An Analysis of the Visual Grammar of Magazine Covers

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雑誌表紙の視覚的文法の分析

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Abstract

Magazine covers are multimodal, with both images and written text combining to form the whole. This paper uses Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) framework of visual grammar analysis to examine the covers of popular fashion and lifestyle magazines aimed at men and women respectively. Through this framework, along with the concept of signification (connotations of a word in addition to its denotation or dictionary definition) as outlined by Barthes (1957/2006), the study will examine how the people on the covers are represented, how they relate to the viewer, and what this representation says about the purpose of these magazine covers.

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　雑誌の表紙はマルチモーダルであり、画像と文章が組み合わさって全体を形成している。本稿では、Kress と van Leeuwen（1996）の視覚文法分析の枠組みを用いて、それぞれ男性向けと女性向けの人気ファッション誌とライフスタイル誌の表紙を検証する。この枠組みを通して、バルト（1957/2006）によって概説されたシニフィケーション（辞書的な定義に加え、言葉の意味づけ）の概念とともに、表紙に描かれた人物がどのように表現され、見る者とどのように関係し、この表現がこれらの雑誌の表紙の目的について何を語っているのかを検証する。

Analytical Framework

Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) make the point that, much like writing, pictures are

a form of communication between the creator/author and the viewer/reader. However, unlike direct spoken interactions, in both written and visual communication the creator is separated from his intended audience in both time and space, and thus must make his compositions with an imagined audience in mind. Likewise, the audience must have an imagined author in order to attempt to understand the message being conveyed. Thus, the creator and audience must share a common sense of meaning in order for the message to be understood, in other words a grammar.

If there is a grammar of visual communication, it follows that the tools of textual analysis can be applied to this visual grammar as well. Saussure (1983) claims that words are linguistic signs that form a link between sounds (signifier) and mental concepts (signified). Furthermore, the sign that forms this link is maintained solely by convention rather than any inherent connection between the signifier and concept. However, Peirce (1966) shows that in addition to symbolic signs, you can also have iconic and indexical signs, where the relationship between signifier and signified is based on visual similarity and causation respectively. For example, a road sign with a picture of a running deer indicating that deer cross the road at this point is an iconic sign because it resembles the animal. On the other hand, jet trails in the sky are indexical because they indicate the passage of an airplane, even if the airplane isn't visible.

In terms of the purpose behind words, Halliday (1978) divides words into three metafunctions; interpersonal, experiential, and textual. Interpersonal words are classified as those that are used to maintain social relationships, while experiential words function to describe and talk about objects.

Meanwhile, textual metafunctions serve to organize interpersonal and experiential words into meaningful interactions. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) suggest that not only textual but also visual communication can be organized in these terms and build their framework for the analysis of visual grammar around these metafunctions.

Barthes (1957 cited in Jaworski and Coupland, 2006) agrees that linguistic tools can be applied beyond just text and points out that writing systems such as pictographs can have both iconic visual relationships to mental concepts and symbolic phonetic meaning. For Barthes anything that has meaning, whether it is verbal, visual, or even an object, can be speech and thus be analyzed using linguistic methods. Barthes goes further with the concept of signification, whereby a second order of significance exists. If a word is a sign that denotes a relationship between a sound and a concept, that sign can also be associated with other concepts. Barthes uses the example of roses, which represent a specific type of flower but which, for him, can also signify passion. Thus, because he cannot separate the rose from the connotation he gives it, the rose is a sign for passion as well as a type of flower.

Signification is necessarily dependent on a shared vocabulary of experiences in order for the intended meaning to be understood by all parties, such as both sharing the association between roses and passion. However, it is nevertheless an effective form of communication that allows much to be communicated in an efficient manner by forming a link between a sign (visual or textual) and a more universal myth.

Using Kress and van Leeuwen's framework it is possible to systematically decode the message being communicated by a piece of visual or multimodal information. In addition, by using Barthes concept of signification it is possible to combine the descriptive powers of linguistics with broader areas of psychology and history to begin analyzing the deeper levels of meaning or "why" of a message rather than merely the "what" of its direct denotated meaning.

Of course, even with a systematic framework for analysis there can still be other valid interpretations. As Cameron (1997, p.47) notes, "Analysis can never be done without preconceptions, we can never be absolutely non-selective in our observations".

Analysis of Magazine Covers Using Kress and Van Leeuwens's Framework

Choice of Magazine Covers

I decided to compare the two most popular American male and female-targeted fashion and lifestyle magazines for analysis. According to the Association of Magazine Media (2013), in 2011 Cosmopolitan had the highest Average Single Copy Circulation (1,530,144) of all American magazines and Gentlemen's Quarterly (GQ) was the 40th most popular magazine overall and had the highest Average Single Copy Circulation of Cosmopolitan's male equivalents (172, 640).

