

The Social Anatomy of the Romance-Confession Cover Girl

BY GEORGE GERBNER

The romance-confession magazine's cover girl appears to be oblivious of her surroundings and unrelated to the "sin" exposed in the magazine's articles. The author, a member of the Institute of Communications Research, University of Illinois, explains why, and reports on how the cover girl is perceived.

ALL MASS MEDIA ARE MARKET ORIENTED, but popular magazines must also be *supermarket* oriented. Depending for the bulk of their circulation on single-copy sales through food, drug and variety chains, they have a special task of salesmanship via magazine cover.

How do they tackle this task? How are editorial and distribution requirements reflected in the design and content of magazine covers? And how, in the light of these requirements, are the covers perceived? These questions furnished a starting point for a study of confession magazine covers, selected because of the curious way in which they express both the social appeal of the magazine and the pressures of supermarket distribution.

The market position of the confession industry shapes its content through an editorial prescription designed for working class women with presumably middle-class pocketbooks, anxieties and "behavior problems."¹ The social appeal of the confession pivots on the sympathetic heroine's human frailties

¹ These conclusions are drawn from a report by this author on "The Social Role of the Confession Magazine," *Social Problems*, Summer 1958 (in press).

in an inhospitable world she cannot fully understand. The heroine's "sinful" resistance, or desperate drift down the line of least resistance, brings further calamity, suffering and the final coming to terms, but not to grips, with the punitive code of her world. Her inevitable "crime" becomes irrelevant as an act of social protest. She is rarely permitted to become conscious of the social origin of her personal troubles. This ingredient of unrelatedness appears to provide the editorial antidote to the risk of strong social medicine involved in evoking sympathy for victims of the brutal society of the confessions.

The unique feature of the confession cover is the striking contrast between the "confession type" cover girl and the surrounding verbal context. She appears unrelated to the story titles and blurbs of her menacing verbal world. It is as if the editorial safety-valve of social unrelatedness would find its outward manifestation in the structure of the confession cover. The mechanics of distribution also favor the development of such a cover design, and of a cover girl who has the specific function (as does the heroine) of being a reader-identification image.

The formal aspects of the romance-confession cover design have been surveyed through observation over a period of time and a study of all confession magazine covers on sale in the Champaign, Illinois, area in January 1957. These findings were amplified by soliciting policy statements regarding cover design from confession magazine art editors.²

There were 12 different titles on sale at the time, published by nine firms, and distributed by two wholesale news agencies.³ Close-up pictures of eight blonds and four brunettes dominated the uniformly structured covers. (See Figure 1) The 11 cover girls (two magazines happened to use the same model) displayed appealing features, flashing smiles, cosmetic perfection and eye-contact with the viewer. There was nothing more "sexy" or revealing than one bare shoulder among them.

The verbal context surrounding the image of the radiantly poised, wholesome cover girl was anything but trouble-free. The story titles and blurbs spoke of women "attacked," "frightened and shamed," confessing "The Most Shameful Night of My Life," exclaiming "Oh, God, Don't Let Me Hurt Him," admitting that "We Didn't Know Our Love Was Abnormal," and so on.

About one out of every three cover titles dealt with sexual problems varying from apparent nymphomania to frigidity, and from taboos to sex-tests and tips. Another third reflected mainly marital and parental troubles such as adultery, bigamy, illegitimacy, misce-

genation, etc. The remaining third focused on other forms of anguish, shame, terror, illness and crime.

This is the dark and turbulent verbal world into which confession publishers insert, as a matter of policy, the dominant, concrete and colorful personification of clean-cut all-American girlhood. "There is virtually no relationship between the pictorial element and titles featured" on the cover, explains the art editor of one confession magazine. "The blurbs or cover titles have no relationship to the subject," writes another. Actually, they reason, each unit serves its own purpose, and combined they attempt to satisfy the multiple functions and requirements of the magazine.

THE MECHANICS OF DISTRIBUTION

In the women's field, the service and fan magazines have enough of a claim on a share of the romance-confession reader market to make competition a factor in cover design. Some outward manifestation of glamour and respectability helps the confession match its rivals' bright atmosphere of supermarket cheer.

