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Analysis of Billie Eilish’s 2021 Vogue Cover as A Rhetorical Situation

Billie Eilish is a relatively new and young singer who has found world-wide success through her melodic, breathy, and heartfelt sound. She sings of themes such as isolation, rejection, anger, and pride. Whether someone hears her voice on the radio, over the speakers in a supermarket, or in person, her sound is recognizable to the masses. As is her image. Ever since Eilish began her rise in fame she has maintained a notably androgenous and individual style of dress and presentation. That is until recently when she posed for the cover of the 2021 cover of Vogue. Billie Eilish used the cover of Vogue magazine as a platform for her to defiantly promote her message of self-acceptance to her fans after she received intense scrutiny about her body by the media and public at large.

Pre-Vogue cover shoot, Eilish could be found in oversized monochrome outfits and with her iconic acid-green rooted hair. Her style was bold and drew eyes with its interesting use of colors and manipulations of sizes. This style allowed her to keenly side-step the extremely prevalent sexualization of young female celebrities promoted by the media and paparazzi. Instead of the story being about what she looked like under the clothes, the story was about the clothes and her sound. This was partially important because Eilish started her career at the young age of sixteen with her debut album *When We All Sleep, Where Do We Go?* which she wrote
and produced with her brother from her bedroom. She was just a normal girl with an amazing voice. A voice that gained her an immense amount of fame and recognition in a very small amount of time. The oversized clothes and bold colors worked as a buffer for much of the shaming and scrutiny that came with her sudden fame. Unfortunately, this buffer could not last forever and on October 11th, 2020, the media and public finally got what they wanted when a photograph was taken of the then 18-year-old in a tank-top and shorts on a hot day in Los Angeles. The public’s response over social media and countless stories can be summed up with one statement, that she had gotten fat.

Eilish’s 2021 Vogue cover is her response to the criticism. The cover is a response to a ‘rhetorical situation’. A rhetorical situation is defined as “a natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance” (Bitzer 4). Essentially, a rhetorical situation is made through the existence of an immediate issue or circumstance that necessitates a response or action. The situation can be divided into three separate but intertwined parts: the exigence, the audience, and the constraints.

The exigence can be understood to be the issue or dilemma that requires immediate attention. In the case of the Vogue cover, the exigence was that after several years of avoiding the commentary and judgement of the press regarding her body, Eilish was suddenly receiving immense amounts of body-shaming which was in turn infiltrating her primarily young female fan-base and was causing them pain. An article in Healthy Weight Journal entitled “Body Shame: The
Shaming of Women” states “Women's bodies are supposed to maintain our culture's delusion of eternal youth and control, our denial of our animality and our mortality” (Sheinin). Eilish began her music career at 16 years-old and at the time of the tank-top photo being taken she was 18 years-old. She had aged, grown, and matured. She was a young adult at the time of the photo and more than that she was running to her car to grab something. She was not posing for a photo-op or attempting to look presentable. She was existing and going about her life without the glitz and the glamour of a stage or a stylist. She was being normal. And for that her young fans were treated to seeing her shamed and dragged. For many who are her size or larger it was a startling reminder that they are expected to feel ashamed of their bodies. Many young impressionable and insecure girls saw themselves reflected in the Eilish and felt the sting of her bullying just as deep as her. As Jill Locke writes, “Rather than focus on changing the world in ways that might lessen [the] shame, the shamed… focuses on changing [themselves] so that they might accommodate the demands of [their] milieu” (Shame and the Future of Feminism, 151). Many young girls are incredibly absorbent of negative feedback, especially about their bodies. This can lead to a dangerous need for validation and approval, effectively handing over the reins of their self-approval to someone else.

However, Eilish continued inspiring her young fans and did not take the abuse from her shammers lying down. Her bold Vogue cover is a blatant affront to those that would tell her or her
fans to be ashamed of their bodies. She poses in a seductively tight and sheer body-con outfit, accentuating her curves and proudly displaying her fully matured body. Eilish herself is quoted at the bottom of the page as saying “It’s all about what makes you feel good”. The quote speaks directly to both the exigence and her audience. The quote in white stands in stark contrast to the mauve background and only further enforces the look of defiance which can be seen on Eilish’s face just above.

The audience in a rhetorical situation consists of those to whom the message and exigence effects who can enact some sort of action or change in response. In this case the audience are all those who are aware of who Billie Eilish is, how she previously styled her appearance, and those that know about the situation and resulting shaming involving the tank-top photo. Those that fall into all three categories regardless of whether they are fans, critics or somewhere in between regarding her music, can have an informed and productive opinion on the Vogue cover. They are also capable of changing the narrative and spreading her positive message to the other groups to which they belong. In “Billie Eilish is not just for Gen Z” Raisa Bruner writes: “[Eilish’s] refusal to conform makes her a voice of a generation that desires authenticity above all” (54). The article was written in 2019 when Eilish was just 17 years-old and not yet a well-known artist. Eilish has been representing her authentic self since the very beginning, drawing people into her music and being a role-model. Eilish’s devoted fans take comfort in her not shying away from the darker aspects of young life now-a-days such as depression, anxiety, and other forms of mental-health struggles in her music. They feel seen and understood and her Vogue cover bolsters this feeling.

The constraints are the obstacles which limit a particular medium or method of conveying information. In the case of Billie Eilish’s June 2021 Vogue cover there are several constraints. There is the fact that Vogue is a fashion magazine which means that their photos are likely edited,
she has been told how to pose, and the photo on the cover is probably one of hundreds which were taken during the shoot. The photo was likely picked because it looked editorial and not because it was the most candid. All of this could affect the perceived authenticity of Eilish’s body positive message. Another constraint that may limit the reach of Eilish’s message is the fact that she cannot control who sees the cover and ensure they understand the situation or exigence. They may only be seeing the cover of the magazine and possibly not read the corresponding article inside to get context for either the quote on the front or the reason for the photoshoot. There are also the constraints that come from choosing Vogue as the platform for her message as they are well-known but are typically believed to be an elitist magazine. Though this could also be understood as an affordance as it could add more gravity and stardom to the new look which she is using to convey her message. Another constraint is the possibility that viewers of the Vogue cover may see the cover of as her giving into Hollywood’s sexualization of young female artists. However, this idea can be discredited by the quote from Eilish under her image on the cover. She says, “‘It’s all about what makes you feel good’”. This implies she made the choice to dress provocatively. She says ‘it’s all about…’ which implies the clothes are means of communicating a message and not an effort to assimilate. Finally, there is a more cynical way the cover may be misconstrued which is a constraint. There is the risk of someone believing the entire shoot and photo is a ploy or business tactic to remarket herself after a photo which was deemed undesirable by the public was published. Whether or not this final constraint is true or not, the way that a person understands the purpose behind a message or display greatly affects the success of the message.

Overall, I do believe that the Vogue cover was rhetorically successful. Eilish uses her celebrity status, the platform of Vogue, shock-factor and the deviation from her previous style and presentation to embolden and inspire her young fans to not be ashamed of their bodies. Her quote
on the cover speaks directly to her critics and those that would shame her. Eilish successfully conveys her message of self-acceptance and an unwillingness to change regardless of shame to all members of her audience, fan and shamer alike. There are many constraints which the cover could face which may dilute or impede the message of the photo. However, regardless of whether the cover was able to help hundreds of young and self-conscious people or just one, the importance and necessity of the message remains.
WORK CITED:


Photos:

