

“You Are More Than Just Your Gift:” Facework and Idealization in Disney’s *Encanto*

Janelle L.H. Gruber

Penn State University - Schuylkill

Valerie Lynn Schrader

Professor of Communication Arts & Sciences

Penn State University - Schuylkill

vls146@psu.edu

Abstract

In this rhetorical analysis, we apply Goffman’s theory of facework to the Disney film Encanto, arguing that Encanto provides important lessons regarding facework and advocates for using facework in moderation. Encanto tells the story of the Madrigals, a family who experiences a miracle that results in each member of the family having a special gift – all except for one, the teenage protagonist, Mirabel. When Mirabel recognizes that both the miracle and her family are in danger, she realizes that her individual family members are using facework in order to fit in with the rest of the family and impress the community, even though they feel confined by their gifts. Mirabel’s sisters use idealization to mask feelings of insecurity as well as their own creativity, while her aunt Pepa and cousin Camilo experience difficulties engaging in facework due to the nature of their gifts. Furthermore, Mirabel’s uncle Bruno is shunned by the family because he fails to properly engage in facework. We contend that Encanto provides a cautionary message for its young audience: facework should be used in moderation and that maintaining face, idealization, and front at the expense of expressing one’s emotions can have negative consequences on not only the individual engaging in facework, but also those around them.

Disney’s *Encanto*, featuring music by Lin-Manuel Miranda and direction by Byron Howard, Jared Bush, and Charise Castro Smith, was released in United States’ theatres on November 24, 2021, earning over \$27 million in its opening weekend (“Encanto,” 2021; “Encanto,” n.d.). Featuring the voices of Stephanie Beatriz as the teenage protagonist Mirabel, Maria Cecilia Botero as the family matriarch Abuela, and John Leguizamo as the family

scapegoat Bruno, *Encanto* tells the story of the Madrigals, a family who experiences a miracle that results in each member of the family having a special gift. Mirabel's mother can heal people with her cooking, her sisters Isabela and Luisa have the gifts of beauty and strength, her aunt Pepa can control the weather through her emotions, and her cousins Dolores, Camilo, and Antonio can hear things at a great distance, shapeshift, and talk with animals, respectively. Mirabel's uncle Bruno has been ostracized by the family because his gift, the ability to predict the future, unnerves the family and the community. When the miracle and the family are in danger, Mirabel, the only family member without a special gift, takes it upon herself to uncover the problem and save her family and the miracle that has empowered them and their community.

Encanto has received mostly positive critical reviews, with many critics noting the political and family-oriented messages in the film. Maya Phillips (2021) of the *New York Times* praises the film's use of diversity and computer animation, noting that the film's creators "subtly incorporate an important political message" about "displaced people who build a home from nothing" (para. 7). She states that the Madrigal family's "history is the source of their magic, and they use that magic to selflessly improve their community, without needing to assimilate into it. Given our nation's track record on these subjects, to see such a tale in a children's movie is quietly extraordinary" (para. 7). Although she critiques Miranda's songs for being too similar to his previous work, Kristen Page-Kirby (2021) of the *Washington Post* applauds *Encanto*'s visual and voice work, as well as its "simple yet powerful" overarching message: that "people are worthy of love because of who they are, not what they do" (para. 4). Richard Roeper (2021) of the *Chicago Sun-Times* calls *Encanto* "vibrant, gorgeous, eye-popping, colorful and, well, enchanting" and notes that it contains "lovely messaging about the importance

of family” (para. 2-3). He claims that “if you could hug a movie, this is the kind of movie you’d want to hug” (para. 3).

While the movie offers the political and family-oriented messages noted by critics, many of the characters in *Encanto* also engage in facework. Defined by Erving Goffman (1967), facework consists of “the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face” (p. 12), which is “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself...in terms of approved social attributes” (p. 5). The idealized front expected of each member of the Madrigal family is primarily determined by their gift and is reinforced by the family matriarch Abuela (see Appendix A for the full family tree). The Madrigals use facework to protect their family and the community, but this leads to several family members feeling confined by their gifts. In this essay, we argue that *Encanto* serves to teach lessons regarding facework. Luisa, Isabela, Mirabel and Abuela engage in facework that is detrimental to their mental health and to their interpersonal relationships. Through Pepa’s and Camilo’s inability to use facework and Bruno’s refusal to engage in facework, viewers learn that putting on a face in certain situations has value. We contend that *Encanto* provides an important message for its young audience: that facework should be used in moderation and that maintaining face, idealization, and front at the expense of expressing one’s emotions can have negative consequences on not only the individual engaging in facework, but also on those around them.

