

The power of the image: the role of social representations

CATHY NICHOLSON¹, SARAH H. AWAD²

¹ London School of Economics and Political Science

² Aalborg University

The theory of social representations has offered a significant and nuanced theoretical framework to gather and interpret knowledge across a wide range of subjects and mediums in order to discuss how different social and material contexts are perceived for the purpose of providing a meaningful foundation to a given reality. The theory has been critiqued and expanded hugely to provide a rich source of intellectual enquiry within social psychology and beyond. However, one area that has received scant attention, is the significance of graphic imagery as a source of data from which to explore social representations within the public consciousness. As imagery in media and social media has become an extension of perceptions of a given social reality, this special issue aims to fill this gap to explore how the power of the image can reflect the diffusion of social representations across our often politicised social and cultural worlds.

KEYWORDS: Social representations, social imaginary, social image, graphic imagery, figurative nucleus, themata, photojournalism.

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INTRODUCTION

From exploring and analysing how the image of Psychoanalysis as a scientific phenomenon was diffused across and within different sectors of French society in the 1950's, Moscovici (1961/2008) developed his theory of social representations (SRT). From its earliest foundations SRT opened opportunities to cross cognitive and social boundaries to suggest that any social object is not simply reproduced in the mind of an individual, but rather embedded within a social construction of knowledge systems across a particular public sphere (Moscovici, 1961/2008, Jovchelovitch, 2007). Common sense thinking uses knowledge and beliefs generated by established cultural and historical experiences, to make inferences from them to develop modalities of knowledge that serve to shape and embed ideas, communications and developing social realities. Central to SRT is the dialectical relationship between the self and Other, where Other's worlds "become part of our own consciousness and all aspects of culture fill our own life and orientate our existence towards others" (Marková, 2003, p. 256). Social representations are thus entrenched within a given culture and context, co-constructed by its members and are not only understood by them, but act as catalysts for both reflection and action. "Representation, communication and language are the only path to knowledge that we have" (Jovchelovitch, 2007, p. 99), and so social representations act as containers of the complexities and contradictions of social and community life. And in so doing maintain social structures and institutions through hegemonic communication systems supporting systems of ideology or to reflect resistance to provoke systems of change through emancipation (Howarth, 2006).

This special issue takes the concept of image as its central theme to explore how different meanings ascribed to it have been interpreted over the years. After discussing this progression and development, we then turn to the wide variety of papers that are central to this issue, to discuss how each adds to the literature in a specific way.

IMAGE AND ITS MULTIPLE MEANINGS

When Moscovici set out to explore the image of Psychoanalysis (1961/2008), he used the term to reflect the exploration of knowledge across distinct populations to depict a certain social reality to them. Suggesting the "idea of an image or social model with a concrete and limited content of propositions relating to specific aspects of the representation's object" (p. 24), the rich data amassed allowed conjecture as to not only how these populations differed in their

understanding and positioning, but also how data was used to access particular knowledge systems within communities. Of particular interest was the inclusion of power relations filtering through the mass media and religious circles effecting different and distinct groups understanding. By bringing together ranges of experiences, vocabulary, and modes of behaviours from an array of origins, the resulting circulation of knowledge of these conceptual images stands as a base from which the unknown, or the unfamiliar, becomes known in a particular way. This process of objectification, whereby nascent socially represented knowledge develops into a specific form through a variety of means, whether as an icon, a metaphor or trope becomes apparent. The resulting construct comes to stand for the new phenomenon and through its image structure, it has the ability to reproduce complex ideas (Moscovici, 1988). Often referred to as the figurative nucleus of a representation leading to the exploration of themata (Moscovici, 1961/2008), it can capture the essence of the phenomenon, and so making it intelligible by interweaving it into the existing fabric of the group's common sense by anchoring it into existing realities (Nicholson, 2017). Thus, the idea of an image as an objectification of a social idea, a conception held in common amongst group members to depict a certain social reality, remains integral to the foundations of SRT.

Increasingly visual images have become central to creating social images of a social object, a direction which holds the capacity to transcend previous knowledge about self and other, both individually and social to mirror a particular social imaginary (Arruda, 2016). Paintings were used as early as the 11th century by European explorers to construct an image of the unfamiliar 'other,' those images had an enduring psychological influence on the perception of non-European cultures (Jahoda, 1999). Since the advent of photography technologies in the mid 19th century, visual representations have also gained significance as a medium across multiple disciplines and industries. It has been used as a tool of power and a method for surveillance and control (Hall, 1997; Tagg, 1988). It has also become a significant medium for collective and individual memory preservation (Barthes, 1981), for social identity constructions (Forrester, 2000), and for disseminating news through photojournalism and shaping people's attitudes and emotions in relation to world happenings (Sontag, 1997).

