

Designing identity in VTuber Era.

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1. Abstract

Virtual YouTubers (VTuber) are streamers and vloggers who use 2D and 3D computer generated virtual characters and engage in creative activities on platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, Twitch. VTubers first appeared in 2017 in Japan and adopted anime-like visual characteristics. Currently there're more than 10'000 VTubers and some of them have their own TV shows or work for international companies. Based on identity formation theories, this paper sheds light on VTubers identity construction, reasons for engaging in VTubers activities and gender expression. This research provides evidence that VTubers are not avatars, differences and similarities exist between En, Fr and J-VTubers because they formulate and put into practice different criteria based on individual self-expression and community interactions.

2. Introduction

Virtual characters “provide access points in the creation of identity and social life. It is not simply that users exist as just “mind”, but instead construct their identities through avatars” (Taylor, 2002, p. 40). This research proposes a hypothesis to theorizing VTubers as a distinct group of virtual characters (beings) and not as avatars. Avatars found in *Second Life* or *VRChat* are bound to those virtual worlds (Nagy & Koles, 2014), however, VTubers are only bound to the production of creative content and entertainment for viewers on platforms such as YouTube, Twitch or Twitter, making them cross-platform and not linked to a specific virtual world. If a person does not produce creative content such as videos, singing, drawing, games streaming, he or she cannot be considered as a VTuber. Because VTubers cannot be analyzed as avatars since their existence depends on their creative activities, a new research should be conducted in order to understand VTubers and their identities. Individuals who decide to become a VTuber construct their virtual identities based on two choices: individual and communal. Individual implies that identities are built depending on how individuals want to portray themselves (Schegloff, 1992) and communal implies that individuals choose elements of identity that are most relevant in regard to specific social situations and groups of individuals (Van Langenhove, 1999).

3. Results

This survey was conducted between 07.01.2020 – 20.03.2020 with VTubers contacted in Japanese, French and English by e-mail, direct Twitter messenger and Google Form. 95 answers were submitted by majority coming from independent and amateur VTubers and some from small companies. Results that appeared in this research paper were based on spontaneous answers to each survey question and due to this paper's page restriction, only main answers to each question were provided. VTubers' answers were grouped into three categories: En-VTuber (English VTubers) with 44 answers, Fr-VTubers (French VTubers) with 4 answers and J-VTuber (Japanese VTubers) with 47 answers.

Fr, En, and J-VTubers found the appeal of being an animated character, not having to show their physical face for reasons such as privacy due to potential risks of stalking, being anyone and anything, enjoyment, community interactions and content creation. Specific to J-VTubers included

performing in an ideal form and being released from the physical body after which virtual freedom could have been acquired, becoming a 美少女 (*bishôjo* “beautiful girl”), being likeable for approval needs. The majority of all VTubers groups had a clear idea of what and how they wanted to perform their VTuber identity, some En-VTubers required time before making a decision or their initial idea evolved over time. Some J-VTubers conducted their activity without any specific thought process. Goals and purposes of Fr-VTubers and En-VTubers were to build and help grow a community, to be social and enjoy themselves, to bring positivity by creating a safe space where people could be entertained. While some J-VTubers have also listed the last two goals, other answers included knowledge transmission, business related, spreading awareness of cyberspace as a living environment. En, Fr and J-VTubers characters had specific entertainment abilities, they played games, sang, drew, talked with viewers or told stories. J-VTubers also focused on handcrafts, reading and transmitting knowledge. En and Fr V-Tubers were mostly active on Twitch and Twitter, J-VTubers were mostly active on YouTube and Twitter. Twitch was used for streaming gameplay, majority of En-VTubers who used Twitch preferred to keep their natural voice, gender and psychological identity as they spent long hours talking while streaming. YouTube allows for individuals to curate their virtual content and host live shows. On Twitch and YouTube viewers can engage with VTubers in the comment section. Fans mostly commented J-VTubers lives on YouTube and members of VTubers community or VTubers themselves commented En and Fr-VTuber lives on Twitch.

Regarding choices of psychological virtual identity, 40% En-VTubers and 31% J-VTubers chose an identity for their VTuber close to their generic identity in the physical world: they exaggerated certain aspects of it by being more positive, polite, optimistic, cute or cool, as their goal was to entertain viewers. 22% En-VTubers, 25% Fr-VTubers and 21% J-VTubers chose an identity that was exactly the same as the one in the physical world. 13% En-VTubers, 50% Fr-VTubers and 31% J-VTubers created a fictional persona, En-VTubers often constructed a backstory for their fictional character based on type of content they intended to produce, J-VTubers mentioned creating a personality that fitted character’s visual aesthetics or was decided by employer. Only 11% of J-VTubers have specified choosing an ideal persona as their VTuber identity, for example a *bishôjo*. 22% En-VTubers, 25% Fr-VTubers and 6% J-VTubers have said to possess a fictional persona and a generic identity from the physical world simultaneously, such happened when individuals created content on YouTube with their persona and streamed on Twitch with their physical world identity.

