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# The syndrome of multiple bodies: the transformative impact of the onlife existence on preadolescents

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This conceptual paper explores the integration of technology and virtual spaces into preadolescents' lives, blurring the boundaries between the digital and physical worlds. It emphasises the profound implications of this integration on various aspects, including perception, reality, and interactions. The younger generations, deeply immersed in this reality, experience a transformation in their perception of the world, well-being, identity, and selfhood due to technology's pervasive influence. The fusion of online and offline experiences gives rise to a new form of existence, shaping a hybrid identity that can be manipulated and reconstructed in the virtual realm. However, this fluidity and transience of virtual life also pose risks and challenges to personal identity and societal ruptures. Educators face the dual challenge of effectively integrating technology into education while understanding its impact on the new generations. Social media usage influences the interlink between body and identity processes, challenging traditional notions of embodiment and raising questions about the malleability and multiplicity of identities in technologically mediated spaces. The proposed reflections seek to provide valuable guidance for educators in navigating this complex digital reality.

## KEYWORDS

preadolescents, virtual reality, onlife, body, education, dualism

## 1 Introduction

This conceptual paper builds upon a comprehensive research study grounded in an in-depth examination of over 2,300 preadolescents (Digennaro, 2023; Digennaro and Iannaccone, 2023). The ensuing discourse directs attention towards the implications derived from the collected data. Our interaction with technology and virtual spaces increasingly shapes our lives. Floridi (2014) has described this new form of existence with the term *onlife* by referring to the integration of online and offline experiences. The boundaries between the digital world and the physical world are increasingly blurred: the vital, relational, social, communicative, occupational, and economic dimensions result from a continuous interaction between the material and analogic reality and the virtual and interactive reality (Sadin, 2018). Our life is now shaped by a continuous and intricate interaction between the material and analogic reality of our physical existence and technology's virtual and interactive reality. This integration has profound implications for various aspects of our lives. It affects how we perceive and cross the world, transforming our understanding of reality and interactions with others.

Our daily activities, relationships, and modes of communication are heavily influenced by this interplay between the virtual and physical domains (Lovinik, 2019).

The confines between analogue and digital life and between actual and virtual life have blurred to almost non-existent, and the upcoming generations are profoundly ingrained in this dynamic reality (Turkle, 2011; Mayer et al., 2020). The way these younger generations view and feel essential parts of human existence, such as the body, well-being, identity, and selfhood, are being dramatically altered by technology (Mayer et al., 2020; Digennaro, 2022; Digennaro, 2023). Their perception of the world and their place in it have significantly changed due to technology's pervasiveness in their life. Their daily lives fluidly connect with virtual places and digital platforms, blurring the gap between offline and online activities. Furthermore, technology impacts people's entire well-being, going beyond simple communication and interaction. With technology becoming more ingrained in their daily lives, the idea of well-being itself is being rethought (OECD, 2019).

In the infosphere<sup>1</sup> in which the young are completely immersed (Floridi, 2014), and which pervasively enters every individual's daily life, there is no longer an online life that adds to, at most coexists with, the offline life. Instead, a fusion between the two has emerged, giving rise to a new form of hybrid existence, which represents a fusion not only in terms but in substance. This gives birth to an identity that is neither purely virtual nor purely physical. The force with which the virtual dimension impinges upon personal identity is pervasive to the extent that it can change, with a single click, the entire social condition of an individual. Changing the representation and narrative of a life, altering the network of relationships and the flow of information on social networks, and shaping how one presents oneself externally and presents one's identity are within everyone's discretion. The social self – the part of an individual's identity and personality shaped by social interactions, relationships, and the cultural environment – can be moulded to one's liking, adapted, deconstructed, and reconstructed according to circumstances. All of this is showcased in an immense virtual display where identities are fully displayed. The allocated space for privacy has diminished. An increasing quantity of data concerning individuals is being generated, persisting under the dominion of external entities. Individuals generate personal data, thereby exposing such information to the scrutiny and control of external parties (Zuboff, 2015).

