

THE CHILDLESS MILLENNIAL PRETZEL COMPANY: EXPLORING  
STEREOTYPES WITHIN DISNEY FAN GROUPS ON FACEBOOK

by

Morgan Murphy

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Science in Media and Communication

Middle Tennessee State University  
August 2020

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Tricia M. Farwell, Chair

Dr. Sally Ann Cruikshank, Thesis Committee

Dr. Jason Reineke, Thesis Committee

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Dr. Cruikshank and Dr. Reineke for their guidance during this process. I appreciate you both! I would also like to thank Dr. Reineke and Ms. Paula Malone for their help with throughout my time in the Media and Communication program. Your quick responses to my many questions are greatly appreciated.

**Dr. Farwell:** I would not be here without you. Thank you for encouraging me to pursue graduate school during our campaigns class my senior year. You are a wonderful mentor, and I am thankful for your guidance on research, life, and knitting.

**Valen Wilcoxon:** If the only thing that comes from graduate school is your friendship, it was totally worth it! I am thankful for you and your constant encouragement.

**Mom and Dad:** Thank you for always encouraging me. This means even more knowing you both laid the foundation for my education during all of those years of homeschooling. We did it!

**Matt Posey:** Thank you for walking this graduate school journey with me, and for always proofreading my papers. Now, let's go to Walt Disney World!

## **Abstract**

In 2019, a Facebook post was shared across various social media platforms. The post, with names blacked out, was said to have originated from a mother who expressed her disgust with childless millennials who visit the Walt Disney World, saying, “DW is for CHILDREN!!!! People without CHILDREN need to be BANNED!!!! [sic]” She was upset that other people were in line for pretzels, making the line longer. The original poster saw childless millennials as taking away from her family’s experience, as they added to the number of people in line for rides, food, and character interactions. Social media allows people with common interests to connect with each other in new ways. This study looks at how Disney fans use Facebook groups to discuss the childless millennial stereotype in relation to the original Facebook post so widely shared across social media. Four Disney-related Facebook groups were studied. Results found that, overall, Walt Disney World fans are accepting of childless millennials and encourage their participation in the group, despite the stereotype of a childless millennial being negative. Walt Disney welcomed fans to his first park, Disneyland, with the phrase, “To all who come to this happy place, welcome.” This same welcoming attitude is adopted by fans in the four Facebook groups studied.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

When Walt Disney opened Disneyland in California in 1955, he greeted his guests with: “To all who come to this happy place, welcome,” (Harris, 2008). Although Disney passed away before the opening of Walt Disney World in Florida, his brother Roy Disney echoed this sentiment at the opening ceremonies in 1971 saying, “May Walt Disney World bring joy and inspiration and new knowledge to all who come to this happy place... a Magic Kingdom where the young at heart of all ages can laugh and play and learn — together,” (“Walt Disney World Resort Opens,” 2019). The Disney brothers made it clear in their opening speeches that everyone was welcome to visit their parks and enjoy the magic Disney has to offer. Disney Parks continue to unite people with a love of fantasy, food, and rides from all over the world, as more than 20 million people of all ages, demographics, and nationalities visited Walt Disney World in 2018, making it the most visited theme park in the world (TEA/AECOM, 2019).

Walt Disney World and its five sister resorts around the world, Disneyland Resort in California, Tokyo Disney Resort, Hong Kong Disneyland Resort, Disneyland Paris, and Shanghai Disney Resort, encourage the active participation of fans. Numerous designs of Mickey and Minnie Mouse ears can be purchased at nearly every store in the four parks and many on-site resorts, helping visitors feel as if they are part of the experience. Several shows throughout the theme parks, such as the *Indiana Jones Epic Stunt Spectacular!*, *Frozen Sing-Along Celebration*, and *Turtle Talk with Crush*, invite members of the audience to participate. Mickey’s Not So Scary Halloween Party, Mickey’s Very Merry Christmas Party, and Disney Villains After Hours events even invite fans to dress up as their favorite characters and enjoy specialty snacks, drinks, and

souvenirs throughout the night. Fans pay more than \$100 per person for these events, which are normally less than six hours long, for the opportunity to meet their favorite characters and experience an immersive event.

Despite Walt Disney World's claim to be the "Most Magical Place on Earth," not every visitor has a magical experience. In 2019, a Facebook post was shared across various social media platforms. The post, with names blacked out, was said to have originated from a mother who expressed her disgust with childless millennials who visit the Walt Disney World, saying, "DW is for CHILDREN!!!! People without CHILDREN need to be BANNED!!!! [sic]" She was upset that other people were in line for pretzels, making the line longer. The original poster saw childless millennials as taking away from her family's experience, as they added to the number of people in line for rides, food, and character interactions.

Companies often watch social media to see how fans interact with their brand. With the increased use of social media as a means of communication, it is important to study how fans interact with their favorite brands and companies online. This study will examine how Disney fans participate in Disney culture via Facebook groups, specifically looking at the reaction by Disney fans to a post criticizing the "childless millennial" segment of the population. Posts and comments in four Walt Disney World related Facebook groups were analyzed using stereotyping theory. This thesis seeks to answer how childless millennials are accepted in the groups, as well as how the original childless millennial post is viewed. Three types of posts were found: posts reclaiming the childless millennial stereotype, posts with humorous tones, and posts discussing the original childless millennial post.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of a childless millennial may seem simple on the surface, but a deeper dig into the subject shows a contested site for communication. The following literature review looks at The Walt Disney Company's history and parks, Disney fan studies, social media, and the psychological struggle of waiting in line. This literature review will also provide definitions of childless and millennial.

### Disney History

#### *The Walt Disney Company*

The Walt Disney Company, first called Disney Brothers Cartoon Studios and later Walt Disney Studios, began as a cartoon studio in the early 1920s. Walt Disney, his brother Roy, and animator Ub Iwerks created popular cartoons about a rabbit named Oswald (Barrier, 2007). Their cartoons were distributed by Universal Pictures, and a clause in Disney's contract gave intellectual property rights to the distributor. Universal Pictures maintained the rights to these cartoons and fired Walt Disney after he asked for more money, leaving him with no animators and no characters (Barrier, 2007).

After this, Walt Disney created a new character named Mortimer. Today, he is known to the world as Mickey Mouse, as Walt Disney's wife did not like the name Mortimer Mouse (Barrier, 2007). Mickey Mouse premiered in the 1928 cartoon *Steamboat Willie* and has been loved by fans around the world since (Barrier, 2007).

The Walt Disney Company has come a long way since the Oswald cartoons were taken over by Universal Pictures. Today, the Walt Disney Company owns and operates six media companies, among them ABC, ESPN, and National Geographic. They also

have six theme park locations, with many locations having multiple parks, a Hawaiian resort, four cruise ships, a retail store chain, 11 movie and music studios, and four streaming platforms (“The Walt Disney Company,” 2020). The Walt Disney Company is known worldwide and continues to acquire more studios and intellectual property each year. Recently, The Walt Disney Company acquired Lucasfilm, the creator of *Star Wars*, and Marvel (Collis and Hartman, 2018).

Many of the attractions in Walt Disney World are based on feature films from the Walt Disney Company. For example, there are attractions based on *Frozen*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Peter Pan*, and *Star Wars*, with new attractions based on *Moana* and *Ratatouille* coming soon. The theme parks and movies are so intertwined that it would be difficult to understand the theme parks without knowing of the Disney movies. Disney movies play a large role in American culture. The Walt Disney Company has promoted ideals through its movies like “universal love, good conquering evil, and simple happy endings,” (Wills, 2017, p. 104).

The Walt Disney Company is an entertainment company at its core, but it is important to understand and acknowledge that Disney “is fair game for serious critical review,” (Wasko, 2020). The company has established worldwide dominance in the entertainment industry, but is still viewed as a company that makes magic for its guests, rather than a behemoth near-monopoly.

### ***The Walt Disney Company Parks***

One of the more popular properties of the Walt Disney Company is the Disney Parks sector. The company operates multiple theme park locations across the world,

specifically Disneyland and Disney's California Adventure in California, Walt Disney World in Florida (which has four unique theme parks on property), Tokyo Disneyland and Tokyo DisneySea in Japan, Disneyland Paris and Walt Disney Studios Park in France, and Hong Kong Disneyland and Shanghai Disney in China ("Family Vacations at Disney Parks & Resorts," 2020).

