

The Imaginary and Social Representations Generated by Fashion Images in Women's Magazines

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The purpose of this research is to clarify the impact of fashion images produced by the media on the imaginary and on social representations, and to analyse the relationships between these two entities. This work therefore focuses on two specific theories and concepts: the "social imaginary" and "social representations". In more specific terms, our aim is to show how fashion images in women's magazines form part of an established social imaginary, generate social representations that give structure to this imaginary, and create fantasies and utopias including the so-called "ideal woman".

Keywords: The imaginary, social representations, relationship between imaginaries and social representations, fashion images, women's magazines, ideal woman.

The media is a key socialisation agent (Reiser, Gresy, 2011). Despite this, women's magazines generally depict a utopian, idealistic image of femininity. In other words, the images of women produced by and published in women's magazines are beautified, glorified and

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idealised versions of reality which, in turn, offer a model of the so-called "ideal woman". That said, women's magazines are also driven by economic motives and are therefore bound to meet advertiser demands and reader expectations. Nevertheless, while the fashion images that they convey are somewhat utopian in nature, they are also governed by the relationship between the broader social representations and social imaginaries associated with women. The result is that the female imaginary portrayed in women's magazines is also influenced by a number of social values and stereotypes. As well attempting to understand how social representations and imaginaries influence the content of women's magazines, it is therefore equally important to consider the impact that social representations and imaginaries have on the manner in which these images are received. It is also important to analyse the relationship between social representations and imaginaries from a representational dynamics perspective. It is against this background that we have produced this research. We begin by discussing the theoretical frameworks that underlie the two concepts referred to herein, defining the perspectives from which these concepts will be addressed, and identifying the relationships which, in our view, connect these two concepts. We then discuss women's magazines, focusing on their economic position and editorial content, address the image of women that these magazines produce, and assess the associated imaginaries. Finally, and based on the premise that women's magazines produce and promote the concept of the "ideal woman", we present the results of an empirical study involving 700 women's magazine readers, the aim of which, is to gain an insight into their social representations of the ideal woman. Because the majority of the images and text that produce and distribute this image of the ideal woman in women's magazines come from the fashion world, our research focuses on the fashion imaginary as one component of a broader female imaginary. In more precise terms, we have looked to characterise the relationships between the fashion imaginary and social representations of the ideal woman.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The imaginary, a theory in its own right

The imaginary is a coherent set of mental productions, or of productions formed by visual or linguistic images that produce meaning (Wunenburger, 2003). It is formed from human

experience, rituals, beliefs and perceptions. It is therefore the result of both shared significance and collective creative capacities.

More precisely, according to Sironneau (1993, cited by Legros et al., 2006), the polysemic concept of the social imaginary can take on three key meanings: the mythical aspect of social existence, the imagination of a utopian society and the day-to-day imaginary that underpins social practices. The imaginary is therefore a fundamental concept in a range of human science disciplines, including philosophy (Foucault, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Ricoeur, Durand, Deleuze, Castoriadis, Taylor, etc.), anthropology (Levy-Strauss, Lombard, Juillerat, Anderson, Wunenburger, Aubree, etc.), sociology (Durkheim, Caillois, Bertin, Bourdieu, Macé, Dagnaud, Seca, Flichy, Tremblay, Pociello, etc.), psycho-sociology (Moscovici, Jodelet, Arruda, De Alba, Moulin, Apostolidis, Kalampalikis, etc.), psychology (Freud, Lacan, Piaget, Anzieu, Bachelard, Dejours, etc.), semiotics (Barthes, Metz, Duflos-Priot, Houdebine, etc.), linguistics (Boyer, Houdebine, Charaudeau, Montes, etc.), communication (Soulages, Lakel, Massit-Folléa, Robert, Musso, etc.) and history (Pintos, Corbin, Laborie, Fourcaut, etc.). Although the imaginary is primarily a heuristic concept, it also provides fertile grounds for empirical research (Corneloup, Debardieux, Buschini, Breton, Vieille Marchiset, Soulier, Coutant, Duflos-Priot, Monneyron, Maffesoli, Hotier, Marillonnet, Balandier, Durand, Violet, Flichy, etc.).

