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## The Commodified Self: Consumer Consciousness, Social Media and Self-Presentation in the Digital Age

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**Abstract:** Digital visibility on social media platforms influences consumer buying decisions and transforms self-presentation into an entrepreneurial practice. Historically, consumer behaviour in literature reveals the intricacies of human desires and societal pressures, shifting the boundary between need and want. By extending Arlie Hochschild's concept of emotional labour, this paper analyses how brands and influencers perform 'authenticity' to convince consumers, blurring the boundary between genuine self-care and commercial persuasion. Shopping for personal satisfaction and purchasing new products by following current trends constitutes consumer behaviour in the digital age. From original texts to digital screens, literature often portrays body image and personality as social fabrications shaped by consumer culture. Through the lens of consumer consciousness, this paper examines the power dynamics of visibility and persona in the digital age, where viewers function as active participants in the consumption process. Contemporary consumers prioritize convenience, interactivity, and instant gratification, a condition intensified by the platform dynamics that algorithmically inserts e-commerce advertisements between influencer narratives, collapsing entertainment into transaction. Through Michel Foucault's Panopticon and Erving Goffman's dramaturgy, this paper shows how digital visibility, under neoliberal imperatives, unconsciously influences an individual's self-presentation. Further drawing on Foucault's notion of the 'techniques of the self,' this paper argues that digital self-presentation constitutes a neoliberal form of self-governance where each individual voluntarily optimizes their bodies for the market. It is here that consumers internalize market logic as personal growth. Therefore, this paper analyses the intersections of digital visibility, paid promotions, and consumer identity.

**Keywords:** *Consumer Consciousness, Digital Panopticon, Commodification, Self-Presentation, Visibility, Post-Digital Culture*

## Lost in the Loop: Consumerism and the Digital Self

In the digital age, social media has transformed self-presentation into a site of visual politics where the curated persona becomes both commodity and capital. Social media platforms psychologically influence the users to perform a depoliticized version of the self for visibility, likes, emojis as reaction and expressing feelings and market canvassing. This phenomenon is directly connected to the neoliberal market trends that reframe identity as enterprise. Here, consumer behaviour is shaped not by rational choice of the consumers in the decision-making process but, by the unconscious influence of marketing brands and social media, which dictate norms of beauty, success, desirability and personality. Each individual internalizes these imperatives subconsciously, mistaking consumption for self-care. Individuals perform emotional labour to produce authentic personas, generating affective capitalism that monetizes feeling itself. In the attention economy, visibility becomes currency, and the self is perpetually produced for surveilling and gets accustomed to the existing changes in the market.

I have always wondered about, why can't I see my own face? Of course I can see my arms, the portion below my neck and my legs. Our eyes act like a digital camera with HD quality, capturing everything we see with absolute clarity. However, whether that image or video is saved permanently depends on our brain and heart, on our perceptions, the people around us, our circumstances, values and beliefs. Except with the help of a mirror or through someone else's gaze, has anyone truly seen themselves? The original, authentic version of yourself can only be seen by others, which is different and perhaps more realistic. This profound question of self-recognition finds its roots in Jacques Lacan's concept of the "Mirror Stage," which posits that identity is formed through one's reflected image (Lacan 1). Similarly, Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of "the Look" argues that we become conscious of ourselves as an object only when perceived by another (Sartre 340).

Similarly, when we take a selfie on our smartphone and look at it, why does it feel different? Somewhere within our consciousness, we believe and recognize that, "this is not the way I should look." The unsettling reality is that one cannot see the original version of ourselves. This is where we become unconscious. In order to correct and make ourselves presentable, this unconscious lack is inscribed in our minds. Thus, self-presentation becomes both important and difficult for each individual to consciously present ourselves in an acceptable way. This very consciousness is observed, curated, and monetized by the consumer market and the digital world. As the example of the selfie and our "true" selves suggests, the two are never identical. Here, the camera alone is not enough, we again apply filters to create an artificial look of ourselves, for our own satisfaction and how we wish to be seen.

