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# An Apologetic Theological Vision on the Social Phenomenon “Kardashians”

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## Abstract

Exacerbated consumerist lifestyles damage the social and environmental fabric. At the time of crisis, socio-cultural phenomena such as the reality show "Keeping Up with the Kardashians" have the potential to numb socio-environmental awareness and feed the "consumer culture" of the global North and the "throwaway culture" of the global South. TV and other media could build bridges between such opposing realities. However, socio-environmental suffering is made invisible to make opulence and excesses visible. This article aims to criticize certain socio-cultural models and to present family values and integral ecology, developed by the theology and magisterium of the Catholic Church, for the restoration of the social fabric and the reduction of environmental degradation.

*"... the best way to transmit an idea is to live it. And it is done, moreover, with explicit announcement and denunciation".*

*Una Vida Sobria, Honrada y Religiosa [A Sober, Honorable, and Religious Life], Eizaguirre J. (2010)*

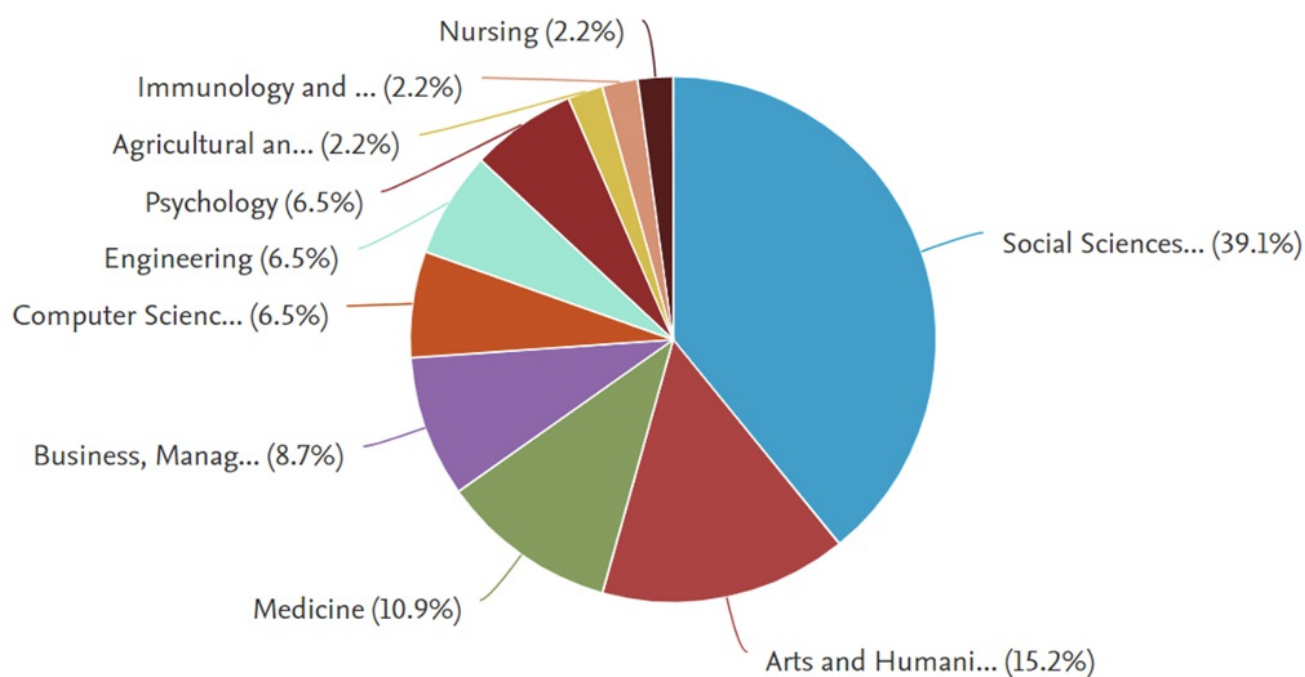
## Introduction

The reality TV show “Keeping Up with the Kardashians” (KUWK), starring the Kardashian family, has become a social phenomenon. It first aired in 2007, showing the family's day-to-day life on live TV. The penultimate season ended in 2021, but there are numerous spin-offs associated with the series. The last episode had 2.4 million live viewers (Keeping Up with the Kardashians, Wikipedia, 2023). A new season premiered in May 2023.

