Cyber, Body, and Communication

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Abstract: The emerging phenomenon of "virtual idols," a product of the technological era, has gradually become a new segment in the idol market. In the cyber world, the embodiment of virtual idols is primarily manifested in five aspects: world body, social body, political body, consumer body, and medical body. As a representative product of cyborgs, virtual idols connect their own bodies to the cyber world through scientific and technological means. Due to the unique composition of virtual idols, they project reality into the cyber world and construct the world body of virtual idols through interaction with fans. In the cyber world, fans and virtual idols communicate through the internet, creating an exclusive society for virtual idols and fans. During the process of social interaction, they continuously construct the social body of virtual idols. Simultaneously, based on the distinctive attributes of the virtual idol group A-SOUL, the political body of virtual idols is jointly constructed by the two-dimensional images in the cyber world and the "avatars" engaging in real-time interaction with fans. The continuous fusion of fans and virtual idols transforms both parties from mere producers and consumers, constructing the consumer body of virtual idols. As representatives of cyborgs, virtual idols reveal the diverse extensions of the body in the cyber world, providing new pathways for the construction of the medical body in the technological era. The construction of the body by virtual idols in cyberspace offers new pathways and insights for the construction of the body in the technological age.

Keywords: Virtual Idols, Cyber Feminism, Body Forms

1. Introduction

In his work "Body Forms: Five Types of Bodies in Modern Society," American author John O'Neill elaborates on body forms as physiological bodies and interactive bodies. Based on this, he further categorizes bodies into five types: world body, social body, political body, consumer body, and medical body. Haraway, departing from the natural physiology of the body, analyzes the human body by incorporating machines, species, and technology. She redefines the body and characterizes cyborgs as a fusion of machine and organism, a biological entity in the social reality. Virtual idols, with their characteristic real-time interaction, can be viewed as a self-mapping of individuals in the virtual world within the cyber realm.

This paper aims to explore the construction of virtual idol body forms from the perspective of cyber feminism, combining O'Neill's five body forms.

2.   Literature Review

2.1.   Cyber Feminism

In 1985, Haraway's essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" marked the emergence of cyber feminism. Haraway asserted that we are all cyborgs, hybrids of organism and machine. The fundamental tenet of Haraway's cyber feminism is that communication technology and biotechnology have reconstructed our bodies and identities, blurring gender lines, with the cyborg becoming a symbol of feminism. Science and technology provide women with new power and freedom, expanding the space for women's survival and development, and enabling women to have equal discourse with men, thus achieving women's liberation.

Prantl's research focuses on the relationship between women and electronic technology. She believes that new scientific technologies can empower women, and these technologies contribute to promoting gender equality.[1] The online world brings a sense of empowerment to women.[2]

In China, research on "cyber feminism" initially focused on translation and introduction, leading to the emergence of research monographs. Currently, the research is concentrated on Haraway's cyber feminism. Domestically, the hotspots in the study of "cyber feminism" focus on the intersection of technology and the body, as well as the realm of identity.[3] Zhou Liyun points out the contradictory relationship between science, technology, and the body. On the one hand, science and technology challenge the constraints of the body, and on the other hand, they imitate the functions of the body. Zhang Minghua believes that women can express their demands through new media in cyberspace, with female writers using their own body's sexual consciousness and ethical subversion to declare war against patriarchy.[4] Yang Jiping suggests that in cyberspace, women can break free from gendered bodies and become equal beings with dual identities.[5] Guo Lili summarizes the essence of Haraway's cyber feminist thought: the breakthrough of boundaries, the rupture of identity, and the change in the situation of women. Guo Lili points out that Haraway believes women possess cyborg characteristics, and only cyborgs can accommodate women of various identities.[6] Du Lanlan believes that cyber feminism is a feminist theory and practice linked to cyberspace.[7]

2.2.   Virtual Idols

Research on virtual idols in China primarily focuses on three aspects: the technical composition of virtual idols, the interaction between virtual idols and fans, and the dissemination of virtual idols. Yan Qing and He Limin conducted research on the idolization and motivational behavior of contemporary youth towards virtual idols. They found that the significant reason for contemporary youth's admiration for virtual idols is the unique character attributes of these idols. The admiration of fans for virtual idols is related to the information environment created by media technology and its promotion.[8] Xu Zhimeng and Liu Yingjie pointed out that virtual digital personas, as a new type of "idol," establish a bond of trust with fans by constructing a perfect and reliable image. Following a path similar to that of real-life celebrities, virtual idols create a quasi-social relationship between fans and idols.[9] Liu Sihan discovered that in the "anthropomorphization" communication of virtual idols, fans establish a connection with virtual idols through content. In the construction of virtual idols, fans are not only followers but also collaborative creators. Through virtual idols, fans form their own identity and self-recognition.[10]

2.3.   Body Forms

In the study of body forms, an examination of literature and a comprehensive analysis reveal that the focus of foreign academia on the body lies in its relationship with reason, consciousness, and soul.