To date, few scholars have examined the messages in *Encanto*. Play therapist and trauma scholar Sydney Conroy (2022) studied how the film portrays intergenerational trauma, suggesting how therapists might use the film to help families communicate their experiences with trauma. Film and media researcher Katie Potter (2022) compares *Encanto* to another popular Disney film, *Frozen*, observing how *Encanto* diverges from traditional Disney themes in

order to bring to light anxieties that exist in families. In another comparison study, film scholar Manuel Betancourt (2022) explores the different depictions of Colombia in *Encanto* and in the mystery film *Memoria*. Our study on *Encanto* seeks to contribute to the scholarly literature on this unique Disney film by exploring the messages concerning facework in the film through rhetorical criticism as a research method.

Rhetorical criticism is “one means through which we expose our structure or reasoning, acknowledge the agency of our interlocutors, and sustain our commitment to the ongoing practice of argument itself” (Browne, 2007, p. 109). Instead of focusing on measurement, rhetorical criticism explores meanings in text and requires interpretation and judgment (Zarefsky, 2006, p. 384). The role of a rhetorical critic is to try “to understand what is going on in order to interpret more fully the rhetorical dynamics involved in the production and reception of the message” (Andrews, 1983, p. 6). Rhetorical criticism involves forming logical arguments about a specific text and supporting these arguments with evidence from the text and theoretical framework. In this rhetorical criticism study, we apply Goffman’s facework to *Encanto* in order to better understand the messages in the text and how they have the potential to impact young audiences.

Literature Review

In his book *Interaction Ritual*, Erving Goffman (1967) defines face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself...in terms of approved social attributes” (p. 5). He describes facework as “the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face” (p. 12). Facework consists of the ways in which face is created and maintained, particularly when challenged with a “face threat.” Goffman (1967) explains that individuals use facework to “counteract ‘incidents’ - that is, events whose effective symbolic implications

threaten face” (p. 12). When these “incidents” occur, face-saving is needed in order to prevent embarrassment or loss of social standing.

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) describes a person’s face as a mask used to conceal imperfections: “this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves—the role we are striving to live up to—this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be” (p. 19). Facework takes place in the “front region,” while anything the individual wishes to hide is left in the “backstage.” The front region is “the place where the performance is given” (Goffman, 1959, p. 66). Performances in the front region “may be seen as an effort to give the appearance that [an individual’s] activity in the region maintains and embodies certain standards” (p. 67). In contrast, the backstage is “a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course” (p. 69). It is “where the suppressed facts make an appearance,” and it hides anything that is “inconsistent with the appearance fostered by the performance” (p. 82).

Goffman (1959) explains that performances of face are “socialized, molded, and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented” (p. 35). This act creates the idealization of face, which he describes as “an idealized view of the situation” (p. 35). Goffman (1959) contends that “when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of society, more so, in fact, than does his behavior as a whole” (p. 35). The idealization of face is something individuals strive for in order to maintain or increase their social standing, to present themselves as credible or flawless, and to avoid embarrassment.

Goffman (1967) explains that facework is performed in two ways: the avoidance process and the corrective process. When engaging in the avoidance process, an individual attempts to

“avoid all contacts in which...threats are likely to occur” (p. 15). If the individual is unable to avoid such contacts, he/she/they may engage in defensive measures, such as not discussing topics that may reveal backstage information, or protective measures, such as being overly polite or making jokes. If a face threat occurs, an individual may engage in the corrective process in order to reestablish face. The corrective process involves the challenge (where the face threat occurs), an offering (where the individual is given the opportunity to correct the “offense”), acceptance (in which the other party accepts the individual’s offering), and thanks (when the individual “conveys a sign of gratitude to those who have given him the indulgence of forgiveness” (p. 22)).

Goffman (1959) also describes the expressive equipment that is “intentionally or unwittingly employed by an individual” to project face – this is referred to as “front” (p. 22). There are three components of front: setting, which consists of the scenic components such as time and place; appearance, which is how individuals express themselves physically; and manner, which includes an individual’s behavior and presentation of emotions. A conflict front, or inconsistent front, may also occur if one component of front contradicts another (Goffman, 1959).

