

VTUBERS AS ANIMATED PERFORMANCES:

BRIDGING DATABASE CONSUMPTION AND DIGITAL KINSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

Japanese animation director Oshii Mamoru famously stated, “All film is becoming animation.”¹ Today, even human beings are becoming animation. Capturing live human performances with animated virtual avatars, virtual YouTubers (VTubers) have been an increasingly significant phenomenon in digital culture since 2016, when “Kizuna AI” in Japan introduced herself via a 3D video uploaded to YouTube. Utilizing 3D modeling and motion capture technologies commonly used in short films and animation, she created a virtual character and, in reference to herself, introduced the term “VTuber.” With software and hardware advancements, more and more people are becoming part of VTubing, as content creators and/or consumers.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, VTubers experienced explosive growth. Through performances mediated using advanced motion capture technologies such as Live2D and 3D avatars, performers/creators embody fictional, anime-like characters in real-time interactions with audiences. By the end of 2022, the number of VTubers had surpassed 20,000 worldwide. The global Vtuber market was valued at USD 4,448 million in 2022 and is still growing.² However, this complex performance genre awaits academic investigation.

At the vanguard of this trend and leading the worldwide market are the Japanese enterprise Cover and its female VTuber group Hololive Production. This paper focuses on these VTubers as examples of the genre. VTubers produced by Cover and Anycolor, another Japanese company, have long accounted for over 70% of the global market’s total watch hours. Furthermore, Hololive primarily focuses on an idol-centric approach in Japan, combining live game streams with marketing strategies such as collaborations with physical businesses. For instance, on March 16–17, 2024, Hololive held its fifth festival and exposition in Japan. There were four live events in two days; each attracted 15,000 viewers worldwide, and more people watched the live streams online. Over 30,000 people attended the exposition. Hololive VTubers are becoming increasingly

integrated into the daily lives of Japanese and global audiences. Finally, Hololive has expanded its operations into Indonesian- and English-speaking markets, establishing a cross-cultural, global outreach framework.

VTubers represent a unique intersection of reality and fiction, in which human performers embody virtual avatars to create real-time, interactive experiences. Such hybrid performances blur the boundaries between physical and digital realms and reflect deeper cultural practices rooted in Japanese media consumption. Central to this phenomenon is how VTubers engage with *otaku* culture—a subculture known for its intense focus on fictional characters and their traits. Unlike traditional anime protagonists, who are bound by linear, pre-scripted narratives, VTubers operate within a more fluid, participatory framework, and their identities evolve in collaboration with fans.

Cultural critic Azuma Hiroki’s “database consumption” concept provides a critical framework for understanding how VTubers resonate with otaku sensibilities. In otaku culture, fans consume and interact with fictional characters in modular ways, focusing on distinct traits (e.g., appearance, behavior, and voice) instead of following a cohesive, linear storyline. VTubers exemplify this mode of engagement by embodying customizable traits that can be continuously remixed and reinterpreted through fan interactions. This allows VTubers’ identities to be shaped by the performer’s choices and the audience’s preferences, creating a dynamic, collaborative performance environment that reflects the database model of consumption.

Despite VTubers’ rapid growth and global popularity, research on VTubing remains limited. Existing research primarily focuses on audience reception, quantitative analyses of VTuber content, and the technical aspects of virtual performances.³ However, critical aspects of VTuber culture (e.g., the intersection of emotional labor, virtual identity formation, and the hybrid nature of VTubers as both animated characters and human-driven performances) have been largely overlooked. This paper seeks to fill this gap by examining how VTubers function as a form of *animated performance* that blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction. It focuses on the emotional labor required to sustain these digital personas and explores how audience interactions shape their evolving identities, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of VTubers as a media phenomenon and a new form of digital kinship. Furthermore, it addresses this hybrid performance’s ethical and cultural implications, offering insights into the sustainability of VTubers’ emotional labor and global cultural significance.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: FROM DATABASE CONSUMPTION TO DIGITAL IDENTITY

Although VTubers are a new media development, they are deeply rooted in existing cultural practices. VTubers mainly engage with Japanese otaku culture because they thrive on the consumption of and engagement with fictional characters. To understand VTubers as animated performances and their significance, I draw on Azuma's database consumption concept, which offers a critical framework for analyzing otaku engagement with VTuber characters.

In his influential work on Japanese otaku culture,⁴ Azuma argues from a postmodern viewpoint that contemporary Japanese consumers, particularly otaku (people who consume specific types of subculture), engage with characters in modular ways. Namely, they focus on specific traits, appearance elements, or behaviors instead of engaging with characters in relation to traditional, linear narratives. VTubers exemplify this phenomenon in ways that resonate with otaku sensibilities by embodying various anime archetypes ranging from “idol” personas to *kawaii* (cute) aesthetics. By integrating human interactions with these selected character traits, VTubers represent a continuation of existing cultural engagements with fictional characters. The specific manifestations of these engagements in the digital age are relevant to the critical question of how human beings evolve via technology. For example, Tsunomaki Watame's use of Live2D to emphasize *kawaii* traits through limited facial expressions and subtle gestures (Fig. 1) highlights how VTubers selectively focus on specific, recognizable elements to generate audience engagement. This example illustrates how VTubers operate within Azuma's database model, enabling fans to interact with familiar character traits in nonlinear, customizable ways, transforming these traits into evolving identities that reflect performer input and fan preferences.



Figure 1. Tsunomaki Watame, “Ver3.0 ohiro-me: Tsui ni are o miseru toki ga kita ka...!”