Current research trends not only advance the aforementioned key points but also explore new directions such as "body and identity construction," "body extension and reshaping," among other issues. Author O'Neill categorizes body forms into five parts: world body, political body, consumer body, medical body, and social body, analyzing the construction and representation of the body from these five perspectives.

Regarding the study of the world body, it typically centers on Marx's view of the body. In the field of communication, scholars extend research on the world body to embodied communication. Wang Juan points out that in the era of digital media, the physical body is connected to the world through embodiment. In the new media environment, the body, as the subject, completes the production and dissemination of media content.[11]

In the research on the social body, Liu Yufan and Ran Hua indicate that the materiality of interpersonal communication media in social space and the visually shaped forms of the body by digital cultural norms constitute the implications of the "social state" body.[12]

In discussions concerning the political body, O'Neill analogizes the state to the human body, employing a subtle metaphor. André Corrêa introduces the populace into the political body, emphasizing the political rights of the people while highlighting the limitations of those rights.[13]

In studies related to the consumer body, Lu Zhen proposes the emergence of a new model for consumers in the information age. With the development of information technology, production patterns become more flexible, blurring the boundaries between consumption and production, leading to the emergence of productive consumers.[14]

From the perspective of medical body construction, O'Neill introduces the concept of the "medical body," considering it as a commitment of medical technology to individuals, families, and modern therapeutic nations.[15] Viewing the medical body as an extension of media, McLuhan believes that media is an extension or expansion of human sensory abilities, with humans as the authentic bodily subjects.

3. Virtual Idol's Body and Communication: The Development of Cyber Feminist Theoretical Implications

3.1. World Body: Linking the Virtual and the Real, Establishing a Self-Body

O'Neill proposed in "Body Forms": the foundation of all science is the world body.[15] The world is the connection people establish with nature through the body, and the body, as a medium, can link the world and, as matter, can compose the world. In the cyber world, virtual idols construct a self-body through scientific technology, linking their bodies to the cyber world.

Haraway disengages the human body from its natural physiological reality, analyzing and redefining the body by combining machines, species, and technology. The cyberspace, as the fourth space born and developed based on technology, is a realm where cultures from real life are projected, and through technology, cyberspace can concretize the existing thoughts in the real world. Humans explore their identities based on symbols, providing an experimental ground for Haraway's cyborg feminism viewpoint. Haraway views women in the cyber world as cyborgs not confined by gender, nationality, race, or species limitations.

Haraway defines cyborgs as a fusion of machine and organism, a biological entity in social reality. The virtual idol group A-SOUL, with real-time interaction, can be considered a manifestation of cyborgs in reality. Technology reconstructs the body and identity, making the virtual idol group A-SOUL, composed of "avatars" from reality and virtual images, the most suitable model for explaining cyborgs.

In the cyber world, the A-SOUL virtual idol group constructs its identity through the real-life images of idols. However, due to the unique nature of cyberspace, A-SOUL's identity can be

artificially depicted by technology, and fans can also participate in the construction of this identity. Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory suggests that individuals, consciously or unconsciously, shape others' specific perceptions that align with their expectations through appearance and behavior in daily interpersonal interactions, presenting their best image in everyday life. In real life, individuals adjust the roles they present to others by facing different people, a concept referred to as Jung's "persona mask."[16] In the cyber space, fans detach themselves from reality, projecting their emotions and fantasies onto virtual idols. The continuous interaction between fans and virtual idols, the blurred projection of reality and the virtual, inadvertently influences the construction of the virtual idol's body.

In the process of constructing the world body for the A-SOUL virtual idol group, fans typically engage in the idol's identity construction by creatively reinterpreting virtual idol materials. When fans of the A-SOUL virtual idol group engage in secondary creative works, they often invest a substantial amount of emotional factors, infusing their own emotions and personal values into the works. These creations significantly enhance the interaction between idols and fans. In such interactive processes, idols tend to align their image with the inclinations of their fans. The diverse, boundary-less, conflicted, and non-essential themes conceptualized in Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" find expression in the A-SOUL cyber virtual idol group.

