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A Study on Cyborgized Body Presentation in Social Media and the Identity Anxiety of Young Women

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Abstract

In the contemporary digital milieu, the bodily presentation of young women on social media is undergoing a profound process of cyborgization. Through the pervasive use of beautification filters, AI-generated avatars, and cosmetic surgery discourses, the human body is perpetually edited, enhanced, and reconstructed, creating a cyborgized entity that transcends physical limitations and blurs the boundary between the real and the virtual. This paper aims to investigate the construction mechanisms of this phenomenon and its consequential impact on the identity anxiety of young women. Drawing upon key theoretical frameworks from post-humanism, surveillance studies, and social theory, this study analyzes the primary construction pathways of the cyborgized body. It critically examines how this mode of presentation exacerbates identity anxiety by fostering a severe online-offline identity schism, perpetuating relentless social comparison under a pervasive algorithmic gaze, and framing the body as a perpetually unfinished project that demands constant optimization. Finally, this study moves beyond a narrative of victimization to discuss the complex agency and potential for resistance among young women, acknowledging that the cyborgized body is simultaneously a site of intense discipline and a potential nexus for empowerment, creative self-expression, and ambivalent negotiation.

Keywords: Cyborgization, Social Media, Body Presentation, Identity Anxiety, Young Women

1. Introduction

The experience of modern selfhood is inextricably linked to the act of scrolling through a digital feed. Within this endless stream of images, the human body, particularly that of the young woman, has become a primary site of performance, scrutiny, and technological mediation. In what can be described as a shift from analogue presentation to digital reconstruction, the contemporary social media environment, or platform society, has fundamentally altered the relationship between the self and its representation (Van Dijck, J., Poell, T., & de Waal, 2018)[1]. This platform society is not merely a technological infrastructure but a pervasive socio-cultural and economic logic that, through mechanisms of datafication and commodification, converts interpersonal relationships, self-identity, and the body itself into forms of quantifiable, tradable capital. For the millions of young women who navigate platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Xiaohongshu, the simple act of sharing a photograph has transformed into a sophisticated process of digital self-fashioning. This process is enabled and encouraged by a suite of powerful, accessible technologies designed to alter, optimize, and perfect the human form. This deep and daily integration of technology with the biological self gives rise to what this paper terms the cyborgized body.

Drawing inspiration from Donna Haraway's (2016)[2] foundational concept in "A Cyborg Manifesto", the cyborg is not a futuristic machine-human hybrid of science fiction but a present-day reality, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Haraway's cyborg was a politically charged figure, a metaphor for breaking down rigid dualisms (human/machine, nature/culture, male/female) and forging new, non-essentialist identities. In the context of 21st-century social media, this concept finds a new, more commercialized and ubiquitous manifestation. The cyborgized body is a fusion of a user's organic, physical features with layer s of code, algorithms, and data that sculpt it into an idealized, digitally native form. It is both an extension of the self and a departure from it, a hybrid entity that exists in the liminal space between the tangible and the virtual.

While this technological mediation offers an unprecedented sense of control over self-presentation, it is not a neutral tool. It operates within a deeply commercialized ecosystem that profits from user insecurity. The seamless, perfected image of the cyborgized body projected online often stands in stark and painful contrast to the physical, unedited body offline. This discrepancy fosters a pervasive and multifaceted identity anxiety, challenging young women's ability to cultivate a stable and authentic sense of self. This paper seeks to answer the central research

question: How does the pervasive construction and presentation of the cyborgized body on social media contribute to the escalating identity anxiety experienced by young women?

To address this question, this paper argues that the technological and discursive mechanisms of cyborgization create a powerful feedback loop. First, it will explore the digital construction of this body, analyzing the ways in which filters, AI, and data-driven disciplines operate under a hegemonic algorithmic gaze. Second, it will delve into the psychological consequences, examining how this process generates a fractured self through an online-offline schism, perpetual social comparison, and the framing of the body as an unfinished project. Finally, the analysis will move beyond a simplistic narrative of victimization to explore the nuances of female agency, resistance, and ambivalence within this technologically saturated environment, offering a more complete picture of life as a digital cyborg.

