

Boundary between Virtuality and Reality: Comprehending VTubing Phenomenon through  
Posthuman

by

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Defense Date: March 29, 2024

Approved:

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the  
Department of Asian & Middle Eastern Studies in The Graduate School of  
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ABSTRACT

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## **Abstract**

When Kizuna AI debuted as the first VTuber in the world, a new Japanese popular culture emerges. In just five years, as a new category of YouTubers, a group of VTubers (virtual YouTubers) is gradually coming into the public eye. Different from other YouTubers, VTubers use a digital avatar to represent their body and response to their audience. By using technologies such as 3D and live2D, VTuber are able to create any characters they want ignoring the limitations of their real-life identity. Through their interactions with audience through digital avatars, some VTubers have gained a large number of followers and earnings during live streaming. Graphics technology and VTuber's performance create a connection between virtuality and reality. However, since the emergence of VTuber agencies in 2018, the VTubing phenomenon faces several new limitations. The agency's business contract shatters the fantasy world that VTuber brings to their audience and prompt the audiences to shift their attention from the VTuber's behavior to that of the people manipulate the avatar (*naka no hito*). The result dilutes or even eliminates the connection between the VTubers and their digital avatar.

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## 1. Introduction:

As I walked down the Shinjuku street, I heard a Kawaii voice coming from the electronic screen above my head. Why I use the word “Kawaii” to describe the voice instead of lovely is because it is a kind of cuteness that exist only in Japanese popular culture. The voice is from a new debuted VTuber named Spaghetti Aglio e Olio (アーリオ・オーリオ・エ・ペペロンチーノ). The name is originally the name of an Italian pasta dish from Naples. Olio claims to be the king of the spaghetti kingdom and has the appearance of a beautiful girl. She has yellow hair with pink highlight and rainbow-colored eyes with crown-shaped pupils. Her cute voice and image have gained her about 20,000 followers within a week of her debut<sup>1</sup>. However, her identity and appearance, her togetherness all exist only in the virtual world of the internet. Unlike traditional YouTubers who make video using their real body, the audience can only see and hear Oilo through the digital avatar, but not her with the flesh. She has a similar body structure to humans, but everything is different from natural humans. Her body is an assemblage of electronic information, and her humanoid appearance rewards the audience with the same happiness of watching traditional real-life YouTubers. Such YouTubers who use virtual identity and digital avatars for video production and live streaming are collectively known as VTubers.

The full name of VTuber is Virtual YouTuber, a new genre of YouTuber. The first VTuber is Kizuna AI from Japan, who debuted in November 2016<sup>2</sup>. Her cute appearance quickly gained her a huge fan base, and her presence caused a big reaction in Japanese society. Since

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<sup>1</sup> “【初配信】はじめまして！アーリオ・オーリオ・エ・ペペロンチーノなのじゃ〜！【#pepeライブ】.” YouTube, November 21, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aTgcn1F1lgA>.

<sup>2</sup> “A.I.Channel.” YouTube. Accessed January 21, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4YaOt1yT-ZeyB0OmxHgoIA>.

then, VTuber industry or VTubing phenomenon has started to influence Japan and the whole world as a new trend. In about two years, the number of debuted VTubers exceeded 20,000 people<sup>3</sup>. Although some of the VTubers use different types of digital platforms including X/Twitter and Twitch, most of them post videos and live streams on YouTube. As the most popular online video platform<sup>4</sup>, YouTube has a place in modern life to a greater or lesser extent. In addition to the income earned from watching videos uploaded by YouTubers, the Super Chat also accounts for a portion of YouTube's popularity and revenue. According to the most Super Chatted world widely in 2022 produced by PLAYBOARD, there are 5 VTubers in the top ten (three from NIJISANJI and two from hololive production, both are international VTuber agencies from Japan)<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> MoguLive 編集部. "VTUBER の人数が 20,000 人に到達 ユーザーローカルが発表." MoguLive, November 29, 2022. <https://www.moguravr.com/number-of-vtubers-reaches-20000/>.

<sup>4</sup> "18 Best Online Video Platforms for All Creators 2023." Riverside. Accessed April 2, 2023. <https://riverside.fm/blog/video-platforms>.

<sup>5</sup> PLAYBOARD, "Top Super Chat Earners- End of 2022", YouTube, Dec 12, 2022, Accessed March 27, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZKtRopdhQyI>.



**Figure 1. Screenshot of the ranking of the Top Super Chat Earners -End of 2022, video made by PLAYBORAD**

As for the top 100 rankings, 60% of them are VTubers<sup>6</sup>. After the emergence of VTuber as a new type of YouTuber, websites for online statistic like PLAYBOARD would separate them from other existed types of YouTubers as an individual category. Unlike traditional YouTubers who can show their biological body in video or live streaming, most VTubers conceal their flesh and real identities and use the avatar to create a new identity in the virtual world. Such a novel occupation causes controversy and develops as a new trend in Japanese popular culture. Before the public fully understands VTubers, they already occupy a significant portion of the online market, especially live streaming on YouTube, Twitch, and Bilibili from China.

<sup>6</sup> Diff. "Most Super Chatted Channels in Worldwide - Year-End." PLAYBOARD. Accessed March 29, 2023. <https://playboard.co/en/youtube-ranking/most-superchatted-all-channels-in-worldwide-yearend>.

According to GAMESIGHT, a digital platform for support game companies and game fanbase, there are now over 49,500 active VTuber doing game live streaming on Twitch and YouTube<sup>7</sup>. Because this site only counts VTuber with game channel, it's not the sum of all VTuber on Twitch and YouTube. Although the total number of VTuber in the worldwide is not clear at this point, we can still compare the data that has been obtained. Compared to the end of 2018, this number has more than doubled. Different from Kizuna AI, the VTubers with 3D digital avatar, most of the VTuber's debuting nowadays use 2D illustrations and live2D technology to make their avatar movable. Live2D avatar have greater mobility and lower cost than the 3D avatar used initially. In the previous 8 years, the VTuber industry has gone through different innovations and fixed the current mode of using Live2D for broadcasting. Although there are now more than 20 VTuber agencies around the world, it is impossible to ignore the influence of the largest existing VTuber agency, NIJISANJI/ANYCOLOR, Inc, on the technology and development of the industry.






With the debut of the first wave of VTubers in 2016, led by Kizuna AI, the VTubing phenomenon in Japan has brought VTuber as a new trend to the forefront of attention and acceptance. The VTuber connects their virtual identity to the audiences in the real world with avatars and utilize the freedom of virtuality combined with technology like Live2D to create work that provides emotional value to the audience through digital platforms including but not limited to YouTube and X/Twitter. Since the emergence of VTuber agency in 2018, VTubers as a profession has gained capital support and restrictions. VTuber agencies like NIJISANJI provide technical and monetary support to the VTubers, but heir commercial contracts put a cap on the

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<sup>7</sup> An, Yane. "The Rise of Vtubers 2023: Virtual Creators in the Streaming Space." Gamesight Blog, August 31, 2023. <https://blog.gamesight.io/vtuber/>.

VTubers' unlimited virtual identity. Capitalism provides material support for the virtual anchor industry to achieve technological freedom, but at the same time controls the content that VTubers and their virtual identities export to the reality, which dilute or even eliminate the connection between the VTuber and their digital avatar.

## 2. The Emergence of VTubers:

Rank	Channel	Super Chat Revenue	Count
1 NEW	 jun channel #うんこちゃん #加藤純一	+\$1,838,166	+104K
2 NEW	 Vox Akuma[NIJISANJI E...] #NIJISANJI #にじさんじ	+\$1,037,506	+83K
3 NEW	 Pastor Jerry Eze #Streams of ... #church	+\$1,025,441	+157K
4 NEW	 Chloe ch. 沙花又クロエ - ... #ホロライブ #hololive	+\$857,161	+40K
5 NEW	 Bispo Bruno Leonardo #oração #Bispo	+\$854,688	+343K

**Figure 2: Screenshot of the ranking of the most Super Chatted YouTubers in 2022 offered by PLAYBORAD**

According to the data offered by PLAYBOARD, Vox Akuma is the YouTuber with the second most Super Chat (figure 2) in 2022<sup>8</sup>. Different from other YouTuber, Vox Akuma is a VTuber, the abbreviation of virtual YouTuber. Meanwhile, Chloe at the fourth place is also a VTuber. Both of them are affiliated VTuber from two of the largest VTuber agencies in Japan,

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<sup>8</sup> Diff. "Most Super Chatted V-Tuber Channels in Worldwide - Year-End." PLAYBOARD. Accessed March 29, 2023. <https://playboard.co/en/youtube-ranking/most-superchatted-v-tuber-channels-in-worldwide-yearend>.

NIJISANJI and hololive. In 2022, Vox Akuma received over 1 million dollars of Super Chat and becomes the VTuber who earned the highest annual Super Chat. He debuted as VTubers in December 2021 as a member of Luxiem, the fourth wave VTubers produced by NIJISANJI EN<sup>9</sup>. That means that in the first year of his career as a VTuber, he surpassed most of his predecessors and other peers in this industry<sup>10</sup>. At the same time, as a character who exists in a virtual world, he has accomplished more than even most YouTubers who really existed. In addition to Vox's own charismatic personality and low attracting voice, it was necessary for the company to provide him technical and financial support. As a VTuber affiliated to NIJISANJI, as soon as he debuted, he received exquisite illustrations by a well-known artist LAM, a digital illustrator with more than 750 million followers on X/Twitter, and highly a movable avatar.

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<sup>9</sup> "【debut Stream】back from the Dead【nijisanji En | Vox Akuma】." YouTube, December 20, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqMp1vooavM&amp%3Bt=2s>.

<sup>10</sup> Diff. "Most Super Chatted Channels in Worldwide - Year-End." PLAYBOARD. Accessed March 29, 2023. <https://playboard.co/en/youtube-ranking/most-superchatted-all-channels-in-worldwide-yearend>.



**Figure 3: Screenshot of Vox Akuma’s debut live streaming**

During May 2022, Vox Akuma created his official account on Bilibili. In his first Bilibili live streaming, he received gifts valued more than 1.1 million yuan (over 152 thousand dollars) from approximately 40 thousand audiences in less than 2 hours<sup>11</sup>. The huge profit Vox made during a single live streaming shocked other VTubers and their audiences, as well as made others who were not familiar with VTubers start to notice this new phenomenon. News websites and magazines in different countries have reported on his achievements, including a Chinese news magazine *VISTA Kantianxia* (VISTA 看天下) produced by Ningxia Daily Newspaper Press

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<sup>11</sup> Ageless and scandal-proof: Chinese Tech Groups Bank on virtual influencers. Accessed March 12, 2024. <https://www.ft.com/content/e67086ad-81dc-4dd2-940c-1b0a5ae02f8c>.

Group<sup>12</sup>, British daily business newspaper *Financial Times*<sup>13</sup> and LINE NEWS from Japan<sup>14</sup>.

What exactly is the VTuber phenomenon? Why has it become so influential and profitable in just a few years? Even the audiences who know VTubers might use these kinds of queries. How does a VTuber, an unrealistic character that exists in a virtual world, establish a connection between the virtuality and the reality and provide emotional value to the audience live in the real world through their virtual creations? In this chapter, I would like to analysis how VTubers establish a relationship between them and their audiences through both technological and emotional means, which also bring an immersive experience for the audience while live streaming.

