Sixty-Four Years of Life: What Did Its 2,128 Covers Cover?

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Authors note: If you print this article, you will need to print each of the 7 tables separately. You can also look up any Life magazine cover by keyword or date between 1936 and 1972 at this link: http://www.life.com/Life/search/cover

Purpose and Introduction

The first cover of Life magazine, dated Nov. 23, 1936, showed a Margaret Bourke-White photo of the Ft. Peck Dam in Montana built by the WPA. The first inside photo displayed a surgical-masked doctor in a crowded delivery room. "With the caption "Life begins," the full-page photo presented a baby boy in the doctor’s gloved hand." [1] That baby was George Story who became a journalist and then a city manager before retiring to Hawaii. On April 4, 2000, only days after it was announced that Life would fold for the second time, George Story died at age 63 of heart failure. "George was always so positive and he really enjoyed his fame as Life's baby," his widow said in the May 2000 issue of Life—its last. [2]

George Story’s life paralleled the story of Life, whose rise and fall became arguably the most spectacular in 20th century magazine history. From its first issue, sales far exceeded even Luce’s expectations. His prospectus predicted that it would take two or three years to reach a “break-even circulation” of 500,000. Nevertheless, all 250,000 copies of the first issue sold out the first day. A dealer in Cleveland, who received 300 copies, telegraphed the publisher’s circulation office: “Life sold out first hour. Could sell 5000 more.” [3] From Los Angeles came the word, “First issue of Life caused heaviest demand…of any publication ever known. Clean sellout. We lost thousands of sales and still a heavy demand.” By the end of 1937, Life’s circulation reached 1.5 million.

Two years after its final issue seems an appropriate time to look back on the history of Life magazine. The purpose of this research, therefore, is to conduct a content analysis of the 2,128 cover images of Life. As the most important page of a magazine, the cover “is the magazine’s face; it creates the all-important first impression.” It must also set the tone or personality of the magazine, attract attention; provide continuity and identification from issue to issue; and lure the reader inside. [4] Most designers and editors agree that a good cover should be “simple, competitive, poster-like and eye-catching. It should express the philosophy of the magazine and be easily recognizable to
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...the reader.” [5] The choice of who or what to feature on the cover becomes not only an editorial one, but can also be “a social indicator of where any group in society is today in terms of importance and value.” [6]

This research will determine whether Life covers functioned as a “cultural artifact,” a “marketing tool,” or both. If the magazine’s covers functioned as both cultural artifact and marketing tool, then it may be concluded that readers bought magazines with covers that accurately reflected social reality. If the magazine cover was only a marketing tool, then readers may, for example, have preferred covers that portrayed beautiful, sexy women or reflected their own insular prejudices. Most academic studies on magazines approach the cover from the “cultural artifact” model. All of the professional literature on magazines, however, assumes that the cover is a marketing tool and give advice to editors and publishers about how to create best-selling covers.

The cultural artifact model looks at magazines as a reflection of cultural demography. These studies, assuming social responsibility on the part of magazines, measure how accurately covers reflect gender, ethnic, or other cultural norms. The marketing tool model, on the other hand, presumes that the cover is simply a marketing decision. Editors and publishers choose cover images on the basis of what they believe will sell the most copies.

Johnson and Christ illustrated the “cultural artifact” model in their studies about women appearing on the covers of Time magazine. Their first study analyzed how and when women were portrayed in Time’s “Man of the Year” covers from its founding in 1923 up through 1984. [7] Their second Time study, “Women Through Time: Who Gets Covered?” was groundbreaking because—rather than choosing a sample of covers—it investigated every single cover of a magazine throughout its history until the current date. [8] Their third study, “The Representation of Women: The News Magazine Cover as an International Cultural Artifact,” analyzed how Time portrayed international women. It also looked at every single cover of the magazine. In summarizing their purpose for studying Time, Johnson and Christ wrote:

To investigate the covers of Time is to investigate an international cultural artifact. The covers, serving as benchmarks to history and culture, indicate which individual women attained power and status in their time. Additionally, the covers, with their indication of occupational status, allow researchers to see what myths or misconceptions, if any, were being communicated. [9]

The same approach is reflected in Cramer’s article, “The State of Women’s Magazine Research,” in which she wrote:

Increasingly the field of mass communications is concerned with media as a social institution…. To address such concerns, scholars focusing on women’s magazines could
conceptualize their work within theoretical frameworks that situate media within their particular social, historical and political context and that would enable a focus on questions of ideology and the meanings that are either conveyed through texts or determined by readers. [10]

