The unsustainable weight of self-image: (re)presentations in the spectacle society

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Abstract *This study aimed to identify adolescent self-image in the face of a society forged by perfect image-body standards, understanding the influence of social relationships and the media in constructing their identities. This is qualitative research based on Oral History involving 13 male and female and adolescents aged 15-19, students from a public school in Minas Gerais. We employed interviews with a semi-structured roadmap to collect data, which were later interpreted by thematic content analysis proposed by Bardin. The findings were arranged into two categories: 1 - Self-image in the construction of the adolescent's identity and 2 - The aesthetic ideal of the spectacle society. The reports show a strong influence of technology in forming their identities and possible consequences that the search for a spectacular image to meet the aesthetic standards of the virtual or real world can bring to adolescents. This idealized self-image reveals the new way of being and living, the values, and the fragile and superficial relationships in the spectacle society.*

Key words *Adolescent, Self-image, Body image, Social identification, Beauty culture*

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Introduction

Adolescence is a stage of biopsychosocial changes, characterized by own behaviors, questions about rules and values arising from the family, distance from this family cycle, and approximation of the groups of friends with whom it identifies. In this moment of discovery, adolescents seek to be part of society, knowing and recognizing themselves in their living environment[1].

Transformations such as the loss of the child's body and body restructuring can cause suffering to adolescents searching for social acceptance, generating concerns about body image, how they present themselves and relate, their body, and how it is recognized. The sociocultural influence of the media and the consumer market, linked to the body industry, define the ideal beauty standard and stand as an essential risk factor for body dissatisfaction[2].

Image gains extreme relevance in the contemporary world. Spectacle is the current model of life, as stated by Debord[3]. The spectacle society concerns the capitalist setting, in which capital and consumption mean personal satisfaction and translate into a new aesthetic that involves body and relationships, also permeated by new technologies, where image mediates the social relationship. In this society of appearances, the adolescents risk becoming volatile in the image in their search for acceptance and belonging.

The show is widespread throughout society, whether through merchandise, behaviors following a specific pattern, or images of subjective contentment, with a predisposition to become regulatory[3,4]. Life is transformed into a show, and relationships are based on image, subjectivized values validated by adolescents. It is the current world view, where credulity and utopia emerge from the philosophy of "what appears is good, what is good appears"[3]. There is a progressive self-exhibition, where the appreciation of what is intrinsic and the retrospective reflections become unnecessary[5].

Concomitant to the consumerist market is a media of power exacerbated by the advent of the internet and social networks, which play an influential role in fixing the recommended beauty standards[6]. Furthermore, stigmatization arises from a society based on aesthetic standards that contribute and reinforce the devaluation of subjects when they do not meet these perspectives[7].

Life is spectacularized in this consumerist society with liquid tendencies, which alienates and reduces subjects to image[3]. Adolescence is the group most vulnerable to influences and the media. Sustaining this ideal image, especially for adolescents who are in the process of change, is quite complex because it transcends the body issue[8].

As it is an experiential period characterized by peculiarities that exceed biological transformations, adolescents seek social recognition that transcends the family core. There is a need to reconfigure social and individual roles. The complex changes experienced make them vulnerable to the media and social demands, which lay down specific behavior and lifestyle patterns. These demands tie them into an existential condition, with the risk of being reduced to an image in a society where subjective values fall apart. The body cult turns it into an object of consumption, and achieving the aesthetic ideal becomes more relevant than thinking, feeling, creating, or being healthy[9].

In adolescence, it is imperative to build an identity, which is influenced by the social group and cultural values of contemporary society. There is also the association of the media, which offers symbolic resources to construct social standards, affecting individual and social identities[10].

Concerning identity, we use Bauman's[11] concept of liquid identities, constructed with all kinds of available materials, related to the communities in which they are inserted to be used and displayed. Modern individuals are fragile and insecure, live superficially, and need to hide behind technological and market facilities, thus building various identities used to conceal a face and bring greater satisfaction.

From a Debordian perspective, the symbolic values of the spectacle society represented by consumption and image underpin this identity[3]. In the words of Tostes and Sanches[12], "in this process, consumption brings us closer and further away from what we want to have or become since it is constantly changing patterns. The symbolic value of what we consume is what expresses our identity".

