

FROM CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION TO OSTENTATION: THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKS ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S INCOME¹

DO CONSUMO CONSPÍCUO À OSTENTAÇÃO: O IMPACTO
DAS REDES SOCIAIS NA RENDA DOS JOVENS

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ABSTRACT

Thorstein Veblen observed that, in the society of his time, people highlighted their power and wealth through their conspicuous consumption, especially in public places; ostentation thus made it possible to win the admiration of their peers. Nowadays, this ostentation can be done using social networks, through the exhibition of consumer images by means of

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photographs, notably selfies. Comparison through social networks is verified with special intensity among its bigger users, young people. It may happen that the need for emulation leads these people to spend beyond their financial means, promoting excessive indebtedness. This article analyzes this relationship between conspicuous consumption, social networks and indebtedness based on the results of a survey carried out using online questionnaires, which suggests the possibility that this phenomenon is actually taking place.

Keywords: conspicuous consumption; social networks; young people; indebtedness.

RESUMO

Thorstein Veblen observou que, na sociedade de sua época, as pessoas exibiam seu poder e riqueza por meio do consumo conspícuo, especialmente em locais públicos; a ostentação, portanto, lhes possibilitava conquistar a admiração de seus pares. Hoje em dia essa ostentação pode ser feita por meio das redes sociais, através da exibição de imagens de consumo tais como fotografias, notadamente das chamadas selfies. As comparações por meio das redes sociais se verificam com especial intensidade entre os maiores usuários destas, os jovens. Pode ocorrer que a necessidade de emulação leve essas pessoas a gastarem além de suas possibilidades financeiras, promovendo o endividamento excessivo. Este artigo analisa essa relação entre consumo conspícuo, redes sociais e endividamento com base nos resultados de uma pesquisa realizada mediante questionários online, que sugere a possibilidade de que esse fenômeno esteja de fato ocorrendo.

Palavras-chave: consumo conspícuo ; redes sociais; jovens; endividamento.

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1. Introduction

The novel “The Great Gatsby”, written by F. Scott Fitzgerald, presents the character of Jay Gatsby, an emerging millionaire, who holds large parties in his mansion, marked by luxury and ostentation as a way of highlighting his wealth; his guests also dressed elegantly, through which they demonstrated their possessions. This novel, a vivid description of the American Gilded Age, classically expresses how people seek to obtain social status through the acquisition of goods and services in order to display their power to other members of the society, as “to win and maintain the esteem of men, it is not enough to possess wealth or power. Wealth and power must be made evident, as esteem is only granted in the face of evidence” (Veblen, 2018, p. 63).

Currently, people do not need to attend a party or any other place

to show off their assets; social networks can be characterized as today's party rooms, where those who heavily use the networks can show off their clothing, food, travel, and the places they frequent. Social media can be used to show "evidence of success" to a much larger number of people than would be possible in a ballroom or any other spatially limited location. Through selfies and other photos or videos, users can share images that portray their consumption pattern and communicate their success to others (Galindo, 2014). As Iqani and Schroeder (2015, p. 411) say, "Selfies are rooted in participatory cultures of new media forms (...) Consumer culture offers a dazzling array of goods and services that induce individuals to participate in a system of commercial gratification".

With the intensification of the use of social networks, they can increasingly influence the lives of their users, especially young people, in different aspects. Young ones tend to have greater contact with these networks, a reason why it becomes more necessary to understand the behavior of these consumers when they use social networks and the consequences of this.

Thus, social networks caught our attention not necessarily because they created the problems of conspicuous consumption and therefore ostentation, as these already existed, but because they allow these problems to reach another, much more problematic level, due to the speed with which information circulates in these media. Social networks can, therefore, multiply difficulties that already exist in the physical world; furthermore, their use can constitute a problem in itself, as many users become addicted to them. Therefore, by spending many hours a day on these networks, especially young people are constantly exposed to these temptations, multiplied in virtual reality.

Therefore, it is necessary to understand how showing off via social media encourages excessive consumption, including the case of young people who do not have sufficient means to keep up with the standard of living exhibited by the higher classes, and to understand the consequences of this constant exposure of individuals to living standards higher than the one they could afford. Thorstein Veblen, American economist and sociologist, discusses in his book "The theory of the leisure class" (2018, originally published in 1899) the concept of conspicuous consumption;

departing from his conceptualization, we explore in this article the idea of ostentation through consumption on social networks by young people, to understand the impact of social networks on the conspicuous consumption of this group and how this could consequently affect their income.

This article has the general objective of verifying how social networks stimulate conspicuous consumption and therefore ostentation among the young ones, in the spirit of Veblen, looking at how the desire to transmit a certain social status through social networks leads these people to consume thinking about the image they want to get constructed, especially through different photos and other visual means. Social networks have become increasingly present in the lives of young people, even for those who do not intend to be so immersed in them, and it is suggested that “immersion in the digital environment occurred almost obligatory, so that they would not remain on the sidelines of social relationships” (Miranda et al, 2015, p. 308). We will also try to identify whether there are instances of debt caused by this conspicuous consumption. Finally, we seek to understand how these factors are interconnected, allowing us to understand the relationship between social networks and excessive consumption among young people, even causing, in some cases, high debt. It should be remarked that the objective of this work is not to suggest that social networks automatically imply a lack of financial control, but rather to verify the possible existence of uncontrolled indebtedness due to the conspicuous consumption that they promote.

The methodology used in the research initially involved a literature review seeking to make the necessary connections between studies already carried out on the different variables. The aim is to discuss the concept of conspicuous consumption and to understand how it can be verified today. We highlight, among other aspects, the use of photographs to promote this kind of consumption and we consider the possibility of the existence of a certain addiction in the use of social networks. We also analyze the concept of emulation, especially among the young ones, in social media. Finally, we discuss the possible consequences of this process on young people's debt. In addition to the theoretical review, empirical research was carried out through the application of an online questionnaire via Google forms. Finally, we analyze whether the data collected from the questionnaire

confirm points identified in the theoretical review.

