

# Virtual Youtubers, Japanese Popular music, and performing persona: An Investigation into the VTuber Phenomenon in Japan

Wong Chung Yan, Joanne Year 4



## Introduction

In the 21st century, virtual idols in Japan are booming in popularity, particularly among teenagers and fans of animation, video games and Vocaloid synthesizers such as the Hatsune Miku franchise. Virtual idols are generally defined as digital avatars who develop a substantial fan base through singing, dancing and other forms of interaction with the audience. Regardless of gender, character designs of virtual idols often emphasize a cute, “kawaii” in Japanese, aesthetic, a youthful persona, Japanese idol-like costumes, and a pleasant voice timbre. One form of virtual idol is the Virtual Youtuber, also known as VTubers, which came into the spotlight since the emergence of Kizuna AI in 2016, who was the first VTuber idol in Japan. VTubers deliver performances on YouTube, including singing, dancing, gaming and interactions to perform their persona using 2D and 3D computer models.

## Objectives

- To explore and elucidate the aspects of performance in relation to the VTuber persona performances
- To identify and demonstrate VTubers musical performances to establish the sense of community

## VTuber and persona

Scholars have been debating the exact definition of performance throughout the 21st century. Simon Frith (1990) and Philip Auslander (2004) put forth discussion having a broader interpretation of the word “performance” in the forms of the real person, the performance persona and character persona. Audience consumes the extensive VTubers identity as a kind of entertainment by integrating their persona as a sum of behavioral performance, recordings and stage performances. The section demonstrates performance of persona with regards to VTubers’ performance in all means of appearances.

## Character design and sound timbre

In terms of physical appearance, we could categorize VTubers in terms of visual design, character costumes and movements. VTubers have appealing character costumes and animated identities, largely influenced by the deep-rooted Japanese “kawaii” and cuteness culture. In aspects of character story, VTubers achieve authenticity through cultivating a unique and fantasy persona. The Vtuber industry also incorporates a wide range of sound timbre and quality from anime-like bright tone to a diva-like timbre. The ambiguous voice timbre drives audience interests conforming to the presentation of character persona.

## Performing the persona

VTubers perform their persona by utilizing their physical appearance, movements, character story and voice timbre. With case examples focusing on the two production agencies, the section demonstrates how VTubers reproduce their persona through individual and communal performances in verbal interactions and musical activities. Aqua Minato, who has over 1 million subscribers on her Youtube channel, posted 13 thousand posts in less than 3 years since her VTuber Twitter debut in 08/2018.

## VTubers’ collaborations

VTubers portray and enrich their persona through interactions, e.g. discussing similar experiences and common interests. Nevertheless, communication is not limited to daily conversations in streaming sessions and Twitter, but also manifests musically, i.e. musical collaborations. A VTuber generation ecosystem is developed to connect active VTubers in the market to perform a well-defined niche to the community.

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## Industry Overview

2 Major VTuber media agencies:  
Nijisanji and Hololive Production



- First VTuber celebrity: Kizuna AI (2016) 286 million subscribers
- VTuber community: Youtube and Twitter
- VTuber talents: 13,000 VTubers (Use Local, 2020)
- Industry Significance: - 1.5 billion views per month

### Graphical Presentations

2D, 3D character models, VR

The behind-the-scenes movements are captured with motion sensors and utilize computer technologies to animate the character's movements.

### Authenticity in a virtual world



The research illustrates how VTubers perform in various media, whether it be live streams, recorded music videos or textual interactions, which helps Japanese VTubers communicate their character persona for subsequent character developments, alongside introducing their authentic digital identity to the immense VTuber fandom.



Highest revenue generated from Youtube Super Chat: over 1.5 billion yen



Oricon Album Charts Daily #1 CD Album Prismatic Colours (2020): over 35 thousand sales

## Performance Case Studies

“Music will be the key to VTubers and virtual entertainers becoming mainstream”  
– Naoto Kato (CEO of GREE and VR platform Cluster)

## Music Videos



### Akina Saegusa - Telecaster B-Boy

Saegusa’s Vocaloid music cover has an astounding 3 million views in merely 4 months after the release of the video in January 2021

Following the J-pop digital music engagement model - Approach, Attach and Resonance (Yamaguchi, 2012)

VTubers’ music videos, categorized in music covers and original music. VTubers distributing music in the mainstream through large Japanese record labels, notably, Universal Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment and Avex Entertainment Inc..

## Performing live streaming sessions



### Minato Aqua - Aqua Ch.

The creation of audience engagement is inseparable from the performance of persona in facial expressions and upper body movements in live streaming sessions.

“Live streams are the key to performing the persona,” - CEO of Hololive

## Live Stages e.g. Hololive 1st festival #とまらないホロライブ

The virtual identities of VTubers commonly appear on-stage as holograms in live event performances and perform in the same space with the audiences. Music events are delivered in 3 main formats, including concert hall performances in physical venues, hybrid concerts consisting of a real-time broadcast on NicoNico, and concerts taking place only in virtual spaces.

## Conclusion

The another perception of persona performance reshapes the definition as integrating all means of expressing the celebrity persona to convey authenticity through performance. The interdimensional performance of VTubers has connected potential subscribers from all over the world as a unique kind of entertainment, an evolutionary milestone in the 21st century Japanese pop music industry.