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Know Thyself: Individualism in Cold War America and Disney's The Mickey Mouse Club

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University of Wyoming

Know Thyself:

Individualism in Cold War America and Disney's *The Mickey Mouse Club*

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Honors Capstone Project

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“Know Thyself, a wise old Greek once said. Know Thyself. Now what does this mean, boys and girls? It means be what you are. Don’t try to be Sally or Johnny or Fred next door; be yourself. God doesn’t want a tree to be a waterfall, or a flower to be a stone. God gives each of us a special talent. God wants some of us to become scientists, some of us to become artists, some of us to become firemen and doctors and trapeze artists. And He gives each of us the special talents to become these things, provided we work to develop them. We must work, boys and girls. So: Know Thyself. Learn to understand your talents and then work to develop them. That’s the way to be happy.”

- Jimmie Dodd, 1955

Introduction

I could spell Mickey Mouse before I could read or write. Somehow, either through one of my beloved Disney CDs or my grandmother’s singing, I had heard *The Mickey Mouse Club* theme song before I even knew which show it belonged to. Many of the lyrics I did not care about and easily forgot, but the tune stuck with me as I grew older, as did the spelling of my favorite mouse’s name: “M-I-C-K-E-Y M-O-U-S-E.”

Even though I grew up in the 90s, traces of Disney’s early works had survived the passage of time and ingrained themselves into my memory. Moments like these prove that ever since Walt Disney’s career took off in the 1920s, he has been and continues to be a pervading force in American culture.

Disney’s influence on America’s culture and youth was even more profound in the post World War II, Cold War period when America was in a desperate struggle to assert their values. Americans needed a figure they could trust to assign those values, and they needed a platform in which to teach them to their children. Disney’s 1955 show *The Mickey Mouse Club* was the perfect program in which to teach Cold War children about American identity and individualism. The show’s demographic was children, but it treated them as if they were adults. It featured

newsreels from around the world, music, comedy, Disney cartoons, and serial segments where children would overcome everyday challenges. *The Mickey Mouse Club* featured a cast of ordinary, teenage performers called the Mouseketeers and two grown-ups, Jimmie Dodd and Roy Williams, who acted as edutainers for America's youth. Together, they created a space where children could learn what it meant to grow up as an individual in American society.

Popular culture, such as *The Mickey Mouse Club*, and the commodification of pop culture through culture industry has always helped shape and promote the American identity. The culture industry tells its consumers that they are individuals, but it also relies on the masses to conform in order to fit in, thus creating a mass of pseudo-individuals whose beliefs are shaped by societal needs and expectations. In this essay, I will examine how 1950s television, particularly Disney's *The Mickey Mouse Club*, contributed to this phenomenon in a time when the integrity of American ideals was in constant strife due to the rising fear of Communism. First, I will begin by examining how the concept of individualism in 1950s America was shaped by contradictory ideals. From there, I will look at how these ideals were passed down to America's youth through education and entertainment in order to create proper American citizens. Then, I will discuss how television operated as a tool to reinforce American values in its viewers and how its influence was even more powerful over children. And finally, I will discuss the role *The Mickey Mouse Club* played in shaping the ideals of America's youth.

Identity and Individualism in 1950s America

America was founded on the concept of freedom; in 1950s America, people had the freedom to pursue individual goals and dreams, the freedom to practice socially accepted

religions, and the freedom to buy property and settle down with a nuclear family in a white, suburban, middle-class neighborhood. These ideals were a product of how individualism was constructed in the 1950s. In Post World War II, Cold War America, individuals were expected to embody the contradictory ideals of being anti-Communist, unique and other-directed, conforming to gender roles, and allowing capitalism and corporate control to define them.

One of the factors that contributed to how Americans defined themselves during the Cold War was the rising fear of communism. According to Wendy Wall, an associate professor of history at Binghamton University, “In 1950, fewer than 50,000 Americans out of a total US population of 150 million were members of the Communist Party. Yet in the late 1940s and early 1950s, American fears of internal communist subversion reached a nearly hysterical pitch.” This hysteria, no doubt, arose from the rumors that the Soviets had harnessed the power of the atomic bomb with the help of Communist spies hiding out in American soil. A majority of anti-Communist hysteria was then perpetuated by political figures such as Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy and government boards who made it their personal mission to weed out American Communists.

In 1938, a government group called the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) was founded to investigate citizens and organizations for suspicious, Communist activity. It was not until 1947, however, that the House of Un-American Activities Committee made national headlines by going after the film industry (Wall). Actors, screenwriters, and directors were forced to defend themselves and fellow co-workers against anti-Communist allegations at public hearings. Those who did not cooperate or who were found guilty were blacklisted. Those who were blacklisted were avoided because associating with someone with

Communist ties was controversial and therefore downright un-American. Furthermore, if someone chose to associate with alleged Communists, their loyalty to American ideals were questioned.

One of the more cooperative witnesses during the 1947 hearings was Walt Disney. Walt Disney, was regarded as “a key figure in the process of national self-definition,” and he was very adamant and outspoken about his opposition towards communism (Watts 287). During his testimony, he referred to it as a very “un-American thing” and assured the committee that everyone who currently worked for him was “100 percent American” (Watts 284).

In order for someone to be “100 percent American,” they had to oppose communist ideals. Communism emphasized conformity to the community rather than the autonomy and special talents of the individual. In contrast, American culture encompassed individuality. Communism rejected capitalist beliefs and advocated for the erasure of private property; Americans believed in the power of Capitalism and that owning private property was a symbol of hard work. Communists were seen as depraved Atheists, while Americans prided themselves on being moral Christians.

