

GQ

(August 2019)



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GCSE Component 1: Exploring the Media

Focus areas:

- **Media language**
- **Representation**
- **Media contexts**

THE PRODUCT

- 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 digitally; it has its own acclaimed website and apps.
- Published monthly, British *GQ* sells itself as *"The greatest magazine around. The men's magazine with an IQ. Whether it's fashion, sport, health, humour, politics or music, GQ covers it all with intelligence and imagination."*
- *GQ* is aimed at ABC1 men aged between 20 and 44, has a 212,000 monthly print readership, with online boasting over 2 million monthly unique users, and more than 2 million social media followers.
- Funded by magazine sales and advertising, *GQ* says that 88% of its audience have bought or plan to buy products they've seen in *GQ* and 93% of *GQ*'s audience own designer fashion.
- The limited colour palette of black, white, gold and orange create a sense of cohesion to the design, whilst also reinforcing the magazines messages of luxury, sophistication and masculinity.
- There is a long shot of footballer and celebrity Raheem Sterling, ensuring the magazine has star appeal for the audience.
- The cover price further reinforces this is a print magazine aimed at an ABC1 audience with disposable income.
- Consider the selection process that took place when creating this magazine cover – there was clearly a conscious decision to aim it at men who are interested in fashion, celebrity, politics, music and sport.
- Sterling 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. His cool, relaxed gaze and slight smile looks down at the reader, suggesting he should be admired, looked up to.
- Sterling's leather combat trousers and boots are more high fashion than practical and connote luxury and masculinity, whilst also indicating to readers that *GQ* is a lifestyle magazine.
- Sterling's professional role as a footballer is anchored in the main cover line *"Guardian Angel. How Raheem Sterling saved football from itself"*. *GQ* calls Sterling a *"Guardian Angel"*, which has multiple connotations, including a sense of guidance and protection, suggesting he is looking after players and the values of the game by rooting out racism. The idea that he is doing morally good work is reinforced through his black angel wings and cross tattoo. This also frames him as a Proppian Hero, which is conventional for magazine cover stars.
- The top cover lines *"How to wear a broken suit"* and *"Why it's finally OK to own a belt bag"* should be considered when thinking about the magazine's target audience. In today's competitive society, which focuses heavily on aesthetics and where having the 'right' look is apparently very important, the reader begins to

PART 1: STARTING POINTS – Media language

How media language creates and communicates meaning

The typical codes and conventions of print magazines are used here to construct the *GQ* front cover:

- The branded masthead is conventionally placed in the top left-hand corner (Z-rule) and stands out with the choice of gold font, connoting luxury and exclusivity – traits that the brand associates with.

think of this magazine as a casual ‘how to’ guide when it comes to being a fashionable man.

- At the top right of the page, there is another cover line advertising a picture special from ‘*GQ Heroes*’. “*All the sizzle*” implies gossip and celebrity intrigue, while the term “exclusive” suggests the reader won’t be able to find it anywhere else and they need to purchase the magazine to be in on the secrets.
- On the right-hand side of the page the reader is offered some politics, “*Westminster has become a living nightmare. Andy Burnham’s Manchester masterplan.*” This hyperbolic language is a reference to the elected Mayor of Manchester, Andy Burnham, who is calling for more devolved power to be given to cities rather than held by the government in London. By including some serious journalism, as well as entertainment and fashion advice, the magazine is broadening its offering for its audience members.

Possible areas for further investigation:

- **Genre:** codes and conventions of magazine covers – layout, house style, by-lines. Genre conventions of magazines, their ever-changing nature and hybridity.
- **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), for example “*Speak no evil. Inside the most brutal dictatorship you’ve never heard of.*”

PART 2: STARTING POINTS – Representation and contexts

Social, cultural and historical contexts:

- Historically, British black men have been under-represented on magazine front covers due to systemic racism within the industry. In a 2018 study, completed by The Guardian, into glossy magazines, it was revealed that of 214 covers published by the 19 bestselling glossies in 2017, only 20 featured a person of colour. That’s 9.3%, whereas 13.7% of the UK are BAME. Of all the mainstream media outlets there has arguably been the smallest shift in magazine front covers

representing a diverse range of people. However, sister magazine at Conde Nast, Vogue appointed editor Edward Enninful in 2017. He has turned one of the nation’s most respected fashion magazines into a celebration of all beauty – not excluding blackness but championing it. This, alongside the 2020 global anti-racism protests, has meant that recently there has been a wider range of ethnicities and races on the front of British *GQ*.

