

Abortion Legalization and Social Representations of Feminism in Argentina

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Over the last few years, the Argentinian feminist movement has experienced remarkable growth in its volume, scope, and public recognition. Positioned within the massive mobilization for the legalization of voluntary termination of pregnancy (VTP), we are interested in addressing feminism as a social movement. Thus, we propose an analysis of social representations (SRs) of feminism as a means of studying collective identity. We also describe the role of attitudes towards VTP legalization as a cleavage that configures two opposing representations of feminism. We took a sample of 772 people from 16 to 81 years of age ($M = 37.8$, $SD = 17.1$). Applying a word association technique, we gathered information about participants' SRs of feminism, together with information about their attitudes towards VTP legalization, political ideology, political interest, the personal relevance of religion, and participation in social and political actions and/or organizations regarding gender and/or sexual diversity matters. Our results evidenced a generally positive representation of feminism, but one that is conditioned by attitudes towards abortion legalization: that is, people who were in favour of VTP legalization expressed positive associations, mainly referring to feminism as a social movement, emphasizing the political dimension. In contrast, people who were against VTP legalization were more likely to hold a mainly negative representation of feminism, exemplified by representations of specific women who act motivated by hatred, resentment, and contempt towards men, and who

express an authoritarian seek for a dominant position in society. We discuss the implications of these results in terms of collective identity.

Keywords: Social Representations, Feminism, Social Movements, Abortion Legalization

In Argentina—as in most of the world—feminism has a long history, and has achieved many of its goals. However, over the last few years, the feminist movement has experienced remarkable growth in its volume, scope, and public recognition; and historical claims have gained visibility in public opinion, penetrating the public agenda. The social movement ‘Ni una Menos’ (in English: ‘Not One Woman Less’), which targets violence against women; the international women strikes during #3M and #8M; and the campaign for the legalization of voluntary termination of pregnancy, are the most salient examples of the current political importance of feminism in Argentina. The National Meetings of Women in Argentina (now termed the Plurinational Meeting of Women, Lesbians, Trans, Intersexual, Bisexual and Non-Binary people) went from convening seven thousand women to more than seventy thousand in a few years. This growth is evidenced by a massive and organized public presence (e.g., concentrations, protests, artistic interventions, conferences, interviews), including the important participation of young people. The massive demonstrations that took place during the public debate on the legalization of abortion in Argentina during 2018 and again at the end of 2020— heirs of the ‘Not One Woman less’ massive protests initiated in 2015—are a clear example of this exponential growth (Bauso Beltran, 2018; Natalucci & Rey, 2018).

This scenario is framed in what has been conceptualized as the ‘fourth wave’ of feminism in Iberian America, which began to recognize the transversality of demands for social justice and human rights protection by proposing intersectionality between categories such as gender, ethnicity, and social class (Matos & Paradis, 2013). Moreover, the feminist claims reached dissemination in the media (Fernández Hasan, 2019), and feminisms began to actively take part in the political agenda and to participate in public policy development. For example, in addition to the debate and subsequent sanction of the Law of Voluntary Termination of Pregnancy (VTP) and the sanction of laws related to subjects such as violence against women (e.g. Micaela Law, Brisa Law), in 2019, the Ministry of Women, Gender and Diversity was created in Argentinean national and subnational governments. This accounts for a tendency

towards the institutionalization of feminisms, and their growing legitimacy as social and political actors (Tesoriero, 2020).

As a whole, this situation enables analyzing feminism not only as a current of thought but as a growing social movement (Peña-Fernández et al., 2020). For its characteristics, feminism can be conceptualized as what has been called a ‘new social movement’ (Lamadrid Álvarez & Navarrete, 2019). New social movements differ from traditional social movements both by the nature of their demands and by their structure and organization. While traditional social movements were mainly organized around economic and social demands, new social movements also dispute cultural and identity issues. Moreover, they have more diffuse, decentralized, and horizontal structures, and they do not place the state as an adversary or an object of conquest (Rabbia & Dreizik, 2017). Thus, symbolic and identity issues are central elements of the problematization around and within these new social movements, and the social representations approach becomes a proper analytical tool for addressing them.

The new social movements approach emphasizes the relevance of addressing collective identity, because of its relevance in the configuration of the movements, their prospects, demands, and possible repertoires of action. The definition of collective identity is complex and it has been treated both as a general ‘one size fits all’ model for explaining collective action and as a residual analytical category (Polleta & Jasper, 2001). This category can be especially hard to address when we refer to inherently heterogeneous, diverse and inclusive social movements. Collective identity is not given but is the result of agreements, negotiations and constructions that involve both cognitive (goals, means, fields of action) and affective dimensions (Melucci, 1991). The result is not a fixed, stable and coherent identity, but it can evidence contradictions that represent internal tensions. Furthermore, collective identity involves the ability to distinguish a ‘we’ from an ‘others’, and to be recognized by those others. Therefore, the context also provides opportunities and constraints, while the conflict provides the basis for the consolidation of group identity and solidarity (Melucci, 1995).

Social representations provide a window to the constitutive elements of the collective identity. Thus, social representations (SRs) enable an understanding of the structure and disputes around the meaning of feminism, addressing the differences between the core elements of the movement’s identity, and the perception and labelling coming from the outgroup.

