

SOCIAL MEDIA AND AESTHETIC PROCEDURES IN BRAZIL: WOMEN AND INSTA'TUTIONALISM

REDES SOCIAIS E PROCEDIMENTOS ESTÉTICOS NO
BRASIL: MULHERES E INSTA'TUCIONALISMO

Isadora Maia di Santis¹

Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

E-mail: Isadora.disantis@hotmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-7217-3608>

Grazielly Vilmes²

Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

E-mail: grazielly2001@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6149-3201>

Liana Bohn³

Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

E-mail: liana.bohn@ufsc.br

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3443-5048>

Solange Regina Marin⁴

Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

E-mail: solange.marin@ufsc.br

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1427-2029>

Recebido em: 27 de dezembro de 2024

Aceito em: 10 de junho de 2025

-
- 1 Bacharel em Relações Internacionais pela UFSC e pesquisadora interessada em questões de desenvolvimento socioeconômico, economia institucional e teoria feminista.
 - 2 Bacharel em Relações Internacionais pela UFSC, pesquisadora em temas como transição energética e economia feminista.
 - 3 Professora do Departamento de Economia e Relações Internacionais (UFSC) e do Programa de Pós-Graduação Interdisciplinar em Ciências Humanas (PPGICH/UFSC). É doutora em Economia e pesquisadora em Economia Feminista.
 - 4 Professora do Departamento de Economia e Relações Internacionais (UFSC) e do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Economia (PPGeco/UFSC). É doutora em Desenvolvimento Econômico e pesquisadora em História do Pensamento Econômico e Mulheres e Desenvolvimento, Pobreza e Desigualdade.

ABSTRACT

This article, grounded in the theoretical framework of institutionalism – particularly the perspectives of Thorstein Veblen and Hazel Kyrk – examines the relationship between social media use (Instagram) and the growing prevalence of aesthetic procedures in Brazil. It argues that the female body has emerged as a new product of the contemporary leisure class, with social networks serving as its primary means of display. Through the dissemination of images and videos, transient and often unattainable aesthetic standards are established, driving individuals to invest resources and efforts in aesthetic procedures. These endeavors aim to replicate prevailing beauty ideals and secure social validation.

Keywords: Institutionalism; Hazel Kyrk; Social Media, Aesthetic Procedures.

RESUMO

Através da abordagem teórica do institucionalismo, especialmente do pensamento de Thorstein Veblen e Hazel Kyrk, este artigo tem por objetivo discutir a relação entre o uso das redes sociais (Instagram) e o aumento do número de procedimentos estéticos no Brasil. O estudo propõe que o corpo feminino se tornou um novo produto da classe ociosa contemporânea e as redes sociais, seu meio de ostentação. Mediante o compartilhamento de imagens e vídeos, criam-se padrões estéticos instáveis e inalcançáveis, embora capazes de mobilizar recursos e esforços em procedimentos estéticos que buscam emular a referência de beleza e garantir validação social.

Palavras-chave: Institucionalismo; Hazel Kyrk; Redes Sociais; Procedimentos Estéticos.

JEL Code: B52, B54, D19.

1. Introduction

The number of aesthetic procedures in Brazil has been steadily increasing. In 2023, the country ranked first globally in terms of surgical procedures, with more than 2 million interventions performed. Among the most common procedures are liposuction, breast augmentation, and eyelid surgery. From a gender perspective, only 24% of these procedures were performed on men, while the remaining 76% were carried out on Brazilian women (International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2023). Furthermore, the FinanZero Loan Index⁵ highlights a growing trend of individuals taking out loans to finance aesthetic modifications, which has

5 The Loan Financial Index (IFE – Índice Financeiro de Empréstimo) measures the demand for credit on the internet. Available at www.finanzeiro.com.br

emerged as an additional factor contributing to personal indebtedness.

Brazil's prominence in aesthetic procedures is also reflected in social media usage. According to DataReportal⁶, while the global average daily time spent on social media is 2 hours and 23 minutes, Brazil ranks third, with an average of 3 hours and 37 minutes per day. In this context, Instagram, a platform primarily dedicated to sharing photos and short videos, is particularly popular, boasting over 134 million active users, 58.4% of whom are women. Social networks, much like traditional media, mirror dynamics in which body representation is meticulously crafted and manipulated to conform to visibility standards akin to those of fashion magazines and advertising (Silveira, 2017). Consequently, platforms that emphasize self-image significantly influence how users present themselves, shaping and reinforcing contemporary beauty ideals.