To establish a typical representation of both magazines, I examined their covers over a 6-month period from July to December 2012. In addition, the July issue of GQ and the November issue of Cosmopolitan were chosen for more detailed analysis as they both feature the same cover model, thus allowing for more direct comparison.

Interpersonal Metafunctions

Kress and van Leeuwen list the following aspects of visual design under interpersonal metafunctions: Demand/Offer, Social distance, Detachment/involvement, and Power. In an analysis of 6 issues of GQ (Table 1) and Cosmopolitan (Table 2) respectively, we see a great deal of similarity in these interpersonal metafunctions within the two sets of magazine issues, as well as between the two sets.

Table 1 *A summary of interpersonal cover features of Gentleman's Quarterly (American edition) issues from July to December 2012*

Issue	Social Distance	Horizontal angle	Vertical angle	Direction of gaze
July	Close personal	Frontal	Level with viewer	Towards viewer
August	Far personal to close social	Frontal	Level with viewer	Towards viewer
September	Close personal	Frontal	Level with viewer	Towards viewer
October	Close social to far social	Frontal	Level with viewer	Towards viewer
November	Close social to far social	Frontal	Level with viewer	Towards viewer
December	Close social	Frontal	Level with viewer	Towards viewer

Table 2 *A summary of interpersonal cover features of Cosmopolitan (American edition) issues from July to December 2012*

Issue	Social Distance	Horizontal angle	Vertical angle	Direction of gaze
July	Far personal to close social	Frontal	Level with viewer	Towards viewer
August	Far personal to close social	Frontal	Level with viewer	Towards viewer
September	Far personal to close social	Frontal	Level with viewer	Towards viewer
October	Far personal to close social	Frontal	Level with viewer	Towards viewer
November	Far personal to close social	Frontal	Level with viewer	Towards viewer
December	Far personal to close social	Frontal	Level with viewer	Towards viewer

Demand and Offer Images

Kress and van Leeuwen state that the direct gaze between the person in the image and the viewer serves to demand the establishment of a relationship between them. This is contrasted with offer images such as landscapes or images of people who do not make eye contact that are presented to us for impersonal contemplation. All cover models of both magazines make direct eye contact with the viewer (Tables 1 and 2), and thus establish a personal connection with them.

Social Distance

All the Cosmopolitan covers (Table 2) feature a model photographed at a medium shot (from the knees up) whereas the GQ covers (Table 1) have a slightly more varied range of distances, from close-ups (head and shoulders) to medium long shot (full figure). These roughly correspond to Hall's (1966) classifications of personal distance (close-ups = close personal, medium = between far personal and close social, medium long shot = close social to far social). None of the models are photographed at a long shot or wider, which would correspond with Hall's public distance designation at which point people are considered strangers. Thus, once again the people on the cover are largely presented as people with whom we have some degree of a personal relationship.

Involvement

All the models (Tables 1 and 2) are photographed from a frontal point of view, directly facing the viewer at a horizontal angle. Kress and van Leeuwen suggest that this indicates involvement with the viewer, whereas an oblique angle would suggest detachment.

Power

Kress and van Leeuwen claim that the vertical angle between the viewer and subject represents the power relationship between the two. If the viewer is pictured from a higher vertical angle (looking down on the subject) then the viewer holds power over the subject. Likewise, if the subject of the image is represented at a higher angle than the viewer it suggests that the subject has greater power and authority than the viewer. Once again Table 1 and Table 2 show a great deal of homogeneity with all models photographed level with the viewer. This would indicate an equal power relationship between the viewer and model.

Experiential

Under Halliday's Experiential meaning potential Kress and van Leeuwen place narrative representations and conceptual representations. Here I will examine two selected covers in more detail.

The human eye has a natural tendency to follow objects that point in a certain direction (leading lines). Narrative representations are those that tell a story or appear to represent a particular moment in time using vectors. For example, in a dynamic photograph of two people playing tennis, the direction of the players gaze, the positions of their limbs, and the placement of the ball are all vectors that together tell the story of the game being played.

Conceptual representations are defined as those that do not show movement through vectors and can include such abstract items as charts and diagrams. It can be difficult to say with certainty however when an item has no vectors. For example, even an abstract item such as a pie chart contains vectors in the form of lines radiating from the center of the circle, which draw the viewer's eye, and even a chart of fluctuations in stock prices over time tells a story.