Furthermore, while the imaginary provides the basis for extensive research work in a broad range of disciplines, it is important to note that there are two major approaches to the concept: one narrow and stable, the other broad and dynamic (Wunenburger, 2003). Under the first approach, the imaginary is viewed as no more than the product of the imagination. Under the second, however, it is creative, dynamic and capable of organising images in its own right (Thomas, 1998), images which draw their meaning from the relationships and interactions between them (Grassi, 2005). In this study, we adopt the second approach to the concept, particularly as we also support our arguments by referring to the theoretical framework of social representations and the relationships between the two approaches.

Social imaginary and social representations

Historically speaking, the concept of the imaginary (Charaudeau, 2007) has its roots in classical thought, where the imagination is seen as *fantasia*. The concept was then further developed by Freud and, later, Jung, who uses the notion of "archetypes", which he defines as

types of variable, conscious representation that generate "the dream images of modern man" (Jung, 1964, p 67) and reside in the substratum of the collective unconscious. Parallel to this, Bachelard (1985) questions the relationship between rational and imaginary activity and sets up a contradiction between the world of ideas and the world of images, the latter of which he sees as more powerful and as having a greater influence on being. The third phase in the concept's history coincides with the development of anthropological research, which views myths, legends and social rituals as the organising discourse of human societies. In a similar vein, Durand (1992, 1998) takes Bachelard's work a step further and develops a more general concept of the imaginary, as a force that imposes structure on the images that underlie it and that, as a result, is rooted firmly in a representational universe. In other terms, it can be argued that representations are the elements that give the social imaginary its structure, with the origins of the social imaginary lying in the sphere of social representations. The imaginary is therefore the outcome of a symbolisation process, by which the world is viewed and understood in a specific way, founded on social representations.

Social representations and social imaginary

The concept of social representations, which mainly has its roots in sociology and social psychology, is a cross-disciplinary notion that is used much more frequently than the concept of the imaginary. Nevertheless, these two concepts are rarely compared with each other (Legros et al., 2006), despite the fact that they are undeniably closely related. Moreover, the concept of social representations was introduced into social psychology by Moscovici (1961) and was popularised by Durkheim's concept of collective representation in sociology. In more specific terms, in Moscovici's (1993, 2001) view, collective representations give way to social representations when the diverse origins and backgrounds of individuals and groups are taken into account. This diversity is the result of the division and organisation of labour and the development of more specialised tasks which, in turn, leads to the expansion of knowledge. Furthermore, Moscovici sets up the concept of social representations in opposition to Durkheim's idea of collective representations as immutable guides for every individual member of a society. Indeed, for Moscovici, these social representations are both generated and acquired at the same time and, as such, are constantly changing, both stable and unstable. This is, therefore, a highly dynamic approach, in the sense that different groups are likely to develop and give rise to representations that are markedly different from those of other

groups, and that these groups use psychological and communication mechanisms to produce and transform existing social representations.

Following on from Moscovici, a number of theorists went on to develop a framework for social representations. These included Jodelet (1989, 1997), Doise (1986, 1992) and Abric (1976, 1994), among others. As far as Abric is concerned, social representations result from a process of appropriation of reality. They are specific world views that social groups develop, based on the history and location of the group, and the history of the individuals within the social organisation, as well as the values and social issues that govern the group. They reflect a collective body of knowledge, i.e. what people think they know and what they are persuaded to think about objects, situations or information. They are both “the product and the process of the mental activity through which an individual or a group recreates the reality they are confronted with and assigns a special meaning to this reality” (Abric, 1994, p. 13). Social representations therefore represent implicit knowledge (Abric, 1996) or, as Jodelet puts it, “socially-constructed and shared forms of knowledge, that are practical in purpose and lead to the construction of a shared reality within a given social unit” (Jodelet, 1997, p. 53). Furthermore, “they circulate in discourse, are carried by words, are transported in the messages and images of the media, are crystallised in behaviour and in material and spatial arrangements” (Jodelet, 1997, p 48). More specifically speaking, social representations are, according to Doise (1985,1986), the organising principles that determine the positions that individuals or groups hold within social relationships. Consequently, as Castoriadis (1975) demonstrated, representational activity takes place within a set of pre-determined social behaviours, the purpose of which is to shed light on the relationships between social order and social practices.

