

New collaboration in a virtual world: Studying Vtubers through Identity, Gender and Fan Engagement

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	page i
Abstract.....	page iii
Statement of Originality.....	page iv
Acknowledgements.....	page v
Introduction: Entering the Vtuber Rabbit Hole.....	page 1
Chapter 1: Contextualising the Literature of Vtubers.....	page 7
Chapter 2: Identity in Hololive English.....	page 26
Chapter 3: Gender Performance in Hololive English.....	page 42
Chapter 4: Parasocial Relationships & Symbiotic.....	page 52
Co-Creativity in HoloEN	page
Conclusion: “See you next stream!”.....	page 76
References.....	page 81

List of Figures:

Figure 1: Screenshot from Hololive Fan Discord Server contextualising ‘forbidden knowledge’	page 28
Figure 2: Screenshot from Hololive Fan Discord Server of rules against the discussion of ‘forbidden knowledge’	page 28
Figure 3: The nightmare painting by Nanashi Mumei	page 40
Figure 4: Mumei’s extreme close-up portrait of Hoshimachi Suisei	page 40
Figure 5: Work-in-progress sketch by Mumei depicting Hololive talents Natsuiro Matsuri and Kureiji Ollie	page 41
Figure 6: Gura and Anya’s collaboration, with Gura frowning upon a certain realisation	page 46
Figure 7: Sample of Ceres Fauna’s Twitter account	page 54
Figure 8: Hololive Fan Server users comparing kayfabe in pro-wrestling with Vtubers	page 55
Figure 9: Archived fan discussion on Hololive Fan Server about how Noir Vesper broke his kayfabe during debut, endearing him to viewers	page 56
Figure 10: Interaction between Watson Amelia and Ouro Kronii on Twitter, playing on each other’s time-based kayfabe	page 57
Figure 11: Amelia learning how to use the pouch in <i>Elden Ring</i> to quickly summon Torrent	page 58
Figure 12: Appearance of Hasksoft’s 3D model of Amelia before playing <i>Half-Life: Alyx</i>	page 59
Figure 13: Amelia playing <i>Half-Life: Alyx</i> while using Hasksoft’s 3D model	page 59
Figure 14: Official artwork of Troubleshooter for <i>DNF Duel</i>	page 61
Figure 15: Thumbnail of Maximillian Dood’s reaction video, illustrating the similarities	page 61
Figure 16: Troubleshooter’s 7 th colours in <i>DNF Duel</i> , sporting a red shirt, black pants and dirty-blonde hair similar to Maximillian Dood	page 62

Figure 17: Sample photo of the <i>DNF Duel</i> mod that recreates Maximillian as Troubleshooter	page 63
Figure 18: IRyS' MV of “ <i>INTERNET OVERDOSE</i> ”, animation by Akashiba	page 63
Figure 19: Comparative screenshot of the original MV of “ <i>INTERNET OVERDOSE</i> ”	page 64
Figure 20: Omaru Polka’s livestream intro, animated by Kay Yu	page 65
Figure 21: Screenshot from Kay Yu’s itch.io site for <i>HoloCure</i> showcasing Gawr Gura fighting Deadbeats and Shrimps	page 66
Figure 22: Bloom & Gloom drawn by Sana and IRyS on-stream	page 67
Figure 23: Bloom & Gloom’s sprites for <i>HoloCure</i> ’s next update	page 67
Figure 24: Fan art samples by users @uki_shu and @03Pun15 on Twitter	page 70
Figure 25: Fauna’s reaction on Twitter upon learning how popular the Cowfauna trend became	page 71
Figure 26: Animated gif by Walfie of Amelia eating sand	page 72
Figure 27: Hololive English ‘Smol’ avatars designed by Walfie	page 73

ABSTRACT

Following the debut of Kizuna Ai, the self-proclaimed first Virtual YouTuber in 2016, a new market and genre of online content creators exploded in popularity. Vtubers are distinguished from their predecessors through livestreaming and performing under the guise of a 2D or 3D virtual avatar. These characters are inspired by Japanese anime and manga, animated using motion-capture and facial tracking software. Through livestreaming and performing a fictional persona, Vtubers create the illusion of interacting with a real-time anime character, blended together with the real human performer.

Since the field of Vtubers is rapidly evolving, there is an unexplored gap in research about this emerging media phenomenon. This gap can be found in the existing literature on YouTubers and Twitch streamers, because Vtubers are situated in livestreaming media. Additionally, how do Vtubers perform and enact aspects of Japanese pop-culture and media for international audiences? My research and thesis focus on Hololive English, an all-female ensemble of Vtubers that performs for English speaking audiences.

Beginning with examining Hololive English as a transnational media project, I draw from the literature of Japanese cultural studies and media studies. This is followed by studies of avatars and persona in relation to Hololive English. This informs my first research question, how Vtubers provide new affordances for identity in online cultures. I then contextualise Hololive English within gender studies and online gender performance, exploring how Vtubers challenge, reproduce or deviate from gender norms. I also challenge the one-sided understanding of parasocial relationships between Vtubers and fans. Utilising audience reception theories, fandom and participatory culture studies, I propose a new term, ‘symbiotic co-creativity’ to examine mutually beneficial collaborations between Hololive English and their fans.

By examining the symbiotic co-creativity that exists between Vtubers and fans, it prompts a re-thinking of how parasocial relationships emerge between online media stars and their creative fans. This new type of collaboration reflects the contemporary field of online fandom cultures, and contributes to the literature of collaborative and co-creative media works in fan culture.

Statement of Originality:

This thesis has not been submitted to a previous publication, nor to a prior university for a degree, diploma or masters course. This thesis is the result of my own work, save for the material referenced in this thesis, with credit given to the contributing creator in the full thesis text.

(Signed) _____ Date: _____

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Introduction: Entering the Vtuber Rabbit Hole:

“Nice to meet you, my name is Kizuna Ai! ... You know, I’m actually 2-D! ... Well, take it that I’m virtual. Don’t you think “virtual youtuber” sounds really cool?” (A.I. Channel, 2016, official translation).

On December 1st 2016, Kizuna Ai uploaded her self-introduction video to YouTube, establishing a brand new media genre and an ever-evolving entertainment industry dedicated to “Virtual YouTubers.” Virtual YouTubers, hereafter referred to as Vtubers, are a new form of pop-culture media in which a performer, YouTuber or live-streamer masks their real identity under the appearance and persona of a virtual avatar. These avatars take strong influence from Japanese pop culture media, including anime, manga and J-Pop idols. Vtubers are visually represented as animated Live2D characters or 3D avatars combined with full-body motion capture. While the still-active British-Japanese Ami Yamato has been creating this style of content on YouTube since 2011, it was Kizuna Ai’s success within Japan’s *otaku* subculture that resulted in Vtubers becoming a globalised phenomenon (Lufkin, 2018; Gigguk, 2020).

As of 2022, there is now a veritable rabbit hole of Vtubers working either independently or for a Vtuber talent agency, creating content under pseudo-anonymity across media platforms including YouTube, Twitch and social media like Twitter to entertain viewers. These activities include playing and live-streaming video games, free-chatting with viewers, drawing, karaoke and music production, amongst other activities. With growing accessibility to technology and software that enables anyone to become a Vtuber, it has developed an alternative career path comparable to the well-established YouTubers, Twitch streamers or multimedia celebrities such as PewDiePie, Markiplier et al.. Vtubers are also a fusion of online live-streaming culture with Japanese anime and manga's style and mainstream appeal. The Vtuber avatar becomes a virtual mask or puppet, with the performer able to share stories from their own life or embellish them with their fantastical character as a form of real-time roleplaying with viewers.

Their explosive success is demonstrable with Vtubers establishing and breaking several records despite only entering mainstream pop culture within the past decade. For example, former Hololive Japan Vtuber Kiryu Coco remains among the Top-10 most successful Vtubers from SuperChats on YouTube, having earned approximately \$4,600,000 before retiring (Playboard, 2022; Morrissy, 2020).

Likewise, VShojo's Ironmouse became the most subscribed female streamer and Vtuber on Twitch during her subathon early in 2022 (Grayson, 2022).

Furthermore, as Japanese culture writer and reporter for Restofworld.org Roland Kelts identifies, the lockdowns enforced by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic resulted in people discovering Vtubers during periods of isolation and loneliness (Kelts, 2021). This cemented the global popularity and appeal of Vtubers for newfound fans.

The resounding success and ongoing popularity of Vtubers raises a few essential questions, including why should we care about Vtubers in the field of academia. Why is there so little written about them in media and cultural studies? I argue that because Vtubers are an evolving and ever-changing medium, it becomes imperative to study and record them contemporaneously. The tools needed to study Vtubers in academic contexts are readily available, as Vtubers are deeply rooted in culture, technology and media. For example, we can learn how the virtual avatar of Vtubers are utilised to afford anonymity for the performer, or how they enable new performances of gender and sexuality in online livestreaming culture.

Additionally, there is a strong case for exploring the interactions between Vtubers and their fans. This is because fans play an important role for Vtubers, as they create content that can be approved or incorporated into the Vtuber's livestreams and activities. Studying this relationship allows one to rethink parasocial relationships and the implications of fans participating in creative media production. To contribute to the literature on Vtubers, it becomes vital to make these timely investigations while the industry retains its current popularity and appeal.

Research Context:

My exposure to Vtubers began with Kizuna Ai and her videos, including translated clips shared across social media. In particular, Ai's infamous parroting of English profanities such as "FAKKYU!" while playing *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard*. Although I was aware of Ai's content, I considered Vtubers a novelty until late 2019, when I became more invested after discovering the Vtubers of Hololive Production. Following a crossover between Hololive and the mobile game *Azur Lane*, I found translated clips of livestreams that endeared me to Hololive Japan's Vtubers. Specifically, Lyger's translations of Natsuiro Matsuri's "band-aid story" in the video "*All You Need Are Band-aids*" and Nakiri Ayame's miraculous luck when playing *Minecraft* (lyger Vtuber translations, 2019a; 2019b). I was able to enjoy the livestreams of Hololive Japan talents owing to my earlier studies in Japanese language and culture.

To contextualise Hololive Production, they are a Vtuber talent agency run by the entertainment/technology company COVER Corp; CEO Motoaki 'YAGO' Tanigo. Initially focusing on VR/AR game development with an experimental table tennis game, COVER Corp began to focus on the production of Vtubers with the introduction of their first virtual idol, Tokino Sora, on September 7th, 2017 (Hololive ホロライブ – Vtuber Group, 2022; SoraCh. ときのそらチャンネル, 2017). Tanigo's direction for Hololive is influenced by Vocaloid characters including Hatsune Miku and Japan's J-Pop idol agencies like AKB48. As of Hololive Production's fifth anniversary, the company oversees 71 Vtubers across their all-female Japanese, Indonesian, English and all-male HoloStars branches (COVER Corp, 2016b, 2016c). In my thesis, I focus specifically on Hololive English, having followed the branch since its debut in 2020. Its sample size of 10 active talents provides a readily accessible and available archive of content on YouTube.

Study Aims:

In conducting this research on Hololive English, I have three core goals to demonstrate why Vtubers should be studied in academic literature. The first research question examines how Vtubers shape identity so that it combines their

fictional character with their real performer's identity. This question is followed by reviewing Hololive English in the context of gender performance and determining if Vtubers contest or conform to hegemonic or cultural gender norms. The most significant goal of my study is to call for a re-evaluation of traditional understandings of parasocial relationships. Rather than critique Vtubers as an un-reciprocal form of performance and entertainment, I argue there is a distinct and mutually beneficial interaction that strengthens the bond between Vtuber creators and fans when creating content for each other.

Materials, Theories and Methods:

Since Hololive English's Vtubers produce content on YouTube, Twitch and Twitter, my primary sources and materials are the performers' archived YouTube livestreams and their social media accounts. I watched these livestreams as they were happening in real-time, or watched them again at a later date if the stream was archived on YouTube. To remain impartial, I adopted a passive observation approach – avoiding making comments to the Vtubers during livestreams or making comments on their videos. Due to the length of the livestream archives, I used timestamps identified by other users' comments to identify moments of interest or events that were important for my research. Japanese terms and loanwords in this thesis are italicised, and names with extended sounds are represented in English phonetically. Vtubers in this thesis will be introduced using Japan's naming conventions - surname/family first, given name second. I.e. Watson Amelia - Watson is the surname and Amelia is the given name. The research theories I explored for this project came from peer-reviewed journals, articles and scholarly publications across media and cultural disciplines.

To illustrate how Hololive English Vtubers construct identity, I selected three talents to examine as part of a media analysis. The content for analysis includes the selected Vtubers' debut livestreams, where they introduce themselves to their audiences for the first time and livestreams where they demonstrate their skills or disclose personal details about themselves. I examined these talents using Chih-Peng Chen's strategies of mystification, basking and self-promotion (Chen, 2016). After studying the talents' debut livestreams, I turn to Nathan Jackson's

conceptualisation of memes as creating a collective identity between live-streamers and viewers and how memes influence the Vtuber's identity and persona when livestreaming (Jackson, 2021). I argue the same criteria could be equally applied to all currently active Hololive English talents to explore how each talent constructs their online identity and persona. I use Jackson and Chen's findings to establish a framework for analysing how Hololive English talents construct their online identity and persona. This framework is compatible with Vtubers, but I expand upon it by introducing how fans impact and contribute to the process of constructing identity.

For the discussions of gender within Hololive English, I draw upon Judith Butler's discussions of gender performance (Butler, 1988) and the insights of Hiroshi Aoyagi (Aoyagi, 2005), Patrick Galbraith and Jason Karlin (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012) on Japan's idol culture. Hololive English is an all-female unit, where femininity is the predominant form of gender performance. I use the aforementioned literature to examine how the talents play with gender during livestreams. This examination develops the question on whether Vtubers contribute to gender norms, or perhaps destabilise gender performance in online media. Moving from gender to fandom studies, the concluding chapter of this project draws upon media scholar Henry Jenkins' studies on participatory cultures and fandom studies (Jenkins, 1992; Jenkins, 2006). Jenkins' studies provide a useful framework for studying the interactions between Hololive English and their fans. Drawing from the studies of Horton & Wohl on parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956), I also evaluate where the engagements between fans and Hololive English become mutually beneficial, while also interrogating any flaws that arise in this system.

Structure and Expected Findings:

In *Chapter 1*, I focus on situating the Vtuber phenomenon, and by extension Hololive English within the literature of the media that inspired the genre. I begin by situating Vtubers within Japanese pop-culture literature to identify their cultural contexts and aspects of their performance that are recontextualised for western audiences. I follow this examination by establishing the literature relevant to my research themes – identity, gender performance and parasocial

relationships. Finally, I establish my methodologies for the rest of the thesis from the theories explored in the literature review.

In **Chapter 2**, I focus on the creation of identity within Hololive English. Drawing from the discussions of how identity is constructed in online environments like YouTube, I present the first media analyses for this project. Three selected Hololive English Vtubers' livestreams are examined through a media analysis drawing from Chapter 1's literature. The first examination explores how identity is constructed through specific strategies, followed by interrogating how memes impact and shape the performer's persona and interactions with viewers.

In **Chapter 3**, I situate Hololive English's talents in the context of gender performance, drawing upon the literature and studies of Japan's idol culture. I selected Hololive English's most successful Vtuber to identify how she performs her gendered identity for viewers. Continuing the discussion of gender performance, I conduct a media analysis from a series of livestreams where the all-female Vtubers satirically perform and parody aspects of masculinity. Concluding the examination of gender, I examine how non-heteronormative gender performance by Vtubers contributes to studies of gender performance in online media.

Chapter 4 presents the central argument that one-sided parasocial relationships are outdated or contested when examining the relationships between Vtubers and fans. One case study I present explores the communication and participation between Vtubers and their fans. I follow this by examining how Hololive English's Vtubers have started trends or tell stories in online media that result in fans creating derivative works. The concluding media analysis seeks to answer what happens when fan-made goods or characters become adopted into the media company's intellectual property.

The **Conclusion** presents an overall summation of these findings. I will also briefly discuss possible future research themes that lie outside this current study's scope.

Chapter 1 – Contextualising the Literature of Vtubers

Since the popularity and trend of Vtubers is a recent and ongoing media and pop-culture phenomenon, there is a small but growing number of academic studies discussing Vtubers, some published throughout this year (Liu, 2022; Bredikhina & Giard, 2022; Brett, 2022). I begin my studies on Vtubers by situating them within the fields of media, Japanese studies and fandom studies. I also draw upon the literature on anime, manga and J-Pop idols, as these inform the cultural and historical contexts from which Vtubers emerged. From this literature, I raise two major research arguments for my case studies of Hololive English: firstly, the affordances of virtual avatars for identity and gender; and secondly, the remediation of parasocial relationships between YouTubers, Twitch streamers, Vtubers and fandoms.

The virtual avatar used by Vtubers enables new forms of online persona and gender performance that distinguish Vtubers from other forms of Japanese pop-culture media and real-world YouTubers and streamers. I analyse whether within these created identities, there is sometimes a ‘slippage’ between the real performer and their fictional character. This blurring of the performer, their role and character, creates a different kind of identification unlike other forms of media characters and identities. This argument regarding identity and persona, is followed by the assertion of a new concept that properly encapsulates the relationship and collaboration between Hololive English and their fans’ contributions. I refer to this dynamic as *Symbiotic co-creativity*, which I argue promotes mutually beneficial media collaboration between fans and Vtubers, challenging previous studies on parasocial relationships.

Situating Vtubers within Japanese Pop-Culture

Since Hololive English is a branch of the Japan-based Hololive Production talent agency, it is important to identify how Vtubers emerged from Japanese pop culture and how they repeat or diverge from what previous literature has identified. I begin by turning to Japanese and Asian Studies scholar Koichi Iwabuchi and his writing on the transnationalisation of Japanese goods, culture

and products. Iwabuchi proposes the terms cultural odours and fragrances to describe “...in which cultural features of a country of origin and images of its national, in most cases stereotyped, way of life are associated *positively* with a particular product in the consumption process” (Iwabuchi, 2002, p27, original emphasis). Writing on examples like the Sony Walkman, how Japanese animations or games either promote or downplay their Japanese cultural identity, Iwabuchi argues that these ‘cultural odours’ become ‘fragrances’ that facilitate a positive image of Japanese culture and media. Examining Vtubers as a Japanese cultural product based on Iwabuchi’s studies, they share a similar appeal and cultural ‘fragrance’ with anime and manga – initially marketed for domestic Japanese audiences, but found international popularity with overseas fans.

