

# Iconographic interpretations of the woman in an ethnic media support: a semiotic approach

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## Abstract

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In this research we explore how, in an occidental context, ethnic iconographic features are used and assembled in an ethnic magazine to represent a target that the media calls “the maghrebin woman” (women with origins from Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria). This targeted and represented figure corresponds to women who are immigrants’ descendants. Several theoretical lenses are suited to sustain this research:

- (1) *Roles and meanings of media for ethnic consumers.* The scope of ethnic media has been studied by sociologists, historians, communication and information Sciences (Ghosn, 2013 ; Rigoni, 2010) but very little in consumer behavior and marketing aside from few studies that deal with the role of ethnic media in consumer acculturation (Peñaloza, 1994; Lee and Tse, 1994).
- (2) *Relationships between ethnicity and consumption, immigrant’s descendants as consumers.* Post-assimilationist research on consumer acculturation identifies first generations of immigrants as “cultural navigators” and “swappers” (Özçaglar-Toulouse et al., 2009; Askegaard et al., 2005; Oswald, 1999); their children have been depicted as “cultural chameleons” (Sekhon and Szmigin, 2011) adapting in both cultural contexts for a better camouflage. This results from a “torn” sense of self (Jafari and Goulding, 2008) and a blurred sense of “origin” versus “destination,” and/or “native” versus “host” (Regany, Visconti, and Fosse-Gomez, 2012; Bhatia, 2002; Bhatia and Ram, 2009; Lindridge, Hogg, and Shah, 2004; Silhouette-Dercourt, de Lassus, and Darpy, 2014).
- (3) *Racialized and ethnic differences* have been researched and explored in consumption and communication studies. (Hence, the representation of Muslim Arabs in American movies (Touzani and Hirschman, 2018) or the Afro-American mixed-race women in U.S. advertising (Harrison, Thomas, and Cross, 2017). They highlight the cultural meaning that derives from those representations within an economic, social and political framework. They offer an understanding of reality through a system of cultural references that define and shift one’s place in society (Schroeder, 2005). Research has tended to focus on the persuasive influence of advertising while ignoring the influence of television programs, magazines and the media in general (Hirschman and Thompson, 1997). Very little research has examined the ethnic media, which has been explored as an acculturation agent of primo immigrants (Lee and Tse, 1994).

In the present research, we explore how ethnic iconographic features are used and assembled in a French ethnic magazine named “Gazelle” that aims at targeting a woman

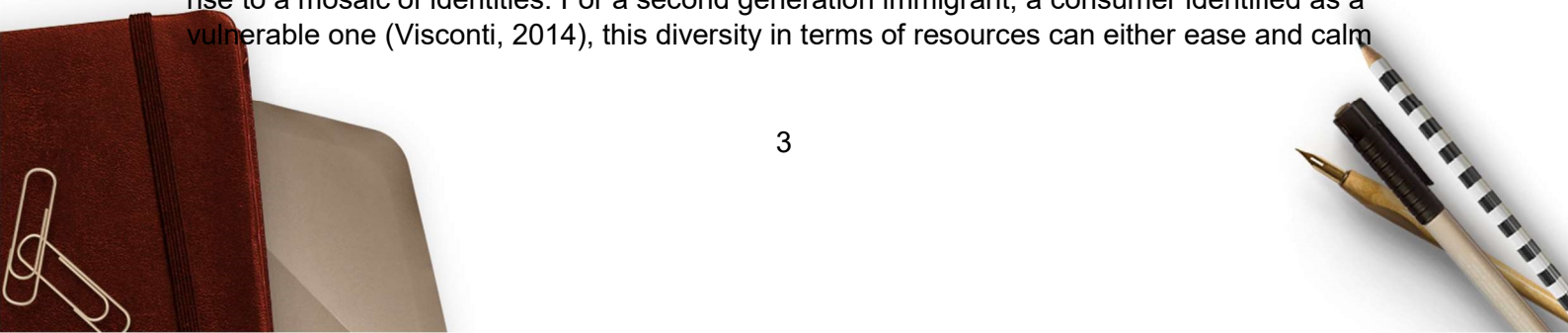
they call “the maghrebi woman”. She supposedly represents a woman with immigrant backgrounds from North Africa (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia). The context of the research focuses on the French-North African ethnic consumers and more specifically, the second generation of women immigrants, also called the “children of migration” (Portes et al., 1999). The context of this research (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011) is the representation and consideration of ethnic minorities in France. France has experienced mass immigration from Europe, Asia and Africa for a century (North-African immigrants and their children being nowadays the first ethnic community) and is a multicultural country, even if it is contested (and sometimes denied) by the political sphere (Withol de Wenden, 2004). France has a history of establishing assimilationist policies, inherited from its colonialist and political background (Modood, 2007) ending in the banning of ethnic statistics and a focus on formal legal equality. A societal debate has, however, been raised concerning challenges to providing public recognition to minority communities.