*Life*’s revenue losses in the 1960s and early 1970s brought it to a staggering halt with its last weekly issue on Dec. 29, 1972. *Life* reached a circulation high in 1969—8.5 million—when it took one million *Saturday Evening Post* subscribers after the *Post* died in February of that year. But *Life* could never attract sufficient advertising revenues to offset the cheap subscription rates it had to offer to sustain that many readers. A 1972 study by the Association of National Advertisers, for example, found that *Life* sold an average of 80 percent of its subscriptions at less than the basic price. [11] In a series of moves, *Life* reduced its rate base to 5.5 million by 1972. By this time, “*Life*’s operating expenses exceeded its income by some ten million dollars a year,” van Zuilen wrote. [12]

Re-launched as a monthly by Time, Inc. in 1978, *Life* endured another 22 years, but never came close to the 8.5 million subscribers it enjoyed at its height. In 1980, it reported an average paid circulation of 1,364,800 to the Audit Bureau of Circulations. By 1994, it had reached a circulation of 1,614,700, but declined to 1,558,800 by 1998, the last year of available figures from the Audit Bureau. [13]

*Life* sat itself up to follow the cultural artifact model by virtue of its purpose statement. “To see life, to see the world; to eyewitness great events; to watch the faces of the poor and the gestures of the proud,” read *Life* magazine’s purpose statement in founder Henry Luce’s 1935 prospectus. It continued:

> To see strange things—machines, armies, multitudes, shadows in the jungle and on the moon; to see man’s work—his paintings, towers and discoveries; to see things thousands of miles away, things hidden behind walls and within rooms, things dangerous to come to; the women that men love and many children; to see and to take pleasure in seeing; to see and be amazed; to see and be instructed…. To see, and to show, is the mission now undertaken by a new kind of publication, THE SHOW-BOOK OF THE WORLD…. ”

Did *Life*’s covers reflect this purpose? Or did its covers reflect tried-and-true marketing principles followed by most other magazines? This study will answer that question through a review of the professional and scholarly literature and a content analysis of all of *Life*’s 2,128 covers.

**Literature Review**

**Scholarly literature**

Research on magazine covers is interdisciplinary with studies appearing in mass communication, psychology, history, women’s studies, art, and sociology journals. Most (although not all) of these studies share an implicit or explicit “cultural artifact”
model in approaching the examination of magazine covers.

For example, when Johnson and Christ studied 50 years of *Time* magazine covers, they found that women appeared on covers from 1923 through 1987 only 14 percent of the time—just 482 covers out of 3,386 issues published. In 59 percent of those covers, women were depicted as entertainers or “spouses.” However, they also found that nearly twice as many covers showed women during 1965-1989 (269 covers or 20.6 percent of the time) than during 1940-1964 (147 covers or 11.2 percent of the time). They found that the greatest increase in women on covers came during the 1970s and 1980s. During the 1970s and 1980s, women appeared on 232 covers compared to the 1930s and 1940s when women appeared on 117 covers. [14]

In their third study, Johnson and Christ unexpectedly found that coverage of international women on *Time* covers did not increase in the same proportion as its coverage of American women. “Our third expectation was that international representation would increase through the decades as the USA became more cosmopolitan and international in its orientation,” they wrote. “This was not the case…. In terms of percentages, the coverage of international women was more prevalent in the 1920s, `30s, and `40s than more recently…. When turning to international women, *Time* turns mostly to Europe and mostly to entertainers, artists, socialites and nobility to help sell the product,” they concluded. [15]

The most comprehensive examination of *Life* occurs in the book *Looking at Life*, which is a collection of essays that originated at the conference “Looking at *Life*: Rethinking America’s Favorite Magazine, 1936-1972” held at the University of Colorado, Boulder, in 1995. None of these 13 essays, however, focus on *Life*’s covers. Examining *Life* from an interdisciplinary perspective, these essays are written by scholars in art history, American history, American Studies, journalism, women’s studies and English literature. The two essays that shed the most light on *Life*’s content and readership are the introductory essay "Looking at *Life*: Rethinking America’s Favorite Magazine, 1936-1972" by Erika Doss (the book’s editor) and “Who Reads *Life*: The Circulation of America’s Favorite Magazine” by James L. Baughman. [16]

Malkin, Wornian and Chrisler analyzed covers of 21 popular men’s and women’s magazines for gender messages related to bodily appearance. In an article in the journal *Sex Roles*, magazine covers were divided according to whether readers were primarily male or female. Each cover was reviewed using a checklist designed to analyze visual images and texts as well as the placement of each on the covers. “Analyses showed that 78 percent of the covers of the women’s magazines contained a message regarding bodily appearance, whereas none of the covers of the men’s magazines did so,” they concluded. [17]

