes a slightly less optimistic view: "I don't know that many have enough listeners to make a ton of income. So, I don't know how seriously they think that [they can make money] …. For some, the magic dissipates quickly, it's a lot of work and so you really have to love it…. I think realism hits most [people] in the face pretty early on" (Baham). This does not mean all podcasts operate

at a deficit and some Disney podcasts, like *Moustalgia*, have yielded some financial gain or at least enough to cover costs. But the number of money-making podcasts is low, roughly 20% of all podcasts (regardless of genre) bring in 80% of the profits for that medium, making most podcasts unprofitable (Goodrich). So, between the costs of equipment, the lack of financial stability, and the challenges inherent in podcast production weed out those motivated by profit leaving the enthusiasts who produce media because it is their passion.

Besides the potential to earn income, there are other, non-monetary benefits for doing well in the Disney podcast community. Like many businesses, Disney offers various perks to those individuals it feels important enough to court in what is commonly referred to as "brand ambassadors" or "influencers." This can be someone like Lou Mongello, who has thousands of loyal listeners, or Jeff Baham, whose Haunted Mansion fan podcast and website enable him to share targeted marketing when Disney has new Haunted Mansion merchandise it wants to sell. Usually, the perks are invitations to the media-only press events, but it can also mean comped park tickets, free merchandise, behind-the-scenes access, and invitations to exclusive events. However, on par with Disney's secretive nature, who benefits from the Disney Company is kept hidden by both Disney and those it sponsors.[41] This is presumably so that podcasters will still be viewed as trustworthy to their audience and their recommendations and advice seen as authentic, but it also can act as another way Disney exerts influence and control—no content creators know when or how Disney will bestow perks and so they are motivated to work that much harder to attract its attention. Opinions on this phenomenon range within the Disney fan community. Some do not see this as a problem like *Network 1901* host Josh Taylor: "I don't give a shit…I'm pretty

[41] Every podcaster I interviewed said they did not know who Disney sponsored but each had their own suspicions of which creators were earning benefits. They shared that the telltale sign was when a creator's content shifted from being fairly balanced to suddenly overly positive about their Disney experiences.

sure I know of some [who get perks] …For me, I think a lot of people being upset about it are coming from a place of jealousy more than anything" (Taylor Interview). Many, like XXXXXX, do not necessarily mind the practice but hate the secrecy, "If you're honest about it, I have no problem. But when other people [take perks from Disney] and don't tell you, that's another story…It's garbage" (XXXX). And Dale Wentland points out the hypocrisy in even having an opinion against taking perks from Disney, "People who get upset about that, I can guarantee they aren't upset that other news media get that. It's not like Disney fandom is this official thing with rules or whatever. Heck, we're paid by YouTube. And, of course, why wouldn't we accept that?" (Wentland). I will dive deeper into this debate and some resulting consequences later in the chapter, but the differing opinions of who should be able to reap benefits from what companies and how shows the tension creators can be under when operating within a participatory culture and fan community.

All the podcasters interviewed for this project shared that Disney had not offered them perks nor the opportunity to become influencers for the company, but nearly all expressed some desire to be on the receiving end of Disney's benevolence. "Yes!" Wentland enthusiastically exclaimed, "Please hire me, Disney!" (Wentland). Though he was mostly joking in this response, Wentland's reply highlights the potential conflict of interest and paradox that most podcasters face—to be a successful Disney podcaster your advice must be perceived to be authentic and uninfluenced; but to exist as a Disney podcaster is to be, to some extent, in service to the Disney Company and under its influence and/or seeking its approval.

Stuck Between Agency and Admiration

In the creative expression of their fandom, Disney podcasters and vloggers face a challenge that is prevalent throughout all kinds of media fandom and a great concern to many

fan-creators: copyright law. Where the rights of the copyright holder end and free speech begins are still nebulous leaving some fans not knowing if their fan practices are legal or illegal (Tushnet 60).[42] But "fans often have at least vague ideas about how copyright law would apply to their activities" according to copyright lawyer Rebecca Tushnet, and "some copyright owners have taken an aggressive stance against fan activity" (Tushnet 60, 69-70). Though most fan creations are protected and fall under Fair Use laws this does not assuage fans' fears because, as Johnson observes "fans confronted by corporations are financially unable to mount a corresponding legal defense" (295).[43] The power imbalance between media corporations/copyright owners and the fans is staggering. Media franchises, like Disney, *Harry Potter*, *Doctor Who,* etc. not only have their own legal teams but also millions (if not billions) of dollars to help bring about and weather any court case. Most fans do not have the finances to challenge them in court and they also may not want to fight back. As Tushnet observes, "When copyright owners aggressively allege infringement, threatening fans with massive civil penalties, fans may naturally choose to shut down or hide their activities rather than stand their ground" (61). With so many fans creating and sharing across the internet, it is unlikely most, if not nearly all, fans will never face any real legal threat, however the threat still exists causing many fans to take it into consideration when creating and sharing their content.