According to Kataoka et al. (2024), digital influencers foster an idealization of the body and beauty that contradicts the natural processes of life, while still serving as a reference for individuals who engage with their photos and images. Consequently, Hermans, Boerman, and Veldhuis (2022) suggest that social media usage significantly influences followers' decisions to pursue aesthetic procedures. The demand for aesthetic procedures cannot, therefore, be understood solely through the traditional lens of medical product consumption; instead, it must be analyzed in light of its subjective elements. To this end, this paper, which aims to explore the relationship between the growing demand for aesthetic procedures and social media, draws on the institutional perspective of two authors – Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) and Hazel Kyrk (1886-1957) – who shared an anthropological interest in the “world behind the demand curve” (Van Velzen, 2003, p. 48).

Kyrk's *A Theory of Consumption* (1923) significantly influenced the field of consumer economics by incorporating and expanding the approach of Original Institutionalism (Van Velzen, 2003; Philippy, 2021; Kuiper, 2022). Her ideas align with John Dewey's pragmatism (Van Velzen, 2003)⁷

6 The report provides annual insights into global internet usage trends and is available at <https://datareportal.com/reports/>

7 Van Velzen (2001, p. 56) argues that Kyrk's approach is perhaps more philosophical than institutional, and it is due to her incorporation of Dewey's ethical thought that her theory stands out as it does. Kyrk's conceptualization

and converge with Veblen's discussions on how pecuniary emulation became a dominant motive for consumption in society, shaped by social determination and the creation of consumption patterns (Todorova, 2023)⁸. In order to achieve the objectives of our paper, the institutionalist theoretical frameworks developed by Hazel Kyrk (1923) in her analysis of consumption and consumer behavior, as well as Thorstein Veblen's (2006) study of the influence of the leisure class, will be particularly useful. We defend the hypothesis that the human body has become a new product to be displayed by the new dominant class, reflecting the relentless pursuit of the productive class to attain this aesthetic fashion standard.

The paper begins with a review of the works of Veblen (2006) and Kyrk (1923), discussing key concepts such as consumption, especially conspicuous consumption. Next, the new social dynamics influenced by the online environment are interpreted through the lens of these theories, examining the influence of social media and the role of aesthetic procedures within this framework of coercion among Brazilian women. Finally, the paper presents some concluding remarks.

2. Thorstein veblen and the creation of consumption patterns

At the end of the 19th century, Thorstein Veblen⁹ published his most famous book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. In this book, the author examines the emergence of a dominant class that establishes norms and customs for the rest of society, with a particular focus on the subjugation

of the valuation process, her focus on experiments as a means to enhance welfare, her overall emphasis on the importance of effective freedom of choice, and her stress on consumer education are elements that allow her theory to be interpreted as a pragmatist Deweyan approach to the consumption process.

- 8 However, van Velzen (2003, p. 48) argues that Kyrk's work is not a mere copy of Veblen's work. More than Veblen, Kyrk is not only concerned with the question of why consumers behave as they do, but also with how they should behave, and uses his analysis to point to, for example, waste involved in a thoughtless "emulation of the rich". Also, Kyrk is not as antagonistic to business as Veblen is. Whereas Veblen conceptualizes businessmen with their profit motive as saboteurs of the economic system and suggests they should be replaced by disinterested, benevolent engineers, Kyrk views businessmen and the profit motive as essential forces in the productive process, which in the proper institutional setting may be conducive to the generation of welfare. And, with few exceptions, she rejects social engineering.
- 9 Thorstein Veblen was an influential American economist and sociologist, known for his theories on conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure. His works challenged traditional economic conceptions, emphasizing the role of social norms and institutions in shaping economic behavior. Veblen is widely recognized as a seminal figure in the field of economic and social thought. For a more detailed history about Veblen, see Camic (2020).

of the productive class. Through this analysis, Veblen explores the tools of domination employed by the leisure class.

From a historical perspective, Veblen (2007 [1899]) begins his analysis by examining what he defines as the early stages of barbarism, using indigenous populations of the United States as an example. In these societies, the division of labor already displayed a hierarchical structure, with women performing essential tasks for life maintenance, while men were primarily engaged in occasional activities related to violence, such as warfare and hunting. Although both types of labor were crucial for the functioning of these communities, only male labor was associated with glory and spectacular elements, while female activities were devalued due to their connection with routine, everyday tasks.

As society evolved, the distinction between tasks became more pronounced, leading to a division between industrial and non-industrial functions. Industrial work, according to Veblen (2007 [1899], p. 27), is an inheritance of female labor, defined as “any effort aimed at valorizing human life through the exploitation of the non-human environment”. In contrast, male labor is associated with functions linked to violence, poverty, and merit, as well as honorary roles that, in this new stage, no longer contribute materially to social life.

