Dressing Modern Frenchwomen
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Chapter Three

Publicity

According to Fred Davis in *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, fashion feeds on the unstable aspects of consumers’ social identities, and “designer-artists” who initiate new styles somehow “intuit the currents of identity instability” and try “to lend expression to them, or alternatively to contain, deflect, or sublimate them.” Davis recognizes that fashion cycles respond to a “complex of influences, interactions, exchanges, adjustments and accommodations among persons, organizations and institutions.” Usually, the process “is sustained through some complex amalgamation of inspiration, imitation, and institutionalization,” but major fashion revolutions (like that of the 1920s) draw more on inspiration than on imitation or institutions. By contrast, the average fashion cycle is “institutionally constrained by numerous aesthetic conventions, publicity practices, and merchandising requirements.”

In 1925, a year of little change, Jeanne Lanvin elucidated: “We proceed by successive adjustments and imperceptible modifications. We must avoid bewildering customers and they scarcely ought to perceive the transition.”

This chapter adapts Davis’s insights about the fashion process as a shifting amalgamation of inspiration, imitation, and institutionalization. Despite widespread assumptions that designers imposed their will on fashionable women, designer accounts of their relations with fashionable women, these women’s accounts of their role in selecting and rejecting styles, and the number of unsuccessful models presented in every collection reveal that the connections between designers and consumers were much more complicated. The multitude of magazines de-
voted to publicizing haute couture is equally compelling evidence for an interactive relationship between designers and consumers.

Influenced by postmodern feminist critiques of liberal ideas about a single, stable, and independent self and notions about more flexible identities, I want now to investigate both how fashion magazines affirmed the possibilities of exploring new personas along with new styles while reaffirming women’s belief in a core self. Though recent feminist scholarship revolves around gender or sexual identity, fashion magazines, and presumably their readers, were as obsessed with redefining or modernizing class-specific conduct and apparel. They were not prepared to abandon grounding notions of an essential self.

**Dictating or Divining?**

Public opinion held that designers dictated to passive consumers. Their position echoed Enlightenment criticisms of women’s susceptibility to the seduction of consumer goods and also reflected uneasiness about the new visibility and status of couturiers and couturières. Neither designers nor their customers were enamored of these views.

Coco Chanel claimed that she created her simple chemises and suits in response to consumers’ new economic, social, and leisure opportunities. Fashion reporters in the 1920s and many fashion writers since then barely rephrased her promotional copy. Especially after Chanel aligned her styles with adolescence and mobility, characteristics of the modern women, journalists and biographers paraphrased her promotional copy. Her publicist, Lilou Marquand, had a different perspective. She believed that Chanel dreamed of transforming “the woman in the street” with slim skirts, pullovers, and suits. “Beyond appearance, she sought to form the person, her way of life, her way of thinking.” The novelist Colette agreed that Chanel tried to “sculpt” women, not just get rid of “doo-das” on clothing. Edna Chase, editor-in-chief of *Vogue*, called Chanel “a super saleswoman,” who insisted that fashion magazines use full-page photographs of her mannequins, posed standing, because this pose best displayed their simple, straight lines. Michel de Brunhoff, editor of *Paris Vogue*, found her very demanding. She refused to let editors select among the fashion shots she sent them or to release photographs of models “unless they were shown alone on the page, the facing page not containing models from different houses.” These insider views suggest not so much dictation as complex negotiations between designer intentions and consumer interests.

Interwar designers contended that they understood the desires of women. Jean
Charles Worth (son and heir of Charles Frederick Worth) summed up their position: “Couture is intimately, profoundly associated with the feminine mentality of an epoch, one of its most precious reflections.” 9 How did designers acquire their knowledge of women’s desires? Once again, Jeanne Lanvin lifts the curtain on backstage practices: couturiers observed their customers and decided the direction of fashion “by the way the customers react before such and such a dress in the collection.” Vogue reported that couturiers studied “the daily needs of woman and helped her to meet them without sacrificing her femininity and personal style,” adding that “more than one couturier” hovered around fitting rooms and tea-rooms eavesdropping on their clients’ conversations. 10 Couturiers’ new social status allowed them to socialize with elite women at the theater, the horse races, and galas. When they donated models to charitable auctions or organized charitable fashion shows, they used these opportunities to see what styles were popular at these events. 11

Fashionable women differed about their servitude to fashion. In 1926, when the weekly supplement Éve asked a handful of Parisiennes about “The Tyranny of Fashion,” the answers ranged from an unqualified yes from Mme. Jeanne Prost, who called women “slaves of fashion,” to an adamant no from Mme. Germaine Sallandri, who held that “an intelligent, tasteful woman only takes from fashion what emphasizes her charms and erases her disadvantages.” 12 Ten years later, the Countess de Pange took a cultural approach. She argued that fashion, which was the contrary of fantasy, “implied uniformity.” It depended upon the history and psychology of people. 13 The Couture Syndicate and the fashion media took Sallandri’s position. The syndicate considered “the Frenchwoman . . . a precious collaborator for couturiers,” for “she tempers fashion and adapts it to her person.” Éve held that women select styles that suit their “personal tastes” and particular circumstances. 14