The family became famous following the publication of a pornographic video starring Kim Kardashian and commercially managed by her mother. From then on, the program shows the details of the family's private life, including love conflicts and toxic relationships, high levels of material consumption, highlighting Kim Kardashian as the “goddess Venus”, a fashion idol. Kim Kardashian has built an empire and has become a myth with the sale of her sexual image and her subsequent business deals (Englund 2023). According to McClain (2015), the Kardashian clan “is a contemporary cultural touchstone, recognizable around the world, connoting unwarranted celebrity, voluptuous beauty, and multiple fleeting marriages.”

The social response to this type of phenomenon in the media does not leave indifferent, showing at least two molar dispositions towards the product. Viewers with a positive affective disposition. It includes those who think they can live this kind of life, even virtually. It illuminates their daily life with a point of humor “that doesn't hurt anyone”. It also includes those who want to live that way and do everything possible to achieve and maintain that profane, consumerist and chrematistic ideal of life. On the other extreme, viewers with a negative affective disposition to this type of show. For them, the program is immoral, and irreconcilable with a healthy and sustainable lifestyle. A significant number of viewers are positioned in “hate-watching”, where they derive pleasure from mocking its contents and characters. These people are not, however, exempt from the influence of the communicative medium on their own ethos (Cohen et al., 2021). Since 2011, the show has become a product of interest, even for the academic world, with 32 articles published in journals indexed in the SCOPUS database, where any member of the Kardashian family is named or studied in detail by themselves or as a social role model. Figure 1 shows the disciplines or areas of study in which these articles can be circumscribed, where 56% of the articles have been published in academic North American journals. There is particular interest in the social sciences, arts and humanities, and business, management, and accounting. According to some of these studies, this communicative model is often associated with unconstructive social dialogue. Ramdhany & Ambelegin (2023) have described the frequent use in KUWK of negative impoliteness. Bousfield & Locher (2008) explain impoliteness as a “behavior that is aggravating to the face in a specific and certain context”. More specifically, negative impoliteness is defined by Culpeper (2005) as a communicative model in which it is intended to frighten, invade, belittle, and ridicule the interlocutor. Moreover, these types of shows reinforce the idea that a thin body is a basis for an adequate and full life (Ritter 2023). The public behaviors of celebrities like the Kardashian clan significantly influence public health and plastic surgery trends (Ward et al., 2018; Tijerina et al., 2019). Kim Kardashian and her interest in criminal justice is not new, however, Jensen (2021) shows that the media cater to this type of political discourse more for celebrity than for justice, diverting the political attention and the interests of affected communities.

The KUWK phenomenon has been evaluated from different social, humanistic, financial, and even psychological and neurological perspectives (Figure 1), however, there is no critical discourse from a Christian theological perspective. This article aims to elaborate a theological-apologetic discourse in the face of lifestyles such as those of the Kardashian family by showing how they can deteriorate the family fabric and environmental balance. According to the method of Vanhoozer (2007) and the methodology proposed by John XXIII, in *Mater et Magister* (1961), which consists of see-play-act, I will look for the hypothesis of the world and the metaphorical root that underlies these attitudes and ways of acting, the type of human being that they "sell as a product", the "god" they worship and claim to adore. The argumentative development is not intended to demonize anyone nor to establish as the only ones the family and environmental values established by the magisterium of the Church and Catholic theology. Rather, it is intended as a contribution and an invitation to a change of behavior that preserves our "Common House", family, and environment, as a healthy, private, safe, and sustainable meeting place. I am not unaware of the obscene and immoral behavior of some members of the Catholic community in matters of finance, environment, or abuse. I intend the recipient of this article to be the whole social community without distinction, also (or perhaps especially) the believing communities. The aim is to reach everyone with the ever-renewing message of Jesus Christ, in terms of social criticism and theological apologetics.



