

# *The Commodification and Alienation of Vtubers in China*

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to analyze the how the vtuber industry, an online idol or streamer using virtual avatar controlled by a real person affect female actors, especially in terms of classic idea of commodification and alienation. The analysis is supported by participant observation of several female vtubers and a series of interview of vtuber audience. The result demonstrates vtubers industry as a new hybrid product of capitalism and modern technologies is affiliated with sexism presumption due to the nature of capitalism's aims appreciation and expansion. In addition, new technologies in the digital age becomes newer and more efficient means of exploitation of resources related to sex.

**Keywords:** Internet, Feminism, Online Streamer, Capitalism, Marxism.

## **1. Introduction**

Vtuber, or virtual Youtuber is a kind of online idol that uses a virtual avatar controlled by a real person using motion capture software, usually appearing in a Japanese anime style appearance. The Vtuber industry has become a profitable economic sector in the digital age [1]. Jada Nagumo writes that one new executive of the vtuber industry said that the most popular VTubers could bring in several million dollars as income [2].

It is realistic since the most profitable Chinese vtuber in October 2021, hanser, had 22984 paid audiences and received more than 789 thousand RMB, or about 110 thousand dollars). 七海 Nanami, the second most profitable one, has 6772 paid audience and received more than 724 thousand RMB or about 100 thousand dollars<sup>1</sup>.

However, the prosperous vtubers industry in China indicates that watching vtubers becomes a way of consumption and vtubers thus become a form of commodity. Therefore, I would argue that the commodification of vtubers lead to the alienation of vtuber performers.

There are few scholar articles on commodification and alienation of vtuber performers. Most articles on Japanese personal idols and virtual images of females mainly focus on the commodification of idols but do not provide in-deep analysis in the alienation of young people playing the role as idols. Therefore, I attempt to do research and write a paper on how vtubers are commodified and performers behind the virtual figure.

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<sup>1</sup> vup.darkflame, 2021

## 2. Literature Review

As stated above, there are few scholar articles on commodification and alienation of vtuber performers. However, research on the traditional personal idols and virtual female figures is still valuable in my research in defining the commodity nature of vtuber and objectification of female performers behind the vtubers' virtual images.

Galbraith and Karlin provides a juxtaposition of the traditional real-person idol and vtubers.

They have stated that real-person idols in Japan like AKB-48 have already been adapted to capitalism, being objects of desire, which could provide a certain kind of pleasure to male consumers. Similarly, female vtubers could be understood as an even more extreme form of female idols since their appearances and actions could be shaped more easily to suit the desires of their male consumers. Their depictions of the relationship between idols and consumption could also be applied to vtubers [3].

For the virtual image of females, several researchers have identified the objectification of those female avatars, which are also the very form of representation of vtubers to audience. Beck and Rose have identified that depictions of female characters in video games tend to be unrealistic [4]. MacCallum-Stewart discusses that other pattern of stressing females' sexualized features like wearing carefully designed clothes and performing sexually implicative actions like showing a part of breast and feet, and wearing explicitly short clothes [5]. Those traits found by the researchers could also be applied to vtubers, proving that the virtual images of those females are both commoditized to attract consumers. Black have observed that the advantage of cute and unrealistic virtual images is fitting a particular type of male consumer [6]. The author points out that otakus', who are targeted consumers of vtuber desired femininity cannot be achieved by females in real life.

## 3. Methodology

I have done a qualitative analysis for the research. The aim is to have a deep understanding of two of most popular Chinese vtubers- the Asoul group, and Ace Taffy and understand how audience think of the vtuber, finding their reasons for watching v-tubers, logic of choosing preferred v-tubers and general opinion toward the whole vtuber industry. The research was combined with one-month observation and ten interviews with a vtuber audience online.

I have watched the lives and video clips and search for their background information like character setting or related memes online. Through the observation, I have learned the background information, appearances, of virtual images, their produced content like live and video clips, bidirectional interaction between them and audiences, and Chinese Internet users' view of them. All of the interviewees are male and at least watched the live or video clips of the Asoul group, 七海 Nanami, and Ace Taffy more than two times. They are all male and like Japanese ACGN (anime, comics, games, and novels) culture. Five of them at least watch live or video clips once a week or are arduous followers of news vtubers. The interview consists of five questions and some random questions that I generated during the interview. The five regular questions are:

1. Why do you watch vtubers?
2. What is the advantage of vtubers compared with traditional real-person idols or streamers?
3. Introduce the video or live clip of a vtuber that you like/most? If watching vtubers frequently, which produced content of the vtuber you like most? Singing? Playing game, dancing or Talk Show.
4. Describe the virtual figure and character setting of the vtuber? How do you like them?
5. Do you like Interact with vtubers? How do you like it?