Weeklies serving modest middle-class women believed that women should dress in a manner appropriate to their station in life. As Catherine Horwood found in interwar England, differing strata of the bourgeoisie adopted different sartorial strategies, with the modest middle class more concerned about “keeping up appearances” than the haute bourgeoisie. 15 However, French women’s weeklies insisted on personalization, a term these magazines and presumably their readers preferred to individualization. Although personalizing usually meant colorful embroidery or other decorative details, it was a way of applying “the façade of individuality to an essentially conformist environment.” 16 Decorative details, es-
pecially those crafted by the wearer, reconciled middle-class devotion to feminine respectability with a more elitist desire for individuality.

Only one respondent to the 1926 survey, stage actress Cecile Sorel, attributed transformational powers to fashion: “Fashion is a way of renewing oneself, physically and morally. It is the occasion for the woman to be multiple.” Self-fashioning arguments were common in articles about Hollywood stars in American and French movie magazines, but rare in French fashion magazines, even after the latter began to publish interviews with film stars. The exceptions were a few articles on fashion as rebirth in American-owned *Vogue* (and an ad campaign promising cosmetic “Metamorphoses” by the American company Elizabeth Arden). Star culture, with its standardization of beauty and fashion norms, was less prevalent in France than in the United States, no doubt due to the competition of other, socially prominent celebrities, like “les élégantes.”

French fashion magazines did run articles about transforming dresses by wearing long, loose blouses known as tunics over sheath dresses in the 1920s or adding cuffs, collars, or sleeves to fitted dresses in the 1930s. In addition to the obvious appeal of keeping up with fashion economically, these articles tapped into their readers’ wish to try out new personas in a period of rapidly changing expectations of women. But these kinds of article never suggested a fundamental change in the wearers. Couturiers and journalists who suggested that fashion helped a woman to be “always new, always unexpected,” added: “without ceasing to be you, before all else, after everything.” This sort of comment suggests that fashion arbiters believed that readers liked the idea of presenting different personas but did not want to abandon the notion of a core self. These journalists rarely detailed what exactly this core self was, allowing readers to answer from their own self-understanding. Extrapolating from the overall contents of these magazines, this core self included religious and family values.

The popular novelist, feminist, and fashion chronicler Magdeleine Chaumont gave *Éve* a rare psychological answer: “Clothing offers the woman certitude of success and love; well dressed, the ugliest is passable.” Although her argument was purely speculative and highly generalized, fashion columns repeated it. An article by cultural commentator Georges Masson made a subtler psychovestimentary argument: clothing was a form of “supplementary confidence.” Implicitly, many fashion reporters agreed; explicitly, they rarely referred to psychology. Research into the psychological bases for fashion choices was less developed in France than it was in the United States.

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50 Gender, Genius, and Publicity
sought general psychological expertise on how to persuade people in theories about perception and suggestion. They were interested in how visual images and repetition captured attention and converted potential into actual customers. Although fashion magazines drew on this academic material, they did not cite it.

Fashion magazines also ignored psychoanalysts who linked the sexual instinct to a desire to be beautiful (which included well-dressed) to attract mates. In general, these magazines avoided direct references to sexuality. More than concerns about propriety motivated their erasure of sexuality. Fashion magazines profited from couture’s design-centered approach to marketing, one that emphasized promotion, as opposed to today’s market-centered approach, with focus groups and other research into consumer needs and desires. Fashion journalists occasionally discussed “seductive” styles, which they associated with mystery. However, they were more inclined to use the adjective to describe clingy fabrics, not dress styles. A Vogue staffer who mentioned “sex appeal” attributed it to American (meaning Hollywood) fashion, which the staffer contrasted to the “charm” of French fashion. Charm implied a subtler, indirect kind of seduction.

The only contemporary research into why Frenchwomen bought the clothes they did were fashion magazine interviews with style setters, which give a snapshot of the opinions of fashionable Paris. In 1920, Femina asked ten style setters, “For whom do women dress?” Most of the respondents thought that women dressed for themselves, citing women on desert islands who cared about their appearance. Their answers conformed to fashion magazine claims that women dressed for themselves, their comfort, and the occasion. Eighteen years later, the Countess Elie de Ganay defined elegance as “knowing how to adapt yourself to fashion or, if you prefer, adapt fashion to yourself. It means knowing how to dress strictly according to the minute or the occasion.” Daisy Fellowes claimed to dress “simply to be comfortable, at my ease and without the least disguise.” Her answer was fashionably correct but disingenuous. According to fashion photographer Cecil Beaton, she “invented the sequin coat cut like a man’s dinner jacket” and “wore it with audacity and a green carnation.” Schiaparelli, who often dressed Fellowes, lauded her “courage” in wearing outré models. Fellowes liked to attract attention by standing out; most bourgeois women decidedly did not want to follow her example.