## ***2.1 How to Understand VTubing Phenomenon?***

VTubing is a new phenomenon resulting from combining Japanese culture (including but not limited to anime and manga, RPG games, cross-dressing, and Kawaii) and cutting-edge technology. Every VTuber has their personal avatars with a virtual identity to replace the flesh and represent themselves during the live streaming. The avatars are always captivating virtual characters based on 2D illustrations or 3D models. As for the platforms they use to upload works, they actually use the same platforms as other types of creators. VTubers will register accounts with their virtual name and identity in different online platforms for their subsequent

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<sup>12</sup> “【Vox Akuma】关于我在看天下新闻杂志上看到 vox 这件事\_哔哩哔哩\_bilibili.” \_哔哩哔哩\_bilibili, May 22, 2022. [https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1XA4y1o7Pg/?spm\\_id\\_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd\\_source=58feb72fc42cb6d2e88c29aa7d09ed93](https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1XA4y1o7Pg/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=58feb72fc42cb6d2e88c29aa7d09ed93).

<sup>13</sup> R/Nijisanji on reddit: Vox Akuma mentioned in Financial Times article ... Accessed March 12, 2024. [https://www.reddit.com/r/Nijisanji/comments/y2oemr/vox\\_akuma\\_mentioned\\_in\\_financial\\_times\\_article\\_on/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Nijisanji/comments/y2oemr/vox_akuma_mentioned_in_financial_times_article_on/).

<sup>14</sup> “日本発 V チューバー「Vox Akuma」、中国のライブ配信で投げ銭 2000 万円。運営会社は来月東証に上場 (36KR Japan) .” LINE NEWS. Accessed March 13, 2024. <https://news.line.me/detail/oa-rp25648/puhztefi5rxr?mediadetail=1>.

development, including but not limited to YouTube, X/Twitter, Facebook, Tik Tok, Niconico (Japan), and Bilibili (China). According to the data collected by User Local, a Japanese data technology company, as of November 28, 2022, there were over 20 thousand active VTubers worldwide<sup>15</sup>. Until February 2024, about one thousand VTuber's YouTube channels have more than 100 thousand subscribers, and more than 70 of those VTubers have gained more than a million followers<sup>16</sup>.

The phenomenon of VTubing begins in the 2010s in Japan. As the first VTuber in Japan, Kizuna AI, produced by the Japanese digital entertainment company Activ8 debuted and opened her first YouTube channel in 2016<sup>17</sup>. Kizuna AI is famous for her sweet voice and a sense of *Moe* (萌) or *Kawaii* in Japanese popular culture. The cute appearance of her avatar makes many audiences who love Japanese culture accept the new possible existence of virtual characters. She has long black hair with some pink highlights. Her pink and white costume implies a sense of purity and adorableness. She always wears a pink hairband (figure 4) that looks like rabbit ears, two leaves, or the shape of a heart refers to her name, “AI/愛,” meaning love in English, and the heart shape becomes her signature.

Another way of interpreting her name is the abbreviation of Artificial Intelligence. She denies the existence of the people who manipulate the avatar (中の人/*naka no hito* in Japanese)

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<sup>15</sup> “VTuber(バーチャルYouTuber)、ついに2万人を突破(ユーザーローカル調べ) | 株式会社ユーザーローカル.” 株式会社ユーザーローカル. Accessed December 15, 2023.

<https://www.userlocal.jp/press/20221129vt/>.

<sup>16</sup> ファン数ランキング(1ページ) | vtuberチャンネル... Accessed March 12, 2024. <https://virtual-youtuber.userlocal.jp/document/ranking>.

<sup>17</sup> “A.I.Channel.” YouTube. Accessed January 21, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4YaOt1yT-ZeyB0OmxHgo1A>.

and claims that she is the product of Artificial Intelligence<sup>18</sup>, which also refers to her name “AI”. What she stated was not the real information about the *naka no hito* or any real person’s identity but a virtual identity of Kizuna AI. She wants her audience to recognize her as an existence in virtuality. However, she is not a real AI program generated by coding and machines. To fit the identity of Kizuna AI, she will act like an intelligent humanlike AI girl in her videos.



**Figure 4: The profile picture of Kizuna AI’s YouTube Channel. Her hairband has a pink heart on the top.**

Kizuna AI uploaded her first video on YouTube in December 2016 and participated in Unite Tokyo 2018, organized by Unity · Technologies · Japan<sup>19</sup>. Unlike other human presenters who

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<sup>18</sup> “【自己紹介】はじめまして！キズナアイです♡(´ ˘ ˘)♡.” YouTube. YouTube, December 1, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NasyGUeNMTs>.

<sup>19</sup> “【Unite Tokyo 2018】基調講演スペシャルゲスト キズナアイ。” YouTube. YouTube, May 7, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZOwd8GB3uOQ>.

introduced their digital products, Kizuna AI was the presenter and introduced herself. As the special guest of the keynote speaker of Unite Tokyo 2018, Kizuna AI introduced herself and interacted with the audience using the digital avatar of a cute and vivid Japanese girl<sup>20</sup>. Her loveliness and enthusiasm attracted the public's attention, and she became the hot topic of Unite Tokyo 2018<sup>21</sup>. Besides Kizuna AI, Kaguya Luna, produced by Sacra Music (a subsidiary of Sony Music Entertainment Japan), Mirai Akari, produced by GOOM STUDIO (a subsidiary of BANDAI NAMCO Arts Inc.)<sup>22</sup>, and other VTubers debuted during 2016-2018 set the early business operating model and standard of being a VTuber.

When Kizuna AI talked as a virtual character in front of the public, how do people understand her behavior and identity? We could not go back to 2016 to interview the audience at that time. Connecting and bonding with a virtual character is very common in Japanese popular culture. In Japanese romance games, the virtual characters in the game will deepen their relationship with the player by conversing with them (Figure 5)<sup>23</sup>. The interactions between the characters and players create an immersive gaming experience, immersing them in the game and making them part of the story. However, such lines in the game and the ending of the story were fixed at the time of the game's release. When players play a game many times, they can predict what comes after and where the story is going, and gradually lose the novelty. Players are still able to experience a love relationship between them and the virtual characters who can only respond with fixed conversations. The relationship created by VTuber is a development of the

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<sup>20</sup> 小林 信行. “VTuber は、世界に向かって AI を叫ぶ.” ユリイカ 2018 年 7 月号 特集=バーチャル YouTuber 50-9, no. 724 (July 2018): 56-63.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> “PS Vita 「ニル・アドミラリの天秤 クロユリ炎陽譚」 プレイムービー 【隼人/滉/翡翠 編】.” YouTube, August 24, 2017. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=\\_p8Bc02Fxs0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=_p8Bc02Fxs0).

existed interactions between game characters and players. Unlike the fixed lines in games, VTubers are able to response to audience in real time with different contents.

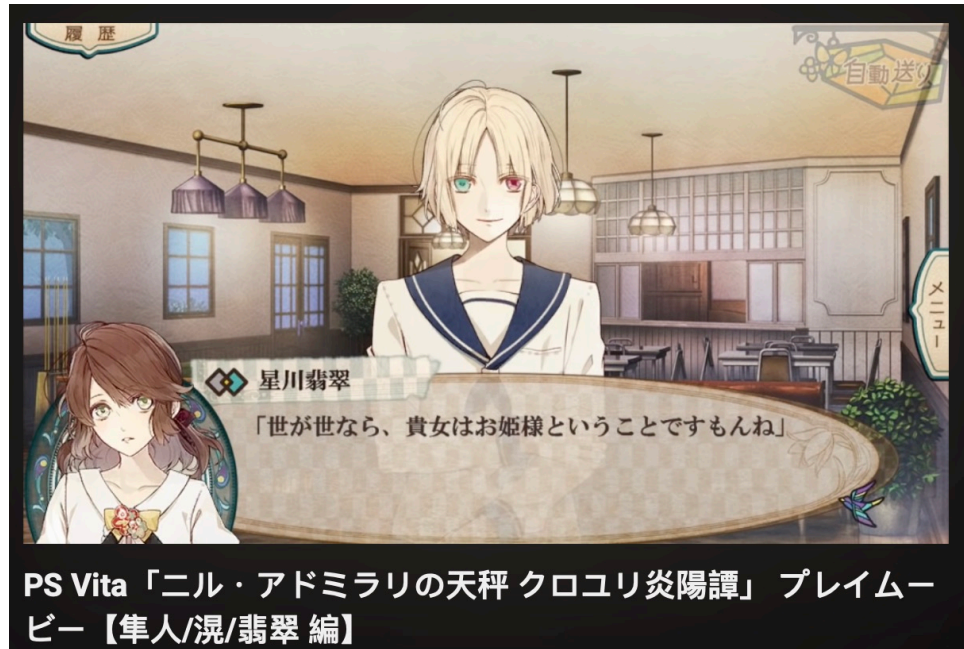


Figure 5: Screen shot of Nil Admirari no Tenbin, an otome game produced by Otomate

VTubers can be divided into the digital avatar and *naka no hito*. The existence of VTuber refers a combination of *naka no hito* and their avatar. When the audiences are watching a VTuber's live streaming, they visually see an animated illustration of a virtual character, and aurally hear the sounds and ideas conveyed by *naka no hito*. It is a process includes separation and recombination of mind. The mind (voice) of *naka no hito* separate from the flesh and unit with a new body (avatar). To better understand this process, I want to apply N. Katherine

Hayles's analysis of the Turing Test in her *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*.

Before discussing the Turing Test, it is necessary to include Hayles's interpretation of posthuman.

First, the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life. Second, the posthuman view considers consciousness, regarded as the seat of human identity in the Western tradition long before Descartes thought he was a mind thinking, as an epiphenomenon, as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow. Third, the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born. Fourth, and most important, by these and other means, the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals (Hayles 1999, 2-3).

Hayles lists four points of being posthuman, however, I am going to focus on the third and the fourth points in this chapter. According to her third points, human practices how to manipulate their biological body to achieve a manipulation of body alternatives in the future, for example, VTubers' avatar. Numerous VTubers' debut has proved that human being is ready to adapt a "new body" which can possibly replace a part of their biological body, or ignoring the limitation caused by the flesh. As for the fourth point, which I trust should be the most indispensable point, it emphasizes the important role of technology. In posthuman ideology, human being is able to "seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines" (Hayles 1999, 3). In VTubing phenomenon, the motion capture device and facial capture software enable the connection between *naka no hito* and advanced technology, which reflect it through avatars. Although there are still some invisible limitations to achieving such a technological link, such as high cost on customizing and acquiring the right equipment for the *naka no hito*, it is enough to prove that mankind is gradually realizing

the posthuman concept of a seamless human-machine interface. This also makes technology extremely important in realizing the concept of posthuman, which is one of the key words I want to emphasize in the second half of this chapter.