SRs are practical, socially constructed knowledge, which enables the development of a common sense of reality (Jodelet, 2011). SRs contain cognitive and affective elements, which are hierarchically organized (Moliner & Abric, 2015). The central core perspective—which

guides this research—postulates that SRs are organized as a dual core/periphery system, whose main function is to maintain their stability. More specifically, the central core contains a limited number of elements, which are relatively consensual and stable over time; while the peripheral elements are more numerous, less consensual, and subject to changes over time (Moliner & Abric, 2015). The peripheral system is more flexible and has a defensive function in relation to the central core: if a situation challenges the meaning of the core elements, it is activated and tries to justify it to achieve its durability (rationalization mechanisms) (Wachelke, 2012). Consequently, while the nucleus has a normative character, the periphery is functional (Parales-Quenza & Vizcaíno-Gutiérrez, 2007).

Regarding its social dimension, it is relevant to note that SRs are doubly social: on the one hand, the processes that lead to their construction, development and consolidation, are social; on the other hand, they fulfil a social purpose, since they work as a common framework during communication (Pérez, 2003). Consequently, although they are an expression of individual subjects, SRs must be understood as an appropriation of collectively elaborated knowledge. SRs are neither naive nor innocuous, because cultural, ideological, and group evaluations are at the base of their structure. Moreover, they communicate affective, cognitive, symbolic, and axiological orientations (Pérez, 2003). Consequently, SRs are correlated with attitudes and behaviours towards the social objects they refer to. That is why addressing them is especially relevant when feminism is being debated.

In this frame, it is relevant to note that regional empirical literature addressing feminism as a social and political movement is scarce, especially when it comes to describing SRs of feminism and its political correlates. Some research addressed representations of feminism in the mass media and reported an increased public presence of the topic during the last few years (Fernández Hasan, 2019; Peña-Fernández et al., 2020). However, while articles written by feminist activists sustain positive representations of women and the feminist movement, mainstream representations of feminism continued to be associated with women's victimization (Peña-Fernández et al., 2020).

Regarding general attitudes towards feminism, there is some evidence that more knowledge and more exposure to feminism—through education and personal role models—promote positive attitudes and self-identification with feminism (García Jiménez et al., 2016; Swirsky & Angelone, 2016). Furthermore, a general desire for equality, empowerment and freedom of choice is related to self-identification as a feminist. Conversely, Yeung et al. (2014) found that system justification motives—motivation to believe in the essential justice of the

social system—explained antifeminist backlash: feminists could be specially targeted because of their opposition to the status quo and also by virtue of being less ‘protected’ by social desirability concerns.

In the Argentinian scenario, greater public visibility of feminism and, in particular, the prolongation of the public debate on the legalization of VTP, boosted the hostility of certain sectors of society towards feminisms, their demands, and public demonstrations. Indeed, during the last three years, the debate about abortion legalization in Argentina represented a cleavage that politically mobilized broad sectors of society. The length and depth of the informative hearings before the debate on abortion legalization in congress represented a historical milestone for Argentine politics (Lucaccini et al., 2019). Two opposing and very large groups were demonstrating in the streets simultaneously. On the one hand, the feminist movement (and other people more or less identified with its demands), and on the other hand, the pro-life movement which opposed the enactment of the law. Although progressively shifting towards secularism, the pro-life movement has historically had strong religious roots, in particular due to the support of evangelical worship (Gudiño Bessone, 2017). Furthermore, in their most radical expressions, pro-life supporters pressed and threatened legislators and activists, with the aim of stopping the approval of the bill. Both movements had a strong presence on the streets, on social networks, and in the media, and disputed the representations of feminism (Loza & López, 2020). Thus, this scenario challenges the identity of the feminist movement itself, as well as the stereotypes and outgroup representations of the feminist movement. Accordingly, positions towards VTP become relevant for understanding SRs of feminism.

It is also relevant to note that, although the Argentinian feminist movement has consolidated a somewhat unified identity around the campaign for abortion legalization, internal disputes over other issues remain unsolved. For example, with a biological perspective on gender, certain minority sectors of feminism object to the participation of transgender people (Valencia, 2018). Moreover, a discussion persists about the approach (in theoretical terms, but also regarding demands of public policies) to sex work or prostitution, where abolitionist, pro-regulation and intermediate positions coexist (Morcillo & Varela, 2017). Given that the voluntary interruption of pregnancy was legalized in Argentina at the end of 2020, identifying the tensions in SRs of feminism may be relevant for understanding the medium-term prospects regarding the movement demands, and the potential scope of these tensions.

In summary, the main goal of this paper is to address SRs of feminism in an Argentinian sample. We also study attitudes towards VTP legalization, describing the levels of polarization

and their demographic and political correlates. Given the centrality of abortion legalization over the last years, we address the role that legalization of the VTP had in structuring SRs of feminism. Thus, we present an approach for studying relevant dimensions of the Argentinian feminist movement identity, as well as the outgroup's perception of it.