Several of the women interviewed in 1920 gave nuanced answers. Two contended that women subconsciously dressed to please men, but two others held that women who dressed for male attention did so “to eclipse” other women. Male
commentators in the general-interest press espoused similar views, which were simultaneously flattering to men and insulting to women. Typically, these male commentators wrote as if all women were the same.30 Fashion magazines did not publicize their opinions, which were neither complimentary to their readers nor consistent with their message about individuality or personalization. Other respondents to the 1920 survey recognized that different women adopted different sartorial strategies. One drew distinctions between coquettes, who sought male attention; the elite, who pleased themselves; and “the mass,” which wanted “to put a distance between themselves and others.” Another respondent argued that age affected women’s sartorial strategies: at eighteen women sought male attention; at thirty, they wanted to be noticed by other women; and at fifty, they acted for “their own satisfaction.” Fashion magazines advised wearing clothing that suited one’s age and size—theyir gesture toward the not-yet-developed concept of market segmentation.31

Further insight into why women dressed as they did can be found by reading autobiographies. Care is required because most women’s autobiographies tell more about special occasion gowns than everyday clothing. Many autobiographies hint at different motives for wearing different items of clothing; these motives include the wearer’s disposition and social expectations. When Catherine Pozzi was recuperating from a bad bout of tuberculosis, she recorded in her diary that a Callot evening gown made her “beautiful again . . . and younger.” When she was in better physical and emotional condition, her diary entry noted that a designer afternoon dress was simply “as it should be.”32 Female characters in popular women’s novels also selected fancy dinner frocks to feel attractive but chose dresses and suits for family gatherings to conform to familial and social expectations. On the basis of wide reading in women’s autobiographies and popular novels, I posit that bourgeois Frenchwomen, like the elite Canadian women interviewed by Alexandra Palmer, saw special-occasion outfits as long-term investments and peer-group uniforms and, accordingly, took considerable care purchasing and maintaining these dresses.33 The French material suggests that dressing for church and extended family events was more important in interwar France than in postwar Canada.

Advice on apparel for weddings, christenings, and family gatherings in women’s and fashion magazines confirm the custom of dressing for these rituals according to familial conventions. These conventions included composing a look that communicated the social standing of their (implicitly bourgeois) husbands and extended family.34 Society magazines never mentioned spousal or fam-
ily approval of clothing. The difference mirrored the disparity in the social standing of *haute bourgeoisie* and middle-class families and greater disposable income among *haute bourgeoisie* women.

The saying, “The couturiers propose; the Parisienne disposes,” captures the symbiotic relationship between designer and buyer. M.H. of *Vogue* elaborated: “The great collections launch various themes. Only when the Parisienne has taken them up do ‘the fashions’ become ‘the fashion.’” M.H. claimed that *les élégantes* “now play the role actresses and mannequins played in the past. . . . The time when couturiers imposed their fantasies upon us is over.”35 Rejecting the notion that couturiers dictated to customers, Martine Rénier asked: “You think that you follow him? What an error! He precedes you, but in the direction that you want to go.”36 In short, “he” divined what “you” wanted.

Perhaps the most persuasive evidence for the interdependence of couturiers and customers are the percentage of models shown annually that sold well enough to recoup costs. Even in the boom years 1927–29, only about one-tenth of the models shown in collections sold well, and most of them sold to commissionaires and foreign buyers.37 Vionnet’s sales records for the mid-1920s suggest that her house made more than ten “repetitions” apiece of only fifteen to twenty models per collection. Most of her successful models did not sell more than 60 units, and none sold more than 165.38 One effect of this sales pattern was that about fifteen very successful models from each collection were “seen everywhere” in Paris, prompting fashion reporters to complain about a lack of individuality.39

Another indication of couturier’s dependence upon customer preferences involved designers taking cues from a rejection of styles in their last collection, as happened when they abandoned efforts to restore fuller skirts and pagoda sleeves in the early 1920s. Other times, designers persisted but made concessions to customer resistance. When Jean Patou showed dresses with a natural waistline in 1924, few fashion writers predicted a change in silhouette. When several designers included dresses that “discretely outlined the female form” in 1925, many fashion journalists reported that women, discontented with the uniform-like chemise dress, would not accept the new style unless dresses remained comfortable and practical.40 For three more years, fashion columnists warned designers that Parisiennes would only accept the new style if it avoided the tight waists and billowing skirts of previous eras. During these years, most Parisiennes did not adopt the new line, and many designers continued to show the straight silhouette alongside a curvier one, leaving fashionable women with a dilemma: “obvious or hidden waist?”41
As late as the spring of 1929, when the summer collections were shown, a handful of couturiers did not include garments with natural waistlines. One fashion columnist claimed that “among those who battle for the resurrection of the truly feminine woman, men are prominent. . . . From the woman’s point of view, they resist, no doubt because they fear losing the advantages conferred . . . by the masculine look and in order not to abdicate the independence and prerogatives we have obtained in modeling ourselves on the masculine sex.” Writing for the general-interest publication *Le Journal* and the feminist publication *Minerva*, a fashion journalist, Juliette Lancret, reported on women’s resistance to the supposedly more feminine curvy silhouette, saying that Parisiennes refused to buy longer hemlines and fuller skirts. Her articles goaded the president of the Haute Couture Syndicate into a public protest, which spurred other fashion columnists to support Lancret. When resistance to long, full skirts continued for two years, designers raised the hems slightly and reduced the volume of daytime skirts.