Generally, the public understands the Turing Test as a test to examine whether machines can think. However, the Turing Test includes different types of testing, for example, the test between males and females. In Hayles's analysis of the Turing Test, she questions the commonality between differentiating binary genders and distinguishing humans and machines. Whether the person is male or female, he or she is human. The Turing Test will not discover which gender can think or not. In Hayles' book, she suggests that Turing Test implies a division between the "enacted body" and "represented body" (Hayles 1999, xiii). The enacted body refers to the physical body, the flesh we are born with for the rest of our lives, and the represented body refers to a virtual body that is constructed by a person's culture, language, and anything elements existed in their mind without physical materials. The Turing Test does not simply recognize "who can think" or "what can think." The result "reunited the enacted body and represented body into a single identity" (Hayles 1999, xiii). The subject's experience was united, separated, and reunited in the Turing test. The exact process applies to Vtubers. *Naka no hito* remains their identity in real life before being a VTuber and acting based on their avatar. When they start using the avatar to represent themselves on the Internet, their enacted and represented bodies are separated. The represented body will dominate and affect the outcome of all transactions during live streaming. As time passes, both bodies will be responsible for representing the person together as a unity. This process shows the possibility for a human to divide their flesh and mind and preserve the human mind in the virtual through technology. The

use of technology plays an essential role in VTubing. Without technology, people cannot create a virtual world that can be “parallel to the ‘real’ world” (Hayles 1999, 14).

## ***2.2 Suspension of disbelief***

According to the definition in Merriam-Webster, suspend (one’s) disbelief means “to allow oneself to believe that something is true even though it seems impossible<sup>24</sup>”. The concept of suspension of disbelief originally refers to “one of Aristotle’s principles of theater”<sup>25</sup>. In watching fictional works or stories, the audiences give up doubting the authenticity of the content but choose to believe and release the tension to “purify the soul”<sup>26</sup>. English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge coined this phrase in his *Biographia Literaria*. In the Chapter XIV, he says:

During the first year that Mr. Wordsworth and I were neighbors, our conversations turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colors of imagination....The thought suggested itself (to which of us I do not recollect) that a series of poems might be composed of two sorts. In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real.... In this idea originated the plan of the “Lyrical Ballads”: in which it was agreed, that my endeavors should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing **suspension of disbelief** for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> “Suspend (One’s) Disbelief Definition & Meaning.” Merriam-Webster. Accessed March 9, 2024. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/suspend%20one%27s%29%20disbelief>.

<sup>25</sup> Safire, William. “Suspension of Disbelief.” *The New York Times*, October 7, 2007. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/07/magazine/07wwln-safire-t.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. “From *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter XIV by Samuel...” Poetry Foundation. Accessed March 10, 2024. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69385/from-biographia-literaria-chapter-xiv>.

Coleridge argues that if an author can combine unrealistic elements with “a human interest and a semblance of truth”, it can convince the reader to give up questioning the veracity of the content and choose to believe in it. His ideology of suspension of disbelief can be applied not only to literary works including poetry, but also to other media of art works, such as films. Robert W. Welkos, a writer for *Los Angeles Times*, once mentioned that “whether the audience willingly suspends its disbelief” was the key factor in determining the success of a Hollywood movie in his report<sup>28</sup>. In the same report, Nicholas Meyer, the director of two *Star Trek* feature films, also explains that the trick of creating art is to cover up and embellish the fictional elements so that it can appeal to the audience<sup>29</sup>.

Besides literature and films, the VTuber phenomenon can also be a field that applies suspension of disbelief. If a successful movie needs to make the audience suspend disbelief, then a successful VTuber needs the same elements. For VTubers who are unable to reveal realistic body and real information, their virtual identities replace all relevant personal information. Similar to Kizuna AI, every avatar has a specific background story about their virtual identity. After VTuber’s debut, the first stage of their work is to introduce their virtual identities and personalities to audiences through animated videos and live streaming. However, the introduction will not include any information about their real identity. One of the default rules of VTuber industry is that the audience should not dig up information about the *naka no hito*. Generally, VTubers use the word “lore” to represent all worldviews and stories associated with their virtual identity, which means similarly to the backstory. They hope that audience can respect the context

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<sup>28</sup> “Would You Believe . . . : From ‘king Kong’ to ‘Indecent Proposal,’ Audiences Have Been Asked to Buy a Premise That Can Make--or Break--a Film.” *Los Angeles Times*, April 15, 1993.

<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-04-15-ca-23034-story.html>.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

of their lore stories and refer to them in an appropriate way. For example, Vox Akuma is a demon over 400 years old. He expects his audience to respect him as a demon and his impossible age for a human being. The VTubers will improve or adjust the identity by updating related materials (photo, painting, textual message, and more) in those accounts.

In order to arouse the interest of audiences, VTubers will choose identities and appearances that are far removed from reality to create a sense of mystery. Through their performances in animated videos and live streaming, VTubers will grow the audience to believe and accept their virtual identities. However, a number of VTubers are some characters existed only in mythology and fairy tale. In NIJISANJI, besides Vox Akuma as a demon, Kuzuha, another popular male VTuber with 1.7 million subscribers on his YouTube channel, claims to be a vampire who is a game otaku<sup>30</sup>. It is this completely unrealistic element of Kuzuha's identity that attracts so many followers and make him became the most popular male VTuber in the world<sup>31</sup>. Aside from his unique identity, his rich lore story and interesting performance during daily live streaming are also some factors that contributed to his success.

Kuzuha's avatar is a young male with white hair. From his default appearance, he looks similar to human being. He wears a black jacket and gray pants. In keeping with his preference for staying at home, he does not even wear shoes. Besides several earrings, there is not much extra decoration on him or his clothing. Although he wears human clothing, his red shining eyes, canine tooth, and sharp ears and nails (figure 4) tell us his identity as a vampire.

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<sup>30</sup> "Kuzuha." NIJISANJI. Accessed March 18, 2023. <https://www.nijisanji.jp/en/talents/1/kuzuha>.

<sup>31</sup> Based on the data compiled by PLAYBOARD collected during March 2024, Kuzuha's #15 on the ranking of most subscribed VTuber. None of the other 14 channels before him were male VTubers. Thus, Kuzuha is most subscribed male VTuber.



**Figure 6: The profile picture of Kuzuha's YouTube Channel and his default avatar**

In addition to the visual design feature, Kuzuha talks and responds like a vampire in his X/Twitter post and YouTube live streaming. He states that his original name is Alexander Lagusa and is over 100 years old. Besides his original male avatar in a black coat and grey pants, he also owns a female avatar named Sanya in a cute Gothic dress<sup>32</sup>. In his own words, he can transform his gender and appearance by drinking others' blood. According to his narration, his vampire mother, who gave him the name Sanya, used to prepare dresses for him when he transformed into a female body (Figure 8). He continues telling the audience about his life and story little by little during each live streaming as the supplement to his identity as a vampire.

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<sup>32</sup> “【 40 万人記念 】 石油王募集中 【 雑 】 .” YouTube. YouTube, October 31, 2021. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHUgx5qO\\_r8&t=611s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHUgx5qO_r8&t=611s).

Although Kuzuha defines himself as a man, he experiences talking and acting like a woman with his female avatar<sup>33</sup>. Including the original avatar and female avatar, Kuzuha has already collected more than ten avatars with innovative styles. Each avatar has its specific role or function. For example, he published an avatar of him pretending to be a high school boy last spring (Figure 9). Various hairstyles and outfits allow him to switch his look and appearance in the streaming.

## 葛葉 Kuzuha

魔界での名はアレクサンドル・ラグーザ。  
愛称はサーシャ。  
魔界から家族と共に移住してきた吸血鬼。  
父親の気まぐれで人間界へ移住したと聞いているが、本当の理由は不明。  
移住後、葛葉だけは肉体を3歳まで巻き戻している。  
幼少期の葛葉は教育係から逃げ回っていた為、家族が改めて色々な事を学べるよう強制的に行った。  
その後、長男と親の脛をかじり倒しながら生きている生活だったが、現在は諸事情で全員魔界に戻ってしまった為一人暮らし。  
大金持ちと結婚する為に始めた配信業も忙しく、不本意だがニートとは呼べない生活を送っている。

本名	アレクサンドル・ラグーザ	身長	178cm
愛称	サーシャ	体重	60kg前後
年齢	不明 (100歳以上)	性別	男
誕生日	11月10日	好きなもの	金 血 ゲーム
		嫌いなもの	ピーマン トマト 炎 努

**Figure 7: The screenshot of Kuzuha’s profile**

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<sup>33</sup> “あぺくすれげんどもさ メイカパイセン参戦 水産参戦.” YouTube, February 15, 2019. <https://youtu.be/So2EfbfrZHA>.



**Figure 8: Sanya (female Kuzuha)'s outfit**



**Figure 9: High School Kuzuha's outfit with black hair**

## ***2.2 Development of VTubing Technology***

The virtual world built by VTubing and the digital avatars allows VTubers like Kuzuha to enjoy the freedom of creating a virtual character to show their whimsical ideas. They can't enrich their roles without the support of technology. The primary technologies connected VTubers and avatars are Live2D and real-time motion capture software. Instead of showing their natural body, VTubers use a digital avatar model to reflect their reaction and movement, including facial expression, blinking, talking, and slight turning of the upper body with technology like Live2D, computer graphics, and real-time capture software. For the VTubers who debuted recently, Live2D is essential software. Before the Live2D technology became widespread, digital avatars used by the first generations of VTubers, including Kizuna AI, was presented in 3D model. Because of the high cost and operational complexity of 3D modeling, it is difficult for individuals or small companies to use it. Live2D, a software technology using 2D illustration to achieve pseudo-3D effects, was introduced to the public during a similar period as the VTubing phenomenon. This technology does not rely on extra hardware facilities like motion capture suits; people can download the Live2D software and use their computers to achieve a simple pseudo-3D effect at home<sup>34</sup>. As this technology becomes extensive use, besides qualified companies like Sony and NAMCO, small companies and individuals can create a personal aviator and debut as a VTuber more simply and cheaply. According to the data collected by PANORA (a Japanese news website focusing on virtual reality), by October 2021, the number of VTubers on YouTube had exceeded 16,000<sup>35</sup>. More than simply an increase in the number of VTubers, Live2D has benefited the

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<sup>34</sup> “サービス紹介.” 株式会社Live2D, September 2, 2019. <https://www.live2d.jp/service/>.

<sup>35</sup> “バーチャル YouTuber、本日 1 万 6 千人を突破 (ユーザーローカル調べ) | 株式会社ユーザーローカル.” 株式会社ユーザーローカル. Accessed March 25, 2023. <https://www.userlocal.jp/press/20211019vs/>.

VTubing industry in two specific ways. First, with Live2D technology, VTubers can design and create multiple avatars freely; second, as an easy-to-operate technology, Live2D allows VTubers to use their avatars at home, encouraging a higher frequency of live streaming.

Live2D technology makes it possible for VTubers to stream from their home with primary electronic devices. The first generation of VTubers like Kizuna AI uses 3D models in their videos. Most of their videos are captured in 3D studios with motion capture suits for precise motion capture. In order to complete the filming, the massive consumption of human and material resources is unavoidable. However, with the development of Live2D technology, VTubers and VTubing companies have figured out how to apply Live2D to create pseudo-3D avatars to replace high-consumption 3D modeling. When this technology was initially applied in VTubing, the principal operation method of VTubing was still uploading videos on the YouTube channel. Some VTubers might do live streaming, but it was different. In 2008, NIJISANJI, a Japanese VTuber agency, was founded with self-developed mobile phone software for facial capture<sup>36</sup>. Their application changed the previous 3D-based operation and popularized the live2D technology in the VTubing industry. As the first wave of VTubers produced by NIJISANJI, Tsukino Mito's performance laid the foundation for the company's future direction. She made her first live streaming on YouTube the day after her debut and discussed The Human Centipede with the audience<sup>37</sup>.

