VTubers: The Influence of Crossing Cultural Boundaries from Japan to America on This Media Genre

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolution and transformation of Virtual YouTubers (VTubers) as they migrate from Japan to America, analyzing how this shift has reshaped content creation and self-presentation in digital spaces. Through comparative analysis and digital ethnographic research of Japanese and American VTuber agencies, content styles, and creator behaviors, this research demonstrates how VTubers have evolved from Japanese idol culture-influenced performers to a distinctly Western form of content creation. While VTubers, like traditional content creators, experience self-commodification, their unique pseudo-anonymous nature through digital avatars allows them to operate under different social expectations and norms. This study argues that VTubers' disembodied identities challenge conventional notions of content creation and authenticity, creating new possibilities for diverse voices in digital media while redefining the relationship between creator identity and content production.

Keywords: content creator, Hatsune Miku, Twitch, VRChat, VShojo, VTuber, Youtube

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1. Introduction to VTubers

In Kizuna Ai's self-introduction video posted on YouTube in 2016, Kizuna unknowingly coined the term "virtual YouTuber." She established an entire genre of media that is hereafter referred to as VTubers, individuals who mask their real identities through 2D/3D digital avatars to make content on YouTube or live stream on Twitch. Because of Kizuna Ai's rapid popularity, VTubing companies and agencies (namely Hololive and Nijisanji) have sprouted up and popularized this concept in Japan and the rest of Asia, taking on strong aesthetic influences from anime, manga, and JPop culture (Bryon 1). However, Kiryu Coco from Hololive Japan's 4th generation cohort broke the Asia-centric image of VTubers by fluently speaking English on her live streams. She is the only member of Hololive Japan fluent in both English and Japanese and often makes content on taboo topics in Japanese culture such as openly talking about her sexuality. The opening up of the genre is facilitating the migration of the phenomenon to the US and is inspiring the rise of amateur, independent, English-speaking VTubers and the requisite talent agencies to manage them. Through these up-and-coming media stars, the concept of VTubers has decoupled from Japanese idol culture and taken on a distinctly global ethos. In this migration, I believe that VTubers have evolved from Japanese idols into a more Westernized approach, similar to traditional content creators in America who make content with their real identity. American VTubers were not as influenced by Japanese idol culture but instead emphasized the content creation part of being a VTuber. As a result, they also experience a commodification of the self, since their self-presentation is tied to their income. However, because VTubers are pseudo-anonymous, they self-present and self-commodify differently from traditional content creators. This recognition of the disembodiment of identity challenges the traditional notions of content creation, as it allows for a new type of content creator that operates under different, much laxer rules and expectations.

Hololive virtual idol concert performance featuring multiple VTuber performers on a digital stage. Screenshot from Hololive Official/Cover Corporation (2023).

2. Background on VTubers: the Influence of Anime & Japanese Idol Culture

From their beginning, VTubers were heavily influenced by the popular culture of Anime and Japanese idol culture. We can see this in how VTubers are characterized by their

appearance, persona, norms, and even the idea of what a VTuber is. VTuber avatars are designed in a way to resemble Anime characters, and they even possess lore, and fictional backstories, just like their Anime character counterparts. However, they behave like Japanese idols in their adherence to strict gender norms and are "revered for a sense of purity, innocence or childishness" (Aoyagi 35). The CEO of Hololive English, Motoaki Tanigo even explicitly cites AKB48, a prominent JPOP idol group as a major influence on Hololive, where they found the inspiration for Hololive's debut and graduation system, cohort model, fandom names, producing J-pop music, and concerts (Byron 10). The connection to the entertainment industry is also why many Nakanohito, the term for the real person behind the VTuber avatar, have worked as voice actors, actors, and musicians in their previous careers. While early VTubers did create content, their role as an idol came first, which meant that content creation merely supplemented their main activities of making and performing music.

VTubers and traditional Twitch streamers playing League of Legends. Screenshot. Source: Youtube Channels Mimi Is Now (2022) and Synpase (2023)

3. Westernization of VTubers: from Japanese Idols to Content Creators

The migration of VTubers from their original origin of Japan to America was propelled in 2019 by Kiryu Coco. Her multicultural background as a Japanese American and her fluency in both languages helped to introduce and popularize VTubers to the Western world: she received the most amount of monetary donations out of all VTubers on Youtube (Byron 10). However, in this migration, some aspects of Japanese VTubers have mostly persisted like the avatars' resemblances to anime characters. However, the influence of Japanese idol culture has waned, as seen in the differences between American and Japanese VTubers. American VTubers are not all from the entertainment industry like their Japanese counterparts, and they do not put out as much music, speak Japanese, or behave like Japanese idols. I believe this difference is because J-Pop is uniquely tied to the Japanese language and Japan's cultural-societal norms while Anime is globalized. Thus, the aspects of being a VTuber that were specifically tied to the Japanese language and culture itself have gradually become forsaken due to a difference in location. Despite this, the core concept of being a VTuber, the act of using an avatar and operating pseudo-anonymously, has stayed the same across cultures. Replication is the determinator – that is why the character designs, VTuber personas, and VTubing itself followed because these were the aspects that could be easily recreated elsewhere. Because of this removal of the idol

aspects of VTubers, we see that American VTubers are simply content creators who use an avatar.

