

Why “Virtual YouTubing” will become the most influential form of content creators in the near future.

The digital realm has given us an unlimited space and opportunities to share our interests and communicate with others who share the same interest, those who takes the lead to create contents for the wide audience are called “Internet influencer”. These influencers have their own communities, where content consumers and fans can communicate with each other, share their interests and express their support for the influencers. In 2016, a brand-new internet celebrity phenomenon called “VTubers”, short for “Virtual YouTubers” emerged and climbed the internet popularity list so fast that it is on par with normal content creators and even potentially on equal footing with traditional media entertainment. (O’Meara, 2021) I argue that “Virtual YouTubing” will become the most influential form of content creators in the near future.”

Online identity, internet influencers and Community

Before heading to the topic of “VTuber”, I would like to first identify some key terms that will be used to better understand the concept of VTuber.

The first key term is Online identity. Identity is the concept of your very own being, it is gender, age, occupation and ethnicity that will be interpreted differently when interacting with different people. It can be positive or negative, people can improve their imagery but cannot physically change their identity. Online identity is different from traditional definition of identity, because there is simply no physical face-to-face interaction and the enormous freedom of customising your identity, there is no guarantee that all the user information is true, everyone has the ability to change what cannot be physically changed in the ordinary life, no one except the user knows the truth, anyone can be anyone, even fictional identities. (Marwick, 2013)

The second key term is Community. Community is a group of people with common traits, interests or share similar ideals. Humans as social beings have the need to be accepted and recognised, with those needs satisfied we will feel comforted, loved and accepted. Cyber communities are a new type of communities born out of the creation of internet, they can be a more personalised, for the benefit of ones’ self because you do not necessarily need to contribute in cyber communities, you can be a bystander. This cause virtual communities to be default decentralised, each member starting as an audience, but it is decentralisation that creates flexibility and more possibilities. (Delanty, 2018)

The third key term is Internet influencers. Crystal Abidin defines internet influencers are “every day, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces.” (Abidin, 2015, 1st paragraph) Platforms such as YouTube, Twitch, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram are populated with these influencers, they generate contents everyday such as video gaming, fashion showcase, illustration and design, political discussions and social discussions etc, to satisfy the regular demand for contents from the existing fandom and attraction to potential new consumers.

Virtual YouTuber

A Virtual YouTuber (short form: VTuber) is a content creator that utilises digital generated anime or cartoon avatar with live motion capture technology to give a sense of physical interaction with the audience while masking the physical identity of the influencers. They focus on entertainments such as video gaming, singing, ASMR, chatting, stage performance and many more activities that can be performed in the digital realm. On paper, they are almost identical with normal streamers and other influencers alike that focuses on real time communication or entertainment production, and depends greatly on the support and loyalty of fans. (Kelts, 2021) But I argue they are not the same, more of a diverged form of content creation from normal digital influencers. VTubers enjoy privacy more than traditional media because of the fictional persona and digital model they present as VTubers, protecting them from potential identity leak or doxing and stalking, while enjoying the ability to be any character and the freedom to create any content. (Bredikhina, 2020) For fans, because of the constant emphasis on VTubers as Virtual beings, the characteristics and activities they experience with VTubers are inspired or directly taken out from the topics of anime, comics and video games. (Lu, Shen, Wigdor, Li, 2021) This allows VTubers to instantly capture the attention of consumers from these 3 interests, establishing their own decentralised small communities that pushes to create “VTuber norms” in the overall community, which will then inspire all the fans to spread awareness, in combination with VTubers’ constant appeasement through digital entertainment, allowing them to seize an impactful place on the internet.

It all started in 2016 when the very first official Virtual YouTuber debuted, her name is “Kizuna Ai” and she revolutionised the industry of streaming and pioneered the concept of a VTuber. (Kizuna Ai Inc., 2022) A lot of what is consider as norms in the VTuber industry, such as live or recorded 3D performances, scheduled streaming activities, regular singing and gaming streams, collaboration streams, utilisation of character model to show emotion, breakthrough from traditional language usage, relaxed atmosphere, encouraged audience involvements through chat function and donations, active communication with fans and community, different culture and language appreciation, involvement in professional industries such as advertisement for brands, events and organisations etc, are pioneered or inspired by her and her production team. Unfortunately, despite being in indefinite hiatus since the 26th of February 2022, (Amos, 2022) her last Live stream concert called “hello, world 2022” (Kizuna Ai, 2022) have over 2.9 million views on YouTube, the view number is solid evidence of just how appealing the idea of VTubers is to popular digital culture and should not underestimate its potential to influence the whole internet and the ordinary world.

There are two types of VTubers in the market currently: Corporate VTubers and Indie VTubers. Corporate VTubers are VTubers that are operating under an agency that offers professional supporting, managing and advertising team to the talents. Often selected by open audition, these talents are bounded by corporate law and contract, but also receive protection from company in case of any doxing and leak of real identification. (Colp, Deyo, 2020) The main leading virtual agencies in the market now are Hololive, Nijisanji and Virtual eSports Project which are mainly Japanese agencies, with Vshoujo and PRISM Project being

the English agencies. All of them from the two regions have over millions of views, and with more than 10-20 talents constantly producing content for audiences. For indie VTubers, they are self-started and sustained with all aspect of operation belong to the sole content creator, they require much more time to generate a fanbase and viewership but enjoy much more freedom in what types of content to generate and no liability to corporate limitations. The number of active VTubers have reached 16000 by the October of 2021 (Panora VR Japan, 2021), it is not just Japanese and English VTubers in the market, but also content creators from all over the world such as Indonesia, Korea, China, The Philippines and Europe all contributed greatly in popularising VTubers and generating influence and awareness in their own regions.

