

# Women in review: body representation in the social imaginaries

## Mulheres em revista: representação corporal no imaginário social

Mariana Fernandes Costa<sup>1</sup>  
Jorge Coelho Soares<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Instituto de Nutrição, Núcleo de Estudos sobre Cultura e Alimentação. Rio de Janeiro-RJ, Brasil.

<sup>2</sup> Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Instituto de Psicologia, Programa de Pós-graduação em Psicologia Social. Rio de Janeiro-RJ, Brasil.

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Correspondence  
Mariana Fernandes Costa  
E-mail: marifcosta@gmail.com

### Abstract

The aim of this study was to analyze food and beverage ads containing the female body figure (fragmented or whole) reported by *Seleções (Reader's Digest)* between 1944 and 1948 and *Claudia* magazine between 2004 and 2008. Magazine advertisements were analyzed semiotically in order to shed light on the social imaginarity of the female figure at two moments. We have identified 82 food and beverage ads, 33 ads in the sample of *Seleções* and 49 ads in the sample of *Claudia*. The representation of women's body in the social imaginarity was organized into two categories: multifunctional image and body perception. The ads in *Seleções* depict two types of women: "traditional woman" – housewife (37.5%), wife (20.83%); and "modern woman" – happy (37.5%), sensual (20%) – representing only one type of woman: "queen of the home." The ads address relationships, children and how women can please their husbands by means of food. In *Claudia* magazine, women's roles were the same. However, we have found an "advancement" in women's profile (35.21%) over the decades: women appear as active in the labor market (9.86%), happy (26.04%), with a healthier body (22.92%) and a more beautiful body (21.87%), as evidence of a beauty standard exposed and/or imposed by society. In addition, there was an increase in the mother's image (23.94%) in ads depicting the influence of women on children's consumption. Therefore, we call today's women "hypermodern women," who not only play social roles (mother-wife-housewife-woman-professional) but have also moved on to a higher stage of modernization.

**Keywords:** Human body. Advertisements, food and beverages. Gender identify.

## Resumo

O objetivo foi analisar anúncios de alimentos e bebidas que contêm a figura corporal feminina veiculados nas revistas *Seleções do Reader's Digest*, no período de 1944-1948, e *Claudia*, de 2004-2008. O foco foi dado à análise semiótica dos anúncios para compreender o imaginário social da figura feminina em dois momentos. Foram identificados 82 anúncios de alimentos e bebidas, sendo 33 de *Seleções* e 49 de *Claudia*. A representação corporal da mulher foi organizada em duas categorias: imagem multifuncional e percepção corporal. No imaginário dos anúncios de *Seleções* transitam dois tipos de mulher: “mulher tradicional” – dona de casa (37,5%), esposa (20,83%); e “mulher moderna” – alegre (37,5%), sensual (20%) – que representam apenas um modelo de mulher: a “rainha do lar”. Esses anúncios falam de relacionamentos, filhos e como agradar ao marido através da comida. Na revista *Claudia*, os mesmos papéis são executados, entretanto, constatamos um “avanço” no perfil mulher (35,21%) ao longo das décadas: uma mulher que aparece inserida no mercado de trabalho (9,86%), alegre (26,04%), de corpo mais saudável (22,92%) e belo (21,87%), com um padrão de estética e beleza exposto e/ou imposto pela sociedade. Além disso, observou-se um aumento da imagem de mãe (23,94%) nos anúncios, retratando a influência da mulher no consumo infantil. Portanto, podemos chamar a mulher dos dias atuais de “mulher hipermoderna”, que além de exercer os papéis sociais de mãe-esposa-dona de casa-mulher-profissional, passou a um estágio superior de modernização.

**Palavras-chave:** Corpo humano. Anúncios, alimentos e bebidas. Identidade de gênero.

## Introduction

Different areas of knowledge that study diets, such as Psychology, Anthropology, Sociology and Nutrition Science, show in their literary productions the numerous conflicts, dilemmas and paradoxes surrounding the topic and its relation with the body, health and good shape. The various approaches and aspects of food and beverage consumption have attracted increasing interest from consumers, food industries, government policies and the media in general.