Different from previous VTubers who kept being pure and cute in front of the camera, Tsukino Mito chatted with the audience as if they were friends and had no qualms. Her boldness

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<sup>36</sup> "About." ANYCOLOR Inc. Accessed March 28, 2023. <https://www.anycolor.co.jp/en/about>.

<sup>37</sup> "月ノ美兎の放課後ラジオ #1." YouTube. YouTube, March 18, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=trGGp3zbJoA&amp;t=3114s>.

and graciousness broke the boundary between her and the audience. They made the audience feel that even though they exist in different worlds, they can communicate like people in ordinary human society. Besides Tsukino Mito, a mass of NIJISANJI VTubers appeared in the public eye. In just seven months, more than 50 VTubers focusing on live streaming with NIJISANJI's Live2D application debuted. Led by Tsukino Mito, NIJISANJI VTubers came up with a live streaming-based operation model with the application of Live2D. They changed the direction of the VTubing industry and inspired individual VTubers or VTubers from other agencies to do live streaming until now. It is safe to say that without NIJISANJI, the VTubing industry might not be as dominated by real-time live streaming as it is now.

With the spread of advanced technology, VTubers have a high degree of freedom to design their avatars. The virtual world allows them to create avatars that live differently from the general human body and any other known creatures in the real world. The avatars can be animal anthropomorphism similar to humans or creatures that exist only in myths and legends. Almost every VTuber will create a virtual view of the world for their avatars and add more details during the live streaming. The avatars are someone or something from the imaginary world and have specific likable characters. The VTubers will perform in line with the personality they designed for the avatar, which can be similar to their actual characters or the opposite. In other words, a VTuber uses a digital avatar to create a new identity through advanced technology based on their own design and physical reaction.

The avatars provide an opportunity for people living in the real world to create an independent identity ignoring the limitation caused by physical differences, including gender and race to present themselves. Other than VTubers like Kuzuha, who clarify their gender, there are some genderless VTubers or cross-dressing VTubers. A particular type of VTubers called

*Babiniku* specifically refers to male VTubers using female avatars during the live streaming developed under the cross-dressing culture in Japan. *Babiniku* identifies themselves at the time of their debut and performance as female during the live streaming. To act and sound more like a female, they might use voice-changing software and imitate female movement during the live streaming. The *Babiniku* VTubers believe that instead of a male avatar, an avatar of an adorable young girl can appeal to a broader audience (Liudmila and Giard 2022, 1644). Based on the ranking of the world's most subscribed VTuber produced by PLAYBOARD can confirm their concerns. As of the end of March 2023, the top 10 VTubers with YouTube subscribers are all female (nine from hololive production and one from NIJISANJI)<sup>38</sup>. Although Kuzuha is the most popular male VTubers, he can only rank 15th in this list. According to the ranking, visually performing with female avatars can receive more attention and affection. Such advantages are not limited to female VTubers. The high degree of freedom in avatar designing allows male VTubers to own a female avatar to represent themselves and use images of adorable girls to attract audiences. With the development of *Babiniku*, the opposite type *Gyaku-Babiniku* (reversed *Babiniku*), appears later. Some female VTubers will perform with male avatars and sound like a male. The emergence of genderless VTubers dilutes the restrictions of the physical body of VTubers and breaks the limitation of their real identities on the virtual identity.

The available live streaming can increase visibility and income, and those functions are also applicable to the VTubing industry (McDonald 2016, 37). The live streaming encourages the audience to interact with VTubers. At the same time, VTubers from different areas can use live streaming to build a virtual relationship with each other. By working with VTubers from various

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<sup>38</sup> Diff. "Most Subscribed V-Tuber Channels in Worldwide - Total." PLAYBOARD. Accessed March 23, 2023. <https://playboard.co/en/youtube-ranking/most-subscribed-v-tuber-channels-in-worldwide-total>.

regions and speaking different languages, they can further expand their visibility to benefit themselves and the platform. Cooperation between VTubers is joint. At the end of March 2023, a Japanese Vtuber, Minase Rio, from hololive production live streamed his first anniversary on YouTube. In this live stream, he cooperates with 44 VTubers from Japan, Korea, and several western countries, including America and British<sup>39</sup>. Every Vtubers prepares a song and does a duet with Minase. Instead of physically singing in the same space, Minase puts his avatar with others, creating a sense of togetherness in the virtuality. Besides putting avatars in the same virtual space, he interacts with others' avatars. Although Minase cannot physically touch other VTubers, from what the audience can see on the screen, it is as if they can reach each other. More than 16 thousand people watched live streaming. The number is far greater than the audience of his other live streaming. Fans of other VTubers came to his channel for their favorite VTubers, and they also got to know a boy named Minase Rio. Additionally, he received over 1,700 dollars of Super Chat during this live streaming<sup>40</sup>. Such cooperated live streaming between VTubers from different regions can contribute to rapid visibility and revenue growth.

### ***2.3 Conclusion of VTubing Phenomenon Emerge***

When Kizuna AI debuted, no one would have predicted that she might start a trend called VTuber phenomenon. The existence of VTubers has given the young generation new job

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<sup>39</sup> “【#水無世燐央1周年 歌枠】1周年なのでゲストをたくさん呼びして歌う！！【水無世燐央/Uproar!! / アップロー/ホロスターズ】.” YouTube. YouTube, March 30, 2023.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4X6wNg8VNH8&t=8919s>.

<sup>40</sup> Diff. “Most Super Chatted V-Tuber Channels in Japan - Daily - 03/30/2023.” PLAYBOARD. Accessed March 31, 2023. <https://playboard.co/en/youtube-ranking/most-superchatted-v-tuber-channels-in-japan-daily?period=1680134400>.

opportunities while also inspire people to think about creating new ways to express themselves. For VTubers, no matter who they are in real life, acting as a virtual character provides them a new platform where they can express themselves freely. Take *Babiniku* mentioned above as an example. Cross-dressing or even swapping gender is common behavior in VTubing. Some VTubers claim their gender differently from *naka no hito*. *Babiniku* are male VTubers who use avatars of cute anime girls to represent themselves during live streaming. To become more fit with the image of cute girls, they will disguise their masculine voice into feminine voice as well. By using a female avatar and other related techniques and technology, *Babiniku* VTubers can have a long-term experience of being female with less cost in the virtual world. Besides gender, VTubers also have a high degree of freedom in terms of race, biology, and all factors related to the physical body. Because they shed their flesh and accept a virtual body, they have the right to transform their digital avatar and become whatever they want to be in the virtuality.

The whimsy of the VTuber creators is significant to VTubing phenomenon, but without the support of related technology, we could not have seen the now flourishing. The 3D models used by the earliest VTubers such as Kizuna AI could show more body movements with motion capture suit, but the high production costs and delicate technical requirements prevented most ordinary people from becoming a VTuber this way. The Live2D avatar improved by NIJISANJI software introduced the audience to a new type of VTuber. Nekomasu, one of the *Four Heavenly Kings of Virtual YouTubers*, believes that NIJISANJI's use of Live2D avatar has changed the situation of expensive 3D models not being able to get to market<sup>41</sup>. At the same time, VTubing

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<sup>41</sup> “VTuber はなぜ増え、どう駆け抜けたのか？ 当事者たちが振り返る 2018 年【のじゃろりおじさん×にやるら対談】.” 電ファミニコゲーマー - ゲームの面白い記事読んでみない？, December 27, 2018. <https://news.denfaminicogamer.jp/interview/181227#i-2>.

agency like NIJISANJI and hololive are gradually increasing after the end of 2017. The emergence of professional agencies has changed the VTuber's viability and has hindered the freedom of being a virtual character. In the next chapter, I will focus on the graduation of VTubers to analysis how the relationship between *e naka no hito* and avatars is disrupted by business contracts.

### 3. Graduated VTubers

#### 3.1 Graduation and “Death”

The *Four Heavenly Kings of Virtual YouTubers* (バーチャル YouTuber 四天王) refers to five Japanese VTubers who contributed the VTuber boom in the early stage of VTubing phenomenon, including the first VTuber Kizuna AI. Some of them are produced by technology company, like Kizuna AI, others are produced by individuals. However, most of them did not continue their activities as VTubers now. Graduation, this is what fans and those who familiar with VTubing phenomenon call this ceasing to continue being a VTuber. The word "graduation" was originally used by Japanese idols, like AKB48. When a member does not want to continue being an idol or wants to leave the idol company, they use the word graduation to signify the termination of their contract. Usually the members will announce the exact date of their graduation and hold events to celebrate it. For example, if an AKB48 member graduates, they might have a graduation stage or concert to say goodbye to their fans. Graduated idols can choose to continue to sign with another company as an idol or choose other careers, or even quit the entertainment industry. The graduation of VTuber is very similar to the graduation of an idol. Regardless of the type of VTuber you are, any actions that are not taken for the purpose of continuing VTuber activities may be collectively referred to as “graduation”. In this chapter, I am going to introduce the VTuber’s graduation and use several graduations of VTubers from NIJISANJI as my case studies to analysis the unwilling graduation caused by the conflict between *naka no hito* and their agency, which cause impediments to the virtual freedom of VTuber.

When a VTuber does not want to continue streaming as a VTuber and wants to pursue a different career, or the person does not think VTubing is right for him or her, they have the option of graduation. Graduation means leaving the agency or engage in a new profession for *naka no*

*hito*, but for VTuber as a virtual character it means “death”. A graduated VTuber will not continue posting videos or live streaming using their avatars and social media accounts. As for the VTubers produced by individuals, they still own their avatars and accounts; however, the VTubers with an affiliation like NIJISANJI will be banned from accessing to the avatars and accounts after graduation. On the other word, the affiliated VTuber can use the materials offered by the agency during the term of the contract, but they have no ownership of any resources, including their avatar. Typically, but based on the reality, some VTuber's will be forced to discontinue their contracts due to conflicts between *naka no hito* and the affiliation.