Walt Disney's first park, Disneyland, opened in Anaheim, California in 1955. The park was a huge success and the company soon began planning for a park in Florida. Walt Disney wanted to create an "Experimental Prototype City of Tomorrow," which was the precursor to today's Walt Disney World (Chytry, 2012, p. 268). Walt Disney died before his vision could be completed, and the Walt Disney Company chose to build another Magic Kingdom on the property in Florida instead. Walt Disney's original plan was completed later with some alteration when Epcot opened in 1982.

Walt Disney World, located in Lake Buena Vista and Bay Lake, Florida, near Orlando, is the biggest of the Walt Disney Company's parks and covers nearly 40 square miles, approximately the size of San Francisco ("Family Vacations at Disney Parks & Resorts," 2020). The vacation destination is the largest single site employer in the United States, with more than 70 thousand cast members employed ("Family Vacations at Disney Parks & Resorts," 2020). The resort features four parks, two water parks, 30 resorts with a total of 30 thousand hotel rooms, and four modes of complementary transportation ("Family Vacations at Disney Parks & Resorts," 2020).

The four parks in Walt Disney World are Magic Kingdom, Epcot, Hollywood Studios, and Animal Kingdom, each with their own unique theming and design. Magic Kingdom is broken up into five distinct areas: Main Street U.S.A, Frontierland,

Fantasyland, Adventureland, and Tomorrowland. This park focuses on classic Disney properties, such as *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Song of the South*, and *Cinderella*. Epcot, originally intended by Walt Disney to be a neighborhood, has two areas: FutureWorld and the World Showcase (“Family Vacations at Disney Parks & Resorts,” 2020). Epcot is famous for its festivals, which take place nearly every month.

Hollywood Studios, originally called the Disney-MGM Park, allows fans to be immersed in their favorite movies, such as *Indiana Jones*, *Star Wars*, and *Toy Story* (“Family Vacations at Disney Parks & Resorts,” 2020). Hollywood Studios is also home to popular rides Rock ‘n’ Roller Coaster and Tower of Terror (“Family Vacations at Disney Parks & Resorts,” 2020). Animal Kingdom is the newest park on property, opening in 1998 (“Family Vacations at Disney Parks & Resorts,” 2020). Animal Kingdom combines Disney magic with nature, allowing guests to see animals and characters in the same park. The newest Animal Kingdom attraction, Pandora – The World of *Avatar*, is based on the popular movie *Avatar* (“Family Vacations at Disney Parks & Resorts,” 2020).

Walt Disney World’s Magic Kingdom is the most visited theme park in the world, with more than 20 million visitors in 2018 (Jordan, 2019). Walt Disney World as a whole sees an estimated “hundreds of millions” of guests each year (“Family Vacations at Disney Parks & Resorts,” 2020). With so many visitors, it is likely that guests will have to wait in line to experience an attraction or ride, meet a character, or purchase food or drinks. Walt Disney World has made efforts to minimize wait time, or at least make guests aware of wait times. The My Disney Experience app allows guests to track attraction wait times, order their food ahead of time and book FastPass+ reservations for

rides which allow holders to essentially skip the line (“Family Vacations at Disney Parks & Resorts,” 2020). This technology allows guests to choose how they will spend their time in the parks, as they know approximately how long they will wait for most attractions.

### ***The Walt Disney Company Fans***

Disney fans have long been research subjects, most recently in a 2019 study of their social media habits and how social media influences the relationship between the fan and the corporation. The study found that Facebook and other outlets allowed “a proliferation of online fan groups that established a multitude of new social formations in the park,” (McCarthy, 2019, p. 2). These social formations include events such as Dapper Days, when Disney fans dress in their finest attire at the parks.

The social media interactions between fans has even created fan celebrities, with popular members of Facebook groups posing for photographs with other fans throughout the parks. Disney provides many fan events throughout the year that are included in park admission, such as Food and Wine Festival and Flower and Garden Festival at EPCOT in Florida, and birthday parties for popular characters like Mickey Mouse. The most dedicated Disney fans, however, take it to another level and create their own events several times a year, such as Dapper Days and costume dress up events, often referred to as Disneybounding.

Disney strongly encourages fan participation, leading to a strong bond between the person and the company. A 2004 study found that college students were reluctant to criticize *The Little Mermaid*, a popular 1989 cartoon film based on Hans Christian

Andersen's *The Little Seamaid* (Sun and Scharrer, 2004, p. 36). College students read Andersen's story and watched *The Little Mermaid*, then compared and contrasted the two tales in class. According to the article, most students held firm in their positive attitudes towards *The Little Mermaid*. One respondent said, "Always a Disney fan, I find it hard to criticize Disney," (Sun and Scharrer, 2004, p. 52). "I don't really judge Disney films. After seeing *Pocahontas* I gave up trying to be critical. I think it is pretty hopeless," (Sun and Scharrer, 2004, p. 51).

As the student in the Sun and Scharrer (2004) study said, it is difficult for fans of Disney to criticize Disney in any capacity, partially due to the *Disneyization* phenomenon. Many people begin consuming media at a young age, and corporations like The Walt Disney Company have ushered in readily available digital media, leading to commodification at a very young age (Giroux, 2016). *Disneyization* is defined as "the process by which of the Disney theme parks are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world," (Bryman, 1999). This culture of participation creates advocates for the company.

Participatory culture is a "new style of consumerism," (Jenkins, 2003). Jenkins defines a participatory culture as a culture "with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civil engagement; with strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others; with some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices; where members believe that their contributions matter; where members feel some degree of social connection with one another (at least they care what other people think about what they have created)," (Jenkins, 2006). In the context of fandom, the culture is an avenue "through which fans

explore and question the ideologies of mass culture, speaking sometimes inside and sometimes outside the cultural logic of commercial entertainment,” (Jenkins, 2003).

Participatory culture allows fans to play a part in the culture, rather than only viewing the culture, and take pride in their contributions and participation.

Jenkins also questions if participatory culture becomes exploitation when it is commercialized. Disney is a commercial entertainment company, but the participatory culture is typically not seen as exploitation, based on fan reaction to always increasing prices. Many fans use social media to voice their dislike of the price hikes, but continue to pay thousands of dollars per year to travel to Disney parks. Walt Disney World is described as “a place of control, simulation, reactionary conservatism, corporate branding, and surveillance,” (Williams, 2013). The theme parks are a safe haven of sorts for visitors, as there is an expectation of safety and fun. Fans expect a level of service from Walt Disney World, and do not hesitate to spend the money and time requested to ensure their experience is up to standard, even if a lot of that time is spent waiting in line.

### **The Psychology of Waiting**

Waiting in line is considered one of the more frustrating parts of life and although lines are simple, they can interrupt daily life (Norman, 2008). It does not matter if the interaction was positive; if the wait is long, there is an anger that “pollutes the overall judgments that we make about the quality of service,” (Maister, 2005, p. 1). There are six keys to designing waiting lines that cause the least amount of frustration for customers: “provide a conceptual model, make the wait seem appropriate, meet or exceed expectations, keep people occupied, be fair, and end strong, start strong,” (Norman, 2008,

p. 1). If a line is created with those who will wait in mind, the line will likely be less frustrating. There should be something to distract the people in line, as well as a visible end goal. If those waiting in line also have an idea of how long the wait is, they will likely be less frustrated and irritable during their wait.

### ***Waiting in Line at Walt Disney World***

Though there is an expectation that guests will have to wait in line, the Walt Disney Company has attempted to make waiting enjoyable. Disney has done its best to “make the waiting experience less psychologically wearing,” (Katz, Larson and Larson, 1991, p. 2). Many Walt Disney World attraction lines, called queues, are themed to match the ride. This allows guests to have some entertainment while waiting. Often, guests move through multiple rooms throughout their wait (Katz et al, 1991). The main objective is to keep the line constantly moving. This minimizes frustration and allows the guest to see progress made (Katz et al, 1991). The lines get longer every year, but park satisfaction among guests rises (Katz et al, 1991). When asked what they most disliked about their trip to Walt Disney World, guests immediately responded with lines, but each agreed that they would return (Norman, 2008).