Therefore, in this new context, “with insignificant exceptions, the upper classes typically do not engage in industrial functions, and this fact serves as the economic expression of their superiority” (Veblen, 2007 [1899], p. 19). From this perspective, a group of high social standing, the *leisure class*, is perceived, where exclusion from productive work serves as evidence of their dominance.

To expand their expressions of superiority, individuals belonging to the leisure class create consumption mechanisms to materialize their esteem towards both others and themselves. In barbarism, for example, the victors of wars seized the possessions of the losers and initiated forced relationships with their women, with female appropriation serving as an element of both coercion and ownership. Veblen’s view of patriarchal relations of domination was not new; before publishing *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, he had already published *The Economic Theory of Women’s Dress* (1894), *The Beginning of Ownership* (1898), and *The Barbarian Status*

of *Women* (1899). In his 1894 work, he criticized the subjugation of women through clothing, distinguishing between clothing (which serves the functional role of protecting the body) and dress (which functions as an adornment and a means of demonstrating the capacity for expenditure). Women's clothing, according to Veblen, thus served as a vehicle for expressing patriarchy. According to Nils (1999)¹⁰, patriarchy, sanctified by marriage, was the most fundamental institutional aspect of what Veblen referred to as barbarism.

With the end of the period of barbarism, consumption assumes a prominent position. According to Nils (1999), Veblenian theory views consumption as an essential part of human sustenance, encompassing basic activities such as eating, drinking, and providing shelter. These activities are necessary and can be satisfied in purely functional ways, although they may generate varying levels of satisfaction. The concept of conspicuous consumption, on the other hand, represents a critique of unnecessary consumption, primarily intended as a form of social display. It occurs "as a form of symbolic exchange, in particular, as a way of demonstrating social superiority over those unable to consume in the same manner" (Nils, 1999, p. 692).

Based on the logic of conspicuous consumption, material goods transcend the boundaries of comfort, increased profit, and utility, acquiring a social value of prestige in relation to others. The acquisition of technology, art, food, narcotics, and fashion can be seen as a means of displaying individuals' social status, often becoming a source of envy. Parties and events, therefore, evolve beyond mere celebrations, serving as opportunities for these men – members of the leisure class – to showcase the luxuries they can afford while distancing themselves from productive functions (Veblen, 2007 [1899]). Competition is inevitable in this scenario, where "the struggle is, however, essentially a struggle for honor, based on an invidious comparison of prestige between individuals; thus, definitive

10 For Nils (1999), according to Veblen, the members of the leisure class were essentially sophisticated barbarians. Furthermore, the institution of display remained deeply embedded in contemporary society, particularly through the unaltered role of women, as exemplified by the most barbaric of institutions – marriage. For Veblen, marriage represented little more than the ownership and barter of women. As the most fundamental form of ownership, patriarchy served as the model for all subsequent forms of private property.

conquest is impossible” (Veblen, 2007 [1899], p. 45), constituting the constant *pecuniary struggle*. Therefore, pecuniary consumption serves to materialize the honor of the leisure class.

Women, however, do not occupy this position; they inherit the objectified treatment from the time of barbarism. As they are not considered members of the leisure class, they do not partake in the benefits of pecuniary consumption but instead signify the prestige of the man who possesses them as property. According to Veblen (2007 [1899, p. 77):

The woman, being property, should consume only what is necessary for her sustenance, except to the extent that any excess consumption contributes to the comfort or respectability of her master. The consumption of luxury items, in its true sense, is consumption aimed at the comfort of the consumer himself; it is therefore an attribute of the master.

Considering the importance of consuming appropriate products and adopting proper behaviors, the question arises: how to define what should be consumed? This responsibility lies with the leisure class, which determines what is considered hierarchically superior through art, intellectual pursuits, gastronomy, good manners, and values. By gaining access to these resources, even without engaging in productive labor, a mechanism of social differentiation is created. From a gender perspective, women, who are seen as the property of men from the leisure class, also have designated roles within this context, as they are idealized to symbolize leisure and male domination. A classic example presented by Veblen (2007 [1899]) is the practice of *lotus feet* in China. Starting in the 10th century, this painful and slow process of foot deformation, which severely restricted movement, became a cultural symbol and an ideal of femininity, signifying the possibility of female leisure, alongside the power of their husbands.

From the above, one might mistakenly assume that the productive class does not engage in the logic of conspicuous consumption because it is not privileged with leisure. However, since the advent of Modernity, Veblen (2007 [1899], p. 87) suggests that the definition of consumption associated

with prestige permeates society in a way that is no longer restricted to the dominant class:

The lines of demarcation between social classes have become vague and transitory, and wherever this occurs, the norm of good reputation imposed by the upper class extends its coercive influence, with slight hindrances, throughout the social structure, reaching the lower strata.