Sheppard also studied sex-role images in popular magazine covers. In her study, students rated magazine covers on a seven-point scale that measured their degree of interest in reading each magazine. Her results confirmed that clusters of magazines
reflected sex role images, that males and females differed in their evaluation of magazine clusters, and that “women’s responses to magazine covers revealed traditional versus nontraditional sex role images.” [18]

In an *Art Journal* study, Marquardt examined the covers of international political journals between 1919 and 1936. She compared cover design and colors of “Leftist” and “Rightest” magazines from Germany, the Soviet Union, and United States. She found that despite their increasingly overt political focus, their covers revealed “a consistent use of innovative design and modernist imagery.” With the exception of the four “Rightest” journals, all were printed in black and red—“colors that came to be identified with the radical (i.e., Communist) movement,” she wrote. [19]

Two books about *Life* written by former staff members did not reveal anything about its choice of covers or cover-art philosophy: *The Great American Magazine—An Inside History of Life* by Loudon Wainwright (Knopf, 1986) and *That Was the Life* by Dora Jane Hamblin. (Norton, 1977)

**Professional Literature**

The dirty little secret of the magazine industry is that its “sell-through” rate—the percentage of copies sold at retail outlets—averages less than 50 percent. That means more than half of all magazines sent to retail outlets end up in landfills—not to mention those purchased and later discarded. A successful “sell through” means anything more than 60 percent for most publishers. Magazine editors and cover designers go to great lengths to create best-selling covers.

For example, when Meredith Berlin, the editor of *Seventeen*, joined its staff in January 1997, she wanted to put “Titanic” star Leonardo DiCaprio on the cover, she later told an American Society of Magazine Editors seminar. However, veteran staffers warned her: “Boys don’t sell. Boys don’t sell. Boys don’t sell.” Previous issues featuring a boy on the cover had sold poorly no matter how popular he was, they told her. Nevertheless, she went ahead and put DiCaprio on the May 1997 cover and it became one of the magazine’s best sellers. [20]

Jeff Williams, a circulation consultant in Tulsa, Oklahoma, wrote in *Folio*, the magazine industry’s premier trade journal: “When you talk about newsstand sales in terms of 10,000 copies here and 30,000 copies there, those large numbers all start with a single buyer choosing the magazine from amid hundreds of other options. All newsstand buyers take this step because of the cover. This means that the cover design—the only real tool you have to get potential buyers—has to stand out.” [21]

Click and Baird in their textbook, *Magazine Production and Publishing*, say that a good magazine cover has several functions: “In the first place, there is no other page that has as much responsibility for setting the tone or personality, of the
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magazine. Second, the cover must be dynamic enough in appearance to draw readers to the magazine. Third, it must provide some continuing characteristics that identify it from issue to issue… Finally, it should lure the reader into the magazine.” [22]

Even in *Network Computing*, the editor expressed this philosophy when he wrote: “We use our cover not only to hook you in but also to make a statement about who we are. It’s a fleeting chance to make a first impression, a glance from across the bar—a provocative headline, an interesting image or, hell, practically the entire table of contents.” [23]

At Cincinnati-based F&W Publications, publishers of seven magazines, the circulation department controls the cover decision. David Lee, F&W’s corporate circulation director, told *Folio*: “We take the view that the contents belong to the editor and the packaging belong to marketing. The cover is primarily a sales tool. If we’re trying to achieve retail sales, we should have the final say on the words and images on the cover and how they work together to maximize sales.” [24]

A summary of the conventional wisdom about covers, reflected through the professional literature as well as the author’s professional magazine experience, includes five generally accepted principles

a) Covers with women sell better than covers with men. Even women’s magazines portray mostly women on their covers, as illustrated by the anecdote quoted earlier with *Seventeen* editor Meredith Berlin.

b) Covers with people on them sell better than covers with other objects. Some studies have shown that at least 75 percent of all covers feature one or two people on them. An informal survey by the author of 200 magazine covers on display at a bookstore showed that more than 60 percent of them displayed people on the cover.

c) Movie stars and entertainers sell better than politicians, business leaders, or sports celebrities.

d) Sex sells.

e) Good news sells better than bad news. Most covers emphasize positive, upbeat themes and cover lines.

