

Virtuality and Vulnerability: The Queer Performances of Chinese VTubers

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

VTubers, short for “Virtual Youtubers,” refer to online content creators who have animated avatars and a persona associated with their avatars in live streams and videos. Facilitated by motion-capture, facial recognition, and live2D technologies, VTubers first emerged in Japan around 2016 and later developed into a global industry, reaching millions of audiences in Asia, Europe, and North America. As the performers behind the VTubers (“zhong zhi ren”) stay anonymous, the audiences are attracted to the VTuber personae that not only fulfill audiences’ fantasy and also feel authentic. However, investing in a virtual relationship also raises many questions: how should we understand the disjuncture between the VTuber persona and the performer’s own identities? What opportunities and/or concerns emerge from such disjuncture? In this thesis, I analyze cases of Chinese VTubers to examine the VTuber-audience relationship and the dynamics between the performer, the avatar, and the VTuber persona to explore the queer potential of VTubing in China.

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1. Introduction

The Spring of 2021, the second year of the Covid-19 global pandemic. Everything remained online: shopping, classes, schoolwork, socialization, entertainment, etc. Most of my friends went back home from campus, yet my hope for returning to my home in China seems more and more bleak day by day. My family and friends stayed in touch with me on social media, yet it was not enough for me. During the quarantine, I had one of the strangest experiences I have ever had in life: I felt myself fading away. I was unsure of my own existence and the existence of others, fearing that all the zoom meetings, video calls, and text messages are some kind of computer simulations with no real people involved, even though rationally I know this feeling of nonexistence was mere illusion.

At the end of 2020, VTubers first drew my attention as a potential research subject, yet later it turned out that watching their live streams impacted my personal life as well. Life in quarantine caused me to suffer from insomnia, and without sunlight, my time at night felt particularly lonely and gloomy. Coincidentally, because of the time difference, post-midnight in the U.S. was exactly the time when Chinese VTubers started their live streaming. Oftentimes I would open a VTuber's live stream channel and leave it in my browser just because I wanted to hear someone talking in my room.

Interestingly, I never felt that these VTubers were "unreal," even though they use virtual

avatars instead of showing their faces. Many VTubers fans, like me, are emotionally engaged with VTubers as a way to socialize with others and combat loneliness.

VTubers, short for “Virtual YouTubers,” refer to online content creators who have animated avatars and a persona associated with their avatars in live streams and videos. In the VTuber community, many fans comment that VTubers blur the boundary between “the real” and “the virtual/imaginary.” Although audiences can only see the animated avatars in live streams and videos (instead of the performers themselves), VTubers rarely seem like fictional characters or robots to the audiences. While VTubers’ avatars often match certain archetypes, the performers’ affective work also creates a sense of authenticity for their persona. Merging the fantasies created through avatar design and the authenticity of the performers, VTubers have attracted millions of audiences in China and across the world. However, it may appear that VTubing already structurally forms a binary of avatar/human, or virtual being/corporeal being. In fact, VTuber’s avatar is usually referred to as “the skin” (皮) in the Chinese context as opposed to the VTuber’s “soul” (魂), i.e., the VTuber persona.

Moreover, although VTubers’ outstanding skills in gaming, singing, voice acting, drawing, etc. can help them attract more fans, the key for VTubers to appeal to more audiences is their charisma, which may be a kind of romantic appeal for the fans. Thus, some VTubers may perform a kind of queerness in their live streams, whether it is manifesting androgyny or engaging with homosexual feelings. The virtual relationships

between VTubers and audiences thus raise many questions: How do VTubers harmonize the disjuncture between their VTuber persona and the performer's own identities? What roles do the technologies involved in VTubing play in shaping VTuber's being? How do VTuber audiences make sense of such disjuncture? This thesis includes two chapters. In the first chapter, I examine the VTuber-audience dynamics and the relationship between the performer, the avatar, and the VTuber persona. In the second chapter, I take gender and sexual identities as an example to analyze performances of queerness and explore the transformative potential of this media form in reimagining identities and embodiment.

1.1 VTubers in China—a Virtual Presence, a Hyperreality

“VTuber” is a universal term for VTubers on various digital platforms, including but not limited to YouTube. As the content creators on Bilibili are called “Up” or “Up 主,” it is also common to use the term “VUp” to refer to Chinese virtual live streamers on Bilibili.¹ VTubers are not the first entertainers who have virtual avatars—many talent agencies and TV stations have previously produced virtual TV hosts, virtual singers, virtual bands, etc. What brings VTubers to the public's attention is the performers' creative uses of avatars on live streaming and video-sharing platforms such as YouTube, Bilibili, Twitch, and TikTok. The rise of digital platforms offers the basic infrastructure

¹ For concision, this chapter will use “VTuber” to refer to all virtual live streamers.

that allows users to interact with different groups and build their own products and services. (Srnicek 43) These platforms provide the access to audiences and play a crucial role in determining VTubers' model of monetization, so VTubers are highly reliant on live streaming and video-sharing platforms.

Motion capture, facial recognition, and live2D technology also facilitated the emergence of the VTuber industry. Live2D is the technology that generates 2D animations of a character (the avatar) by transcribing the performer's physical motions to movements of the layered parts of a character illustration. With motion-capture, facial recognition technology, and live2D animation, the live2D characters can present the performer's movements and facial expressions. As VTubers are seated in front of the computer for most of the time (like many other live streamers), the performer usually does not need to wear any devices to capture detailed movements—just a computer (with a webcam) and a live2D software will do, which significantly lowers the cost for starting a VTuber career. Although the majority of VTubers today only use live2D avatars in their videos and live streams, some talent agencies and performers can afford 3D modeling, real-time rendering technology, and motion-capture devices to better capture the movements of performers in a 3D space.

Nonetheless, VTubers not only need the digital platform, equipment, and software but also the performer's creative and affective work to engage and entertain the audiences. The pioneer Japanese VTubers such as Kizuna AI first appeared in 2016 and

started to upload videos of them trying various activities like performing skits, playing games, drawing, dancing, dubbing, etc., and strived to create more interesting contents to make the best use of their avatar and their persona. VTubers quickly gained popularity in Japan and later reached other parts of the world. Around 2018, most VTubers shifted their focus from making videos to live streaming, which marks a new era in the VTuber industry. The reason for such a transition is that, with the platforms' monetization models, live streaming creates more profits and attracts more fans than video uploads in the long run. During live streams, VTubers may play video games, sing songs, perform skits, or just chat with the audience, all of which encourage the audience's participation via communication in the chat box (or even through fans' direct participation in multi-player video games). As T. L. Taylor points out in her book *Watch Me Play*, one of the major motivations for people to watch live streams is "a desire to have a feeling of community or a social experience...Broadcasters often work hard to foster this sense of social engagement and connection, and it can form a powerful tie between viewers and channel." (Taylor 41) The audiences' interactive experiences in live streams allow VTubers to build a strong bond with existing fans and create a fan community, while the videos (many of which are edited from live stream recordings) continue to attract new audiences. Watching live streams can become a routine for loyal fans, who are willing to tip/sponsor VTubers more frequently. Part of VTubers' revenues also come from holding concerts, attending comic cons, and selling products like

posters, keychains, radio plays, music CDs, etc. (usually called “merch”). As a result, VTubing became increasingly popular and profitable, and many VTuber talent agencies started to dominate the industry. VTubers also begin to form groups (similar to idol groups) and collaborate in live streams to attract more fans and increase their competitiveness in the industry.

