

VTubers: Para-Social Relationships with Simulacra on Virtual Hyperreality

*VTuber is a phenomenon that has gained popularity in the last ten years over the internet. They are fictional personas embodied by digital graphics played by an actor, hosting interactive live streams involving bi-directional interaction with thousands of viewers. Many of the viewers developed para-social relationships with their favourite VTubers through watching and interacting with them through the digital media. This paper examines the VTuber phenomenon through a reading of Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, which introduced the concept of hyperreality as a generation by models of a real without being rooted on profound reality. Two main arguments discussed are: that the viewer-VTuber relationship is between the viewer and The Person Behind as individuated from both the fictional character and the actor, and that The Person Behind is hyperreal. A deceptive effect brought up by the VTubers as simulacra is examined through Baudrillard's example of a hyperreality. The hyperreality of VTubers opens up the possibility for the simulacra to precede the real.*

Kizuna AI, the first VTuber, debuted in 2016 as a virtual YouTuber, hence the term VTuber (Turner, 2022). Kizuna AI is a digital persona represented by a digitally modeled character with an actor behind it, controlling her movements, facial

expressions, and voice. The term VTuber has broadened to refer to any virtual entity that posts digital content and hosts live streams on the internet regardless of the platform, similar to what traditional live-streamers do.

A VTuber embodies a fictional digital persona in the form of digital graphics. It is a character that usually comes with a background story, or at least, a concept of what it should be perceived as. The background story of a VTuber is not aimed to make sense of the character in their fictional world, but merely to form an identity so they can stand out. It could be as bizarre as “a shark goddess from Atlantis that takes the form of a human with sharp teeth” or as simple as “a detective girl”. A VTuber involves a concept of identity, digital representations, and an actor behind it. However, there are important distinctions in how the actor influences the character of the VTuber compared to other media such as film. In film, the actors are supposed to hide their real self as much as possible in order to play the character. Meanwhile, the actor behind a VTuber often shapes the character played with their own personalities and traits. This is apparent when VTubers talk about their favourite food, favourite games, their preference in music, their beliefs, etc. These dispositions might come from the actor and not part of the designed character. The viewers are fully aware of this and do not see this as a problem, unlike in film. In fact, a lot of the viewers are interested in connecting with the ‘actor’ via the VTuber character. The dynamic of the VTuber persona and the actor behind it will be further examined in section 2.

One characteristic for VTubers is that the viewing experience is interactive, their live streams through the internet allow viewers to interact with the VTuber via text in a chat pool. A number of viewers, sometimes tens of thousands, bombard the chat with their text submission hoping it would catch the eye of the VTuber. Viewers can get a better chance to be noticed by sending donations along with their messages. VTubers participate in a variety of different activities in their streams. They could be gaming, drawing, or simply chatting, the only limitation is that they must still be able to interact with the viewers.

Viewers watch and interact with their favourite VTuber as a stress relief on a regular basis (Tan, 2023). Although engagement with viewers is important to maintain the community and interactive facets of VTubing, some viewers simply watch the streams without interacting. It is as if the other viewers participating in the chat are already filling the community role for them. Other than the interactivity, seeing and hearing the VTubers talk is an attractive enough form of entertainment exemplified by the many video clips of VTuber streams on the internet that attract viewers even without the bi-directional interactions.

The interactions between viewers and VTubers on live streams can be considered para-social, which is a term that has been used since the 1950s. One of the prominent examples of the term at the time was the interaction between radio broadcasters and their listeners (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Radio listeners could interact with broadcasters through letters or phone calls, which

is comparable to the interactivity of a VTuber stream's chat. Para-social interactions are only in the context of mass communication. It differs from one-to-one communication because although the viewer-to-broadcaster interactions are one-to-one, the broadcast is, by definition, one-to-many, and the interactions are many-to-one.