Disney does not have a history of suing fans, but it does have a highly publicized history of being overly litigious. Some fans do fear legal action and realize how much they are under Disney's power. On this subject, XXXX expresses concern wondering, "How many of us are going [to be able] to pay a lawyer and dump our episodes and start over [if Disney sends a cease

[42] Much if this uncertainty is due to the inability of the court system to keep up with the rapid speed of new technologies.
[43] Fan creations are protected under Fair Use laws because they are considered "transformative" which are "uses that add new insights or meaning to the original work" (Tushnet 61).

and desist]?" (XXXX). If Disney so decides, one cease and desist order (with or without cause) could mean the end to their existence as a creator because they do not have the resources to challenge the mega-corporation and, as XXXX worries, completely start over. Other fans say they are less concerned. Nearly all the podcasters interviewed for this project claim they do not take the threat of litigation into heavy consideration when planning their shows and that it does not affect their decision making. Some feel that their content is too small and insignificant for Disney to notice, or that possibly it is indifferent to their world: "The corporate side doesn't care [about our podcast]," Taylor observes, "I don't think Disney knows we exist, and I don't know if I want them to" (Taylor Interview). Tushnet notes this is one of the more common beliefs among fans who create: "fans tend to see their legal status as similar to their social status: marginal and, at best, tolerated rather than accepted as a legitimate part of the universe of the creators" (60). With so much new media content being uploaded every day and Disney fan content is really only of interest to a niche group of people, Taylor may be right—Disney may have no idea they exist and so will never know if the copyright has been infringed.

Others feel Disney may welcome the criticism and be all the better for it: "We're not afraid the Disney Company is going to get upset," Wentland states, "Critics have always existed. I think they actually prefer hearing the critique versus the brown-nosing. If I knew they were listening, I wouldn't change how we do our shows at all" (Wentland). Wentland's attitude reflects another approach Tushnet observes that many fans take. They believe their activities do not hurt the copyright owner, but in fact offer some kind of help by either drawing attention to the company or, as Wentland shares, highlighting something that could help them be better and make more revenue in the future (Tushnet 62). Wentland's assessment also seems logical. Getting honest customer feedback that offers good advice for improvement is a constant

challenge for companies and they are continually adopting new strategies to solicit such information. It could very well be that Disney's customer experience team pays attention to the podcasts and notes the feedback from loyal customers highly educated about the brand.

Lastly, some fans are influenced by their other "magical" experiences with Disney and rely on their faith that Disney cares about them and its relationship with fans and customers. "Am I worried that we'll get sued?" Baham wonders out loud. "No." he concludes, "Disney doesn't do that to their fans" (Baham). Baham, like many fans (particularly those discussed in chapter one), believe their relationship with the company offers grace, protection, and even encouragement. Whether Baham's opinions reflect reality, though, is highly questionable and his observation, while genuine, demonstrates a disconnect not just from Disney's litigious history but also from his own experience with the company. Baham himself was barred by Disney's legal team from speaking at an event in the Walt Disney Family Museum due to his fan activities. He had recently published an unofficial fan book on the Haunted Mansion ride and the museum invited him to put together a panel of speakers on the subject, asking him to be one of the key speakers. Disney's legal team found out, barred him from speaking, and warned him not to try to represent the company in any way (Baham). Being legally barred from speaking because of his fan practice was a detrimental experience for a fan as dedicated as Baham, yet he did not seem to blame the company or show anger towards it, only disappointment and the unwavering belief that Disney unquestioningly cares about its fans. His experience exemplifies a crack in the podcasters' self-awareness as Baham, like others, believes the critique on his podcasts is unaffected by his fandom. His inability to criticize Disney after it rejected him shows that the podcasters may not be as independent from Disney as they believe nor as secure from Disney's legal team as they hope.

This does not mean they are not wary of Disney and think they can produce any kind of content they wish. As I will soon discuss, this security in their relationship with Disney was drastically shaken in a recent upheaval in the fan community that caused many to rethink their podcasting and vlogging and wonder if Disney would allow them to continue. It forced many to reevaluate and realize that they are not safe and, at any moment, Disney could drop the proverbial Sword of Damocles, ending their careers as Disney fan producers. Vlogger and podcaster Andy Henderson expressed his awareness of the delicacy of the situation:

> Those in the Disney universe who podcast and YouTube, we operate in this gray area, that Disney allows us to do a few things… [such as] talk about and use clips from their movies, which is huge, and criticize them…. Disney is well aware of what I do. Disney is well aware of what I put online. I look at the IP addresses of who is watching and I know, on the podcast at least, that there are people at Walt Disney Studios who listen to the podcast...And the worry for all us Disney creators… [is that] Disney could then say 'Hey, whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa (sic) we're not going to let you do it anymore. Shut everybody down.' They could try to stop us from filming in the parks, but they probably couldn't do that. But what they could do was when we put our stuff online, very easily put content claims on there and take it down. (Henderson and Pratt)

XXXX similarly expresses an apprehension towards Disney, its monitoring, and the potential for problems: "I care [if Disney notices us]. If Disney's contacting us it's a C and D [Cease and Desist letter]. There's no other thing. And I don't want that. I would be dumb to think we're not on their radar in some capacity" (XXXXX). While Disney remains silent most of the time in regard to the content creators, this silence does not equal consent or approval and creates a space of uncertainty for the podcasters and vloggers. There are some rules clearly laid out, like movie or

sound clips cannot be longer than thirty seconds, but many others are unspoken, ambiguous, and changeable, giving Disney the upper hand and placing the fans in a constant state of unease or anxiety.

Technically, podcasters are mostly free to produce whatever content they want in any format they choose and released when they feel appropriate, but it is always under the shadow of this unspoken threat. The power dynamic situates them in paradox and forces them to make choices between their agency as fans (to enact their fandom as they see fit) and their admiration for (or fear of) Disney, not wanting to put the relationship or themselves in jeopardy. Do they choose to be free in their commentary and feel whole as fans, but risk attracting Disney's anger and possibly be shut down? Or do they only post promotional material on the company, secure their position as fan producer and possibly earn perks, but suppress their true feelings and thoughts? Regardless of how much podcasters and vloggers take this into account, it is still a paradox they must negotiate and continually consider.