In view of these differing, complementary approaches, the theory of social representations may be seen as a theory of social connections. In other words, social representations form the basis upon which individuals understand a socially shared world. These representations create a framework for interpersonal exchange, and are created within and by discourse, image production activities and social practices. In fact, social representations establish themselves within a structure capable of producing social imaginaries. These, as Charaudeau (2007) emphasises, are generated by common discourse and form a coherent system of thought. In other words, social representations are the elements that structure the social imaginary. However, as Doise (1992) points out, just as with social

thought, it is important to avoid seeing social imaginaries as a simple juxtaposition of various representations. Quite the opposite: the social imaginary, in the sense that it develops within the mechanisms of social representations, reflects the complex relationships between systems of knowledge that feature emotions (*pathos*), rational arguments (*logos*), self images (*ethos*) (Charaudeau, 2007), existing representations, developing representations (Salesses, 2005), changing representations (Flament, 1994, Guimelli, 1994), symbols, images, values, ideals and utopias.

In short, the imaginary is the place where shared meaning is created by a collective conscience. It plays a major role in social interaction and, as such, its roots can be traced in representational dynamics. Despite this, very little (if any) work has been undertaken to demonstrate this phenomenon empirically. This is the purpose of this study. The aim of this research, therefore, is to analyse the relationships between social representations and imaginaries. We will do so by conducting a comparative study of the female imaginary as seen in women's fashion magazines and analysing representations of the "ideal woman" among women's magazine readers. Based on the premise that representations of "fanciful" objects are more important than "real" things (Moscovici, 1998), we decided that the representation of the ideal woman was a worthy object of discussion within our proposed theoretical framework. Having identified fashion magazines as a significant, if not the only source of images and discourse about women, we developed the following hypotheses: 1) that the content of women's magazines produces a "fashion imaginary", 2) that this fashion imaginary forms part of a set of underlying representations, 3) that this imaginary has its roots in the representational mechanisms of various social representations, including representations of the ideal woman, and 4) that it interacts with these representations and, by doing so, forms a constituent part of their makeup.

WOMEN'S MAGAZINES AND FASHION IMAGES

Women's magazines, an industry in its own right

Women's magazines first came onto the scene in the second half of the 18th century. Their main objective was to assert the unique contribution of women in the fashion, beauty and literature worlds. Today, women's magazines are the second most popular media group after television (Direction générale des médias et des industries culturelles, 2011). Most of these

magazines sell worldwide and three of them (Elle, Marie-Claire and Madame Figaro) sell on all five continents (Soulier, 2008).

In 2010, the industry (Source: La Tribune de la Vente n°423 / OJD, April 2011) turned over €3.62 billion in France alone, accounting for 38% of total printed press turnover (Source: Ministère de la culture et de la communication, February 2012). Despite the recent economic crisis, statistics show that sales have remained relatively stable. Although total circulation has tended to fall over the last decade (Direction générale des médias et des industries culturelles, 2011), the appearance of new magazines (20ème observatoire de la presse, 2011) has helped to keep turnover at the same level. This ability to resist downward economic pressure is largely due to the capacity of women's magazines to combine printed and online productions successfully. In other words, women's magazines have harnessed the expansion of exclusive online content, forums, blogs and web zones by creating new blog writers and forming reader communities.

In light of their economic and financial clout, women's magazines are a major source of influence in the fashion and beauty worlds, as well as in the education, gender relations, health and diet spheres. Moreover, as the leading press outlet for advertisers (Soulier, 2008), the industry's financial power and levels of coverage make it a key player in the consumer advertising sector.

