

Behind The Avatar: Understanding Indonesian Vtubers' Self-Representation

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Abstract

The popularity of Japanese pop culture in Indonesia has reached the point where it has become part of one's identity. This phenomenon has catalyzed the emergence of Indonesian Vtubers known for its visual representation by the creator. While studies pertaining Vtubers mostly focused on the audience, this study focused more on the creators exploring motivation behind their creative decision. Through in-depth interviews with seven Indonesian Vtubers and questionnaire disseminated through the Vtuber community, we found that Indonesian Vtubers perceive their virtual persona as alter ego. Most of their creative decision is driven by their cultural interest towards Japanese pop culture, this is also based on their cultural background and how they are exposed to Japanese pop culture since childhood to teenager including anime, manga, and games. This study concludes that virtual persona such as Vtuber serves as an extension of one's self. Vtubing allows the creator to explore identity based on their cultural preferences.

Keywords: *Indonesian Vtubers, Vtuber, Digital Media, Digital Identity, Visual Culture, Pop Culture.*

Introduction

Japanese pop culture has gained prominence, as seen as the growing popularity of anime, manga, and Japanese video games. This cultural influence has extended to the digital world marked by the rise of Vtubers or Virtual Youtubers. Vtubers noted for its unique viewing experience that they offers, such as avatar swapping during streaming which enhances interactivity and viewer engagement [1]. The first VTuber, Kizuna AI, debuted in 2016 and sparked a wave of similar content creators. VTubers became popular during the COVID-19 pandemic, due to increased online content consumption [2], [3]. One study reveals that state media in China promoted VTubers to disseminate messages of positivity during the health crisis during COVID-19 pandemic, this shows the intersection of Vtubers with public sentiment and political narratives [4]. The emergence of Vtubers indicates there is a shift in creation and consumption driven by the advancement of technology. Moreover, the emergence of Vtubers fosters local fandom, offers something more to the experience of viewing and catalyze the potential of transmedia [5]. This development contributes to a more vibrant visual culture.

There are several discussion pertaining Vtubers, previous research discusses into how social presence of Vtubers shaped the audience perception. This study reveals how streamer's visual representation creates a non-linear relationship with their social presence [6]. Another study focuses on viewers' perception towards Vtubers which concludes several key factors that influences viewers' interest [7]. However these study tend to focused more on the audience rather than the Vtuber themselves. Another previous study was conducted which focuses on visual representations of Indonesian culture through Vtubers in Indonesia [8]. This study concludes that Vtubers tries to adapt Indonesian cultural artefact in their visual representation which marks the enthusiasm of Japanese culture in Indonesia and emphasizes on local cultural identity to gain relatability. However, this study only focused more on how Indonesian culture adapted into visual representation of Vtubers. These studies research findings indicate that while many studies have explored the relationship between Vtubers and their audience, few have delved into the relationship between the creator and the Vtuber's

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visual representation itself. Our study shifts the focus toward the creator behind the Vtuber, exploring the motivation and catalysts that drive them to represent themselves in such way. The data focused on Indonesian Vtubers, as they are developing community and currently in the spotlight of pop culture in Indonesia. This research is guided by the question: *What meanings to these Vtubers' avatar hold for their creators?*

As is already known, Vtuber function as companions, educators, and entertainers. They serve to fulfill the psychological needs of their audiences and provide intimate digital experiences through direct interaction [9]. However, the behind-the-scenes aspects of Vtubers are just as important to understand. The fandom and community surrounding Vtubers and streaming culture are becoming increasingly prominent. Fans now embody the dual roles of consumers and creators, actively participating in the production of fan art and community-driven content [10]. Audience engagement is often catalyzed by a Vtuber's visual representation, it is equally important to understand what the creators themselves are trying to construct through these visual identities.

Vtubers and Their Avatar

Vtubers represent themselves in form of avatar in virtual environment. This allows a distinct form of self-expression which differ significantly from their offline identities. This connection to their avatars enables creators to explore various aspects of their personalities, engage with audiences in innovative ways, and navigate the complexities of digital interaction.