The combination of observation and interview provides important sources for my analysis of vtuber industry in terms of commodification and alienation.

## 4. Results

Based on my experience in finding qualified interviewees, I find that the targeted consumers of female vtubers tend to be young males who are interested in Japanese ACGN culture. Therefore, the whole design of vtuber is built upon attracting those targeted consumers. As Black observes that males who are obsessed with Japanese ACGN culture have desired femininity that cannot be achieved by females in real life [7]. The desired female should have a combination of infantilized innocence and cuteness, and a matured and attractive sexuality. Living females in the physical world could rarely meet the standards, but digital technology could create “perfect” female images. A-soul and many other vtubers’ s digital avatars are produced under similar logic: their virtual figures are the ultimate object of desire that could meet the male consumers’ needs. It has become an important reason for the male audience to choose to watch vtubers. In addition, the vtubers’ virtual figures could fit various aesthetics, from cute Loli (Diana from A-soul group and Ace Taffy, for example) to sexually matured young ladies (Carol and Elieen from A-soul group). The diverse virtual figures are shaped by a more careful division of the market in the digital age, which could fulfill consumers' different needs and likeness via the massive resources on the Internet. However, each vtuber’ s virtual figures are the desired bodies of the target consumer and thus becomes a carefully designed commodity.

Since vtubers are virtual live streamers, making content that is attractive to the audience is an essential job for them. According to my interview and questionnaire, all of them admit that vtubers’ live content is the key factor that influences their choices and evaluation of the and three of them talk about the particular live content or video clips of live that make them to be the fan of a particular vtuber. Vtuber’ s live content are largely not determined by their wills. They must and are willing to fit because whether their audience likes content is related to their income: more people watching, more potential income.

As I stated above, one of vtubers’ largest targeted consumers are young males who love Japanese ACGN culture. According to my observation and interview, vtubers’ live content highly adopts the likeness of this group of targeted consumers. Singing songs from Japanese animations is the most popular live. For example, one of the interviews introduces a video clip from one of his favorite vtuber-Bella from A-soul group. I find that this series of video clips singing Japanese animation songs like Akatsuki no Kuruma (暁の車 Gundam SEED and Fly me to the Moon from Neon Genesis Evangelion receive more than ten thousand “likes” <sup>2</sup>. The tendency of playing games related with ACGN culture can be also seen through another live content-game playing: while most popular game at that time: League of Legends, PUBG, and Apex are always welcome, games associated with ACGN culture have been frequently streamed. For example, Cyberpunk 2077 and Genshin Impact are played by all vtubers that I have studied in this research and some of the interviewees mentioned vtubers’ lives or video clips of those two games or other games with strong Japanese animation influence, like Ark Night and Lovelive. Thus, the live content of vtubers in general is carefully adopted to the likeness of the largest targeted consumers like commodities.

Interaction is important for vtubers. All of the interviewees mentioned what ways vtubers interact with their audiences and described that vtubers tend to do so via responding to the bullet screen or comments. All of them say that they would interact with vtubers by bullet screens or comments areas, and three of them admit they reward vtubers via superchats. Based on my observation, the interaction between vtubers and audience consists much of their lives. Audience, or consumers continue to play a dominated role: while they are leading the vtubers’ interaction with the audience, they could control the live content and appearance of vtubers through superchat, massive bullet screens, and comments,

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<sup>2</sup> 肥恐龙 523, 2021

and vtubers often follow the most popular options for higher popularity and keep the audience studying.

The interaction between vtubers and audiences could reflect the relationship between vtubers and the audience and further sheds light on how a subtle commodification of vtubers.

According to the interview, four of the interviewees say that they are watching a particular interesting interaction between vtubers and the audience. One of my interviewees mentions a video clip that he remembers most. When Diana finds that audience using bullet screen talking to the superchat but ignoring other comments on the bullet screen and her, she responds: “are you guys talking with people who give superchats or talking with me?”<sup>3</sup>. He thinks audiences would believe Diana has good characteristics since audiences think that the response shows that Diana treats paid audiences and unpaid audiences with the same attitude. Thus, they are willing to support her, both psychologically and materially. A video clip recording

Meanwhile, according to my observations and results of interviews, I find that some audiences view vtubers as desired females that they could see and interact in cyberspace and some of those audiences even want to view female vtubers as desired girls or even imagined lovers. Some patterns of vtubers addressing themselves and their audiences and audiences addressing and commenting on vtubers reflect the fact. For example, one interviewee, G, an ardent follower of a-soul and many other vtubers, mentions one Chinese Vtuber, Ace Taffy (永雏塔菲 or 永雛タフィー), likes to say “Master, Taffy likes you very much” (主人, Taffy 好喜欢你). “Taffy” still remains in English pronunciation while Ace Taffy speaks all parts in Chinese because using Taffy as the shortened nickname of 永雏塔菲, sounds soft and gentle, and also conveys a sense of intimacy.

