Just Because You Can "Dream it," Doesn't Mean You Can Wear it:

An Investigation of Performative Identity Working for Walt Disney World

for Master of Arts

Global Community Engagement

Hannah Zwemer

University of Denver University College

November 14, 2019

Abstract

This research examines cultural infringement, conformity, and identity in working for Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida. By analyzing the work of scholars in the fields of workplace culture, identity/body performativity politics, and dress culture, I argue for a more inclusive and modern update to the company's dress code and policies. While there have been numerous steps forward from its origin, "the Disney Look" does not allow for individuals to fully and truly express their individuality. This research argues and outlines steps to be taken to allow for more individual expression, while still enacting Disney's ultimate dream and vision for his theme park(s). By enacting small changes, little by little, Disney could pave a strong path forward in workplace culture and dress worldwide. This would allow for more individuality amongst cast members and less identity loss in the Disney parks and beyond.

Description of Conflict:

When one hears the words "Disney World," often, they find themselves immediately transported to a place of make believe, of childhood fondness and memories, of simple, *happy* existence. Images of castles, smiling, life-sized characters, balloons, and grinning, clean-cut, costumed cast members flood the senses and usually drive the mind to a happy place. Less often, though, do families and "Disney-goers" of all ages really contemplate what it would be like to *work* there. Rarely would one truly consider the cast members and their outfitting, the uniformity, the *sameness*. Cast members do not have "cutting edge" body modification and are limited in their ability to individualize their "look" and henceforth their identity.

"The Disney Look" is the code of standards that every cast member employed by the Walt Disney company is required to abide by. When Walt Disney created the parks, he was looking to create something that had never been done before: an immersive, "'living, breathing thing' provoking continual change and evolution…Visiting Disneyland would be 'like a theatrical experience—in a word, a show'…Disney ensured that entry to the park would be substantively separated from outside reality" (Chytry 2012, 265-266). By creating what Josef Chytry calls "experience economies," a concept that offers a total experience, Disney was able to create this whole other world of make believe that Guests visit to escape their *real* world. In order to achieve this, there was/is an expectation of dress and costume and overall "look" for those employed under the Disney brand and the theme parks particularly.

More than the average "business casual" dress model for a workplace, the Disney Look (which can be accessed and downloaded in the form of a thirty- two page PDF document titled "The Disney Look Book" on the company's employee portal) illustrates expectations and restrictions on things such as nail length and color, hair style and color, jewelry, facial hair, and more (Disney 2008). The dress codes for all lines of work ranging from the daily operations and "Guest facing" roles to those in more corporate positions behind closed doors, every cast member must adhere to these codes and expectations in order to maintain both a job and a "clean record card" with the company.

The challenge (that will be argued in the remaining sections of this paper) is multi-faceted, with an unending amount of questions and concepts to consider. I do not argue that "the Disney Look" is unnecessary, but rather that I find its constituents to be quite restrictive for a company that is both so forward thinking and pervasive in everyday culture. Specifically, in this research, I examine to what degree does "the Disney Look" reinforce workplace culture that infringes upon individual/cultural freedoms? How much of it is deemed necessary vs. creating a polarization? By centering "the Disney Look book" at the heart of my research, I hope to explore the nuances and implications of the strict dress code in relation to the overview or outlook of the company as a whole. In other words, how can we truly embody the messages of Disney to be unique and follow our dreams if our cast members feel that their individuality is limited?

<div align="center">Interplay of Culture, Power, Identity:</div>

In order to begin the answering these questions, it is important to investigate the complexity through as many lenses as possible. Because Walt Disney World employs over 75,000 cast members, there are countless religions, cultures, genders/sexualities, traditions, etc. that the company must take into consideration. In order to effectively analyze the issue, I must delve into the research in three separate sections: culture, identity, and power.

Culture:

"Culture" is a tricky topic because encompasses a lot. There are "pop cultures," "dating cultures," different ethnicities and nationalities' cultures, etc. This is something that is also so multi-faceted and deep, there is no way to cover it in its entirety. Shaunasea Brown provides a nice sliver of insight by examining the experiences of self-identified black women in Canada through case studies. The thrust of her argument comes from the framework surrounding "femininity" and racial relations throughout North America and Canada. Through her explorations and interviews and referencing scholar Patricia Hill-Collins, Brown investigates that the "normality as an ideology that assumes that middle-class, heterosexual white femininity is the standard for female perspective (2005, p. 193)" (Brown 2018, 67). By analyzing lived experiences and one's sense of identity from their (her) hair, this research helps to situate the "constructions of

race [that] were historically supported through 'factual' disciplines underpinned by scientific racism" and perhaps explain some of the dress codes and restrictions/limitations on Black hair in today's workplace (Brown 2018, 67).