This behaviour reveals a new kind of consumer consciousness. We are buying different versions of ourselves, editing with various pose and angle and finally, consuming our own image to fit the standards of the digital market. This unconscious trend is precisely what the digital market gains from. The more dissatisfied we feel with our authentic selves, the more beauty products keep on convincing our consciousness to buy and try them. For example, if we are not confident with our natural lip colour, we use lipstick or tinted lip balms to hide it and look presentable.

Erving Goffman's concept of "front stage" performance in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* provides a critical lens through which to read the digital selfie as a site of 'impression management' (17). According to Goffman, individuals perform curated versions of the self whenever an audience is present, concealing the unpolished "back stage" of private reality. This digital performance creates the very "loop" of selfhood described earlier, that is, each individual consciously and continuously views, edits, and re-presents themselves in front of a stage. Thus, the feeling "this is not the way I should look" emerges from the dissonance between Goffman's back stage and the perpetually performed front stage demanded by the digital market (Goffman). According to Byung-Chul Han, this is not enforced surveillance but "smart power" that seduces individuals into voluntary self-optimization, where the subject becomes both the entrepreneur and the labourer of the self (Han 12). This trend is fuelled by consumer behaviour in the market.

This particular digital phenomenon, in literature, is related to "interality." Within the fields of literary and media studies, "interality" denotes the dynamic, relational spaces that emerge between texts, media, and lived human experience (Arvidson 186). This "interality" is visible in the everyday act of taking a selfie and thus, creating a space between the lived moment, the phone's camera, the filter applied, and the audience's likes that constitutes an internal zone where the self is neither fully real nor fully digital but constantly negotiated. Together, these frameworks reveal that, this "loop" is not merely a psychological condition but a platform-driven consumer economic model, constructed in a post-digital iteration of Goffman's front stage, where authenticity itself is platformed for consumer engagement (Goffman).

### **The Digital Panopticon: The Illusion of Free Will and Buying Behaviour**

Michel Foucault's, theory of surveillance and self-regulation, primarily discussed in his work "Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison" (1975), introduces the concept of the 'Panopticon', a hypothetical prison designed by Jeremy Bentham, where a single guard can obscure all inmates without been seen. Foucault uses this concept as a metaphor for modern

societies, where individuals are subject to constant surveillance, leading to self-regulations. “He who is subjected to a field of visibility and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power, he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principles of his own subjection” (Foucault 203).

The consumerist gaze digitalizes Foucault’s Panopticon, turning the smartphone into a tower where users police themselves. In social media platforms individuals prioritize visibility, convenience, interactivity and instant satisfaction for both consumption and social validation. Social media and algorithm-driven applications particularly on android and iPhone smartphones, play a critical role in purchasing decisions, with a significant rise in impulse buying behaviour. In the context of digital consumer culture, Foucault’s notion of the Panopticon creates a regime of visibility, where individuals have their own right to choose what is best for them (Foucault).

Social media, influencer marketing functions as a digital strategy and creates a desire where, consumers feel they are freely selecting and tightening the loop between visibility and consumption. Most content creators use multimedia applications, tools, video, audio, images and text to create engaging, entertaining, marketing and personal narration. Individuals are increasingly susceptible to the ways of social media influencer marketing and constructed online personas. Social media shapes decision making and buying behaviour. It creates a logic in the mind of the viewers where the boundary between authentic desire and manufactured demand becomes blurred.

According to Liliana Naydan, “the screen functions as both window and wall, mediating all forms of cultural exchange” (Naydan 14). For example, Liliana Naydan, investigates twenty-first century American literary fiction that explores the societal effects of digital technology, intersects with post digital themes at least implicitly (Naydan). She considers, “ways in which these diverse authors aestheticize and critique a widespread digital culture that threatens print culture and screens humans from another and considers ways in which, in the process, they produce politically charged philosophies of digital technology in literary form that build on ideas about hybrid identity and that present alternatives to the idealistic vision of digitalization” (Naydan 14).