METHOD

Participants

772 Argentinians aged between 16 to 81 ($M = 37.8$, $SD = 17.1$) responded to our online questionnaire. Participants were selected through a self-elected non-probabilistic sampling method. 28.9% of the participants were men, 68.8% were women, 0.4% were transgender or non-binary persons, and the remaining 1.9% did not answer. Regarding educational level, 4.8% of the sample did not complete middle school, 59.8% completed middle school, and the remaining 35.4% had a degree or superior education. Besides, 70.1% of participants who had completed middle school were university students at the time. Thus, it is relevant to note that women and people with more years of formal education were over-represented. This will be taken into account during the interpretation of our results.

Measures

In order to gather information regarding SRs of feminism in our sample, we applied the word association technique (Abric, 2001). More specifically, we provided the following instruction: "If someone mentions the word 'feminism', which are the first ideas that come to mind? Write up to 5 words or brief concepts". The five-word limit was set because that is the amount previous literature suggests that people can spontaneously associate (Wagner & Hayes, 2005).

After the completion of this task, participants received a questionnaire designed *ad hoc* to assess some political cultural dimensions relevant for understanding SRs of feminism:

- a) *Personal position about the legalization of VTP*: participants had to answer—on a scale ranging from 1 = totally disagree, to 10 = totally agree—how much they agreed or disagreed with voluntary termination of pregnancy legalization in Argentina. The score in this variable was used to compose two groups (1-5 = against VTP, and 6-10 = pro VTP), and analyze SRs of feminism within each one.
- b) *Ideological Self-positioning*: participants had to place themselves on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 = totally left (more liberal) to 5 = totally right (more conservative),

three being the centrist position. We also included the options: ‘apolitical’, ‘non-partisan’, and ‘don’t know’.

c) *Political interest*: we applied a locally adapted 6-item scale (Brussino et al., 2009). Participants had to answer—on a scale ranging from 1 = no interest, to 5 = a lot of interest—how much interest a series of political situations generates in them (e.g., political news, political campaigns, and elections). Answers were added and combined in a one-dimensional index ($\alpha = .94$)

Finally, participants answered how important religion was for them (from 1 = not important at all, to 5 = very important), and how frequently they used to involve themselves in social and political actions and/or organizations regarding gender and/or sexual diversity matters (from 0 = never, to 3 = regularly).

Procedure

Data were collected during July 2019 through an online questionnaire comprised of the described data collection instruments. Participants received all the relevant information about the objectives and scope of this research. Moreover, they had to explicitly give their consent before initializing the survey. We also informed them that participation was voluntary and that their answers were anonymous, confidential, and would only be used for research purposes.

Data Analysis

For the analysis of SRs of feminism, we adopted a structural approach aimed at identifying elements of the representation’s central core and other peripheral dimensions (Abric, 1976, as cited in Moliner & Abric, 2015). First, we conducted a lemmatization process to unify different expressions of the same concept (e.g., verbs and substantive forms of the same idea, plural and singular). Then we conducted a prototypical analysis using the software Iramuteq (Vergès, 1992). This process allows analyzing the evoked terms, taking into account both their frequency and order of evocation. As a result, we obtained four quadrants, where the horizontal axis represents the order of evocation and the vertical axis the frequency of the terms. The delimitation of each quadrant was based on the mean sample score for each dimension. Thus, the central core included the most frequent and first mentioned terms. Next, we decided to address positions about abortion legalization as a classification variable, studying differences between people who support and people who do not support this policy. First, we estimated associations and correlations between attitudes towards the legalization of VTP (ordinal scale)

and our variables of interest, applying Spearman’s rank correlation coefficient and Cramer’s V coefficient, depending on the level of measurement of the variables. Then, we conformed two groups of participants: ‘Against Abortion’, including people who answered 5 or below in the question about attitudes towards the legalization of VTP; and ‘Pro-Choice’, including people who answered 6 or more on the same scale. Finally, we compare SRs of feminism of the two groups. Given that the prototypical analysis evidenced a huge dispersion of the evocations (most words and concepts were mentioned only once or twice), we decided to classify them into fewer categories. This classification was made following grounded theory guidelines and it was validated by two independent judges (Strauss & Corbin, 2002).

Then, using RStudio, we conducted two complementary procedures for describing both the most common categories used by each group and the most distinctive ones. First, we computed the evocation frequency for each category and group. Given that the groups have different sizes, we used logarithmic transformation to make them comparable. Then, we plotted the categories in a bidimensional space that allowed us to identify both the relevance of the category for each group and the distance from the other groups in terms of its use (see an example of this procedure can be found in Silge & Robinson, 2017). After, we proceeded to identify the 15 most distinctive categories of each group. This does not mean the most *frequent* categories for each group, but rather those that show the greatest *difference* between groups: they are more used by one group and, at the same time, less used by the other. For doing that, we calculated the log odds ratio for each category using the following function:

$$\log \text{ odds ratio} = \ln \left(\frac{\left[\frac{n + 1}{total + 1} \right] \text{Against}}{\left[\frac{n + 1}{total + 1} \right] \text{Pro}} \right)$$

where *n* is the number of times the category is used by each group, and the *total* indicates the total words for each group (Silge & Robinson, 2017). Then, we plotted the 15 most distinctive words for each group.