The VTuber industry started as part of the ACG (Anime, Comic, and Games) subculture since most of the avatars are designed in Japanese anime-style as if the anime/comic characters “come to life” in VTubers’ videos and live streams. The design of VTubers’ avatars and their personae usually align with popular archetypes in ACG works, such as high schooler, princess/prince, office worker, gangster, witch, vampire, alien, and fairy, etc. However, the VTuber fan base in China today is not necessarily limited to the ACG subculture group. These archetypes are already prevalent in fictional works in general, and more importantly, unlike fictional characters, VTubers can interact with the audiences without losing the appeal as fantasy personae. Live streaming allows VTubers to be a companion whom the audiences can communicate with almost daily. Thus, many audiences who take interest in VTubers are not necessarily part of the ACG interest group—VTubers have shown their potential to reach out to more people.

To realize the fantasies that VTuber personae create, most performers would never reveal their personal information such as legal name, home address, physical appearance, age, etc. For clarity, I will refer to the person who uses avatars to live stream

and perform as “the performer,” i.e., “中之人” (“the person inside”), and the online persona as “the VTuber,” as “中之人” is a convenient reference for people to avoid confusing the performer with VTubers. Different from traditional live streamers, performers use avatars to create and portray more interesting, diverse kinds of personae, so avoiding mentioning the performer’s personal information allows them to stay in character. Another reason for concealing personal information is to protect the performer’s privacy, though this is tricky for VTubers. As they do not show their faces in live streams like many other live streamers, it is harder for people to excavate performers’ sensitive, private information, but this is not a promising method to ensure the performer’s safety. Most performers have left some traces of their identifying information on the Internet, such as their previous artworks that may be linked to their legal name, photographs, and educational or work experiences, etc., so people may learn about the performer’s identity outside of their VTuber career and even spread the information online. Sometimes people look for such information out of curiosity, but in other cases, the information can be used for harassing, outing, threatening, and cyberbullying the performers. Because of the cybersecurity issues in recent years, people can find performers’ sensitive information such as names, addresses, mobile numbers, national ID numbers, etc. by purchasing leaked data from hackers.² Also, when people

² See, for instance, Xiong, Yong, and Nectar Gan, “Nearly One Billion People in China Had Their Personal Data Leaked, and It’s Been Online for More than a Year.” *CNN*, 5 July 2022, <https://amp.cnn.com/cnn/2022/07/05/china/china-billion-people-data-leak-intl-hnk/index.html>.

spread rumors, performers may be forced to disclose personal information to clarify the issues. Many VTubers had to quit and permanently suspend their account because of identity leaks or privacy issues, and there have been cases that VTubers had to quit just because the performers are revealed to be in a romantic relationship. It is a financial loss for the performers and their talent agencies. Thus, the majority of VTuber audiences condemn individuals' attempts to excavate performers' private information, and respecting the performers' privacy has become the norm among audiences.

As the cybersecurity problem has damaged the VTuber industry, whether it is necessary to keep the performers anonymous has long been debated in the VTuber community. It is unrealistic for the performers to become entirely oblivious from the audiences' view, and it is part of the audiences' expectations that the performers present a specific persona that may not be exactly the same as their personality in real life. Yet because of the everydayness of live streaming, the VTuber's performances will seem authentic to the audiences. Many fans do not care much about the performer's identity at all because they like the VTuber, not just the performer. However, because of the potential difference between their real-life identities and their online persona, the performer's personal information does potentially break this persona. When the performer gets canceled, some talent agencies have tried to hire a different performer to take over the avatar and the VTuber account, yet the takeover also breaks the character—the new performer may have different voice, personality, and live streaming

styles, and it is often emotionally unacceptable for the fans to lose the original performer. Thus, after the performers quit, the avatars and the accounts usually end up being abandoned indefinitely.

In China, many expected that VTubers and virtual idols can potentially become flawless idols who would not get canceled because of the anonymity of the performer. For example, in January 2022, the Media Opinion Data Center (of People's Daily Online) published "The Research Report of Public Opinion Risk Management in the Virtual Idol industry."³ In the report, the analysts explain virtual idols' edge when compared with real idols:

虚拟偶像领域持续扩大得市场潜力与商业价值，逐渐获得资本得青睐……另一方面，伴随著真实偶像代言人接连‘塌房’危机品牌形象，基于虚拟偶像得可控性，与虚拟偶像合作或打造自己得AI虚拟代言人成为众多企业品牌营销的重要手段。

(The virtual idol industry expands its market potential and business values, wining favors from the capitals...Moreover, whereas real (human) idols who are canceled would damage the brands' images, collaborating with virtual idols or creating the brand's own AI spokesperson became an important brand

³ The Media Opinion Data Center (previously called "Media Opinion Monitoring Office") is part of People's Daily Online, which is the official newspaper of the Communist Party of China. The Media Opinion Data Center's publications make suggestions for policymakers and the media industry to help them better monitor online public opinions. The Report intends to offer insights for "governmental agencies, corporations, and organizations in the industry," focusing on the risk management of public opinion.

marketing strategy for many corporations, given the controllability of virtual idols.) (Diwu Zhaoting 第五昭婷, 7)

The scope of the Report includes not only VTubers but also virtual idols who are not live streamers and “virtual humans” (虚拟人) run by AI, though it is once believed that all of these virtual beings are less likely to get cancelled than real human celebrities. This is partially true for VTuber—as the performers are anonymous, the information about performers’ scandals or misconducts may not immediately reach the public, giving the talent agencies time to handle these issues. However, many VTubers across the world have quitted because of the performers’ misconducts, and they cannot restart their career as another VTuber because the audiences may recognize them from their voice and live streaming style.

The idea that VTubers never get canceled also links to another common criticism of VTubing, which considers the use of avatars potentially as a kind of “false advertising.” In the Report, the analysts claim that

此外，从长期来看，虚拟偶像产业将带来以下多种“经济隐忧”：一是颜值经济，由技术催生而来的虚拟人实现了性别、年龄、容貌等方面的平权，或导致虚假宣传、恶性营销类行业乱象频发。

(In the long run, the virtual idol industry will carry the following ‘underlying economic concerns.’ First is the *yanzhi* economy. The virtual humans produced

by technologies achieve equality in gender, age, appearance, etc., yet it may cause frequent problems of deceptive advertisement.)