Every event of daily life, every aspect of one's existence, even the most intimate sphere, can be packaged in digital form and launched into the stream. Nevertheless, what distinguishes these narratives, these virtual selves, is their transience: everything can be deleted – if not annihilated – quickly. Everything can be erased, modified, adjusted. Moreover, the transience of the virtual self, in online existence, ultimately becomes the transience of personal identity. In the fluidity with which virtual life can be constructed and without the

subtle membrane that separates it from physical life, everything merges, loses its solid form, and becomes manipulable (Han, 2023). One also influences personal identity by modifying life on social networks and proposing a new narrative of the self. A click on social media can trigger a process of existential change that affects the individual. These risks often remain latent, yet they determine rather profound social and individual ruptures.

In his reflection on the risk society, sociologist Beck (2013) warns about the inevitable emergence of risks associated with abundance and excess and the difficulty in determining some risks. While the health risks associated with the inability to manage nuclear waste are pretty evident, clearly perceived, and comprehensible to the broader public, there are more subtle, less visible forms of risk that are equally dangerous.

These trends go beyond fundamental Western modernity elements such as self/non-self, subjective/objective, and body/identity. They are also challenging the educators who today face a dual challenge in technology and the digital landscape (OECD, 2019). On the one hand, they are tasked with comprehending how to effectively integrate technology into their educational activities, aiming to enhance the quality of their pedagogical practices (Kovalik, 2003; García-Valcárcel, 2016). This entails acquiring technical skills and understanding how to leverage digital tools to engage and inspire students in their learning journeys (Khan, 2017). On the other hand, educators are also expected to grasp the profound impact of the onlife era on the new generations, recognising their evolving needs, aspirations, and challenges in this complex digital reality (Turkle, 2011; OECD, 2019). This understanding is essential for recognising the new needs and requests emerging among the new generations and developing appropriate strategies to support their growth within this intricate context. As we cross this onlife existence, we must recognise and understand the complexities and consequences of this blending of realities. By embracing this interconnectedness, we can harness technology's potential benefits while navigating its challenges.

Considering the increasing prevalence of preadolescents' engagement with the virtual world, this article delves into the unique circumstances shaping their identities in this digital realm. By focusing on specific aspects of their interactions and observations centred around the body, it seeks to provide educators with valuable insights and practical guidance for navigating the evolving landscape of preadolescent identity formation. By observing these bodily dynamics, researchers and educators can gain valuable insights into the intricate interplay between digital interactions, identity formation, and the overall well-being of individuals during this critical developmental stage. The body serves as a tangible and expressive medium through which preadolescents engage with and manifest changes in the virtual world. Recent studies in the field of embodiment (Gallagher, 2005; Marmeleira and Santos, 2019) have suggested that our bodies are not just external shells but integral to our perception, cognition, and self-awareness. It acts as a vehicle through which individuals experience and interpret the world around them. It influences how we move, communicate, and engage in social interactions. In an era where technology extends our physicality, what becomes of the intimate connection between individuals and their embodied sense of self? Humans naturally develop a sense of self intricately intertwined with our physical existence. Our bodies serve as the medium through which we interact with the world and construct our identities. However, with the advent of technology and its ability to augment and

1 The concept of the infosphere emphasizes the pervasive nature of information in our modern, technologically driven world, where data is continuously generated, transmitted, and processed within various interconnected systems and devices. It's a concept that reflects the all-encompassing presence of information in the digital age, shaping and influencing various aspects of our lives and societies.

extend our physical capabilities, the nature of this connection is undergoing significant transformations. This challenges conventional notions of embodiment and raises questions about the malleability and multiplicity of our identities in these technologically mediated spaces. At the same time, it represents significant challenges and responsibilities for education. While most of the scholarly discussion on virtual identities revolves around online self-presentation, social media practices, privacy, networked publics, participatory culture, etc., (Boyd, 2008; Papacharissi, 2011; Véliz, 2019) in this case, the attention is given to the subjective perception of the individuals in the process of hybridisation of their identity and body.