3.2. Social Body: Constructing Social Circles, Seeking Identity Recognition

In online interactions, humans communicate through the internet, and communication gives rise to society. The body is the most primitive tool for humans, connecting individuals to society through the perception of nature and action.[15] In the cyber world, virtual idols form a cyber society through interaction with fans, and within this cyber society, fans and virtual idols share a social body.

Representations of the physical body in reality are embedded to construct the social body online. New mobile technologies link intelligent bodies in the digital space, and the bodily transformation brought about by new technologies has not completely detached from the physical body. Digital technology and culture shape humans into new forms, and as a crucial medium for interpersonal communication and information dissemination, the body possesses social attributes.

Among A-SOUL's fans, most interactive behaviors are based on fans seeking identity recognition. Initially, fans' affection for the group is primarily drawn by the virtual idol's characteristics. However, in the process of interacting with virtual idols, fans project their expectations and aspirations onto them. Through interactions with virtual idols or engaging in activities such as secondary creative works, fans gradually find a sense of identity. These activities do not receive differential treatment based on fans' identities, race, or gender. In Haraway's cyber feminist perspective, cyberspace eliminates the limitations of the body and race. In the interaction between fans and virtual idols, through cyberspace, fans continually construct a more perfect self, with identities constantly changing and updating. Fans also become a form of cyborg in this process.

With the development of internet technology, social media platforms have emerged, allowing people to gather in cyberspace, transcending time and space constraints. During the activities of the virtual idol group A-SOUL, fans gather through the internet, forming a small society centered around A-SOUL, where A-SOUL constructs its social body. In the cyber world, fans discuss and share idol-related information and works. In this small community, the promotion of exciting works fosters a tremendous sense of group identity and belonging.

In virtual communities, when virtual idols are live-streaming, fans can communicate through bullet comments, creating a triangular community model of fan–virtual idol–fan interaction. A-SOUL engages with fans through live-streaming bullet comments, and fans interacting in real-time can also communicate with each other, forming a close-knit community. This immediate communication community allows fans to feel a sense of reality and immersion in the cyber world. Continuous

interaction between virtual idols and fans creates shared memories, deepening their sense of mutual identification. In the virtual space of the virtual idol's live-streaming room, everyone's real-life identity is erased. In this space, everyone can reconstruct their identities. As mentioned earlier, the virtual live-streaming room is a cyber society where virtual idols continuously construct their social bodies through interaction with fans.

3.3. Political Body: Constructing the "Frontstage" and "Backstage" of Social Bodies

In "Body Forms," O'Neill categorizes the political body into physiological political body, productive political body, and libidinous political body.[15] Erving Goffman introduces the theatrical concepts of "frontstage" and "backstage" into the field of communication.[17] Virtual idols collectively construct the political body through the visual labor of the virtual image's "frontstage" and the emotional labor of the "backstage" performed by the "avatars."

Goffman, in his analysis of social interactions in "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life," introduced the dramaturgical theory, emphasizing the crucial concepts of the "front stage" and the "backstage." The "front stage," composed of stage setting, personal front, and performance, represents the external presentation of virtual idol girl groups in the cyber world—such as their appearance, way of speaking, facial expressions, body postures, etc. The "backstage" is the place where performers reveal their authentic selves after leaving the performance. While not a specific, fixed location, the "backstage" is the space where performers display their true selves. In the construction of the virtual idol's identity, the "avatars" serves as the backstage of the virtual idol.

In the construction of the productive political body of the virtual idol group A-SOUL, engineers use technology to create a model of the virtual idol through symbols and programs, forming a simplified virtual idol. This technology allows virtual idols to be independent of real appearance and personality, bypassing the early training stages and significantly reducing the cost of idol production. Through electronic signals, a perfect idol can be created. In the activities of virtual idols, they seem to be in a constant "frontstage" state. Virtual idols interact with fans through live broadcasts in cyberspace, shaping a body image with a beautiful appearance. This "frontstage" production labor contributes to the construction of the productive political body of the virtual idol in cyberspace.

After the construction of the virtual idol's image, it goes online to interact with fans at scheduled times, engaging in live broadcasts. At this point, technology is no longer the sole determining factor for the virtual idol's image; fans and the "avatars" join in the symbolic writing of the virtual idol. The "avatars" interacts with fans during live broadcasts, providing feedback based on personal experiences, genuine emotions, and character, resonating with the fans. The emotional labor invested by the "avatars" in interacting with fans during live broadcasts contributes to self-identification, constructing the productive political body of the virtual idol.