While Iwabuchi’s insights can be applied to how Vtubers became transnational, alone, they are insufficient for examining how Hololive operates as a media franchise. I expand these considerations to Japanese media scholar and writer Marc Steinberg and his book about iconic Japanese characters and the anime media mix (Steinberg, 2012). Steinberg focuses his case study on *Tetsuwan Atom* - localised to *Astro Boy* - as character merchandising, where the image and circulation of the titular hero Atom/Astro facilitate the recognition of the character. This method spreads the appeal for Atom/Astro across other forms of media outside its original scope (Steinberg, 2012, pp. 43-45). Steinberg also identifies the anime media mix, which “...has no single goal or teleological end; the *general* consumption of any of the media mix’s products will grow the entire enterprise” (Steinberg, 2012, p. 141, original emphasis). For Hololive Production, the company operates by combining character merchandising and the anime media mix. However, Vtubers deviate from the strategies of anime/manga multimedia franchises by performing across a wider range of media and content production models. This includes YouTube livestreams, augmented reality concerts, music albums and online comics/manga. In turn, these goods and services contribute to the Hololive brand, promoting recognition of their Vtubers as both characters and talents within pop culture. What I take from Steinberg and Iwabuchi’s discussions is a starting point for analysing how Vtubers are situated in Japanese popular media.

Virtual Idols within the Media Mix

Situating Hololive English within the context of their predecessors in Japanese pop culture like virtual idols, including Hatsune Miku, I continue from the above studies to examine how Vtubers are continuing the studies of J-Pop media.

Media scholar Daniel Black defines the virtual idol as existing without a physical body or actress but is entirely digital and able to have her voice and appearance transformed or manipulated by users and fans (Black, 2012). The Vocaloid character Hatsune Miku is arguably the most recognisable virtual idol within Japanese pop culture. What began with the Vocaloid voice-synthesiser program marketed with the *bishoujo* image of the turquoise-haired, futuristic idol Hatsune Miku in 2007, has resulted in the Vocaloid brand becoming an iconic franchise within Japanese pop culture and beyond (Yamada, 2017; Kobayashi & Taguchi, 2018). Ethnomusicologist Keisuke Yamada highlights how fans of Hatsune Miku and Vocaloid music producers used Miku's voice samples and the Vocaloid software to compose and create songs. These are shared and uploaded to websites including Niconico Douga and YouTube¹. In response, the producers receive comments from users and derivative works or remixes made by other composers. Crypton Media facilitates this practice through their Piapro licensing to encourage the fans' creativity and use of their characters and images (Yamada, 2017), further developing the brand appeal of Vocaloid's characters. These ongoing studies on Hatsune Miku and Vocaloid support Black's conclusion that virtual idols like Hatsune Miku have succeeded in facilitating a participatory, remix-driven culture "...her popularity is clearly based most importantly on the fact that she can become an *otaku*'s own, "personal" idol" (Black, 2012, p.224, original emphasis).

Yet this positive attitude toward virtual idols is challenged as musicologist Alyssa Michaud examines and critiques the pivotal role of fans in Vocaloid's participatory fan culture (Michaud, 2022). Supporting Black's assessment,

¹ Niconico Douga is a video-sharing site in Japan that is similar to YouTube, but has different commenting features

Michaud identifies that Miku does not exist as a real person, yet she performs, dances and sings to songs composed by fans as part of holographic live concerts. These fans also participate by waving glowsticks in time with her singing (Michaud, 2022, pp. 6-7). On the one hand, virtual idols seem to encourage their fans' creativity, as the idol's voices and images are arranged into new songs, artworks and remixes. On the other, Crypton Media then implement these songs into official Vocaloid video games and live concerts, where Miku and other Vocaloid characters sing and perform flawless dances. Michaud highlights this as a tension between Vocaloid fans and music critics, owing to the lack of believable human performance by the holographic Hatsune Miku. (Michaud, 2022, p5). Michaud also identifies, but does not answer the question of who benefits the most from this participatory culture; the fans who produce music with Vocaloid software or Crypton Media? I draw upon these discussions to further explore this tension that also exists within Hololive English's participatory fandom cultures.

Examining virtual idols outside the Vocaloid franchise, pop-idol research student Dorothy Finan examines how idol-nurturing games such as *Love Live! School Idol Festival* embodies and simulates the gendered relationship between the usually male producer and female idols (Finan, 2021). Finan also explores the emotional connection where the player views and nurtures the virtual idol as though they were a real idol by acting as her producer. If Vtubers can be considered virtual idols, in that they exist as digital characters that fans interact with, then I supplement and slightly diverge from Finan's findings. I assert that Vtubers, including Hololive English – differ from their flawless counterparts in virtual idols because they are played by real-world performers. That is, they are prone to flaws or mistakes, failures or contradicting themselves. This results in the engagement between the performer and their fans becoming more personal and believable through real-time engagement, bringing them closer to the real-time performances of YouTubers and Twitch streamers. It is this 'slippage' and departure from the static or transformable virtual idols observed by Finan, Black and Michaud that is present in Vtubers that affords new opportunities to conduct ongoing research.

Lastly, the studies by cultural anthropologist and idol scholar Hiroshi Aoyagi allow for a detailed analysis of how Hololive English is informed by and diverges from J-Pop idol discourse. In his exploration of the obsessive nature of idol fans and idol *otaku*², Aoyagi documents the cult-like devotion towards idols (Aoyagi, 2005), which can be expanded to explore how Hololive English have diverged from the practices and culture of J-Pop idols. As part of the media analysis examining gender in Hololive English, I draw upon Aoyagi's studies of gendered performance in Japan's idol culture, specifically the cultural image of female idols as 'pure and innocent' personas (*ibid*, 2005, p.35) and how Hololive English talents continue or otherwise contest hegemonic idol performances. The term 'talent' is commonly used within the idol industry to refer to an idol/entertainer who is not specialised in any particular performance (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012, p.7). In situating Hololive English within online participatory cultures, I seek to identify how Vtubers have diverged from the J-Pop idol industry that inspired them.

Having established and identified the cultural context of Hololive English and the Vtuber phenomenon, I now examine the importance of the virtual avatar.

The Virtual Avatar and Theoretical Backgrounds

Avatars are the virtual representation of a player or user in online video games including *Final Fantasy XIV* and *World of Warcraft*, or virtual worlds and services like *VR Chat*, *Second Life* and *Roblox*. Video game scholars such as Jesper Juul – author of the games studies book “*Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*” (Juul, 2005), have identified emerging themes and studies on video game avatars. Specifically, the avatar as self-identification, avatars as identifiable characters or avatars as a persona in online worlds (Juul & Klevjer, 2016, p. 3). For Vtubers, the avatar contributes to performative role-play interactions with the audience during livestreams, rather than an avatar controlled or played in a video game. Despite this departure, games studies provide a starting point to connect Vtubers to existing academic literature.

² Otaku are described as obsessive or hardcore fans of Japanese pop culture, ranging from manga, anime, idols, etc. and have been extensively studied by Azuma (Azuma, 2009) and Galbraith (Galbraith, 2009).

In his introductory article on Vtubers, Roland Kelts outlines that the use of avatars by Vtubers provides a form of suspension of disbelief to the audience. It creates the experience of interacting with a real-time cartoon or anime character (Kelts, 2021). The appeal of virtual avatars by Vtubers can be supplemented through Japanese cultural critic Hiroki Azuma's insights on *moe*-elements. *Moe* is defined by Japanese media and pop-culture scholar Patrick Galbraith as a euphoric affective response toward a fictional, often female character (Galbraith, 2009 & Galbraith, 2019). From Azuma's definitions, *moe*-elements are visual elements such as animal ears, hairstyles or colours, character design archetypes or ways of speaking intended to evoke the *moe* response from audiences (Azuma, 2009). These *moe*-elements are broken down into databases to be organised and fashioned to create characters that evoke certain *moe* responses, which Azuma identifies as database consumption (Azuma, 2009). This practice influences *doujin* culture – amateur or independent fans who create derivative works using these characters, recycling them or re-imagining them in new contexts. Galbraith identified this as a common and ongoing practice for Japan's *otaku* culture (Galbraith, 2019), culminating in major conventions including Comiket. I cite the discussion of *moe* as part of the aforementioned case studies on gender with Aoyagi's idol studies. Focusing on a specific Hololive English member, I use *moe* as a framework for examining how cuteness is performed in online streaming culture such as Vtubers.

Existing Studies on Identification with Virtual Avatars:

Turning to Ulrike Schultze – a scholar on information technology and social media identity, I focus on the question of how the use of avatars by Vtubers contributes to and establishes their identity. Utilising a performative lens, Schultze examines the construction of embodied identity. She defines embodied identity as how our interactions with the world and others inform our identity. (Schultze, 2014). From her findings on *Second Life*, the user and avatar engage in a cyborg-like performance, where the avatar represents the real user through actions or appearance while also acting as a lens for engaging with the virtual world. From Donna Haraway's famous essay "*A Cyborg Manifesto*" (Haraway, 1985), the cyborg - conjoined from 'cybernetic organism,' has now become

ubiquitous as humans engage with technology in daily life (Haraway, 1985, p. 191). Vtubers are essentially cyborgs as they combine the human performer's voice with motion capture and facial tracking software to control a virtual avatar. Situating this hypothesis towards Hololive English, Schultze's approach can be deployed to examine how performance and personality inform identification with the Vtuber avatar.

Schultze's proposal of the avatar as a form of self-identification has been observed in video game studies, as discussed by Juul and Klevjer. "When players refer to the avatar they control as 'I,' does this also mean they think of there being some kind of logical continuity between themselves and the character?" (Juul & Klevjer, 2016, p. 3). This discussion can be seen in online games researcher Cheng-I Teng's application of self-affirmation theory to MMORPG players. Here, self-affirmation theory is described as self-defence against perceived threats to one's self-image or self-worth. Teng seeks to answer how self-affirmation supports avatar-identification, that is, how the player sees their avatar as an extension of themselves (Teng, 2019). Using Teng's discussions as a starting point enables the question of how the performers behind the Vtuber avatar identify with their character.

From his study, Teng identifies four key constructs from his respondents that flow into positive avatar identification. These include avatar customisation, attractiveness, the ability to contribute to team play and earn achievements and the uniqueness of the player's avatar. These facilitate positive play experiences and player loyalty (Teng, 2019, pp. 1457-1458). However, while aspects like customisation, attractiveness and uniqueness of avatar also apply to Vtubers, both for the performers and audience, some of Teng's constructs do not apply appropriately to Hololive performers. This is because Teng's findings and framework are contextualised in game studies rather than livestreaming as observed in Hololive English. For this reason, I turn to the literature on Persona Studies to examine alternative approaches to studying identity.

Another aspect of studying identity would be through the discussions of persona, drawing from Jungian psychology. The collective journals of Persona Studies

explore the persona in the contexts of the internet, video games and real-world culture. The term persona refers to a ‘mask’ through which one constructs or presents their identity through social contexts or interactions with others (Marshall & Barbour, 2015). Sociology lecturer Lesley Procter develops her arguments from Persona Studies and Schultze’s proposal. Thus I connect her insights to how Vtubers construct identity. Procter highlights how the term persona is also used instead of avatar in the contexts of games and social media. However, she raises concerns over the conflation of the two terms due to their distinct nuances (Procter, 2020). Developing from Russell Belk’s extended self and Schultze’s embodiment studies, Procter proposes a combined terminology in ‘avatar-persona’ with the paradoxical intent of preserving the similarities and distinctions between the two terms. This avatar-persona is “both avatar (object) *and* persona (projection of self). Due to the interaction of parasociality, immersion and identity, the avatar-persona and user cease to be separate entities” (Procter, 2020, pp. 58-61, original emphasis). Parasociality can be defined here as the emotional connection between the Vtuber and their virtual avatar. I argue that Vtubers embody this logic of ‘avatar-persona,’ informing my examination of how Hololive English’s Vtubers combine their personal identities with their fictional, on-stream persona and virtual characters.

Schultze and Procter’s findings on performativity and the avatar-persona provide useful insights into how one constructs and identifies with their virtual avatar. In addition, these studies provide useful insights for examining identity construction and avatar identification. Building a framework for analysis from these relevant, existing studies, I then branch my argument into two sub-themes, the construction of identity and persona by Vtubers, followed by examining how Vtubers enable new forms of online gender performance.

Constructing Identity and Persona Through Virtual Avatars:

I continue the first sub-theme of identity with women’s and gender studies scholar Chih-Peng Chen’s study on Taiwanese YouTubers and how they established their identity. I observe similarities and departures between Hololive English and their predecessors in relation to her study. Chen identifies four key strategies used by her respondents in establishing digital self-image, including

basking, mystification, self-promotion and gender-switching (Chen, 2016, pp. 243-247). Of these, basking, mystification and self-promotion appear to be the most appropriate for discussing how Vtubers construct identity and persona, thus I use them as a framework for my media analysis in the following chapter. In identifying these strategies for Hololive English talents, I establish how online identity is constructed by the performer, the avatar-persona and audience of Vtubers.

Returning to persona studies, digital communications and media scholar Christopher Moore, collaborating with P. David Marshall and Kim Barbour identify five key dimensions of online persona construction that I use to supplement Chen's strategies as mentioned earlier. These dimensions are the "public", "mediatised", "performative", "collective" and "value of persona", each flowing into the other in the act of constructing and maintaining one's online persona for themselves and audiences (Moore et al., 2017). Firstly, the public dimension refers to 'official' self that one enacts to a wide audience, becoming mediatised as a form of expressing oneself. The performative dimension concerns how one performs their identity, gender or connections with others. Lastly, the collective dimension focuses on how one connects with others through online social media (*ibid*, 2017, pp. 2-6). Because Vtubers are strongly reliant on online media such as YouTube and social media, Moore et al.'s study of constructing online persona is relevant to my research. From Chen and Moore et al., I develop a combined framework of these studies of persona and digital self-construction to interrogate how Hololive English's Vtubers' construct their online persona and identity.

Another practice that I observe in my case studies on Hololive English is what video games and livestreaming researcher Nathan Jackson identifies as 'memesis', the act of proliferating and recycling memes to create newer memes (Jackson, 2021). From his case studies, Jackson observed that Twitch streamers establish a shared collective identity and persona through their engagements with the audiences using internet memes (Jackson, 2021). These findings continue Moore et al.'s insights into the collective persona, as Jackson contextualises Twitch streamers as micro-publics that proliferate and interconnect across social

media platforms. “Micro-publics are micro, not in terms of scale, but with regards to the nature of the network that is regularly and privately updated by a central identity” (Moore et al., 2017, p. 6). This means that internet celebrities – including Vtubers, influencers and YouTubers – can update their identity and content in real-time while in constant connection with their followers and proliferate news and updates at near-instantaneous speed. I extend Jackson’s arguments to identify how Hololive English’s Vtubers establish and negotiate their identity with audiences through memes and real-time interaction with viewers.

Considering how Vtubers have evolved from YouTubers and Twitch streamers presents a key question: “Why is the virtual avatar so important to Vtubers?” I raise this in consideration of linguistics scholar Kristy Fägersten’s case study of Felix Kjellberg, known for his equal success and infamy as PewDiePie. Fägersten highlights that Kjellberg’s rampant use of profanities serves a twofold purpose. The first is the creation of the persona of PewDiePie that Kjellberg uses for his YouTube videos and livestreams. This persona enables a casual and informal parasocial relationship with his audiences, who are receptive to his crass behaviour (Fägersten, 2017), seeing him as a friend who uses coarse language as though they were in the same circle of communication. In light of this, if the avatar were to be taken away from Vtubers, what distinguishes their activities from real-world YouTubers and Twitch streamers?

By deploying Procter’s avatar-persona theory in the context of Hololive English talents’ livestreams, the virtual avatar enables new affordances that webcam streaming does not allow for. The result, I argue, is that the virtual avatar used by Hololive English Vtubers is a stylised and controlled form of identity and persona that blends the individual’s lived experiences with that of their fictional character, with characteristic ‘slippage’ thus diverging from the practices observed in YouTubers like PewDiePie. Having explored my first sub-theme of research, I now review the relevant literature for the second sub-theme, online gender performance by Vtubers.

Gender Performance in Vtuber Practice:

The concept of gender performance was explored in the essays of cultural studies and feminist scholar Judith Butler. Butler argues that gender is an act of performance rather than something naturally encoded into the body or inherent identity (Butler, 1988). As cultures repeat actions attributed to masculine or feminine performances, they codify gender norms associated with ‘male’ or ‘female’ gender identity and performance (Butler, 1988, p. 523). I combine Butler’s discussions of gender performance with the studies of gender performance conducted by Hiroshi Aoyagi, to build a framework for analysis. I then use this to identify how the female talents of Hololive English perform, exaggerate or challenge gender norms as part of their livestream activities. In doing so, it allows for examinations of how gendered tropes that appear within Japanese popular media are performed or enacted by the international Hololive English talents.

Web-platforms scholar Niels van Doorn extends Butler’s proposition, arguing that gender and sexuality are inherently virtual modes of performance and phenomena “...they are not concrete, materially existing entities but rather constitute a variety of effects, affects, ideals and regulatory norms that are *repeatedly actualized* in material-discursive practices.” (van Doorn, 2011, p534, original emphasis) From his prior studies on online gender representation, van Doorn identifies that these repetitions extend not just to the physical body but through technology and web media. As a result, it enables new modes of gender, embodiment and sexuality (van Doorn, 2011). Using the lens of gender performativity afforded by combining the collective studies of Butler, van Doorn and Aoyagi, the online gender performances of Vtubers can also be extended to examine in this new context. To explore online gender performance, I first examine how gender is performed in video games and online media, historically and more recently.

Historically, the landscape of video gaming has been driven by hegemonic masculinity. Games researcher Nick Yee has observed in studies from 2008 that one form of resistance to this culture by female gamers was through cross-gender

play using in-game avatars. Instead of using a female avatar or name, they used a male avatar and handle. “Unfortunately, current MMOs are not gender-inclusive utopias. There are many social and cultural constraints for women who enter these spaces.” (Yee, 2008, p. 93). Gaming and gender researchers Kate Rosier and Celia Pearce have also examined how gender performance influences one’s avatar in their studies across *Second Life* and *Guild Wars* (Rosier & Pearce, 2011). These studies continue to identify cross-gender performance by male and female gamers. However, as gaming has slowly become more inclusive of culture and gender, there are signs of change. This observation is supported by Andrew Zolides’ study of how female professional gamers like MrsViolence enacts and performs femininity to reaffirm her gender and identity “...that both sets her apart from and embeds her within the masculine space of professional video gaming.” (Zolides, 2015, p.48). What I take from these studies of female gamers is a recognition of the move towards inclusion and contesting hegemonic masculinity in gaming culture, which also extends to the all-female Hololive English performers.