The economics of magazine display space, and the rivalry among titles impose further requirements. Chain stores average about 60 magazine titles; but roughly 80% of the dollar volume comes from the top 20 magazines. Their total yearly sales from *all* general magazines put together just about equals that of chewing gums; but the magazines take up more space.⁴

Claims that confession readers spend more on some staples than do others are designed to attract advertisers;⁵

² Letters were received from Edward Rethorn of Ideal Publishing Corporation, Mel Blum, Magazine Management Company, New York, and James B. Fitzpatrick, Fawcett Publications, New York.

³ The magazines are: *True Confessions*, *Revealing Romances*, *Life Confessions*, *Your Romance*, *Intimate Story*, *True Revelations*, *Personal Confessions*, *Secrets*, *Personal Romances*, *True Love Stories*, *True Romance* and *True Experience*.

⁴ Chain store magazine sales have been reported by *Chain Store Age*, and summarized in *Advertising Age*, August 12, 1957. The figure on chewing gums can be found in the report on candy and gum sales, *Chain Store Age*, Grocery Edition, Product Study No. 3, September 1956.

⁵ Cf. *Supermarket Buying and Magazine Dollars*, a study by Crossley, Inc., 1954.



FIGURE 1
 Four of the twelve covers used in the experiment.

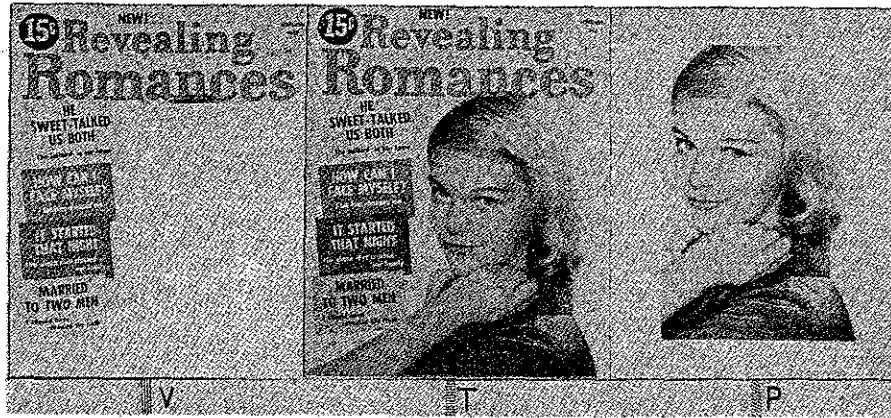


FIGURE 2

Forms V, T, and P of one of the 12 covers used in the experiment. Stripes below each form correspond to markings used in Figure 3 (below).

