

TGIF: THANK GOODNESS IT'S A FICTIONAL-DEPICTION-OF-A-DISNEY-VACATION

A Content Analysis of “the Disney Episode”

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INTRODUCTION

A vacation to a Disney theme park has become an American rite of passage - which is exactly what the Company wants. Since the early days of the Company, there is evidence of what would become known as corporate synergy. Toys modeled after Mickey Mouse would evolve over time into marketing efforts such as the famous “I’m going to Disney World!” line being shouted by a football player after a Super Bowl victory. All of these elements work together to integrate Disney into the daily lives of its fans around the world, and cement the idea that the ultimate family vacation would be to none other than a Disney theme park.

After Disney’s acquisition of Capital Cities and ABC in 1995, they had direct access to a linear network – and the opportunities for cross promotion that came along with it. Disney no longer had to rely solely on advertisements during commercial breaks or promotional specials or series to put their vacation destinations on television screens across the nation. This led to a television phenomenon throughout the family sitcoms of the 1990s: a Disney episode.

These memorable television episodes would take their characters out of their soundstage living rooms and into the Disney theme parks for an episode (or sometimes two). In doing so, Disney was reinforcing the ideal of American families vacationing at Disney parks, as well as directly advertising the experiences they offer through the characters and television shows that audiences already knew and loved.

This paper aims to analyze the events portrayed in these Disney episodes to determine how they fit Disney marketing efforts and how they compare the reality of the average Guest's experience at a Disney Park.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Corporate Synergy

The original, primary objective of the Walt Disney Company was to create entertaining cartoons. However, over time, Walt Disney would continue expanding the notion of what could be done in the realm of family entertainment. By 1957, the Walt Disney Company had continued to evolve, now producing live action films, television series, and operating a theme park among other things. Around this time, the corporate strategy had evolved to include all of these elements and how they work together synergistically, although they may not have been describing them as such at the time (Benna 2015)

During the early years of Micheal Eisner's rein as CEO, corporate synergy became a true focus of the Company (Stein 2011, p.39). This occurred in a variety of ways with Disney's original properties; turning *Beauty and the Beast* into a Broadway musical, using Disney Stores to sell toys based on characters, or using entertainment offerings in the theme parks to promote new films.

The acquisition of Capital Cities/ABC gave the Company a new slate of opportunities for cross-promotion of their various divisions. Former head of entertainment at ABC, Ted Harbert, claims that Eisner was motivated to pursue the acquisition by his

desires to run a television network (Adalian, 2024). It cannot be denied that having a television network allowed for Disney stories to be told daily to viewers in the comfort of their own homes. It gave an avenue to the company to promote its films and theme parks, while also expanding its selection of serialized television content and reaching a wider audience. Once under the Disney umbrella, various ABC channels were able to cross-promote and rebroadcast content. For example, SOAPnet hosted same-day episodes of daytime television content, ABC Family would show specials that originally aired on ABC, and ABC itself hosted Disney Channel shows on Saturday mornings (Benson 2005).

Advertising

Given that they have so many businesses to promote, naturally, Disney does produce traditional advertisements. Movie trailers, magazine ads, and commercials for the theme parks are all commonplace (Walt Disney Marketing Strategy: How They Became Entertainment King, 2021). There have been many advertising campaigns over the years that have been incredibly successful; some even entering the cultural zeitgeist, as the afore-mentioned Super Bowl ads have (Auster 2013). Many children of the late 1990s will remember the Disney Parks commercial that was included in the VHS tape of their favorite movie growing up.

Disney utilizes an extensive marketing strategy, considering a variety of factors when creating marketing materials for their brands including the Theme Parks – an industry in which they are a global leader (Zhu 2024). At its core, Disney remains a storytelling company, and that value is seeped into their advertisements as well (Social, 2024). Thus,

the integration of Disney Parks promotion into the ABC family sitcoms starts to feel right at home, allowing the Company to produce what a reader of the New York Times called “half-hour infomercials for the Magic Kingdom” (When Entertainment Becomes Advertising, 1997).