## 2 Reflecting on the onlife existence

In a longitudinal study, the author coordinated research involving 2,378 preadolescents (Digennaro, 2023; Digennaro and Iannaccone, 2023). The study employed a comprehensive data collection strategy involving an anonymous and self-administered questionnaire to investigate various dimensions of social media use, body representation, and real/virtual identity. The first part of the questionnaire focused on gathering information about social media usage patterns, including typology, intensity, image-based engagement, and the type of profiles (public/private) participants maintained. The second part aimed to assess the participant's perception of their own bodies and the relationship between natural and virtual bodies, along with the propensity to consider the virtual identity as part of their self (Hoelscher, 2003; Di Gesto et al., 2020; González-Navarro et al., 2020). An overwhelming 99% reported engaging in daily social media browsing, emphasising the ubiquitous role of social media in their lives. Instagram and TikTok emerged as the most popular platforms, capturing significant attention. Additionally, WhatsApp played a crucial role, being widely used for sharing pictures and videos among the participants. Notably, around 44.20% of pre-teens dedicated two or more hours daily to social media activities, indicating the substantial time commitment of these platforms in this age group.

The data collection process was enriched by incorporating a qualitative approach, which involved conducting focus groups ( $n=5$ ) and in-depth interviews ( $n=125$ ). In particular, such interviews aimed to gather rich, detailed information and insights about the participant's experiences, opinions, beliefs, or behaviours. In-depth interviews involved open-ended questions, allowing participants to express themselves freely and providing the researcher with a deeper understanding of the subject matter (Creswell, 2009). These methods were employed to delve deeper into the participants' experiences of constructing their personal identities through the interplay between the real and virtual dimensions.

The focus groups provided a valuable platform for participants to engage in open discussions and share their perspectives, insights, and personal narratives regarding the intricate dynamics between their real and virtual selves. A rich and multi-dimensional understanding of the complexities involved in identity construction within the digital realm was achieved through group interactions. Furthermore, in-depth interviews were conducted to obtain a more detailed and individualised exploration of participants' experiences. These one-on-one interviews allowed for a deeper exploration of the nuances, motivations, and personal reflections associated with the

interplay between their identities' real and virtual dimensions (Seidman, 2013).

By employing these meticulously chosen measures, the study program investigated the intricate interplay between social media use, body representation, personal identity, and the complex process of self-formation within the digital realm. The selected measures were designed to shed light on the multifaceted dynamics that exist in this context, providing valuable insights into how individuals shape their identities in the digital landscape, with a specific focus on the body. With its intricate interplay of personal and social dimensions, the body has been subjected to rigorous analysis and utilised as a privileged vantage point for observation. The study demonstrated that preadolescents regularly engage with social media, and the most prevalent activity is observing, sharing, and commenting on photos of themselves and others. Furthermore, a strong inclination was observed to alter one's image using filters and dedicated apps to shape one's identity, make it more personalised, and conform to attainable beauty standards (Digennaro, 2023; Digennaro and Iannaccone, 2023). Importantly, through manipulating their appearance, preadolescents seek social approval and visibility. In addition, the study revealed that the desire for social approval and visibility through the manipulation of one's appearance on social media platforms is a significant driving factor among preadolescents. By carefully curating and modifying their images, they aim to present an idealised version of themselves that aligns with societal beauty standards deemed attainable. This process reflects their desire to be accepted and recognised in online social circles.