While Azuma provides insights into the broader cultural consumption of VTubers, Nanba Yūki's "three bodies" framework facilitates an exploration of the complex identity formation involved in VTuber performances—specifically, how the human performer and the digital character interact to create a media persona. Nanba describes VTubers in terms of "three bodies": the "person" (the human performer), the "fictional character" (the avatar), and the "media persona" (the human-character representation emerging from the interaction between these two elements).⁵ In this framework, the VTuber is viewed as a media entity connected to, yet separate from, the performer based on the avatar's presentation. This concept underscores the complexity of VTubers' digital identity as neither entirely human nor purely fictional but a hybrid creation shaped by both.

Building on this, Yamano Hiroki's "moderate independence" concept further clarifies the relationship between performers and avatars by suggesting that, while the human performer is essential to the VTuber's identity, the digital persona takes on a life of its own from the audience's perspective. The VTuber's moderate independence emerges from the interaction between these two entities, as the audience increasingly perceives the avatar as a distinct, autonomous figure. This allows for a hybrid identity co-constructed by performers and fans while maintaining enough separation to invite audience participation. This hybrid identity is not simply a fusion of human and virtual traits; rather, it is a dynamic configuration shaped by performer agency, fan interactivity, and platform constraints. It represents a model of identity co-authored across both human and nonhuman registers. These theories collectively illustrate how VTubers navigate the tension between human agency and the performative freedom of the avatar, ultimately creating an identity that exists at the intersection of reality and fiction.

From theoretical analysis to legal practice, defining the relationship between performers and avatars remains challenging. Discussions largely focus on the opposition between reality and virtuality. In English academia, media studies research on VTubers focuses on quantitative analysis and audience reception, centering on performers. Although people notice the interwoven tension between fiction and reality in VTuber performances, the latter draws greater scholarly attention. Manting Chen and Rocco Juanlei Hu's recent studies on VTubers interpret VTuber performances as "partially embodied" media.⁶ After analyzing 300 videos, they conclude that, while VTubers perform characters according to Japan's otaku cultural features (e.g., *kawaii*), human actors employ various strategies to reveal their physical appearance and break the image of a character—"virtual breaking."⁷ In other words, Chen and Hu propose that VTubers represent a "partially embodied" media form, emphasizing that human revelation prioritizes physical embodiment. In contrast, I

contend that the essence of VTuber performance lies in its animated construction. In this context, the expressive limitations of Live2D and the aesthetics of limited animation define a novel kind of performative embodiment—one based on digital mediation rather than physical visibility.

Thus, in contrast to Chen and Hu's conclusion, I focus on the essential characteristics of VTubing as an "animated performance." Although I agree with Teri J. Silvio's view of animation as a mode of performance that emphasizes human labor,⁸ in studying VTubers, I find performance in its general sense of embodiment and anime as moving images to be vague but helpful descriptions. In reference to this gap, I aim to unravel the complexity inherent in VTuber performances.

VTUBERS AS ANIMATED PERFORMANCES: BRIDGING FICTION AND REALITY

Examining what distinguishes VTuber performances from traditional anime is essential. This involves exploring how VTubers engage audiences in real time, generating emergent, interactive narratives. Derived from the genre's technological base, VTubing is considered a type of animated performance. VTuber performances fundamentally entail integrating advanced motion capture technologies and animation software to transform real-time human actions into animated avatars. For example, Live2D and 3D motion capture technologies are often used in VTuber performances to enable performers to embody anime-style characters with various interactivity levels. Live2D is widely used due to its low cost and ability to render 2D characters in real time. Using it, performers can present an avatar with fluid, visually appealing facial expressions and movements. As Figure 1 shows, the VTuber uses motion lines to emphasize the sense of movement and undergird the 2D character's appearance. 3D motion capture provides a more immersive experience and human-like performance but requires more sophisticated equipment (Fig. 2). This technology is often limited to professional VTubers with access to specialized studios.



Figure 2. Tsunomaki Watame, “Tsunomaki Watame 2nd Live: Watame Night Fever!! In Tokyo Garden Theater; Teaser Movie.”

Live2D enables 2D animated characters to move fluidly while retaining the aesthetic charm of anime. However, despite this characteristic fluidity, Live2D avatars have limited motion capabilities, emphasizing facial expressions and small body movements over full, dynamic motion. This limitation aligns closely with the “limited animation” concept, a hallmark of Japanese anime. As Thomas Lamarre notes, the limited animation in Japanese anime involves limiting the number of frames to suggest movement, thereby creating an aesthetic that emphasizes “movement on and between surfaces” or what Lamarre calls the “animetic interval.”⁹ This technique focuses on keyframes and moments of heightened expression rather than continuous, fluid movement.

The limited movement that Live2D offers VTubers similarly relies on minimal, selective motion to convey emotion and personality. The avatar’s static elements are punctuated by expressive facial changes and small gestures, creating a rhythmic performance that mirrors the expressive economy of limited animation. Lamarre’s discussion of the animetic interval helps facilitate an understanding of how VTuber avatars, despite their limited movement, generate expressive performances. By focusing on small, meaningful gestures (e.g., a tilt of the head, a facial expression shift, or an eye movement), VTubers can evoke a wide range of emotions and actively engage an audience (Fig. 3). This technique is highly influential in live streamed interactions, which often center on verbal communication and immediate responses to audience feedback rather than on elaborate physical movements.



Figure 3. In the common collaboration of singing. Tsunomaki Watame is on the right. She is famous for her mouth, which is said to be shaped like Mount Fuji (AZKi Channel, “Uta-waku: koyoi wa watame AZKi Night Fever!!”).