According to NIJISANJI’s official site, as of February 2024, there are currently a total of 204 active VTubers from 3 branches (143 VTubers from JP, 32 VTubers from EN and 29 VTubers from VR) and 57 VTubers graduated<sup>42</sup>. All of the affiliated VTubers have the freewill to graduate. Their graduation usually because of *naka no hito*’s personal problems or some disagreement between them and their agency. For example, as one of the most popular VTuber from NIJISANJI, Suzuharu Lulu graduated at the end of June 2021. In her graduation live streaming, she the prolonged live streaming has affected her daily life and health. Because of working as a VTuber, she was harassed by a stalker, which was the biggest reason she graduated<sup>43</sup>. (Even if VTubers does not take the initiative to reveal anything related to their real identities, some fans and audiences will dig up the personal information of *naka no hito* in different ways, which may affect the VTuber's daily life.) After asking NIJISANJI and calling the police to no avail, she chose to graduate to protect herself. Although NISANJI provided Suzuharu

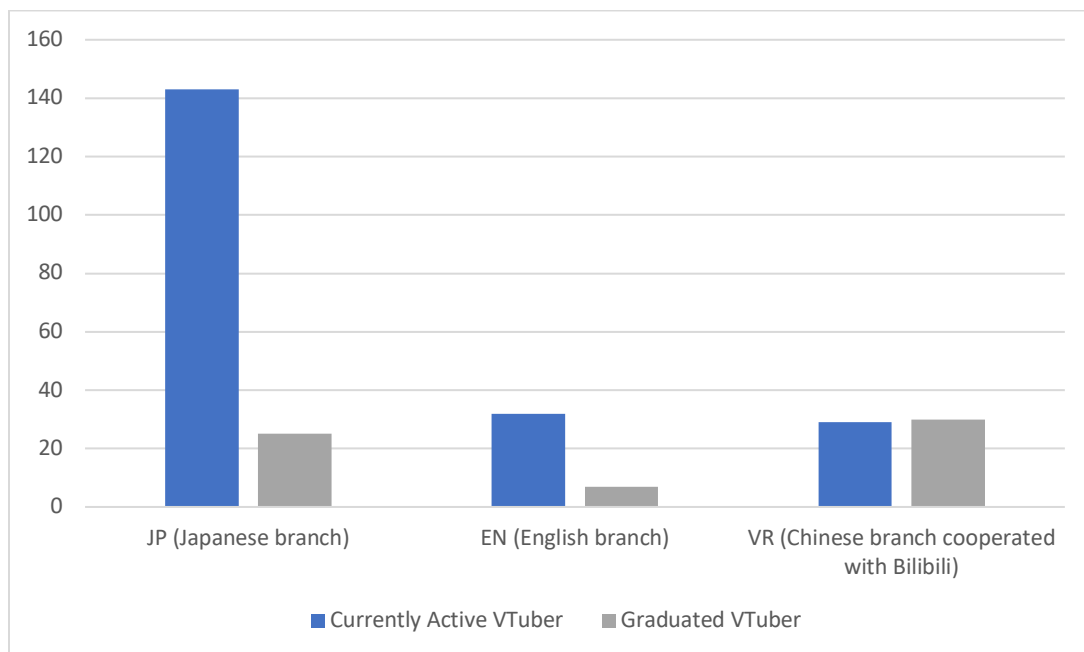
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<sup>42</sup> “タレント一覧.” にじさんじ. Accessed February 20, 2024. <https://www.nijisanji.jp/talents>.

<sup>43</sup> “【最後の配信】にじさんじ所属ッ！鈴原るるでしたッ！！ありがとうッ……！！【鈴原るる/にじさんじ】.” YouTube, June 30, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-d8NPJ8Shfl>.

Lulu with technological and financial support for being a VTuber, the agency missed the needs of the *naka no hito*.

**Table 1: The Number of Active and Graduated VTubers of NIJISANJI's Three Branches until February 2024**



In the following case studies, I will go into detail about two other VTubers who were overlooked by the company for their personal needs and forced to graduate from NIJISANJI. As for Mayuzumi Kai, his portrayal of the virtual identity exemplifies the application of suspension of disbelief. Over the course of two years, he created a virtual hacker that connects the virtual and the real, involving the audience in his lore story through the flexible use of technology. However, because of the conflict between the *naka no hito* and NIJISANJI, Mayuzumi Kai had to break this

virtual dream and return to the reality of choosing graduation. As for Mysta Rias, another VTuber graduated because of a conflict with NIJISANJI, he explained after graduation that NIJISANJI ignored his huge tax problem, forcing him to ask for help from other agency. Even with the support of technology from VTuber agencies and the complete lore story of virtual characters, VTubers always have to deal with the impact of real factors on the *naka no hito*, ultimately severing the connection between them and the avatar.

Because of the special relationship between the VTuber and their *naka no hito*, the VTuber agencies hires people on the basis of their competence as VTubers. It is possible for the VTuber agency to hire morally corrupt VTuber without having a detailed understanding of the people manipulate it. Although the audience will see VTuber as separate from the *naka no hito*, the *naka no hito* 's words and actions will have a direct impact on their performance as a VTuber. If their behaviors bring sever influence on the image of VTuber and the company, the company, like NIJISANJI, have the right to terminate their contracts. Back in March 2019, NIJISANJI terminated a rookie VTuber Shindo Raito (真堂雷斗), who had been debuted for just four days. Through a series of investigations by netizens, it was found that the Shindo Raito's *naka no hito* had made disrespectful comments about women on the internet before he debuted from NIJISANJI, such as trying to use his status as a liver to ask female fans to meet him offline. He had even harassed other VTubers. His various baleful comments and behavior made NIJISNAJI fire him immediately. Such a dismissal is a desperate decision by NIJISANJI. Not coincidentally, in March 2023, NIJISANJI EN fired Zaion LanZa, a female VTuber debuted only 3 months ago. In the announcement post in the X/Twitter of ANYCOLOR, is says Zaion violated more than 10 rules, including but not limited using copyrighted songs without prior authorization, reveal

internal information during live streaming and making offensive comments including discrimination and sexual assault<sup>44</sup>.



**Figure 10: Screenshot of Termination of Zaion LanZa's contract**

<sup>44</sup> Official, NIJISANJI EN. “[Important Notice]We Are Sorry to Announce That Due to the Reasons Explained in the Attached File, We Had to Make the Decision to Terminate Our Contract with the Nijisanji En Liver Zaion Lanza, Effective Immediately.Thank You for Your Understanding. Pic.Twitter.Com/6miswjskin.” Twitter, March 10, 2023. [https://twitter.com/NIJISANJI\\_World/status/1634147534795841536](https://twitter.com/NIJISANJI_World/status/1634147534795841536).

Although NIJISANJI asked Zaion to take a two-month leave of absence and had several conversations with her during this period, she did not improve her behavior. In order to minimize further damage to the company and its stakeholders, NIJISANJI terminated its contract with Zaion during the beginning of March 2023. And recently, NIJISANJI fired a female VTuber named Selen Tatsuki. Similar to the announcement of Zaion's termination, NIJISANJI cites several of Selen's violations of rules. However, her fans and coworkers outside NIJISANJI spoke out and proved that the announcement was not true. Meanwhile, selen states that she was bullied by other VTubers from NIJISANJI, which is one of the reasons for her previous suicide attempts. This series of problems made it impossible for the audience to trust NIJISANJI anymore and raised questions: how do we distinguish between virtual and real when we facing a VTuber?

### 3.1.1 Mayuzumi Kai

On the evening of June 19, 2021, a strange commercial film was shown on the Shinjuku ALTA VISION, a famous commercial building east exit of Shinjuku Station, Japan. Instead of a real actor, a VTuber named Mayuzumi Kai appeared on the screen. In the film, he says:

This film is not a promotion, advertisement, or anything of significance. I just want to ask the people living in the reality who are watching this. Thus, I directly interfere (the reality). この映像は宣伝でも広告でもなく、何か意義がある物でもない。これを聞いている現実を生きる人達にただ聞きたいことがあって、こうして、直接干渉しにきた<sup>45</sup>.

He stated that he was human or was supposed to be. And now he was shocked to find out that he's an imaginary character made up by humans in a virtual world. Besides presenting his new cyberpunk style costume in this film, he also asked three questions to the people in reality: 1.

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<sup>45</sup> “【にじさんじ】 黛灰新宿アルタヴィジョン放映像像【字幕】.” YouTube, June 19, 2021. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_9sZHaS6h9A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_9sZHaS6h9A).

What does he look like to those watching or listening to the film? 2. What is reality? What's the difference between reality and virtuality? 3. Why the world human live is the reality, while the world he lives is the virtuality? After asking everything he wanted to know, the film came to a screeching halt. Fans and passersby watching the film in the surrounding area let out gasps of surprise, while the screen quickly jumped to the next unrelated film. As Mayuzumi pokes fun at himself in the film, most people recognized his questions and his new costume were too “Chūni”<sup>46</sup>. People only took his question as an anecdote and not many gave him a serious answer.

Mayuzumi Kai is a male VTuber from NIJISANJI debuted on 29 July 2019. He introduced himself as a virtual hacker raised in an orphanage. As a hacker, he has a genius mind and a calm personality. Since his debut, he had organized several VTuber events both within and outside the NIJISANJI. In addition to some of the events being paid for by NIJISANJI, he also organized a number of events at his own expense, including rock paper scissors game with a prize of 1 million yen<sup>47</sup>. While continuing to work as a VTuber, he was also constantly refining the worldview of his virtual identity. The film played at Shinjuku station was produced by him at his own expense. Maybe some NIJISANJI's commercials may have been shown in some of Japan's hottest spots before, but Mayuzumi was the first VTuber in NIJISANJI to connect the virtual him to the people in reality through street advertising. In fact, Mayuzumi did more than simply show his film in Shinjuku. In his channel, he also showed his video being “played” on several big screens at Shibuya Crossing, one of the most trafficked spots in Tokyo, on the same day.

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<sup>46</sup> “Chūni” or “Chūnibyō” is a term from Japanese anime. It can be directly translated as a syndrome that occurs in students in their second year of middle school. It is used to describe delusions that teenagers might have, such as fantasizing that they have superpowers to save the world.

<sup>47</sup> “【#にじさんじじゃんけん王】じゃんけん大会 参加者発表&トーナメント抽選会【黛 灰 / にじさんじ】.” YouTube, December 9, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vd9XBtn7jvA>.

However, there were no eyewitnesses who captured Mayuzumi's film playing at Shibuya that day, so people suspected that he used technology to synthesize the video from the streets of Shibuya. His brilliant plan brought gasps from the audience and caused a sensation in the VTubing community.

The film is actually an addition to the worldview for Mayuzumi Kai's virtual identity. Different from other VTubers focusing on game, music, and other media of work, Mayuzumi is a story-based VTuber (ストーリー勢). Story-based VTuber is not a popular type because it takes time and effort to design an engaging and immersive story. Each VTuber have to need to act out their characters and add to the backstory according to their personal virtual worldview in different forms at all times, including the tone during live streaming, their relationship with other VTubers, every post in their official account and more. A complete virtual worldview takes a lot of manpower, time and money to shape. Even if a lot of resources are spent, if the story doesn't engage the audience, it may end up as a failure. However, Mayuzumi made it. His story began with his debut streaming. At the end of his debut streaming, Mayuzumi asked the audience if anyone was involved in an experiment or a project. The audiences had no idea about the experiment or project he asked, but people realized that it might be a part of his story.