The place of images in women's magazines

Women's magazines generally contain two types of content – editorial content and advertising. The latter accounts for around 40% of total content ("Chiffres clés de la presse", Direction du développement des médias, Bureau du régime économique de la presse et des aides publiques, département des statistiques, 2007). Since the mid 2000's however, a close link has become apparent between these two components. In fact, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish editorial content from adverts. In more specific terms, advertising now uses the available space in a different way. It is no longer clearly delimited and identifiable, instead becoming more integrated into editorial content. The images that adverts use have also changed, making them much more similar in appearance to fashion photographs in their broadest sense, (Geers, 2010). This growing similarity is even more marked when it comes to beauty product advertising. As a result, there is a very close relationship between the fashion and beauty advertising worlds and the women's magazine industry. This close relationship is

reflected in the clever use of images in both editorial content and advertising. Despite this, there is little analysis of images in press-specific scientific publications and, where images are addressed, the focus is on advertising images. As demonstrated above, however, there is a growing similarity between editorial content and advertising. This makes it increasingly difficult for readers to differentiate between the two, in the sense that this similarity has an impact on the imaginary. We have therefore adopted a strategy of approaching images of women in women's magazines in an inclusive manner, making no distinction between fashion images per se and advertising images.

The image of women in women's magazines

Women's magazines, just like the fashion and cosmetics industries, are founded on the myth of the eternal, ideal woman. The images published in these magazines, a fictional construct written by women, for women, (Darras, 2004) remain nevertheless anchored in reality. By retaining this link with reality, these images reflect a set of existing social practices. They resonate with the public and, even though women's magazines are a vector for women's liberation, they remain dependent on the foundations on which they were built, i.e. the ideal of beauty, the concept of the ideal body and the ideal clothing with which to adorn it. Despite this, women's magazines do not offer a single, stereotypical image of female beauty. Instead, by publishing a wide variety of shapes and forms in their images, they produce a space where representations that form part of a shared imaginary come together. In more specific terms, women's magazines deliver networked representations of the female gender, of the female body, clothing and beauty... indeed, of the ideal woman.

The images published in women's magazines are governed primarily by economic motives, in an attempt to optimise marketing revenue from the clothing and cosmetics industries. These images have a considerable impact on the relationship between media content and reader reception. In other words, the fashion images (in their broadest sense) published in these magazines, which are part of a set of representations which, together, form an imaginary of creative and trend-setting fashion, create social representations that give structure to the social imaginary. They also change existing representations and, in some cases, even create new values or change existing ones. It can clearly be seen therefore, that women's magazines, through the discourse they produce, create and promote a female imaginary: one that is largely rooted in the world of fashion. Consequently, the image of the

ideal woman is primarily conveyed through fashion images in their broadest sense: advertising, fashion photo shoots, fashion shows, celebrities promoting cosmetics and fashion brands, etc. The fashion imaginary is therefore a key component of the female imaginary and, as such, the image of the ideal women is an integral part of this imaginary. In order to test our initial hypothesis, we therefore studied the fashion imaginary as conveyed through fashion images and fashion-related content.

WOMEN'S MAGAZINES : IMAGINARIES AND SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

The fashion imaginary, taken in its broadest sense to include the imaginary of the ideal woman, clothing and beauty and incorporating elements loaded with social and symbolic significance (Monneyron, 2010) such as models' clothing and body shapes, is an aesthetic model that reflects major trends in society and individuals' relationships with fashion, others and themselves. Consequently, the fashion images published in women's magazines are a set of indicators of existing inclinations and concerns, as well as of ongoing transformations. As such, they have psychological, sociological and anthropological significance. It is through the prism of these images that myths and symbols are detected, that conventional collective behaviour (as defined by Barthes, 1957) is inferred, and that standards, aspirations, ideologies, utopias, ideals and even fears are perceived. Fashion magazines are the place where images of women are created, and where these images converge to form a shared "standard", an ideal "goal" that all women should strive to achieve. This ideal is, by definition, difficult to obtain and, in some circumstances, can cause frustration, self-loathing and even psychological disorders.

