

More Than Mouse Ears: Creative Disney Fan Identity and Consumption

by

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Walt Disney once said: “First, think. Second, dream. Third, believe. And finally, dare.” His quote may have been in regard to his media company, but in reality, it could easily be applied to the journey of obtaining a doctorate degree and pursuing such an academic feat. This would not be possible without the help of many individuals. These individuals are constantly lifting a student up and encouraging them that their hard work and determination will all be worth it one day. Here is where I would like to thank everyone who has gone on this journey with me for all of their help and reassurance.

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ABSTRACT

This study, undertaken over several weeks of onsite fieldwork in the Disneyland and California Adventure theme parks in Anaheim, CA, examines identities, representational strategies, and approaches to product consumption among three specific fan groups who frequent the parks. Informed by Michel de Certeau, Pierre Bourdieu, and Erving Goffman, I analyzed the consumer and producer relationship dynamics created by fans choosing to represent their fandom in unique, unexpected, and in some cases, confrontational ways. These three fan groups were examined via in-depth interviews and participant observation, both within the parks and as part of each group's social media presence.

Keywords: Disney, fandom, culture, Disneyland, disneybound, dapper day, gangs, social clubs, identity, consumer, producer, community

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: DISNEY PARKS AND FAN COMMUNITIES

The Disney fanbase reaches far and wide thanks to their expansive film collection, six amusement park locations across the globe, and unending merchandise agreements with major retailers, including their own park-specific merchandise and streaming service. The Walt Disney Company represents the second largest media company in the world, worth 193.98 billion dollars, and fosters a fandom that seems to offer something for nearly everyone (Forbes, 2019; Statistica, 2019). Disney fans are virtually limitless in their ability to express their love for the brand and its associated narratives. However, most recently on social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram, the Disney following has grown beyond the typical vision of families wearing matching t-shirts visiting the park or young children enjoying Disney movies. Instead, subcultures of the overall Disney fandom are choosing to express their “Disney Side” in inventive ways that do not encompass stigmas and merchandising dictated by the overall corporate mandate. Specially, three particular fan groups within the larger Disney fandom are choosing to create and represent their own version of Disney.

This study aims to focus on three Disney fan communities: Disneybounders, “soft” cosplayers who collectively bend Disney Resort rules regarding adult costumes by creating outfits that resemble characters through colors and accessories; attendees of Disney Dapper Day, an unofficial event that occurs twice a year to celebrate the era of Walt Disney’s life (1940-1960’s) in which parkgoers dress up in character-inspired

vintage clothing (Marotta,2018); and, finally, the nearly 150 California social clubs (SC) that are branded with Disney characters and references, which include both adults and children among their rank, and have been dubbed “Disney Gangs” by the Anaheim public.

The purpose of studying these particular Disney fan groups is to highlight an alternative side of Disney fans within the Resort Parks; to examine, in particular, how they are contesting Disney’s preferred marketing and consumer practices and, in the process, using Disney intellectual property to create their own social identity. Following De Certeau (1984) – and his idea that institutions, such as Disney, create power through being producers, while individuals act, sometimes in unexpected ways, as consumers within the environments defined for them by these powerhouses – I aim to provide evidence of a trend among fans in which the latter are changing the consumerist power structure of Disney fandom by creating their own merchandise, trends, and guidelines in order to create a distinctive identity (Strauss, 1959). These innovative fans illustrate that individuals can learn to navigate structures – both physical, such as a magical amusement park, and psychical, such as the strict producer/consumer dyad – and create their own rules and processes that go against the basic idea of everyday, passive consumerism. By bending the rules imposed by the owners of the intellectual property to which they so enthusiastically respond, they in turn create identity and products unique to them. This study hopes to provide new insight into how fan-consumers are stepping away from the mainstream products and narratives provided for them by institutions and creating entirely new rules and

products that challenge the institutions with which they identify, as well as recognize any shift in corporate structures that accommodate these practices from the consumer point of view.

To avid Disney fans, the pilgrimage to the resort parks indicates more than a vacation filled with food and rides. It becomes a celebration of identity, a symbolic representation of their consumer habits, and a realm in which fantasy becomes reality. To better understand how these ideas come together, the topics of fan studies, Disney fandoms, and theme parks must be established. Particular studies in this review of literature reflect the specific methods and theoretical approaches I will be using for this particular project. Although there have been several studies regarding Disney fans, there is a much more limited selection of studies regarding Disney Gangs, Disney Bounders, and Disney Dapper Days.

Fan Studies

Mark Duffett (2013) explains that “a focus on fandom uncovers social attitudes to class, gender and other shared dimensions of identity” (p. 3). Spanning entertainment, art, sports, commerce, citizenship, and politics, fan studies covers a large area of media and cultural spaces, but the majority of the most recent fan studies focuses on fan identification and community (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2017). Identification with popular media impacts many dimensions of social life, including group organization, consumer habits, and personal identity formation among others: “Conceptualizing fans as performers rather than recipients of mediated texts thus offers an alternative explanation of the intense emotional pleasures and rewards of

fandom” (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 48). Fans play and participate with texts, developing a realm of fantasy where they can mold it to fit their imagination. Costumes, art, fanfiction, toys, or forms of material culture encourages interaction between the audience (Sandvoss, 2005; Duffett, 2013). This connection to text is one of the underlying distinctions between fans and relatively more passive audiences. Fan and brand communities are often formed around a shared consciousness, ritual, behaviors, and traditions situated within a commercial and mass-mediated attitude (Muiz & O’Gunn, 2001). According to Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schorder (2006), fans and consumers join such communities to 1) reassure quality, 2) seek others that are interacting with a brand, 3) pursue joint consumption, and 4) further develop the brand’s symbolic function. Loseke (2007) states that communities such as these are a place to better understand narratives and one’s identity within that narrative.

Narratives of identity are about self-understanding, the policies, and practices of organizations, social policy, and culture. Exploring relations among narratives of identity is the examination of theoretical and empirical links among cultural and personal meaning power, and social structure. All are inextricably related. (p. 681).

From this point of view, we can see how social constructs play a part in identification with popular media and in turn, how that identification impacts societal views and group organization, consumer habits, and personal identity formation.

Facilitated by a meaningful and affective bond between the self and objects, individuals begin to share deep connections with a community (Sandvoss, 2005; Tsay-

Vogel & Sanders, 2015). This connection and interaction manifest the central aspects of the fan's identity and the values that they deem important. Focused on creative practices that take a text far beyond the casual enjoyment for entertainment's sake, fans are often seen as active audiences that closely identify and interpret texts and re-work them through various interactions, both on their own and within a loyal/fandom community. Individuals become fans because they identify with the symbols, culture, and principles of brands and narratives (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). "In the context of fandom, it is clear that identity plays a critical role, particularly as members of a fanbase develop strong social identities based on the degree to which they perceive themselves to share personal interests and values with other fans in the community" (Tsay-Vogel & Sanders, 2015, p. 34). Jenkins (1992) suggests that when fans come together and share a particular taste in popular culture, they begin to create their own social institutions and interpretive practices. Because of this, these communities have become meaning-makers in terms of how their fandom is perceived by both insiders and outsiders to the taste of the community. One of the largest fan communities, one in which narratives play a huge part, is the subcultures surrounding the Walt Disney Company and their various characters, parks, and merchandise.

The Disney Fandom

Describing one cohesive Disney fandom or pinpointing the average Disney fan is almost impossible. With a multigenerational global community that spans decades of media and characters, the Disney fandom is created of smaller sub-cultures often riding a wave of nostalgia and imagination (Koren-Kuik, 2013). However, one

identifying factor for Disney fans is their participatory nature. Whether it is re-watching films, dressing up as characters, or - the ultimate immersion - visiting the many Disney Resort Theme Parks, Disney fans are dedicated to interacting with the media in a tangible way. As I emphasize below, the symbolic nature of locations, such as Disneyland, provide a place for fans to perform through narrative landscapes and interactive character meet-and-greets. Goffman (1959) believes that individuals use symbols to enhance and structure performance; thus, when a place of reverence and emotional pleasures is available to fans, they are able to perform one of their many identities. Sandvoss (2005) states that “the themes of the theme park, for instance, are not the themes of the actual landscape but, as in the case of Disneyland, the themes of the virtual, symbolic spaces of entertainment media” (p. 59). Even those that are not necessarily Disney fans are surrounded by thematic elements that can help them feel as if they have been transported, if they give into the environment around them. This is the appeal of theme parks and one of their overall purposes; transportation (Lukas, 2008). “Fandom can be a place where the grownup rules are suspended, where we can stop pretending to be adults, and revel in the delightfulness of enchantment and mystery and fantasy” (Fraade-Blazer & Glazer, 2017, p. 154-155).

Public spaces that embody and bring narratives to life, such as Disneyland, fulfill a dual function for fans. They provide a place for imagination to become reality and a place for fans to come face-to-face with others that are looking for the same experience (Sandvoss, 2005). The parks become platforms for fans to not only

tangibly interact with the narratives, but a place to represent their fandom without judgement. This is essential to the three Disney fan groups discussed in this study.

The first group, known as Disneybounders, consist of Disney fans that use their creativity and imagination to put together outfits that reflect Disney characters. This style is almost like a secret handshake between Disney fans, because instead of dressing up in costume like attire, similar to cosplaying, these fans use clothes that they wear in their everyday life to *resemble* their favorite characters. For example, a Disneybounder may wear red shorts, a black t-shirt, and yellow shoes to dress like Mickey Mouse. Or they may wear a blue shirt, yellow skirt, and a red bow to look like Snow White. Disneybounding has become extremely popular on social media with several groups existing to show off bounds and ask for advice. This casual outlook on cosplaying is to get around the rule that restricts adults from wearing costumes while visiting the Disney theme parks. This allows fans to channel their inner Disney Style, while still following park rules.

The second group in this study is similar to Disneybounders, but with a sartorial twist. Dapper Day weekend has become a tradition for many Disney fans who enjoy dressing in vintage clothing. Designed to celebrate Walt Disney's legacy and lifetime, Dapper Day weekend is celebrated twice a year in the fall and spring as a convention at Disneyland, Walt Disney World, and Disneyland Paris. Here, participants wear clothing inspired by the 1920's through the 1960's to commemorate when Disneyland first opened in 1955, and relive certain moments of Walt Disney walking through the park that has become a huge part of pop culture. While some

participants choose to strictly dress in vintage clothing, others use this occasion to reimagine Disney characters in different era's and choose to bound with a vintage vibe.

Finally, the last of the three groups I engage here are the Disney Gangs or, as they would rather be known, the Disneyland Social Clubs. Consisting of 150 or so individual groups, this community is well known for wearing biker-like vests in the park that are decorated with Disney related patches and pins. Described by the local California media as being rowdy, obtrusive, and genuinely rude to other visitors at Disneyland, this group has been known to take over areas of the park for their own entertainment, and take over rides with their masses to exclude others from enjoying the park. Two groups in this community are involved in a legal battle regarding rules at Disney.

These three Disney fan groups express a unique fandom when it comes to the Disney brand. The power of these fandoms comes from their community and the reflexive assertion of their identity within the specific space within which they engage (Peyron & Marseille, 2018). Whether online or at the parks, the groups choose to go against the normal Disney ideal and instead inventing their own assists in warding off the criticism from outsiders. It also creates a collective narrative that works against the stereotypes of abnormality that have dogged fandom in the past (Duffett, 2013).

Theme Park Interaction

The aesthetic qualities of Disney theme parks become a stage for these performances. Theme parks, like Disneyland, invite visitors to enact their imaginations

and become a part of the culture they love. With the variety of themed spaces, sounds, smells, and the interaction with characters, visitors are immersed in the space. For instance, Disneyland and Disney World are both divided into different lands. These lands are distinguished from each other by color, smell, architectural styles, landscaping, shops, music, and landmarks (Berleant, 2008). Time does not exist in theme parks as it does outside of them. Instead, nostalgic ideas, dreams, and futuristic mindsets all come together to provide a narrative escape for visitors. “The theme park can be defined as: A social artwork designed as a four-dimensional symbolic landscape, evoking impressions of places and times, real and imaginary” (King, p. 387-389).

Disneyland in particular provides different areas within which fans can engage in performance. Berleant (2008) states that the Disney parks are a “comfortable mix of discrete regions, styles, activities, and interests” (p. 4). Many who visit theme parks are looking for authentic experiences that transport them from their everyday lives to a place of entertainment and relaxation (Wang, 1999). This authenticity comes from the multisensory, multi-experiential space that theme parks, like Disneyland, provide. To do this, designers have to use aesthetics to enhance a narrative. King (2002) describes theme parks as “symbolic landscapes of cultural narratives. They are the multi-dimensional descendant of the epic, book, play, and film; four-dimensional stories in which the ‘guests’ — in theme park parlance — can immerse themselves” (p. 3). Compared to the narrative aspects that inspire the aesthetic qualities of the theme park, King (2002) differentiates amusement parks as a “thrill industry” filled with rides,

games, and spectacles. Amusement parks are generally designed to focus on adrenaline and require less of a story component (Lukas, 2013). On the other hand, because theme parks are centered around thematic worlds and narratives, they provide a place for escape and fantasy (Lukas, 2008).

Theme parks also establish an immersive space that brings everything to life providing a sense of connection, loyalty, and freedom to guests within the park (Lukas, 2013). The aesthetic qualities of a theme park allow fans to live out experiences that they have read or seen through attention to narrative detail. Visitors can “meet” characters, live out stories, and become a part of the narrative in a special way. Whether performing as a fan or experiencing it as a casual visitor, theme parks allow guests to create authenticity with time, attention, and detail (Lukas, 2013). From the large attractions, to the waiting lines, the safety instructions, the park attendants’ costumes and the excitement of others experiencing the same thing as you, all apply to this reception. However, this public space does not just invite performance through its landscape aesthetics. Fan and visitor interaction are encouraged through the cultural and symbolic appeal of merchandising in the park. Eco (1980) states that there is an architectural form that depicts the cultural context in which we live by becoming icons and symbols that communicate what is important to those immersed in particular cultures. Icons such as Disney’s Castle or Mainstreet U.S.A. “Disneyland’s power, shared with other compelling landscapes, is rooted in culture and shaped as a matrix of cues that point to our most passionate and deeply felt ideas about who we are and how we think as people” (King, 2002, p. 6). Through symbols, icons, and popular

narratives, Disney encompasses several ideals of what Walt Disney wanted to showcase for his daughters and families around the world; a distillation of cultural values (King, 2002). Linked to many of the popular movies and television in today's culture, the Disney brand offers a way to experience these characters and narratives in a safe environment that blurs the line between fantasy and reality. This "Disneyization" (Bryman, 1999) of culture provides a nostalgic feel for visitors, not only through the re-experiencing of their favorite movies and books, but through a re-imagined version of the ideal America. Anne Norton (1992) stated that, "Americans in Disneyland do not mistake it for reality. Rather, recognizing it as a representation of desire, they celebrate their collective capacity to produce a world more rational and more rewarding than that which Providence supplies them" (p. 21). Disneyland, specifically the area of Fantasyland, is themed so that popular culture, fantasy, and reality come together to create an ideal version of American culture. The success of Disney's globalization can also be seen in the consumption of the products around the world and in the attendance of the parks located outside the United States, and the contentious spreading of Disney Culture (Stein, 2011)

Part of the appeal of Disney is being able to interact as an active audience member instead of a passive one at home. It is about going beyond the basic need for entertainment and escape and into a consumption of the brand through immersive experiences (Berleant, 1994). Most importantly, however, "it is a search for an unmediated experience, of putting oneself, literally, in the object of fandom and the self that goes beyond mere consumption and fantasy" (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 61). By

doing this, visitors are able to experience the space in different ways each time they are there. Guests must be immersed in the space in such a way that it unravels around them, engulfing them into the narrative (Lukas, 2008). As Koren-Kuik (2013) states,

Disney encourages participatory fandom in its most complex and wide range form, inviting fans not only to watch movies and television shows but also play, sing, learn, and experience. The jewels in the crown of this participatory fandom construct are Disney's theme parks because they offer the consumer/fan a spatial platform which brings all the elements together in the experience of walking or riding through narrativized space. The land of Disney relies on two elements to ensure its success: a particular kind of utopia and a special type of fandom. (p. 147)

This "utopia" is provided by the affective spaces that allow visitors to relive nostalgic experiences. They are able to visit and relive their favorite stories, characters, eras, from their favorite films through themed spaces.

Disneyland, in comparison to other Disney parks in Florida or outside the US, brings a particular kind of experience because it is the original of all the parks; the park that Walt Disney himself planned and walked through. No other park can claim to have had such a hands-on touch from the creator of the company. Disneyland has a unique atmosphere compared to the other parks. You will find that characters roam more freely throughout the park for spontaneous interactions, bringing the interactive element of theme parks front and center. It is also significantly smaller than its counterpart in Florida: Disneyland houses only 500 acres of land compared to Walt

Disney World, which boasts 27,520 acres (Travel and Leisure, 202). There is also the difference in crowds. Walt Disney World may be bigger, but Disneyland has more annual passholders visiting the park each day, creating a different atmosphere for those visiting for vacation trying to maneuver around those who are popping into the park to eat or catch a show. All of these factors create very different experiences for fans when they visit the different parks.

It is because each park has their own unique personality that they become a medium of study, a text in which consumers are transported to different lands with characters, similar to the cinema or literature. Sandvoss (2005) believes that fan texts across all genres of popular culture allow different readings and that landscapes related to fandom are being pressured to provide experiences that can be referenced through absent codes and symbols. Disney itself provides these experiences through strategic tactics and simulations that can be found in their landscape and ride theming, character meet-and-greets, merchandising, and signage.