2. The Digital Construction of the Cyborgized Body

The creation of the cyborgized body is a continuous, multifaceted process embedded in the daily use of digital platforms. This process is governed by the powerful yet often invisible algorithmic gaze. This concept extends Laura Mulvey's (1975)[3] male gaze into the digital realm, describing a form of surveillance that is wielded not by a specific human subject but by the impersonal, data-driven logic of platform algorithms. These systems are not neutral arbiters; they are, as John Cheney-Lippold (2017)[4] argues, active agents in the making of our digital selves. This gaze functions through a potent feedback loop: a user posts content; the algorithm measures its engagement (likes, shares, comments, watch time); it then promotes content with similar aesthetic characteristics, which in turn shapes the user's understanding of what is desirable and popular, compelling them to produce content that conforms to this now-validated standard. This mechanism functions not merely as a post-hoc sorting of content but as a form of preemptive discipline. Before publishing, users internalize the algorithm's perceived preferences, engaging in self-censorship and self-curation to select poses, filters, and themes most likely to garner algorithmic favor. This constitutes a more efficient mode of control, as it transmutes external surveillance into an intrinsic, self-motivating impulse.

This creates a form of algorithmic governmentality, a Foucauldian concept adapted to the digital age, where power is exercised not through overt coercion but through the subtle shaping of choices and possibilities. Users internalize this gaze, becoming their own disciplinarians because they intuitively understand what the algorithm will reward. This cycle is amplified by commercial interests, as brands and influencers whose content aligns with the dominant aesthetic are rewarded with greater visibility, further solidifying a narrow, monetizable standard of beauty. As Safiya U. Noble (2018)[5] has demonstrated in her work on search engines, such systems often function as algorithms of oppression, reinforcing societal biases and amplifying Eurocentric, ableist, and ageist ideals of beauty while marginalizing others. The result is an intensely homogenized visual culture where a specific look, often referred to as Instagram face, with its poreless skin, cat-like eyes, full lips, and ambiguous ethnicity, becomes the default template for digital beauty.

Within this algorithmically curated ecosystem, the cyborgized body is constructed through a spectrum of increasingly sophisticated practices. The most common pathway is the ubiquitous use of beautification filters and photo-editing applications. The normalization of these tools has transformed self-perception into an engagement with a technologically mediated looking-glass self (Zuo & Wang, 2019)[6], where one's identity is shaped by the anticipated and actual reactions to a digitally altered image. These tools operate through principles of erasure (removing flaws like pores, wrinkles, and acne) and standardization (reshaping features to fit a pre-programmed template). The gamified design of these apps, with daily updates, new filters, and premium features, encourages habitual use, embedding the act of digital alteration into the very fabric of self-representation. This logic is extended with the creation of digital doubles through AI-powered avatars and portrait generators. Here, the physical self is not merely retouched but can be almost entirely substituted by a flawless surrogate. The user provides the raw data (a few photographs), and the machine produces an idealized doppelgänger that exists independently of its creator. This perfect cyborg offers a protective shield, allowing for social interaction without the vulnerability of exposing the physical self. However, this practice also deepens the sense of disembodiment and can lead to a form of psychological dissociation, where the user's primary sense of self becomes more attached to the celebrated digital avatar than to their own body. It raises profound questions about identity: when one's most liked and validated self is not you, but an AI's interpretation of you, where does the authentic self reside?

The influence of these digital aesthetics is not confined to the screen; it bleeds into the physical world through the pervasive discourse surrounding cosmetic surgery on social media. Platforms have become powerful engines for normalizing and popularizing invasive procedures. Influencers document their journeys with rhinoplasty, lip fillers, and BBLs (Brazilian Butt Lifts), framing these medical interventions as acts of self-care and personal investment.

