

“She is one of the lads”: VTuber Gender Construction and Audience Empowerment

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INTRODUCTION

Digital gaming remains one of the most prominent activities found on live streaming platforms, with Japanese game streamers frequently using virtual avatars to represent themselves in their content (Johnson & Baguley 2025; Johnson 2024). Shown below in Figure 1, these creators are referred to as Virtual YouTubers or “VTubers” (Li 2023). While they operate much like real-life streamers, VTubers are distinguished by their digitally-mediated performances (Wan & Lu 2023), harnessing technologies such as motion-capture to embody an avatar – a fictional, interactive “character” that exists alongside human creators (Bredikhina 2020; Sakuma et al. 2023).



Figure 1: Screenshot of VTuber Inugami Korone live streaming gameplay (Lee 2020).

Rooted in the *otaku* subculture, VTuber avatar designs are largely inspired by Japanese animation and video game aesthetics (Lu et al. 2021). However, they continue to garner popularity beyond this context; a 2024 Streams Charts audience analysis reported a consistent yearly growth in VTuber viewership globally, denoting 403.1 million hours of content watched within the first quarter (Dempsey 2024). As streamers, VTubers occupy a participatory realm where individuals can express themselves and form counterpublics against hegemonic, masculine technocultures rampant in gaming communities (Freeman & Wohn 2020; Salter & Blodgett 2012). With digital avatars

further proven to be significant tools for identity affirmation within gaming cultures (Schultze 2014; Taylor 2002; Whitehouse et al. 2023), their potential to broadcast various gender identities become crucial cases to explore. This paper thus seeks to provide a novel understanding of how VTubers distinctly *co*-construct diverse gender representations in real-time, examining the extent to which they empower themselves and their audiences in the androcentric space of gaming.

In light of this, I relate the outcome of my study into how VTuber game streamers create online gender presentations, investigating their ability to foster inclusive spaces for marginalised gender identities. Using a qualitative approach that combines digital ethnography and reflexive thematic analysis, data from 10 English-speaking VTubers (see Table 1) and their audience responses were collected and analysed. The selection aimed to capture a wide spectrum of identities through diverse model genders and “offline” pronouns.

VTuber ID	Live Platform	Model Gender	“Offline” Pronouns	Company Affiliation	Subscriber/Follower Count
V1	YouTube	Male	He/Him	Yes	100k - 500k
V2	YouTube	-	She/Her	Yes	500k - 1M
V3	Twitch	Female	She/Her	Yes	100k - 500k
V4	Twitch	Female	-	Yes	500k - 1M
V5	YouTube	Male	He/Him	Yes	1M - 1.5M
V6	Twitch	Female	He/Him	No	100k - 500k
V7	Twitch	Male	He/Him	No	100k - 500k
V8	Twitch	-	Any/All	No	100k - 500k
V9	Twitch	Male	He/Him	No	100k - 500k
V10	Twitch	Female	She/Her	No	1M - 1.5M

Table 1: Demographic profiles of VTubers observed in this study. ‘-’ refers to indeterminate gender or pronouns.

My findings reveal that the creation of a VTuber’s online gender is not static, but rather a dynamic process that adapts in real-time through interactions between their design and fictive persona, their “offline” identity, and audience engagement. Notably, unlike traditional streamers, VTubers must navigate the expectations of not only their viewers but also the affordances of a real-life “actor” and a virtual “character”. This renders their gender identity a ludic *co*-construction rather than a fixed expression. Grounded in theories of online self-presentation and gender performativity (Butler 1988; Goffman 1973; Nakamura 2002), I frame these elements as distinct components of a VTuber’s gender “stage production” (Figure 2).