**Print Publicity**

Another testimonial to the commingling of designer initiative and customer interest is the amount of publicity designers deployed. The advertising field was expanding. A syndicate in existence since 1906 had more than 1,600 members in 1931. Most members resided in Paris, and most of the remainder lived in Lyon and Lille. While most members were print media directors, a growing number came from publicity agencies. Women entered this expanding field. Courses on publicity had existed since 1906, and schools were founded in the 1920s; three journals specializing in publicity and marketing existed in the interwar decades. While most agencies, schools, and concentrated on the larger and more lucrative areas of department store and small shop marketing, some agents served haute couture and a few scholars studied their publicity.

In addition to signature styles and cultural events to display models, couture houses used print publicity to develop brand-name recognition. However, haute couture was selective. Although advertising agents declared that posters, with their visual content and repetition, were good vehicles to reach women, couture houses never used outdoor posters, presumably because these posters were too public to persuade wealthy women. This must have been a gendered decision, since automobile manufacturers employed posters to persuade wealthy men. In any event, advertising took a new direction in the interwar years. After a slump in the early 1920s, poster advertising revived, and new print technology fostered
brightly colored commercial posters. But by the 1930s, over 90 percent of advertising budgets went to other kinds of advertising. Economists and publicists believed that urban pedestrians and transit passengers paid little attention to posters precisely because they were so ubiquitous.

Couturiers also shunned regular advertisements in the daily press, which reached between 200,000 and 3 million readers per newspaper. They did allow fashion drawings and photographs to be distributed by press agencies to major dailies and weekly supplements, though the captions did not always identify the couturier, as opposed to their provenance (Paris). Moreover, couturiers admitted to their shows fashion columnists from prestigious national dailies like Figaro, as well as from major regional and provincial dailies, like L’Echo du Nord, in Lille, or Le Progrès, in Lyon. They sent drawings and photographs to illustrated weekly supplements and to Parisian dailies and to major provincial dailies. Nos Loisirs, the women’s supplement to Le Petit Parisien, reached a circulation of more than 3 million, while Eve (1920–40), an illustrated supplement to ten to eighteen provincial newspapers, reached provincial readers who wanted to follow Parisian fashion. Although Nos Loisirs’s coverage of haute couture was sporadic, Eve regularly published two complementary columns: “All the Fashion,” on the latest trends, and “Fashion for the Economical Woman,” on sewing one’s own stylish clothes.

Dry goods shops and department stores placed sales ads in the daily press near the new women’s pages, which emerged as publishers realized that the wife and mother decided which newspapers came into the home. Retail outlets may have avoided the women’s page because ads on special topic pages cost more than ads on other pages. Even without a designated women’s page, newspapers grouped items of interest to women. In Le Progrès de Lyon, “The Workbasket” (knitting and mending basket) appeared near the weekly column “Women’s Life. Paris Fashion.” So did small ads for such products as food supplements and household cleaning products. Textile producers advertised in the daily press but were less satisfied with these black-and-white ads than they were with multicolored ads in fashion journals. Major producers like Rodier deftly built up brand-name recognition through fashion journal ads and advertorials.

Haute couture and textiles preferred niche advertising in media devoted to their products. Before the war, the silk manufacturer Maison Albert Godde et Bedin (AGB) published a free eight-page bulletin filled with illustrations of couture creations identified by couturier—a kind of indirect publicity only worth the expense
if the firm already had brand-name recognition. After the war, the bulletin became
the society magazine *Art-Goût-Beauté*, with a circulation of 15,000 to 20,000.
Publicity for one of AGB’s successor companies, Wilmart, continued in the fashion column and ads. From 1919 through 1935, the Lyonnais Silk Manufacturers Syndicate subsidized a lavish bimonthly, *La Soierie de Lyon*, which in 1927 became a monthly with cultural coverage in vain hopes of doubling circulation to 3,000. Soon after the syndicate stopped its annual subsidy of 23,000 francs in 1934, *La Soierie de Lyon* folded. Although *La Soierie* was a trade publication with reports on exports, taxes, and tariffs, it always included fashion coverage.