Walt Disney World posts wait times for attractions and character meets, as unknown waits seem longer than known waits (Maister, 1984). The wait times for more popular rides can exceed three hours, but it is typically an enjoyable wait thanks to cast member interaction, props to match the theme of the ride, and constantly moving lines.

Unfortunately, the ride queues set a high expectation that is not met in other areas of the park. Outdoor snack carts, for example, often have long lines, but guests have to

wait on a sidewalk outside with no known wait time rather than in a colorful, air-conditioned queue. Guests see other people getting their food and enjoying a cold drink while they wait in line, leading guests to believe they are waiting even longer. The scenery is not as interesting as ride queues, either, as snack carts and quick service restaurants are typically surrounded by trash cans. This is done for convenience, but leads to a less than magical experience while waiting for a Mickey Mouse shaped pretzel. The pretzel cart line, in fact, triggered the entire childless millennial phenomenon on social media, as it was the final straw for the original poster.

## Social Media

### *Overview*

Social media is an ever-changing and complex communication tool. It has many attributes and differences between platforms, but can be broadly defined as an Internet-based application, with user-generated content being the main form of communication (Obar and Wildman, 2015). Profiles are created, whether for individuals or groups, and are maintained by the social media platform (Obar and Wildman, 2015). The platforms facilitate the connection between individuals and groups (Obar and Wildman, 2015). This is the essence of the communication between Disney fans on social media, specifically Facebook. Disney fans use the Facebook social media platform to interact with each other about upcoming events, rides, and day-to-day activities. While Disney fans do communicate on other forms of social media, particularly Instagram, Facebook allows more freedom to post pictures, comments, questions, and polls, and thus has a larger

community. Those wanting to be in the group typically must agree to the group's rules and wait for approval by an administrator.

### ***Facebook***

Facebook started in 2006 and had a reported 2.37 billion active users as of April 2019 (Hutchinson, 2019). One of the main avenues of communication on Facebook is groups. These groups range in topic from small social pages, to topic-specific pages, to town-specific pages to industry-specific pages, with everything in between. For example, many neighborhoods have Facebook pages, allowing neighborhood watch programs to communicate more consistently (Fennelly and Perry, 2018). In 2017-2019, Facebook shifted their algorithm, and the number of Facebook users who were actively engaged in groups jumped from 100 million to 400 million. The shift from news feeds based on individual profiles to more group-based interactions was brought on by the 2016 Presidential election, after Facebook received backlash for not actively preventing the spread of misinformation and fake news (Rodriguez, 2020).

For the Disney community, Facebook groups are used to share advice and best practices for traveling to the Disney parks, as well as sharing Disney crafts, stories, and experiences. More than 100 general Disney Facebook groups are active, with many more groups specific to a certain park, dining plans, crafting, and even specific characters.

### ***The Walt Disney Company's Social Media***

Disney has an active social media presence, with the Walt Disney Company as a whole operating 141 Facebook pages, 55 Twitter handles, and 31 Instagram accounts

(Unmetric, 2020). Among them are Walt Disney World, Disney+ (one of Disney's streaming services), shopDisney, and DisneyEats (a page dedicated to food inspired by Disney movies and attractions). The company also runs a general Disney fanpage, which has more than 52 million likes on Facebook and more than 6 million Twitter followers. Content on these accounts include recipes, new product promotion, inspirational Disney quotes, and photos from the parks. This allows members of the Disney community to participate in the culture without physically being in the parks, often creating a fear of missing out, encouraging followers to return to the parks.

### **Case Study**

The childless millennial conversation began in the summer of 2019 on Disney fan social media after a post surfaced shaming young people without children who visited Walt Disney World. The post garnered attention from popular media like *The Washington Post*, BuzzFeed, and CBS News, with each outlet sharing the post and subsequent responses. The conversation continues to resurface approximately every few months on Disney Facebook groups. The post is now often viewed in a humorous light, but originally made many Disney fans angry and defensive.

#### ***The Original Childless Millennials Post***

The author of the post shaming childless millennials at Walt Disney World is unknown. The account is blacked out on the screenshot shared by Twitter user @JenKatWrites on July 19, 2019. This tweet was the first time the post was shared to the public, so it is impossible to determine the original author.



Figure 1. The original childless millennial post.

The original author uses this Facebook post to express frustration with the lines at Walt Disney World, as well as the childless millennials waiting in line. The author's rant shows that she is tired of seeing people who do not have children at what she considers a children's park. It is also reasonable to think that the author is frustrated with her own experiences, and is tired of her child being upset. She uses social media to blame other people for her less-than-magical Walt Disney World vacation.

### ***Childless Millennials Defined***

When analyzing the childless millennial phenomenon as it relates to Disney, it is important to define what constitutes a childless millennial. A definition of terms has not been discussed regarding this specific instance, so the popular definitions must be used to provide context. According to Pew Research Center, anyone born between 1981 and 1996 is considered a millennial (Dimock, 2019). This range is contested and can include different years in other research studies. This impacts the understanding of the terminology used in the original post. It is impossible to know if the author who originally used the term was referring to someone born between 1981 and 1996, or if she was referring to younger teenagers, who would actually be considered as part of Generation Z. This could change the conversation around the post, as there is some confusion regarding who is part of what generation. Millennials are very active on social media, with an estimated 75 percent of millennials having at least one active social media profile (Spainhour, 2019). Millennials possess different qualities than that of previous generations, as they often come from non-traditional family backgrounds, are open to change, value inclusion, and value experiences over possessions (Spainhour, 2019). All of these factors influence how millennials interact with others, as well as how millennials are defined.

Childless is also an important word to define. It is typically understood that childless refers to someone without children, but in the context of this post, does that mean the person has no children, or does not have their children with them? It is impossible to know if these childless millennials are in fact childless, or if they do have children who were not present during the time period observed by the original poster.

When considering other definitions for these words, the conversation can change from disrespectful teenagers at Walt Disney World cutting line for a pretzel to overworked parents needing a break from their children, thus escaping to Walt Disney World.

Society views those without children as a deviant group, particularly if the childlessness is voluntary (Veevers, 1973; McMahon, 1995; Church, 2000). Two factors were found in the decision to be voluntarily childless: the attraction of being child free and the rejection of motherhood (Gillespie, 2003). Neither of these choices are inherently unethical, but the post used childless in a negative connotation, suggesting that it was wrong to not have children, despite there being many women who are content without children, or cannot physically have a child. The post reinforced a stigma found in a 40-year-old research study that said childlessness is viewed as a bad thing (Veevers, 1973).

Disney fans have been the subject of many studies, but few to date look at the interaction between fans online. In an increasingly digital age, it is vital to understand how people of different backgrounds and life stages connect on social media. Studying this interaction on Facebook allows the researcher to view these discussions and use past literature to better understand the growing community.

### CHAPTER III: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This thesis examines conversations on Disney-related Facebook groups about childless millennials in Walt Disney World. To better understand the interactions, the researcher will apply stereotyping theory to the posts. Stereotyping is an ordering process that allows people to make sense of another person or object using their own beliefs and values (Dyer, 1999). Walter Lippmann, who conceived the modern stereotyping theory, saw stereotyping as a way for people to make sense of the world around them (Lippmann, 1922).

Lippmann said, “In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture,” (Lippmann, 1922, para. 5). Stereotyping allows people to take what they know, either from their own experiences or what they have been told, and apply it to unknown situations, aiding in the understanding of new information. According to Dyer, though, stereotypes are negative, and are used as a form of “abuse” and as a justification for objectifying groups of people (Dyer, 1999, para. 1). While Lippmann had good intentions for the use of stereotyping, as Dyer observes, stereotypes are often used in negative ways, especially in the media. For example, in children’s television programming, gender stereotypes such as, “math is for boys and not for girls” are conveyed (Wille et al, 2018, p. 1). Stereotypes go beyond race and gender, though. People are often stereotyped based on their education, socioeconomic class, age, and generation (Dionigi, 2015; Dobson and Knezevic, 2018; Durante and Fisk, 2017).

Stereotypes go beyond traditional media, and although social media platforms are used for important discussions, they can also be used as “a space for even less restrained stereotyping,” and “incendiary discourses and social stereotypes,” (Dobson and Knezevic, 2018, p. 382). This is especially true for a platform like a Facebook group, as there is often very little moderation despite a high volume of content. While Lippmann’s original view of stereotypes allows people to make sense of what they see, stereotyping is often used to objectify and simplify groups of people.