The current number one VTuber of all time is Gawr Gura from Hololive EN (English), with over 3.8 million subscribers, 25.5 million total views, generated A\$7,104 from Super Chat (Donations in YouTube) in the past 7 days, generated a total of A\$1.3 million from Super Chat, and finally ranked 36th place in subscriber rank in YouTube Japan. (Playboard, 2022) A another VTuber from the English agency Vshoujo called Ironmouse also have become the top streamer in Twitch with 95k active subscribers and is the top subbed female streamer in the history of Twitch. (Miceli, 2022)

These evidences they help to prove the influential power VTubers by presenting directly evidence of overall growth in activities and industry size, and the revenue generated. The great amount of profit and popularity constantly generated every day challenge and influence traditional media interactions and concepts. There is a great emphasis on VTubers being such an unconventional form of influencer but achieve being the fastest growing internet communities of the 2000s and arguably one of the most influential digital communities and content creators now.

“Unprofessional”, Strong bond with fans, and A fresh industry

There is main three reasons why “Virtual YouTubing” will become the most influential form of content creators in the near future. They are Unprofessionalism, Strong bond with fans and A fresh industry.

When we look at any kind of mass audience entertainments like TV dramas or stage shows, we expect professionalism from all of these events, but for VTubers this is hardly the case. The sense of exclusively presenting a casual entertainment give VTubers a lot of freedom and flexibility in both operation and positive imagery for consumers while also offering the fans a sense of relatability to the “celebrities”. Using the VTuber Oozora Subaru from Hololive as example, she is often joked as a “duck” by the overall community and combining with her “Tomboyish” behaviours such as screaming and shouting during streams, she is breaking the cultural stereotype of female can only be feminine, she embraces the idea of an informal identity and utilise the flexibility and support to grow closer to fans by openly acknowledging their opinions and jokes, allowing her to appeal to the fans and spread influence with her usual activities.

In the field of entertainment, fans are the most important factor and the main source of income. For the VTuber industry, translators are one of the main driving forces in

popularising these influencers. The extensive amount of translation of streams from Japanese to English in the form of highlight clips have given a chance for the overall community to catch up with the newest activities and spread awareness in and outside of the digital realm. The community of VTubers are constructed with positivity and open communication between the content creators and audiences, combining with the volunteer support from these fan translators in the community, VTubers have opened its way to become global. (Morrissy, 2020) There is also the matter of fans' loyalty which leads to rewarding experiences. A recent example would be VTuber Ouro Kronii from Hololive EN appearing in one of the billboards in NY city Time square, it was Kronii's birthday and fans booked a billboard for publicly displaying birthday cards, wishes and fan made videos to show affection to the influencer, then with Kronii openly acknowledging and thanking to the fans and community, greatly strengthen the bonds between them, expanding the compacity of the fandom and the capability to spread influence by physically appearing in ordinary life. (Busby, 2022)

VTuber is a relatively fresh industry, a lot of opportunities are still waiting to be innovated by these influencers, or further improvement of existing activates, such as offering more motion capture capability and showcase of more expressions through the digital models, bigger scale of 3D concerts and events, sponsorships, collaboration with official brands, workshops for fans or people interest in the industry and innovative goods and merchandises. One good example of utilise being a fresh industry to create more opportunities to spread awareness in the ordinary life is VTuber Yukihana Lamy from Hololive releasing her own premium brand of sake called Yuki-Yo-Zuki (雪夜月). It is a collaboration with renowned Japanese brewery Meiri Shurui (明利酒類), the sake uses the IWC2020 Gold winning "Fukushogun Daiginjo" as base, it is of the highest quality of sake that also comes custom packaging including an exclusive illustration of the VTuber and the unique light blue bottle to suit the blue colour scheme of the talent. (Moshi Moshi Nippon, 2021) Another noteworthy example would be two VTuber mascot of the professional Japanese baseball team Fukuoka SoftBank Hawks, Takamine Umi and Aritaka Hina. They have their own YouTube channel that holds commentary and live stream on official matches, and always advertising or encouraging the community to participate in the popular sport. (Fukuoka SoftBank Hawks, 2022) These two examples reflect on creative ways that VTubers can link themselves to the ordinary life, alcohol and sports are undoubtedly regular parts of daily life which connects and appeal to the audience through relatability with the mass, these official commercial sponsorships and representatives further enforce the idea that VTuber is already an official form of business and influential media.

These three explanations further develop that VTubers as not just any usual live streaming entertainment influencers or content creators, it is unique and powerful, it actively challenges stereotypes and create new ways or ideas to link itself with ordinary live activities. The industry or community strive to be recognised by the mass, barging into the ordinary live, utilising its direct relation to video games and digital pop culture, and itself being a native digital media to rapidly gain awareness and influence in both digital and physical world.

Conclusion

Through many examples presented, it is clear that VTuber aren't just a type of video game streamers anymore, they represent the identity a brand-new type of contemporary influencers, one that explore itself out of the digital realm despite being a native digital medium. No one expects the whole of VTuber community would grow so large to be featured in traditional medias such as TV shows, radio broadcasts or even the large billboards in Times Square, but it is certain that this breakthrough from a small, unprofessional and unconventional form of influencer to millions of fans, creators, translators and producers from all over the world, will continue to grow even larger and influential to the ordinary world. Virtual YouTubing will become the most influential form of content creators in the near future, or maybe it already is the most influential form content creators.

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