RESULTS

After conducting the lemmatization procedure, 3229 evocations remained, the mean evocation frequency being 4.18, which is high considering that five was the upper limit. This could account for certain familiarity and relevance of the concept. Only 36 people did not give any

answer. Moreover, 1246 evocations were unique and 947 words or concepts were mentioned only one time, which evidences the great polysemy of the word feminism. A first prototypical analysis including the words mentioned 5 or more times, included 111 unique evocations, representing only 55.4% of the corpus.

Table 1 shows the structure of SRs of feminism in our sample. The central core was mainly informed by positive evocations (“equality”, “fight”, “rights”, “empowerment”). Besides, abortion was used in three different ways: “abortion”, “legal abortion” and “legal, safe, and free abortion”, the last one being the slogan of the campaign for abortion legalization in Argentina. These results suggest that abortion is a highly salient issue, not only for the feminist movement’s agenda but also for the general public.

Table 1.

Structure of the Social Representations of Feminism ($N = 772$)

		Mean Range $\leq 2,69$		Mean Range $> 2,69$	
		CENTRAL CORE		FIRST PERIPHERY	
		F	Range	F	Range
Frequency $> 16,11$	Equality	156	2.2	Sisterhood	78 2.9
	Fight	150	2.3	Freedom	58 2.8
	Rights	141	2.4	Respect	31 3.4
	Empowerment	57	2.4	Violence	30 3.1
	Women	52	2.4	Legal Abortion	27 3.1
	Abortion	34	1.9	Revolution	22 2.7
	Equity	33	2.6	Violence	21 3.1
	Extremist	28	2.3	Patriarchy	21 3.4
	Fighter	20	1.8	Justice	20 3.5
	Legal, Safe and Gratuitous	20	2.5	Left-wing	18 2.9
	Abortion			Ignorant	17 3.5
	Fanaticism	20	2.4	Deconstruction	17 3.3
			CONTRASTING ELEMENTS		SECOND PERIPHERY
		F	Range	F	Range
Frequency $\leq 16,11$	Feminazi	15	2.3	Gender	15 2.7
	Do not represent me	13	1.8	Diversity	15 3.2
	Resentful	13	2.2	Strength	14 3.7
	Ideology	12	2.0	Intolerant	14 2.7
	Equal Rights	11	1.3	Ni una Menos ¹	14 3.9
	Gender Equality	11	1.6	Trend	12 2.7
	Gender Violence	11	2.5	Change	12 3.8
	Green Kerchief ²	10	2.5	Hate men	12 3.0
	Hembrism	9	2.1	Resentment	12 3.2
	Indoctrination	9	2.2	Empathy	12 3.5
	Politics	9	2.2	Love	11 3.9
	Male Chauvinism.	9	2.6	Union	11 4.1
	Protests	9	2.6	Inequality	10 3.0
	Fight for Rights	9	2.6	Equal Pay	10 3.4
	Women Rights	8	1.5	Independence	10 2.7
	Exaggeration	8	2.0	Incoherence	10 3.4
	Movements	8	2.5	Inclusion	9 2.9
	Crazy Women	7	1.3	Liberation	9 2.9
	Stupidity	7	2.0	Lie	9 2.7
	Marxist	7	2.4	Wrong	8 2.8
			Future	8 4.4	
			Defiance	8 3.0	
			Youth	8 3.9	
			Abortionist	8 3.1	
			Aggressive	8 3.2	
			Power	8 3.4	
			Disrespectful	8 3.2	

Note: *F* refers to frequency of evocation and *Range* refers to the mean evocation rank.

¹ “Ni una Menos” is the main slogan of the movement facing violence against women. It translates literally to “Not one woman less” and it means that women demand femicides to stop.

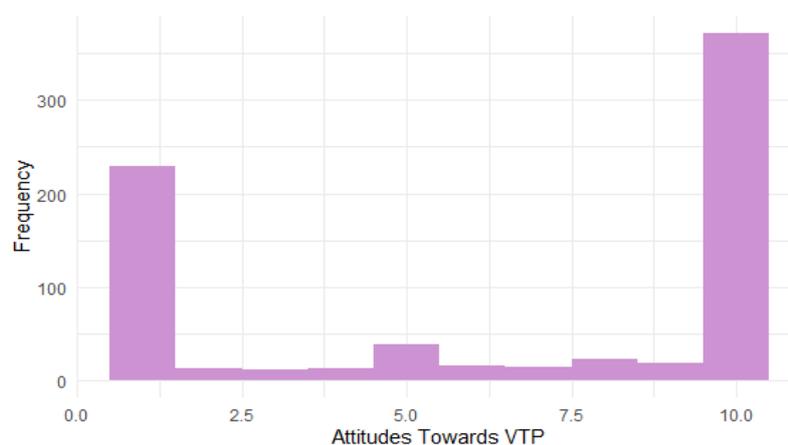
² The green Kerchief has become a symbol of the campaign for abortion legalization in Argentina as well as in many other Latin-American countries.