Furthermore, most of Hololive’s VTubers use animated images for their opening music and ending scenes. This convention can be seen as evoking an animatic introduction for VTuber performances,¹⁰ and this anime quality of VTubing defines its essence. Overall, a VTuber’s appearance functions as a filter to cover human performers. A VTuber’s animetic intervals, which usually face the viewers, allow the viewers to project their imagination onto the streams. The limited images thus invite free interpretations and serve as an interface that brings other media forms to the audience.

Unlike anime protagonists, VTubers are not simply virtual characters acting out pre-scripted narratives. Instead, their performances are emergent, shaped by real-time interactions with each other and their audience. Performer input and audience engagement contribute to the development of the VTuber’s character. Thus, VTuber performances markedly differ from traditional anime, particularly regarding narrative structure and audience interactions. Anime typically features a pre-established narrative with defined characters, worldbuilding, and a linear progression. In contrast, VTubers operate in open-ended performance environments. Although their characters may have simple backstories, they are not guided by predetermined plots. Instead, the “story” emerges over time through continuous improvisation and audience interactions.

Houshou Marine, Hololive’s highly popular third-generation VTuber with over 3.4 million subscribers, is a prominent example. Although the performer is over 30 years old, the avatar is a 17-year-old girl who dreams of becoming a pirate. The “age difference” functions as a running joke in her interactions with the audience. For example, during live streams, Marine often comments that she is in her “second round of being 17.” The performer has sometimes acted as the “78-year-

old Marine” from a parallel world, humorously using her life experience to answer audience questions (Fig. 4).

Such audience interactions and the significant resources invested in producing high-quality animated music videos (MVs) contribute to Marine’s immense popularity. In these MVs, the performer continually adds layers to Marine’s character story. For instance, in *Marine Set Sail!!* (2022), Marine embarks on an adventure to obtain her own pirate ship; in *I’m Your Treasure Box: You Have Found Captain Marine in a Treasure Chest* (2022), Marine seeks and finds hidden treasure; and in *Dead Ma’am’s Chest*, Marine opens a treasure chest only to encounter the ghost of another version of herself inside (Fig. 5). These MVs depict an ambiguous world, combining Marine’s character background with the song lyrics and animated performances and thus expanding the audience’s imaginative space regarding her representation and further possibilities as a VTuber.



Figure 4. Houshou Marine, “Marine senchō 78-sai: Sexy Boomer Grandma Marine.”



Figure 5. Houshou Marine, “Original Anime MV: Yuureisen sen.”

The relationship between these MV narratives and Marine is open to audience interpretation. The songs are not “autobiographical.” Instead, Marine functions as an anime actor who performs in various MVs. Thus, a VTuber evolves every time a new presentation adds to the character’s image, development, and possible future trajectories. This emergent, collaborative, and ongoing storytelling is central to understanding the distinct nature of VTuber performances. These real-time interactions transform VTuber narratives into an emergent, collaborative process in which the performer and the audience work together to co-create the character’s story. Fans also contribute by offering live feedback during streams, creating fan art or fiction, and generating community-driven storylines. Consequently, the performer and the audience co-construct the VTuber’s identity and story. This participatory dynamic distinguishes VTubers from traditional anime protagonists, whose stories are dictated by writers and animators. Hence, the participatory nature of VTuber

storytelling aligns closely with Azuma's database consumption concept.

VTubers' fans, similar to those in otaku culture, do not engage with them through a traditional linear narrative but by consuming segmental elements that form a "database" of character traits, behaviors, and styles that are remixable and revisited over time.¹¹ The story emerging from a VTuber performance is not a central driving force but a byproduct of repeated interactions with these familiar elements from the database. VTubers' personalities grow through engagement, rendering them more dynamic than traditional anime characters. Essentially, VTubing becomes a database that brings various media to its viewers; this database should not be considered stable and flat but dynamic and contingent.

Furthermore, VTubers embody a hybrid identity that merges the boundaries between the human performer and the digital character, contributing to a new understanding of character embodiment in animated media. In exploring VTubing culture, I assume that VTubers' technical sophistication enables a unique blurring of reality and fictionality. VTubers create an animated performance space where the human performer and the digital avatar exist in a dynamic relationship.

On the one hand, this performance inherits and represents the very nature of anime. "Plasmaticity," as Lamarre suggests, is anime's ability to transform and adapt in response to human input and the audience.¹² The concept of plasmaticity—animation's capacity to transcend fixed forms—elucidates the process by which VTubers adopt mutable characteristics throughout their performances, thereby transforming their personas in real time without the physical constraints of human embodiment. This supports the assertion that VTuber characters are inherently modular, evolving as a result of the interplay of technological affordances and performer choices (Fig. 6). Specifically, human performers are limited by their own physicality, whereas VTubers—based on the visual and audio flexibility typically associated with animated media—can adopt exaggerated expressions, change costumes instantaneously, and even transform (i.e., appear entirely different from frame to frame). These abilities can create a multilayered viewing experience that blends entertainment and cultural expression with emotional support.

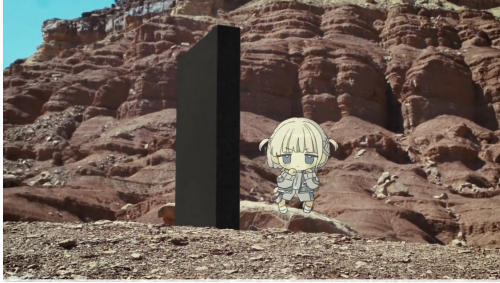


Figure 6. Note the deformation of the character and the meme that “imitates” *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Todoroki Hajime, “Bancho”).

