

Identity Construction and Social Relationships Between Virtual Streamers and Audience

-- Taking *Vox Akuma* as an Example

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Abstract

With the growth of the live streaming industry and technological advancements, the number of Virtual streamers, which are live streamers who use 2D or 3D virtual models as a medium, has significantly increased. However, among the numerous virtual streamers, many neglect the most important aspects of this type of broadcasting, which are the construction of the virtual streamers' personalities and the establishment of their relationship with the audience, resulting in varying quality among streamers. Therefore, this article uses *Vox Akuma*, a virtual streamer with millions of followers and an annual income exceeding one million USD, as an example to analyze his identity construction as a virtual streamer and the new social relationships he has developed with his audience by using in-depth interviews, case analysis, and participatory analysis.

Keywords

Virtual Streamers, New Social Relationships, Identity Construction.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research Background

Since 2016, with the rise of virtual streamers and the dissemination of niche cultures, the virtual streaming industry has experienced explosive growth. Currently, there are over 10,000 professional virtual streamers with millions of followers, forming a self-contained subculture. However, there is still little research on the comprehensive identity construction of virtual streamers and the new social relationships that have formed between virtual streamers and their audience. Bilibili is the most centralized platform for virtual streamers in China, with the best development situation. As of May 2023, over 10,000 virtual streamers have conducted live broadcasts in the virtual stream part of the platform. Bilibili Live has set up a virtual streamer part, and the platform has held many online and offline activities for virtual streamers. YouTube is still the main platform where most virtual streamer and agencies are active. According to User Local statistics, as of January 2020, over 10,000 virtual YouTubers have been active on YouTube.

1.2. Research Significance

Virtual streamers have a short development time, but their influence is significant. This article can address the current research gap on the identity construction of virtual streamers and their relationships with their audience. Examining the relationship between virtual streamers and their audience from the audience's perspective can contribute to the in-depth expansion of the new social relationships in the metaverse and provide insights into the practice of virtual streaming.

1.3. Research Content

Taking Vox Akuma as an example, this paper analyzes the multiple comprehensive identities of virtual streamers from three aspects of virtual avatar, voice actor, and virtual streamer, and comprehensively analyzes and summarizes the new social relationship between virtual streamers and audiences from four quadrants with the depth of relationship and interaction frequency as the horizontal and vertical axis.

1.4. Research Innovation

Extend the analysis from one virtual streamer community in Vox Akuma to the whole virtual streamer audience. Also, a four-quadrant model with relationship depth and interaction frequency as horizontal and vertical coordinates are used to analyze the audience groups represented by different quadrants, and the audience relationship is interpreted through the four quadrants.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Zhicong Lu, Chenxinran Shen, Jiannan Li, Hong Shen, and Daniel Wigdor [1]

From October 2019 to April 2020, a team from the City University of Hong Kong and the University of Toronto conducted a study of 21 respondents from the NGA forum to investigate their viewing habits and opinions on virtual streamer. The study analyzed how the audience interacts with and perceives virtual streamers. The results of the study showed that the content and motivation of virtual streaming were similar to that of real-life streaming. However, the audience had different expectations for real-life streamers and virtual streamers. They felt more distant from virtual streamers and intentionally separated the person and the virtual image to preserve the perfect image of the virtual streamers.

2.2. Tan Ying [2]

Tan Ying, a graduate student of Guangxi University, took the female virtual streamer Xiaoxi as an example to study the construction of her communication relationship as a typical virtual streamer whose main activity mode is the video and proposed the importance of the generation, maintenance, and construction of the relationship between virtual streamer and stakeholders. It is mentioned in this paper that the establishment of the transitive receiver relationship between virtual reality is the premise of the generation of the transitive receiver relationship of virtual UP. The first condition is the identity of the audience to itself and the virtual IP in the process of communication. Identity is the cognition and description of the subject itself, including the determination and recognition of the identity composition, status, and role of the collective or self in society.

2.3. Liudmila Bredikhina [3]

This study confirmed the first hypothesis that, unlike avatars, VTubers are directly related to their activities as entertainers and creators, engaging in creative activities such as game streaming, singing, dancing, knowledge sharing, and video and image creation. Individuals participate in VTuber activities to express themselves (creative expression through content publishing), use VTuber as a communication tool (knowledge sharing, business communication or research), or as a way of life (continuous participation in creative content production and communication). VTuber allows individuals to express themselves and play with anime-like facial expressions; you are not bound by the laws of physics

2.4. Sebin Lee and Jungjin Lee [4]

Taking the virtual concert "Ju. T'aime" explores the experience of VTuber fans as viewers and creators. It identifies factors of enjoyment that viewers experience while watching a virtual

concert and the interactions they engage in. It confirms that loyalty, experience working with artists, and enjoying working with colleagues are motivations for volunteering in content creation. Furthermore, having fans as content creators is beneficial as they can anticipate the needs of other fans and produce content that reflects fandom culture and their needs, as they themselves are part of the fandom.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1. Interview method

Through the one-to-one interview with the audience, the psychological activities and behavior habits of the audience are understood, and the interview content is analyzed to summarize the image of the virtual streamer in the audience and the relationship between the audience.