In a patriotic and profit-motivated response to the need to revive demand for French fabrics after the war, a publicist for Hachette, which had purchased *Femina*, informed the Lyonnais Silk Manufacturers’ Syndicate that *Femina* and one of its daily newspapers, *Excelsior*, would run regular features on fabrics. This initiative had the intended effect of increasing textile advertising. As supply and demand improved, wool and silk manufacturers bought full pages on the inside front or outside back covers of fashion magazines and in close proximity to features on their products—which were really advertorials for their products. Textile ads and advertorials pioneered the routine use of photographs in French fashion magazines. After the demise of *La Soierie de Lyon*, the Silk Manufacturers Syndicate contributed 150,000 francs to the Central Silk Committee for publicity in fashion and general-interest illustrated magazines but soon redirected its advertising away from the drawing-dominated *L’Illustration* toward the new photo-journal, *Vu* (a Lucien Vogel magazine, similar to *Life*). To fund these initiatives, the Central Silk Committee raised and spent 250,000 francs.

Couturiers did not have the financial resources to establish house organs and did not engage in collective advertising on the scale of textile manufacturers associations. Instead, groups of couturiers sponsored magazines. After the war, Cheruit, Doucet, Jenny, Lanvin, Paquin, Patou, Poiret, Worth, and nineteen other designers sponsored an “official” publication, *Les Elégances Parisiennes*, which gave advance information about forthcoming collections. When *Elégances* succumbed in 1922, *L’Officiel de la Couture* replaced it. When the depression hit, the couture syndicate added an official bulletin in a smaller format. The four-man executive board, all business directors of major couture houses, informed members about new import duties on their goods and legal protection of their models.

A plethora of theoretically “independent” fashion magazines sprang up. Their independence was tenuous, since much of their revenue came from advertising.
for couture and textiles and since their columnists had to have good relations with couture houses and textile firms to access their collections. Usually, fashion columnists made only mild criticisms of collections. When they went further, the couture syndicate retaliated. By the early 1930s, more than two hundred of these magazines were being published in France. Although several were distributed in other European countries, most targeted different strata of bourgeois Frenchwomen.66 Individual issues were displayed in refined magazine shops—not in the more plebian tobacco shops.67 Circulation soared in the 1920s, sank in the early 1930s, and slowly revived in the late 1930s.68 During the depression, several changed title and format, merged with other periodicals, or stopped publishing.69

In the 1920s, these magazines introduced innovations in layout. They increased visual content, sold advertising space in larger blocks, and placed full-page ads on the first few pages of each issue, instead of burying ads in the final four pages, as most had done before the Great War. Marketing experts promoted advertising through “evocation,” meaning greater use of graphic images than of textual description.70 Assuming women to be emotive and impulsive shoppers, they considered evocative advertising particularly appealing to female consumers. Marketing experts advised producers who wanted to “reach a feminine clientele” to purchase large blocks of space in fashion magazines and women’s supplements of daily newspapers,71 as couture and textiles were already doing.

The twelve magazines analyzed below were published by eight publishers in Paris; many of these publishers also put out apparently rival magazines. Magazines hired publicity agencies, located in the couture district, to handle their advertising.72 Soon couturiers filled the inside pages of magazines with full- and half-page ads, although they rarely paid the premium for cover ads. For a full-page ad, Vogue and Femina charged 5,000 francs in 1927 and 7,000 francs in 1934 (with a dip in price in between, when the depression hit).73 Fashion weeklies asked 1,900 francs per page in 1927 and 4,000 francs per page in 1934. They sold more advertising by the line, which was cheaper, and charged even less for “a mention” in a shopping column. When a prominent couture house went into bankruptcy in the Great Depression, it owed 8,500 francs to Femina’s publicity company and 6,000 francs to L’Officiel de la Couture.74

Other than citing couture houses and textile firms in quarterly reports on seasonal collections, the fashion media did not acknowledge close ties with advertisers.75 Ads for these women’s magazines claimed that their readers leafed through issues at their leisure; scholarly studies of how present-day women read...
contemporary women’s magazines confirm that women browse through them. Casual readers might have been unaware of the tangled web of relations between magazines and marketers. Unlike the advertising-saturated and media-savvy readers of today, readers of interwar magazines might not have suspected the incessant relationship between magazines and marketers. But they became more discerning. Not long after a new kind of women’s magazine, *Marie Claire*, came on the market in 1937, it placed the following disclaimer beside its table of contents: “We remind readers that our pages of text contain no publicity of any sort. All the products cited, all the firms and brands mentioned in our articles, are there for the sole purpose of rendering service to our readers.” *Marie Claire*’s circulation hurtled to 900,000 in 1939, far beyond the circulation of the magazines discussed below. In addition to using more photographs, *Marie Claire* had more beauty and fitness columns than fashion magazines did. However, *Marie Claire* adopted many fashion magazine formulas, such as referring to readers as “chères lectrices” and setting up a Friends of Marie Claire House with courses on cooking, cutting fabrics, and physical culture, as well as advice on “elegance, beauty, household and legal matters.” Like department stores, the Marie Claire House included a tearoom, lounge, travel bureau, and ticket office.