Identity:

Similar to "culture," "identity" is hard to fully grasp, study, and pin down to one understanding. Scholars Michelle Dietert and Dianne Dentice researched the workplace experiences of "female to male" (FTM) transgendered people perhaps in hopes of enlightening and normalizing identity scholarship. Like Brown, these researches conducted interviews and used the evidence of case studies to study how trans people "lived" in the workplace. Their research explained and expanded on the ideas and notions of western culture and its existence surrounding the concept of binarity and gendering and the reflection of social norms (Dietert and Dentice 2009). This is notable when thinking about the Disney parks and their highly gendered costuming that explicitly differentiates between "male" and "female" in many areas. Similarly, Monica Sklar and Marilyn DeLong studied self-identifying punks and how/if they modified their physical appearance in order to become or stay employed. Through surveys and interviews they investigated the necessity or desire to conform to the workplaces and how this might or might not affect someone's sense of identity. This research explains the concept of "appearance labor" or, a sort of competition between two "identities:" the "personal self" versus the "work self" (Skalr and DeLong 2012). Naturally, this idea presents a conflict between feeling the need to accommodate and manipulate oneself to feel accepted/emotionally comfortable in the workplace and (though perhaps arbitrary, but ultimately important) being true to oneself and his/her/their true identity and personhood.

Power:

This concept is a bit trickier both to grasp and explain, simply because "Disney" and *all* it incorporates and encompasses is both expansive and pervasive. It could certainly be argued that there is not a soul alive who has not heard the name, seen a variation of a character, or referenced a quote or idea presented or created by the franchise. The Walt Disney Company has become a staple in the homes across North America (and arguably the rest of the globe) and the theme parks see thousands of

Guests from every continent, country, and island *every single day*. Christophe Bruchansky writes about the unique nature of Walt Disney World in his article, "The Heterotopia of Disney World." A heterotopia (originally defined by Michel Foucault) is an amalgamation of a utopia *and* reality, representing the most idealized aspects of a culture—a perfect explanation for Walt Disney World. Heterotopias (Disney World specifically) are fueled by consumerism and the "necessity" of commodities (Bruchansky 2010). Families and individuals alike pay (both in product and experience) for what is deemed "good," "just," and "necessary" to exist in a certain context/society, like "pop culture." In other words, Disney can continue to sell what they do (tangible and non), because people will continue to pay for it.

Because of this, there is a disconnect between the physical "brick and mortar" of the physical (or "outside") "Disney World" and the thoughts, culture and utopian ideals of the "inside." This is specifically exemplified and amplified for the cast members. They live, breathe, and generally *exist in* this world of make believe and fantasy *every day*. There is no vacation or reality escape, but rather a confused and warped sort of reality. In regard to blatant power dynamics, one must consider the sheer size (and arguably, location) of the corporation (and Disney World specifically) and understand that a lot of the rules and regulations *especially* in terms of dress codes and regulations are there simply because they can be. The casting door (in every role) is on a revolver and there will always be someone in line to step in and pick up the slack.

Disney is unique to study both in terms of content and academia, owing to its magical and seemingly carefree nature. The scholars outlined above helped to situate and illustrate nuances and different aspects of the Disney culture with which to dig deeper into research and literature surrounding work culture and dress in conjunction with conformity, cultural infringement, and general questions of employee identity.

Review of Research (Experts and Approaches)

Background Information:

Kottack and Kozaitis provide a strong framework for a deeper investigation into research in their book, "On Being Different." In chapter three, "Globalization and Identity," they write about how different the world and society look(s) now than it did sixty years ago and in order to continue to move forward (a concept very interesting and

important to Walt), one must accommodate and cater to these differences/changes. They state, "differentiated society celebrates diversity" and in regard to the Disney company, while true, there is a slight sense of disconnect (Kottack and Kozaitis 2012, 30). How can Disney *truly* (in an embodied way) celebrate diversity if there is a strain on cast members and their ability to freely exhibit their identity? Chapter four's subject of "The Multicultural Society" takes this further when thinking about the difference in *people* that are employed by the Walt Disney company. Disney is a first name company and prides itself as such, with the iconic nametags bearing huge significance in *being* a cast member—always stating where an individual is from and listing their language and yet, the notion of assimilation is arguably too strong. Uniforms and costumes are quite important, especially in regard to theme park employees, but with little to no room for individual "flare," people and *who* they are down to their core and their performativity, get lost. "Disney" (both the parks and the surrounding geographical location, i.e. the greater Orlando area) has its own specific culture that has the ability to mold and form those who spend a great deal of time there. Similar to the old adage of community and comradery for the United States of "a melting pot", (obviously later changed to that of a tossed salad so as not to erase individuals' own cultures and traditions), the Disney culture is quite like a blended soup: many different cultures and languages coexisting, but hard to pull out specific flavors.