Within Japan’s Vtuber culture, there is a practice known as *babiniku* that holds similarities to previous studies of cross-gender performance identified by Rosier and Pearce. Thus I turn to situate and explore how Hololive English deploy or performs heteronormative or non-conventional forms of gender performance such as *babiniku*. *Babiniku* (バビンキ), which localiser Matt Alt defines as “*wearing a virtual girl’s body*” (Alt, 2021), is a form of cross-gender performance where males use female avatars and/or voice changers to perform as cute female characters. Asian studies and gender researcher Liudmila Bredikhina, collaborating with Agnès Giard, introduces *babiniku* as part of the ongoing practices of online gender role-play and crossdressing in Japanese culture. Bredikhina and Giard’s findings suggest that the feminine avatar provides a mode of confidence and freedom for *babiniku* Vtubers to express and play with femininity and challenging hegemonic masculinity in Japanese society (Bredikhina & Giard, 2022, p9). To extend this discussion on how *babiniku* enables new forms of online gender performance, I interrogate whether the inverse argument is true. That is, how do the all-female Vtubers of Hololive

English play with masculinity, male avatars or alter-egos? Developing from this, I examine how Hololive English perform non-conforming acts of gender performance and what implications these have in livestreaming media.

I also draw upon Aoyagi's, Galbraith & Karlin's idol performance studies (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012; Aoyagi, 2005). Since Hololive English draw upon this heavily-gendered industry and culture, I argue that the examinations of gender studies from these fields are just as applicable to Vtubers. This cultural context raises the question of how the talents of Hololive English perform femininity or whether they instead contest hegemonic or stereotypical gender performances found within idol culture. From these, I interrogate and conclude whether or not Vtubers enable a new and empowering form of gender performance in both online media culture and J-Pop idol culture.

Remediating Understandings of Parasocial Relationships & Fandom Creativity

My next research theme focuses on parasocial relationships with Vtubers and developing a better understanding of their interactions with audiences. Donald Horton and Richard Wohl introduced the concept of parasocial relationships in their influential studies in early radio and television, defining them as one-sided relationships driven by audiences in response to a media star or celebrity (Horton & Wohl, 1956). For the audience, the celebrity is treated like they are a close friend, family member or confidant. At the same time, the celebrity 'reciprocates' this relationship for the audience so long as they uphold their persona and illusion of intimacy or friendship (Horton & Wohl, 1956, pp. 216-218).

What has become apparent in recent studies (Chen, 2016; Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018; Jarzyna, 2020; Tolbert & Drogos, 2019), however, is that the archetypal uni-directional definition of parasocial relationships has been challenged by the rapid growth and proliferation of social media and communications technologies. Although parasocial relationships continue to be observed in the contemporary media climate, including amongst some Vtubers, there is now a proliferation of two-way communication channels for engagement between audiences and celebrities. As the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in greater media consumption than previously recorded, research psychologist Carol Jarzyna believes that re-

examining parasocial relationships can provide further insights into psychology and mental well-being (Jarzyna, 2020). Given the meteoric success and popularity of Hololive English during the COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020, my research is timely for expanding the debate of remediating parasocial relationships.

I assert that the previous one-sided definition of parasocial relationships fails to accommodate the collaborative processes observed between Hololive English's Vtubers and their interactions with fans. I begin by examining contemporary studies of parasocial relationships in the age of social media and interactive web culture. I follow this by contextualising the fandom's creativity as part of participatory culture studies. Finally, I outline how the collaborative processes between Hololive English's Vtubers and their fandoms result in new creative media practices that challenge traditional parasocial relationships.

Contemporary Studies of Parasocial Relationships

With the rise of social media, including Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, social media researchers Shupei Yuan and Chen Lou have contributed to studies on contemporary parasocial relationships (Yuan & Lou, 2020). Their study proposes that parasocial relationships between fans and social media influencers are shaped by source credibility (informed by expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness and wishful identification) and justice/fairness. That is the persuasion and trust between audiences, employees or customers (Yuan & Lou, 2020, pp. 135-136). The term 'source credibility' refers to how a communicator can convince or persuade a listener to receive a message or buy a product (Ohanian, 1990, p. 41). While source credibility may hold relevance to my study, Yuan and Lou are writing from a business and financial outlook, which is not part of my research. This is because my focus is on Hololive English's talents' creativity and approach that encourages their audiences' creative collaborations with them. I examine how parasocial relationships form in live-streaming and social media environments and how this differs from Hololive English's Vtubers.

Since the talents operate on livestreaming platforms like YouTube and Twitch, psychologist Zorah Hilvert-Bruce's study, in conjunction with James Neill, Max

Sjöblom and Juho Hamari, provides insight into how parasocial relationships develop through streaming. Developing from ‘User-Gratification Theory’ - how people actively search and consume media content that satisfies their needs, Hilvert-Bruce et al. identify what motivates users to participate with Twitch live-streamers (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018). The key precedents are social interaction and community participation, entertainment and information, and external support as a replacement for real-world relationships (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018, pp. 59-60). Drawing from Hilvert-Bruce et al.’s discussions, I examine how emotional connectedness emerges between Hololive English talents and their fans across their social media engagement and YouTube livestreams.

Although parasocial interactions are no proper substitute for real human engagement, Jarzyna identifies studies that provide evidence supporting claims that parasocial relationships can provide feelings of companionship or suppress loneliness (Jarzyna, 2020, pp. 420-421). However, Jarzyna also reminds us of the negative impacts of parasocial interactions, including body image disorders, media or celebrity obsession and impacting self-esteem (Jarzyna, 2020). As identified in Horton and Wohl’s original study, “...when the parasocial relationship becomes a substitute for autonomous social participation, when it proceeds in absolute defiance of objective reality, that it can be regarded as pathological” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 223). Tying this to Hololive English, I seek to highlight how the performers control and mitigate parasocial relationships by examining their interactions and collaborations with audiences.

Running counter to one-sided parasocial relationships is how fan participation and interactions are actively acknowledged, anticipated and encouraged in contemporary media. This argument was explored by media psychologists Amanda Tolbert and Kristin Drogos’ study on tweens’ (children aged 9 to 12) engagement with YouTubers through wishful identification and parasocial relationships (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019). As a result of the real-time interactions and platforms of engagement between Hololive English and their fandoms, it has created a unique environment that has enabled fans to actively participate or even create content and props for their favourite Vtubers. Through this examination of how fans of Hololive English contribute to the talents’ activities, I challenge

previously one-sided understandings of parasocial relationships, as they fail to accommodate the creative collaborations between Hololive English and their fans. To establish a framework for examining this relation between Hololive English and their fans, I turn to situate the performer and fan interactions as part of participatory culture instead.

Understanding Participatory Culture and Fandoms

The term ‘participatory culture’ was coined by media scholar Henry Jenkins’ influential work, “*Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*” (Jenkins, 1992). A participatory culture is defined as one with few barriers to entry and makes the users’ contributions feel worthwhile as part of the creative community (Jenkins et al., 2009). In this regard, YouTube and Twitter can be identified as participatory cultures. The question I pose addresses how fans and Hololive English navigate and operate within this shared digital culture and what distinguishes this mode of fan transformation from past media forms.

One of Jenkins’ significant contributions regarding fans partaking in participatory culture is expanding upon cultural critic Michel de Certeau’s positioning of fans as ‘poachers’ of texts (Jenkins, 1992, p. 24). Jenkins argues that fans rarely act passively in response to a single media text. Instead, they constantly reappropriate and add new meanings from texts and draw intertextual connections across a wider range of media. As fans communicate across the globe to sustain this culture, “Fandom here becomes a participatory culture which transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 45). Developing from Jenkins’s key theories of participatory culture, I present a cross-examination of how fans and Hololive English’s Vtubers transform, respond to or reappropriate the material proliferated across YouTube and Twitter in the production of new media content.

As one of the main contributors to fandom studies, Jenkins’ theories have been extended by himself and fellow media scholars such as Kristina Busse and Jonathan Gray. In his later texts, Jenkins builds upon media and cultural writer Pierre Lévy’s concept of collective intelligence to examine how fans have capitalised on internet technology to establish a global participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 133-139). Lévy describes collective intelligence as the ability

to share information and knowledge across cultures and languages, which is all the more relevant through the internet (Lévy, 1997). Collective intelligence is relevant to Hololive English and their fandoms, enabling examinations of how the performers and fans interact across YouTube and Twitter. Likewise, the study by Busse and Gray, which explores how fans identify themselves as part of a collective community, can be used to explore the relationship between the Vtuber performer and their fans (Busse & Gray, 2011).

Fans as Creative Contributors to their Beloved Media:

With the growth of communication channels between fans and producers of official media, it is not uncommon to observe fans actively contributing to the media works they love. This practice has been observed across media, including video games, film and television, as well as unofficial modes such as game mods, fan art and fanfiction. For example, *Apex Legends*' 3rd Anniversary Celebration event featured fan artists and streamers who created character and weapon cosmetics and loading screen art to be earned in-game (Respawn Entertainment [@PlayApex], 2022; EA, 2019-2022). Likewise, the TV series *MythBusters* hosted by Adam Savage and Jamie Hyneman, frequently tested myths that were requested by fans or revisited myths in response to fans' requests.

Examining fans contributing to their favourite media allows for new insights that reveal how parasocial relationships have been challenged. This finding is particularly noteworthy as there are instances where Hololive English's fans have made significant contributions to the group's activities, elevating their status from passive fans and consumers. At the same time, is there an imbalance or change in the dynamics that result from fans participating with media companies like Hololive? Raising this question now can provide insight into whether or not fans financially benefit from their interactions and contributions to Vtubers, as observed in Michaud's examination of the participatory Vocaloid fandom. I continue this argument examining how fandom perceives their relationship and contributions to Hololive English's Vtubers in participatory culture.

Media and fandom studies scholar Bertha Chin provides one account of how series producers and actors engaged with an active and well-known fansite for

The X-Files - XfilesNews.com. What Chin's findings revealed was a hostility that emerged between passive 'fangirls' and members of the fan-site who collaborated with the show's producers, creating an 'us versus them' mentality (Chin, 2013, pp. 94-96). Counter to this, I argue that the collaborations and engagements with fans by Hololive English are instead celebrated by the talents and their diverse fan community. Finally, I continue this discussion by examining fan labour and how it emerges in Hololive English's fan culture.

Concerning the exploitation of fan labour and fan material, I turn to Fan Studies scholar Mel Stanfill's book, "*Exploiting Fandom: How the Media Industry Seeks to Manipulate Fans*" (Stanfill, 2019). Focusing on the theme of labour in his fifth chapter, Stanfill identifies four forms that fan labour manifests: the audience commodity, promotional labour, content labour and 'lovebor'. Audience commodity describes the fans as both a product and resource for advertising and promotional labour, which means fans work through word-of-mouth to draw attention. Content labour is made by the fans in the belief it holds value and finally 'lovebor' – that is, "the work of loving the object of fandom and showing that love" (Stanfill, 2019, pp. 133-151). I argue that the form of fan-labour prominent within Hololive English's fanbase can be categorised under the audience commodity, content labour and 'lovebor.' Returning to the discussions of the media mix, I present an examination of the fan labour observed between Hololive English and their fans as part of participatory cultures. In doing so, I produce new evidence of how the participatory online cultures that enable fans to engage and contribute to their favourite media works challenge the original understanding of parasocial relationships.

Concluding Analysis:

Despite the relative infancy of the Vtuber medium, I have established and identified key fields for conducting my research arguments. Utilising and redeploying Procter's avatar-persona, I argue that the virtual avatar can anonymise the identity for Hololive English's Vtubers, enabling them to combine their fictional and real stories in real-time performance during livestreams. I then sought to draw upon gender performance studies by Butler. I combined these with the studies of gender performance within Japan's idol culture as informed by

Galbraith, Karlin and Aoyagi. Drawing upon the literature of identity, persona and gender studies has informed the approach for conducting my case studies.

From my analysis of participatory culture and fandom studies from Henry Jenkins' seminal work, it is apparent that fans add and construct meaning to media texts and that this can be successfully extended to Vtubers. This provides an analytical framework which I use to examine how Hololive English talents engage with fan-made content. In my examinations of the fandom's creative contributions to Hololive English's livestreams, I contest Horton & Wohl's traditional format of parasocial relationships, which fails to accommodate this new form of participatory media. I develop and assert a new framework that I consider more appropriate to the phenomenon of fan interaction with Hololive English. This approach expands upon the work of existing scholars and positions the fans and Vtubers in what I define as "symbiotic co-creativity" to add to a framework for future scholars to examine this evolving new medium.

Chapter 2: Identity in Hololive English

This chapter examines how Hololive English talents create their identity on online networks like YouTube and Twitter or develop their identity by drawing upon memes to build their persona.

In contrast to YouTubers or Twitch streamers who adopt a persona using their real face and identity, e.g. The Angry Video Game Nerd (James Rolfe) or Markiplier (Mark Fischbach), Vtubers become partially anonymised when performing under their virtual avatar. This aspect of Vtuber performance may provide security benefits to the Vtuber. Alternatively, performing under the virtual avatar provides greater confidence through anonymity, particularly if they are introverted or hesitant about streaming to large audiences. This is demonstrated by VShojo's Ironmouse, who despite her affliction with CVID (Common Variable Immunodeficiency), has become the most subscribed female Vtuber on Twitch (Grayson, 2022). "At the end of the day, we're all just streaming... I just decided I wanted to look like a pink-haired demon from an anime show, you know?" (Ironmouse in Grayson, 2022).

This ability of the virtual avatar to provide anonymity recalls the discussions of Lesley Procter's avatar-persona, where the avatar and fictional character they perform becomes blended with their real self (Procter, 2020). While aspects of the Vtuber's real identity may become known unintentionally or unless explicitly disclosed by the Vtuber themselves, I contend this does not impact the viewer's experience. I seek to explore how this blended identity is created in the performances of Hololive English's Vtubers. I suggest constructing memes and interacting with viewers is another factor for examining identity in Vtuber discourse. Drawing on the creative potential of memes has also contributed to the popularity of Hololive English's Vtubers. By creating and facilitating an active and evolving engagement with viewers through memes, identity for Vtubers becomes a new experience of collaboration and entertainment between fictional characters, the performers and the audience.

Structure of Chapter:

This chapter interrogates the avatar-persona of Hololive English's Vtubers, their methods of constructing their identity with fans and how important the Vtuber identity is to the medium. My examinations of identity are supported through case studies and media analyses of selected talents' livestreams. In addition, this study examines how online memes influence the talents' identities and online persona. Finally, my study will address how collective identity within media culture is shared and constructed in online environments like YouTube, Twitch and social media. I first examine how identity is shaped within Vtuber culture and, by extension, Hololive English. Secondly, I present my case study and findings informed by Chih-Peng Chen (2016). Following this, I provide a case study of how memes impact the identity and content of Hololive English performers. Concluding this, I reflect on how Vtubers negotiate memes and their identity to establish how identity manifests within Hololive English and becomes an evolving form of entertainment.

Identity within Vtuber Culture and Hololive English

As discussed previously, the virtual avatar anonymises a Vtuber's real face and identity when livestreaming. However, there are times when the real identity becomes known or bleeds into the Vtuber's activity. This situation is referred to within Hololive fan communities as "forbidden knowledge," demonstrated in Figures 1 and 2 (Byron, 2022, own screenshots). Adopting a Vtuber name and identity is comparable to a stage name that establishes an identity for media performers, as discussed by linguists S. I. Garagulya et al. (2019). As this thesis refrains from disclosing any Vtuber's real identity, I instead examine how Hololive English talents construct their online virtual identity and persona with their audiences.

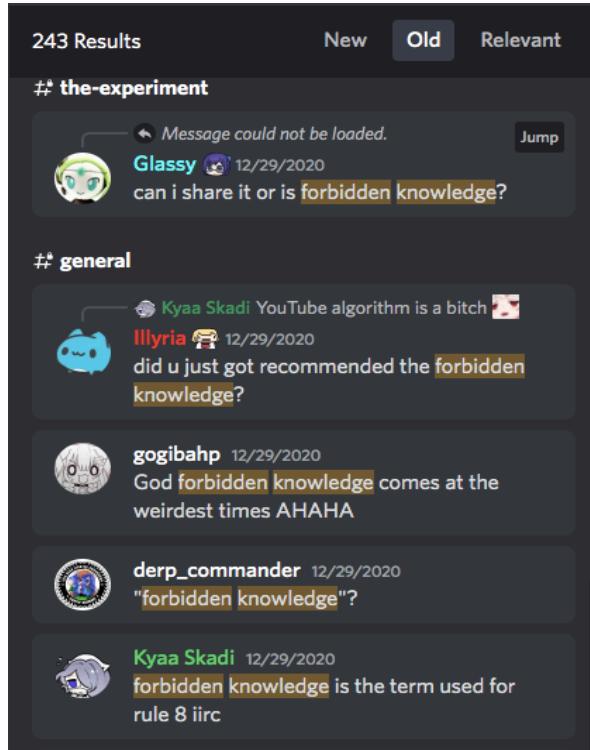


Figure 1: Screenshot from Hololive Fan Discord Server contextualising ‘forbidden knowledge’ (Byron, 2022, own screenshot)

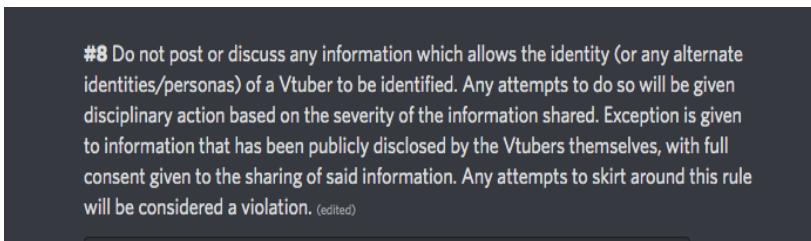


Figure 2: Screenshot from Hololive Fan Discord Server of rules against the discussion of ‘forbidden knowledge’ (Byron, 2022, own screenshot)

Returning to the term “forbidden knowledge,” it can be compared to the rules of magic performance, where magicians refrain from giving away the trick or spectacle. In the case of Hololive English, the “trick” refers to the Vtuber’s real name or past identity. However, there are times when this real self becomes the centre of discussion, as explored by performance and anime/manga scholar Stevie Suan’s investigation of Kizuna Ai (Suan, 2021). Suan draws attention in his chapter to the audience’s mixed-to-negative reception towards a series of videos where Kizuna Ai was divided into four separate versions of herself, with slight changes in design and voice to distinguish them from the original (Suan, 2021, pp. 201-203). The clones were later given distinct names and personalities to

distinguish themselves; two of them became Aipii and Love-chan, while the third, Ai-Ge, was marketed to Kizuna Ai's Chinese audience. However, long-time fans of Kizuna Ai challenged how much ownership the original actress had over her character following Ai's duplication, fearing it diminished her performance as Kizuna Ai and her importance to the Vtuber industry (Suan, 2021). Following the controversies, Kizuna Ai's original actress was appointed as the advisor for the company that oversees the brand of Kizuna Ai (Kizuna Ai Inc, 2020), while Love-chan and Aipii were given more distinct designs and independence from Kizuna Ai's YouTube channel.