Fashion images in women's magazines and the imaginary of fashion images

Fashion images stem from forces that shape social events and social changes. In doing so, they provide symbols and messages that create and propagate existing representations and imaginaries of social reality and, as such, influence social change. Consequently, as Monneyron (2001) rightly notes, it is possible, by analysing fashion images, to identify major trends in individual behaviour and social structures. The imaginaries of fashion images also highlight a female imaginary that has its roots in myths, but that has adapted to the characteristics of modern societies.

Those few studies that have been conducted on the imaginary of women's fashion and hence on fashion images which are one of the vectors of this imaginary, reveal that the world is one in constant change. Indeed, in the 1960s, this imaginary was characterised (Monneyron 2001) as much by purity and innocence as by its personification of sexuality. In the 1970s, wisdom, respectability, nature and freedom were the watch words. The 1980s, meanwhile, saw the emergence of a dominating (and somewhat worrying) form of femininity, associated with the growing presence of women in the social and economic spheres and, alongside this, the incorporation of male fears about women into their imaginary. During the 1990s, there was no single, agreed model in fashion magazines. Instead, this decade saw two major trends emerge. The first was a highly sexualised woman, and the second was an almost desexualised woman with a strong personality, capable of succeeding in a male-dominated world through her intelligence and strength of mind, yet still remaining seductive. The fashion imaginary in the 2000s (Marillonnet, 2010) produced several archetypes, including the woman who interacted with society but not with men and, as such, was highly socialised but sexually decimated, and the stereotypical seducer, with her standard clothing, body shape and appearance. Underlying these stereotypes was a complex yet widely accepted female identity, with impeccable yet often subversive seduction skills, borrowed from, but not conforming to, societal expectations and male fantasies of masculinity, childishness or even detachment. The end of the 2000s (Eschwege, Charpentier, 2007, Liaboeuf, 2007) saw the emergence of a more "natural" imaginary in fashion images, associated with the symbolic system of spontaneity. In other words, natural beauty was something to be glorified, albeit discreetly and understatedly, in order to pursue a goal of harmony between an individual and her appearance. Furthermore, two constants can be identified, constants which remain unchanged in the fashion imaginary in every era since the 1930s: the ideologies of slenderness and youth. Each of these ideologies received a substantial boost in a particular period: slenderness (or extreme thinness) in the 1970s, and youth in the 1990s. This concept of beauty, which is highly prevalent in the fashion imaginary, is now no longer as universally accepted as in the past. However, it still remains the dominant image across all forms of discourse, both in magazines and in reality, although evidence for the latter remains somewhat anecdotal. Slenderness is, of course, the main image of beauty as seen in fashion images. However, it is also firmly rooted in the social imaginary, where it symbolises the participation of liberated, independent, dynamic and mobile women in public life. In other words, the slender body shape has become a widely-

promoted image in fashion magazines, in contrast with both history and other cultures, where the seduction imaginary favours feminine curves as symbols of fertility. There is also a certain ambivalence in current discourse, which both encourages and condemns the dominant model, thereby maintaining its status in the social imaginary. Similarly, the ideology of highly attractive youth, which is so clearly visible in these images and yet is often denounced when it crosses over into youth culture, is also part of this deliberate ambiguity, playing as it does on the "natural" dimension of the fashion imaginary. This imaginary is based, more specifically, on a constant adjustment between a desire to change and a desire to remain authentic, i.e. to "get back to nature". However, as noted by Council of Europe's Steering Committee for Equality between Women and Men in December 2011, "while some women's magazines have adapted their publications to reflect the diversity of body shapes, the perfect body policy still dominates". Indeed, the written content of women's magazines is largely dominated by messages about beauty, staying young, losing weight, dieting and changing appearances. This means that, in the press, the perfect body is associated with the qualities of youth, slenderness, thinness and flawless health, promoting exercise and cosmetic surgery as ways to achieve this goal. Similarly, fashion images are dominated by pictures of young, lanky, ultra-thin and naturally flawless women, with many pictures airbrushed to achieve this look. The fashion imaginary therefore presents a flawless, almost unrealistic female image, one that appears to be universally propagated across all fashion images. As such, it proposes (or even imposes) an ideal of female beauty. Nevertheless, since the end of the 2000s, images and written content have begun to appear in fashion magazines that appear to distance themselves, and in some cases even denounce this ideal. Indeed, both magazines and fashion shows have started to use models with much more "curvy" figures. Alongside this, images of more mature women are now being used to advertise fashion collections and cosmetic products. However, an analysis of these images shows that these curvier and older models are no more "ordinary" than their younger, more slender predecessors, even if they do deviate from the ideal of beauty that lies at the core of the fashion imaginary. In other words, these images still represent an "ideal" for those women who identify with the models concerned.