The body and topics related to it have been an object of study from antiquity to the present day, representing a subject of prominence in all historical moments, related to the interests and needs of the time. The body is a terrain of symbolic meanings, in which practices and representations

related to it (the habitus) communicate their suitability to the immanent needs of the various fields of society (such as health, fashion and sport) and deal with positioning individuals in social spaces.<sup>1-3</sup>

With every passing day, concern for the body has a greater impact on people's lifestyles. This concern is clearly seen in the media, understood as one of the main places of construction of social reality, even because public opinion has become increasingly dependent on this discursive machine, an increasingly autonomous field of other social fields as a mandatory sphere of visibility and notoriety. In this way, it is understood that the advertising discourse has been following and dictating the transformations of each historical period, maintaining and influencing people until today.<sup>4,5</sup>

Image has a fundamental role in forming the senses, since it and words together construct the global sense of communication, often implicit. Thus the need to develop skills that go beyond decoding what is visual and enable the construction of meanings from the simultaneous reading of words and images.<sup>6</sup>

The objective of this study was to analyze food and beverages advertising containing total or fragmented female body figures broadcast in Brazilian editions of (American general-interest family magazine) *Reader's Digest* in the 1944-1948 period and *Claudia* magazine (published by major Brazilian publisher and printing company *Editora Abril*) in the 2004-2008 period. The design of the study was guided by a semiotic analysis of magazine ads having women as the main object of interest in order to understand the social imaginarieness of female figures in two moments of our history.

Advertising is one of the main ways to sell products and services, presenting their qualities and benefits, a mixture of images, symbols, feelings and values resulting from the needs of commensality.<sup>7</sup> Since there are few studies on food and beverage advertisements in magazines and their importance in the social sphere, this research is justified by the contribution to understanding the meaning of the codes established in the universe of human discourse and allows to understand the production of representation of women's bodies in the social imaginarieness.

## Social imaginarieness

Throughout history, all societies have produced their own global representations. According to Pesavento, they are ideas-images through which they attribute an identity, establish their divisions, legitimize their power and devise models for the members' behaviors. Then they would be collective representations of reality not reflections of reality.<sup>8</sup>

To know a reality means to perceive it as historically determined. It consists of subjects who represent it and symbolize it. In the form of perception, intuition, sensations, conceptions, reality is always a reality for an individual or group of individuals who share its meaning. In addition

to being cognizant, concrete individuals, they are also desirous, imaginative, dreamy, capable of fabling, of symbolizing the existing real and the possible real. In reality, reason and emotion are intertwined and there is no way to dichotomize them. In the unity of the perceptual act, one thinks as feeling, one feels as thinking. Therefore, existence results from a complex act in which feelings and thinking come together, but also desiring, dreaming.<sup>9</sup>

Image is the revelation of something other than itself. Thinking allegorically implies referring to one thing but pointing to another one, to some sense beyond. More than that, it implies realizing the concrete representation of an abstract idea whose meaning is not manifest. Underlying what is seen, read or imagined, the allegory contains another content.<sup>8</sup>

From a structure of senses, socially constituted, reality becomes known in discursive forms, multiple speeches: writing, gestures, imagery and finally symbolic ways of saying the world. Therefore, investigating a social reality presupposes having a coordinated set of representations, a structure of meanings that circulate among its members through different forms of language: this set is the social imaginarieness.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, the realm of the imaginarieness is constituted by the set of representations that extrapolate from the limit placed by the findings of experience and the deductive threads that they authorize. Therefore every culture, every society and even every level of a complex society have their imaginarieness.<sup>10</sup>