The relentless pursuit of digital validation from mobile cameras can come at the cost of affecting our self-presentation, offline connections, and cultural heritage. For example, the festival of *Onam*, in Kerala is increasingly performed in front of the camera as selfies and videos, to appreciate and celebrate ‘Onam look’, before it is shared with our family or

educational institutions or workplace. The communal enjoyment of the *sadya*, a traditional vegetarian feast served on banana leaves, becomes reduced to a What's App image or photoshoot. People purchase specific, traditional Kerala saree with different designs and styles just to take a selfie and post it on WhatsApp or Instagram. Each dish served on a banana leaf becomes a digital competition and self-satisfaction, rather than served for grandparents and family members. Before any college day or arts fest in Kerala, students spend hours watching, the trending "Get Ready with Me" YouTube shots and Instagram reels where influencers promote specific dressing styles, make-up and traditional accessories as "fest essentials". The traditional *kasavu saree*, with white and gold borders, once woven for a community ritual, is now tailored in different fashions and printing styles. The digital audience values this heritage through its likes and heart emojis. Thus, the "right to choose" is itself an illusion produced by this regime. This tailoring of tradition for digital audiences is not unique to Kerala, "contemporary American fiction also registers how screens reshape cultural rituals as Liliana Naydan argues in her analysis of post-2000 novels" (Naydan 14).

### **Commodified Authenticity: To Be Seen Is to Be Sold**

Content creators include affiliate links to e-commerce platforms such as Flipkart and Purple within their lifestyle videos transforming casual viewership into monetizable clicks. The architecture of digital platforms further intensifies this cycle of perpetual consumption by embedding e-commerce directly into content. Advertisements from e-commerce entities such as Flipkart, Amazon, Nykaa, and Purple are algorithmically inserted between influencer narratives, collapsing the boundary between entertainment and transaction. The affordance of the hyperlink 'link in bio,' 'swipe up,' or 'tap to shop', produces a seamless pathway from desire to acquisition, capitalizing on the affective immediacy generated by the influencer's performance. This design cultivates a consumer consciousness conditioned by instant gratification of the viewer, where they are persuaded to purchase immediately, through instant accessibility. This proves how companies target social media influencers to drive consumption in the attention economy.

Sponsored advertisements of various brands and paid promotions often appear alongside personal stories in social media platforms. This creates a visible gap between original content and lived experience where viewers are left to choose wisely from these mixed messages, questioning authenticity. In the attention economy, companies outsource marketing labour to social media influencers who monetize affect and intimacy. By tagging products and embedding affiliate links to platforms like Flipkart and Purple within lifestyle content, influencers collapse the distinction between authentic self-presentation and advertisement. This strategy converts

viewers' desires into clickable consumption, revealing how consumer consciousness is shaped not by autonomous choice but by the unconscious influence of algorithmic marketing and branded content. This constant exposure to commodified 'authenticity' subconsciously shapes personality formation and diminishes our self-confidence.

Michel Foucault defines "techniques of the self" as practices "which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves" (Foucault 18). In the digital age, this transformation is no longer autonomous but platform-mediated. Social media and paid promotions function as the 'help of others,' instructing individuals on how to optimize their skin, body, and persona through sponsored routines, 'link in bio' purchases, and influencer-led 'self-care' regimens. The consumer thus performs a neoliberal form of self-governance where one voluntarily surveils, edits, and consumes another person's image to meet market standards of visibility. Here, the boundary between self-improvement and product consumption dissolves, as the 'transformation' Foucault describes becomes contingent upon continuous buying. The individual does not eliminate imperfection but manages it, perpetually clicking, applying, and re-presenting the self, thereby internalizing market logic as personal growth.