Although Americans were adamant about what was American and what was not, during 1950s America, there were contradictory notions about what it meant to be an American individual. American individualism emphasized both independence and reliance upon community (Thomson 497). There was an emphasis on being mature, which meant that “the individual must assume adult roles and responsibilities and ‘feel one’s self as part of the community’” (Thomson 502). People who found work and settled down were seen as mature, while people without a clear path set out for them in life were seen as immature. Therefore,

individuals needed to have goals, a desire to have a family, and an idea of how they wish to contribute to society. Men were encouraged to work or to become soldiers; women were expected to marry and care for the home. If a citizen was independent yet reliant, a hard-worker, mature, responsible, had goals that benefited society at large, and had a heterosexual, nuclear family, then they were a good citizen; they were fulfilling the American dream.

People during the 50s and 60s were also “other-directed”, which meant they would “take [their] cues from peers and [were] a product of twentieth-century mass society” (Goodheart and Curry 197). Other-directedness emphasized the importance of individuals looking towards their peers to see what was acceptable behavior and what was not. The “other-directed personality strove to fit in, not stand out” because being popular was synonymous with success (Kordas 27). However, some of the older generations were skeptical of the other-directed personality type because they had been raised to be more inner-directed. They feared that an emphasis on belonging to the community could lead to people losing their individuality, thus turning America into a place of mass conformity like the Soviet Union (Kordas 28). In order to dispel these fears, one was expected to help the community, but in a way that utilized the individual's own special skill set. Anyone could grow up to be anything if they set their mind to it and worked hard--as long as they were a man.

Throughout the discourse of American individualism, most definitions have “made the implicit assumption that the ‘individual’ was male” (Kerber 152). Since individualism has always been a (white) “male-centered discourse” it reduces the options available to women and other marginalized groups when figuring out how they fit into society (Kerber 166). Disney played into male-centered individualism when he constructed his position of “libertarian

populism” which focused on independent, ordinary, self-reliant individuals who struggled against authority (Watts 288). These heroes were almost always male. In 1950s America, women rarely found themselves portrayed as heroes in stories. They were the wives, the girlfriends, and the damsels in distress who functioned as a plot device to further the action of the male protagonist. Therefore, the path of the male individual was open to endless possibilities, while women were forced to find themselves through a path of submission, compartmentalization, sexualization, and consumption (Kerber 154,160).

Consumerism and corporate ties participated heavily in defining American individualism. Corporations were an omnipresent force that shifted the idea of what it meant to be an individual because they wielded the most power over their workers and consumers. Corporations told people under their control that they knew the workers and consumers better than they knew themselves (Thomson 504). They perpetuated the idea that in order to be successful, one had to achieve middle-class status by working hard or, if you were a woman, by marrying someone wealthy. The best way to contribute to Capitalism, however, was through consumption of American products. Thus, people began to define themselves by their work, their income, and the purchases they made.

The individual was heavily defined by what products they consumed and marked themselves with. Consumers were not just buying Crest toothpaste or Ivory Snow laundry detergent, they were buying into a culture that valued domestic security, normality, and whiteness. Whiteness is not only defined as the absence of color, but by “the absence of emotional, political, or philosophical pigmentation” (Nadel 41). Purchasing these products signified a desire to be an ordinary American citizen.

Furthermore, commodifying pop culture through the culture industry played a major role in how corporations were able to wield their influence over the masses. Culture industry, a “commercial system that commodifies and standardizes art,” produces goods such as television, music, magazines, etc., which keep the population entertained and subdued (Malpas and Wake 205). According to theoreticians Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, culture industry is “the opium of the masses” and it lures people in with its “subtle conformism” (Daly 41). Before long, those under its power start to slowly lose their individuality.

Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their collaborative book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, postulate that “in the culture industry the individual is an illusion not merely because of the standardization of the means of production. He is tolerated only so long as his complete identification with the generality is unquestioned” (154). Without question, individuals lose autonomy when they allow themselves to identify with culture industry. Their so-called individuality is not real; it is merely an illusion. Adorno and Horkheimer also argue that the corporations “provide the individual with an illusion of spontaneity, choice and diversity” making it easier for the individual to still think they have autonomy, when in fact, they are signing themselves away to corporate control (Malpas and Wake 206). When blinded by the various possibilities, people fail to see that culture industry as well as Capitalism has an underlying structure. There is freedom, but it is the “freedom to be the same” (Daly 42). Thus, true individualism in a capitalistic society is unobtainable and the best thing that people can hope to achieve is a sense of pseudo-individualism.

Walt Disney, blissfully unaware that he was contributing to pseudo-individualism, carved a niche in the culture industry with his cartoon creation Mickey Mouse. Mickey, voiced

by Walt Disney, was an extension the man himself and became the very essence of the Disney company. Due to Mickey's popularity, corporations produced a myriad of Mickey Mouse merchandise. Mickey Mouse's face was plastered onto any and every conceivable product. He was on satchels, "soap, candy, playing-cards, bridge favors, hairbrushes, china-ware, alarm clocks", hot-water bottles, paper, ribbons, purses, biscuits, footballs, paint sets, sewing kits, etc. (Watts 149). Even when Mickey's character became less popular among the public, his power as a marketing symbol never faltered. As one observer of the Mickey Mouse takeover aptly stated, "Mickey Mouse is the greatest thing in the history of merchandising" (Watts 148).

American adults comprised a large portion of the consumer demographic, but given the baby boom, a large number of children needed to be educated in the American way of life since they would be the ones running the country in a few years time. Americans not only worried about how to raise their children to be consumers, but how to instill in them other American values as well.

Cold War Influence on American Child-Rearing

One of the most prevalent fears during this time period was how Americans were going to raise their children in a time of conflict. Adults realized that the Cold War would be heavily fought using ideology rather than just military action, which meant that victory in the Cold War was contingent not only on nuclear power, but on raising "patriotic, ideologically sound citizens at home" as well. (Kordas 2). In order for America to succeed, the citizens had to ardently believe in American exceptionalism and the power of democracy. Therefore, children had to be

instilled with the same American values and belief systems. They wanted children to grow up to be independent, virtuous, patriotic, and to adhere to gender roles.