These principles are summarized in a classic quote from former *People* magazine editor Richard Stolley, who once offered this prescription for magazine covers: “Young is better than old. Pretty is better than ugly. Rich is better than poor. TV is better than music. Music is better than movies. Movies are better than sports. Anything is better than politics. And nothing is better than the celebrity dead.” [25]

**Methodology**
This study undertook a content analysis of every Life cover between its 1936 birth and its second death in May 2000. Cover collections came from three sources: a) the Life magazine website (www.Lifemag.com) with a searchable database of every cover between 1936-1972, which Time, Inc. plans to continue to maintain; b) the 60th anniversary issue (October 1996) containing a photo of every cover between 1936 and 1996; and c) a university library containing bound volumes of all 2,128 weekly and monthly issues. Life published a number of special issues in addition to its monthly and weekly issues. Because they were often linked to current events, they were excluded from this study because they might not reflect typical content and choices made by the editors.

The content was analyzed according to type and theme of cover image. The type of image described the nature of persons or things depicted on the covers. The theme of the cover image described the story, social trend, or historical event the particular cover was depicting.

Unlike Time, which had personality-centered covers, some Life covers included photos of “things” such as animals, nature scenes, aircraft, and machinery. Time, as Johnson and Christ pointed out, has practiced “personality journalism.” Almost invariably, Time’s cover stories have been built around an individual. Life, on the other hand, had a broader purpose: “To see strange things—machines, armies, multitudes, shadows in the jungle and on the moon; to see man’s work—his paintings, towers and discoveries; to see things thousands of miles away, things hidden behind walls and within rooms, things dangerous to come to,” as Luce wrote in his prospectus. Therefore, the same methodology that Johnson and Christ used in their Time studies will not work for this study of Life. It is necessary, therefore, to analyze both type and theme of cover image.

This study is also distinguished from the Time studies because its primary purpose is not to see how gender or another social norm was reflected on the magazine’s covers (although that is a secondary purpose). Its primary purpose is determine whether the magazine followed the “cultural artifact” goals of its prospectus—to reflect the diversity of the world—or whether its editors succumbed to commercialism and made their covers a marketing tool.

Type of image: For covers with people on them, “type” included gender, American citizen or non-American, and race (white or African-American). The number of people up to two appearing on the cover was also recorded. Any cover with three or more people was recorded as a “crowd.” The rationale for this designation was simplicity in coding. Gender designation is more cumbersome and less meaningful when three or more people are depicted on the cover. Larger numbers of cover persons also raises the necessity of distinguishing between “central” and “non-central” cover persons. The purpose of distinguishing between American and non-American cover persons was to measure cover images against Luce’s stated purpose of making Life “the
show-book of the world.” Did *Life* showcase the world or did it primarily showcase Americans on its covers?

One expectation is that international representation will increase over time. This expectation was also held by Johnson and Christ, who hypothesized that “international representation would increase through the decades as the USA became more cosmopolitan and international in its orientation.” [26]

Measurement of gender and race will also compare cover images with Luce’s stated purpose for the magazine: “To see life, to see the world; to eyewitness great events; to watch the faces of the poor and the gestures of the proud. To see strange things—machines, armies, multitudes, shadows in the jungle and on the moon; to see man’s work—his paintings, towers and discoveries; to see things thousands of miles away, things hidden behind walls and within rooms, things dangerous to come to; the women that men love and many children; to see and to take pleasure in seeing; to see and be amazed; to see and be instructed….” Luce’s goal of “diversity” was prescient of late 20th century social trends, and this research will seek to determine how well he fulfilled that goal.

Since Luce also wanted the magazine to “see strange things” and “to see man’s work,” a large number of covers display non-human images. These non-human images were divided into four types: animals (non-human), nature (any object appearing in nature); technology (any humanly created object); art (painting, sculpture or drawing), and “other.” Each cover type was defined according to strict criteria (see appendix).

Theme of image: The theme was expressed by the image as well as the single, brief cover line that appeared on all of its covers. Fifteen themes were identified in a pilot study of the covers. The variety of these themes also reflect Luce’s broad goals of making the magazine a “show-case of the world.

1— Business/professions: Covers depicting business and commerce themes as well as people identified in any particular occupational or career category.

2— Leisure or recreational activities: Includes anything people do with their leisure time.

3— Movies/entertainers: Entertainers, including movie stars, singers, dancers, comedians, etc.

4— Politics, government or government leaders: Includes elective and appointive office holders as well as candidates for public office. Also includes the British and other European nobility.

5— Religion or religious leaders: Includes leaders of organized religions or any issue involving religion.

6— Organized sports and athletics: Includes organized amateur, collegiate or professional athletes.
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7—Science and technology: Includes a wide domain of physical or biological sciences, engineering, or scientific research advances. Includes space and space travel.