The use of avatars allows VTubers to maintain anonymity while fostering a sense of intimacy and connection with their audience, as they can interact in real-time and respond to viewer input [11]. The use of avatar also enhance their comfort and freedom in content creation, as they are not constrained by the expectations associated with their physical appearance [12]. This dynamic enhances audience engagement, particularly among younger generations familiar with digital technology. Furthermore, the customization of avatars can reflect the creators' idealized selves, impacting their self-perception and behavior in both virtual and real-world contexts [13]. The interaction between the VTuber and their avatar can lead to a deeper connection with the audience, as viewers often feel they are engaging with a character that embodies specific traits and personalities [2].

The relationship between creators and their avatars is complex; many creators view their avatars not just as digital representations but as integral parts of their identity. This perspective aligns with the concept of avatars as extensions of the self, where the avatar embodies the creator's personality, values, and aspirations. As such, the avatar becomes a medium through which creators can navigate social interactions, express creativity, and engage with communities, ultimately enhancing their sense of self in both virtual and real-world contexts [14].

The study of VTubers provides insights into broader cultural phenomena, such as the influence of digital media on identity formation and community building. As VTubers often embody characteristics that resonate with specific cultural narratives, their work contributes to the ongoing dialogue about representation, creativity, and the evolving landscape of online content creation [9]

Vtubers: Digital Identity and Self-Representation

VTubers engage in a performance of identity through their avatars, this aligns with the front-stage and back-stage self-presentation concepts articulated by Erving Goffman [15]. On the front stage, VTubers present a carefully crafted persona through their animated avatars, which often embody characteristics that resonate with their audience, such as cuteness or fantasy elements, reminiscent of Japanese anime aesthetics [2]. This performance allows them to interact with viewers in real-time, creating a sense of intimacy while maintaining a degree of anonymity, as they do not reveal their physical selves [16].

The avatars serve as a medium for self-expression, enabling VTubers to explore alternate identities that may differ significantly from their real-life personas. This exploration is channeled by the flexibility of avatar customization, allowing creators to embody traits they admire or aspire, thus transforming their digital personas into idealized extensions of themselves [13]. For instance, the Proteus effect suggests that users may adopt behaviors and attitudes that align with the characteristics of their avatars, reinforcing the connection between the virtual representation and the self [13]

As VTubers perform, they often blend their constructed identities with personal elements, resulting in a dynamic connection between authenticity and artifice. This not only enriches their content but also fosters a unique environment for self-discovery and connection among viewers, as the avatars become

vessels for both entertainment and emotional engagement [17]. Ultimately, the performance of identity through VTuber avatars exemplifies the intricate relationship between digital personas and self-expression, allowing creators to engage with their audiences in ways that transcend traditional boundaries of interaction. Vtuber avatars exemplifies how digital personas can be used for self-expression, allowing creators connect with audiences beyond the limits of traditional interaction.

Methods

This study employed descriptive qualitative method with validation from in-depth interview and online questionnaire to explore Vtubers’ self-representation through their avatar. This approach is effective to understand the meaning constructed by the creator pertaining their Vtuber personas and the dynamics of their digital identity which is formed by everyday practices.

The primary informants in this study consist of seven Indonesian Vtubers who actively conduct live streams on digital platforms such as Youtube and Twitch. These Vtubers were selected purposively based on following criteria: (1) they are actively live-streaming for at least the past year, (2) they use virtual avatars as their main medium of interaction with audiences, (3) they are willing to share narratives behind the construction of the character they portray, (4) they represents diverse backgrounds, including both established agency-affiliated Vtubers and independent streamers.

The seven primary informants interviewed for this study are Akonight, Nara Yukimi, Mijo (Bayem Ijo), Elula Fengari, Cat Sheet, Avalon Rose, and Qui Faranet. Interviews were conducted online during mid-2024 via platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet and Discord. The format of the interview was semi-structured featuring questions designed to explore the creators’ perception on their avatar that they portray, the dynamics between their online personas and offline identities and the creative processes involved in designing their Vtuber avatars.

