



Designing Happiness: Analysing Disney's Strategies for Creating Immersive and Emotionally Resonant Experiences



Presented by: Namrata. Samel

Roll No: MD/24/145

Department of Design space, NIFT Kannur

Date: 28/05/2025

Subject: Design Research Methods & Industry Guided Project Proposal

Contents

Title	1
Abstract.....	1
1. Introduction.....	2
2. Research Overview	2
3. Literature review	3
4. Research Problem.....	4
5. Research Question.....	4
6. Research Gap.....	4
7. Stakeholders	5
8. Research Implication	5
9. Research Method & Methodology	5
10. Research Findings:	7
11. Budget of Research (Estimation)	11
12. Timeline of Research (Estimation).....	11
13. Conclusion	12
<i>References</i>	13

Title

Designing Happiness: Analysing Disney's Strategies for Creating Immersive and Emotionally Resonant Experiences.

Abstract

In today's rising experience economy, emotional connection has emerged as a key factor in determining user satisfaction and brand loyalty. This research investigates The Walt Disney Company's design strategies for creating happiness through immersive storytelling, spatial environments, and multisensory experiences. It seeks to examine how Disney crafts emotionally impactful experiences and how these approaches can be applied to inclusive and immersive user experience (UX) design across both physical and digital spaces.

A qualitative mixed-method approach was adopted. The study included an extensive literature review focusing on immersive design, nostalgia, and emotional engagement. Primary data was collected through user study by doing an online survey of 61 participants who had interacted with Disney through movies, merchandise, theme parks, or apps. The survey explored emotional responses, design perceptions, inclusivity, and personalization. This was complemented by a market study by doing competitor analysis of Universal Studios, Warner Bros., Apple, and Netflix, as well as a product study by SWOT analysis of Disney's design ecosystem.

Findings reveal that visual storytelling, soundscapes, and character interaction are key contributors to emotional engagement. Participants emphasized feelings of joy, nostalgia, and emotional resonance, validating Disney's experiential design strategies. However, the research also identified areas for improvement, particularly in personalization, accessibility, and inclusive design. While Disney maintains a strong advantage in thematic cohesion and emotional depth, there is a growing need to innovate further in digital and hybrid platforms to align with evolving user expectations.

This study contributes to the discourse on emotion-centred design and presents a framework that integrates environmental storytelling, user empathy, and immersive technology. Disney's design model offers valuable insights for future UX designers aiming to create experiences that are not only immersive but also inclusive and emotionally meaningful.

1. Introduction

With today's digital era, experience design is no longer merely a matter of usability, it's a matter of building emotional connections. And in spite of advancements in UX, there is a noticeable gap in understanding how happiness is deliberately designed through immersive storytelling environments. This particularly is true in a time where users are not only looking for products, but for meaningful emotionally resonant experiences.

The Walt Disney Company has long been a leader in this domain, blending spatial design, nostalgia, soundscapes, and character-driven narratives to evoke joy and wonder (Esguerra, 2020; Codreanu, 2025; Bemis, 2020). Researchers have explored individual elements like theme park architecture or collective memory, but few have addressed how these components come together to form a unified emotional strategy.

This study investigates Disney's holistic approach in designing happiness by analysing its immersive and emotional techniques through literature, user study, market study and product study. It looks at how users experience joy, inclusion, and emotional engagement across various Disney touchpoints.

What this research newly contributes is an integrative emotional design framework centred on empathy, storytelling, and sensory immersion offering actionable insights for UX designers aiming to create meaningful and inclusive experiences.

2. Research Overview

2.1. Research Topic

How Disney designs experiences to create happiness and emotional connection through immersive storytelling.

2.2. Research Problem

Despite Disney's global success in crafting immersive and emotionally engaging experiences, there is a lack of unified academic understanding of how these experiences are intentionally designed to create happiness across both physical and digital platforms. Moreover, gaps remain in the areas of accessibility, personalization, and inclusive design, which limits the broader application of Disney's emotional design strategies in UX design.

2.3. Research Objective

- To analyse how Disney designs emotionally engaging experiences through immersive storytelling, spatial environments, and sensory elements.
- To explore how these design strategies contribute to user happiness and emotional connection across both physical (e.g., theme parks) and digital (e.g., apps, films) platforms.
- To identify key components of immersive UX design such as storytelling, soundscapes, character interaction, and personalization.
- To evaluate the inclusivity and accessibility of Disney's experiences, highlighting areas for improvement in diverse user engagement.
- To develop a design framework for future UX designers, inspired by Disney, that integrates emotional design, empathy, and immersive technology.