8—War/military or military leaders: Must be related to specific wars or international conflicts. Does not include civil unrest or protests in other countries.

9—Education: May be related to education at any level and may include students, teachers, or administrators.

10—Fashion: A focus on fashion trends and style.

11—History: A focus on any event, activity or person that occurred earlier in history. Also includes Life anniversary issues and “year in review” issues.

12—Crime and law enforcement: Self-explanatory. May include law enforcement officers or those accused or convicted of crimes.

13—Geographic places: Must include a named city, state, country, or location. Doesn’t include general outdoor scenes that don’t have a proper name.

14—Civil rights movement: Any photos dealing with the civil rights movement, which was mostly in the 1950s and 1960s.

15—Other: Any theme or topic that cannot be easily categorized in any of the other categories. If a cover theme wasn’t easily obvious, it was included in this category.

Covers were divided into two groups, 1936-1959 and 1960-2000, for comparison purposes. These two groups were labeled as the “early years” and the “later years.” While 1936-1960 included only 23 of Life’s 64 years, it also included 1,196 (or more than half) of all 2,128 issues. The magazine was published monthly instead of weekly during its last 22 years.

To ensure accuracy and validity, a second coder was employed to do a content analysis of the same 2,128 issues. Since each issue involved two content decisions—type of cover image and theme of cover image—4,256 choices had to be made by the two coders. Their first comparison of figures resulted in an inter-coder reliability of about 85 percent. The two coders discussed differences and refined the definitions for type and theme of images. After making changes as a result of more clearly defined criteria, a final inter-coder reliability of 97.55 percent was reached.

How can the “cultural artifact” or “marketing tool” approach to cover choice be verified? If covers followed a cultural artifact model, then they will accurately reflect cultural demographics and trends. In that case, a majority of the following three expectations relating to cover images will be met:

a) Because of the civil rights movement, the number of African-Americans on covers will increase significantly after 1960 compared with earlier years.
b) Because of the women’s movement, the number of women on covers will increase significantly after 1960 compared with earlier years.

c) Because of increasing globalization and international travel, the number of non-Americans on covers will increase significantly after 1960 compared with earlier years.

If *Life* covers were used as a marketing tool, then the following expectations will be met:

a) In all decades, a majority of covers in all decades will portray women.

b) In all decades, the number of African-Americans on covers will not change significantly.

c) In all decades, the majority of the covers will portray Americans and not change significantly.

**Results**

The results show some distinct differences between covers from 1936-1959 and covers from 1960-2000. Table 1 shows a dramatic decline in the percentage of covers with people on them and an 80 percent increase in the percentage of covers without people. “Without people” covers included those showing animals, nature scenes, technology, or various forms of art. “With people” covers declined from 85.5 percent between 1936-1959 to 73.9 percent between 1960-2000, while “without people” covers increased from 14.5 percent to 26.1 percent. These results coincided with dramatic declines in *Life*’s circulation during its later years.

Who got covered on *Life*? Thirty-six covers from these 64 years portrayed one or more of the Kennedy family. John F. Kennedy was on 25 covers, while Jackie edged him out to appear on 26 and earn the number one spot. Robert F. Kennedy appeared on five covers while Edward Kennedy was on nine. Rose Kennedy even made a solo appearance on one cover.

Richard Nixon ranked third behind JFK and Jackie in number of appearances by a single individual with 15. Ronald Reagan had 11. But Marilyn Monroe beat him with 13 cover appearances, while Elizabeth Taylor was close behind at nine. Barbra Streisand made four cover appearances.

Royalty, especially female members of the British royalty, were favorite cover figures for *Life*. Queen Elizabeth I appeared on two covers while Queen Elizabeth II appeared on six either before or after her coronation as queen. Her sister, Princess Margaret, appeared on five while Princess Diana appeared on six. Princess Anne and Princess Grace of Monaco both appeared once, as did the queens of Iran and Egypt. The only male royalty figures to appear on *Life* covers were Prince Charles (twice), Prince Juan Carlos of Spain (twice) and the kings of Saudi Arabia and Romania.