The image is shaped by intrinsic issues and the subject's daily experiences. It is a condition of individual arrangement where the subject knows and is recognized; that is, it occurs from the fusion of social patterns and relationships built. The crucial importance of self-image in the construction of this identity is highlighted.

Self-image can be understood as to how subjects see themselves, how they think they are or feel. It is "a psychic phenomenon that allows subjects to represent and record the events expe-

rienced or perceived. It is built as a visual representation, which interferes with the subject's perception, reaction, and interaction with the social environment". It can be said that the construction of this image occurs while individuals interact with the world in their affective relationships and sociocultural spaces[13].

The perceived own body image reflects one's relationship with the environment, which allows knowing oneself and building an identity. In contemporary times, identity is the combination of image (what captures and projects us) and consumption (what we consume and how we consume). By expressing aesthetic ideals and ways of living, the media influences the construction of a body pattern in the subject's unconscious. In adolescence, this image is introjected and validated and becomes a value[9].

From this perspective, this study aimed to identify the self-image of adolescents in the face of a society forged by perfect image-body standards, understanding the influence of social relationships and the media in the construction of their identities.

Methods

This qualitative study is attentive to the plurality of shared voices and identifies situations that pervade numbers considering the subjectivity, dynamism, and peculiarities of opinions[15]. The narratives were obtained from the methodological framework of oral history, a set of procedures that uses oral sources and reveals the subjects' experiences, enabling a new version of the facts to be considered socially[16,17]. We employed the hybrid oral history, which promotes a dialogue between the collected oral statements and other existing documents, and thematic oral history as a narrative genre, which allows participants, here called collaborators, to reveal their perception about themselves, under the influence of the media and their social relationships[16,18].

The research involved 13 adolescents aged 15-19, namely, ten female and three male students from a state public school located in the Midwest region of Minas de Gerais. This is convenience sampling, considering the inclusion criteria: being regularly enrolled in the school, submitting the parent's authorization through the Informed Consent Form (ICF), and signing the Informed Assent Form (IAF). The exclusion criteria were not fulfilling the conditions described. The selection considered the age group (adolescence)

without considering that gender, race, or ethnicity were not analyzed, although the adolescents had some common social markers, such as being students in public schools.

The adolescents were invited to participate in the research after a brief presentation of the theme in the classroom. Those interested, primarily female, filled out a form with the name, address, name, and telephone number of the person in charge. After contact and authorization through the ICF and signing the IAF, each adolescent was interviewed individually on an agreed day and time, in a schoolroom, outside school hours, ensuring a private space that favored the approach with the adolescent and listening to their perceptions, feelings, and choices, impregnated with subjectivity. The adolescent was identified as "A", followed by the number that represents the order in which they were performed, gender F (female) and M (male), and age.

We conducted semi-structured interviews from May to July 2019 to collect data, with guiding questions about the perception of self-image, ideal body and beauty patterns, and social media influence on self-image. Interviews were recorded on a digital device and transcribed in full to analyze and interpret narratives, following the pre-interview, interview, and post-interview steps[16].

The interviews were terminated by theoretical saturation when no new information was obtained. Thus, the data set was validated, enabling the understanding of the researched phenomenon[19]. The research findings highlight the content of the interviews, regardless of the number of participants, and allow understanding the senses and meanings of the adolescents' actions and experiences in their social (re)presentation.

The qualitative data interpretation employed Bardin's[20] thematic content analysis, which included the following steps: pre-analysis, inspecting the material, and processing the results. The use of this technique is justified by the way it processes the information collected. It also facilitates the analysis of the context of the messages and characterizes their social influence, which meets the objectives of this study. The analysis included the organization and transcription of the narratives in full; vertical reading, which comprises the cumbersome reading of each narrative to capture the central ideas; and horizontal readings to determine similar statements to organize them into groups to produce categories and subcategories.

The study was approved by CEPES-UFSJ, in line with Resolution N° 466/2012/CNS.

Results and discussion

Self-image in the adolescent's identity construction process

In the contemporary world, image gains new contours and requires subjects to adopt another way to present themselves. In this context, in their transition to the adult world, "digital native" adolescents – called as such because they were born in a world of new technologies and digital media[21] – manifest this influence in their behavior and features, as seen in their self-definition, directly or indirectly strongly associated with electronic elements:

There is no fixed thing like ... I like ... there are people who ... like I love to engage in such sport. I don't like to do anything. I just stay on the phone, you know? - A 4 (F, 16).