Several scholars have examined how facework can be used in intercultural contexts. In 1988, Stella Ting-Toomey used Goffman’s concept of facework to develop face negotiation theory. Influenced by the individualism-collectivism dimension of culture, face negotiation theory focuses on intercultural conflict styles (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998) state that “cultural values shape our meanings and punctuation points of salient facets of social self and personal self,” noting that the use of facework, particularly when engaging in conflict, varies by culture (p. 188). Cocroft and Ting-

Toomey (1994) observed differences in the use of facework between Japanese and United States respondents, as well as between male and female respondents. Oetzel et al. (2000) examined facework behaviors in conflicts between best friends and conflicts between strangers in both the United States and Japan; they observed thirteen unique clusters in the analysis: “aggression, apologize, avoid, compromise, consider the other, defend self, express feelings, give in, involve a third party, pretend, private discussion, remain calm, and talk about the problem” (p. 397). Using a questionnaire to study self-reported usage of facework by participants in four countries, Oetzel et al. (2001) found that facework and face concerns vary by a culture’s power distance and level of individualism and collectivism. In a later study focusing on parents and siblings’ interactions in Germany, Japan, Mexico, and the United States, Oetzel et al. (2003) noted that, while there were cultural differences in the use of facework, there were also similarities across all cultures; for example, they found that participants who engaged in conflict with parents used facework differently than those who engaged in conflict with siblings. In her study that utilized questionnaires completed by respondents from six different cultures, Merkin (2006) observed that the power distance dimension of culture played a prominent role in what type of communication strategy respondents used when managing face threats. Jwa (2017) examined facework among second-language speakers and found that they used face in three ways: “self-mocking humor, group embarrassment, and attempts to build group cohesion” (p. 517). The literature regarding facework in intercultural communication suggests that the use of facework varies by culture, the power dimension of each culture, and by the relationship of the participants in the facework encounter.

Goffman’s concepts of facework and front have been explored in other ways by scholars of both communication studies and sociology, including how facework is used by friends

(Durham & Friedman, 2016; Manusov et al., 2004; Miller-Ott & Kelly, 2017), how musicians utilize facework strategies when handling face threats during performances (Scarborough, 2012), and how facework is used by instructors to provide written feedback to students (Gardner, Anderson & Wolvin, 2017). Several studies have examined how facework is used in social media settings (Lim et al, 2012; Romo et al, 2017; Schuller & Schrader, 2017; Sharkey et al., 2012). However, to date, few scholars have published studies examining how facework is portrayed in fictional texts and what lessons can be conveyed regarding facework to an audience through these texts. In a 2014 study, Schrader explored how the use of facework in the musical *Wicked* contributed to messages regarding leadership in the musical. Del Saz-Rubio and Gregori-Signes (2013) studied how facework strategies are utilized in the court martial cross-examination scene in the film *A Few Good Men*. We hope that this study contributes to the growing body of literature regarding how popular culture texts convey messages about facework to mass audiences.

Analysis

In this essay, we analyze the use of facework by several characters in the film *Encanto*. Appendix A includes a family tree that outlines the three generations of the Madrigal family and the magical gifts of each family member. This analysis, which focuses on the characters who best demonstrate Goffman's concept of facework, has been organized in three sections. The first section includes Luisa and Isabela, as the storylines of these two characters are similar in regards to their use of facework. Next, Mirabel and Abuela are discussed together as the interactions between these characters provide various examples of facework. In the third section, we explore how a pair of parent/child characters, Pepa and Camilo, are unable to engage in facework due to the nature of their magical gifts. Finally, we examine how the character of Bruno is rejected by

his family when he refuses to engage in facework and how this refusal leads to his self-imposed exile in the film. Through this analysis, we suggest that the portrayals of facework in this film serve as pedagogical tools regarding healthy expression and the portrayal of self.

Luisa & Isabela

One example of facework in the film is demonstrated by Luisa, one of the oldest Madrigal grandchildren, whose gift is her physical strength. Luisa's name, which means "renowned warrior," aligns with her gift. Luisa describes herself in the song "Surface Pressure" in the following terms:

"I'm the strong one, I'm not nervous.

I'm as tough as the crust of the Earth is.

I move mountains, I move churches.

