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Culture III

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Virtual YouTubers in Real World

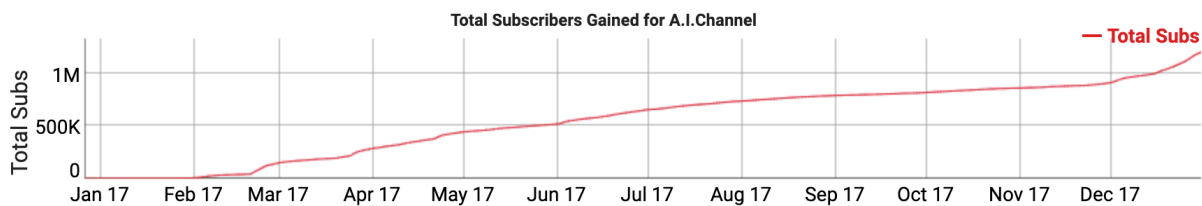
With the rapid development of the Internet, our life was changed drastically: many services and activities such as shopping, socializing, entertaining shifted to be “online” activities. One of the most crucial influences of the technology revolution is the establishment of video-sharing and streaming platforms that allowed Internet users to share more interactive multi-media resources and products with the rest of the world. In the beginning, people started to make videos to record their daily life (so-called Vlog, a word derived from Blog, which is text-based articles that were used as dairies) and post on various platforms, for example, YouTube. These personal producers are often called “YouTubers” by the audiences. Recently, a variation of YouTubers came to a dramatic expansion, “Virtual YouTuber,” with the progress of the concept called Virtual Reality. Hiding their real identities, putting on designated appearances and characteristics, VTuber (short of Virtual YouTuber) attracted lots of people because of their uniqueness in styles and interactiveness between a virtual world and the real world. Specifically, in Japan, VTubers become popular by incorporating themselves with *Moe* culture, and attract a large number of fans, especially the “*Otaku*” who use the Internet intensively. This essay will explore how Virtual YouTubers became prevailing; what made the expansion of this form of video-sharing come true; how Virtual YouTubers started to form an industry, and explain how fans influence the industry by looking at the case of how is the culture being consumed and reproduced in China.

The word “Virtual” means that the character in the videos of the YouTuber is not a real human but an animated figure. Most of the figures are anime-style *Shojo* (young girls) and the voice and motion of the figure are provided by a human whom often being called “*Nakanohito*” (the person inside) by the fans. Besides the difference between showing up with a “mask” and a persona and showing up in the video with a human face, VTubers basically do same things as traditional YouTubers: talking about daily life, playing games and singing (Nagata, 2018). Utilizing the latest technology, it is even possible for them to do streaming to do real-time interaction with their fans.

The features of VTubers are pretty similar to those cosplayers who use a mask or a headgear to hide their faces behind. They never let people know their real identities and appearances, because they are what they are performing, and in this way, they provide an immersed experience of people’s imagination. The reason why VTubers became attractive, especially for anime fans, is that in Manga or Anime, the interaction between characters and consumers is in a fixed single direction: Manga readers and anime watchers obtain their experience from a third-person perspective while enjoying Animes and Mangas. They can’t be involved in the story; therefore, the flow of interaction and information is only from the works to people while consuming the works. Even though it is possible for fans to deliver their idea by creating fan arts and works based on the original ones, it requires certain capacities such as drawing, singing or video editing, and this limitation creates an invisible obstacle between the virtual world and the real world (which is often called the wall between dimensions). However, by adopting an anime-style character with properly designed characteristics, VTubers make it possible for consumers to interact with their imagination of “*Nijigen*” (2D virtual world) without limitation. Since the characters is operated by a real human, they can own social media accounts on Twitter or

Facebook. Fans are able to communicate with the character by texting comments under a Tweet, which requires no extra efforts but access to the Internet and the ability to write. While the flow of interaction become bidirectional, fans can get instant reactions and satisfactions and get involved in a virtual world. In short, the most attractive aspect of VTubers is combining with the *Moe* culture, VTubers intensify the feeling of *moe*, which is addressed by Nakahara as a kind of feeling of love (Condry, 2013, p. 192) by getting fans to be more involved in their life and fulfilling their fascinations.