Magazine directors tried to develop a rapport with readers by employing long-term editors or columnists who personified the magazine. What distinguished fashion magazines from other illustrated magazines publishing then, apart from their focus on fashion, was their women editors and columnists. All the long-term fashion editors and named columnists were women. Among them were Jeanne Ramon Fernandez (J.R.F.), fashion editor of *Vogue* Paris from the early 1920s through the 1930s, and Martine Rénier (M.R.), fashion editor of *Femina* from 1925 through the 1930s. Many columnists, like Camille Duguet, who penned the “Elegant Visions” column in *Chiffons* from 1918 to 1932, wrote for more than one fashion magazine. Columnists who used pseudonyms chose familial ones like aunt, cousin, or godmother. They addressed readers as “lectrices amies.” We can safely infer some subscriber identification with long-term columnists. Because many contributors only initialed their articles, it is difficult to know how many were women, though their knowledge of social niceties marks them as bourgeois. Reporters who signed first names invariably chose sobriquets like “Francine” or “Sylvène,” presumably on the long-standing assumption that lectrices paid more attention to women’s opinions on fashion and women’s issues. Pseudonyms also allowed the journalists to write for several periodicals at the same time.
Management developed reader loyalty by giving out coupon books, opening shopping and needlework academies, and selling dress material and notions by mail. Eve published an annual Almanac advertised as “an agreeable companion,” with advice about sewing and embroidery. Another strategy was “Letter to a friend” or provincial relative advising readers how to dress and where to buy the latest products. Because correspondence between friends and relatives seemed personal, these features were deemed to be effective ways of persuading women to purchase products. Like other service columns, these articles used the first- and second-person pronouns, I and you, to construct subject positions through synthetic personalization, a process by which personal pronouns create the impression that the writer knows the reader. La Mode and La Mode du Jour published “Entre Lectrices,” letters between isolated readers that must have contributed to a feeling of belonging to a like-minded community. Occasionally readers chided editors and columnists, and the journalists responded by explaining or changing their position.

Given that these magazines were marketing vehicles, their advice was relatively restrained. Even Vogue suggested that the chic woman did not pursue every trend, kept models from previous seasons in her wardrobe, and did not have a wide variety of outfits in her wardrobe. Why? “The costume that gives her a young look, that responds to her taste and comfort and activities, should not be set aside for some arbitrary novelty that will not give her as complete satisfaction.” Other reasonable guidelines were mixing and matching pieces to vary outfits and building a wardrobe around a basic piece, such as a coat. The 1999 wardrobe exhibit at the Musée de la mode (Louvre) confirms that style setters did not own very many designer outfits and wore good couture pieces for many years.

Magazine Marketing

At the apex of the bourgeois women’s press were two society bimonthlies that became monthlies in the mid-1920s. Vogue called itself a lifestyle magazine: a counselor on “the choice of a dress, a perfume, a residence, a restaurant.” Femina claimed to be a guide to “the art of pleasing others, distracting oneself.” Both reported on the couture collections in illustrated columns with such titles as “When Looking at the Collections” (Femina, 1917–1923), or seasonal pieces, such as “First Echoes of Spring Fashion” (Vogue, Feb. 1926). Another regular feature, “Fashion in the World,” detailed new styles and where they might be worn. Articles on wardrobes—good indicators of the social status of readers—included specialized
ones for travel and entertainment. Individual issues cost between 3 and 4 francs in the early 1920s and 8 to 10 francs in the late 1930s. Subscription rates between 75 and 100 francs in the late 1930s suggest that only wealthy women could afford subscriptions. Each magazine had about 20,000 subscribers in the 1920s; Fémine reached a peak readership of 40,000 in 1934–35. Their influence extended beyond subscribers because neighborhood dressmakers took these magazines to show customers couture models, and many women could afford the four seasonal collections or annual wedding issues, which were advertised separately in fashion and women’s weeklies.

In articles, advertorials, and advertisements, Vogue and Fémina showcased “exclusive” fabrics, haute couture designs, expensive cosmetics, art deco furnishings, and automobiles. These society magazines bear some resemblance to late-nineteenth-century women’s magazines, which reconfigured the chic parisiennne as an artistic consumer who expressed her individual taste in fashionable attire and interior decorating. By linking personal chic with home decorating, these fin-de-siècle magazines redefined shopping as a domestic duty and alleviated anxieties about female consumers walking through the city, window shopping, and behaving like flaneuses. By the 1920s, society magazines presumed that their readers were consumers and promoted hybrid modern/art deco rather than pastiche antique furnishings. In place of fin-de-siècle covers depicting women reclining on divans, interwar covers showed active women attending tea dances, balls, and the theater. These magazines advertised cruise lines, hotels, and Vuitton luggage. Most ads for household products touted appliances, such as refrigerators, which were too large for most French apartments.