Through symbols, icons, and popular narratives, Disney encompasses several ideals of what Walt Disney wanted to showcase for his daughters and families around the world: a distillation of cultural values (King, 2002). From clothing, accessories, and collectible novelties, the economic activity of the theme parks plays an important role in transporting visitors and their participation. “Brands have evolved into distinctive stories that reflect our most powerful and most intimate ideas, even if we do not recognize such stories as being connected to consumerism” (Lukas, 2008, p. 188). Disney has blended their merchandising into the overall experience so

completely that it becomes a part of each themed land's experience. Visual signifiers that allow fans to express their identity outward, such as Mickey ears, park-and-character related clothing, and other things of this nature provide another extension of fan performance (Sandvoss, 2005; Fjellman, 1992). Merchandising is all a part of the escapism and fantasy that Disney provides through their theming. You never truly leave the park and the experience if you become a consumer of the merchandise. Likewise, the merchandise outside the park - such as the movies, television shows, and books - provides a place to start with the theming, as well as to continue it once a guest returns home. Visitors know what to expect from characters, rides, and lands. They know the stories. As stated above, one of the unique aspects of the three fandoms under examination in this study is their push against the normal Disney brand and aesthetic; and instead, they produce their own identity to ensure their experience fits their unique community.

Producer and Consumer Exchange

The study of popular culture allows us to not only explore the bond between fans and a text, but also to see how fans shape the prominence and structure of those texts beyond simple attention (Duffett, 2013). Jenkins (2013), describes this as participatory culture and explains it as a two-way infrastructure between producers and consumers; he believes that a collective intelligence can alter the source of a corporation's power. Bourdieu (1983) suggests that the relationship between producer and profit is connected to the size of the audience and the social quality of a product, therefore, providing another avenue of scholarship: how the audience's reception and

interaction with media provides revenue and economic value to society. Hills (2002) suggests that “fan consumers are no longer viewed as eccentric irritants, but rather as loyal consumers to be created, where possible, or otherwise to be created through scheduling practices” (p. 36). Considered an industrial process filled with complex labor, legal, and sociocultural procedures, corporations depend on audiences to consume the products, and then in turn, network on the brand’s behalf to ensure more production (Geraghty, 2017). From this standpoint, producers would not see a profit or a growth in popularity without the involvement and dedication of fans. Fans help guide decision making, as well as provide diverse taste in programming:

Institutionalized representations of fandom can affect cultural production in ways that, from a normative standpoint, are desirable and beneficial, in that they connect to long-standing media system structure and performance values, such as diversity and competition. (Napoli & Rostrich, 2017, p. 415).

However, because texts invite interpretation and interaction from fans, they create a struggle for control between the public’s fair use and the producer. Tushnet (2017) states that the interpretation and use of narratives, characters, and other copyrighted items found in popular culture have changed since the first fanzines passed around fan conventions in the 1970s. With the onset of the internet, fans no longer had to hide their artistic interpretations of their favorite texts.

Social media and access to the internet has given fans a new power within their fandoms. Jenkins (2008) describes this shift as a convergent media where transformative storytelling from fans unfolds over multiples screens. Fan engagement

and exchanges have changed significantly, and social media serve as symbol-driven spaces to share and engage with one another. These channels have also given fans a conduit through which to produce and distribute content that is related to their fandom, helping them to contribute at a faster rate, create a more rewarding relationship between fans, and enhance consumer-driven processes and loyalties that are built outside of the regular consumer sphere (Chin, 2016).

Yet, the battle of authorship and text manipulation is not just between authors and consumers. Fan communities also have their own rules about fan works becoming visible to those outside the fandom. Tushnet (2017) describes some fans as limiting visibility to only those within the main fan communities, describing the text as personally theirs to discuss, while others want more input from outside the community and to welcome more individuals into their fandom. “Authorship is not the only form of agency. Fans tend to use their agency to fulfill their structural position – their role as fans – and to connect, individualize and enhance their experience, in effect unlocking the thrill of being in situ as fans” (Duffett, 2013, p. 232).

Subcultures play an important part in developing hierarchies and social constructs among fandoms. Loseke (2007) states that communities such as these are a place to better understand narratives and one’s identity within that narrative:

Narratives of identity are about self-understanding, the policies and practices of organizations, social policy, and culture. Exploring relations among narratives of identity is the examination of theoretical and empirical links

among cultural and personal meaning power, and social structure. All are inextricably related. (p. 681)

Sandvoss (2005) also states that fan communities are structured not only by their members but also by the content of which they are fans. The representative and ideological ideals of these groups rely on what the groups stand for symbolically and through the appropriation of their object of fandom. Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2007) describe consumers as wanting to fit in and be a part of popular cultures; therefore, brands can use this to their advantage to persuade more buyers to come to them. Symbols can represent power and can be a cultural target against consumers: Schouten & McAlexander (1995) describe consumer behaviors that facilitate identity as the experimentation, conformity, and mastery of a brand. Once a consumer has gone through these steps, Schouten & McAlexander suggest, they have become a part of a brand and have started to incorporate it into their identity. “Fans possess not simply borrowed remnants snatched from mass culture, but their own culture built from the semiotic raw materials the media provides” (H. Jenkins, 1997, p. 50). Consumption in the form of fan identity thus becomes yet another way to express their interests, but it is also a way in which producers can control the use and popularity of texts. Therefore, consumers and producers depend highly on each other, and “contemporary consumers cannot subsist entirely in authenticated simulations. They are frequently required in their dealings with wider society to read, assess, and confront, as an annexation of the culture of consumption’s system other categories such as associations of stigma” (Kozinet, 2001, p. 58).

Authorship and interpretation do not just occur within communities and online. In several instances, it is expressed through cosplay, tourism, and conventions. Peaslee (2013) suggests that when given access to other fans, celebrities, and behind-the-scenes experiences, fans can verify the value of their fandom and the worlds in which they ‘play.’ King (2002) states that “these places [and experiences] have the powerful ability to evoke because they bypass the conscious mind to plug directly into our pre-conscious cultural matrix. This matrix is built up over centuries of symbol-making, imagery, and iconography” (p. 6.). Because Disney is a conglomerate, they are designed to generate revenue. Nevertheless, the Disney brand is also in charge of Walt’s original vision, which continuously entices consumers and fans to engage the Disney fictional universe (Koren-Kuik, 2013). This can be seen through continuous symbol making and identification, which fans use to create communities and develop identities.

CHAPTER II

THEORY: IDENTITY AND FAN CONSUMPTION

Sandvoss (2013) state that “fandom is facilitated by a meaningful and affective bond between the self and the object world, and the deep connection one shares with a community is manifested by central aspects of the fan’s identity and the values on which one reflects” (p. 35). Focused on creative practices that take a text far beyond the casual enjoyment for entertainment sake, fans are often seen as active audiences that closely identify with, interpret, and sometime rework texts through various interactions, both individually and with a fandom community. Individuals become fans because they identify with the symbols, culture, and principles of brands and narratives (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). According to Tsay-Vogel & Sanders (2015), “in the context of fandom, it is clear that identity plays a critical role, particularly as members of a fanbase develop strong social identities based on the degree to which they perceive themselves to share personal interests and values with other fans in the community” (Tsay-Vogel & Sanders, 2015, p. 34). Tsay-Vogel & Sanders further suggest that individuals that are more self-reflective with symbolic awareness are more likely to be engaged in fandom communities. This comports with earlier, foundational work by Goffman (1956), Mead (1939), and Strauss (1959), all of whom subscribe to the idea that symbols are one of the main components of social interactions and the development of culture, otherwise known as symbolic interaction.

Symbolic Interaction

Mead (1913) defines symbolic interactionism as a process that “involves interpretation or ascertaining the meaning of the actions or remarks of the other person, and definition or conveying indications to another person as to how he is to act” (Mead, 1913, p. 537). Generally speaking, symbolic interactionism refers to the way individuals act towards things based upon the meanings derived from social interactions and modifications made through self-interpretation and reflection (Blumer, 1966). Divided into two levels of non-symbolic and symbolic interaction, this framework views human interaction as a learned experience through the formation and sharing of symbols, or otherwise known as objects. Objects or symbols, according to Blumer (1966), “are human constructs and not self-existing entities with intrinsic natures” (p. 539). These constructs can be anything—physical or imaginary—that can be selected or referred to, and their meaning, definition, value, and nature are derived from people’s orientation and action toward them. Thus, the world is “socially produced in that the meanings are fabricated through the process of social interaction” (Blumer, 1966, p. 540). Therefore, according to Blumer, without formative processes and learning of meaning, gestures are deprived of significance. Culture, society, and personality impact social constructs and symbols, and help individuals interpret and recognize intentions, wishes, feelings, and attitudes (Blumer, 1966). The development and interpretation of symbols and meaning is an ongoing process that lends itself to group life: “The participants in each of such relations have the same common task of

constructing their acts by interpreting and defining the acts of each other” (Blumer, 1966, p. 538).

Identity Formation

Identity is therefore developed through a reflective state of social interaction. Individuals are able to assume various identities and use them to interact in different situations and with different people. These identities or “masks” are made internally within a person’s consciousness where they can play back interactions, reflect, and practice social situations (Goffman, 1956; Strauss, 1959). This allows individuals to predict what needs to happen within social contexts and react instantly in unknown situations. This reflection plays a role, for example, in Disney fandoms, because the corporate Disney identity can be quite different from the identities portrayed by individual fans. Therefore, this internal reflection allows individuals to negotiate their personal identity in part through the symbolic meanings others have thrust upon them; for instance, the Disney Gangs/SCs have chosen to represent their Disney identity in ways alternative to the corporate norm. Symbols play an important part in identity formation because in every description of identity, there is a social self, the part of one’s conscious that is presented to others. Jenkins (2006) states that, “the embodied point of view – mind and selfhood – emerges into, and within, an intersubjective human world of others and objects and the effects which the individual has upon them” (p. 71).

Mead (1913) describes the two halves of identity as the “I” and the “Self.” Mead explains that the self is always an object and cannot appear in consciousness as

the I, meaning that the I is an inner monologue, a consciousness that helps the mind reflect upon social interactions. These interactions are then internalized, focused, and acted out as the self, which is a social representation of one's learned identity (Mead, 1913). Internally, individuals have both an "I" and a "me" that they can call upon as they process their internal thoughts, ideas, and reflections. The "I" represent the individual's mind as a subject, while the "me" represents the individual's mind as an object: "The differences in our memory presentation of the 'I' and the 'me' are those of the memory images of the initiated social conduct and those of the sensory responses thereto" (Mead, 1913, p. 375). Strauss (1959) elaborates upon Mead's (1913) idea of identity by suggesting that,

identity is connected with the fateful appraisals made of oneself – by oneself and by others. Everyone presents himself to the others and to himself and sees himself in the mirrors of their judgments. The masks he then and thereafter presents to the world and its citizens are fashioned upon his anticipations of their judgments. (p. 9)

Strauss (1959) believed, much like Mead and Blumer, that language, classification, and interaction impacted value and identity associated with objects, particularly by how that object or person is judged by others.

Goffman (1956) also suggests that interaction plays a defining part in shaping an individual's identity. Each of the Disney fandoms discussed in this study are invested in how objects and identity rely on each other: whether a club patch, Disney accessories, or particular clothing colors, these items are a symbolic representation of

how these Disney fandoms want to be seen individually and socially within the larger Disney universe. Separating the personal identity from the social with the representation of a frontstage and backstage metaphor, Goffman defined the backstage as a place where individuals could drop social pretenses and reflect upon, critique, and modify their identities, “a hide-out where certain standards need not be maintained that it becomes fixed with an identity as a back region” (Goffman, 1956, p. 76). In all of these descriptions, identity is developed through both social interaction with others and the reflective state of one’s own mind. Individuals are able to assume various identities and use them to interact in different situations and with different people, and this emphasizes how the social interactions of Disneybounders and the Disney Gangs, as two prominent examples, is so important. These individuals are seeking communities in which they are welcome to express their Disney fandom in a unique and accepted way outside of the corporate configuration. The Disney Parks and various social media platforms allow these groups to socialize, exchange ideas, and feel accepted. Through the online platforms, fans are able to practice using symbolic interaction and determine social cues that can later be used when they meet in-person. In fact, some Disneybounders may only ever socialize using social media. Disneybounders are very active within their groups online, especially through Facebook groups and Instagram, asking questions about upcoming trips, what people think of outfit ideas, and sharing their bounds from the park or monthly challenges. There are individuals that stand out within the community and have become influencers that others inspire to dress like or meet while in the park. This

representation of Goffman's (1956) frontstage/backstage fantasy realms creates an atmosphere in which fans do not have to be worried about being judged on their personal identity and self-identification. They can practice their social interactions online first so that when they finally are able to meet other fans in person, they are ready to interact.

Self-identification, according to Jenkins (2006), is an ongoing process that uses symbolic meaning derived from social interactions to determine who we are and where we fit within society. "Identification has to be made to matter, through the power of symbols and ritual experiences" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 6). Just as symbolic meaning is derived from interactions, these exchanges allow for comparisons of self, which makes room for future interactions. Strauss (1959) states that "face-to-face interaction is a moving, 'running' process; during its course the participants take successive stances vis-à-vis each other. The initial reading of the other's identity merely sets the stage for action, gives each cues for his lines" (p. 57). These interactions help develop societal standards, rules, and expectations. Once an individual has established the symbols of a group and can interact with others using those symbols, the interactions begin to reflect their personality through inner monologues, reflection, and comparisons (Goffman, 1956). Jenkins (2006) goes on to explain that "identifying ourselves, or others, is a matter of meaning, and meaning always involves interaction: agreement and disagreement, convention and innovation, communication and negotiation" (p. 17).

Jenkins (2006) states that identity is produced by social interactions as well as life circumstances; narratives are both symbolic and social. They are constructed, told, heard, and evaluated within certain contexts. They have their own set of social norms attached to them. Loseke (2007) states that “narratives create identity at all levels of human social life” (p. 661). Loseke’s take on identity provides insight into why participating in fandoms within the Disney Parks is important to the three fandoms discussed in this study. All three use the narrative attributions of the park as a social medium in which they can act out their Disney side. Social interaction and the park backdrop play an important part in community identity within the groups. Each of the groups have planned meetups, attire guidelines, and areas within the park that help represent their unique identity. Whether the narratives are cultural, brand-related, media-related, personal, or reflexive, they have an impact on identity in the same way that symbols do; they provide guides and inspiration as to who we should be and how we should perform. It is through shared narratives and symbols that social assemblages are formed.

Fan Stigmas

Media play a distinct part in creating the identity and image of communities. Arsel and Thompson (2010) examined the impacts and stigmas that brands endure within the marketplace and found that, many times, fans and consumers of different brands will either go out of their way to disassociate with brands in order to change their personal identity, or try to change the consumer habits of a brand in an effort to change the stigma. Kozinets’ (2001) study of *Star Trek* fans found that many fans

struggle with this process: “Drawing from Goffman, Kozinets argues that devoted Trekkers undergo a symbolic transformation from being a discreditable person (that is, a closeted fan who fears his/her identity would be spoiled if publicly identified as a Trekker) to being a discredited person (that is, one who proudly embraces and displays his/her fandom and accepts the stigmatizing consequences)” (Kozinets, 2001). Arsel and Thompson (2010) also found that fan communities will often re-interpret social stigmas to attain self-acceptance. However, fan communities have their own stigmas that they reproduce through social hierarchies and status. No matter the fandom, *Star Trek* to Harley Davidson, individuals within fandoms have to maintain certain levels of knowledge, representation, and involvement. These guidelines and restrictions can underscore the tensions and judgment that comes from those outside of a fandom, as well as the acceptance of those within their fan communities (Kozinets, 2001).

Seeking common commonalities and mutual interests plays an integral role in fandom and the building of fan communities. McMillan and Chavis (1986) dictate that there are four distinct ways a fan joins a community: they must 1) see themselves as a member through identification, identity, and investment; 2) feel that they can have an influence within the group and that the group can impact them; 3) feel rewarded for their participation in a group and lastly; 4) share an emotional connection to those already invested in the group.

Therefore, if an individual is happy when participating with a text, they are more inclined to become a fan of it (Tsay-Vogel & Sanders, 2015, p. 34). Jenkins (2000) agrees with Tsay-Vogel and Sanders, and suggests that one of the principal

characteristics of fandom is found when personal reaction is transformed into social interaction, and spectators are included to become participants. However, in many cases, an agreed upon enjoyment does not mean acceptance. As mentioned above, communities form their own rules and regulations to maintain order and decipher true fans from those that represent a media stigma. Jenkins (2006) describes community acceptance as an agreed upon stance of language, participation, and symbolic meaning. Cohen (1986) describes these preconceived ideas:

The boundary thus symbolizes the community to its members in two quite different ways: it is the sense they have of its perception by people on the other side – the public face, or ‘typical’ mode; and it is their own sense of the community as refracted through all the complexities of their lives and experience – the private face, and ‘idiosyncratic’ mode. It is in the latter mode that we find people thinking about and symbolizing their community. (Cohen 1986, p. 13)

Busse (2013) states that “true” fans and subcultures found within fandoms are parsed out by the ruling of the “geek hierarchy.” Where you are placed within this group-defined ladder is the true test to whether you are accepted into a fandom community or not. Culturally, individual and group identity are not the only ways in which fandom is defined; consumer practices and stigmas also play a part. “In these cases, consumers are drawn to the consumption field by its affiliated marketplace myth and continue to garner identity value from these meanings, despite the stigmatizing association that circulates in the broader culture” (Arsel & Thompson,

2010, p. 3). Arsel and Thompson (2010) highlight the myths associated with brands and communities, and show how fans within these communities' distance themselves from such stigmas. They showcase fans of brands that disassociate with brands because of how they are highlighted by consumer habits within the public eye, even if someone is a fan of the product. On the opposite end of the debate, brands can also influence consumption. Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2007) describe consumers as wanting to fit in and be a part of cultures that are popular; therefore, brands can use this to their advantage to persuade more buyers to come to them. Symbols can represent power and a cultural target against consumers. Consumption then becomes yet another way for fans to express their interests and identity. It also is a way in which producers of media can control the use and popularity of texts and create highly dependent relationships between fan consumers and producers. It is here that fans can use the representation of their identity to fight back against social stigmas and corporate control.