This "Disney culture" looks different among different roles and areas, too. Entertainment "drama" looks different than gossip among attractions which looks different than "small talk" among executives. Each Disney cast member has his/her/their own individual "Disney" experiences, but the overall "Disney bubble" is real. It is confusing and slightly disorienting to be surrounded by fantasy and "magic" as an employee paid to sell experiences and highly priced products to aweing Guests. This becomes taxing, exhausting, and complex because nothing feels truly real. (This may or may not change on days when cast members are not working and choose to enter the park(s) as a "Guest" in which they might indeed experience the reality escape). Similar to Bruchansky's argument as Disney World as a heterotopia, Jean Baudrillard researched the relationships between reality, symbols, and society. He argues that the world and society is either based off of something that *was once real* (simulacra) or is

based off of something real, but is not in itself *real* (simulation). In his book, he uses Disneyland in Anaheim, CA as a "real life" example, but the ideas speak to the Disney culture as a whole (Andalib 2015). Cast members recognize the magic and sense of "make believe" and their jobs and careers are crafted to suspend the disbelief and speak in coded language to truly transport the Guests into this "make-believe" (but still physically tangible) world. This provides complications because the parks are beautifully crafted and designed to be an absolute escape from reality… and they are. The problems arise when considering the negotiation of this and the cast members who work tirelessly to bring it all to life day in and day out.

<div align="center">Experts in Conflict:</div>

Once again, while there is little academic research specifically tied to Disney, there were several scholars whose work and research in work culture, identity/body politics, and dress codes proved useful in examining the work/dress culture of Disney World. Tristan Green defines "work culture" as the process that tells individuals how to act (and wear, talk, topic of discussions, how to interact, etc.) in a work setting. By giving this definition, he frames a discourse or culture that is otherwise hard to conceptualize as well as how and why work culture discriminates. The main takeaway(s) from his research is that modern work culture (and the ability to conform to it) serves as a marker for one's success. He argues that this is based on two things: employers find and hire employees who align and "fit" with the company and that the workplace is becoming increasingly more political and success is based on "who you know" (Green 2005, 634). By stating that "work culture" in and of itself is not discriminatory, but rather the social interactions that *create* the culture is, Disney provides a perfect example: the Disney Look is meant to do the opposite of discriminate—it is meant to provide unity, cleanliness, almost a sense of perfection, but in doing so people are swallowing and concealing their own individual identities.

In a similar realm of study, Amanda and Justin Waring researched the notion of different and competing identities: performing between a "work identity" and a "self-identity" (relatively similar to the work of Skalr and DeLong) and the disconnect between a "professional self" and the physical body. As their research is focused around the projection/presentation of self on the physical body rather than "the dress," their

argument allows for discussion on the physical bodies Disney has and does employ. In their work, Waring and Waring reference a study that shows the correlation between weight and recruitment/employment, revealing that overweight people tended to be overlooked during recruitment processes (Waring and Waring 2009, 349). While speaking with a leader about this project, I learned that at one point in recent history cast members who were overweight (though I am not sure of exact stipulations) were not permitted to work in "Guest facing" roles (conversation with manager, 2019).[1] This means that these employees were not allowed to work in any positions that saw or interacted with any paying Guests for fear of soiling the Disney image, so to speak.

While this particular fact no longer rings true, it is important to investigate other ways (and why) in which the company might continue to move in a structured path forward. DJ Williams et. al. claim that as society continues to progress and change, the dress codes and policies that require the concealment or covering of tattoos/other body modifications in the workplace should be modernized too. According to their findings, 21% of American adults have tattoos and 11% have piercings in other places than their ears; meanwhile, 32-51% of college students have piercings (Williams et. al. 2014). The prevalence of tattoos/piercings/general body modification is only going to increase, making it an issue that needs to be addressed by modern work culture. Williams writes,

> Although it remains important for workers to try to be sensitive to the perceptions of others who personally may not like such modifications, it is also important that expectations of professional appearance are sufficiently flexible to avoid contradicting core values pertaining to human diversity, cultural competence, and empowerment (Williams et. al. 2014, 374).

These are all truly core concepts of the utmost importance to a company like Disney who promotes individuality and kindness; especially where compromises could be made to accommodate for both Guests and cast members alike.