In the footnote, the analysts note that *yanzhi* economy means “industry that develops around physical attractiveness” (“颜值经济指的是围绕颜值而发展起来的消费产业。”). (Diwu Zhaoting 第五昭婷, 11) In other words, the analysts argue that *yanzhi* economy is an economic concern because how virtual humans are presented to consumers is different from who the performers really are. What VTubers present is a fantasy rather than their authentic self, so it is a misrepresentation that misleads the consumers. It is possible that fans may get frustrated if they find out that the performer behind the VTuber looks drastically different from what they imagined to be behind the VTuber’s persona. Yet VTubing does not promise to represent reality, nor are they meant to do so—the potential of VTubing lies exactly in imagining beyond “the reality” of the performer’s identities and physical appearance.

As mentioned, VTuber’s avatar is usually referred to as “the skin” (皮) in the Chinese context as opposed to the VTuber’s “soul” (魂), i.e., the VTuber persona. The “soul” refers to the VTuber’s personality, charisma, and talents (such as singing, voice acting, improv, etc.). The skin-soul dichotomy often appears in the discussions around how VTubers are different from traditional live streamers and why certain VTubers became popular. For example, there is a phenomenon in the Chinese community known as “皮拉人, 魂留人,” meaning that the avatars can attract audiences, while the

performer's "soul" keeps the fans.⁴ In other words, having a good-looking avatar is not always enough for a VTuber to be successful. The contents in live streams are crucial in turning audiences into loyal fans. Therefore, the use of avatars is not a kind of "false advertising" because a VTuber's appearance is indeed their avatar, and the performer's own physical appearance is irrelevant in VTubing.

Thus, the avatar is not merely a puppet for performers to control; rather, it constitutes an important part of the VTuber's persona. Technically, performers can change their avatars easily and own multiple avatars, but they need to make sure that the different avatars they use are consistent with their VTuber persona. As Andre Nusselder argues in his book *Interface Fantasy: A Lacanian Cyborg Ontology*, "Because we invest ourselves in virtual environments as alter egos, 'being in a virtual world' is not some sort of disembodied presence, as in the conception of cyberspace as a realm where "the mind leaves the body"; instead, it actually has a material, embodied foundation." (Nusselder 92-93) The use of avatars is not a kind of "disembodiment": the visual design of the avatar, the VTuber persona, and the performer's own personality all need to fit together. The artists who design the avatars also need to make sure that the performer more or less identifies with the avatar and the persona. When a VTuber sits in front of their computer and live streams, they can see their avatar in the live stream software,

⁴ See, for example, the thread on NGA's VTuber sub-forum: <https://ngabbs.com/read.php?tid=32706362>. NGA (National Geographic of Azeroth), established in 2002, is originally a Chinese World of Warcraft players' forum and later developed into one of the largest player's forums in China that include many sub-forums covering topics such as video games, mobile games, ACG culture, etc.

which they would recognize as themselves, and they would speak and act with this virtual body. This scenario is similar to the one Jacques Lacan describes as the mirror stage: the infant gazes at the mirror and recognizes themselves in the mirror image. (Lacan 75-6) Identification with the avatar (and the mirror image) creates an illusion of a unified self, which is at the same time alienating because the self is confused with another. According to Lacan, such illusions are necessary for infants to perceive themselves as complete, distinctive beings. (Lacan 78) In VTubers' case, the avatar is necessary for their audiences to see them as a complete, distinctive being. Just like the infant's recognition of the reflection in the mirror in the mirror stage, it does not matter that the avatar may not visually resemble their corporeal body – the point is that the performer can identify with the avatar, that they recognize the avatar as themselves during live streams. Even though people in the VTubers community speak of “the skin” and “the soul” as separate elements of a VTuber, those two are highly interconnected with each other.

Another issue with the contrast between “fake” VTubers and “real” humans is the general opposition between theatricality and authenticity. For VTubers (and any other types of live streamers), it is common for them to have a persona in live streams, and this persona is not entirely virtual or real. T.L. Taylor points out that “Perhaps one of the most important things to understand in discussing the performative elements of streams is that it is not framed in contrast to authenticity...Much of everyday life is

performative, and live streaming merely picks up on that theme and amplifies it for entertainment purposes.” (Taylor 87) As live streamers, VTubers will present a sense of everydayness in their live streams, even if the performer does intend to roleplay as fictional characters. VTubers often share the performer’s life experiences in live streams so that the audiences can resonate with them. Many VTubers would discuss real-life issues and anecdotes to produce such a sense of authenticity. A VTuber’s online persona is a merge of the performer’s own characters and their roleplaying, so the VTubers’ performances in live streams would feel natural and authentic to the audiences.



Figure 1: Screenshot from Nanami's live stream

I will offer an example of a VTuber’s account on why the avatar and the persona are both parts of the ground of a VTuber’s being. In the VTuber community, people often use the word “graduate” (毕业) to refer to the VTuber’s quitting the VTuber business. When a VTuber quits, the performer can still continue to work as another VTuber by creating a new account with a new name, avatar, and online persona. This is

called “reincarnation” (转生). In July 2022, a popular Chinese VTuber Miquitu (@蜜球兔) was considering “graduation” (i.e., ending her career as Miquitu) because of intense online critics. Her colleague Nanami (@七海 Nana7mi), who is also a Chinese VTuber, discusses in live stream why she does not wish Miquitu to “graduate” or “reincarnate” (see fig. 1). Nanami explains:

我说，你不要毕业，这个，留下来如果实在不想播，不播也行啊，以后想播的时候再播就行，但是当时她还是就，不行。她压力太大了那个时候…但是我很难受嘛…虽然就是在那个直播以外的地方是朋友嘛，可能会聊天啥的，但是就是，在直播看不到了，其实就是相当于这个人死了一样，但是死是说得很难听啊，但是就是差不多意思，所以不要毕业！[读 chat] “不过死了也可以活” No. No. 死了之后活了的就不是那个死了的人了，他就是另一个人了，那是不一样的！

(I talked to her [Miquitu], ‘please don’t graduate. If you don’t want to live stream, you can take a break and restart later.’ But she still said no. She was too stressed out at that time…But I felt sad…we are still good friends outside of live streams; we may stay in touch, yet I will never see her in live streams again. It is basically like this person is dead. Death sounds so bad, but it [graduation] is pretty much that. So please, don’t graduate!’ [Nanami reads a viewer’s live chat.] ‘You can come back to life after death.’ No, no, if one comes back to life, that is not the person who had died. They become a different person [after ‘reincarnation’]. That is not the same!) (“*Shangjian you li*” 00:02:42-55; 00:03:03-04; 00:18:01-20; 00:18:46-56)

The “graduation” of Miquitu would still be a kind of loss for Nanami because the person that she knows outside of cyberspace is not the same as Miquitu, the VTuber. The so-called “graduation” is, as Nanami suggests, the “cyber death” of a virtual being—both the “skin” and the “soul” are replaceable in practice but irreplaceable in the formation of a VTuber’s being.⁵ Instead of being perfect idols who are always young and beautiful, VTubers are in fact vulnerable beings who nonetheless fulfill and/or inspire the audiences’ fantasy of a companion.