2.4. Scope

- Explores how Disney designs immersive and emotionally resonant experiences.
- Covers both physical (theme parks) and digital (apps, content) platforms.
- Focuses on user emotions like joy, nostalgia, and connection.
- Provides insights for inclusive and accessible UX design.
- Includes competitor analysis to compare design strategies.
- Applies findings beyond entertainment to fields like education and retail.

3. Literature review

Esguerra analyses Walt Disney's foundational role in the experience economy, particularly through Disneyland. Using historical and visual analysis, she identifies principles such as "Blurring the Line Between Real and Imagined" and "Setting a Stage," which transformed entertainment into a deeply immersive and emotional consumer experience.[1]. Codreanu explores how Disney storytelling fosters happiness through the hero's journey, emotional arcs, and visual grammar. Disney's formula offers idealized worlds that fulfil deep human desires for optimism, growth, and belonging.[2]. Caeyers adapts video game storytelling to dark rides in theme parks. He adds "kinetic storytelling" as a fifth narrative mode, emphasizing multi-sensory design. While this framework is robust, he notes a gap in academic literature on designing movie-based immersive attractions.[3]. Ter Beek analyses the Magic Kingdom's immersive architecture using neo-baroque theory. He highlights Disney's spatial design, illusionism, and transmedia storytelling. [4]. Disney theme parks as collective memory spaces that reinforce national identity. Through folklore, civic rituals, and immersive design, Disney allows users to physically "experience" cultural narratives as analysed by Bemis. [5]. Padhi and Katoch identify immersion, interaction, and embodiedness as key to realistic VR. Their phenomenological study found real-time interaction and body feedback to be central in creating presence. [6].

Kailas and Tiwari highlight the role of spatial audio in enhancing immersion. Their study shows how auditory design affects UX in XR (Extended Reality) settings. The research advocates for user-specific audio design, though it leaves out how users with impairments perceive these experiences. [7]. Spence investigates Disney attractions form part of a larger brand mythology, reinforcing themes like innocence and the American Dream. Nostalgia and tradition are identified as emotional anchor [8] In Nostalgia and Mediated Memory, Keller studies Disneyland as a nostalgic space. Her surveys show that personal memory, preserved architecture, and themed events evoke strong emotional responses. However, she overlooks the role of digital technology in shaping these nostalgic experiences. [9]. Som, Mathew, and Vincs propose a conceptual design framework combining art, narrative, and VR. The three-phase model: Immersion, Interaction, Interpretation, shows how immersive technology can emotionally engage users, though the emotional depth and memory impact of such engagement are not examined. [10]. Zhang discusses immersion as a multidimensional experience: sensory, cognitive, and emotional. The paper compares different measurement tools, proposing a hybrid framework for XR applications.[11]. Chen et al. develop a unified ontology of immersive experience. They identify key mechanisms like interactivity, boundary alteration, and motivation. [12].

4. Research Problem

Despite Disney's global acclaim in crafting immersive and emotionally engaging experiences, academic inquiry lacks a unified understanding of the mechanisms that design happiness across physical and digital platforms. Moreover, gaps exist in accessibility, long-term emotional impact, and inclusive experience design.

5. Research Question

How does Disney design experiences that make people feel happy and emotionally connected, and what can designers learn from these strategies to create inclusive and immersive experiences in both physical and digital spaces?

6. Research Gap

- Limited exploration of inclusive and accessible immersive design.
- Lack of empirical data on user emotional response and long-term effects.
- Minimal discussion of digital nostalgia and mediated memory.
- Insufficient understanding of boundary alteration and empathy in XR (Extended Reality) storytelling.

7. Stakeholders

- UX/UI Designers and Experience Designers (translating Disney-like strategies to apps and services)
- Theme Park and Entertainment Designers
- Educators & VR Developers (for immersive learning experiences)
- Researchers in media studies, cultural memory, and human-computer interaction
- Visitors/Users (especially those with varied emotional, sensory, or physical needs)

8. Research Implication

This research contributes to:

- Deepening understanding of emotionally-driven design frameworks.
- Informing inclusive UX practices through spatial, narrative, and sensorial elements.
- Offering strategies for digital happiness design inspired by Disney's legacy.

