

## **Chapter 1 Semiotic analysis of women on the front and back covers of the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla gazette, Mexico**

### **Capítulo 1 Análisis semiótico de las mujeres en la portada y contraportada de la gaceta de la Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, México**

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## **Abstract**

It is known that women's image on the front and back covers is crucial for magazines in commercial and business fields; in academic magazines, nevertheless, the image on the outside doesn't get the same weight since the purpose of these magazines is to inform about the university life that every student, faculty, and administrative staff live day by day. Therefore, the objective of this work is to analyze women's representation on the front and back covers of the *Gaceta Universidad Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla* (BUAP's gazette) from 2012 to 2018. This was determined to identify the identity changes that these images have undergone based on institutional contexts. The chosen method to come to this was a semiotic model based on the proposal of Morris and Vilches retaking the syntactic and semantic dimensions to identify the identity elements of the female student. As a result of this analysis, the following categories emerged to reinforce the image of college women in its different facets: women entering the university; women in university spaces; women in academic activities; and women in sports activities. The analysis of these images leads us to conclude that the college women's representation is observed in two administrative periods of the rector's office, one of which women were represented from the gender stereotypes assigned to women; nevertheless, the other period shows a change in the representation of college women with more inclusive images influenced by the policies of gender mainstreaming in higher education.

**Image semiotic, College woman, Academic magazine, Front covers, Back covers**

## **Resumen**

Se sabe que la imagen de la mujer en las portadas y contraportadas de las revistas en los ámbitos comerciales y empresariales son muy importantes para la atención del lector y la venta de éstas, sin embargo, en las revistas del ámbito académico no se le da el mismo peso a la imagen en los exteriores, ya que el propósito de éstas es informar acerca de la vida universitaria que viven día a día cada estudiante, docente y administrativo. Por ende, el objetivo de este trabajo es analizar la representación de la mujer en las portadas y contraportadas de la *Gaceta Universidad Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla* de los años 2012 a 2018 para identificar los cambios identitarios que han sufrido estas imágenes con base en los contextos institucionales. La metodología utilizada fue un modelo semiótico basado en la propuesta de Morris y Vilches retomando las dimensiones sintáctica y semántica para identificar los elementos identitarios de la mujer estudiantil. Como resultado de este análisis surgieron las siguientes categorías para reforzar la imagen de la mujer universitaria en sus diferentes facetas: mujeres ingresando a la universidad; mujeres en los espacios universitarios; mujeres en actividades académicas; y mujeres en actividades deportivas. El análisis de dichas imágenes nos permitió concluir que la representación de la mujer universitaria se observa en dos periodos administrativos de rectoría, uno de los cuales a la mujer se le representa desde los estereotipos de género asignados a las mujeres, sin embargo el otro periodo muestra un cambio de representación de la mujer universitaria con imágenes más inclusivas influenciadas por las políticas de transversalización de género en la educación superior.

**Semiótica, sintaxis, Semántica, Gaceta, Representación**

## **1. Introduction**

For several years, women have been considered to be an important element of the front and back covers of printed and digital magazines to attract the reader's attention. The image of women has been a crucial element in the sale and production of these products, especially in advertising magazines. In some cases, such as on the covers of sports magazines, the presence of women continues to be practically inexistent as referred by studies conducted in this area (Gómez-Colell, Medina-Bravo & Xavier, 2017). Other studies emphasize the ethnic-racial aspect (Jaimes, 2017). There are plenty of studies of magazine covers aimed at the female population where the representation through images of women is presented from gender stereotypes; an example is the study of content analysis of magazine covers with presence in social networks in Ecuador that Brito-Rhor conducted (2019). In contrast, there are other related studies that present women as a protester, refugee, soldier, and mother and all these roles stand against discrimination and inferiority in Mohamed Shafik Abdelrazek (2022). Likewise, the work of Wardah & Kusuma (2022), show that women are represented as strong, dominant, and independent figures in an animated film, and the element of feminism is moderately presented, both in news agencies and animated films.