Family Sitcoms and TGIF

Prior to becoming Disney’s CEO, Bob Iger was the President of ABC Entertainment. Around this time, ABC was faced with several truths. Families were less likely to watch television than they used to, as it became more common to have multiple televisions in a home. Simultaneously, content was skewing more towards adults on ABC, while channels like the Disney Channel catered to children. This was leading to a fragmentation in their audience. On top of this, the other cable networks were running dramas on Friday nights (Snetiker 2015). Into this vacuum, ABC launched a programming block that would make history: TGIF, or Thank Goodness It’s Funny, began on September 22, 1989 (Snetiker 2015).

Over the course of its run, TGIF hosted many legendary family sitcoms, including *Full House*, *Family Matters*, *Step by Step*, *Boy Meets World*, and more. For the 1991-1992 season, the TGIF block was reaching 20 million viewers each week (Snetiker 2015). This time period aligned perfectly with both Disney’s acquisition of ABC and the rise of corporate synergy – Disney even had a director of corporate synergy, Lorraine Satoli, who stated that Walt Disney “practically invented the idea of cross- promotion” (Neal 2007).

It seems like the stars aligning, then, when one by one, TGIF shows began airing the “Disney episode.” When questioned about the phenomenon, an ABC spokesperson stated

that “Disney World has always used the medium of television to promote itself” (It’s a Small World 1997). From 1993-1998, seven sitcoms visited the theme parks, since 2000, six more have joined their ranks ((*A Spoonful of Sitcom Synergy: 25 Years of the “Disney Episode”* - *AV Club*, 2018, CBR). While these episodes were often popular with young fans, they represented a challenge to the showrunners: they had to come up with a reason that their characters would need to visit Orlando or Anaheim, create a compelling story to tell while they are there, all while highlighting whichever aspect of the parks Disney was currently promoting ((*A Spoonful of Sitcom Synergy: 25 Years of the “Disney Episode”* - *AV Club*, 2018).

Theme Parks

Since the opening of Disneyland in 1955 revolutionized the industry, theme parks have become incredibly popular destinations for adults and families alike. Stepping into the world of a theme park creates a fantasy, an alternate reality where Guests have full permission to play (Allen 2014). In this way, theme parks exist as a sort of liminal space – a world of imagination that is completely practical and concrete (Allen 2014).

Aronstein describes Disney Parks as “work disguised as play” (Aronstein 2013). That is, as we leave the reality of the world behind and enter a park such as Disneyland, we are consciously choosing to accept the new reality and values that these spaces are attempting to teach all who enter them (Aronstein 2013).

This nonreality, this means of education and entertainment, has moved beyond the gates of Disneyland to influence society itself. In looking at spaces such as themed

restaurants and hotels outside of Disney destinations, such as Las Vegas, one can clearly see the influence that Disney theme parks have had. In the work “The Disneyization of Society,” Bryman discusses these influences at length. Bryman asserts that the four elements of a Disney experience are theming, dedifferentiation of consumption, merchandising, and emotional labor (Bryman 1999). By harnessing these elements, theme parks have become sought after experiences – some even describe them as rites of passage.

Disneyland and the Average Theme Park Visit

The average day at a theme park can vary wildly from Guest to Guest. For example, parents with small children are going to have very different priorities than thrill seeking adults. But even recognizing that there is a range of motivations and interests among theme park Guests, there are some experiences that have become expected on a day at Disney.

It’s hard to deny the feeling of entering a castle park and strolling down Main Street U.S.A.; in fact, this area serves as a purposeful setting of the stage for the fantasy experience that Guests are stepping into (Allen 2014). According to Forbes, the ‘quintessential’ Disney day would be spent entirely at Magic Kingdom. This day would include a character meal, plenty of time to experience the park’s attractions, a break at a nearby hotel for dinner, and finally a return to the park to view the fireworks (Tremaine, 2024).