Stuck Between Agency and Authenticity

Besides having to be concerned with the Disney Company's view towards their media production, Disney podcasters and vloggers must equally consider their audience, who is arguably the main reason why they exist in this capacity. Even though most of their productions are self-funded, their audience drives and influences what they do. Most importantly, they get an enormous amount of support from their fans who "like" their videos and podcasts and send affirming, positive messages on social media and email that drive them to continue. "I like hearing what people have to say if it's helpful and constructive," states McCarter (McCarter). Audience members also provide valuable feedback that holds them accountable for the information they share and tell them how they can improve. Though direct, harsh criticism is

rare, podcasters take it seriously because most want their shows to improve. And Testa explains, "Overall our feedback is very positive. Sometimes you get an asshole, and some nitpick. But nitpicking can be good because it helps us get the details correct" (Testa). And many care deeply about their audience because they see their shows contributing to the vibrancy of the Disney fan community. Taylor shares, "[Our podcast network] is a chance to bring people into the community and do fun things and have interesting conversations" (Taylor Interview). Even though their sometimes celebrity status sets them apart from other fans, they still are active members within the community who want to see it thrive.

Along with the all-important moral support, satisfied listeners can financially support the shows directly through a monetary donation or by paying subscription fees. And their clicks, reviews, and recommendations on the various host sites such as iTunes, Stitcher, and YouTube increase shows' ad revenue earnings and sends them higher on the list of the top podcasts, thus gaining them more visibility and potentially more listeners. Though this mode of support results in minimal financial compensation it does support the Disney content creators in their dream of being a full time, career Disney fan like Lou Mongello.[44] "That's the dream," DCast podcaster Andy Henderson gushes, "to make a living doing Disney content." Co-host Garret Pratt agrees: "Absolutely, I think both of us would agree that if this show blew up and made us money, that'd be the dream" (Henderson and Pratt). As I discussed earlier, this dream is the goal for most Disney podcasters and vloggers, even if it is understood that it may not be achievable. But it does not stop them from trying and regularly asking for support of all kinds on their shows and is one area where they are highly dependent upon the goodwill of their audience.

[44] On a *Network 1901* podcast, Taylor shared that he receives around $4.00 compensation for every 20,000 views on YouTube. (Taylor, "Thor Ragnarok and Disflix")

While moral support is given freely and generously from listeners, financial support is increasingly becoming an area of contention within the Disney fan community. I will discuss this more specifically in the next section, but openly desiring money or payment for a fan practice meant to express a love for Disney and the fan community is viewed as distasteful, antithetical to the Disney fan ethos, occasionally described as "money grabbing," and can risk great fallout in the Disney fan community. Monetizing a practice founded on community building and connection changes the relationship, commodifies friendship, creates social hierarchies, and cheapens the community ties. When these types of imbalances happen in fan communities, friction and argument are inevitable (Johnson 285-286). XXXX candidly states his strong opinion on the matter: "If you can't afford your equipment, then don't do a fucking podcast. Why should other people pay for you to do your show?... If you can't afford the server space, then you should not do it. It means your show is not good enough" (XXXX). Co-host Simone DeMilo shares his sentiment: "What do you think you're fucking Martin Scorsese? It's like you are not hot shit, you're not actually famous. You're not that important. We're not fucking starving children in Africa, we don't need to beg for money. There are a lot of people suffering, give your money to them" (DeMilo). Others may not be as explicit as XXXX and DeMilo, but their comments expose where the limits of participatory culture lie—you are expected to contribute, not take; support is given, not demanded. Requesting money from other fans to fund your fan practices breaks down the very nature of how their community functions which is why many become angry and offended at the notion. Fans are content to follow the established model for online media content, where clicks generate revenue ads, but anything requested beyond that risks straining the relationship between creators and their audience.[45] This distaste places the media producers in a

[45] Surprisingly, this distaste does not extend to merchandise. Many Disney fans have Etsy accounts and sell home crafted Disney merchandise. This is not only viewed as acceptable but even praised because it is seen as fans trying

paradox, as they often exhaust their own limited funds and need financial support from fans to continue their podcasting and vlogging. They must choose how to negotiate the costs of their production with the potential to alienate their fans, as a misstep in either direction could cause them major problems and the possibility of losing their show. Most find a happy medium with the crowd-funding websites Patreon and/or BandCamp, as fans can pay what they want, when they want, willingly, without risk of losing access to the content. However, as XXXX and DeMilo demonstrate, there are still many who view asking for funding at all as unacceptable and will view anyone who asks in a negative light.

Furthermore, gaining perks from Disney is equally viewed as problematic, as podcasters and vloggers are expected to be (and usually advertise themselves as) honest and genuine in their critiques, carefully crafting a show from their own lived experiences. Any influence from Disney is seen as corrupting this authenticity and attempting to buy a recommendation. "That's the problem [of perks]," XXXX says, "Your opinion is going to be listened to by all these people. It's your job to be honest. But if you get perks, you are getting paid to promote the parks.… The opinion means nothing because it's just Disney's [opinion]" (XXXX). Even just the suspicion that someone might "be on the take" sows great distrust among the Disney fan community and can result in a backlash against the content producer. Lou Mongello is one of the producers who is regularly accused by fans in the community of being corrupted by the Disney Company. While he still has a loyal following, there is also a segment that feels resentment towards him because he may not be genuine. This is most clearly seen on his iTunes Ratings & Review section, in which most of the almost eighty negative reviews cite this corruption as a reason they hate or dislike his show. WDWMeg2011 shares, "This man is nothing but a money grubbing idiot. He

to make a living from their fandom. The key difference here is that the established market norms for both podcasting and home crafted goods are widely different with the expectation that media will be free and funded by ad revenue.

feeds off people's love for Disney to fuel his income." londonparis85 states: "It's a shame this man has profited off listener's love for walt Disney world." Dirkamus observes, "Podcast might as well be sponsored by Disney." Garymeth posts, "Basically someone is getting paid to say everything is awesome all the time" (iTunes). And most notably TommyThm shares what nearly all express:

> …over the years the show has been on it has become increasingly evident that Lou's opinions should be taken with a rather hefty grain of salt. The high level of access, top flight guests he gets on the show, and insider treatment (not to mention the fact that he is allowed to conduct his own tours on WDW property for a profit?!) indicates that he has some sort of symbiotic relationship with the Disney Company. I will not flat out say his positive reviews and lack of criticism is (sic) paid for…but over the years the show has been on and not one even remotely critical comment has come out of his mouth in conjunction with all the special treatment is highly suspect. It casts doubt about the credibility of the show and the host. (iTunes)

While fans have made it clear that they do not want their amateur content providers to be taking payment from Disney in any form, podcasters and vloggers are often in a bind because it is those very perks that give them access to exclusive events and enable them to provide unique content their viewers enjoy. Exclusive access leads to a show with breaking news that no one else will have, which will make their base happy and attract new audience members, yet it can also upset the very fans who want this exclusive information. Beyond this, the perks are tempting to any Disney fan. Being in a position to create content that pleases Disney enough to provide the podcaster/vlogger with coveted access to events, and possibly even park tickets, not only enhances their own fandom experience but may help ease the burden of the cost involved in

gathering information for the production. It is yet another paradox Disney fans must negotiate when creating their content and a position they must be aware of. Do they work to be authentic but lose out on incredible experiences that could make their podcast or vlog better? Or do they work to court Disney and potentially lose their audience? An important difference with this paradox compared to their paradox with the Disney Company is that here the stakes are incredibly high. If podcasters and vloggers blunder and anger Disney enough to send a cease-and-desist letter, they can still exist in fan spaces. They may not be able to produce media, but they still have their membership in the community and can find new venues of expression there. But if they anger their peers, they lose what is arguably most important for all of the Disney fans I discuss in this project—their community. As open and accepting as the Disney fan community can be, it can also become angry and unforgiving. Those who upset the community risk eviction from these spaces cutting the fan off from most of the fan activity and so Disney fan producers must tread carefully when negotiating this paradox.

The Brief and Wondrous Life of Disflix

Recently a group of Disney fan vloggers pushed too far, and, with one attempt to make more money, upset their delicately negotiated position with both fans and Disney resulting in massive upheaval and their public disgrace. On April 9, 2017, Disney fans across social media platforms were alerted to the launch of the new website *Disflix.com*. Thinking it was a new movie streaming service that offered exclusively Disney-only movies and television shows, the fan community immediately erupted into a buzz of anticipation.[46] But their excitement was quickly squashed as they logged on to find no trace of the Disney Company or its movies and instead were shown pictures of familiar Disney vloggers and a commercial advertising the site as

[46] This was two years before the launch of Disney Plus and so, at the time, there was no Disney streaming service.

a fee-based subscription service. Mimicking the Netflix streaming video subscription model, several vloggers banded together to create the company Disflix, place their Disney related fan videos on one website, and charge viewers a monthly subscription fee of $9.99 for access to those videos.[47] They offered fan-made content that would include live streaming from the Disney parks, online classes, travel tips and advice, and other exclusive videos they said could not be found anywhere else on the web. Beyond this, there was no detailed information besides a promise that the fee would be worth the cost and that Disflix was going to revolutionize the Disney fan community.

It seemed that these vloggers were attempting to enact their agency as media producers to change the mode of distribution so that it would favor them more financially and evolve their status from amateur to professional content creators. Presumably tired of the old model which takes an enormous amount of energy and marketing to make vlogs even slightly profitable, these producers decided to copy an already successful model employed by Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, and many other media companies. In their excitement, they did not appear to think through the consequences and ramifications of this move. In their push to change the status quo, they managed to incur the wrath of nearly the entire Disney fan community and possibly even the Disney Company itself.

Instead of the outpouring of support that normally coincides with new Disney fan endeavors, the Disney fan community unleashed fury upon Disflix and its creators for overstepping their role and upsetting the balance. Many called it a scam, others a “rip off” and “selfish” and one commented that it was “the fucking dumbest money grab I’ve ever seen” (“#DisFlix Hashtag on Twitter”). Nearly every Disney fan group on Facebook was abuzz with

[47] The $9.99 fee was the “early bird” discounted special. The regular price for a Disflix subscription is unknown as the website folded before it released any other pricing information.

anger as fans discussed what was going on, why they were upset, how Disflix members had responded to their messages, and what they, as a fan community, were going to do about the situation. Simultaneously, a torrent of angry tweets with the hashtag #disflix was directed at Disflix's members, who had listed their personal Twitter handles on the Disflix website. The anger continued through the next day, increasing as fans fed off each other's frustration and circulated rumors that Disney and/or Netflix was taking legal action against the group. With pressure mounting from the Disney fan community, Disflix took down the one-day-old website and posted this statement explaining its dissolution:

> Disflix started with the intention of creating a collaboration of people in the Disney community and building a place for fans and vacationers. Many were eager to be a part of the project, in part because of the collaboration aspect of the model and wanting to be a part of something positive and new. Unfortunately social media, being what it is, created a negative and hateful view of the business. This business was built entirely around collaboration. We weren't trying to offend anyone, just having the courage to pursue another dream and venture. We wanted to test the business model out and try something new. If the Disney community is determined to be against it, then we see no reason to continue pursuing it…on to the next one! We have already refunded all who have joined. We do apologize to all the people who subscribed and who were excited for Disflix. We thank you very much for your positive messages, and your excitement to try something new. ("Disflix")

By blaming the viciousness of the fan community (and their use of social media) for the reason Disflix failed, the site's owners stimulated the fans' animosity, causing a new wave of angry tweets that propelled the discussion into the next day. Meanwhile, vloggers associated with the

project were suddenly losing large amounts of Twitter and Instagram followers and YouTube subscribers. They frantically struggled to scrub all connection with the company from their social media accounts and personal websites. But the backlash was so swift and harsh that some have retreated from social media entirely, while others have continued posting but act as if Disflix never happened.