With the development of the digital camera in the late 1980's and the growing sophistication of smartphone imagery and communication globally, visual imagery has taken centre stage in developing and crystallising social representations within any given social imaginary. Tik Tok for example, one of the world's most popular social media platforms, communicates 14 billion images daily, with an annual rate of 660 billion in 2013 to 1.94 trillion in 2024 (Broz, 2024). This rate of take up, particularly amongst the young is unprecedented as

visual imagery opens discussions between self and society and how social representations develop from previous incarnations and future orientations. This development of image technologies has also made it an accessible tool for resistance, where one can ‘look back’ at authority (Thompson, 2005) and document injustices and mobilize protest movements (Awad & Wagoner, 2020).

Despite the central role that images play in our knowledge and perception of the world, psychological research has traditionally relied mostly on spoken and written language. There is a growing body of research, however, that develops more ways to analyse and use images in research (Reavey, 2012), not only as a practical device to produce knowledge, but also as a way of knowing the world. Research on imagery can cover a wide variety of topics relating to graphic images (e.g., pictures, statues, designs), optical images (e.g., mirrors, projections), perceptual images (e.g., sense data, appearances), mental images (e.g., dreams, memories, ideas), and verbal images (e.g., metaphors, descriptions) (Mitchell, 1984; 1986).

In this special issue, we focus on the graphic images with research on a wide variety of the image including protest art, social media images and memes, documentary film, drawings, comics, and graffiti images. Those images are understood as cultural artefacts, both signs and tools, that mediate our relationship to the world and others (Vygotsky, 1997; Cole, 1996) and as integral to the production, circulation, and transformation of knowledge. Images can be considered to hold the capacity to construct an array of social meanings through processes akin to that of social representations (Ullan, 1995), as every image can present in one way or another the existing social realities of the time while simultaneously comminating something new that revisits those realities (Marková, 2003). This special issue takes the visual image as a central point of research and new thinking within a vastly changing cultural and political world and expands the social representations theoretical traditions through the following empirical contributions.

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Isabel Macedo, Luiza Lins, Tiago da Silva and Rosa Cabecinhas - *Exploring images of otherness through cinema: analysis of counter-visualities in Portuguese films.*

The language of images of the other is central to the genetic components of social representations as they develop and recede over time and place. This paper takes this at its base to explore how experiences of exclusion of those with a history of migration to Portugal navigate their identities steeped within asymmetric power relations. Using three short films,

the extensive analysis highlights the unseen challenges of personal and social realities of those whose collective memories of Western coloniality lies deeply within their consciousness. The study centres on the depiction of the visual representations of the actors set within a portrayal of intercultural and intergenerational dialogue relating to realities of gender stereotyping and racism. The authors conclude how the medium of cinema highlights opportunities for a range of social representations of these epistemic experiences to be given a chance of becoming part of local and global societal narratives, where cultural relationships are given the possibility of challenging the status quo.

Carolina Fernandes and Susana Batel - *The right to stay: Exploring graffiti and street art as political representations against touristification in Lisbon.*

This article addresses a growing problem in Southern European cities, where tourism and gentrification are leading to physical and psychological displacement of local residents. The authors analyze how this problem is addressed through graffiti images in the urban space of Lisbon, Portugal. Graffiti images are here addressed as a form of political participation and as a representations project that negotiate meanings in the public sphere. Through the method of wandering ethnography, different legal and illegal graffiti and street art images are analyzed using Pragmatic Discourse Analysis. The study shows how those images re-present and politicizes the topics of gentrification, tourism, and the housing crisis in a way that reaffirms the residents' right to place and the right to belong.

Louis Joe Kernahan - *The power of the image and the role of social representations in iconographic reproduction: The pink triangle.*

This paper uses the image of a pink triangle in various illustrative forms to denote its significance as an iconic symbol of identity and resistance within the queer community over time. Its original roots as a prisoner marking within Nazi concentration death camps, with a pink triangle denoting Jewish homosexual males, set the profound social representations within an imaginary of an oppressed group facing genocide in Germany. This iconic symbol is traced over time to reveal how its power has remained a dominant force within the queer community through the processes of objectification and anchoring that has remained pertinent to each phase of its ongoing development. The changes of the original image interacting with artistic flair from different artists over a period of many years reflect the particular imaginations of resistance and pride within the community.