In digital beauty discourse this has been reconfigured as decentralized and delegated labour. The visual politics of a Vanaura Organics and Shesha Ayurveda reel is incomplete until "sleep is considered as a skincare" routine, weaponizing viewers participation to sustain the myth. Consumers feel safe to use natural organic ingredients. The influence of such contents function as what Foucault calls a "capillary" form of power, no longer imposed from above but exercised through the self (Foucault 1978). YouTube sponsored advertisements of Vanaura Organics and Shesha Ayurveda exemplify digital marketing's turn toward 'natural beauty' (Vanaura Organics; Shesha Ayurveda). This marks a shift in consumer consciousness where to be seen is to be sold and to appear is to consume. By framing natural plant-based ingredients and 'sleep' as pathways to a 'natural glow,' these brands reposition routine self-care as aesthetic labour aligned with wellness. Here, Hochschild's emotional labour becomes relevant where, influencers and brand narratives claim natural care, and 'authentic' concern to manage the consumer's feelings of health anxiety, thereby gaining their trust. In doing so, they reconfigure routine wellness practices as aesthetic labour by promising a return to one's authentic selfhood, that produces market value for the 'natural' beauty sector.

These sponsored or paid promotions by influencers do not claim a 100% clear skin solution. Rather, they optimize the language of 'reducing' 'reduce pigmentation,' 'reduce fine

lines,’ ‘clean the pores’, but never promise an ultimate clear skin. Neither the natural nor the chemical beauty industry seeks to present the face as entirely free of imperfections. Instead, they maintain the term ‘reduce,’ even after regular use, ensuring that the problem is managed but never fully resolved. This reveals the core logic of paid promotions: the consumer is kept in a perpetual state of improvement, where authenticity is marketed as progress, not perfection.

Recently, rosemary oil and rosemary-infused sprays emerged as a dominant trend in the haircare market. This trend became popular through social media and paid promotions. This exemplifies on how traditional herbal knowledge is replaced as a scalable, sprayable commodity for digital audiences. Here, digital beauty culture commodified botanical ingredients as ‘natural aesthetic remedies’ for hair thinning, healthy hair growth with consumer notions of wellness and authenticity. For instance, in Shesha Ayurveda sponsored YouTube advertisement, they claim natural 0% bleach free products for hair care and enhancement. Marketing campaigns aestheticize the ‘ubtan’ trend through a visual lexicon of heritage and Ayurvedic lineage. The depoliticized version of beauty marketing operates through the neoliberal displacement of structural critique into the domain of privatized consumption. The promise of natural organic ingredients such as aloe vera, turmeric, sandalwood, coffee, honey and rosemary reveal how self-care works within a shadow economy.

Naomi Wolf terms the “beauty myth”, not a celebration of the body, but a mandate for obedience (Wolf 86). While Wolf located this mandate in magazines, digital beauty discourse transforms it to paid promotions, comment sections, where viewers repeat and enforce the rule. Wolf argued that beauty myths erode choice by making selfhood contingent on appearance (Wolf 20). In digital capitalism, this erosion deepens, where selfhood is now performed through posting, commenting, liking, and sharing “natural skin” and organic ingredients content, turning identity work into unpaid labour for platforms. For Wolf, images of female beauty operated as a “political weapon” (Wolf 21).

Here, social media functions as a Panopticon (Foucault), by creating a regime of visibility where marketing discourses of ‘natural’ health and authenticity mobilize emotional labour to blur authentic desire and market demand. The commodification of ‘natural consciousness’ reveals how self-care becomes commercial persuasion. The present digital consumer culture is oriented towards a ‘natural look’. The presents trend favoring ‘nude shade’ and ‘earthy colour palates’ score well in the market. This shift from chemical to natural beauty products reveals how consumer consciousness is shaped by digital marketing strategies claiming health and wellbeing. Therefore, the promise of natural organic ingredients reveals how self-care works within a shadow economy.