*Life* solidly backed the World War II effort and included 132 covers on war themes between 1941 and 1945. The subject matter ranged from depictions of airplanes, ships and battle scenes to regiments, military leaders, and ordinary soldiers in many settings. The strong war coverage continued with the Korean and Vietnam wars, although it wasn’t as frequent as World War II. *Life* devoted its cover and entire March 1991 issue to the Gulf War. “*Life* invented photojournalism,” wrote Managing Editor James R. Gaines in that issue. He continued: “Over the last half century LIFE photographers such as Gene Smith, Carl Mydans, David Duncan, Paul Schutzer and Larry Burrows at great personal risk (Schutzer and Burrows were killed in action) recorded the panoply and tragedy of war in some of the greatest combat photographs ever taken.” [27]

**Gender**

The most surprising result of the study is that the number of covers portraying women declined dramatically between 1936-1959 and 1960-2000 (Table 2). An average of 57.7 percent of “early” covers (1936-1959) portrayed women compared with 44.3 percent of “later covers (1960-2000). These were “women only” covers since “couples” were excluded from gender comparisons. The number of covers with men increased conversely from 42.3 percent to 55.7 percent.

The easiest explanation for this surprising finding is that a high percentage of 1940s and 1950s covers depicted fashion trends, movie stars or other celebrity entertainers. While there was no occupational breakdown, the majority of women on covers were movie stars. For example, Bette Davis (January 13, 1939), Katharine Hepburn (January 6, 1941), Shirley Temple (March 30, 1942), Judy Garland (December 11, 1943), and Gina Lollabrigida (September 3, 1951) are some of the best-known stars appearing on *Life*’s covers during its early years. These cover themes depicted women in entertainment-related roles much more frequently than men. These cover themes were much less common after *Life*’s rebirth in 1978, when covers tended to focus more on issues than on people.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh was the first well-known woman to appear on a *Life* cover who wasn’t a movie star or model. She appeared on the May 15, 1937 cover, while Eleanor Roosevelt was the second when she was on the May 29, 1939, cover. Like
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Lindbergh and Roosevelt, however, most other women on Life’s covers were spouses of well-known men. While a few covers included women sports celebrities, no cover ever included a woman in a leadership role such as president of a corporation or university. Besides the British royalty figures, the only woman political leader to appear on a Life cover was the New York Congresswoman Bella Abzug in June 9, 1972.

Race

The portrayal of African-Americans on Life covers did increase dramatically between 1936-1959 and 1960-2000 (Table 3). The percentage of covers portraying African-Americans jumped from 1.0 percent during the early years (a total of seven covers) to 6.4 percent during the later years (a total of 27 covers). The only cover to portray an African-American between 1936-1939 showed a laborer sitting on the back of a farm wagon of watermelons being harvested from the field. No African-Americans appeared on covers during the 1940s. The six African-Americans portrayed during the 1950s were all sports figures: Jackie Robinson, Roy Campanella (twice), Willie Mays, and Sugar Ray Robinson and his boxing ring opponent. The first non-athlete African-American was entertainer Dorothy Dandridge in 1954. The second was Mrs. Medgar Evers, who appeared on Life’s cover after the 1963 murder of her husband, while Martin Luther King Jr. didn’t make a Life cover until 1966.

Nationality

The number of covers portraying Americans vs. Non-Americans remained constant between early and later years. The percentage of covers portraying Americans was 80.6 percent between 1930-1959 and 83.3 percent between 1960-2000. Therefore, the research expectation that international covers would increase as the USA became more cosmopolitan was not reflected on Life’s covers.

Themes

“Movies and entertainers” was the most frequent cover theme with the exception of the 1940s and 1990s. During the 1940s, almost 25 percent of all covers depicted wartime themes, while “science and technology” led the 1990s. These trends are depicted in Table 5.

A more convenient way of looking at the themes is to divide them into “serious” and “light” themes. For the purposes of this study, a “light” theme depicts an activity in which consumers participate primarily for leisure and recreational purposes. The five “light” themes that were identified included: 1) recreational activities; 2) movies/entertainers; 3) sports/athletics; 4) fashion trends; and 5) geographical places. Although professional entertainers and athletes earn their livelihood from these endeavors, their purpose is primarily to entertain their “customers.” Here are some examples:
1) Recreational activities: a night-time fireworks display illuminating the Casino, Hotel de Paris, and International Sporting Club at Monte Carlo (February 28, 1938)

2) Movies/entertainers: three young actresses (Patricia Neal, Susan Douglas, and Patricia Kirkland) crouched on a snowsled with the cover line “Three Broadway Actresses” (February 3, 1947)

3) Sports/athletics: Swedish skating star Vivi-Anne Hulten performing at Rockefeller Center (January 3, 1938)

4) Fashion trends: an unidentified model wearing a see-through veil with the cover line “Spring Veils” (March 24, 1941)

5) Geographical places: an unidentified Indonesian girl with the cover line “The New Nation of Indonesia” (February 13, 1950)