### Advertising: semiotic analysis of images

Means of communication are great machines of seduction working in instituting and modifying the social imaginarieness, for through allegories, metaphors and elucidations the machines of seduction touch our symbolic field, our ideals, our sacredness, our utopias.<sup>9</sup> It is possible to consider as the media latent function everything that it seeks to sell that is not concretely the product itself but its magic, its way of ideologically presenting the current system, ideas, concepts, values, forms of relationship.<sup>11</sup>

Images are present in our everyday life from an early age, in real or imaginary ways. They can be understood as mental representation, illustration, constructive aspect and identity, visual memory, metaphor, appearance, among others. What is common in all definitions is that it refers to analogy, something that resembles something else. This common denominator of analogy or similarity immediately places images in the category of representations.<sup>12</sup>

Among all the theories that can approach images, the semiotic point of view considers the mode of production of meaning, the way messages cause significations, verifies categories of signs, if it has specificity, its own laws of organization and looks for particular significations.<sup>13</sup>

In the present research, the point of view is based on the analysis of female body images in a context of food and beverage advertising where the message is conative and centered on the recipient's implication. This is a descriptive study with a qualitative approach associated with a quantitative one. Semiotics was used to analyze the ads, following Gemma Penn's theoretical reference. And for the tabulation of data, simple descriptive statistics.<sup>14</sup>

Four editions per year of *Reader's Digest* in the 1944-1948 period and four editions per year of *Claudia* magazine in the 2004-2008 period were randomly selected. Among such samples, food and (non-alcoholic) beverages ads containing total or fragmented female body images were studied.

We believe in the relevance of analyzing *Reader's Digest* because it is a very influential magazine in Brazil from the 1940s, when the values of the *American way of life* were rising and being "modern" meant following this model. It was a period characterized by a boom in consumption and of great expansion in the advertising field. Another issue that shows the importance of the magazine for apprehending the imaginarieness of the time is the great amount of advertisements in the magazine for the most diverse products, targeting all people and serving as an ideological instrument of the American presence. It is worth mentioning that the *Reader's Digest* magazine did not aim at a specific target audience, reaching a very heterogeneous audience and different age groups. Therefore, it has always been a magazine of difficult classification: educational, varieties, family-oriented etc.<sup>15</sup>

Illustrated magazines are vehicles of great prominence in the period, responsible for influencing behaviors and creating hype. Through them and the ads that they conveyed it is possible to have some perspective on the historical construction of Brazilian cultural meanings in a period of substantial transformations and complex negotiation of our cultural identity.<sup>7</sup>

*Claudia* is a magazine created by the Behavior Center at (major Brazilian publisher and printing company) Editora Abril in October of 1961 targeting a female audience, dealing with daily life situations, behavior and women's topics through discourses of different meanings and representations. It is defined as the most complete women's magazine, which is at their side in all challenges and brings the greatest variety of relevant subjects in their lives: family, love, career, beauty, fashion and quality of life.<sup>16</sup> *Claudia* is a commercial Brazilian monthly magazine, with circulation of 450 thousand and 1.8 million female readers.<sup>17</sup> It has been established as one of the most important ones for women.<sup>18</sup>

From the past, it is possible to study contemporaneity and modes of consumption in society. Ladies' magazines are a cultural product reflecting cognitions on the social roles destined to women as mothers, wives, homemakers and professionals through information about food, nutrition, health, aesthetics, among others.<sup>19</sup>

Food is an area of female dominion and it is women who are in charge of deciding on the final consumption, organizing and carrying out the family eating practices and taking on the

role of homemakers. However, with the greater participation of women in the labor market, the industrialization of food products and modern marketing techniques, new eating practices have been adopted, practices that aim at work simplification and economy of time, allied with greater health concern and quality of life.<sup>20,21</sup>

In this context, women become the main target of advertisers, who seek to manipulate the will and desire to consume and convey a cultural beauty pattern that guarantees identity to modern women.<sup>21,22</sup>

### Body representation: women under scrutiny

Women's body representation in the social imaginarieness has been organized into categories (multifunctional image and body perception) and subcategories. This determination has emerged from observing ads' proposal to establish, build, and disseminate women's multifunctional images, exposing bodies' behavioral and perceptual attributes. Therefore, advertising seeks to frame the ads contents with an understanding of women's bodies, a representation studied in (Erving Goffman (Canadian-American sociologist and writer) Erving Goffman's sense.<sup>23-25</sup> For this, it is understood that the magazine exposes in its ads a virtual woman and that this woman, in a communicative act, represents a pattern of conduct with socially adequate attributes.