And I glow, 'cause I know what my worth is.

I don't ask how hard the work is.

Got a rough indestructible surface.

Diamonds and platinum, I find 'em, I flatten 'em.

I take what I'm handed, I break what's demanded" (Bush, Howard & Castro-Smith, 2021, 34:19).

Luisa's presentation of self to her family and community reinforces and bolsters her image as "the strong one." In public and in her home, she is perpetually performing physically demanding tasks, sometimes even anticipating what physical task people will ask of her before they ask it. For example, in one scene, a man in the community approaches her, asking her to fix the church. While he is asking, she already has the building on her shoulder and is engaged in the task he is requesting. In addition to performing this role in public, she is also constantly taking on all the

physical tasks in her home. However, as Luisa continues her self-description in the song “Surface Pressure,” viewers learn that backstage, Luisa is tired, anxious, and filled with self-doubt. She sings,

“But under the surface, I feel berserk as a tightrope walker in a three-ring circus.

Under the surface, was Hercules ever like, ‘Yo, I don't wanna fight Cerberus?’

Under the surface, I'm pretty sure I'm worthless if I can't be of service.

A flaw or a crack, the straw in the stack

That breaks the camel's back, what breaks the camel's back?

It's pressure like a drip, drip, drip that'll never stop.

Pressure that'll tip, tip, tip 'til you just go pop.

Give it to your sister, your sister's older

Give her all the heavy things we can't shoulder

Who am I if I can't run with the ball?

If I fall to pressure...” (Bush, Howard & Castro-Smith, 2021, 34:45)

Luisa only makes this confession to her sister Mirabel after Mirabel’s persistent prompting.

While Luisa’s frontstage maintains her face of being “the strong one,” she confides her backstage doubts and concerns to her sister only. Mirabel responds to this confession by stating,

“I think you are carrying way too much” (Bush, Howard & Castro-Smith, 2021, 37:40).

This musical conversation shows that, for the community, Luisa illustrates a consistent front, which Goffman (1959) notes occurs when setting, appearance, and manner align with one another. When she confides her backstage feelings to Mirabel, she physically moves away from their home and walks through the community, leaving the populated area before she will address

her sister's questions about her nervousness. By adjusting the setting before addressing backstage concerns, Luisa is able to maintain the idealization she has created for the community.

However, with her sister, Luisa begins to display a conflict front, where one or more of the elements of front do not align with the others (Goffman, 1959). Luisa's appearance begins to change as she develops an involuntary twitching in her eye. This physical manifestation of stress is the clue that leads Mirabel to reach out to Luisa to discuss her concerns about the family's magic. A drastic change in manner also occurs in this interchange when Luisa confesses her fears and insecurities. Luisa later admits that she has been feeling "weak" and she tells Abuela that she is "losing [her] gift," noting that when she was asked to carry donkeys, they "felt heavy" (Bush, Howard & Castro-Smith, 2021, 38:00). The donkeys, which feature in Luisa's song as well, are symbolic of Luisa herself, who is expected to do manual labor for the family and the community. While Luisa is able to maintain her face in the community, she confesses to her family what she sees as her failures, including her family members in her backstage concerns.

At the end of the film, Luisa's situation is resolved when she regains her physical strength. She learns to take on challenging tasks in moderation, rather than trying to do everything for everyone. Her family also learns to support this healthy decision. As the family rebuilds their house and Luisa takes on her normal physically-daunting tasks, her cousin Antonio pushes her into a hammock and hands her a drink to keep her from taking on too much. Luisa's storyline illustrates the importance of including trusted individuals in backstage concerns and cautions against maintaining idealization at all times.

Another example of facework in the film comes from Mirabel's other sister Isabela. In the opening song of the film, "The Family Madrigal," Mirabel introduces Isabela as "graceful, perfect in every way. Isabela grows a flower, and the town goes wild. Isabela, she's the perfect

golden child” (Bush, Howard & Castro-Smith, 2021, 7:30). Like Luisa, Isabela maintains a face that is consistent with her gift: she appears to be “perfect” in both her home and in public life. Her gift is to add beauty wherever she goes, either by just being present or by growing stunning flowers out of thin air.