Suan's thorough examination of Kizuna Ai's performance reveals how identity is negotiated by Vtubers and raises the potential for the Vtuber's character to be replaced or duplicated by other performers. Yet this is a contentious issue for fans, referring back to Procter's proposal of the avatar-persona (Procter, 2020). Using the framework of avatar-persona, I raise the observation that because the performer behind the Vtuber becomes so integrated with their virtual avatar through their personality and interactions with viewers, it becomes impossible to replace or replicate them with another actor or talent. Conversely, when a Vtuber graduates – a term borrowed from idol culture meaning to retire or move on to new careers (So Japan, 2016) – there is a possibility for fans to rediscover them under a new persona and avatar. This scenario also applies to Hololive Japan's former talent Kiryu Coco, who graduated on July 1st, 2021. Following her departure, fans who knew Coco's "forbidden knowledge" or recognised her performances and personality were able to discover her post-Hololive career and continue supporting her.

I now explore strategies and techniques that Hololive English's Vtubers use to construct their avatar-persona and identity with viewers, followed by examining how memes impact the Vtuber's avatar-persona.

Online Self-construction and Memes to construct identity in Hololive English

The findings and study conducted by Chih-Ping Chen on Taiwanese YouTubers provide insights into how Hololive English Vtubers establish their identity on YouTube and social media. Chen specifically highlights YouTube as the ideal

platform for analysis of constructing one's digital self and online identity, owing to the consumption of media on YouTube, the YouTuber's skills or professions and strategies for constructing the digital self (Chen, 2016). These strategies include basking - the act of enhancing one's image and performance through mimicking or association with a celebrity. Likewise, mystification is described by Chen as a sense of distance or mystique between the YouTuber and their fans, while self-promotion is simply the act of promoting one's skills. Lastly, gender-switching allows new forms of gender play through make-up, crossdressing or playfully disguising personal information (*ibid*, 2016, pp. 244-247).

Of these strategies, I selected basking, mystification and self-promotion as the most relevant strategies applicable to how Hololive English talents construct their identity, and provide a framework for analysing my case studies. I begin by focusing on the talents' debut streams, where they introduced themselves to audiences for the first time. This examination opens up questions about how one presents themselves while performing as a Vtuber for Hololive English and what aspects of their personality or skills they share while performing as their character. I examine these through the following studies of Hololive English talents Mori Calliope, Takanashi Kiara and Nanashi Mumei.

I supplement this by extending Nathan Jackson's observations of memes that influence the collective persona of Twitch streamers and their audiences (Jackson, 2021). Borrowing from Limor Shifman, Jackson highlights memes as digital items or artefacts created with a specific meaning or awareness circulated via the internet (Shifman, 2011; Jackson 2021, pp. 70-71). Jackson identified that Twitch streamers develop a collective persona with their audiences; furthermore, when memes are created or proliferated by viewers or streamers, it shapes their personality and interactions during livestreams. These are consistent with Moore et al.'s examinations of online identity and persona in the spheres of public, online, collective and performative personae (Moore et al., 2017). These anonymised, yet personal interactions extend beyond Vtubers, especially in the age of social media communication. Centring this research on Hololive English demonstrates how identity is constructed between the performers and their fans.

To interrogate my research questions concerning identity and how Vtubers provide new affordances for identity in online culture, I create an analytical framework by synthesising relevant theories on identity as explored in the literature review. I draw upon Chen's exploration of digital identity construction on YouTube; Moore et al.'s studies of online persona construction, which are continued by Jackson's investigation of how memes influence identity in livestreaming. My framework also incorporates the central idea of Procter's avatar-persona and Schultze's embodied identity studies in virtual worlds.

Case Examination: Mori Calliope

I selected the following case study of Mori Calliope for analysis as a strong example of one of my key study aims of analysing how Vtubers develop and shape their identity by combining both the performer and the virtual character in livestream performance and interaction. In this first instance and later case studies, I establish the first part of my analytical framework using Chen's strategies of mystification, basking and self-promotion to examine Calliope's debut livestream and later activities. Mori Calliope debuted as the first member of Hololive English during the group's introduction relay, starting with Calliope on September 12th 2020, through to the following morning (Mori Calliope Ch, 2020a). From the outset, mystification is apparent between Calliope and her viewers, as her in-character backstory and lore establishes her as the Grim Reaper's apprentice, but also a rapper and Vtuber.

Appropriately, Calliope's debut livestream provides an ideal example to examine Chen's digital self-construction strategies, beginning with self-promotion. As the first member of the relay, Calliope introduces herself following a typical procedure. However, Calliope's nervousness was very apparent and she encountered several technical issues, such as slow framerate and nervousness. "Umm... I seem to have lost my debut slides... here we go, I found it... and from there we will begin...! *Screams as all slides appear simultaneously*" (Mori Calliope Ch, 2020a, 10:50-11:38). Despite encountering these issues, Calliope continues her nervous introduction. Whether this is slippage with genuine nerves from the performer or the performer enacting nervousness is ultimately

immaterial – as it functions to endear Calliope to her newfound audience. Following this introductory procedure, Calliope’s self-promotion and demonstration of her skills as a rapper is evident with her first original song, “*Excuse My Rudeness, But Could You Please RIP?*” (Mori Calliope Ch, 2020b). The song is a fast-paced and boastful rap with profanity and wordplay across Japanese and English lyrics, revealing greater confidence and pride in her work than Calliope’s nervousness suggested. Taken aback by this sudden display of confidence and Calliope’s work ethic in making new songs, her viewers are captivated and eager to follow her ongoing music career and major live concerts (COVER Corp, 2022).

Schultze’s theory of embodied identity is also evident within this livestream, as Calliope establishes not only her own identity, but an embodied identity for fans that wish to support her. They collectively decided on the fan-name of ‘Deadbeats.’ In addition to Schultze, I also draw from Hayley L. Cocker & James Cronin’s discussions on YouTubers and their fans/community as they are also applicable to Hololive English. I highlight this act of establishing a nickname and identity for collective fans from Hayley L. Cocker and James Cronin’s examinations of how YouTubers establish a charismatic community (Cocker & Cronin, 2017). Cocker and Cronin draw from Max Weber’s concept of *Gemeinde* – the charismatic community and the *vergemeinschaftung* – meaning communal relationship, to examine how YouTubers establish a relationship and community with their viewers. In this case, Calliope and her viewers agreeing on the community name of Deadbeats helps construct each other’s identities for both Calliope and her newfound fans. The impact of this process of establishing a fan collective by Hololive English talents is central to the avatar-persona’s development and success of their career.

Returning to Chen’s strategies, I identify the usefulness of basking in the context of Calliope’s activities in livestreams and her music production career. Calliope uses basking as she connects herself to established talents within Hololive Production and her musical achievements. As her popularity grew, Calliope also basked in her growing musical success, demonstrated by her major partnership with Universal Music for her music production (Mori Calliope, 2022b, 45:30).

In addition to Chen's findings on mystification strategies, I synthesise this analysis with Procter's avatar-persona theory to further analyse how Calliope constructs and performs her identity. Consistent with Chen's observations, Calliope exaggerates the reaper persona associated with her virtual avatar and lore. "Okay, first of all, I don't live in Japan. I live in Underworldian Japan. We gotta get that straight, Deadbeats." (Mori Calliope Ch, 2021a, 35:00). So what is the significance and impact of Calliope's acts of mystifying her life or mentor figures – e.g. Death-sensei? Mystification serves a twofold purpose, the first being to entertain and endear Calliope to viewers, while also establishing personal boundaries between her real-world identity and her activities under the guise of her fictional avatar-persona.

I now explore further methods Calliope uses to create and develop her identity in Hololive English.

How Calliope establishes her identity in Hololive English

Although Moore et al.'s studies doesn't include Vtubers and predates Hololive English, the relevance of their examinations of the development of online persona is evident in the examination of how Calliope upholds and establishes the persona of 'Mori Calliope.' Returning to Moore et al. to provide a framework for examining how Calliope upholds her identity and persona through her activities on YouTube and music production, I examine how these dimensions impact upon Calliope's performative and mediatised persona. In contrast to her debut stream, Calliope's nervousness has dissipated over the past two years, allowing her to perform with greater confidence and appearing more 'natural.' This is evident in Calliope dropping the higher-pitched voice in favour of her natural, deeper voice.

At the same time, Calliope draws on her past performing experiences before Hololive English to also contribute to her current persona of 'Mori Calliope'. Throughout her ongoing livestreaming and music career, Calliope produced songs including "*Cursed Night*" (Mori Calliope Ch, 2020c) and "*end of a life*" (Mori Calliope Ch, 2021d), which can be interpreted as reflections of a pre-Hololive career and uncertainties.

“...as I type this now, I’m the happiest I’ve ever been in a very, very long time. Content with my music, content with my existence, grateful for my fans and ready to continue producing music....” (Calliope’s pinned comment on “*Cursed Night*”, Mori Calliope Ch., 2020c)

The lyrics of “*Cursed Night*” and “*end of a life*” provide examples of a personal slippage between the performer’s career and the identity she created as ‘Mori Calliope.’ Through these songs, Calliope appears as both performer and character to reflect and respond to moments of insecurity and self-doubt experienced pre-Hololive. Following the release of “*end of a life*,” Calliope hosted a lyric analysis stream where she explained the song’s lyrics, talking about her own experiences and hardships as the song’s inspiration. (Mori Calliope Ch, 2021e). Although Calliope wrote the song based on her own experiences in Japan and her doubts about breaking through the underground rap scene, she feared that the song would alienate audiences because of how personal it was to her, “...I think I mentioned this before, but I was never a big fan of songs that were too nitty-gritty, detailed and specific...” (Mori Calliope Ch, 2021e, 0:12:47-0:16:00). However, as Calliope was reading the viewers’ comments about their own experiences and interpretations of the song, she was satisfied the final product turned out to be relatable to a wide range of audiences (Mori Calliope Ch, 2021e). The significance and impact of this slippage evident in Calliope’s songs and her mediatised persona is that it makes avatar-persona more relatable and strengthens the bond between her character and fanbase, through shared intimacy which encourages empathy.

Having established a framework of media analysis, I now turn to identify how these strategies manifest for the next member of the relay, Takanashi Kiara.

Case Examination: Takanashi Kiara

In spite of the marked difference between the talents and their avatar-personas, there is an underlying consistency in the methods and strategies used to by the performers. This highlights the relevancy of applying Chen’s strategies to

studying Vtubers. Takanashi Kiara is the second member in Hololive English's debut relay. Kiara is introduced with a mystified and fantastical backstory that was illustrated, narrated and edited by Calliope (Takanashi Kiara Ch, 2020a, 3:30). Kiara plays the role of an energetic phoenix and manager of the Kiara Fried Phoenix (KFP, a parody of the real-life KFC) fast food chain who aspires to become an idol. Unsurprisingly, Kiara and Calliope interact and perform as each other's antithesis. Kiara is boisterous and head-over-heels for Calliope, the latter being laid-back and frequently annoyed with Kiara, calling her by the moniker '*kusotori*', meaning 'shitbird'. These dynamics and mystified interactions influence how Kiara, Calliope and their fans view each other, which I will elaborate on after examining Kiara's debut stream.

Following Calliope's example of naming her fans, Kiara refers to her fans as KFP Employees, establishing a communal identity for herself and her viewers. Rather than presenting an original song during her debut like Calliope, Kiara's self-promotion draws attention to her language proficiency, as she is trilingual and able to speak English, Japanese and German (0:23:00). The very concept of a debut live-stream is consistent with Chen's strategies of self-promotion, as the performer is introducing themselves, their character's lore and avatar-persona. Chen's study also identified basking as the association or mimicking of a celebrity to establish the YouTuber's identity (Chen, 2016, p.244). What Kiara basks in when introducing herself is declaring her adoration for Hololive Japan's Usada Pekora, having been a fan of hers before joining Hololive English. This is evident through Kiara addressing Pekora as her *senpai* – meaning senior or person of respect in Japanese – and the viewers' remarks that Kiara's laugh has a strong resemblance to Pekora's "up-and-down" laugh³. Viewers responded by typing out Pekora's laugh in the livestream chat, eventually followed by Pekora herself commenting on Kiara's livestream, to Kiara's delight and surprise (0:28:00-0:30:00). In deploying these strategies as part of her debut, Kiara successfully establishes an ongoing communal relationship with her fans.

³ Usada Pekora's laugh alternates between high and low pitches, represented by fans in text forms as "A↗Ha!↘Ha!↗Ha!↘"

Cocker & Cronin's study of traditional YouTuber fans becoming a 'cult of personality' also applies to Kiara (and by extension, Hololive English). As they proposed in their study "that new cults of personality differ from their predecessors through the collaborative and communal interdependence between the contemporary culted figure and his/her community of followers." (Cocker & Cronin, 2017, p457). Consistent with Calliope establishing her community of Deadbeats, this act of developing a collective identity for fans serves to establish a mediatised and public persona for both the performer and followers. This serves to establish the collaborative relationship that eventually emerges between the Vtuber and their fans, with the performers later entrusting fans to make content which can be later be celebrated or shared in YouTube videos and livestreams.

Having examined how the strategies described by Chen, Cocker & Cronin and Moore et al. provide a useful framework for Calliope and Kiara's debut livestreams, I now explore how the talents engage with memes, community jokes and how these impact their identities.

How memes impact the identities of Mori Calliope and Takanashi Kiara

As per Jackson's study (Jackson, 2020), memes are relevant to the process of constructing an identity for Twitch streamers, which is also compatible with Hololive English talents. For Calliope, I draw attention to her fondness for drinking alcohol, followed by a hearty 'Guh!', or being nicknamed 'dad' for her deeper voice and outgoing yet caring relationship with her peers. In Kiara's case, she receives the nickname '*tenchou*' – meaning shop manager in Japanese. Drawing upon these nicknames or community jokes can establish what manga scholar and critic Itou Go called *kyara*. *Kyara* are simplistic characters designed to induce *moe* for viewers that can be placed in non-narrative contexts or given new media contexts by fans. However, they lack the narrative or depth of character in comparison with anime and manga (Itou, 2005; Galbraith, 2009; Sone, 2014; Annett, 2015).

Although I acknowledge that Calliope and Kiara are performing *kyara* on-stream, I contest this simplistic definition because the Vtubers are being performed in real-time by human performers. That is, their flaws or instances where they break

their character's performances serve to remind viewers they are interacting with a human performer behind the virtual avatar. This is evident across Kiara and Calliope's debut streams as they attempt to remain in-character for audiences, despite the apparent nervousness and pressure. Recalling Alyssa Michaud's discussions on Hatsune Miku, she highlighted that music critics lambasted Miku's performance because she was a virtual, holographic performance – capable of singing or dancing without making any mistake at all (Michaud, 2022). These examples of 'slippages' where Calliope or Kiara break character or reveal personal, real-life details about themselves on-stream, serve to create a stronger relationship and identity with viewers, as opposed to static or pre-programmed *kyara* like Hatsune Miku.

Vtubers are also capable of reaffirming their identity in contrast to the pre-recorded or artificial interactions that appear within Vocaloid *kyara* like Hatsune Miku. The performers behind Kiara and Calliope can call out when memes and jokes have either run their course or conflict with the performer's identity. An example of this is Kiara's running joke where she claims to be from Australia, originating from fans mishearing Austria for Australia. Kiara has confirmed she is from Austria; however, she plays with the Australia/Austria joke for comedic effect. A memorable example is when hosting a German language stream with Gura, Kiara claims, "...in Australia *winks* we only have the grades 1-5, but in Germany, we have the grades 1-6." (Takanashi Kiara Ch, 2021, 0:35:00). Although Kiara draws upon this for comedic effect, she reminded viewers that it was a joke during an early 2022 livestream and reaffirm that she is Austrian (Takanashi Kiara Ch, 2022, 1:36:00). Having extended Jackson's studies of memes to Hololive English's talents, reveals a distinct form of identity that is negotiated in real-time by the performer, the audience and avatar-persona that stands apart from the identities constructed by conventional media characters.

Having examined how Calliope and Kiara develop their identities, I now highlight how Nanashi Mumei uses memes to develop her identity and persona with viewers.

Case Examination: Nanashi Mumei

Following the success of Hololive English in 2020, the second group of talents debuted in 2021 as holoCouncil – with Nanashi Mumei debuting as the fourth member in the relay between August 22nd and August 23rd (Nanashi Mumei Ch, 2021a). Consistent with the first group of Hololive English talents, mystification is presented through Mumei’s in-character lore, which is extravagant to situate her role in the group and build hype from viewers. Within holoCouncil, Mumei is established as the Guardian of Civilisation who oversees humanity’s progress and history. Mumei establishes continuity with her peers by recapping their debuts but critiquing their flaws, e.g. Ouro Kronii’s laziness despite her being the Warden of Time – with Kronii’s introduction preceding Mumei’s (Nanashi Mumei Ch, 2021a, 3:15). Mumei basks in her characterisation as Guardian of Civilisation by playing up forgetfulness, frequently reminding viewers, “I have a bit of a memory problem, not sure I mentioned that” (Nanashi Mumei Ch, 2021a, 8:50) to incite *moe* affect and viewers’ desires to protect her.

Mumei’s identity and collective persona that she establishes with her viewers emerge through her witty humour and interactions with peers in livestreams. In one livestream while playing *RimWorld*, Mumei receives a prank call from fellow holoCouncil member Hakos Baelz, who was attempting to fool Mumei into thinking it was her birthday (Nanashi Mumei Ch, 2021d, 1:44:35). Likely aware of the prank, Mumei plays along and exaggerates her forgetfulness, believing that it *was* her birthday. Viewers contribute to this joke by sending birthday wishes and Superchat donations to Mumei, despite it not being her birthday. Here, Mumei is basking in her characterisation as a forgetful guardian for the viewers’ delight and subsequently leaves Baelz confused. For this examination of Mumei, I supplement Chen’s strategies with Jackson’s identifications of memesis and creating memetic history in Mumei’s livestreams.