Upon reaching the lower classes, it becomes evident that the productive groups within society feel compelled to replicate idealized forms, emulating behaviors that often contradict the time and financial resources available to non-idle classes. However, the diffusion of conspicuous consumption patterns promotes a homogenization of consumption, thereby eliminating the exclusivity that was once used as a status differentiator. The idea of social rapprochement is undermined, as the dominant class continuously creates new patterns, perpetuating a cycle of differentiation and attempts at convergence. In this cycle, consumption takes on purposes that remain intangible to the majority of the population. Ultimately, there are only those who create the ideal and those who reproduce it (Veblen, 2007 [1899]).

3. Hazel Kyrk and her new perspective on consumption theory

In her work *A Theory of Consumption*, Hazel Kyrk (1923)¹¹ analyzes consumer behavior and the formation of consumption patterns. According to McGovern (2006), Kyrk's discussion blends economic analysis with pragmatist philosophy, domestic economics, and psychology, positioning

11 Hazel Kyrk was born in Ohio in 1886 and dedicated her life to education and research in Economics. After completing her Ph.D. in 1910, she taught at various institutions, including Wellesley College and Oberlin College, and contributed to statistical studies during World War I. Her research primarily focused on food and economic issues, which led to collaborations with renowned universities such as Stanford and Iowa State. In 1925, she joined the University of Chicago, where she remained until her retirement in 1952. Kyrk was later recognized with the Hart Schaffner and Marx Prize for her contributions to Economic research (Dimand, Dimand, Forget, 2000).

the consumer at the intersection of economics, politics, and cultural themes. Unlike the marginalist approach, Kyrk (1923) rejects the idea of a distinct consumer class, emphasizing that it is impossible to isolate consumers, as their interests are inherently tied to the community in which they live. In other words, and directly related to Veblenian thought, consumption is socially determined.

Although consumption is socially determined, Kyrk (1976 [1953]) discusses the nature of the decision-making process – specifically, what the individual truly wants to consume. If all acts were without deliberation, this issue would not arise. However, when expenditures are planned to some degree, a conscious choice is involved. The distribution of income among alternative uses requires decisions about ends (or the extent to which certain goals should be achieved) and decisions about means, making the consumer's choices more complex than those of a business manager. This complexity arises because the consumer must compare different types of satisfaction or ends, even though he does not make decisions by objectively measuring pleasure, satisfaction, or utility. His deliberation is more like an experiment, evaluating different possibilities and considering alternatives, which ultimately leads to an ordering of his preferences.

From consumer choices, consumption patterns or lifestyles are consolidated. Kyrk (1923) emphasizes that these patterns are intrinsically linked to social norms and cultural values, which play a central role in organizing human life in contemporary society. Emerging from the interaction between individuals and their social environment, these patterns reflect both individual aspirations and collective influences. Shaped by dominant social codes, consumption patterns are akin to the customs and traditions of a group, representing a crucial component of an individual's social heritage. Additionally, they encapsulate the entirety of the individual's personality and the cultural context of their time and social group, exerting significant influence over human behavior.

Conventional needs play a significant role in an individual's budget, as individuals “know very well that under the cover of these budget items, which apparently represent only interests in health, beauty, social interaction, education, recreation, etc.” (Kyrk, 1923, p. 221), lie the prestige values that constitute the unwritten code of the group to which they

belong and aspire to maintain. Notably, some of these values may cause genuine physical discomfort to the individual; however, the strength of social impulses and their associated consequences often overpower such unpleasant sensations.

The feeling of belonging arises from shared ways of life, marks of reputation, and respectability, which standardize behavior and function as a life plan. The objects consumed transcend their immediate functionality, serving both their practical purpose and the maintenance of prestige. As Kyrk (1923, p. 222) notes, “this is conspicuous family consumption, consumption for display, to tell a story, to give information – pictorial consumption, so to speak.”

In this context, poverty is defined as income falling below the consumption standard, which can be understood as a minimum standard of living. Thus, poverty involves a reflection on this standard, which is closely tied to aesthetics, social values, and power dynamics between classes and groups. Kyrk (1976) exemplifies this in her analysis of women’s clothing among working women from 1875 to 1946. Furthermore, by influencing both individual and collective behavior, consumption patterns play a crucial role in social cohesion and economic stability, making them essential for a comprehensive understanding of social dynamics and human conduct.

However, as a result of the social stratification process – rooted in differences in economic power and resources – purely formal prestige values are created. For instance, leisure expenditures are reflected in lifestyle patterns as symbols of status rather than mere means of personal satisfaction. This dynamic fosters irrational spending and intensifies the competitive cycle of fashion, driven by the pursuit of prestige through consumption. While changes in the design of consumer goods may occur for reasons unrelated to finances, the desire to adopt elite brands is frequently motivated by the fear of appearing poor (Kyrk, 1923).