[...] I like watching a lot of television, dancing, listening to music ... I'm an amiable girl, whatever you need you can count on me. - A 11 (F, 17).

About me ... I take the boy to school. I come home and do home chores. Then I go to watch TV series. When the series ends, I see a soap opera. After the soap opera, I see a little more of the series. Then, I watch another soap opera. - A 13 (F, 18).

The reports point out that adolescents are highly connected to technology, and when talking about themselves, it is challenging to separate their traits from their habits, interests, or desires.

With the rise of the internet and virtual media, communication has been increasing fast, associated with the ability to multitask in a few 'clicks', which are attractive factors for adolescents, characterized by immediacy and impatience. Such influencers play an essential role in the construction of the subject's identity[10]. It is important to note that the indiscriminate use of technologies can negatively affect relational or psychological problems[21].

Image is, thus, an essential point in this context, considering the actual relationship of adolescents with technology and the media. Asked about the importance of image in the current world, they stated that it is highly valued by society:

[...] there are many people who, like, a little fellow there, will be now more attracted to beauty than character. I believe this is very wrong. And it's not only him; also, many girls do this [...] I think this is strange because nobody will have beauty forever. So, I don't know why ... - A 5 (F, 17).

Unfortunately, it is so. Let's suppose you are only going to be taken seriously before society if you are well-groomed, beautiful, and stuff... This is an awful thing because we have to evaluate what someone has to say: what's inside and not that external part, you know? I think it is very wrong. It is also the same thing in... the job market, you know? In the social environment, to make friends, in relationships, right? And society demands a lot from you. - A 6 (M, 16).

Yes, in society, yes. It demands a lot, right? I think this is just as wrong. - A 10 (F, 15).

Regarding image in the contemporary world, the results are similar to another study[8], where the narratives point out an obligation of the subject to meet the imposed standards to be included in specific spaces. Not following the recommended standards interferes in the relationships with others and reflects significantly in the look on oneself, sometimes generating discomfort and dissatisfaction with one's reflection in the mirror.

When talking about their perception or feeling in front of the mirror, some adolescents brought up the problem in their account, mentioning negative feelings:

[...] a word that defines me when I see myself in the mirror is... AGAIN... just that, like… when I look like that, I only hear one word: Again. But I don't know... say what I... Like: Again. You're going to go again through the same things. You're going to live the same things again, and stuff… You're going to see the same people again. You're going to go through the same things again, hear the same old jokes... People will judge you without knowing you …all that. - A 4 (F, 16).

Wow ... ugly. I don't know. I just wanted to stay at the doctor all day, just so that he could remove all my defects. - A5 (F, 17).

[...] Well, sometimes I keep thinking, 'that person is more beautiful than me'. I try to improve, but it doesn't get near sometimes... I think it's more lack of acceptance... - A 7 (F, 17).

It is worth mentioning that we live in a historical context that outlines the ideal body model and beauty standards, which have repercussions that transcend individual subjectivity. They are involved in a broad context of society's power over the subject who seeks to meet its needs[8].

The molds of the ideal body have provenly been unattainable, and even individuals who approach the demands and social standards of beauty are bored by not considering perfection in its entirety[22]. This is similar to the study[2] where even eutrophic adolescents were dissatisfied with their body; that is, a body with a satisfactory weight is not enough and corroborates our study's findings, in which most adolescents are dissatisfied with their body.

Faced with the possibility of modifying the image, the desire for aesthetic change appears in the narratives, and the nose is the most troublesome, followed by weight, scars, pimple spots, stretch marks, and height:

[...] my nose ... rhinoplasty. I think I would just remove my scar, which was when I fell playing with my sister. This one is when I was run over. Nowadays, it doesn't harm me so much. When I was younger, I tried to hide it as much as possible. I used to cut bangs just so it wouldn't show up. Nowadays, it doesn't harm me much because I'm already kind of accepting it. But I don't like it very much. - A 7 (F, 17).

I wanted to change my height because I don't like being short. It would change my fatness. But I'm a little bit relaxed. I've already lost a little weight: it's swelling. - A 10 (F, 15).