- In 1994, Mark Simpson – an author and journalist – coined the word ‘Metrosexual’. He is famously quoted as saying “*I had seen the future of masculinity and it was moisturised.*” In the early 2000s 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 and according to the magazine, 80% of its readers buy at least one male grooming product per month. In 2014, Simpson then introduced the term ‘spornosexuals’, men who are extremely body focused. The selection of the *GQ* cover shot, with Sterling’s six-pack and muscles on show, even though he is a footballer, supports this concept.
- In December 2018, Raheem Sterling took to social media to highlight racism in the British press. Sterling screen-grabbed two MailOnline articles, which juxtaposed how his Manchester City teammates (Phil Foden and Tosin Adarabioyo) had been treated for buying their mums a house. Sterling used his platform to highlight this racial inequality in response to personally receiving racist abuse on the pitch from fans. That same week in 2018 saw a Tottenham Hotspur supporter arrested for throwing a banana skin at Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang and Motherwell’s Christian Mbulu received racial abuse. Since the social media post, Sterling has become a sought-after spokesperson for charities, activists and other social causes. Gary Lineker has called him “*perhaps the most influential player in the game*” off-field. The full *GQ* article by Alistair Campbell can be read on *GQ.co.uk* for free.
- *GQ Heroes* is an event aimed at “*luxury business and creative minds*”. Held annually in Oxfordshire, it has a programme of speakers

“who are shaping society and culture around us”.

Representations of ethnicity and gender:

- Using a hugely successful black cover star (Raheem Sterling is British Jamaican) as their dominant image, GQ is presenting a role model for its readers, someone to aspire to be like. Although Sterling’s sporting success might be outside of most reader’s possibilities, his work ethic, principles and desire to want to better himself is not.
- The choice to represent Sterling topless with his tattoos on show reinforces the stereotype of men as having to be hyper masculine, strong and muscular. The tattoos themselves represent different aspects of his identity – the cross on his chest illustrates his Christian faith, while the baby on his arm represents him as a father. The black wings represent him as a supernatural figure suggesting his extraordinary skills on the pitch. The wings, combined with the main cover line *“Guardian Angel”* and the low angle shot construct him as a protective figure, fighting for justice. His wide stance and the choice of costume represent him as a dominant, confident figure. Meanwhile the thick silver jewellery and watch represent his wealth and modern masculinity.
- The main cover line reads, *“How Raheem Sterling saved football from itself”*. The reader understands this to mean that he is a success on a much grander scale than just the pitch; he is an influencer. His thick silver jewellery reinforces the capitalist ideology that for a man to be thought of as successful you must be wealthy and make a lot of money.
- All the men named on the cover are represented as successful in their own field, which conforms to the genre conventions of glossy magazines. Andy Burnham (white British) is framed as having a *“masterplan”* for Manchester representing men as clever, powerful and forward-thinking. This is juxtaposed with the representation of Machine Gun Kelly (white American), whose life is described as *“insane, wild and totally nuts”*, however this extreme lifestyle is more what the reader would expect

from a rapper than a politician, so the cover lines serve to reinforce our preconceived ideas of these roles. The Machine Gun Kelly cover line is not judgemental, but celebratory, inviting readers in to see what his apparently crazy life is like.

- For modern men, there is a societal expectation that they must ‘have it all’ – health, wealth and strength – and the image of Sterling 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, *“How to wear a broken suit”* and also showing them what to covet, *“Why it’s finally ok to wear a belt bag”*. This is like the female lifestyle 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.

Areas for further investigation:

- The choice of the two women – Gwendoline Christie and Adwoa Aboah – represented on the front cover.
- The changing perception of tattoos in media representations.