These predominantly positive associations with the word “feminism” might partially respond to the sample characteristics, given that university students and young and progressive people are over-represented (almost 60% of the sample was Pro-VTP legalization and positioned ideologically from the centre to the left). This could overshadow the representations that other comparatively smaller groups hold. In this regard, the contrasting elements (those highly relevant for a smaller number of people) seem to dispute the positive meanings of feminism, containing many negative and disqualifying associations (e.g. “feminazi”,³ “resentful”, “hembrism”, and “indoctrination”). As can be seen, many of the negative associations refer to extremism or ideology. In most instances where words like “ideology” or “left” were used, they were negatively connoted.

Given the coexistence of these opposing representations, and taking into account the relevance and ambivalent role that abortion legalization played in the SRs of feminism, it is relevant to understand this issue as a cleavage for identifying different groups that might hold different representations of feminism. An inspection of attitudes towards abortion legalization in Argentina evidences a high polarization: 80% of the participants positioned themselves in the extremes: 31.1% of the sample was totally against (0) and 49.9% was totally in favour (10) of legalizing the voluntary interruption of pregnancy⁴ (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Histogram of Attitudes towards Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy in the Sample ($N = 772$)



³ A word used to compare feminists to Nazis, and to suggest that they are violent, authoritarian, and extremist.

⁴ Given that this is not a representative sample of the Argentine population, it must be emphasized that these percentages do not necessarily correspond to the levels of general approval of the legalization of the VTP in the country.

Furthermore, attitudes towards VTP were associated with other demographic and political dimensions: positive attitudes towards VTP were negatively related to personal relevance assigned to religion ($\rho = -.46$; $p \leq .001$) and right-wing ideology ($\rho = -.45$; $p \leq .001$), and positively related to political interest ($\rho = .16$; $p \leq .001$) and gender and diversity activism ($\rho = .29$; $p \leq .001$). Finally, men ($V = .22$; $p \leq .001$) and older people ($\rho = .21$; $p \leq .001$) tend to oppose abortion legalization more, when compared to women and younger people.

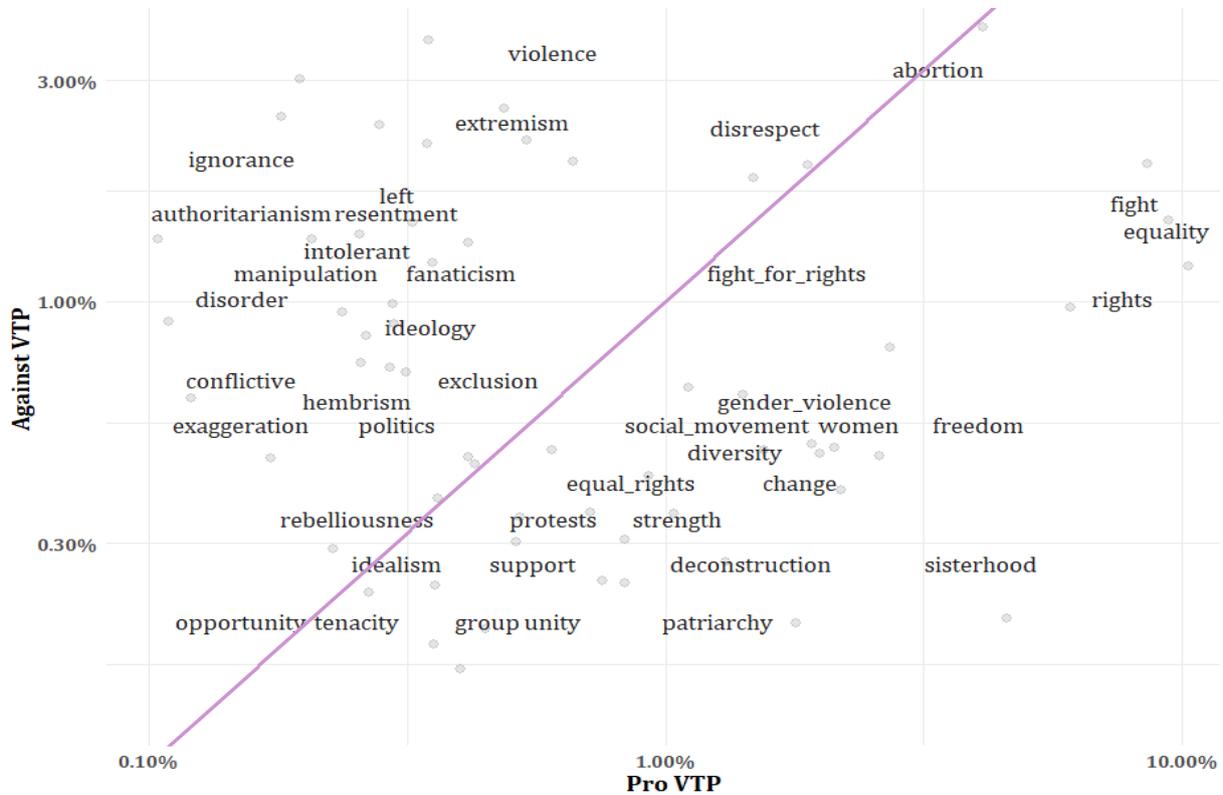
Next, we proceeded with the classification of evocations in a smaller number of categories and of participants in two groups (Against-VTP and Pro-VTP legalization), following the above-described procedures. The group of participants opposing abortion legalization was composed of 325 people, the group in favour of this policy being relatively larger (422 people). Moreover, while in the former the mean evocations per participant was 3.97, in the latter the mean was 4.33. According to social representations theory, this might suggest that the pro-choice group is more familiar with, or more interested in, the issue (Pérez, 2003).