Consumer Practices and Cultural Capital

De Certeau (1989) states that "the approach to culture begins when the ordinary man becomes the narrator, when it is, he who defines the (common) place of discourse and the (anonymous) space of its development (p. 5). When consumers take the meaning of a brand into their own hands and make symbols representing something completely unique to their identity, they begin to evolve from being a performer of a text to a co-creator, taking popular culture into their own hands. Both the rhetoric and practices of everyday life, according to De Certeau, establish systems,

language, and order in which groups can manipulate in order to create culture.

“Everyday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others” (De Certeau, 1984, p.xxi). The current situation between Disney and the fans that are appropriating their intellectual property is creating an interesting power exchange. Although these individuals are using intellectual property owned by the company for their cosplay-like ideas and club related activities, they are attempting to create their own cultural capital outside of Disney recommendations. This social production and reproduction of culture is a way for fans to display their own definition of culture through knowledge of and participation in a particular text.

De Certeau (1984) explains that the efficiency of production leaves little space for consumers to produce products of their own in regard to popular culture because economic order decrees who is the main producer of products. Therefore, brand producers walk a thin line between wanting consumers to participate with their brand and consumers making the brand their own (Hill, 2012). This division of producer and consumer illustrates a power struggle between media industries and fans because fans feel a need to produce, create, and manipulate texts in order to perform the text in a way that represents their fan identity. As De Certeau states,

The efficiency of production implies the inertia of consumption. It produces the ideology of consumption-as-receptacle. The result of class ideology and technical blindness, this legend is necessary for the system that distinguishes and privileges ... in a word, ‘producers,’ in contrast with those who do not produce. By challenging ‘consumption’ as it is conceived and (of course)

confirmed by these ‘authorial’ enterprises, we may be able to discover creative activity where it has been denied that any exists. (De Certeau, 1984, p.167)

Disneybounders challenge consumption of the Disney brand by seeking out and purchasing accessories and clothing from smaller fan-owned shops. Many of them also use their own skill set to show off their creativity and create outfits and accessories with items they have at home. Dapper Day participants are similar in their consumer habits but seek out vintage clothing shops to ensure their looks are authentic to specific eras in American history. And of course, the Disney SCs have taken the power exchange a step further. Not only do they appropriate the use of Disney IP by naming their clubs after characters and using their likenesses on their patches, they use the park as their area to establish their hold on their consumer power. It should be noted that fans who produce and circulate their own goods, such as these fan communities, often create productions with values as high or higher than the official merchandise (Fiske, 1992). Therefore, the influence, impact, and change a group has upon stigma and symbols depends on their magnitude compared to other consumers.

Bourdieu (1983) suggests that the relationship between producer and profit is connected to the size of the audience and the social quality of a product, which in turn determines cultural taste. Taste is determined by different factors such as ones cultural and aesthetic patterns in choosing consumer goods, style, and manners. Taste is often associated with an individual’s social interactions and how groups determine what is good, stylish, and appropriate in society. Bourdieu (1990) presents clothing as an example: working-class individuals tend to seek out clothing for functional purposes,

while those with a higher-class distinction look for clothing that satisfies their taste for elegance and cosmetic needs. In fandom, audiences' reception and interaction with media and their related merchandise, provides insight into cultural and economic values within the fan society. Taste then becomes a symbolic measure and differentiating factor in determining social status. "Struggles over the appropriation of economic or cultural goods are, simultaneously, symbolic struggles to appropriate distinctive signs in the form of classified, classifying goods, or practices, or to conserve or subvert the principles of classification of these distinctive properties" (Bourdieu, 1990, p.249)

Fans are enthusiastic readers of texts and consumers of related products. Knowledge is exchanged as a form of currency among these circles providing fans a way to distinguish high-class from low-class, or rather, a true fan from an average admirer. These investments and attempts at authorship between producers and consumers are where the shift in cultural capital happens. Whoever controls the most knowledge and following has the most power. Similar to Marx's (1917) view of capitalism and social classes, Bourdieu (1995) perceives culture as a symbolic resource that can be exchanged: "The field is simultaneously a space of conflict and competition...in which participants vie to establish monopoly over the species of capital effective in it—and the power to decree hierarchy and all forms of conversion rates in the field of power" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 16-17). The field that Bourdieu refers to is a space of engagement where what he calls the habitus – social interactions, habits, and cultural norms – is formed and deployed. The field is

characterized by transformations that are caused over time, through conversations that take place with others. Once those that occupy it, take the time to dictate what is of importance, in short, space is made up of practices and readings of a symbolic quality (De Certeau, 1984). It is in this space that taste and class are decided, and capital and knowledge are exchanged to determine one's position among their peers. Bourdieu uses sports to describe this phenomenon, stating that individuals can play all sports, but some require access and tools that are not available to everyone.

Disney can be seen as an elite sport due to the cost of admission, therefore, separating average fans who only visit once in a lifetime, those who visit a few times in their lifetime, or those who never visit, all of whom can be compared favorably or unfavorably to those that hold annual passes. But these three communities have a small stake in the overall cultural capital that the Disney corporation holds within pop culture. Since its establishment in 1923, The Walt Disney Company has become one of the largest corporations in the world, with many of their movies exceeding \$1 billion dollars at the box office alone. They operate the largest resort in the world and employ over 200,000 cast members (Berman, 2018; Disney News, 2018). Loy (2012) nonetheless critiques a Marxist view of Disney that assumes the passive acceptance of those that consume the brand's products: "While a Marxist critique is highly useful in situating Disney World within theory of popular culture criticism, it portrays the millions of individuals who visit the theme parks each year as undiscerning, passive, and undifferentiated masses. They can only be the victims of commodification and hegemony, their experiences handed to them from on high" (p. 4). But the use and

reading of Disney's brand, texts, and parks by the fans determines a different field of culture, depending on the community one examines. These fans use their experiences and social interactions in the park to create a dynamic social hierarchy that puts them above the average Disney fan and park visitor.

Sandvoss (2007) suggests that this shift is important to fan consumption because it dictates what is popular among similar subcultures, and the social logic that breaks away from cultural stigmas, creating a new significance to brand symbols. Focused on creative practices that take a text far beyond the casual enjoyment for entertainment's sake, fans are often seen as active audiences that closely identify and interpret texts and re-work them through various interactions, both solo and with a fandom community. Individuals become fans because they identify with the symbols, culture, and principles of brands and narratives (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Cultural capital does not necessarily elevate an individual's career or overall standing in society, but it can provide weight within one's social settings and community. However, fan knowledge is self-acquired and used to compensate for the perceived gap within other qualifications such as economic status and education. "Fandom," as Fiske (1992, p. 33) suggests, "offers ways of filling cultural lack and provides the social prestige and self-esteem that go with cultural capital." Here is where we see the implications the three Disney fan groups have upon the Disney brand, upon the Disney theme parks, and among other fans: these groups have taken their use of symbols far beyond conversation and association with a brand. Instead, they are using their knowledge, creative abilities, and access to Disney as a way to command power. Fan

enthusiasm has always centered on how a brand can serve their personal and social needs (Fraade-Blanar & Glazer, 2017), but when these needs are not met, fans may feel empowered to take their fandom into their own hands. Their evolution from passive consumer to an inherited cultural producer (one that defines their culture through fashion, lifestyle, clubs, and vacation preferences) is a distinct implication of their fan and individual identity, using symbols to dictate how they are represented to society and, in some way, change the social stigmas regarding Disney fans.

This study, therefore, was guided by several questions that investigate how consumers, hierarchal structures, cultural capital, and symbolic interaction come together in fandom representation. These research questions lend themselves to observational and interviewing methods of data collection, focusing on the cultural and consumer aspects of Disneyland's fandom groups. To better assess these groups, the following research questions will be explored:

RQ1: a) How do these subcultures address the different practices and symbolic interpretations of Disney's intellectual property within each of the three fandom groups?

b) How and why did these Disney subcultures begin and what are their rituals?

These questions are intended to address how the subculture of each group differs and is made up of different types of personalities, rituals, and performances in and outside of the Disney theme parks. These groups were examined through observations within the park and in-depth interviews with members of each group. It should be noted that

each interaction was different depending on the group, the member, and the distinctive levels of trust I gained. I believe that determining the cultural ideals of each group is the first step in determining their overall impact on the parks and within the overall Disney fandom.

RQ2: a) Why do individuals choose to represent their fandom in an alternative way?

b) How does participation in these subcultures impact an individual's identity?

This particular question relates to the idea of identity and performance within symbolic interaction. An individual's level of involvement within the fandom will impact their identity (Goffman, 1956; Mead, 1939). This topic will be examined through interviews with group members of different involvement and status.

Observations may play a role in answering this question, as well, because individuals may not be aware of their actions when interacting with others.

RQ3: How have these subcultures influenced Disney merchandising and park areas?

De Certeau (1984) and Bourdieu's (1983) developments of cultural capital and exchange between producer and consumer will aid in answering this particular question. It will be addressed by analyzing fan attire, available merchandizing from the parks, and fan-made materials, and comparing their influences on one another. I will also look at how consumer practices influence areas of the park through observations and interviews.

RQ4: In what ways do these subcultures impact other visitors to Disney theme parks?

Finally, this question is intended to address how individuals who associate with these fandoms coexist with visitors to the park that are casual visitors. Theme parks are social landscapes that provide entertainment and narrative experiences for every visitor (King, 2002), therefore, how the groups interact with the park could have an impact on others around them. Through observations and interviews, I will conclude how the groups see their activities impact on others, and in turn, how others react to them within this setting.

This research furthers media analyses related to cultural and theme park studies and by examining the diverse groups of fans that frequent the Disneyland and California Adventure theme parks. I used a variety of qualitative methods to achieve triangulation. This study used observational and interview data, such as thick descriptive data to not only provide context to why the groups act the way that they do, but allows insight into their subcultures and rituals that will later be addressed through interviews. Casual observations allowed for the building of rapport and spontaneous participation with groups. Finally, all of the research questions will be answered with some form of in-depth interview data. This data will allow members of these subcultures to describe their personal connection to the groups, the overall Disney fandom and ethos, and why they choose to participate and represent their fandom in this particular fashion.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Following Blumer (1959), Geertz (1973), and Carey (1988), I chose to use a qualitative methodology to look at the use of symbolic meaning and interaction within subcultures to better understand and describe behavior and rituals. Each of these scholars defines their use of qualitative methods and symbolic meaning differently but helped establish how qualitative researchers identify phenomena, inquire about culture, and observe and interact with subjects. I felt that these communication and data analysis processes provided the best approach to understanding these fans and interpreting their behavior.

I spent a total of 28 days visiting Disneyland and California Adventure from June 19, 2020 through July 9, 2020, and then returned for Dapper Day Weekend October 31, 2020 through November 3, 2020. During that time, I spent an average of four to eight hours at the park depending on what groups were present. Brennen (2013) states that becoming a participant observer is essential to producing a quality ethnographic study and demands day-to-day interaction with participants and immersive observation. Meanwhile, Denzin and Lincoln (1998) suggest that “there are not objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of the observer and the observed” (p. 24). Therefore, I concluded that becoming a participant observer was a viable option in order to collect the data I needed to complete this study. Participant observers are usually categorized into four different groups: 1) the complete observer, someone who is a non-participant; 2) the description observer,

someone who is onsite, but distances themselves; 3) the participant observer, someone who is fully integrated into the culture while taking extensive notes, and 4) the complete participant, who is fully bonded with an organization, picking up their beliefs and values (Brennen, 2013). I tried to keep myself situated within the participant observer category, adopting the posture of a researcher involved in the culture to learn more about the individuals and their practices, but not someone who has “gone native” or abandoned their role as a research completely. Being both an academic and a fan creates an interesting relationship with research. Henry Jenkins (2006) characterizes this collaboration of interests via the notion of the “aca-fan.” He states that being a fan and a fandom researcher allows us to be an expert in a topic, which in turn leads to trust from our participants. He states that claiming a fan identity does not lessen the ethnographic research, but instead states that, “writing as a fan means...that I feel a high degree of responsibility and accountability to the groups being discussed here. I look at my fellow fans as active collaborators in the research process” (1992, p. 7).

Accordingly, I kept up with some of my participants via social media after my initial fieldwork, following their Disney exploits from afar and without much communication. I wanted to make sure I kept contact with many of them in case I had more questions. I returned to Disneyland and California Adventure from October 31, 2019 to November 4, 2019 to collect my last set of interviews during the fall Dapper Day outing at the parks. Here, I reunited with some of my participants from the summer and met and interviewed new ones. During this stint, I participated in

“dapper” dress to attend the convention and also wore my newly patched White Rabbits vest to a Sunday Funday meet-up with the SCs. My continued participations allowed me to observe and talk to each group without feeling like I was an outsider.

In-depth Interviews

Those that agreed to participate in this study were asked about their participation in the social communities under study, their attitudes toward Disney merchandising and parks, and how Disney intellectual property influenced their personal and group identity. Topics included how they dress when they go to a Disney park, their typical activities while at the park, their favorite characters and why, where they bought their Disney-themed merchandise, and how they integrated the characters and communities into to their own lives outside the park.

While I had initially planned to conduct interviews offsite (in or nearby participants’ homes or workplaces), respondents consistently asked if we could conduct the interviews while they were in line for food, rides, or just hanging out in the park. This resulted in a collection of interviews ranging from 10 minutes to over an hour. Some additional interviews were conducted later on the phone or via e-mail and one interview, which totaled more than two hours, was conducted during a SC’s weekly podcast to which I was invited. The interviews were semi-structured and were guided by an interview schedule, but I welcomed discussion on topics as they were presented and deviated as needed to follow interesting details.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis, and notes were dictated either during the interview or soon after to record emotions, body language, and dress

of each participant. Each interview was recorded using the application Otter.ai and was then edited and exported to Microsoft Word after transcription; this is where I would note my observations from the interview. These transcriptions and field notes were repeatedly read and searched for thematic patterns and key phrases during the analysis stage. While there was no set number of required interviews, I set a goal to try and talk to 50 participants to ensure that enough people from each of the three groups were interviewed. Brennen (2013) indicates that the researcher should include enough participants to ensure the same information is repeated often. After 55 subjects, I had reached data saturation, but still needed to attend the Dapper Day celebration to talk to those involved. I collected an additional 20 interviews during this data collection period. The answers were similar to the ones from interviews over the summer, but also added new elements for analysis concerning just the Dapper Day celebration. In total, after looking over all of my interviews, I ended with a total of 73 participants.

Member checks were executed during the interviews by repeating the participant's answer to them as the interview evolved. This was to ensure that the participants' answers were credible and correct, and I allowed them to add to or clarify any answers. Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that this procedure is crucial during interviews to not only establish credibility but to ensure participants are recognizing their answers as true or accurate.

Lastly, one of the key components of this study was being physically present in the park and observing the different fan communities as they participated in their group activities. Observations in qualitative research provide scholars with the ability

to say they have “been there, seen that” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Participant observations and field work create precise and vivid detailed accounts that help support the other areas of data collection, such as interviews. Being a part of group interactions, routines, and conversations allows the researcher to provide thick descriptive data, to participate in a culture, and to build rapport. If I had conducted this study via social media or phone conversations, the data would likely have yielded different, and perhaps less useful, results. Being at the parks not only allowed me to see different rituals and routines in which each group participated, creating a group culture, but it allowed me to gain their trust. Without these in-situ activities, I would not have seen the need to engage my participants as an active member of their various groups.

Coding

Once the interviews were transcribed, I began my coding by reading and noting key terms found among each transcript. Each interview was read multiple times to ensure that all themes and codes were found. I chose a color to represent each new theme and highlighted instances in the data as I saw them occur. The most obvious of the codes were related to the three different group identities with which I am working: social cubs, Disneybounding, and Dapper Day. Aside from these three obvious items, 20 other themes began to emerge. These themes were then combined into like terms and finally, seven overall themes were developed, each of which I will explore in detail below: *community*, or the subcultures these fans have established within the overall Disney fandom; *status*, or fans’ economic ability to not only afford to perform

their fandom in such ways, but to afford in many cases to venture to the Disney parks; *identity*, or the masks and personalities that these participants wear to be accepted within the Disney community; *representation*, or fans' need to be seen and acknowledged by other fans and those at the parks; *imagination*, or fans' ability to create and use Disney intellectual property in unique ways; *nostalgia*, which describes fans' need to revisit their childhood and specific eras of the Disney timeline to better connect with the brand, park, and characters; and, finally, *product*, because these fans are renegotiating Disney's market power and have begun creating their own culture and brand of Disney-related products.

These methods provide me with a rich protocol for engaging the experience of my participants and their involvement with the three different Disney fan communities. Through these interviews and observations, I have the ability to examine each of my research questions through the theoretical lens of symbolic interaction, cultural capital, and the consumer/producer relationship between fans and the Disney corporation.