The audience's suspicions proved to be correct. From July 2019 to the end of June 2021, Mayuzumi spent two years gradually constructing his character's story and worldview. His story features a professor who teaches him computer skills, his client and various authorities in the virtual worldview. Because Japanese VTubers love to devise special events on April Fool's Day, it became a great time of year for Mayuzumi to reveal something new to his audience, including live streaming secretly hosted by his professor and some message "Mayuzumi" did not recognize. As "Mayuzumi"'s and audiences' memory differed, the story line became clearer. What is

Mayuzumi's existence? What is the meaning of his existence? In his story, Mayuzumi clearly delineates between "Mayuzumi"'s existence in the virtual world as a VTuber and his existence in reality. According to his professor's word in the live streaming, "Mayuzumi" was trapped in the virtual world, and he was here to take "Mayuzumi" out of the virtuality and back into the reality. The professor argued that "Mayuzumi" was not happy in the virtuality where he needed to follow an arranged script. The only way to make him happy was to bring him back to reality, which means "Mayuzumi" as a VTuber would be disappeared in the future. However, the audience changed the result. On May 20, 2021, Mayuzumi posted a voting in his Twitter (X) account. He asked the audience if he should delete any data related to his professor and leave it in the virtual world, 80% of the audience chose to delete it. This choice means that "Mayuzumi" as a VTuber would stay in the virtual world, but him in reality might disappear. The selection is not only the choices in his story, but also the choices in his life. "Mayuzumi" as a VTuber represents him continuing being a VTuber, and him in reality means that he might graduate from NIJISANJI in the future. As it says in film mentioned in the beginning of this section, Mayuzumi clearly knew that he was a virtual character that emerged from human's imagination and technology. As a character that existed in people's fantasies, he should cut off from the real him (the person behind the digital avatar, "*naka no hito*"). When he asked the audience if they should stay in the virtual world, he was actually asking them if he should continue streaming as a VTuber. Because 80% of his viewers chose to keep him in the virtuality, he'll continue his work as a VTuber while keeping his story going. However, because of the professor's disappearance, he spent a month on "restoring", the start of his new project, which is the film people seen in Shinjuku.

The two-year-long story and interlocking plot design not only startled Mayuzumi Kai's fans, but also brought the story-writing genius to the attention of others who follow other

VTubers. One week after the film released, Mayuzumi's YouTube channel reached 400 thousand subscribers. When everyone thought he had a bright future ahead of being a VTuber, he announced a few months later on December 3rd that he needed to take at least three months off for psychological reasons<sup>48</sup>. During the live streaming, he began to experience mild depression a month ago. The depression got progressively worse and prevented him from focusing on his work as a VTuber. Chronic lack of sleep and stress made his streaming less effective than he expected, which deepened his stress and worsened his condition. In order not to let this vicious cycle continue, he decided to take a few months off. Unfortunately, things did not turn out as well for him as everyone expected. In May 2022, shortly after he returned from his break, Mayuzumi said that although he had something wanted to do, he was still a little overwhelmed<sup>49</sup>. He became progressively more reluctant to face the audience as he was worried that the terrible mental state would affect his speech during live streaming. He wanted to protect himself, and his fans, by cutting back on the live streaming. Although he could not explain it now, he said that one day he will explain it to everyone. Surprisingly, on July 2 of the same year, Mayuzumi announced that he was terminating his activities as VTuber, that is, graduating from NIJISANJI. On the same day, he uploaded a video in his YouTube channel to explain his graduation. In the video, he states that there is a huge difference in direction between himself and ANYCOLOR, the company managing NIJISANJI project ( “ANYCOLOR との方向性の違い” ). Since November of the previous year, Mayuzumi had several discussions with ANYCOLOR about proposals for his

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<sup>48</sup> “【報告】 ちょっとお休みする (※配信後限定公開になる) 【黛灰/にじさんじ】.” YouTube, December 3, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcPCLss2sqc>.

<sup>49</sup> “【同窓会配信】 俺のデビュー当時にチャンネル登録してた人しかコメントできない枠 【#黛の同窓会】.” YouTube, May 11, 2022.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3avoeWzbxns&t=23s&ab\\_channel=%E9%BB%9B%E7%81%B0%2FKaiMayuzumi%E3%80%90%E3%81%AB%E3%81%98%E3%81%95%E3%82%93%E3%81%98%E3%80%91](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3avoeWzbxns&t=23s&ab_channel=%E9%BB%9B%E7%81%B0%2FKaiMayuzumi%E3%80%90%E3%81%AB%E3%81%98%E3%81%95%E3%82%93%E3%81%98%E3%80%91).

future goals. Because of the binding nature of the commercial contract, he was required to participate against his will in the activities requested by ANYCOLOR. Mayuzumi didn't want to disappoint the audience by making something that did not live up to expectations because of his own reluctance, so he eventually chose to graduate. Although there were still a lot of unfinished stories, he had to graduate because he did not agree with the ANYCOLOR's proposal. On July 27, he celebrated 600 thousand subscribers on his YouTube channel and had a digital living funeral. During the live streaming of his living funeral, he turned his avatar into black and white and made a digital deadee. He greeted the audience and other VTubers as a movable deadee<sup>50</sup> and continued live streaming for more than 20 hours, ending his two years as a VTuber.

As a VTuber, Mayuzumi Kai unintentionally created a mythological story of his own. In his two years of activity, he used digital technology and the features of VTubing to surprise and shock the audience for countless times. His success is inseparable from the support of the company, but at the same time, he had to end his life as a “Mayuzumi” early because of the company's contractual constraints. Like he said in the last several videos, he still had things wanted to do that were not done. After the graduation, Mayuzumi posted his final tweet “THE END. The story does not continue.” He did not say the story was over, instead, he said “the story does not continue”. If he had not graduated in July 2021 and instead continued his story, wouldn't it be possible that the audience would now to experience a whole new virtual worldview? Because “Mayuzumi”'s time is over, we have no way of knowing how the story is really supposed to end. In the comments under the graduation streaming, some fans thought Mayuzumi Kai's graduation represented the end of an era of NIJISANJI. In the future, VTubers might be forced to

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<sup>50</sup> Deadee: black and white portrait of the deceased. It is usually placed in the middle of the funeral for visitors to worship.

follow the proposals put forward by the company for their activities, rather than the VTubers themselves deciding how to go about it. Because of the commoditization of VTubing industry, the company forces their contracted VTubers to participate in lucrative activities rather than arranging them on their own willing. If the VTubers are not willing to do what the company wants, then they may end up like Mayuzumi Kai and have to graduate from the company.

Mayuzumi Kai wanted to figure out the difference between the virtuality and the reality. As a virtual character who existed in people's imagination, or his imagination, he would like to know the difference between him and real human. This is not only the question he wanted to ask, but also the essence of the VTuber's existence. After graduation, *naka no hito* of Mayuzumi Kai still worked as a YouTuber with another name and account. However, he showed his appearance to the audience and stream as a traditional YouTuber. Though he did not mention anything related to his time as Mayuzumi Kai, his distinctive low voice and live-streaming habits made him immediately recognizable to his fans. In those live streaming with flesh, his personality and preferences are very different from those of Mayuzumi Kai, the character from his imagination. He does not simply create a virtual hacker called Mayuzumi Kai. In his two-year construction, he relied on technology and the imagination to introduce a human named Mayuzumi Kai living in another world. This is the *naka no hito* of Mayuzumi Kai's understanding of virtuality and VTuber.

When Mayuzumi Kai graduated from NIJISANJI, he said "the story does not continue". The forced suspension of his story is a category of end of VTubers who sign with agency. Prior to the emergence of VTuber agency, VTubers did not graduate as quickly or as directly. Like early period of Porcelain Maid and Ironmouse, general VTubers who had no support from corporations, they gradually familiarized themselves with how to manipulate digital avatars

through interaction with the audience. Through their efforts, they can accumulate enough money to improve their avatars to respond better with their audience. The emergence of VTubing agency has changed this step-by-step process. VTubers who sign with agency like Mayuzumi Kai have exquisite avatar when he debuted. The agency will be responsible for helping them upgrade the avatars, rather than relying on them to try to save up for the upgrade on their own. At the same time, they lost possession of the avatars. The digital avatars are crucial for a VTuber. When they lose access to their avatars, they will lose their voice as a VTuber, which refer to the graduation. The advent of VTubing agency has fast-tracked the debut of the VTuber, but at the same time, it also creates a complete “death” of graduated VTuber.

### **3.1.2 Mysta Rias**

On May 12, 2021, the first wave of NIJISANJI EN, Lazulight debuted. Their debut marks the beginning of NIJISANJI's development of English-speaking VTubers and the official start of their expansion into English-speaking areas. Until February 2024, there are nine waves of English-speaking VTubers debuted from NIJISANJI EN. They come from different regions and countries in the world, including but not limited to the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and Sweden. The language they use do not limited to English. In addition to Japanese, which is essential for communicating with Japanese NIJISANJI VTubers, the VTubers from EN branch also use other regional languages such as Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, French, and Swedish to communicate and live streaming.

The creation of new branches is not successful from the beginning. The prosperity of EN branch started with the debut of their fourth wave, Luxiem, the first male VTuber wave from NIJISANJI EN. In just one month from their debut on 21 Decemeber 2021, the five members of Luxiem have gained more than 200,000 followers each on Twitter/X accounts and YouTube

channels. During the beginning of February 2022, their debut song “Hope in the Dark” MV reaching 3 million views. Their popularity didn't just happen on YouTube and Twitter/X. On a Chinese website called Bilibili, their debut song MV currently has over 12 million views. Their success influenced the fans of VTubers in various areas, as well as the NIJISANJI EN VTubers who debuted after them.

Among the five members of Luxiem, there is one VTuber Mysta Rias who is loved by the audience for his hefty tone and funny personality. Mysta is a virtual detective, but often makes hilarious blunders. On the day of his debut, he posted a video on his Twitter/X account about guessing colors inside plasticine. He made four guesses, but they were all wrong. The 27-second video full of failures has gotten millions of plays on Twitter/X<sup>51</sup> and over 2 million plays on Bilibili<sup>52</sup> as well. The audiences love Mysta for his humor and quirkiness. However, during several live streaming, Mysta revealed that he used to live in poverty and was bullied for his British Cockney accent<sup>53</sup>. He even suffered from ADHD<sup>54</sup>. His life before being a VTuber earned the sympathy of the audience. The contrast between his sad past and his present lively personality has earned him a growing fan base. Fans are also happy to send him virtual gifts during the live streaming and see his quality of life improve. In 2022, he was ranked 18th on the worldwide

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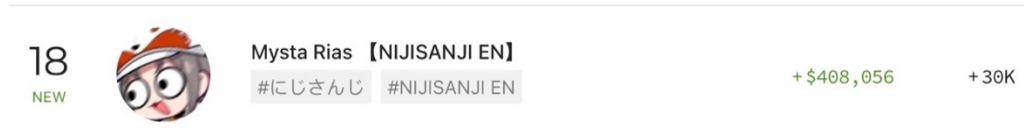
<sup>51</sup> Mysta Rias 🧑🏻♂️ Nijisanji en on Twitter: " [https://t.co ...](https://t.co...) Accessed February 13, 2024. [https://twitter.com/mysta\\_rias/status/1473726709719572484](https://twitter.com/mysta_rias/status/1473726709719572484).

<sup>52</sup> “【熟/Mysta】这就是侦探吗\_哔哩哔哩\_bilibili.” \_哔哩哔哩\_bilibili, December 21, 2021. [https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV19g411w7vq/?spm\\_id\\_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd\\_source=58feb72fc42cb6d2e88c29aa7d09ed93](https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV19g411w7vq/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=58feb72fc42cb6d2e88c29aa7d09ed93).

<sup>53</sup> “【QNA】 Answering Questions 【nijisanji En | Mysta Rias】 🧑🏻♂️🐱.” YouTube, December 22, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uts4iwacEo8>.

<sup>54</sup> “【zatsudan】 i Have SUPERCHAT now 【Nijisanji En | Mysta Rias】 🧑🏻♂️🐱.” YouTube, December 28, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ev1YhW9SbAc>.