Apart from the belief that the avatar is a “mask” that misleads consumers, another narrative in the VTuber community states the opposite: the avatar as a “mask” reveals the true being behind the avatar rather than concealing it. For example, on the VTuber fans’ forum “NGA,” a commenter states,

虚拟皮套并非是对主播的掩盖，而是对主播的掩盖之掩盖——也即对包裹主播的血肉皮囊这一掩盖物的掩盖。在虚拟主播与观众的互动中，她的真实容貌只是阻碍观众认知真实的干扰项，所以皮套这种掩盖反而会使她比真实还要更加真实。

(Virtual avatar is not the masking of the live streamer, but the masking of the mask—i.e., it is the masking of the streamer's corporeal body, as the corporeal body itself is a mask. When interacting with audiences, her actual appearance (in

⁵ Many VTubers have various avatars, but these avatars usually depict the same character in different outfits and hairstyles. If an avatar is different in other aspects such as age and sex, VTubers would use these avatars to roleplay as a different character accordingly.

real life) is only a distraction that hinders audiences from knowing the real, so the virtual avatar as a masking actually makes her more real than the real.)⁶

In other words, the commentor suggests that the performer's physical appearance may not match with/reflect their soul, and the avatar reveals the performer's true self by hiding the corporeal body. This argument is questionable because live streams are for entertainment purposes, so the performers are not exactly showing their "authentic self." Yet what is interesting in this statement is this idea of being "more real than the real": why do audiences feel that VTubers are "more real than the real"? Why do VTubers seem more real than the live streamers who show their faces in live streams?

VTuber personae are, in Jean Baudrillard's words, simulations: "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal." (Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations" 166) In hyperreality, the notion of "the real" has lost its meaning because the difference between reality and fantasy, the real and the imaginary has been blurred. As mentioned, some VTubers fans find that VTubers are "more real than a real person" because they can "skip" the corporeal body and directly speak with the person's soul. However, the audiences are not directly speaking with the person's "soul" as they imagine but with a simulation that has no origin or reality; it is because of the

⁶ See the thread link (the quoted response is at #17. The commenter's user ID is 62674258): <https://bbs.nga.cn/read.php?tid=29005694>

hyperreality that the fans find VTubers “more real than the real.” Or, in Baudrillard’s words, “Simulation is the ecstasy of the real.” (Baudrillard, “Fata Strategies” 187) While VTubers do take performer’s real-life experiences to connect with audiences, this sense of “realness” is also mediated and thus imagined by the audiences. The performers do exist “in real life” and impact the VTuber personae, yet VTuber personae as simulations fulfill/inspire the audiences’ fantasies, so the audiences cannot reach “the real” of what they desire.



Figure 2: Screenshot of Cai Ming and Nanako on magician Liu Qian’s magic show

An untypical example in the Chinese VTuber industry may aptly demonstrates why the human performer is not “the real person behind” the VTuber. In 2020, the Chinese actress and comedy sketch performer Cai Ming (蔡明) started to work as a VTuber called Nanako (@菜菜子 Nanako), a mythical girl who has the power to comfort people. Cai Ming is a famous actress in China known for performing sketch comedies on CCTV New Year’s Gala for more than two decades since 1991. She began collaborating

with the Chinese video-sharing and live stream platform Bilibili, Inc. to produce reality shows and animation and to live stream as a VTuber around 2022. Nanako is one of the few VTubers whose performer's identity is widely known rather than being concealed. However, Nanako and Cai Ming only address each other as "a friend" and have clearly stated that she is Nanako rather than Cai Ming (see fig. 2; "*Qian ge ming*" 00:05:08-09). On the one hand, Nanako does reference her friend Cai Ming's past experiences and her classical punchlines (from her comedy sketches) to entertain the audiences. On the other hand, the audience can easily notice that Nanako's persona is different from Cai Ming's. As a live streamer, Nanako needs to chat with the audiences in most of her live streams, and many people often find it comforting to interact with Nanako, as if she is a kind, considerate elder who helps the young with their worries in life. Known for her versatility in acting, Cai Ming has played a wide variety of roles throughout her career and has several signature characters. Cai Ming has a different audience and different identities from Nanako, and conversely, one may realize that Cai Ming, as a public figure, is also a persona: it does not follow that Cai Ming is "the real self" of Nanako, just like "the real self" of Cai Ming is actually unknown to the general public. Since the performer is no longer anonymous, the blending of the virtual and the real becomes evident to the audiences; nonetheless, Nanako can preserve her identity as a VTuber, and the audiences can still enjoy Nanako's live streams even when they know her connection with Cai Ming.



Figure 3: A VTuber presents the facial capture software

Moreover, the dichotomy between the avatar and the performer neglects many technologies that are crucial in the creation of a VTuber persona — the avatar and the human performer do not have a clear, neat boundary between each other. As Friedrich Kittler points out in his article “Towards an Ontology of Media,” after the emergence of computer technology, the metaphysics that separates humans and technology has come to its historical end: “Postwar computers cannot be thought of anymore as external and extensive objects which our immaterial Cartesian subject represents to itself. On the contrary, computer technology on the one hand and man on the other are inseparably linked by an endless feedback loop.” (Kittler 29) This is one of the key reasons why the skin-soul binarism cannot account for who VTubers are: the separation between humans and technologies no longer make sense, as the information transmitted among these entities is neither matter nor form. For example, the human performer’s movements are not directly mirrored by the avatar: there is a whole process of capturing and

transcribing such information that cannot be done without the camera, the computer, the motion capture software, and the live stream software. To create live2D animations, the illustrations are “tied” to a skeleton composed of dots and lines, and every dot connects to a certain point on the performer’s body; the performer’s movements are then captured and compressed into movements of these dots. (see fig. 3) This transcribing process is called “rigging,” which allows the 2D virtual avatars to mimic the performer’s physical movements and facial expressions, though it is more of an abstraction rather than an exact reflection. Similarly, the performer’s voice is mediated through the microphone, the audio interfaces, etc., and the audiences’ own screens and sound equipment also shape how they perceive the VTuber. As Kittler proposes, “Instead of still subjecting humans, beings, and machines to the dichotomy of form and matter, we could learn to spell out, at least for the time being, this new trinity made up of commands, addresses, and data.” (Kittler 30) There is no clear boundary between the VTubers’ “skin” and “soul,” so we shall see that it is all these entities, including the human performer, the avatar, the digital equipment, and the technologies, together that constitute what people perceive as “VTubers.”

