

Ashley Knipp

Graduation Year: Senior

College: Arts & Letters, Business

Major(s): Accounting, Film/Television/Theater

Minors(s): none

Scholar Group Membership: No

Did you received other funding for this project?: No

Could you have completed this project without CUSE funding? No

More details on CUSE funding assistance? ISLA (the Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts) would not have been able to give me enough for the research trip, and no other grant I could find came close to fitting my focus of study

Project Title: Disney's Magical Brand Strategy: A Case Study on the Strategic Evolution of Disney Parks' Immersive Attractions

Project Location: Shanghai Disneyland in Shanghai, China

ND Faculty Mentor: Susan Ohmer

Project Type: Research

Why did you undertake this project/experience? Deepen your knowledge of a topic or issue, Research/experience necessary for senior thesis or capstone project, Prepare for graduate school (MA or PhD), Career discernment and/or preparation, Internationalize your Notre Dame experience

Did your funded experience help you:

[Deepen your understanding of your coursework or field of study]: Very Much

[Discern your interests and post-bac goals]: Very Much

[Become confident in your ability to set and achieve your goals]: Very Much

[Gain a more nuanced view of local, national, or global communities]: Very Much

[Improve your written and verbal communications skills]:Very Much

Tell us about your experience.

For this project in Shanghai, I considered the following, primary question: What role do immersive strategies play in the design of Disney's latest park? I hypothesized that Shanghai Disneyland would showcase clear commitment to the evolution of immersive parks through both technology and cultural connection. I will address the most interesting questions answers I returned with. How does the Pirates of the Caribbean ride in Shanghai showcase evolution strategy compared to its counterpart in Florida? I hypothesized that the ride in Shanghai would showcase significantly improved technology. My hypothesis was not only confirmed, but also advanced. The ride includes the Pepper's Ghost illusion, wide and high screens, immersive internal architecture, elaborate scene design, vehicle-sourced sound, and an integrated restaurant – these are all technological improvements, but the narrative is the significant focus of evolution. The Pirates of the Caribbean ride in Shanghai completely abandons the narrative of the original ride, as well as the signature

song, “Yo Ho.” The entire ride is pushed by a narrative based on the films of the last 14 years, but retains the favorite scene from the original ride – a 360-degree scene where a large pirate ship is engaging in battle.

How does Peter Pan’s Flight in Shanghai showcase evolution strategy compared to its counterpart in Florida? Peter Pan’s Flight is one of the oldest rides in all of the Magic Kingdoms. In Walt Disney World, the wait for this ride is always very long, even though the technology is ancient. I wondered whether Shanghai Disneyland would exalt the antiquated technology or redesign the ride with the latest technology. To my surprise and satisfaction, the ride featured a blend of old and new technologies, which solidifies an exception to my thesis: the nostalgia exception. Interspersed throughout the ride, elements of outdated technology directly replicating elements from the original ride can be seen. The remaining elements are evolved versions of elements seen in the original ride including the “Pepper’s Ghost” illusion, projections, and more complex artistic and technological elements. What’s most interesting is the lack of cultural evolution in this ride. Local guests who have never seen the ride in the U.S. have no reason to understand why this is the only ride with a blend of outdated and recent technology. Only those who understand the nostalgia associated with the historic, U.S. rides understand the significance of the blend of technologies.

How are immersive spaces received by someone outside of the park’s local culture? There is clearly a “language of Disney” and “Disney culture” because experiencing the parks felt completely comfortable for me, as an American, as it was for the local people of Shanghai. More than once, a classic Disney instrumental would play over the park speakers and I would sing the corresponding English lyrics while someone behind me would sing the corresponding Chinese lyrics. It felt like I was in Disney World until I entered an attraction or show and heard the actors or animatronics speaking Chinese, rather than English. Though the language barrier was difficult, there was always one employee in each establishment that knew enough English. The most alienating factor was the food. Most dishes served throughout the park were distinctly Chinese or generally Asian, which was somewhat difficult on my American stomach. Where domestic Disney parks will serve hot dogs, burgers, and pizza at every stand, most stands in Shanghai sell things like grilled eel, noodles, and plenty fatty pork.