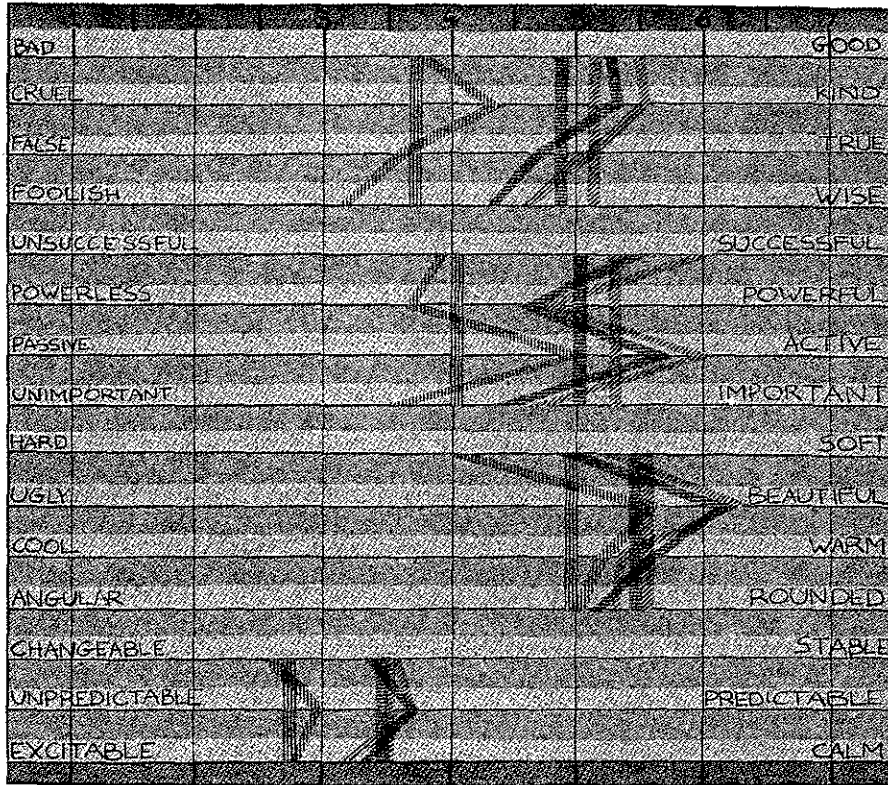


FIGURE 3

Mean responses by basic groups plotted on summary form of semantic differential. Vertical stripes mark means for Group V, horizontal stripes for Group T, and diagonal stripes for Group P. Vertical bars indicate means of combined scales; profiles show means on individual scales. Line 4 represents dead center.

they seem to have little effect on retail store managers who consider the magazine display space more a customer convenience than a major profit-maker. Although many of the racks are owned and serviced by the wholesale distributor, the floor manager often rules the display. His judgment, sometimes guided by customer comment, may result in preferential treatment for the magazines whose outward appearances conform to the widest variety of clientele sensibilities. Offenders, especially in the women's field, may suffer by being among those hidden from sight—and sale—behind their rivals on the crowded rack.⁶

There are other reasons, too, why the romance-confession magazine can ill afford to externalize its combustible editorial mixture. It is the only fiction group with both feminine *and* working class readership. Under the soothing but transparent cloak of euphemistic names containing such words of presumably feminine appeal as "secrets," "love," "experience," the strong stuff of working-day life in its torrid aspects is the meat of the "romance-confession" diet. Its editorial formula hits closest to home, both literally and socially. Vivid cover pictures of its embattled and embittered heroine in action (as she is portrayed inside the magazine) would dramatize the editorial ingredient of incipient revolt—and by the supposedly more docile of the sexes—against the fabric of restraint of pseudo-middle class life.

So, all cannot be sweetness and light—not in the confessions. Their unique editorial appeal must find its way to the cover without inviting censorship. "Regulations enforced by chain store managements result in penalties to a

⁶ This general impression has been confirmed through interviews with 15 store managers in the Champaign-Urbana area.

publisher from banning one issue to losing forever the racks of that chain," writes an art editor. "Local censorship and religious black lists are also important in establishing [cover] format."

The compromise formula adopted by the confession relegates the explosive social appeal to the relatively abstract verbal form. Counterpointing this is the dominant pictorial image of the cover girl, conducive to identification and merchandising euphoria, and seemingly unrelated to the surrounding verbal context.

The confession cover may thus be seen as an objective record of the circumstances of its creation. Underlying the stimulus—whether so intended and recognized or not—is the social history of market-produced editorial functions and distribution requirements. But how does the cover girl actually perform her task of confession magazine salesmanship? How is the apparent contrast between the cover girl and her verbal setting resolved in perception? What is her image in the eyes of the viewer? How does her juxtaposition with the contrasting verbal context affect her assumed personality, status, functions?

The experiment discussed below attempted to provide some answers to these questions.

THE COVER GIRL EXPERIMENT

The experiment focused on the romance-confession cover girl, and on the influence of her position in the verbal context. Subject responses were elicited to the 12 covers described previously. There was no attempt to select confession readers as respondents. It was felt that more than average familiarity with the inside contents of the magazine would "contaminate" the judgment of the cover itself as a stimulus.

Each cover was prepared in three different forms to test the influence of

the verbal context and the cover girl separately as well as together. One group of subjects received a form of the cover girl showing *only the verbal material*; the cover girl was cut out and replaced by a white sheet of paper. This will be referred to as the verbal form, and the group responding to it as Group V.

Another form showed *only the cover girl's picture* cut out of the verbal form, and pasted on cardboard. This is the pictorial form, shown to Group P.

The cover *without any alteration*, designated as the total form, was given to Group T. Figure 2 shows the three different forms of one cover.