3.2. Case analysis method

This paper analyzes the construction of the relationship between virtual streamer Vox Akuma and fans by analyzing the incidents of extreme personal threats from fans and human flesh online violence.

3.3. Participation observation method

By going deep into the fan community, the opinions of fans on virtual streamers in most communities were observed. Through the analysis of the live content of the streamer, the comprehensive identity of the streamer is summarized.

4. FINDING

Vox Akuma, a virtual YouTuber owned by Anycolor company in Japan, is used as an example in this paper for the following reasons: First, it has millions of fans on Youtube and Bilibili at the same time and has a wide range of audiences. Second, in 2022, it ranked second in Youtube's annual live broadcast revenue list. Bilibili's two-hour live broadcast earned millions, with good economic benefits. The above two points are enough to prove that Vox has achieved excellent results in the construction of a virtual streamer identity, and the huge number of fans provides the author with a wealth of cases to summarize the new social relationships generated in the Vox fan community.

4.1. Triple identity construction

This paper will analyze the identity construction of Vox Akuma and most of the virtual streamers from three aspects: the avatar, the person in the middle, and the virtual streamer, to summarize the importance of identity construction for the IP construction of virtual streamers.

4.1.1. Avatar

Avatars, 2D or 3D avatars with their own character's backstory and career setting, are mostly company-supplied or custom-made. The background story of the Vox avatar is "the strongest ghost from the past, who cares for his companions and minions even though he has superhuman physical abilities and absolute confidence." His 2D avatars also use costumes that match the period and occupation elements of the backstory. During the live stream, Vox will include backstories about its characters, such as unprompted stories about the age of its characters. This kind of live content that virtual hosts carry out based on their people is called Role Play (RP). The wonderful Role Play can let the audience clearly understand the difference between the virtual streamer and the ordinary real streamer, to strengthen the identity of the virtual streamer.

4.1.2. The person in

Nakamoto, from the Japanese "中の人", literally meaning "the person inside" or "the person behind", is the voice actor and motion capture source of the virtual streamer, that is, the person "playing" the virtual streamer. In the virtual live broadcast where the majority of the audience is quadratic element enthusiasts, few people will actively disclose their personal identity information. The content of the live broadcast mainly depends on the improvisation of the virtual host, so the voice, personality, etc., greatly determines the success or failure of the virtual IP. And 70% of the respondents were first attracted by the voice of the person in the virtual broadcast after accidentally watching it. However, in the industry, the virtual streamer will not take the initiative to publish the identity information of the person in it and the behavior of malicious disclosure of the person in it is not recognized. On the one hand, the audience of the virtual streamer is mostly quadratic enthusiasts, and the disclosure of the real appearance of the virtual streamer will affect the audience's perception and then lead to defamation. On the other hand, because the middle person is hidden behind the virtual streamer image, some extreme viewers will try to search for the middle person with human flesh, which endangers the personal safety of the middle person.

4.1.3. Virtual streamer

The identity of the virtual streamer is the combination of the person in the middle and the virtual character setting, forming the virtual streamer familiar to the audience. Relying on the image alone can not make the virtual streamer stand out from the fierce competition in the market, but also need the people in the personal interpretation to make the virtual image full and fresh. Before these image texts are re-created and activated by fans, they are incomplete.[5] The personalization of virtual streamers is an important link for virtual digital technology to participate in the construction of a new relationship between human and technology survival. The so-called "virtual streamer personalization" has two connotations. The first one refers to the audio-visual transmission pattern of the virtual streamer. Digital technology shows the appearance and sound of the virtual streamer. The other is the personalization of the "body language" of the virtual streamer and the personality charm of the virtual streamer. The "personality" of the virtual streamer is also the intermediary symbol of the communication between the radio and television programs and the audience. A virtual image is a fictional person, which needs the personality charm and personal personality of the person itself and the rich and complete character of the role summarized based on the role setting. The middle person presents a new online image, by carefully selecting, selectively presenting, or concealing some situations of himself, and finally achieving the purpose of shaping a new online identity. Momo, the interviewee, said, "I am a fan of two-dimensional culture, and the first time I watched the virtual live broadcast was when Vox was broadcasting. When I saw the cover of the live broadcast, I just thought that the character looked very good. After opening it, I found that Vox was conducting RP content.

