

Out-group Characters Depicted in American Musical Films: Take the Film The Greatest Showman as an Example

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Abstract: *The Greatest Showman*, a 2017 film directed by Michael Gracey, focuses on the first circus in history, its founder, and its members under the background of The Great Depression. Therefore, this paper primarily examines the dialogue and lyrics in the film, and how these elements help to portray the out-group characters and describe what they have gone through. The data source of this research is *The Greatest Showman (2017)*, which includes scripts, dialogues, and lyrics from the film soundtrack. Based on the content of the film, the authors carefully read the script credits and the soundtrack, subsequently selecting data relevant to the research topic and consulting secondary sources (research articles and audience reviews). By recording and analyzing relevant data, this paper relates them to the mechanisms of social identity theory. The paper finds that the film uses monologues, dialogues and title tracks to reflect the positions and emotions of out-group individuals, all of whom are discriminated against because of who they are, all of whom have good character traits, and all of whom dare to change the status quo, build shelters for themselves and ultimately take pride in their uniqueness and accept their out-group identity.

Keywords: Musical Film, Out-group, Identity, *The Greatest Showman*, Social Identity Theory

1. Introduction

As the nominee for the 2017 Academy Awards, the musical film *The Greatest Showman* not only succeeds in its musical elements, but more importantly, it tells an uplifting and touching story. In the story, several out-group individuals are depicted, who, due to unavoidable factors, become outsiders in the society and face severe discrimination and injustice. Fortunately, they are protected by the Barnum Circus to showcase their talents and always have the courage to change their situation. As social identity theory represents how society filters out-group individuals, this paper aims to explore the portrayal of out-group individuals in the film by applying social identity theory to explain the thoughts and behaviours of the characters in the film. In addition, the paper outlines the situation and character traits of these individuals and uses the dialogue and lyrics from the film as reference.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is the work of Henri Tajfel [1]. Individuals derive a portion of their self-concept from their membership in social groups. The main aim of SIT is to understand and explain how people can come to adopt and behave in terms of such social (rather than personal) identities [1]. The Social Identity Theory explains the cognitive processes underlying intergroup behaviors.

2.2. The Mechanism of Social Identity Theory

Social categorization refers to the process by which people identify which social group they belong to based on external or internal criteria [2]. Typically, the criteria include social classes, genders and races, jobs, and character traits. As a result of their membership, individuals adopt the norms and characteristics of the group and change their behaviour to some extent [2]. This process refers to social identification. By engaging in social comparison, individuals justify their group memberships. They seek to achieve self-esteem by positively comparing an in-group to an out-group on some valued dimension to achieve positive distinctiveness.

2.3. Out-group Individuals

Correspondingly, out-group individuals are those who fail to identify their groups, adopt the norms, or justify their membership. As a result, they are not psychologically identified as members of the social group. A direct relationship between intense in-group favoritism and out-group antagonism might divide society into segments, giving rise to negative attitudes toward outgroups and a high potential for conflict [3].

3. Findings and Analysis

P.T. Barnum (Hugh Jackman) is an ambitious man. Having experienced early life poverty, Barnum was driven by a voracious appetite for wealth. He worked assiduously to improve the lives of his family and to become a member of the elite social class of 1840s New York [4].

3.1. Social Categorization

At the beginning of the film, Barnum's father, a town tailor, took young Barnum to the home of a nobleman. As young Barnum looked at his torn shoes, his father told him to “stand up straight and wipe the muck off [5],” a scene that illustrates how poor the Barnum family is through action design and lines. By indicating the family's economic conditions, the film tells the audiences that Barnum and his father categorized themselves as the social group of poor, through the process of social categorization based on internal criteria. They acknowledged the difference between them and the noble family, where they wanted to reduce their gaps by organizing their meters.

In the noble's house, young Barnum mimicked the noble's daughter Charity in how she drinks tea. This amused Charity and provoked the noble, who slapped Barnum on the face and told him to “stay away from my daughter [5].” Inside the nobleman's house, young Barnum imitated the nobleman's daughter, Charity, drinking tea, amusing Charity and enraging the nobleman, who slapped Barnum and told him to “stay away from my daughter [5].” This reflects that the nobles sorted the Barnums as people with low incomes. His words and actions become the external standard, emphasising their disparity and his disrespect. This attitude was transmitted to the Barnum family, cementing young Barnum's social identity as a member of a poor group.

3.2. Social identifications

Starting the circus, Barnum made a lot of money and quickly positioned himself as a member of the nobility. He adopted his own ways of behaving to gain respect and recognition, such as when he bought a new house on the estate and encouraged his daughter to study ballet, like those families used to dream about. These show that Barnum adopts the standard of living of an aristocrat. He lived in a large house and allowed his children to receive an advanced education in the arts. This suggests that he is going through a process of self-identification and that he caters to the aristocracy to gain respect and adoption.

In an attempt to make his circus more “elegant,” Barnum invited the young noble actor Philip Carlyle to join his circus. Philip rejected his invitation at first as Barnum made his non-group identity known in the theme song, *The Other Side*:

*But I live among the swells, we don't pick up peanut shells.
I'll have to leave that up to you.*

...

*If I would mix up with you, I'll be the talk of the town.
Disgraced and disowned, another one of the clowns [5].*

Philip, who represents the nobility group, began the self-identification stage by dismissing Barnum's endeavors because they were born into different social statuses. Being a part of the circus means that Philip must give up his social status as an aristocrat, which contradicts his self-identification as a noble and puts him in the position of an “out-group.”