Indoctrinating the youth with American ideals was not a new practice. There were several times before the Cold War when Americans felt that their ideals were in danger from other foreign powers (Kordas 4). Children were brought up to be proper, democracy loving citizens during the Revolutionary War and World War II, so Americans could distinguish themselves from their enemies and guarantee American values remained untarnished. Before the Cold War, however, “Americans had never found themselves enmeshed in a conflict that was so thoroughly ideological in nature, one based almost entirely upon a clash between profoundly different values and beliefs” (Kordas 2).

As Stalin rose to power, the Soviet Union began raising their children to love their nation and support communism. Their process of indoctrination was loosely borrowed from Nazi Germany because of how effective it was in producing loyal, patriotic citizens. When children of the Soviet Union were sufficiently indoctrinated, the parents were seen as outstanding citizens. One newspaper proclaimed: “if a person brings up his children properly, he is a good Communist” (Kordas 8).

Americans were aware that the Soviets were raising their children this way, and it terrified them. They were familiar with how children had been raised in Germany thanks to news outlets and propaganda films. One popular propaganda film, *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi*, was produced by Walt Disney in 1943. The film follows a young child, Hans, who is growing up in Nazi Germany, and his only option is to learn how to become a patriotic, Nazi soldier. Through fairy tales and classroom instruction, Hans learns quickly to favor the strong

over the weak and dictatorship over democracy. His sole purpose is to “fight, obey, and die for his fuhrer” (Education for Death). His education is complete when Hans joins the Nazi army and marches and heils robotically alongside his fellow soldiers. The most compelling image in this film for audiences at the time though would have been seeing the Bible replaced with *Mein Kampf*. This scene showed just how immoral their enemies were. If Germans had practiced Christianity, the religion most favored in America, rather than reading *Mein Kampf*, perhaps they could have been redeemed or saved. Seeing this film made people realize that instilling the young masses with a dangerous, patriotic ideology had powerful effects. Americans, positive in their moral superiority and fearful for their children's future, realized they needed to raise their own children with wholesome American values¹.

In order to not seem as extreme as the Soviets, Americans made it their goal to raise children who chose to uphold American values on their own, rather than forcing them to conform. Children were taught these values through instruction from parents, teachers, magazines, educational films, television, etc. According to Ann Marie Kordas in her book *The Politics of Childhood in Cold War America*, children were taught:

Lessons in the superiority of democracy and the American political system; the greatness of American history and the American way of life; the advantages of capitalism; the virtues of honesty and loyalty; the need to serve the large community and conform to its values; and the importance of developing and adhering to appropriate gender roles (10).

After becoming so thoroughly versed in these topics throughout childhood, it was hard for children not to happily conform to American values of their own free will.

¹ [American child-rearing intensifies]

Even when adults were not explicitly educating their children, children were taught to unconsciously follow societal norms through things as simple as gender themed toys, chores, magazines, career choices, dating, and television shows. Adults believed that America would be secure as long as everyone followed suitable gender roles. Therefore, children were made aware of what rules to follow at young ages (Kordas 103).

Toy companies aided in this endeavor by marketing toys to young children that taught them their proper place in society. Boys played with toy guns and nuclear themed toys so they could be like soldiers; girls played with realistic baby dolls, dishwashers with working water, and easy bake ovens. These toys trained children to be prepared for gender appropriate chores (Kordas 104). Sons were encouraged to help their fathers build things and fix up items around the house; daughters cooked, cleaned, and sewed.

Boys and girls were also taught to follow different career paths. Boys were expected to find work to support a family or become a soldier; girls were taught how to care for a home and how to choose someone to marry. While there were career options for women, most of them “required women to use the ‘feminine’ skills that they had learned as part of their preparation for marriage and motherhood. Jobs such as teacher, nurse, secretary, and beautician were commonly touted as ideal jobs for girls” (Kordas 110).

Most of the time, employment opportunities for girls were ignored due to a much larger emphasis on the value of home economics courses. These courses taught young women about running a future household while, at the same time, teaching them how to start a family. Furthermore, a teenage girl’s main goal was to embrace domesticity, please boys, and be pretty without being sexy. Women who were too sexy were eyed with suspicion. It was always the

hypersexualized *femme fatale* in films who turned out to be a spy and who corrupted the once pure hearts of patriotic men. Thus, sexy women “symbolized the dangers of the atomic bomb and the threat of communism” (Kordas 116).

Teenage girls were taught how to find someone to marry by finding a guy they liked and going steady with him. Selecting the correct boy to date was a very serious process. Girls were taught to “regard boys and dating as a form of consumption”; they had to seek out a partner who was already of middle-class status or someone who was willing to work his way up to the middle-class (Kordas 120). Not only did the girl have to like her partner, but she needed to make sure her family and peers approved of him as well. Girls had to entertain her potential boyfriend at home in order to gain guardian approval, and peers had to confirm that the gentleman in question was of a high enough status. Practicing these gender roles in real life was an important task for America’s youth, but so was watching these ideals, as well as other American values, reinforced for them on television.

1950’s Television

No other medium in the Cold War captured audiences and gave lessons in nationalism quite as effectively as television. Before long, most Americans had a television set in their home and families would gather around it to soak up its information. Due to its increased accessibility and popularity, television quickly became a symbol of American life. Shows and advertisements aired were those which safely represented and upheld the values of familial togetherness, truth, and anti-communism.

The television created an illusion of truth by projecting an aura of intimacy between the viewer and on-screen personalities. News shows “manifested ‘togetherness’ by bringing the world to the viewer” through an artificial family composed of multiple hosts (Nadel 27). Comedy shows used laugh tracks in order to convey a sense of spontaneous interactions between the viewers and performers (Nadel 27). Performers even played roles that were most like themselves in order to create intimacy between the performers and the audience. Doing so created the illusion that the performers were in their audience’s living rooms and interacting with their viewers on a personal level; the performers were honored guests. This sensation lended authenticity and charm to the show (Nadel 27). It showed audiences that the performers were not just playing characters; they were also real people.

