

GQ magazine front cover

(July, 2016)



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Component 1: Exploring the Media

Focus areas:
Media language
Representation
Media contexts

PRODUCT CONTEXT

- Launched in 1931, *GQ* began its life as a quarterly publication called Gentleman's Quarterly, aimed specifically at fashion industry insiders. Its popularity with customers caused its rebranding in 1967 to *GQ*.
- Produced by Condé Nast, today *GQ* is a multi-platform brand. Each issue is published in print and on the iPad; it has its own acclaimed website, iPhone apps and an annual event called 'GQ Men of the Year'.
- *GQ* has an average circulation of around 115,000 and a readership of almost 400,000 through its various platforms.
- *GQ*'s catch phrase is 'the magazine for men with an IQ.' The brand is built around more traditional ideas of masculinity. It includes coverage of executive concerns and targets a more serious minded, conservative, older reader than some other men's lifestyle magazines such as *Loaded* and *FHM*.

PART 1: STARTING POINTS – Media language

Social and cultural contexts:

In 1994, Mark Simpson an author and journalist coined the word 'Metrosexual' in an article for the Independent newspaper after he attended Britain's first *GQ* style exhibition. He is famously quoted as saying "I had seen the future of masculinity and it was moisturised." This term gained global popularity in the early 2000s, epitomised by men like David Beckham, when it became more **socially acceptable**

for men to openly care about their **looks, clothing and skincare** regime. **Men's magazines** embraced this through their **content and advertising**. Arguably, the primary role of such magazines is to encourage spending amongst its readers.

In 2014, Simpson then introduced the term 'spornosexuals', men who are extremely body-focused, who spend all their time at the gym and make their bodies their best accessory. The selection of the *GQ* cover shot, with Johnson's bicep in the foreground and the rest of his image secondary to it, and the choice of cover lines surrounding it all support this concept.

Consider how choice of elements of media language influences meaning:

- The overarching **theme** for this issue appears to surround ideas of **masculinity**:
 - » The **strapline** tells us it is a special issue dealing with "**Mind, Body & Masculinity**".
 - » There is an **extreme close up** of Dwayne Johnson with his huge bicep in the foreground.
 - » The **cover line** to the right tells the reader to "Man up! How to be a man in 2016".
 - » If we consider the **selection** process that takes place when creating a magazine cover, there was clearly a conscious decision to **associate** ideas of **masculinity with physical strength**.

Semiotic analysis:

- The red, black and white **colour palette** used for this particular cover helps to support the idea of **power**. Red is associated with strength and the black is also a strong, bold statement.
- Johnson is **looking directly** at the audience, seemingly making eye contact. This is a common **convention** of magazines and helps to add to the more personal approach of this format. The intensity of his stare and the lack of a smile could also suggest how seriously he expects to

be taken and maybe how seriously the readers should take themselves and their own bodies.

- Johnson's experience as a professional wrestler earned him the ring name, '**The Rock**', which has **connotations of strength and stability**. This name is used prominently here, across his image, with his actual name appearing smaller and below it. Perhaps he is more famous as 'The Rock' or perhaps the magazine is suggesting that his persona and look are more important than the man beneath.

Consider how media language creates and communicates meaning:

- The **strapline** on the right third of the cover, "Your ideal beach watch. The best for under £300" should be considered when thinking about the magazine's **target audience**. Modern print magazines survive predominantly because of their advertising revenue, they are adept at selling you things you didn't even know you wanted – a £300 watch specifically for the beach implies a certain level of wealth of the target audience.
- Further down the page, there is another **cover line** advertising 'The Style Guide', a new section inside. In today's competitive society, which focuses heavily on **aesthetics** and where having the 'right' look is apparently very important, the reader then begins to think of this magazine as a casual 'how to' guide when it comes to being a man.
- Finally, at the very bottom of the page there is a more **newsworthy topic** mentioned, "The extraordinary truth behind the Viola beach tragedy." This is a reference to the band Viola Beach who all died in a tragic car crash in Sweden. There is a lot of speculation around the crash and this cover lines suggests that *GQ* has the answers. By including some **serious journalism** as well as entertainment and fashion advice, the magazine is broadening its range of offerings for its audience members.

Possible areas for further investigation are:

- **Genre: codes and conventions** of magazine covers: layout, use of cover star, house style, mastheads. Genre conventions of magazines, their ever changing nature and hybridity. For example, Men's Lifestyle magazines could be specifically about fashion or health and fitness and still come under the umbrella term 'lifestyle'. It might be helpful to compare two quite different types of men's lifestyle magazine such as FHM.

- **Narrative** - cover lines on the front cover tease people to want to read certain stories within the magazine (could be linked to Roland Barthes' enigma codes).

PART 2: STARTING POINTS – Representation

Historical and Political Contexts:

African Americans have had a long and complex **history** in the motion picture industry. At the start of the 20th century, many films depicted black characters that supported the dominant stereotype of the time: incompetent, hyper-sexualised and/or criminals. It wasn't until the growing momentum of the **Civil Rights Movement** that there was a push against this status quo and there evidently there is still a way to go.

In 2015 April Reign, the Broadway Black managing editor, created the hashtag **#OscarSoWhite** to bring attention to the Academy's tendency to overlook performances and achievements by non-white professionals. By 2016, little had changed and so many actors and actresses boycotted the 2016 Oscars, branding it 'racist' and 'too white'.

Consider the representation of ethnicity and gender:

- Using a hugely successful black **cover star** (Dwayne Johnson is half Samoan and half African American) as their dominant image, *GQ* is presenting a role model for its readers, someone to **aspire** to be like. Although Johnson's Hollywood success might be outside of most reader's possibilities, his work ethic and desire to want to better himself isn't.
- Johnson's success as a wrestling character allowed him to cross over into more **mainstream culture**, most importantly an actor. Black actors have, historically, always been paid less than their white counterparts and so for Johnson to be considered one of the most bankable **Hollywood stars** is an achievement and his success is even greater than one first realises.
- The use of Johnson's **iconic** bicep with its Brahma bull tattoo reinforces the **stereotype** of men as having to be **hyper masculine, strong and muscular**.

Consider the social, cultural and political significance of particular representations:

- For modern men, there is a **societal expectation** that they have to 'have it all': health, wealth and strength and the image of Johnson supports

this as he epitomizes all three. Also, just like their female counterparts, the very essence of men's lifestyle magazines is **consumerism** and so the images and cover lines will always seek to support this, informing men of what they supposedly need, "the essential wellness gadgets" and also showing them thing to covet, "your ideal beach watch".

- The cover line reads, "How Dwayne Johnson became the Hollywood's most bankable star." The reader understands this to mean that he is a success in Hollywood, he brings in a lot of revenue for film companies. This is reinforcing the **capitalist ideology** that for a man to be thought of as successful you must be wealthy and make a lot of money.
- Cover lines such as "How to be a man in 2016" suggest that the reader cannot possibly

already know this and will need the magazine to help show him the way. This is similar to the female magazines that tell their readers how to be beautiful, get fit and dress well. The importance of **body image and consumerism** doesn't change just because of gender.

Possible areas for further investigation are:

- We might want to consider the **image as a commodity**. Most of the images used in magazines are to sell and advertise both the magazine and its advertised products. Celebrity cover stars sell magazines as people often want a window into their lives.
- This could be further considered in relation to Blumler and Katz's '**Uses and Gratifications**' theory which considers why people interact with media texts.