On the other hand, a VTuber’s animated appearance “ages” and personality “changes.” For example, in Hololive zero-generation AZKI’s new image revealing live, bygone outfits are shown with their dates passing in the background (Figs. 7 and 8). Cover previously positioned AZKI as a virtual diva. Now, while maintaining her role as a singer, she has discovered a talent for *GeoGuessr*, a game of guessing places on Google Maps. She also follows her fans’ requests to act *yandere* (i.e., to appear psychologically unwell) behavior and makes situational ASMR performances. Thus, the interaction between the company, the VTuber, and the audience creates a two-way emotional bond. This approach also underscores the emotional labor of VTuber performers, who must convey a full range of emotions with limited physical movement, additionally employing voice modulation and real-time engagement to maintain emotional authenticity. Thus, limited animation not only aligns with VTuber storytelling but also amplifies the emotional labor inherent in sustaining these digital personas.

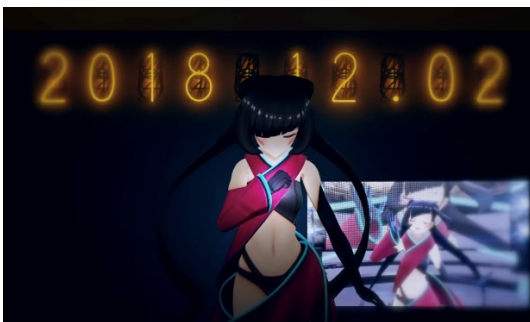


Figure 7. “#AZKi shin bijuaru ohiro-me: 4th Anniversary Live ‘Pages’ katsudō yonshūnen kinen raibu.”



Figure 8. “#AZKi shin bijuaru ohiro-me: 4th Anniversary Live ‘Pages’ katsudō yonshūnen kinen raibu.”

This transformed narrative structure reflects broader trends in digital culture, with fan collaboration and database consumption driving character development. Tracing the development of this Japanese subculture reveals that character-driven creations have a famous ancestor—Hatsune Miku, the software of “Vocaloid,” which inspired thousands of creators and derivative works worldwide. However, she is at the extreme end of the spectrum: Her character is created entirely by audience-supplied content.¹³ VTubers find a balance between humans and anime. Through their unique narrative structure, VTubers challenge conventional understandings of storytelling and demonstrate how engagement between performers and fans can shape virtual identities. This combination of real-time interaction and modular character consumption allows VTubers to embody human spontaneity and the repeatable, recognizable traits of anime archetypes, blending these into a distinctive form of digital performance. Japanese otaku culture has essentially become an immense global database. VTubers’ animated performances contribute to a new converging node in which the ecology of Japanese otaku culture is available to viewers constantly. Cultural elements and affective companionship interweave in VTubing.

CULTURAL AND GLOBAL SIGNIFICANCE: VTUBERS AS TRANSMEDIA PHENOMENA

VTubers’ cultural and global significance can also be better understood through Henry Jenkins’s “transmedia storytelling” and “convergence culture” concepts. By existing across multiple media platforms, VTubers represent a form of content that transcends traditional boundaries. Essentially, VTubers are not merely performers confined to the digital space; they represent a dynamic and evolving form of digital media that transcends traditional boundaries, expanding across multiple platforms and global cultures. In Jenkins’s convergence culture, content flows across multiple media platforms, and audiences are encouraged to participate in shaping and expanding the narrative.¹⁴ VTubers also exemplify Jenkins’s idea of transmedia storytelling, in which multiple platforms contribute to expanding a character’s narrative.¹⁵ According to Jenkins, “reading across the media sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption.”¹⁶

VTubers epitomize this convergence of platforms, operating not only across live streaming sites (e.g., YouTube and Twitch) and social media platforms (e.g., Twitter and Reddit) but also in physical spaces, as demonstrated by a recent collaboration with Major League Baseball’s Los Angeles Dodgers. On July 5, 2024, Hololive JP’s VTubers Usada Pekora and Hoshimachi Suisei and Hololive EN’s Gawr Gura appeared at Dodger Stadium for “Hololive Night,” featured on giant

screens (Fig. 9). Hololive symbols and these performers also appeared as part of a postgame drone performance (Fig. 10). After the top of the seventh inning, Gawr Gura sang “Take Me Out to the Ball Game,” a traditional American baseball anthem—a moment VTuber and baseball cultures met. This collaboration marked the convergence of Japanese digital idols with US sports culture, demonstrating VTubing’s fluidity in crossing media platforms and cultural boundaries.



Figure 9. Hololive Production (English) (@hololive_EN), “‘hololive Night’ at Dodger Stadium.”



Figure 10. Hololive Production (English) (@hololive_EN), “A Big THANK YOU to Everyone Who Joined Us for ‘Hololive Night’ at Dodger Stadium.”

This event highlighted the essence of convergence culture (i.e., the intersection of distinct media forms), with a VTuber performance meeting live sports entertainment and leading to different fanbases interacting with and expanding on the content. Baseball fans, many of whom had likely been unfamiliar with VTubers, were introduced to Hololive; existing Hololive fans saw their favorite characters transcend their usual digital confines and enter the physical world of sports. This convergence of audiences expands the reach and cultural impact of both the Dodgers and Hololive, creating a hybrid fanbase.