Our article is divided into four sections, the first being this introduction. The second one presents the theoretical framework through five subsections that seek to analyze each of the variables involved in the problem presented, namely: conspicuous consumption, selfies and digital photos, social networks, emulation and debt. The third section presents the data collected from the questionnaire released via Google form, discussing the results, and verifying the connections with the theoretical framework. The fourth section corresponds to the conclusions.

2. Theoretical frameworks

2.1. Conspicuous consumption

Veblen, an economist and sociologist who lived in the society of the USA at the end of the 19th century, sought to explain consumer behavior based on institutions. For Veblen, the consumption habits of the individuals are related to the environment in which they are inserted; consumption would always have a social and intersubjective dimension, as each person's consumption would always be linked to the consumption of others. Thus, consumption habits form part of a set of culturally developed patterns, thus becoming institutions. Therefore, the choice process depends on the individual's decision mediated by his/her environment, relationships, and on the contacts that each person has (Camatta, 2014).

One of the essential concepts in Veblen's perspective is the so-called conspicuous consumption, which would be based on emulation. For him, conspicuous consumption is consumption carried out by the so-called leisure class, the class that takes care of activities such as politics, war, sports, and religious observance (Veblen, 2018). These are non-productive activities, as productive work represents “poverty and subjection” and is therefore “incompatible with a good reputation in the community.” (Veblen, 2018, p.65).

The possession of wealth would be a form of discriminatory distinction in our society. In the barbarian tribes, men had to reach

certain standards of physical resistance and intelligence to be respected; nowadays, in turn, the possession of a certain level of wealth came to be characterized as the way of being well regarded in the eyes of the society. Thus, those who fail to achieve this goal are not admired by the community, leading to damaged self-esteem (Veblen, 2018). In this sense, conspicuous consumption “signifies a particular expression of the predatory practices of pecuniary invidious distinction” (Todorova, 2014, p. 674).

For Veblen (2018), the existence of individual property in a society is responsible for the need of its members to accumulate goods and to consider themselves better than the others due to this possession. In this way, he considers that if someone is in an unfavorable situation when compared to other individuals in society, this person will look for a way to accumulate more until he/she catches up with the others’ level of riches and, if possible, surpasses it. Consequently:

The consumption pattern that usually guides our efforts is not the average, common, already achieved consumption; it is a consumption ideal that is just a little beyond our reach, or that can be achieved with some effort. The reason is emulation – the stimulus of a discriminatory comparison that leads us to want to surpass those in whose class we have the habit of including ourselves (Veblen, 2018, p.111).

Veblen (2018) highlights emulation, the need to compete through the acquisition of goods to reach certain social status that is achieved by leveling up or even by surpassing those who are slightly above. In this way, consumption in search of status is not limited to the leisure class, but it also extends to other members of society.

Part of this sought-after differentiation occurs through the consumption of products considered luxury. Mortelmans (2005) studies luxury consumption as a form of distinction, highlighting that people will seek to differentiate themselves through the purchase of these goods, avoiding, however, any exaggeration, so that they are not seen as snobs among the social group in which they belong. This author emphasizes that the value and classification of what is considered luxury will only exist in

a given context of distinction, that is, it is in the interaction between the different social layers that will be defined what can be considered luxury consumption or not. Thus, according to Mortelmans (2005), it is possible to observe a cascade effect of the meaning of luxury that extends from classes with more resources to those with fewer ones, covering a diversity of social layers. In other words, what is considered conspicuous consumption may vary according to different classes. A good that can be used to make a person stand out financially within a social class is not necessarily an ostentatious good for another class that is positioned a little higher in the social ladder. For example, within a social class with fewer resources, going to a restaurant in a certain neighborhood may be considered ostentatious, but this may not be considered a differentiator for those with greater resources, and perhaps even the opposite: going to that restaurant may be seen as a symbol of poverty for those who are richer.

In the context of tourism, while for lower income classes local trips, such as going to a nearby beach or city constitute a status symbol, for richer classes the dispute would be about how many countries each one has visited and how often they travel abroad. In other words, there are different ways and levels of ostentation; so conspicuous consumption can be defined by the simple idea of wanting to buy something to show off, regardless of what it is, as highlighted by Mortelmans (2005, p.517), “it does not matter whether or not these objects are considered luxury products by the dominant culture. Only the use of these products as signs of social position makes them luxury products.”

The idea of cascade aligns with what Veblen (2018) states regarding the desire of individuals to always try to be a little above the class in which they are inserted. This means that the higher we go up the social pyramid, the form of distinction will change: the richer the class, the more expensive the type of consumption needed to differentiate oneself from the class below. Thus, conspicuous consumption nowadays can be characterized by any consumption behavior that aims to show off, that is, to demonstrate wealth to others, be it using an expensive lipstick or driving a luxury car (Scheetz, 2007).

By taking normal everyday objects beyond their basic use, we can visualize the cultural elements that make ordinary things end up serving

emulative purposes. A car is not only used to move from one place to another safely and quickly, it needs to be beautiful and presentable to other members of the social circle in which the person is inserted: “[C]onspicuous consumers prefer the social values such as status, desirability or recognition that can be created by having the product, instead of taking into account their own feelings and the functionality of the product” (Efendioğlu, 2019, p. 2177).

In the current situation, given that social networks allow greater interaction not only among the same social class but also between different ones, they constitute a perfect tool to present the aforementioned “evidence” of social status to a wider range of people.

2.2. Paintings, images, selfies and digital photos

Images have existed since the earliest times of humanity; we find them in prehistoric times from the cave paintings on, through paintings and sculptures from the civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia, Greece and Rome (Knauss, 2006), until we reach the present day with selfies, a type of “self-portrait taken with a digital camera, often stretching your arm and turning the lens towards yourself or in front of a mirror, to be shared via social networks” (Galindo, 2014, p.10). Images are characterized by having a universal communication capacity, which makes it possible to send messages transmitted through these images to different layers of society (Knauss, 2006).

Vieira (2018), analyzing paintings from the 16th century to the 19th century, says that aristocratic paintings were used to demonstrate social status. Vieira's study investigates how the objects present in the painting and the clothes worn by the people in the images represent expensive goods with high social status. Although over the years each image and painting sought to portray and communicate different aspects, such as faith, purity or intellectuality, the presence of the affirmation of wealth remained in all paintings, thus characterizing this factor as an always present feature of the representations. Finally, Vieira (2018) highlights the importance of future research that could extend this study to selfies. Indeed, as Brook

(2008) states, we must remember that although some images, typically photographs, show some situations as they occurred, many are created, not to present reality, but to construct particular scenarios.