Finally, the study offered strong evidence in favour of developing a unique duality between people's actual physical bodies and the variety of digitally controlled body representations widely used on social media. The dramatic difference between one's real physical self and the meticulously crafted virtual personas displayed online is highlighted by this dichotomy. People can offer idealised versions of themselves in the digital world by using filters, editing software, and high-end apps to produce an image that complies with conventional beauty standards. Constant exposure to these expertly created, digitally changed body representations on social media can cause people to feel disconnected from reality. Because of these idealised digital personas, some people could feel pushed to strive for an unattainable level of beauty that is frequently unreachable. As a result, this separation from their actual physical bodies can have various negative effects, such as lower self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and a higher propensity to engage in dangerous behaviours to attain the idealised perfection seen online. The real body is often perceived and experienced as an obstacle to achieving aesthetic or functional perfection because it is judged based on unrealistic and unattainable criteria. Above all, it is unable to provide absolute freedom of choice, free from constraints that seem endless, which instead appear to be achievable by the body and the identity projected in the virtual realm. The virtual body, projected and represented in the digital world, is increasingly becoming an autonomous and self-referential entity, independent from the real body and its limitations. It is perceived as a space of freedom in which the individual fully controls their existence.

In this scenario, it becomes the main tool for constructing and representing a self that is magnified and exalted, projecting a heightened version of oneself into the digital realm. However, it is an ephemeral, ethereal, intangible, and disposable body, corresponding

to an ephemeral, ethereal, intangible, and disposable identity. All of this can lead to forms of alienation from one's own body and existential dimension, with a reduction in sensory perception and direct experience of one's real self. This is a highly relevant topic that requires educational interventions capable of adapting to an era where new technologies are pervasive and digital identities assume an increasingly central role in the existential experience of young people.

### 3 Bodies, identities and dualism

In the current societal context, the all-encompassing impact of social media has seamlessly woven itself into the intricate fabric of individuals' daily lives. As argued by Han (2014), there exists a prevailing societal inclination toward prioritising positivity while concurrently suppressing the expression of negativity. This paradoxical societal tendency may give rise to profound individual and social discomfort as people navigate the complexities of a cultural landscape that accentuates opportunities and a sense of belonging, while simultaneously fostering deep-seated neuroses and a sense of seclusion. In the realm of social media tribalism, characterised by an environment dominated by positive interactions and support, individuals discover themselves situated in a virtual space where they can establish their own unique presence and seek shelter from external negativities (Robards, 2018).

Thus, a chimaera project of contradictions is born: a society that, by fostering an excess of positivity, simultaneously creates a complex landscape of amplified opportunities and psychological challenges. One domain where this paradox is particularly evident is the realm of image-based social media platforms (such as Instagram), which have become increasingly prevalent among preadolescents. These platforms demand substantial time and effort from users, who strive to cultivate a strong virtual reputation and construct body representations that align with prevailing socio-cultural ideals. However, there are negative consequences associated with this effort: the use of filters and specialised applications to modify one's physical appearance to enhance social media standing correlates negatively with body satisfaction (see Gu et al., 2022). This phenomenon gives rise to a new form of dualism, where a distinction is made between real and virtual bodies (Digennaro, 2022).

When preadolescents engage with social media platforms, their attention is primarily drawn to visual content, and interactions centred around images, videos, and similar media formats. This emphasis on visual representations perpetuates a prevalent inclination to differentiate between the body one inhabits and recognises as an innate aspect of their corporeal existence—a tangible dimension of their being—and the virtual representation of the body propagated through social media. Instead of viewing the body as an integral part of personal experience, it is often perceived as a malleable template that must be adapted and manipulated to conform to societal ideals (Aniulis et al., 2021). Consequently, the more preadolescents immerse themselves in social media, the greater the potential for detachment from their physical selves, leading to feelings of disconnection and dissociation (Gentile et al., 2012; Perloff, 2014; Fardouly et al., 2015). The sharing, commenting, and disseminating of filtered images further perpetuate the cycle. Individuals aim to cultivate a more socially acceptable body image by employing editing tools that alter appearances. Simultaneously, interactions with peers revolve around

continually exchanging pictures and comments about body image and physical appearance. The virtual portrayal of the body on social media platforms is meticulously curated and enhanced, often promoting unrealistic beauty standards. This can contribute to the development of negative body image among individuals and exacerbate the conflict between the real and the virtual body. Such a dualistic perspective reinforces societal norms surrounding beauty, race, gender, and body type, potentially causing harm to those who do not conform to these norms.