Needless to say, some vectors are more obvious than others and thus there may be many different interpretations concerning what constitutes a vector, so others may not draw the same conclusions as myself. In examining the front page of the July 2012 edition of GQ and the November 2012 edition of Cosmopolitan magazine (both featuring photographs of Kate Upton), the most obvious vector is the model's gaze towards the

viewer. This serves to draw the viewer's attention towards the model's face. Once focused on the center of the page, the viewer's eyes are kept there using further vectors.

In the case of the GQ cover, the model's hair falling on her shoulders along with the straps of the bikini top pull the eye downwards. However, the eye then follows the curve of the bikini to the cleavage line, which in combination with the arm holding a Popsicle draws the eye back towards the models face. Furthermore, the model is framed above and to the side by text, so if the viewer's eye leaves the model's face it will encounter the text and likely read it. By reading the text the eye will be drawn from left to right and from top to bottom thus ensuring that the eye is brought back either to the model or towards more text. The overall effect is to create a circular composition, which keeps the eye returning to the center of the page.

This holds true for the cosmopolitan cover as well, with the eye drawn to the model's face through her direct gaze. The combination of flowing hair and a plunging neckline form a circle with her face and breasts, trapping the eye, while two more circular frames are formed. The second, circular frame is formed by the model's arms, while the third is formed by the framing text as in the GQ example. In addition, as Faulkes (2010) notes, "Every issue of *Cosmo* has a sex article. The teaser title of that sex piece is *invariably* in the upper left corner. That's the first place people will start to read, and you want to grab their attention. And the old truism holds: sex sells." This phenomenon was also observed in all the Cosmopolitan magazines I analyzed.

While neither photo shows much of a narrative in terms of telling a story with vectors, they are still present and keep the viewers eyes circling the model at the center of the magazine.

This use of vectors makes perfect sense from a business standpoint since potential buyers typically encounter these magazines as they walk past a newsagent or at a supermarket checkout. The magazine cover must immediately attract the viewer's attention and the longer it can keep the viewer looking at the cover the more likely that they will purchase it.

Textual

Kress and van Leeuwen place salience, information value, and framing under Halliday's Textual metafunction. However, the categories do not appear as distinct from each other (or the ones listed under experiential) as do the ones listed under the interpersonal metafunction category, and at this point the classification into the Hallidayan framework can feel somewhat arbitrary and forced.

Salience

Salience is defined as how certain items are made to stand out from others, and thus be given more importance. This can be done through variations in aspects such as contrasts in size and colour, or compositional placement. Both magazine covers analysed contain many highly salient elements. The most obvious is the use of a solid background, which makes the model stand out. This is further enhanced by the model appearing both in front of and behind text and, on the Cosmopolitan cover, using a drop shadow to lend a three-dimensional effect.

The use of colour in the text fonts, and its relationship to the colours of the background and model's clothing, also lends salience. For example, the "GQ" title is coloured red and blue, which along with the white background matches the red, white, and blue of the model's bikini top and Popsicle. In addition, the black, grey, and red text colouring is highly contrastive and visible on the white background. In the case of cosmopolitan, you have white text to match the white dress of the model.

The white and black text used also stands out against the pink background, and when font colours like pink and purple are used they are placed on contrastive colours such as white or black to maintain their visibility. Also, the colours chosen, while being clearly visible to the reader, are also complimentary to each other (in Cosmopolitan, pastel pinks are paired with pastel oranges and yellows as opposed to say, vibrant green), creating a pleasing overall effect. The uses of colour described above were also observed in the other issues analyzed (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3 *A summary of cover features of Gentleman's Quarterly (American edition) issues from July to December 2012*

Issue	Model description	Model's clothing description	Text colour	Background colour
July	White female actress	Red, white, and blue bikini top	Black, grey, red, and blue	White
August	White male actor	Grey vest; black tie with white dots; white dress shirt with rolled sleeves	Black, grey, and red	White
September	White male athlete	Grey T-shirt; grey, white, and brown bracelets	Black, grey, red, and white	White
October	Black male actor	Black suit jacket and dress pants; black dress shoes, black tie; grey dress shirt	Black, grey, red, and white	White
November	Asian male athlete	Grey suit jacket and dress pants; black and red vest/hoodie; white dress shirt; black tie; black, red, and white basketball shoes	Black, red, and white	White
December	Black female singer	Black leather jacket	Black, grey, and yellow	White

Table 4 *A summary of cover features of Cosmopolitan (American edition) issues from July to December 2012*