In similar vain to Williams et. al., Gowri Ramachandran argues for a stronger, more defined "freedom" of dress. How one chooses to dress is indicative and informative of their identity and personhood. Essentially, Ramachandran believes that companies and employers should allow their employees more agency and responsibility

---

[1] This was not an established meeting and I do not wish to violate any privacy.

in their self-image and its presentation, likening it to the restrictions and protections on freedom of speech (Ramachandran 2006). She recognizes the importance of uniforms (or in Disney's case, costumes), yet she argues for reasonable accommodation, especially on a case by case basis. Level of "appropriateness" or "professionalism" can be determined through conversations and relative compromise from both parties.

Proposed Mitigation and Support

Change in Company Policies:

A seemingly natural, "next step" of course, is to investigate *how* these ideas and practices could be implemented into company policies. Based on the research, the best possible solution (albeit monetary restrictions and other potential complications) would be to edit and re-write the Disney Look Book in accordance with more modern styles and personal autonomy. While "redoing" the physical document may be more of a nuisance than necessary, the company could begin to adapt and change the current costumes and "look" to be more gender-neutral (which they have started with the opening of new attractions such as Galaxy's Edge both in Anaheim and Orlando). In terms of the already existing costumes across the properties, the strict "requirement" of skirts for females might be either eliminated or become up to the discretion of the individual cast member. (There are many roles where both male and female cast members wear the same costume, but there are some where "the Disney Look" is very different between male and female—I quote "requirement" above after speaking with a leader who believes there to be some lenience now) (Hilleary 2019). When it comes to tattoos, piercings, and other body modifications (including hair, nails, makeup, glasses, etc.) "professionalism" or what is considered "in Look" or "appropriate" might be determined on a case by case basis such as Ramachandran suggests. Seemingly impossible to address with over 75,000 cast members, upon employment each new cast member must attend multiple training sessions and evaluations via the Disney Look team to ensure they are in accordance with the guidelines. This would provide the appropriate opportunity for inspection and conversations with individual cast members on how to appropriately and professionally "perform" their own unique individuality—all while still adhering to the Disney Look.

Awareness of Mentality and Societal Position:

Overall, the company should perhaps embody a stronger "practice what we preach" mentality when regulating the dress and performativity of its hard-working cast members. With a company as pervasive as Disney and a theme park as popular as Disney World, there are a lot of incredibly fine lines to be careful of crossing. Disney World, in its purest of forms, is a place that anyone in the world is welcome to escape to—pure fantasy and magic and *fun*. How does one negotiate this (understanding that cast members must not "offend" *any* person) with their own happiness and personal sense of identity? It would stand to reason that most visitors from the United States might not be offended by "approved" tattoos and piercings, but that does not speak for every other culture or country that might choose to visit the parks. However, as the world continues to progress and move forward, understanding that body modification of any sort is truly an expression of self and identity and general "personhood," Disney (and all its constituents—being the global parks, the stores worldwide, the executives, etc.) could be a pioneer in individual expression within the workplace, especially considering the movies, the messages, and the culture the company as a whole holds so dear.

Communication Plan/ Paradigm of Engagement with Leadership and Colleagues

Steps Toward Change:

It is not news that Disney World is a large company. With over 75,000 employees it can be incredibly challenging to locate the correct people to speak with, especially regarding rules and policies that affect the *entire* company as a whole, not just one specific department. Once located, interviews and conversations would be the next step. Asking questions about the creation of and decisions behind the costuming in Galaxy's Edge (specifically in regard to likelihood to change parkwide and funding) would provide useful in determining the future of the company as a whole. In order to gauge general insight and cast members' thoughts and opinions on "the Disney Look" as a whole as well as their general experiences with feelings of conformity or identity loss, email surveys might generate the results I am after. So as to be sure employees would be interested and incentivized to respond, I'd speak with leaders and attempt to attach "FastPasses" or special "cast member" exclusive experiences to these surveys.

Depending on the results yielded by those answers, it would be smart to host conventions and/or workshops on how to be generally more *aware* of performativity in terms of culture, individuality, etc. I could show documentaries such as "Good Hair," with Chris Rock and his interviews of Black women and their experiences with their hair, find more statistics/films/general information on tattoos, piercings, and other modifications, and share how the trajectory of our culture/society is changing and the best way(s) to accommodate for such.