Since audiences believed television was a beacon of truth, it functioned as the perfect surveillance tool to seek out the communists hiding in the midst of American soil. The FBI, the CIA, the House of Un-American Activities Committee, and other organizations were doing their best to find and punish questionable citizens. Television aided in that quest because it helped supply a set of cultural norms which made it easier to recognize who was a true American and who was not. Several programs took a not so subtle approach with their anti-Communist messages by saturating their narratives in Cold War themes. Americans were portrayed as free and just; Communists were immoral and atheistic (Nadel 31).

In order to keep television programs in accordance with American values, there was heavy censorship and codes put in place by the National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters. In 1956, the National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters created a list of what was acceptable to play on television and what was not (Nadel 34). Mentions of God

and respectable treatment of authority figures, such as police officers was encouraged; Indecent shots of performers and sexual activity was unacceptable (Nadel 35). Homosexuality, which was seen as a rebellion against cultural heteronormativity, was also inappropriate for the air because gay men were believed to be communist spies and lesbians supposedly stole away potential husbands from heterosexual women (Kordas 128-129). Black people on TV, while it was acceptable, was not popular because it made white audiences uncomfortable.

According to Alan Nadel in his book *Television in Black-and-White America: Race and National Identity*: “Television was the site of exemplary citizenship--the apotheosis of democracy--it was a new kind of democracy, one forging consensus by precluding controversy. And since television was *the* American activity, anything not suitable for broadcast, by implication, was un-American” (Nadel 36). Therefore, if a producer wanted their program aired, it was safer to create something that was not controversial and that would be appropriate to watch with the whole family.

1950s Children’s Television

The generation of children born between 1946 and 1964 were the first kids to actually grow up alongside the television (Coleman 298). According to Ross Gregory’s almanac *Cold War America*, during World War II, there were around 30,000 television sets and only six television stations (468). In 1946, only 7,000 television sets were sold over the course of the year (468). Over the next four years, America saw new advances in technology, a larger income among middle-class families, and a culture that reveled in leisure and luxury; these factors

contributed to a spike of 5 million television sales in 1950 (468). By 1955, 64.5% of households had television sets, and “by 1960, 85.9% of households had at least one TV” (Coleman 298).

Television programs served as a temporary babysitter while children’s fathers worked and their mothers did chores around the household. It functioned as both an educator and entertainer since it offered children important lessons in national identity through engaging narratives. Several television shows during this time period taught young audiences how to be proper citizens, but, most importantly, it taught them to be scared of communism and how to fight it.

Anti-communist motifs were present in dramas, comedies, and even westerns. Ann Marie Kordas writes: “The theme of the western itself, the right to establish civilization in a hostile environment, replicated the ‘theme’ of the Cold War- the triumph of order over chaos, law over lawlessness and civilization over savagery” (86). Just as the pioneers and cowboys conquered nature and native inhabitants, so too could Americans beat the threat of communism. All one needed to be a hero was to be civilized, brave, just, and a lover and protector of family values.

One of the most popular western shows to air during the Cold War was Disney’s *Davy Crockett* which ran during 1955-1956 (Watts 314). Crockett’s character was the perfect exemplar of masculine, American patriotism and freedom. He helped civilize the frontier by using reason instead of just brute force; he allowed gender roles to govern his behavior; he permitted Christianity to influence his moral decision making; and he fought and even killed the enemies which threatened civilization. In the end, he dies protecting these ideals, and by doing so, “Crockett symbolized the American character in the death struggle with the Communist foe” (Watts 317). Davy Crockett became a role model for young boys growing up in Cold War

America. They placed coonskin caps atop their heads, pulled out their plastic guns, and played cowboys and child soldiers, ready to face any obstacles that lie ahead.

Disney produced several other movies and television shows during this time period which taught children how to be true Americans in Cold War America. The most influential show, however, which instructed America's youth in lessons of American individualism was *The Mickey Mouse Club*.

Disney's *The Mickey Mouse Club*

On October 3, 1955, children gathered around their television sets to catch the season premiere of Disney's new live-action show, *The Mickey Mouse Club*. The show ran Monday through Friday for one hour on the ABC network (Watts 335). Soon, it captivated an audience of millions of children. They would eagerly run home from school and plop themselves down in front of the television, ready to consume the latest Disney sensation. Leonard Maltin, American film critic and historian, who grew up watching the *The Mickey Mouse Club* said: "It was more than a show. It was a daily event" (*The Mickey Mouse Club*). Kids were drawn to both the fun antics put on by the Mouseketeers and the educational aspects of the show. The Mouseketeers and the grown-ups would act as teachers for their viewers; they taught children what it meant to be an individual growing up in 1950s America. Individualism in *The Mickey Mouse Club* reflects and reinforces the notions of the times in which the show was conceived; individuals were expected to represent the American ideals of familial togetherness, being both unique and other-directed, conforming to gender roles, and being a hard-working consumer.

I. Familial Togetherness

The Mickey Mouse Club became extremely popular during its run on television. The show blended classic Disney ideologies of nostalgia with the postwar value of optimism and affluence (Coleman 299). Thus, it was able to traverse the boundaries of the old and the new which made it relatable for both adults and children. Together as a family, white, middle-class, suburban audiences could enjoy newsreels of what was happening in the world and the antics of the Mouseketeers from the comfort and safety of their own homes (Coleman 299).

Nothing promoted familial togetherness quite as much as *The Mickey Mouse Club*'s Tuesday "Guest Star Day." The Mouseketeer family invites the audience to welcome their special guest into the viewer's home. It is no longer just the Mouseketeers' special guest, but ours as well. Jimmie Dodd and the children sing and dance and tell their viewers to "sweep the place clean, and dust off the mat so the 'welcome' can be seen," as if the guest really will enter the audience's home (*The Mickey Mouse Club*). Not only are the Mouseketeers and their special guests the audience's guests, but the viewers are the guests of the Mouseketeers. In the Thursday "Circus Day" episode, the Mouseketeers shout warmly: "you're the guest of the merry Mouseketeers" (*The Mickey Mouse Club*).