Research in this field reveals that the persistent alteration of physical appearance and the inclination to differentiate between real and virtual bodies are inversely associated with body acceptance. Additionally, feedback related to appearance serves as a mediator between the alteration of physical appearance and body dissatisfaction. Individuals tend to compare themselves to others they perceive to be similar in relevant domains, such as appearance. Social media platforms facilitate these comparisons by providing access to various images and videos featuring individuals with desirable physical attributes. The implications of these findings extend beyond the individual level, highlighting the broader societal impact of the dualistic perspective between the real and the virtual body. Social media platforms reinforce unrealistic beauty standards and contribute to marginalising individuals who do not conform to these norms. The intersecting factors of race, gender, and body type play a significant role in shaping and perpetuating these standards, further exacerbating social inequalities (Wolf, 1991). The constant engagement in social media-driven comparison processes and exposure to models induces preadolescents to invest excessively in their bodies and social reputation, resulting in a dualism between the real and virtual body. This conflict between these two existential dimensions emerges as a latent construct and reflects a desire to become in real life as one appears in the realm of social media. The virtual reality in which they are engaged is completely fused with real life (Floridi, 2014). The manipulable virtual body is perceived as part of one's existence, leading to a longing to manifest in real life as one appears in the images and videos disseminated through social channels.

Given the tremendous pressure that preadolescents face to intensify their use of social media and technology, coupled with the transitional and developmental phases they experience in shaping their body image, it becomes nearly inevitable that negative effects on body satisfaction and personal well-being will ensue. Social media platforms heavily prioritise appearance and the promotion of idealised bodies. Moreover, they offer endless opportunities for comparison, reinforcing and internalising idealised body forms. The inability to replicate these ideals in real life leads to frustration and decreased self-esteem. The body becomes an object of the present, which must remain for the individual to sustain their existence. Still, it becomes intangible, invisible, almost entirely absent at a conscious level. It becomes a digital representation with no concrete connection with reality. If the possession of one's own body is taken to the extreme, turning it into mere material to be shaped, while the individual disembodies themselves, the body detaches from the individual and loses its meaning. It no longer belongs to the individual; it becomes an object stripped of any existential significance (Sartre, 1956; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The instrumental aspect of corporeality is exalted, and it becomes an extension of the presumed power of the individual to control existence, to manipulate it according to their own desires. The self-detaches from the body, which can be used for one's own

purposes, composing and decomposing it at will, adapting it to circumstances and shaping it according to one's desires and whims. A disjunction is reached where one ceases to be a body and begins to desire to possess a body that must be adapted to the image of a more congenial identity. The debasement of the body affects the individual in their subjectivity, influencing their personality and their inner self, that is, what represents the very essence of the individual. The body becomes a temporary incarnation, a passage searching for a meaningful trace of the self. This ephemeral identity is essential only in a specific moment, situation, or circumstance. One hides behind the impression, the artful construction: in the multiplication of infinite bodies, the body ends up being infinitely absent.

The risk that young people face in this game of disintegration and reintegration is the dissociation of their own bodily image; the emergence of multiple bodily identities – and, therefore, multiple existential identities – that are not necessarily coinciding and potentially conflicting with each other. In the construction of similarities between reality and representation, a faintly traced form of relationship between the self and its image is established, the rudiment of a connection that struggles to maintain a level of significance (Foucault, 2006). Through successive resemblances with surrogate bodies, the risk is that the original version of one's bodily identity ceases to exist. The self-construction of the body occurs not only in virtual form but also in real form, with definitive and lasting interventions. From an irreducible incarnation, the body transforms into a personal construction, an object of ownership, transient, manipulable at personal will, and subject to the desires and whims of the individual.