How Mumei Establishes her Identity Through Memes

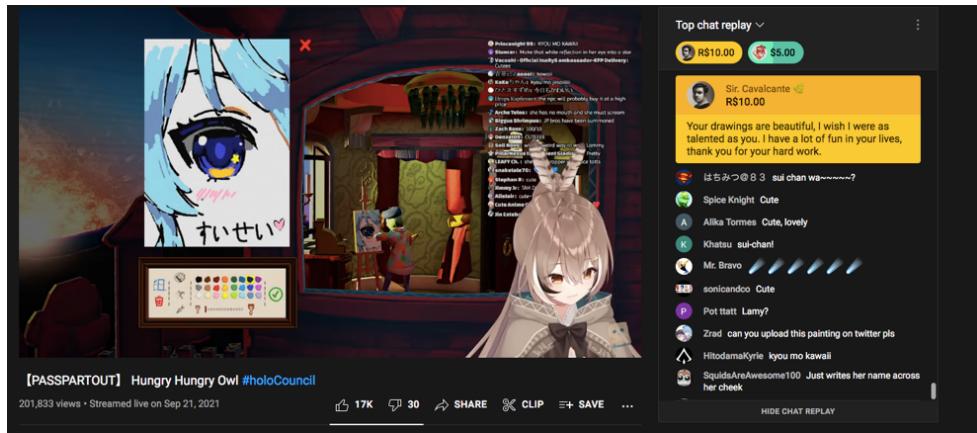
Mumei’s activities on-stream are a key aspect of the absent-minded and playful image that she maintains for viewers. An example of this is Mumei’s affinity towards berries in *Minecraft* (Mojang/Microsoft Game Studios, 2009-2011). Although berry shrubs in *Minecraft* hurt players walking through them to collect

berries, Mumei became fixated on collecting them and established a berry farm in the Hololive English *Minecraft* server. Mumei enacts this obsession by overwhelming other players like Kronii by giving away a heap of berries (Nanashi Mumei Ch, 2021e, 9:00-12:00). This is in line with what Jackson identifies as a memetic history. “The memetic history of a stream is the history of memesis within an individual stream’s collective memory. . . . This became significant to me when I was present for a reference to a joke that appeared in a couple of streams months earlier.” (Jackson, 2020, p. 83). In the case of Mumei, her obsession with berries became a meme for both her and her viewers, extending to Mumei’s berry farm on their private server and her community membership stamp. Mumei’s association with berries also resembles the memetic association of Hatsune Miku with leeks, demonstrating how memes establish identity in online pop-culture fandoms.

To further explore how memes influence Mumei’s identity and persona, I turn to her art portfolio. Mumei’s talent as an artist is demonstrated in her livestreaming career, beginning with her sketch of a peafowl (Nanashi Mumei Ch, 2021b) and streaming art video games like *Passpartout: Starving Artist* (Nanashi Mumei Ch, 2021c). In one *Passpartout* stream, Mumei is uncertain of what to draw and begins free-sketching. The painting soon becomes a demonic figure with sharp fangs in a wicked grin, black eyes and red irises, demonstrated in Figure 3 (48:00-52:30). Appropriately, viewers are horrified and taken aback by what Mumei’s drawing becomes, with Mumei herself being unsure what the painting is supposed to represent. The common assumptions from viewers include “sleep paralysis demon,” “nightmare fuel,” or a caricature of Hololive Japan’s Hoshimachi Suisei, who has displayed comical yet psychopathic tendencies, demonstrated in the clip “*The origin of Psychopath Suisei*” (Jurunrishi, 2020). Following the demonic picture, Mumei draws a more definitive portrait of Suisei with an extreme close-up of her right eye in Figure 4.



Figure 3: The nightmare painting by Nanashi Mumei (Byron, 2022, own screenshot, referencing Nanashi Mumei Ch, 2021)



Figures 4: Mumei's extreme close-up portrait of Hoshimachi Suisei (Byron, 2022, own screenshots, Artist: Nanashi Mumei).

The nightmarish artwork was eventually added to Mumei's membership emotes, appropriately titled “:nightmare:”. Emotes are special characters similar to emojis but exclusive to viewers who pay a monthly subscription to the talent's YouTube/Twitch channel to use these emotes during livestreams and access members-only content. The :nightmare: emote is used for several purposes, be it anticipation for Mumei's next livestream, whenever Mumei or viewers get too excited playing a video game and welcoming new members. Much like Mumei's addiction to *Minecraft* berries, the painting developed a memetic history for being in jarring contrast to Mumei's quiet and soft voice and persona. Eventually, the painting became emblematic of Mumei's later artwork and personality, using this

more eclectic style for future drawing streams demonstrated in Figure 5 (Nanashi Mumei Ch, 2022a).

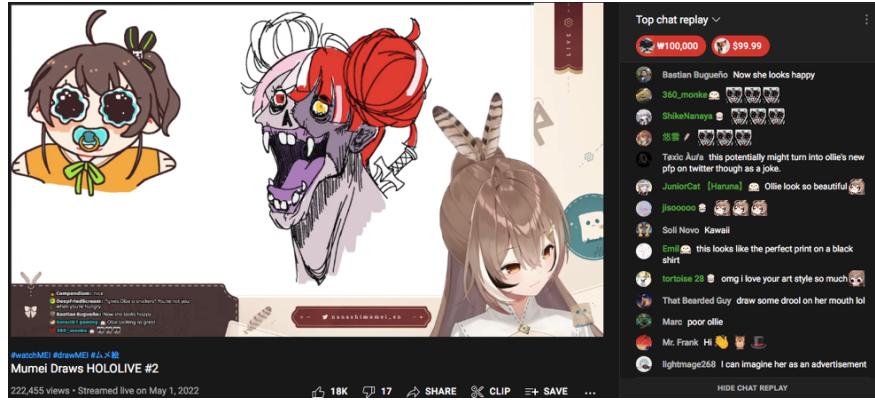


Figure 5: Work-in-progress sketch by Mumei depicting Hololive talents Natsuiro Matsuri and Kureiji Ollie (Byron, 2022, own screenshot, referencing Nanashi Mumei, 2022a).

Chapter Conclusions:

Using the aforementioned case studies of Hololive English Vtubers, there is evidence of talents constructing identity through memes. This illustrates how identity within Vtuber culture is a collaborative and often transformational process while also serving as a form of entertainment. In performing their characters on-stream, all Hololive English talents demonstrate mystification to establish appeal for new viewers. This also obscures aspects of their real identities and allows them to remain in-character to not break the illusion for viewers. For Mori Calliope, she frequently mystifies aspects of her career – purporting to live in Japan’s underworld to justify poor internet connection or basking and self-promotion of her current persona in an aptly-named song, “*The Grim Reaper is a Live-Streamer*”. On the other hand, Nanashi Mumei establishes her identity through spontaneity and memetic actions that resonate with her viewers. This includes her obsession with berries in *Minecraft* to the creepy artwork she made in *Passpartout: Starving Artist*. Drawing from these mutually understood jokes and memes between Vtubers and their fans creates a new form of parasocial relationships where the engagement with viewers contributes to establishing a collective persona and identity for the talent and the character.

Chapter 3: Gender Performance in Hololive English

Having discussed the process and aspects of identity construction by Hololive English talents in the previous chapter, I now examine gender performance and sexuality as they appear within Hololive English.

Returning to the discussions by Judith Butler on gender performance and gender identity, Butler argued that gender is both a social construct and a performative action that is repeated to create how we understand gender in society and for ourselves (Butler, 1988). Rather than masculine or feminine being intrinsic to one's identity, Butler suggests that the performance of gendered actions associated with 'male' or 'female' result in establishing gender norms and identity. "...Gender cannot be understood as a *role* which either expresses or disguises an interior "self"... As performance which is performative, gender is an 'act', broadly constructed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority." (Butler, 1988, p11, original emphasis). This means that the performances of gender that conform to either masculinity or femininity construct hegemonic gender norms, ideals or values that represent the identity of the male or female gender across cultures and societies.

I argue that examining the performance of gender in the new online media performances of Vtubers extends the existing literature on how gender is represented, performed or challenged in online streaming media. This investigation extends to studies of how gender is performed in transnational pop-culture media, including anime, manga and Japan's idol industry. My examination will also contribute to exploring how Vtubers perform gender or sexuality in ways that either challenge hegemonic cultural norms or otherwise reaffirm them.

Structure and Studies for this Chapter

The first study of this chapter examines Hololive English within the discourse of Japanese idols and the *moe*-affective response. I contextualise this by analysing

how Hololive English perform *moe* through visuals or on-stream performance. I follow the performance of gender through the second case study, turning towards forms of gender play across the gender spectrum enacted by Hololive English talents enabled by their virtual avatar and technologies. I contextualise this in the Japanese practice of *babiniku*, where a male performs under a female avatar and voice changer. Flipping the perspective of *babiniku*, I present an examination of livestreams in which the all-female performers of Hololive English enact masculinity. From this, I interrogate what forms of masculinity are made prominent in online media or perhaps become stereotyped. The third case study asks whether or not Hololive English enable new forms of LGBTIQ gender performance and what implications this may have for LGBTIQ gender performance in online culture.

Performing moe and seiso in Japanese Pop-Idol Culture and Hololive English

The visual and performative aspects of gender in Japanese pop-culture provide a window into understanding what gendered tropes and aesthetics are performed by the international Hololive English Vtubers. Immediately, they take strong influence from the gendered tropes and aesthetics of *bishoujo* and *moe*, the former meaning beautiful girl and the latter being a passionate, affective response to a fictional character (Galbraith, 2019, p.80). Hiroki Azuma has previously contributed to the discourse of *moe* through his examination of *moe*-elements and database consumption. That is, *otaku* – the hardcore fans of anime, manga or other media, will deconstruct characters to identify specific aspects of the character that generate the *moe* affect and categorize them into a database. This database is then used to organise and create derivative works like fan art and *doujinshi* – self-published comics (Azuma, 2005; Galbraith, 2019).

Moe can also be contextualised in the studies of Japan's pop-idol industry, owing to the large following and appeal of prominent agencies, including AKB48 and Johnny's. Galbraith and Karlin's book continues Hiroshi Aoyagi's studies on idol culture (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012). What is identified in these studies on idol culture is how Japan's idol industry and culture are strongly adherent to strict gender performance by male and female idols. That is, female idols must abstain from dating or relationships lest it provokes a scandal, while male idols can

become the desire of female fans (ibid, 2012), propagating double standards. Aoyagi highlighted that female idols enact various forms of femininity, be it cutesy, sexy or somewhere in-between; however, they are to be revered with a sense of purity, innocence or childishness (Aoyagi, 2005, p.35). Idol culture is relevant to Hololive English as CEO Motoaki Tanigo cites AKB48 as a major influence on Hololive's activities (Takanashi Kiara Ch, 2022b).

From this crossover of Hololive English and Japan's idol culture, several loanwords are used within Hololive's fan culture. One such term is *seiso* 清楚, meaning purity or cleanliness and adapted from Aoyagi's identification of idols performing purity (Aoyagi, 2005). Within Hololive's fandom, the term *seiso* refers to when the Vtubers perform as genuine idols, i.e. singing, dancing and refraining from coarse language, or ironically breaking this performance through profanity or crude jokes (Hololive Fan Wiki, 2022). Despite Hololive English's core inspirations from idol culture, the talents are capable of breaking these conventions because of the overlap that exists within predominantly western livestreaming culture. This deconstruction of idol performance and culture during livestreams helped to extend the appeal of Vtubers beyond the norms of Japan's idol culture.

To examine how the femininity observed within Japan's idol culture appears in Hololive English or is otherwise challenged, I present an examination of Hololive English's most successful talent Gawr Gura. I contextualise Gura's performances and expressions of femininity towards Aoyagi's observations of idols-in-training. Additionally, this examination highlights how Gura breaks the traditions associated with idol culture in her livestreams and the implications of her actions on gender performance.

Case Examination: Gawr Gura

Much like her peers, Gawr Gura is introduced with a stylised backstory, purporting to hail from Atlantis and appropriately has shark motifs in her design to reflect that. During her debut, Gura captivated her viewers with her memorable exclamation of "a" (Gawr Gura Ch, 2020a, 3:12-3:40) and singing Tatsuro

Yamashita’s “Ride on Time” (43:40). Gura quickly became the fastest-growing talent in 2020 and first to reach 1 million subscribers in 2020 (Thomas, 2020). Gura’s success can be attributed to her likable personality, witty and sarcastic humour, karaoke sessions and popularity with Japanese viewers. Consistent with Azuma’s discussions, Gura’s visual design sports prominent moe-elements designed to endear her to fans (Azuma 2005). These include her small childish height, shark motifs including a tail and shark teeth hoodie, and alternate costumes often sporting cat-ear accessories.

On-stream, Gura performs a ditzy but cute persona, chatting with viewers on random tangents, screaming in terror when playing horror games and occasional lapses in intelligence. Gura’s on-stream performances are comparable to what Aoyagi identified as *burikko* performance by idols in 1980, which refers to deliberately acting cute or exaggerating girlishness as a form of escapism from Japanese hegemonic masculinity (Aoyagi, 2005, pp.90-98). Gura’s performance of ‘cute’ femininity arguably extends beyond her on-stream performance, as Calliope praised her wardrobe coordination during Hololive English’s first in-person collaboration (Mori Calliope Ch, 2022c, 35:00-37:00). However, Gura is not afraid to break her cute, *seiso* image through sexual jokes, profanities and sharing gross or off-putting stories.

One form of sexual humour that Gura is subject to is her lack of breasts compared to fellow Hololive English members. Bust-size jokes are common within Hololive’s fandom, with both talents and viewers referring to breasts as ‘*boing-boings*’ due to how breasts are animated and bounce on the Vtuber’s Live2D avatar (Hololive Fan Wiki, 2022). Gura’s reactions and performances towards flat-chest jokes vary across livestreams. For example, one livestream from 2020 sees Gura disclosing a prideful “shark fact” that since sharks are hydrodynamic and good swimmers, “...you cannot be hydrodynamic if you have boing-boing” (Gawr Gura Ch, 2020b, 0:08:45-0:09:35). Alternatively, Gura reacts with anger or annoyance when viewers make this joke at her, albeit in a self-deprecating fashion. During a collaboration between Gura and Hololive Indonesia’s Anya Melfissa, Gura highlighted similarities between herself and Anya (Gawr Gura Ch, 2021, 0:12:00-0:13:25), until the realisation that Anya has a larger bust, causing

Gura to frown in anger in Figure 6 (Byron, 2022, own screenshot, *ibid*, 0:12:00-0:13:25).



Figure 6: *Gura and Anya's collaboration, with Gura frowning upon a certain realisation* (Byron, 2022, own screenshot)

Gura's performance throughout this exchange is deliberate despite being the joke's target, since Anya's Live2D avatar has a visual error that makes it look like she has large breasts. However, the official design sheet by Anya's character artist depicts her as flat-chested (Uekura, 2020). Following Anya's reassurance to Gura that "It's just your imagination" (*ibid*, 2021, 13:00), Gura's smile returns, and the two continue their collaboration in high spirits. Beyond performing sexual humour, Gura has shared gross anecdotes that contradict her cute design and personality. One noteworthy example is a story Gura recounted while streaming *Minecraft*, in which she was eating pizza in the bathtub, only to accidentally drop a slice in the bathwater then quickly eat it again (Gawr Gura Ch, 2020c, 0:23:00-0:25:00). These instances of *kimokawaii* performance by Gura – combined from *kimo* (gross, ugly) and *kawaii*; challenge Aoyagi's identification of the 'pure' idol. At the same time, Gura's performance are capable of conforming with Japanese pop media tropes, albeit contextualised through YouTube livestreams and other activities.

Gura contextualised in Aoyagi's Cutesy Idol

Gura's performances are compatible with Aoyagi's discussions of cutesy idols, in part to Hololive's inspiration from J-Pop idol culture. Gura has demonstrated her singing and dancing talent in live concerts (Gawr Gura Ch, 2022), consistent with Aoyagi's identification of idols maintaining a cute or pure persona. However, Aoyagi highlighted a strong discontent from his observants, resulting from their growing frustration and sadness at having to perform a fake and sexualised character that was not reflective of who they were. "I had to wonder whether the motto of Cutie Smile Productions -'pure, honest, and pretty' – actually meant that a woman had to mold herself into a personality that did not represent who she is." (Aoyagi, 2005, p. 113, original emphasis). Although Gura performs in a fashion consistent with Japan's idol culture, these gender norms do not restrict Gura, as she blurs the line between her idol and livestreaming personas. On the one hand, Gura enacts *seiso* through her singing and dancing, consistent with idol culture. On the other, Gura breaks these norms through her enjoyment of horror and action games, or disclosing unfiltered stories that elicit disgust from her viewers.

Having discussed how Gura performs gender in Hololive English and how it either contrasts or continues J-Pop idol performances, I now turn to examine how non-conforming gender performance manifests in Hololive English.

Case Examination: Cross-Gender Performance in holoMinistry

Borrowing discourse from video games studies, video games with customisable avatars provide players the ability for cross-gender performance (Yee, 2008; Rosier & Pearce, 2011). Within Japan's Vtuber culture, is the practice known as *babiniku*, where males use a female avatar and voice changer to act and perform femininity (Alt, 2021; Bredikhina & Giard, 2022). My second case examination from Hololive English explores a reversal of *babiniku* to examine what forms of gender performance emerge when the all-female talents perform masculinity. These are holoCouncil's Opposite Day 2022 livestream and Hakos Baelz's back-to-back Valentine's roleplay streams.

In some popular culture circles, January 25th is considered Opposite Day, where one performs falsehoods or reverses their normal behaviour (Days of the Year,

2022). For this reason, the members of holoCouncil hosted a stream where they played as alternate-gender versions of themselves (Ouro Kronii Ch, 2022b).

Tsukumo Sana became Tsukumo San, Ouro Kronii became Ouro Krono, etc., under the fake unit of holoMinistry. Unlike the talents' animated Live2D avatars, holoMinistry are static images, only animating when the talent speaks, and are drawn in the style of *bishounen* male characters, *bishounen* meaning beautiful boy/youth in Japanese. From the outset, it is apparent that female talents are using voice changers and filters to deepen their voice to sound masculine. However, this results in their voices becoming robotic, incomprehensible or sometimes, the girls' real voice appears while performing as their male counterparts.