To enrich the data and support findings from the interviews, an online questionnaire was also distributed through Vtuber community forums in Indonesia. The questionnaire consisted of 13 open- and closed-ended questions structured to explore creators’ views on avatar representation, their experiences using virtual identities, and their perceptions on the relationship between their characters and their real selves. A total of 28 responses were collected from active Indonesian Vtubers with diverse backgrounds.

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify and categorize narrative patterns that emerged from participants responses. This analysis focused on several key areas, including the interpretation of avatars as digital identities, the relationship between the virtual persona and the creator’s self, as well as character construction strategies and cultural affiliations. Moreover, the questionnaire data were analyzed descriptively to map general tendencies and variations in perspectives among respondents. This provide broader understanding of the dynamics of Vtuber identity construction among Indonesian creators.

Result

The result from semi-structured with the informants which can be categorized through following thematic coding:

Table 1. Thematic Coding Table.

Primary theme	Sub-theme	Quotes/Key Points	Interpretation & Conceptual category
Virtual identity and self-representation	Avatar as self-extension	“Comissions isn’t just for visual assets , but also about highlighting the character and vibe” (Nara Yukimi)	Commissioning is used as a means of expressing ideal identity and personalization
	Visual consistency as professional image	"When my character looks neat and professional, I feel more appreciated..." (Qui Faranet)	Avatar is not just a personal identity but also a symbol of professional credibility.

	Affection towards the avatar	"I feel more comfortable and confident when my character feels just right..." (Mijo/Bayem Ijo)	Avatar supports self-efficacy through ideal self-representation (Proteus Effect).
Japanese pop culture appropriation	Influence of Japanese aesthetics	"I've always liked Japanese aesthetics, but my character still has an Indonesian vibe..." (Akonight)	Indonesian Vtuber identity formed by the selective appropriation of global culture
	Negotiation between local and global culture	"I'm Cat Sheet, an Indonesian YouTuber who streams on Twitch and usually uses English..." (Cat Sheet)	Avatar reflects a synthetic between Japanese and authentic Indonesian identity
Avatar as performative and relational medium	intimate relationship with audience	"I feel more connected with the audience when my character represents my real self" (Elula Fengari)	Avatar become emotional bridge between the creator and the audience, not just appearance
	the role of avatar in the performance	"Because, you know... if like... I don't know, especially as a VTuber, right? Like, just randomly contacting someone through Discord or WhatsApp or whatever... I dunno, it feels kinda creepy or something..." (Cat Sheet)	Performative component strengthen digital presence and personal communication
Collaborative relationship with illustrators	Trust as the primary factor	"I chose an artist who could really capture the essence of my character..." (Avalon Rose)	Artist/illustrator selection on account on chemistry and interpretive ability
Digital Identity as negotiation process	Dynamic and fluid identity	"Honestly, if I like their art style, I just go for it!" (Cat Sheet)	Vtuber identity is the result between personality, public image and community expectation

Vtuber phenomenon in Indonesia represents a contemporary form of complex digital expression, where identity representation, cultural aesthetics, and online community dynamics converge in one performative space. The practice of Vtubing is not only presents virtual character as a mere entertainment but also an existential extension from the creator. Based on in-depth interview result and questionnaire responses from several active Vtuber in Indonesia, it is found that commissioning artwork plays a crucial role, not only in visual production but also formation, maintenance, and negotiation of virtual identity. The avatar created through this commissioning process becomes living entity, reflecting the creator's desires, emotions, and self-image. It serves as expressive medium which creates possibility for flexible identity performativity, becoming space where creators form their personal narrative in fluid realm digital world.