Like Luisa, Isabela is also prompted to reveal elements of her backstage in a conversation with her sister Mirabel. Mirabel, who resents and dislikes her seemingly-perfect sister, attempts to reconcile with Isabela in order to save their family miracle. Mirabel accuses Isabela of being selfish and self-centered, to which Isabela responds, “Selfish? I have been stuck being perfect my whole entire life.” She confesses that she does not want to marry the man who her family has picked for her, saying, “I never wanted to marry him, I was doing it for the family” (Bush, Howard & Castro-Smith, 2021, 1:08:29). As in the conversation with Luisa, the conversation between Mirabel and Isabela takes place in a private setting – Isabela’s bedroom. This enables Isabela to maintain her idealized face publicly while sharing backstage concerns privately with her sister.

Isabela’s choice to reveal her backstage to Mirabel results in her usage of all three components of front. While these components are consistent with one another, they are inconsistent with the idealization Isabela has created and maintained in front of the family and community. When she admits her reluctance to marry in her song “What Else Can I Do?,” she accidentally creates a cactus, which is vastly different from the traditionally beautiful flowers that she had previously created. In response to this new creation, she sings, “I just made something unexpected, something sharp, something new. It’s not symmetrical or perfect, but it’s beautiful” (Bush, Howard & Castro-Smith, 2021, 1:08:52). As the song progresses, Isabela admits that she is tired of being perfect and maintaining an idealized face, and she wants to

explore what else she can do with her powers. As Isabela creates different flowers, including vines and carnivorous plants, these new flowers change her physical appearance, causing her to appear messy, artistic, and covered in splatters of colors from her new plants. Furthermore, Isabela changes the appearance of her environment, first in her bedroom and then in other parts of the home, such as the roof, the front yard and the courtyard. Lastly, Isabela's manner changes. In most of her interactions with Mirabel leading up to this song, Isabela is sharp and high strung. However, throughout the song, she learns to "let go" of her perfect image. By the end of the song, she is much more relaxed and even jokes with Mirabel saying, "you're a bad influence" (Bush, Howard & Castro-Smith, 2021, 1:11:39). While Isabela's new setting, appearance, and manner are consistent with each other, they are inconsistent with her previous idealized front, suggesting that Isabela's idealization was preventing her from expressing other parts of her personality, such as her creativity.

After revealing her backstage to Mirabel, Isabela does not continue to maintain her perfect image. For the remainder of the film, she embraces her messy appearance and takes joy in creating cacti, carnivorous plants, vines, and other less traditionally beautiful flora. She does not move forward with the marriage arranged by her grandmother and supports the relationship between her ex-fiancé Mariano and her cousin Dolores, who has harbored a secret crush on Mariano throughout Isabela's courtship. Isabela's story suggests that too much focus on idealization can result in suppressing other parts of one's personality and encourages viewers to consider their own needs and not just what is expected of them.

Mirabel & Abuela

Like her sisters, Mirabel provides an example of facework in the film; however, Mirabel's use of facework contrasts that of her grandmother, Abuela. In the opening song of the

film, viewers learn that Mirabel is the only member of her family without a magical gift. Mirabel's communication with both her family and the public indicates that she is fine with being different from her magical family members. Even in the face of skepticism and insensitivity, she maintains her face of being a good sport. After the disclosure of her lack of magic at the end of "The Family Madrigal" opening song, one of the village children questions her use of face, saying, "if I was you, I would be really sad." Another says more critically, "I wonder if your gift is denial." The village store owner says that Mirabel can have the "not-special special" since she is the only Madrigal without a magical gift (Bush, Howard & Castro-Smith, 2021, 9:10).

Throughout "The Family Madrigal," Mirabel practices the avoidance process. Goffman (1967) explains that when individuals cannot avoid situations where a face threat is present, they may engage in defensive or protective measures (p. 15). In "The Family Madrigal," Mirabel uses both. At first, she employs defensive measures, successfully avoiding answering the village children's question of "what is your gift?" fourteen times. She also uses protective measures, especially deflection, when she changes the topic, dances, and walks away. She also employs the protective tactic of making jokes, quipping "I never meant this to get autobiographical" (Bush, Howard & Castro-Smith, 2021, 8:12).

Ultimately, Mirabel is unsuccessful in avoiding the topic, and confesses that she has no magical gift. She then begins the corrective process, assuring the village children that she is not upset by this and that she is happy being the only Madrigal without a special gift. However, viewers are aware that Mirabel is putting on a front by the end of the second song, her solo, "Waiting on a Miracle." During this song, she discloses her backstage to viewers by explaining that she is really hurting and very much wants a magical gift like the rest of her family. Like her

sisters, Mirabel displays an idealized front that differs significantly from the emotions she is experiencing backstage (Bush, Howard & Castro-Smith, 2021, 22:29).

Abuela, the family matriarch, is focused on the image of the family as a whole and on the ability of each magical family member to maintain their idealized front. She believes it is her family's duty to maintain a perfect image and use their gifts to help the community. She explains this through a vow in the opening song:

“We swear to always
Help those around us
And earn the miracle
That somehow found us
The town keeps growing
The world keeps turning
But work and dedication will keep the miracle burning
And each new generation must keep the miracle burning” (Bush, Howard & Castro-Smith, 2021, 6:47)

Through these lyrics, Abuela illustrates that she feels it is the responsibility of her family to uphold an idealized image because they have been granted power through the miracle. Goffman (1959) notes that facework is especially useful for individuals who hold positions of power. In *Encanto*, the Madrigal family members are in positions of power because of their miracle, and these positions of power come with expectations on how to behave. Abuela pushes her family members to maintain face and attempts to employ corrective practices to maintain the image of the family. For instance, when Mirabel interrupts her cousin Antonio's gift ceremony party to tell everyone that she sees cracks in their home, she is presenting a challenge to her family's face.

Her grandmother engages in the corrective process by first providing an offering to partygoers, assuring them that “there is nothing wrong with the Casa Madrigal, the magic is strong,” and that there is plenty to eat and drink (Bush, Howard & Castro-Smith, 2021, 27:12). Accepting this offering, the partygoers continue eat, drink, and enjoy themselves at the celebration.

Later, at a special dinner with the Guzman family (the family of Isabela’s fiancé, Mariano), the entire Madrigal family experiences loss of face when they all learn that Mirabel has gone into Bruno’s tower and recovered his final prediction before he disappeared. Mirabel begins by telling her father, who is visibly agitated and distracted during the meal. When Luisa is asked to move the heavy piano, she struggles to move it and weeps because she feels weak. Camilo is unable stop shapeshifting, and this lack of control results in him changing into different people within seconds. Pepa has a storm cloud forming over her head, and Dolores, who is exceptionally soft spoken, shouts. Again, Abuela attempts to employ the corrective process on behalf of her family members, saying that “everything is okay.” However, her attempts are not received positively this time, and the Guzmans quickly depart, with other villagers looking on with concern.

Mirabel and Abuela find themselves at odds with one another, as Abuela’s chief concern is maintaining the idealization of the Madrigal family, while Mirabel is focused on revealing her family’s backstage in an attempt to save the miracle, the house, and her family. This results in an argument between the two where Abuela accuses Mirabel of acting out of spite due to not receiving a gift, and Mirabel accuses Abuela of seeing Mirabel as a disappointment and for forcing an impossible idealized front onto her family members. Mirabel runs away, and when Abuela finally finds her, the two reconcile after Abuela admits that Mirabel was right in that she forced an idealized front onto her children and grandchildren in a desperate attempt to preserve

the miracle. Mirabel and Abuela's story arcs serve as a cautionary tale regarding idealization: constantly expecting oneself and others to live up to an idealized standard is unhealthy and detrimental to interpersonal relationships.

Pepa & Camilo

Pepa, Mirabel's aunt, and Camilo, Mirabel's cousin (Pepa's son), experience unique challenges maintaining face in the film due to the nature of their gifts. Pepa's gift is to control the weather, but her emotions also trigger volatile changes in the weather. This means that her backstage is always on full display to everyone around her; Pepa cannot put on a front or hide her emotions because the weather reveals her backstage feelings. When she gets upset talking to Mirabel about Bruno, a dark thunder cloud forms over her head and she says, "Great, now I am thundering" (Bush, Howard & Castro-Smith, 2021, 45:22). The song "We Don't Talk About Bruno" also tells the story of how Pepa's emotions on her wedding day caused a hurricane. Since Pepa cannot hide her feelings, she cannot engage in facework.