The way individuals handle, feel and perceive their body reflects a collective reality. Consequently, the body, first and foremost, comes into existence and has meaning within a social context, which constructs it, with representations being attributed consisting of significances, images and meanings within a symbolic universe and becoming a cultural fact.

Women's body representation in social imaginarieness has been organized into categories and subcategories, with 88 and 167 recording units in the sample ads in *Reader's Digest* in the 1944-1948 period and *Claudia* in the 2004-2008 period, respectively. Females' bodies attributes in the social construction of women's identity are identified in Table 1.

It is worth mentioning that in the same ad there may be more than one image of women's functional role and more than one perception of female bodies.

**Table 1.** Attributes of female bodies in the social imaginaries present in food and beverage ads in samples of *Reader's Digest* (1944-1948) and *Claudia* (2004-2008) magazines and frequency of verification of the recording units.

Categories	Subcategories	Reader's Digest		Claudia	
		n	%	n	%
Multifunctional image	Woman	12	25.00	25	35.21
	Mother	8	16.67	17	23.94
	Wife	10	20.83	13	18.31
	Homemaker	18	37.50	9	12.68
	Professional	0	0	7	9.86
	Total	48	100	71	100
Body perception	Health / balanced	2	5.00	22	22.92
	Love/sexuality	8	20.00	20	20.83
	Beauty/beautiful	5	12.50	21	21.87
	Knowledge/intelligent	7	17.50	3	3.13
	Cheerfulness/happy	15	37.50	25	26.04
	Social relationships / friend	3	7.50	5	5.21
Total	40	100	96	100	

Goffman explains that in social interactions individuals act (as on a stage) what they would like to be, using tricks (masks) so that people really believe that what they are seeing is the real image, while inwardly individuals know that they are playing some role and that, in fact, this is their virtual image.<sup>24,25</sup>

Also according to Goffman, this happens unconsciously and individuals daily hide behind these masks in order to conceal their real image so that stigmas are muffled by the virtual image created by each one due to the social need to belong to certain groups and in need of being similar or equal to those making them up. The way individuals feel configures their personal information, which is conveyed by a symbol that imprints a prestige position, popularly called "*status*."<sup>25</sup>

Such symbols have been studied here and presented as female bodies' attributes in social imaginarieness. By framing an image that is presented so that others recognize it, it was possible to verify that the ads explore women's body representation and, in addition to taking care of themselves, they are involved in other functional activities in daily life.

The multifunctional image category, with 48 recording units in *Reader's Digest* and 71 recording units in *Claudia*, presents some body facing itself and others, that is, in which the woman printed in the ads complains, requests a status of functionality, creates a virtual image that she considers socially appropriate (women in general), based on concerns with her children (in her role as a mother who understands and cares for her children), with her husband (wife/partner), work (in her role as a professional in the labor market) and with her own home (in her role as a homemaker who cooks, cleans, washes, irons, takes care of the family space).

In relation to this image of women's bodies' functionality, the evidence of homemakers' role is highlighted in the sample of *Reader's Digest* (37.50%) published in the 1944-1948 period, which is not so expressive in the ads in *Claudia* (12.68%) broadcast in the 2004-2008 period. However, the work function performed as professionals inserted in the market is shown quite significantly in the recent period (9.86%) when compared to the 1940s, when it had no expression (0%).