However in this paper, we return to the printed media of the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP) to analyze the representation of women on the front and back covers of the BUAP's gazette from 2012 to 2018 to identify the identity changes that these images have undergone based on institutional contexts.

It is necessary to clarify that higher education institutions are producers of subjectivities, identities, narratives, and discourses of men and women, but also of education and professional training, therefore, the tensions that are generated are present in the institutional, political, cultural and educational spheres. Likewise, these representations are framed in an international, national, and local context where gender inequalities and their manifestations through forms of exclusion, discrimination, and violence against women have been established in our daily lives and the university environment is no stranger, which is a challenge for university communities.

Therefore, the greatest challenge of gender mainstreaming in higher education is that politics is not enough to produce cultural changes, the university institutional culture is rooted under a perspective regulated by power and gender that order relationships in social life crystallizing in various practices and one of its expressions is objectified around the representations of women through images.

These approaches to the institutional gender culture make visible the inequalities that persist for women in higher education. Students, teachers, and administrative staff are still far from equity concerning their male peers in higher education institutions in Mexico. Concerning BUAP, few academic works are reporting on gender relations among university students. The book *Violencia de género en la Universidad* (List, 2015) presents some approaches that reflect on this social phenomenon.

There is an undeniable relationship between Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and the spheres of power because it is at this junction where "the imaginary representations of men and women in a given community crystallize" (Palomar, 2005, p. 8). And in this task, representations and discourses are key to understanding this institutional culture, which emerges from social actors from the various power groups.

One of the most important debates in recent times has been that of incorporating the gender perspective in higher education. In response to the question "What does it mean to incorporate the gender perspective in higher education?" "It means promoting an ethical change in institutions so that they incorporate respect for diversity and the search for equity, particularly gender equity, into their axiological systems" (Íbid, p. 11).

In recent years, the debate on the importance of incorporating the gender perspective in higher education institutions has become relevant. On the one hand, there is a need for men and women to coexist in a climate of respect for diversity and the search for equity; notwithstanding, these policies are also a response to the HEI's need to obtain prestige and economic resources, in addition to addressing neoliberal policies in the training of people capable of integrating into the labor market (Jaiven & Cruz, 2005; Zapata & Ayala, 2014).

In 2001 the Mexican State decreed gender equity through the Law of the National Women's Institute as part of its national policy with which all federal public administration agencies in the areas of education, health, labor, etc. had to comply with it throughout the national territory. That is why this work is divided into four parts: 1) the visual representation of university women in the BUAP's gazette, where we contextualize it as a means of institutional communication, as well as the "Manual de Identidad Gráfica BUAP" and gender policies through the "Protocolo para la Prevención y Atención a la Violencia de Género" (Protocol for the Prevention and Attention to Gender Violence); 2) the semiotic model based on the proposal of Morris and Vilches is approached, taking up the syntactic and semantic dimensions to identify the identity elements of the student woman in the front and back covers of the university gazette, taking up eight images; 3) the results of this visual analysis are shown with the categories: women entering the university; women in university spaces; women in academic activities; and women in sports activities; and 4) we conclude that the representation of university women is observed in two administrative periods of rectoría, one of which women are represented from the gender stereotypes assigned to women, nevertheless the other period shows a change in the representation of university women with more inclusive images influenced by gender mainstreaming policies in higher education.

## 2. Visual representation of women in the BUAP gazette

At BUAP, printed publications were for many years the means of internal communication for the university community. The BUAP's gazette is a monthly publication that is currently printed and digital, one of the few magazines that are still printed in the institution. It has a circulation of 10 thousand copies, distributed in all academic units to show the development of teaching, research, cultural dissemination, sports, and liaison, as it is the main publication by the Rector's Office to publicize institutional messages.

It is worth mentioning that the print media have played a leading role in HEI's for decades, as Andión (2005) points out: "As social agencies founded to preserve culture and transmit social and historically legitimate knowledge to new generations, universities have used the media as technological resources since their origin" (p. 11).