The language like tweakments, non-invasive, enhancements, minimizes the risks and frames the body as a perpetually upgradeable device. The success of this discourse lies in its ability to reframe medical procedures as practices of consumerism and self-improvement, akin to purchasing new clothing or learning a new skill. The rise of financial technologies, such as "Buy Now, Pay Later (BNPL)" services, now widely applied within the cosmetic sector, it further lowers the decision-making threshold, rendering expensive body modifications as accessible as purchasing a smartphone on an installment plan. This digital-to-physical pipeline is confirmed by research establishing a significant biopsychosocial link between high engagement with appearance-focused social media, photo-editing behaviors, and a greater acceptance of cosmetic surgery (Rodgers, R. F., Slater, A., Gordon, C. S., McLean, S. A., Jarman, H. K., & Paxton, S. J., 2020)[7]. The accelerated trend cycle of TikTok can popularize a specific surgical look (like the fox eye trend) in a matter of months, turning the human body into a site of fast fashion. This has given rise to phenomena like Snapchat dysmorphia, where patients seek out surgeons asking to be modified to look like their filtered selfies, a stark example of the hyperreal image dictating physical reality.

Finally, the cyborgized body is constructed through the logic of the quantified self. As sociologist Deborah Lupton (2016)[8] details, fitness trackers and wellness apps encourage individuals to translate their bodily experiences into a stream of objective data. Weight, body fat percentage, steps taken, and calories consumed become the key metrics of a body's worth. This practice is a modern form of Foucauldian self-discipline, where individuals internalize the gaze of the data and engage in constant self-surveillance to ensure their metrics align with ideals of health, fitness, and, implicitly, moral virtue. Sharing these metrics on social media by posting a completed run map or a "what I eat in a day" video, transforms this private discipline into a public performance of self-control and productivity, aligning with neoliberal ideologies of self-optimization. In this hyperreal environment, as theorized by Jean Baudrillard (1994)[9], the digitally perfected and data-optimized body becomes a simulacrum, which is a copy without a direct original, that achieves a greater sense of reality and desirability than the unedited, unquantified physical body. In this hyperreal context, the filtered selfie ceases to be a mere representation of a physical face; it establishes itself as the new, authoritative benchmark. Consequently, the unedited, organic body is relegated to the status of a flawed and disappointing copy of its digital ideal.

3. The Fractured Self: Cyborgization and Identity Anxiety

The pervasive presence of this digitally perfected, constantly monitored body cultivates a profound and multifaceted identity anxiety among young women. This anxiety is not a simple matter of low self-esteem but a deeper ontological crisis that unfolds through a series of interconnected dynamics. It manifests as a schism between the online and offline self, a state of perpetual comparison, and the sense of the body as a perpetually unfinished project. At the heart of this is a debilitating paradox surrounding authenticity and the constant fear of exposure.

A central tension within social media culture is the simultaneous demand for authenticity and the rewarding of polished performance. Platforms and their users increasingly valorize realness, vulnerability, and candid moments. Trends like unstructured "photo dumps," "get ready with me" videos that show a pre-makeup face, and confessions of personal struggles are presented as markers of an authentic self. However, this performed authenticity operates within a system that is fundamentally inauthentic. The Algorithmic Gaze does not reward genuine messiness, it rewards a curated and aesthetically pleasing version of it. The "no-makeup makeup" look, achieved with subtle filters and expensive skincare, is a perfect metaphor for this paradox: it requires significant artifice to appear natural. This dynamic places young women in a double bind. They must perform a self that appears genuine and relatable, while simultaneously adhering to the unspoken aesthetic rules of the platform. This is where Erving Goffman's (1959)[10] dramaturgical theory becomes exceptionally relevant. Social media collapses the distinction between the "front stage" (where one performs for an audience) and the "back stage" (where one can relax and be uninhibited). The user's profile becomes a perpetual front stage, creating immense pressure to maintain the performance at all times. This perpetual on-stage condition leads to cognitive and emotional burnout. Maintaining an idealized digital persona requires continuous identity labor—an unacknowledged and uncompensated yet immensely taxing form of work encompassing content curation, image editing, comment management, and the navigation of attendant anxieties.

