

## “Who Says”: How Selena Gomez and The Scene Attempt to Subvert The Popular Standards of Beauty

In 2006, the National Bullying Prevention Month campaign was established in the United States by PACER (Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights) Center’s National Bullying Prevention Center. PACER, an organization which aims to help children and teens with disabilities and their families, has recently expanded to incorporate the National Bullying Prevention Center for all youths suffering bullying in schools and elsewhere. This was one of the first major movements to prevent bullying in children and teens. Following this event, additional campaigns like STOMP Out Bullying and Disney’s “Choose Kindness” in 2014 have continued to increase awareness and prevention of bullying, as well as to expand the fight against gender and sexuality prejudices and encourage belief of self-worth in children and teens. The campaigns released public service announcements and lead to various sub campaigns, such as STOMP Out Bullying’s Blue Shirt (for Bullying Prevention) Day which encourages individuals to wear blue on a particular day in October to show support for anti-bullying movements.

Because the target audiences for such campaigns included children and teenagers, organizations have also made other rhetorical attempts such as using popular music. Around 2007 or so, Disney started releasing commercials and music videos starring popular Disney celebrities like Selena Gomez, Demi Lovato, Jonas Brothers and more about various social campaigns like the Pass the Plate/ Magic of Healthy Living, green initiative and anti-bullying. The music video of “Who Says” by Selena Gomez & The Scene (2009) exemplifies such a rhetorical act as it supports the anti-bullying campaigns by advocating the value of inner-beauty over the more

popular standards of physical beauty. In this paper, I will analyze “Who Says” as a visual artifact to explore its rhetorical value for subverting the popular standards of beauty—and thereby standing up against bullying in its various forms (e.g., body-shaming as bullying).

Rhetoric refers to the use of symbols to communicate and often persuade or influence the thoughts and/or behaviors of an audience. This definition goes back Aristotle’s view of rhetoric as discovering all available means of persuasion in any given situation. Scholars such as Roland Barthes and Keith Kenney have recently elaborated this classical definition by examining how it applies to visuals. In order to analyze the visual rhetoric expressed in the music video of “Who Says,” I will first build on Barthes’s perspectives in his work, “Rhetoric of the Image,” with a particular focus on his notions of the *linguistic*, *coded-iconic*, and *non-coded iconic* messages. Put simply, the *linguistic messages* are verbal messages which accompany pictorial messages; the *coded-iconic* or *denoted* messages are the visual components explicitly expressed in a visual artifact; and the *non-coded iconic* or *connoted* messages are the meanings and associations audiences can draw from the denoted aspects (Barthes). These notions help examine the rhetoricity of the visual elements related to fashion and body, location, and signs as they are used in the video under analysis. After analyzing the linguistic, coded-iconic, and non-coded iconic elements in the video, I will also apply Kenney’s ideas in “Building Visual Communication Theory by Borrowing from Rhetoric,” on how visuals can form arguments in order to discuss whether the video “Who Says” may be considered a visual argument for the anti-bullying/inner-beauty social awareness campaigns. The rhetorical perspectives used for this analysis help us better understand how some of the visuals prevalent in “Who Says” construct the video’s visual-rhetorical value and contribute to the plight of anti-bullying campaigns.

### Rhetoric of Fashion and Body

At the beginning of the music video, “Who Says”, Selena Gomez is outfitted in a black designer dress, jewelry, and bedazzled high

heels with makeup on and her hair stylishly pinned up (Figure 1a). Fittingly, the singer is in the midst of a photoshoot, with photographers and other members of the

video crew directing her poses for the pictures. As the video continues, Selena’s posture and expression show frustration and awkwardness. Considering the music video as a rhetorical artifact, it is possible

to apply Barthes’ messages to observe rhetorical implications of the images in these frames.

Although linguistic message is carried through the entirety of the video in the form of lyrics, I will disregard the song lyrics in order to focus on the visual aspects of this artifact. This initial scene provides many connotations, but principally, the outfit and accessories fit American society’s standards of beauty – this wardrobe is very similar to what celebrities and models wear to events and for magazine spreads – and as such elevate the attire into a symbol for conventional beauty.

a.



b.



c.