One of the very first VTubers adopting an anime-style figure is Kizuna Ai. Starting early, she gathered a large number of fans quickly by utilizing the advantages of being virtual. However, while Ai became more and more popular on YouTube from February 2017, few people joined to be a VTuber.



(Total number of subscribers of Kizuna Ai's Channel;

Source: <https://socialblade.com>, downloaded on June 2019, available at

<https://socialblade.com>)

There were two possible factors accounted for this situation. First, the motion capture device for doing the motion projection for the figure in the software was not affordable enough for common people. Some “affordable” devices sold by NOITOM were still around a thousand dollars, and to set up the devices and the software required expertise of manipulating system. Another feasible reason is that since Kizuna Ai was so successful, people were doubting whether their ability of

performing can fulfill audiences' need like Ai given that most of them were not professionals in providing character's voice and acting. Later, these two problems were both resolved. By applying computer vision, motion capture could be done by using algorithms to recognize faces, arms and hands from images taken from a camera. This technique was used in Live2D, which provided a way to build animated characters solely based on 2D drawings instead of 3D modeling with expensive software and devices. It lowered the difficulty and the cost of creating characters and doing motion capture to make the figure move. The concern of personal ability to be successful after becoming a VTuber was eliminated by a man who started a VTuber channel and used a model of little fox girl, named *Nekomasu*. Following several weird hand gestures of the model, no one expected the voice came out was from a middle-aged man. Although the first video was not perfect and the difference between the actual voice and the expectation was unbelievably dramatic, the "Gap Moe" (the feeling of *Moe* brought by great differences inside one's attributes) of the character attracted lots of people. More importantly, it delivered a thought that everyone has the opportunity to be a VTuber by showing oneself. The resolution of these two problems caused a massive expansion of VTubers at the end of 2017 and the beginning of 2018. "Although there were only around 100 VTubers in January 2018, the number increased to 2000 in April 2018. It tripled just in 3 months and the trend was continuing." (Kimura, 2018, translated by the author). Being a Virtual YouTuber provides *Nakanohito* a mask, which will hide nearly all the intelligence about the actual human behind and offers them a flexible degree of freedom to control what they want to show to the public. While discussing who tends to become VTuber, Nagata expressed the idea of Daichi Tsukamoto, who is the CEO of Duo Inc., which is a VTuber management agency: "They tend to have a desire to express themselves to others but are often too shy to do so by showing their face to the public" (Nagata, 2018), and

actually there are many people who can demonstrate their creativity and talents after eliminating their concern about showing in the public by becoming a VTuber (Nagata, 2018).

As more and more people joining in this trend, some capitalists noticed the commercial opportunities inside this industry.

“Gree, one of Japan’s biggest mobile app developers, plans to invest 10bn yen (\$88m) over the next two years into developing virtual talent, creating more live-streaming opportunities, building filming and animation studios, and giving creators resources.”
(Lufkin, 2018)

The most common way to make profits is exactly the same as what YouTubers do: advertising. Take Kizuna Ai as an example. Initially, she played games while streaming just like other YouTubers did in order to gain a stable fan base. After getting more popular, she started to make advertisements for new games in her YouTube videos to get profits from game developing companies. Some companies, unlike the organization of Kizuna Ai which only focused on one single character, created multiple characters, and each character are designed with different virtual identity and personality. By doing so, the company could accumulate the fan base from people with varying preferences of virtual characters. These companies also have abundant commercial resources, for instance collaboration opportunities with other companies.