Research Background and Positionality

Before I begin the analysis section of this study, it is important that I be transparent regarding my background with the subject matter and relationships with the participants. This ensures transferability and dependability within my study, also known as validity and reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I have long been an avid fan of The Walt Disney Company, growing up in what many call the "golden era" of Disney films from the late 1980's to the early 2000's. Not only was I fan of the

intellectual property, characters, and music, I was also a huge fan of the Disney Resort Parks. My first encounter with the Disneyland and California Adventure theme parks was when I was in high school on a school field trip. I then returned two years later for a family vacation, and then once again on my honeymoon. Having only visited the sister park, Walt Disney World, once when I was five, I found myself claiming that Disneyland was my home park.

Because of my love of all things Disney and my research agenda regarding fan communities, it seemed almost obvious that I would choose to do a study in a place I knew well. Due to my personal investment in the fandom, I decided that an objective viewpoint would be the best possible method when conducting interviews and observations. I wanted to keep my personal love for the company and parks out of the data. However, as mentioned before, this became difficult in earning participants' trust, and therefore my objectives were altered to become a participant observer. This change resulted in much richer data, as well as more access to information and more participants. I believe that it also altered my research agenda from being a strictly ethnographic study in the tradition of media anthropology to a hybrid, partially autoethnographic approach. Similar to Rasmussen (2011) and her study regarding Hooter's workers, my experiences with the groups became a part of this study and how I viewed my data after collection. Becoming a part of the groups and relaying my observations and participation through a first-person lens create another segment of rich, descriptive data regarding my research that supplements the interviews I conducted. Ellis & Bochner (1999) describe this as narrative inquiry, a process by

which a researcher intertwines their personal narrative and understanding of a culture or situation with the data they have collected from other individuals, creating a generalized story through the combined narratives. This is not to say that I am no longer a researcher, but rather I used my personal experiences with these fan communities to better support literature written about them and their personal descriptions of their involvement. Anderson (2006) describes this as being highly reflexive: researchers “ethnographic data are situated within their personal experience and sense making. They themselves form part of the representational processes in which they are engaging and are part of the story they are telling” (p. 383).

The analysis and interpretation of the data will be processed by describing the three different fandoms and their experiences individually. Within those narratives, the research questions will be addressed and answered with the data collected. I chose this particular process in presenting the data due to the large amount of data collected and the overlapping nature of the three communities. I feel that this structure will allow the interpretations to be presented in an organized manner that highlights each fan group’s findings individually, but also displays their similarities.

CHAPTER IV

STEPPING OUT IN “DISNEY STYLE”

Defined by style and creativity, two subcultures of the Disney fandom have found popularity among social media platforms that then extend into fans visiting Disneyland. These fans use their creativity to inspire outfits that conjure up the past of Disneyland while fashioning new ways to identify with Disney characters. This chapter explores the productivity of Disneybounders and Dapper Day participants and how they are creating a new Disney culture around adult fashion.

Disneybounders – The Peter Pans

They are not hard to spot, if you know what you are looking for. Disneybounders dress like the many Disney characters you see in the parks and films, but in a casual, nonchalant way that differs from a cosplayer or someone wearing a costume. Using everyday clothing, Disneybounders rely on color-blocking, the method of wearing multiple solid colors together, to communicate character aesthetics.

Disneybounding was a term coined by Disney fan and blogger Leslie Kay in 2011 after she started prepping for an upcoming Walt Disney World trip. Described as a fashion forward way for Disney fans to celebrate their fandom, “Disneybounding” refers to weaving casual clothing to create a character-inspired outfit (Borrenson, 2017). Not to be confused with cosplay, which is strictly prohibited at all Disney Resort Parks (except for children and Halloween events), this type of casual, subversive representation allows fans to have fun without being pegged as in-costume. The difference between Disneybounding and cosplay, is that cosplay is defined as

costumes that are screen-accurate and fully embody characters (Lamerichs, 2010). Disneybounding should not look like a costume, but an interpretation of a character with colors and accessories. One example would be instead of carrying around a fake sword like a cosplayer, a bounder would wear a sword necklace. Instead of wearing a Snow White costume, a bounder would wear a blue shirt, yellow skirt, and red shoes (Borresen, 2017). The Disneybounding following grew from Kay's blog, to her Pinterest board with outfit-inspired pins, to more than 200,000 followers on her personal Instagram. From there, several Disneybounding social media pages popped up and even inspired monthly challenges to encourage fans to participate in bounding inside and outside the parks. In particular, the official Facebook page, Disneybounders Unite!, has over 23,000 followers that post daily inspirations, ask for advice from fellow bounders, and encourage those interested in showing off "their Disney side."

One study regarding Disneybounding found that fans who participate in this phenomenon use bounding as a way to celebrate their Disney identity and reflect upon positive memories from the Disney narrative (Brock, 2017). Brock states:

Disneybounding is not about putting on a show; instead it is a self-reflective act of performing a fan-centered, but deeply personal identity. Disneybounding is about finding a personal identity through the Disney magic and sharing that identity with a group of like-minded individuals. This difference makes Disneybounding a subset of cosplay – everyday cosplay. (2017, p. 313)

Cosplay is a way for fans to extend their participation and explore identities while interacting with others. It is a way for fans to express their talents and fandom at the

same time (Duffett, 2013). Although focused on the addition that Disneybounding provides to cosplaying, Brock provides a pathway into looking at how Disneybounding is an extension of identity. Lantz (2019) goes on to explain that “Disneybounding evokes a specific character, while maintaining a distinction between bounding and costume. ‘Bounding’ is etymologically related to “boundary” or “bounds,” the sense that what visitors do goes up to the edge/boundary of costume without transgressing into full costume” (p. 8). Establishing a trend across the globe, social media accounts for Disneybounding has over 50,000 followers on Facebook and over 91,000 followers on Instagram, and an upcoming book to be released in 2020 regarding popular bounders and their experience.

Childlike Nostalgia

Many Disneybounders can be seen posing for photos in and out of the park in their bright ensembles documenting their outfits for social media and the many Disneybounder social media groups of which they are a part. Once you begin looking for bounders, seeing the color combinations and immediately thinking of certain Disney characters becomes second nature. The ease, access, and creativity of this trend has become a sensation among Disney fans. But for many, it is more than picking out cute clothes that represent a character; it is about seeing the park in a new way and experiencing Disney through the eyes of a child again. Because adults are not allowed to wear costumes in the park, this subtle bending of the rules creates magical experiences that are usually allotted for children, a part of their identity that Strauss (1959) would say is reserved for the parks and the bounding community. Strauss

suggests that fantasy realms, in this case Disneyland, are useful to identity and establish community development because they allow individuals to release tension, fulfill wishes, and have momentary escapes from reality to participate in narratives they deem essential (p. 59). This connection to a text is one of the distinctions between fans and passive audiences.

One of the first questions I asked in my interviews was, “who is your favorite Disney character and why?” It was meant to be an ice-breaker but turned into a representation of who Disneybounders really are. I received the expected answers of Mickey Mouse or someone else from the Fab Five (Mickey and Minnie Mouse, Donald and Daisy Duck, and Goofy), because they are the epitome of Disney intellectual property. Others mentioned a princess or obscure character, but the character mentioned the most, even in offhand comments or explanations of character interactions, was Peter Pan, the embodiment of never growing old and constant adventure. I quickly learned after several interviews that this was not for show or fashion; this was a way to connect to the park and characters. Many of the Bounders planned their outfits around the release of movies, to correspond with events at the park, and in consideration of which characters they hoped to meet that day, some even bringing multiple outfits and changing depending on what was going on. Many Bounders even seek out areas of the park with which to coordinate their outfits in order to make their social media post more impactful. Here, they are not just using the park as a performance space, but as a narrative background to bring their bounds more fully to life. For example, Bounders dressed as princesses may find that Fantasyland

offers the right vibes for photos. If someone is dressed like a Pixar character, Pixar Pier serves as the background. Their choices in outfits is important, but so is their use of the storytelling aspects of the park. They use these elements to make bounding even more interactive in relation to their community. But the planning and effort that Bounders put into their clothing was not an issue. The experience was reminiscent of playing dress up as a young child and getting to step into the shoes of their favorite characters. For example, Natalia, a 35-year-old female remarked on how everyone is a kid at heart when they visit Disneyland, no matter their age:

I think it [Disneybounding] gives you a chance to go [to the park] and if you want to act like a kid, you can and no one's going to be like, 'Oh, why? How stupid does she look? Or how ridiculous is that?' No one's going to criticize you like they would on the outside world. When you're at Disney everyone's like, 'Oh, that's cool. That's kind of neat.' And it doesn't matter if I'm 10-years-old, or if we're 35 and 40, which we are. I think people don't really care and age doesn't matter. You can be a kid at heart at Disney and that's the best part of it. (Natalia, personal communication, June 27, 2019)

To those that choose to Disneybound when visiting the parks, their wardrobe decisions represent a simpler time in their lives, their childhood. Like Natalia, many choose to bound because it allows them to let loose, dress up, and identify and interact with various characters on a level different than that available to the average park visitor. Others, like Mary, who grew up going to the park, believe it is a more fashion forward way of celebrating their love for Disney. Mary told stories of her mom making sure

they all wore something Disney related to the park when she was growing up to really celebrate their love for the characters. Now, Disneybounding allows her to do that but with a more creative twist. Mary was one of the Bounders who gushed over her love for Peter Pan, stating:

Favorite? I would say my interactions with Peter Pan. He's my favorite character. And actually, that's the story that really like, reflects who I am as a person. And just like my ideology is that whole story. So, when I go to Disneyland, and I just interact with Peter Pan, like I love it. And at one point, I remember him specifically coming up to me because I was dressed up as Peter Pan. We took so many pictures and acted like children and it has been one of my favorite memories. (Mary, personal communication, June 21, 2019)

Recognition Through Bounding

When I decided to become a participant observer, I tried to recreate such scenarios in order to understand the excitement behind meeting characters while dressed like them or their counterparts. My first encounter was with Winnie the Pooh at a time when I was clearly dressed as Piglet. The characters do respond differently and spend more time with you, interacting and taking photos, if you put in the effort. It was then that I realized that Bounding created a special experience that many adults, especially those who did not get to experience the park as young children, would miss if they did not dress to identify with these characters. It also made the entire experience less awkward as an adult: I had been to Disneyland multiple times before and stood in line to take pictures with characters, but there is a sense of discomfort in

being a lone adult in line to meet a character with no apparent purpose aside from a quick Instagram post. Kim summed up the experience I had when she said:

It's been a part of my life from day one, so it's more of like now finding my own image in knowing that Disney is what I grew up with, and it's okay that it's part of my adulthood. There's so many different ways to incorporate it into your own life. (Kim, personal communication, November 2, 2019)

Mara, a mom and boutique owner of a boutique specializing in Disney themed hairbows, agrees that Disneybounding has made her park visits more magical and has become a reminder of why she loves Disney and wants to pass the magic on to her own child:

It makes me feel like I can be part of Disney even more rather than just a person visiting in the park because people will comment on the outfits. It gets the cast members excited. We've had some pretty magical moments with some of our Disneybounds which makes it even more special to be in the park and really reinforces why we love Disney. (Mara, personal communication, November 3, 2019)

Many participants, like Melanie, commented on how cast members, characters, and other park goers remark on their attire, praise them for their creativity, and give them personal attention that they would not receive had they not been bounding. Similar to the attention that writers receive when they write fan-fiction, the community encourages this personal expression of fandom, because it transforms from an individual illustration of identity into a collective identity and representation of the

subculture (Jenkins, 1992). These interactions help develop societal standards, rules, and expectations within the Disneybounding community. Once an individual has established the symbols of a group and can interact with others using those symbols, the interactions begin to reflect their personality through inner monologues, reflection, and comparisons. There are not official rules or guidelines to Disneybounding, other than not wearing an official costume, but the standards that I discerned were that colors are a key factor in creating your character, accessories are important and provide character detail, and that one should not be too “costumy.” As long as an individual followed these steps, it appeared that they were accepted as a part of the community. Goffman (1956) states: “thus, when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, that does his behavior as a whole” (p. 35). Goffman, in this case, would say that when bounders go beyond the first step of dressing up and start to interact with the community is when symbolic interaction begins. They are able to share and enjoy the performance of symbols together and highlight how it benefits society or their community. For instance, while observing Disneybounders in the park and in their social media groups, participants are highly encouraging to others that are involved in the community. Whether Bounders stop each other at the park, have a cast member interact with them, or leave a comment on their posted pictures online, these interactions become anticipated throughout the community. Though reminiscence of childhood magic and attention-seeking play a big part in many fandoms, this wistfulness, or longing for a more peaceful time in an

individual's life, plays a much bigger part in the overall identity of those that participate. The simple act of dressing up as particular characters demonstrates performance and building of community. Meaningful and affective bonds create connections that become a central part of a fan's identity (Sandvoss, 2013; Tsay-Vogel and Sanders, 2015). For example, Laura, a Disneybounder and Dapper day attendee, explains how being a part of these communities helps her keep her passion for not only Disney, but many other creative outlets that go into bounding.

I feel like I'm 36 and I have finally found, like, my people and I found a creative community that I can, you know...I love being creative, it doesn't have to be around Disney, but like having something that we're all into so much that you all can relate to so much to and can be so creative with and just something that you all are so passionate about...it's awesome. (Laura, personal communication, November 2, 2019)

Richard, another bounder, also mentioned how the community affirms Bounders and their efforts by recognizing his hard work at creating his outfits:

It's also kind of self-validating, like you may think, like, 'Oh, I'm gonna pick this random obscure Disney character, and you'll, you'll create a whole bound for it and I guarantee at least one person is going to know who you are [character wise] and that makes you feel special because, it's like, 'okay I'm not the only one that appreciates all this esoteric stuff. There's like, a community and there's, like, you know, other people like me (Richard, personal communication, November 1, 2019)

Bounders are creating meaning through their engagement and acceptance with one another while deciding as a collective community that being an adult Disney fan is okay and acceptable both inside and outside of the park. This acceptance, innovation, and communication about being a Disney fan allows these fans to see themselves in others (Jenkins, 2005). Part of that meaning and communication comes from how cast members, characters, and other park attendees react to the creativity of Disneybounders. As mentioned previously, these interactions create moments that feel magical to some Bounders and would not otherwise happen, constructing a self-validation for why one would dress up in the first place:

You're just more excited to come. Disney is fun anyway, but it just adds that little extra element of fun. And it's so cute to watch the characters react. So if you happen to find the character that you're bounding as, they even get excited, so it has that extra element of fun, you know, and then people will notice that you're kind of themed around the park and they'll say, 'oh'... it just adds an extra element of fun. It's just fun. (Sally, personal communication, June 23, 2019)

Product Creation

But cast members and other park goers are not the only ones noticing this new trend. Disneybounders believe that they have caught the eye of Disney corporate and other brands like Loungefly, Boxlunch, and DN Handbags, each of whom work with Disney on themed merchandise. When the trend first started taking off, many bounders resorted to making accessories for their bounds or looking for accessories

outside the Disney stores. Sites like Etsy became popular in finding belts, purses, broaches, pins, and any other accessories boundaries needed to complete their look. But over the past few years, Disney started introducing accessories and clothing that complimented the bounding trend. The shopDisney website even has a section dedicated to bounding clothing and accessories. Therein they state:

As every true bounding fan knows, accessories are the easiest way add that true Disney statement to your look. Handily, shopDisney has loads of quick ways to achieve that Disney difference from our range of Mickey ears, to bags, wallets and jewelry featuring all your favorite characters. With such a wide selection of pieces, what will you choose first? (shopDisney, February 2020)

However, even with Disney-made or -approved bounding merchandise widely available, many Disneybounders still choose to create their own pieces or support smaller shops making unique items.

I probably do a lot more [shopping] outside of Disney because Disney doesn't offer a lot of adult clothing that's not ridiculous with prints. You know, when you're bounding, you're trying to be a little more subtle. So, people have to think about what it is that you're wearing. But you definitely don't want to think too hard on it. So, you definitely have to make sure colors are spot on. (Mara, personal communication, November 3, 2019)

That is one reason that Mara creates character inspired bows for both children and adults to use while Disneybounding. These accessories, with subtle nods to the

character, allow others to identify who you are bounding as without making it as obvious as the majority of the Disney merchandise.

This desire to create or shop outside of the official Disney bubble indicates a desire to keep the power of bounding within the consumer's grasps. After several interviews, I began to sense that Bounders did not want specifically to *avoid* buying from Disney, but instead that the Disney merchandise took away from the subtle and creative gestures that other Bounders looked for. If you were too obvious, you were not doing your part in the community to create a certain ambiance. For example, one of my interview questions asked where participants purchased their items to Disneybound. The majority of participants were in line with Mara, stating that although they do purchase some official Disney merchandise, they prefer to either make their own accessories and clothing items or purchase them from smaller shops because of the creative level and attention to detail that Disney does not always have. To them, many of Disney's accessories and clothing were very commercial and did not present the unique and creative factor most bounders look for. But it should be noted that fans must be careful that they are not just regifting a version of their fandom to the community that is the commercial product reimaged. Instead, Scott (2009) suggests that fan-producers need to make sure their creative ventures are being utilized and fans within the community recognize their efforts as more than recreation. De Certeau (1984) describes this as "advances and retreats, tactics and games played with the text" (p. 75); a type of creation by consumers that creates their own experiences with a text that rivals a producer's materials. On the other hand, Disney's attempt to

create a market for bounders displays a desire to take creative control back. It is obvious that this trend has taken off with hundreds of thousands of followers on the various social media sites participating in the community inside and outside of the park. Otherwise, why would a media conglomerate like Disney pay such close attention and begin trying to service these customers on their level?