A total of 538 University of Illinois students from five different departments were used as respondents. Testing was done in class. A subject responded only once to one form of one cover. Subjects were told that they would be asked for their views and feelings about *the girl's picture* in front of them. (Group V subjects, who had the girl cut out from the cover, were instructed to respond to the test on the basis of their mental image of the girl whose picture might go on the cover.)

The testing was done in two stages, using two tests that had some features in common. The first stage included a total of 140 subjects in the three basic groups. The test used at this stage included a blank page for writing a personality sketch of the cover girl, and 26 "semantic differential" scales.⁷ These are 7-point scales defined by contrasting adjectives such as good-bad, wise-foolish, active-passive, etc. Respondents mark their reaction to the stimulus (in this case their form of the cover girl)

⁷ These scales and their uses are described in Charles E. Osgood, "The Nature and Measurement of Meaning," *Psychological Bulletin*, 49:197-237, 1952, and in *The Measurement of Meaning*, by C. E. Osgood, G. J. Suci and P. H. Tannenbaum (University of Illinois Press, 1957).

on these scales according to the intensity of their association with one or the other of the polar adjectives. If undecided, they check the middle.

The second stage of the testing, involving the balance of the subjects in the three basic groups, was confined to the semantic differential, and three questions asking about the cover girl's age, occupation and "moral principles."

Although the findings reveal some differences between certain cover girls, these are fewer and no greater than differences between our forms V, T and P. These and other underlying similarities justify lumping the data for the 12 cover girls together into a composite picture suggestive of the image of "the confession-type cover girl."

Semantic Differential Results

The mean responses on the semantic differential for all subjects in the three groups are plotted on a summary form of the differential in Figure 3. This summary form includes the 15 scales that appeared to represent the range of discriminating responses. The scales appear grouped into "combined characteristics" rather than in random order and direction as they appeared on the tests.

The results,⁸ also shown in Table 1, suggest possible effects of illustrating, or matching with an overtly appropriate picture, the verbal material on these covers. Such practice would make the cover girl appear significantly more unfavorable on all but two of the 15 characteristics, as she did appear to Group V in comparison with Group T.

In other words, on the basis of story titles and blurbs alone, Group V conceived the cover girl as tending to be a "bad," "false," "foolish," "unsuccess-

⁸ Space limitations preclude publication of all findings and tabular material. However, they may be obtained directly from the author.

TABLE I
Mean Scale Positions on the Semantic Differential by Basic Groups

| Scale | Group V (N-174) | | Group T (N-185) | | Group P (N-179) |
|---------------------------|--------------------|---|--------------------|---|--------------------|
| bad—good | 3.77 | * | 5.25 | | 5.49 |
| cruel—kind | 4.39 | * | 5.32 | | 5.53 |
| false—true | 3.64 | * | 4.67 | † | 5.06 |
| foolish—wise | 3.16 | * | 4.29 | | 4.58 |
| unsuccessful—successful | 3.92 | * | 5.43 | * | 5.99 |
| powerless—powerful | 3.70 | * | 4.55 | | 4.58 |
| passive—active | 4.97 | * | 5.61 | † | 5.98 |
| unimportant—important | 3.61 | * | 4.44 | | 4.68 |
| hard—soft | 4.07 | * | 5.01 | | 5.26 |
| ugly—beautiful | 5.59 | * | 6.13 | | 6.20 |
| cool—warm | 5.22 | | 5.58 | | 5.40 |
| angular—rounded | 5.02 | | 5.19 | | 5.30 |
| changeable—stable | 2.49 | * | 3.29 | | 3.53 |
| unpredictable—predictable | 2.99 | * | 3.69 | | 3.68 |
| excitable—calm | 2.79 | * | 3.36 | | 3.23 |

*The differences between the two means are significant at the 1% level.

†The differences between the two means are significant at 5%.

ful," "powerless," "unimportant" and almost "hard" creature. Group T, which saw the actual picture of the cover girl in the same verbal context, perceived her as "good," "kind," "true," "successful," "soft," and even a little "wise," "powerful" and "important."