Likewise, Martínez (2008) mentions that the press:

*It has a clear social responsibility so that every journalistic product (front pages, news, headlines, etc.) has an impact on the men and women who come into contact with such products. Hence, all responsible journalism has to pay attention to the discursive and visual use in the elaboration of its messages. The covers of newspapers and magazines orient readers towards the vision of the world they want to convey, i.e., they present readers with the information marked by the context in which it is framed and created with a clear objective according to the interests and ideology of the newspaper or magazine in question (p. 155).*

That is why this printed media was taken up again to study the visual representation of university women since we consider that such visual representation transcends the formal aspects of creation, in which the discourses carrying ideologies, worldviews, and meanings are embodied. These visual representations question people and influence their interactions, so it is urgent to be aware of their importance as reproducers of social order among BUAP university students, as they are nowadays the only printed media in force.

The production and circulation of these visual representations about women at BUAP are carried out by one of the dominant actors: the university authorities who create and produce diverse visual representations about university women, changing and contradictory images depending on the interests, the dominant policies, the changes of the actors in power, among others in a dynamic relationship where representations are confronted over time and account for specific social constructions.

Given this context, it is necessary to mention that for the creation and production of the front and back covers of the BUAP the years 2012 to 2018, graphic and content elements were used, which resulted in the "BUAP Graphic Identity Manual" and "Protocol for the Prevention and Attention to Gender Violence".

Regarding gender mainstreaming policies in Higher Education, in 2002, the National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions (ANUIES), of which BUAP is a member, agreed to collaborate with the National Institute for Women (INMUJERES) to incorporate the gender perspective in programs, policies and research projects.

In 2003, INMUJERES created its Gender Equity Model, which consisted of a management system that provided companies, public institutions, and social organizations with tools to assume responsibility for equality between men and women. To this end, a Gender Equity Certification was contemplated as recognition for those organizations and institutions that demonstrated their commitment to equal opportunities.

In 2009, the UNESCO Conference "The New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research for Social Change and Development" promoted gender equity from the perspective of the responsibility of universities to train citizens committed to human rights and equality.

That same year, under the auspices of ANUIES, the National Network of Higher Education Institutions: Pathways for Gender Equity (RENIES) was founded to establish a commitment with rectors and authorities to address gender equity. In its declaration, the following guidelines are presented: university legislation, equal opportunities, reconciliation of professional and academic life, gender statistics and diagnoses with a gender perspective, language, raising awareness in the university community, gender studies in higher education, and combating gender violence in the workplace and at school.

Regarding gender studies in universities, BUAP was a pioneer in founding the Center for Gender Studies in 1995, which is attached to the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters and whose activities revolve around research and outreach. Subsequently, BUAP proposed its Gender Equity Model, which was implemented in the University Hospital and obtained its certification and distinctive in 2009, in addition to being the reference for its propagation to the different faculties, administrative offices, and institutes, likewise the Gender Equity Committee was created to meet all the requirements for certification.

Subsequently, a Gender Equity Model emerged in BUAP in 2014, and in turn, the Directorate of University Accompaniment (DAU) was created, which is in charge of the Coordination of Equality and Inclusion that includes the Program of Attention to Equality to carry out the following activities: training, care and psychological counseling to students in situations of discrimination and/or gender violence.

In 2019, the BUAP released the "Protocol for the prevention and attention of discrimination and gender violence" where different instances and procedures to address the prevention and attention of discrimination of gender violence in the institution are presented.

In 2020, the Institutional Direction of Gender Equality was created with the objective of "institutionalizing and mainstreaming the Gender Perspective, as well as the attention and prevention of gender violence and discrimination at the University" (BUAP, 2021). This direction was born to frame the work in favor of gender mainstreaming that instances such as the Center for Gender Studies and the Directorate of University Support (DAU) had carried out in previous years. These organizations promoted the advancement of actions in favor of equity, among which the "Protocol for the Prevention and Attention to Discrimination and Gender Violence at BUAP", the creation of the Gender Units of the University, and the creation of the Observatory for the Prevention and Attention to Discrimination and Gender Violence stand out.