Later in the video, the singer tosses the jewelry adorning her aside and removes her heels to run out of the posh studio and on to the city streets to escape the situation. The fact that she physically throws the jewelry aside, instead of just removing and handing it off to someone, and that she then completely flees the studio suggest both a literal and a symbolic rejection of the situation. Selena will not subject herself to the standards imposed upon her any longer.

The video continues with Selena walking barefoot through the streets of a typical downtown area, observing street signs (Figure 1b). Eventually, her wardrobe transitions fully as she replaces the designer dress with casual summer clothes of jean shorts and a tank top with sneakers, while actively wiping off the remnants of cosmetics from the photoshoot – wiping away the conventionality to present herself unconcealed and beautiful for it (Figure 1c and 1d). Although one might argue that Selena’s choice of casual clothing also fits into social standards, in that the style of the jean shorts with pockets peeking out the bottom and the top were fairly conventional for teenage girls, this conventionality still supports the overall theme. The casual outfit is more symbolic of trying to associate Selena herself as just another teen girl – instead of a rich and attractive celebrity – so her intended

message can better reach the audience. It is comparative to having a parent instruct a child not to do something, versus a peer instructing a child not to do something; children and young adults are more likely to listen to and believe a peer about how the world works, especially with regard to

**d.**



*Figure 1.* From top to bottom, images occur in chronological order in the video (SelenaGomezVEVO).

concepts like *beauty* which are highly subjective and can change with each generation.

### **Rhetoric of Location**

Just like with fashion, this music video also demonstrates a rhetoric of location. Just as Selena moves through the video, transitioning from the image conformity of the beginning to the freedom and acceptance of inner-beauty at the end, transitions of location parallel the argument.

As previously mentioned, Selena starts at a high-end studio in the midst of a professional photoshoot. The room's interior is very sleek and modern and is lit by artificial lights. It very clearly associates with the high-end, celebrity scene – with popular media which is a fundamental basis for defining standards of beauty. After all, societies develop certain images as *beautiful*, because they are particular standards that reoccur in social media. A well-observed example is how American favoritism of skinny young women with flat bellies as models in magazines such as *Seventeen* or *Vogue* has propagated the idea that girls who are thinner, with more lithe physiques are lovelier than larger-sized young women. Thus, this opening location combined with Selena's outfit acts as a symbol for society and socially-defined beauty.

Of course, Selena flees this situation yet again and begins to meander down streets of some ubiquitous downtown area – with old brick storefronts and cracked, stained sidewalks. And, continuing on, she makes her way to a graffiti-ed, industrial zone of the town. Basically, the location transitions farther and farther from the aesthetic locations – emphasizing just how far Selena is going away, literally and metaphorically, from social demands. All the while, Selena become progressively happier, bouncing steps and smiling more—despite the environment's crudity.

In a stark contrast, after Selena changes her clothes, she then moves to a waterfront. At first, it appears counter-intuitive as previously she was withdrawing from attractive locale. However, this final beach scene actually juxtaposes the opening scene entirely: Instead of high-end fashion, she is dressed casually; instead of bustling photographers, she is surrounded by peers similarly, casually dressed; instead of a modern interior, she is outside; instead of conventional beauty, she surrounds herself with the naturally occurring and nonconforming beauty of the earth.

### **Rhetoric of Signs – A Fusion of Linguistic and Pictorial Messages**

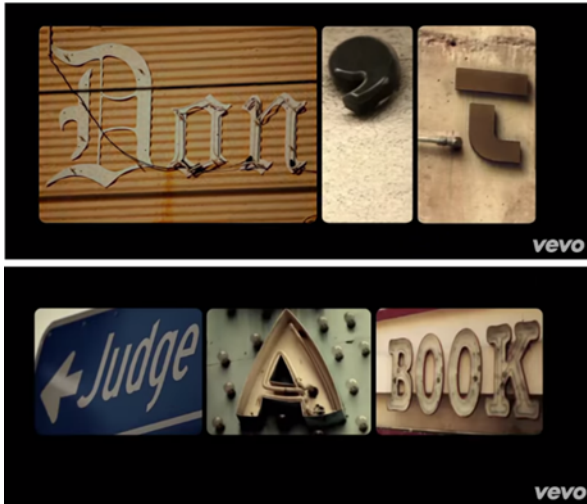
A purpose of the linguistic message, as Barthes describes, is to deepen the overall meaning of something, such as comic strips and videos. Here, the signs relay words and phrases to repeat Selena's lyrics and/or emphasize idioms like "True beauty lies beneath the surface" and "don't judge a book" as well as just "beauty queen" (Figure 2; Figure 3). What is more unique, however, is how these linguistic messages are presented, and the connotations it derives.