The audience's language is more explicit. Audiences of vtubers also use intimate or sexually implicative words to describe the appearances or actions of vtubers. For example. “coquettish” (骚 or a less explicit homonym, 烧, or 风情) is commonly used when the vtubers control the virtual figures to explicitly show the beauty of their virtual body parts like breasts and legs. Vtubers whose appearance and character settings are more inclined to the cute would receive bullet screens full of “cute” (可爱捏) or “sweet” (甜) instead. However, only one of the interviewees mentions that he has used such explicit language during the interaction. Based on my observation, none of those vtubers expressed strong rejection of the audience's use of explicit language.

Moreover, the pattern of interaction discussed above could reflect how audience and vtubers view their relationship. Ace Taffy addresses the audience and reflects that some vtubers try to build an intimate relationship with audiences. Ace Taffy uses an overly affectionate way, putting herself in a maid or girlfriend position and even using sexual-implicated jokes and ways of performing (ASMR, for example). Other vtubers like the A-soul group and 七海 Nanami tend to perform as friends of the audience. However, in the live or pre-produced videos, they still play a girlfriend or at least desired girl role.

During the interview, G also tells that “little boyfriend” is a popular self-claimed identity of the audience of a Chinese vtuber 小花灯 qwq and Ace Taffy. Despite those intimate self-defined identities. Besides, based on my observation, some audiences wrote a story about an imagined life between them and a particular vtuber. Vtubers tend to be lovers or admired girls, depicted by audiences in those stories. Some audiences even explicitly self-claim that they are playing the roles of boyfriends or husbands of vtubers in those stories. Such an intimate relationship is bidirectionally maintained by vtubers and audiences and has become a way to attract new audiences and make profits from the audience's rewarding actions and voluntary propaganda. The intimate relationship between

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<sup>3</sup> 嘉然今天吃电气鼠, 2021

vtubers and consumers thus becomes something that could be sold as the commodity, whose intrinsic worth and merits are ignored but monetary values are promoted.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Commodification

Marx states that "a commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another", and commodities have exchange value, which means that commodities could be exchanged with other things including money. The chapter thus aims to define commodity nature of vtubers via the juxtaposition of vtubers and Japanese idols, a highly commodified profession in Japan and analysis of my ethnography.

Some of Galbraith and Karlin depictions of the relationship between idols and consumption could be applied to vtubers. Their characters are highly designed, and their images are widely promoted through developed transmitted technologies [9]. They tend to be young or present as young. They have a wide range of audiences because they have various kinds of personalities, talents and appearances to suit the likeness of different audiences. They are both not expected to have great talent in one thing like singing, dancing or hosting a talk, but they are encouraged to improve themselves in those aspects. While idols are exploited to attract maximized consumption via their performances and related products like music and fashion albums, vtubers play an important role in the promotion and advertising of other products. There are products using the virtual figures of popular vtubers like A-soul and 七海 Nanami in China and those vtubers could be brand ambassadors to promote certain products. In the aspect of production relations, vtubers are the products of agency companies like Hololive or Yue Hua (the agency company of A-souls) to make more profits [10]. Therefore, vtubers are exchangeable.

Marx concept of Alienation is an important theory analyses show how the capitalist society exploits the value of workers. The commodification of vtubers thus undoubtedly leads to the alienation of vtubers performers. In the system of industrial production and maximum production, they are commodities, not persons. Marx identified four types of alienation under a capitalist system of production (1844). They are alienation of the worker from their products, the production process, their *Gattungswesen* or species-essence, and other workers [11]. In this research, based on my interview records and observations, I propose that vtubers performers have experienced all three forms of alienation except the alienation from *Gattungswesen*.

First of all, vtuber experience alienation from their product. As I stated above, vtuber does not have control of their virtual figures and the produced content. Capitalists have already determined the design of the product and how it is produced based on the needs of consumers. For example, one could see that virtual figures have to develop more attractive figures and their body parts with sexual implications like breasts, legs, and feet are intentionally stressed in their lives or videos to meet the needs of consumers. Their virtual figurer must follow the Japanese animation style instead of choosing avatars based on their own likeness.

