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Subjectivity of Women's Body on Tiktok

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Abstract

Tiktok has become very popular among people from various backgrounds, but especially among women. Although they can use Tiktok for a variety of activities, many women use Tiktok to show off their dances. This study argues that Tiktok application provides a medium for women to articulate their interpretation of their body that is limited by dominant discourses (especially around beauty) yet simultaneously liberating from everyday constraints. Through Tiktok, women show off their understanding of women's bodies freed from the gendered prescriptions. This freedom of interpretation can be understood as women's becoming the subject of their bodies. This study attempts to argue that in women's embodiment in Tiktok, where women's body is in contact with technology, the body has transformed its meaning into the posthuman body, to the extent it frees itself from the limitations of the body as bound to physiological function and fixed meanings.

Keyword: women's body, technology, popular culture, Tiktok

A. Women on Tiktok

Patriarchal and capitalist ideologies govern women and their bodies. The entertainment industry is an institution that adheres to patriarchal and capitalist ideologies and perpetuates these ideological values through many representations. The entertainment industry represents the ideal woman through her beauty and body beauty. In entertainment, women's bodies are considered to have a role as "charms," to the effect that they are controlled by capital or by those with symbolic and economic power. But in today's digital era, women have simultaneously become objects under the influence of technology. Technology directs women to the reality of posthumanism that causes their bodies to be no longer bound to nature but open to various modifications by and through technology. They become "posthuman."

Posthumanism is a departure from a humanism based on the idea that human needs, values, concerns, and opinions are the most important, or that "humanity" as understood in such terms define existence. Posthumanism arises through a questioning of what it means to be human in the digital age.[1] As we enter an era marked by new digital and genetic technologies, various ethical and existential issues are raised to maintain a level of continuity with emerging cultural concerns. According to Graham, one of those issues is characterized by the human imagination dreaming of the bod-

1 Kim Toffoletti, *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls: Feminism, Popular Culture and the Posthuman Body* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 30.

ies of gods and goddesses, monsters, and other fantasy creatures.[2] The body that craves imaginative things is called the posthuman body, which is the cause and effect of postmodern, power relations, pleasure, virtual, and reality.[3] They also emphasize that the posthuman body is an attempt to follow trends in processing identity and body perceptions dissolved in the vortex of postmodernism, posthumanism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and postindustrial capitalism.

The posthuman body no longer has the essential distinction between the existence or authority of the body with computer simulations, biological organisms, or cybernetic mechanisms. Along with feminist writings on posthumans, including the history of the relationship between women and technology in image, design, and use, it can provide clues as to how women have been positioned relative to technology to date. In a critical debate about technology, Toffoletti emphasizes that feminist theory has explored the benefits and limitations between technology for subject configurations, especially female subjects, among others by questioning the categories of organic and artificial, nature and machine, male and female, and mind. and body.[4]

Technology can no longer be conceptualized as a neutral tool adapted by humans to control and dominate their environment. As Heidegger had said, technology "enframes" being, thus making the environment into a reservoir of resources, that is, into objects bound to be used and manipulated.[5] Thus in broad terms, technology, especially in the context of entertainment media and social networks, can be seen as a cultural game that results in the self-erosion of those who have immersed themselves in a situation where the actions they take are dedicated to the gaze of other people.

Technology is developing rapidly with innovations to facilitate all human affairs, whether related to science, economics, social, or entertainment. These innovations are in the form of applications that users can use practically depending on their individual needs, such as digital wallets, online shopping applications, social media, and so on. There are no fewer entertainment media made to have fun because basically, humans are players who play games or what Thissen calls "*homo ludens*."[6] The concept of *homo ludens* is relevant for understanding the phenomena, prevalent in the digital era, where humans as "players" that enjoy their lives in the second reality in the form of the virtual world (games).

One of the entertainment media that is much loved lately is the Tiktok application. This application is not only favored by the people of Indonesia but also the world community. It shows that the application is included in popular culture, which has characteristics favored by many people and is closely related to commodities. The Tiktok application is designed for content creators. Putri argued that the Tiktok application provides facilities for users to create unique short videos, quickly accompa-

2 Elaine Graham, "Cyborgs or Goddesses? Becoming Divine in a Cyberfeminist Age," *Information, Communication & Society* 2, no. 4 (1999): 420, https://doi.org/10.1080/136911899359484.

3 Judith M. Halberstam and Ira Livingston, *Posthuman Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 4.

4 Toffoletti, *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls*, 20.

5 Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays* (New York: Harper, 1977), 287.