The anxiety stems from the constant fear of the "back stage" being exposed—an unedited photo being tagged, an unflattering angle captured in a friend's video, or an offline encounter that reveals the discrepancy between the digital and physical self. This fear is amplified by "context collapse," a term describing how social media flattens diverse social contexts into one. A single post is viewed simultaneously by close friends, family, potential employers, and anonymous strangers, making it impossible to tailor the performance to a specific audience and heightening the need for a universally appealing, yet fundamentally generic, persona.

The cyborgized body is the primary tool in managing this paradoxical performance. It allows one to project an image that is just authentic enough—not overtly artificial, but subtly perfected to meet an idealized standard. This constant management of a fraudulent authenticity is emotionally and cognitively exhausting, leading to feelings of impostor syndrome and a deep-seated fear of being found out. This fear is the affective core of the broader identity fragmentation. The schism between the online and offline self becomes a source of chronic stress. This process fosters self-objectification, where individuals learn to view themselves from a third-person perspective as an object to be appraised, a psychological process directly linked to negative mental health outcomes, including depression and eating disorders in adolescent girls (Tiggemann & Slater, 2017)[11]. This psychological division leads to a fractured identity, where the real self is perceived as a source of shame and the digital self feels like an inauthentic impostor (Zuo & Wang, 2019)[6]. This internal fragmentation is externally fueled by the relentless cycle of social comparison. The infinite scroll is a design feature that prevents cognitive closure, immersing the user in a never-ending stream of content to compare themselves against. Public-facing metrics like "like" and follower counts provide a real-time, quantitative measure of social validation, turning self-worth into a competitive sport. Empirical research has robustly demonstrated that the more time young women spend engaging in this comparison, the greater their body image concerns (Fardouly, J., Diedrichs, P. C., Vartanian, L. R., & Halliwell, E., 2015)[12] and body surveillance (Wang, Y., Li, Z., & Zhang, Y., 2022)[13]. The Algorithmic Gaze intensifies this by creating personalized echo chambers of idealized beauty, ensuring that each user is constantly measured against a standard that is not only unachievable but also perpetually shifting.

These dynamics converge to frame the body as a perpetually unfinished project, a source of existential weight. This resonates powerfully with philosopher Heather Widdows' (2018)[14] argument in Perfect Me that beauty has transformed into a dominant ethical ideal in our time. The pursuit of physical perfection is no longer seen as a matter of vanity but as a moral imperative—a demonstration of discipline, self-respect, and personal responsibility. Within this neoliberal ethical framework, self-care is redefined as the endless investment in and optimization of the body. An individual's value becomes less determined by inner qualities or social contributions and more contingent upon their demonstrated ability to manage and present a compliant, efficient, and attractive physique. This projectification of the body conflates the concept of self-love with the practice of ceaseless self-modification. This ethical ideal has a profound economic dimension, fueling a multi-billion dollar beauty economy that profits directly from this manufactured anxiety. The pressure to constantly invest time, money, and energy in self-improvement is relentless. This reframes identity itself. It is no longer rooted in a stable state of "being" but is lost in an anxious, relentless process of becoming—always striving for a future, perfected self that remains perpetually out of reach.

4. Agency and Ambivalence in the Digital Panopticon

Despite these significant pressures, it is crucial to avoid a deterministic narrative that casts young women as passive victims of technology. They operate with a complex and sophisticated agency within this digital panopticon, engaging in practices of empowerment, resistance, and constant negotiation. On one hand, the tools of cyborgization can be wielded for empowerment. For individuals from marginalized communities, the ability to control one's digital representation can be a profound act of self-determination. For example, LGBTQ+ individuals can use avatars or carefully curated images to explore gender presentation in a safe, reversible way before expressing it offline. People with chronic illnesses or disabilities can choose to present themselves in ways that foreground their identity beyond their condition, building communities and controlling their own narrative. In these contexts, they reclaim a fragment of Haraway's (1991)[2] original political vision for the cyborg as a figure of transgressive and self-defined identity, using technology to challenge rather than conform to societal norms. Furthermore, active and conscious resistance emerges from within these very platforms. The body positivity movement, while often criticized for being co-opted by commercial interests and centering more socially acceptable plus-size bodies, nonetheless opened up a crucial dialogue about beauty standards. In its wake, more radical movements like body neutrality, which seeks to de-emphasize appearance as a source of value altogether, and fat liberation have gained traction. On a smaller scale, practices of resistance are common. The use of "finstas" (fake/friend Instas) or private accounts allows users to create protected spaces where they can share unedited photos and express vulnerability with a trusted circle, consciously opting out of the public performance of perfection. These acts represent deliberate attempts to rupture the seamless facade of digital perfection and build pockets of authenticity.