But, despite Disney's overtures, shopping outside of Disney contributes to a higher status for those heavily involved in the community. Bounders often eschew products that Disney dictates bounding should be of interest to Bounders; instead, they are creating and buying from outside sources to indicate prestige and elusiveness. The less obvious their accessories, the more a person has to know about bounding and the overall Disney fandom to appreciate their efforts. This insider knowledge separates those with lower cultural capital, the ones submitting to Disney designated items, from those with higher cultural capital, the ones that are putting forth more creative effort. Bounders like Kim appreciate that Disney is trying, but, to her, their attempts are not always attainable or original: "I don't buy from Disney. I've got to be honest. Like I, I'm not super impressed with Disney's attempt to kind of grasp onto bounding because it seems a little too posh to me" (Kim, personal communication, November 2, 2019). There seems to be an attitude regarding the merchandise that Disney provides for Bounders. Although sometimes appropriate for a particular bound, the authenticity and creativity of putting together with those items robs the bounder. Kim, a 36-year-old bounder and Dapper day attendee, goes on to explain that finding the pieces to

Disneybound outside the Disney-approved recommendation structure makes the experience more fun and creative:

What we love about bounding is taking pieces – like she has a Bolero and a certain color and a dress in a certain color – and you match those things because that’s what bounding is. You take very specific coloring from the characters and make a completely new outfit. You know, the costumes and the dresses within the dress shop (a Disney store) are cute, but it’s not very creative. It’s like, ‘oh I put this dress on and I’m bounding,’ and it’s already done for you. The whole fun behind bounding is like, ‘oh my God I found this skirt at a vintage shop and I could totally use it for Mad Madam Mim.

Honestly you want to see how many people notice. (Kim, personal communication, November 2, 2019)

Although bounding has a personal element to it, as many Bounders described choosing characters that represented who they are, there is also an element of wanting to be noticed for their effort. For instance, Kim described Disneybounding, stating that bounding “really adds to other people’s experience. It’s a little more of a secretive thing, but it’s the thing that people keep an eye out for when they’re here” (Kim, personal communication, November 2, 2019). Which is true, in my experience in the park: unless you are aware of the trend, you may notice that someone has chosen to wear clothing with colors that are similar to a character or has accessories that pay homage to certain characters, but you are not an insider into what is really happening. Peaslee (2013) describes this phenomenon as media conduction, a framework in which

public access to different groups creates recognition, ritual, meaning of information being distributed by fans. It also creates a gateway for fan producers to entice consumer practices and create value for their products. Being inside the park helps those outside the community notice more because they are obviously in the Disney mindset, but for those that bound outside of the parks, the secretive aspect becomes a game to see if anyone notices.

Silver, a well-known bouncer in the community, discussed this aspect by describing the experience of bounding at the park and being surrounded by others who also bound as a special experience:

I think dressing in DisneyStyle (another way of describing bounding) at the parks is more fun than doing it outside of the parks because Disneyland is where it will be appreciated the most! You're undoubtedly surrounded by people who like Disney and are happy to be there and those are the people that will notice and appreciate the effort you put into your outfit. I definitely like seeing what other people are wearing at Disneyland and I think it's a really cool pool of creativity and inspiration! It just heightens the experience of being at Disneyland even more when you feel good in what you're wearing and proud of what you put together for the day. (Silver, personal communication via e-mail, December 20, 2019)

While observing bouncers in the park, I noticed many being stopped by other park goers to discuss their accessories and ask where they could purchase them, creating yet another consumer-driven demand for bounding merchandise and setting bouncers

apart from typical Disney fans wearing park merchandise. Even when I would personally stop someone and ask them if they were bounding to start the conversation for an interview, you could instantly see the pride and excitement on their face because you had recognized their efforts. To be honest, the recognition was also stimulating when I would bound. I did not put near as much effort into my bounds as did many of those I interviewed, but just the small gesture and comment really heightened my experience in the park. It made me feel as if I was a part of something that was special, almost as if I was a part of the magic in the park. When I approached many of the people I interviewed, I had to wait for them to take pictures with others that were enjoying their outfits. One experience that stood out the most was with the first couple I interviewed during my time in the park. Julie and Seth were bounding as Ariel and Eric, and as I spotted them, they were taking photos with a little girl who was in an Ariel costume. When I asked about the experience, Julie, who did the Disney college program and now works as a “rent-a-princess,” said that such interactions are common. She said she knows the children do not think they are the characters, but many want to stop and talk because they see a similarity in their “costumes.”

This status symbol dictates that Disney is more than just a piece of clothing or mouse ears to these fans, it is a lifestyle and creative outlet, which is persuaded by the social interaction and encouragement from others in the community. Jenkins (2006) states that “this ability to transform personal reaction into social interaction, spectatorial culture into participatory culture, is one of the central characteristics of

fandom” (p. 41). One becomes part of a community through the interaction and shared feelings about the activity within a subculture. In this case, sharing feelings of inspiration, encouragement, and creativity becomes a reserved experience shared between fans and their performance.

Limitless Boundaries

Disneybounding is not restricted to just park visits. Many bounders choose to continue the trend outside of the parks to “keep the magic alive.” The trend has become a new way to celebrate one’s “Disney Style” and fandom in a personal and creative way by participating in monthly bounding challenges posted on social media or simply coordinating bounds with events in their personal lives. Silver, well-known for her creative bounds states:

I think Disneybounding is really special because it’s so personal. With cosplay, you’re usually trying to look as much like a cartoon character as possible. But, with Disneybounding, it’s about your own personal sense of style / fashion sense and relating it to Disney. It’s much more creative and, like I said, personal! It’s personal because it’s different for everyone and no one will really do a Disneybound the same way, even if you’re trying to copy someone else it’ll still be unique to you because YOU are unique. There are endless possibilities because there are hundreds of characters to emulate and hundreds of ways you could style one singular character! (Silver, personal communication via e-mail, December 20, 2019)

Many bounders stated that bounding for a special event in their lives or celebrating a character on particular days is no different than when others celebrate their fandom, especially those that love sports.

The thing is that, like, this is just like sports right, so my coworkers are all into that and that's their thing, that's their life passion. So, this is just another outlet, it's just different in that you dress up instead of putting on a jersey for Kobe or whatever, and you're dressed up like a character and I don't see anything different. (Laura, personal communication, November 2, 2019)

Jenkins (2013) suggests that “fans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images” (p.23), which describes the ideas and practices of bounders in a simplistic but accurate way. Bounding has grown and become popular among Disney fans because it represents a creative outlet in fan identity performance, and extends the magical experience from the park into everyday life. Out of the three fan communities under investigation here, Bounders are the only ones that use their identity performance to extend boundaries. The park serves as a great place to socialize and bring outfits alive with thematic backgrounds, but bounding, like wearing a sports jersey as mentioned above, is a way to continue the celebration of fandom outside of a designated arena. I believe that because bounding can be a very subtle gesture, it is a genius way to identify and personify characters without being obnoxious about one's dedication to a fandom.

What is interesting about the bounding community is that unlike the other two fan communities discussed in this paper, they are not completely restricted by physical

location. Anyone can bound anywhere. Throughout the year, challenges are released on social media to encourage Disneybounders to be creative and bound outside of the park. For instance, every March, the Disneybounding community participates in a challenge where they have a daily prompt for bounding. The prompt could be a character, a movie, ride, or collection of items that go together like princesses, but the idea is to normalize Disneybounding outside of the parks. These social media pages also release random prompts throughout the year to encourage Bounders to continue their creative efforts inside and outside of the park. Of course, dressing up inside the park has been noted as a more magical experience because people there understand and support your efforts, but the ability to participate in this community without making the journey to the parks allows a symbolic pilgrimage of sorts (Aden, 1999), through which bounders can mentally transport themselves outside of their own habitus into their fan community through the action of bounding. The journey and ability to experience the Disneyland theme park is expensive. Therefore, bounding allows fans to go beyond the text (movies, music, books) that Disney releases and express their fan identity in new and creative ways that allow them to feel more connected to the community that does get to visit the parks. It also creates a new way to differentiate true fans from passive viewers, one that is separate from a true fan pilgrimage. Because bounding is subtle and almost secretive to those outside of the community, it shows a dedication from individuals that otherwise may not be considered when assigning cultural capital within the overall fandom (such as someone simply wearing a Disney themed shirt that anyone could buy at a store). Of

course, bounding has been compared to the dedication that comes with cosplay, but from my observations and interviews, it goes beyond the aspect of dressing up and replicates the creativity and dedication that fans use when writing fan fiction. They are using characters to create a story within their own realm (inside Disney or not) and allowing others to add to the story through social interaction that once was limited to the physical constructs of the Disney parks. The physical aspects of a park enrich Disneybounding, but the creativity and imagination of Bounders has expanded the theme park to the outside world. Whether they are taking pictures in places that complement their character outfit or simply relying on the magic of bounding to reproduce the feeling of being in the park with other fans, they are creating new environments that add to the story and excitement of Disney outside its gates. I believe that without the connectivity of social media platforms and their ability to provide access to new ideas and fans across the globe, the trend of Disneybounding would be limited in its appeal or impact. The visual aspect of pictures and community reaction has made this trend viable to both those that are able to visit the parks and those that cannot.

To Disneybounders, participating in the community allows them to relive magical moments like visiting the park or memories from their childhood by dressing up without having Disney plastered all over their outfits, and allows them to celebrate their Disney side any day of the year. To Bounders, the experience goes beyond buying merchandise; it has become a part of their identity, almost like Peter Pan's shadow attached to their everyday persona. For many, Bounding allows their Disney

side to shine through in a subtle way that is personal and full of pride in themselves, and celebratory of the characters they choose to represent, yet so elusive that it blends into them like a shadow. This symbolic shadow becomes a piece that goes unnoticed unless directly presented in the spotlight – like when they purposefully post about bounding or let someone outside of the community in on their secret. Such performative actions implies that Bounding goes beyond dressing up, casual cosplay, or whatever term used to define it, but rather becomes an extension of the overall fandom community and an individual’s identity.

Dapper Day – Stepping Out In Style

When you talk with Disney bounders, many of these “Peter Pans” will often mention participating, or wanting to participate, in Dapper Day, a special event held during the fall and spring at Disneyland, Walt Disney World, and Disneyland Paris. But despite the crossover from bounding, those that participate in Dapper Day represent a special side of Disney – a vintage, vogueish side. These participants go beyond the boy who never grew up, and instead focus on the timeless fashion and elegance that Wendy teaches Peter.

Marked as a day to “step out in style,” Dapper Day weekend has become an homage to Walt Disney and his vision of the happiest place on Earth. Instead of walking down Main Street USA and seeing visitors dressed in shorts and a t-shirt, you walk through a fashion time machine to Disneyland’s opening day in 1955, when people dressed in their best period clothing. Disney fans and Bounders attend the two-day, unofficial celebration, held at Disneyland, Disneyworld, and the international

park and dress up in character-inspired vintage clothing (Marotta, 2018). Dapper Day is an event that produces events that let you “step out in style!” Started in February 2011 by L.A. designer Justin Jorgenson, Dapper Day Events celebrate a fun, refined style from yesterday and today. The event organizes outings and social events at locations like museums and theme parks. “The Dapper Day Expo is a celebration of stylish living from yesterday and today” (Dapper Day Website, 2019). But most of all, it is an extension of the Disneybounding fandom. Although Disneybounding is not required to participate in Dapper Day, it is encouraged by the majority of the Disney fan communities Jorgenson was inspired to organize Dapper Day after seeing that even his most stylish friends dressed down and “like tourists” when at a Disneyland park. His vision for the event came after seeing sketches of rides where visitors to the park were dressed in their best fashions and wanted to recreate that (Orange County Register, September 10, 2013). This festivity is not in any way associated with Disney or tied to one particular era - although many fans dress in styles from the 1940’s and 1950’s – but has become a celebration for fans to represent their fandom in a unique way that not only observes the Disney narrative and characters, but also honors Walt Disney’s impact on culture during his lifetime. Lanz (2019) describes it as a way for fans to “create a more immersive experience for themselves and other tourists, enhancing the already themed, staged space. They publicly perform their highly stylized fan subculture for both their own and others’ pleasure” (p. 3)

Vintage Status

The vintage ambiance goes far beyond donning hats, dresses, heels, and three-piece suits to a time when Walt Disney was first creating “magic” in the park.

Dressed in a 1950’s-style blue dress with white star and red and white striped belt, I took it upon myself to bound as a vintage, varsity version of Captain America. It felt right honoring such a legend after the events of Marvel’s Cinematic Universe the past year. However, playing dress up in the parks did not feel so right when I first approached the entrance. I had bounded before but had always kept my outfits casual compared to the dress and petticoat I was wearing for the convention. I felt overdressed and quite silly. It was not until I encountered other groups also dressed in vintage clothing that I began to see the magic that Dapper Day entails. The park had a different feel to it that weekend. It really felt as if Walt Disney would walk through the tunnel of Sleeping Beauty’s Castle at any moment. There really was something truly special about embracing the history of the parks for one day and seeing the symbolic nature not through Disney cartoons, but through the perspective of a small American town that anyone and everyone was welcome. Kristen, a vintage influencer on Instagram, echoes this sentiment:

We’re inspired by the vintage look and there's something about being connected to the original design and life of what it looked like when [Walt] Disney walked through the park. It just makes you feel a little less commercial and more like, I'm here to enjoy Disney for what it was originally meant to be

and feel pretty at the same time (Kristen, personal communication, November 2, 2019)

Sally, a bounder who typically dresses in more dapper type bounds even outside of the festive weekend, expressed how much she enjoys celebrating Dapper Day:

Dapper day is kind of like bounding to the tenth power where you're just kind of, like, you put a kind of fancy flair on the traditional, subtle bounding. It's still subtle, but it's just, you're just like dressed to the nines, instead of just in casual wear. And it's nice to see people participate and see how much effort they put into their bounding attire. It's very exciting. And we wish each other happy Dapper Day while passing each other in the park. It's cute. (Sally, personal communication, June 23, 2019).

The weekend starts with a convention where attendees can shop for vintage and vintage-inspired clothing, dance to big band songs, get their hair done in period styles, and even acquire a tattoo. Dressed in clothing spanning the 1920's to the 1960's, some attendees stick to more traditional attire, while some use the opportunity to bound as characters in era appropriate clothing. The convention is a small part compared to the totality of activities that constitute the entire weekend. I attended the convention to learn more about Dapper Day and to talk to participants. What I found was that many people skip this part of the weekend and go straight into the parks, because the parks bring the purpose of the weekend alive. When in the parks on Saturday, you may see a handful of people dressed up at different parts of the day, but Sunday is when Disney is transformed from a tourist attraction into a time machine. By Sunday afternoon, the

areas of Main Street and Sleeping Beauty's castle are bombarded with individuals and groups dressed in vintage clothing. Dapper Day participants use the park as the key to reinvent their stories. Whether bounding or not, these individuals are looking to recreate pictures from Disneyland's opening day and without the park as their background, the true inspiration behind the weekend is lost. While the convention is filled mainly with adults, the parks are filled with families that use this time to coordinate outfits and spend time together reflecting on the past and wonderment of Disney. Mara, who has attended Dapper Day for several years now, states:

I love the era of clothing. I think it's really nice that everybody gets dressed up because sometimes you can go to the parks and there can be some really interesting outfits that maybe aren't so family appropriate, so I love Dapper Day because it gives you that family vibe and it kind of is reminiscent to when the park first opened. (Mara, personal communication, November 3, 2019)

Nostalgia and the longing to return to a simpler time is something Disney has trafficked for much of its corporate history. Whether it is recreating mid-20th century Americana through Main Street USA or bringing to life favorite characters from visitors' childhoods, Disney has made an impression by becoming a part of culture through narratives. Koehler (2017) describes how Disney encourages nostalgia by stating their purpose as a company "where the healing potentiality of nostalgia lives. At the end of the nostalgic drive is a desire to be...returned to a time and place where both the stories and the people they reflect are whole" (p.14). But nostalgia is not the

only enticing factor to the weekend. Like bounders, many Dapper Day participants choose to partake because of the experience and community that surrounds the event:

I actually think it's very inclusive. Like, it's so weird because this group will come up to each other on the street. Like, if I also dress this way in LA, and people will come up to you and be like, 'Oh my God I saw you a Dapper Day!' 'Oh, I saw you at Disney! You look fabulous!' Like they're very inclusive and it's like a way that strangers, are no longer strangers. (Kristen, personal communication, November 2, 2019)

Dapper Day participants are, however, more prone to boundary policing. Those that choose to don the vintage look do tend to regulate those who are dressed appropriately for the occasion and those that are "too commercial," that is, wearing Disney manufactured dresses or clothing that is not from a reputable vintage brand:

You know you're creating a certain image, but you're also kind of upholding an image. Like, for me it's not necessarily a status thing. People visit [the parks] every day from out of town and whatnot and we're in dapper or bounding and we have become an image. It's like we're something that is a part of the park and they can appreciate it. Like [they say] 'Oh my gosh there's somebody who's actually bounding and they're inventing.'. But I think that's what I look like, that's how I feel like when I'm walking in the parks. But it's a lot of paying tribute to, like Disney for creating this. We want to give him a special moment of appreciation as we walk through the park. (Kim, personal communication, November 2, 2019)

Dapper Community

Creating a particular image for brands is an important marketing strategy, one that influences fan communities and the main reason for the convention that is attached to the park outing. There you will find reputable vintage brands that are highly accepted among Dapper Day participants and the vintage scene. Arsel and Thompson (2010) found that stigmas surrounding major brands endure within the marketplace and discovered that many times, fans and consumers of different brands will go out of their way to disassociate with brands or change the consumer habits of a brand. By looking at social experiences and cultural capital within the marketplace of popular brands, they were able to determine that aesthetics and socio-cultural forces impact whether audience consume brands. The reason is because fans may enjoy being involved in a fan community or enjoy a particular brand, but do not like the identity that comes with being a consumer of it. Therefore, they make a conscious effort to change stigmas associated with particular brands. Disney fans are constantly facing these types of problems. Many participants discussed how being an adult that enjoys Disney and the Disney parks comes with judgment from other adults who associate Disney with childlike behavior. Specifically, they mentioned being adults who enjoy going to the Disney parks without a family in tow. Even millennials faced major backlash this past year as adults with families shamed the generation by calling them “childless millennials” and complaining about their love for something that children should be enjoying (Bartirromo, 2019). Dapper Day in turn allows adults to “play dress up” and enjoy the parks in an adult and fashionable way.