4. The Content Creator's Self-Commodification of Self-Presentation

The American media and entertainment industry treats VTubers like traditional content creators and, thus, replicates similar economic structures that content creators are subjugated to. For example, VShojo is the biggest American-based VTubing company operates like a creator management agency, not like Hololive which functions as an Idol entertainment agency. VShojo affords much more freedom of expression and flexibility with the work they put out which reflects how VTubers developed in America. Because of the structures of these American VTuber management agencies and content platforms, Vtubers make a living primarily off the content they produce just like traditional content creators. Their incomes are precariously tied to sponsorships, ad revenue streams, and additional monetization streams in which fans can support creators through subscriptions and donations on Twitch or other platforms (Zhicong Lu 6). These content platforms like Twitch are mediums that "emphasize the authentic nature of live video and real-time, interpersonal interactions" (Zhicong Lu 2). That is why the content of most traditional content creators represents their day-to-day lives. That also means that their self-presentation is tied to their income. Self-presentation as defined by Erving Goffman is "when people try to control impressions of themselves" in order to "attempt to shape the attitudes and behaviors of audiences through the presentation of self-relevant information" (Goffman 3).

In presenting themselves to their audience, the economic model of making a living as a creator requires a commodification of the self. Creators are all fighting for the same attention on these entertainment platforms – their earnings are dependent on viewership. Competition among content creators is the driving force for the commodification of their selves. In order to stand out from the vast number of creators on platforms like YouTube, Twitch, or TikTok, creators need to create content that is engaging, unique, and marketable. This leads to the commodification of the creator themselves because they are their content. Self-commodification refers to the process of treating oneself as a product to be marketed, promoted, and sold to others. Content creators become a product that is packaged and sold to their audience as they monetize the self-presentation of their appearance, personality, life, and themselves (Bryon 20). As the competition among content creators grows, the commodification of the self becomes more pronounced. Creators are forced to innovate and evolve their content constantly and who they are as people in order to stay relevant and maintain their audience. That could lead to changing aspects of themselves, use of trends, clickbait titles, and other marketing tactics to increase views and engagement.

5. Standards and Expectations for Content Creators

Traditional content creators are held to a high standard both as creators and people because, in the eyes of the viewer, these roles are one and the same. Content creators are often held to these standards because they have the power to influence their audience and potentially shape public opinion. How creators portray themselves on the internet is what audiences expect them to be like. This is because the platforms where content is consumed emphasize "authenticity" (Zhicong Lu 2). However, even though creators are producing content

about themselves, there is still a performative aspect of what they are showing as the true depiction of who they are and their lives. Goffman emphasizes the "self-presentational skill to communicate accurate, 'truthful' impression of self" because authenticity is what allows for relationships to be built between creators and their audiences (Goffman 493). Viewers build an emotional bond with content creators as they become invested in their lives, personalities, and the content they produce. Moreover, this emotional bond can translate into financial support, as viewers can directly contribute to their favorite content creators through subscriptions, donations, and sponsorships. Due to this emotional and financial dependence on viewers, viewers hold content creators to high standards in terms of their behavior, content quality, and how they behave as everyday people.

VTuber Character Design. Screenshot. Source: Asunicha Art (2024)

5. Implications of VTuber's Pseudo Anonymity as a Content Creator

      While VTubers are content creators and thus self-commodify their self-presentation, they do so differently because their "real" identities/bodies are not tied to their content and behaviors since they're pseudo-anonymous. While viewers attribute what a VTuber chooses to share about their lives to the voice actor behind the VTuber avatar, there is no physical image of a real person to which they can attach this information. This means that VTubers do not have to worry about the "authenticity" of matching their explicit (physical appearance) and implicit (behavioral) self-presentations to the audience. That is because the collective identity and self-presentation of a VTuber are made up of two parts: the Nakanohito (the real person behind the VTuber) and the fictional Anime-like persona and lore. For example, Hololive's Kiryu Coco's lore claims that she is a kid dragon who came to Japan from another world as a language exchange student. She often streams with this anime character-like persona of a kid dragon but also talks about her life as a real person outside of this persona. On live streams and in their content, VTubers shift between these two aspects. Some creators emphasize one over the other, but overall VTubing is a performance that combines both the VTuber persona/lore with the real-life stories and personalities that make up their Nakanohitos.

The identities, actions, and behaviors of the VTuber are inherently tied to their digital avatar. VTubers do not self-present and experience self-presentation in the same way as traditional content creators because the avatar acts as a mask between their behaviors/actions and their selves. For content creators that show their identity, the corporeality body plays a fundamental role in their self-presentation since viewers observe this sync in behaviors/personality with the physical through the creator's expressions. Traditional content creators rely on this collective performance of behavior and physical actions in order to build connections with the viewers. A consequence of the avatar obstructing human physical expressions of self-presentation is that viewers emphasize connecting with the actual behaviors and personality of the Nakanohito much more (HuaiLiang 47). Self-presentation for VTubers thus emphasizes the behaviors because there are no connections with that to the physical self.