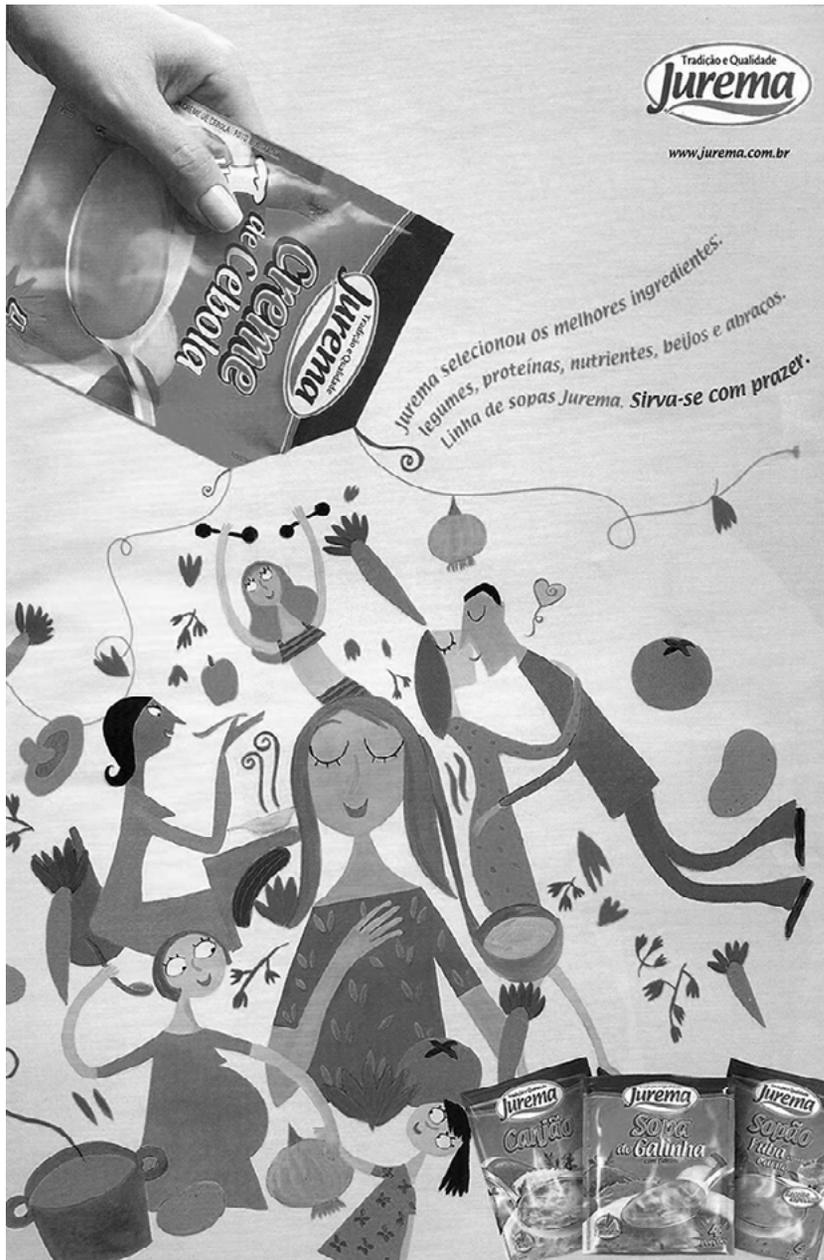
Besides, women's (35.21%) and mothers' (23.94%) roles end up presenting higher exposure in ads in *Claudia* than in *Reader's Digest* (25% and 16.67%, respectively). On the other hand, the role of wives is more present in *Reader's Digest*, corresponding to 20.83%, while in *Claudia* such role is shown in 18.31% of the ads analyzed.