One major emphasis of the show was pursuing one's talents, while at the same time contributing to the Disney collective and joining the Mickey Mouse Club family. Through the portrayal of the happy, teenage Mouseketeers in the show, a sense of unity was created through generational ties and corporate power (Coleman 299). Children who joined the Mickey Mouse Club would be among their fellow Disney loving peers. All one had to do to be part of the

Mickey Mouse Club was continue to support Disney productions and buy official Mickey Mouse Club merchandise. By doing these things, they would be accepted as members of the family.

Disney made joining the group seem desirable by making being a Mouseketeer in *The Mickey Mouse Club* seem familial and fun. The three grown-ups, Jimmie Dodd, Roy Williams, and Bob Amsberry, who participated in the show, function as parental figures and role models for the Mouseketeers; their inclusion creates a nice, although unconventional, family dynamic within the group. One of the Mouseketeers, Bobby Burgess, said that Jimmie Dodd was a “good Christian man” who “liked working with kids. He and his wife could not have children, so we were his children. So it was real special” (Watts 337). Roy Williams also acted as a father figure. He hosted after show parties at his house for the Mouseketeers and was well-liked by the children (Watts 337). With the friendly and entertaining atmosphere *The Mickey Mouse Club* presented, how could any of the children watching resist the urge to join in on the fun?

II. Unique and Other-Directed

The call to join the collective of *The Mickey Mouse Club* was strong. In the show, the Mouseketeers are placed in gender appropriate, matching outfits and adorned with Mickey Mouse ear caps, showing their unity through Disney products. They dance and sing together in unison with giant smiles plastered on their faces. Their war cry is “One for all, and all for fun,” a statement that says it is okay to be part of this group because it is innocent in its pursuit of unity for entertainment purposes. One need not be afraid of losing their sense of individuality like the morally bankrupt Communists, for *The Mickey Mouse Club* is merely a place to have fun and learn with fellow peers. The Mouseketeers reminds the audience in their “Merry Mouseketeers”

opening song that the kids watching “got a lot between [their] ears,” a hint that it is smart to join the Mickey Mouse Club (*The Mickey Mouse Club*).

Even though there is a lot of emphasis on joining the club, *The Mickey Mouse Club* still promotes an aura of individuality amongst the Mouseketeers, thus contributing to the contradictory idea of American individualism. On the front of every outfit, the name of the Mouseketeer is stitched on in dark, bold, capital letters that make it easy to quickly identify a particular member. When Mouseketeers are in full body costumes that make it difficult to tell who they are, Jimmie Dodd is always there to tell the audience which Mouseketeer is commanding the stage. Jimmie is also constantly addressing them by their names rather than by “Mouseketeer” throughout the show when he makes eye contact with them, or when he is trying to get them to do something. Name dropping occurs in several other segments of *The Mickey Mouse Club* as well. In the “Newsreel” segments, names of interesting individuals will be repeated so the audience can get a sense of who they are in a short amount of time. Furthermore, in the “What I Want to Be” installments from week one of the show, Duncan and Pat’s names are constantly used to remind the audience that these children are individuals who stand out because they are pursuing their gender appropriate, capitalist dreams. Doing so helps maintain the sense that the members of *The Mickey Mouse Club* are individuals rather than pawns in a Disney child army.

Although Disney wanted the Mouseketeers to appear individualistic, they all shared one common trait: they had all taken dance and music lessons (Bowles 11). Disney wanted to avoid getting as many professional actors as he could, and instead wanted average children who were capable of singing and dancing. Average children would be more relatable to the average viewer.

Some Mouseketeers, however, were better at dancing or singing than others and took those moments when performing to try to stand out from their peers. According to Leonard Maltin, “Mouseketeers liked Monday best because that was their time to shine” (*The Mickey Mouse Club*). These were the days in which the Mouseketeers had more room to show off their array of talents, which is made obvious by some of the lyrics from the Monday Mouseketeer song: “the talents given to you and me, we must develop faithfully, so we can be good Mouseketeers” (*The Mickey Mouse Club*).

In the beginning of the very first *Mickey Mouse Club* episode, “Monday: Fun with Music Day,” the Mouseketeers do a tap dancing number before introducing themselves to the audience. The dance is choreographed and ordered, but loose enough to allow individual flair to be apparent in their movements. Sometimes a Mouseketeer is a little too slow while moving their feet while another is slightly too fast, creating a sense of spontaneous fun. Some of the Mouseketeers have dance solos and move to the front of the group to show off their moves. Out of all the Mouseketeers, Bobby and Sharon were the dancing duo that stood out the most. They worked well together because “they both liked to dance fast and do a lot of acrobatics” (Bowles 75). After the dance sequence, the Mouseketeers make a point to introduce themselves individually to the audience. Each child says their name a bit differently so the audience gets a taste of their personality. Some children shout it out excitedly and with purpose, others are a bit more humble and shy.

Mouseketeers also showed off their talents in “The Shoe Song” which was a segment from the first Monday episode. During the song, several of the Mouseketeers dress up and dance to give the audience an idea of what type of shoe is being focused on. While on stage, the

Mouseketeers play up their acting, singing, and dancing skills as a way to stand out. Even grown-up Roy Williams gets to show off his sketching talents as he draws all of the shoes as anthropomorphic characters. He does so quickly and without error, making bold strokes with a piece of charcoal on a large sketch pad. One of the most memorable performances from this song is Bronxon (from the blue team) dancing as a ballerina. She gracefully balances on her pointe shoes and elegantly performs pliés and pirouettes across the stage before giving the audience a deep bow. Even Roy is taken by the performance as he smiles like a proud parent in the background. After each individual performance, however, the kids reunite with the other Mouseketeers who are waiting on the side of the stage with Jimmie. Once there, they tap dance to the same moves, and sing along to “Shoe Song” lyrics, thus marking them as part of the club.