A VTuber's pseudo anonymity through the use of the VTuber avatar also transforms the way they are commodified. The physical body is also an important part that is commodified for traditional content creators because they show themselves in their content. Most of the top creators fit into traditional beauty standards, thus making it difficult for people who don't to make a living as a creator. While it is difficult to alter your physical appearance, VTuber avatars are entirely digital and therefore fully customizable. The design of a character is a deliberate process, with companies, designers, and voice actors collaborating to create an avatar, persona, and lore that appeals to viewers. As a result, these digital avatars and personas created for VTubers are commodities, products meant to be monetized. I believe that the flexibility that digital design affords emphasizes the commodification of the VTuber's appearance more than traditional content creators. This is because VTubers have absolute freedom to control how they present explicitly, every single aspect of this avatar is thought of with the perspective of capturing the viewer's attention in order to monetize.

6. New and Laxer Expectations of VTubers Because of Differing Self-presentation and Self-commodification

In comparison to traditional content creators, VTubers' differences in self-presentation and self-commodification because of pseudo-anonymity allows for these new types of content creators to operate under different, much laxer rules and expectations from viewers. That is because viewers recognize a disembodiment of identity: there is the VTuber avatar and persona they see on screen and the real person behind it that is giving it a voice. VTubers essentially transcend being fully real or artificial and meet at a middle ground; they are portraying a character and themselves as a content creator. The disembodiment between the voice actor and VTuber persona is implicitly shown through the creator's content and explicitly maintained by fans and their companies who "limit the spread of Nakanohito's personal information" (Zhicong Lu 9). Viewers also perceive a "psychological distance" with the VTuber, thinking of them more as a character and not as just a real person, as Zhincong Lu's research shows. One viewer describes how "watching VTubers' live streams is like watching the performance of an actor wearing a mask. Although I know there is a human behind the avatar, it feels different and she becomes more distant (Zhicong Lu 7). As a result, there is "little interest in knowing their identities, and they denounced behaviors relating to prying into Nakanohitos' privacy" (Zhicong Lu 9). How fans position themselves within these connections they form for the content creator is different for VTubers; they know that they are not fully "real." Real in this

case refers to being human. The live stream nature of platforms like Twitch emphasizes the real, authentic aspects of content creators and their lives since they show their faces and interact with viewers in real time. Viewers start to feel like they know these creators personally, often developing parasocial relationships which are one-sided, unreciprocated relationships (Byron 12). These social norms of how viewers develop an affinity with traditional content creators don't apply because viewers know they are not fully "real."

These more lenient standards and norms are grounded in how VTuber's fictional personas and avatars draw heavily from Anime. Anime often exaggerates physical features and presents dramatic histories with supernatural and fantastical elements. These avatars perform and exhibit extreme behaviors and personality traits, reminding viewers that VTubers partially embody a fictionalized character while also sharing parts of their real lives. As a result, viewers are more tolerant of VTubers' offensive language and "stupid" behavior than real-person streamers (Zhicong Lu 2). If these behaviors were exhibited by content creators using their real identities, viewers would likely not accept them as they do with VTubers. In contrast to real-person streams, the economic transactions for the service of a VTuber's entertainment product also feel less grounded in the real-life monetary nature of a content creator's job. Viewers feel like "purchasing virtual gifts for VTubers seems like purchasing virtual goods in games. It feels less like tipping to a real person" (Zhicong Lu 9). Whereas for real-life streamers, people "disliked some real-person streamers' solicitation behaviors for virtual gifts and were jealous of, and had judgments about, streamers who earned much money." Despite a VTuber's characteristics, viewers still form emotional connections and parasocial relationships with VTubers because the performative elements can enhance the appeal and make them more relatable or likable. The combination of a fictional persona, exaggerated appearance, and real-life sharing creates a unique dynamic that distinguishes VTubers from traditional content creators and blurs the line between reality and fantasy.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the unique qualities of VTubers afford these types of content creators much more flexibility than traditional content creators. VTubing's migration to America has not only opened up what it means to be a VTuber or who can be one but has also reimagined who can be a content creator. The fact that VTubers' physical selves are not tied to their content means that anyone can be a VTuber. While anyone can technically become a traditional content creator right now, the consequences of self-commodification make it difficult because self-presentation is intrinsically tied to the job of a content creator and audiences bias for content creators who are conventionally attractive. Although VTubers still experience a commodification of the self, their disembodied identities challenge traditional notions of content creation, allowing for a new type of content creator that operates under different, much laxer rules and expectations. In this way, VTubers represent a new frontier in content creation, breaking down barriers and allowing for a greater diversity of voices to be heard.

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