53% En-VTubers, 75% Fr-VTubers, 77% J-VTubers were of male sex and gender, 47% En-VTubers, 25% Fr-VTubers, 23% J-VTubers were of female sex and gender. Regarding choices of VTuber gender, 82% En-VTubers, 100% Fr-VTubers, 48% J-VTubers chose a VTuber character of the same gender and sex as in the physical world. For some male En and Fr-VTubers it would have been uncomfortable pretending to be a girl and it would have demanded great effort; they felt more comfortable playing a character of the same sex and gender as themselves; it was easier for them to identify to a male character. Female En and Fr-VTubers decided to keep their virtual character of the same gender and sex as theirs because female characters were cuter and more popular with viewers; it was easier to portray a female character; they found it off putting to have a female voice come out of a male character; they did not feel comfortable having to portraying a male character. 16% En-VTubers and 50% J-VTubers chose a VTuber of a different gender and sex than themselves in the physical world, all were men using female characters. In Japan, 変美肉 *babiniku* (virtual, *bishôjo*, incarnation) is the act of using a *bishôjo* character and being virtually reborn as a *bishôjo*. The term is not restricted to men, however, in this survey only men engaged in this activity. In the West “crossplay” is used when an individual uses a character of a different gender and sex. J-VTubers chose *babiniku* because they wanted to feel desired; to be released from one’s physical gender identity and social norms, and because *bishôjo* are *kawaii* (cute and loveable). 16% of En-VTubers used female characters because they found

them more appealing than male models. 2% of J and En-VTubers' characters had no gender (non-human character). No women using a male character was documented in this survey. 71% En-VTubers, 100% Fr-VTubers and 36% J-VTubers used their own voice for their virtual character, meaning that their voice and their gender matched the voice and the gender of the VTuber character. 9% En-VTubers and 24% of J-VTubers used their natural male voice on a female character. 2% En-VTubers and 2% J-VTubers were male and used a voice changer to get a male voice. 2% of J-VTubers were female and used a voice changer to get a female voice. Voice changer in both scenarios was used to distance oneself from the natural voice and to keep anonymity. 2% En-VTubers and 20% of J-VTubers were male and used a voice changer to get a female-like voice that fitted the female character. 16% En-VTubers and 16% J-VTubers engaged in voice acting — they adjusted their voice to match their VTuber character.

4. Conclusion

This research proves initial hypothesis that VTubers, unlike avatars, are directly linked to their activity as entertainers and creators by engaging in creative activities such as game streaming, singing, dancing, knowledge sharing, video and image creation. Individuals engage in VTuber activities as a way to express themselves (creative expression with content publication), use VTuber as a communication tool (knowledge sharing, business communication or research) or as a way of living (constant engagement in production of creative content and communication). VTubers enable individuals to express themselves and play with anime-like facial expressions; they are not bound by physical laws (for example VTuber can fly, become a melon, or change size and become a *bishôjo*). Current results reflect differences and similarities between En, Fr and J-VTubers identities based on community interactions and individual expression. By being part of a community, En and Fr-VTubers construct their identity accordingly: they create family-like relations between each other (some VTuber are considered to be “mother” figures), they often collaborate together on Twitch and their communal interactions lead them to adopting friendly and not distant personalities. J-VTubers are more interested in “idol” activities of VTubers, the majority interacts with their viewers in the comment sections on YouTube or Twitter. Moreover, the communal interest and adoration of *bishôjo* characters leads to groups of men playing *babiniku*. Majority of J-VTubers are male and 50% choose characters of a different gender with *bishôjo* characteristics, they become *bishôjo* by playing with visual and social codes of a *bishôjo*. These men are “rethinking” the basic issues of life: social interactions, gender codes and body because *babiniku* is an agency and a form of play to express oneself differently from social norms. With VTubers we are possibly witnessing creation of new virtual beings, a revolution in the entertainment industry on individual and professional levels. Future research will focus on adoration of anime-like female characters, prevalence of men in amateur VTuber phenomenon, lack of women using male characters, impact of “idol” culture and *bishôjo* as gender performance.

5. References

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