Following the procedure described above, and taking into account only the logarithmic transformation of the frequency of each category within each group, we plotted these categories on a bidimensional space to identify the common categories and the main differences between the two group's representations (see Figure 2). The categories in the upper right quadrant are the most frequently used, while those of the lower left quadrant are the least frequent. Those categories placed on or close to the purple line are similarly used by the two groups. The space above the line corresponds to SRs of the Against-VTP group, and the place below the line contains the SRs of the Pro-VTP group.

A visual inspection shows that the SRs of these two groups have few shared elements, being clearly differentiable. "Abortion" is the most shared and frequent category, which constitutes additional evidence of its centrality. Although less frequent, "idealism" and "rebelliousness" are somehow shared between the two groups, which is interesting given their ambiguous meaning: while for some people rebelling and being idealistic might be a desirable feature (strongly identify with youth), for others these terms might refer to a certain lack of sense vis-à-vis reality or oppositionality. Other shared categories (but with a low frequency) are "opportunity" and "tenacity". In general terms, the Against-VTP group uses almost exclusively negative categories, while the Pro-VTP group does the opposite. The following results provide additional evidence on this matter.

Figure 2.

Spatial distribution of the categories used by Against VTP and Pro VTP groups for representing Feminism.



Note: only categories with four or more mentions are plotted.

Having shown that the SRs of feminism of both groups hardly overlap, we proceed to complement the results identifying the most distinctive categories used by each group to refer to feminism. Figure 3 shows the fifteen most distinctive categories of each group, estimated following the above-mentioned procedure. The longer the bar, the more distinctive that category is for the referred group.

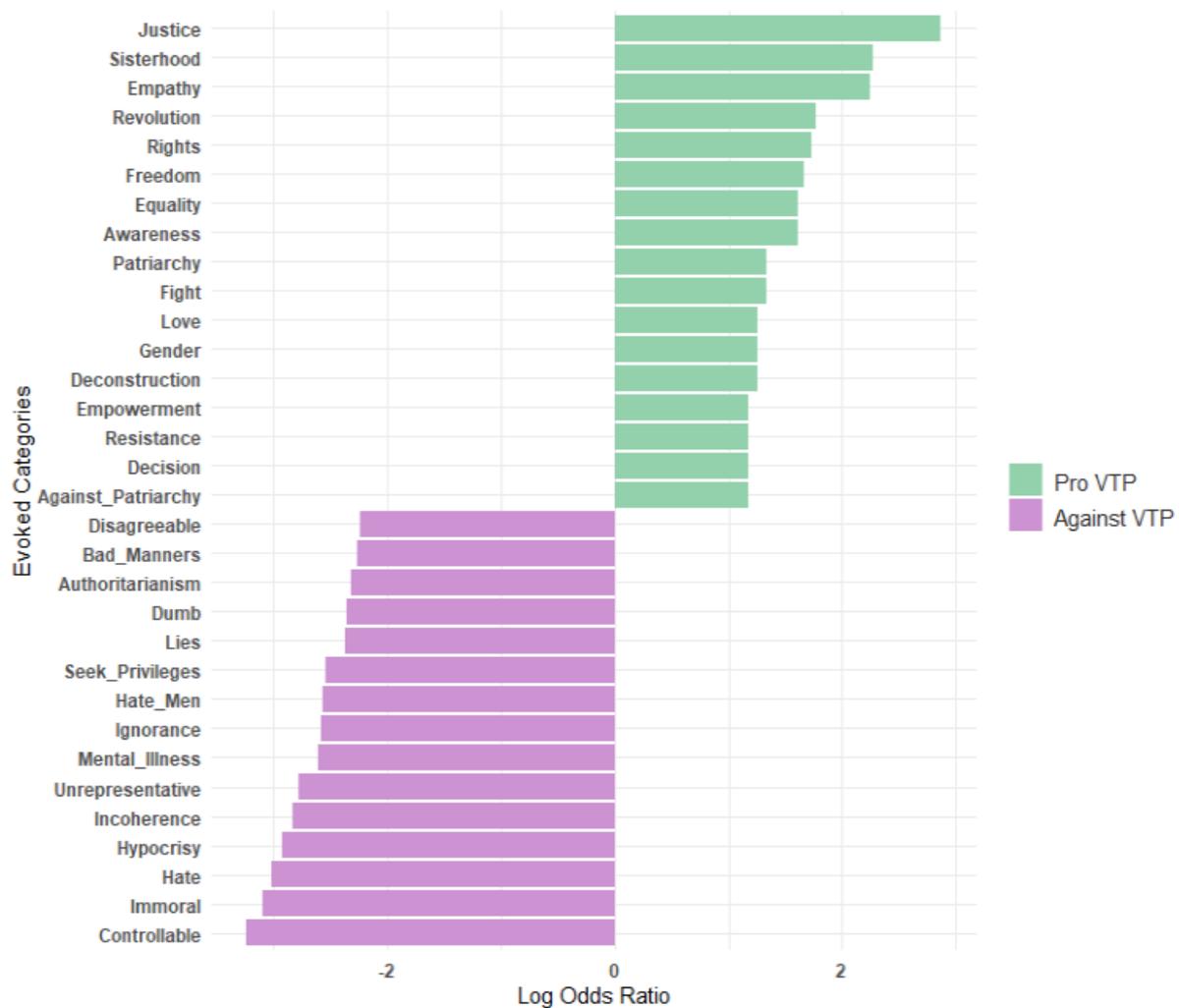
The first dimension to address is the connotation of the most distinctive categories used by the two groups to represent feminism. As we evidenced above, while all the distinctive categories used by the Pro-VTP group had a positive connotation, all the distinctive ones of the against-VTP group were negative. This suggests that the two groups not only have opposing orientations towards abortion but also towards feminism itself.