6 Thissen, *Contemporary Culture New Directions in Arts and Humanities Research*, 100.

nied by various special effects to share through social media accounts, whether in the form of dances, parodies, or other performances.[7]

Users of the Tiktok application consist of various groups, male or female, from children to adults. However, the main focus of this research is the female users of the Tiktok application. There are various kinds of characters and content displayed by female users on the Tiktok application; what is interesting is that most of the content created by female users is in the form of dance moves or other movements that make their body parts the highlight of the video. This is not surprising. For women have long been associated with dancing, where the latter becomes a form of exploration of the strength and tenderness of women in the arts. Bartky, for instance, shows that women have traditionally been silenced and valued more by their physical appearance than by their physical strength.[8] Yet, although women have traditionally been silenced in literary forms of communication, it turns out that women make up the majority of the dance community. Feminists and dance theorists have debated the negative connotations associated with the body and the idea that dance is an irrational activity.[9] Debates continue on the implications of the appearance of women on the Tiktok application. Women who use the Tiktok application perform dance moves, ranging from simple dance moves to wild dance moves that show off their curves. The attributes or clothes they attach to their bodies when appearing in video uploads also vary, from closed clothes too revealing clothes as if they want to show their bodies to the public.

This paper argues that the female body displayed on the Tiktok platform has become a posthuman body, a body that is productively re-created in the sense of "contaminated bodies" explored by Halberstam and Livingstone.[10] The concept of a contaminated body in this paper does not imply various efforts made to modify the body to achieve the goal of some idealized version of the body. This article attempts to present an argument that what women using the Tiktok application can do to make their appearances go beyond the ideals of a staged body and how they make their bodies do more than they can when they swing their bodies in front of the camera, and how their appearance and accessibility can be expanded so that they become a virtual posthuman body human.

Regarding women's bodies, Muwarni explains the construction of women's bodies in WRP (a meal replacement product) product advertisements and the ideology of capitalism that plays a role in constructing women's bodies.[11] Meanwhile, Fitriana describes her findings related to the female body represented in the AX (deodorant) advertisement, which is closely associated with sensuality indicated by minimal clothing, facial expressions, and camera techniques that

7 Ni Luh Wiwik Eka Putri, "Interaksi Simbolik dalam Proses Komunikasi Nonverbal pada Aplikasi Tiktok," *Widya Duta: Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu Agama dan Ilmu Sosial Budaya* 14, no. 1 (March 31, 2009): 12, https://doi.org/10.25078/wd.v14i1.1039.

8 Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

9 Jade Boyd, "Dance, Culture, and Popular Film," *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no. 1 (March 1, 2004): 67–83, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680770410001674653.

10 Halberstam and Livingston, *Posthuman Bodies*, 3–4.

11 Endah Murwani, "Konstruksi 'Bentuk Tubuh Perempuan' Dalam Iklan Televisi," *Ultimacomm: Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi* 2, no. 1 (June 1, 2010): 11.

target specific body parts of women.[12] Sukamto explains how the mass media, especially women's magazines, and television, incessantly promote unrealistic female body images,[13] including body shapes that cause women to experience dissatisfaction with their own body. Handayani describes in detail photographers who have power over women as photographed objects, specifically how men, as photographers, combine their gaze with the gaze of speculators in objectifying women.[14] According to Handayani, camera technology has become part of the mediation of normalized objectification of women.

Aforementioned studies show that women's bodies become bodies used as objects in specific domains or can be said to be collectively owned for various needs of the people and the mass media. This study aims to complement previous studies regarding the female body, but it also provides a new perspective. While the female body can be seen as an object, it can also be seen from the position of women as *subjects*, as is shown by the example of women who use the Tiktok application. Hayles emphasizes that (digital) technology is not only about computer simulations, hyperreality, or the possibility of downloading thoughts into machines, but has also led to the emergence of various kinds of embodied virtuality, indeed a new form of subjectivity born from the intersection of the body and technology.[15] Different social media platforms in this digital era have freed women to move about in virtual media. On the one hand, this freedom gives women the freedom to express something, but on the other hand, whether they realize it or not, women have been shackled to the demands of other people (followers or viewers) on social media. In connection with the current popularity of the Tiktok platform, this study questions the position of the female body as a posthuman body that is bound by technology and whether women who use the Tiktok application have autonomy over their bodies and their selves.

B. Women's Body as an Embodiment of the Posthuman

The essence of social media, including Tiktok, is to be stylish or as a personal branding that makes users exist. Here, Descartes' phrase "*cogito ergo sum*" turns into "I am stylish, so I am." Users recognize that one is recognized from the number of likes and comments that other people post on someone's posts. Various things are done by users to carve their brands on social media by winning recognition from others. Tiktok purports to give freedom to its users to style and express themselves according to their wishes. Many women find a new mode of existence on this platform.