Describe the impact this project had, both on you as a student-scholar and on the people you worked with.

This project confirmed what I would love to do for the rest of my life. I was able to use the knowledge I obtained from classes such as Disney in Film and Culture, Media Industries, Management, and Marketing. I am endlessly fascinated by media conglomerates and the global entertainment market around what is considered “mainstream.” The incredible amount of investment risk in entertainment lends itself to these conglomerate systems, which then have deep relationships with culture due to the social economics of supply and demand. I’ve never been outside of the country before (besides Canada - but that doesn’t really count). This is the first time I’ve ever needed my passport. This is the first time I’ve ever been in an area where I’m a foreigner who doesn’t speak the language. This was an eye-opening experience for my career because of the incredible wealth of cultural information available through a commonly understood set of entertainment narratives.

Moreover, I discovered the power of mainstream media to connect cultures. In just a few days, I felt completely at home in a country where I don't belong because I know Disney. I understood every reference to the films in the park and in my hotel. In no way do I belong in China, but I belonged in Shanghai Disneyland because I know the "language of Disney" through films and references. The power to connect and include audiences around the globe necessarily requires evolution of immersive spaces because the connection is forged through familiarity with film references. If the global audience has not seen the film in reference, it is less likely that they will feel they belong in the space and will therefore be ostracized. This would lead to less tickets sold and less souvenirs bought. Business needs to react to culture just as much as culture reacts to business.

While on this trip with my advisors, I strengthened my skills of critical analysis and discussed academic concepts around the immersive spaces while experiencing the park, rather than separating experience and analysis. My advisors were able to experience new sources and inspirations for future projects for their own academic work.

Describe how this experience is connected to your plans as a student or future professional.

This project was my one chance to break into an academic community that I revere, respect, and passionately want to belong to. Since the spring of 2016 I've been approved to write a 50-page thesis on immersive spaces in Disney parks, but I quickly discovered that the academic conversation around Disneyland in California and Walt Disney World in Florida is highly saturated. Shanghai Disneyland opened in June 2016, offering a perfect opportunity for a temporal, regional, and cultural study in brand strategy comparing the first domestic parks, and a park rejecting evolutionary strategy (Paris, which has plenty of research published), to the most recent park embracing evolutionary strategy (Shanghai). As mentioned earlier, my hypotheses were confirmed which will make my senior thesis even stronger than I could have hoped.

Though I will be working at KPMG as a consultant and Certified Public Accountant immediately after graduation, my ultimate goal is to become a professor focusing in media industries. I am hoping that this thesis will be my submission when I am applying for graduate schools.

Disney is one of film and TV's top five conglomerates, and, therefore, worthy of study from both business and cultural perspectives. Two FTT faculty advisors accompanied me on this trip – one with a focus in Disney studies and the other with a focus in animation studies, which necessarily includes Disney. This trip helped me experience my ideal future by watching my two advisors doing work in Shanghai Disney.

What advice would you give other students who are planning to pursue similar projects?

I would encourage students to pursue any topic that interests them and find passion and productivity where you may never have found it before. Research something you care about even if you think no one else will care about your research. I am eternally grateful to the Roberts Family because this grant was somehow absolutely perfect for me as a researcher and perfect for my project. Without the Roberts Endowment in East Asian Studies, I would never have been able to do this research abroad and my thesis would not have been half as good. Take the risk. Put forth

a crazy project idea and someone may support you, despite all your expectations. Once accepted, take charge of the organization of your project. It's for you. You should dive in and love taking notes, saving receipts, and doing as much as you can with the budget you have. Undergraduate research might be the craziest opportunity you have at Notre Dame, so take the reigns.