The convergence of multiple platforms and cultural forms ties into Azuma’s database consumption theory. In otaku culture, fans consume and remix character elements, choosing and reengaging with specific characteristics that resonate with them. VTubers embody this concept through their performative flexibility. Each VTuber adopts prefabricated traits that appeal to their fanbase, such as Gura’s playful personality or Pekora’s chaotic but endearing charm. These traits are consumed and expanded across platforms, from YouTube and social media to fan art communities, where fans creatively remix and reinterpret these traits.

Lamarre accurately states, “Transmedia storytelling is nothing new.”¹⁷ The drone images in Figure 10 evoke an old hallmark of anime: *senga* (line art). The key is that old and new technologies converge for consumers. Hololive Night demonstrates VTubers’ capacity for creating integrated characters that can fit seamlessly into a wide range of contexts, from digital live streams to live sports entertainment. The convergence of these platforms affords fans opportunities to engage with VTubers in a fragmented, participatory manner. They can consume traits from the database of VTuber personas across different media and contribute to their development. Jenkins’s emphasis on participatory culture thus intersects with Azuma’s database model, as both highlight fan agency’s role in expanding the narrative and the emotional connection with characters.

The integration of VTubers into various media also reflects Marc Steinberg’s concept of the “media mix,” in which characters move fluidly across different platforms, thereby enhancing audience engagement and expanding their cultural footprint. According to Steinberg, anime characters and narratives often span multiple media platforms, allowing for integrated consumption and interaction.¹⁸ VTubers operate similarly, as their performances are not confined to their live streams. Instead, their personas operate across various platforms, including social media, music releases, and fan-driven content (e.g., fan art and memes). In Hololive media mix projects such as “holoWitch” and “hololive ERROR,” VTuber characters exist in other worlds and media, such as anime, comics, and games. Steinberg’s analysis of the media mix highlights how VTubers, similar to anime characters, function as modular entities whose limited on-screen motion is only one part of their overall media presence. This transmedia engagement supports VTubers in cultivating a robust digital presence despite Live2D animation’s technical limitations.

An outstanding example is the work of Juufeetei Raden, a member of the Hololive DEV_IS group ReGLOSS. Juufeetei, who holds an art curator license, presents live streams that are widely recognized for sharing knowledge related to art history (Fig. 11). Her character’s role as an apprentice in Japanese *rakugo* (comic storytelling) is also considered part of the performer’s real identity. Given her streams’ cultural and artistic content, which is a rare focus among VTubers, Juufeetei permeates the lives of Japanese people in a differentiated manner simply by sharing knowledge. For example, Juufeetei recommends several literary books each month, and many bookstores in Japan have capitalized on her reputation by offering special sections with these titles. She has also collaborated with museums by, for example, voicing guided tours. Her performance attracts people from communities beyond otaku culture such that she has become an accessible database of sorts for Japan’s art sector.

In her MV *Mirai no Museum* (Future Museum), a combination of animated images and spot scenes generate an experience of “virtual tourism,” to borrow Okamoto Takeshi’s expression (Fig. 12).¹⁹ Okamoto uses virtual tourism to describe only VTubers’ game streams, in which a gaming world becomes a shared space for VTubers and viewers, but I view the entire ecology of VTubers as extending people’s reality. As a new form of performance, VTubers’ animated images have already added another layer to our reality with a technocultural ambience. In this sense, virtual tourism indicates the overall content of VTubers’ streams.



Figure 11. The official profile describes Raden as an art enthusiast (Hololive Production, “Juufuutei Raden”).



Figure 12. Juufuutei Raden, “#ReGLOSS3D ライブ: Mirai no Museum/Perfume; cover.”

Juufuutei’s case reflects the complexity of VTubing as animated performances. As mentioned previously, unlike typical animated characters, VTuber characters do not develop through pre-scripted stories, relying instead on the character database. VTubers are even more complex because the database they create is not confined to fictional, 2D data. Instead, their animated performances continuously absorb elements of reality, thereby connecting to and strengthening Japan’s otaku culture.

Juufuutei’s popularity is largely limited to Japan. However, VTubing has transcended Japanese boundaries to become a global presence. Through contemporary virtual technology, this industry transcends physical geographical boundaries, thus becoming both “local” and “global.” Cover’s CEO, Tanigou Motoaki, suggests that he took “Airbnb” as a paradigm of the business model.²⁰ He evokes the image of home and sharing—ideas that support my aforementioned argument of seeing VTubers as portals bringing Japan’s otaku culture database to a worldwide audience. As such, Cover collaborates with other enterprises and continues to hold worldwide fan

meetings.

Animated and transmedia performances shape VTubing’s unique vitality and help explain its circulation worldwide. Conceptually, space is crucial for understanding VTubing. While a few VTubers produce virtual spaces via platforms such as VRChat (Fig. 13), the standard practice is a “personal room” that links VTubers and their audiences (Fig. 14).

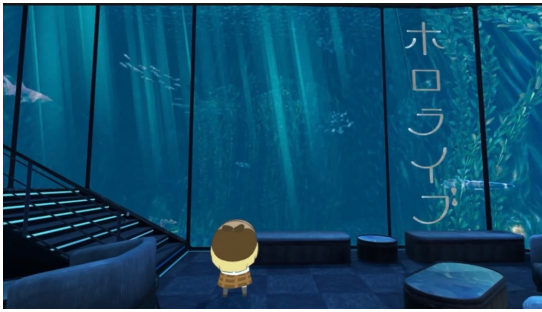


Figure 13. The Holo Aquarium on VRChat (Watson Amelia Ch. hololive-EN, “Charity Stream: 🐠 Ame 4 Ocean Conservation🐠🐡🐢🐡”).