The outrage finally began to abate as the days passed and community members were able to articulate and express their anger in a constructive manner. Many podcasters, vloggers, and bloggers released a response to the Disflix fiasco, some even writing official statements condemning the situation and assuring their audience and Disney that they were not associated with the project. Others continued the discussion in Facebook groups and on the online discussion boards, relieved that it was over and had resolved quickly. As the dust cleared, many even realized that they were thankful the entire debacle had happened—even though there was an unprecedented amount of stress and drama in the Disney fan community, the widespread outpouring of anger united facets of the community that had previously operated in separate spheres. Even XXXXXX, one of the most misanthropic Disney fans, observes, “People who hate each other banded together. It was amazing. That’s why it is a community! It was one of the first times I didn’t feel alone in the [Disney fan] community. I wasn’t alone in screaming and that [Disflix] was a bad thing” (XXXX).

What angered the Disney fan community was not the fact that Disflix members wanted to earn a living from their work as Disney fans but the method in which they tried to make that money. In their attempts to “pursue another dream and venture” they subverted several systems and norms carefully established over many years, drastically upsetting the delicate balance Disney fan producers had cultivated between themselves, the Disney Company, and their

audience. First, they broke rank with their peers, placing a dollar value on their content, when the established practice was to offer it free and earn money from ad revenue. Not only did this automatically devalue all other fan-produced content, but it communicated that Disflix members felt their content was better and worth more than others. It also subverted the reward system that allows the fans to decide who is worthy to earn the most money. The more popular the vlogger or the video, the more clicks, watches, and subscriptions they get, resulting in more money. It is a democratized system that does not place one fan-producer over another but lets the public decide, keeping any hierarchy from forming. *No Midnight* podcaster Kory explains, "Disflix is gone and I am glad if for no other reason than this: competition breeds quality. We will all continue to get better at our craft when the playing field is level and you the listener and viewer will benefit most of all" (Kory). Adding insult to injury, the Disflix vloggers operated in secret and did not alert other vloggers and podcasters that they were attempting to subvert and change the system other fan-producers operated under and relied upon. Most were taken completely by surprise by the launch of Disflix and had to scramble to understand the new parameters of operation that were being forced upon them. Many expressed an understanding as to why the vloggers tried to launch Disflix, but they were still angry at the attempted coup.

It also cut fans off from the media content, holding it hostage unless they pay the inflated subscription fee.[48] No preview of the site was provided and the price was fixed, taking away fans' agency in deciding how, when, and how much to support the vloggers in this endeavor. Before, they made money off their fans' donations and "likes," but now they were explicitly and directly asking for money, denying those who could not or would not pay, and taking away

[48] At the time, Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon subscription services ranged between $7.99 and $9.99 and usually offer one free month to preview the service. Disflix did not offer this and many felt the price was comparatively overinflated.

agency from the fans entirely. “You were literally trying to cash in on us,” Relevant Bret angrily tweeted at the Disflix members (“#DisFlix Hashtag on Twitter”). Furthermore, no clear explanation was offered as to how Disflix would be any different from the thousands of videos, podcasts, and blogs already offered for free on the internet. This left many questioning why they should pay when they could get the same content free elsewhere. As Disney blogger Brittany DiCologero shares:

> Although vlogging is a different platform from our website, I cannot imagine charging our readers for any of our posts. I don’t mean this to sound like our posts aren’t worth it, we stand by our site and believe we do put out high quality content, however we understand that there are so many other places to get similar content that charging for a similar ‘product’ not only seems like a poor business plan, but also a rip-off. (DiCologero)

Attempting to require their peers and supporters to pay for content that is free elsewhere forced a separation that betrayed the ethics of Disney fandom and the established system norms, resulting in overwhelming anger and hurt feelings from the entire community.

Last, and arguably most important, Disflix’s actions went directly against the Disney Company and its rules, inadvertently placing all Disney fan media producers in jeopardy of being shut down by Disney’s legal team. Disney has very clear rules in place stating that no one can profit from Disney products without its permission or use its products for financial gain or commercial purposes. The theme parks, which were to be the central subject of Disflix’s videos, are clearly included in these rules. Profit from YouTube and podcasting have been acceptable because producers stay well within copyright and free speech laws and are making money from ad revenue generated by their personal opinions and personalities, not by using Disney’s

copyrighted material. But when Disflix charged money for videos filmed in the parks, they changed their fan practice into a commercial venture, placing them in direct violation of Disney's rules and copyright law (not to mention the direct copying of Neftlix's name, font, and logo). As Kory states, "We're lucky that they [Disney] not only allow us to shoot our adventures inside their gates but that they embrace our community of storytellers…. What Disflix attempted to do and ultimately failed at was try to monetize Disney's content without Disney's permission" (Kory).