Although VTubing is a relatively new form of entertainment that has created some controversies and still wait for people to further explore, the disjuncture between the VTuber and the performer also creates the potential of VTubing in its reimagination of identities and embodiment. In the Introduction to *Posthuman Bodies*, Jack Halberstam

and Ira Livingston introduce the idea of “someness”: “How many races, genders, sexualities are there? Some. How many are you? Some. ‘Some’ is not an indefinite number awaiting a more accurate measurement, but a rigorous theoretical mandate whose specification, necessary as it is, is neither numerable nor, in the common sense, innumerable.” (Halberstam and Livingston 9) The someness (of body and identities) resists essentialism and the binaries such as virtual and real, male and female, gay and straight, so body and identities are not stable or measurable. Or, in Donna Haraway’s words, “One is too few, but two are too many.” (Haraway 35) In VTubers’ case, one seems too generalizing and leaves the complexity of VTubers’ identity unacknowledged, and two risks ignoring the possible overlap between the VTuber’s and the performer’s identities, characters, talents, etc. Moreover, as Halberstam and Livingston propose, “The posthuman is a technology, a screen, a projected image; it is a body under the sign of AIDS, a contaminated body, a deadly body, a techno-body; it is, as we shall see, a queer body...The posthuman does not represent an evolution or devolution of the human. Rather it participates in redistributions of difference and identity.” (Halberstam and Livingston 3-10) VTubers challenges the coherence of the human body and crosses many (humanist) boundaries such as self and other, human and nonhuman, normal and queer. VTubing also potentially help performers have greater claims over their body and socialize with people in their desired persona. In the next chapter, I will take gender and sexuality as an example to articulate how performers can utilize the VTuber persona to

manifest a different sense of self. The VTuber audiences, too, may find the online community to be a comfortable space to explore their interests and desires as well.

2. Performing Queerness: Gender and Sexuality of Chinese VTubers

Social networking and participatory culture are core components of live streaming, and this is particularly true for VTubers. The use of avatars allows performers to create and present more interesting personae that attract audiences, which is most of VTubers' edge. Some VTuber fans may not be interested in watching games live streams or listening to VTuber's singing, but they all surely desire some kind of socialization and even a sense of belonging in VTubers' fan community. Building an emotional connection with audiences is crucial for VTubers — their profit and success depend on whether the fans enjoy communicating and interacting with them. In other words, to interact with the audiences, VTubers first need to have a recognizable persona to state who they are, which usually includes personalities, skills, life experiences, voices, appearances, and sometimes a background story. Social engagements with VTubers may furnish audiences' fantasies of intimate or romantic relationships— although VTubers usually choose to keep some distance from audiences, the audiences' fascinations with them are common in the community. Also, watching different VTubers collaborate in live streams, audiences may sense (or imagine) some intimacies between VTubers. Hence, the discussion of sex, gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation of VTubers and their performers is nothing rare in VTubers' live streams or fans' chat groups, or online forums. It is, as one may notice, possible that the gender, sexuality,

and sexual orientation of a VTuber is different from that of their performer. In addition, the audiences' perception of queer VTubers is also different from that of queer people in real world. In this section, I will start with the discussion of VTubers' "sex" and then move on to examine VTubers' queer performances.

In Katherine Hayles' book *How We Became Posthuman*, she examines the Turing test, which is known to be designed to prove the machine's ability or inability to imitate behaviors that people view as signs of intelligence. Building a thinking machine performs the erasure of embodiment, since "having intelligence" no longer requires embodied actions in the material world. However, Hayles points out that there is another version of "the imitation game" — the test to differentiate men and women: "You are alone in the room, except for two computer terminals...You use the terminals to communicate with two entities in another room, whom you cannot see. Relying solely on their responses to your questions, you must decide which is the man, which is the woman." (Hayles xi) One of the entities, a man, will try to trick the human evaluator to believe that he is a woman, while the other entity, a woman, will answer the evaluator truthfully. Why does Turing include gender in the test? What would it mean if a machine can imitate "a woman/man" as well as (or even better than) a human? Hayles argues that "By including gender, Turing implied that renegotiating the boundary between human and machine...would also necessarily bring into question other characteristics of the liberal subject, for it made the crucial move of distinguishing

between the enacted body...and the represented body.” (xiii) If the machines can imitate a gendered human being convincing enough to trick other human beings, the technology then joins the enacted body and the represented body together. Yet the test itself also creates the possibility that the enacted and the represented body may not align with each other. As Hayles suggests, “What the Turing test ‘proves’ is that the overlay between the enacted and the represented body is no longer a natural inevitability but a contingent production, mediated by a technology that has become so entwined with the production of identity that it can no longer meaningfully be separated from the human subject.” (xiii) The Turing test not only examines the fungibility of human intelligence but also other “attributes of humans,” such as gender. We cannot assume the conjunction of the enacted and the represented body—the audiences ask the question because they cannot tell the enacted body’s sex just from listening to or viewing the represented entity. According to Hayles, “What embodiment secures is not the distinction between male and female or between humans who can think and machines which cannot. Rather, embodiment makes clear that thought is a much broader cognitive function depending for its specificities on the embodied form enacting it.” (xiv) The point of the Turing test is not to suggest that gender and sex are traits that only humans possess or that having (the normative) gender makes one human. Embodiment, as Hayles suggests, does not secure the univocity of gender.

The claim that “the overlay between the enacted and the represented body is no longer a natural inevitability but a contingent production” echoes Judith Butler’s critique of the heterosexual matrix in *Gender Trouble*: the binary opposition between male and female is not a natural, biological fact but rather a social construction. (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 9-10) It is a product of the compulsive heterosexualization of desire, which requires a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female). As Butler argues, sex is as culturally constructed as gender: “There is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a prediscursive anatomical facticity. Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along.” (12) Sex is not an intrinsic, biological, “natural” element of the body, and gender is not a cultural expression of sex. Rather, the norms and discourses around “sex” and “gender” regulate bodies. For VTubers, the disjuncture between the represented body (the avatar) and the enacted body (the performer’s body) is usually the default. Even though the audiences may still imagine/expect that the VTuber’s gender and sexual orientation align with that of the performers, they are also aware of the possibility that they may not. Because of the assumed disjuncture, queer performances—the acts and gestures that deviate from the heterosexual matrix—are accepted in the VTuber community.

