

## **A Multimodal Analysis on Rick Singer from *Operation Varsity Blues: The College Admissions Scandal***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Multimodal communication employs multiple semiotic modes to convey meaning. *Operation Varsity Blues: The College Admissions Scandal* is a documentary about Rick Singer, an education entrepreneur who committed the bribes. This study analyzed his representation through the oral and visual modes and was aimed at showing how multimodality could help reveal particular character representations. This study applies multimodal theory (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006) and semiotic modes (Chia & Chan, 2017). The oral monologues and dialogues, and the visuals of people, objects, and places were scrutinized to observe how Rick Singer was depicted. As a result, he was seen being portrayed as a wealthy and successful entrepreneur with many high-ranking connections, who strategically manipulated his clients and his university partners in a clever scheming maneuver. The interplay of both the oral and visual modes has resulted in a relatively complete picture of the main actor of this documentary.

**Keywords:** crime documentary, multimodality, oral mode, representation, visual mode.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Multimodality takes an essential role in this study in revealing a representation of a personal character. As Kress and Leeuwen (2006) described, multimodality played a significant role in language because it combined multiple semiotic modes, such as images, graphics, colors, proximity, gestures, pitch, and volume. In addition, Bull and Anstey (2019) explained that multimodality is essential to understand since new technologies produce a variety of new communications forcing the development of a new meaning-making system.

The data of this research is a documentary which can be understood as a film about real life that claims truthfulness (Aufderheide, 2007). There are seven types of documentaries identified by Nichols (2017), namely, a poetic mode, an expository mode, an observational mode, a participatory mode, a reflexive mode, a performative mode, and an interactive mode. The documentary analyzed in this study, *Operation Varsity Blues: The College Admissions Scandal* can be classified as a reenactment categorized as participatory and reflexive modes. According to Bruzzi (2019), *reenactment* can be defined as the representation and repetition of past actions.

The documentary being studied in this research is *Operation Varsity Blues: College Admission Scandal* (furtherance, OVB). It is a documentary about a successful and affluent entrepreneur who was involved in education or known as an educational agent. Rick Singer has almost twenty years of experience as an education agent who typically prepared these pupils before they entered college. However, Rick Singer acted illegally in his business, i.e., carrying out a bribery plot against his customer's desired institution. However, his scam was exposed and made public in 2018, resulting in his conviction. In 2023, it was known that Rick Singer had been convicted of violations and sentenced to three and a half years in prison.

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Further, this documentary is directed by Chris Smith and written by Jon Karmen (IMDb, 2021). *OVB* is labeled as a reenactment since the documentary is based on real incidents of educational bribery cases in America conducted by Rick Singer, the perpetrator, played by actor, Matthew Modine. Besides, only some scenes are a recreation of an actual event, such as when Rick Singer was talking on the phone with Augustin Huneus. On the other hand, some scenes are inspired by actual events, such as Rick Singer's custody.

A documentary is used as the object of this study because it presents reality in various ways and is created for various purposes. Documentaries are never separated from spreading information, education, and propaganda for specific people or groups. Documentaries also present objective facts with essential values, implying that they relate to real-life events. *OVB* was selected since it was based on a shocking scandal. *OVB* exposes the harsh truth of today's reality. According to Goldberg (2021), *OVB* is more than just about wealthy families buying college admissions. This documentary also highlights that many universities maintain close ties with the wealthy elite.

The primary focus of this study is Rick Singer's character. There are two reasons why Rick Singer is the main object of this study. First, the writer chose Rick Singer instead of the FBI, parents, or the University staff because he was the mastermind behind this bribery scheme. Second, the writer was interested in Rick Singer's representation as the main character in the *OVB* documentary. A representation can be constructed through several semiotic modes. According to Chia and Chan (2017), there are six types of semiotic modes: linguistic, audio, spatial, oral, visual, and gestural. The representation of Rick Singer's character was analyzed through the oral and visual modes, as these two are the most relevant for analyzing a film or a documentary.

## **METHOD**

The researchers' source of data is based on a documentary called *Operation Varsity Blues: The College Admissions Scandal*. The researchers collected the data by transcribing the monologues and dialogues, and documenting the visuals. After getting done with the data collection, the data would be categorized into oral and visual modes using Chia and Chan's modes theory (2017). Oral mode included the monologue and dialogue. Then, the visual mode included the people, objects, and places that related to Rick Singer. Further, the researchers analyzed the data by applying the theories of semiotic mode by Chia and Chan (2017), after getting the representation of Rick Singer from oral and visual modes, later, the writer figured out the interplay between the two modes.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Based on the documentary *Operation Varsity Blues: The College Admissions Scandal*, this chapter presents findings and discussion showing Rick Singer is represented through oral and visual modes.