3.3. Other Out-group Individuals

3.3.1. Disrespect and exclusion

When the circus was founded, a critic called the circus “a primitive circus of Humbug [5],” and people treated the circus members as freaks:

The crowd: (grappling with the members) You want to protect that bearded lady? We don't want you. Get out of here [5].

The crowd addressed physical and verbal aggression toward the circus members to repel them, mainly because of the members' unique appearances and the fact that their performing arts did not fit into the dominant social aesthetics. They did this to emphasise their social norms and the marginalised status of circus members as individuals outside the group. Meanwhile, Anne Wheeler fell in love with the actor Philip Carlyle. On a date, they coincidentally meet Philip's parents, who directly assaulted Anne on her race by calling her a maid.

Anne Wheeler was a representative of Latino immigrants at that time. Due to racial discrimination, they feared detention and deportation[6] and therefore tended to avoid interacting with the authorities. As a miniature of those immigrants' positions, this is a direct indication of the arrogant behavior of the upper class and the helplessness these Latino immigrants felt.

Anne expressed her discontentment and hopelessness in the song *Rewrite the Stars*:

*You think it's easy. You think I don't want to run to you.
But there are mountains,
And there are doors that we can't walk through.*

The lyrics employ metaphors, with the mountain as an obstacle and the door as a barrier to bring the two people together [7]. As Anne's monologue, it conveys her despair that their love would be blocked by “mountains” and “doors” of racial discrimination and different group identities. She didn't have the right to stand equally beside her lover because of her identity as an out-group individual in this white society.

3.3.2. The courage to make changes

As the story progresses, Barnum invited the “Swedish Nightingale” Jenny Lynd and planned a tour. People started to change their opinions toward him. At the dinner, Barnum refused the circus members to join him on the grounds of inappropriateness. Letty Ruiz (the Bearded Lady) led the other members into the dinner and expressed their thoughts and feelings with a song *This Is Me*:

*When the sharpest words wanna cut me down,
I'm gonna send a flood, gonna drown them out.
I am brave, I am bruised, I am who I meant to be,*

*...
I'm not scared, to be seen, I make no apologies,
This is me [5].*

The lyricist uses personification, in which the “sharpest words” are given human qualities [7]. With an uplifting melody, Letty encouraged the other circus members to break the status quo as outsiders, which means ignoring the attacks of others and courageously fighting back against the voices of exclusion. This declarative monologue, accompanied by rhythmic dance, shows the group’s courage to respond to discrimination in mainstream society.

3.3.3. The image of “dream”

Upon learning that Charity felt her uncertainty about her future in that she was to attend a boarding school, Barnum led her to an abandoned manor, where he encouraged her to ignore the negative emotions she was experiencing by presenting her with his idealized, imaginary world, as depicted in the song. *A Million Dreams*:

*Cause every night I lay in bed,
The brightest colors filled my head,
A million dreams are keeping me awake.
I think of what the world could be,
A vision of the one I see,
A million dreams is all it's gonna take [5].*

Young Barnum described his dream future and made promises to Charity, and this is why the whole story began; Meanwhile, he showed that despite being a disrespected out-group character from the perspective of nobility, he still had the precious characteristics of being hopeful and being able to make dreams and fight for them.

When Barnum invited those “outsiders” to his show, he sang the song, *Come Alive*, tell people that he could provide a place for these outsiders to “redefine” themselves:

*When the world becomes a fantasy,
And you're more than you could ever be,
Cause you're dreaming with your eyes wide open [5].
Meanwhile, in the title song *The Greatest Show*,
It's everything you ever want,
It's everything you ever need,
and it's here right in front of you.
This is where you wanna be [5].*

Barnum described his circus as a shelter for those outsiders to realize their dreams, to protect them from aggression and discrimination. He was convincing the “out-group” members to have the courage to show their talents in front of the “in-group” people, who are members of the mainstream society.

When the big fire ruined the circus, all their efforts to build their shelter turned into dust and ashes. Barnum couldn’t recover from the setback. The members came to the pub and enlightened Barnum:

Lettie Letz: Our mothers were ashamed of us. Hid us our whole lives. Then you pull us out of the shadows, and now you're giving up on us too. Maybe you are a fraud. Maybe it was just about making a buck. But you gave us a real family [5].

In this dialogue, the circus members expressed their gratitude for the warmth they received from the circus family. Barnum succeeded in making his dream come true. He truly made the circus “a vision of the world [he] sees,” which is an actual shelter and a warm home for those members who were defined as out-group members of society to feel free and caring.

4. Conclusion

As a musical film, *The Greatest Showman* was successful in its touching melodies, diverse choreography, and stunning special effects. Most importantly, the story introduces a world of outsiders and sets the audience thinking. Through psychological mechanisms, they were identified as outside members of mainstream society because of their family backgrounds, races, appearances, etc. They made an effort to join the mainstream by adopting their behaviors or hiding behind the stage curtain, where they could escape from aggression and discrimination. In those lyrics, dialogues, and monologues, audiences can recognize the Social Identity processes these out-group individuals were undergoing. Meanwhile, audiences can feel their courage and power to fight against the dissenting voices and aggression, and also, the warmth of the circus as an idealized second home that fully accepted them. This research focuses mainly on qualitative data from past research and the film itself. Camera language and music property were not analyzed in this research. Future research about the film may delve into how the lyrics in title songs express emotions and attitudes from a literary perspective.

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