4.2. New Social Relationship

Based on the identity construction of virtual anchors, more and more viewers can strengthen their identity of virtual anchors in their interactions with them, thus strengthening the emotional connection between them. In other words, the virtual image is the main body, ignoring the appearance and background conditions, and the new social relationship on the network is faster and more open. In the network environment where people are not exposed to their real information, they are more likely to show more obvious personality than in the real world, and they are more likely to accept communication and contact with others in the virtual environment, thus producing a new type of social relationship.

According to the theory of identity construction, people usually form their sense of identity through self-reflection and interaction with others. The mutual production and exchange of knowledge in the field of virtual anchors connect fans, form an emotional community based on

identity, and thus generate collective identity.[6] In addition, self-identity is constantly strengthened in the interaction with anchors, thus strengthening the emotional connection with anchors. This paper will use the relationship depth and interaction frequency as the horizontal and vertical axis, use the interview method and observation method to define the concept of four quadrants, and explain this new social relationship between virtual anchors and audiences from four quadrants. Based on the interview, the author defines the deep relationship between the audience and the virtual streamer as that the audience watches the virtual streamer for a long time, talks about profound content, and enjoys a high degree of affection. During this period, a stable and continuous companion relationship is formed, and most of them ignore their interest in the live content of the streamer and just enjoy the process of watching the live broadcast. Through the process of watching the virtual streamer, the audience gradually deepened the understanding and love of the streamer's personality and personality, and finally selected one or more streamers for long-term viewing. On the contrary, the shallow relationship is for the audience to watch the streamer for entertainment and relaxation, and they do not want to spend too much energy to understand the experience and character of a streamer, etc., and often only choose the live content they are interested in. In the process of constantly screening the live content that they are interested in, the audience screens the streamers of live-related content.

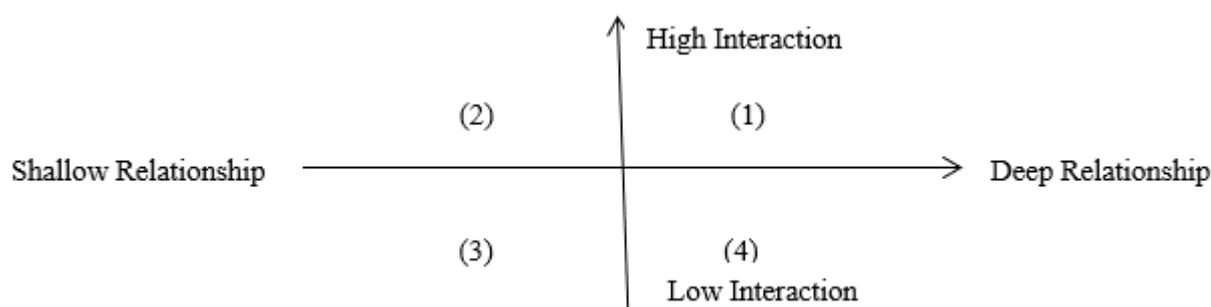


Figure 1. Four Quadrants of the relationship between virtual streamers and audience

4.2.1 Quadrant 1: (deep relationship, high interaction)

Viewers in this quadrant have a high frequency of interaction with the specific streamer, watch the live broadcast for a long time, and have a deeper understanding of the streamer, which is characterized by strong stickiness, strong dependence, obvious emotion, and a strong sense of identity with their own "fan" identity. Specifically, they actively send rewards or speak in the live broadcast of a specific streamer, and have a deeper emotional connection with the streamer than the audience. They enjoy deepening their inner connection with the streamer through frequent interaction with the streamer. "After I met him, every aspect of my life was taken over by him," said M Tit. "My glasses cases, water glasses, watches, bookmarks, etc., and the standing cards on my desk have his shadow. One thing that makes me happy is that the real Kindred (fan name of Vox) found the courage to make friends with me after seeing these things. Many of them are very similar to my personality, and we get along very well. "Most of the audience in this quadrant have a strong sense of belonging in the fan community and often become the leader of the community or the creator of the secondary creation of the streamer content. But part of the audience's attachment is too deep to form a morbid possessive psychology. In the fan community of Vox Akuma, the virtual streamer studied in this paper, some fans are unclear about the boundary of the relationship between themselves and the virtual streamer, because the streamer often creates virtual love stories and has not previously explained the relationship division. In a virtual love live broadcast conducted by Vox with the audience, a female virtual streamer of the same company as Vox encountered content that could not pass the level in the