HoloMinistry act with significantly less restraint when making sexual jokes and innuendo compared to their Council counterparts. Examples include substituting 'clocks' or 'rockets' for genitalia and San's quip: "If you call me small, I'll prove you wrong... I'll smash Uranus." (Ouro Kronii Ch, 2022b, 10:00), prompting a hysterical response from viewers. Throughout the livestream, holoMinistry practice pick-up lines towards girls and play *The Jackbox Party Pack 7*, but ultimately graduate after getting frustrated with unexpected technical issues. The holoCouncil members enact masculinity as holoMinistry in a deliberate parody, as they engage in homoerotic flirtation with each other and self-deprecation of their Council counterparts. In contrast with Bredikhina and Giard's study on *babiniku* Vtubers, holoMinistry's performance differs from conventional *babiniku* practices. Firstly, the all-female talents are enacting an exaggerated form of masculinity resembling 'jock' stereotypes for a comedic livestream. This contrasts with *babiniku* Vtubers because they perform femininity as a means of challenging hegemonic masculinity that exists in Japanese culture (Bredikhina & Giard, 2022, p.10). Additionally, the holoCouncil members discard their *bishoujo* performance and identity, whereas *babiniku* Vtubers become *bishoujo* through their virtual avatars and performances.

To further examine gender play within Hololive English, I compare the performance of holoCouncil/holoMinistry to the Japanese language practice of *ojisan gokko*. *Ojisan gokko* is identified by sociolinguist Wes Robertson as Japanese teenage girls using SNS and text messaging, adopting the language of a

creepy or shady older man, referred to in Japan as *ojisan*. (Robertson, 2020, 2021). In practice, one girl sends text messages that read like a creepy *ojisan* attempting to win the other girl's attention. This includes using emoji and kaomoji, asking for their information and sexual requests, but closed with ‘なんちやつて/nanchatte’ which translates to “Just kidding” (Robertson, 2021). holoMinistry can be seen as creating a new variant of *ojisan gokko* performance through their sexual innuendo and acting out stereotypical aversion to girls, their Council counterparts, and girlish behaviour. Just as *ojisan gokko* is a form of play and gender performance through SNS, the performance of the holoCouncil members as alternate-gender counterparts further reveals how gender is performed in online media. This playful performance of gender is demonstrated by Ouro Kronii – performing in character as her counterpart Krono “...We've been preparing for this like, a year, for years...but then they [holoCouncil] come in and steal the show...” (Ouro Kronii Ch, 2022, 1:06:00). What this mode of gender performance through holoMinistry demonstrates is how gender is both a performative act, but also proliferator of gender norms or stereotypes. In doing so, it enables new media creators such as Vtubers to challenge or critique gender tropes that appear in popular culture.

Although holoMinistry was a one-off livestream, I continue discussing how Hololive English perform gender in the context of Hakos Baelz's back-to-back Valentine's Day livestreams in 2022. In these sequential livestreams, Baelz plays the role of the sleepy-headed girlfriend the viewer comes home to in the first stream (Hakos Baelz Ch, 2022b), while Hayko (her male counterpart) is the boyfriend the viewer wakes up alongside in the second (Hakos Baelz Ch, 2022c). Both streams utilised their viewers' active participation in real-time, using polls in the livestream chat to determine Baelz and Hayko's response and influence the story.

In Baelz's performance, she speaks with a softer voice and is flirtatious with viewers, however she is quick to chastise the viewer for not spending more time with her (Hakos Baelz Ch., 2022b). The collective goal of viewers was to repair their goodwill and relationship with Baelz. On the other hand, Hayko's

performance in the following livestream is more assertive and at times possessive towards the viewer. An example is Hayko's more provocative dialogue like “bad girls must be punished” (Hakos Baelz Ch., 2022c, 10:00-11:30), with viewers responding with a flustered emote and reacting defensively towards Hayko. What I take from Baelz's performances across these livestreams is evidence of how Vtubers can perform gender in fluid or creative performances through their use of media technologies and roleplay.

LGBTIQ Performance in Hololive English

Amanda Potts' observations of the YouTuber YOGSCAST Sjin are relevant to the closing case study of gender performance in Hololive English – with the current examination focusing on pseudo-lesbian performance observed between Hakos Baelz and fellow talent IRyS. What Potts identified from examining Sjin's YouTube content was that exposure to the queer or homosexual discourse and language by Sjin resulted in “...progressive conversations about sexuality and gender performativity in very large communities of (largely adolescent, male) fans.” (Potts, 2012, p. 164, original emphasis).

Although IRyS and Baelz frequently collaborate, their dynamics and interactions are framed like a comically dysfunctional marriage. Notably, they declared a divorce following a *Clubhouse Games 51: Worldwide Classics*⁴ livestream (IRyS Ch, 2021, 2:34:00), with future collaborations developing a memetic appeal with viewers. Baelz and IRyS perform this ‘relationship’ by making jokes at each other’s failures, flirting and sexual innuendo similar to the *ojisan gokko* performance observed with holoMinistry. One example is substituting sexual foreplay with the board game *Monopoly* when collaborating in *Minecraft* during a fan-fiction writing session (Hakos Baelz Ch, 2022a, 3:48:45-4:10:00). This performance between Baelz and IRyS represents a way in which Vtubers develop a variant of the *moe* affect called *teetee*, derived from the Japanese word *toutou* 尊々, meaning precious (Hololive Fan Wiki, 2022; Nozawa, 2021). In their chapter examining the affective response of viewers towards fictional idol characters,

⁴ In Australian and European regions, the game is known as “51 Worldwide Games”

Shunsuke Nozawa describes *toutoi* as a relationship between fictional characters that the passive viewers find precious (Nozawa, 2021, p.258). Although Baelz and IRyS are performing their ‘relationship’ as a form of play, the pseudo-lesbian interactions and their strong collaborative relationships supports Potts’ claim that exposure to non-heteronormative language or play can promote or encourage a better understanding of LGBTIQ performance and discourse in internet culture.

Chapter Conclusion:

Focusing on female gender representations of Hololive English, I highlighted how the Vtubers depart from the performance of purity and *seiso*, as identified by Hiroshi Aoyagi’s studies on idol culture. Examining Gawr Gura, I argue she performs gender that is consistent with Japan’s idol culture – examining her *moe* appeal and talent for singing and dancing. However, Gura is not afraid to break this norm by sharing vulgar jokes and stories during livestreams. Beyond idol culture, the holoMinistry collaboration demonstrates a satirical performance of masculinity, similar to the language practice of *ojisan gokko*. Concluding the examinations, I examined Baelz and IRyS’ on-stream interactions, framed as comedic, pseudo-lesbian performances. I argue that these performances support the hypothesis that LGBTIQ play or non-heteronormative gender performance can develop a stronger and positive attitude towards non-heteronormative identification in online media culture.

Chapter 4: Parasocial Relationships & Symbiotic Co-Creativity in HoloEN

In contesting one-sided and unreciprocated parasocial relationships, I construct the term “symbiotic co-creativity” to identify a more mutual and collaborative relationship between Hololive English’s Vtubers and fans.

In contrast with Horton & Wohl’s original studies (Horton & Wohl, 1956) on parasocial interactions and relationships in early TV and radio media, the advances in communications technology and social media have enabled new modes of engagement between fans and their favourite media celebrities. Horton & Wohl identify that the performer creates a persona to establish a sense of intimacy or relationship with their audience. In exchange, the audience upholds this perceived relationship with the persona, which “contribute to the illusion by believing in it, and by rewarding the persona’s ‘sincerity and ‘loyalty.’” (Horton & Wohl, pp.216-220, original emphasis). Parasocial interactions and relationships have been traditionally understood as one-sided engagement from the audience to their stars. However, they are challenged when contextualised within Henry Jenkins’s studies of participatory cultures and fandoms (Jenkins, 2006).

This is because participatory cultures and online fandoms have shortened the distance for communication between media celebrities and fans, encouraging users’ participation within the community. From Jenkins’ studies on participatory cultures, he outlined three key aspects that informed the production and consumption of online media content. These include access to technology or services for poaching, transforming or recirculating media content, Do-It-Yourself subcultures that encourage fans to create media content, and media producers that promote new forms of narratives or audience engagement (Jenkins, 2006, p.135-136). This provides increased potential for collaboration, participation or recruitment from the audiences in creating media content through participatory culture. What has yet to be studied extensively, however, is what happens when the audiences actively contribute not just time and money but their

fan-made creations to the content creator they are emotionally invested in. I use this point to continue my interrogation and remediation of studies on parasocial relationships. I contend that the mutual and collaborative relationship between Hololive English and fans challenges unreciprocated parasocial interactions, instead encouraging a new type of participation and creative engagement with fans.

My first case study in this chapter examines the interactions between Hololive English's Vtubers and their fans. Drawing upon the findings of identity and avatar-persona discussed in Chapter 2, I discuss how these lend themselves to the discussions of 'kayfabe' and emotional connectedness introduced in this chapter. The term kayfabe refers to the staged but believable storylines and drama of professional wrestling. The second study of this chapter seeks to clarify and identify where the relationships between Vtubers and fans become a participatory culture and how these collaborations become mutually beneficial. I also identify how gender performance, as examined in Chapter 3, can be used to influence content produced between Hololive English and their fans. This chapter leads toward a conclusion that situates Hololive English and the fandom within a new mode of participatory culture.

Modes of Interaction between Hololive English and Fans

All Hololive English Vtubers constantly communicate with fans and viewers, predominantly through livestreaming on YouTube and Twitch. Social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram are also used to engage with viewers and other Vtubers outside livestreams, share schedules outside YouTube and retweet fan art for livestream thumbnails, demonstrated by Ceres Fauna in Figure 7 (Byron, 2022, own screenshots). In free-chatting livestreams, the Vtuber may ask the audience what they have been doing recently, to which the audience responds via the livestream chat room on YouTube or Twitch (Watson Amelia Ch, 2022c, 4:00-5:00). Likewise, when live-streaming video games, the Vtuber may ask for the audience's advice to solve a puzzle or defeat a challenging boss. They may not respond to every message, but dialogue and communication with the audience is dynamic and constant.



*Figure 7: Sample of Ceres Fauna’s Twitter account
(Byron, 2022, own screenshot, referencing @ceresfauna)*

These are consistent with Wulf et al.’s studies of livestream interaction on Twitch (Wulf et al., 2018) and Hilvert-Bruce et al.’s discussions of viewers’ motivations to watch Twitch streamers (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018). The main motivators include the sense of belonging to a community, livestreaming as a source of entertainment, and the desire to meet and interact with other people. Hilvert-Bruce et al. identify that these are key motivators that facilitate the viewers’ emotional connectedness – the extent to which one is psychologically attached to the live-streamer and the livestreaming community (Hilvert-Bruce et al. 2018, p. 63). Using emotional connectedness as a starting point allows for a better understanding of the relationships and dynamics that emerge between Hololive English’s Vtubers and their fans.

Establishing Emotional Connectedness with Hololive EN Through Kayfabe

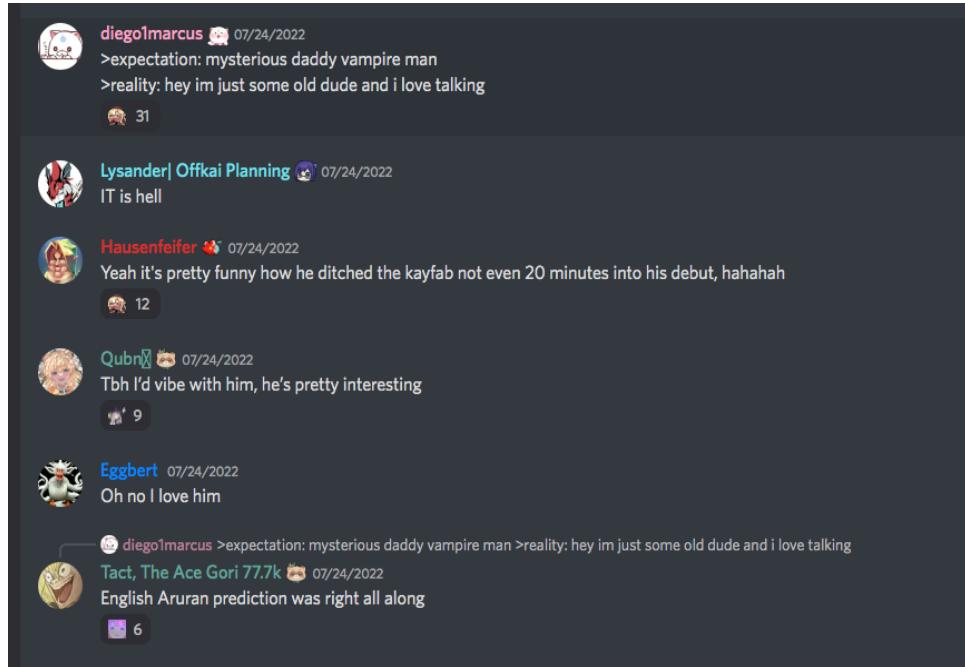
In addition to the social and communal nature of livestreaming, Hololive English establish emotional connectedness with their fans and viewers not just through the avatar-persona as discussed in Chapter 2, but through the performance of ‘kayfabe.’ I borrow the term kayfabe from the literature on professional

wrestling, as it resembles the performances observed in Hololive English (Gigguk, 2020). Within wrestling, fans acknowledge that the fights, characters and storylines within the arena are often scripted, larger than life or faked in some way. However, fans willingly suspend their disbelief and remain invested in the storylines and drama despite the performative nature of pro wrestling *because* they believe it to be real (Chow & Laine, 2014; Jones, 2019). I connect this nature of kayfabe to the discussion of the avatar-persona and identity of Vtubers explored in Chapter 2.

This is because Hololive English's Vtubers perform as both their character and incorporate aspects of their real selves through their virtual avatar-persona. In the case of Mori Calliope, fans accept her fictional kayfabe of the Grim Reaper's apprentice-turned-rapper but also acknowledge Calliope is a skilled rapper in real-life. The application of kayfabe from professional wrestling has been proposed by anime and *otaku* culture YouTuber Gigguk in his video about Vtubers: "You know there's a real person behind this anime avatar. You know they're just playing this character, but who the fuck cares about that? ...That's right, Vtubers are just wrestling, with waifus." (Gigguk, 2020, 11:45-12:59). I agree with Gigguk's jovial assessment that the Hololive English performers establish a strong emotional connectedness with their fans through the blending of their character's kayfabe, their personal stories and identity. Kayfabe is often discussed amongst Hololive fans in Figures 8 and 9, supporting its application in this examination (Byron, 2022, own screenshot). I now explore kayfabe and emotional connectedness in the case examination of Hololive English talent Watson Amelia.



Figure 8: Hololive Fan Server users comparing kayfabe in pro-wrestling with Vtubers (Byron, 2022, own screenshot)



Figures: 9 – Archived fan discussion from Hololive Fan Server on how Noir Vesper broke his kayfabe during debut, endearing him to viewers (Byron, 2022, own screenshot)

Case Examination: Watson Amelia’s Kayfabe and Emotional Connectedness

Watson Amelia was introduced as the last member of Hololive English’s debut relay, with fans expecting her to round off the unit as the logical detective in homage to Sherlock Holmes (Watson Amelia Ch, 2020a). While Amelia basks in her ‘kayfabe’ as a mystery-solving detective, she also demonstrated a fondness for chaotic humour, giving the viewers a sample of her “Watson Concoction” as a psychedelic conclusion to her debut (45:00-51:00). Amelia also enjoys teasing her viewers with crude jokes, such as her response to a tutorial while playing *Super Mario Odyssey* – “Nothing beats a ground pound, eh? That’s funny.... Because actually that’s what I did to your [the viewer’s] mom last night! Laughs” (Watson Amelia Ch, 2020b, 1:21:33). However, she has since supplemented her detective kayfabe by purporting to be a time-traveller during a *Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout* stream. Since this “revelation,” Amelia’s characterisation as a time-traveller has informed her identity and interactions with other members in Hololive English. I highlight this in Figure 10, depicting an interaction between Amelia and her junior, Kronii (@ourokronii, 2021).



Figure 10 – Interaction between Amelia and Kronii via Twitter, playing on each other's time-based kayfabe (Byron, 2022, own screenshot, referencing @watsonameliaEN & @ourokronii, 2021)

Examining the interactions between Amelia and her viewers and how she establishes emotional connectedness with them, I present a media analysis from two of Amelia's archived YouTube livestreams. The first is Amelia's playthrough of *Elden Ring* in March 2022 and her *Half-Life: Alyx* livestream in June 2021. Beginning with *Elden Ring* (Bandai Namco Entertainment/From Software, 2022), as it was her first time playing this game, Amelia wants to learn and play the game for herself but is not afraid to ask for the viewers' advice. After creating her character Bowson and arriving in the game's starting dungeon, Amelia is prompted to go through the tutorial area (0:43:00). Instead, Amelia dismisses the mini-dungeon completely. “Downstairs is the tutorial? *Pauses while Bowson opens a door ...I don't need no stinking tutorial.*” (Watson Amelia Ch, 2022a, 0:44:30). What follows Amelia’s determination to keep exploring is her viewer’s comments of mixed anticipation, fear and jest.

As Amelia streamed the game, her viewers shared their concerns, who are aware of the difficulty of *Elden Ring* and its predecessors *Dark Souls* and *Bloodborne*. Examples of real-time comments included “Famous last words”, “lol”, and “Please do the tutorial Ame” (0:44:30-0:45:30). Despite this, Amelia proceeds

through the initial area of Limgrave at her own pace, occasionally receiving tips from viewers. One such interaction is when Amelia receives the item to summon the spectral horse Torrent, with viewers teaching Amelia how to set items to the quick-access pouch in Figure 11 (Byron, 2022, own screenshot; Watson Amelia Ch, 2022, 1:48:47).



Figure 11: Amelia learning how to use the pouch in Elden Ring to quickly summon Torrent. (Byron, 2022, own screenshot, referencing Watson Amelia Ch, 2022, 1:48:00)

Throughout the livestream, Amelia perseveres against mini-bosses like the Beastman, encounters the deceptive recurring character Patches and ultimately enjoyed *Elden Ring* more than she initially anticipated. The insights on memetic history from Chapter 2 (Jackson, 2021) also applies to Amelia’s later *Elden Ring* livestreams and her kayfabe performance. In particular, Amelia uses the weapon skill Ground Slam – where the player leaps into the air before slamming the ground with their buttocks, as her preferred finishing move. Amelia uses this move primarily against major bosses like Godrick the Grafted (Watson Amelia Ch, 2022b, 5:51:16-5:52:00) for her viewers’ delight and re-contextualises her joke from *Super Mario Odyssey* into *Elden Ring*’s setting.