Issue	Model description	Model's clothing description	Text colour	Background colour
July	White female musician/ actress	Low-cut yellow one-piece dress	White, black, gold, and peach	Orange
August	White female actress/model	Pink jeans; low-cut, midriff and shoulder-barring floral top	White, black, blue, orange, purple, and yellow	Pink
September	White female actress/singer	Blue jeans; unbuttoned yellow shirt with rolled sleeves, tied above midriff	Yellow, blue, black, purple, and white	Light blue
October	White female actress/ musician	Low-cut, short, pink and black one-piece dress	Black, pink, white, peach, and yellow	White
November	White female model/actress	Low-cut, short, white one-piece dress	Orange, pink, purple, black, white, and blue	Pink
December	White female musician	Low-cut, short, purple one-piece dress	Purple, red, black, white, and orange	Light blue

Information Value

Information value refers to the extra information that factors such as positioning can have. Examples given by Kress and van Leeuwen include left to right images representing before and after, or upper and lower images representing the ideal and real respectively. In the case of the two Kate Upton covers, the central placement of the model on the page indicates their primary importance over the text in the margins. Also, as previously mentioned in the *experiential* section, the upper-left corner is of primary importance on a page and thus both covers feature their most important or interesting headlines there. These top stories are also demarcated as important by featuring all uppercase letters and larger font sizes than other headlines.

Framing

Framing is a way of separating or grouping elements. Examples can include textual arrangements such as columns in a newspaper, literal frames such as the famous yellow rectangle on the cover of national geographic, or more subtle, internal framing such as a person standing in a doorway or even a face being surrounded by hair. In the cases of the two Kate Upton covers examined, there are multiple layers of framing (which were described in detail in the *experiential* section), such as the framing of the model's face by her hair, clothing, and limbs, as well as by the surrounding text. The overall effect of the

framing appears to be to place emphasis on the cover model by separating her from the textual elements.

Signification

I have used Kress and van Leeuwen's framework to analyze the covers of male (GQ) and female (Cosmopolitan) targeted fashion and lifestyle magazines, which reveals a systematic attempt to make viewers focus on the cover model and to feel a personal connection to them. However, while the framework is useful in systematically comparing different aspects of visual design, to get a deeper understanding of the genre we must also look at connotations of the images. By looking at the secondary meanings of the images, both intended and unintended by the creator(s) of the images, we can move beyond the "what" and "how" of visual grammar to the "why". Of course, as with any meaning, the interpretation will necessarily be dependent on the individual experiences of the analyzer.

Models

Cosmopolitan and GQ are the most popular magazines in their respective genres, thus they represent the views and aspirations of mainstream society. Simply by placing certain models on their covers they are stating that these people represent an ideal, one that everyone else should aspire to be like. Thus, models are inevitably attractive, successful, and presumably happy, celebrities. The models are further idealized by using a team of hairdressers, makeup artists, and fashion designers to make them as perfect as possible, as well as using post-production photo manipulation to erase any perceived flaw.

The reasoning behind the large group effort to produce these covers is that the viewer will make the subconscious conclusion that if they buy these magazines and follow the secret advice hinted at by the cover headlines, they too will achieve the ideal represented by the models. Indeed, the combination of a model's face with the text elements gives the impression that the models themselves are speaking the text contents to the viewer as with word balloons in a comic strip. This sense of direct communication with the viewer is further reinforced using the second person address such as "you" in the headlines. For example, on the Kate Upton Cosmopolitan cover we see "ARE YOU LETTING YOUR DREAM LIFE GET AWAY?" Furthermore, as we are inclined to feel a personal connection with the cover models (see sections under *interpersonal metafunctions*) we are more positively inclined towards the messages they present.

Machin and Thornborrow (2006), looking at Cosmopolitan in particular, find that the magazines are promoting a "lifestyle" which is defined by certain tastes in clothes and other consumer items. While "social style" is based on traditional class and gender

rules, lifestyle becomes a group to which people can belong by following role models and experts. The cover models function as the role model, which people strive to emulate, and the cover text hints at the expert advice contained within.

Inevitably the models imply inferiority on the part of the viewer. After all, the viewer isn't on the cover and thus doesn't match up to society's ideal. However, by presenting the model in such a way that it is difficult for the viewer to distance themselves emotionally from the model (see sections under *interpersonal metafunctions*) it is also difficult for the viewer to distance themselves from their implied inferiority in relation to the model.