Besides the anger aroused by Disflix breaking Disney's rules, their clear and unabashed violation of copyright law set a new precedent that would force Disney to take legal action and could result in consequences for all Disney podcasters and vloggers. With the content proposed by Disflix being similar to what other vloggers produce, fear swept through the vlogging and podcasting community, which wondered if Disflix's actions could have larger effects on their own practices and result in their collective silencing. Vlogger JamesChats explains:

> [Disflix] could have become a serious issue. And I can guarantee that in no time Netflix or Disney or both would be taking serious legal action against them and then they would have to take more legal action against other content creators. They might not have to, but they might do it for safety measures. Because once one person crosses that line or one company crosses that line it opens a floodgate of people and companies that want to cross that line and they have to take care of that problem before it becomes a major problem. So, if they were to actually take legal action against Disflix it could have prevented people like myself from creating content within the parks. ("Disflix was a Terrible Idea")

Nearly all vloggers and podcasters who commented on the situation shared JamesChats' fear that Disflix's actions could result in them being shut down. Even the unconfirmed rumor that Disney

had sent Disflix a cease-and-desist order left many terrified that one might be coming for them soon too. “I just hope that Disflix hasn’t done too much damage” Kory worried, “It would be a real tragedy for content creators everywhere if Disney decided to close their gates to us and our cameras. If they did that, they’d be fully within their rights to do so, but it would be the end of a magical time when people’s real passion for Walt’s creation was shared worldwide, not for money but for love” (Kory).

Weeks later, Disflix was still being discussed in the fan community. However, the calm had settled, the immediate threat of Disney’s legal action gone, and now it is more evoked as a blunder and an inside joke. “Wait, did @FightinMickeys delete their account? Looks like their skin is thinner than #DisFlix’s” one Tweeter posts, “#disflix was a great idea. Sincerely, New Coke ‘Speed 2: Cruise Control’ Garth Brooks as Chris Gaines” another Tweeter jokes (“#DisFlix Hashtag on Twitter”). The fury has subsided, but the memory remains and it does not appear the Disney fan community will forget this soon. While it has been catastrophic for the vloggers involved, who may never regain their standing in the community, it was also an event that led to closer community ties. By banding together against Disflix swiftly and en masse, the community bonded, collectively reaffirmed their values, and was able to “rise up and take ownership the content they want and how they want it” even if it was ironically at the expense of the leaders who originally helped them form those bonds (Taylor, “Thor Ragnarok and Disflix”).

Conclusion: Finding Peace in the Paradox

Even though the Disney fan community seems stronger after the Disflix ordeal, the challenge of negotiating pressures between creators, fans, and Disney persists and may get worse. According to E-Commerce experts Wan, Lu, Wang, and Zhao, the more people connect with content creators, the more they come to expect from those creators, the more they will want

from those creators, and the more demanding they will be (841). Fans may not be satisfied with the balance for long as other platforms, like TikTok, continue to make media creation easier, cheaper, and more widely available. Even so, the balance does not truly exist because regardless, Disney has won. Fan activities cannot be separated from consumption and the promotion of the source of their fandom. Though their activities may not intend to exist as a promotional tool, by sharing their love and enthusiasm, fans promote and encourage others to consume more (Duffett 23). Whether it is intended or not, nearly all Disney podcasts do this and heavily promote the Disney Company and its products in almost all their shows. It is the main way they feel best to express their devotion and find connection with others while gaining great satisfaction by helping others incorporate the Disney "magic" into their everyday lives.[49] This results in podcasts and vlogs becoming forms of love letters to the Disney Company with fans acting as de facto marketers for it. Even though they are influencing listeners' tastes and shaping how people interact and consume the Disney Company, Disney fan creators will never tell people to avoid the Disney Company or the parks, and their advice always leads to more consumption of the Disney brand rather than less. This pattern is consistent across all platforms of expression with their collective work creating an echo chamber of pro-Disney positivity that ultimately increases how much time and money their audience members spend with Disney.

Disney fan producers are aware of their position and aware that their fandom results in free marketing for Disney. But they see it as a natural byproduct of their fandom that does not necessarily conflict with their agency as media producers. Instead, they view it as a tool that allows them to continue their activities unabated. They understand that their unintentional marketing allows them to negotiate their position with Disney because by keeping it happy they

[49] Many even incorporate this phrase into the introduction of each podcast in some form.

do not face the threat of legal recourse. In a conversation with other vloggers, Ricky Brigante shares his observation of this phenomenon:

> There's no arguing about it. Essentially what you do, what I do, what you do, it's almost, without being run by Disney, it is almost an arm of publicity. We have our own voice, of course, our own opinions, but it is just another way to get the word out there and that's why Disney happily is like 'yes, please come.' I mean, none of us sit there and critique something and it's like 'oh my god that was awful.' It's like 'well, you know, it could have been this, but here's what's good about it. (Brigante)

All of the podcasters I interviewed confirmed this statement, completely agreeing that a byproduct of their fan practices was marketing for the Disney Company, but they also equally understand that it allows them their freedom as podcasters. Chris Sharps observes, "Ultimately the answer has to be yes. It's what we're doing. We're marketing Disney" (Sharps). "Even our show [promotes Disney]," XXXX says, "All podcasts about the parks are marketing for the parks because we love the parks and we'll say go to the parks…I think all podcasts are marketing for whatever they're talking about" (XXXX). They understand that in sharing their love for Disney in their vlogs, blogs, podcasts, or social media in effect they are walking, talking advertisements to the magic of Disney, whether they receive perks or not. However, their goal is not to promote the Disney Company but instead to express their fandom of Disney. *Mouse Chat* podcaster Christina Wood clarifies, "I think that we do promote Disney but as an aside. That's not the point of what we're doing. What we're trying to share is that we love Disney" (Wood). Answering, Wood adds, "We're not so much promoting Disney as much as Disney fan culture…. We are part of the marketing machine of Disney and it is why they let us exist. At the same time, the fandom is there and we have the fandom ourselves. We're really just fanboying and fangirling. I'd be

doing this anyways with my friends but this way a couple hundred people listen to me" (Wentland). So while their products market Disney for free at their own personal and financial expense, they don't see it as a sacrifice or a compromise. Rather, they understand that it is a necessary part of their complex negotiation of the paradoxes in which they find themselves. If Disney benefits, they benefit, and if they benefit, their fans and the community benefits. Their natural outpouring of love for the brand places them safely under Disney's and their audience's goodwill without having to "sell out" and affords them the freedom to continue producing. Producing allows them to share their love for Disney and to be the fans they want to be. Through this, they get to contribute to the Disney fan community in a positive way that gives them an invaluable return on their investment that can continue indefinitely as long as this balance remains.