The original childless millennial post made many people angry, not only because of the rampant profanity, but also because of the harmful stereotypes present. The original poster views all childless people at Walt Disney World as selfish “sluts” in short shorts. The post also focuses on women who are childless and does not explicitly mention childless men, despite a reference to childless couples in the first line of the post. This language reinforces and showcases the stereotype that childless women are “slutty” and “immature.” No negative language is used to describe childless men at the theme parks in the post, as they are omitted entirely, minus the childless couples reference. Childless millennials are not exclusively females, but this post seems to only apply to females.

## CHAPTER IV: METHOD

### Statement of Purpose and Definition of Terms

The purpose of this study is to analyze the online conversations among Disney fans about childless millennials at Walt Disney World and study the views expressed on Facebook of childless millennials who visit the theme parks. For this research study, childless will be defined as someone without children present with them at the theme parks, while millennial will be defined as someone born between 1981 and 1996. There is not a definitive way to determine the age of someone claiming to be a childless millennial online, nor can it be determined if they legitimately do not have children. Therefore, the researcher did not look beyond the Facebook group posts for other information on the group members and took each post in the group at face value.

This research study will use textual analysis to examine the childless millennial conversation within select Disney-focused Facebook groups. A textual analysis is described as a way for researchers to “understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live,” (McKee, 2003). A qualitative method is preferable for this study because it allows the researcher to examine comments and interactions around the childless millennial discussion for themes, such as discussion in greater depths of the original post, reclaiming the childless millennial term, and humor.

### Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following questions: How does the greater Disney fan community within Facebook groups view the conversation about childless

millennials? Are childless millennials encouraged in Disney Facebook groups? How is the original childless millennial post viewed by Disney Facebook group members?

### **Sample**

This research study looked at Facebook groups because they allow conversations to take place with little interruption. Unlike Twitter, there is no character limit for Facebook posts and comments. While many Disney fans use Instagram to connect with other Disney fans, Instagram does not facilitate discussion in the same way as Facebook.

The following four groups were chosen for their high level of daily activity, as well as the openness of the group. The administrators in each group act as moderators, rather than gatekeepers, mostly allowing for the free flow of conversation among members. The groups used for this study, “Annual Passholders,” “Smart Moms Plan Disney,” “Walt Disney World Tips and Tricks” and “Annual Passholders - Walt Disney World (Happy People Only),” each have between 140 thousand and 250 thousand members. The post that started the childless millennial conversation referred to Walt Disney World and no other Disney parks, therefore all groups in this sample are Walt Disney World related.

To obtain a sample, the researcher used Facebook’s search in group tool using the key words “childless millennial,” filtering the results to include what Facebook considers to be the top posts in the group. The other filters available, tagged location, date posted, and posted by, remained on the default settings of anywhere, any date, and anyone, respectively.

This method of sampling allows the researcher to see the most relevant conversations about childless millennials at Walt Disney World in each group. Choosing only the top posts and related replies as determined by Facebook could limit the findings of this study, as it does not include every post about childless millennials within each Disney fan group. The posts analyzed must have the phrase childless millennial in the body of the original post to be considered, instead of only a comment with the words childless millennial. This is one downfall of Facebook's group search tool, as it gives comments the same value as a post in the search results. Each post containing the term childless millennial was read, but not all were included in the study. In some cases, the use of the term childless millennial was irrelevant to the post and greater conversations. Some posts also mentioned other Disney properties not related to Walt Disney World in Florida. These did not contribute to the childless millennial conversation and therefore were excluded from this study.

Both the selected posts and comments from the selected posts were analyzed. Posts were analyzed and categorized into one of three themes – reclaiming the childless millennial stereotype, humor, and discussion of the original childless millennial post. The themes were determined based on the wording and tone of the post. Comments were not categorized, but were analyzed to determine how group members reacted to the post. The post selection allowed the researcher to read the posts and comments as a continuous conversation that lasted approximately six months, rather than as distinct conversations. Each post was read four times and was categorized into themes based on perceived tone and wording, as well as how the phrase childless millennial was used. Each post had a

different number of comments, some with as little as five and others with up to 400 comments. Comments were also read four times.

The themes found were not mutually exclusive, as many posts could be categorized by more than one theme. However, each post was only counted once based on the main theme of the post as determined by the researcher. Many posts were humorous but focused more on discussion or reclamation. The humor theme was only applicable for categorization if that was the main focus. This allowed the researcher to look deeper into the post. If each post was categorized based on the first reading, they would have all likely been categorized as humorous.

A post is considered a reclamation of the childless millennial term if it shows someone proclaiming their childless millennial status, with disregard for any negative connotation. If a post included a person who is not a childless millennial joking about the term or pretending to be a childless millennial, the post is considered a humorous post. Many posts considered humorous included emoticons that signaled a tongue-in-cheek approach to the topic. Finally, any post that discusses or references the original childless millennial post is considered to be in the discussion theme. While other themes were found, such as asking for trip advice as a childless millennial and calling other people in the theme parks childless millennials, they were not prevalent. Each of these themes had very few posts and were moved to the discussion and humorous themes, respectively.

## CHAPTER V: ANALYSIS

This thesis examines the top search results for posts about childless millennials on select Disney Facebook groups. The researcher collected 54 posts, but after eliminating posts because they were cross-posted in multiple groups, 43 posts were analyzed. The researcher found three main themes: Twenty-three posts reclaimed the childless millennial term, 13 posts included humorous childless millennial references, and 7 posts discussed the original childless millennial post. These themes are not mutually exclusive and were determined based on wording and tone of the post, as well as the use of emoticons, Disney references, and photographs. Comments on each post were also analyzed, but were not categorized into themes. Analyzing comments allowed more insight into if and how childless millennials are welcomed into groups. Eleven posts were eliminated because, although they contained the term childless millennial, they were not relevant to Walt Disney World and discussed other Disney properties, such as Aulani, a Disney resort in Hawaii, or Disneyland in California.

### **Theme 1: Reclaiming the Childless Millennial Term**

A post was considered reclaiming the childless millennial term if it included reference to the post's author as a childless millennial. Of the 43 posts analyzed, 23 posts were identified as having a reclamation theme. Many of these posts featured photographs of Walt Disney World guests wearing shirts proclaiming they were childless millennials, with a few even holding pretzels. The pretzels were a reference to the original post, which said the childless millennials were eating all of the pretzels at Magic Kingdom. The tone of the reclamation posts are consistently flippant. The group members who

claim to be childless millennials are proud of this term, but show their pride in a joking manner.

### ***Annual Passholders - Walt Disney World Resort***

In this group, 11 posts were identified as reclaiming the childless millennial stereotype, which is the most of any group analyzed. A post from December 2019 showed a woman taking a selfie sitting in front of the Magic Kingdom castle. She is wearing pink Minnie Mouse ears, pink sneakers, and a Millennial Pink shirt with “Childless Millennial: Looking Like a Whole Snack” on and a pretzel design on the front. She is also wearing a pink MagicBand, which is a Walt Disney World’s guest ticket, room key, and method of payment. The pink color matches a retail line the Walt Disney Company released in 2018, with the specific shade of pink used is marketed as Millennial Pink (Tuttle, 2018). The line was released before the childless millennial culture began, but Walt Disney World guests can still purchase Millennial Pink products. This post not only embraces, but also reclaims the childless millennial term and embraces stereotypes.

Millennials are often represented in media as self-absorbed and social media obsessed, and the selfie while sitting in Magic Kingdom is ridiculing and reinforcing this stereotype (Lantos, 2014). Millennials are seen as consumption-oriented, and the photograph included in the post reinforces this stereotype, too (Eastman, Iyer, and Thomas, 2013). The woman in the photograph is wearing an Apple Watch, sunglasses, athletic shorts, pearl earrings, a Mickey Mouse necklace, and an Alex and Ani bracelet. Her nails are manicured, and her makeup and hair are done. In the original post, childless millennials are criticized for throwing “away their money on useless crap,” and this post

reinforces the stereotype, as the millennial in the photograph has on more Disney merchandise than those in the background of the photograph.