## 4 The syndrome of multiple bodies

As a result, the value of the body is not inherent in itself; rather, its significance lies in the potential to assume responsibility for the infinite vortex of virtual reality. The body becomes indistinguishable, blending seamlessly with the fictional dimension of numerous bodily identities that exist online, often with little reflection in the physical realm of reality. In a society dominated by appearances, transparency, and performance, the body is exalted primarily for its aesthetic form and appearance, rather than for the functions it can perform. However, in the virtual realm, the transformation extends beyond physical alterations. It encompasses how individuals perceive themselves, others, and even the surrounding world. Individuals forge their own bodies based on a cut-and-paste of externally defined models, based on technical knowledge, more or less assimilable to the original version, but with little concern for the compatibility of these borrowed models.

A revolution of consciousness is experienced, and a constant metamorphosis is undergone; it is no longer just a bodily condition but, from an ontological perspective, it ends up representing the very condition of being in the world. Designed and constructed bodies intertwine with each other in an inextricable tangle. Particularly during the formative period of preadolescence, individuals become lost in myriad possible bodies, oscillating from one to another without finding one that completely suits them and resolving that constant sense of discomfort and precariousness that seems to emanate from society. Thus, an endless search for that imaginable and re-creatable body ensues, one that, in appearance, seems attainable but lacks

existential substance. What happens to the bodies of the young – and more generally to the bodies of many individuals living in modern society – can be defined as the *syndrome of multiple bodies*. Even because of decisions made by individuals themselves in search of relief from the sufferings determined by society and in the hope of fully realising their emancipation, they end up consuming and distorting the original body, the nerve centre of individual existence, inevitably leading to the onset of this syndrome. The outcomes of which have only been partially analysed and understood.

Le Breton (2007) warns us that the sacredness of the body, its given nature, is no longer the origin of identity, of a personal history made flesh, but rather a malleable form to be subjected to profound transformations. With the help of technology and scientific progress, we now witness an inexorable acceleration of processes of change concerning the body without a corresponding educational and social action that informs and makes young people aware of what is happening in their lives. Their bodies are naked and inert in the face of a society that wants to strip them of their corporeal dimension and considers the body as a surplus, an additional element to an existence that can be disembodied, as the only significant aspect becomes a constructed image of the body. The individual projects onto their own body a composite, skewed, unregulated knowledge consisting of numerous inaccuracies, confusions, and distorted knowledge that is nevertheless given some importance. And this continuous stirring in search of an identity paradoxically generates a body, or rather, a collection of bodies that hold no meaning for the individual who has generated them. The bodies, lost in various forms of hybridisation, end up losing substance and significance. They become insignificant, mere fetishes, artificial bodies without coherence of meaning or identity. Virtual reality, the onlife existence in which young people are fully immersed, clearly contributes to this multiplication process. It allows for the programming of hybrid lives that exist in the intermediate zone between real life and virtual life, and they refer to the natural body as if it were a quotation, nothing more.

The altered body coincides with being in the world in a distorted form: no longer a given of nature, an element of existential dimension, but an artefact resulting from technology, a manipulation carried out with greater or lesser intentionality by the individual, but in which consciousness is lost. The consciousness of one's body and consciousness of one's own world: both lost in a state of alteration. Here, it is not just a matter of bending the body to the individual's will, of dominating it through individual will and with the help of technology. Rather, a short circuit is determined, a deprivation of the world for the individual: with an altered body, the experience of things, their order, and their meaning are radically changed (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Everything is altered, alteration after alteration: it is not just an aesthetic change but a true revolution in the ontology of the individual. With each step forward in constructing a body, there is a retreat in presence in the world. Paradoxically, the more the individual tries to mould the body in their image and likeness, driven by the desire to make it more personal, truer, and more responsive to a mental reference model, the more they move away from their existential reality. The world recedes into an ever-remote distance that soon becomes impossible to bridge. It is not simply a matter of replacing an old body with a new one, but a powerful existential change, a disturbance of existence because the body that is unfolded toward the world, with which the individual intends to mark their

presence in the reality of facts, no longer manages to represent the Self, it has become another self.