Considering the aforementioned, there was a visual and content change in the front and back covers of the BUAP university gazette despite the emergence of the "BUAP Graphic Identity Manual" in 2014, which has the function of unifying the graphic elements to achieve a university identity. It is worth noting that these graphic guidelines impacted said gazette, so greater care was taken in the visual representation of the university woman as referred by Martínez (2008): "Images are representations that express certain meanings, hence we have to be critical readers to know what is hidden behind each of the choices that make up this type of text" (p. 154).

We need to clarify that in 2014 the combination of various changes in university identity in the aspect of the institutional visual image together with public policies and the emergence of various agencies that address Equality and Inclusion, achieved the modification of the visual representation of university women in the BUAP gazette.

### **3. Methodology**

The image is an epistemological link and a methodological vehicle for research. Hence, several authors specialized in the use and application of the image, considering it as a new form for the generation of data and its interpretation, as well as the dissemination of knowledge. Belting (2007) emphasizes that "we live with images and we understand the world with images; this living relationship with the image extends equally to the physical production of images that we develop in social space" (p.14). That is why we set ourselves the task of analyzing a visual corpus of front and back covers from the years 2012 to 2018 of the BUAP's gazette. This visual corpus will be analyzed and interpreted as a visual text through two dimensions: syntactic and semantic.

Vilches (1984) indicates that the text can be studied as a set of procedures that determine a discursive continuum, that is, as a semantic-syntactic representation. A photograph can be studied as a visual text by highlighting the syntactic marks (its expressive or signifying plane), and the actualized sememe (its denoted meaning).

Likewise, Morris (1985) distinguishes three dimensions in semiosis: syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. The syntax is considered to be the study of the syntactic relations of signs to each other, abstracting from the relations of signs to objects or interpreters. Semantics is concerned with the relation of signs to their designation and, therefore, to the objects they can denote or denote. Pragmatics is the relation of signs to their interpreters.

It should be noted that in this text-only syntax and semantics will be taken up again as a model for the analysis of the images of the front and back covers already mentioned.

According to Charles Morris (1985) syntax admits:

*The existence of classes of signs, such as individual constants and variables, and predicative constants and variables, which constitute the formal correlates of the various types of indexical and characterizing signs; operators correspond to class specifiers; periods, parentheses, and brackets are resources existing in language to indicate certain relations between signs; terms such as "sentence", "consequence" and "analytic" are syntactic terms to designate certain types of combinations of signs and relations between signs; sentence (or "prepositional") functions correspond to combinations of signs lacking certain indexical specifiers necessary for complete sentences ("propositions"); rules of formation and transformation correspond to how signs are combined or derived from one another by potential or actual language users (pp. 53-54).*

Regarding semantics, "deals with the relation of signs to their designata and, therefore, to the objects they can denote, [...] pure semantics provides the terms and theory necessary to speak of the semantic dimension of semiosis, while descriptive semantics is concerned with actual aspects of that dimension" (Ibid., p.55). That is, semantics allows us to describe some social situation that will be analyzed and interpreted before any spectator.

At the same time, it can be said that a sign "has a semantic dimension to the extent that there are semantic rules (whether they are formulated or not is irrelevant) that determine its applicability to certain situations under certain conditions" (Ibid, p.59).

Within semantics are considered those elements that describe us as a social phenomenon, which can be analyzed and interpreted through semantic rules to understand the representation of university women in the visual media of the BUAP, therefore, in this work, all the front and back covers of the periods 2012 to 2018 BUAP's gazette were consulted. Subsequently, 16 images were selected to identify the identity changes; notwithstanding, only eight images were chosen for the visual corpus of this work.

For the selection of these front and back covers that integrate the visual corpus, the following points were considered: a) the representation of university women through photographic images; b) the representation of university women in various activities: academic, sports, and recreational; c) space of publication of the images: front and back covers; d) date of publication between the years 2012 to 2018.

With all the above, the methodological proposal for this work was based on semiotics emphasizing the semantic and syntactic dimensions to analyze and interpret the eight visual images of the visual corpus belonging to the Gaceta Universidad Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, which was based on Morris (1985) and Vilches (1984) who work on these dimensions. We consider that both dimensions are necessary and useful because the syntax is related to perception and semantics to visual content.