Gender

Theoretically, Cosmopolitan should be better in terms of female representation than GQ as it is aimed at women and has a female editor in chief. However, a look at Kate Upton on the Cosmopolitan cover shows that the cover model is highly sexualized, with a low-cut, short dress drawing attention to the model's breasts, legs, and narrow waist. This trend is consistent across each issue (Table 4). However, while the GQ cover with Kate Upton is also highly sexualized, with emphasis on the model's breasts combined with a very phallic and suggestively placed popsicle, it is hard to say that it is more sexualized than the cosmopolitan cover.

Some could argue that the depiction of women in the way Cosmopolitan does can indicate an empowered confidence in a woman's own sexuality. However, the combination of the image of the cover model with the other multimodal features of the cover contradicts this. When looking at the cover text, gender roles are also very prominent. On the cosmopolitan cover much of the text is concerned with men ("25 WAYS TO KISS A NAKED MAN, EVERY INCH OF HIM" and "Surprising Times He Really Needs You"). This is combined with an emphasis on sex ("COSMO'S KAMA SUTRA BAD- GIRL EDITION" or "8 Very Naughty New Positions"), which will presumably be with a man. This gives the impression that it is women's duty to be highly sexualized and concerned with men's pleasure, in addition to aspiring to the ideal body type exemplified by the cover model. The GQ cover text only makes passing references to women ("O BEAUTIFUL KATE UPTON, THE NEW REASON TO LOVE YOUR COUNTRY") and concentrates instead on sports, fashion, and food. This could be considered to imply that while women are pleasing to look at, their needs are not a man's concern. They are ultimately just another set of items for men's enjoyment and consumption.

The particularly formulaic cover design of Cosmopolitan could be degrading to women. By having covers featuring identical poses and similar clothing, it emphasizes the disposable nature of the cover girls. As seen in the *experiential* section, the lack of narrative structure places the models in the same realm as an abstract item or object.

Each month there is another near identical (Caucasian in my sample of issues, Table 4) pretty face. So, what is the value of the individual appearing each month? Where is her individuality? She is just another object to be slotted into the designated space to smile out from the stands for a month, soon to be forgotten.

GQ (Table 3) fares somewhat better than Cosmopolitan (Table 4) in that it depicts models of a wider variety of occupations, genders, and races. The models are photographed from a greater variety of distances and poses than the Cosmopolitan covers, although still very homogeneous.

The text itself appears gender coded, with the text in Cosmopolitan appearing in softer pastel colours and a curvier font than that on the GQ cover. These colour and font combinations imply the stereotypical images of male (hard and strong) and female (soft and warm) preferences.

Consumerism

As ad-dependent lifestyle magazines, these are primarily vehicles to present a population with a vision of an ideal and then sell the products that can allow people to purchase their way into that lifestyle. Thus, while on the surface they appeal to different demographics (male and female), the reality is that they are both representative of a mainstream, consumerist lifestyle.

In fact, the covers of the magazines can be seen as no different from any other consumer product which "...must hail the potential purchaser from the shelves, draw attention to its presence among competitors' products, and communicate desirability both at a distance and on closer inspection" Graddol (1996, p.73). This is entirely to be expected, as no magazine that failed to meet these criteria would stay in business for long otherwise. Ultimately, the people on the covers are no less a disposable consumer product than the magazine itself.

Conclusion

In this exploration of multimodal forms of communication such as magazine covers, we can see that there is an underlying set of visual rules, and that this visual grammar can be analyzed in much the same way as words are in linguistics.

By examining a series of covers, it becomes apparent that there is a great deal of similarity in how people are portrayed, represented, and relate to the viewer in both GQ and Cosmopolitan magazines, despite their different target audiences. Using Kress and van Leeuwen's framework we see that the cover models demand an active, personal involvement with the viewer as equals. This is accomplished by presenting the cover

models from a close, frontal angle, with a direct, level gaze at the viewer. The cover models serve to draw the viewer's gaze to the center of the magazine and keep it there. This engagement with the viewer serves to capture the viewer's attention in an attempt to sell copies of the magazine and the products advertised within. The viewer is led to consider the cover model as an ideal to which they can aspire by purchasing the magazine, following its advice, and using the products and services advertised within.

However, to gain greater insight into the true meaning being communicated by magazine covers it is necessary to move beyond this more classification-based analysis and look at the connotations of the visual modes of communication. By applying Barthes (1957) idea of signification to the analysis we see that the cover models are represented as an ideal to which readers must strive to match to obtain their own desired lifestyle. Ultimately, the purpose of mainstream fashion and lifestyle magazine covers (regardless of their targeted gender) is to grab the attention of a viewer, promote a particular lifestyle, and entice consumers to purchase the magazine to achieve that lifestyle.

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