If access to paintings such as portraits was in earlier times restricted to the aristocracy, with the emergence of photographs the potential for preserving images changed. Photo portraits meant in their genesis a form of social distinction, initially being luxury items; however, with the advancement of technology and the emergence of affordable cameras, the less well-off sections of society gradually began to be able to produce their own images (Oliveira, 2018).

Photographs nowadays work as ways to prove that something happened. If there are no images, how can something be proved to others? How will people who travelled, went to a restaurant or to a concert prove these events without an image to confirm their presence there? Thus, “photography works as a means of proof, in which the absence of an image that proves the fact suggests that it never existed” (Almeida, 2015, p.11).

Thus, according to Bugeja et al. (2018), taking a photo at a tourist attraction may be more valuable to show others that the person was there than as a memory of the place visited. These authors carried out research with a group of young people between 25 and 30 years old and identified that these young people “like to explore a city and take photos of all the attractions and landmarks they find. They do not want to spend a lot of time learning about a specific place, but they prefer to see many tourist attractions at once” (Bugeja et al., 2018, p.117).

Photographs currently do not require professional knowledge: anyone can take a photo instantly! Furthermore, cell phones with the selfie feature introduced a type of photos that traditional cameras did not allow. Thus, people can post their photos (including themselves in them) on the internet and view images shared by others (Almeida, 2015). Besides, it is currently possible to improve the photos through editing⁴, as people seek to share the best representation of themselves to others:

4 From its origins, photographs were retouched; the advancement of technology only facilitated and popularized these editions (Galindo, 2014).

This photographic production, which is made to be shared and viewed by others, meets a series of editing criteria. Everyone wants to show the best of their image, since it is through the judgment of this other's gaze, expressed in comments and likes, that this subjectivity gets built according to the logic of visibility (Galindo, 2014, p.17).

2.3. Social media

Digital social networks have been increasingly present in contemporary society. They can be conceptualized as virtual places (sites) in which it is possible to create a profile using personal data, not necessarily true, and to use it to post photos, to exchange messages and to create a list of friends (Torres, 2009). It is no secret that there is an “undeniable appreciation among many young people for the communication tools made available via the internet” (Oliveira, 2012, p.30). Thus, social networks represent a fundamental form of internet communication that young people use.

According to Canezin and Almeida (2015), people can often feel pressured to use social networks to avoid feeling socially excluded. The authors problematize the impulse people have, needing to be connected all the time. This behavior was also verified by Miranda et al. (2015), specifically among younger people, whose presence on social networks becomes virtually mandatory even for those who do not appreciate them, in order not to be excluded from social relationships. On the other hand, many people use social networks not because of pressure but because they feel that they are comfortable spaces to communicate with others. Dogan and Kaya (2016) identified that shame allows us to anticipate the propensity for internet addiction, concluding that people who feel a lot of shame and avoid socialization can use social networks excessively, as these are places where they can communicate, avoiding face-to-face interaction with others.

Participation in social networks can, therefore, occur for a variety of reasons, from using it for fun to using it to avoid feeling excluded. In

any case, once inside social networks the individual is subject to possible addiction. According to Griffiths (2013), addiction to social networks is more problematic than others, as it is not an addiction that can be solved through complete abstinence, considering that social networks are often used for work and not just for leisure.

Through social networks, there has been created a potentially intense level of contact, which does not require a physical dimension, with people belonging to other geographic and/or social areas. Once they have created their profile, young people are able to add to their networks other young people who are already part of their social circle at the educational institution, at work or in any other real place, but they will also be able to add people they have met through digital networks and with which they relate only in this way.

On social networks, an experience occurred in a certain physical location is shared, using some filters defined by the profile owner who chooses what to show or not to other users. In this virtual world, where young people begin to interact both with people they know and with those they never personally met, they develop "...relationships and behaviors that are extremely permeated by a virtual subjectivity, in which they have the need to always be connected" (Miranda et al., 2015, p.307).

However, to create social relationships on networks, creating a profile is not enough, as argued by Moreira (2015, p.21): "To exist virtually and to stay 'alive', it takes time, dedication, ability to impress and to be impressed; it is necessary to become a technological subject." In this way, the publication of photos becomes one of the tools on the networks to maintain this virtual existence mentioned by Moreira, as also mentioned by Galindo. Considering the need for a virtual existence, young people publish photos in order to obtain approval through likes and comments, these actions being "defined, created and mandatory cultural norms within social networks" (Almeida, 2015, p.31).

Thus, if "Veblen's places of leisure were the conspicuous public stages of society, such as homes, parties, religious ceremonies, and other social gatherings" (Miller, 2018, p.2), today social networks take over this space; after all, no party room will be bigger than the virtual space. The use of social networks, photos and conspicuous consumption connect

here. Young people are inserted in a digital world to which it is virtually impossible not to belong. In other words, we have reached a point where young people are inserted into a network in which they are bombarded by images that bring with them exacerbated consumption. Three problems come together here: conspicuous consumption itself, the image that conveys conspicuous consumption and an addiction to social networks, which represent the medium in which young people are exposed.

Considering that in the contemporary world “it is necessary to present a self-portrait to the network and to measure oneself in relation to something ideal” (Braga, 2021, p.660), digital photos work in the search for the construction of an image associated with the social status that each network user aims to represent. Therefore, digital photos work as a showcase that will allow people to display this evidence. This is how, “in unprecedented proportions, consumer exposure leads people to build their accounts and post in order to create a profile that produces value and represents the way they want to be perceived” (Dantas, 2018, p.15).

Mortari (2022) affirms that original institutionalism believes that economic behavior is based on habits and institutions; therefore, social networks have intensified people's interaction with institutions, as they reinforce consumption patterns and lifestyles: “Institutions shape behavior by dictating what is acceptable and what is objectionable, that is, they define rules of behavior.” (Mortari, 2022, p.20). Thus, Mortari highlights the importance of looking at the context of social networks, given that human preferences are shaped by the institutional context in which they are inserted.

Therefore, for Mortari (2022, p.13), “this means that analyzing the consumer decision process has become more complex. Social media, by becoming an integral part of personal daily life, started to have an important influence on consumer behavior”. Furthermore, an important kind of character stands out in this environment: influencers⁵, figures who, for Mortari (2022, p.82), “mobilize resources for institutional entrepreneurship

5 People who have the ability to influence the behavior of others who follow them; they usually have a high number of followers. There are different types of influencers, among others in religion and in fashion. In this article, we are referring to influencers responsible for showcasing travel, fashion and parties, which tend to provoke conspicuous consumption.

through social media, where they can build their own brand, becoming themselves human brands capable of influencing behavior.” Digital influencers emerge in this scenario as great proponents of the ideal to be sought after by young people. Given that influencers “incite users to consume what they publish on their profiles” (Dantas, 2018, p.18), young people begin to desire a lifestyle like that of these new digital celebrities.

Digital influencers have profiles full of photos, each one reaffirming their status through ostentation. In addition to publishing photos portraying their trips, places they visit and items they purchase, influencers do not usually post anything repeated, that is, with each new photo published they wear a different outfit, portray a different place or a different trip. They thus encourage other individuals to always consume something different.

Furthermore, we can verify, as suggested by Dantas (2018, p.77), that despite many differences “a parallel can be drawn between the leisure class of the XIXth Century and the generation of digital influencers”. Just like the leisure class, digital influencers would be responsible for promoting the ideal of conspicuous consumption. Users with average or low incomes who follow these influencers are exposed to a luxury routine that becomes an ideal for them. On the other hand, we can also understand that “today, to varying degrees, we are all part of the leisure class, and the challenge we face is to create an economic and technological structure where we can display our visible selves” (Miller, 2018, p.2).

Finally, it is possible to note that Veblen already predicted the evolution of the media as a way of directly exposing individuals to other members of society, making it necessary to guarantee their status through exhibition.

The means of communication and the mobility of populations expose the individual to the observation of many people who have no way of evaluating his respectability other than through the assets (and perhaps the education) that he is able to display when he is under their direct observation (Veblen, 2018, p.99).

Users work in two ways with conspicuous consumption on

networks. The same individual who, reacting to another person's photo, feels the necessity to post a photo that contains a greater level of ostentation to compete with that person, generates, when publishing his photo, the same feeling in other users who will also seek to compete with the evidence of wealth portrayed in the published selfie. In this way, a vicious circle of endless competition is created in a space where images are published every minute and people feel the need to reaffirm their status with new “evidence”, given that the previous ones are lost amidst the frequent updating of the profiles, running the risk of the person and his/her consumption being forgotten among so many images (Almeida, 2015).

2.4. Emulation

Verdugo and Ponce (2021) discuss the ‘new luxury’, a kind of luxury consumption affordable for the middle classes, made possible by the advancement of technology that has made exclusive goods cheaper. They analyzed the personality traits that lead to conspicuous consumption, and they confirmed the hypothesis that competitiveness has a positive relationship with conspicuous consumption. According to Miller (2018), Veblen observed that all social classes practice conspicuous consumption, where each one of them would envy and compete with the class immediately above, highlighting that there is no finish line in emulation, since there will always be further up another social class to be reached.

If in a scenario without social networks, constant competition was required to stay in the spotlight, on social networks it becomes more difficult to maintain notoriety.

Amid the bombardment of selfies (and images in general), how can you gain the spotlight for yourself? How to achieve the much-desired visibility that, in the contemporary world, can often be transformed into economic return, in addition to status and prestige? How to have more “followers”? And, perhaps more importantly, why would you want them? (Galindo, 2014, p.60).

Individuals feel the need to consume more all the time, so they can post again and continue showing off the good life they have; if someone that a person competes with posts something, this person will feel the need to post something immediately to compete and not be forgotten because of the post that was just made. With a constant and easily accessible flow of information about the lives of others, individuals are tempted to always compare their wealth with that of others (Wallace et al., 2016).

2.5. Debt

Conspicuous consumption leads to low savings and, possibly, to incur in debt. This seems to be the case in Brazil: according to the Consumer Debt and Default Survey (2023), in that January 78% of Brazilian families were in debt. Several reasons can lead a person into debt; social networks may be one of the reasons, not because they will necessarily cause debt, but because there are cases in which they encourage people to get into debt. In addition to ostentatious purchasing, acquisition by impulse has intensified with the arrival of social media. This kind of buying is characterized as occurring spontaneously and unreflexively (Rook and Fisher, 1995, p. 306).

In a scenario of constant competition for a high social status, low-income young people who do not have sufficient resources try to meet the living standards of higher classes. These young people, therefore, get into debt by increasing consumption beyond their possibilities, aiming for acceptance and social status (Lopes, 2021, p.38). Furthermore, according to Santini et al. (2018, p.183), “consumer age is negatively correlated with impulse buying”.

A major facilitator of this consumption for low-income young people today is the various forms of credit available, as argued by Lopes (2021, p.60), who considers that “If the consumer does not have money available to purchase the desired object, they can resort to loans or to credit cards in the Brazilian case. When these debts are paid off, new dreams emerge, and they lead to a new debt to make them possible”.

In relation to impulse consumption, according to Bonomo et al. (2017, p.65), it “is positively correlated to the income commitment of

individuals with debt”, so that impulse buying would not necessarily imply indebtedness, but can compromise the income of those already in debt.

Thus, it appears that impulse purchases, as they are carried out quickly and without planning, can lead to debt, as also argued by Lopes (2021, p.54):

Those who have this disorder believe they have an emotional void that needs to be filled through conspicuous consumption. Compulsive shopping is characterized by a sudden impulse associated with a feeling of pleasure. In this way, consumption increases and with it the individual's chances of getting into debt.

Thus, since impulsive purchases are related to the desire to achieve happiness, since happiness can be achieved by obtaining social status, status consumption and impulse consumption come together, leading to debt.