Even though VTubers can state their identities, it is relatively easy for them to slip out of the fixed identity categories. As Butler points out in her book *Undoing Gender*,

“One only determines ‘one’s own’ sense of gender to the extent that social norms exist that support and enable that act of claiming gender for oneself...The body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine.” (Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* 7-21) Both the performers’ and the audiences’ expectations and assumptions shape how they perceive the VTubers’ gender and sexuality (and all sorts of identities). In addition, the fantasy that VTubers creates also invites audiences to imagine beyond the limits of social norms. I will take an example to demonstrate the “instability” of VTubers’ gender identities and how the fluidity of VTubers’ identities allows VTubers to create a queer-friendly space in their live stream channels.



Figure 4: Screenshot from Aza's live stream

Aza (@阿萨 Aza) is a Chinese VTuber affiliated with a talent agency, who has about 1.3 million followers on Bilibili, currently one of the most followed Chinese male presenting VTubers worldwide. In his self-introduction video, he describes himself as

“an ordinary citizen exploited by capitalists” who “takes whatever jobs he can.”²⁹ (“[VUp Aza]” 00:00:32-38) Aza usually sings songs, plays video games, and chats with the audiences in live streams, and he has released several original songs throughout his career. In one of his live streams, Aza shared his experiences of being misgendered (see fig. 4) when the audiences were discussing their sexual orientations in the chats:

[chat: “我是女铜”] 你是女同啊？那直播间肯定也总归各种性取向的人都会有吧，是吧，因为我们直播间人也不少，对吧…[chat: “钹通在这里看你，你思考一下什么原因”] 女同看我干嘛，我是男的！（笑）…我说女同不要找我谈恋爱噢，我是男的…啊你们说到这个，等下，我想跟你们说噢…前段时间我有一个私信…特别有意思，他说就是，他意思说我是男的女的，就是因为看我就是长得很像绿色猫娘，然后觉得我是那个，女生用变声器假装男生声音在说话。啊当然我没有回复…我觉得我声音还挺 man 的…大家别听错噢。

([chat: “I’m a lesbian”] You are a lesbian? Well, there are people of different sexual orientations in this channel, for sure, because we have a lot of people (audiences) here…[chat: “Think about it, why are lesbians watching you here”] Why would lesbians watch me? I’m a man! (He giggles.)…I mean, lesbians, don’t try to court me—I’m a guy…Oh, since you brought this up, wait, I wanted to share this with you…I received a message a while ago…It was very interesting…They said, they sort of asked whether I am a man or woman because I look like “a green cat girl.” They thought that I am a woman who uses voice-changing software to pretend as a man speaking. Of course, I did not reply…I

think my voice is manly. Please don't be mistaken.) ("*Changwan ge le xiuxi xiuxi*"
1:41:15-1:43:16)

While voice is often associated with one's identity and agency, the very media form of VTubing complicates the assumed link between voice and truth. (Weidman 233-238) The audiences are aware that VTubers' avatars are stylized illustrations, yet in the meantime, they also realize that the voice can be altered as well through technologies or voice acting.

In the case that Aza described, while Aza believes that his avatar and his voice are both masculine, the audiences may have different perceptions. The person who sent him the message considers Aza's appearance and voice androgynous and speculates that the feminine appearance matches the performer's "actual" gender, and it is the voice that has been altered. Even though the social norms do shape audiences' perception of VTubers' gender, none of the attributes traditionally associated with gender expressions can be a stable, clear indicator of VTubers' gender, and audiences can reach different conclusions when watching the same VTuber. In some cases, audiences suspect the voice, and in others, they may distrust the visual or the VTuber's verbal claim, and so on. Some VTubers would actually write their gender identity in the

title of the live streaming channel or on their live stream channel's cover photo so that they do not have to explain it repeatedly.¹

Although there are no essential markers of gender and sexual orientations either in or outside of the digital space, androgyny is relatively more prevalent in the world of VTubing, whether it is part of the VTubers' identity or the audiences' perception. Many regulatory norms of gender and desire revolve around the physical body, and in VTubers' virtual world, neither audiences nor VTubers are not corporeally present. The mediating technologies involved in VTubing not only disturb the conventional connections between sound and image, voice and body, and person and presence, but also create new and unfamiliar ways of understanding voice and subjectivity. (Weidman 241) Audiences' confusions around VTubers' gender are not only an issue for the gender non-conforming VTubers but for most VTubers. VTubing thus unsettles the fixed identity categories and the criteria that sustain cisgenderism and heteronormativity. Instead, the contingency and fluidity of gender and sexual identities are normalized for the VTubers, and VTubing thus provides the opportunity for VTubers to build a queer-friendly space. In Aza's channel, even though he identifies as a cisgender, heterosexual man, he does acknowledge and respect the gender and sexual diversity of his audiences,

¹ When VTubers clarify their gender and sexual identities, they usually do not address whether they are speaking of the VTuber's identity or the performer's, as it may be out of character for them to explicitly talk about the performer's identity. For example, in Aza's case, we are not sure if he only means that "Aza is a man," or if he means that the performer behind Aza is also a man. The same goes for the other cases discussed in this thesis. This ambiguity itself invites audiences' imagination/speculation of a queer VTuber.

creating a safe space for queer fans. VTubers who have live experiences as queer people can create an even more engaging queer space by sharing their thoughts with the fans.

Apart from the discussions that directly address the VTubers' and audiences' identities, VTubers and their fans also "perform queerness" in the live streams. What is interesting about such performances is that cisgender, straight people participate in such performances along with queer people—their identities in real life do not bother them from doing so, since they are anonymous in the digital space. Some of these performances specularize queerness and thus reinforce gender binarism and heteronormativity, and the performances are mostly for entertainment purposes, but this phenomenon nonetheless flourishes as part of the queer culture in China. Since these performances are not indicators of real-life identities, queer people can express themselves through such performances less concerned about being harassed, or they can watch others' performances of queerness and find a sense of belonging in the community. I will take two cases to analyze how queer expressions are performed, shared, and enjoyed by everyone in the live stream channel.