The community formed by the "avatars" through interaction with fans becomes a primary site for emotional labor in the virtual idol's construction. Establishing connections through interaction with fans, the community created by the virtual idol enhances the self-value of both the virtual idol and the "avatars." With the continuous advancement of virtual technology, the boundaries of the backstage have evolved, and the demarcation between the real-world and online-world backstages continues to blur. In the virtual world, the real backstage is consistently shifting, and the virtual idol's backstage tends to exhibit a trend towards a "pseudo-backstage."[18] The fusion and replacement of the "frontstage" and "backstage" in the construction of the political body of virtual idols continue to evolve.

3.4. Consumer Body: Shifts in Consumption Habits from Reality to Virtual

O'Neill, in "The Body in Form," asserts that the world is composed of material, and the material world is inseparable from consumption.[15] The construction of the virtual idol's body is intrinsically linked to the construction of the consumer body through interaction with fans, as the virtual idol collaboratively constructs the consumer body with its fanbase.

Body consumption is not only an individual behavior to build identity and realize self-worth but also a public act reflecting societal relationships that mirror cultural values.

Consumer scholar Veblen points out that "in a consumer society, consumption behavior does not necessarily involve monetary exchange; the act of viewing itself constitutes consumption."[19] With the rise of new technologies such as VR and 5G, China's virtual idol development has entered a high-speed phase. Virtual idols are active in fields such as live broadcasting, gaming, and music. Their revenue is no longer solely focused on simple digital song sales; live streaming, endorsements, and IP industries have gradually become part of the virtual idol industry chain.

In the construction of the virtual idol's consumer body, active fans act as productive consumers. When fans consume virtual idol merchandise, they simultaneously engage in the secondary production of virtual idol content. Meanwhile, fans share the produced content on social media. Fans of the virtual idol group A-SOUL come from different subcultures. In the "small society" created around the virtual idol group A-SOUL, various subcultural circles continuously blend, creating songs, animations, fan fiction, and peripherals centered around the virtual idol group A-SOUL. Fans are no longer simple consumers but have become producers. This production method allows fans to participate in the construction of the virtual idol's consumer body, satisfying their desire for self-expression, gaining group identity within the community, and adding diversity to the virtual idol culture chain through their creative actions. This process results in added value in the consumption of virtual idol culture. The virtual idol, by reshaping its identity through the network, illustrates that fans actively contribute to the construction of the virtual idol's consumer body.

In the consumer era, consumption activities are more apparent at the level of symbolic goods rather than merely at the material consumption level.[20] Virtual consumption has emerged as a behavior due to the prevalence of the internet. What is purchased in virtual consumption are virtual products—comprising not tangible physical entities but specific symbols. These virtual products possess symbolic value, catering to certain psychological needs of consumers. In products related to virtual idols, some are generated through virtual networks. For instance, fans of A-SOUL not only purchase outfits for members on Bilibili but also buy captain gifts for members during live broadcasts. These virtual gifts serve as essential means for fans to express love and support for their idols. In the cyber world, the body of the virtual idol group A-SOUL is continuously constructed through fan consumption.

3.5. Medical Body: Extension of the Body in the Cyber Space

The medicalization of the body accompanies the comprehensive industrialization and socialization of the body. In the cyber world, everyone is a cyborg, and virtual idols continuously extend the physiological body through communication technology, constructing the medical body.

In the field of communication studies, Marshall McLuhan introduced the concept of "media as an extension of man." He stated, "Clothing is an extension of the skin, housing is an extension of the temperature-regulating mechanism, stirrups, bicycles, and cars are all extensions of the legs, and media or technology can be any extension of man."[21] This theory, decades ahead of its time, is highly visionary, and in the modern technological era, it seems as McLuhan predicted – people have extended the space of their bodies through technology. With technological advancement, the central nervous system of humanity has been extended, electronic media has transformed the world into a

synchronous space, breaking the limitations of time and space. "We are rapidly approaching the last stage of human extension – the stage of simulating consciousness through technology."[21]

Haraway analyzes the human body by separating it from the natural physiology of reality, combining machines, species, and technology to redefine the body. Technological progress has led to the creation of tools. Human life is inseparable from the tools manufactured by technology. It can be said that technology and machines coexist with humans, and human life depends on machines. Today, humans have evolved from manufacturing machines to becoming parasitic within machines, with machines becoming extensions of any ordinary person's limbs – humans as components on machines – or both being organs on the cyborg. When machines are embedded in the human body, a new system is formed, a new human. The growing dependence of humans on machines has propelled the flourishing development of cyborgs in this era. In the cyber world, the human medical body is gradually being replaced by the prosthetic, and the coexistence of the human flesh and machine body belongs to a kind of cyborg. Sun Wei defines individuals with both machine and human attributes as "cybernetic individuals," penetrated by the crisis of the post-human era and immersed in data. [22] The term "cyber person" can be explained equivalently to "cyborg."