Many Indonesian Vtubers began their journey from their deep interest in Japanese pop culture such as anime, manga, and video games. However, this interest does not remain passive. It developed to a form of active appropriation, reinterpreted through the lens of local affection, personal emotion, and

a unique identity aspirations. As shown in table 1, Akonight expressed, “*I’ve always liked Japanese aesthetics, but my character still has an Indonesian vibe—it doesn’t have to wear batik, but it’s more about the way of speaking, the attitude, and the jokes.*”. This quote shows that the identity of Indonesian Vtuber avatars constructed through symbolic negotiation between global influences and local values. Japanese aesthetics that serves as visual inspiration doesn’t diminish Indonesian cultural traces; rather, it is adopted and localized into distinct hybrid identity.

Avatar, in this context, functions as an imaginative space where creators are able to design an ideal image—both visually or in terms of personality. Commissioning becomes a primary gateway which allows desired identity visualization. This aligns with the perspective of Nowak & Fox (2018) who emphasizes that avatars are not a mere digital representation, but also an extension of values, preferences, and personalities. Through the commissioning process, creators have total control in determining how they want to present themselves and are recognized in the virtual world, making this process not only technical and artistic but also existential and symbolic.

Vtubers are not only performers but also curators and designers of their own persona. Commitment to the details in the character design reflects a deliberate effort to convey identity messages subtly yet powerfully. Beyond aesthetics, avatar also serves as a symbol of professionalism. Consistent use of original, high-quality visual assets creates an impression of totalism and credibility. As shown in table 1, Qui Faranet expressed during the interview “*When my character looks polished and professional, I feel more respected, and the audience can respect me more too.*”. This aligns with Goffman’s concept [15] which explains how individuals construct self-presentation to shape specific impressions before an audience. In the context of Vtubers, commissioning becomes an important visual strategy to manage impressions and reinforcing the image of a consistent and professional digital creator.

Beyond visual and performative aspects, commissioning also has significant psychological impact. Mijo/Bayem Ijo remarked “*I feel more comfortable and confident when my character matches what I imagined. It really helps during live streams.*” This shows how the alignment between avatar and ideal self-image can increase confidence and comfort in public performance. This statement resonates with the concept of Proteus Effect by Yee & Bailenson (2007), which states that users are inclined to adapt their behavior with characteristics of the avatar they embody. When an avatar is designed in accordance to personal values and desire, creators find it easier to become one with the persona resulting in an authentic performance.

One important aspect that is often overlooked in the practice of commissioning is the relational dimension between Vtubers and illustrators. The artist selection process is not always pertaining aesthetic preference, but also tied to trust and sensitivity towards the character’s narrative. As shown in table 1, Avalon Rose stated “*I choose artists who can capture the essence of my character — not just someone who draws well, but someone who can make the character feel alive.*”. This shows that commissioning is a collaborative process, where illustrators act as translators of the creator’s narrative ideas, emotions, and image into a concrete visual form. This relationship is often long-term built on foundational chemistry, prior working experience, and the artist’s reputation. In a digital community that is anonymous and transnational, trust is the primary currency to maintain quality and continuity of creative work.

Vtubers’ identity as shown in the findings of this study is not something static or fixed. It is a result of constant negotiation between the personal and the public, between imagination and reality, and between the local and the global. The study by Lehtovirta (2023) states that the freedom to create an avatar allows Vtubers to explore identities that are not limited by physical form or prevailing social norms in real life. This opens space for more fluid, flexible, and experimental forms of identity.

However, this freedom always is in tension with audience expectation and digital culture norms. Appearance, narrative, and interaction of a Vtuber needs to be adapted to social codes from the platform community where they perform. In this context, commissioning is not only serves as a medium of individual expression but also a field of negotiation between personal desires and collective expectations. As stated by Elula Fengari “*I feel more connected to my audience when my character represents who I truly am.*”. This quote shows that the success of an avatar does not lie solely on its visual aspect, but in its ability to reflect affection and intimacy the creator feels towards themselves and their audience community.

As part of this study, a total of 28 Indonesian Vtubers had participated through online questionnaire providing qualitative data to complement the understanding of the relationship between the creator and their virtual character. The majority of the respondents, 60,7% identified themselves as female,

meanwhile the other 39,3% were male. In terms of avatar gender 60.7% were female, 17.9% male, and the remaining 21.4% represented non-human entities, such as animals, inanimate objects, beverages, and aliens.