Ten women who actively use the Tiktok application have been willing to provide answers to fifteen questions asked about their views on the authority of their bodies as well as how they repre-

12 Rizki Fitriana, "Perempuan Dan Sensualitas: Bentuk Komodifikasi Tubuh Perempuan Melalui Body Images Yang Dikonstruksikan Di Dalam Iklan Axe," *Commonline* 3, no. 2 (June 2014): 16–27.

13 Monique Sukamto, "Citra Tubuh Perempuan Di Media Massa," *Anima Indonesian Psychological Journal* 21 (May 9, 2006): 299.

14 Rivi Handayani, "Male Gaze Dalam Fotografi Model: Objektifikasi Dan Komersialisasi Tubuh Perempuan," *Jurnal Jurnalisa : Jurnal Jurusan Jurnalistik* 3, no. 1 (2017): 91–105, https://doi.org/10.24252/jurnalisa.v3i1.3086.

15 N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 13.

sent their bodies in a technological product in the form of an application or social media platform that offers a variety of exciting features. Based on the answers provided, seven women were well aware that they have control over their bodies, that their bodies are theirs, but because they live in a social environment that has its own rules for behavior, dress, and so on, so they cannot freely show who she is. To be accepted by society, they have to show something that they are not. Eight out of ten female users of the Tiktok application like the application as a means of entertainment. The majority of the content created by these women displays dance movements, but many also show off the women's "curves." For the users, this is perceived as a form of self-liberation from the things (of the "real life") that bind them. When they create videos and see the results, there is an exceptional satisfaction for them, mainly because they feel they have succeeded in presenting the body part that they like the most.

The women's body parts are deliberately shown and become the highlight of their uploaded videos. A number of respondents have undergone treatments for beauty and physical perfection and admit that some parts of their bodies received particular attention, not to maintain a healthy body but to achieve a body pleasing for their viewers. On their Tiktok clips, certain body parts get special attention—the face that shines because it gets facial treatments, or the "curves" that resulted from body treatments. Even further, minor surgeries on the face, excessive dieting, liposuction, use of silicone, and so on. The female body parts displayed the most in the videos uploaded by female users are the face, thighs, hips, and chest. The movements they show are in the form of shaking their hips, leaning their chest, and making expressions that attract the audience's attention, especially the male audience. In other words, women's freedom to use the Tiktok application displays many videos that show the sensual side of the female body.

Technology can produce new worlds—as in virtual realities—and genetic interventions that can produce "clones" and genetically modified organisms. Graham affirms that computer technology and electronic media that are everywhere and give rise to genetic engineering can expand and move the physical body into new media such as cyberspace and reconstruct patterns of physical space, procreation, and communication.[16] Consciously or unconsciously, the bodies of women who actively use the Tiktok application become posthuman bodies, a "cyborg" as defined by Donna Haraway that results from the amalgam of the human and the electronic.[17] The cyborg or cybernetic organism is one of the most popular posthuman models related to the contemporary imagination, especially with the existence of technology and various innovative media that offer different interesting images of machines that change themselves. Balsamo emphasizes the description of cyborg humans that the cyborg body is not always a liberation space.[18] Instead, it can be used to improve or rethink the human body, especially the female body. Based on the findings regarding women who are actively surfing in cyberspace, two things are discussed in more depth

16 Graham, "Cyborgs or Goddesses?," 422.

17 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

18 Anne Marie Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

in this study, namely the construction of women's bodies on Tiktok, which is the embodiment of the posthuman body and the subjectivity of women to the bodies they display on the content of the platform.

C. Subjectivity of Women's Body on Tiktok

The attitudes and movements of women often become the center of attention of many people. More than twenty years ago, it was shown that attention to the female body was coupled with the requirement to meet beauty standards. Post-feminist sentiment has strengthened the relationship between femininity and bodywork.[19] While a woman's body does not only contain a slim and white body aesthetic, it is still required to be a "hot" and "sexy" body characterized by a body shape deliberately suppressed by tight clothing to show her curves clearly. Several videos uploaded by women using the Tiktok application show sensuality to get satisfaction from the number of likes and comments made by the audience. Although the idea of sensuality presented in popular media is rarely clearly defined, the assumption created in society in general is that sensual activity refers to actions deliberately performed to invite sexual imagination in those who to which they are directed.[20] Skimpy and revealing clothes are constitutive features of this idea of sensuality.

Women who use social media platforms see uploads from other women and encourage themselves to post pictures or create content themselves. Following what happened to women who actively use Tiktok, they only saw a few videos that pushed them to do the same movements and videos as what they had seen before. However, many of these women are not aware of the vulnerability caused by the media they use.