This experience has become so engrained in American culture that it is considered a rite of passage to experience. Disney fans are so devoted to this pilgrimage, in fact, that

they are willing to go into debt to pay for it. Says one visitor after going into debt to take her 18-month-old son to Walt Disney World: “I’ll make more money...But he’ll never be that young again” (Fu 2024). Indeed, studies have shown the high levels of delight that consumers experience during these visits – particularly Millennials (Santos 2023)

The level of expectation that Guests have in their theme park day is also displayed in the aspects of it that they most complain about. According to one study of reviews left for Shanghai Disney Resort, Guests are likely to share concerns about parking, employees, and their expectations based on recommendations (Bai 2023).

THEORY

According to Entman in 1993, “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.” With this definition in mind, this paper will be applying framing theory to discuss how the Walt Disney Company utilizes these sitcom episodes to frame a family vacation to Disney. Much of the content analysis will be focused on what aspects of a “typical” family vacation are omitted from this media.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this paper is to analyze Disney episodes of various family sitcoms to determine if they do fit the definition of advertisement, and more so if these television

episodes accurately represent the product they are showcasing. In order to do so, this paper attempts to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What common themes can be found in the plot of Disney episodes of family sitcoms?

RQ2: How are these themes consistent with Disney's marketing strategy and advertisements?

RQ3: How are these themes consistent with the realities of an average Guest's experience at a Disney theme park?

METHODOLOGY

To answer these questions, this paper performed a content analysis of the 13 sitcoms that have filmed Disney episodes at either Disneyland Resort or Walt Disney World Resort since 1993. The list of episodes coded are as follows:

1	<i>Blossom*</i>	S3.E19 – The Best Laid Plans of Mice and Men	1993
2	<i>Full House</i>	S6.E23 – The House Meets the Mouse (Part 1)	1993
3	<i>Full House</i>	S6.E24 – The House Meets the Mouse (Part 2)	1993
4	<i>Family Matters</i>	S6.E22 – We're Going to Disney World: Part 1	1995
5	<i>Family Matters</i>	S6.E23 – We're Going to Disney World: Part 2	1995
6	<i>Step by Step</i>	S5.E22 – We're Going to Disney World: Part 1	1996
7	<i>Step by Step</i>	S5.E23 – We're Going to Disney World: Part 2	1996
8	<i>Boy Meets World</i>	S3.E21 – The Happiest Show on Earth	1996

9	<i>Roseanne</i>	S8.E17 – We’re Going to Disney World	1996
10	<i>Roseanne</i>	S8.E18 – Disney World War II	1996
11	<i>Sabrina the Teenage Witch</i>	S2.E23 – Disney World	1998
12	<i>George Lopez</i>	S3.E24 – George Goes to Disneyland	2004
13	<i>Modern Family</i>	S3.E22 - Disneyland	2012
14	<i>The Middle</i>	S5.E24 – The Wonderful World of Hecks	2014
15	<i>Black-ish</i>	S3.E1 - VIP	2016
16	<i>Home Economics</i>	S3.E1 – Mickey Ears, \$19.99	2022
17	<i>The Wonder Years</i>	S2.E10 – The Happiest Place on Earth	2023

*Note: Blossom was produced by Touchstone Television, owned by Disney, but is the only episode of this sample to have aired on NBC rather than ABC (*A Spoonful of Sitcom Synergy: 25 Years of the “Disney Episode” - AV Club, 2018*).

Following the content analysis, the researcher conducted an interview with the mothers of two families who represent average theme park Guests to gain an understanding of their experience. This data will be compared and contrasted with the plot points of the fictional families portrayed in the sitcom episodes.