These para-social interactions with a VTuber can result in what is called para-social relationships. It is, although tempting to say otherwise, a relationship that is neither social nor imaginary (Giles, 2010). It is not a social relationship because it does not necessarily involve direct communication between two parties with full awareness of each other as individuals. The VTuber does not intend to distinguish a viewer from another and build relationships with each of them individually. Moreover, viewers are usually only distinguishable from each other by their username. However, from the point of view of the viewers, the relationship is meaningful. However, the reality of the relationship and who is involved is a subject to philosophical inquiry. The following sections will examine the VTuber phenomenon and the ontology of it, and reveal these two points: that a viewer-VTuber relationship is between the viewer and *The Person Behind*, and that *The Person Behind* is *hyperreal*.

Ontological Examination of the VTuber

Giles (2010) acknowledged Busselle and Bilandzic's (2008) two types of realism, external and narrative realism, in the context of fictionality. External realism looks at how fiction makes sense in the real world, while narrative realism looks at the coherence and plausibility of the fiction in itself. This paper, however, will

refer to the *real* (Italicized) in the context of Baudrillard's simulacra – the *real* as distinct to the *hyperreal*. The *real* as in: how something is of profound reality. It is similar in spirit with Busselle and Bilandzic's external realism, but instead of dealing with the content of a fictional narration, it deals with the ontology of objects.

VTubers often discuss in-real-life experiences, and in doing so, they refer to themselves ambiguously. Consider this sentence uttered by a VTuber on a live-stream: "I went to the bookshop the other day, and got the book you guys recommended! I love the cover design!". Who is "I" in that sentence? We know that the fictional persona obviously did not go to a bookshop for it is a mere fictional character. We may intuitively think that it refers to the real actor behind the persona. It is plausible that the actual actor went to the bookshop but instead, I argue that the "I" here refers to another persona beside the fictional persona that the actor plays. In this paper, I will use the term *The Person Behind* to refer to this persona of the person behind the VTuber as experienced by the viewers and as either intentionally or unintentionally put forward by the actor. It does not refer to the actual actor behind. In this section, I will examine *The Person Behind* and support the argument that the counterpart in the para-social relationship of the viewer is *The Person Behind* as opposed to the *Vtuber persona* or *the Actor alone*.

How is *The Person Behind* individuated from the actual actor? The VTuber is a synthesis of the fictional persona and the actual actor. The amalgamation between the two generates *The Person Behind* as a consequence, which then becomes inseparable

from the VTuber. The VTuber is then built on the complex causal relation between the fictional persona, the actor, and *The Person Behind*. The viewers never interact with the actual actor outside the context of the VTuber. The real actor bears no necessity to the phenomenology of the VTuber as a whole, and therefore is replaceable. Suppose that at some point, the actor behind is replaced by another person who has learnt everything there is to know to play the character exactly as how the previous person did. The new actor is aware and able to replicate the preferences, psychological tendencies, way of speaking, voice characteristic via digital voice-changer, and so on. The viewers would be able to continue the para-relationship without any problem. Suppose that the viewers recommended the book before the change of actor, and the new actor was the one who went to the bookstore. The actor changed, yet *The Person Behind* persisted. *The Person Behind* was the one who received the recommendation of the book, and also the one who loves the cover design. The viewer interacted with *The Person Behind*, before and after the actor-change. The existence of *The Person Behind* is not between the VTuber persona and the actor, but the VTuber persona and the meta-awareness of the actor, which results in *The Person Behind*.

The actor-change is an exaggerated scenario to reveal the individuation of The Person Behind, but The Person Behind is individuated even without any change. When one watches a VTuber live-stream, they are well aware of the existence of The Person Behind, but might not realize the individuation of it from the actual actor. Section 3 will reveal the mechanism that plays

into the deceptive effect that prevents viewers to notice this individuation.

Another scenario that challenges the individuation of The Person Behind, and emphasizes the significance of the real actor, is the following. Suppose a VTuber is a member of a VTuber company, and at one point, the actor of that VTuber decides to leave the company for some reason. The actor then created her own fictional persona, and started her own VTuber channel. It is then made obvious, either by design or by chance, that the same actor that left the company is the one behind the new VTuber. The viewers acknowledge this, and some of the fans of the old VTuber transferred over to the new one, continuing their para-social relationship. It is thus very tempting to assume that the para-social relationship must be between the viewer and the actual actor. However, I argue that most people fail to see that The Person Behind is the one who persisted between both VTubers. The counterpart of the para-social relationship of the viewer is The Person Behind. It is true that The Person Behind has a tight causal relation with the actual actor, yet in both the old and new VTuber, the viewers do not engage with the actor directly, only via the VTuber persona, which is fictional and not grounded in profound reality. Moreover, the actor is still acting to put forward the persona of The Person Behind. This scenario, to the contrary of normative assumptions, actually plays a role of a simulacrum that precedes the real, hence creating a *hyperreality*.