3. Field research: results and discussions

To carry out our research, a questionnaire was prepared with fourteen questions, five of them relating to the profile of the respondents (only four of them were considered in the analyses, one was discarded) and nine questions relating to the subject under analysis. According to data from Statista, a website that provides statistical data, among young people aged 16 and 24 who use the internet in Brazil, approximately 92% used social media in 2021. Furthermore, it was identified that the websites that had the most access in Brazil were Facebook with 48.56% of all visits, Pinterest with 32.14% and Instagram with 7.34%. But in relation to preference, it was identified that Instagram is preferred by around 32.6% of respondents, followed by Facebook with 11.8% of Brazilian young internet users (Bianchi, 2022a, 2022b and 2022c). Taking into account the data presented and considering that Instagram and Facebook are social networks widely known for sharing images, it was decided to direct questions about social networks considering exclusively these two.

3.1. Profile of the respondents

The questionnaire was disseminated through university groups in Brazil on Facebook and WhatsApp. The objective of the questionnaire was to reach mainly people between 17 and 27 years old, the segment that we consider as “young people” in this study. The survey circulated between May 16, 2023, and May 31, 2023. The survey collected a total of 402 responses.

3.1.1. Age

Regarding the age of the respondents, the questionnaire provided three age range options, namely: 16 years old or less, between 17 and 27 years old, and over 27 years old⁶. Of the total of 402 respondents, 85% are between 17 and 27 years old, and 15% are over 27 years old.

3.1.2. Gender

Regarding the gender of the respondents, of the total of 402 respondents, 55% identify as women (cisgender, transgender), and 44% identify as man (cisgender, transgender). The alternative ‘others’ was also made available, which corresponded to 1% of respondents.

3.1.3. Family income

In relation to family income, according to table 1, of the total of 402 respondents, 10% had a family income below R\$2,000, 32% between R\$2,000 and R\$5,000, 26% between R\$5,000 and R\$8,000, 17% between R\$8,000 and R\$13,000 and 15% above R\$13,000. Most respondents had income between R\$2,000 and R\$8,000 (58%). In the divisions by age group, the numbers in this income range are 60% of those between 17 and 27 years old and 50% of those over 27 years old.

6 We understand that there may have been some confusion with people who are exactly 27 years old. We chose to ignore this, and accepted the answer given by these people, fitting one of the two options.

Table 1 – Family Income of Respondents

Alternative	Between 17 and 27 y.o.		More than 27 y.o.		Total	
	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%
Less than R\$ 2.000	35	10%	6	10%	41	10%
Between R\$ 2.000 and R\$ 5.000	108	32%	19	31%	127	32%
Between R\$ 5.000 and R\$ 8.000	94	28%	12	19%	106	26%
Between R\$ 8.000 and R\$ 13.000	53	15%	15	24%	68	17%
Above R\$ 13.000	50	15%	10	16%	60	15%
Total	340	100%	62	100%	402	100%

3.1.4. Level of education

Of the 402 respondents, 69% had incomplete college education, as seen in Table 2. The predominance of this profile is probably due to the fact that the questionnaire was disseminated mainly in university WhatsApp groups.

Table 2 –Level of Education of Respondents

Alternative	Between 17 and 27 y.o.		More than 27 y.o.		Total	
	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%
High-school - Incomplete	1	0%	0	0%	1	0%
High-school - Finished	46	14%	0	0%	46	12%
College - Incomplete	254	75%	23	37%	277	69%
College - Finished	34	10%	27	44%	61	15%
Graduate studies - Incomplete	4	1%	4	6%	8	2%
Graduate Studies – Finished	1	0%	8	13%	9	2%
Total	340	100%	62	100%	402	100%

3.2. Analysis of the results

3.2.1. Time spent daily using social media (Facebook and/or Instagram)

Regarding the time spent daily using social networks, according to Table 3, we see that 15 (4%) out of the 402 interviewees said they did not

use Facebook or Instagram, 74 (18%) used it for 1 hour or less, 100 (25%) used it for 2 hours, 103 (26%) use 3 hours, 54 (13%) use 4 hours and 56 (14%) use 5 hours or more.

Among the respondents aged 17 to 27, we had higher percentages with longer daily time usage compared to those aged 27 or over. While around 54% of respondents aged between 17 and 27 said they used social media for 3 hours or more, 45% of respondents over 27 said they used social media for 3 hours or more.

Table 3 – Daily time use of social networks (Facebook and/or Instagram)

Alternative (daily use)	Between 17 and 27 y.o.		More than 27 y.o.		Total	
	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%
Does not use	11	3%	4	6%	15	4%
1 hour or less	60	18%	14	23%	74	18%
2 hours	84	25%	16	26%	100	25%
3 hours	87	25%	16	26%	103	26%
4 hours	50	15%	4	6%	54	13%
5 hours or more	48	14%	8	13%	56	14%
Total	340	100%	62	100%	402	100%

The percentages reaffirm the need to carry out a more focused analysis on young people between 17 and 27 years old, given that they are those who spend the most time using social networks (Facebook or Instagram). Therefore, all the analyses below were carried out considering only young people between 17 and 27 years old who use Facebook or Instagram.

3.2.2. Comparison of financial life on social networks

We see in Table 4 that among the 329 respondents aged between 17 and 27 who said they used Facebook or Instagram, 306 (93%) said they had already compared their financial life with that of another person on social media, 168 (51%) sometimes and 138 (42%) frequently.

Table 4 - Answers to the question “have you ever compared your financial life with someo-

ne else's based on photos shared on these social networks?"

Alternative	Qt.	%
No, I have never compared	23	7%
Yes, sometimes	168	51%
Yes, often	138	42%
Total	329	100%

When analyzing the answers to the question “Have you ever compared your financial life to someone else’s based on photos shared on these social networks?” by time of use of social networks, as shown in Table 5, it is possible to notice that the percentages of responses ‘Yes, sometimes’ or ‘Yes, often’ increase with greater time of use. Of the respondents who use it less than 1 hour a day, 85% have already compared their financial life due to social networks, while those who answered 2 hours, 3 hours, 4 hours, and 5 hours or more have respectively the percentages of 92%, 93%, 100% and 98%.