Content Analysis

The television episodes above were analyzed according to the following coding guidelines:

Level of Realism: This category refers to how likely the events of the episode were to happen to the average Guest and was measured on a 5-point scale, 1 being very unrealistic and 5 being very realistic.

Discussion of Cost: This refers to how often main or supporting characters mention money or expenses for the trip and was again measured on a 5-point scale, 1 being almost never and 5 being very frequently.

Overall Tone: This category was established to measure how positively or negatively the main or supporting characters react to visiting the parks and is the final category to be measured with the 5-point scale from very negative to very positive.

Includes Attractions: This was marked present if characters were featured riding or discussing having ridden an attraction.

Includes Characters: This was marked present if costumed characters are seen in the episode.

Characters Participate in Plot: This category was marked present if costumed characters influence one or more plot points for the sitcom characters.

Visits Multiple Parks: For this category, a visit was defined as when a scene with dialogue featuring the sitcom characters was filmed in the park.

Waits in Line: This category was marked present if the sitcom characters were visually depicted in line or had lines of dialogue discussing waiting in line.

Fictional Entertainment: This category was marked present if an episode contained in-park entertainment that was contrived for the episode plot.

In addition to these categories, notes were taken on which parks, resorts, and attractions were featured, as well as a plot summary for each episode. The unit of analysis was one episode. Once the episodes were watched, the researcher chose to omit the first *Roseanne* episode from the data, as this episode was entirely composed of scenes of the family preparing to go to Walt Disney World, but no scenes were filmed on location until the second episode. Then, the data for the remaining episodes to be discussed were compiled and analyzed using Microsoft Excel.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted via an email questionnaire. Interviewees were asked the following questions:

1. How frequently have you taken your family on vacation to Disney? Which resort did you visit (Disneyland or Walt Disney World) and how many family members were with you?
2. How long would you say you typically take to plan and save for a Disney vacation?
3. Which attractions or experiences would you say make up a typical Disney visit (whether or not your family tends to do them)?
4. Which attractions or experiences do make sure not to miss with your family?
5. Do you always or usually...
 - ... meet characters?
 - ... ride rides?
 - ... watch entertainment offerings?

6. Was your decision to vacation at Disney based on any advertisements or media you consumed?

7. My paper is based on analyzing ABC sitcoms that had episodes filmed at Disney. Have you ever seen any of these episodes and do you remember how realistic you felt they portrayed a family vacation to Disney?

These questions were sent to two different family matriarchs who reside in the Midwest and travel to either California or Florida to take their families on vacation to a Disney Park. These two interviewees were selected in a convenience sample, in which the researcher contacted friends and relatives to ask for suggestions of willing participants.

RESULTS

Content Analysis

Upon analyzing the data compiled from the content analysis of the television episodes, some patterns emerged. The first notable finding is that out of 16 episodes, 11 were filmed at Walt Disney World and five were filmed at Disneyland Resort. For the three categories that were coded on a 5-point system, the mean value was found. For the level of realism, the mean was 3.1. For the discussion of cost, the mean was 2.4. Finally, for the overall tone of the episode, the mean was 3.6.

For the present or not present criteria, the following data was found:

VARIABLE	UNITS CONTAINING
Episode includes attractions.	16
Episode includes characters.	13

Episode includes characters influencing the plot.	4
Episode takes place in multiple parks.	12
Episode features waiting in lines.	7
Episodes features fictional entertainment offerings.	8

Next, the data compiled regarding the parks visited showed that EPCOT was most frequently featured, with 10 episodes, followed by Magic Kingdom (8 episodes), Disneyland Park (5 episodes), and Disney's Hollywood Studios (5 episodes). All of the U.S. Disney theme parks were featured in at least one episode.

Finally, looking at which attractions were featured showed that 24 different attractions were featured across various episodes. Splash Mountain was shown most frequently, with six features. This was followed by Dumbo the Flying Elephant and Big Thunder Mountain Railroad with five features each, and Main Street Vehicles with four features. It should be noted that for the purposes of this paper, the researcher did not distinguish between Walt Disney World Resort and Disneyland Resort in the attraction totals if said attraction exists on both coasts.