Before the examination of *hyperreality* in the next section, it is helpful to understand that there is a social aspect

between different VTubers, where they interact with each other, and consequently, creating a complex web of causal relations enriching the fictional narrative. VTubers often hold collaborative live-streams where they hold conversations on many topics. In these interactions, the personality of The Person Behind is at play. VTubers put personal opinions and preferences into the table, which then influences the other VTubers. They bond and create meaningful friendships that viewers witness. These friendships are part of the fictional narrative, and so are all other relations. As another consequence, a collective memory of past collaborative events are formed. VTubers share memories of past events and also their perspective on them. They are part of this virtual social microcosm involving the Persons Behind. This is the basis of continuity of narrative between live-streams. It is how a friendship between two VTubers develops. It is worth noting that despite how the between-VTubers relationships are seen through the livestreams, they may not correspond to the relationships between the actors. This disparity further emphasizes the distinction between the social relations in profound reality and the VTubers' social microcosm – the former is of the *real*, while the latter is a simulation of the *hyperreal*.

The Hyperreality

Baudrillard (1994) picked Disneyland in America as a good example that involves all orders of simulacra. Simulacra are

objects of a simulation as images with varying degrees of relation with reality:

Such would be the successive phases of the image:
it is the reflection of a profound reality;
it masks and denatures a profound reality;
it masks the absence of a profound reality;
it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own
pure simulacrum.
(Baudrillard, 1994, p.6)

Disneyland is a potent example of a simulacrum as it provides characters played by actors that create a social microcosm full of emotion. Baudrillard went further and argued that Disneyland presents itself as imaginary in order to make people believe that the world outside its doors is a profound reality in contrast to inside, whereas profound reality is absent in the hyperreality outside its doors.

I argue that VTubers are pure simulacra even when they seem to allow a lot of bits and pieces of the reality of the actor to penetrate through the avatar. Nonetheless, they are simulacra that give rise to a social microcosm where virtual beings interact with each other while being watched by the viewers, much like a Disneyland park. Viewers are well aware that they are watching a simulated reality, a social dimension where VTubers have meaningful relationships with each other. Since the characters themselves are not real, the relationships between

them and the further story that develops through these interactions are just as unreal.

The awareness of *The Person Behind* their favourite VTuber gives a way for watchers to develop a parasocial relationship with the actor along with the avatar. The VTubers themselves often exploit this awareness to let loose and 'have a break' from all the acting. They deliberately discuss meeting each other in real life, talk about their impression on each other's actual appearance, and so on. It provides convenience for the VTubers because they can pick and choose when to act and alter how much effort they put into the acting. However, I argue that regardless of the degree of acting they put into it, they are nonetheless playing a persona as 'The Person Behind the VTuber' from the point of view of the viewers as subjects of hyperreality.

Instead of a back-and-forth between their real profound self and their avatar character, they are simply switching between two characters that are expressed only through simulacra. I argue that this back-and-forth between The Person Behind and the VTuber's persona plays the same effect as the gates in Disneyland. It is a distinction that tricks the viewers into believing the reality of one must be in contrast to the other.