In the dimension of semantics, all the visual elements represented in the image such as objects, actions, spaces, and people were considered to thematically categorize the representation of women considering the following elements: a) physical characteristics of women (age, hair, nose, face, eyes, complexion, complexion); b) poses; c) actors; d) protagonist in the image; e) things; f) actions and g) place.

In the dimension of syntax we find the technical elements of the image: a) device; b) format; c) publication space; d) publication date; e) dimensions; f) printing system; g) typography and h) color. Then there are the compositional elements of the image: a) axis; b) planes; c) golden points; d) angulation; e) light condition; f) depth of field; g) movement.

#### 4. Results

In this research, we obtained the following results based on the two dimensions worked on in the methodology: the dimension of semantics and the dimension of syntax.

##### 4.1 Semantics dimension

In this dimension, we worked with a visual corpus consisting of three front and five back covers of the University Gazette of the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla from 2012 to 2018, selected from the archive of the Directorate of Institutional Communication and Dissemination of the same university; this archive has a digitized collection of this publication from 2011 to 2021 with a total of 126 issues, which can be found at the following link: <https://comunicacion.buap.mx/?q=content/ediciones-gaceta-universidad>

We previously mentioned that the semantics dimension allows us to describe some social situation that will be analyzed and interpreted by any viewer. That is why each front and back cover were considered to arrive at the following classification: 1) women entering the university; 2) women in university spaces; 3) women in academic activities; and 4) women in sports activities.

##### 1. Women entering college

**Figure 1** Cover from issue no. 156



Source: BUAP gazette, 2012

**Figure 2** Back cover from issue no. 211



Source: BUAP gazette, 2012

##### 2. Women in university spaces

**Figure 3** Back cover from issue no. 172



Source: BUAP gazette, 2013

**Figure 2** Cover from issue no. 230



Source: BUAP gazette, 2018

### 3. Women in academic activities

**Figure 5** Back cover from issue no. 180



Source: BUAP gazette, 2012

**Figure 6** Cover from issue no. 217



Source: BUAP gazette, 2017

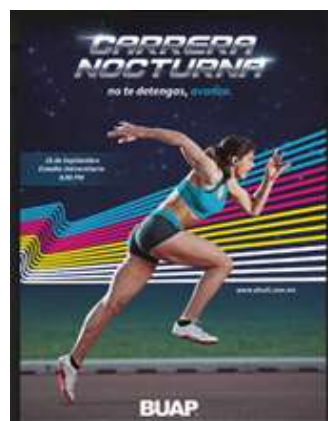
### 4. Women in sports activities

**Figure 5** Back cover from issue no. 178



Source: BUAP gazette, 2014

**Figure 6** Back cover from issue no. 195



Source: BUAP gazette, 2015

#### 4.2 Syntax dimension

In the first dimension of the syntax are the technical elements of the image: a) Device, the three front covers, and the five back covers were taken with a digital reflex camera. b) Format, all images are in digital format. c) Publication space, three images are front covers, 1st liner, and five back covers, 4th liner. d) Date of publication, the images are from 2012 to 2018, of which, one front and back cover are from the same year (2017) and two back covers from 2014. e) Dimensions, all images are 21.5 x 28 cm. f) Printing system, all are offset. g) Typography, there are two large serif and sanserif groups that are interchanged in the publications. h) Color, the blue color is predominant both in the backgrounds and in secondary marking elements such as *folds*.

Regarding the compositional elements of the image we observed in the images: a) axis, all the images are on a vertical axis. b) Planes, in this section we took into account the type of plane in which the women appear, therefore, we have two general planes, two whole planes, two American planes, and two medium planes. c) golden points, all the images coincide with the golden points. d) Angulation, six images were observed with normal angulation and two images in sharp angulation. e) Light condition, we found four images with natural light and four images that combine both natural and artificial light. f) Depth of field, we observed five images with a lot of depth of field and three images with little depth of field; and g) Movement, in six of the eight images we can observe the movement of both the bodies of people and ornamental elements that suggest them.