CONCLUSION

According to Disney YouTube vlogger JamesChats, “Outside of this community, nobody cares” (“Disflix was a Terrible Idea”). Stated unemotionally, JamesChats shares this thought more as a detached observation and caveat to warn his audience that his vlog may not be of interest to them unless they are part of the Disney fan community. It might be a futile attitude for a Disney fan to express but his observation may be apt. What occurs in the Disney fan community appears to have little to no effect on the greater world outside of Disney fandom: their social activities are purposefully insular, the Disflix fiasco and angst-fan schism affected few beyond the community, and besides travel help, Disney podcasts and vlogs do not impact the fields of podcasting and YouTubing nor American culture at large. Yet, much of their story connects to us, Disney fans or not. Regardless of where you live around the world, Disney is trying to gain your business and will use manipulation and control to do so. Bartkowiak shows how covertly Disney attempts hegemony, even with those skeptical of the brand, and Bennet and Schweitzer demonstrate the alarming ways it will weaponize cultural norms to squeeze every last dollar from parents. This study shows how the Magic Bands apply control to anyone who enters a Disney park and how Disney attempts to influence reviews in its favor. It also demonstrates something more universal, though: the drive and need for happiness, relationships, and self-expression. We all want connection and companionship and have, to some extent, the desire to share and be accepted for who we are. The Disney fans featured in this study have achieved this and have found the way to “live their best life” and to be happy.

In chapter one, I introduced the “pixie dusters” and showed how their happiness derives from a denial to see the capitalistic parts of the Disney Company and its actions. But I also

uncovered how much joy and fulfillment being a Disney fan brings into their lives and the sacrifices they make to be an adult Disney fan. The choice to go against cultural norms and to possibly lose friends takes an act of agency that demonstrates independent thought and strength of will. Though chapter two focused on schism, vulgarity, and infighting, it also revealed how, even through adversity and rejection, fans found each other again and formed new communities, support systems, and ways of being a fan—or more importantly, a way to continue being happy as a fan. And chapter three demonstrated that by following their own desires on an individual and independent path, for their own personal satisfaction and gain, content creators negotiated peace between the warring pressures from Disney and their peers to keep everyone happy.

Since I began conducting this study, almost every person with whom I have shared the topic responded, "Oh! I know someone like that" and usually followed it with a condescending remark along the lines of, "they are crazy." This is the prevailing attitude these fans encounter in their lives regularly when other dedicated fandoms, like sports teams, are readily accepted. It is my hope that, by privileging their voices, thoughts, and experiences, along with my own, I explain this fandom and create a better understanding. While I have tried to represent the Disney fan community as much as possible, it is impossible to encompass such a large group. I was geographically limited and unable to observe fans in other cultures. Also, due to cost, I was unable to spend as much time in the parks with the local fans as I would have liked. However, due to the wide availability of social media, fans' heavy use of it, and the length of time I spent interacting with them, I was able to observe a wide variety of fans who live throughout the United States.

This study was completed during a contentious time in the United States and, at its final writing, we are experiencing a time of chaos and uncertainty. COVID-19 has caused the deaths

of over 500,000 Americans and caused many businesses to go under. The Disney Company itself has lost a staggering amount of revenue and conducted massive layoffs. It also greatly limited access to its parks and hotels and has permanently cut major services to save money. These include services fans relied on to afford their regular trips such as the annual pass program and free airport transportation. The dynamic between Disney and its fans is changing—fans who believed Disney could never falter are now seeing it slowly crumble. Disney is not at risk of going out of business, but the decisions to cut extensively from the parks and the parks experience, the most beloved of all fan experiences, is forcing fans to reevaluate their view. It is a critical time for fans because cognitive dissonance is no longer a coping mechanism but a source of angst. Disney is in essence against itself, or more so against its carefully cultivated image. Fans are struggling to reconcile the Disney they love with the Disney who lays off 30,000 employees but still gives the CEO a bonus; the Disney that values their patronage with the one that permanently cuts their only options to afford park visits. Infighting is commonplace as they process this change and the effect on the community is dire. It is a fascinating moment for this fandom community, but it exceeds the scope of this study; it pained me that I was not able to include it. It is my hope that other fandom scholars conduct further research in this area because what happens with Disney during and post-COVID-19 will have long-lasting implications for the Disney fan community and media fandom in general.

Finally, in researching and writing this dissertation, I found myself situated in my own paradox. My academic training has provided me with the tools and critical thinking skills to pull back from my fandom to see the Disney Company for what it is—an insatiable, capitalistic, imperialistic corporation that does not care about its fans beyond what income they generate. As critical of Disney as I am, though, I also acknowledge my own inability to break away from the

company completely. Several times I was the perfect embodiment of hegemony, enjoying and praising "benefits" and "services" during my visits that, in the clear post-vacation light, were obvious tactics of marketing manipulation. It could be argued that my allowing Disney to pull me into its schemes is worse than the fans I study because I knew exactly how and when Disney would employ its tactics. And still, I was drawn in, much to my financial demise.[50] I was careful in my interviews not to allude to my positionality nor lead my participants to any conclusions or new understandings. But I did hope in some small way their interaction with me might cause them to pause and think more critically about their engagement with the Disney Company. I simultaneously was jealous of their unwavering devotion and the joy it brought them and hoped they would never lose it. Regardless of each fan's position with Disney and in the community, whether pixie duster or angst fan, consumer or creator, they demonstrate that much is to be negotiated if they want to participate in this culture. They also show the benefits and fulfillment that can come from a successful negotiation and, as a result, are valued members of a close, supportive community. Many other people may not be willing to undertake such a negotiation, but, for these fans, it is worth it because ultimately, it makes them happy.