Super Chat ranking with over 400,000 dollars in Super Chat<sup>55</sup>. By this time, he had gained over a million followers on both Twitter/X and YouTube.



**Figure 11: Screenshot of Mysya Rias ranked 18<sup>th</sup> on the worldwide Super Chat Ranking in 2022**

During June 2023, right before the debut of the eighth wave NIJISANJI EN Vtuber, there were rumors that a very famous VTuber was about to graduate. To the crowd's surprise, a month later on July 23, Mysya would announce that he would host his graduation live streaming on the 27th of the following month<sup>56</sup>. Because there was no preview of Mysya's graduation, and both Mysya and NIJISANJI did not reveal the exact reason of the graduation, everyone was very surprised by this sudden announcement. The audiences and fans had no choice but respect Mysya's decision and expressed their sadness and love during his graduation live streaming.

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<sup>55</sup> Diff. "Most Super Chatted V-Tuber Channels in Worldwide - Yearly - 2023." PLAYBOARD. Accessed February 13, 2024. <https://playboard.co/en/youtube-ranking/most-superchatted-v-tuber-channels-in-worldwide-yearly?period=1672531200>.

<sup>56</sup> Official, NIJISANJI EN. "【important Notice】 we Hereby Announce That the Nijisanji En Liver MYSTA RIAS Will Graduate on August 27, 2023 JST.Thank You for Your Understanding and Your Support of Nijisanji and Nijisanji En. Pic.Twitter.Com/RLzjuwazaf." Twitter, July 23, 2023. [https://twitter.com/NIJISANJI\\_World/status/1683099645046833153](https://twitter.com/NIJISANJI_World/status/1683099645046833153).

Two months later, a new male VTuber K9 Kuro debuted from Vshojo, a VTuber agency that once had only female VTubers. He is the first and the only male VTuber in this agency. During his debut live streaming, the audience noticed that the new VTuber's voice was highly similar to Mysta Rias's voice (As mentioned before he was bullied for his British Cockney accent, so his accent is very recognizable to the audience). By comparing the voice and the style of his live streaming, Mysta's fans confirm that the new VTuber K9 Kuro is Mysta's new account. Meanwhile, with only two months between Mysta's graduation and Kuro's debut, the audience wonders if Mysta is ready to re-debut from Vshojo after graduation from NIJISANJI. Because Vshojo used to be a female-only VTuber agency, why would they allow K9 Kuro to debut as the only male Vtuber? What is the relationship between Mysta/Kuro and Vshojo? Afterwards, Kuro explained the heavy doubts during his live streaming.

In his debut streaming, Kuro says he faced a tax bill of up to 350 thousand pounds when he was still a member of NIJISANJI EN. He asked his collages at NIJISANJI and other VTuber friends to help out with the tax problems. Ironmouse from Vshojo was the first and the only one correctly replied to him. Ironmouse introduced Gunrun, the CEO of Vshojo to him, and Gunrun helped Kuro to deal with the massive tax<sup>57</sup>. During his live streaming, he alluded to the fact that his former agency NIJISANJI and ex-colleagues didn't help him with the tax problem. He could not have gotten through such a difficult time on his own without the help of Ironmouse and Gunrun. Because of their help, "so many different chains of events" was set off, culminating in his graduation from NIJISANJI and his re-debut in VShojo. However, this sequence of events

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<sup>57</sup> "Kuro Explains How He Joined Vshojo." YouTube, October 1, 2023.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38msQLIN6-c>.

happens sooner than the audience thinks. Kuro started to prepare his debut during the January of 2023, nine months before the official debut and when he was “still” Mysta.

Unfortunately, because of the confidentiality of the contract and the private of tax issues, the audience have no way of knowing exactly when Mysta/Kuro faced tax problems or why neither his former coworkers nor his former company helped him in a timely manner. On March 30, 2023, Mysta, while playing a game with another NIJISANJI VTuber Kyo Kaneko, had revealed that he had paid double taxes the previous year due to the negligence of his accountant. At the time, he was waiting for NIJISANJI to put him in touch with a new accountant to manage the year's taxes. However, Kyo said the accountant NIJISANJI introduced to him wanted to charge 5 thousand dollars for tax administration, but no other VTubers from NIJISANJI EN had encountered an accountant who charged such a high fee<sup>58</sup>. Although the audience cannot get the full picture of all happened events, according to some clips of the live streaming, it is clear that NIJISANJI or ANYCOLOR has some management issues. Whether the company did not introduce right tax administrator for VTubers, or whether they left the VTubers themselves to ask for help from other places, this is the result of the company not being diligent enough.

“What is going on here?” After a series of content consolidations, this is the question many fans want to ask. When mysta planned to graduate, a lot of fans were saddened by his sudden announcement. So when they accidentally heard a familiar voice coming through a new VTuber Kuro, a number of Mysta’s fans went to watch Kuro's live streaming instead. However, lot of people have raised questions as to how Mysta could debut with a new avatar and name from NIJISANJI’s rival company in such a short period of time. If Mysta had not decided to graduate

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<sup>58</sup> “Kyo & Mysta Play Who’s Your Daddy.” YouTube, March 31, 2023.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIrOpyj08-g&t=6672s>.

and start plotting new avatar months ago, there is no way he would have been able to debut so quickly.



**Figure 12: Screenshot of comments under Kuro’s debut announcement**

Even though the audiences can quickly guess who is behind the new VTuber, they have no way of knowing what exactly happened between him and the two VTuber agency. Below Kuro’s debut announcement, most comments are welcoming him back. It makes his graduation two months ago look like a joke. Different from Mayuzumi Kai’s funeral-like graduation, Mysta Rias’s graduation is similar to the first episode of a TV show. The audiences know there will be a second episode, and they are willing to watch. VTuber’s graduation becomes less like saying goodbye to a familiar virtual character and going in anticipation of a change of the person. The audience's expectation of VTubers goes from their virtual behavior back to the behavior of *naka no hito*.

### 3.1.3 Selen Tatsuki

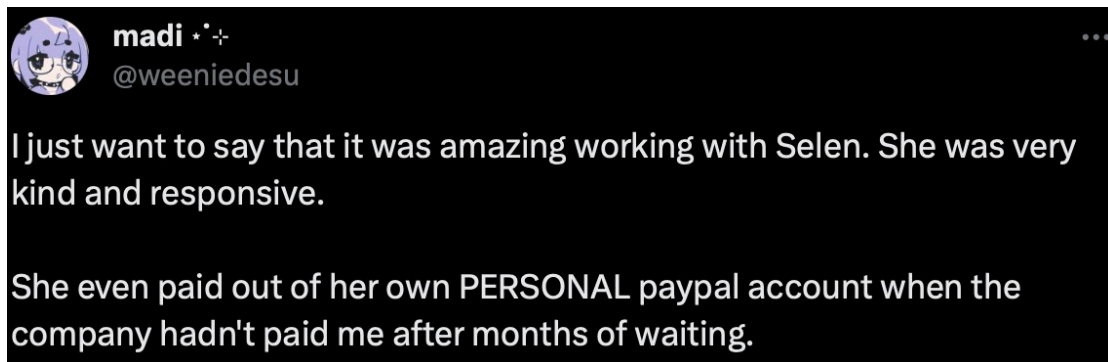
On Feb 5, 2024, NIJISANJI official X account announced the termination of Selen Tatsuki's contract with ANYCOLOR (NIJISANJI). In the official announcement, NIJISANJI points out that Selen's longstanding violations of company rules and cause "a wide range of issues", including but not limited to "non-compliance with rights confirmation and authorization flows, which could potentially lead to infringement of third-party rights, including copyrights". Despite repeated reminders from ANYCOLOR, she did not change her approach. And these problems of hers resulted in ANYCOLOR being delay paying commissions to their partners. In desperation, NIJISANJI had no choice but to terminate the contract with Selen and remove her access to her Twitter/X account and YouTube channel<sup>59</sup>.

However, Selen's fans and people who have worked with Selen are not convinced by the violations cited in the announcement. They continuously comment under NIJISANJI official X account for further explanation. madi, an artist with more than 60,000 followers on Twitter/X who has worked with Selen says "she was very kind and responsive". madi also mentions that Selen paid the commissions with her personal account when ANYCOLOR delayed paying it for months. Not only that, but the announcement mentions that Selen "demanded that ANYCOLOR should be held legally responsible" because "she was no longer able to engage in her activities as a Liver due to the decisions made by ANYCOLOR, was being harassed by other affiliated Livers due to mismanagement". ANYCOLOR does not acknowledge Selen's accuse but states that Selen

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<sup>59</sup> Official, NIJISANJI EN. "【notice: Termination of Selen Tatsuki's Contract with Anycolor】 we Hereby Announce That We Have Had to Make the Difficult Decision to Terminate Our Contract with the Nijisanji En Liver 'Selen Tatsuki' Effective Immediately, Due to Repeated Breaches of Contract and Misleading... Pic.Twitter.Com/Arids68tzu." Twitter, February 5, 2024. [https://twitter.com/NIJISANJI\\_World/status/1754459182412222481](https://twitter.com/NIJISANJI_World/status/1754459182412222481).

wants to shift her responsibility for those violations. madi's testimony was at odds with the content of the announcement released by ANYCOLOR, which led the audience and Selen's fans to wonder if ANYCOLOR was the one trying to shift the responsibility, not Selen.



**Figure 13: Screenshot of madi's post**

Because Selen's access to her accounts was removed by ANYCOLOR, she uses another account called Doki to responde to fans' questions (I will use Doki to refer to Selen in the following content). During her live streaming using new account, Doki says that she was hospitalized for a suicide attempt, and she has been harassed or bullied when she was still in NIJISANJI<sup>60</sup>. She could not provide more information in the stream because she needs to talk to her lawyer first. However, when Doki was making a declaration, ANYCOLOR did not make any further announcement but to state that the termination of Selen Tatsuki's contract has no impact

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<sup>60</sup> "【my Return】い'm Back Everyone【dokibird】." YouTube, February 8, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2YmJL0PX5M>.

on their performance. ANYCOLOR’s new statement made the audience believe more and more in Doki’s words and start accusing the company of inaction and evasion of responsibility. On the same day, HYTE, a PC hardware company terminated their collaboration with ANYCOLOR. HYTE cancelled and refunded all related order and apologized to the fans. The fans support HYTE’s decision and believe that it was the right thing to do<sup>61</sup>.

The repercussions of Selen Tatsuki’s termination go far beyond that. Since February 6, ANYCOLOR’s stock price has been falling, and is down 6.5% on the first day alone. As of February 14, eight days after the event, ANYCOLOR’s stock price has fallen from 3,615 per share to 3,130 per share<sup>62</sup>.



Figure 24: Screenshot of the changes in Anycolor Inc.’s stock price

<sup>61</sup> HYTE. “[Notice] in Light of Recent Developments Regarding Anycolor [Aka Nijisanji], HYTE Has Made the Decision to Terminate Our Current Projects with the VTUBER Group. Pic.Twitter.Com/Muuekq8vzf.” Twitter, February 7, 2024. <https://twitter.com/hytebrand/status/1755306063115788503>.