Media technology dismembers the human body into independent parts and enhances them in terms of power and scope through the use of media technology. Virtual idol group A-SOUL achieves the extension of the body in the cyber world, becoming an "invisible entity" detached from real biological features. [23] Fans also submerge their true selves, entering the cyber world. In the cyber world, virtual idol group A-SOUL lives in a space where the virtual and the real intertwine. In this space, the cyborg itself is their medical body.

Virtual idol group A-SOUL, born in the Internet world, primarily engages in activities such as live streaming. This mode of activity represents a highly integrated form of human-technology interaction in the era of artificial intelligence. In the intelligent age, the profound integration of humans and technology provides a new pathway for shaping the body, much like how virtual idol group A-SOUL is composed of two-dimensional images and the "avatars". In the cyber world, identities are submerged in the virtual realm, and physical inconveniences are no longer obstacles, as the immersion brought by intelligent technology allows individuals to reshape a cyber identity, extending the body in the cyber world.

4.   Reconsideration of the Development of Virtual Idols in the Digital Virtual World

In an era of rapid technological advancement and succession, the cyber age has arrived, with virtual idols gradually emerging as a new type of digital media in the cyber era. In the cyber age, the primary focus of this study is how the virtual idol group A-SOUL constructs its body. This paper employs literature review methods and case study approaches to conduct the research. The findings reveal that in the cyber world, the construction of A-SOUL's virtual idol body is concentrated in the construction of five bodies: the world body, the social body, the political body, the consumption body, and the medical body.

Regarding the study of the world body, O'Neill posits that the foundation of all science is the world body. Haraway, departing from the physiological reality of the human body, reanalyzes and redefines the body by integrating machines, species, and technology. Virtual idols can be seen as a manifestation of cyborgs in reality. The fading of anthropomorphism implies the advent of the cyber age. In the fertile soil of cyberspace, virtual idols, different from ordinary ones, grow and develop. A-SOUL adopts a mode of combining virtual two-dimensional images with the real "avatars" to construct the world body.

In the study of the social body, Liu Yufan and Ran Hua discovered that the social body is expanding toward a "socialized" body. [12] This study analyzes the social behaviors of the virtual idol group A-SOUL in the cyber world and finds that virtual idols' interactions in the cyber world

align with real-world social interactions. Through online socialization, a network social circle is established, veiling users in a layer of anonymity. In the cyber society, the medium replaces the physical body, connecting people in the cyber world. Virtual idols, in the cyber world, construct the social body through the society built by community interaction.

In the study of the political body, this research finds that in the construction of the virtual idol's political body, the virtual idol group A-SOUL divides the body into the "frontstage" and the "backstage." The virtual idol processes symbols to establish the model of the virtual idol, engages in communication with users using virtual two-dimensional images, and conducts the "frontstage" labor of the virtual idol. The labor state constructed by such work is the "frontstage" production of the political body of the virtual idol. Subsequently, the emotional labor carried out by the "avatars" in interaction with fans constructs the "backstage" production of the political body of the virtual idol.

As for the study of the consumption body construction, the rapid development of virtual intelligent technology provides new directions and guidelines for the consumption of virtual idols. Both idols and fans are no longer merely unidirectional producers and consumers. With the continuous updating of intelligent technology, both sides constantly transform and integrate, eventually forming a scenario of "production and consumption in one." Physical consumption also continues to shift towards virtual consumption, as fans and virtual idols mutually construct each other's consumption body in their interactions.

Finally, in the study of the medical body, it is found that the virtual idol is a projection and extension of the human medical body in the cyber world. Virtual idols can be seen as pioneers in the exploration of body construction in the cyber world. Virtual technology provides a way to reshape the medical body for those with physiological inconveniences and also realizes the extension of the body.

In summary, in the cyber world, virtual idols serve as pioneers by establishing social circles, engaging in labor production separately, interacting and mutually constructing with fans, and other methods to construct their bodies. In the continuously evolving cyber era, insights can be derived for all users on how to construct their bodies. However, there are still some shortcomings in this paper. In the construction of virtual idols in the cyber era, how can the authenticity of virtual idols be ensured? Can the "avatars" receive returns proportionate to their efforts in the labor of virtual idols? Will the virtual world lead users to excessive immersion? These are still questions worth exploring and researching.

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