However, the lived experience for most young women likely resides not in the extremes of total subjugation or radical resistance, but in a state of persistent ambivalence. This ambivalence is a sophisticated survival strategy for navigating the paradoxical demands of the platform society (Van Dijck et al., 2018)[1]. It can be understood as a form of strategic conformity—making calculated decisions about when to conform to aesthetic norms and

when to resist them. A young woman may post a highly edited photo on her main feed to meet professional or social expectations, while simultaneously sharing a sarcastic, unfiltered meme about beauty standards on her story. This is not hypocrisy; it is the emotional and cognitive labor of managing multiple, often conflicting, presentations of self. This ambivalence manifests in a complex pleasure-pain nexus. Young women may derive fleeting satisfaction and a sense of belonging from the dopamine loop of likes and validation, yet they remain acutely aware of the illusory nature of this satisfaction and its underlying psychological costs. One might critique unrealistic beauty standards in one moment, only to skillfully deploy facial slimming and skin smoothing functions in the next. Such behavior stems not from ignorance but from a pragmatic negotiation within a contradictory culture that demands they be simultaneously beautiful and authentic. This constant toggling between participation and critique, between leveraging the system for personal gain and being aware of its psychological costs (Fardouly et al., 2015)[12], is the central tension of modern digital citizenship for young women.

5. Conclusion

The cyborgized body on social media is a defining feature of contemporary identity formation for young women, a complex phenomenon born at the intersection of technology, culture, and commerce. It is constructed through a cascade of daily practices, such as filtering, AI generation, data-driven self-discipline, and the internalization of digital aesthetics, all taking place within a powerful platform ecosystem. This paper has argued that while offering new avenues for self-expression, this process of cyborgization is deeply implicated in the rise of identity anxiety. By generating a painful schism between the online and offline self, fostering a toxic and relentless environment of social comparison, and framing the body as a never-ending ethical project, it fundamentally destabilizes the possibility of a coherent, secure, and authentic sense of self.

Yet, the narrative is not one of complete technological determinism. The same platforms that enforce these disciplinary norms also serve as arenas for empowerment, resistance, and the forging of alternative communities. Young women exhibit a complex agency, navigating the contradictory demands of the digital world with strategies of ambivalence and negotiation. Their experience highlights the central paradox of digital life: the struggle to reconcile the boundless possibilities for self-creation with the rigid constraints of algorithmic culture. Ultimately, addressing the profound identity anxiety stemming from cyborgized presentation requires a multi-pronged approach. It calls for individual resilience and the cultivation of critical digital literacy, but this is insufficient on its own. It also demands a collective push for greater platform accountability, including algorithmic transparency and the redesign of platform architectures to prioritize user well-being over engagement metrics. Specifically, this could include mandating the clear labeling of filtered or altered images in commercial content, redesigning user interfaces to de-emphasize public-facing quantitative metrics such as “like” counts, and developing algorithms that actively promote diverse, non-standardized body representations to disrupt homogenous aesthetic echo chambers. The critical challenge for our time is to foster a digital culture that values human complexity and authenticity over the flawless but fragile perfection of the digital cyborg. Only then can we hope that the future of the cyborg will align more closely with Haraway’s vision of liberatory potential, rather than devolving into a mere instrument of discipline within the logic of commercial platforms.

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