Figure 5: Screenshot from Qingtan's live stream

Qingtan (@轻叹 ww) is a self-employed Chinese VTuber who has a female presenting avatar but claims to be a heterosexual, masculine man. In 2022, Qingtan gained a lot of subscribers after one of his videos on Bilibili went viral. The video is edited from his live stream, in which he roasts his audiences for being gay but had a slip of the tongue: “我本来以为大家可能都是口嗨嘛，结果弄到最后发现只有我一个真的男同。不是不是不是——诶诶只有我一个假的男同!” (“I thought you all are just joking around, but it turns out that I’m the only one who is gay. No, no, no—I’m the only one who is not gay!”) (“kouhu tongshi” 00:00:01-00:00:16) Later, Qingtan shares his thoughts on becoming popular because of that video and explains his reasoning for choosing a female presenting avatar to the audience in a live stream (see fig. 5):

你们看到我的皮，就是会因为我的声音不喜欢我；你们听到我的声音，会因为我的皮不喜欢我，诶这样你们就都不喜欢我，就没有人在我直播间犯病了…就是感觉自己已经是个男的了，好不容易唉当个纸片人，还要做男的好烦啊…那我就按照我的喜好来捏一个女皮，这不是很好吗？老婆就是我自己，因为我很清楚我喜欢什么样

的女孩子，但我不清楚我喜欢什么样的男孩子，因为我不喜欢男孩子呀，这个逻辑没问题吧？

When you see my skin, you would not like me because of my voice; when you hear my voice, you would not like me because of my skin. Then none of you will like me, and no one would be acting crazy in my live stream...I feel like—I am a man already, and now I can be an anime character, it sucks if I am still a man...I designed a female-presenting skin according to my preference, isn't it nice? The 'wife' is 'myself.' I know what type of women I like, but I do not know what type of man I like because I am not interested in men. Doesn't it make sense?

(“*Huiying*” 00:01:12-19; 00: 00:01:47-00:02:00)²

Here Qingtan indicates that he is a straight man, and the avatar represents his heterosexual desire rather his self identity. He expects that the mismatch between his voice and his avatar will drive people away, yet many audiences express in the chats that they are interested in him precisely because his voice and his avatar are very matching when he is cross-dressing—the masculine voice and the feminine avatar reach a kind of harmony.

Qingtan does not identify as queer, nor does he intend to attract queer audiences, but from the audiences' perspective, he does perform queerness in his live streams. He

² The phrase “犯病” means “going mad,” and in the context, it refers to fans' actions of showing affection towards VTubers. When presenting affection towards celebrities or fictional characters online, people tend to use more explicit expressions, so in the Chinese context, it may be said that they are “being crazy.”

feels that he needs to clarify his intention because having a female presenting avatar has been associated with homosexuality. He thus disavows the queer readings to reiterate his masculinity and heterosexuality. However, as a VTuber, he not only owns an avatar that he likes but also embodies it. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the avatar is part of the VTuber's being. Although femininity should not be connected with homosexuality, and Qingtan identifies as a straight man, his act of cross-dressing is still a queer performance that the audiences enjoy. As Hongwei Bao suggests in his book *Queer China*, the queer culture in contemporary China is "never completely identitarian," and it is even more so in the Chinese VTubers' community, given the complexity of VTuber's being. (Bao 25) The queer expressions and queer desires in the Chinese VTubers' community are often not manifested through claims of identities but rather through gestures, insinuations, banter, queries, experimentations, etc. Although the public representation of LGBT+ rights and politics are banned in China, the curiosity and exploration of homosexuality, homoeroticism, and gender crossing/non-conformity have been part of many Chinese subcultures. The production and consumption of queer cultural texts and art forms allow people – whether they consider themselves to be queer or not – to engage with queer issues and queer desires and thus increase the recognizability of the LGBT+ group.

As public figures, VTubers usually would not take the risk of explicitly identifying as a sexual minority: the queer performers may worry about censorship and

homophobic/transphobic harassments, and it is risky for the cisgender, straight performers to lie about their gender and sexual identities. Yet the (self-)censorship also creates an interesting situation: when VTubers deny that they are queer, the audiences cannot know if it is genuine or out of the fear of censorship. Thus, even the denial of queer identity may be read as queer as well. Here I will examine the Chinese male VTubers' performance and analyze Chinese VTuber Raisai's meme as a case. The audiences' question "are you gay?" anticipates a performance rather than an answer of "yes" or "no," and the VTubers themselves invite queer readings of homosocial contexts.

To discuss homosociality in the Chinese VTuber community, it is important to note a context of the male presenting VTubers. In China, the female presenting VTubers are overall more popular than the male presenting VTubers and the agender VTubers. This is because a lot of Chinese VTuber audiences are heterosexual men who are only attracted by female presenting VTubers, and some even presume that only women and gay men would watch male VTubers. If they are looking for homosocial bonding with live streamers, they usually would rather watch male streamers who do not have an avatar: most male presenting VTubers are assumed to serve a female fan base, while homosocial bonding (i.e., a kind of "brotherhood") is important for traditional male live streamers. Although VTubers do not have to appeal to the fans with some kind of

intimacy/romance, there is still an underlying heteronormative assumption of the VTuber-audience relationship.

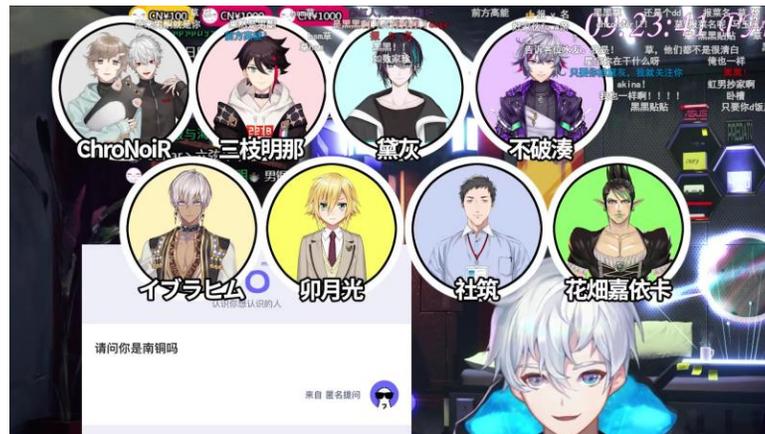


Figure 6: Screenshot from Raisai's video

Raisai (@雷岁_Raisai) is a male-presenting Chinese VTuber managed by Bilibili Esports. Although not a professional esports player, he is considered one of the best FPS gamers in the Chinese VTuber community.³ One of his most viral video is one called “I am Not Gay,” which is a clip from his chatting live stream in which he responded to some anonymous questions submitted by his fans (see fig. 6):

[Pome 上的匿名消息截图: “请问你是南桐吗”] 我为什么要挑这个棉花糖出来呢, 就是因为我出道到现在啊确实有很多人关心这个问题啊, 可能是因为我平时看的男性前辈比较多, 所以确实会有这样的疑问。但是我今天在这里, 我要郑重第告诉这位水友, 虽然——啊, 虽然我推 [VTuber 的名字和头像出现] ChroNoiR、三枝明那、黛灰、不破湊、伊卜拉新、卯月光、社筑、花畑嘉依卡、真白

³ FPS refers to first-person shooter games. Online FPS games are played competitively, and it takes a lot of time and effort to improve one’s skill, so many FPS games have their own esports competitions.