There are several more times in *The Mickey Mouse Club* where Mouseketeers are shown as both unique and part of the group. In the third episode of *The Mickey Mouse Club*, “Wednesday: Anything Can Happen Day,” Jimmie has the Mouseketeers perform in a gadget band. Jimmie gives the group random items instead of traditional instruments and teaches them how to make music out of what, at first, seems like a bunch of junk. Everyone in the rhythm section of the gadget band is given an individual role: Bobby plays the washtub drum with some pipes as sticks, Mike bangs old lids from pots together, Cubby shakes a can of nails, Nancy beats a smaller washtub, and Karen rubs a washboard² with a stick. The remaining Mouseketeers are left with bottles and combs, but the kids get to choose which of these two items they want³.

Several Mouseketeers swarm Jimmie to grab the bottles while squealing with delight. They each

² Here you go, Karen. Your trash instrument is gender roles and domesticity.

³ Although the Mouseketeers are pretending to choose what they want for the first time on the show, they have obviously already practiced using these instruments before filming, so we, the audience, are not actually sure if they had much choice in which instrument they were assigned, but we are presented with the illusion that they had a choice in the matter.

play their trash instruments separately at first, but then Jimmie has them come together and play their individual parts all at the same time. On their own, their individual parts sound odd and out of place, but when put together, all of the random sounds come together and create music.

Perhaps one of the most prominent examples of *The Mickey Mouse Club* displaying individualism as both unique and part of the group is in the fifth episode of the show, “Friday: Talent Round-up Day.” In this episode, Mouseketeers and the grown-ups are allowed to bring in “the talent” (*The Mickey Mouse Club*). “The talent” is someone who makes a special guest appearance on the show in order to entertain the Mouseketeers, show off their skills, and obtain Mickey Mouse themed prizes. Crowd favorite, Annette, gets first choice when bringing in a talented individual. She brings in a young blonde boy by the name of Larry Ashers who captivates the Mouseketeers with his trumpet playing. Larry is then left to the mercy of his peers. While he is playing, the camera does close-ups on several of the Mouseketeers’ faces to get a sense of their reactions. Most of them are staring at Larry, grinning widely, and swaying to the funky rhythms. Karen messes up and claps along several minutes before she is supposed to. Several of the Mouseketeers give her a look and she covers her mouth and giggles, embarrassed. At the end of his performance, Larry is crowned an “honorary mouseketeer” (*The Mickey Mouse Club*). He is given a *Mickey Mouse Club* themed cowboy hat, a scroll, a locked box of “mouseketreasures,” and a pair of sequined mouse ears which are placed atop his head (*The Mickey Mouse Club*). The Mouseketeers cheer wildly as he is accepted as part of the group.

III. Conformity to Gender Roles

In order to be considered part of the group, members of the *The Mickey Mouse Club* needed to not only be familial, unique, and other-directed, they needed to conform to the gender norms put in place by society as well. Throughout the series, the audience members learn how to appropriately assume their gendered positions through lessons in topics such as heterosexual romance and career choices.

“The Shoe Song” not only allowed Mouseketeers to show off their talents, but it also enforced societal notions of heterosexual romance and domestic stability. Karen, who always seems to be the one used to uphold gender norms, starts the song off by playing the role a “baby shoe” (*The Mickey Mouse Club*). No doubt, the baby shoe is foreshadowing for “The Shoe Song’s” fated ending scene. Most of the shoes presented next are random: Cubby and Dennis play rugged cowboys, while Bronxon does her ballet dance in her “dainty” ballet shoes (*The Mickey Mouse Club*). Sharon and Bobby play the role of two teenagers who are out dancing together. Their playful dance moves and happy demeanor make it appear as if they are at their local dance hall on a date. Then, the final shoe is presented; the “bridal slipper” (*The Mickey Mouse Club*). Cubby and Karen exit a makeshift chapel as the bride and groom; Jimmie Dodd stands between them wearing a priest’s white collar. The Mouseketeers cheer wildly and shower the two smallest Mouseketeers in rice as they drive off in a cardboard car with a string of shoes trailing from the tail bumper. The Mouseketeers did not cheer for the other shoe performances, so their excited shrieks come as surprise. It shows that marriage, especially white, Christian, heterosexual marriage is something to be celebrated and cherished.

Although Karen is often used to portray appropriate gender roles for young women, Mouseketeer Annette was America's sweetheart. She was the last Mouseketeer to be added to the show, and although the producers were not amazed by her talent, they added her in order to make an even 24 Mouseketeers (Bowles 28). Soon, however, she became a huge hit among viewers, especially among young boys. She "was getting close to four thousand letters a month, nearly one third of the total for the entire cast" (Bowles 27). Along with their letters of love, boys sent gifts of candy and perfume (Watts 342). In later seasons of *The Mickey Mouse Club*, as Annette began to develop while going through puberty, Disney had to make sure that Annette did not appear attractive in a way that would be considered immodest. Staff members had to strap down her breasts before dressing her in her Mouseketeer sweater to "deemphasize her physical allure (Watts 342). Disney publicists also maintained the image of Annette's purity by having her talk about her interests to the media. She described herself as someone who was religious, worked hard, and loved to cook (Watts 342). According to Steven Watts in *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life*, Annette was a prime example of "Disney's idealized 1950s female: both beauty and brains, both energetic ambition and demure domesticity" (343). She was determined to be the best actress she could be, but she was also completely willing to put her career aside in order to raise her future children (Bowles 31).