In the context of social consumption, while consumers possess formal freedom of choice, their decisions are often significantly shaped by various social and commercial pressures. Recognizing this, Kyrk (1923) emphasizes the importance of a robust theory of consumption that considers commercial practices capable of undermining consumer interests, including monopolies, fraud, and adulteration.

4. Social media and the performance of aesthetic procedures: an “insta'tutionalism?”

With the growing integration of mobile devices into daily life, social media applications have become increasingly prominent, serving as a continuous and pervasive form of entertainment. In Brazil, one of the world's leading consumers of digital products, Instagram holds particular significance, ranking as the most widely used platform (Forbes, 2023)¹². On this platform, users share images and videos documenting their lives, showcasing experiences and everyday moments, while increasingly constructing a curated image for their followers. This curated self-presentation reflects the individual's desired perception by others, ultimately serving both personal and professional purposes.

In this context, digital influencers have emerged as a distinct niche within the job market. These individuals, characterized by substantial followings on their social media accounts, possess the ability to influence the opinions and decisions of others through their perceived authority, expertise, or relational dynamics (Pereira, 2017). By publicly displaying habits, principles, ideas, and values, influencers disseminate lifestyles associated with success and well-being, thereby encouraging their emulation beyond the digital sphere. Consequently, these shared behaviors are imbued with social meaning, as they are not only visible but also widely disseminated and adopted by groups. Within the framework of Kyrk's Theory of Consumption (1923), such phenomena align with the concept of artificial desires, resonating with Veblen's (2007) notion of conspicuous consumption.

This group, emerging as a passive authority in the digital environment and dictating norms and values, represents a new manifestation of the leisure class. However, by instrumentalizing modern forms of coercion, it distinguishes itself from earlier iterations by operating within the framework of new communication technologies. While in the 19th century,

¹² According to the Digital Report 2024: Brazil published by Data Reportal, WhatsApp is the most accessed social media platform in the country, with 93.4% of the population using it, followed by Instagram, with 91.2% of users. (Available at: <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-brazil>).

contact between other groups and dominant practices was limited to the external environment, “today, the institutions are out there, in our minds, and vibrating or beeping in our pockets. Every time we check our social networks, the institutions are strongly reinforced” (Almeida & Mortari, 2021, p. 4). In this context, the construction of behavior patterns and lifestyles by this new leisure class has intensified significantly.

The expansion of forms of social differentiation, along with the presentation of this differentiation – constantly reinforced through the perpetual exposure of continuously connected users – serves not only as a standard to be emulated or a marker of superiority through consumption. By sharing their lives, the new leisure class markets a desire for imitation while simultaneously promoting their own image and the goods and services showcased during their exposure. This process persuades users to consume, as “social networks are big businesses focused on selling things” (Almeida and Mortari, 2021, p. 6). Consequently, social medias contribute to impulsive and often unnecessary spending, even when aimed at achieving prestige through consumption, as previously suggested by Kyrk (1923).

Given these effects, one might expect social networks, as a source of significant pressure on behavioral patterns, to be avoided by users. However, cell phones have unified a variety of previously disconnected activities (such as messaging, banking, alarms, and personal document), with social networks becoming an additional feature, offering a perceived form of connection with others. In Brazil, according to *Digital 2024: Brazil*, 59.9% of social media users report using these platforms to stay in touch with friends and family, while only 43.2% use them to search for products to buy. Despite this, much of the time spent on social media involves passively consuming diverse content and following – often with minimal interaction – the lives of acquaintances and strangers, many of whom owe their fame to the platforms themselves.

In a country characterized by profound social inequalities, it is unsurprising that Brazilian users rank among the most active consumers of social media, with daily usage exceeding recommended limits by up to six times. This extended engagement, particularly on Instagram, is not only detrimental from a psychological perspective – promoting harmful lifestyle comparisons that adversely impact mental health – but also exacerbates the

difficulty of disengaging from these platforms, a pattern akin to substance addiction (Monteiro et al., 2020; Haidt, 2024).

With the growing potential for coercion by social institutions in shaping desires, it becomes essential to identify the new frontier of dominance exercised by the leisure class, which now commodifies its life and image. The standard extends beyond clothing, accessories, and experiences; it encompasses the form itself and the supposed naturalness of this form – as if the ideal of beauty had not been meticulously constructed through various health and aesthetic interventions. Cabral and Vendressen (2008, p. 475) argue that:

The superstar of the new fashion is the body, and it has become the site of conspicuous consumption. Perhaps we may not be able to distinguish the rich from the poor by their black clothes, watches, and bags, but the chances are greater for the rich to be much leaner. It is likely that the rich have sculpted their bodies with gym workouts, guidance from a personal trainer, liposuction, and possibly implants; the rich body will be much more expensive to maintain and will show it.