Table 5 - Answers to the question “Have you ever compared your financial life with someone else's based on photos shared on these social networks?” by daily use of social networks

Alternativa	1 hour or less		2 hours		3 hours		4 hours		5 hours	
	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%
No, I have never compared	9	15%	7	8%	6	7%	0	0%	1	2%
Yes, sometimes	27	45%	52	62%	42	48%	27	54%	20	42%
Yes, often	24	40%	25	30%	39	45%	23	46%	27	56%
Total	60	100%	84	100%	87	100%	50	100%	48	100%

4% of the respondents (1 of 23) who say they never compare their financial lives on social media use the networks 4 hours or more per day, while among those who compare frequently, 36% (50 of 138) use 4 hours or more per day. Furthermore, 70% (16 of 23) of those who never compare use less than two hours per day, but among those who compare frequently, only 36% (49 of 138) use less than two hours per day, which suggests that

greater daily use of social networks leads to more comparisons (or, better, that people who do not compare have a lighter use of social networks).

Table 6 - Answers to the question “Have you ever compared your financial life with someone else’s based on photos shared on these social networks?” by gender

Alternative	Women		Men		Non-binary	
	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%
No, I have never compared	5	3%	17	12%	1	25%
Yes, sometimes	91	48%	74	55%	3	75%
Yes, often	94	49%	44	33%	0	0%
Total	190	100%	135	100%	4	100%

From a gender perspective, Table 6 shows that of the 190 women who use social networks and are between 17 and 27 years old, 185 (97%) said they make comparisons, 48% sometimes and 49% frequently. On the other hand, 88% of the men said they compare, 55% sometimes and 33% frequently.

In relation to income, there are no significant variations between the different ranges, as shown in Table 7; among those with a family income below R\$2,000, 97% perform the comparison sometimes or frequently, being the income range with the highest percentage of statements for the question asked, but all of them reach at least 92%.

Table 7 - Answers to the question “Have you ever compared your financial life with someone else’s based on photos shared on these social networks?” by family income

Alternative	Less than R\$ 2.000		Between R\$ 2.000 and R\$ 5.000		Between R\$ 5.000 and R\$ 8.000		Between R\$ 8.000 and R\$ 13.000		More than R\$ 13.000	
	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%
No, I have never compared	1	3%	8	8%	6	7%	4	8%	4	8%
Yes, sometimes	17	55%	46	44%	47	51%	34	64%	24	50%
Yes, often	13	42%	51	48%	39	42%	15	28%	20	42%
Total	31	100%	105	100%	92	100%	53	100%	48	100%

The next analysis involving comparison of lifestyles on social

networks was carried out through the question: “On a scale of 1 to 5, how much do you agree with the following sentence: "People judge my social status by my profile on these social networks". The answers are presented in Table 8.

Table 8 - Answers to the question “On a scale of 1 to 5, how much do you agree with the following sentence: ‘People judge my social status by my profile on these social networks?’”

Alternative	Qt.	%
1 – Completely disagree	65	20%
2 – Partially disagree	46	14%
3 - Indifferent (or neutral)	81	25%
4 - Partially agree	84	25%
5 - Completely agree	53	16%
Total	329	100%

Of the 329 respondents between 17 and 27 years old who use social networks, 41% completely or partially agree that people judge your social status by your profile on social networks, with 25% partially agreeing and 16% completely agreeing, a slightly higher percentage than those who disagree (34%).

When we disaggregate by gender, we see in Table 9 that among women, 44% partially or completely agree that people judge their status via networks. Among men this percentage drops slightly to 38%

Table 9 - Responses to the question “On a scale of 1 to 5, how much do you agree with the following sentence: “People judge my social status by my profile on these social networks” by gender

Alternative	Women		Men		Non Binary	
	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%
1 – Completely disagree	39	21%	25	18%	1	25%
2 – Partially disagree	21	11%	24	18%	1	25%
3 - Indifferent (or neutral)	46	24%	35	26%	0	0%
4 - Partially agree	48	25%	35	26%	1	25%
5 - Completely agree	36	19%	16	12%	1	25%
Total	190	100%	135	100%	4	100%

Regarding time use, table 10 shows that 54% of those who use 5 hours or more believe their social status is judged on social media, the highest of all the values among those who agree.

Table 10 - Answers to the question “On a scale of 1 to 5, how much do you agree with the following sentence: “People judge my social status by my profile on these social networks” by daily time of use

Alternative	1 hour or less		2 hours		3 hours		4 hours		5 hours	
	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%
1 - Completely disagree	11	18%	21	25%	12	14%	10	20%	11	23%
2 - Partially disagree	9	15%	11	13%	12	14%	11	22%	3	6%
3 - Indifferent (or neutral)	15	25%	28	33%	22	25%	8	16%	8	17%
4 - Partially agree	16	27%	18	22%	22	25%	15	30%	13	27%
5 - Completely agree	9	15%	6	7%	19	22%	6	12%	13	27%
Total	60	100%	84	100%	87	100%	50	100%	48	100%

In table 11 we see the answers to this question classified according to income.

Table 11 - Responses to the question “On a scale of 1 to 5, how much do you agree with the following sentence: “People judge my social status by my profile on these social networks” by family income

Alternative	Less than R\$ 2.000		Between R\$ 2.000 and R\$ 5.000		Between R\$ 5.000 and R\$ 8.000		Between R\$ 8.000 and R\$ 13.000		More than R\$ 13.000	
	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%
1 - Completely disagree	4	13%	19	18%	22	24%	11	21%	9	19%
2 - Partially disagree	3	10%	10	10%	14	15%	10	19%	9	19%
3 - Indifferent (or neutral)	6	19%	29	28%	21	23%	15	28%	10	20%
4 - Partially agree	10	32%	32	30%	24	26%	7	13%	11	23%
5 - Completely agree	8	26%	15	14%	11	12%	10	19%	9	19%
Total	31	100%	105	100%	92	100%	53	100%	48	100%

Among those with a family income of less than R\$2,000, 58% partially or completely agree that their social status is judged on social media; this percentage reduces as the family income range increases, except for family income of more than R\$13,000 which increases again. Therefore, among those with family incomes between R\$2,000 and R\$5,000 the percentage of partial agreement or total is 44%, in the range of R\$5,000 and R\$8,000 it is 38%, in the range of R\$8,000 and R\$13,000 it is 32% and in the range of more than R\$13,000 it is 42%. So, the only group in which the majority agrees that their status is judged by their social network profile is the one with the smallest income level.