Interview

Of the two interview questionnaires sent out, only one was returned. The respondent indicated that they have been to Walt Disney World many times as a family, bringing as many as 10 people with them. She stated that they typically stock up on Disney Gift Cards throughout the year to finance these visits. For their family, they tended to focus

on character dining, attractions, and nighttime spectaculars. When asked why she chose to visit Disney theme parks, she stated “I loved going as a kid and wanted my kids to experience it. We love Disney movies!” (K.Reiman, personal communication, December 02, 2024).

DISCUSSION

The first research question posed in this paper asks if any common themes can be found within the plots of the various sitcom episodes. One common element is a conceit regarding why the characters are going to Disney. In some cases, the family receives extra money; in others, a main character wins a contest where the prize is going to Disney. Several feature parents discussing how important it was to take their family on a Disney vacation. In fact, the only episode that does not clearly define why the characters are visiting the parks is *Modern Family*, in which the episode opens with the family already getting ready for their day at Disneyland.

The second research question was seeking to find how these television episodes are consistent with Disney advertising strategy. Many episodes are careful to highlight some of the newest offerings in the theme parks. For example, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* showcases Disney’s Animal Kingdom, which opened just two days before the episode aired. Another example can be found in *Home Economics*. Airing in 2022, this episode has an extended sequence featuring Star Wars: Galaxy’s Edge – a land that opened in 2019 and continues to be a major focus of Disneyland Resort advertisements.

However, in addition to the specific in-park experiences that are highlighted, these episodes consistently reinforce the idea that a Disney vacation is a rite of passage for American families. The plot of the *George Lopez* episode centers on George's relationship with his mother and his resentment that she never took him to Disneyland as a child. In *Black-ish*, Dre is similarly motivated to give his family the luxurious vacation experience he never had. Many of the episodes feature a character giving some variation of the line "I've always wanted to go to Disney!" Even the respondent to the questionnaire expressed a similar sentiment. More than any one particular aspect of the parks or resorts, these episodes work to reinforce the cultural significance of the Disney vacation.

Finally, this paper sought to analyze how the experiences portrayed in the television episodes compared to the average Guest's experience in the parks. The interview respondent stated that her family loves the attractions, characters, and entertainment offerings in the parks, most of which feature heavily in the episodes. She also stated that to her memory, the sitcom episodes seemed accurate. The research in this paper shows that this is true to varying degrees across all of the episodes. However, it is likely true that the average person most clearly remembers the highlights of their visit – such as a thrilling attraction or a beautiful firework show. These are the elements that are also most likely to appear in television or advertising content about the parks. Although the evidence for this phenomenon is anecdotal, it could be true that these episodes align with an average Guest's perception of their own experience while still glossing over many of the realities of a Disney vacation, such as waiting in line. Further research could examine this hypothesis.

Limitations

There are a few limitations present in this research. First, as it is a student, there were time and budget constraints that may not have been present in a larger study. There is a lack of intercoder reliability as the author was the only coder available. Additionally, the interview portion of the research may have been more successful if conducted over video call or face to face rather than over email. However, due to scheduling conflicts, a more thorough interview process was not possible.

Naturally, due to the nature of a content analysis, there are limitations on the conclusions that may be drawn regarding audience behavior or response to the media being studied. Additional research could study how these episodes compare to Disney advertising regarding consumer behavior.

CONCLUSION

The filming of sitcom episodes in Disney Parks is now a tradition over 30 years strong. The content of these episodes seems to reinforce the notion of a Disney vacation as a cultural rite of passage, while also working to highlight current offerings in the theme parks. While additional research would be needed to analyze audience perceptions of these shows, one fact is clear: they remain a strong example of corporate synergy at work within the Walt Disney Company.

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