As a result, the human body becomes the central element of hierarchical power through consumption, creating the possibility of constructing and deconstructing the natural body according to the demands shaped by fleeting trends. These trends are prominently featured on platforms such as Instagram, which, by emphasizing image and physical appearance, validate references based on social acceptance manifested through likes, hashtags, comments, and shares. Given the speed at which content is consumed and rendered obsolete, *magic formulas* proliferate – such as hair growth supplements, slimming gels, muscle-enhancing products, weight loss pills, and, at the extreme, surgical procedures. This acceleration also affects the demand for an idealized appearance, even if the standard is transient. Nevertheless, it is the ability to approximate this ideal that secures social approval and belonging. The perception of the *ideal body* is presented as both meritocratic and democratic, leading to the notion that “faced with so many opportunities, *only those who don't want to*

be beautiful” (Melo, 2006, p.37).

Thus, a new market emerges, responsible for fulfilling these desires, as can be understood in Kyrk’s interpretation (1923, p. 262):

All these influences which lead the individual to seek new experiences and values through expenditure, and which direct him in his actual choices of what his new goods shall be, are strengthened and furthered by the constant pressure brought to bear by the producers. In their advertising and selling methods can be seen reflected in the diverse interests and motives which lead to the spending of the surplus, and the forces which determine how it shall be spent.

The difference now is that advertising has become more subtle, as it is internalized within the representations of influencers’ daily lives. Given that the network of followers is voluntary, the consumption and portrayal of the influencer’s lifestyle serve as a source of credibility for brands and services. Followers, in turn, seek to emulate not only the influencer’s lifestyle but also what it represents socially, which necessitates the consumption of the same products and the imitation of the aesthetic standards they promote. While individual choices remain intact, they are transformed into a collective phenomenon on social networks, driven by the desire for social validation. In these contexts, aesthetic procedures are increasingly normalized and glamorized as pathways to achieving an ideal of beauty (and a symbol of success), which is presented as ostensibly natural.

When observing the Brazilian context, the prominence and expansion of this new market become evident. According to the *International Survey of Aesthetic Procedures* conducted by the *International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery* (ISAPS), in 2021, over 14 million aesthetic procedures were performed worldwide, with nearly 3 million taking place in Brazil. In 2022, this number increased even further, positioning the country as a leader in the number of surgical aesthetic procedures performed. Economically, these procedures generate between US\$65 and US\$87.5 billion globally.

In the rush to undergo such procedures, many individuals go into debt in order to achieve the desired aesthetic standard. However, since this

does not correlate with an increase in income, the investment (and resulting debt) can be understood from an institutionalist perspective. Following Veblen's theory, seeking loans becomes a clear strategy for the productive class to replicate the consumption patterns of the leisure class – specifically, acquiring a body aligned with the prevailing aesthetic standard. The desire to belong to a prestigious group allows individuals with limited resources to overcome this financial barrier, disregarding potential future losses. This behavior reflects irrational spending, as described by Kyrk's theory of consumption.

Regarding the demographic undergoing aesthetic procedures, research by ISAPS (2022) highlights a significant gender discrepancy, with women accounting for 76% of such procedures. This disparity can be analyzed through the lens of Veblen's theory, which posits that the female body and women's lives have historically served as instruments for demonstrating the power of the leisure class or, more recently, as a reflection of women's own positioning within this class.

While the contemporary ideal of female beauty, especially in the era of social media, is often framed as an expression of individualized self-esteem accompanying advancements from the feminist movement, it aligns with what Wolf (2018, p. 27) describes: “the ideology of beauty is the last remnant of the old ideologies of the feminine that still has the power to control” women. This ideology has supplanted earlier forms of social coercion, such as those tied to motherhood, chastity, and domesticity. On social media, coercion is amplified through the use of filters and digitally edited images, which blur the boundary between reality and fiction. Additionally, an unattainable aesthetic standard homogenizes and commodifies beauty, reinforcing a collective ideal.

Melo (2006) analyzed narratives from women who had undergone plastic surgery to explore the motivations behind these decisions. Their findings reveal a tension between the illusion of individual autonomy and the influence of collective coercive power. All interviewees cited self-esteem as a primary motivation for surgery, viewing the procedure as a means of enhancing well-being. However, this perception often coexists with the standardization of aesthetic desires, revealing the pervasive influence of societal expectations. In parallel, external factors are also recognized by

the interviewees as influencing their decision-making processes, albeit in a less prominent role. One participant, for instance, highlights situations of discomfort, describing moments of embarrassment related to her weight – “it’s very embarrassing to go to a store and not find anything that fits you. It’s a very unpleasant situation. (...) Only I know what I went through for not having a body that people consider ideal” (Melo, 2006, p. 66).