Rather than just showing a line of text, or even just allowing the lyrics to provide any verbal message, the video uses cuts and fragments of road and business signs, compiled together into a collage of letters, which observed together relate the words and phrases. For instance, one verbal collage uses nine different building and road signs to write out, “True beauty lies beneath



Figure 2. Above is an example of a sign-collage message from the video, writing out “true beauty lies beneath the surface” (SelenaGomezVEVO).

a. below



b. below



Figure 3. Above are two more examples of sign-collages from the video (SelenaGomezVEVO). A) This collage writes out “don’t judge a book.” B) This collage writes out “beauty queen.”

the surface” (Figure 2). The typefaces and sizes are different and many of the pieces are worn or old – the first part spelling “true” is dirty and missing half the “r” – which is not necessarily aesthetically pleasing. And yet, this pictorial message makes the argument more poignant. The signs are ubiquitous visuals Americans can see every day; they are not intentionally pretty and each is unique. One association the audience might thus make is that the signs are like people in that they do not necessarily follow current social standards of what is attractive, and yet they still have personality, and uniqueness, and a natural inner-beauty that is outside of social norms. The use of the street signs for the verbal message that “true beauty lies beneath the surface” makes it much more evocative because of this connotation. Additionally, signs by basic nature direct or command people – they relate what a building is, what the street is, where you can get gas or food, how fast to drive, and so on. This imperative nature thus leaks into the connoted message – dictating that you should observe the messages to be true such that the audience should believe that true beauty really does lie beneath the surface.

### **The Possibility of an Argument**



Kenney suggests that visuals “can be said to persuade by argument when we [the audience] have the ability to choose” and that, to be an argument, visuals must also do three things. Firstly, the visuals must “provide reasons for choosing one way or another”; secondly, the visuals must “counter other arguments”; and lastly, the visuals must “cause us [the audience] to change our beliefs or to act” (Kenny 58). By this standard, is “Who Says” a visual argument?

Based on my analysis drawing upon Aristotle’s classical definition of rhetoric as well as Barthes’s and Kenney’s ideas about visual rhetoric, “Who Says” appears to have both communicative and persuasive functions. According to Kenney’s first requirement for an argument, there are two choices blatantly offered in the music video under analysis: the choice to conform to social standards of beauty or the choice to disregard such norms and to instead believe that all people naturally have a form of inner beauty. The video appears to favor the latter choice, of inner beauty, by countering the social argument for conventional beauty. From the beginning of the video, the main premise is that “conforming to American society’s ideas of beauty is stressful and uncomfortable” – e.g., the earlier discussed situation where Selena is conforming to the media in her designer outfit and cosmetics, but shows obvious discomfort through her awkward body language, tossing of the jewelry to the floor and deciding to escape the photoshoot. The counter to this social conformity is thus when Selena rejects the ensemble and its social implications by changing into casual clothing, after which she is visually happier and more relaxed – smiling and joining peers to celebrate on a beachfront – thus providing the premise that “it is better to dress freely (without worrying over social image beliefs) and be happy, than to conform and be pretty, but unhappy.” Hence, the music video, “Who Says” attempts to successfully influence the audience by urging them into accepting the belief that beauty is not skin-deep; it is not socially defined. Beauty, instead, is internal and ubiquitous.

**Works Cited:**

Aristotle. *Rhetoric*. Trans. Edward Meredith Cope. 1877. Ed. John Doe. New York:

Philosopher's Attic Press, 2010. Print.

Barthes, Roland. *Rhetoric of the Image*. N.p.: n.p., 1993. Print.

Kenney, Keith. "Building Visual Communication Theory by Borrowing from Rhetoric." *Journal or Visual Literacy* 22.1 (2002): 55-80. Print.

PACER Center. "History and Impact." *PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center*. PACER Center, Inc., n.d. Web. 19 Oct. 2015.

SelenaGomezVEVO. "Selena Gomez & The Scene - Who Says." Online video clip.

YouTube. YouTube, 4 March 2011. Web. 19 Oct. 2015.