9. Research Method & Methodology

This study uses a mixed-method qualitative approach. Along with a detailed literature review, a primary survey was conducted to understand how users emotionally experience Disney's immersive environments, and how key design elements contribute to happiness and emotional resonance. Also, competitive analysis (market study) and SWOT analyses (product study) were conducted to understand the brand better. User study was conducted with an online survey created using Google Forms. It included both closed-ended and open-ended questions to capture quantitative ratings and qualitative insights. The survey link was shared via social media platforms (WhatsApp, LinkedIn, and Email).

9.1. User Study:

9.1.1. Survey Sample:

- **Sample size:** 61 respondents
- **Demographic:** Participants were from diverse age groups, backgrounds, and professions. The majority had experienced Disney's theme parks, movies, apps, or merchandise.
- **Sampling method:** Convenience sampling (voluntary participation).

9.1.2. Survey Questionnaire Topics:

The survey included questions covering the following areas:

- **Basic Information:** Disney experiences, age group, profession.
- **Emotional Experience:** Emotions felt during Disney experiences (joy, nostalgia, excitement, etc.).
- **Design Elements:** Ratings on storytelling, visuals, soundscape, character interaction, interactivity, and emotional connection.
- **Inclusivity & Accessibility:** Opinions on whether Disney experiences feel inclusive and accessible.
- **Reflection and Insights:** Open-ended questions on what designers can learn from Disney's strategies.

9.1.3. Ethical Considerations:

Participation was voluntary. Respondents were informed that their answers would be used only for academic purposes and would remain anonymous.

9.2. Market Study (Competitor Analysis):

Brand	Strengths	Weaknesses Compared to Disney
Universal Studios	- Strong environmental storytelling - Advanced technology use - Focus on thrill and excitement	- Less emotional warmth - Prioritizes excitement over emotional connection
Warner Bros. Studio Tour	- Authentic fandom immersion - Behind-the-scenes storytelling	- Informational, not magical - Less thematic coherence
Apple	- Immersive retail spaces - Joy through minimalist design - Strong aspirational branding	- Product-centred, not story-centred - Emotional bond built via brand, not fantasy
Netflix	- Emotional storytelling through content - Digital and pop-up immersive events	- Short-term experiences - Lacks sustained physical-world immersion

(Sources: Universal Orlando, Warner Bros. Studio Tour, Apple Retail, Netflix Official Website)

9.3. Product Study (SWOT Analysis):

STRENGTH	WEAKNESS
• Strong emotional storytelling	• Limited personalization
• Multisensory immersive environments	• High cost, less accessible
• Global brand loyalty	• Over-reliance on nostalgia
• Mastery of physical and digital experience	• Accessibility improvements needed
OPPURTUNITIES	THREATS
• Expansion into digital learning & retail	• Competition from immersive brands
• Using AR/VR/XR for deeper emotional reach	• Risk of brand fatigue
• Localized storytelling	• Higher demand for personalization
• Affordable immersive digital experiences	• Representation and inclusivity pressure

10. Research Findings:

10.1. User Study (Survey) Findings:

Participants' Disney Experience:

- Most participants had experienced Disney through movies, Disney+, and merchandise.
- Some participants had visited Disney parks.

Emotional Responses:

- Majority of participants reported feeling joy, nostalgia, excitement, and calm/comfort.
- All respondents said the Disney experience left a lasting emotional impact — meaning the feelings were not just temporary.

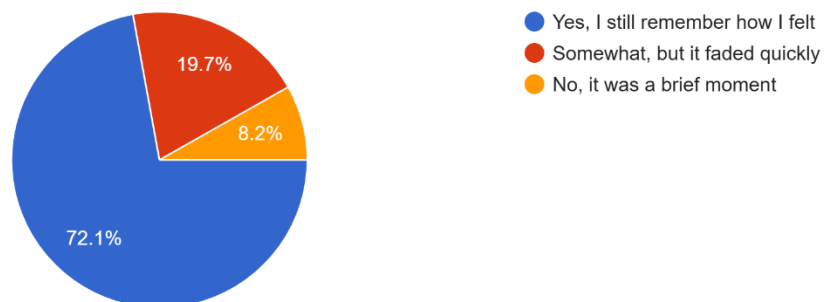
Key Factors for Emotional Connection

Participants said experiences were memorable because of:

- Childhood memories
- Visual richness and storytelling
- Ambience and atmosphere
- Colors, lights, and strong emotional narratives