**Figure 1.** Distribution of scholarly articles related to the Kardashians clan by area or discipline of study. Descriptores utilizados en la base de datos SCOPUS: "kardashian family" OR "Kardashian clan" OR "Kim Jenner" OR "kim Kardashian" OR "Kourtney Kardashian" OR "Khloé Kardashian" OR "Kylie Kardashian" OR "Kendall Kardashian" OR "Kylie Jenner"

## Discussion

The *world hypothesis* underlying the KUWK cultural context holds that narcissism, ostentation, the voluptuousness of the

senses, satisfied sexual desires, and fame achieve happiness, all based on a consumerist system, greed for money and emotional and sensory experiences. It is the claim of the "golden calf", something tangible that satisfies and can be worshipped, where people, things, and nature have a fundamentally chrematistic value. Where a relationship is established between happiness and "popular hedonism", linked to the selfish pursuit of short-term gratification, indulging in sensory pleasure without considering the consequences on oneself, society and the environment. It is what Lasch (2019) has called the "culture of narcissism" that drifts towards individualism, consumerism, sexual liberation, the cult of money and appearance, with a moral devaluation of the family, the meaning of life and social causes. This is a rough description of the culture that KUWK represents.

Although some authors have pointed out the negative influence of these types of shows on society, others consider that KUWTK is not responsible for the destruction of the social fabric, but rather, it acts as a mirror of the 21st-century media (fast news, repeated, entangled, fake news that are later disproved, humor, superficiality). These reality shows are a social reflection. A circular dialogue where reality society and virtual reality feedback with each other (Asseraf 2018; Bettini 2021).

The *root metaphor* is simple: "Money brings happiness". Therefore, the type of human being it presents is narcissistic, egocentric, dissatisfied with their personal life, with a bland type of life or, perhaps, with a need to evade, mock or alienate themselves from their reality. A human being who is driven by his desires and sometimes enslaved by them. A human being who lacks fortitude and temperance, with little empathy for those who suffer and for the environmental crisis.

### "Kardashians theology"

Many studies show how religious beliefs shape society and vice versa. Religion is an essential part of the human condition. The Kardashian clan is well-advised and aware of this conditioning factor. They have created a church in their image. The goal is in the words of Klóé Kardashian that "people feel good, not judged or rejected." ([¿Las Kardashians son católicas o cristianas? El clan tiene su propia iglesia - El Sol de México | Noticias, Deportes, Gossip, Columnas \[Are the Kardashians Catholic or Christian? The clan has its own church - el Sol de México | News, Sports, Gossip, Columns\] \(elsoldemexico.com.mx\)](#)). This vision of god "silencing consciences" while money is worshipped, is very far from the transcendental vision of Johnson (2021) who invites, in the name of Christ, to "dare to entrust our existence to the sacred mystery, ever greater, that surrounds our life (everyone's) with immeasurable love". Moreover, the exclusivity of the followers of this religious group, the payment of high dues and tithes, and the reductionist message of Christ, make them lose credibility and are far from the universal message of Christ: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..." (Mt 28:19). The blurred sense of the cross or the scarce confrontation with the Word transform these religious services into "spiritual worldliness". Pope Francis reflects on this point: "Worldliness is a proposal of life, a culture of the ephemeral, of appearance, of make-up..., it has superficial values. It is a culture that does not know fidelity because it changes according to circumstances... Many are Christians, but they are worldly. Jesus, in the parable of the seed that falls to the ground, says that the worries of the world, that is, worldliness, suffocate the Word of God, and do not allow it to grow". [Dios nos defiende de la mundanidad espiritual que corrompe a la Iglesia \[God defends us from the spiritual worldliness that](#)

corrupts the Church] - Vatican News. In this text, the Pope warns the world and the Catholic Church itself of the dangers of worldliness.

Kim Kardashian, the banner of worldliness, has become a personal brand. Currently, her fashion aims to do "social justice" (Jensen 2021) with a more inclusive model (ethnic diversity, age, size). However, the prices of her creations are neither modest nor inclusive. The interest is always oriented towards expanding the sales market. The goal is to produce, through consumption, more money (Sastre, 2014). There is a big difference between the "Kim Kardashian brand" and the "God brand". According to the idea developed by Abadía and Segarra (2023), the Church represents something intangible, absolute, and transcendent, which easily fills immanence, social action, and reaction with meaning. However, the Kim Kardashian brand is pure materialism, money, and business that later fills concepts such as social justice, inclusivism, or human rights.