Undermined in its foundations, the body remains stuck, limited in its progress in the world. It has gained otherness through subsequent adjustments and caused a short circuit with corporeality. It becomes a foreign body, no longer recognised by its own corporeality: a dark, incomprehensible reality opens up, corroding the openness to the world and confining it within the limits of an increasingly blocked body, fixed upon itself. Resisting this process requires an enormous effort from the individual. Today, a body that is slow to change, and inherently stable, foreshadows a sort of social exclusion, dissociation. As [de Gaulejac \(2006\)](#) notes, since everyone is advancing, since everyone is in a perpetual process of movement and evolution, those who remain immobile will perceive themselves as separated from others by an ever-growing gap. In the hierarchy of values associated with the body, transience and constant search for novelty have downgraded durability and stability. Novelty and change are prioritised over endurance. The relationship between a body struggling to meet the demands of the onlife dimension and an individual undergoing distress is particularly poignant. This connection often manifests in a syndrome marked by intricate symptoms such as eating disorders, distorted body image, heightened stress, anxiety, and a notable sense of body disconnection. Recognising the intricate interplay between technological influence and individual suffering underscores the necessity for comprehensive approaches.

The 21st century opened with an immense accumulation of bodies, with opportunities for self-manipulation made available to many. And with enormous social pressures that young individuals find difficult to resist; in fact, for those who oppose these pressures, the risk of falling into a sort of social isolation is very high. With the 21st century, the long course of history that led to a progressive rise of what we could define as bodily autonomy can be said to have ended. Freed from myths and beliefs, shielded from illness, immune to the dogmas of religions, and projected beyond space and time, the body has become an absolute property of humans. This conditionable subject-object can be disposed of both individually and collectively. The thresholds of efficiency are continuously pushed forward, as are those of fatigue. And on these thresholds, collective strategies develop, with the weight of social force bearing down on individuals' bodies. The incitement to a constant search for well-being, initially seen as a good omen, sensible advice to be extended to all citizens for individual and, above all, collective good, quickly transforms into a coercive force that leads individuals to dare more and push the presumed level of well-being further ahead. The predominance of hedonistic rhetoric and the repercussions manifesting in people's lives are evident. The theme of a slim, beautiful, and attractive body fills the pages of health and beauty magazines and represents an almost totemic object that fills the personal pages of millions of individuals on social media: it is presented as imperative, almost inevitable, and inescapable.

How is it possible to feel good about oneself if, in reality, my body is distant from the standards that are so praised and exalted? The strength of will needed to withstand such comparisons must be enormous. The pervasive presence of this societal theme prompts a shift in needs—no longer focused on feeling good about oneself, but rather feeling good according to societal proposals. This shift results in an increasingly entrenched and pervasive extension of the strict norms imposed on the body. This turns the pursuit of well-being into

a new form of slavery that generates discomfort. Paradoxically, one falls into a malaise state in the pursuit of imposed well-being. There is always an idea of the body to be disseminated, commercialised, and proposed as the most appropriate one. The shop windows may change with their displays, but the intention behind them remains the same: to use the aesthetic value of the body.

In this light, educators are, today, responsible for guiding young individuals through this complex landscape, ensuring they cultivate healthy identities and navigate virtual realities with wisdom and discernment ([Livingstone and Third, 2017](#)). By shaping the power of virtual realities, promoting digital citizenship, supporting offline experiences, and collaborating with families and communities, educators can empower preadolescents to navigate the digital age with confidence and resilience. By adopting a proactive and holistic approach, they can foster a generation of digitally literate individuals who embrace their identities in the digital realm while thriving in the complexities of the onlife experience. Opportunities and difficulties are presented by the changing body views, the redefining of wellbeing, the complex process of identity development, and the expanding idea of the self in the digital age. Educators can navigate the implications of technology and foster positive outcomes by comprehending and critically analysing these dynamics. This will help to promote a healthy balance between technology integration and people's overall development in modern society.