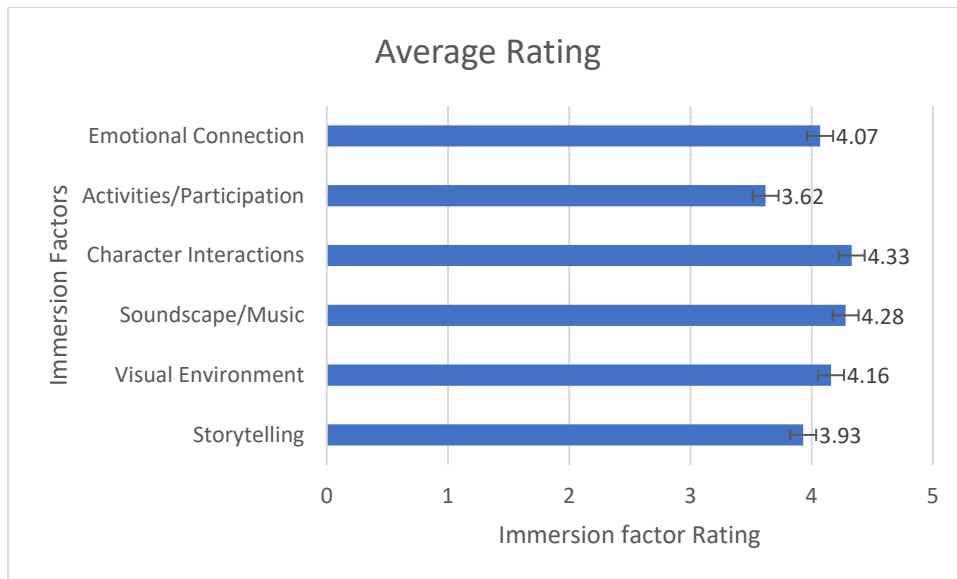
Did the experience leave a lasting emotional impact?

61 responses



Immersion Factor	Average Rating
Storytelling	3.93
Visual Environment	4.16
Soundscape/Music	4.28
Character Interactions	4.33
Activities/Participation	3.62
Emotional Connection	4.07

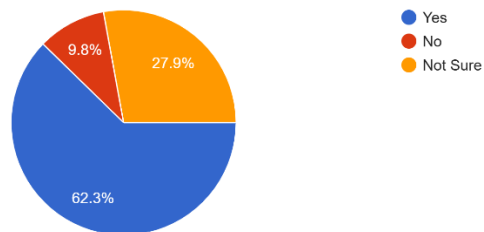
- Character interactions and soundscape/music were the strongest factors in feeling immersed.
- Activities and participation were rated lower (some users felt less involved).



Personalization:

- Most participants (62.3%) felt the Disney experience was personalized.
- Some were "Not sure" about personalization, suggesting room for improvement.

Did the experience feel personalized to you?
61 responses



Inclusivity and Accessibility:

- Most participants felt Disney experiences were inclusive, but a few were "not sure."
- Very few provided detailed suggestions for making experiences more inclusive, showing a gap in awareness.

Learnings for Designers:

Participants suggested that UX and experience designers should learn from Disney's:

- Emotional storytelling
- Creating deep emotional connections
- Empathy and compassion in design
- Regional and localized content (for wider cultural inclusivity)

Interest in Other Fields: Almost all participants said they would be interested in emotionally immersive experiences outside entertainment, like in education, healthcare, or retail.

This primary research strongly supports that emotional storytelling, immersive soundscape, character interactions, and visual richness are key to designing happiness.

At the same time, inclusivity and deep personalization are areas where future designs can grow, both for Disney and experience design in general.

10.2. Market study (Competitor Analysis) Findings:

It points out that in spite of brands like Universal Studios, Warner Bros, Apple and Netflix bring something distinctively unique to immersive experiences, none of them matches Disney's thematic and emotionally rich storytelling strategy. Universal has the thriller and technological nuance but no emotional richness that Disney delivers each time. Warner Bros. have fandom-based immersion but fails to deliver the unified thematic coherence that Disney embodies. Apple designs aspirational, engaging shopping spaces but its experiences are based on product interaction, not narrative magic. Netflix takes us through digital narrative and pop-up experience but its effects are necessarily transitory and do not benefit the physical immersion Disney provides. On the whole, Disney keeps its competitive edge by virtue of its integrated emotional storytelling, long-term involvement strategies, and command of both physical and digital spaces, though ongoing innovation is needed to lead the way in an ever-changing experience economy.