<sup>62</sup> 5032 stock price | Anycolor Inc.. stock quote (Japan: Tokyo) | ... Accessed February 14, 2024. <https://www.marketwatch.com/investing/stock/5032?countrycode=jp>.

While the stock price continued to fall, Doki, through her lawyer, submitted materials to ANYCOLOR that she intends to use in her appeal. The materials include voice message from NIJISANJI EN Vtubers that she recorded over the course of a year. In order to prevent the impact of the incident from going beyond uncontrollable limits, the involved VTubers and the CEO of ANYCOLOR, Riku Tazumi, made a video clarification and apology<sup>63</sup>.

After this event, Doki's YouTube channel gained over 500,000 followers and this number is still rising. During the week of February 12 to February 18, she even became the VTuber with the most Super Chatted in the worldwide<sup>64</sup>. No one cares if she was formerly known as Selen Tatsuki, only if she can win this fight against NIJISANJI. As one of the main members of the NIJISANJI EN, Selen always collaborated with other VTubers and participate in events together. When she brought up the fact that she was being bullied by other NIJISANJI EN Vtubers, everyone was very surprised. On February 12, Elira Pendora, a female VTuber from NIJISANJI EN explained the recent events via live streaming in her YouTube channel, with other two related male VTubers Ike Eveland and Vox Akuma. In this streaming, they explained that their personal information was exposed by Selen to her lawyer and that they were not involved in any bullying or harassment to her. Though at the very beginning of the stream, Elira states that "what we say on this stream is our own words and our own feelings", most of the audience consider it as a script. In the comments under the video, messages questioning NIJISANJI and their VTubers received a large number of "likes". No matter what they state in the stream or later, it does not

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<sup>63</sup> "Addressing Your Concerns." YouTube, February 13, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7zaTpwp8DQ>.

<sup>64</sup> Diff. "Most Super Chatted V-Tuber Channels in Worldwide - Weekly - 02/12/2024 - 02/18." PLAYBOARD. Accessed February 20, 2024. <https://playboard.co/en/youtube-ranking/most-superchatted-v-tuber-channels-in-worldwide-weekly?period=1707696000>.

change the fact that viewers have lost trust in NIJISANJI<sup>65</sup>. As of March, Selen's case is not yet over. Because of the special nature of being VTuber, *naka no hito*'s personal information cannot be made public. This also denied the audience the opportunity to learn the true nature of the recent events. Both parties claim to be in the right.

### **3.2 Conclusion**

VTuber's graduation was originally a farewell to the person existed in the virtually. The graduation cuts off their connection to the real world and their way of communicating with real human beings. However, as the audience come to understand the concept of VTuber, they seem to detach themselves from the virtual world created by VTuber and their avatars and focus more on the reality of the content. The existence of *naka no hito* is always default. Even if a VTuber graduates, their fans can still have access to new content if they figure out the existence of *naka no hito*. When a VTuber graduates and redebut with a new name and avatar, this type of “reincarnation” behavior only changes their exterior, not the interior. This transformation also making the audience less and less shy about mentioning VTubers’ “past lives”— other virtual identities the *naka no hito* had before debut. Even though mentioning *naka no hito* is a taboo, it is still possible to search for personal information and even photos of VTubers on some related website. Even if VTubers are characters exists in a virtual world, the audience accustomed to the real world will still want to know any information about their reality.

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<sup>65</sup> “A Message from Nijisanji En.” YouTube, February 13, 2024.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o65VwnQvWW4&t=13s>.

多くのVtuberが所属している、  
にじさんじにミスタ・リアスさん  
というVtuberがいます。他のVtuberとはまた一味違って、  
個性的で物知りなところが莫大な  
人気を誇っているVtuberです。ミスタ・リアスさんのYouTubeチャンネル  
「Mysta Rias [NIJISANJI EN]」は、  
チャンネル登録者数103万人。ショート動画や3時間を超える  
長編動画だったり雑談動画など、  
どれも多くの視聴者に愛されているんです！ そんなミスタ・リアスさんのプロフ  
ィールや、  
前世、ママについても調査しました！ 今回の記事では、

- ミスタ・リアスさんは何者なの？
- ミスタ・リアスさんの中の人(前世)は？
- ミスタ・リアスさんのママ(絵師)は誰？
- ミスタ・リアスさんの身長年齢(誕生日)などwikiプロフ

について詳しく紹介していきますね。

**Figure 35: Screenshot of a Japanese report of Mysta Rias (*naka no hito*)'s personal information**

## 4. Conclusion

On April 12, one of the most famous Japanese Vocaloid singers Hatsune Miku's performance on Coachella was met with controversy. Quite a few people were disappointed with the "hologram singer" who "fails to appear" on Coachella<sup>66</sup>. Back in July 2023, there was a Thai VTuber Dacapo who received a lot of condemnation for only appearing on screen during a paid anime show. Rumors claimed that people paid \$200-300 for the show and ultimately felt it was not worth it because they only saw an avatar wiggling on the digital screen<sup>67</sup>. On Tiktok, there were even a number of parodies of the Dacapo's look with some electronic jams to mock the cut-price show. However, it was a music festival that costs less than \$9 (300 Thai baht), and Dacapo's shows were free for all guests. The reason for this controversy and rumors is because the public did not know about VTuber and their fans. Therefore, they did not consider VTubers' performances as being as valuable as regular real singers' performances.

Just when I thought Hatsune Miku's performance causes another controversy over the non-acceptance of virtual characters with avatars, I realized that wasn't the case. Quite a few of the news reports have featured fans complaining that the equipment at the Coachella site was not advanced enough to allow Hatsune Miku to appear as a hologram on the live stage<sup>68</sup>. Their

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<sup>66</sup> Desk, Web. "Coachella Crowd Left Disappointed as Hologram Singer Fails to Appear." thenews, April 14, 2024. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1178453-coachella-crowd-left-disappointed-as-hologram-singer-fails-to-appear>.

<sup>67</sup> "Did People Really Pay \$300 to See a Vtuber Reveal His Face during a Concert in Thailand?" Yahoo!, July 11, 2023. <https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/did-people-really-pay-300-to-see-a-vtuber-reveal-his-face-during-a-concert-in-thailand-201206005.html>.

<sup>68</sup> R/music on reddit: Coachella fans "disappointed" after digital artist Hatsune Miku's hologram failed to show up, April 13, 2024. [https://www.reddit.com/r/Music/comments/1c38yfb/coachella\\_fans\\_disappointed\\_after\\_digital\\_artist/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Music/comments/1c38yfb/coachella_fans_disappointed_after_digital_artist/).

favorite Vocaloid singers were “flattened into an LED screen”<sup>69</sup>. Fans thought they had a chance to see Hatsune Miku breaking out of the 2D screen on Coachella's stage, so they purchased tickets for around \$500 dollars and were sorely disappointed. Through the show was less than fans’ satisfactory, it puts Hatsune Miku on the same grand stage as a bunch of well-known international singers. Fans freely express their love and expectations of a virtual singer, no different from fans of a real singer. Is this a sign that human being is coming to terms with living in the same society as the virtual characters like Hatsune Miku? Since Hatsune Miku, who is unable to interact with her audience in real time, has been accepted by a wide range of viewers, will VTubers, who are able to interact in a way that is closer to human beings, be accepted by society in a shorter period of time?

Coachella this year has invited some K-pop artists, and in K-pop there are some virtual idols who have been soaring in popularity lately. On March 9, a K-pop idol group PLAVE took first place in MBA Music Core with their new song “WAY 4 LUV”<sup>70</sup>. Unlike other idols that appear on the stage, they are virtual idols that exist only on the big screen. Everyone in the room was very surprised that a virtual idol group was able to win the first place. Plave and their fans let out a gasp of surprise at the result. In fact, they're a new rendition of VTuber. As virtual idols, not only can they perform on stage like regular idols, they also maintain a live streaming twice a week to interact with their fans. Because 2D models like Live2D cannot support high-intensity body movements for stage performance, PLAVE used 3D models as soon as they debuted. This also gives them more freedom when they are during the live streaming, for example, they can

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<sup>69</sup> Coachella fans crowded together to watch a hologram sing ..., April 13, 2024. <https://www.sfgate.com/sf-culture/article/coachella-hatsune-miku-hologram-review-19401378.php>.

<sup>70</sup> “240309 Plave ‘Way 4 Luv’ 1st Win 240309 MBC Music Core [1080p].” YouTube, March 9, 2024. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_cmBRL0UPr8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_cmBRL0UPr8).

learn to dance and show the results like the audience. Many people question whether PLAVE are AI because they don't understand the concept of VTuber of virtual idols. Even as a form that the public may not accept immediately, they still won the first place in music show within a year of their debut and introduced the audience to a new way of presenting art and music.

Not only in entertainment like music, VTuber is also appearing in government propaganda. In February 2020, the Communist Youth League of China introduced two new VTubers called *Jiangshanjiao* (江山娇) and *Hongqiman* (红旗漫). Their names are from the poems written by Mao Zedong in 1936. Both of them have several Chinese elements in their custom. *Jiangshanjiao* is a girl in a blue cheongsam, and *Hongqiman* is a boy wearing a modified Zhongshan suit. Communist Youth League of China wants to use the two adorable characters to get involved in popular culture like VTubing and to achieve political propaganda among the young generation (Yang 2021, 100). However, because of the influence of public opinion on Chinese digital platform during the pandemic period, they graduated 5 hours after their debut. Although this was a relatively unsuccessful experience, it was enough to prove that the government had taken note of the new trend of the VTubing phenomenon. In the future, people may be able to fully embrace the involvement of virtual characters in the real world.

From a 2D illustration to live2D or 3D models that are moveable, to VTuber that can interact with the audience, this process combines variable aspects of Japanese popular culture, which is also a manifestation of human desires. VTbers usually spend a lot of money on customized their avatars, which are both beautiful and never grows old. Even if the *naka no hito* has some damage to their body or appearance, as long as they have a completed avatar, they can continue to interact with people through avatars. For example, on Bilibili there is a blind VTuber

with over 1.4 million followers<sup>71</sup>. As a new profession that requires a great deal of high-tech assistance, VTubing gives people the opportunity to break away from the constraints of their physical bodies and real identities, and to express themselves freely to the audience through a virtual avatar. There is a limit to the distance one's physical body can reach, but there is an infinite range that thoughts can convey. With the aid of technology and the rapid spread of the online society, VTubers have the opportunity to overlook their physical shortcomings to achieve efficient messaging. Even though there are still a lot of people who do not understand VTubers, various industries including but not limited to music production are willing to incorporate VTuber or virtual characters as a new breakthrough into their business. As the general public accepts co-existing in a world with virtual characters, I believe that people can gradually understand the detachment of the mind from the body and get rid of the limitations imposed by their biological body, thus initially understanding of the concept of posthuman. The current use of VTuber still has some limitations and is not accepted by the mainstream culture. Nevertheless, VTubers become more frequent used in various industries, I believe that the VTubing phenomenon can create new possibilities.

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<sup>71</sup> “【诺子】盲人主播是如何独立开播的？ 电脑读屏以及弹幕姬无障碍\_哔哩哔哩\_bilibili.” \_哔哩哔哩\_bilibili, September 2, 2023. [https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Ww411D7TV/?spm\\_id\\_from=333.999.0.0](https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Ww411D7TV/?spm_id_from=333.999.0.0).

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