Gendered career choices make themselves apparent in the "What I Want to Be" segment from week one. When Alvy Moore, a supposed reporter for *The Mickey Mouse Club*, goes on a hunt for two children he wishes to give a tour of Trans World Airlines (TWA) to, he stops to address the audience directly. He asks the children watching, "Do you know what you want to be when you grow up? Because if you do, you're one of the people I'm looking for. And if you

don't, well, maybe you can help me look anyway. Probably give you a few ideas, too" (*The Mickey Mouse Club*). Moore is giving the children a subtle reminder to start planning ahead for their future and that they should pay attention to possible career options.

This serialized segment of the show follows the journey of a young boy, Duncan, and a young girl, Pat, who are following their future career goals. Duncan wants to be a pilot; Pat wants to be a flight attendant. When selecting Pat, Alvy does not ponder the potential that her fellow classmates have as well. But when he is selecting Duncan from a model plane show, he surveys all of the young boys before him and thinks how most of them could become rocket scientists, engineers, astronauts, and pilots (*The Mickey Mouse Club*). He particularly admires Duncan for his hard work in earning money for his model plane, his perseverance in putting it together, and his unwillingness to give up easily.

Alvy Moore then takes them to an airport in New York to study under an actual TWA crew so they can learn about their prospective careers and further their dreams. Once there, Pat is dropped off at the TWA Hostess School which has a warning on the door in bold lettering: "Women only" (*The Mickey Mouse Club*).

The TWA Hostess School is composed of a salon and a couple of classrooms in a small hanger of the airport. Pat is restricted to this area while Duncan is free to run around the whole airport. Pat's first instruction as a hostess is in feminine presentation: makeup and hair styling. The TWA Hostess Instructor, Miss Rubat, informs Pat that all hostesses have to have their hair cut above their shoulders and curled a certain way so that their hat can rest on the curls. There are age limits, weight limits, and height limits as well⁴. They must be between the ages of 21 and

⁴ Probably also race limits since every hostess in the show is caucasian, but I'm not going to go there because talking about Disney and race is like shooting racist fish in a barrel.

28, 100-135 pounds, and 5'3"-5'8" tall (*The Mickey Mouse Club*). These restrictions, no doubt, are set in place to make sure the flight attendants they hire will be attractive. Miss Rubat also points out that most women only work a total of 18 months before they become married and leave. Perhaps flight attending was seen as a nice way to find a first class husband. Pat, who has braided pigtails, does not want to cut them off. Luckily, she is spared from having to chop off her hair for now, but if she goes back to hostess school in the future, she will not pass with her long pigtails. She will have to give up her personal sense of style in order to fit TWA Hostess standards.

For Pat's second instruction, she has to learn the art of balance and poise by crouching several times in a row, making sure her back remains straight, all while wearing high heels. The task is so easy and monotonous that during this process, her mind wanders. She daydreams about flight attendants and passengers ceaselessly performing this exercise in the plane's center aisle.

Pat also learns the value of getting through tough situations with a positive attitude while participating in the final exam with the hostesses. In the exam, hostesses are expected to diffuse a negative situation with a fake passenger. One hostess solves the problem of a passenger being afraid of flying by reassuring her that she felt the same way her first time and that each flight she has been on has been "smoother than the last" (*The Mickey Mouse Club*). All the while, she is maintaining eye contact and forcefully smiling. The instructor praises her for following protocol correctly and for using "a little bit of her personality" (*The Mickey Mouse Club*). Pat follows suit when she is put to the test and successfully diffuses the made up situation with fake passenger Alvy Moore. At first she appears annoyed, like she wants to tell Alvy off for being so rude, but she regains composure, smiles, and politely gets her way through it. Everyone applauds and Miss

Rubat says, “You can get through any situation if you just smile and really mean it inside” (*The Mickey Mouse Club*). This segment shows that the path of individualism for woman has many restrictions; she must be beautiful, poised, secluded, and be able to hide negative aspects of herself behind forced optimism and wide, polished grins.

Duncan, on the other hand, is free to roam. The whole airport is at his disposal. He runs around in open spaces, touches airplanes, and climbs control towers. From the top of the control tower, he has complete control over the whole airport. He daydreams of flying planes in rough weather and conquering the skies. Duncan does not have to learn about dress codes or how to smile and mean it. He learns practical knowledge of airport operations and science; he is taught complex lessons in calculating wind velocity, how a facsimile machine operates, and how to read a weather map. The only restriction he gets is possibly not choosing where to live out of a total of eight cities; if he becomes a top pilot, however, he will receive “first choice” (*The Mickey Mouse Club*). Therefore, he has a goal to reach for. All of these moments show that individualism for men is full of possibilities and freedom. *The Mickey Mouse Club*’s “What I Want to Be” conveys the message that young individuals can be whatever they want as long as it conforms to gender roles and societal expectations. Something that all young individuals can pursue, however, is the consumption of Disney products.

IV. Consumerism

During the time in which *The Mickey Mouse Club* was conceived, Mickey’s character had become slightly less popular due to his more conservative and better behaved nature (Bowles 10). Donald Duck and Goofy were bigger stars at the time, but Mickey still functioned as an

excellent marketing symbol. Mickey's never ending power over consumers provided a perfect opportunity for the show to make some extra money that could be put towards funding Disney's current on-going project, Disneyland. Roy Williams designed the famous Mickey Mouse ear hats after a gag that he liked from a 1930s cartoon where Mickey Mouse tips the top of his head, rather than a hat, to Minnie Mouse (Bowles 8-9). These hats became extremely popular and are still sold today in Disney shops and Disney theme parks around the world. Now, in 2016, there are many different Mickey Mouse ears available, which plays into the illusion of choice and spontaneity⁵. There is an option of choosing the style of the ears, but the variety is not presented because the corporation wants everyone to feel like an individual. There is only variety so that no consumer is left out. Buying a pair of Mickey Mouse ears and putting them on labels that individual as part of the Disney collective.