Then, vtuber performers experience the alienation from the process. The process of making products (goods and services) is a repetitive and unaccomplished task. The commodity attribute of vtubers determines that they are selling services to audiences, who receive the service as consumers. Therefore, as I stated above, their live content and ways of interaction is fixed: a certain genre of songs, dances, and game-playing, of which are popular among ACGN lovers. Meanwhile, their relationship and live content are usually determined by the audience. When vtubers receive rewards like superchat, they often have to do what the superchats have said or responded to the superchat; otherwise, they will be attacked by the audience.

Competition among vtubers is very common since the market is limited. Therefore, the alienation from others happens on vtubers. I have watched a video clip showing one vtuber's cynical attitude toward the A-soul group, which had been a new but fast-growing vtuber group. Vtubers' conflicts and debates happen every day, but there is no vtuber-union formed to struggle for better payment against the live platform like Bilbil or management company.

## 5.2. Objectification

Objectification is defined as treating a person as a thing and understood as a moral threat to humanity, since it reduces one's value only to utility. Most feminists argue that objectification is central to understanding the oppression of females. For example, men's consumption of pornograph makes females on pornographes as mere instruments to fulfill men's sexual desires or other purposes. In my opinion, commodification is the beginning of the objectification of vtubers or females behind the virtual figures.

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Nussbaum has identified seven ways of treating a person as an object and Rae Langton has added three more [12,13].

- 1.instrumentality: treating a person as a tool for the objectifier's purposes;
- 2.denial of autonomy: treating a person as lacking in autonomy and making decisions;
- 3.inertness: treating a person as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity;
- 4.fungibility: treating a person as interchangeable with other objects;
- 5.violability: treating a person as something that could be break up, smash, or break;
- 6.ownership: treating a person as a thing that is owned by another that can be bought or sold;
- 7.denial of subjectivity: treating a person as something whose experiences and emotions could be ignored
- 8.reduction to body: treating a person as only one's body or body parts matter
- 9.reduction to appearance: treating a person according to one's look or other features could be sensed;
- 10.silencing: the treatment of a person as if one is not able to speak

Based on the ethnography, I think how the audience and the market treats vtubers fit into all previous categories of objectifications. First of all, since vtubers are commodities that are used to meet the audiences' desired femininity and make profits for agency companies or themselves, they become instruments for objectifiers' purposes. Vtubers as commodities, as I discussed above, adapt the intensive division of markets, and thus being interchangeable: audiences could choose to support other vtubers that are more attractive in the market to them and companies could replace less popular or profitable vtubers with more popular and profitable ones. Meanwhile, the audience's preoccupation with the appearance of vtubers' virtual figures and vtubers also focus on making the virtual figures more attractive to audiences (e.g. Each a-soul member's virtual figure has at least ten different clothes). In addition, their body parts with sexual implications like breast, leg, and feet are intentionally stressed in lives or videos, or simply being consumed or judged by the audience. Therefore, vtubers experience reduction to body and reduction to appearance.

Furthermore, I have identified that the relationship between vtubers and audiences is intimate but unequal. The commodity attribute of vtubers determines that they are selling services to audiences,



who receive the service as consumers. In market capitalism, vtubers as commodities must maximize profits and thus they need to make consumers as satisfied as possible since their incomes are determined by consumers. Therefore, their services made by their virtual appearances, produced contents, the way of interactions, and the relationship with audiences are all determined by consumers. I have listed examples of how vtubers lose control of their subjectivity: the live content is usually determined by the audience and their appearance must follow the Japanese animation style instead of choosing avatars based on their own likeness. Therefore, vtubers suffer inertness and denial of subjectivity. Vtubers also suffer from ownership since superchats and other reward actions could “buy” vtubers to perform certain actions. The unequal relationship and commodity nature of vtubers also make them easily violated and silenced. While audiences have an overly intimate relationship with vtubers or use sexually extravagant words to describe vtubers, vtubers tend to accept those transgressions and remain a moderated attitude. In fact, signs of denouncing intimate relationships like claiming that they maintain such relationships for economic interest would be mocked by the audience.

