

VTubers: The Appeal of Creating a Public, Virtual Identity

Virtual livestreamers – also known as vtubers – are a recent hot topic among the livestreaming community. Vtubers as a whole provide a wide range of topics for discussion, especially in relation to identity performance. Identity, as a concept is a notably fluid process, and as Jones and Krzyzanowski (2008) state, it can be “(re)constructed and (re)interpreted by actors in a multiplicity of ways” (p. 43). In this paper, I will be discussing the appeals of vtubers in relation to their construction of identity as part of my chosen stream – Identity and Online Advocacy, with a particular focus on the ‘identity’ aspect. This is due to the wide range of subtopics available for discussion in terms of virtual livestreamers and their identity. By creating a public virtual identity, livestreamers of all genres are able to express their creativity through a virtual avatar while also maintaining their privacy and a public identity that is separate from their private life.

Identity in general, has been a concept that has been reinvented and reconstituted over time. Individuals are constantly redefining their own identities while also figuring out how to present the self in public. While there are several different models of identity, the latest approach on the concept is the postmodernism approach which separates identity from the essence of the soul (Schier, 1993). This is especially relevant in the digital world where individuals are free to present themselves how they wish to be seen. The identity that they have chosen for themselves is how they choose to act (Holland et al., 1998). In an age where individuals can physically present however they wish through avatars in videogames or as faceless entities existing on the Internet with a simple profile picture to identify themselves, self-presentation is a subject that many have to consider. Research conducted by Foley et al. (2012) finds that even on anonymous social websites where individuals can represent themselves via an avatar, identity and physical appearance still play a part in how others perceive them. This could suggest that the freedom to customise their avatar to have more desirable features has been a constant appeal to individuals, including the youth. In relation to my topic – the appeal of creating a public virtual identity – the manipulation of identity is especially relevant in the case of vtubers.

The term 'VTuber', a portmanteau of the word 'virtual YouTuber', can be accredited to the first vtuber who debuted in late 2016, Kizuna Ai who coined the term (Vicente, 2021). It can also be used to refer to individuals who play a fictional 2D (or sometimes 3D) character who creates a variety of content, ranging from game livestreams to music performances (Maneetapho, 2020). To further understand the appeal of vtubers, it is important to also consider the world of livestreaming in general, which makes up a large part of the content that vtubers create. Taylor (2018) draws attention to this in her interviews with several livestreamers who all give a variety of reasons as to why they started livestreaming. These reasons varied from personal interest in broadcasting to forging social connections with other friends and even for the sake of making livestreaming their career. These livestreamers go to great lengths to keep their viewers engaged and entertained, and the most successful ones are able to make a full living off their streams. Johnson and Woodcock (2019)'s research focuses on how streamers (specifically on Twitch) monetize their streams through subscribers who donate "cheers", advertisements and sponsorships. In an age where an individual can make a living off livestreaming, it is no wonder that most livestreamers are motivated to work as hard as they can to engage viewers. As Taylor (2018) notes, people watch livestreamers for their "personality, life, quirks and style" and the more interesting and entertaining a livestreamer is, the more likely it is that they will be popular. When it comes to vtubers, it is not any different. In Padilla's interview with several well-known vtubers, the streamers all broadcasted similar content, typically gaming livestreams and chatting streams (Padilla, 2021). Vtubers and real-life streamers barely differ in terms of content created and both have the goal to entertain their viewers. However, the main difference is that vtubers are often real people who are performing a public virtual identity separate from their real identity, while most non-faceless livestreamers are presenting some form of their actual identity.

In contrast to livestreamers who are comfortable showing their face, most vtubers choose not to. This is often done to maintain their own privacy and to avoid getting potentially doxed. In some cases, like the vtuber Zentreyra, the person behind the vtuber avatar even hides their voice through a voice changer or "speech-to-text-to-speech" (Padilla, 2021, 2:08). By performing their identity through an avatar, the medium allows streamers who want to avoid revealing their real face a form of anonymity while still being able to freely express their emotions. Additionally, the medium allows individuals