The coercion to conform to a socially established ideal manifests in real-world experiences through exclusion from consumption opportunities and feelings of embarrassment, complicating an individual’s ability to participate in social activities and gain acceptance within peer and familial groups. Reversing this dynamic – or adapting to the standard institutionalized (albeit temporarily) as superior, particularly by social networks – requires not only pursuing an aesthetic ideal but achieving it rapidly and publicly demonstrating it. This sharing, primarily through social media, ensures the experience is validated, commented on, liked, and socially amplified.

In this regard, Melo (2006, p. 33) highlights the pursuit of external attention as a significant motivator. One interviewee, after undergoing cosmetic surgery, revealed: “the first thing I do is leave the house; since no one notices me at home, it is good to at least see others looking, since looking does no harm, right?” However, with the advent of social media, leaving the house is no longer necessary. These platforms break down the walls of privacy, allowing every step of aesthetic transformation to be socially shared, symbolizing a metamorphosis akin to the caterpillar turning into a butterfly. Showing oneself in the *ugly* phase of the process also generates engagement and social validation, further perpetuating the cycle.

While there is a growing pressure on men to conform to aesthetic standards, women remain the primary targets of the social coercion perpetuated by the myth of beauty. This is evident both in their dominant presence as consumers of social media and as the majority undergoing surgical procedures for aesthetic purposes. As Melo (2006) points out, while women are consistently burdened with the expectation of maintaining an attractive appearance as a social duty, men retain the privilege of choice, with body care seen as optional and not determinant of their social worth.

The term *insta'tutionalism* aptly encapsulates the role of social networks in amplifying social standards and creating modern institutions that exert significant influence, particularly on women. These platforms operate through smartphones, reinforcing their presence 24/7, convincing users, establishing behaviors to emulate, and dictating what holds value. They offer a roadmap to achieving the current ideal—an ideal that is ever-changing, often already different by the following day.

Final remarks

This study underscores that the relationship between social media and aesthetic procedures among Brazilian women can be effectively analyzed through an institutionalist lens. The coercive power of beauty standards is intensified within the social media environment, shaping consumer behavior that aligns with Kyrk's concept of irrational consumption, driven by the dominance of a leisure class as outlined by Veblen.

In recent years, the rise in aesthetic surgeries appears closely tied to the growing aspiration to achieve an idealized body, with these procedures serving as tools to attain a new *fashion product*: the standardized body. In this dynamic, social media acts as a potent amplifier, offering intimate glimpses into the lives of socially dominant individuals – purveyors of an artificial morality that galvanizes waves of followers. The leisure class has adapted to contemporary contexts, maintaining its coercive influence while amplifying its power through digital platforms.

Although Thorstein Veblen and Hazel Kyrk could not have predicted the advent of social media, the core vulnerabilities of human nature that they identified – such as the desire for belonging and the fear of exclusion – persist unchanged. Social media has merely brought these vulnerabilities into sharper focus. The relentless pursuit of belonging drives individuals to replicate the lifestyles and patterns of those higher in social hierarchies, especially regarding aesthetics and appearance. Within this institutionalist framework, it can be argued that we are witnessing an era of *insta'tutionalism*, where social institutions and aesthetic norms propagate exponentially through social networks.

The findings of this research are exploratory and do not aim to exhaust the discussion of the interplay between social networks and aesthetic procedures within an institutionalist framework. For instance, racial dynamics may exacerbate the issue, suggesting an attempt to align with Eurocentric beauty ideals originating from the North. Moreover, the implications of this reality for younger audiences – especially children and adolescents – remain fertile ground for further investigation. Similarly, as social networks create niche communities, it becomes essential to explore whether and how divergent aesthetic standards, such as those championed by the *body positivity movement*, coexist within this digital landscape.

References

ALMEIDA, F. MORTARI, V. **Smartphones, Social Networks, and Fake News: Institutional Economics Approach to Decision Making in the Twenty-First Century**, *Journal of Economic Issues*, v. 55, n. 2, p. 342-348, 2021.

CABRAL, A. R.; VANDRESEN, Monique. **Revista Feminina e a Cultura de Narciso: notas sobre a construção do corpo**. *DAPesquisa*, Florianópolis, v. 3, n. 5, p. 471-475, 2008.

CAMIC, C. **Veblen: The making of an economist who unmade economics**. *Harvard University Press*, 2020.