10.3. Product Study (SWOT Analysis) Findings:

It analysis identifies that although emotional engagement brands such as Disney do well in storytelling, multisensory experiences, and worldwide loyalty, they are increasingly struggling with accessibility, personalization and inclusivity. The changing digital environment presents tremendous opportunities through the use of AR/VR technologies, localized content and low-cost immersive platforms. Yet, to remain relevant and emotionally engaging, these brands need to manage the increasing expectations of diverse global consumers and distinguish themselves amidst rising competition. A strategic emphasis on innovation, inclusivity and personalisation will be the central approach to maintaining their influence in the future of experience design.

11. Budget of Research (Estimation)

Item	Description	Cost (INR)
Survey Tools	Google Forms	Free
Research Incentives (For users)	Incentives through vouchers or coupons	₹3000
Travel/Field Study	Park/museum visit or virtual tours	₹5000
Printing/Reports	Hard copies, materials	₹1000
Contingency	Miscellaneous	₹1500
Total		₹10,000–₹12,000

12. Timeline of Research (Estimation)

Week	Activity
Week 1–2	Finalizing proposal and scope
Week 3–5	Literature Review (compiled + APA formatted)
Week 6–7	Designing research tools (User Study (Surveys)/ Market Study (Competitor Analysis)/ Product Study (Swot Analysis))
Week 8–10	Data collection
Week 11–12	Data analysis
Week 13	Draft writing
Week 14	Final report + submission

13. Conclusion

This study confirms that Disney's success in crafting immersive and emotionally resonant experiences is the result of intentional design strategies centred around storytelling, environment, and sensory engagement. By prioritizing emotional connection, Disney creates memorable experiences that resonate with users across various touchpoints, from theme parks to digital platforms.

The research findings show that elements like visual storytelling, soundscapes, and character interaction play a vital role in generating feelings of joy, nostalgia, and belonging. While Disney excels in creating thematically cohesive experiences, the study also highlights the need for greater emphasis on personalization, accessibility, and inclusivity to meet diverse user needs.

Overall, this research underscores the potential for applying Disney's emotion-driven design principles to broader UX practices. It presents a framework for future designers aiming to build emotionally engaging, inclusive, and immersive experiences that leave a lasting impact on users.

References

- [1]. Esguerra, M. L. (2020). *Staging and selling experiences: Investigating Walt Disney's role in the experience economy* [Honors thesis, California State University, Long Beach].
- [2]. Codreanu, F. (2025). *Disney storytelling – the proven recipe for happiness. In Storytelling through Images, Literature for Children and Young Adults*, P90.
- [3]. Caeyers, F. (2021). *The design of movie-based theme park attractions: Exploring environmental storytelling to create immersive dark ride experiences* [Master's thesis, Université du Québec à Chicoutimi], P22-24
- [4.] Ter Beek, J. (2018). *The immersive theme park: Analysing the immersive world of the Magic Kingdom theme park* [Master's thesis, Radboud University Nijmegen], P15-17
- [5]. Bemis, B. (2020). *Mirror, mirror for us all: Disney theme parks and the collective memory of the American national narrative. The Public Historian*, 42(1), P1–25.
- [6]. Padhi, D. R., & Katoch, S. (2021). *How real is virtual reality: An immersion, interaction and embodiedness study. In Design for Tomorrow (Vol. 2, P86–89).*
- [7]. Kailas, G., & Tiwari, N. (2021). *Design for immersive experience: Role of spatial audio in extended reality applications. In Design for Tomorrow (Vol. 2, P110–112).*
- [8] Spence, L. S. (2019). *Disney World, the mythic space, and the Disney Company mythology* [Master's thesis, Illinois State University].
- [9] Keller, K. (2011). *Disneyland and nostalgia* [Master's thesis, California State University, Northridge], P34-37
- [10] Som, S., Mathew, D. J., & Vincs, K. (2021). *Harnessing immersive technology with art and design: A conceptual design procedure with the aid of virtual reality. In Design for Tomorrow (Vol. 2, pp. 121–132).*
- [11]. Zhang, C. (2020). *The why, what, and how of immersive experience. IEEE Access*, 8, 148679–148693.
- [12]. Chen, C., Hu, X., & Fisher, J. (2024). *What is 'being there'? An ontology of the immersive experience. Annals of the International Communication Association*, 48(2), 210–231.