Pepa's son Camilo has the gift of shapeshifting, meaning that he is able to change his appearance to look like other people. Because of his gift, he often pretends to be other people; this presents a challenge in appearance as there are some scenes when people are talking with Camilo, thinking he is someone else. For example, Mirabel is talking with who she assumes to be her cousin Dolores about her concern about the loss of their family miracle, but Dolores is just staring at her, because it is not Dolores – it is Camilo. Felix, Camilo's father, then comes into the scene and scolds Camilo for taking his sister's form in an attempt to get more to eat. Camilo is, in effect, the opposite of his mother. While Pepa cannot put on a face because her backstage is always revealed, Camilo is never seen sharing his backstage because he is almost always putting

on some else's face. This has the same result: neither Pepa nor Camilo can properly engage in facework because of their gifts.

Pepa and Camilo's inability to use facework provides an interesting contrast to the rest of the Madrigal family. Because their gifts are always on display, they cannot achieve the idealization that Abuela seeks for her family. Pepa cannot engage in facework due to her gift, and although Camilo is essentially engaging in constant facework, he is not achieving idealization because he cannot be trusted to be genuine. Their storylines suggest something different from the other storylines in *Encanto*: that facework, front, and idealization serve important purposes. Just as an obsession with idealization causes problems for many of the other characters in the film, Pepa and Camilo suffer the effects of not being able to properly engage in facework. This suggests to viewers that facework is something to be used in moderation; it should not be used excessively or avoided altogether.

Bruno

Unlike Pepa and Camilo who cannot engage in facework, Bruno could engage in facework but refuses to do so. Bruno has the magical gift of having visions of the future. The controversial nature of Bruno's gift leads to him being ostracized; prior to the plot of the film, Bruno abandoned the family. In "The Family Madrigal," Mirabel introduces the absent Bruno by singing, "My Tio Bruno...they say he saw the future. One day he disappeared" (Bush, Howard & Castro-Smith, 2021, 5:59). Mirabel has a desire to learn more about what Bruno saw that made him leave when she learns that it may be related to her family losing their magical gifts. Mirabel pushes her family for more information in the song "We Don't Talk about Bruno." Through the song, various characters share their negative experiences with Bruno's predictions, including a hurricane on Pepa's wedding day, a fish dying, someone gaining weight, someone going bald,

and difficulties with Isabela's and Dolores' love lives. At the end of the song, Mirabel learns that she was at the center of the prophecy that triggered Bruno's disengagement with his family.

Dolores, whose gift is enhanced hearing, has a line in the song that notes the difficulties that Bruno had maintaining face while practicing his gift. She sings,

“It's a heavy lift, with a gift so humbling
Always left Abuela and the family fumbling
Grappling with prophecies they couldn't understand
Do you understand?” (Bush, Howard & Castro-Smith, 2021, 47:11)

As the plot evolves, viewers learn that Bruno never actually left his family but has been living inside the walls of Madrigal family's magical home, Casita. Bruno's physical retreat serves as a metaphor for the backstage; he refuses to engage with his family and community, and therefore lives only in the backstage, as there is no one for whom to put on a face.

Mirabel discovers where Bruno has been hiding and pleads with him for help understanding his prophecy concerning her. In their interactions, Bruno continues to resist engaging in facework, but, ironically, he utilizes front in his attempts at avoiding facework. Mirabel's and Bruno's entire conversation takes place in the space where Bruno has been hiding for a decade. His physical appearance is meant to be scary; when Mirabel first sees him, he is a hooded figure in the shadows with green eyes holding rats. Bruno's manner and personality are depicted as eccentric; he runs away from Mirabel when she first sees him and then continues to try to get her to leave throughout their interactions. He is superstitious, often jumping over cracks and tossing salt over his shoulder. He shares his mental health challenges with Mirabel as well, showing her how he engages in obsessive-compulsive behaviors and introducing Mirabel to two of his additional personalities, Hernando and Jorge. Though Bruno works to avoid putting on

a front, he nevertheless depicts a consistent front, as his appearance and manner reflect his isolated setting.

In their discussion, Bruno reflects on why he left after having a foreboding prophecy about Mirabel and the fate of the family's magic. He explains, "I knew how it was going to look. I know what everyone would think. Because I am Bruno and everyone always assumes the worst" (Bush, Howard & Castro-Smith, 2021, 59:43). Just as other members of the family were forced into maintaining an idealization, Bruno was forced into the role of family scapegoat. In this way, his storyline parallels Luisa's and Isabela's; all three characters were assumed to be nothing more than their gifts, and it was expected that their use of facework would reflect the roles they were assigned to play. Bruno's storyline differs from his nieces, however, in that he chose to disengage with the family and the community, isolating himself through his refusal to engage in facework.