3.2.3. Posting photos wearing the same clothes

Of the 329 young people between 17 and 27 years old who use social networks, 77 (23%) said they avoid posting photos wearing the same clothes, and among these 23 (7%) have never posted wearing the same clothes and 54 (17%) have already posted some time, information contained in table 12.

Table 12 - Answers to the question “Have you ever posted a photo wearing the same clothes you wore in another photo on these networks?”

Alternative	Qt.	%
No, I avoid posting photos using the same clothes	23	7%
No, but I would have no problem posting	83	25%
Yes, but I avoid posting photos using the same clothes	54	17%
Yes, I don't care about that	169	51%
Total	329	100%

3.2.4 Reasons for posting photos

Table 13 reports the circumstances under which people post photos on social media.

Table 13 - Answers to the question “Do you post photos when you go to parties/ restaurants/travel/buy clothes?”

Alternative	Parties		Restaurants		Travels		Buy clothes	
	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%
1 - I do not post	108	33%	146	44%	62	19%	294	89%
2 - Sometimes	176	53%	145	44%	136	41%	28	9%
3 - Yes, frequently	45	14%	38	12%	131	40%	7	2%
Total	329	100%	329	100%	329	100%	329	100%

The event that respondents most agreed led them to post photos sometimes or frequently was traveling (81%), followed by going to a party (67%), a restaurant (56%) and buying new clothes (11%).

3.2.5 Income commitment due to social networks

The first question related to income commitment asked the respondents to rate from 1 to 5 whether they agreed with the sentence “I have already committed my monthly income to maintain a standard of living that I share on these social networks”.

Table 14 - Answers to the sentence “I have already committed my monthly income to maintain a standard of living that I share on these social networks”

Alternative	Qt.	%
1 - Completely disagree	269	82%
2 - Partially disagree	34	11%
3 - Indifferent (or neutral)	14	4%
4 - Partially agree	11	3%
5 - Completely agree	1	0%
Total	329	100%

We see in Table 14 that the percentage of respondents who stated that their income was compromised (partially agree or completely agree) was low, only 12 respondents (3%). However, this is already an indication that

the commitment of income to maintain social media status occurs. Among the 12 who agree that they have already had their income compromised, 10 are women (83%) and 9 use social networks for 3 hours or more (75%).

Table 15 - Answers to the sentence "I know someone who has compromised his/her monthly income at some point to maintain a standard of living that is shared on these social networks"

Alternative	Qt.	%
1 - Completely disagree	63	19%
2 - Partially disagree	28	9%
3 - Indifferent (or neutral)	54	16%
4 - Partially agree	86	26%
5 - Completely agree	98	30%
Total	329	100%

The second question related to income commitment asked respondents to rate from 1 to 5 whether they agreed with the phrase "I know someone who has compromised his/her monthly income at some point to maintain a standard of living that is shared on these social networks". Table 15 shows that 56% partially or completely agreed, stating that they know someone who has already compromised their income to maintain a standard of living on social media. This suggests that compromising income due to emulation of living standards may be more frequent than it would appear to be by looking at the previous table alone.

Table 16 - Answers to the sentence "I have already felt pressure to buy something I saw on my social networks"

Alternative	Qt.	%
1 - Completely disagree	89	27%
2 - Partially disagree	43	13%
3 - Indifferent (or neutral)	43	13%
4 - Partially agree	80	24%
5 - Completely agree	74	23%
Alternative	329	100%

The third question related to income commitment, presented in Table 16, asked respondents to rate from 1 to 5 whether they agreed with the phrase “I have already felt pressure to buy something I saw on social media”. Among them, 47% partially or completely agree that they have felt pressure to buy something under these conditions, while 40% said they have not.

In turn, Table 17 presents the percentage of people who partially or completely agree with the statement that they felt pressure to buy something they saw on social networks according to the time they used these networks. The number of positive responses increased according to the number of hours spent on social media; 40% of those who use it for 1 hour or less agreed (partially or completely), 43% of those who use it for 2 hours, 46% of those who use it for 3 hours, 50% of those who use it for 4 hours as well as 60% of those who use it for 5 hours.

Table 17 – Answers to the sentence “I have already felt pressure to buy something I saw on my social networks” by usage time

Alternative	1 hour or less		2 hours		3 hours		4 hours		5 hours	
	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%
1 – Completely disagree	20	34%	29	34%	20	23%	13	26%	7	15%
2 – Partially disagree	11	18%	9	11%	10	11%	8	16%	5	10%
3 - Indifferent (or neutral)	5	8%	10	12%	17	20%	4	8%	7	15%
4 - Partially agree	11	18%	16	19%	24	28%	16	32%	13	27%
5 - Completely agree	13	22%	20	24%	16	18%	9	18%	16	33%
Total	60	100%	84	100%	87	100%	50	100%	48	100%

Analyzing this question by gender, according to Table 18, partial or total agreement was 56% among women and 34% among men.

Table 18 – Answers to the sentence “I have already felt pressure to buy something I saw on my social networks” by gender

Alternative	Men		Women		Non-binary	
1 – Completely disagree	51	38%	36	19%	2	50%
2 – Partially disagree	22	16%	21	11%	0	0%
3 - Indifferent (or neutral)	16	12%	27	14%	0	0%
4 - Partially agree	24	18%	54	29%	2	50%
5 - Completely agree	22	16%	52	27%	0	0%
Total	135	100%	190	100%	4	100%

Table 19 presents the answers to this question from an income perspective; the range that showed the highest percentage of partial or total agreement with the phrase, 52%, was the income range of less than R\$2,000.