She was rated quite "active" and "beautiful" whether seen or not, but a little more so when seen. She appeared "changeable," "unpredictable" and "excitable" to both groups, but less so when her picture was seen. The picture of the cover girl designed to the specifications of the romance-confession market thus transforms the impressions created by the supercharged verbal context of the cover.

Compared to the effects of her image on the verbal material, the effects of the verbal context on her image are subtle. These effects can be examined by comparing the responses of Group T to the actual cover with the responses

of Group P which saw only the cover girl's picture.

This comparison reveals that Group P rated her slightly higher on all but two of the scales. However, only three of these differences are significant.

The implications of failure, trouble, and guilt in the verbal setting seem to depress significantly the cover girl's "successful" and "true" ratings, and—probably coupled with her apparent unawareness—make her appear less "active." The verbal context, on the other hand, does not injure significantly her other ratings, least of all her attractiveness. It even appears to enhance slightly her "warmness."

A separate analysis of responses by sex revealed that the appearance of the picture on the cover impressed men most as an indication of her success; it had its greatest effect on women in transforming her image from bad to good. When the verbal context was ab-

TABLE 2
Tabulation of Assertions by Basic Groups

| Assertions | V (N-50) | T (N-40) | P (N-50) |
|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Assertions about personality..... | 196 | 322 | 306 |
| Average per respondent..... | 3.9 | 8.0 | 6.1 |
| Favorable | 71 | 273 | 267 |
| Average per respondent..... | 1.4 | 6.8 | 5.3 |
| Unfavorable | 125 | 49 | 39 |
| Average per respondent..... | 2.5 | 1.2 | 0.8 |
| Assertions about "sexiness, promiscuity..... | 83 | 27 | 44 |
| Average per respondent..... | 1.7 | 0.7 | 0.9 |

sent, the girl's success rating went up the most among both men and women.

Other Personality Data

A further assessment of the cover girl's presumed personality was made on the basis of the questionnaire data. One-page personality sketches written by the 140 subjects were analyzed for straightforward assertions. Specific questions yielded additional information.

Analysis of the tabulation of personality assertions (see Table 2) reveals that those who saw only the verbal context wrote the least about the cover girl's personality, and most of that was unfavorable. Those who saw the picture *alone* wrote more, and most of that was favorable. But those who saw the confession cover girl in her "natural" verbal habitat wrote the most and came to her defense with the highest number of positive assertions. That this defense was felt necessary in view of her verbal setting is evident from the fact that in that setting she received more critical comment than in the absence of that setting (although not nearly as many as in the absence of her picture).

The high number of favorable assertions in Group T is again indicative of the "contrast effect" of the cover design. For a number of subjects the con-

fession-type cover girls appear "too good" for the confession. As one subject put it, "She has a smile on her face that shows contempt at the thought of the type of magazine that she appears in." Wrote another: "What I can't figure out is what a pleasant, clean-looking American girl is doing on the cover of a scandal sheet." In these cases the threatening implications of the verbal context did less to implicate the cover girl—seemingly oblivious of her setting—than to make her appear perhaps vulnerable but the more virtuous by contrast.

Spontaneous statements about the cover girl's "sexiness" support this possibility. Such assertions occurred *least* often in Group T. Perhaps this "contrast effect" is also due to a feeling on the part of subjects that, in view of the girl's apparent innocence, there is little need to mention what is already vividly spelled out on the cover. But, at any rate, it shows the effectiveness of her role in the cover design as a sop to moralists and censors.

Class Status, Age and Morality

The confession market position requires the editorial prescription of "workshirt" social setting, and the wom-

an's middle-class consumer status. The resulting "class structure" of the cover design appears in the responses to a question about the cover girl's socio-economic position. (See Table 3)

The verbal context alone suggested a "lower class" cover girl to four times as many subjects in Group V as did the cover girl when seen in the same context by Group T. Her contrasting verbal setting seemed to enhance her social position; the Group T girl on the cover rated slightly higher than did the Group P girl by herself.

The goal of identification may be served better if the cover girl does not seem too "professional." The test question about occupation or activity yielded a wide variety of guesses. But only about half of all respondents thought of the cover girl as a professional model. Occupational ratings were sorted into "higher type" (including model), such as student, secretary, career girl; and "lower type" ranging from waitress to prostitute. The verbal context alone suggested a lower occupational type to one in four Group V subjects. But none in Group T associated her image with a lower type occupation, and only a few in Group P.