An analysis of the imaginaries of fashion clearly shows that, on the one hand they are long-standing features of our society and, on the other hand, that they are able to incorporate, impose, distort and even anticipate universally-accepted stereotypes and social expectations. By so doing, it is clear that these imaginaries play a role in creating the "ideal woman". Yet, as

Durkheim (1911, cited by Romain, 2011) states, a society cannot be constituted without creating ideals. More specifically, according to Durkheim, ideals are born out of reality and merge with it, eventually surpassing it and becoming a driver of action. Women's magazines are also a key enabling a mechanism through which the concept of the ideal woman is born, where, according to Durkheim, ideas converge to create a blueprint for, and a summary of, social life. Women's magazines play a participatory role in producing the social discourse necessary to social functioning and, as such, to the construction of ideals. In this role, these magazines are a major producer of prototypes, symbols, opinions, stereotypes, beliefs, myths, emotions, attitudes and values. In other words, they produce and express social representations. The role of women's magazines is not, however, limited solely to the propagation of the ideal female model. Indeed, they also play revelatory role. Although they form part of a social dynamic and, in certain aspects of their activity, contribute to social construction, they are also forced to accept (and in some cases reinforce) existing social trends. Consequently, women's magazines draw their inspiration from deep-seated social representations and, through their written content, contribute to creating new representations and changing existing ones. In other words, the model of the ideal woman is not exclusively a construct of women's magazines. Even though these magazines play a major role in propagating this model, they do not offer a single representation, but a multitude of different representations of women which, together, form the female imaginary. These include seduction, beauty, female sexuality, female work, gender relations, motherhood, the feminine ideal, fashion, luxury, etc. Consequently, the social imaginary can be viewed as a way of viewing the world, based on a set of specific imaginaries which, in turn, are born from developing or changing representations that interact with each other.

In light of the developments outlined above, we are able to state with confidence that the way in which social objects are viewed (through analysis of the associated imaginaries) is heuristic in nature, in the sense that it enables us to identify the objects concerned, and their associated contours and movements, although circumventing the content of such objects can only be done with some difficulty. As we have seen above, however, imaginaries are generated in representational mechanics, just as representations draw at least some of their fuel from the imaginary. Consequently, it should be possible to refine our understanding of the social imaginary by analysing the representations that make up this imaginary. Based on the general assumption that the imaginary both grows from, and fuels, the dynamic of social

representations, and having studied how the fashion imaginary has developed and changed since the 1960s, we settled on the following aims: 1) to analyse the content and structure of the representational space surrounding the ideal woman, and 2) to test our hypothesis by assessing the results of this analysis against the fashion imaginary. In more specific terms, given that the concept of the "ideal woman" is drawn from women's magazines and is rooted primarily in the fashion imaginary, it is our intention to: 1) identify those elements of the ideal woman that are present in the fashion imaginary, 2) prove that this representation features components that pre-date changes in the fashion imaginary, and 3) demonstrate that this representation contains characteristics that reflect major social trends that run through both social representations and imaginaries.