Culturally, self and group identity are not the only ways in which fandoms are defined. Consumer practices and stigmas also play a part. “In these cases, consumers are drawn to the consumption field by its affiliated marketplace myth and continue to garner identity value from these meanings, despite the stigmatizing association that circulates in the broader culture” (Arsel & Thompson, 2010, p. 3). Despite what others outside the Disney fandom might think, those involved in the community feel an appreciation for each other, so much so that some become influencers within the fandom. Kim talked about how some Disney affiliated brands have met those stigmas with products that seem more adult in nature:

I mean it's just been a part of me from day one, so it's more of like now finding my own image in knowing that Disney is what I grew up with and it's okay that that's part of my adulthood. So, it's more of like, there's so many different ways to incorporate in your own life, Her Universe, Disney Couture... I mean they're definitely making their image, more of what we are. (Kim, personal communication, November 2, 2019)

Glamour Magazine (2019) even wrote a piece on why “It’s Not Weird to be an Adult Women Who Loves Disney” citing several well-known Disney influencers and how their love for Disney has transcended the many stereotypes surrounding adults who enjoy the media conglomerate, stating that, “when asked about the stigma attached to adult women visiting the parks, they shut it down. As these three [participants they interviewed] see it, everyone’s a fan of *something*—why should enjoying a roller coaster through space in an intergalactic Tomorrowland be so different” (pp. 22).

Dapper Day, like bounding, has created a subculture that celebrates adults loving Disney and encourages participation by reveling creativity. This is not the Disney fandom that many of these fan's parents grew up. It has evolved and changed into an inclusive community that celebrate each other's love and dedication to Disney since their childhood. But, with any fandom, dedication and knowledge plays a part in who is considered a committed versus a casual fan.

Dapper Hierarchy

Hierarchies within fandom become an important role in determining fanship and where you are placed within certain subcultures . Stigmas surrounding those that partake in Dapper Day seem to stem from social media, while Disneybounding has an extensive social media presence, the acceptance and encouragement is seen more in the bounding circles, versus the dapper ones.

There is a weird subculture [within the bounding/dapper community] that started to happen in the Instagram world of people who treat you like they're better than you because they have more followers. It's like, don't get caught up in that and don't even focus on that. Who gives like two bananas? Like, it doesn't matter. (Kim, personal communication, November 2, 2019)

But it does. Followers, outfit inspirations, and time put into the subculture play a huge part in the overall hierarchy. Kim went on to discuss that those that bound in dapper dress have become more popular due to the exclusiveness of the pieces they use in their wardrobe. But she believes that it should not matter and that bounding in general should be celebrated. The problem though is that the distinction does seem to matter to

those involved in both communities. Stepping out in style and donning one's "Sunday best" creates a standard for those wanting to participate, even for those wanting to bound in vintage clothing. The social hierarchy surrounding those who participate creates rules within the community that need to be followed, lest one not be allowed within the inner circles of the fandom. Although no one is excluded from participating, judgement from those highly involved in the Dapper community do decide who is actually dapper and who is not. The entire Dapper Day affair is not sponsored by Disney, therefore, visitors in the park that are unaware of the event are also excluded in participating in the fandom, at least until the following year, assuming they are exposed to the Dapper culture. Among my interview participants, one particular group commented on how wonderful the Dapper community is and the acceptance it provides to so many looking to join. In the same breath, two young women walked by in Disney-marketed dresses and the same group commented on how "commercial their attire was." It was an off-hand comment, and I do not think the Dapper participants realized the somewhat hypocritical attitude they had established. It stuck with me as I observed others participating in the weekend. There seemed to be a celebrity status bestowed upon some individuals who participated and their apparent fans who circled them for pictures. The majority of participants, like me, could recognize those heavily involved in the community. I don't know about others, but I compared my simple attire to many of theirs, wondering if I fit the bill for the celebration. But despite the difference in status and attire among those that participated, the overall sentiment of the weekend and celebration was executed well by those involved in the fandom.

Walking with Walt Disney

The orchestration of Dapper Day enhances the fan experience by bringing a touch of status, symbolism, and nostalgia. Nathan Hunt (2011) characterizes nostalgia as a “mode of interpretation,” stating that, “narratives circulated in fandom are nostalgic in that they seek to fix or reiterate histories of production as essential contexts for the contemporary reading” (p. 98). Dapper Day Disney fans do this by recreating a chronotope, in this case, a time and place when the park first opened, and the status and class that was held during that time. Bakhtin (1981) stated that specific places in time, such as the chronotype depicted above, allow audiences to read a text through an artistic lens of time, allowing the culture of a time to dictate a theme. Disneyland provides the perfect setting for such a chronotype due to its symbolic landscapes and cultural narratives (King, 2002). Main Street USA, for instance, was built specifically to prompt nostalgia for Marceline, Missouri. As King (2002) suggests, “Disneyland’s power, shared with other compelling landscapes, is rooted in culture and shaped as a matrix of cues that point to our most passionate and deeply felt ideas about who we are and how we think as people” (p. 6). Lantz (2019) states:

Main Street USA evokes a fictional idea of the American small town (inspired by Walt Disney’s hometown of Marceline, Montana, but not at all a true or exacting representation); it also obfuscates that fact that the buildings and facades of Main Street are clearly markers of white, straight, middle-class culture. In a similar vein, Dapper Day privileges a bourgeois or mainstream, turn-of-the-century sensibility. This cultural framework marginalizes

difference based in gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality, and turns that difference into a form of tourism- performance—people to be gawked at or mocked. (p. 1351)

It is through the representation of American culture that Disney's theme parks transport visitors to another time. The addition of the vintage dress simply enhances the landscape and transportation of narratives. Reflected in immersive storytelling and themed spaces, Disney has become an echo of the ideologies of family, country, small towns, and so on that allow it to take on an all-American and wholesome aesthetic that could be said to be missing in today's culture. In a way, it glosses over and simplifies memories of the past and makes them seem perfect, even in reality, the truth about the past was far from it (Lankauskas, 2014, p.40). King (2002) states:

Like all great artists, Disney showed us how to see our own recent past as a culmination of the artforms of the past: architecture, painting, novels, films, theater. His conception of a "total immersion" experience to transport the park traveler back in time and across vast spaces applied the power of the physical setting to capture the imagination of audiences of every age and origin. (p. 14)

Those that participate have taken a period of time that has long-been made into a stereotype and have attempted to recreate it in a weekend that is desirable and profitable for at least a subculture of the massive Disney fandom. By using the physical space of Disney and creating a chronotope of Disneyland's past, Dapper Day has taken the symbolic landscape and culture Walt Disney dreamed of and introduced it to a new generation. Doss (1997) states that Disneyland was envisioned as a place

for families that was a structured ideal vision of what America should be within the walls of a theme park. Through the use of eccentric characters, constructed neighborly sets, and the magical power of social subversion, Disneyland becomes the ideal space in which the imagination can engage with the familiar myths and rituals that Dapper Day has deemed the superb era of American life.

Both Disneybounders and the Dapper Day community encompass the “two elements” that Disneyland relies on to succeed: “A particular kind of utopia and a special type of fandom” (Koren-Kuik, 2013, p. 146). Both fan communities have pushed the boundaries of physical space and clothing to enrich their “Disneyside” and explore how dress, location, and nostalgia can inspire fan creativity to generate a producer minded atmosphere by fans for fans.

CHAPTER V

DISNEY GANGS/SC: DIFFERENT PATCH, SAME LOVE

One of the more unique Disney fandoms revolves around what the public commonly refers to as the Disney Gangs. These social clubs (SC's), the term they prefer, are a hierarchy of voted-in members who are seeking other non-traditional Disney fans with whom to celebrate their fandom. Similar to the Lost Boys of Neverland, these fans are cloaked in denim vests with club insignia patches on the back, Disney SCs are in the parks for a purpose:

...for members to feel like they belong somewhere. Too often, those who don't fit the mold - the artists, the bikers, the self-proclaimed freaks - find themselves ostracized and alienated from society at large. The clubs give them a place to commune with others like them - who also happen to love Disney.
(Saylor, 2018)

Starting with The Neverlanders in 2013, the SC's have grown from a few clubs of annual passholders to more than 150, with many more looking to establish themselves. Disneyland SCs revolve around Disney characters, narratives, rides, and even Walt Disney himself, with names like The White Rabbits, The Flynn Riders, Walt's Most Wanted, and many more, encompassing anything and everything Disney. Some clubs are smaller with less than 10 members, while others boast about their large memberships of 200 (Social Clubs of Disneyland, 2018).

Although the clubs claim they are not gangs, you can see many of them in the parks aiming to take over rides and areas, creating possible access issues for the general public. Many of the group members say their aim is to simply celebrate Disney and participate in charitable giving (Kaminsky, 2018), but that does not stop other fans and park-goers from judging them:

Not only do Disneyland social club members take their fandom to the next level, but the way they present themselves to the world — and the way they're perceived by other park guests — tells a complex story. Nonetheless, the outsider aesthetic causes a lot of problems for the social clubs. Numerous Reddit comments gripe about the social clubs' habit of "ride takeovers" (basically, ensuring that all members make it onto a ride vehicle at the same time); taking up too much space in congested areas; or perhaps most amusingly, shouting obscure Disney trivia at each other while waiting in line. (Dickson, 2019)

Although the clubs state they are not gangs, a lawsuit has been filed between two clubs regarding protection money during a charity walk, causing a negative narrative toward all clubs (Martin, 2018). Deemed as a "dark undercurrent" to this Disney fandom, the lawsuit states that the Mainstreet Fire Station 55 SC's leader was terrorized by the head of the White Rabbits SC and accuses the White Rabbits, and 18 other members of defamation, invasion of privacy, conspiracy, and intentional infliction of emotional distress (Martin, 2018). For several in the community, this topic is a sore spot that does not represent them or their fandom in the best light,

specifically since one of the accusers, to them, was not really ever apart of the SC scene. But despite their social purpose, the Disney SCs do not present the most communal of appearances to other clubs and outside visitors to the park, especially the biggest one, the White Rabbits.

What's in a Vest?

The White Rabbits' reputation came with many warnings before I ever approached one of the members. Park-goers told me of their unruly behavior and gang-like mentality. Other SC described them as old school compared to their "new school" club approach, warning me that they would not want me talking to them. And of course, the media narratives surrounding *any* Disney SC all but warned me that conversations with these groups would be impossible. It was not until I had been turned away as a researcher by several SCs for asking too many questions that I became brave enough to seek out a vest with a white rabbit emblazoned on the back. It just so happened that interviewing Nick, a prominent member of the White Rabbits, would break down the walls I needed to make connections. From there, I was welcomed into the SC community with open arms and six months later, I would become a White Rabbit.

With over 100 SCs visiting the parks every week for Sunday Funday, it comes as no surprise that guests feel their presence. But the identity that the media and other park goers have given the SCs is not one they want to adopt. Many SC members wonder what is so off-putting about them. Is it their appearance which is not always the squeaky-clean persona that many Disney fans have, but instead a vibrant

masterpiece of tattoos and brightly colored hair? What about their vulgar yet hysterical theatrics when together? Or is it simply the stigma that comes with the three-piece patch set attached to a sleeveless denim vest, a symbol of many biker organizations? Jack, the president and founder of the White Rabbits, reflects upon the impression made upon others in the park environment by SC members:

They're always going to talk shit. Do you think if we would have been wearing, like, collegiate cardigans, we wouldn't have got the same shit as wearing the denim biker vest? Probably not. I guess it would be no different than a large group of adults wearing the same t-shirts. (Jack, personal communication, July 9, 2019)

Jack's sentiment regarding the attire is just one opinion among the SC community. Some agree with him while others honor the tradition and sentiment that comes with the vest, tagging them as outsiders. The deep-rooted oppositional nature of the biker vest causes a push and pull on the SCs. The association of a patched vest is inherent in the biker culture, especially within the Harley Davidson sub-culture indicating a "hard-core and outlaw" ideology that is associated with acting out and being wild in the general public (Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schröder, 2008). Consumer brands associated with such iconography carries symbolic weight in many cultures, and that even with further integration among other groups or fandoms, these associations can be hard to shake (Sandvoss, 2005). When one is surrounded by squeaky clean families in matching t-shirts and Mickey ears, being tattooed and pierced makes one stand out.

To many SC members, like Todd, this is why the community and identity associated with their vests and patches means so much:

People come from all walks of life. So, you know, normally you wouldn't approach somebody that looks like me or somebody that looks like you, but it's very easy in this group; it's seamless. Like when you get these groups together it's just very easy and nobody really looks at the look of the person. (Todd, personal communication, July 9, 2019)

To some, the idea of the vest and its ideology and past is an interesting dichotomy within the parks. Tim, the president of the Alley Cats said:

Almost all of the Social Clubs have vests to express what they love about Disney. This includes pins, patches, supporter patches from other clubs and most importantly, their club logo and name displayed in the style of a motorcycle club. It is all for fun and not meant to be taken seriously. After all, if I was trying to look tough in Disneyland, I wouldn't have patches on the back representing a couple of kittens. (Tim, personal communication via e-mail, July 2019)

With so many different clubs, what sets each one of them apart is not so much the vest, but the patch on the back. The characters, rides, and names that each club wears represents who they are and what they stand for. But that is just the back of the vest. The fronts of the vest are weighed down with Disney pins, non-Disney pins, supporter patches, and Disney related patches. "The entire vest is steeped in enough symbolism to rival the most medal-heavy military uniform, combing the romance of

group membership with the thrill of self-expression” (Fraade-Blazer & Glazer, 2017, p. 143). Chosen with care, every part of the vest is a mirror into the emotional involvement these fans have with Disney:

I guess you could say it is about the recognition... it's to be affiliated with something. I think it's just everybody has a really high liking and love for Disney, and this is how we express it. Instead of just being a normal person that comes in a t-shirt. (Gus, personal communication, June 30, 2019)

Gus, a member of Stich’s Shenanigans, spoke in great length of how Disney was a part of his life from the time he was a small child to now, into his 60’s. For him, wearing his vest had become a conversation piece in the parks, allowing him to express his love for the SC community with others, but also share in his love and knowledge of the Disney parks. Many SC members feel that their vest is an extension of them. If you look closely, the carefully chosen array of pins on each member’s vest is usually themed. Some have chosen particular characters with whom they choose to associate, while others display pride in their favorite rides. To some, having these iconic characters, rides, and even their SC’s patch mean so much to them that they get tattoos of the symbols to carry their pride with them, even when not wearing their vest. Some SC’s even encourage tattoos of their patches after members have been a part of the scene for so many years to show their dedication. Similar to Disneybounders, this identification and celebration of Disney is an extension of their identity and dedication to the media company.

Community Status

But for many SC members, the vest embodies more than just the SC community and pride for Disney memorabilia and characters; it also represents financial stability in being able to afford the annual pass, nostalgia for their youth, and coming to the park with their families (and now their chosen families) and showing that being an adult who loves Disney and the parks is not something to be ashamed of. Some SCs even take it upon themselves to be, in their words, honorary cast members, who can help other visitors with information and facts about the park, such as Alexa, a member of the Port Royals.

“You're here to talk to people, especially the other social clubs, which are amazing. They're all incredible. But others in the park come up to you, they talk to you. It feels like you're a representative of the park without being an employee” (Alexa, personal communication July 3, 2019).

Fan communities like SCs are connected not only by the structure and atmosphere they create, but by a common use of symbols to create meaning (Strauss, 2005). For instance, Mickey's Tripod's, a newer SC (established just three years ago), said that they wanted a group that would go around and photograph the park together. Therefore, they chose Mickey framing a photo with his hands as their vest symbol. Mickey's Fun Wheelers chose the symbol of the Pal-A-Round, a Ferris Wheel located in California Adventure, and formerly known as the Fun Wheel, as their symbol because the founders of the club got engaged in front of the ride. Stitch's Shenanigans chose Stitch, from the film *Lilo and Stich* (2002), because a key phrase in the film

states, “Ohana means family. Family means nobody gets left behind or forgotten.” But the vest becomes more than just a group associated with a symbol or motive, it brings together a group of people who form friendships and a connection to one another outside of the symbols that brought them together. For instance, Jack explains that the SC symbol brought together many in his club, but it becomes so much more than that:

I think part of your identity is, who you do have as friends? You know what I mean? And since there is a good amount of my friends that come from the social club community, I guess it would be easy to say that it is part of my identity. Now I'm not walking around in a White Rabbit vest and stuff in my day-to-day life, but it is part of my identity because there has been so many legitimate friends that have been made in the social club community that it does travel outside of the park into your (SC members) everyday life. (Jack, personal communication, July 9, 2019)

For some of the earliest clubs, like the Main Street Elite, of which Eddie is a member, the club has grown beyond the vest. Yet, the community still revolves around the symbolic properties of their club, the members, and the Disneyland parks.