Several posts reclaiming the childless millennial term reference Epcot, with many including photographs of alcoholic beverages. For example, one post said, “The childless millennial is out and about today in Epcot 😊 Germany being the first stop of course 😊” (Johnson, 2019). The photograph attached showed a female millennial drinking beer and wearing Minnie Mouse ears with a German flag bow. This post shows pride in being a childless millennial at Walt Disney World, and the comments encouraged the guest’s fun. One comment said, “This is our first stop as millennials with children too 😂,” (Bruner, 2019). In this post, emoticons are used to lighten the tone surrounding the childless millennial term. Although the term was originally intended to be negative and was highly debated on Disney Facebook groups, the emoticons reflect more of a happy, easy-going tone.

Some responses to the post had a joking reaction, asking the author of the post how she could take the beer of a child, which was a reference to the original post, which claimed a childless millennial took a child’s pretzel. Other comments encouraged her to enjoy a pretzel with her beer. Overall, comments were very supportive of the childless millennial and encouraged her to have a fun day at Epcot, but some group members expressed frustration with the childless millennial posts. These frustrated comments had the same tone as the original childless millennial rant, asking the woman in the photograph why she felt the need to post in the group. For example, one comment said, “Ok enough with the childless millennial posts. We get it ur young wild and free [sic],”

(Martinez, 2019). This reinforced the stereotype that childless millennials are annoying and excessive, as presented by the original childless millennial post.

Other posts reclaiming the childless millennial term included photographs of characters throughout Walt Disney World. A post from November 2019 included a photograph of five women posing with Goofy at Epcot with the caption, “Just some Childless Millennials here,” (Cody, 2019). Each woman is wearing Minnie Mouse ears and a t-shirt that said, “Childless Millennial,” with the colors matching those of a Disney princess. The t-shirts are not a Disney product. One woman is wearing a yellow shirt and ears with a rose, suggesting she was supposed to dress as Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*. Others in the picture are dressed to represent Cinderella, Aurora from *Sleeping Beauty*, Pocahontas, and Jasmine from *Aladdin*. Three of the women are wearing leggings, while two are wearing shorts. One woman, who is dressed in the colors of Pocahontas, is wearing short jean shorts with ragged edges. This could be a reference to the original post about childless millennials, as the author was angry at the childless millennials wearing “SLUTTY shorts” at Walt Disney World. Millennials are stereotyped as wearing athletic clothing in everyday life, and the women in this post reinforce that stereotype (Choi and Hahn, 2018). The shorts being seen as too short is more of an age stereotype than generational, but is still a stereotype of young females. This post is one of a very few to show more than one race. Most women who reclaimed the childless millennial stereotype were white, but two races (black and white) and one ethnicity (Hispanic) are represented in this post.

Childless millennials were criticized in the original post for taking a child’s spot in line, but many have embraced this characteristic and draw attention to their

comparably easy wait. A female millennial posted a picture with Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog* with the caption, “Oh you know me... just hanging out being a childless millennial.. [sic] not having to wait three hours to meet the princesses with a cranky 3 year ol□❤,” (Maldonado, 2019). The post has more than 1.6 thousand reactions and 100 comments, with many people encouraging her desire to meet characters. Only a few negative comments were posted, with most only expressing their annoyance that the childless millennial phrase was still relevant. Stereotyping takes place in a slightly different manner in this post, as the childless millennial is not being stereotyped, but is stereotyping mothers and children. She suggests that children who have to wait in line are cranky, and that mothers do not enjoy waiting with their children. Thinking of waiting and children in this way is stereotypical, especially at a theme park.

Other childless millennials use this Facebook group to ask for advice on events to attend at Walt Disney World, nearly always adding the disclaimer of childless millennial to their post. For example, one member of the group asked for opinions on Mickey’s Not So Scary Halloween Party, and if it was appropriate for her to trick-or-treat. Another person asked if she and her significant other would enjoy the *Frozen* Sing-Along park attraction even though they did not have children. Both group members began or ended the post saying, “childless millennial here.” While they are not directly discussing the stereotypes of a childless millennial, they are proudly claiming to be a childless millennial, which was originally intended as a negative term.

***Annual Passholders - Walt Disney World (Happy People Only)***

This group had only three posts identified as reclaiming the childless millennial term. A post from August 2019 showed two females in front of the castle in Magic Kingdom wearing childless millennial shirts. One woman has on heavy makeup with mermaid Minnie Mouse ears and short blue jean shorts. The other woman is wearing athletic leggings, pink Minnie Mouse ears, and a side braid. This again reinforces the stereotype of millennials and their clothing choices, as previously mentioned. The two women wear their shirts proudly, as they both are grabbing the area around the childless millennial design to make sure it is seen in the photograph. They are taking ownership of their title in this image, proudly displaying their status as childless millennials. This was also the first post analyzed that included the hashtag “#childlessmillennial.” Hashtags are generally seen as something millennials and teenagers excessively use, therefore limited use of hashtags in the posts analyzed is breaking a stereotype.

Facebook groups are often used to share upcoming events, and one member of this group posted an event inviting childless millennials to visit Magic Kingdom on August 22, 2019. According to the event’s page, “Millenials [sic] without children all go to Disney,” more than one thousand childless millennials visited Magic Kingdom and 10 thousand indicated they were interested in the event. The Facebook group member shared the post on July 29, 2019, with the caption, “Sooooo just seen this! [sic]” There are 83 comments on the post, with many comments encouraging everyone to enjoy a day at Walt Disney World. After several people asked if other generations could participate, the person who shared the event commented, “In my eyes that includes all of you ! Just make sure to wear your short shorts!!!! 😊😊 [sic]” (Amaya, 2019). The short shorts comment

was a reference to the original post, and group members continued to take ownership of this in several comments. One person commented, “Nope, you gotta wear the shorts if you want the pretzel! 😂 You only live once!!! [sic]” again referencing the original post, while reclaiming the terminology that was initially considered negative.

The third reclamation post in the “Annual Passholders - Walt Disney World (Happy People Only)” group is a photograph of four adults in Epcot. Three of the adults, two males and one female, are wearing shirts that say, “Childless Millennial,” and the fourth adult, a male, is wearing a shirt that says, “Keeping the Childless Millennials Out of Trouble.” Interestingly, this photograph has no caption, leaving commenters to interpret meaning. Approximately one thousand people reacted to the post, with most choosing the laughing and like reactions and only two people choosing negative reactions. Most comments cheer on the group to have fun at Epcot, with some referencing the original childless millennial post, saying they should wear their short shorts and eat a pretzel. The short shorts and pretzels have become symbols for resistance to the original post. The ability to comment on this post was turned off either by the person who posted the picture or an administrator of the group. No reason was given for this, but in other posts within this group many people expressed frustration with the repetition of childless millennial posts, therefore comments could have been turned off to limit the conversation.

### ***Smart Moms Planning Disney***

The third Facebook group in this study did not have any posts that reclaimed the childless millennial term. This group is primarily for parents planning trips to Disney

parks, so it is not surprising that they did not show interest in reclaiming the stereotype, as they are not in the childless millennial life stage.

### ***Walt Disney World Tips and Tricks***

This group had 9 posts identified as reclaiming the childless millennial stereotype. A female childless millennial posted her tips for embracing excitement as an adult at Walt Disney World. She included photographs with Snow White, Grumpy, and Dopey from the animated movie *Snow White*. They were taken at Storybook Dining at Artist Point, an upscale character dining experience at Walt Disney World's Wilderness Lodge and show the female and a male interacting with and hugging the characters. She discussed her experiences at Walt Disney World, including purchasing an autograph book and waiting in line to meet characters. At the end of her post, she said, "So to anyone thinking 'am I too old for Disney' .... the answer is NO!!!! And don't let ANYONE tell you different!!! [sic]" (Waters, 2019). One thousand people reacted positively to the post, and the 246 comments shared the excitement, with many posting their own character interaction photographs. The original childless millennial post criticized the spending habits of childless millennials and their willingness to waste their money on "useless crap," while this post encouraged the purchase of autograph books and character dining experiences. This post reclaims the stereotype by proudly displaying the money spent on vacation. The souvenirs and extra character experiences are not essential, but are enjoyed by many, including childless millennials.