to perform as another gender completely without worry of backlash, especially in the case of LGBTQ+ streamers who may not want their family to know about them. According to Freeman and Wohn (2020), the online livestreaming space has seen a rise in female and LGBTQ+ streamers. This is especially true in the case of vtubers, in which majority of the most popular vtubers, are female. On the Playboard website, the top 10 most subscribed vtuber channels on YouTube are mostly female vtubers, with Gawr Gura having 3.9 million subscribers as of March 2022. In comparison, the most subscribed male vtuber, Kuzuha, has 1.2 million subscribers. From these statistics alone, it could be suggested that presenting as female in the vtuber world has an advantage in terms of reaching a wider audience. However, a female avatar does not always mean that it is a real woman behind the 2-D avatar. There have been several cases, of which the most famous one being the incident when a middle-aged man turned out to be the voice behind a famous Japanese vtuber, Nora Cat (Baseel, 2018). Despite the face reveal however, there was not as much backlash due to most people being able to separate the real individual from the vtuber avatar, seeing the two as separate entities. Aside from the occasional occurrence in which the real face behind the vtuber avatar does not match the gender of the character, there are also various vtuber avatars who have no definite gender. An example would be the Japanese vtuber, Ryushen who has no specified gender and has stated in several streams that their gender does not matter (Yamatanomomochi, 2021). Other situations in which being a vtuber offers a different way to present oneself in terms of gender or sexuality is in interactions with other vtubers. Occasionally, some male and female vtubers openly mention their attraction to the same sex or have interactions with fellow same-sex vtubers that can be seen in either a romantic or sexual light. Abidin (2019) has written about homonormativity and queerbaiting online, in which she mentions how the LGBTQ+ community has grown on YouTube and that 'queerness' has been used commercially to draw in viewers. In relation to vtubers, homonormativity is a commodity that is used to draw in viewers while also offering a way of support for queer vtubers to express their own gender and sexuality safely and freely through a virtual avatar.

Being a vtuber does not simply revolve around streaming with a virtual avatar and most virtual livestreamers even craft their own lore or backstories for the character they are streaming as. When individuals are given the freedom to livestream as demons, humanised dragons and more, it is inevitable that the creators behind the avatar write up

stories to make their characters just a little more interesting. While the lengths to which each vtuber goes to comply with their lore vary, some vtubers have done projects to further cement their identity as a vtuber and their character's backstory. An example would be the Japanese vtuber, Mayuzumi Kai, who has on one occasion created a project in which he appeared on the screens of Tokyo city centre and delivered a speech on what it could mean to be 'real' (hien subs, 2021). The project further reinforced his identity as a character that exists only within the virtual world and is not an actual person. However, not every vtuber plays a character that only exists within the virtual world. There are streamers whose characters share similarities to the real person's careers. An example would be Japanese vtuber, Sukoya Kana, whose character works in a hospital. The real person behind her character is also a medical practitioner who has shown off her medical knowledge (Ethereald Clips, 2021) and recently had to take a break to focus on her medical school examinations (MofuMofu Subs, 2021). In Sukoya's case, the individual behind the character's career as a healthcare worker contributes directly to Sukoya, the character's identity. On the other hand, it is not only anonymous individuals who have chosen to livestream as vtubers. Several vtubers have also had a background as well-known figures in their careers, most often being musicians or voice actors, and have chosen to debut as vtubers. An example is singer and voice actress, AmaLee, (AmaLee, n.d.) who recently debuted as a vtuber under the name Monarch in December 2021 (Agonoy, 2021). AmaLee is a case in which both her identity as a vtuber and voice actor is public knowledge, in contrast to several other vtubers who have had background in voice acting, but have not made their past work publicly known for either privacy reasons or due to their contracts with the companies they're signed to. From these cases, it can be seen that these individuals have used the skills that they have acquired in their past and current careers to contribute to their livestreaming career. With some vtubers having had background in voice acting, previous fans of their work (in the case of AmaLee) are able to discover the individuals' new appearance as vtubers as well as their past works as voice actors and musicians. This falls in line with Abidin (2021)'s research on refracted publics, of which one of the conditions is discoverability in which the user would have to know about the content before they are able to find it. Most mainstream media users who are unfamiliar with AmaLee's past works or her career in general may not chance upon it, but those who have already known about vtubers or her as a voice actor, would be able to find her work easier. Essentially, vtubers as livestreamers have different ways of incorporating identity into their character, some

choosing to be completely separate entities and some who choose to incorporate aspects of their real identity into their character.

To conclude this paper, vtubers are individuals who play a fictional character via an avatar. This avatar allows them to enjoy the social aspect of livestreaming in which they can engage meaningfully with their audience all while keeping their real identity a secret. The virtual avatar also allows the streamer to create content surrounding the lore or theme of their character, allowing them to explore their own identity in new and creative ways. Additionally, the virtual avatar allows individuals to express their own gender identity safely in private, without worry of judgement, especially in online spaces that are more accepting of LGBTQ+ and genderfluid individuals. With these aspects in mind, it is no wonder that being vtuber holds a lot of appeal for streamers who prefer to keep their real identity a secret.

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