### **The representation of Rick Singer Through the Oral Mode**

The documentary consisted of 101 incidents of monologues and dialogues that showed the representation of Rick Singer. From 101 incidents, it can be categorized that Rick Singer was represented or constructed as a character as a successful entrepreneur with high class

connections and highly effective scheming strategies. In particular, table 4.1 lists the characteristics obtained from the analysis of oral mode. The number in the brackets describes how many times the incident occurred.

Table 1  
Rick Singer's Representation from Oral Modes

No.	Characteristics
1.	Strategic: mastermind, planner, and tactician (7)
2.	Scheming: Cunning (5), manipulative, and liar (4)
3.	Well connected (7)
4.	Experience entrepreneur: Communicator (7), professional (2), workaholic (2), and rich (1).
5.	Desertion: Rats abandon a sinking ship (1)
6.	Unrepentant: Nonchalant and remorseless (1)
7.	Minor Characteristics: Confident (3), Influencing (2), Certain (1), Dedicated (1), Energetic (1), boastful (1), High-driven (1), linchpin (1), Pushy (1), and Secretive (1).

According to the table, RS has been portrayed as a wealthy entrepreneur with excellent communication skills, which he used to fool his upper-class clients and organize schemes with university employees. In addition, Rick Singer is shown as a well-connected and manipulative businessman. It also has some minor character portrayals. As a result, this part will focus on Rick Singer's dominating portrayal, which is well-connected and manipulative.

### Well-connected

As an educational agent, he must have broad connections with university staff and deep connections with the universities.

JV: "What I thought was interesting is that I was expecting him to text me or call me when he got to Stanford. Because **Stanford has... It's very secure. You have to have a keycard to kind of swipe in and out of every door. And somehow he just showed up at my door.** I was shocked by that, but it definitely told me **he had connection with Stanford deeper than myself**"  
(1:15:01 - 1:14:24)

The data above represented Rick Singer as an individual with many deep connections with many universities' higher-ups. For instance, data 1 showed Rick Singer not just had a connection with the sailing coach from Stanford, but he also had access to go inside Stanford's office.

### Manipulative

Rick Singer is represented as a manipulative individual and liar. He deceived and lied to the parents of these pupils in order to use his assistance as an educational agent.

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JP: “Rick Singer was skilled at leveraging off people. He had sixth sense to exploit and find vulnerabilities of people he was working with. From my understanding in the

Felicity Huffman case, **he told Felicity, “Your daughter’s scores aren’t good enough to get into this school” Turns out that was made up, false.**

**The daughter would’ve gotten in regardless. It’s identifying those pain points. Felicity can begin to rationalize “Am I a good enough mother? Have I spent too much time on my career?” “Don’t you want your daughter in a good school?” Leveraging off the weakness, the pain point”**  
(51:37 - 51:04)

Rick Singer was a manipulative and cunning individual, as could be seen through his statements to the parents of his students. Most of Rick Singer's statements about unqualified students for admission to the respective university turned out to be false. However, these false statements convinced parents, leading them to think they were incompetent parents and that the only solution was to use Rick Singer's service. In reality, Rick Singer's claim was false.

### **The Representation of Rick Singer Through The Visual Mode**

The documentary consisted of 102 incidents of people, objects, and places that showed the representation of Rick Singer. From 102 incidents, it can be categorized that Rick Singer was represented or constructed as a character as a successful entrepreneur with high class connections and highly effective scheming strategies. In particular, table 4.2 lists the characteristics obtained from the analysis of oral mode. The number in the brackets describes how many times the incident occurred.

Table 2  
Rick Singer’s Representation from the Visual Modes

No.	Characteristics
1.	Elite: Wealthy and upper class (11)
2.	Scheming: Cunning (3), manipulative (3), and liar (1)
3.	Entrepreneur: Well connected (6) and Workaholic (4)
4.	Desertion: Rats abandon a sinking ship (1)
5.	Unrepentant: Nonchalant (3) and remorseless (2)
6.	Minor Characteristics of Rick Singer: Calm (1), cooperative (1), denial (1), dumfounded (1), easy going (1), guilty (1), obscure (1), secretive (1), and power (1), pushy (1)

According to the table, Rick Singer has been depicted with numerous characteristics; however, the most prominent depictions of Rick Singer's characteristics in terms of visual modes are as an affluent entrepreneur and a scheming person. Rick Singer also has a number of minor character traits in addition to his main ones. As a result, Rick Singer's major representation in this section is as a wealthy entrepreneur and devious individual. These portrayals are discussed below:

## Wealthy

The researcher found that (figure1), represented by Rick Singer, is wealthy based on the collection of visual data. According to the Collins dictionary (2023), wealthy is defined as a large amount of money, property, or valuable possessions. As a result, the following character is represented. The following scene, which runs from minute 39:57 to 39:34, can be seen in the third appendix, depicts Rick Singer's outstanding Newport Beach residence:

(1)



(39:57 - 39:34)

(2)