This Facebook group is focused more on tips for navigating Walt Disney World than discussion, therefore many childless millennial posts are asking for the best

restaurants or rides and only mentioning they are a childless millennial as a disclaimer, as previously mentioned. This allows other group members to make suggestions that are for adults only. Several posts ask about the best restaurants that do not have character experiences. Typically, where there are characters at Walt Disney World, there are children, and these posts make it clear that the childless millennials are not interested in an experience like that. This reinforces the stereotype that people who do not have children hate children, but also counters a stereotype from the original childless millennial post. The author of the original post expressed frustration with childless millennials experiencing Walt Disney World in ways that are meant for children and created the stereotype that childless millennials are adults who do not want to grow up. Although the childless millennials asking for non-character meals are reclaiming the childless millennial stereotype by using it as a positive label, they are also doing exactly what the original author demanded, as they are staying away from experiences often meant for children. Other members of this group, however, embrace the childlike mindset many have at Walt Disney World, with several questions about Mickey's Not So Scary Halloween Party and Disney's Villains After Hours event.

Several members of the group use Facebook as a forum for trip reviews, posting a day-by-day itinerary of their Walt Disney World experience. Many include photographs with their reviews, and a lot of the females are, ironically, wearing short shorts. In a sense, they are both reclaiming the childless millennial stereotype while also dressing in a very stereotypical way, as discussed previously. Other trip reviews include tips specifically for childless millennials, such as FastPass+ strategy for two people,

restaurants with the best adult atmospheres, and using the Memory Maker photograph system without children.

This group is also used for Disney fans to share their excitement for their upcoming trips. A post from July 30, 2019, said, “yep, this childless millennial has another Disney trip planned 😂.. [sic] Dining reservation day! Got everything we wanted, including BOG for my birthday!! 😊 Who else has 180 days to go? [sic]” (Murray, 2019). Be Our Guest (BOG) is a *Beauty and the Beast*-themed restaurant at Magic Kingdom with character dining experiences. This post received 41 reactions, most of which were likes and loves. There were only four comments from other group members, all responding with their own trip countdowns.

Group members also ask for packing suggestions when preparing for their Walt Disney World trip. A September 27, 2019, post asking for packing suggestions for two childless millennials received 9 interactions and 22 comments with several key items like ponytail holders and pain relief medication, but also received some comments referring to the original post. One comment said, “Be sure you bring along a lot of Angry Mom Repellent, 👍 [sic]” which reinforces the stereotype that mothers at amusement parks are angry. This stereotype received more notice following the original childless millennial post, as the author is a mother who was at Walt Disney World, and was very angry. The September 27, 2019, post reclaimed the childless millennial stereotype by using it as a reason for needing different packing tips.

In the original post from September 2018, the childless millennial label was meant to be negative and degrading, as it referred to women without children as sluts in

short shorts. Childless millennials have embraced this term and stereotype, though, and used it to proudly proclaim their current life stage. The term is no longer seen as derogatory, in part because of the reclamation that has taken place on social media. It is still used as a stereotype, but it is now embraced and celebrated, when it was meant to be negative.

## **Theme 2: Humorous Childless Millennial Posts**

While there are a large number of proud childless millennials, there are also many parents proclaiming childless millennial status during an adult-only trip. Of the 43 posts analyzed, 13 were identified as having a dominantly humorous undertone, meaning they use humor to discuss childless millennials and their habits. There is some ridicule of the childless lifestyle, but the majority of posts show a desire for emulation of the childless millennial lifestyle during adult-only Walt Disney World trips. To be categorized as a humorous post, it must include a joke about childless millennials, as detailed below. This theme is not mutually exclusive from the other two themes.

### ***Annual Passholders - Walt Disney World Resort***

Seven posts in this group take a humorous approach to discussing childless millennials. For example, a post from September 14, 2019, with the caption, “Bet the childless millennial lady would have hated us. What about the millennials with children, who left their kids and husbands at home and flew to Disney for a girls [sic] weekend 😂🎃👻🎃❤️ [sic]” shows 6 photographs of 4 women throughout Walt Disney World (Kubicki, 2019). In the first picture, taken at Mickey’s Not So Scary Halloween Party at

Magic Kingdom, each woman is dressed as a Disney villain. Their clothing is tight and revealing, and is not what a stereotypical mother would wear. The women are not childless millennials, but they are millennials who do not have their children with them. This allows the women to own the persona of a childless millennial, while also making fun of the childless millennial stereotype and playing into assumptions made by the original childless millennial post's author. The group of friends also visited Epcot's International Food and Wine Festival and had tea at the Grand Floridian Resort. The known stereotype of mothers at amusement parks, as portrayed by the original post, is not shown in these photographs. Here, the mothers take on more of the childless millennial stereotype, but do so in a joking manner. They are not only proudly displaying that they are childless for the weekend, but their appearances and chosen activities reflect more of a childless millennial than of a mother, therefore breaking the stereotype set by the author of the original post. Several posts about girls' trips use this same sarcastic, joking voice. This is not considered a reclamation of the childless millennial stereotype because the women do not fit that category. They do have children, but are enjoying a trip without their children. They use the childless millennial wording as a joke, rather than a reclamation.

While the majority of posts that discuss childless millennials in a humorous way are from parents, one post from childless millennials stands out. In a photograph posted on December 15, 2019, two childless millennials are holding a droid that was built in the *Star Wars* area of Disney's Hollywood Studios. The caption said, "Childless millennials no more ! 😂 [sic]" (Morales, 2019). This shows that the two people in the photograph view the stereotype of childless millennials as a joke and found a way to make fun of

childless millennials while also showing off their new droid from Walt Disney World and referring to the droid as their child. This couple takes the childless millennial conversation less seriously than others who have previously posted, but still wanted to join the conversation, leading to calling their droid a child.

Posts from one group member in particular use the childless millennial stereotype to justify actions while at Walt Disney World. One of the member's posts from August 2, 2019, includes a photograph of him talking on a cell phone and holding an alcoholic beverage at Epcot with the caption:

“... in my defense, I did try to report my absence to work, but every time I would call, phone would continually ring and at the same time I received a notification of a call waiting. I would hang up to answer the call no one would be there. I attempted several times never getting through to anyone... So, guess I'll just wing it for the afternoon. And that's the story I'm sticking with. On a side note the Citron and lemonade slushie from France is delicious! 😊 I wonder if I should be using my corporate American Express card? I can't let all these childless millennials have all the fun!” (Palermo, 2019).

He uses sarcasm and joking to draw attention to the stereotype and tries to emulate the stereotype throughout his day at Walt Disney World. Everything was posted in a light-hearted manner, and many commenters said it deserved to be the post of the day on Facebook. This humorous approach of making fun of the stereotype does draw a different type of attention to the childless millennial discussion, but it still reinforces the stereotype established by the original post.

***Annual Passholders - Walt Disney World (Happy People Only)***

This group also includes posts with a humorous undertone. For example, one group member posted photographs of herself, her husband, and two friends throughout Epcot with the caption, “Gen Xers (and a baby boomer in tow) Visited Epcot today—CHILDLESS—and had a great time. May be even better than with kids!! Alert the media. It’s not just millennials!! 😊😊😊 [sic]” (Loman, 2019). The group member jokes that, previously, the stereotype was that only childless millennials have fun at Walt Disney World. This post challenges that stereotype by showing members of other generations enjoying the parks. It does, however, reinforce the stereotype that only people without children can have fun at the parks, which was created in the Disney fan Facebook groups.

The humor theme continued in several other Facebook posts, specifically a post from July 29, 2019, when the original post first surfaced. A female group member posted, “I thought you all would enjoy that I went to MK today (childless) and wore the shortest shorts in my possession. Lol [sic],” (O’Baerry, 2019). The post does not include any photographs, but was placed on a blue background, drawing attention to the post. This group member is joking about the short shorts referenced in the original childless millennial post. She is not, however, discussing the childless millennial phenomenon, nor is she reclaiming the term. When other posts reclaimed the childless millennial term, they did so by proudly proclaiming their childless millennial status via wording in the post and clear disregard for others’ thoughts. This woman, however, is only making fun of the post, joking in a tongue-in-cheek manner.

### ***Smart Moms Planning Disney***

This group had the fewest posts about childless millennials with only two, but both had a humorous theme. The small number of posts was surprising, as the original childless millennial post and subsequent responses made it seem that mothers everywhere were upset with childless millennials who visited Walt Disney World. The first post, from August 11, 2019, said, “2 Childless Millennial's [sic] (We left our 3 kids at home) enjoying a day at MK!! And guess which one of us is the slutty one 😊🤣” (Haydel, 2019). The photograph attached the post shows a couple standing in front of the Magic Kingdom castle. The male is wearing athletic clothing, while the female is wearing a two-piece red and white polka dot outfit and red and black Minnie Mouse ears. The end of her post refers to the original childless millennial post, which said all childless millennials were sluts. The post had more than 700 reactions, which were all positive, and 95 comments. Many comments also took a humorous approach, answering who they believed to be the slut. Others did not understand the context of the post and wondered why someone would refer to either of the people in the photograph as a slut.

The second post from this group also has a humorous tone. It was posted on November 11, 2019, and said, “I found a really cheap flight from Dallas to Orlando and i [sic] dont feel bad about taking a last minute three day trip without our kids! Lol woo hoo couple trip to disney [sic]. I need a shirt that says "we're not childless millenials [sic] we just left them at home." 😊😊😊😊” (Washington, 2019). This post only has 18 comments, but has 237 reactions, all of which are positive. In the original childless millennial post, there was a guilt trip mentality, and the author made readers believe that anyone who does not have a child should not go to Walt Disney World. As this post shows, parents

are now leaving their children at home and going to Walt Disney World on their own, and they are proud of it. This is breaking the stereotype insinuated by the original post.

### ***Walt Disney World Tips and Tricks***

This group did not have any posts that had a humorous undertone. This group's purpose is to provide Walt Disney World visitors with tips, rather than to provide a forum for discussion, which likely affected the number of childless millennial posts.

### **Theme 3: Discussing the Original Childless Millennial Post**

A post was considered a discussion of the original childless millennial post if it included a question, or opinion about the original post. Of the 43 posts analyzed, 7 posts were identified as a discussion. This theme is not mutually exclusive from the other posts, but must include more than a short reference to the post to be considered a discussion.

### ***Annual Passholders - Walt Disney World Resort***

Compared to the other themes in this Facebook group, there were very few discussion posts. This is in part because, on August 5, 2019, a group administrator posted “\*\*ADMIN PSA\*\* I'm deleting any post that has mention of childless millennials and muting the original poster. It's TIRED! I'm over it,” (Richard, 2019). Therefore, any post prior to August 5 that mentioned childless millennials was deleted, limiting the sample for this study. However, even the post asking people to stop discussing the phenomenon spurred a discussion, as there are nearly 2 thousand reactions and more than 400 comments. Many of the comments supported the administrator's decision and used

memes to encourage her. Some group members questioned the actions, though, and said they enjoyed the posts. One member said, “... When you start to sensor [sic] it ruins it for everyone. This is supposed to be a fun website. I have kids and thought the jokes were funny. Disney is for everyone young and old no one has the right to say it is only for one group of people only,” (Sullivan, 2019). The ability to comment on the post was turned off after a comment from the administrator said, “Ok.. [sic] this was super fun, but I'm done. Like I said, deleting and muting the posts. Angry parents and angry millennials alike... I dont [sic] care,” effectively stopping any mention of the term childless millennial, until the previously mentioned girls' trip post from August 10, 2019. From that date on, the only posts still available on the “Annual Passholders - Walt Disney World Resort” group are humorous or a reclamation, as there is no direct discussion of the original childless millennial post.

#### ***Annual Passholders - Walt Disney World (Happy People Only)***

This group had 2 posts identified as a discussion of the original post. On July 26, 2019, a group member shared the *New York Post* article about the original post. In the caption, the group member said,

“I will tell you the truth - if you like going to Disney World no matter what your age, how many in your party, even if you are by yourself, it is nobody's business but yours. And there is absolutely NOTHING wrong with it. I would rather hang out with complete strangers at Disney World then [sic] most people anywhere

else. Be proud of your Disney Lifestyle [sic], you are part of some of the best people on the planet," (Reid, 2019).

The post had 114 reactions and 124 comments, many of which discuss stereotypes, although not directly. One commenter referred to the author of the original post as pretentious, while another said, "man, I didn't realize simple reproduction gave people the right to skip in line! 😂 I say let the childless people go first, we take less time, and that way moms can't be bothered with me wearing shorts outside in Florida during the summer? [sic]," (Fieler, 2019). This comment takes what is represented in the original post, an angry and selfish mother, and applies it to every woman with children.

The second discussion post, from September 2, 2019, is a link to a video of four childless millennials discussing the post and what they believe their place is at Walt Disney World. This post received only two interactions, both of which were likes, and no comments. It is considered a discussion post, as it links to a video discussing the post, but there are no responses to analyze. There is not a way to know how many people from the Facebook group watched the video or interacted with the video on another social media platform.

### ***Smart Moms Planning Disney***

This Facebook group did not have any posts that discussed the childless millennial post. This was again surprising, as the original childless millennial post and subsequent coverage claimed to represent the views of many mothers. It is possible that group administrators acted as a gatekeeper, though, and blocked any posts about childless

millennials from being viewed by group members, as every post in this group must be approved by one of the 104 administrators and moderators.

### ***Walt Disney World Tips and Tricks***

This Facebook group did not have any posts discussing the childless millennial post. This is in part because it is a group for tips, rather than discussion, as previously stated. Therefore, fans in this group may have felt this platform was an inappropriate place to discuss the childless millennial topic.

### **Summary**

Members of the four Facebook groups analyzed were supportive of childless millennials and encouraged everyone, regardless of age or other demographics, to enjoy their Walt Disney World adventures. Some group members expressed annoyance with the high volume of discussion of childless millennials, but no posts were overtly rude or demeaning. Overall, the group members welcomed the childless millennial conversation, and even looked to emulate childless millennials in some instances. Childless millennials are generally encouraged by other group members, while those wanting to emulate childless millennials are often subjected to more negative comments. Still, these negative comments center around annoyance more than anger or hate. The original childless millennial post is viewed as rude, stereotypical, and false among each of the four Disney-related Facebook groups studied.

## CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Walt Disney Company is a behemoth in the entertainment and hospitality industry. Significant qualitative research has been conducted on Walt Disney Company movies, music, and other intellectual and entertainment properties, as well as fan interaction on games like *Disney's Kingdom Hearts*, allowing people to understand the cultural impact of Disney's media. The current research study sought to bridge a gap in research of Walt Disney World and the interactions between fans on four Disney-related Facebook groups. Thus adding to the knowledge of Disney fandom by exploring how fans interact with each other through a stereotyping lens.

In the original post, childless millennials were stereotyped as slutty, immature people who wasted their money on useless things at Walt Disney World. The original author viewed Walt Disney World as a place for families with children, rather than as a place for everyone. She viewed childless millennials as selfish and was very angry that they were also in line for pretzels. According to the original post, childless millennials' time is not as valuable as that of mothers, as they are expected to wait in line and give preference to those with children.

Overall, conversations about childless millennials are accepted and welcomed into Disney Facebook groups. This gives childless millennials a place to discuss Walt Disney World events and other Disney-related topics with other fans. This finding refutes the original poster's claim that childless millennials should be banned from Walt Disney World. According to the conversations in the Facebook groups analyzed, the general Disney fan does not see childless millennials as a nuisance, and most did not previously notice childless millennials in the theme parks. Occasionally, other members express

frustration and annoyance with the topic of conversation, but the conversation rarely sparks negativity, as the annoyance is directed more at the continual discussion of childless millennials, rather than childless millennials in the parks. This could be because the conversation exploded when the original post surfaced in the summer of 2019 and continued for several months before tapering off. This topic inundated many group's pages, leading to frustration when trying to discuss other topics. Most of the time, though, posts by or about childless millennials are encouraged, with other group members offering advice on navigating Walt Disney World without children. This is surprising, as people are typically not understanding of others who are in a different stage of life. It is possible that this connects to Disney culture, however, as every Disney fan is expected by other Disney fans to have some sort of childlike suspension of disbelief when it comes to magic, friendship, and imagination in terms of the park experience. Walt Disney welcomed everyone to his theme parks, and placed an emphasis on childlike imagination, which could contribute to the elementary school playground-like culture of the groups; everyone is expected to be friends. There are arguments in the groups about other topics, but the childless millennials' love of Disney is seen as valid among other group members, and the disagreements are based on opinions, rather than a person's demographics. Group members seem to be united by their mutual love of Walt Disney World, and most choose to focus on that, rather than differences. This could be because of the happiness that the Walt Disney Company promotes, as every movie or television show typically has a happy ending and features some type of magic. Because the movies, music, and characters owned by Disney tend to be positive, brightly colored, and promote universal love and

happy endings, it is possible that this fandom is somewhat conditioned to promote happiness and magical experiences among each other.

