

Instagram's influence on beauty standards adoption by young women

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Abstract

This article aims to identify the influence of Instagram's digital influencers on adopting beauty standards by young women. Quantitative and qualitative research - survey, focus group, and netnography - were carried out to understand whether these influencers create pressures and frustrations in young women and if they feel induced to be submitted to plastic surgery and cosmetic procedures from this influence. The conclusion was that these opinion-makers are responsible for the desire to perform cosmetic surgeries and can generate comparisons and dissatisfaction among the women interviewed. The article ends with recommendations to the public sector, influencers, and brands.

Keywords: Instagram; Cosmetic Surgery; Beauty Standards.

Track: Digital Marketing & Social Media.

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1. Introduction

Currently, media culture sets rules and social norms that influence people to see the world through its lens. Taking advantage of this power of influence, brands establish a socially coveted, profitable lifestyle to create an individual consumer. As a result, a false sense of need and belonging is generated, not meeting the fundamental human needs, producing an immediate and frustrating society (Silva & Santos, 2012).

As a result of this consumerism scenario, there is a homogenization of public opinion formed by the media and major influencers. This fact is highlighted when we analyze current beliefs about body image and beauty, especially those imposed on women. The beauty myth was conceived based on the Industrial Revolution effects when women were breaking free from the mystique of domesticity and invaded this space as a means of female domination (Wolf, 2020). The beauty market became the new cultural and social parameter in the female world; beauty standards influence a large part of their behavior and consumption, controlling their subjectivity, self-esteem, freedom, and even their psychological health.

More recently, with the social network's influence on a global scale, the search for beauty within established standards has intensified, and these networks play an expressive role for women. The messages from the media reinforce a stereotype of unattainable beauty, discriminating against those who do not fit this standard. Social networks and the beauty myth determine ideal behaviors for women, who become vulnerable to external approval, and have their self-esteem shook (Wolf, 2002).

This article aims *to identify women's adherence to beauty standards in the context of social networks influence*, as 93% of women say they access social networks about three hours a day (Mulheres, 2017).

The social network chosen was Instagram, preferred among young Brazilians (Volpato, 2021). We have specific objectives: to understand if digital influencers on Instagram propagate an aesthetic standard; to understand whether these influencers create pressures and frustrations on young women; identify whether these influencers propagate pressure to perform aesthetic procedures; identify the women's reaction to possible pressures.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cultural industry and consumption

In a mass communication and full consumption society, the propagation of manipulated moral values occurs in the most diverse everyday living areas. The need for survival outweighs the possibility of resistance from a weakened subjectivity. One of the

greatest dangers caused by the depletion of the subject's critical capacity is the political potential that the unreserved acceptance of the aesthetic and propagandistic penetration of culture can provoke, like Nazism and the domination of German society, through ignorance and a false aura of stability and social happiness (Adorno, 2021). Thus, the so-called cultural industry forms convenient truths through the mass media and propagates the ideology and set of values that most interest it through a psychological mechanism that prefers a well-planned lie to a blunt truth (Fianco, 2010). The Frankfurt School philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer introduced the cultural industry concept that forms convenient truths through the mass media and propagates the ideology and set of values that will bring the most results to the industry. Therefore, the dissemination of a single truth becomes a very effective means of social domination.

The same power relationship currently takes place more visibly with the advancement of social networks. The media put pressure on the individual, determining how he/she should act and what to consume to become part of the ideal society. The problematization is not in consumption itself, which is part of society, but in the importance of consumption in everyday life, playing a central role in defining the self and creating a sense of identity (Richins, 1994).

2.2. Beauty industry

Since women's liberation from the social function of motherhood, domesticity, and passivity, it was necessary to create new social coercion to impede the feminine sphere advancement: the beauty myth. Lipovetsky (2000, p.139) affirms that "the reign of thinness echoes these transformations, expresses the refusal to identify the female body with motherhood, the weakening of social consideration linked to women mother, the social valorization of the active, independent woman." Historically and culturally speaking, women are more vulnerable to this type of coercion due to society's influential patriarchy. Daily, body models indicate beauty in the most diverse media, in a game of seduction and images, referring to ideals of health, thinness, and attitudes (Barbosa, Matos, and Costa, 2011). This capitalist logic of the beauty industry acts by creating deeper insecurities in individuals, such as the fear of old age, which can be alleviated with products and aesthetic techniques from the same industry (Barbosa et al., 2011).

Le Breton (2013) defines the body as the axis of the relationship with the world, the space and time in which the existence of the social actor becomes singular. However, the beauty industry has created body and aesthetic "models," which exclude diversity and any respect for the natural cycle of the human being, establishing that the "perfect body" and the

so desired happiness are inseparable (Dantas, 2011). From the association of beauty standards with youth and health, the body starts to have a potential market. Each body part becomes a possible target for consumption and aesthetic treatment (Dantas, 2011).