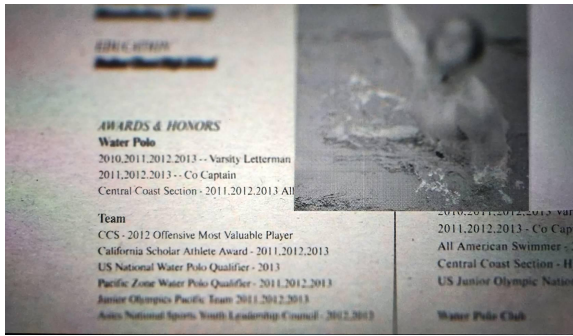
Figure 1 Rick Singer's Residence in Newport Beach

Based on the analysis of people, objects, and places, Rick Singer can be represented as a successful entrepreneur since his character shows he is wealthy. First, Rick Singer is wealthy, as evidenced by his simple attire. According to Nugroho (2023), rich people choose to dress simply since they have proven themselves through their plenty of fortune. Thus they choose to dress like everyone else. In addition, it can also be seen through the interior of Rick Singer's residence, which was made of marble or granite. According to the Hipcouch Editorial Team (2022), marble and granite create a sense of luxury. As a result, based on Figure 1 the reflection from his house and the vehicle he drove represents that he is wealthy.

## Scheming

Rick Singer can be represented as cunning in his schemes based on the analysis of people, objects, and places.

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(1:05:12 - 1:04:50)

Another false student's profile (Written portfolio: Water polo awards and teams, actual portfolio: None of these)

Figure 2 Several Examples of Data Fabrication by Rick Singer

Rick Singer can be represented as cunning in his schemes based on the analysis of people, objects, and places. Rick Singer modified the profiles of his pupils with very subtle modifications as if the pupils were athletes in high school or had a physique by athlete standards, even though the reality was a fabrication and far from reality, based on the visual evidence. The goal of this counterfeit is to get Rick Singer's pupils accepted into their preferred universities.

### The Interplay of Oral and Visual Modes

The use of interplay aims to make both modes work together to strengthen the representation of Rick Singer. Both modes will strengthen specific characteristics.

Based on the oral mode, it can be noticed that RS has skilled communication abilities, which he employs to manipulate clients. The visual representation of RS portrays him as a wealthy entrepreneur residing in a luxurious residence and driving a high-end vehicle. His criminal activities, including the falsification of a student's portfolio/report, are depicted multiple times. This is discussed in detail in the section on the interplay between oral and visual modes, particularly in Table 3.

Table 3

The Interplay Representation of Cunning (timestamp: 1:05:12 - 1:04:50)

#### Oral

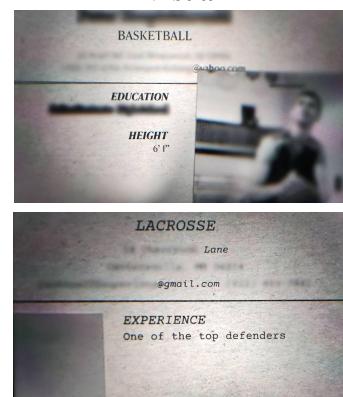
BW: "Some of the fake athletes at USC, it seems like it would be hard to miss"

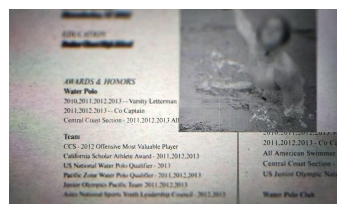
BW: "I mean, **there was a 5'5" men's basketball player**. Another example, **a high school cheerleader was made to look like a lacrosse player**"

BW: "There was **a water polo player who didn't play water polo in high school**"

BW: "It's pretty remarkable that none of these things raised a red flag. And on the rare occasion when they did, Heinel was there to smooth them over with the admissions department"

#### Visual





Based on the preceding research, it is possible to conclude that both modes present an interplay of Rick Singer's representation. He has been portrayed as a wealthy and cunning businessman with outstanding communication abilities. One of the most evident characteristics of Rick Singer's representation is that he is shown as a cunning man.

The monologue and the clip above are from the same scene that show Rick Singer using fabrication to get his pupils into prestigious universities. The two modes above complemented each other in representing Rick Singer's traits, as seen in the monologues above describing the visualization in the left column.

As seen in table 3 the oral data (monologue) and visual data complemented each other. These two data points from each mode combined to create a representation. The representation of Rick Singer which was cunning came from the interaction of oral and visual data. Whereas the oral data is a monologue explaining Rick Singer's data fabrication, the visual data is the illustrations of Rick Singer's data falsification.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has revealed how two semiotic modes and their interplay were used to understand an individual's representation. Deconstructing representation is a challenging and intricate process, thus, analyzing a representation using more than one mode is essential. In other words, employing more than one mode leads to a deeper understanding of the world. As representations are made up of numerous aspects and elements, the more semiotic modes that are involved in the analysis, the more accurate the images resulted from the analysis.

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