“Serious” themes, on the other hand, reflect the fields of endeavor in which ordinary people earn their living. They also include the coverage of governmental affairs at all levels, social and criminal justice issues, as well as medical, scientific, and technological advances. Nine “serious” themes were identified in the cover images: 1) business/careers; 2) politics/government; 3) religion; 4) science/technology; 5) war/military; 6) education; 7) history; 8) crime/law enforcement; and 9) civil rights. Here are some examples:

1) Business/careers: closeup of Jane Pauley with the cover line: “How Jane Pauley got what she wanted—time for her kids, prime time for herself” (June 1989)

2) Politics/government: Prince Charles in his Welsh Guards Uniform with the cover line “Prince Charles is 30” (November 1978)

3) Religion: a statue of Mary with the cover line: “Two thousand years after the Nativity, the mother of Jesus is more beloved, powerful and controversial than ever” (December 1996)

4) Science/technology: a space photo of the earth with the cover line “Behold the earth: Startling new photos show our planet as we’ve never seen it before” (April 1992)

5) War/military: a volunteer plane-spotter (Robert J. Boyd, a general store owner) on duty at an outdoor observatory station in Kent, Connecticut, during a minus 20-degree evening with the cover line: “Plane Spotter.” (February 8, 1943)

6) Education: photos of two administrators and a teacher with the cover line “Collision course in the high schools” (May 16, 1969)

7) History: a statue of Marcus Aurelius, last Emperor of Rome’s Golden Age, with the cover line “The Caesars: Madmen, Statesmen and Saints” (June 3, 1966)

8) Crime/law enforcement: a close-up of a loaded pistol with the cover line “Guns are out of control” (April 1982)

9) Civil rights: a photo of marchers from Selma to Montgomery with police standing by as onlookers (March 19, 1965)
This grouping reveals that the “light” themes dominated the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s while the “serious” themes dominated the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. The serious themes averaged 41.2 percent during the early years and 59.8 percent during the later years. The light themes averaged percent during the early years and 38.1 percent during the later years.

*Life* was a different and more serious magazine during the 1990s, at least according to its covers. “Science/technology” themes reached 30 percent—almost double the average for that category from 1936-1989. “Movies and entertainers” dropped to 16.3 percent during the 1990s, its lowest for any decade. “History” covers soared to 14.7 percent while “fashion trends” plummeted to zero. While it became a more “intellectual” magazine in its cover themes, circulation and profitability continued to decline.

**Discussion**

*Life*’s covers followed the marketing tool model during the early years. The most typical cover portrayed a beautiful white American woman who was a movie star or model wearing the latest fashion item. Three categories—leisure activities, movies/entertainers, and fashion trends—accounted for 44 percent of *Life*’s covers in the 1930s, 42 percent in the 1940s, and 50 percent in the 1950s. This finding supports those of Johnson and Christ, who wrote in their 1989 study:

Three hundred forty-six women were categorized into 25 occupations. By far the largest occupation was the artist/entertainer occupation being represented 128 times (37%). Of the 128, 96 were movie stars/actresses, 17 were opera singers, 10 were singers (other than opera), 3 were ballerinas or dancers, and there was 1 painter/sculptor and 1 conductor. [28]

The primary exception to these typical covers was the war effort, which *Life* supported with an unbending patriotism in 132 covers.

Only one of the three hypotheses for the cultural artifact model was met by this study, and that is even debatable:
a) Because of the civil rights movement, the number of African-Americans on covers will increase significantly after 1960 compared to earlier years.

A total of 27 covers between 1960 and 2000 portrayed African-Americans while only seven did between 1936 and 1959 (Table 3). Of those 27, 15 occurred during the 1960s when civil rights turmoil was at its zenith. Almost all of the African-Americans portrayed on covers prior to 1960s were sports celebrities. Overall, *Life*’s portrayal of African-Americans was rather dismal.

Two of the three expectations for the cultural artifact model were clearly not met:
b) Because of the women’s movement, the number of women on covers will increase
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significantly after 1960 compared to earlier years.

c) Because of increasing globalization and international travel, the number of non-Americans on covers will increase significantly after 1960 compared to earlier years.