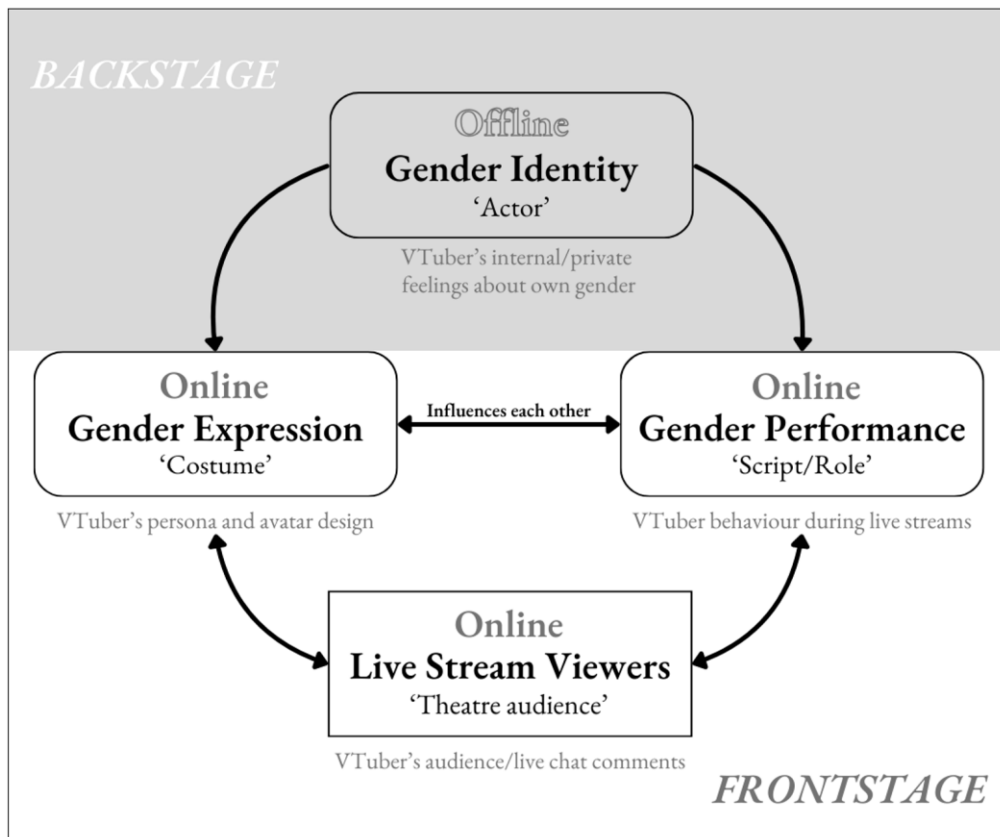


Figure 2: VTuber Online Gender Co-Construction.

Following Figure 2, VTubers can transcend rigid gender norms through their “costume” and “script/role”. Due to the medium's flexibility, they can emphasise feminine, masculine, or gender non-conforming characteristics through their models, backstories, streaming assets, and how they enact them (V1, V2, V3, V6, V8). These attributes are supported – if not directly influenced – by live-chat interactions (“theatre audience”). While VTubers can explore diverse gender presentations, my findings suggest that their portrayals are often sexualised, with specific content and model characteristics exaggerated to align with traditional gender expectations (V3, V4, V8, V10). Equally, while certain VTubers cultivate inclusive spaces that celebrate diverse identities, others limit explicit audience comments of identity empowerment by enforcing chat guidelines. Though direct expressions were rare, words of recognition and affirmation regarding certain VTubers’ subversive gender presentations were considered as indirectly validating. This reflects the broader gendered nature of streaming and its entanglement with affective labour, where maintaining emotional and community cohesion often falls disproportionately on the game streamer (Ruberg & Brewer 2022; Woodcock & Johnson 2019). As such, the fluidity of VTuber gender representation is not only influenced by the “offline” individual, but also by the precarious demands of the streaming economy and audience expectations. This study thus offers insight into how VTubers both reflect and redefine online gender identities, especially concerning marginalised groups within games live streaming communities, and possibilities for alternative presentations to the heteromale norm that continues to pervade digital gaming.

BIO

Zoe Li is a PhD candidate and Sessional Academic at the University of Sydney’s Department of Media and Communications. Based in the Sydney Games and Play Lab, her research explores Virtual YouTubers (VTubers) and their gendered labour. In 2024, she completed her undergraduate thesis (First Class Honours), investigating how they

construct diverse gender representations and empower their audiences. Zoe's focus remains passionately rooted in feminist games studies, with a keen interest in digital identity and interactive media. She hopes to continue expanding our understanding of VTubers and their profound impact on modern digital culture.

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