Posts that were humor based and discussed the original childless millennial post received the most negative comments and reactions. This is possibly because the posts seemed to capitalize on a popular topic of conversation to receive reactions and comments in the Facebook groups. For example, one post that showed a middle-aged man drinking alcohol in Epcot saying he could not let the childless millennials have all the fun received generally negative comments. These comments were not necessarily directed at the man personally, but comments expressed annoyance at bringing in the childless millennial discussion when it did not seem relevant. Childless millennial became a buzz phrase of sorts that people used to invoke reaction, rather than as a point of discussion or descriptor of a group within the fandom. Posts reclaiming the childless millennial stereotype did not receive many, if any, negative comments, with group members encouraging the childless millennials' Walt Disney World adventures by complementing photography skills, outfits worn in photographs, and souvenir selection. The encouragement and kind words are possibly because of the efforts made by the Walt Disney Company to be inclusive; encouraging, albeit indirectly, fans to be kind and supportive of each other.

The original childless millennial post, however, did not receive such positive feedback. Many posts and comments criticized the mother's thoughts and opinions, dismissing her as rude, condescending, and hateful. This reaction could be because Disney fans come from many different life stages and lifestyles, with no group being the hegemon. The negative reaction to the original post was expected in the Annual

Passholder and general Disney Facebook groups, but was surprising in the “Smart Moms Planning Disney” Facebook group. The original childless millennial post made it seem like all mothers hated when childless millennials visited Walt Disney World, but the mothers in the Facebook groups did not have the same reaction. Overall, moms in Disney Facebook groups do not care who visits the parks. All Disney groups studied seem to agree that the problem is the original poster, not the childless millennials, showing that Disney fans do take the “magic” espoused by the Walt Disney Company seriously, and do not want to ruin said “magic” for other fans. There are occasional negative comments, as previously stated, but the four studied Facebook groups serve as a welcome and encouraging place of discussion for childless millennials and the conversation topic of childless millennials.

Studying interaction among fan bases on a specific topic is important for many reasons. First, it allows people to understand the perceived importance of the topic. When the original childless millennial post first surfaced, many mainstream news outlets like *The Washington Post* published articles about the post and subsequent reactions. The coverage of the original post did not last more than one news cycle, though, as many theme park beat writers moved on to other topics. However, the conversation about childless millennials continued for more than six months in the four Disney-related Facebook groups chosen for this study. Almost daily, someone was reclaiming the childless millennial stereotype, discussing the original post, or pretending to be a childless millennial.

Second, studying these interactions allows people to see what place fans have in a company. The Walt Disney Company thrives off of fan participation, and many decisions

made within the company are based on fan opinion, especially in regard to their theme parks. If the Walt Disney Company was aware of how prevalent the childless millennial conversation was among fan groups, they could have joined in the conversation and possibly profited off of the childless millennial group with merchandise lines and other promotions, as the company has done with other social media topics in the past. For example, the Walt Disney Company noticed fans liked certain murals in the parks and created entire product lines based on the colors of these murals. The company also observes what fans wear to the theme parks, such as homemade ears, buttons, and t-shirts, and later create their own version of the products to sell inside the parks. They missed a great opportunity with the childless millennial phenomenon, as it likely would have further encouraged reclamation of the childless millennial term.

As previously mentioned, Walt Disney World is a place of control and surveillance, full of corporate branding and reactionary conservatism (Williams, 2013). The controlled environment and constant branding of the theme parks set an expectation that everyone at Walt Disney World is part of the Disney fandom, when in reality, it is merely a vacation for some people. This creates a dissonance among some, and results in some visitors being seen as outsiders. While the childless millennials were stereotyped as the outsiders and deviants by the original childless millennial post, it could be inferred that the original poster was the outsider, as she did not fit into the controlled environment. The original poster did not buy into the supposed magic of Walt Disney World, therefore disrupting the controlled environment.

Finally, studying the childless millennial conversations among Disney fans allows people to see how childless people are viewed among this fandom. Typically, Disney is

associated with children, therefore many people in the Disney-related Facebook groups have children. This showed that, at least on Facebook, Disney fans are accepting of people who choose different lifestyles. The acceptance in the groups also breaks the previously mentioned stereotype surrounding Disney fans. Not every Disney fan has or is a child, and not everything at Walt Disney World is exclusively for children.

This study was limited by the number of groups examined. There are hundreds of Disney-related Facebook groups that could be analyzed in the same way as the four chosen for this study. Other groups could have different reactions to the childless millennial post and childless millennials as a whole. Since the start of this study, a few childless millennial groups have started, which would be interesting to study. Administrators on Facebook groups have the ability to delete posts and comments, effectively serving as a gatekeeper. This could have impacted the findings of this study, as it is likely not every post was reviewed. In the future, researchers could look at other Facebook groups. This study only analyzed groups related to Walt Disney World. Other Disney Parks could be included in future studies. Disney fans have also started to use Instagram more to connect with each other. Instagram does not allow for the same type of conversations as Facebook, but could be studied, too. Twitter is also an option for future research on the childless millennial topic. There is some ambiguity with the original post, as well, as it is anonymous and has been removed from Facebook. It is possible that this post was fabricated, but the validity of the post is irrelevant to this study, as the reactions assume the post is real.

In conclusion, this study showed that, overall, fans in the Disney-related Facebook groups tend to be accepting of childless millennials, while also condemning the

original poster. The original poster negatively stereotyped childless millennials, but the majority of Disney fans in the groups studied rejected this stereotype and assigned negative stereotypes to the original poster, assuming the poster was an angry mother who hated childless millennials. Now, the childless millennial stereotype is not negative, but an embraced title worth celebrating with pretzels and selfies in front of Cinderella's castle. The Walt Disney company strives to create a welcoming environment in their theme parks, and this encouragement has been emulated by the Facebook groups studied. This carries on the legacy left by Walt Disney when he opened Disneyland: "To all who come to this happy place, welcome," (Harris, 2008).

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Representative Post – Reclamation

TIP - BE A KID & ENJOY THE MAGIC 🎡

no matter how old you are, you can enjoy Disney. I had no doubt in my mind about this.

But it's shocking at how many people feel like they have to hide their excitement ....

I will ALWAYS be a kid at heart

And I did not hide mine AT ALL

I cried so much during this trip

BC My dreams finally came true ✨

Yes, I am a childless millennial 👩 so what?

27 years old and you best believe I had an

- autograph book

- did character dining

- stood in line to meet characters

(HIGHLY RECOMMEND)

AND I GOT TO EAT INSIDE THE CASTLE

😱😱😱 We also did Snow White @ Artist Point. Check out Dopey's photobomb of me and Grumpy 😂

since I never got to go as a kid ... I took myself and it was SO WORTH IT!

So to anyone thinking "am I too old for Disney" .... the answer is NO!!!!

And don't let ANYONE tell you different!!!

Figure 2. Representative post – reclamation.

### Appendix B: Representative Post - Humorous

... in my defense, I did try to report my absence to work, but every time I would call, phone would continually ring and at the same time I received a notification of a call waiting. I would hang up to answer the call no one would be there. I attempted several times never getting through to anyone... So, guess I'll just wing it for the afternoon. And that's the story I'm sticking with. On a side note the Citron and lemonade slushie from France is delicious! 😊 I wonder if I should be using my corporate American Express card? I can't let all these childless millennials have all the fun!

*Figure 3.* Representative post – humorous.

## Appendix C: Representative Post – Discussion of the Original Childless Millennial Post

**\*\*ADMIN PSA\*\***

I'm deleting any post that has mention of childless millennials and muting the original poster.

It's TIRED! I'm over it.



434 Comments

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 Like

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*Figure 4.* Representative post – discussion of the original childless millennial post.