DIMAND, R. W.; DIMAND, M. A.; FORGET, E. **A Biographical Dictionary of Women Economists**. Cheltenham: *Edward Elgar*, 2000.

FORBES, **Instagram é a rede mais consumida no Brasil, mas o declínio preocupa Big Techs**. Forbes. 2023. Disponível em: <<https://forbes.com.br/forbes-tech/2023/03/instagram-segue-na-lideranca-no-brasil-mas-declinio-das-redes-preocupa-big-techs/>>.

HAIDT, J. **A geração ansiosa**. 1ª Ed. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2024.

HERMANS, A; BOERMAN, S. C.; VELDHUIS, J. **Follow, filter, filler? Social media usage and cosmetic procedure intention, acceptance, and**

normalization among young adults. *Body Image*, v. 43, p. 440-449, 2022.

ISAPS - INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY OF AESTHETIC PLASTIC SURGERY. **International Survey on Aesthetic/Cosmetic Procedures performed in 2021.** *Mount Royal: International Survey On Aesthetic/Cosmetic Procedures*, 2022. 56 p.

ISAPS - INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY OF AESTHETIC PLASTIC SURGERY. **International Survey on Aesthetic/Cosmetic Procedures performed in 2022.** *Mount Royal: International Survey On Aesthetic/Cosmetic Procedures*, 2023. 56 p.

KATAOKA, A; MENDES, C. C; LELLO, N. G.; SAADA, R; KAPRITCHKOFF, M. R. **The influence of social media on the decision to undergo plastic surgery.** *Revista Brasileira de Cirurgia Plástica*, v. 39, n. 2, p. 1-7, 2024.

KUIPER, Edith. *A Herstory of Economics*. New York: Wiley, 2022.

KYRK, H. **A Theory of Consumption.** Boston: *Houghton Mifflin Company*, 1923.

KYRK, H. **The family in the American economy.** Chicago: *University of Chicago Press*, 1976 [1953].

McGOVERN, C. **Sold American: consumption and citizenship, 1890-1954.** United States of America: *The University of North Carolina Press*, 2006.

MELO, R. **Admirável corpo novo: cirurgia plástica e reconfiguração corporal.** 98 p. Dissertação (Mestrado). Programa de Pós-Graduação em Sociologia, Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Recife, 2006.

MONTEIRO, R; MONTEIRO, T. M. C; CASSARO, A. C. B; LIMA, M. E. B; SOUZA, N. K. V; RIBEIRO, T. S; ARANTES, T. P. **Vício no Insta: propriedades psicométricas da Escala Bergen de Adição ao Instagram.** *Avances en Psicología Latinoamericana*, v. 38, n. 3, p. 1-12., 2020.

NILS, G. **Thorstein Veblen's Neglected Feminism.** *Journal of Economic Issues*, p. XXXIII, n. 3, p. 689-711, 1999.

PHILIPPY, D. **Ellen Richards's home economics movement and the birth of the economics of consumption.** *Journal of the History of Economic*

Thought, v. 43, n. 3, p. 378-400, 2021.

PEREIRA, C.S.G. **Digital influencers e o comportamento dos seguidores no Instagram: um estudo exploratório**. 97 f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Marketing Digital) – Instituto Superior de Contabilidade e Administração do Porto, Instituto Politécnico do Porto, Portugal, 2017.

SILVEIRA, V.R. **Corpos e beleza no Instagram: estetização em busca de likes**. 134 f. Dissertação (Mestrado) - Curso de Comunicação e Semiótica, Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, São Paulo, 2017.

TORODOVA, Z. **Hazel Kyrk's A Theory of Consumption, Veblen's business and industrial concerns, and W.C. Mitchell's essays on spending and money: conceptual links**. *Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology*, v. 41D, p; 27-45, 2023.

VAN VELZEN, S. **Hazel Kyrk and the ethics of consumption**. In: BARKER, Drucilla; KUIPER, Edith (Eds.). *Toward a feminist philosophy of economics*. London: Routledge, p. 38-55, 2003.

VEBLEN, Thorstein. **The economic theory of woman's dress**. In: CAMIC, Charles; HODGSON, Geoffrey (ed.). *Essential Writings of Thorstein Veblen*. London: Routledge, p. 96-103, 2011 [1894].

VEBLEN, T. **The beginnings of ownership**. *American Journal of Sociology*, v. 4, n. 3, p. 352-365, 1898.

VEBLEN, T. **The barbarian status of women**. *American Journal of Sociology*, v. 4, n. 4, p. 503-514, 1899.

VEBLEN, T. **The Theory of the Leisure Class**. Oxford: *Oxford University Press*, 2007 [1899].

WOLF, N. **O mito da beleza**. Rio de Janeiro: Rosa dos Ventos, 2018.