The second dimension to analyze is the content of those distinctive categories. The Pro-VTP group evoked many more categories regarding feminism as a social movement. Thus, they referred both to the movement's claims (e.g., "equality", "justice", "freedom", "rights"), as well as to categories frequently applied to collective action (e.g., "revolution", "fight",

“empowerment”, “resistance”). The political content of feminism conceptualization in this group is blatant. Moreover, references to affective relations and the bond between women (e.g., “sisterhood”, “empathy”, “love”, and “deconstruction”) were very distinctive.

Figure 3.

Distinctive categories Used by Pro- and Against-VTP legalization groups (Log Odds Ratio)



On its part, the most distinctive categories of the Against-VTP group were disqualifications and—in some cases—insults to feminists (e.g., “immoral”, “incoherence”, “mental illness”, “ignorance”, “dumb”, “disagreeable”). Furthermore, many of those categories conveyed strong negative emotions (there is even direct mention of hate) attributed to feminists. Altogether, they communicate a social representation of feminism personalized in specific women acting motivated by hate, resentment, and contempt towards men, and expressing an authoritarian seek for a dominant position in society. Thus, the political dimension of feminism is almost absent in this group and, when present, is understood as the seeking of privileges or

else noted for being disruptive of the social order. Indeed, this is consistent with some public stereotypes and a stigmatizing treatment of feminist protests by the media (Cebrelli, 2017): during massive feminist rallies in Argentina, some portion of the society and the media focused on minor incidents like graffiti or shirtless protesters, labelling them as violent.

Given these remarkable differences between two highly polarized sectors of society, it is not possible to identify a hegemonic social representation of feminism in Argentina. Instead, there are two opposite representations that dispute these meanings, which are actually hegemonic within each of these polarized groups. Nevertheless, it is relevant to note that, although abortion was demonstrated to be a central cleavage for understanding the SRs of feminism, it is not distinctive of one group or the other: whether you are in favour or against it, the legalization of the voluntary interruption of pregnancy is strongly linked to representations of feminism in Argentina.

DISCUSSION

The main goal of this paper was to analyze the social representations of feminism in Argentina, framed in a scenario where this social movement has acquired a remarkable public and political relevance (Fernández Hasan, 2019; Natalucci & Rey, 2018; Tesoriero, 2020). From the new social movements' theoretical approach, we highlighted the relevance of collective identity configuration for understanding the conformation, actions and prospects of a social movement (Polleta & Jasper, 2001). Moreover, we understand that exposure to positive or negative stereotypes of feminism has an impact on attitudes towards feminism and self-identification as a feminist, which in turn impact the disposition toward collective action (García-Jiménez et al., 2016; Moore & Stathi, 2020; Swirsky & Angelone, 2016). Within this frame, we proposed that public SRs are a key element for addressing the movement's collective identity definition (Jodelet, 2011). We also described the attitudes towards the legalization of VTP and its relevance as a cleavage that polarized the representations around feminism: the positions in favour or against abortion have their correlate in a positive or negative view of feminism (Bauso Beltran, 2018).

Matching the public salience of feminism, the analysis of the SRs showed that feminism is indeed an object with which people are very familiar: almost all the people interviewed were able to generate associations with the concept, and they did so in high numbers. However, as evidenced by the number of associations provided (Pérez, 2003), the personal relevance of the concept seemed to be greater for people who were positioned in favour of VTP legalization

compared to those who were against it. Furthermore, feminism as a concept evidenced a great polysemy, given that—in a sample of 772 people—1,246 unique words or concepts were provided, many of which referred to emotions (e.g., “love”, “hate”, “resentment”) or disqualifying adjectives (“dumb”, “sick”, “crazy”). This could be understood as a sign of people having strong opinions on the subject.

We found no evidence of a hegemonic SR of feminism, but of two opposite representations that came from different social groups. Given the over-representation in our sample of women, young and ideologically progressive people—who tend to be more in favour of VTP and participate more in feminist demonstrations—in a global analysis of the sample, the SR of feminism is dominated by positive content related to the fight for rights, equality, and empowerment of women. This is consistent with previous evidence regarding the growing public relevance of feminism and the dissemination of feminist postulates in mass media (Fernández Hasan, 2019). However, a critical analysis of the core and the contrasting elements of SRs showed the ambivalence in those representations: it was possible to identify a group that—in our sample—is numerically smaller, but who holds predominantly negative representations of feminism.