process of her game live broadcast and contacted Vox to ask about the gameplay. Some fans in the Vox live room thought it was a deliberate act to interrupt the "date" and carried out online violence and physical threats against the female streamer. Both streamers apologized to viewers after the incident. Vox also updated the rules of the live broadcast and seriously condemned this part of the extreme audience, redefined the relationship between him and the audience in the virtual love theme live, that is, "virtual" love. However, this kind of virtual love for the live broadcast also brought pleasure to the audience to a certain extent. The respondent Tofu told me: "Vox's adult ASMR is certainly controversial, but it provides a virtual relationship, which is also very fragile in today's real relationships. Sometimes this tendency to" play "relationships makes people more comfortable, less vulnerable, and at a low cost, like you don't have to spend money on him, spend time on him, You're just a couple for a few hours."

4.2.2. The fourth quadrant; (Deep relationship, low interaction)

This kind of audience is not very interested in interacting with the streamer, mainly because of the language barrier, social fear, and just wanting to watch the streamer quietly. Similar to the highly interactive audience, the audience in this quadrant also has a strong sense of stickiness and dependence on the streamer as a fan. However, similar to the "diving party" in the network, they rarely express their views in the live broadcast room or the fan community, and are more inclined to play the role of "listener". Fishball's rough face said: "Probably because of my personal growth experience, I am not very willing to express my ideas to others and do not want to be noticed by others. Before him, I have no contact with this aspect of live broadcast, and I have no interest in it. In reality, I really 'shrink in the corner to cut off all my social interaction'. In Vox's stream, though, I've always been a silent listener, only occasionally brushing emojis with other viewers. Although my English is not that good, I enjoy Vox's voice. In the process of listening to his content unilaterally, I don't have the burden of communication and can be more involved in the live broadcast."

4.2.3. Second quadrant: (shallow relationship, high interaction)

Viewers who are willing to maintain this quadrant with a streamer have high recognition of the streamer's live content, high frequency of interaction with the streamer, long viewing time, shallow understanding of the streamer, and enjoy the entertainment brought by the streamer's live content. It is characterized by being strict about the content of the live broadcast, having a high interactive intention of the streamers who are interested in the content of the live broadcast, rarely identifying themselves as "fans" of the streamers, and having low personal emotional investment. Yeojun said, "I don't watch virtual streamers, but I just saw a live broadcast when I was eating, and the cover was also a game I was playing. When I click in, I find it is not a real streamer, but a two-dimensional image. I have heard people say that there is such a virtual live broadcast before, but this is the first time to watch it. In the beginning when watching a fun, later found that the streamer's game level is good, live broadcast is also very fun, often go to see him live. For interaction, I sometimes have some ideas about the game or new gameplay on the bullet screen. Generally speaking, I'm very relaxed. I just watch whatever makes me happy."

4.2.4. Quadrant 3: (shallow relationship, low interaction)

This kind of audience only watches the live broadcast of the content they are interested in and has low interaction intention. It rarely identifies a streamer to watch, and its viewing frequency is very low compared with that of the audience in other quadrants. It belongs to the marginal audience, which is similar to "passers-by's goodwill". They have a shallow relationship with the streamer and will not have the identity of being a "fan" of the streamer.

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, this paper introduces the Japanese virtual streamer Vox Akuma and summarizes the importance of virtual streamer identity shaping for IP building by analyzing its identity construction. Vox Akuma's identity construction includes three aspects: avatar, middle person, and virtual streamer. The virtual image has its own background story and professional setting, and the live content is mainly Role Play. The middle person is the source of voice actors and motion capture of the virtual streamer, and its timeliness, personality, personality, and other characteristics greatly affect the cognition and audience stickiness of the virtual streamer. The identity of the virtual streamer is the combination of the person and the virtual character setting, forming the virtual streamer image familiar to the audience. At the same time, the success of virtual streamers also depends on the formation and maintenance of fan communities, and their huge number of fans has become an important case of new social relationships. This paper discusses the new social relationship brought by the identity construction based on the virtual streamer, and from the perspective of the identity construction theory, through the interview method and observation method, it defines four quadrants to explain the social relationship between the virtual streamer and the audience from various angles. In the deep relationship, the audience is emotional and sticky to a specific streamer and is often the leader of the fan community or the creator of the secondary creation of the streamer's content. In a shallow relationship, the audience will only watch the live broadcast of the content they are interested in, have a shallow understanding of the streamer, and have a low personal emotional investment. This paper also discusses some problems existing in virtual streamers, such as morbid possessive psychology and defining virtual love relationships. In a word, virtual streamers bring a new social relationship of a faster and more open network and also cause people to rethink their identity and social relationship.

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