Visitors enter Disneyland with the expectation of an experience of a magical social microcosm filled with joy, that emphasizes the contrast between it and the outside world. Being inside the apparent simulated environment triggers the belief that what is outside the simulation is 'real'. The same effect is played out by VTubers, by going back-and-forth between

playing the VTuber persona and the persona of The Person Behind, the contrast of reality between the two is emphasized. They make the viewers believe that the real person behind is let out through the avatar, while it is just a character behind another character. They make the viewers think 'If the VTuber persona is not the real persona of the subject, then The Person Behind must be the real one'. This effect of separation between realities is precisely what is found in Disneyland as Baudrillard (1994) wrote. The Person Behind, which is the actor's persona that is perceived as the 'real' person behind the avatar, is thus *hyperreal*. The viewers blindly accept this because the actual truth is irrelevant to the consumption of VTuber content as entertainment. They simply play along with the narrative of both simulacra of the avatar and The Person Behind.

As an example, consider a VTuber Abby, who here-and-there on her livestreams mentions 'in-real-life' stories that she is actually Canadian, unlike her VTuber persona that is an Atlantian goddess. Abby is close with her VTuber partner, Brenda, an Amazonian VTuber persona who is well aware that Abby is Canadian 'in-real-life', and reciprocally, Abby is also well aware that Brenda is 'in-real-life' Norwegian, not Amazonian. They often go on live streams together and talk about their 'in-real-life' identities. At this point, the viewers are brought into the hyperreality where *The Person Behind* Abby is Canadian, and *The Person Behind* Brenda is Norwegian. However, the unseen and unproven images of *The Person Behind* Abby and Brenda are pure simulacra. The viewers simply take them in as true. They naively play along with the statements of

where the persons behind are from. The Canadian person behind Abby and the Norwegian person behind Brenda are pure simulacra because they only exist in relation to their VTuber persona and all information about them is spoken through simulacra that are their avatars. We see the simulation in action when they interact with other VTubers, and the hyperreal information about each other's actor persona are reamplified throughout those interactions and therefore realized in the hyperreality.

Moreover, the viewers only engage with the persons behind through the simulacra. The truth behind their 'in-real-life' nationalities are irrelevant to the simulation perceived by the viewers. Whether or not the real persons behind are Canadian and Norwegian, does not change the experience of the simulated hyperreality. Also, even when they hold 'in-real-life' collaborations, they are in the context of 'the person behind the VTuber' and not somebody in profound reality. To further reveal the Baudrillardian simulation in this phenomenon, I can expose that there is no *real* person in the eyes of the viewer – only The Person Behind, which is hyperreal.

Baudrillard (1994) introduced the hyperreal as the generation by models of a real without origin or reality. It is a synthesis of simulacra that can precede the real. Pragmatically, it may seem that the causal relation between the actor and The Person Behind is linear, that is, the actor shapes The Person Behind. However, The Person Behind, as a simulacrum in a web of relation involving other VTubers as simulacra, generates the

hyperreal. This social microcosm of simulacra is precisely the *hyperreal*. It can precede the *real*.

The *hyperreal* precedes the *real* in ways that The Person Behind the VTubers influences the real actors to behave a certain way, and as a consequence, further develop the narrative. The *hyperreal* is no longer an image of any profound reality due to this cyclical causal relations. Moreover, the viewers are also engaged with the *hyperreal* through the interactions with the VTubers. They have a causal role in shaping the narrative, as instantiated with the book-recommendation example in S2.

Conclusion

We have established that the viewer-VTuber para-social relationship is between the viewer and The Person Behind, and that The Person Behind is *hyperreal*. The conclusion of the two premises is that the viewer-VTuber relationship is between the *real* and the *hyperreal*. This conclusion is under the claim that the viewers are *real* and not already *hyperreal* to begin with. However, there are strong pieces of evidence that ground the viewers in profound reality. First, the viewers are psychologically engaged despite engaging behind their anonymous username with the VTubers, as supported by the findings on stress-relief in Tan (2023). There are *real* effects that motivate the engagement and the development of the relationship, which is enough to show how the viewer is of profound reality. Second, many fanatic viewers gather in fan communities and meet each other in real life. The para-social

relationship with the *hyperreal* shapes social relationships of the *real*, that is, between the viewers. This conclusion leads to further philosophical inquiry on how a relationship of the *real* and the *hyperreal* may unfold, and what the consequences of these relationships may be. The awareness of *hyperreality* and its deceptive effect may potentially prevent the *real* from being eclipsed or eroded by the *hyperreal*.

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