

COVID and Disney: Population and Contamination

Elijah Bowers - HST 643 - 3/11/2024 - Spring Session B

When COVID hit in 2019-2020, I was a junior going into my senior year in college. Classes moved online, break was extended for a few weeks until a new sense of normalcy could be defined and established. I worked at a grocery store, played soccer, and attended school. Suddenly, all preestablished norms were disintegrated and a new concept of life was introduced, with masks, new regulations, no indoor dining, and many other drastic changes. It was a hard year; physically and mentally. I was planning to go to Florida and Disney with my girlfriend at the time (who is now my ex) and her family in the Spring of 2021. On Christmas Eve of 2020, I contracted COVID and was forced to miss Christmas with my family and quarantine myself in my house. My goal at the time was to recover in time to still go on my trip. Thankfully, I got healthy enough to go and tested negative. The trip though, was one I will never forget.

On the plane, and in the airport, everyone wore masks and kept to themselves. This was my first time being in an open space with a lot of other people since the pandemic started. It was overwhelming, but also eye-opening as to the extent of this pandemic and its effect on our everyday lives. It also showed the discrepancies among people; how some of them would wear a mask with no questions yet others refused or wore it below their nose or on their chins, not willing to comply with the new norms that were established. The airplane ride was quiet and tense; I feared that the mask would not be enough and I would quickly get sick with COVID again for being so close to other people. In Florida, it was the same; masks, tension, and fear all dictated people's actions and thoughts, yet some people genuinely seemed unfazed. For the first time, it was evident to me that even a pandemic couldn't bring people together or make them agree; there was always going to be right or wrong, left or right.

In Disney, which is usually a happy and welcoming place, fear still ruled. Lines were tense and short; most people wore masks, and most people stayed 6 feet apart, but how can that be truly possible in an overpopulated place like Disney? I felt exposed and unsafe in a place that was supposed to be safe and welcoming. While the new norms of society had been introduced before my trip, it was hard to fully accept them at the moment when a place like Disney has always been known and viewed as a fun, engaging, and social place. In this moment, in this place, I truly felt the weight of this pandemic and the impact it had on our society and everyday lives. I realized how long these limitations and precautions would last now that they have been introduced, and how even in a time of panic and uncertainty, we still find a way to remain divided as a nation over what to do and what not to do. Population and the fear of contamination ruled the vacation, and occupied minds besides my own. In the end, the trip showed me the differences between people in a state of crisis but also made me realize I will never be able to be in a densely populated area again without the fear of catching COVID or some type of sickness. How will this moment be remembered in history? As a moment of national crisis? As a pandemic? Or as a moment when society found a way to divide itself over another common goal? This is a moment where our stories and our history will be examined and studied during this crucial moment in our history and societal norms.