Figure 14. Tsunomaki Watame’s room (Tsunomaki Watame, “Zatsudan & orei: GTA8 ni m...are?”).

A VTuber’s room is not constructed through traditional geometric perspective but rather through layered compositing—a spatial logic rooted in digital aesthetics and ambient media. The visual scene consist of discrete, interdependent planes: a stylized background that evokes domestic intimacy, a foreground avatar animated in real-time; and scrolling viewer comments that occupy an additional semi-transparent layer. This spatial configuration reflects what Paul Roquet describes in *Ambient Media* as a mode of “soft fascination in shallow depth,”²¹ wherein affective immersion is achieved through the ambient interplay of surfaces rather than perspective depth. Rather than simulating a three-dimensional environment, VTuber staging organizes space using what Thomas Lamarre refers to as “distributed layers”²²—co-existing visual layers that support modular, recombinant performances without requiring continuity of depth or volume. This layered structure parallels Lamarre’s notion of the animetic interval, in which expressive potential emerges from the friction of temporally and spatially disjointed frames. In this sense, VTuber environments constitute ambient, affect-laden fields in which human performance and digital aesthetics converge—not by “dwelling in an arithmetical space metaphysically,” but by occupying a layered compositional field that is affective, relational, and media-specific.

VTubers' space and people's reality co-constitute each other. They are connected via digital online devices, such as smartphones, tablets, and smart TVs, which function as portals that allow VTubers' animated performances to create an "ambience," in Roquet's sense of people's reality. Based on Foucault's analysis of the self and biopolitics, Roquet argues that Japan's long tradition of "reading the air," following the standard of neoliberalism, has become a self-regulation technique.²³ Personal media, according to Roquet, generate ambience for configuring one's somatic conditions and adjusting the self to adhere to the needs of neoliberal capitalism.²⁴ Paradoxically, ambient media have a healing effect on a person.²⁵ Roquet focuses on this tension in Japan's ambient media progress. Building on this idea, I contend that VTubing is an evolving ambient media form. Through digital portals, the ambience created by VTubers can actively enliven people's temporal space. This gateway logic has been accompanied by the spread of Japan's otaku culture and has incited transnational interest in VTubers, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During this period, many people sought online companionship without in-person social interactions. VTubers offered a form of emotional solace that was accessible and personalized, coupled with an ability to rewrite reality; these contributed to VTubers' rapid rise in popularity. The animated nature of VTuber performances enables VTuber characters to move between virtual cyberspace and the human material space. Essentially, VTubers push the intertwining logic of reality and fiction to the extreme. Consequently, VTubers served as a locus of change between virtuality and reality before and during the pandemic, and they continue to do so at present. In general, VTuber characters become integrated into fans' daily lives through various forms of technological enhancement. People have largely returned to their normal lives in the postpandemic age; yet, interest in VTubing continues to grow, though the pace of industry growth has slowed down. However, the ongoing global popularity of this genre remains understudied.

EMOTIONAL LABOR AND DIGITAL KINSHIP: THE ETHICS OF VIRTUAL PERFORMANCE

The emotional labor required to sustain VTuber performances raises significant ethical concerns, particularly when considering the intense, ongoing demands placed on performers to maintain a consistent virtual persona. Donna Haraway's "companion species" concept offers a valuable lens for understanding the emotional reciprocity between VTuber performers and their audiences. Just as companion species evolve through mutual relationships, VTubers develop as hybrid digital-

human entities through their emotional labor, which is central to maintaining their connection with fans. As Hololive's official site states, "A new everyday, together."²⁶ The audience's emotional investment in a VTuber creates a feedback loop; the performer must continuously engage with and respond to fan interactions, often blurring the line between personal well-being and professional obligation. This dynamic complicates the performer's relationship with their digital persona, as they must constantly negotiate between the demands of maintaining a fictional avatar and their own emotional health.

Ex-VTuber performer Mashiro Yurino discusses the mental toll of this emotional labor, which leads many performers to retire early or take extended breaks.²⁷ Furthermore, according to sociologist Okamoto Takeshi, based on his own experiences developing a VTuber, the numbers matter. For instance, channel subscriptions and live stream viewer counts influence the performer's emotions.²⁸ The resulting ethical implications are significant. Unlike actors or musicians in traditional settings, VTubers are expected to engage with their fans more personally and continuously, as this creates a large part of their performance content. This blurs the boundaries between work and personal life for the performers and exposes them to potential harassment and emotional strain. Hence, in recent years, VTuber companies such as Cover and Anycolor have collaborated to create a legal team that takes action on behalf of performers whose VTubers have been subject to slander, for example. Nevertheless, this does not guarantee a safe zone for a performer; the mutual care between VTubers and their audiences is indispensable.

Although Sherry Turkle recognizes that digital entities satisfy people's emotional needs, she worries that the lack of reciprocity, which exists in human relationships, causes loneliness.²⁹ However, in the case of VTubers, the animetic interval of VTubers' images offers room to reveal the existence of a human performer. The latency of VTubers' moving images results from human operators and relevant technologies. Yet, the performing condition and animatic nature of VTuber performances create a double-layered buffer zone that guarantees the critical aesthetic distance of the viewing experience, whereby the audience is aware of and separated from the human performer. From this mutually established relationship, consistent companionship provides the audience with an empathetic base for forming digital kinship. The audience can determine whether to build this kinship and communicate with the "family persons." This process is empowering because one can live without the constraint of consanguinity. VTuber fans may be alone in front of a device, but they are not lonely.