In the general sample, the positive aspects of SRs of feminism in Argentina referred mainly to political dimensions of the social movement. Thus, it could be said that references to feminism as a social movement predominated (e.g., “fight”, “empowerment”, “rights”, and references to abortion legalization, among others) over references towards feminism as a current of thought. This is consistent with previous analysis of the fourth wave of feminism in Latin America, where collective action is the protagonist (Lamadrid Álvarez, & Navarrete, 2019; Natalucci & Rey, 2018; Tesoriero, 2020). On its part, negative representations of feminism expressed a violent reaction (including insults and disqualifications); referred mainly to concepts related to extremism, fanaticism and the use of violence; and replicated chauvinistic representations of the social order. This is consistent with previous studies that provided evidence for a stereotypical image of feminisms and feminist women, depicted as embodying traits that are not proper of, or “undesirable”, for a woman (Gundersen & Kunst, 2019). It is worth wondering about the role of the mass media and social networks in the construction of those meanings, given that these contrasting representations overlap with a certain hegemonic and simplistic image of the characteristics and role of women in general and feminism in particular (García & Bailey, 2020).

We presented above the socio-political dynamics that made the debate for the legalization of voluntary interruption of pregnancy a key element of the massive presence of feminism in the public space (Bauso Beltrán, 2018; Lucaccini et al., 2019; Tesoriero, 2020). Indeed, abortion showed a central role in the configuration of SRs of feminism in our sample, which is shared by people who are in favour of and against its legalization. It is relevant to point out the high social polarization around this issue, given that 80% of the people in our sample located themselves in extreme positions. Furthermore, those attitudes towards VTP legalization had demographic and political correlates. The strong association between opposition to abortion and a high level of religiosity is consistent with the relevance that religion has historically had for pro-life movements (Gudiño Bessone, 2017). On their part, ideological progressivism and activism on gender and diversity issues were associated with favourable attitudes towards abortion legalization. Furthermore, women and, in particular, young women, were more clearly in favour of this law. This is consistent with the characteristics of the massive mobilizations and organizations for the legalization of abortion (Elizalde, 2019).

Besides, when contrasting SRs of feminism between these two groups, we found that attitudes towards VTP legalization translate into positions towards feminism. Although these groups shared some categories—mainly the mention of abortion—they presented a set of different associations that evidenced a contrasting social representation of feminism. The representation of feminism by the outgroup remained associated with negative stereotypes, probably exacerbated by the public visibility of feminist women and their mobilizations. A certain conception of feminism as the reverse side of male chauvinism was prevalent, also defining it as an extremist and violent ideology. As was the case with the general SR of feminism, among the ingroup, collective action and social protest were core elements of the movements' identity too, which might have been strengthened around the campaign for abortion legalization. However, the achievement of the legalization of abortion at the end of 2020 might rearrange that configuration to some extent and modify these polar representations in the near future. While some of the feminist movement's demands generate polarization or interest very small groups, others bring together broad sectors of society. An example of this is the “Not one woman less” movement and its actions to confront violence against women. Their demands—which are still active—had a more transversal penetration in society as a whole and could configure other cleavages (Natalucci & Rey, 2018). Thus, it might be relevant to replicate these analyzes of SRs, aiming at an understanding of possible transformations and their implications for the feminist agenda.

We were also interested in collecting information about the existence of different representations or elements in tension within the feminist movement. Thus, we expected to find some associations that, despite possibly being less frequent, would indicate the coexistence of conflicting representations. However, these expressions were almost completely absent, suggesting that a somewhat hegemonic collective identity prevails and can transcend the different currents inside the movement. Indeed, we collected some mentions (in all cases with a frequency less than 4) that questioned a certain biological conception of gender or trans-exclusive feminism, some criticism of “enlightened” or middle-class feminism, and mentions to abolitionism or sex work. However, those tensions were subterranean and represented a very small segment in our sample. In contrast, the evidence suggests a collective identity shaped around more abstract concepts such as the fight for equality, freedom and rights and, more specifically, around social mobilization.

This study presented some methodological limitations that should be mentioned. In the first place, although it included people of different ages, educational levels and provinces of Argentina, it was a non-representative sample. Therefore, it is not possible to generalize the results to the population as a whole. Secondly, although the word association technique is very useful for providing a large amount of information, it does not allow one to delve into the more complex dimensions of the construction of collective identity. Thus, it would be relevant to apply complementary techniques in further studies, such as interviews, focus groups and social network analysis. Moreover, as we suggested above, given that VTP has recently been legalized in Argentina, it is relevant to replicate these analyzes and seek changes in SRs. Finally, it would be necessary to address SRs of feminism in people who explicitly identify themselves as feminists.

In any case, this study constitutes a methodologically rigorous approach to a phenomenon of great relevance in the current regional socio-political scenery. We presented a critical analysis of SRs of feminism in Argentina, highlighting the tensions between the collective identity itself and the outgroup perspective. Besides, we delved into the campaign for the legalization of abortion as a historical milestone in the recent trajectory of the Argentine feminist movement, and as a cleavage to understand society's views on this movement. Finally, we raised some pending questions for the analysis of the medium-term prospects regarding the movement's demands and positioning in the public agenda.

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