Outside the interactions and fan engagement throughout Amelia’s *Elden Ring* livestreams, Amelia establishes a strong emotional connection with her fans by incorporating their material as part of her livestreams. I discuss this aspect of Amelia’s performance strategies by citing her *Half-Life: Alyx* (Valve Corporation, 2020) livestream, in which she used a fan’s model to supplement the viewing experience. As a VR (Virtual Reality) game, *Half-Life: Alyx* requires 3D

motion tracking and controllers. Rather than use her Live2D avatar, Amelia borrowed a 3D model made by the fan Hasksoft (@hasksoft, c2022), shown in Figures 12 and 13 (Byron, 2022, own screenshots). This is because Hololive English's official 3D avatars were not revealed until the Hololive 3rd Fes. Link Your Wish live concert in March 2022. For this stream in June 2021, Amelia reached out to Hasksoft via Twitter for permission to use his model so she could stream and play games in VR (Watson Amelia Ch, 2021, 2:01:50 – 2:02:50).

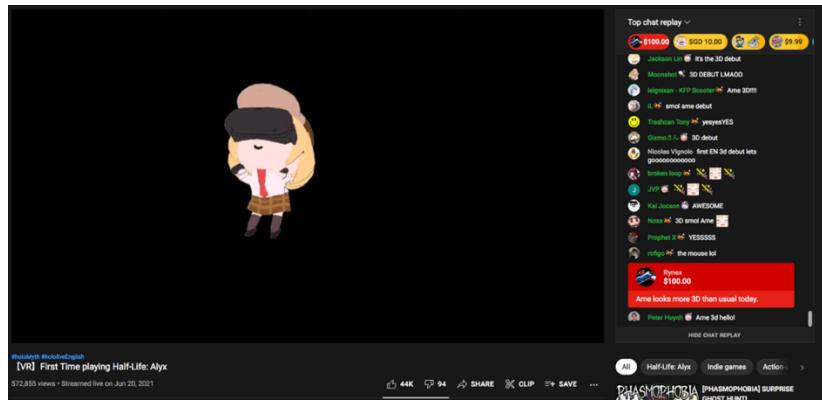


Figure 12: Appearance of Hasksoft's 3D model of Amelia

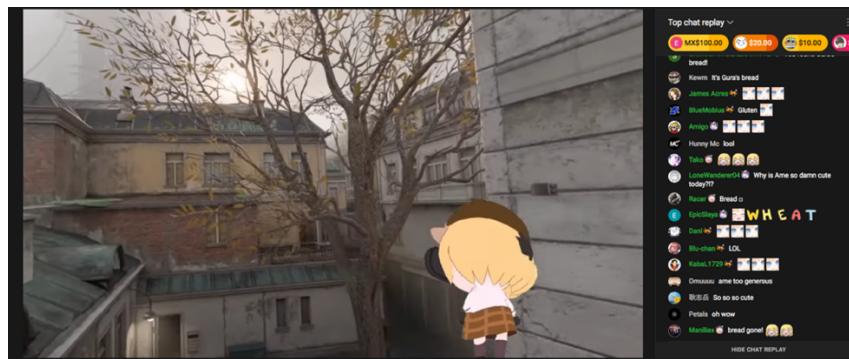


Figure 13: Amelia playing Half-Life: Alyx while using Hasksoft's 3D model (Byron, 2022, own screenshots, referencing Watson Amelia Ch, 2021).

From Hilvert-Bruce et al.'s study, emotional connectedness is facilitated through social and community-oriented interactions on YouTube or Twitch livestreaming, entertainment and meeting new people (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018). This concept is evident in Amelia's livestreams and her interactions with fans throughout her ongoing *Elden Ring* playthrough. In addition to Amelia playing the role of entertainer, her interactions with viewers establish her as a newcomer to *Elden Ring*'s community, as viewers familiar with *Elden Ring* provide Amelia tips or suggestions as she plays. Amelia also demonstrates resourcefulness and creativity

through her engagement with fans, evident in using Hasksoft's 3D model for her *Half-Life Alyx* livestream when she did not have an official 3D model at that time. From these case studies, Amelia establishes emotional connectedness with fans not just through traditional livestream interaction but her incorporation of fan-made content into her activities and her kayfabe of a time-travelling detective.

Distinguishing Hololive EN & Fan Engagement from Twitch Streamers:

Although Henry Jenkins' studies on participatory fan cultures pre-date online streaming media and culture, they can be extended to this current media paradigm. Combined with Mel Stanfill's more recent studies on Fan Labour/Lovebor – which have yet to be applied to Vtubers enables new insights into studying the distinct nature of collaboration that exists between Vtubers and their fans. Continuing this discussion, I propose that rather than one-sided engagement and interactions between Vtubers and viewers, there is a mutually beneficial form of interaction where both parties rely on each other in creating content. The next question I seek to address is what distinguishes the fan practices and relationships between Hololive English and their fans from how Twitch streamers interact with their fans. To examine this, I present a comparative analysis examining Hololive English's IRyS with a popular Twitch streamer and fighting game aficionado, Maximillian Dood (Maximillian Christensen).

Debuting independently between the first and second groups of Hololive English, IRyS' kayfabe and on-stream persona is that she's a Nephilim, a half-angel/half-demon who seeks to bring hope to the world through music. In addition to streaming video games, IRyS specialises in music production with original songs and covers. Maximillian Dood's main content focuses on fighting games, action games and chatting with viewers. Maximillian prefers to livestream via Twitch and upload compilations or highlight reels to YouTube. His lack of a virtual avatar or kayfabe while streaming contrasts Hololive English's activities. In examining how Maximillian Dood and IRyS engage with their respective fanbase's creative works, I seek to establish what distinguishes how the talents of Hololive English consistently encourage a mutually collaborative partnership with their fans.

Case Examination: Maximillian Dood and the Troubleshooter Mod

Prefacing Maximillian Dood's examination, I introduce the fighting game – *DNF Duel* (Nexon/Arc System Works, 2022). As part of *DNF Duel*'s pre-release, short 40-second trailers are published on YouTube to introduce the playable characters. One such character is Troubleshooter, who fights with a square sword, shotgun and explosives. Coincidentally, Troubleshooter bears a passing resemblance to Maximillian Dood as seen across Figures 14 and 15, with Troubleshooter having a similar haircut, glasses and stubbled beard to Maximillian's. Following the announcement, Maximillian uploaded his reaction video to Troubleshooter's reveal. At first, he displays ironic disappointment, initially claiming: "I can't believe they'd put a character that looks this stupid into a game." (Maximillian Dood, 2022a, 0:53), only to smile at how bombastic Troubleshooter's fighting style was "Goddamn I can't keep up the façade" (1:10).



Figures 14 & 15: Official artwork of Troubleshooter for DNF Duel; Thumbnail of Maximillian Dood's reaction video, illustrating the similarities (Nexon/Arc System Works, 2022; Maximillian Dood, 2022a).

Maximillian was not alone in pointing out his resemblance to Troubleshooter, with fans jokingly congratulating him for being playable in a video game. It can be argued that the developers were aware of the likeness, as Troubleshooter's 7th colour scheme in Figure 16 resembles Maximillian's usual on-stream attire (Dustloop Wiki, Nexon/Arc System Works, 2022). Later, the user Excalibur_fyda

uploaded a fan-made game mod for the PC version of *DNF Duel* that modified the colour palette and face to more closely match Maximillian's (Excalibur_fyda, 2022). Video game modifications, often shortened to "mods", are a common fandom practice where the files, gameplay, SFX and character models in video games are adjusted or modified for a new experience. This practice of modding closely aligns with Jenkins's identified central features of participatory fandoms (Jenkins, 2006).

The mod was later used by Maximillian on-stream for future *DNF Duel* livestreams, and he would later contribute by recording new voice lines to supplement the mod. "This isn't me re-dubbing Troubleshooter. This is essentially me providing voice lines for the Troubleshooter mod that is supposed to be a *DNF* version of me." (Maximillian Dood, 2022b, 1:30). In a subsequent livestream on Twitch, Maximillian shares the final version of the mod with his voice samples and new dialogue against other characters in-game (Maximillian Dood, 2022c). Maximillian's contributions to the Troubleshooter mod demonstrate how online media celebrities are in greater communication with fans and can contribute or support their creative endeavours in fan-made projects. This first part of the case study enables the following comparative study on IRyS and her fan interactions.



Figure 16: Troubleshooter's 7th colours in DNF Duel, sporting a red shirt, black pants and dirty-blonde hair similar to Maximillian Dood (Nexon/Arc System Works 2022).



Figure 17: Sample photo of the DNF Duel mod that recreates Maximillian as Troubleshooter (Excaliber_fyda, 2022)

Case Examinations: IRyS' Engagement with covers & fan-games

Turning the discussion towards IRyS, I now explore how her collaborations with Hololive fans differ from what is observed with Maximillian Dood. In mid-2022, IRyS published her cover of “INTERNET OVERDOSE” (IRyS Ch., 2022a), the main theme for the video game *Needy Streamer Overload* composed by Aiobahn and Kotoko (Aiobahn, 2021). What I highlight in this part of the current case study of IRyS’ version of the song is her inclusion of fan-made contributions to the music video. IRyS draws upon a common practice within Hololive English of featuring fan art for livestream thumbnails and music videos.



Figure 18: IRyS' MV of “INTERNET OVERDOSE”, animation by Akashiba (Byron, 2022, own screenshot, referencing IRyS Ch, 2022a).

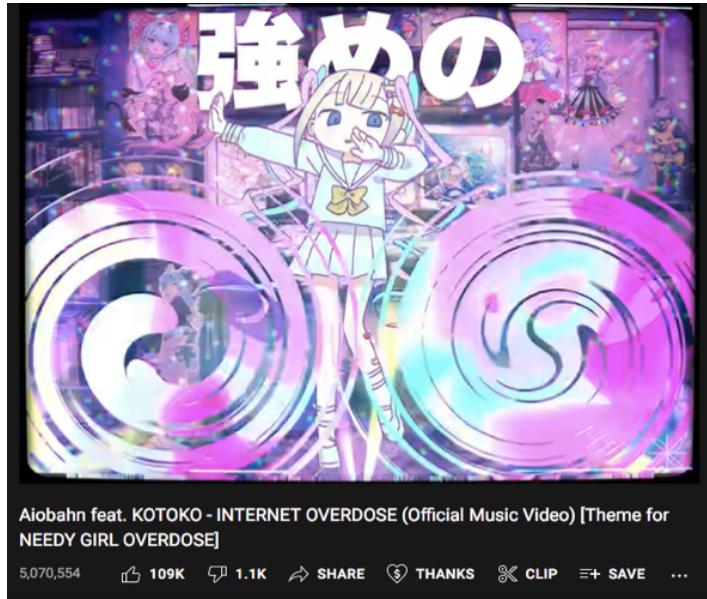


Figure 19: Comparative screenshot of the original MV of “INTERNET OVERDOSE” (Byron, 2022, own screenshots; Aiobahn, 2021).

In this case, the animated gifs of IRyS dancing are provided by Twitter artist Akashiba (Akashibag, 2022) - who previously worked with fellow Hololive English talents Takanashi Kiara and Ninomae Ina’nis on their cover of the Vocaloid song “*Whatever, whatever, whatever*” (Takanashi Kiara Ch, 2021). The background art for IRyS’ bedroom is drawn by Twitter artist reNPC, featuring references to other Hololive English members. Retweeting the announcement, reNPC explicitly thanks IRyS for letting them work on the background art for this MV (@reNPCArt, 2022). This process of Hololive English talents like IRyS working with fans suggests a turn towards a mutually beneficial process of collaboration where fans are recruited to produce the talents’ official works. This new level of fandom participation and engagement is also evident in the following study of the fan-game *HoloCure: Save the Fans* (Kay Yu, 2022).

Case Examination: HoloCure: Save the Fans

Throughout 2022, several Hololive talents played the early-access version of the now-released PC game *Vampire Survivors* (poncle, 2021-2022). With a premise mirroring the *Castlevania* series, the player must survive against waves of enemies, becoming more powerful as they level up and collect new weapons. Although *Vampire Survivors* livestreams enjoy popularity with viewers and Hololive English, it has also spawned popular derivative works, specifically,

“*HoloCure: Save the Fans*” (Kay Yu, 2022). *HoloCure* is developed by a small team led by animator Kay Yu, whose portfolio includes games such as *River City Girls*, *Shantae and the Seven Sirens* and anime projects like *Boruto: Naruto Next Generations* (IMDB, c2022). Yu’s pixel art and animations enjoy popularity across Hololive, with Omaru Polka of Hololive Japan using his animation of her as a loading screen (@kaynimatic, 2020; Polka Ch. 尾丸 ポルカ, 2022). In this current study, I highlight how Yu’s collaboration and engagement with Hololive English contribute to *HoloCure* becoming an ongoing, collaborative project.



Figure 20: Omaru Polka’s livestream intro, animated by Kay Yu (Byron, 2022, own screenshot, @kaynimatic, 2020 & Polka Ch. 尾丸 ポルカ, 2022)

Yu was contracted to animate the MV for Calliope and Gura’s single *[Q]* (Mori Calliope Ch, 2022), with an approach similar to how IRyS recruited Akashiba and reNPC for her cover of *INTERNET OVERDOSE*. In March 2022, Yu posted on Twitter that he was making a Hololive fan game inspired by *Vampire Survivors* (@kaynimatic, 2022). The initial demo of *HoloCure* was released on June 24th, 2022, available for free via itch.io. *HoloCure*’s premise is that the fans and mascots of various Hololive Vtubers have become frenzied, prompting the talents to defeat them to restore their senses. Like *Vampire Survivors*, *HoloCure* is a top-down shooter game where the player controls the Vtubers of Hololive English as they fend off enemies inspired by the talents’ mascots and fans. Each character has a character-specific weapon and abilities based on their kayfabe and on-stream activities. Figure 21 from *HoloCure*’s itch.io page shows Gura

wielding her trident against waves of Shrimps and Deadbeats (Kay Yu, 2022), reusing their designs from [Q].



Figure 21: Screenshot from Kay Yu’s itch.io site for *HoloCure* showcasing Gawr Gura fighting Deadbeats and Shrimps (Kay Yu, 2022)

HoloCure received positive reception across Hololive English and fans for celebrating the kayfabe and memetic histories of Hololive members. Nanashi Mumei was the first Hololive English talent to stream *HoloCure* in June 2022, enjoying the game while facetiously denying addiction to it (Nanashi Mumei Ch, 2022). Similar to its inspiration *Vampire Survivors*, *HoloCure* is an ongoing project with new balance changes and content updates, sometimes at the request of Hololive members or updated alongside their portfolios. Returning to IRyS, she streamed *HoloCure* in early July 2022 and enjoyed playing the game. However, she was bemused that her in-game likeness was a powerful tank – a character designed to sustain lots of damage – with self-healing abilities. In particular, IRyS laughs as she reads her ability “Hope”: “Upon being hit there is a 20% chance to heal 15% [Health Points]... Oh my god I *am* a tank, aren’t I?” (IRyS Ch, 2022b, 2:06:00-2:09:40).

After the game, IRyS teased Yu over Twitter saying she liked how she was “an undefeatable punching bag” and requested a damage buff to Yu’s joking dismay (@irys_en & @kaynimatic, 2022). Two days later, IRyS hosted a mascot drawing

stream alongside Tsukumo Sana, designing the twin mascots Bloom & Gloom in Figure 22. Both Sana and IRyS were excited to see new fan art of the new mascots “Yeah, I can’t wait, I seriously can’t wait for the future content this will bring” (IRyS Ch, 2022c, 1:30:00).



Figure 22: Bloom & Gloom drawn by Sana and IRyS on-stream (IRyS Ch, 2022c)

Later that week, Yu tweeted a work-in-progress screenshot of *HoloCure*'s next update, featuring new sprites of Bloom & Gloom based on IRyS and Sana's designs (@kaynimatic, 2022b). This interaction between IRyS and Yu through the mascots of Bloom & Gloom represents a key finding of this thesis – symbiotic co-creativity between Vtubers and fans. In this case, IRyS and Sana created the new mascots Bloom & Gloom, to which fans responded by creating fan art or, in Yu's case, incorporating them as new enemies in a future update of *HoloCure*⁵. In highlighting how IRyS encourages her fans' creative content with her new mascots, it demonstrates a mutually beneficial relationship that becomes an ongoing form of collaboration and participation.



Figure 23: Bloom & Gloom's sprites for HoloCure's next update (Byron, 2022, own screenshots; @kaynimatic, 2022b)

⁵ The *HoloCure* update introducing Bloom & Gloom was released on September 9, 2022, as Version 0.4.

Situating Hololive English within Participatory Culture:

Situating Hololive English within Jenkins' studies on participatory cultures provides a counterargument to one-sided parasocial relationships. Rather than the Vtubers not reciprocating their fan's creative output, Hololive English readily anticipate and encourage their fan's support and creative projects. In contrast to the collaboration with fans as seen in Maximillian's collaboration with fans based on *DNF Duel*'s Troubleshooter; from the outset, creative collaborations with the fans have been central to the practices of Vtuber culture. This is celebrated not just with Hololive English talents, but fellow Vtuber agencies including Nijisanji and VShojo. So central is this creative fan collaboration to the talents' activities and the success of the respective agencies that these Vtuber companies have established new copyright and derivative work guidelines that actively encourage and promote these online participatory fandoms (COVER Corp, c2016) "Our Company's contents are developed based on the bidirectional activity with the fans, and we are aware that, in that relationship, a totally new culture has been formed." (ANYCOLOR, c2021).⁶

I present two case examinations to further explore how this symbiotic co-creativity manifests across Hololive English. These analyses aim to consider the broader socio-cultural implications of this symbiotic collaboration. The first examination is connected with gender performance examined in Chapter 3, focusing on a trend that Ceres Fauna started on Twitter. Closing this chapter, I revisit Watson Amelia's engagement with fandom in light of this symbiotic collaboration, examining the implications of fan-made content being accepted into Hololive English's intellectual property.

Ceres Fauna's performance of gender and 'milking' a new trend on Twitter

To identify how the performance of gender and sexuality can influence content creation between Hololive English and fans in online participatory cultures, I focus on Ceres Fauna for this study. Fauna is the second member of holoCouncil whose gentle voice and calming personality captures her kayfabe and avatar-

⁶ ANYCOLOR are the parent company of Vtuber talent agency, Nijisanji

persona of Mother Nature. Consistent with other Hololive English talents, Fauna plays video games and occasionally hosts karaoke sessions, albeit unarchived for copyright purposes. However, Fauna's speciality outside these activities is the production of ASMR livestreams. ASMR is abbreviated from Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, described as pleasurable, tingling sensations in response to certain triggers or sounds for viewers. The studies of intimacy in ASMR content by Helle Klausen and Joceline Andersen apply to Fauna's ASMR livestreams (Andersen, 2015; Klausen, 2021), where she performs motherly intimacy through whispering, gentle brushing and role-playing (Ceres Fauna Ch, 2021) for viewers.

