

## Book Review for Journal of Marketing Management (2014)

*Consumer Culture and the Media: Magazines in the Public Eye* by Mehita Iqani. 2012. Palgrave Macmillan: Hampshire, UK. 200 Pages. ISBN 9780230303683. Hardback. Price £50.

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Understanding the role of media in the (re)construction of consumer culture is an established topic within the literatures of marketing and consumer behaviour research. Traditionally, research in this domain has sought to explain how media images (e.g., online and offline advertising, movies, and print media) disseminate a plethora of meanings, signs and symbols amongst people and how such visual means contribute to people's sense of identity and lifestyles choices (see Featherstone, 1982, 2006; Appadurai, 1990; Slater, 1997; Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Mehita Iqani's 'Consumer Culture and the Media: Magazines in the Public Eye' contributes to this eminent scholarship. In a refreshing manner, the author de-familiarises the reader with magazine covers in newsstands, a context that has been probably too familiar (to most of us) to be scrutinised in sufficient depth. Adopting a multimodal ethnographic approach (participatory observations and semiotic analysis of magazine covers), Iqani calls for a cultural critique of self in a society dominated by the ideology of consumer culture. She invites us to change our mindset about our surroundings in our everyday life situations in which we are surrounded by not only "the operations of the global trade system" but also "symbolically, in terms of the images and messages that saturate everyday life and culture" (page 2). As the author contends, such culture in the commercial imagery of our society fills every aspect of public space, to an extent that it leaves nothing available for visual enjoyment.

The book's main objective is to bring out the complexities associated with what constitutes the production and visual consumption of magazine covers in an overlooked context (newsstands). Set in London, as part of the socio-economic context of the global north, newsstands become particularly important in Iqani's account as they re-direct the reader's attention from the familiar imagery of TV screens, eye-catching billboards, and shopping mall consumptionscapes to mundane spaces in here and there. Iqani sees newsstands as social spaces in which commodities strive for life. Magazines have expiry dates; they live and die on shelves. Their existence depends on the attention they receive from consumers. Such public spaces make magazine covers (comprising texts and images) visible in the public eye. Such public spaces, however, are not politically neutral. Through display and merchandising policies and politics, newsstands managers decide what should be accessible to the public, hence prioritising the appearance of some magazines to that of others'. Such complexities and practices of power in the realm of visibility and visual consumption (Schroeder, 2002) are important as magazines paradoxically create enforced freedom for consumers, a kind of *conditional* freedom. That is, on the one hand, consumers are provided with a plethora of cultural signs to choose from; and, on the other hand, their choices are confined to the commodities manipulatively disseminated by the commercial

visual industry and presented by newsstands staff and managers. This seriously challenges the notion of market neo-liberalism that advocates freedom of choice. As Iqani rightly argues, 'choice' is not completely free as consumers' choices are shaped by and limited to what the policies of production and distribution of magazines make available to them. Therefore, cultural resources of the marketplace are critical to the formation of consumers' identities and consumption of 'sign economy' (Baudrillard, 1993).

The ideology of sign economy remains a pivotal theme in Iqani's meticulous analysis. She demonstrates how mundane spaces such as newsstands become platforms of hyper-reality. Aided by technology, glossy magazine covers become mediated sites of glorification of commodities. Whilst a variety of commodities (e.g., luxury goods) are subjectified and personified by means of catchy texts, human subjects (e.g., celebrities) become objectified as commodities. The ideology of sign economy is also geared towards sanctification of the profane as celebrities are elevated to an inaccessible level, to be seen and envied as unreachable gods and goddesses. Highly aestheticised (with the aid of technology) and de-contextualised (from everyday life situations), these celebrities are presented as ideal models to worship in the realm of consumer culture. This sanitisation of ordinary people further follows the neo-liberal system's policies and politics of utopianisation (see also Bauman, 2000). Explaining the systematic process of eroticising society and nourishing hyper-real sexuality, Iqani's sharp analysis also demonstrates the gender power imbalance as women are constantly nudified on magazine covers. This raises a fundamental question: "[...] what is the viewer expected to do with these images?" (page 129). The outcome of such a hyper-real atmosphere is increasing reflexivity (Giddens, 1990) and psychic turbulence in public. An interesting point Iqani observes is that such images contribute more to appearance and visibility in consumer culture than consumer's participation in this spectacular world. Elaborating this point further, Iqani argues that "pornography has moved from off-scene to on-scene" (page 135). The media industry exploits human need for visual consumption to invade their atmosphere with images of sexiness and looking sexy. At this point, Iqani attempts to tap on the post-feminist literature to discuss the issue of bodily representations; yet, her lack of sufficient engagement with the post-feminist literature leaves her discussion somehow incomplete.

Iqani does not claim that all consumers equally engage with such a sign economy in the same way. She identifies three types of visual consumers: 'drifters' (those who, with no shopping intention, look at different magazines if they have spare time); 'speed-shoppers' (those who have a clear idea of what kind of magazine(s) they want and pick the magazine(s) off the shelf); and 'free-readers' (those who do not have an intention of buying anything and read magazines for free). This typology clearly shows the different ways people interact with the visual context in which they live on a daily basis.

Overall, the book enjoys an inspirational narrative throughout. The photographic data presented in the book facilitate the relationship between the reader and the author. As Iqani acknowledges, the book's main drawback is lack of verbal data from consumers. Given the nature of the book (reflection of a PhD research project), absence of this kind of data is understandable. Although many assumptions made in the book are supported by prior research (citations) and also backed up by the author's own photographic data and semiotic analysis, in depth interviews with people could certainly enrich the book.

The book in its entirety is a valuable source of knowledge for marketing and consumer research scholars, particularly those interested in consumer culture, advertising, and media.

Doctoral students, in particular, can benefit from the book as it represents a completed PhD research project. The final chapter of the book highlights a large number of areas for future research each of which can develop into exciting research projects. The book aligns with the critical stream of research in marketing (see Tadajewski, 2010). Iqani's critical reading of everyday life practices of visual consumption and also the production and dissemination of sign economy is can certainly provide an opportunity for practitioners in the media industry to reflect on their own practice and contemplate how their professional practice may influence the very same society they themselves are part of.

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