Body perception, a category with 40 recording units in *Reader's Digest* and 96 recording units in *Claudia*, refers to self-directed body image, that is, the one in which women also proclaim and demand some virtual image representation of socially adequate self-worth and self-esteem. This representation, according to the results found, has attributes such as health (of a balanced body), love (of a body with sexuality), beauty (of a beautiful body), knowledge (of an intelligent body), joy (of a happy body) and social relationships (of a friendly body).

Among the most evident attributes of female bodies' perception present in the contents of ads in *Reader's Digest* are those linked to cheerfulness (37.50%) and love (20%). Bodily perception of an intelligent and beautiful body appears in third and fourth ranks, respectively. In *Claudia* ads, the perception of some happy body was also in the first place (26.04%) followed by the subcategory of some balanced body (22.92%). The perception of some body turned to health was much less representative in *Reader's Digest* (5.0%). It is worth emphasizing that other attributes such as a beautiful body and body with sexuality presented very close values (21.87% and 20.83%, respectively) in the *Claudia* sample. The friendly body is a subcategory of body perception infrequent in both magazines.

These results point to the understanding that people who read the magazine should really believe that what they are seeing is the real body image of a woman who, on the one hand, is obviously functional, simultaneously occupying several social roles. And, on the other hand, even with less evidence, a woman with self-esteem and self-knowledge. These signs feed the relationship, the social interaction.

The ad by (Brazilian company Camil Alimentos S.A.) Jurema soups (Figure 1) published in *Claudia* magazine in July 2008 presents multiple feminine roles in which each female figure performs some function and suggests a perception of their body. Therefore from this ad we can suggest that the five subcategories of the multifunctional image are highlighted since there is a characterization of a woman's image in general (white female figure, blond, wearing gym clothes, who is exercising with dumbbells); a mother (a light-skinned female figure, pregnant, holding a child by the hand and preparing some meal); a wife/companion (a light-skinned female figure kissing a man); a homemaker (a light-skinned female figure in the center of the image, who appears with her eyes closed beside a shell, as if she were enjoying the aroma of the preparation); and a professional (a well-dressed, dark-skinned female figure who has her meal alone, sitting at a table). In addition, the idea of beautiful, healthy, sexualized, happy and intelligent bodies, respectively, is also conveyed.



**Figure 1.** Advertisement by (Brazilian company Camil Alimentos S.A.) Jurema soups, *Claudia* magazine, July 2008.

Text in the figure:

*Jurema has selected the best ingredients:*

*vegetables, proteins, nutrients, kisses and hugs. Jurema soup division. Help yourself with pleasure.*

Ads in *Reader's Digest* do not present any black ethnicity female figure, just an oriental one. Despite being six decades later, the sample of *Claudia's* ads also has very low representation of women of other ethnicities or skin color other than white, as it includes only a black woman and no oriental one. Perhaps this fact is related to the magazines target audiences. Therefore it is understood that it is the audience who shall consume the products advertised and this fact is probably associated with the women's financial condition.

Only 18.18% of the *Reader's Digest* ads sample, from 1944 to 1948, use the entire female body, while in *Claudia*, from 2004 to 2008, 42.86%. And when showing some body part, it is no longer floating around these days, as in some advertisements of the 1940s but represents a photographic framework of the camera in which it is perceived that that part belongs to a whole.

In the sample of food and beverage ads from *Reader's Digest* magazines, it was noted that among the five ads in which the women are full-bodied, in four of them their legs are exposed. In the period between the wars (1918-1938), the bourgeoisie represents a time of body liberation. When another relationship is shown between the physical appearance and the clothes, its exposure begins. There is no longer room for clothes to hide it. The change is even more visible with regard to women's clothing. Control briefs and bodices are left behind and panties and bras begin to appear. Clothes are shortened and legs are made attractive by legwear.<sup>26</sup>

As for the 2000s, the female accessory that most stands out is the bikini, appearing in 12.25% of the ads in the *Claudia* magazine sample. The current concern with body shape and volume is related to the importance that the aesthetic dimension and the issue of the image occupy. This is also reflected in the impressive numbers of cosmetics and plastic surgery industries. The ideal of a perfect body advocated by society and conveyed by the media leads women, especially in adolescence, to some chronic dissatisfaction with their bodies, adopting highly restrictive diets and strenuous physical exercises as a way to compensate for excessive calories ingested in an attempt to match the current cultural model. Many of them seek to recontextualize their bodies and this is sometimes encouraged by some food and drinks advertising campaigns, as if the body were always being redefined to gain an update according to society's standards.