(Yashiro)···啊社筑 (Mashiro)··· Yashiro 和 Mashiro 都是，刀也，谢林，力一，谁叔，还有元初的道明寺晴翔！但是啊···我不是南桐噢，我不是。

[The screenshot of an anonymous message on Pome, “Are you gay?”] Why do I pick this Marshmallow [anonymous message] out? Well, there are indeed a lot of people who have been curious about this question since my debut. It is probably because I watch quite a few male VTubers’ live streams. So...there may be such questions. However, here I will officially tell this fan today: although—uh, although I am a fan of [VTubers’ names and heat portrait appear] ChroNoiR, Akina, Mayuzumi, Fuwachi, Ibrahim, Uzuki, Yashiro, Chaika, Mashiro...ah, Yashiro...both Yashiro and Mashiro, Touya, Shellin, Rikiichi, Belmont, and the original Doumyouji Haruto, [but] I’m not gay. I’m not. (“*Wo bu shi nan tong*”)⁴

Raisai clarifies that “I’m not gay,” yet his response feeds the audiences’ suspicion instead of clearing it—the fact that he quickly lists fifteen male VTubers without any pause is impressive. The twist makes this video clip a popular meme in the Chinese VTuber community. Later, a fan asked the same question again on a different occasion. In October 2021, Live Streaming (正直播), a segment under the Chinese Central Television, broadcasted about the 17th China International Cartoon and Animation Festival, during which the fans on site can have one-on-one conversations with the

⁴ The spacing between the Chinese characters in the video title intends to imply the unreliability of this claim. Pome is an app that allows people to receive anonymous messages. This kind of app/website is widely used by VTubers as a way of connecting with their fans, which allows them to answer audience’s questions and find topics that audiences are interested in.

VTubers. In the video clip (edited by Rasai's fans), the VTuber section is crowded, so the reporter looks around and calls the videographer to follow him and take a look at the VTuber. When the videographer aims at Raisai on screen and his fan, the fan asks, "Are you gay?" Raisai giggles and answers, "No, I am not gay," while the reporter is still talking to the audience. ("*[Leisui] Zai yangshi zhibo*")

Why do audiences ask such a question and even ask it repeatedly? To some extent, performances of queerness, including the act of coming out or closeting oneself, are still spectacles for Chinese viewers. Whether the answer is "yes," "no," or "I abstain" does not matter—the audiences want to see how the VTuber performs the answer. In both cases mentioned above, Raisai claims that "I am not gay," yet the presentations are different and thus entertain the audiences. The example of Raisai's response "I'm not gay" can be compared with the English phrase "no homo." In Joshua R. Brown's article "No Homo," he explains that "no homo," originated in hip-hop music lyrics of the 1990s, "serve as an interlocutor's presumed attack on one's masculinity" and "a self-regulating method for continued construction" of masculinity and thus of heterosexuality. (Brown 301-306) The term "no homo" also addresses the possible continuum between male bonding and homosexuality, and thus people say "no homo" to negate the misconstrued reading. This kind of repudiation is common among male live streamers: in a homosocial context (i.e., when they interact with male audiences and other male live streamers), "no homo" as a clarification hopes to re-draw the line

between male homosocial and homosexual contacts: as the desire for men is often read as feminine, “no homo” can function as a phrase to produce masculinity. In the video, Raisai follows this “no homo” convention: he builds the expectation that he would clarify that he is not gay, yet he starts with affirming the fans’ suspension, which rather undermines his disavowal and invites a queer reading.

The ambiguity in sexuality not only applies to the VTubers but also to the audiences, who are also virtual in the live streams. Most of the audiences will only present themselves in the form of texts (in chat boxes and fan letters, etc.), so their sexuality is nebulous as well. Although gender and sexual norms still play a role in the VTuber community, fantasies and desires can slip out of the regulatory categorizations. Hence, to borrow from Sara Ahmed’s theory in her book *Queer Phenomenology*, both the question “are you gay?” and the response “I am not gay” do not direct people towards a certain sexual orientation as a fixed “destination”; rather, both mean to disorient people. (Ahmed 3) In Raisai’s video, his negation does not lead people to a conclusion of his sexual orientation but rather obscures his sexuality. Audiences search the “position” of the VTuber, which lead people to often deviate from the straight lines, i.e., the conventional gender and sexual norms.

Nonetheless, as mentioned, even though performers can stay anonymous as VTubers, they are still vulnerable to cyberbullying, hate speech, and sexual harassment. It takes efforts for VTubers to build a safe space for queer expressions while facing such

risks. Also, the prevalent misogyny that demeans Chinese female live streamers persists for VTubers as well—many people view VTubers as “online beggars” (“网络乞丐”) and assume that they can command VTubers as long as they have tipped them, so it is a challenge for VTubers to handle these issues and protect themselves.⁵ As the environment varies in different VTubers’ channels and fan communities, the misogynistic, homophobic, patriarchal beliefs and the queer-friendly spaces coexist in the Chinese VTuber community. VTubing can manifest a form of trans*formation for some queer performers: such a metamorphosis is not the loss of the old self with the becoming of a new self; it is rather a fusion of the two, achieving a kind of remaking of the human. However, the social stigmas against women and queer people also linger in VTubers’ digital world, putting many performers in emotionally challenging and financially precarious situations.

⁵ For studies on female live streamers in China, see Zhang, Ge, and Larissa Hjorth. *Live-Streaming, Games and Politics of Gender Performance: The Case of Nu`zhubo in China*. no. 5–6, 2017, pp. 807–25, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517738160>.

3. Conclusion

In this thesis, I examine how audiences' desires and imaginations, performers' desires and creative pursuits, and technologies involved in VTubing shape the being and perceptions of VTubers in China. When the VTuber industry first emerged in China, many investors, talent agencies, and performers hoped that the VTuber business will be more "stable" than that of real idols for they will never get canceled, but in recent years, the industry has stumbled through many challenges such as foreign VTubers being canceled in China for their political stances, VTubers quitting due to scandals, labor disputes between performers and talent agencies, etc. Nonetheless, the popularity of VTubers in China reflects the emerging acceptance of social relations in virtual spaces as well: audiences project their desires on the quasi-fictional VTuber personae and seek a sense of belonging within the fan communities. Moreover, creating a VTuber personae offers performers (and audiences) opportunities to actualize a different sense of self, imagining possibilities beyond the conventional norms that "governs the appearance of 'real' humanness." (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 28) Although the hegemonic, patriarchal ideologies persist in the VTuber industry, many VTuber fan communities, live streams, videos, and performances have become part of the queer culture in China. The performers' creative uses of their avatars also open up new possibilities in performance art, and VTubing as a media form pushes the boundaries between the binaries of authenticity/theatricality, real/virtual, and queer/straight.

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