## From Pores to Flawlessness: Consumer Consciousness and the Myth of Perfection in Contemporary Fiction

Ling Ling Huang's novel, *Natural Beauty* (2023) portrays the core logic of the digital beauty wellness industry. "We don't promise perfection. We promise management" (Huang 103). These lines suggest that, the term 'reduce' in beauty marketing rhetoric, dominates through social media influencer led paid promotions, where products claim to 'reduce pigmentation' or 'reduce pores' but never cure them permanently. "My face was not my own. It was a product, and I was the brand ambassador" (Huang 214). Here, in these lines, it is evident that, in the digital age, digital screens are a reflection of the self, that is performed for an audience of potential buyers in social media platforms, with e-commerce advertisements. Here, Foucault's 'techniques of the self' become market-driven, as the individual voluntarily optimizes her body through 'link in bio' purchases and internalizes the brand's logic as self-care.

"They told me my face was a project, and I believed them. Every pore, every line, something to be managed, optimized, sold back to me" (Huang 62). Through these lines, it is evident that, the beauty industry treats the body as an "optimizable project," highlighting Foucault's 'techniques of the self' under neoliberalism. Here, self-care is reframed as self-branding labour, where the consumer voluntarily manages the self as a marketable asset. This line reveals how consumer behaviour shifts from need to want, where the 'pore' becomes a site of lack or a fault, to be corrected, by the industry itself.

As the narration of the novel progresses, we can also observe that, the sales person's personality must please and convince the customers to decide logically. These sales persons are specifically trained to speak and use happy facial gestures to sell their beauty products. "To sell the cream, I had to become the cream. Smile until your cheeks ache. That's the real ingredient" (Huang 101). Here, Consumer satisfaction is achieved with the help of the self-presentation and performance of the sales person. "I was selling myself before I knew I had anything to sell" (Huang 205).

"The mirror in the store was a camera. I wasn't looking at myself. I was looking at who they wanted me to be" (Huang 88). In these lines, Huang's 'mirror as camera' significantly materializes Foucault's Panopticon in consumer culture. Here, the protagonist's self-surveillance is the industry's gaze, transforming the consumer into both simultaneous subject and object of the gaze. "You don't even need to be good at it. You just need to be seen doing it" (Huang 87). Here, Huang extends Naomi Wolf's "beauty myth" into digital capitalism, portraying how selfhood becomes contingent on marketable visibility.

Sarah Rose Etter's novel *Ripe* (2023) dramatizes the neoliberal logic of self-optimization that underpins digital consumer culture. The protagonist Cassie's workplace portrays that "you can optimize anything: your body, your brain, your heart" (Etter 42). This mirrors the rhetoric of paid promotions on social media, where influencers and e-commerce platforms market products not as cures but as tools for 'impression management'. In the novel, the protagonist later calls "a machine made of meat, and I am always breaking" (Etter 87). This is a condition in consumer behaviour, where consumer's experiences are targeted as commodity, in the attention economy. Here, the body is no longer lived but maintained, ensuring that the loop of consumption remains unbroken.

## Conclusion

The consumerist gaze leaves a lasting imprint on our digital selves. The drive to present a perfect persona often leads to prioritizing superficial, material-driven representations over authentic experiences. Thus, this journey towards making ourselves presentable is no longer a simple act of self-care, rather it becomes a consumer act driven by the market. As we navigate through the influential world of social media and the complex web of visibility, influence and identity, each individual must recognize the hidden agenda of curated self and take wise decisions accordingly. The consumers consciously choose wisely for their health and wellbeing. The Consumerist Gaze, leaves us with a haunting question: "Are we shaping ourselves through social media norms"? It is important to gain the wisdom, to not indulge and losing ourselves into the world of social media. We are living in a world of 'who is watching us', from the advertiser who buy our data to the influencers who shape our desires. Therefore, it's time to reflect on it, reclaim our right to be seen, to be heard and be ourselves.

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