Especially regarding women, in addition to the roles of professionals, mothers and wives, they must be well groomed and fit, so that these roles are socially more valued.<sup>27</sup> The body must be managed in a way that it be always beautiful, competitive, both in the job market and for seduction.<sup>28</sup> Food reeducation, physical activity, prevention treatment are expressions that predominate in women's imaginarieness, as well as "being happy at any price," "beautiful, light and accomplished," "you are responsible for your body" are some advertising messages that legitimize Brazilian women nowadays.<sup>29,30</sup>

## Final thoughts

The data presented and discussed have allowed to understand that the production of women's body's representation through advertising was developed in order to make efforts to frame (in order to establish, construct and proclaim) a certain image of female bodies in the social imaginarieness. In this task, the schemes that generate perception, evaluation and selection of contents seem to be restricted to the multifunctional dimension in society (woman, mother, wife, homemaker and professional) and its dimension of body perception (who has health, beauty, cheerfulness, intelligence, sexuality).

In *Reader's Digest* magazine imaginarieness, two types of women are clearly outlined. "Traditional women" (mother-wife-homemaker), without much vanity, totally family oriented, who are protagonists in food advertisements. "Modern women" who, in addition to being mother-wife-homemaker, are also vain, beautiful, sensual and usually protagonists in beverage ads (carbonated soft drink Coca-Cola). These "two women," under some disinterested look, might appear to be opposites and unrelated to one another, in an attempt to follow the idea of neutrality proposed by *Reader's Digest*. However, this magazine presents two very close types of women, who represent only one model of traditional woman: the "queen of the home." The ads clearly mention relationships, children and how to please the husband through food. Thus, one can see the maintenance of traditional and conservative values in women's roles.

As for *Claudia* magazine, the same roles are performed by women. However, we see a "breakthrough" in their profile over the decades: a woman who appears in the labor market (professional), more independent, active, sensual, vain and happy. In addition, there was a significant increase in associations between the consumption of food or drink and the change in body shape and improvement of physical performance. This fact demonstrates how society exposes and/or imposes a pattern of aesthetics and beauty to be achieved by women from the advertising message that they are able to model their bodies as some raw material still unfinished.

There was also an increase in mothers' images in *Claudia's* ads, portraying the influence of women on children's consumption, being a major target of advertising campaigns. What is most incredible in all this is that 60 years have gone by and thoughts about women regarding ideals of behavior and social roles may have changed but in everyday life there are few changes, especially with regard to the division of housework. Such tasks are historically considered feminine, since cooking and caring for children continue to be widely performed by women and being their responsibility.

Thus, we can call modern-day women "hyper modern women," referring to Gilles Lipovetsky's concept of hyper modernity.<sup>30</sup> In addition to exercising all the social roles (mother-wife-homemaker-woman-professional), they have gone to a higher stage of modernization as they perform more

functions in society. Thus, it is understood that there has not been a complete rupture regarding female models of the 1940s, but a potentialization of tasks and ways of being, in which contemporary women are hyper vain, hyper beautiful and hyper sensual!

Advertising operates as a compass for social navigation, a device capable of storing an impressive collective memory that allows us to interpret the cultural imaginarieness in which we live and the practices we experience through it.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the analysis of ads has shown us that advertising serves as a great cultural reserve of signs and as a reference for understanding the evolution of behavior in society at a given historical moment. The study has allowed us to conclude that there has been some change in women's profile in terms of content and visibility, mainly from the body's greater exposure in ads.

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