As we have seen, the number of covers with women (Table 2) declined after 1960. In the 1950s, 64 percent of covers portrayed women with an average of 57.7 percent for 1936 to 1959. That figure dropped to 40 percent during the 1960s and averaged 44 percent between 1960 and 2000. There is no clear explanation for this surprising drop during the same years as the ascendancy of the women’s movement. It also contradicts the findings of Johnson and Christ who found that women appearing on *Time*’s covers increased: “Women were represented the most in the 1970s (113 covers). This was followed by the 1980s (90 covers), the 1950s (68 covers), and 1960s (67 covers),” and the fewest number of women on *Time* covers in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, they concluded. [29]

Finally, the percentage of Americans vs. non-Americans on covers (Table 4) increased only modestly from 80.6 percent to 83.3 percent. The support for the marketing tool model is stronger, particularly during the early years between 1936 and 1959:

a) In all decades, a majority of covers in all decades will portray women.

b) In all decades, the number of African-Americans on covers will not change significantly.

c) In all decades, the majority of the covers will portray Americans and not change significantly.

If you apply these hypotheses to the three decades between 1936-1959, then all three are clearly met. The majority of covers portrayed Americans and women and the percentage portraying African-Americans did not change.

Covers for the later years are more mixed and difficult to analyze according to clear trends. These years included the five-year hiatus (1973-1977) when *Life* was not published. After 1978, the magazine had new editors and a different playing field. Since television, the rules had changed. The most obvious change was the more serious tone of its covers. The “serious” themes now dominated the covers: Politics/government; science/technology; history; crime/law enforcement. Movie/entertainer covers were down as were covers depicting leisure activities, sports, fashion, and geographic places. Serious themes now accounted for almost 60 percent of all covers, while light themes reached just 38 percent coverage.

*Life*’s move from a marketing tool to a cultural artifact model probably did hurt its single-copy (newsstand) sales. Table 7 presents *Life*’s single-copy and subscription sales from 1980 to 1998 and compares them with the magazine industry as a whole. It shows that *Life*’s single copy sales declined 48 percent during these 18 years,
compared to 30 percent for all A.B.C. member magazines. But it would be going too far to suggest that Life’s cover choices had much to do with either its 1972 or 2000 closures. Many factors contributed to its demise, which are beyond the scope or purpose of this paper.

Conclusion

Throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, Life broke the marketing rules for cover sales and also failed as a “cultural artifact” in reflecting the increasing diversity of the United States. It put “things” on its covers more frequently than people; men more frequently than women; and politicians more frequently than celebrity athletes. The editors didn’t listen to the cover-choosing advice of their Time-Life colleague, People magazine editor Richard Stolley, who said: “Young is better than old. Pretty is better than ugly. Rich is better than poor. TV is better than music. Music is better than movies. Movies are better than sports. Anything is better than politics.” [30] It also did a poor job in following the dictates of its founder in being a “Show-case for the world.”

In some ways, the early years of Life more clearly reflected the philosophy of its founder Henry R. Luce, who died in 1967. He felt that the editors should search diligently for two somewhat elusive qualities he called “charm” and “relaxation.” “Charm is the most important quality which Life needs which cannot be extracted from the ordinary processes of journalistic thought. We find that we must definitely plot and plan for Charm. Charm does not come naturally out of news. And the Charm which comes naturally out of the camera is mostly moonlit landscape stuff which we cannot use. Yet we intend that every issue of Life shall have the quality of Charm.”

Speaking of relaxation, Luce wrote: “I think we may also recognize that Life can properly be a relaxing as well as a stimulating experience to the reader. The relation lies partly in this: that Life’s pattern of news and photographic comment is so different from all other patterns of journalism. All week long a man is harassed and his brow is beetled by the headlines of the Times or Daily Mirror—the dreadful war in Europe or the sex-murder in Hollywood…and then along comes Life and its whole angle on news and news value is so entirely different that he takes a holiday from his almost continuous mental preoccupation with the other news patterns.” [31]

Any effort to conclusively analyze, much less quantify, the reasons for Life’s eventual failure will end in futility. One cannot conclude that Life failed because its covers were no longer a “marketing tool” or did not include sufficient numbers of women, African-Americans, or other nationalities.

George Story never knew how close the end of Life magazine followed the conclusion of his own life. He enjoyed his fame as “Life’s baby,” but as George Story’s world changed over 64 years, so did Life’s. Perhaps Life had outlived its purpose and died a natural death. After all, it was 64 years old and few magazines live longer than
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that. When it was young, it was a “gateway to the world” for Story’s parents and Americans who rarely traveled outside the boundaries of their own state. By the 1990s, Americans had inexpensive air travel as well as television and the Internet to give them the spectacular world views that only Life once provided. Maybe Life didn’t follow all the rules it was supposed to follow, maybe it didn’t watch its diet and exercise properly, but it sure had a good time. And so did those of us who loved it.

Endnotes


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[22] Click and Baird, 206


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an International Cultural Artifact,” 220.