Vogue focused on aesthetic pleasures, stating that “elegance is one thing, the practical sense is quite another thing.” Yet Vogue Paris was less committed to promoting avant-garde art (or queer life styles) than Vogue London under Dorothy Todd’s editorship, from 1922 to 1926, though it was more open to avant-garde art and alternative lifestyles than the New York flagship. Moreover, Vogue and Fémina were useful to their elite readership. Following the fashion-plate tradition, they printed black-and-white drawings of designer clothing with captions explaining the dresses’ construction and text referring to “your dressmaker” making them up. Evidently readers of society magazines did not dress only in couture clothing. Until the mid-1920s, Fémina ran periodic features about easily sewn dresses intended for home sewers. It warned readers about sales-
women’s tactics of persuading indecisive customers with flattering and trendy language. In the 1930s, saleswomen replaced sales pitches like “that makes you look young” or “that flatters your figure” with “that hilarious phrase: ‘This is a Parisian look.’”

*Vogue* and *Femina* differed primarily in geographic focus and gender consciousness. Like its sister periodicals in London and New York, *Vogue* Paris was fascinated by the international set. Directed by Michel de Brunhoff, who promoted automobiles, *Vogue* often led with articles about automobiles, some of which did not mention women drivers or passengers. However, automobile advertisers in *Vogue* and other magazines shared modernist adjectives like *svelte* and *slim* with fashion magazine descriptions of modern women. In this way, *Vogue* and Brunhoff’s other magazine, *L’Officiel de la Couture*, pioneered cross-promotions of couture and automobiles in France. Otherwise, French automakers, or more precisely, French subsidiaries of American companies, adopted this kind of advertising later than American automakers did, perhaps because automobile ownership was lower in France (more than 1.5 million registered automobiles in 1930). One factor must have been calculation about the smaller size of the potential market among Frenchwomen. *Vogue* also published more articles by men than *Femina* or any magazine discussed below. Edited and staffed by women, *Femina* covered automobiles in relation to fashion and cosponsored an annual contest on “feminine elegance in automobiles.” In general, *Femina* offered more coverage of women’s charities, including maternal feminist charities. In the “society” pages, reporters focused on fashionable attire and events; in articles about social issues, they concentrated on issues.

In line with society magazine covers’ elision of marital and maternal representations of society women, their tables of contents excluded wifely or maternal advice.

The fashion weekly *La Mode Pratique* (1891–1939) and bimonthly *Chiffons* (1907–32) cost one-quarter as much as society periodicals—one to two francs per issue—and attracted 42,000 and 200,000 readers, respectively. These prices suggest a middle-class readership. Although they routinely described haute couture collections, they reported on a wider array of clothing and materials than society magazines did. Ads for clothing and textiles used adjectives like *elegant*, which was favored in society magazines, but made greater use of the more pleasing adjective *charming*. Other ads plugged less-expensive household products like...
cleansers rather than household appliances, which one weekly acknowledged were too expensive for their readers. The notable exception was sewing machines, which all society, fashion, and women’s magazines promoted.

These two magazines also took a more cautious approach to the fashion and social changes of the 1920s than that of society magazines. They ran more articles on dressing suitably for family occasions than dressing in the latest style for plays or restaurants, which surely reflected their readers’ family values, status anxieties, and limited disposable income. Yet these magazines, and presumably their readers, were not puritanical or retrograde. The occasionally chiding tone of Camille Duguet, editor of Chiffons, contributed to the demise of the magazine in 1932. When Chiffons revived as the glossy monthly Françoise, costing five francs per issue, the prospectus referred to “the fresh, young, attractive, and elegant magazine” that was also “ingenious, convenient, practical and useful.” In short, it exploited almost every fashion buzzword associated with modernity. Although the new director, Françoise de Perval, was upbeat about fashion trends, Françoise did not survive financial problems as the depression deepened. In a lateral move typical of fashion journalists, Perval joined La Mode Pratique, where she wrote a shopping column, “The Pretty Things I’ve Seen.”

Despite their titles, these two publications resemble Cynthia White’s category of middle-class women’s magazines whose purpose was to serve more than to entertain their readers. Like Nos Loisirs, they wrote about general wardrobes. In Nos Loisirs, “Clothing Suitable for All Occasions” listed three categories of apparel: city wear, for shopping and visiting; travel wear, for weekend excursions and vacation trips’ and ceremonial wear, for weddings and baptisms. Recognizing that many readers could not afford a special travel wardrobe, the author, Marcey Ducray, recommended sturdy and versatile everyday clothing for travel. By ignoring ocean travel and automobile trips, as well as theater and sports apparel, she recognized that her readers were in the lower echelons of the bourgeoisie. One of her articles asserted that weekend travel was a new experience for readers.

All three magazines included advice columns about sewing one’s own clothing and updating last year’s garments. Chiffons and La Mode Pratique also offered sewing, knitting, and crochet courses and sold patterns, material, and notions by mail order. These services suggest that more women were following fashion, if only by changing the length of a hem or adding cuffs to sleeves. Like their English counterparts, these magazines offered “both a dream of unattain-
able glamour . . . and an opportunity to realize some of that glamour through economy, home-production, and adaptation.”