I feel like for us as an older group, because we wore our vest every single day while we're here, like, literally for years and years... it's just...wearing the vest isn't as important anymore. It was in the past, but like now, we just love being a part of a club and being here together. The vest is beautiful. The vest solidifies us as a group of people that like identify each other as, ‘Hey, we love the same things and we love Disneyland as well’ but like I think for us we've

kind of grown beyond the vest. (Edward, personal communication, June 23, 2019)

Becoming a White Rabbit

But whether they wear the vest or not, the club's representation has become a well-known image in the park. Cast members recognize the club members who frequent the park on a weekly basis and have even been known to call anyone who is in a SC a "bunny" (because the White Rabbits are the largest of the SCs). Wearing a vest in the park was an interesting experience. I became a member of the White Rabbit's before I returned to Disneyland for the second part of my data collection. Unlike many of the SCs, the White Rabbits do not have an initiation process. If the President, Jack, meets you and thinks you fit in, you are good to go, but you get three strikes to "fuck up" and after that, you are out. Many of the other clubs make their new members go through several months of tasks to join. For instance, the Big Bad Wolves make their new members do scavenger hunts through the park looking for other SC members with whom they must take pictures, certain characters with whom they must interact, and several other similar tasks. But no matter the process to get in, once you are a part of the SC, you are treated like family – by those with vests on, at least. The cast members and other park goers are a different story.

It was interesting to see how cast members treated me, especially when going through security and bag check. I was often stopped and talked to longer by cast members while checking my bag. They would ask what I was up to in the parks that day or ask me about all of my pins to ensure I was there slightly longer than when I

did not wear my vest. I was also not called “princess” by cast members while wearing my vest, a common signifier they use for women of all ages when interacting with them in the park. I do not want to say that I was being monitored or singled out, but it felt as if I was being watched more than the average guest. When one wears a vest in the park, even if they are not part of a group, they are noticed. Like many of the members have stated, the vest and patch unite them as individuals that all enjoy Disney, but it also singles them out as outsiders in comparison to others in the park.

Known for taking over areas of the park for Sunday Funday Meetups and trying to fit as many SC members in line for a ride at a time, their love for all things Disney does not go unnoticed. Take for instance, Nick the first White Rabbit I spoke to. He is a very tall male and stands apart from the crowd because of his height. Add a biker vest, his tattoos, and piercings, and he could be taken as a menacing individual. Therefore, he takes as much time as needed to talk to anyone that asks about the SC scene, the White Rabbits, or just his love for Disney, because he wants to shed off the negative light that has been placed on the community. He goes on to explain that because he wears a vest, he, along with other members of the SC community, take it upon themselves to be a governing force.

For me, it's different than any other fan, because I have a vest on my back and social clubs hold each other to a very high standard - like, beyond any standard a normal guest would have. Because if I'm a jerk and I'm walking around without my vest on, they just say, ‘oh, it's some tall dude with a black hat on backwards.’ But if I'm a jerk with my vest on, then they're like, ‘Oh, it's a tall

dude with a black hat AND a White Rabbit vest on.’ It’s a lot easier to identify. (Nick, personal communication, June 30, 2019).

SC members understand that they have a reputation that follows them in the park and do their best to go above and beyond for other guests in the park.

We hold our standards very high. The number one rule in any social club is to respect the park and respect the rules. That's just the way it is, you know? You hear these stories where social clubs are claiming territories. That never happened. You hear social clubs have to trip people in order to become a member. That never happens. Because if we did, we're so easily recognizable. Security doesn't care if we have a vest on or not, they're going to go, ‘Hey, you come here’ and they're going to take our pass, just like anybody else. So, we have to hold ourselves accountable to a much higher standard. (Nick, personal communication, June 30, 2019)

The SC members police themselves through several different hierarchies. Mainly presidents and founders are required to keep members in check while at the park representing their patches. The White Rabbits have also dictated a hierarchy within their own club that observes the activities of the other clubs by choosing valued members as “cards” (sticking with the *Alice and Wonderland* (1951) theme). Nick serves as a card for the White Rabbits, which is why he spoke so valiantly of following the rules of the SC’s; it is become a part of his identity within the club. The hierarchy found within the SC community differs from the ones found in the bounding and dapper communities because it focuses on fandom procedures and structures

rather than popularity and participation. Similar to biker gangs, the SC hierarchy is based upon group status; seniority, participation, and leadership among the community (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

When interviewing members, I was often referred to presidents of clubs, because their information was filtered for those asking about the community and altered once they knew your intent for the interview. Before I became a member of the SC scene, many of the members were cordial and would invite me to hang out with them in the park, but you could tell that they were guarded as to what to say and do with an outsider in their midst. They might leave me one-on-one with a member while the others did their usual things. I was also questioned by many if I turned up to a Sunday Funday hangout about my intentions and who invited me. Their reputation has been so tainted by media, rumors, and a few individuals' actions while in the park that they wanted to make sure anyone who came around was authentic to the cause. When I returned in November with a patch on my back, the atmosphere changed significantly. I was no longer the outsider asking questions and intruding on their time at the parks. I was one of them. I was welcomed with smiles and hugs rather than cautioned looks and muted greetings. It was just accepted that I was going on rides with members and a part of the conversations, which changed from guarded answers to hilarious antics. For instance, when I returned, I was immediately put in-line with several clubs to ride Pirates of the Caribbean. I had ridden rides with the SC community before, but they all seemed to be on their best behavior and talked normally among each other. This time it was different. We got into our boat on the

ride and immediately the chastising of others on the ride began. Inside of Pirates is a very expensive restaurant where guests are eating and can see others riding the ride and vice versa. Before the vest, they would have enjoyed the ride together, but with a vest, I was witness to them yelling at restaurant goers asking “those bougie-ass people to throw them some rolls.” To be honest, I laughed along with them and realized that they were just being themselves, despite the many families aboard with us.

Park Rituals

The change in atmosphere and interaction allowed me to see a different side to the SC community, one that represented them so much better than the guarded persona I had encountered before. However rough their external shell, they were simply kids at heart enjoying the parks in a more adult and humorous way. But to the SC community, it is not just about visiting the park and seeing each other. To them, being a part of a family atmosphere that is so huge is about giving back to each other and those outside of the community, especially children, because that is so inherent in Disney’s culture. Many clubs raise money for charity by selling support patches for their club. These patches dictate a friendship among the hundreds of clubs and allow members of different SC’s to support one another. This support is often seen when new members are patched in at “patching ceremonies” which are usually held somewhere in the park. Members from all over the community gather together to say welcome and congratulate newly established members. But the support does not end there. One ritual among the SC community is using social media to “check-in” to the parks by posting a selfie or back-patch picture to indicate they are in the parks and ready to

hang out. Each club has a particular place in the park that has been claimed as their check-in spot and often, many other clubs will post selfies at each other's check-ins to show support. Another representation of raising money for charity, along with showing status, is seen in challenge coins. A standard way to see who has been involved in the SC community longer than others, or who has more pull, is to ask them to show you their challenge coins. These coins are etched with the insignia of the clubs and represents the members like their vests. However, certain coins are worth more in the social hierarchy than others – like the first edition White Rabbit coin. This coin was one of the first among the SC community and are a coveted prized possession for a member of any club. Why? It represents your status among the clubs and how long you have been a part of the scene. Many clubs now have their own challenge coins or something of similar representation to trade among each other but owning a first edition of the White Rabbit coin is special. I had seen the coin presented in many pictures online while researching the groups, but never understood the importance of it until I spoke to the members. It was actually one of the first items, Greg, a long-time White Rabbit member, pulled out of his vest pocket to show me when we talked. Greg actually has three coins, the first and second edition of the White Rabbit coins and another coin representing a podcast that some of the White Rabbits participate in each week. I have one of the latter coins, as I was a guest on the podcast, but that means nothing compared to the frenzy I saw when Greg pulled out his other coins. Many guests pretended to swipe them from his hand and joke that their worth more than him. These coins are often sold at a high value on social media to

other members when someone falls out of the SC community. But the coins are not the only way to show allegiance. These small, but significant gestures are part of the overall social hierarchy that the SC's have established. You can see these rituals from the outside, but the meaning is often left to those highly involved in the community. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) found that the social process within subcultures, such as the SC's or biker gangs, is an important part of the overall ecosystem of a society. They state:

Becoming a member of a subculture of consumption generally means entering at the bottom of a status hierarchy and undergoing a process of socialization. Socialization brings about a transformation of the individual that entails an evolution of motives for involvement and a deepening of commitment to the subculture and its ethos. (p. 56)

Interestingly enough, the SC's feel that Disney is trying to pilfer part of their socialization, identity, and traditions by releasing iron-on patches similar to the ones that the SC community uses to signify their clubs and connections. The patches released by Disney are far from the customized patches the SC's use, but many feel that Disney is using their dedication to characters, rides, and the park as a marketing tool. Daisy, a member of Mickey's Fun Wheelers, described her thoughts on the patches seen in Disney stores by saying:

They know we're fans, and they know that we love anything Disney at the end of the day. So, it's good. Once we started seeing them [Disney generated patches], a couple of people were like 'Really? They just try to make money

out of our ideas.’ But at the end of the day, it opens more people to enjoy what we’re already doing. (Daisy, personal communication, June 30, 2019)

While I was participating in park activities with the SC’s, we were stopped multiple times by people in the park asking where they could buy the vests or patches they wore. Their creativity, similar to the Disneybounders, was recognized and those that were outsiders of the group wanted to know how they could become a part of it, even if it was just to purchase a patch they thought was interesting. Tim, described his experience:

It’s fun to have people approach and ask about our vests. Most people really enjoy seeing our patches and tell us how much they love the Aristocats. I have [met] some very wonderful people from them approaching. I have made fun pin trades and had great conversations with these people. The vests also help people identify other like-minded Disney fans. When I am in the parks and I see someone else with a vest and their club logo/name then it’s easy to approach them and make some new friends. (Tim, personal communication via e-mail, July 6, 2019).

The interest in the patches and unique form of fandom expression displays a small shift in how the SC community is seen by some visitors. De Certeau (1984) states that:

Marginality is today no longer limited to minority groups, but is rather massive and pervasive; this cultural activity of the non-producers of culture, an activity that is unsigned, unreadable, and unsymbolized remains the only one possible

for all those who nevertheless buy and pay for the showy products through which a productivist economy articulates itself. (p. xvii)

De Certeau's statement demonstrates how the use and re-use of products whether from a main producer or a consumer producer is related, and those that do not produce products will seek popular items out as their own. Whether the release of the Disney related patches was a power statement towards the SCs is not known, but the power that the SC's have as producers is evident in their ability to create a community worth noting in the parks.

All in all, the SC scene has made a mark in the Disney fandom and certainly within the walls of Disneyland. Daniel, a member of Tomorrowland's Ravensers, described the identity of the SC community by stating: "We're nothing but Disney nerds in vests" (Daniel, personal communication, June 20, 2019). But in reality, they represent far more. By being outsiders in a place known around the world, members of different SCs have bonded together to show that being a Disney fan can be represented in a lot of different ways, and that just because they represent their fandom differently, does not mean they do not have cultural taste in the overall fandom. Some of their biggest judgement has come from others in the overall Disney fandom. Jack states:

The social club community have actually had to battle a bad rap amongst the Disney fan subcultures, too. I mean that in fact, some of the biggest haters of the social club community come from within other Disney sub subcultures and it's mainly people that have never hung out they never really talked to them. (Jack, personal communication, July 9, 2019).

Personally, after being involved in the three groups looked at in this study, I feel that the SC community by far is the most knowledgeable about Disney, the characters, and the park. Ironically, however, their appearance marks them as outsiders to the other subcultures, who present with what might be described as more “wholesome” looks. But nonetheless, these fans have come together to form a subculture that allows them to be who they are without apologizing and still enjoy the happiest place on earth, just with their own twist.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The first day I walked into the Disneyland parks, I imagined I would discover these three groups, Disneybounders, Dapper Day participants, and Disney Social Clubs, enjoying Disney like I, a very avid Disney fan, did, but with a slight twist in performance. I figured they would ride the rides, eat food, and enjoy shows like any other visitor, but that their experience may be heighten slightly from their wardrobe or ease of access to the park. It was not until I dropped the notion of being an outside observer and had a little faith, trust and pixie dust that I grasped how important these groups are to the Disneyland atmosphere and fan communities, and how each of them are intertwined within each other, creating an even stronger bond and stance within fan representation. Being at Disney dressed a particular way to express their fandom was not at all the reason for their existence. Instead, I learned that their identity performance was dependent on each other; the social interaction and acceptance. These subcultures have created their own intragroup consciousness that does not necessarily go along with the intergroup (overall Disney fandom) rituals that have been established, creating new and creative ways to display their fandom, find acceptance, and express a diverse part of their identity.

Community and Nostalgia

To these groups, being a Disney fan and going to Disneyland is not just another visit to a theme park, no matter how many times they have been; and trust me, these people have been to Disneyland a lot with the majority of them being annual

passholders for years. Instead, the Disneyland theme parks are a space in which their fan performance for all things Disney is accepted and encouraged. It is a space where they can find like-minded adults who love Disney, but do not want to visit the parks alone for various reasons. Rebecca, a 35-year-old Disneybounder, said this about being in the bounding community:

A Disney fan is someone who I think would truly understand the magic of Disney. They don't just come for a vacation. It's an experience. You come and you have a commonality with people here and so I think a true fan really acknowledges that. Like, as you see, I'm 35, I'm dressed as Ariel and it's a place where you just come, and you don't worry about being judged. And it just...it's magic. It's total magic and I love it. (Rebecca, personal communication, June 27, 2019).

When I met Rebecca, she had been exclusively involved in the Disneybounding communities online and that particular visit to the park was the first time she was going to meet up with other bounders and enjoy the park. By taking the next step in meeting outside of social media, she added another layer of fandom and connectivity with others by sharing not only an affinity to Disney and the Bounding community, but by experiencing it together within a physical realm that brings it to life in a different way. She also stated that being a part of the bounding community saved her from a dark place in her life, demonstrating how powerful fan communities can be once someone is involved. Koehler (2017) describes this therapeutic and accepting response as Disney's greatest tool, stating, "The Disney lens provides a cathartic space

for healing the pain of social, spiritual, and cultural alienation” (p.13). It is interesting to see that these communities overcome many of the stresses that come with visiting Disney, such as crowds, money, and time. To them, being a part of the magic and enjoying the experience with like-minded people is worth the negative things that are associated with visiting a theme park. To them, the involvement, participation, and performance of being a Disney fan is everything, and their visit does not constitute a vacation; it is a celebration of who they are without any stigmatizing judgment from others. Silver, another bounder, also explained that being a part of both these communities has changed her life. She grew up an avid Disney fan and has become an icon in the Disney fan circles, being a part of these communities (both online and inside the park) led her to find friendship, acceptance, and an identity:

Everything is different now than it was [growing up]. As a kid, I was so isolated in my love for Disney. I had a few friends who liked going to Disneyland, but no one who was as obsessed or interested as I was. And I was a kid before social media really took off, so the best I could do to find other Disney fans was via online forums and message boards. The early days of Disney internet fandom was really interesting. I loved taking online quizzes about Disney and reading message boards all day. The websites I frequented back then still exist, which is crazy, but the landscape of Disney fans online is very different now. Twitter and Instagram have completely changed the fan community and made it much easier to find fans to become friends with and enjoy Disney with. MOST of my friends now love Disney because I met them

through Disney – that is completely different from my childhood where I kind of had no one to geek out with. (Silver, personal communication via e-mail, December 20, 2019).

Bounding, Dapper Day Weekend, and the SCs (along with many other Disney fan groups not mentioned in this particular study) have made it acceptable to be a Disney fan as an adult. These community members appreciate the nostalgia factor that goes into being a Disney child and still loving everything about the characters and park as an adult. Such fans are able to express who they are and perform their identity in concert with Disney iconographies without shame, comparing their fandom to sports fan who wear jerseys; their chosen performance allows them to celebrate what they enjoy in unique ways. It was not until I started talking to these communities that I too longed for a group of people that I could associate with that loved anything and everything Disney. I have always been known as the “Disney person” in my social circles, but I had never been able to discuss and appreciate it with others until I joined these communities as a participant observer. It was then that I started to realize how special they were to others who associated and identified with the Disney culture. Being able to celebrate a side of yourself that is often hidden around other adults is life-changing to many of these fans. There is no judgment for your obsession with all things Disney, and your participation within the fandom is celebrated and accepted. Taking off a mask and allowing yourself to participate and be involved is one of the key factors in these communities, and the Disneyland park allows for an open and imaginative space for fans to come together. Disneybounder Lisa felt a similar

sentiment towards the park and these groups and how they create something special for adults who love Disney:

There's a community that the park fosters. I think people are automatically like, more friendly, because everybody's here to have a good time and it's not seen as ... I don't want to say like, weird because it's not really weird, even outside [the park], but like there are times outside, especially at work, where I probably felt like I'm more of, like, a spectacle. Like, I'm kind of in a zoo. And it's like, oh, look at the nerd. Like, yeah, that's not the way in there. (Lisa, personal communication, June 21, 2019)

Disneyland parks serve as much more than a physical space themed around movies and characters; instead, it provides a place of virtual and symbolic meaning to these groups, delivering a space for face-to-face interactions that would otherwise not happen or only happen in a digital space (Sandvoss, 2005). Visiting the parks and being with these communities revealed that their fandom is more than consumer consumption of Disney products, but an established relationship with each other through symbols from the brand.