In general, a major concern for this project is the awareness of verbiage used. It is my experience that people are taken aback when faced with conversations regarding "the Disney Look." My intention in my research is *not to offend* cast members or Guests alike, but rather join together and perhaps pave an even more inclusive, cultured, supportive path forward. I also do not mean to negate any of the positive, inclusive, powerful steps that the company *has* made. In an interview with another leader at Disney's Hollywood Studios, I was informed of a sort of training module accessible to cast members on "Understanding the 'T' in LGBT" that allows cast members to take a self-guided instructional "tour" on understanding the best practices for treatment of transgendered cast members (interview with another manager 2019).[2] Additionally, the company has taken steps to ensure the protection and treatment of transgendered cast members throughout multiple aspects of the company including the option for different "dress codes" which may change on a day to day basis. This means that a cast member may choose to dress in "the female look" one day and "the male look" the next, but is not permitted to blend the two looks (i.e. no facial hair and makeup, etc.) (ibid.). I believe this to be impactful and a powerful step forward, but limited information and on a "need to know" basis for whom it affects. Perhaps if policies and regulations were tweaked, however, it would not need to be sought out information.

It is my sincere belief that the Walt Disney Corporation and Walt Disney World specifically, could be a pioneer in changing the way society marries dress and identity with the workplace. If cast members were allotted the autonomy to express themselves (within workplace discretion), identities and individual power could be salvaged. When Walt Disney created his studio and eventually his theme parks, he wanted to instill a

---

[2] This manager did not give permission to have name used.

sense of disbelief, wonderment, and awe. He recognized innovation and the power of the individual to spark change: "We keep moving forward, opening new doors, and doing new things, because we're curious, and curiosity keeps leading us down new paths." It seems only natural that this is the next door to be opened and explored.

References

Andalib, Laureen. "On 'Simulacra and Simulations, Jean Baudrillard," *L'Arte D'Être*, Oct. 22, 2015. https://blogs.cornell.edu/laureenandalib/2015/10/22/on-simulacra-and-simulations-jean-baudrillard/

Brown, Shaunasea, "'Don't Touch My Hair": Problematizing Representations of Black Women in Canada," *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol. 12, no. 8, Dec. 2018, 64-85. https://www.jpanafrican.org/docs/vol12no8/12.8-4-Brown.pdf

Bruchansky, Christophe, "The Heterotopia of Disney World," *Philosophy* Now*: a magazine of ideas,* 2010. https://philosophynow.org/issues/77/The_Heterotopia_of_Disney_World

Chytry, Josef. "Walt Disney and the creation of emotional environments: interpreting Walt Disney's oeuvre from the Disney studios to Disneyland, CalArts, and the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow (EPCOT)." *Rethinking History*, vol. 16, no. 2, June 2012, 259-278. https://eds-b-ebscohost-com.du.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=9&sid=63aa95fe-e6fc-42b2-906c-75ff115e50dc%40sessionmgr102

Dietert, Michelle and Dianne Dentice, "Gender Identity Issues and Workplace Discrimination: The Transgender Experience," *Journal of Workplace Rights*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2009, 121-140. https://eds-a-ebscohost-com.du.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=15&sid=4ba200cc-b135-4efd-a8b5-1ae29a36bc17%40sdc-v-sessmgr01

"Disney Look: Classic Magic," Disney Corporation, 2018.

Green, Tristan, "Work Culture and Discrimination," *California Law Review,* vol. 93, no. 3, May 2005, 625-684. https://eds-a-ebscohost-com.du.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=18&sid=4ba200cc-b135-4efd-a8b5-1ae29a36bc17%40sdc-v-sessmgr01

Kottak, Conrad Phillip, and Kathryn A Kozaitis. "On Being Different." New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2012.

Ramachandran, Gowri, "Freedom of Dress: State and Private Regulation of Clothing, Hairstyle, Jewelry, Makeup, Tattoos, and Piercing," *Maryland Law Review*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2006 11-93. https://heinonline-org.du.idm.oclc.org/HOL/Page?lname=&public=false&collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/mllr66&men_hide=false&men_tab=toc&kind=&page=11

Waring, Amanda and Justin Waring. "Looking the Part: Embodying the Discourse of Organizational Professionalism in the City," *Current Sociology*, vol. 57, no. 3, May 2009, 344-364. https://journals-sagepub-com.du.idm.oclc.org/doi/abs/10.1177/0011392108101587

Williams, D. J., et. al. "'You Need to Cover your Tattoos!'": Reconsidering Standards of Professional Appearance in Social Work, *Social Work*, vol. 59, no. 4, Oct. 2014, 373-375. https://eds-a-ebscohost-com.du.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=5&sid=4ba200cc-b135-4efd-a8b5-1ae29a36bc17%40sdc-v-sessmgr01