### Catholic theological apologetics

This lifestyle denies or ignores the fact that natural resources are limited and that 20% of the population consumes 80% of the resources. The model of life lacks family values, where we treat and take care of others with dignity, in privacy, without seeking from them, or in them, a profit, since the family, the "others" are not for our use and enjoyment. Christianity does not consider that desiring is immoral, but its objective is rather to energize desires, orienting them and freeing us from them, towards freedom that allows itself to be seduced by the message of Jesus (Lleó, 1993). The show and all its environment are a screen of the culture of desire and consumption that seduces because the protagonists get everything that many times the spectators long for. This longing is very far from the seduction that Christ proposes: to move from narcissism to encounter. It is not about making value judgments on the members of the Kardashian clan, but about denouncing immoral lifestyles by confronting them with Christian values. Values that support the family as a place of encounter, respect, and intimacy. Values that give meaning to the care of the natural environment as a healthy, sustainable habitat and a place of enriching interrelationships between all biotic and abiotic components of this planet. Eizaguirre (2010, pg. 108) describes different forms of violence, KUWTK and other socio-cultural models could easily be placed in a type of violence of the opulent First World which, through its omnipresent media, shamelessly shows its moral and material excesses to a Third World devoid of everything.

### Protecting the natural environment

Let's focus on the pernicious effects of "Kardashian model" lifestyles on the socio-environmental crisis we are experiencing. If we all followed the lifestyle proclaimed by KUWTK, we would need "several planet Earths" to maintain the system. The sixth IPCC report on warming already confirms the existence of points of no return, those that, even if we reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, cannot be reversed, and predicts abrupt and irreversible climatic phenomena. One of these most vulnerable places is the Mediterranean basin, which has already exceeded 1.5°C above preindustrial levels (Azzopardi et al., 2020). The Amundsen Sea basin in West Antarctica may have passed a tipping point due to melting ice, potentially destabilizing the rest of West Antarctica (Lenton et al., 2019). These are just two examples. The causes of these

environmental alterations are now well known and are described within global change: burning of fossil fuels, extractivism, exacerbated consumerism, pollution, fires, etc. The "Kardashian house" as a model and lifestyle is sustained in this network of imbalance, assuming that the social model generated in the "cultures of the North" is the most adequate to achieve happiness and well-being. Thus, the environmental costs due to the private flights of these and other celebrities are significant in the overall sources of pollution (Strohmeier et al., 2022). Consuming is equated with being happy.

Pro-environmental behaviors, such as saving energy and water and using public transportation, using seasonal, local and organic food products, reducing food and textile waste, etc., are beneficial to protect the environment and human rights. Personality traits (human virtues), environment-related values (environmental virtues), beliefs, affect, and norms are antecedents of proenvironmental behavior (see Molina and Whiting 2023). However, this "conversion" or "metanoia" towards more proenvironmental habits should not be related to a meaningless sacrifice that could even position us before a dissatisfied and tormented life and could lead to mental disorders and eco-anxiety. Environmental protection also has its origin in the motives of happiness and well-being. In general, there are three different types of well-being in positive psychology: hedonic, eudaemonia, and psychological wealth. Based on different conceptions of well-being, research has shown that hedonic values are negatively related to proenvironmental behavior. Eudaimonism values (prosperity or life worth living, based on virtue) are related to environmental values, but cannot directly predict proenvironmental behavior. According to Wei et al., 2013, psychological richness (open personality traits, sense of wonder, and self-expansion) are good predictors of proenvironmental thinking and a fulfilled life.