In particular, educators must actively engage in continual professional development to stay abreast of technological innovations in the ever-changing digital landscape. Overcoming a negative approach to technology is also imperative. Furthermore, as technology increasingly blurs the boundaries between the physical and digital realms, educators play a crucial role in helping students develop a strong sense of self and identity that encompasses both domains. This involves facilitating discussions around online identity construction, personal branding, and the authentic representation of oneself in digital spaces. Educators now have the responsibility to help individuals critically engage with technology, understand its impact on their lives and identities, and develop the necessary competencies to navigate this complex landscape. Therefore, there is a need for educational interventions to promote more appropriate use of social media and technology and to foster a harmonious and conscious development of body image.

Especially among young people, it is necessary to focus again on the importance of protecting one's body as an intimate existential space. They must be informed about the consequences of excessive and immoderate body manipulation. It is abstract reasoning, certainly, but one that must be considered so that it can be verified through concrete interventions. For example, in schools, which often overlook the body, relegating it to a mere didactic tool and contributing to the depersonalisation of students. Even a targeted intervention to incorporate the body into education could have unimaginable effects. Thus, bringing the body back into the educational discourse is an essential paradigm shift: the relative lack of an educational narrative about the body, the inability to provide tools that can offer individuals a perception of the complexity of their own bodies and enable them to understand the signals, messages, and codes transmitted by them, is a clear cultural delay that we can no longer afford. Reintegrating the body into the educational discourse necessitates a multi-faceted approach, encompassing curriculum redesign, teacher training, and community engagement.

Focusing on the impact of the social media and virtual dimension, addressing this issue entails the vital task of increasing awareness

among young people, parents, educators, and policymakers regarding the potential influence of social media on the development of a positive relationship with the body. It is crucial to tackle these concerns through comprehensive educational initiatives and awareness campaigns, promoting a perspective on the body in the digital age that is healthier and more grounded. Prohibiting young individuals from engaging with social media proves to be an inadequate strategy for mitigating its negative effects. Instead, empowering young people with media literacy and fostering critical thinking skills can enable them to navigate the digital landscape, fostering a more realistic outlook on body diversity and acceptance. Moreover, there is a pressing need to enrich real-life experiences. Encouraging active participation in positive offline activities, emphasizing self-compassion, and nurturing supportive relationships all play pivotal roles in counteracting the adverse impacts of social media on body image.

Finally, transcending the educational discourse, the body proves to be the only social reality capable of unequivocally exposing the distortions of modern societies and the senselessness of many of the choices concerning young people. Despite being increasingly considered only in its organic dimension, treated as an object to be adapted to one's whims, stripped of meaning and disconnected from the individual's existential dimension, pushed outside any matrix of meaning, accompanied only by aesthetic significance and treated through medicine and technology to adjust it, enhance it, or, utopically, make it immortal, the body continues to maintain an intense connection with the self to which it belongs, becoming a spokesperson, through the flesh, for its needs. From here, we must start or perhaps return to modify the cultural and value matrices that characterize our societies.

## 5 Conclusion

The illustration of the syndrome of multiple bodies provides compelling proof of the significant transformational impact of onlife existence on preadolescents. This representation highlights the accelerating nature of changes, particularly concerning the body, and underscores the potential negative consequences. The process of hybridization that is currently shaping individuals' existence through technology, changing their nature, is a phenomenon that requires investigation and analysis. It also underscores the pressing need for educational and social interventions. Without a proactive approach that educates and raises awareness among young individuals about the effects of their immersion in the onlife landscape, there is a risk of overlooking its impact on their lives. Therefore, it is crucial to

implement actions that foster understanding and awareness to navigate the evolving dynamics of onlife existence and minimise potential adverse consequences for the well-being of preadolescents.

In the context of research endeavours, it is crucial to continue to explore the nuanced ramifications of the onlife phenomenon on the lives of individuals. Social media represents a notable and widespread aspect of the virtual reality spectrum, while recent strides in technology, exemplified by the evolving metaverse, continue to push the limits of the virtual landscape, ultimately moulding the individual experience in novel and profound ways.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Author contributions

SD: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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