Thus, a general statement like “vtubers are objectified by their actions and appearances” is well-grounded. However, to better understand the nature of objectification, it is necessary to identify that the objectification of vtubers is two-folded since vtubers consist of two parts: the virtual figure and females controlling the virtual figure. The primary objectification happens at the formation of the vtubers: real females are objectified to be objects made with a series of data in cyberspace. In addition, women have risks of being self-objectified and accepting the myth of rape when controlling the avatars with sexism features like nudity [14]. In vtubers’ cases, the connections between vtubers’ avatars and females are essential. One of twelve interviewees says that the vtuber industry provides females to present sexually attractive images to others regardless of their appearance in real life. Namely, some females behind the mask need their avatars to be qualified in appearances, which is an important quality for live streamers in the eyes of some male audiences as I documented previously. Besides, considering most interviewees agree that live content is the key standard for them to choose vtubers and the large amount of fan-made derivative works focusing on vtubers’ actions, it is reasonable to conclude that females behind the masks are the brain and soul of vtubers. While the appearance of vtubers ensures the initial approvals of audiences, their produced contents maintain and increase support and fan base. Therefore, avatars and females behind avatars are in a tight symbiosis, each of them cannot exist independently. F once said that “we like to interact with young, beautiful and interesting girls” during the interview and the symbiosis makes the achievement of desire possible. Thus, an objectification of avatars’ beautiful appearance could also be understood as an objectification of females controlling the avatar, who make the avatars act to be more charming. The consumption of the intimate relationships created and maintained by females controlling the avatars is also a consumption of the avatar’s beauty, which adds charms to their actions.

However, when I ask six of my interviewees about whether they are aware that vtubers’ avatars and females behind them are interconnected, only two of them, say that he is aware of his actions toward virtual figures (avatars) and derivative works of vtubers are also projected to females behind virtual figures. One of those people, G observes that “those who are controlling the virtual figure of vtubers are performing to be vtubers instead of being themselves, but the performance cannot be perfect”. His words demonstrate that females controlling the virtual figures cannot fully transform into vtubers, a kind of object of desire, and thus are still humans. However, the audience generally does not relate vtubers’ virtual figures to real people. The separation of vtubers’ avatars and real people behind virtual facilitates the objectification: audience could manage their relationships with the avatar and even shape the avatars which are made of digital data as they want without considering the impacts of their actions on real people behind the avatar.

Furthermore, I have identified that the relationship between vtubers and audiences is intimate but unequal. The commodity attribute of vtubers determines that they are selling services to audiences, who receive the service as consumers. In market capitalism, vtubers as commodities must maximize profits and thus, they need to make consumers as satisfied as possible since their incomes are determined by consumers. Therefore, their services made by their virtual appearances, produced contents, the way of interactions, and the relationship with audiences are all determined by consumers. I have listed examples of how vtubers lose control of their subjectivity: the live content is usually determined by the audience and their appearance must follow the Japanese animation style instead of choosing avatars based on their own likeness. Therefore, vtubers suffer inertness and denial of subjectivity. Vtubers also suffer from ownership since superchats and other reward actions could “buy” vtubers to perform certain actions. The unequal relationship and commodity nature of vtubers also make them easily violated and silenced. While audiences have an overly intimate relationship with vtubers or use sexually extravagant words to describe vtubers, vtubers tend to accept those transgressions and remain a moderated attitude. In fact, signs of denouncing intimate relationships like claiming that they maintain such relationships for economic interest would be mocked by the audience.

Whether vtubers are experiencing the alienation from Gattunswesen needs more observation and interview with real vtuber performers is needed. I could only make a hypothesis that vtuber performers have few opportunities for self-fulfillment and self-development via their works considering that they have to adopt to the needs of consumers. The paper has demonstrated results of my research and there is still work to do. First of all, the interviewees are limited in their backgrounds, genders and likes, and a more comprehensive interview should be made. Secondly, I have not interviewed anyone that works in the vtuber industry and thus lack of an important perspective in terms of commodification and alienation.

## 6. Conclusion

The article examines how vtubers and females behind the masks are being commodified and objectified in China based on digital ethnography. Commodification and objections are undoubtedly a form of oppression to females since females’ dignity, or their ideas and definition of their values are replaced with values that are merely for profits or meeting the purposes of others [15]. From the article, I identify three main factors that trigger the oppression in vtuber industry: capitalism, communication technology, and normative female presumptions: capitalism identifies that females’ traded values and the desire of Chinese males, especially otakus, and invests in vtuber industry; communication technologies like Internet, online live platform, and bullet screens make contribute the popularity of vtubers industry in China and the intense interaction between vtubers and audiences; Fausto Sterling proposes that normative female presumptions exist due to historical and cultural factors and in vtubers’ cases, the normative female presumptions for vtubers are being beautiful and intimate lovers of males as my observation and interview suggests [16]. Meanwhile, those factors are interdependent: the normative female presumptions and communication technologies are tools for capitalists to make more profits, and the normative female presumptions with cultural and historical bias are further fixed by communication technologies and capitalists.

In general, vtubers as a product of capitalism, modern technologies, and sexism presumptions, is a new and strong example of oppression of both females and femininity in the digital age. However, one should also admit that watching vtubers is entertainment for male audiences and an economic empowerment of females at the same time.



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