This isolation likely contributed to Bruno's deterioration in mental health. Studies have shown that social isolation and loneliness can lead to mental and physical health problems (Fakoya, McCorry, & Donnelly, 2020; Lovell & Webber, 2024; Murthy, 2023; Trew et al., 2023). Trew et al. (2023) noted that this was particularly prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic during lockdowns, and that it disproportionately impacted certain communities. While Bruno's relationship with his family may have led to his initial choice to refuse to engage in facework and to isolate himself in the walls of Casita, it is likely that his self-isolation and lack of social interaction is what led to his declined state of mental health.

At the close of the film, Bruno comes out of hiding and rejoins his family. He initially resists engaging in facework again, telling his mother Abuela, "I don't care what you think of me" (Bush, Howard & Castro-Smith, 2021, 1:23:39). He is surprised when Abuela greets him

with affection. His interactions with his sisters Pepa and Julieta illustrate the corrective process: he apologizes directly to Pepa for upsetting her on her wedding day and then notes that he has a lot of apologies to say to other members of his family. However, Julieta brushes off his apology and embraces him, saying she is just happy to have him back. Bruno's attempts at the corrective process reinforce the message illustrated in Pepa's and Camilo's storylines: that facework in moderation can be a positive thing for relationships. The interaction between Bruno and his sisters notes a shift in the family as they move away from the unhealthy facework practices demonstrated by the family in the past.

Conclusion

Encanto provides viewers with a number of lessons regarding facework. Through Luisa's and Isabela's characters, viewers learn that consistently maintaining an idealized front can lead to exhaustion and frustration. Abuela's and Mirabel's storylines suggest that fixation on idealization is detrimental to one's interpersonal relationships. Through Pepa's and Camilo's inability to properly use facework and Bruno's refusal to engage in facework, viewers learn that putting on a face in certain situations has value. Bruno's and Abuela's character arcs, as well as Mirabel's relationship with Isabela, emphasize the importance of the corrective process and the value of forgiveness. When taken together, the lessons conveyed through *Encanto*'s characters highlight the importance of facework in moderation; facework can be useful in some situations and problematic in others, but ignoring one's backstage or avoiding engaging in facework altogether is detrimental to individuals' mental health and to their relationships with others.

It is important to note that *Encanto*'s primary audience is children. While children will likely not understand the nuanced messages regarding facework in the film, *Encanto* provides valuable messages in terms they can easily understand. The film teaches that it is important to

recognize one's own value and not to define oneself by a particular trait. It warns against trying to be perfect and against judging others without fully understanding their situations. It highlights the values of forgiveness and balance. These lessons connect to the more nuanced lessons regarding facework but are in terms that are easily understood by young viewers.

Additionally, *Encanto* may be used as a teaching tool in undergraduate communication classes, especially in classes focusing on communication theory or interpersonal communication. Undergraduate students, who often enjoy learning communication concepts through popular media, may recognize how idealization, front, backstage, and the corrective and avoidance processes are portrayed through the characters and storylines in *Encanto*. For this reason, instructors who teach facework in their courses may wish to incorporate *Encanto* into class exercises or perhaps as an assignment to help students apply the theory.

Like all studies, there are limitations to this study. Because we used rhetorical analysis as our research method, we focused only on the messages in *Encanto* and how those messages are conveyed, rather than audience response. Future studies may wish to utilize quantitative surveys or qualitative focus groups and interviews in order to better understand how viewers receive the messages concerning facework in *Encanto*. We also focused solely on one movie due to our method; future research may involve comparison studies of similar texts that may include messages about facework, such as Disney/Pixar's *Inside Out*.

Disney's *Encanto* provides its young viewers with important messages regarding facework, balance, self-care, and forgiveness. Through the many members of the Madrigal family, viewers can learn about the detrimental effects of fixation on idealization as well as problems that arise from refusing to engage in facework. By recognizing the lessons in *Encanto* and connecting them with Goffman's theory of facework, viewers are assured that, as Mirabel

sings in the final number of the film, they are “more than just [their] gift” (Bush, Howard & Castro-Smith, 2021, 1:25:39).

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Appendix A

Madrigal Family Tree