As I mentioned earlier, these groups are intertwined; a finding that I did not think I would encounter. Sure, I figured that there would be some overlap with Disneybounders and Dapper Day, but little did I know it went beyond that. Each fan community had members involved in the other. Trey, a Disneybounding adult who participates in Dapper Day and who was in the process of starting his own SC stated:

I think it's pretty far reaching [the Disney Fandom] as far and wide and that's what's kind of an awesome to the true Walt memory of creating this world that expands from Adventure Land to Frontier Land. Now it's so much more and it continues to grow. That's Disney, that's what Walt Disney envisioned years ago. And I think that's what Disney fans love and whether it be the animation, whether it be coming into the park, there is something for everyone to be involved in. (Trey, personal communication, June 23, 2019)

Whether it be the characters, the history, the park, or the rides, there is an endless list of things for fans to enjoy. Each of the fan communities in this study celebrate many of these things simultaneously, while others choose to enjoy different segments at different times. But no matter what someone enjoys about the Disney fandom, this study shows that there is a subculture that fits their need for a community. With so many different aspects of the overall Disney fandom, to find individuals who identify with multiple facets is not surprising. I figured that many would share favorite characters, rides, and places within the park. What I did not expect was to see that fans of bounding would also be involved in a SC, two completely opposite fan subcultures colliding and morphing into a unique symbolic twist.

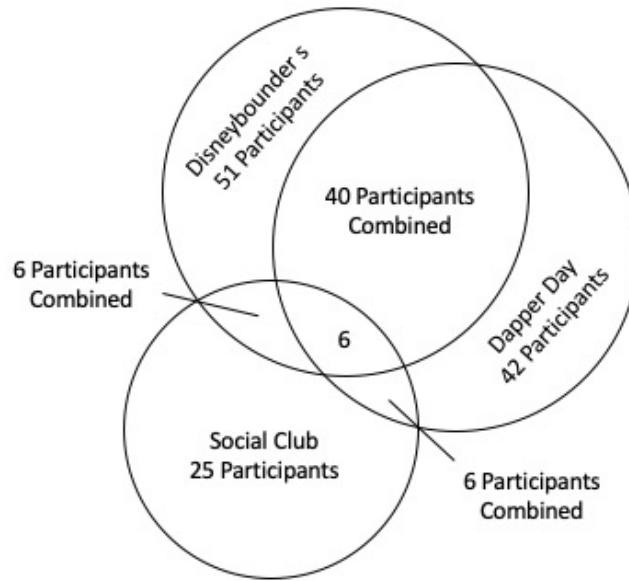


Figure 1.1 – Participants in the study that participated in all three groups.

Status

Not only are the different groups linked, there is a definite social hierarchy when looking at the groups, especially when it comes to their cultural capital within the parks and the overall Disney fandom. Bourdieu (1983) states that cultural capital comes in three different forms that he defines as the embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. In this instance, each group exemplifies cultural capital within the Disney fandom, but their level of commitment and investment varies creating levels of refinement within the fan community. Each group has an extensive knowledge of Disney media, characters, and the park establishing each group with an embodied cultural capital and a base level of taste and aesthetics in regard to the media company. This base level is where the majority of Disneybounders start and remain within the

realm of their status among Disney fans, mainly due to the fact that you do not have to be at the park to bound and bounding requires the least amount of knowledge, culture, and social interaction. Representing embodied cultural capital and elevating the next set of fans within these communities are two things: the annual pass and the access to authentic vintage clothing. Although far apart in connection, these two things are what set apart Dapper Day participants and the SCs from being in the lower quadrant of Disney's cultural capital spectrum. These items imply privilege and ease of location. Being able to afford vintage clothing that fits the parameters of what Dapper Day participants believe is authentic indicates a particular status of class, but being able to afford an annual pass to Disney denotes wealth and status that many fans dream of obtaining as they grow up. Take Steve, for example, he states that becoming an annual passholder meant that he achieved financial security:

We didn't get to go very much. So, when I was old enough that I could pay for my own pass, it still turns out that it's my place. It's one of those places where you want to have the longest craziest days, that I can go there. I can get on a few rides, I can have a good time, I can really enjoy myself and leave the bullshit behind, you know I mean? The day to day stuff that people go through, just kind of disappears once you get to that gate. It really is a fantasy land.

(Steve, personal communication, July 9, 2019)

Steve said his mother worked two to three jobs at a time when he was growing up, so getting to visit Disneyland was a treat that he learned didn't come often. Therefore, he gained cultural status by being able to not only afford to go whenever he wants, but by

being able to go and forget about the real world outside. Finally, the credentials and qualifications that symbolize the institutionalized form of cultural capital belong to the SCs. Out of the three fan communities that I looked at in this study, the Disneyland SCs exemplified the most knowledge of Disney media and characters, knew the parks better than anyone, and are the most well-known among the cast members and other fans that visited the park on a regular basis. Their time and dedication to being inside the park bestowed upon them intellect, social interaction, and community size to be deemed the fan community with the highest cultural capital. Therefore, we should remember that “fan performance in everyday life thus becomes a source of stability and security, performing one of many areas of social interaction” (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 47).

Representation And Identity Through Products

But what does this mean? Why does it matter that different fan groups within the same overall fandom have different levels of culture, class, taste, and identity invested? Because a fan’s ability to create a world and invest in it means more than a community; it also creates more benefits to the overall company producing merchandise for the consumers to use. “Fan enthusiasm is always predicated on the brand serving a very specific and very personal set of needs. Understanding these motivations and passions is the key to real and authentic fan interactions” (Fraade-Blanar & Glazer, 2017, p. 14). Disney is one of the largest media corporations in the world and it is important to recognize that fans are changing the way they are represented in pop culture, their societies, and the overall Disney community. Long

gone are the days of fans representing their Disney side in a Mickey Mouse t-shirt. These fans have shown that being an adult Disney fan is not just about being a kid at heart, although that is important; it is also, and perhaps more importantly, about representing their fandom in unique ways that also dictate popularity among others and status.

In each fan group's chapter, I discussed their affinity towards what the Disney brand has produced for them regarding their particular fan performance. Disney has created Bounding accessories, Dapper Day dresses, and even begun producing iron-on patches similar to the ones the SCs wear on their vests. However, because each of these groups are interlaced within one another, I believe that is why Disney is not their preferred market to buy from. As De Certeau (1998) states:

Marginality is becoming universal. A marginal group has now become a silent majority. That does not mean that the group is homogeneous. The procedures allowing the re-use of products are linked together in a kind of obligatory language and their functioning is related to social situations and power relationships. (p. xvii)

These groups are looking for products that can be used across the different spectrums of fandom. The SCs want merchandise that goes with their vests, bounding opportunities, and the occasional dapper outing in the parks. Dapper Day participants want accessories that can be used for Dapper Day and for everyday bounding, not items that are restricted to one or the other occasion, and Bounders are wanting merchandise that allows them to explore other areas of the Disney fandom without

being labeled as just a bounder. Fan consumers are viewed as loyal customers (Duffett, 2013) that seek out brand quality, brand involvement, a brand's symbolic meaning, but most importantly, they want goods that can be consumed jointly and with multiple utility purpose. "Brand community members constitute a specific group of customers, but treating them as a single, homogenous group may be a serious mistake" (Ouwensloot & Odekerken-Schröder, 2008, p. 581). Just as Goffman (1959) suggests, identity comes in several different forms and individuals are able to access those different aspects of themselves through symbolic connection and social interaction. A Disney fan does not have one definition or identifying marker that states someone is a fan. Instead, a Disney fan is made up of several different facets that are within one individual and make up several different groups. These individuals have several different masks they deploy intentionally in efforts to "belong" to different groups within the overall Disney fandom; that is, there is not one true identity as a Disney fan, but several. Therefore, their options in representing their fandoms should not be limited to a few products in different colors that were meant to represent an entire fandom. Instead, it is clear they want multiple facets of merchandise that suite different needs at different times, but that can be multi-functional in representing different sides of the personalities at once. For instance, Silver stated that everyone is a Disney fan, but that:

Disney is probably the most pervasive media company in the world, especially after acquiring companies like Marvel and Lucasfilm. Mickey Mouse is the most well-known character in the world. I think every person has a connection

to Disney, even if it's just knowing one song or loving one character. And that makes every person a Disney fan! It's that simple. There are so many parts of the company to enjoy that I feel like you'd be hard pressed to find someone that does NOT like anything Disney has created. There are people who like and participate in the fandom more than others, but I think at the core of it all it's just whether or not there's something you enjoy from the Disney Company. (Silver, personal communication via e-mail, December 20, 2019)

I believe, as do my participants, that there is not one way to describe a Disney fan and this study displays that in many forms. Disneybounding allows fans to perform and identify with any character, ride, or space within the parks that they feel is a representation of the Disney fandom. I think it should also be noted, as mentioned by Silver, that the Disney fandom and media company possess a wide range of intellectual property, but despite what characters or saga you enjoy, you are still considered a Disney fan. Even with the values of Dapper Day, which reminds fans of how Disney was started and how one man encouraged the imagination of the world, the newer additions of characters and narratives by Disney are accepted just as much as Mickey Mouse. There does not seem in my experience to be a strict hierarchy concerning which characters or stories are the best; rather, the focus is on what fans enjoy and identify with. Dapper Day participants do this by using vintage clothing to perform their Disney side. This groups exhibits a lost tradition of dressing up to go out and enjoy each other, your families, and screams of nostalgia. Disneybounders seem to enjoy the intellectual property in a more casual way, but still take pride in engaging

with the characters in a new and inventive way. Finally, the Disneyland SCs represent a side of Disney that is not always identified in the media, a side that displays the darker side of Disney as well as the acceptance that the Disney brand and characters have created. These individuals use Disney intellectual property and physical spaces to demonstrate that a Disney fan is not always someone who is bright and cheery like Snow White or child-like and innocent like Peter Pan, but instead, celebrate the difference that have brought them together under one fandom umbrella. Through this study we can see that not all groups are the same or treated equally in the eyes of the overall Disney fandom, but allow individuals to identify with the elements of the media company that they feel make them a Disney fan. Basically, one pair of Mickey ears does not fit all.

Status within these groups also became a key factor in why these communities have become so popular. It is long been noted that fans prefer to have a participatory hand within their fandom. Jenkins (2013) describes fans as poachers, those who do not just enjoy a text, but become involved in it and create with it. He states that, “Fans are not unique in their status as textual poachers, yet, they have developed poaching to an art form (p. 28). This is true of all three of the fandoms discussed. Status plays a part in their “poaching” because it implies a level of knowledge within the communities that those simply trying to break in or pose as a fan within would not understand. Each of these fandoms has made it clear that their love for Disney does not always translate as a love for Disney merchandise. Fraade-Blaner and Glazer (2017) states that:

The high status that is given to time and creativity within fan groups is something Disney might want to keep in mind. When it comes to this type of prestige, effort trumps money. Fans who try to ‘buy their way in’ to the hierarch are often ridiculed as wannabes. (p.160)

These fan groups have made it a priority to make and buy merchandise outside of Disney, expressing that they prefer to support fan run shops that are less commercial and more subtle to fit these fan’s needs. Jenkins (2013) states that

Fan texts, be they fan writing, art, song, or video, are shaped through the social norms, aesthetic conventions, interpretive protocols, technological resources, and technical competence of the larger fan community. Fans possess not simply borrowed remnants snatched from mass culture, but their own culture built from the semiotic raw materials the media provides. (p. 50)

These fans are changing the culture of Disney fandom. Jenkin’s assessment demonstrates that Disneybounders, Dapper Day participants, and the SCs are not simply rejecting the idea of Disney merchandising because it is created by the organization, but that they choose to create their own aesthetics and culture by buying the majority of their fan related merchandise outside of the corporate setting because to them, the social norm placed upon Disney fans is not who they see when they look in the mirror. They have grown in numbers through the shared experiences and creativity, and are determined to seek out more individuals that fit within their niche subcultures that celebrate more than a Disney ideal.

Not only does this research add to the fandom and symbolic interaction scholarship, but it explores how transformative fandom can be when it comes to changing existing norms and challenging the power structure of consumers and producers, especially within a narrative location built for identity performance. It also shines light on the importance of fan performance in everyday life. Fans are not one-dimensional and hardly belong to one facet of society, let alone a fandom. This study demonstrates that the Disney fandom is far larger and sub-sectioned than many realize, yet each subculture relies on the other to challenge creativity and fan stigmas. These fandoms create a new idea of what fandom can represent and how such a large media company, filled with hundreds of texts to be a fan of can bring people of all walks of life together. However, this study focuses on something deeper than connection and community. It highlights and adds to Goffman's (1956) idea of symbolic interaction and how individuals create different identities for different purposes, yet within the Disney fandom, we can see that these different identities are fused together; not as one single entity but as a multifaceted performance to fit the needs of different subcultures all at once. Fans can belong to different fandoms, this is not new, but to belong to different subcultures of different fandoms at the same time is an interesting concept and one that plays into the idea of De Certeau's (1998) producer and consumer power notion and Bourdieu's (1984) cultural capital.

Imaginations Through Products

These Disney communities share a common desire to create and purchase merchandise outside of Disney marketing. As mentioned above, fans have been

producers of text related materials for a long time, but these different, yet entwined, fandoms are taking it to the next step by producing and requesting products that fit the need of different identities, performances, and occasions at the same time. Each of these fan groups have been looked at in the academic realm, but they have all been analyzed separately. What makes the Disney fandom unique and large at the same time is that it serves several different subcultures all at once. Until now, the desire and focus on these fans creating and producing commodities and using the park as a place for performance has been one-dimensional, which loses an interesting aspect of the overall fandom. Interestingly enough, this perspective also allows us to look at how three different fan communities' distinct tastes go into creating and evolving the overall Disney culture, and where it ranks culturally among other major fandoms in popular culture. This produces future research on the impact multifaceted, yet uniquely connected subcultures have on cultural capital. Of course, these communities are just three sub-cultures of the overall Disney fandom. For future research, I would like to continue to look at the impact multifaceted fandoms have on merchandising, consumer, producer relationships, and identity and fan stigmas, particularly within the Disney fandom, and how it compares and adds on to this study. Future fandoms to look at within Disney are the pin traders, goth/Bat Day participants, the Gay Day celebration, and the Disney official fan club, D23. Of course, Disney is not the only fandom with multiple subcultures, and comparing and contrasting other major media corporations and their fandoms would be interesting in terms of how the cultural capital, knowledge, and taste in fandoms change across sectors of popular culture.

Disney is, of course, one of the largest. Interestingly enough, many fans do not look towards the corporate side of the company, but instead, embrace the magical experiences they encounter when visiting the park. For instance, Michael, a participant in all three communities had this to say when describing a Disney fan:

If you haven't found yourself to be a fan yet, it's probably because you haven't allowed yourself to. I think that a lot of people are very standoffish to the idea that a 34-year-old male can come to Disneyland, full-fledged decked out in Disney gear and have an excellent time. And I think that people come in here looking, at especially us with vests on, like that guy's got that vest, not realizing that you haven't given yourself the chance to fall in love. I think that once you give yourself that chance to come here and really realize what it's like, you're going to become a fan too. There's nothing not to love about this place. This place is magical is for everyone. (Michael, personal communication, June 23, 2019)

But as a researcher and someone who is privileged enough to look beyond the show Disney puts on for its fans, I find it vital to understand that Disney is a major player not only in the media spectrum, but within the entire world as a popular culture icon. To these fans, their participation in their subcultures allow them to express different sides of their personalities and connect with others that see the characters, narratives, and parks as an escape from reality. The truth is, of course, that the Disney corporation is creating this alternative reality for them. They may believe the corporate rhetoric about it “being the happiest place on earth” but to them, it has become much more.

This has become an outlet for identity, creativity, and community. What many of these fans do not realize is that by accepting the role of producer instead of passive consumer of products, they are starting to change the reality that the Disney corporation is providing for them. They are starting to pull back the curtain ever so slightly from the fantasy and taking a bigger role in defining what it means to be a Disney fan.

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APPENDIX

List of Participants Quoted in Article

Natalia	35-year-old Disneybounder dressed as the Evil Queen
Mary	25-year-old Disneybounder dressed as Woody
Mara	33-year-old Disneybounder and Dapper Day Participant dressed as Daisy Duck
Laura	28-year-old Dapper Day Participant
Richard	37-year-old Dapper Day participant
Sally	45-year-old Disneybounder and Dapper Day Participant dressed as Bo Peep
Kim	36-year-old Disneybounder and Dapper Day Participant dressed as the Evil Queen
Silver	26-year-old Disneybounder and Disney Instagram Influencer
Kristen	34-year-old Disneybounder and Dapper Day Participant dressed as Anna
Jack	43-year-old President of the White Rabbits Social Club
Todd	44-year-old member of the White Rabbits Social Club
Gus	62-year-old Vice-President of Stich Shenanigans Social Club
Alexa	21-year-old President of the Port Royals Social Club
Edward	31-year-old member of the Main Street Elite Social Club
Nick	40-year-old member of the White Rabbits Social Club
Daisy	22-year-old Vice-President of Mickey’s Fun Wheelers Social Club
Rebecca	35-year-old Disneybounder dressed as Ariel
Lisa	30-year-old Disneybounder dressed as Kylo-Ren
Trey	41-year-old Disneybounder and Dapper Day Participant dressed as Donald Duck
Steve	44-year-old member of the White Rabbits Social Club
Michael	25- year-old member of Mickey’s Tripods Social Club
Tim	34-year-old President of The Alley Cats Social Club