My body, trying to change the spots and marks (stretch marks). Taking some from the belly and take the stretch marks out of my life. These days, I was in the bathroom and looked at them. I started to cry inside ... they are ugly ... it is repulsive. - A 13 (F, 18).

In the relentless search for satisfaction and fulfillment of the beauty dictatorship, the overwhelming trade in cosmetics, props, clothing, physical activities, diets, and above all, aesthetic procedures gained space, as they contribute quickly to the fulfillment of the normative requirements that involve the body[23]. Such context is reinforced in the adolescents' statements regarding dissatisfaction with some body part and the desire to perform some cosmetic surgery, such as rhinoplasty.

Secondarily to body image issues, the desire for change in subjective aspects was also reported:

I would change my way of being. I am very anxious... and I think I am very possessive... I am very possessive. Both in the relationship and my stuff. I think this is partly good but in it gets in the way in some other things. - A 2 (M, 17).

I would put myself more of an outgoing person, you know? Easier to talk to everyone and such. - A 4 (F, 16).

The narratives confirm Debord's[3] perspective of a spectacle society, in which the image is overvalued to the detriment of subjective values or aspects. The desire for an aesthetic change overlaps the others, as an ideal, spectacular image is sought.

The media currently witnesses a rise in the so-called "transgressor" influences, which escape the normative and stereotyped and modify the social adage to defend the differences and empower the subjects and their often-relegated features[24]. It is a movement for valuing differences opposing the ideal model, emphasizing diversity. However, this influence was not identified in the adolescents' narrative.

What is still perceived is that social media and other means of communication have contributed significantly to this relentless search for beauty, added to the intensive manufacturing trade that strictly follows fashion and standards and overshadows the subject's beauty[22]. Bauman[25] claims that society has become liquid, in which relationships are liquid, and there is no realization of personal ideologies. Identity is fleeting following the continuous change in social standards.

It is possible to observe the immediacy present in adolescence, as only one collaborator brought plans in his report:

[...] I'm in the second year of high school. I intend to understand myself to see what I want to do because I don't know what I want to do yet. I'm in doubt about being a tattoo artist, makeup artist, or working with fashion. - A 6 (M, 16).

The adolescents' experience is based on their particular demands, characterized by the difficulty in determining their place in time and space, opposing the future with a tendency to avoid attitudes that shorten the maturation process, consequently, of adulthood[10], which justifies the almost unanimous absence of reports addressing plans or life projects.

Technology and virtual media have influenced social bonds, strengthening or not interpersonal relationships and the individual's perception of issues involving self-image, which instigates us to reflect on the influence of social relationships and the media in the construction of the adolescent subject.

The aesthetic ideal of the spectacle society

Within the society-imposed beauty standards, the adolescents scored the lean or muscular body, long or straight hair, white, and clear eyes. While this paper did not aim to analyze the racialization of beauty in the spectacle society, nor were these issues further discussed with the participants, we should mention the relevance of these discussions on the valorization of some racialized traits and the attempted erasure of other devalued ones[26].

Well, a perfect body, without... a Barbie style body, yes... a thin nose, long, straight hair. It doesn't even have to be straight, long hair, you know? You

also need to be an extrovert, too, right? You need to talk to everyone. - A 4 (F, 16).

In contrast, a teenager reported on the standards imposed on the black race:

Now it became fashionable to be black, you know? ... Now, if you are black, you have to be strong, tall, you know? ... a white smile... When you don't have it, when you are short... and stuff... you are favela dweller and dirty... you know? - A 2 (M, 17).

Reaffirming the power of social media in the beauty dictatorship, its influence appears in the adolescent's distorted body self-image:

[...] the world after this internet thing started, female bloggers, and stuff, got worse. Everyone cared a lot for looks, you know? 'I have to look like that so-and-so girl because so-and-so is pretty and because so-and-so wears that outfit. - A 9 (F, 18).

The reports are consistent with the study[27], which states that society has dictated rules about concepts of ideal standards since the past centuries, in an incessant search for the fantastic, perfect body, judging the norm's deviants. Adolescents' self-image compared to ideal aesthetic standards differs, as does the relationship they establish between beauty standards and self-image assessment:

[...] I didn't even get close to the door, but you know. It already bothered me more, you know. To the point of... I don't know ... Thinking: what am I going to do? Why am I stuck in a shell like that, right? The person you have inside is trapped in the person you have to be outside when you don't fit in. So, you say: What am I going to do? - A 4 (F, 16).