What I highlight about Fauna's performance of sexuality is a trend that she incited on Twitter to encourage fan artists to engage with a more sexualised and playful aspect of her character. On August 8, 2022, Fauna posted a Tweet claiming that she put too much matcha in her latte, followed by another Tweet reading, "Muuuuuuuuuu 🐄" (@ceresfauna, 2022a). The implication being that she was becoming a cow because of the matcha (made of green tea powder). In response, fan artists on Twitter began to upload and share risqué or comedic artwork of Fauna wearing cow-themed clothes, including pyjamas, bikinis or hoodies, tagged under Fauna's dedicated art hashtag #FineFaunart. Examples of which were later retweeted by Fauna (@uki_shu, 2022; @03Pun15, 2022; @ceresfauna, 2022).



Figure 24: Fan art samples by users @uki_shu and @03Pun15 on Twitter (Own screenshot, 2022, referencing @uki_shu, 2022; @03Pun15, 2022).

The following day, Fauna tweeted: “Everyone said ‘oh noooo Fauna the artists are gonna draw you in a cowkini now’ as if that wasn’t my exact intention” (@ceresfauna, 2022b), implying she started the trend to promote and encourage fan art, albeit surprised by how popular the ‘cowfauna’ trend became in Figure 25 (@ceresfauna, 2022c). To bring closure to the joke, Fauna hosted a Superchat reading livestream in mid-August, in which she attached a self-made prop of a cow-print hoodie and bikini to her avatar (Ceres Fauna Ch, 2022). Her viewers responded by calling it cute, sexy or seeing through the joke because it was technically a cardboard cut-out. Although Fauna typically performs a caring and intimate persona through ASMR, she deliberately engineered this joke via Twitter to encourage fan artists to make suggestive, cute or comical artwork. Fauna’s

enactment of gender is also consistent with Butler's studies on gender, and identifying how gender roles or stereotypes are created and proliferated within culture (Butler, 1988). On the one hand, Fauna frequently performs a traditional 'caring, motherly' persona to engage with viewers in both live-streams and ASMR content. Likewise, Fauna is also aware of the sexual appeal of her performances and visual avatar, and actively encourages fan-artists contributions which reflect this aspect.



Figure 25: Fauna's reaction on Twitter upon learning how popular the Cowfauna trend became (Byron, 2022, own screenshot, referencing @ceresfauna, 2022c)

Case Study: Adopting Smol Ame and Walfie into Hololive

Returning to Watson Amelia, focusing on her collaboration with fans, I examine her alongside a prominent fan artist, Walfie, who contributed to Hololive English's memetic history and popularity throughout their debut in September 2020. During a Q&A stream in September 2020, Amelia claimed that she used to eat sand when she was a kid (Watson Amelia Ch, 2020b, 55:00), prompting a confused response from her viewers. Following this stream, Walfie uploaded an

animated gif of Amelia eating sand in Figure 26 (@walfieee, 2020, own screenshot). As Hololive English grew in popularity, so did Walfie's portfolio of animations based on the talents.



Figure 26: Animated gif by Walfie of Amelia eating sand (@walfieee, 2020, own screenshot)

Walfie's animation style of all Hololive English talents, including Amelia, became exceptionally popular on Twitter and well-matched to Amelia's humour and lively streaming persona. On January 26, 2021, Twitter user and indie game developer KevinCow shared a fan game via itch.io titled "*Smol Ame*" (@KevinCow, 2021), a 2D platforming game using Walfie's design and animations of Amelia. The game is designed around Amelia's memetic quirks, such as ground pounds and her frequent hiccups when streaming. 'Smol' is an internet slang meaning small, but in this context is emblematic of Walfie's art-style and animations of Hololive English Vtubers.

By early 2021, Walfie's significance to Hololive English became more prominent. During an April Fool's collaboration on Calliope's channel, all Hololive English members received official 'Smol' Live2D avatars drawn by

Walfie in Figure 27 (Mori Calliope Ch, 2021, 1:01:20-1:04:45). The recruitment of Walfie to design new avatars is significant as it represents a popular fan artist being recruited to produce content for Hololive English. Focusing on Smol Ame in particular, Amelia incorporated this design and avatar into a separate persona or kayfabe that is different from Amelia's original design. This alternative avatar and performance are justified under the pretence of Smol Ame being from another timeline. The video "*A Special Collab with Small Ame!*" (Watson Amelia Ch, 2021) demonstrates this performance. Here, Amelia's performer voices both characters – with the Live2D Amelia arguably more mature than the childish and gremlin-like persona of Smol Ame, represented by Hasksoft's 3D model.



Figure 27: Hololive English 'Smol' avatars designed by Walfie (Own screenshot, Mori Calliope Ch, 2021, 1:01:20-1:04:45)

My findings on Smol Ame are that Amelia has adopted the fan-made version of herself by Walfie into a distinct persona and character within Hololive English. However, this presents a unique social or legal implication considering Walfie's involvement. This is significant because in the combined expo and concert, Hololive 3rd Fes. Link Your Wish, Smol Ame was made into an official mascot costume to represent Hololive English, demonstrated in Aebel's compilation video "*IRL Smol Ame in 3 Minutes*" (Aebel, 2022). Although fans embraced and were excited about Smol Ame becoming a mascot, it presents an interesting question about the legality and ownership of the character of Smol Ame.

Smol Ame is another case of symbiotic co-creativity that exists between Hololive English and their fans. That is, the Vtubers allow fans to re-imagine or create content from their livestreams, creating a feedback loop where both parties encourage and collaborate across social media and livestreaming. It is this engagement and participation with fans that I highlight and assert challenges one-sided parasocial relationships. This also presents the question of who financially benefits from Smol Ame and other fan-made characters. As COVER Corp is a private company, there is no available evidence of the proportion of fan-contributors who are commissioned and paid for their work. Regardless, there is a noteworthy asymmetric financial relationship. This recalls a similar question that was posed by Alyssa Michaud in her examination of fan-contribution to Vocaloid culture, as these songs are transformed into the performances by Hatsune Miku and other characters. Although Kovacic briefly touches upon the nature of fans donating to Vtubers and ‘cyber idols’, comparing it to the Buddhist practice of *kaichō* (Kovacic, 2021, p. 121), it is difficult to ascertain in this current study the extent to which fans are compensated for their works being used by Hololive English talents.

Chapter Conclusions:

I first drew upon the combination of kayfabe from professional wrestling based on Gigguk’s video (Gigguk, 2020) with the emotional connectedness found in livestreaming in Hilvert-Bruce et al.’s study (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018). These ideas can be connected to the formation of identity and persona examined in Chapter 2, as Vtubers establish a collective persona when interacting with their viewers on livestreams. I examined this through Watson Amelia’s performance and engagement with fans and how she regularly engages with them by drawing upon their content, as seen in her playing *Half-Life: Alyx*.

This study was followed by examining how the participation and engagement with fans differ from the practices seen in Twitch streamers like Maximillian Dood. In Maximillian’s example, he contributed to a mod of *DNF Duel* owing to the jokes and resemblance between himself and the character Troubleshooter, recording new voice lines so that his viewers and fans could enjoy a different

game experience. I contrasted this by examining how IRyS recruited fan artists for her MV of *INTERNET OVERDOSE* (IRyS Ch, 2022). I further studied these engagements with fandom and participatory cultures in the collaboration between Hololive English and Kay Yu, who created the fan-game HoloCure as an act of ‘lovebor’. As outlined on COVER Corp’s official web page and instructions for fan-made derivative works, “We consider derivative works to be the creations of fans’ ideas and creativity, based on content created by us.” (COVER Corp, c2016). The company also encourages fans to produce creative fan works, albeit restricting commercialisation to a hobby rather than business level. COVER Corp’s policy is relevant to the arguments and observations made by Mel Stanfill about how industries will recruit fans into the creative process of making content. “In such ways, fans are invited to produce content so industry does not have to do as much labor, or so that the object of fandom is more expansive than would be otherwise possible.” (Stanfill, 2019, p150).

This concept of lovebor applies to Yu’s dedication to Hololive Productions when making *HoloCure*. Where this becomes a symbiotic and ongoing collaboration is that Yu will take suggestions from Hololive talents or update the game to reflect the talent’s career. I provide evidence of this with Yu updating the game to include IRyS’ new mascots, Bloom & Gloom. I closed this examination with two more examples to further establish and identify how this symbiotic co-creativity manifests between Hololive English and their fans. For Ceres Fauna, her deployment of fan-service through the sexualised trend of ‘Cowfauna’ on Twitter provided artists with the opportunity to create fan art of Fauna in cow-print clothing. Where symbiotic co-creativity is further exemplified is through Walfie’s ongoing collaborations with Hololive English. What began with animated gifs on Twitter culminated in Walfie producing official ‘Smol’ avatars for Hololive English and Walfie’s emblematic style adopted into an official mascot costume of Smol Ame for the Hololive 3rd Fes. Link Your Wish convention/expo.

Conclusion: “See you next stream!”

At the time of writing this conclusion, Hololive English is celebrating its 2nd anniversary of performing and streaming across YouTube, Twitch and Twitter since 2020. Within two years, Hololive English and the growing Vtuber industry have caused a paradigm shift in media entertainment, making it all the more important to research this emerging topic.

I began by providing an outline of Hololive Productions’ Vtubers as a transnational project, drawing from Koichi Iwabuchi’s discussions of cultural odours and fragrances. From Iwabuchi’s definitions, Vtubers have the same appeal as manga and anime, targeting domestic Japanese audiences before becoming global fan culture thanks to overseas fan demand and reception (Iwabuchi, 2002). Next, I situated Hololive’s media strategies through Marc Steinberg’s examinations of character merchandising and the anime media mix, which contribute to the success of Hololive English (Steinberg, 2019). Additionally, I compared the media mix of Hololive English with their predecessors in virtual idols and Vocaloids, drawing upon Daniel Black’s studies of virtual idols (Black, 2012). However, I argued that Hololive English’s Vtubers are distinct from virtual idols – who are transformable or flawless - because Vtubers are played by human performers interacting with fans in real-time. This blending of a fictional character with the human performer in Vtuber practice creates a ‘slippage’ which subverts the definition of *kyara*, which Itou Go identified as simplistic characters lacking narrative depth (Go, 2005).

Identifying the virtual avatar used by Hololive English Vtubers, I drew upon Ulrike Schultze’s studies of embodied self and avatar (Schultze, 2014) while also demonstrating how Vtubers embody Donna Haraway’s cyborg (Haraway, 1985), combining humans with technology. To explore how Hololive English Vtubers perform in such a way that blends their fictional character with their real self, I drew upon Lesley Procter’s proposal of the avatar-persona, where the avatar and user become so intertwined they become an extension of one’s self (Procter, 2020, pp. 58-61). From this, I sought to explore how identity is constructed by Hololive English Vtubers, examining specific strategies of online-self creation

and how memes influence the performer and their fans. Finally, I argued that this allows Vtubers to embody Lesley Procter's concept of the avatar-persona, where the performer and their virtual character become intertwined. Additionally, this argument also distinguishes Vtubers from their predecessors in virtual idols, highlighting the human performer behind the virtual avatar.

Identity:

I drew upon the combination of Chih-Ping Chen's study of digital self-construction strategies (Chen, 2016) and Nathan Jackson's observations of memes that influence the collective persona created between Twitch streamers and their fans (Jackson, 2020). Beginning with Mori Calliope's debut stream, I identified how she established an identity for herself, including self-promotion strategies through her first song and establishing her collective community of Deadbeats who show ongoing support for Calliope. Cocker & Cronin's findings of how YouTubers establish a charismatic community (Cocker & Cronin, 2017) also apply to Calliope's engagements with her fans. Examining quirkier and more recent recruits like Nanashi Mumei also reveals how Vtubers embrace memes and memetic history to establish their identity with viewers. In this case, Mumei's fascination with berries, absent-minded engagement with peers and fans or basking in the sinister aspects of civilisation through her nightmarish artwork.

Hololive English's Vtubers are obligated to act out these personae as part of their contracts. When the talent graduates or retires, they return their character, avatar, YouTube channel and Twitter accounts to COVER Corp. I raise this discussion in light of Tsukumo Sana's graduation on July 31st, 2022 (Tsukumo Sana Ch, 2022). Although anime productions or TV series can replace actors or talents for certain characters, this is impossible for Vtubers like Sana because of the strong emotional connection she shared with her viewers. This finding is supported by Suan's case study of Kizuna Ai, further illustrating how identity is transformed in Vtuber cultures like Hololive English (Suan, 2021). Therefore, I highlight the avatar-persona as a key part of Vtuber performance and identity. My argument identifies that the performer's love for her fans and her on-stream personality are so intrinsic to her avatar that it becomes impossible for another talent to reprise the character.

Gender:

Chapter 3 situated Hololive English in gender studies and online gender performance, drawing upon Judith Butler's discussions of gender performance (Butler, 1988). As Hololive English draws heavily from the performances of gender found in Japanese pop-culture media, including anime and J-Pop idol culture, I sought to identify how Hololive English perform femininity or otherwise challenges heteronormative performance found in these media.

Combining Hiroshi Aoyagi's seminal book about Japan's idol culture (Aoyagi, 2005) with Galbraith and Karlin's studies, I contextualised the performance of femininity in Gawr Gura. I examined a specific form of gender performance common across Hololive English and J-Pop idols, purity and innocence – which fans identify as *seiso* (Aoyagi, 2005). From my study of Gura, I identified that although Hololive English are informed by idol culture, Vtubers break the gendered stereotypes and association of purity identified by Aoyagi in Japan's idol industry.

This study was followed by examining the gendered practices in Vtuber culture, contrasting the performance of femininity observed in *Babiniku* with the satirical performance of masculinity by holoCouncil (Ouro Kronii Ch, 2022). Drawing comparisons with Wes Robertson's discussions on *ojisan gokko*, I argue these virtual performances of gender by Vtubers provide new opportunities to study cross-gender performance in online media. Finally, I examined non-heteronormative gender performance in the pseudo-lesbian interactions between Hakos Baelz and IRyS. Although their relationship is performative and comedic, it supports Amanda Potts' hypothesis of how exposure to non-heteronormative discourse and language can result in a normalised or positive turn towards identifying LGBTIQ performance in online media.

Parasocial Relationships and Symbiotic Co-Creativity:

Chapter 4 sought to challenge unidirectional parasocial relationships, identifying a collaborative relationship between Hololive English and their fans that encourages mutual participation and the creation of content. I described how parasocial interactions emerge with Hololive English Vtubers by examining

emotional connectedness from Hilvert-Bruce et al.'s study of Twitch streamers and audiences (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018). I combined this with the concept of kayfabe – performance that is staged or faked to an extent. Yet fans believe it to be true despite the performative nature, drawing from the observations by YouTuber Gigguk (Gigguk, 2020) and the literature on professional wrestling (Chow & Laine, 2014; Jones, 2019). Focusing on Watson Amelia, I highlighted how she performs the kayfabe of being a time-travelling ‘ground-pounder of moms’ detective. Amelia’s connectedness with fans is demonstrated in her *Half-Life: Alyx* livestream, where she borrowed a 3D model from the fan Hasksoft (Watson Amelia Ch, 2021). These strategies establish and enhance the emotional connectedness between Amelia and her fans.

I then examined IRyS’ recruitment of fans Akashiba and reNPC to work on the MV for her cover of *INTERNET OVERDOSE* (IRyS Ch, 2022). This example was contrasted with Twitch streamer Maximillian Dood, who contributed voice lines in response to a fan-made modification of the character Troubleshooter in *DNF Duel*. Where IRyS’ engagement with fans becomes symbiotic and mutually beneficial is her co-creation of her new mascots, Bloom & Gloom, who would be added to the fan-game *HoloCure*. Gender performance can also influence trends or memes shared in participatory cultures, explored in Fauna’s ‘Cow Fauna’ meme she started on Twitter.

Perhaps the most significant case study of fan collaboration with Vtubers would be Walfie’s ongoing support for Hololive English, beginning with his animations of Watson Amelia. What started with an animation of Amelia eating sand led to Walfie designing official avatars for Hololive English. Later, the character of Smol Ame became an official mascot costume. I define these collaborative engagements as ‘symbiotic co-creativity,’ which contest the unreciprocated relationships that define parasocial interactions.

New Significance or Application:

I identified the impact and significance of the collaboration that exists between Hololive English and their fans, which I termed symbiotic co-creativity. This dynamic can be extended to studying other forms of collaborations that exist in

media. For example, we can apply this concept to examine when popular media franchises draw on the fans' participation or create content based on popular fandom memes. The applications of this study could include video games, film & television, and interactive online media platforms, i.e. YouTube, Twitter and Twitch. Additionally, the studies of 'slippage,' where the performer's real identity becomes part of the Vtuber, can extend discussions of how the avatar-persona and identity is manufactured in online creative media.

Calls for New Research:

As the Vtuber industry is constantly changing, there is still scope to explore questions raised in this thesis for further research. I cite gender studies as one example, as there are aspects of gender performance and sexuality that have yet to be explored in this current project. For example, how are concepts of masculinity, transgender and non-binary represented in Vtuber culture? Does this performance of gender and sexuality result in more positive discourse about sexuality or representations of gender in media? What are the influences of the media technology behind Vtubers on the development of avatar-personas?

There is further scope to situate the symbiotic co-creativity within Hololive English and their fans to identify the legality of these interactions. The ethics of copyright or intellectual property are relevant to the studies of Vtubers and their engagement with fans' creative content. This discussion is important in the case of Smol Ame and Walfie as Smol Ame was originally designed as an animated gif by Walfie, before being officially adopted into Hololive's intellectual property by becoming a mascot costume and merchandise. Furthermore, are these practices by Vtuber agencies exploitative of the fans' goodwill and their creative endeavours, or are they compensated and thanked for their contributions?

Currently, the Vtuber industry is approximately half a decade old since Kizuna Ai's debut in 2016. Vtubers have achieved mainstream success and popularity through agencies like Hololive Productions, Nijisanji, VShojo and myriad independent Vtubers. For this reason, the questions raised in this thesis should be taken further to record and document the growing amount of content and research material produced by Vtubers.

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