(Hololive Inc. collaborates with Atré Akihabara celebrating the first anniversary of the debut,

Source: taken by the author at Akihabara Station, June 2019)

Besides official collaboration, companies and people working as VTuber can also get profit from streaming on YouTube and other streaming platforms.

| | Requirements |
|-------------------------|---|
| Ad revenue | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be at least 18 years old, or have a legal guardian older than 18 years of age who can handle your payments via AdSense. • Create content that meets our advertiser-friendly content guidelines |
| Channel memberships | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be at least 18 years old • Have more than 30,000 subscribers • Have no Community Guidelines strikes |
| Merchandise shelf | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be at least 18 years old • Have more than 10,000 subscribers • Have no Community Guidelines strikes |
| Super Chat | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be at least 18 years old • Live in a country/region where Super Chat is available |
| YouTube Premium revenue | Create content watched by a viewer who is a YouTube Premium subscriber |

(Requirements of getting eligibility for earning money on YouTube,

Source: <https://support.google.com/>, downloaded on June 2019, available at

<https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/72857?hl=en>)

After getting permission from YouTube, fans can pay for Super Chat, a special colored comment, during streaming. It is a commonly used way to interact with the character for fans.

While fans paying for Super Chat, YouTube can get profit as well. “Super Chat payments can range between \$1 and \$500 each. YouTube takes 30% of the revenue, and this isn’t considering any apple service fees, tax, MCN cuts or other charges.” (Baker, 2018).

As the industry got larger, companies and individuals started to look for overseas markets. China is one of the largest place to export the cultural product for these VTubers because of the foundation of Japanese popular culture in China and its massive young population, the Chinese *Otaku*. The number of subscribers on Chinese video-sharing and streaming platform Bilibili is even more than that on YouTube. Why did VTuber culture and consumerism spread so fast among Chinese *Otaku* communities? There are two key factors motivating this trend in Chinese market. One of the major reasons is the official collaborations with Bilibili, “the iconic brand of online entertainment with a mission to enrich the everyday life of young generations in China” (Bilibili, 2018). One of the examples is GREE Inc.

“they have entered into a business collaboration agreement (the “Agreement”) to jointly develop mobile games in Japan and China markets under a joint venture. Under terms of the Agreement, the companies will also jointly explore Virtual YouTuber (or the “VTuber”) business.” (Bilibili, 2018)

For those individual VTubers who do not belong to an organization or company, fans are the key factors. In addition to common ways like creating fan arts and making merchandise related to the character, there is a way to rapidly spread and introduce a VTuber by adapting its culture and fitting it into Chinese popular culture: the “Sticker Culture” of online chatting. The Sticker Culture became popular several years ago in China. It is a result and an efficient way of spreading Internet memes and expressing ideas. People add text to pictures to incorporate various memes with the media. Fans adopted this way of advertising their favorite VTubers. They

created the Stickers related to the character combing trending memes. Taking advantages of rapid replication and spreading of stickers and memes, many individual VTubers like Nana Kagura and company supported VTubers became widely known among Chinese *Otaku* community successfully.

It is clear that after the expansion of VTuber industry and the development of overseas market, more and more people are going to seek opportunities to earn money by either founding new organizations or becoming a VTuber as there are less and less limitations and difficulties to do so. However, on the other hand, the market itself has its own capacity. Today we can see that it is hard for one to be as famous as Kizuna Ai, who takes her advantage of early entrance to the market. Moreover, it is hard for VTubers who joined the circle after the massive expansion to remain active for a long time without helps from an organization or trending VTubers. It is reflected by a wave of retreating started recently. Therefore, the environment is not hospitable for newcomers. But there are iterations when the “old” ones “graduate,” in other words being partially or completely inactive, and those might be opportunities for newcomers to fill up the available spaces in the market.

There are several limitations on this study. First, even though it develops at a surprisingly fast pace, VTuber is still at its beginning phase. The way it works might change while cutting-edge technologies being implemented and industrialized. Therefore, studies based on recent phenomenon might only work for this certain period of time. Secondly, as the policies of each companies that involved in the VTuber industry have their own commercial secrets. Lots of insights of how actually do they function remain unknown currently, and it requires further investigation and research on their commercial modes. Last but not least, since VTuber industry initially started aiming at male *Otaku* communities, not many organizations have started focus on

aiming at female fans. As a result, few valuable, admissible and reliable sources are available to do further research on how this industry influences female VTuber fans' communities.

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