I know my place of speech and that I am within the standards because I am tall and blond, you know? However, from my viewpoint, there are many things that I don't like about myself. A lot of people say, "Wow, but why don't you like that? You're so beautiful, you're so up to the standard", right? However, I see myself, and I don't like it, right? - A 6 (M, 16).

I think I'm beautiful. I don't really care that much. - A 11 (F, 17).

The adolescents seek to meet their group's expectations, including the beauty standards, and when not satisfied with their image, they tend to resort to "miraculous" aesthetic procedures that can compromise their health[9]. The accounts show that body dissatisfaction is linked to comparing the actual body with the said ideal one. Subjects still lack something even when they are within the expected standards.

Adolescents correlate the social demand regarding the image with the aesthetic standards of contemporary times, where adequacy is imperative:

So ... the world demands from us to meet its standards, right? With a body like this... fit in the case of the man. A fit, strong body, right? - A 2 (M, 17).

So, as I'm an adolescent, they charge a lot, right? Because adolescence, I think, is the phase that people most want to show off, whatever... Appear more beautiful to the world, right? I think so. Super. - A 6 (M, 16).

The reports presented are similar to the study[8] in which it was observed that adolescents needed to adapt to the needs of the environment in which they live together and interact so that they are socially accepted.

The adolescents are expected not to deviate from the norms and adjust to the standard, disregarding their uniqueness. Besides this image, family pressure questioned who this adolescent is and how his body appears in a moment of transformation:

They demand. Because in my family ...out there, no ... but my family demands a lot because sometimes I'm a little bit chubby. Then they say, "by God, you're too fat, are you engaging in sex?"; "You're too thin, are you throwing up?"; "You're ugly", "do this, do that". It's bad too. Especially coming from your family, father, mother. It's bad, you know? Then you start thinking: 'is that true?' Let me see what I can do about it. - A 10 (F, 15).

In the face of a spectacular society in which the image is the dominant value, adolescents embrace the aesthetic ideal, validating it. In an attempt to be socially accepted, they recognize that they deviate from this ideal and ask a lot of themselves, seeking a perfect image adapted to aesthetic standards. Pressured by social and family expectations, such demands appear related to the body:

I ask a lot of myself. A lot. Everything. If I can't do it, I go there and ask of myself. I'm very perfectionist. I don't like anything about me at all. Nothing. Such as my weight. I get thin, fat, thin, fat ... the face, the beauty. I think that's all. - A 5 (F, 17).

I already got to ask a lot of myself a lot. Really a lot. Kind of looking in the mirror ... I still have these paranoias, you know? Because I am afraid of putting on weight. I think I was so scared, with so much stuff in my head, you know? I became a little paranoid. - A 9 (F, 18).

Social networks, like the media, play an active role in building ideals of existence. It is essential to say that this analysis is a partial selection, and there are other possible perspectives and dis-

courses on the diversity of beauty, different from the normative and value gaps[24]. Considering our selection, the ideals converge in patterns to be followed:

A lot. I am... Anything I think is wrong is not wrong, but my head says so, you know? Then, I keep looking and questioning, you know? It's a lot of influence from the internet too, you know? Because, for example, I began to have low self-esteem after I started to get more into Instagram, comparing myself a lot with other people, you know? Which is something terrible. You say, 'I don't have that in my body'. Then you start to self-deprecate. It feels bad, you know? - A 6 (M, 16).

Self-enforcement transcends the concept of demanding to reach one's limits, satisfy own desires, or reach own goals, as it also involves the need to meet the desires of others with whom someone relates and supply what is standardized and socially regulated. In this sense, subjects tend to become hostages to the intrinsic and external demands and an unhealthy artifice of their feelings and attitudes[17]. By incorporating media discourse, society validates and reproduces the aesthetic ideal. In seeking to achieve this ideal, the subject undergoes transformative, health-compromising procedures and practices, developing diseases such as anorexia and bulimia, or consume products and services broadcast in the media with promises of body satisfaction and social inclusion, ignoring the commercial aspect behind this appeal, resulting in frustration and psychological distress[9,28].