Faced with the hedonistic, consumerist, and predatory lifestyle to achieve happiness, Molina and Whitting (2023) propose a different attitude to life, the cardinal virtues and other virtues aligned as a basis for forms of life respectful of the environment where eudaemonia is achieved. Benedict XVI (2009, art. 66) confronted consumerist lifestyles: "It is good for people to realize that shopping is always a moral act, and not only an economic one. The consumer has a specific social responsibility, which is added to the company's social responsibility. Consumers must be constantly educated about the role they play daily and which they can play by respecting moral principles, without diminishing the intrinsic economic rationality in the act of buying". Whiting et al. (2021) discuss the advantages of establishing consumption thresholds that guarantee the present and future needs of human health and planetary health. Eizaguirre (2010, p. 78), following in the footsteps of Father Arrupe, proposes the development of a "society of sufficiency" with consecrated or lay communities living the radical message of the Gospel ("love one another as I have loved you"). Living simply so that others can simply live. All this without ceasing to be happy! because it is precisely personal and social well-being that is born of a commitment to solidarity and sustainability.

I assume that this proposal is avant-garde and risky, it moves away from the social standards exaggeratedly represented in KUWTK and requires a high degree of personal commitment. No one said it would be easy, but it is worth it. In the face of consumerist exaggeration, "environmental exaggeration" can be a "prophetic act" that sets the social and personal conscience to reflect. For believers, the encouragement is that God is present in all his creatures and all of them are related to each other and to the Trinitarian mystery (Francis, 2015, art 238-240). For non-believers (and believers), we are a complex web of connections highly successful if we can maintain the balance.



## Protection of the family environment

The secular or Christian family is a place of humanization of the person, an irreplaceable place of reference for the person and for society. The specific contributions of the Christian family have to do with its nature as a believing entity, as a domestic church. It is related to the fact that "being in Christ" implies "being with others, with the family, the Christian community, and the whole of society. The family thus becomes a place of encounter with respect and disinterested love, with oneself, with others, and with God. A place where self-esteem, otherness, and transcendence are nurtured. To favor a culture where spiritual, moral, and ethical values are not eclipsed and even destroyed by the voracity of material and hedonistic values. An environment that favors the culture of life in all its stages, charity and justice, avoiding discrimination, educating in the care of the environment, and clearly, transmitting faith (Pulido, 2009). In a Christian family, money is relativized, and work is revalued. From the Holy Scriptures, we read about this danger: "You cannot serve God and money" (Lk 16:13), and even St. Paul had to deal with this bull: "He who does not work, let him not eat" (2 Th 3:10). The right and duty to work has been extensively dealt with by the Magisterium of the Church. For example, John Paul II (1981, art. 9 and 10), dignified the man through work, linking work, dignity, and family. A family model that is far from the one shown by the Kardashian clan, where Kim's figure loses her privacy to become a socio-cultural phenomenon that traces a complex relationship between her body as a mass communication device and the construction of hypersexualized and hypermediated femininity as a form of work (Valencia y Olvera, 2019). For the Magisterium of the Church, work is a service, it opens us to the needs of all and gives us a sense of communion. In KUWTK, one earns money without working. As many say: "They are famous because they are famous" (Jenkins 2002).

Although socially, the success of the Kardashian family model is reflected by the number of followers on social networks. This article presents the Christian family as a radically different life option. Although society does not always agree with Christian values, there is no doubt that properly understood, they are values that identify the person, do not leave him/her empty of contentment but rather place him/her as a loved one from the beginning to the end of his/her life, an incalculable social value.

## Conclusion

According to Oviedo (2002), it is the task of the Church and its theological work to explain the dangers of the absolutization of the market, materialism or the reduction of the economy to finance, individualism, or the loss of community reference, inequality, devaluation of work, moral disarmament and the loss of ecological awareness. It is overwhelming to transmit the faith and to make a wedge in a materialistic society whose fundamental value of things, nature, and other people is the chrematistic one.

Catholic beliefs are not just individual choices that guide one's daily life. They have a high component of otherness, of encounter and commitment with "the other" and, therefore, a social mission where immoral acts, such as war, injustice, social deterioration, or environmental degradation, are denounced. Christians, with criteria supported by scientific and sociological studies and guided by their leaders, must offer their response to the world (Matikiti and Pandasvika (2023).

No one said it would be easy. Christ is ultimately counter-cultural.

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