Social representations of the ideal woman

The results presented here, which relate to social representations of the ideal woman, are based on 700 female readers of women's magazines, aged between 15 and 55 years old. As such, they represent the core target audience of women's magazines (see Premium study 2011, Groupe Marie Claire). The data were gathered in the second quarter of 2011 and processed using the hierarchical evocation method, inspired by the work of Vergès (1992). This method is used to gain an up-to-date insight into representational content and to form hypotheses about the organisation of this content, with peripheral elements surrounding a central core. In practical terms, the data were collected using the free association technique. This involves using a stimulus word to solicit associated words from the subject and then categorise these words in order of importance. The corpus of data is then analysed by cross-referencing the occurrence and average rank of each evocation. It is then possible to break down the elements of the representation by status. As well as gathering information in this manner, we also carried out 80 semi-structured interviews. The findings of these interviews will not be analysed in this article for reasons of economy. However, the results reflect the trends seen in the data collected and support our findings from these data.

Table 1: The social representations of the ideal woman. Free association analysis, N=700

		Rank \leq 2.3		Rank \geq 2.3	
		Low average rank High importance		High average rank Low importance	
High occurrence \geq 50	Feminine	129	1.488	Graceful	80 2.800
	Feels good about herself	149	2.074	Independent	116 2.534
	Slender	131	2.055	Tall	82 2.732
	Beautiful	113	2.115	Intelligent and educated	94 2.819
	Natural	170	2.124	Voluptuous	110 2.436
				Sporty	58 2.793
				Elegant	172 2.395
		CENTRAL CORE AREA		1st PERIPHERY	
Low occurrence \leq 50	Brunette	24	2.083	Blonde	13 2.923
	Young	12	1.833	Tanned	14 2.929
	Flawless	14	1.143	Charismatic	11 2.727
	Seductive	41	2.146	Long hair	13 3.385
				Funny	21 3.857
			Kind	32 4.125	
		1st PERIPHERY POSSIBLE SUB GROUPS		2nd PERIPHERY	

Total number of evocations : 1910

Overall average (rank) : 2.37

The results of the hierarchical evocation study show that the social representation of the ideal woman is based around a central core of five elements. By analysing the central core of this representation, we can deduce that the current concept of the ideal woman closely reflects both the traditional images published regularly in the press and a more recent media trend. Indeed, the ideal woman, i.e. the woman that the subjects of this study aspire to be, is beautiful, feminine and slender, as someone who is natural and feels good about herself. Accordingly, it would appear that women's magazine readers both identify with the stereotypes propagated in fashion magazines, and are looking to build a new vision of femininity. More specifically, this observation seems to indicate that women are receptive to, and interpret, the images they see in the press as the "accepted norm", despite many of them expressing their displeasure with narrow, fixed stereotypes of beauty and with excessively thin, flawless and unrealistic models. It is important, in this respect, to remember that this study is not concerned with the representation of women in the press, but rather with the representation of the ideal woman. Although the presence of these elements in the central core can easily be explained as a reflection the representation of women in fashion magazines, their role as evidence of the representation of the ideal woman is less certain. Indeed, they tend to show that the somewhat fictional images seen in women's magazines (which are often perceived as such) nevertheless have a strong impact on readers and, it would appear, on society as a whole. In this respect, it may be possible to explain this situation as an outcome of

the long-standing trend to portray only thin, beautiful and feminine models and to argue that this trend, in turn, has created a social norm based on a range of socio-economic factors. In other words, the constant and exclusive portrayal of models of this type has generated a social imaginary of female beauty and the female body based on social representations of the ideal woman, founded on the central notion that the ideal woman is beautiful, thin and feminine. As the results show, the concept of the ideal woman is also of a woman who is at ease with herself, who feels "good about herself". This central aspect marks a shift from purely aesthetic aspirations to an individualistic, self-centred and hedonistic ambition, one that stands in stark contrast to stereotypical images and which, in turn, points to a change in female identity. As such, we can argue that self-fulfilment is now one of the most important goals to which women aspire and, therefore, forms part of the concept of the ideal woman. In all probability, the fact that the "natural look" forms part of the central core of this representation is closely related to this particular value. The recent and rapid rise of this preoccupation, which is now a central aspect of the concept of the ideal woman, has led to the development of a strong social consensus and, in turn, has resulted in its infiltration into social imaginaries. It is therefore clear that social representations are formed within a structure capable of generating social imaginaries. In this particular case, we see that the central core contains a representation that transforms reality into something real and meaningful and, as such, plays a role in enriching a range of different imaginaries, including those of the female, fashion, the body and beauty at the very least. In other words, the fact that the "natural" dimension is a central aspect of the concept of the ideal woman goes some way to explaining the (albeit faint-hearted) tendency in fashion magazines to favour "natural-looking" women. It also signals a rapid and enduring change opinion in this respect, something that the fashion imaginary will need to reflect. This becomes even more import when we consider that the elements in the first periphery are closely related to each other, and to the central core, and reflect this in practice. In other words, as Moscovici (1998) indicates, the stable core attracts a set of constantly-moving elements which circulate through communication networks and adopt new meanings when placed in the context of the representation's central elements. In more specific terms, and in light of these theoretical arguments, we can see that the elements in the first periphery (by definition the most important elements of the peripheral system) add further meaning to the female vision of the ideal woman. In fact, through this relationship, the universally-accepted central elements take on a more concrete significance, forming a concept of the ideal woman