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Elif Sandal-Önal and Demet İslambay-Yapalı - *Faces of Citizenship: A social representational inquiry to understand how citizenship as social imagery is described in Turkey.*

This paper investigates how conceptions of Turkish citizenship are expressed in digital media images in response to debates about refugee integration and legal changes in the conditions for acquiring Turkish citizenship in 2022. Through an analysis of image posts on *Twitter* (now 'X') social media platform, the authors show how the use of digital media images can shape attitudes and understandings of groups. Images communicated meanings about citizenship as a legal construct with objective representations and as a sentimental construct with subjective representations. Considering the political tension, many of the images relied on an exclusionary nationalist citizenship construction that essentializes the Turkish ethnic identity category.

Lucas Eduardo Guimarães, Adriano Roberto Afonso do Nascimento, Luciana Célia da Silva Costa, and Márcia Francisca de Oliveira Silva - *Femininity in Superhero Comics: a study of social representations.*

In this study, the authors combine visual content analysis and semiotic methods to investigate the femininity representation in superhero comics, looking specifically at the character of Wonder Woman in four comic book stories published between 1980 and 2012 in Brazil. The findings show that those comic images reproduce traditional ideas of femininity, with little change observed over the years. Despite how Wonder Woman is idealized as one that breaks up with hegemonic femininity, and despite her being presented as a worrier princess that combines strength and independence, the visuals rely heavily on exaggerated feminine physical features that reproduce traditional social representations of what constitutes and distinguishes a woman.

Silvia Gutiérrez Vidrio and Yazmín Cuevas Cajiga - *Memes as Images that Envisage Social Representations in social media. The Case of Internet Memes on Remote Teaching during the COVID-19 Confinement.*

In this paper, digital meme images are investigated as a unit of popular culture that is circulated and transformed by social media users. The authors analyze the use of internet memes during

the Covid-19 in Mexico to comment on and dialogue about the remote online education during the confinement. The findings show how the images were used to make sense of the unfamiliar new situation and share emotions in relations to the challenges faced. The memes captured the different tactics used to navigate the new learning environment, the navigation of private space while being online, the different emotions such as distress and anxiety experienced, and the lack of resources available to support this new learning model. Digital memes are argued to be providing a new visual language in which people communicated in a brief and concise manner their emotions and opinions.

Christiana Karayianni and Charis Psaltis *Social media networks and the networks of meanings as imaginings of the Cyprus problem - A study on the use of images on Twitter as social representations of the conflict in Cyprus.*

Through a complex and computational analysis of 9,815 images tweeted during negotiations of three pertinent political discussions between Greek Cypriot and Turk Cypriot politicians, this paper reflects the usefulness of such a study to open an array of ideas around the diffusion of social representations across societies in conflict. Of particular note is the societal context of generations of people from the two communities having had no physical contact with each other over generations and so the imaginary of the other as mentally constructed, remains culturally embedded and institutionalised. The resulting analysis, in itself a creative breakthrough in visual methodology, suggests patterns of meaning within and across the communication systems in Cyprus that reflects a lack of political will to shift the status quo. The paper highlights the importance of the visual in this communicative context of social media acting as discursive tools that mediates across the cultural and political institutionalised landscape.

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CATHY NICHOLSON received her PhD in 2016 from the London School of Economics and Political Science under the supervision of Caroline Howarth. Her research interests and publications have centred around the dialogical relationships between and across groups in conflict. As an LSE Fellow she has taught on the MSc Social and Cultural Psychology course and as convener of Political Psychology, over several years.

SARAH AWAD is Associate Professor of sociocultural psychology at Aalborg University, Denmark. She received her PhD in Cultural Psychology from Aalborg University and her M.Sc. in social and cultural psychology from London School of Economics and Political Science, UK. Her research interests are in visual culture and the analysis of public images and their influence on identity, collective memory and politics within a society. Her most recent books include *Remembering as a cultural process*, with Brady Wagoner and Ignacio Brescó de Luna (Springer, 2019), *Street Art of Resistance* with Brady Wagoner (Palgrave, 2017), and *The Psychology of Imagination: History, Theory and New Research Horizons*, with Brady Wagoner and Ignacio Brescó de Luna (Info Age, 2017).