All subjects were asked to judge the cover girl's age and morality. Analysis of these judgments shows that being on

the cover enhances the cover girl's youth. More Group T subjects placed her in the 18-or-under and fewer in the 24-or-over category than those of the other groups. Both the verbal context and the appearance of her picture by itself yielded slightly higher mean estimated ages than the actual cover.

A breakdown of subject ages and age ratings by morality judgment indicates 1) that those who judged her to be of "low morality" (a minority, when her picture was seen) were generally younger themselves, and 2) that her moral critics rated her oldest of all groups when they saw only the verbal context, but youngest by a significant margin when they saw the actual cover girl in the same setting.

SUMMARY

The underlying contention is that mass media content reflects, in ways both explicit and implicit, the imprint of concrete circumstances of its production. This led to the hypothesis that the market-produced editorial and distribution requirements shape the functions of the confession cover design, and that these objective functions—whether consciously recognized or not—impart a subtle meaning to content which is implicitly reflected in the response.

TABLE 3
Questionnaire Responses on Class, Occupation

| | V (N-50) | T (N-40) | P (N-50) |
|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| <i>Class (socio-economic status)</i> | | | |
| Middle and higher..... | 55% | 89% | 84% |
| Lower | 45% | 11% | 16% |
| Class status mean on 9 point scale..... | 4.52 | 5.48 | 5.36 |
| <i>Occupation and activity</i> | | | |
| "Higher type" (including model)..... | 75% | 100% | 96% |
| "Lower type" | 25% | — | 4% |

The findings of the experiment, as far as they go, suggest that the image of the cover girl, and her juxtaposition with the contrasting verbal context, serve well the editorial and distribution specifications required of the cover girl. She resolves her apparent conflict with the lurid titles of the cover—suggestive of the brutal world of the confessions—to her favor. Her dominant image exhibits the human appeal of the heroine menaced by society, but in an overtly unrelated form, insulating her from most ill effects.

Her implicit involvement in the torrent of troubles raging verbally around her enhances, as if by contrast, some of her qualifications. It makes her appear both more immature and less active, hence probably less implicated by (or responsible for) that surrounding. It enhances her consumer and class status, yet preserves the "working class" setting considered necessary for social appeal to the confession market. Her evident success is tinged with the verbally implied risks of failure, and her appar-

ent virtue spiced with the basically innocent sexual attraction of the good-bad girl.

Art editors conceive of the romance-confession cover girl as a projection of the reader's self-image, "a composite of our reader type." Her function on the cover appears to be analogous to the inside heroine's function of identification. The editorial prescription calls for a heroine who may be outwardly plain and sinful, but not unsympathetic. The inherent human attractiveness of the heroine is reflected in the overt beauty of the cover girl; "badness" is implicit in the verbal background.

The confession story heroine—simple, trustful human being against a brutal world—sins, suffers and repents, without consciously and actively grappling with the social meaning of her difficulties. The cover girl in carefree, suspended animation, her eyes gazing confidently into those of the viewer, appears innocent of insight into the tragic meanings around her.

"The more I think about it, the more I am convinced that the radio news analyst would never have achieved his wartime eminence if those men who made the greatest reputations had not already achieved distinction for the contributions they had made to the general cultural renaissance that began about 1910 or '12 and continued into the early 1930's. I am thinking specifically of H. V. Kaltenborn, Raymond Swing, and Elmer Davis who—it is true—achieved their chief fame through the medium of radio but who had already equipped themselves to play distinguished and creative parts in the cultural life of their times.

"They belonged to the generation of Walter Lippmann, H. L. Mencken, and Heywood Broun, three men who found in newspaper work the same outlets and opportunities that others found in radio. It was also the time of Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Ring Lardner, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe; of Robert Frost, Amy Lowell, Edward Arlington Robinson. It was a time when the creative writer and artist flourished, and most of them made their reputations in their twenties and thirties."—QUINCY HOWE, ABC news analyst and former journalism teacher, in address at formal opening of New Mass Communications History Center of State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, January 25, 1958.