The most considerable reflection of this beauty standards imposition in Brazil is the popularization of aesthetic surgeries. In 2019, it was the country that performed the most plastic surgeries globally, according to the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS, 2019). In 2020, Brazil was the fourth-largest beauty market in the world. The beauty business in Brazil is one of the fastest-growing worldwide, the third that launches the most products, being the seventh-largest market for makeup and 8th for skincare products. In 2020, while the Brazilian GDP dropped 4.1%, the sector grew 2.2%, already deflated (ABIHPEC, 2021). This growth was at the expense of anxiety, unconscious consumption needs, and even the subjectivity of individuals (Pereira, Antunes, and Nobre, 2011).

2.5. Social networks

In a world driven by technology, social media has become one of the fundamental pillars of business growth. Each social network has several options for approaching consumers, influencing their shopping journeys. According to Patel (2019), there are four types of social networks: entertainment (Youtube); professionals (LinkedIn); niche; and social relationship networks, which are used by the population and bring together and create bonds between different people (Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, this study object).

Social networks have increased rapidly, reaching 53% of the world population, and still with a growing trend (Keiser, 2021). Thus, it is possible to infer that the intense use of social networks can lead to changes in people's perception of reality, both in the political sphere and in the search for information, influencing thoughts and views of the world.

Brazil is among the first two countries in the ranking for the longest time on social networks (on average, three and a half hours a day). Instagram is the preferred social network of digitally active Brazilians. The youngest, between 17 and 25 years old, spend an average of 1 hour and 32 minutes connected to Instagram per day (Instagram, 2021).

With the increased use of social networks, digital influencers emerged. They produce varied content in digital media and manage to reach and stimulate behaviors and become a reference for his/her followers. Currently, 70% of consumers use social media and these influencers' opinions to guide their purchase decision (Marques, 2017).

However, this relationship is not without its problems. In September 2021, The Wall Street Journal released reports by in-house Instagram researchers in which the subject of study

was "how photo-sharing apps affect thousands of teenage users." Data were drawn from focus groups, online forms, and diary studies during 2019 and 2020. The survey revealed that Instagram-specific issues are the tendency to show only good times, the pressure of a perfect body, and an addictive platform. These characteristics can be highly damaging, especially for teenage girls, encouraging eating disorders, a poor perception of their bodies, and depression, being harmful to mental health (Horwitz, Seetharaman, & Wells, 2021).

3. Methodology

The profile selected for research considered Instagram's heavy users in Brazil: women, between 18 and 25, medium and high income, who had used social media for more than three and a half hours a day (Moreno, undated). The approach was mixed: quantitative and qualitative.

The quantitative research questionnaire was based on a literature review and the research objectives. It was distributed through social networks Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp, and the responses were collected between May 18 and 27, 2021. There were 209 respondents.

The qualitative research first stage was the focus group, carried out through Zoom. There were two distinct groups: one with women who believe that social networks have an unfavorable effect on their lives (negative focus group); the second with those who believe social media positively impact them (positive focus group). So, it was possible to have two perspectives on the subject and compare them. Sessions were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The qualitative research second stage used netnography to understand whether digital influencers propagate aesthetic patterns in social networks. This type of research evidence a community's desires, lifestyles, and perceptions of reality on the subject studied (Kozinets, 2016). The analysis of posts and the reactions of followers is hugely relevant, as consumers are becoming authors of brand stories due, among others, to the easy sharing of brand experiences in social networks (Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013). Organic or sponsored posts from 20 Instagram influencers' profiles, published between January and May 2021, and the followers' comments were analyzed. Posts were selected based on citations in focus groups and engagement rate according to the phlanx.com platform.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative research

Among the 195 respondents who went through the filter (women, 18 to 35 years old,

medium to high income, access Instagram, and follow a digital fashion/beauty influencer), cosmetic purchases are made at least once a month (53.8%). These purchases are made for personal pleasure/satisfaction (71.4%). The influence comes from digital influencers (34.5%). Satisfaction with the body is low (78.6% little or not satisfied), and 95.6% are dissatisfied with some specific body part. It has already been suggested by influencers to undergo some aesthetic procedure (66.4%), and 40.3% declared to be very or reasonably frustrated in performing or not being able to perform any aesthetic procedure.

4.2. Focus group

Two focus groups were carried out: the first with six young women, between 20 and 23 years old (the negative focus group); the second with five women between 21 and 23 years old (the positive focus group). It was possible to code the interviews into different categories, using Atlas TI: a) Diversity and Body Positive; b) Influence of friends and micro-influencers; c) Influence of major influencers and Instagram; d) Aesthetic surgeries and procedure; e) Consumption; f) Comparison; and g) Self-knowledge.

The Surgeries and Aesthetic Procedures, Influence of Great Influencers, and Instagram and Comparison categories were the chosen codes to analyze. They are of greater importance for the article objectives and were the most discussed subjects among the interviewees. For both groups, surgeries and aesthetic procedures involve mass propagation through digital influencers and aesthetic clinics, often in a wrong and generalized way. As this is a public health issue, the dissemination of incorrect information can put people highly influenced by digital platforms at risk.