According to the dimension of syntax, referring to the formal and technical aspects of the image on the front and back covers of the *Gaceta Universidad Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla*, we arrive at the following interpretation: The type of device with which all the images were taken was with a digital reflex camera, which shows the importance of the quality of the image for the type of publication, therefore the format of the images is in digital. In the publication space, we observed that the image of women is not the protagonist, since they appear more on back covers than on front covers, in addition to the fact that they do not appear alone when it is an academic activity.

Regarding the dates of the publications, it is important to mention a breakpoint in 2014, the year in which the institution implemented a new graphic identity system that was strongly disseminated and integrated into all areas including publications. The dimensions of all images are letter size, which complies with international standards for the use of paper. The typography is mostly sans serif type to have better legibility and be part of the visual identity systems of the university.

With all of the above, María Martínez (2006) mentions the different choices we find in texts such as:

The typology of the letters (capital letters, bold, etc.), the size, the colors, and the different ways in which the elements of multimodal texts are placed (above or below, to the right or the left) have an effect on the construction of meanings and conditions how our attention varies when reading a page since there is usually a hierarchical relationship between the different elements (p. 166).

Finally, these two semiotic dimensions allowed us to identify the university life of women on the front and back covers of the BUAP's gazette. The dimension of syntax allowed us to break down all the visual elements which were indispensable for semantic categorization.

## 5. Conclusions

In this paper we undertook the task of analyzing the representation of women on the front and back covers of the BUAP's gazette from the years 2012 to 2018 to identify the identity changes that these images have undergone based on the institutional contexts, therefore, we conclude that these university changes occurred from two periods:

1. The period from 2012 to 2014: the university woman was identified as the main protagonist of the editorial space of the gazette presenting her on the front and back covers as if it were an advertising magazine and not an academic one; that is, the woman was considered as a sales product to attract the reading public, this can be seen reflected in the covers of the gazette of those years, in which the woman is observed in the foreground and the background the elements that refer to university spaces such as buildings, laboratories, and sports spaces. In addition, in this facet it was identified that the graphic elements of the gazette are not maintained under the perspective of an institutional graphic identity manual, which causes the front and back covers to present changes in the color palette, the location of logos, the use of typographies and composition.
2. The period from 2015 to 2018: we conclude that the representation of university women is no longer the main protagonist in the gazette's editorial, now it moves to second or third place, sharing the space of the publication with typographies, texts, photographs of buildings, illustrations and digital backgrounds.

In this facet, the graphic elements are governed by a series of institutional graphic identity guidelines framed in the "BUAP Graphic Identity Manual", which defines a specific color palette in blue, as well as the location of institutional logos and secondary graphic elements such as the frame present on all covers to differentiate the back covers.

Finally, we consider that in the first period, women are reflected with stereotypically feminine traits such as feminine poses, clothing, and aesthetic and colorful accessories that have been representing the cliché of women in the media. While in the second period, due to the inclusion of gender mainstreaming policies such as "Protocol for the Prevention and Attention to Gender Violence" in the BUAP, the representation of university women was modified based on these guidelines, so that a change in the image of university women was observed in various areas: women entering the university; women in university spaces; women in academic activities; and women in sports activities.

It is worth mentioning that the inclusion of the "Protocol for the Prevention and Attention to Gender Violence" and the "BUAP Graphic Identity Manual" foster a university identity in women, which leads them to wear the institution's T-shirt and stand out in academic and sports life. Nevertheless, we must not forget that there will be new challenges in the mentioned protocol and manual, due to the changes in the rector's office management periods. It is important to remember that these terms are every four years with the possibility of reelection for one term only. It is necessary to take into account the social transformations that are lived day by day, which impact university policy decisions at different scales such as UN, SEP, ANUIES, and BUAP.

As female researchers, it remains for us to continue monitoring these changes in the identity of university women in the different media of the BUAP according to what has already been mentioned to have a more equitable identity that shows the diversity of people in university spaces. Likewise, to emphasize the creation and production of visual images of these media since they represent a part of the reality of university life.

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