The spectacle society is also the consumption society, which establishes a relationship between the subject's self-image and what he consumes. Immersed in ideal images, the adolescent is bombarded by the media that ensures success from purchasing goods. In order to (re)present, consumption can be excessive:

I buy a lot of clothes. Really a lot. I like clothes, like, going out at night. Black clothes, clothes, not many colorful clothes, flare pants, skirt, you know? And stuff... Anabela, these shoes, you know? Anabela, heels, and stuff. My mom gives me everything I want. Everything. Look, she takes the credit card from my aunts, buys, and never denies me anything. She pays, she buys expensive stuff. - A 3 (F, 17).

Consumption stimulated by self-esteem, the need to belong to a group, or media appeal, especially in individuals forming identity, has a symbolic value. The products "allow creating an image presented socially, just as they make up in individuals' imagination the role they want

to play"[12]. Thus, when trying to establish themselves and be accepted, adolescents associate their self-image with consumption, idealizing an aesthetic standard.

However, some adolescents deviate from the rule of having in order to appear:

I buy when mine is over. If it's already bad, then I buy another one. I buy it only when I think it's beautiful and I need it. - A 1 (M, 18).

Need. Because I wasn't even going to buy it if it were for me. I'm not the buying type. But then, what drives me to buy is if I find it fancy. Like 'wow, that is cute, I'm going to buy it'. But only if I need it. Otherwise, I don't spend money on it. - A 9 (F, 18).

Consumerism is disseminated and exacerbated in a capitalist society. Whether purchased or not, consumer goods are used to define individuals, favoring gaps and strengthening social vulnerabilities and exclusions[29]. Thus, subjectivity is the logic of consumption and how one addresses its imperatives.

Regarding choice, adolescents correlated consumption with the media's influence and pointed out negative consequences stemming from virtual media:

Comfort and fashion, I see a lot of pictures on Instagram of these most famous people. So, I look at the clothes. - A 8 (F, 15).

I think that social networks and the media around us influence people a lot ... and I have several friends here who even cut themselves, that ... you know ... is a case of depression ... I don't know how to judge what depression is or not but they say they are in depression, you know? Because of this body issue, they compare themselves. Most compare themselves in the media, you know... influence. - A 2 (M, 17).

I know people who post a perfect life on the social network and stuff. In real life, it's totally depressing, you know? We find a lot of this stuff. The social network helps to display your perfect life. I identify myself a lot with that, that I put a lot of good things about me and don't show the bad stuff, you know? We always try to block the bad. Because I think that human beings are like that: we always want to show the good part of us, and the good part of us is very momentary. We are never well, you know? - A 6 (M, 16).

In the adolescents' perception, consumer goods can give social visibility, making them the main target of the market, as it is the age group that consumes social media the most. We should remember that disseminating some products or images of these ideas brings negative and dysfunctional feelings or actions in the face of the

impossibility of reaching such illusory but socially necessary patterns[12].

Final considerations

By enabling a space where adolescents could have a voice, share their perception of this spectacularized society, the socially-imposed standards and how the relationships built and the media interfere in the construction of subjectivity, we could observe in the statements that the technologies, more specifically social networks, are part of the universe of adolescents and strongly influence the construction of their identity since they are intensely immersed in this cyberspace.

The aesthetic standards presented in the virtual world are consistent with those shown in the actual experience. In both cases, they are regulatory and tend to become dictatorial, bringing negative consequences for subjects who do not meet these expectations, such as low self-esteem and self-depreciation. They also demand an excessive effort from those trying to adjust to a pre-established model to present themselves socially with ideal image bodies.

The adolescents who collaborated with the research are immersed in demands that pervade social and media standards and self-demand. In this sense, they are constantly dissatisfied, mainly physically.

Thus, this study allowed knowing adolescents' perception amid sociocultural changes and media representations, which leads to critical and reflective analysis on the theme. The adolescent's self-image reveals the new way of being and living, the current values, the fragile and superficial relationships established in the spectacle society. We hope that these reflections can provide supporting elements for other analyses and possible ways of reflecting on adolescent health care from the biopsychosocial perspective, contributing to the construction of their identity.

Collaborations

The authors participated in the conception and design of the research project; data collection, analysis, and interpretation; paper writing and review. The first author is a resident fellow, and the second author is a final graduation paper advisor.

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