In the negative focus group, none underwent the procedures but admitted that they had or had already desired to carry them out since they are exposed daily to this type of content. Among the positive focus group participants, three of the five have already undergone surgery or cosmetic procedure. According to interviewees, many digital influencers do not expose the pros and cons of surgery. They do not show the risks of the postoperative period: *"people are in this constant search for beauty, (...), which put their lives at risk"*.

An insight extracted from the interviewees is that *"these aesthetic procedures are immediate solutions"*. As digital influencers romanticize these operations, the impression is that they are simple procedures, free from health risks and the answer to self-esteem problems. With the growth of influence marketing, digital influencers have great responsibility for the decisions and purchase intentions of followers: *"The fact that they expose their entire lives, I think it's entertaining me."*

The influence of social networks and the community of influencers is present in the routine of interviewees from both the negative and positive focus groups, but the difference lies in how they deal with such pressure. On the negative group, women feel negatively impacted by all kinds of content involving aesthetic standards, and they take this frustration forward, wanting to perform cosmetic procedures and surgeries solely to fit the standard and not as a personal desire. Unlike what happens with the positive interviewees, who seem to filter more what type of content they want to consume on Instagram and have a particular desire to perform aesthetic procedures to address a specific self-esteem problem.

4.3. Netnographic research

One of the profiles analyzed was that of a clinic that performs cosmetic surgeries and procedures (JK Estética), with 1.3 million followers, 628 publications, and an engagement rate of 1.76%. In these posts, many positive comments were observed, such as: *"wonderful," "I want," "my dream," "supernatural," "beautiful," "this clinic is the best," "I'm in love."* Furthermore, few negative comments like: *"artificial body," "do you think this is beautiful?"*

Another profile observed was Mayra Cardi's, a digital influencer with 6 million followers, 5,000 publications, and a 1.49 engagement. The influencer spent seven days fasting to advertise a slimming product, and, according to the analysis of posts, it was possible to see that the repercussion was remarkably negative: *"you don't need fasting, you need a psychologist," "irresponsible," "absurd trigger for people with eating disorders."* The post also had some positive comments such as: *"perfect," "thanks for bringing us knowledge."*

Another influencer analyzed was Gabriela Pugliesi. Initially recognized for its healthy habits, she has 4.7 million followers, 13,000 publications, and 1.27% engagement. It was observed, as a standard, that posts in which the influencer demonstrates her athletic physique at the gym, there are several positive comments, but also some negative comments such as: *"I loved your lipo," "this is facial harmonization," "but this belly had lipo before."* These comments suggest that the influencer can have aesthetic procedures, even if she denies this type of procedure. On the other hand, the influencer has already made posts without any filter, showing fat, cellulite, stretch marks, and other typical characteristics in a human being and received several comments like: *"look at the fat there," "now it looks healthy," "beautiful and real," "it's great to post a real photo! without perfection".*

Netnography partially fulfills one of the research objectives since digital influencers display their bodies within the standard imposed by society in the posts analyzed. However, most of them are judged when propagating this standard. However, some comments show that

the followers feel pressured and influenced to have a body like those they see through Instagram posts and are suggested to perform aesthetic procedures.

5. Final Considerations

Throughout the research, we sought to understand the role played by digital influencers and social networks (namely, Instagram) in propagation of consumption within the beauty industry and its aesthetic standards. The results were connected with the research objectives.

The quantitative research showed that women are dissatisfied with a specific part of the body and have already been suggested by influencers to do some aesthetic procedure, demonstrating the importance of digital influencers, who would propagate, in fact, an aesthetic standard.

Discussions in focus groups lead to the conclusion that the content of digital influencers aimed at disseminating aesthetic standards and exposing the “ideal body” does create a constant movement of comparison between women, pressures, and frustrations in young women. The pressure to perform aesthetic procedures, however, varied depending on how the women perceives the social network influence.

The netnographic analysis concluded that those influencers who display a body within the standard imposed by society, even before the cosmetic procedures performed, cause the followers feel suggested to perform the same procedures. The comments registered associate the aesthetic pressure coming from this type of content with the desire to act on their frustrations after the posts.

In short, the objectives of this article were achieved with the realization that digital influencers on Instagram propagate standards of beauty, generating frustration and aesthetic pressure among young women.

The first recommendation is that government agencies should establish stricter regulatory practices regarding the information given by digital influencers, as this is a matter of public health. As a second recommendation, the influencers' advice should guide them to assume a more responsible posture in the posts regarding the health of their followers. Finally, brands themselves could adopt positions such as Lush, a cosmetics brand, which abandoned social networks like Instagram for the sake of the mental health of its followers (Lush, 2021).

Thus, to complement and support the research on how Instagram and other social networks can influence the behavior of modern society, different audiences can be considered, such as: men, other income groups, different age groups and different genders, in addition to

the influence of social networks in the consumption of other goods, such as fashion, travel, etc.

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