Table 19 – Answers to the sentence “I have already felt pressure to buy something I saw on my social networks” by family income

Alternative	Less than R\$ 2.000		Between R\$ 2.000 and R\$ 5.000		Between R\$ 5.000 and R\$ 8.000		Between R\$ 8.000 and R\$ 13.000		More than R\$ 13.000	
	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%
1 – Completely disagree	8	26%	29	28%	21	23%	16	30%	15	31%
2 – Partially disagree	4	13%	12	11%	12	13%	9	17%	6	13%
3 - Indifferent (or neutral)	3	9%	12	11%	14	15%	9	17%	5	10%
4 - Partially agree	7	23%	30	29%	25	27%	11	21%	7	15%
5 - Completely agree	9	29%	22	21%	20	22%	8	15%	15	31%
Total	31	100%	105	100%	92	100%	53	100%	48	100%

The fourth question, related to income commitment, asked respondents to evaluate from 1 to 5 whether they agreed with the phrase “I

feel that the use of social networks makes it difficult for me to control my personal finance”. The results are presented in Table 20.

Table 20 – Answers to the question “I feel that the use of social networks makes it difficult for me to control my personal finance”

Alternative	Qt.	%
1 – Completely disagree	100	30%
2 – Partially disagree	74	23%
3 - Indifferent (or neutral)	51	16%
4 - Partially agree	63	19%
5 - Completely agree	41	12%
Total	329	100%

Although 47% partially or completely agreed that they feel pressure to buy something on social media, only 31% said that social media makes it difficult for them to control their personal finances. Among the 154 who said that they feel pressure, 49% declared they have difficulties with their financial control.

Table 21 – Answers to the question “I feel that the use of social networks makes it difficult for me to control my personal finance” by usage time

Alternative	1 hour or less		2 hours		3 hours		4 hours		5 hours	
	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%
1 – Completely disagree	23	39%	33	39%	22	25%	13	26%	9	19%
2 – Partially disagree	14	23%	17	20%	22	25%	12	24%	9	19%
3 - Indifferent (or neutral)	7	12%	13	16%	12	14%	9	18%	10	20%
4 - Partially agree	8	13%	15	18%	17	20%	12	24%	11	23%
5 - Completely agree	8	13%	6	7%	14	16%	4	8%	9	19%
Total	60	100%	84	100%	87	100%	50	100%	48	100%

When the responses are classified in relation to the time spent using the networks, as shown in Table 21, those who use them for 5 hours or more showed the highest percentage of partial or total agreement with the sentence (42%).

Table 22 – Answers to the question “I feel that the use of social networks makes it difficult for me to control my personal finance” by gender

Alternative	Men		Women		Non-binary	
1 – Completely disagree	56	41%	43	22%	1	25%
2 – Partially disagree	36	27%	36	19%	2	50%
3 - Indifferent (or neutral)	21	16%	30	16%		0%
4 - Partially agree	15	11%	47	25%	1	25%
5 - Completely agree	7	5%	34	18%		0%
Total	135	100%	190	100%	4	100%

In relation to gender, according to Table 22, women declared a percentage of partial or total agreement of 43% with the difficulty of financial control, while men declared an agreement of 16%.

Table 23 – Answers to the question “I feel that the use of social networks makes it difficult for me to control my personal finance” by family income

Alternative	Less than R\$ 2.000		Between R\$ 2.000 and R\$ 5.000		Between R\$ 5.000 and R\$ 8.000		Between R\$ 8.000 and R\$ 13.000		More than R\$ 13.000	
	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%	Qt.	%
1 – Completely disagree	6	19%	27	26%	30	33%	22	42%	15	31%
2 – Partially disagree	8	26%	23	22%	23	25%	10	19%	10	21%
3 - Indifferent (or neutral)	4	13%	12	11%	16	17%	7	13%	12	25%
4 - Partially agree	7	23%	27	26%	14	15%	9	17%	6	13%
5 - Completely agree	6	19%	16	15%	9	10%	5	9%	5	10%
Total	31	100%	105	100%	92	100%	53	100%	48	100%

In relation to income, as we see in Table 23, the percentage of agreement reduces as the income range increases. Thus, in the income range of less than R\$2,000, 42% partially or completely agree, while only 23% of those with a family income above R\$13,000 agree with this.

4. Conclusion

Conspicuous consumption is a problem amplified by social networks, which allow broad social contact and intense circulation of information. Society is constantly connected to the Internet, being influenced by everything that circulates on digital platforms; this situation encourages conspicuous consumption stimulated by shared images. Emulation, the main factor in influencing conspicuous consumption, is multiplied in this scenario, considering that due to this constant circulation and bombardment of information, publicized evidence of ostentation is quickly forgotten, so that demonstrations of social status need to always be updated with new information.

Since ancient times, when people were represented only in paintings, the representation of signs of wealth has been identified. Extended to the current scenario of digital photos, digital images have become an accessible way for all classes to record their conspicuous consumption at different levels. This phenomenon was boosted by social networks, which are an ideal space for this, especially in the case of young people. The youngsters, when participating in networks for reasons ranging from fun to social pressure, run the risk of becoming addicted to them, spending a high number of hours a day browsing these networks, which ends up promoting conspicuous consumption.

Emulation, which already existed outside of social networks, results in a constant bombardment of information, leading users to make comparisons more frequently. Debt thus becomes an additional problem, as emulation encourages excessive consumption, including by those who do not have the financial means to do so, leading to a compromised income.

From our research, which focused on respondents between 17 and 27 years old who use social networks, it was possible to verify that most

of the respondents have traits of emulation, given that 93% said they had already compared their financial life with that of others on social media sometime. Additionally, 41% said they believe others judge their financial status based on social media, while 34% disagree and 25% are indifferent.

Regarding income commitment, when asked if they had already compromised their income to maintain living standards on social media, only 3% agreed. However, when asked if they believe this has happened to other people, 56% agreed, which indicates a greater occurrence of income compromise due to conspicuous consumption than the previous percentage. This result suggests that future research would require a field study to analyze the behavior of young people and verify situations in which they may have compromised their income due to some behavior related to social networks.

Finally, when it was asked whether people felt pressure to buy something they saw on the networks, it was clear that affirmative responses increased in relation to the time spent using the networks, which could be an indication that people who spend more time in the networks are usually influenced by them; in the case of the survey, 60% of those who use it for more than 5 hours agreed. However, when asked whether they feel that networks make their financial control difficult, only 49% of those who said they felt pressure agreed. This research contributed to verifying and raising awareness about the problems involving the excessive use of social networks, such as compromised income, conspicuous consumption and multiplied emulation.

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