Studies have shown that women who use social media platforms extensively are vulnerable to body dissatisfaction.[21] Women look to the ideals depicted on social media and tend to compare their appearance with the culture of the beauty displayed in the media. As a result, when they fail to fulfill these desires, they will change their bodies. In this case, women look according to the ideals depicted on social media. Women tend to compare their appearance with the culture of the beauty displayed in the media. As a result, when they fail to fulfill these desires, they will change their bodies. The changes they make depend on which part makes them insecure, and the extent of the changes they make vary from simple to extreme. Jamison describes this as a kind of cyborgism, where the female body becomes fragmented and contaminated with technological elements.[22]

The word "perfect" appears ubiqui-

19 Sue Jackson and Tiina Vares, "'Perfect Skin', 'Pretty Skinny': Girls' Embodied Identities and Post-Feminist Popular Culture," *Journal of Gender Studies* 24, no. 3 (May 4, 2015): 348, https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2013.841573.

20 Yuyun Surya and Ida Rachma, *Politik Tubuh Dan Sensualitas Perempuan: Diskursus Media Terhadap Fenomena Goyang Penyanyi Dangdut Perempuan* (Surabaya: Lembaga Penelitian Universitas Airlangga, 2003).

21 Guy Cafri et al., "The Influence of Sociocultural Factors on Body Image: A Meta-Analysis," *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 12, no. 4 (2005): 425, https://doi.org/10.1093/clipsy.bpi053.

22 P. K. Jamison, "Contradictory Spaces: Pleasure and the Seduction of the Cyborg Discourse," *Arachnet Electronic Journal on Virtual Culture* 2, no. 1 (February 28, 1994), http://serials.infomotions.com/aejvc/aejvc-v2n01-jamison-contradictory.txt.

tously in women's narratives about the aspect of appearance, which tends to be the most important thing for them and the primary focus of their narratives. This perfection is then projected onto various social media platforms, including the Tiktok application. Women who use the Tiktok application of all ages admit that perfection is a normative requirement of femininity and acknowledge that they undergo a makeover trick to appear in front of the camera when creating video content. Their faces before applying makeup—what they refer to as "before"—are transformed "after" makeup into what they think is the "perfect face" ready to be shown to many people.

Hayles has observed that there is no easy separation between technology and the human world because the former has now become constitutive of the latter.[23] This can be observed in the case of the women on Tiktok. Through either non-surgical or surgical processes, the makeover trick is an exceptional satisfaction for women when appearing in front of other people. Women who are still not satisfied with the makeover results are compelled to further change their facial appearance, hair, and skin through various surgical and non-surgical means. Technology and chemicals (creams, makeup, dietary supplements, etc.) contribute to changing the woman's body into a "perfect" body based on the discourse circulating on social media. In fact, women on Tiktok compete to shape their bodies and beautify themselves to become ideal figures that the audience can accept. Bodies thereby become a means, or a kind of capital, to receive the "award" of viewer's "appreciation." In this intertwinement with technology, women's bodies become posthumanism bodies that, as Flanagan argues, stand as "otherness" for the women themselves.[24] Female Tiktok users who indirectly change their bodies are, in a sense, controlled by technology. The feature in the Tiktok application that allows viewers messages to be posted serves as a medium for demands to perform movements and dances, demands with which the female users of the application comply.

Foucault has argued that the subject's awareness of the self is first generated by the existence of a form of power.[25] Through Tiktok, women come to face the things that bind them, such as beauty standards that apply to social media. It is undeniable that women who feel that they cannot meet these (bodily) standards result in women not being confident. Yet, there is potential for women to realize the power over themselves (subjectivity) on Tiktok. For example, some women successfully create content with dance moves that can indirectly "control" other people's (viewer's) eyes to focus on them. They often intend to voice, convey some message, or express themselves through the videos. In so doing, women attempt to place themselves in the public sphere. The room for free expression found on the Tiktok platform can become a space for women to free themselves from the usual constraints of society.

D. Conclusion

Intertwinement of the female body and technology has long been a topic that

23 Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 50.

24 Victoria Flanagan, "Girl Parts: The Female Body, Subjectivity and Technology in Posthuman Young Adult Fiction," *Feminist Theory* 12, no. 1 (April 1, 2011): 40, https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700110390596.

25 Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777–95.

offers new ways to rethink the concept of the self, and today's social media platforms, including Tiktok, have given rise to new discourses that explore the subjectivity that emerges as an extension of the user's self. On the one hand, the relationship between women's bodies and technology such as the Tiktok platform can be seen as that in which the discourse and standardization of the "perfect body" constrains women. Nevertheless, the Tiktok platform also has to potential of allowing women to regain control over themselves and build self-confidence. In other words, the Tiktok platform makes it possible to empower female subjects by supporting a posthuman conceptualization of subjectivity that focuses on the "process of being" someone and not being merely subjected to the demands of the other. •

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