Disney was able to further harness the power of Mickey Mouse by using him to instill brand loyalty in viewers of *The Mickey Mouse Club*. In Barbara Coleman's article "Through the Years We'll All Be Friends: The 'Mickey Mouse Club,' Consumerism, and the Cultural Consensus", she points out that the opening song of the show makes learning brand names fun. The tune is extremely catchy, repetitive, and impossible to get out of one's head. As the characters dance and spell out Mickey Mouse's name through song, the audience is tempted to join the Disney club as well as consume Disney products. Coleman also points out that Donald Duck is the only character who does not participate gleefully in the opening sequence. His

⁵ The illusion of spontaneity also sneaks into certain aspects of *The Mickey Mouse Club*. There are a few times where people on the show make a mistake, such as Karen clapping too early when Larry Ashers was playing trumpet or the circus performers clumsily falling down during their performance on "Circus Day." These may seem like mistakes, but they are most likely scripted in order to create the illusion of subtle disorder. The most obvious example of "illusion of spontaneity" though is the Wednesday episode entitled, "Anything Can Happen Day." This episode promises that anything is capable of happening, yet it follows almost the same structure as the other episodes. It promises spontaneity, but ultimately has a rigid structure.

family, and even villains from popular Mickey Mouse cartoons, join the playful camaraderie, but Donald remains an unhappy outsider. Donald's frustrations show the audience that it is better to be a consumer among fellow peers and to be happy rather than being angry and ostracized.

In order to become a tip-top consumer, children watching the show were encouraged to work hard in order to earn their own spending money. The value of working hard was most obvious in the "Boy of the Week" segment (*The Mickey Mouse Club*). In week one, the award is given to a young man named Howard Donning who is praised for his outstanding achievements in agriculture, business, and schoolwork. Several monetary figures and facts are presented to highlight just how hard of a worker Howard is. The narrator tells the viewer that Howard "earned more than \$3,000 in three years of farm work"; his farm work was made possible by his ownership of cattle, one acre of tobacco, six acres of corn, twenty-five acres of hay, and twelve acres of pasture (*The Mickey Mouse Club*). Because Howard is a humble, working-class farm boy, he shows the viewer that success can be achieved only through hard work.

Furthermore, Jimmie Dodd made plugs for perseverance and hard work. At the end of the first Thursday episode, Dodd tells the audience about how he recently went to Disneyland and rode the Mark Twain. The ride reminded him of times during his youth when he would ride boats in Cincinnati. The best part of these rides, he claims, is that he was able to pay for them with money that he had earned himself. He tells the audience that "when you pay your own way, you enjoy it more" (*The Mickey Mouse Club*). His lesson for the children watching is that part of growing up is making their own money to spend on Disney.

Now that the aforementioned lesson was planted in young audiences' minds, Disney used *The Mickey Mouse Club* as a way to promote his merchandise and current projects, such as

Disneyland. One of the special guest stars brought onto the show was the balloonologist Wally Boag. Right away, Boag lets the Mouseketeers know that he works in Frontierland, right across from the Mark Twain. By mentioning this fact, anyone watching who enjoyed his act could go catch the live show by visiting him in Disneyland. Moreover, the Mouseketreasures given to the guest honorary Mouseketeers are mainly composed of items that are sold in Frontierland. If children watching the show wanted to purchase these products, well, they would have to make a trip to Frontierland in the Disneyland park.

Even the Mousekartoons, which are played at the end of every episode, are presented as consumer goods. The Mousekartoons are stored in the “Mickey Mouse Treasure Mine” (*The Mickey Mouse Club*). Disney realizes that his cartoons are just as much as a commodity as his merchandise; the entertainment he provides people is a “treasure” that must be consumed and cherished by his audiences; moreover, the Mouseketeers are meant to be consumed by the audience as well. They are products of Disney packaged as ordinary individuals; their images are shaped by Disney and American ideology and they are there to be consumed by the public as much as any other merchandise.

Due to the hold that corporate authority and the culture industry had on the show, the members of *The Mickey Mouse Club*, both the characters on the show and the consumers, are only pseudo-individuals. The Mouseketeers are only pseudo-individuals because their sole purpose is to promote the Disney image and the American way of life. They wish to lure in their audience and have them conform of their own free will. The consumers are pseudo-individuals because of their willingness to buy into a system that preaches individuality, yet they are unable to define themselves without pop culture to guide them.

Conclusion

The road to national self-definition has been a bumpy one filled with contradictory notions of what it is to be an American individual. Several people have tried to capture the essence of American individualism, while others, Walt Disney among them, have tried to shape it. He took what he deemed to be the most important American ideals--familial togetherness, the unique but other-directed personality type, gender roles, and consumerism--and used them to promote the American identity in *The Mickey Mouse Club*. His profound influence over the youth resulted in creating a swarm of pseudo-individuals who followed societal norms willingly while proudly wearing their Mickey Mouse ears.

Several children's television shows that I grew up with in the 90s tried to follow in the footsteps of *The Mickey Mouse Club*. *Sesame Street* and *Barney & Friends*, for example, had goals that were similar to *The Mickey Mouse Club*; they wanted to create an educational program that would capture children's attention. They used humor, music, and a cast of quirky characters to reel in their audience and then prepared children for their future integration into society. And while these shows were less obvious about promoting their image, they still created an array of Barney plushes and Elmo dolls to fulfill the desires of the young consumers watching.

It is important, I think, to realize the impact pop culture has on consumers. Are we the ones creating and perpetuating societal norms or have they been taught to us? Is it even possible to be a true individual or is pseudo-individualism the best we can hope for because we have grown up in a society that imparts rules to adhere to? All of this also makes me wonder if we are raising our children with their best interests in mind; or are we perhaps raising them to be like us merely because we think our way of living is superior. All of these questions lend themselves to

further research. Right now, however, I think our best hope in solving these questions in our everyday lives is by simply becoming more critical about where our values are coming from rather than allowing ourselves to be complacently shaped by cultural expectations. We need to pick apart what we are told by others, and define ourselves our own way.

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