The emotional labor involved in VTuber performances also relates to their role as digital

companions. Haraway's "companion species" and Deborah Lupton's digital identity³⁰ concepts help reveal how VTubers foster emotionally rich, reciprocal relationships with their audiences. In both frameworks, VTuber performances are seen as establishing complex emotional and relational dynamics that blur the boundaries between human and digital entities.

Haraway developed the companion species theory to explore the interdependent relationships between humans and other species, arguing that human-animal interactions are not hierarchical but mutually constitutive.³¹ Humans and companion species co-evolve through emotional, cultural, and material exchanges.³² However, unlike animals, VTubers exist in a liminal and technological space, where their identity is a hybrid of human and digital elements. As a medium between real humans and fictional characters, VTubers are constituted by the immediacy of live performance and the archival capacity of recorded content. Essentially, VTubers' hybridity means humans can call on their performance—or even company—at any time. VTubers' archival nature allows them to be seen as a new type of companion species. Although VTubers are digital entities, audiences can form deep emotional connections with them, surely in part because audience interactions influence VTubers' narratives. These connections are not one-sided but are built on mutual emotional engagement.

It is essential, as Haraway states, to recognize "that one cannot fully *know* the other or the self"; thus, one must always ask, "Who and what are emerging in relationship?"³³ Conceptually, following Haraway's theoretical trajectory, VTubers' potential as a companion species prefigures her later call to "Make Kin Not Babies!"³⁴ Deviating from standard anthropocentric thinking, Haraway suggests that kinship is about creating "persons" and that kin can be of different "kinds."³⁵ Thus, VTubers resemble Haraway's notion of "persons," as they are not entirely equivalent to "human" beings but serve as a companion species establishing emotional connections with others (e.g., performers and audiences).

While posthumanist theory is far from monolithic, this paper adheres to Haraway's relational approach. This perspective contrasts with N. Katherine Hayles's posthumanism, which emphasizes cognitive nonconsciousness and distributed systemic intelligence. In *How We Became Posthuman*, Hayles focuses on the material-informational substrate of embodiment rather than affect.³⁶ Simultaneously, her subsequent work *Unthought* proposes that meaning and response frequently emerge from nonconscious systems involving both human and nonhuman agents.³⁷ Although Hayles's framework is essential for comprehending the algorithmic structures and machinic cognition that underpin digital media environments, Haraway's emphasis on emotional labor,

mutual care, and interspecies kinship more effectively captures the dynamics of VTuber performances. VTubers are not merely cybernetic systems or data processors; they evolve as affective entities within a shared emotional investment feedback loop. This entangled, relational evolution enables VTubers to function as a novel type of posthuman kin—hybrid beings co-constructed through digital mediation and collective care.

From this perspective, VTubers are alternative selves, evolving in a digital environment and interacting with humans in a web of relationships. Humans and VTubers accompany each other, reflecting on various forms of human existence (including the performer and the audience). Hence, VTubers more closely resemble a cross-species interaction—a virtual kinship created by humans through digital technology. This process of creating kinship is bidirectional rather than a one-way consumption led by the audience.

This emotional reciprocity reflects Haraway's idea of "co-constitution," with VTubers, creators, and audiences shaping each other's emotional states and growing together. Such mutual construction aligns with Lupton's idea that digital technologies are not passive tools but co-creators of identity.³⁸ Lupton posits that digital identity is not a static profile but rather a performative, co-constructed practice manifested through various technological interfaces.³⁹ In the context of VTubers, this identity formation unfolds through layers of performance, platformed affect, and real-time feedback loops—rendering the VTuber's persona a site of negotiation between human input and algorithmic visibility. Similar to social media users or people who engage in self-tracking, VTubers use digital platforms to embody a version of themselves that is co-constructed with technology. Essentially, a VTuber's identity is shaped by human input from two sources: the performer and the audience, as mediated through digital technology's capacities and limitations. This process reflects Lupton's argument that physical and digital selves become intertwined in identity performance.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Lupton's work on people's emotional relationships with their digital technologies—such as self-tracking devices and social media platforms—parallels the emotional bonds between VTubers and their audiences. VTuber fans engage with avatars from phones or tablets as though these are companions.

VTubers and their fans form relational connections resembling the emotional attachments people develop with everyday digital artifacts. For example, many Hololive VTubers assign names to their fans or design official avatars for them. From the performer's perspective, this is an attempt to establish kinship with the audience, and it is entirely up to viewers whether they become fans of a VTuber. For instance, paying for memberships is one way in which viewers express themselves

as fans and support the performer in developing the VTuber further.

An extreme case was Hololive VTuber Shishiro Botan's 2024 birthday event, which was a challenge to the Guinness World Records. Shishiro, in collaboration with Cover staff, Nissin Food, and 400 Hololive fans (including her fans named SSRB), took two days and used over 30,000 cups of noodles to spell "Shishiro Botan" (Figs. 15 and 16), successfully breaking the previous record of 10,005. Shishiro states the rationale for this event: She noticed that typical streams became a tedious routine; therefore, she needed to do something she was passionate about.⁴¹ VTubers are not simply passive entities waiting for their audiences. They actively communicate with their fans even in the real world.



Figure 15. Shishiro's greeting (Shishiro Botan, "#Shishiro Botan seitansai 2024: Rāmen de Ginesu sekai kiroku o mezasu! Menya Botan sekai shin kiroku e no michi").