as someone who is graceful, independent, intelligent, educated, tall, voluptuous, sporty and elegant. In other words, someone who is slender, attractive and feminine is also graceful, elegant, tall and even sporty, but beauty can also be found in a more voluptuous body. Similarly, there are many ways in which a woman can feel good about herself, by being sporty and voluptuous, but also by being independent, intelligent and educated. Moreover, it would appear that the "natural" component is a central feature that runs through, and illuminates, the entire representational field. The content and structure of the representation appears to show that the ideal woman is not only universally beautiful, feminine and thin and feels good about herself, she must also be as natural as possible. That is to say that the representational organisation of the ideal woman reveals a deep-rooted, liberating tendency towards the "natural" and which, by definition, signals a universal rejection of sophistication. In all likelihood, this tendency is the result of feminist trends in social discourse, as well as a growing interest in the environment, diet and health. Moreover, it is interesting to note that the ideal woman is no longer necessarily young, even though images in fashion magazines almost exclusively feature models whose youth is their key point of attraction. The evidence would seem to point to a situation where this stereotype is no longer a source of identification, merely of appropriation. It would appear, indeed, that extremely young fashion models are no longer an aspiration, they are little more than an accepted fact of life. Youth remains a subject of interest, but in a different manner, with women demonstrating more concern for staying young and masking the signs of aging, preoccupations that are reflected in the central concept of self-fulfilment.

In conclusion, we have demonstrated that the central system that defines the social representation of the ideal woman contains two distinct types of element. The first are the stereotypical, traditional characteristics of the fashion imaginary. The second are more recent elements that have yet to be fully incorporated into fashion images and, by definition, into the fashion imaginary (despite being much more widespread in social imaginaries), such as health and environmental concerns. This is the case of "natural" and "feels good about herself," notions both central into the social representation of the ideal woman, which is part of a trend, related to the importance of health and environment protection. Indeed, this approach more and more prevalent in today's society crosses all social activities such as automotive, food, hygiene/beauty products and ethical fashion. The stable core of this representation comprises a

range of elements concerning beauty, slenderness and femininity, in other words, the stereotypes of the fashion imaginary and, in broader terms, the female imaginary. Consequently, the representation of the ideal woman, in line with our hypotheses, lies at the centre of the female imaginary propagated by the fashion imaginary. However, the central system that governs the representation of the ideal woman also comprises elements that reflect a preoccupation for self-fulfilment and the "natural look", in other words, current underlying social trends. These elements give rise to new social representations and are reflected in social imaginaries. As expected, we have also been able to demonstrate that the representation of the ideal woman is constructed around current and developing trends in the fashion imaginary. In other words, we have demonstrated the validity of our general hypothesis that there is strong interaction between social imaginaries and social representations. In more specific terms, the core that lies at the centre of the social representation of the ideal woman contains elements taken from the fashion imaginary and yet, at the same time, includes elements from a different set of social representations and imaginaries. These elements, in turn, point to future changes in the fashion imaginary. It would appear, therefore, that social representations are formed and change more quickly than social imaginaries. The relationship between the two is highly complex, with social representations both influencing and reflecting social imaginaries.

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