The data used to explore how second generations of French-North African women are represented in the public sphere are 67 covers of the magazine « Gazelle » for a period of 12 years (starting when it was launched on the French market in 2006). Gazelle is a successful women’s press magazine edited in France, whose main advertiser is L’Oréal’s brand. It was launched by a French woman and is clearly targeted towards woman from North Africa living in France. Whether distributed in newspaper kiosks, in the press area of supermarkets or visible on the internet, the cover of Gazelle magazine is entitled “Gazelle: The magazine of the Magrebi Woman” and exposes visuals to the public sphere. Those images represent marketing signs and messages, producing cultural meaning and perceptions that can be considered as cultural texts (Schroeder, 2005). A socio-semiotic structural analysis has been conducted on the visuals of the 67 covers. A semiotic square emerged (Floch, 1990, 1995; Mick, 1986; Mick et al., 2004; Oswald and Oswald, 2012) and is based on the binary opposition of a *woman from here* opposed to a *woman from over there*, almost geographically distant, confronting a normalized West and a stereotyped Orient (figure 1).

Four identity positions are identified and interdependent:

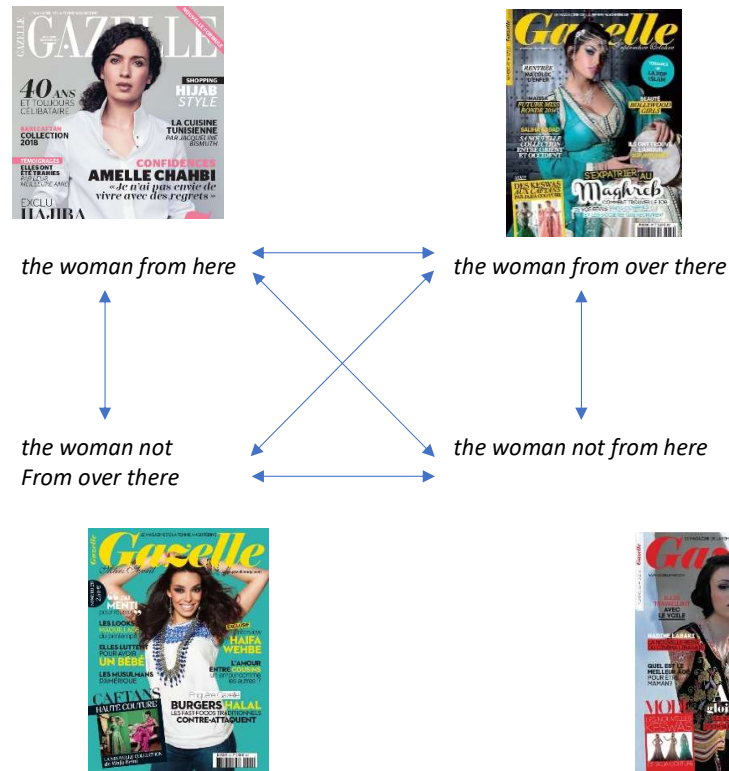
- (1) *the woman from here* (18 Covers) expresses a *desired identity* from the dominant group’s point of view: her “otherness” is minimized;
- (2) *the woman from over there* (25 covers) represents a *fantasized identity* where the woman evolves in the Orientalized universe of the Harem and Arabian nights;
- (3) *the woman not from here* (10 covers) corresponds to a *distant identity* where the woman represented has codes of the country of origin and seem to be in transit from a country to another;
- (4) *the women not from over there* (15 covers) corresponds to an *ethnic identity based on “bricolage”*, where the woman mixes western and oriental codes in an uncomplicated and ludic way.

This research contributes to explain how the media offer cultural resources that give rise to a mosaic of identities. For a second generation immigrant, a consumer identified as a vulnerable one (Visconti, 2014), this diversity in terms of resources can either ease and calm



identity tensions (Zouaghi and Béji-Bécheur, 2011), or enhance the tensions as it blurs and freezes identity cultural references that are known to be fluid, complex and multiple (Oswald, 1999 ; Askegaard, Arnould, and Kjeldgaard, 2005).

Figure 1: The semiotic square



It also enhances the complexity of a cultural sense of belonging that is confused by stereotyped representations of ethnic and origin cultures (Harrison, Thomas, and Cross 2015a). The four female figures emphasize the identity pendulum (Askegaard, Arnould, and Kjeldgaard, 2005; Peñalosa, 1994) and we add it is a symbol of the dynamics of inclusion / exclusion from the dominant culture group's point of view. Indeed, Gazelle magazine offers a space of visibility for a dominated minority group that is under-represented in the mass media in France and it tends to depict an oscillation between the representation of ethnic women who belong to the French nation, and representations of figures who are excluded. In that sense, it contributes to feeding a post-colonial domination relationship between social groups. When opposing a Western woman representation and an Orientalized one, the ethnic media becomes a market space where domination is symbolized. Moreover, the visuals show the figure of a woman that is caught in multiple fantasized representations from here and from over there, emphasizing a sense of nowhere that reinforce a transnational subjective identity (Levitt, De Wind, and Vertovec, 2003). This research also raises the ethical responsibility of market actors such as the ethnic media when targeting and representing a cultural dominated audience, both at the individual and collective level.



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