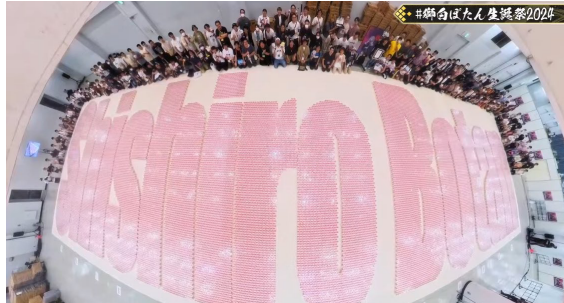


Figure 16. The result (Shishiro Botan, "#Shishiro Botan seitansai 2024: Rāmen de Ginesu sekai kiroku o mezasu! Menya Botan sekai shin kiroku e no michi").

Fans also appear in pre-scripted performances. For example, the "holoWitch" media mix project includes anime and manga, with VTubers enacting *mahou shoujo* (magical girls) and a live performance integrating anime with a stage show. In the climactic battle, fans' messages empower the *mahou shoujo* (Figs. 17 and 18). Through this continuing companionship created via audience-influenced performances, VTubers and fans' bonds strengthen. This digital kinship echoes the companion species concept, in which the relational dynamic between humans and digital entities creates a new form of kinship.



Figure 17. VTuber acts as a mahou shoujo (Hololive ホロライブ, “3D Live: Mahō shōjo Horo Witch! The stage”).



Figure 18. Floating screens are fans’ messages offered to support the performance (Hololive ホロライブ, “3D Live: Mahō shōjo Horo Witch! The stage”).

VTubers complicate the traditional boundaries of digital performance by existing in a liminal space between human and nonhuman as well as reality and fiction. Haraway’s concept of “making kin” helps frame VTubers as a new form of companion species, evolving alongside their audiences in a reciprocal relationship. Unlike social media influencers (whose identities are tied directly to their physical selves) or AI companions (which lack the human input that shapes emotional connections), VTubers operate as hybrid forms combining human emotional labor with digital personas. This unique configuration allows VTubers to forge digital kinship with their audiences in ways that blur the line between the performer and the character. While social media influencers rely on authenticity to build relationships with followers, VTubers achieve a similar emotional connection through the performative distance provided by their avatars. AI companions, though capable of simulating emotional responses, lack the complex co-construction of identity that VTubers and their audiences engage in. The interplay between performers, technology, and audiences in VTuber performances exemplifies a posthumanist vision of digital kinship, in which identity is fluid, co-constructed, and continuously evolving. VTubers—similar to “the quantified self,”⁴² a means of monitoring and shaping selves suggested by Lupton—exist as prefabricated entities that can be adapted, curated, and interacted with across different media platforms. Their identity is not static but evolves in response to audience engagement. This complexity challenges conventional understandings of identity, agency, and companionship in digital spaces, offering a highly nuanced view of how digital entities participate in human emotional ecosystems.

CONCLUSION

The concepts of hybrid identity, plasmaticity, and digital identity collectively underscore the

contribution of the tension between embodiment and abstraction to VTuber performances. Although human performers are essential, their agency is filtered through animated media's visual and affective constraints, resulting in a modular, adaptive persona that exemplifies the logic of database consumption and the emotional demands of digital kinship. Rather than simply simulating life, VTubers articulate a novel mode of partially embodied animation shaped by technological constraints, cultural frameworks, and collective meaning-making.

This paper contributes to existing scholarship by expanding the understanding of VTubers as a hybrid form of digital performance intersecting with key theories of posthumanism, emotional labor, and transmedia storytelling. It examines VTubers through Azuma's database consumption concept to provide new insights into how these virtual personas facilitate modular, evolving identities shaped by fan participation. Furthermore, by integrating Haraway's companion species theory, it highlights the emotional reciprocity underpinning VTuber-audience relationships, offering a unique perspective on how emotional labor and digital kinship operate in virtual spaces. This paper foregrounds the emotional and relational complexity that underpins VTubers as affective digital companions by adopting Haraway's framework of co-becoming instead Hayles's systems-based posthumanism. Finally, it enriches Jenkins's transmedia storytelling and convergence culture theories by demonstrating how VTubers expand their narratives across multiple platforms and cultural boundaries, thereby enhancing their global cultural significance. These frameworks collectively offer a comprehensive understanding of VTubers as a groundbreaking form of digital media that challenges traditional distinctions between reality and fiction, human and virtual, and amateur and professional performances. This research opens new avenues for exploring virtual performances' ethical, emotional, and cultural implications, situating VTubers at the forefront of discussions on digital identity and posthuman futures.

Although this paper explores the cultural and emotional dynamics of VTuber performances, several areas warrant further research. One key question concerns the legal implications of VTubers' hybrid nature: How will intellectual property laws, which traditionally apply to either human performers or fictional characters, adapt to the complexities of VTuber identities, which merge human labor with digital avatars? Furthermore, as VTubers continue to expand globally, future research could examine how the genre complicates local and global cultural dynamics. For example, how does the global popularity of Japanese VTubers affect local content creators in other countries, and what role do cultural translations and adaptations play in maintaining VTubers' appeal across different regions? Finally, further investigation into the emotional and ethical dimensions of

VTuber performances is needed, particularly regarding how companies and performers address the long-term sustainability of the emotional labor involved. These questions suggest that VTubers are not only a significant cultural phenomenon but also a key site for exploring the evolving relationship between technology, law, culture, and identity in digital spaces.

ENDNOTES

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7. Chen and Hu, “The Host in the Shell,” 13.
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