[50] In my first trip using the Magic Bands, I spent fifty percent more on food and merchandise than I had originally budgeted.

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APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

On fandom:

- When did you start loving Disney and how did that come about?
- What about Disney attracts you?
- What kinds of Disney products and experiences do you enjoy the most?
- What do you do in your daily life to incorporate Disney?
    - Why do you choose this/these way(s) to enjoy your fandom?
- Do you have any other fandoms? If so, how do you enjoy them?
- Do your family, friends, and other people in your life know the extent of your Disney fandom? If so, how do they react?
- Do you like to connect to other Disney fans, and if so, where do you go to find them?

On podcasting:

- Why do you do it?
- What made you choose to produce a podcast as an expression of your Disney fandom?
- How do you finance the costs of producing your podcast?
- How do listeners communicate with you and what kinds of feedback have you gotten in these communications?
- Has podcasting changed your relationship with other Disney fans? If so, how?
- How much time does it take for you to produce each individual podcast including research, production, and editing?

- When producing your podcast, how do you decide what content is included in each episode?
- Has the Disney Company ever contacted you regarding your podcast? If so, what did it say?
- It seems that nearly all Disney podcasts, vlogs, etc. focus on the Disney parks experience and not many focus on the films or tv shows. Why do you think this is?
- It could be argued that those who do podcasts or vlogs are acting as promoters or marketers for the Disney Company. What are your thoughts on this? Do you feel that this is what you're doing?
- There are rumors that some Disney podcasters and bloggers are paid by Disney. Do you know about this? What are your thoughts on it? What is your reaction to those who criticize that?
- Most Disney podcasts work hard to keep the "Disney Magic" and don't allow negative behavior such as foul language, discussing politics, etc. But a few are more adult oriented and are 18+ where anything goes. What are your thoughts on these type of Disney fan podcasts? Why do you think Disney fans enjoy these more adult themed podcasts?

APPENDIX B. LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

Jeff Baham- *Moustalgia*

Simon DeMilo- *Mouse Rants*

Lisa Griswold- *Mouse Chat*

Shannon McCarter- *Network 1901*

Chris Sharps- *Mouse Chat*

XXXXXX (aka XXXXXX)- *Mouse Rants*

Josh Taylor- *Network 1901, Modern Mouse*

Len Testa- *The Disney Dish*

Dale Wentland- *Network 1901*

Christina Wood- *Mouse Chat*

APPENDIX C. LIST OF DISNEY FAN PODCASTS

2 Cups of Magic

2 Men and the Mouse

3 Moms and the Mouse

3 O'Clock Parade

All Aboard!! The Disneyland Railroad

All About the Mouse

Backside of Magic

Be Our Guest

Behind the Magic

Beyond the Berm

Butter and Bacon

Club Disney

Communicore Weekly

Connecting with Walt

Creating Disney Magic

Creepy Kingdom

Dave's Disney View

D-Cast

Dining At Disney

Dis After Dark

DIS Daily Fix

Dis Pop

Dis Unplugged

DISDads

DisGeek

Disgruntled Disney Dweeb

DisKingdom

Disney All the Time

Disney Brit

Disney Channel 411

Disney Cruise Line Blog

Disney DIStracted Life

Disney Dish

Disney DNA

Disney Dose

Disney Dream Girls

Disney Every Week PassPorter Moms

Disney Exchange

Disney Fanatic

Disney Hipster

Disney Magic Hour

Disney Movie Review

Disney Nerds

Disney Park Hoppin Party

Disney Parks Podcast

Disney Story Origins

Disney Wedding Podcast

Disney, Indiana Podcast

Divas Dish Diz

Dixie Landings Radio

Diz Runs Radio

Dizney Coast to Coast

Drunk on Disney

E Ticket Report

Ear to There

Earvengers

Enchanted Tiki Talk

Everything Disney

Everything Disney Resorts

Extra Magic Hour

Geekin on WDW

In the Loop

Infinity & Beyond

Inside the Magic

Intercot

It's Mickey

Laughing Place

Mad Hatter Chatter

Magic Never Ends

Magic Our Way

Meandering Mouse

Meandering Mouse Club TV

Mickey Dudes

Mickey Miles & More

Mickey Mutineers

Mighty Men of Mouse

Missing the Mouse

Modern Mouse

Mouse Chat

Mouse in Our House

Mouse Quest

Mouse Rants

Mouse World Radio

Mousecapades

Mousellaneous DIScussions

Mousetalgia!

Mousin it Up

Netcot

Network 1901

Original D

Orlando United

Overall Trends:

Park Hopping Podcast

Parkscope

Presenting Disney

Radio Harambe

Resort Loop

Retro Disney World

Season Pass

Skywalking Through Neverland

Special Mouse

Storybook Radio

Sunset cast

Sweep Spot

The Park Hoppers

The Unofficial Guide's Disney Dish

Three Sheets to the Mouse

Unlocking the Magic

WDW 4 Families

WDW Happy Place

WDW Magical Mainstreet Memories

WDW Main Street

WDW Navigators

WDW Park Hopper

WDW Prep To Go

WDW Radio Show

WDW Today

WEDway Now

WEDway radio

Window to the Magic

World of Walt

Zetus

Zip-a-dee-doo-pod