Fashion supplements to Paris newspapers paralleled society monthlies and fashion weeklies. *Excelsior-Modes*, a quarterly published by the daily newspaper *Excelsior*, cost five francs when it appeared in 1929 and ten francs a decade later, when it was thicker and glossier. *Excelsior- Modes* claimed the same number of subscribers (20,000) as the daily *Excelsior*. Appearing after the seasonal collections, it spotlighted models that “our best qualified elegant ladies” will wear. In addition to printing photographs of *les élégantes*, it published articles by style setters and aristocrats. Like society magazines, it ran articles about travel and advertised hotels in the posh Atlantic seashore resorts of Biarritz and Deauville. *Les Modes de la Femme de France*, a Sunday supplement, was more conservative about clothing trends. Coline, the fashion columnist, was one of the few fashion journalists who warned that low waistlines and high hemlines were not flattering to heavy-set women. At a cost of one franc per issue in 1919, *Les Modes de la Femme de France* claimed “more that 200,000 lectrices among the elite of society.” At a cost of one franc fifty centimes one decade later, it no longer claimed as large or distinguished a readership. Although it survived the depression, it never attracted as many readers as it had in the 1920s. The decline may have been due to its increasingly sclerotic attitude toward new styles.

Other weeklies were more reasonably priced and widely distributed. Older weeklies *La Mode Illustrée* (1860–1937) and *La Mode* (1896) and two newer ones, *La Mode du Jour* (1921–56) and *C'est la Mode* (1932–38), cost less than a franc per issue in the 1920s and most of the 1930s. These four weeklies identified their readers as modest in income but respectable in conduct, which translates as lower middle class. Like other weeklies, they were slow to welcome modern home decoration, largely because of cost concerns. Each magazine had the familiar combination of a column following haute couture and another column on economical variations on fashionable attire. They characterized “real elegance” as “a perfect adaptation of the toilette to the person, the circle, the circumstance. Graceful gestures, a seductive voice, posture, and face, an ease, an absolute, innate distinction, all this is elegance.”

All four were really women’s magazines. *La Mode Illustrée* promised to help readers “make the house as attractive and comfortable as possible.” Cousine Jeanne, editor of *La Mode*, penned a column called “Talking Cooking”; *C'est la Mode* had “The Perfect Housewife.” All these magazines gave advice on such
marital responsibilities as purchasing a husband’s clothes or correcting a husband’s bad habits.

Some comparisons to the Catholic women’s weekly *Le Petit Echo de la Mode* help establish the degree to which fashion reached petit bourgeois women. At a cost of twenty-five to sixty centimes per issue between the wars, *Le Petit Echo*’s circulation reached 1,125,000. The domestic activities of the female figures on the covers and regular columns on mothering, childcare, and cooking identify its ideal readers as lower-middle-class housewives. This weekly even devoted the occasional column to “attractive housedresses.” Despite, or perhaps because of, identifying with the ladies who staffed Catholic charities for families and children, *Le Petit Echo* expressed concern for the economic problems of working-class women. Going beyond the usual complaints about the “domestic crisis,” or middle-class women’s problems hiring domestic staff, they suggested that employers improve maid’s working conditions. *Le Petit Echo* even published letters from women who were factory workers.

Although *Le Petit Echo* distanced itself from other fashion publications, it claimed expertise in fashion:

> The outfits in the *Petit Echo* capture the essence of Parisian elegance. Without delay, we publish the creations of the most celebrated couturiers; no other journal can offer you such certain and rapid information. Perhaps you find the luxury publications more seductive? All they have over the *Petit Echo* is the superiority of their beautiful paper. Our paper is beautiful also, and if we do not put gloss on it, it is simply so we can sell our publication for 40 centimes. And we do not limit ourselves to presenting delicious new models of inaccessible elegance; our pattern service is at your disposal to furnish you with an excellent pattern of impeccable cut with which you can easily execute the pretty model in our collections.

In actuality, the Baronne de Clessy, who wrote the “Revue de la Mode” column, was mildly critical of low necklines, high hemlines, short sleeves, and sheer fabrics, and Liselotte, who wrote the morality column “Jardin des âmes,” could be scathing about revealing clothing “loosening morals.” Although all the magazines considered here presumed a Catholic readership (most obviously in features on christenings), *Le Petit Echo* alone devoted cover drawings to women attending church and covered Vatican pronouncements on women and the family. Franceline, who wrote the “Pages féministes” column, advocated subsidies for
“families with many children” and railed against depopulation. She supported serv-
ices for mothers and children.¹²⁶

One can interpret the elaborate infrastructure of haute couture institutions and market-
ing instruments as evidence of top-down dictation to fashionable women or as testimo-
ny about designers’ dependence upon stylish women. Designers and style setters them-
selves stressed negotiation and interdependence. Sales figures confirm that designers might propose, but Parisiennes and foreign buyers disposed. The sheer number, variety, and circulation of fashion magazines substantiate a complicated two-way relationship between couturiers and customers, as well as a democratization of fashion consciousness.
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