Two important tendencies emerge from these findings. Firstly, there is a strong correlation between the creator's gender and their avatar's gender, especially among female creators who tend to choose female avatars. Second, there are interesting practices where several male creators use female avatars, as well as those who choose non-human entities. This emphasizes that gender is not an essential attribute in Vtubing, but rather performative and contextual. Referring to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity [18], gender identity in Vtubing does not follow biological patterns, but is constructed through repeated expression, aesthetics, and interaction. In the virtual space, creators have the freedom to present identity aspects that they might not feel comfortable expressing in real life, creating a safe space for more inclusive identity experimentation.

In terms of production status, 78,6% of respondents were independent Vtubers, while the other 21,4% were affiliated with an agency or group. This independent status has significant implications for the degree of creative autonomy that the creator possesses. Independent Vtubers typically take full responsibility for the character design, lore, artwork commissioning and rigging, content production and branding strategy. The commissioning practices are often conducted directly through community platforms such as Twitter, Discord or Vgen which creates the possibility for personal negotiation and building close informal relations between the creators and the artists. On the other hand, agency-affiliated creators are typically following strict production structures with pre-determined avatars and narratives. Although they receive financial and logistic support, their creativity is often limited by corporate policies.

The combination of female creator dominance, the prevalence of female characters and the rise of independent Vtubers shows that the field of Vtubing in Indonesia is gendered and autonomous. It serves as a space where identity, aesthetics, and professionalism are dynamically negotiated. In this context, avatars are not merely masks, but a representational medium which allows creators to construct image, community, and engage in emotional labor with the audience. Vtuber identity is not solely controlled by the creator but also constructed reciprocally by interactions and public expectations. Several creators even admit that they feel authentic when embodying their avatar persona, this emphasizes that virtual identities can sometimes reflect a more authentic self than their everyday personas.

This study reveals that Vtuber characters in Indonesia are not merely an entertainment medium but also contain profound meaning to the creators who bring them to life. Vtuber characters function as companions, educators and entertainers for the audience, offering intimate and therapeutic digital experiences [9]. However, behind the scene—the creative processes, the dynamics of commissioning, and the journey of shaping identity—is a crucial part which needs to be understood to fully see how digital identity and emotional connections are formed in the Indonesian Vtubing ecosystem. These characters, in the eyes of their creators, are not only performative tools but extensions of the self that allow them to be present and acknowledged in a digital landscape filled with both possibilities and limitations.

Conclusion

Vtubers' avatars are perceived as an extension of personal identity that cannot always be expressed in real life. These characters allow for exploration of idealized versions of the self, personal sides, or fantasies that are not realized offline, whether in a form of gender, body aesthetics or personality traits. Interestingly, the majority of their creative decisions are influenced by the fascination with Japanese pop culture such as anime, manga, and video games. This is inseparable from their cultural background and prolonged exposure to Japanese media since childhood through adolescence. Thus, Vtubing becomes a platform to address and explore identities formed by cultural preferences of an individual.

For creators, Vtuber avatars serve as a professional face that shapes their public image and presence in the online community. A consistent visual and narrative helps them build trust and creates an emotional connection with the audience. Behind the scenes, the creative process through commissioning—including selecting an artist, intense communication and personal contribution in the design—makes the character a collaborative work which contains profound affective meaning, not merely a visual product. These characters become a meeting point between self-image, aesthetics and emotional connection, both with the creator and the community.

For independent Vtubers, the avatars are symbolizes a journey of self-driven creativity, dedication, and community-based effort. These characters represents dreams and commitments built through self-thought experience. Through virtual characters, creators can craft narratives, build intimate connections with the audience, and express the other side of themselves that might not be easily shown in real life. This study concludes that virtual character such as Vtuber function as an extention of the self, a manifestation of identity which deeply intertwined with the creator's cultural preferences and life journey.

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