



Sexism, Streamers, and Simulated Avatars



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I. BACKGROUND



A selection of women livestreamers and VTubers. From left to right: The VTubers Kizuna AI and Ironmouse and the real-person streamers Snapscube and Pokimane.

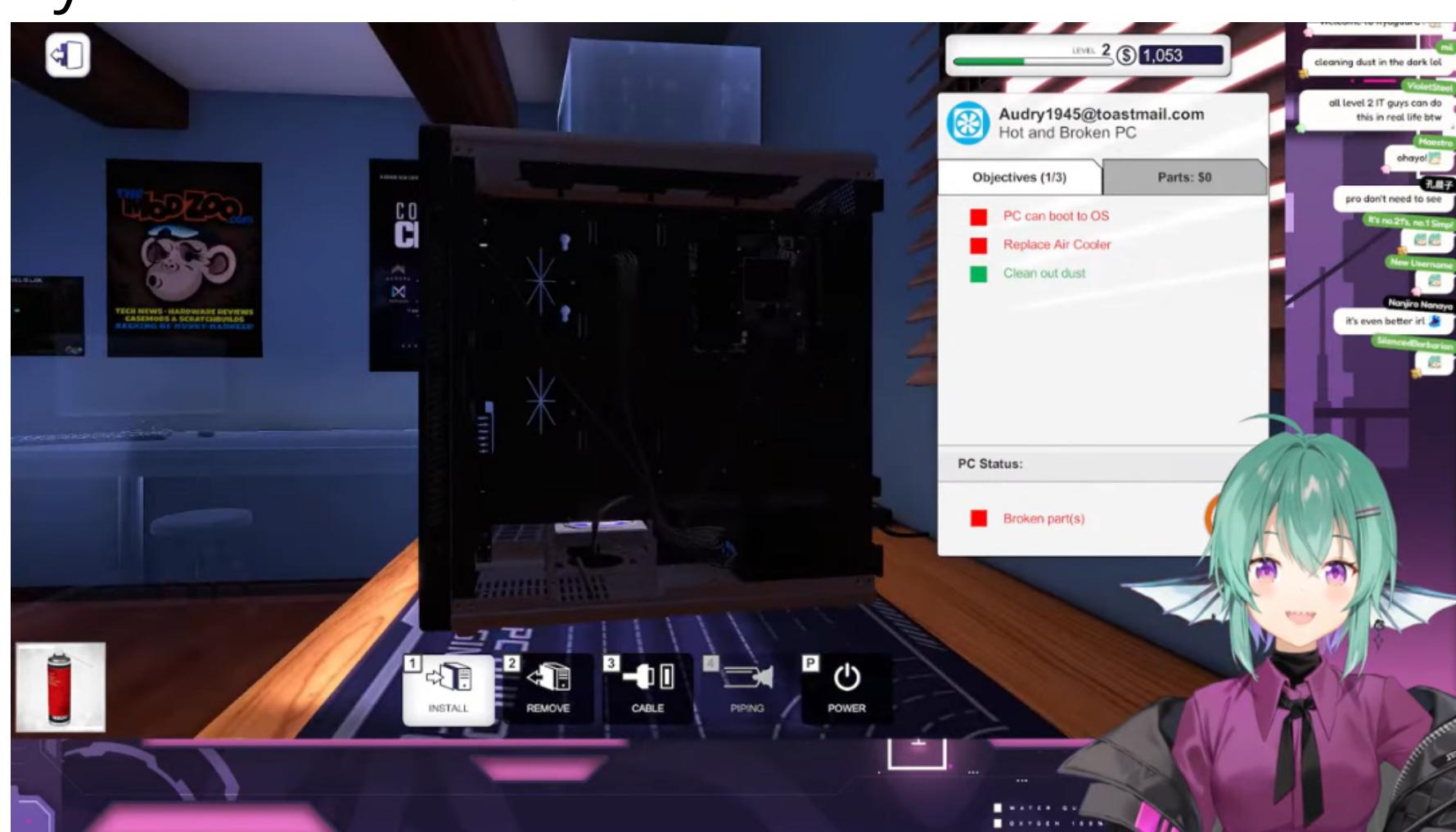
Livestreaming has expanded greatly in the last decade as a medium of entertainment and community growth. Accompanying its growth is the trend of Virtual YouTubers beginning with the debut of Kizuna AI in 2016. Virtual YouTubers are referred to colloquially as **VTubers** and are livestreamers that use 2D or 3D avatars and face-tracking technology to communicate with and entertain their audience.

VTubers use a simulated avatar instead of a camera and are operated by a real person – a **nakanohito**. Their audience only interacts with the avatar and with this imbalance in mind, we set out to answer the following questions:

- How is sexism experienced differently by real-person streamers and VTubers?
- What factors contribute to these differences in experience?

II. SIGNIFICANCE

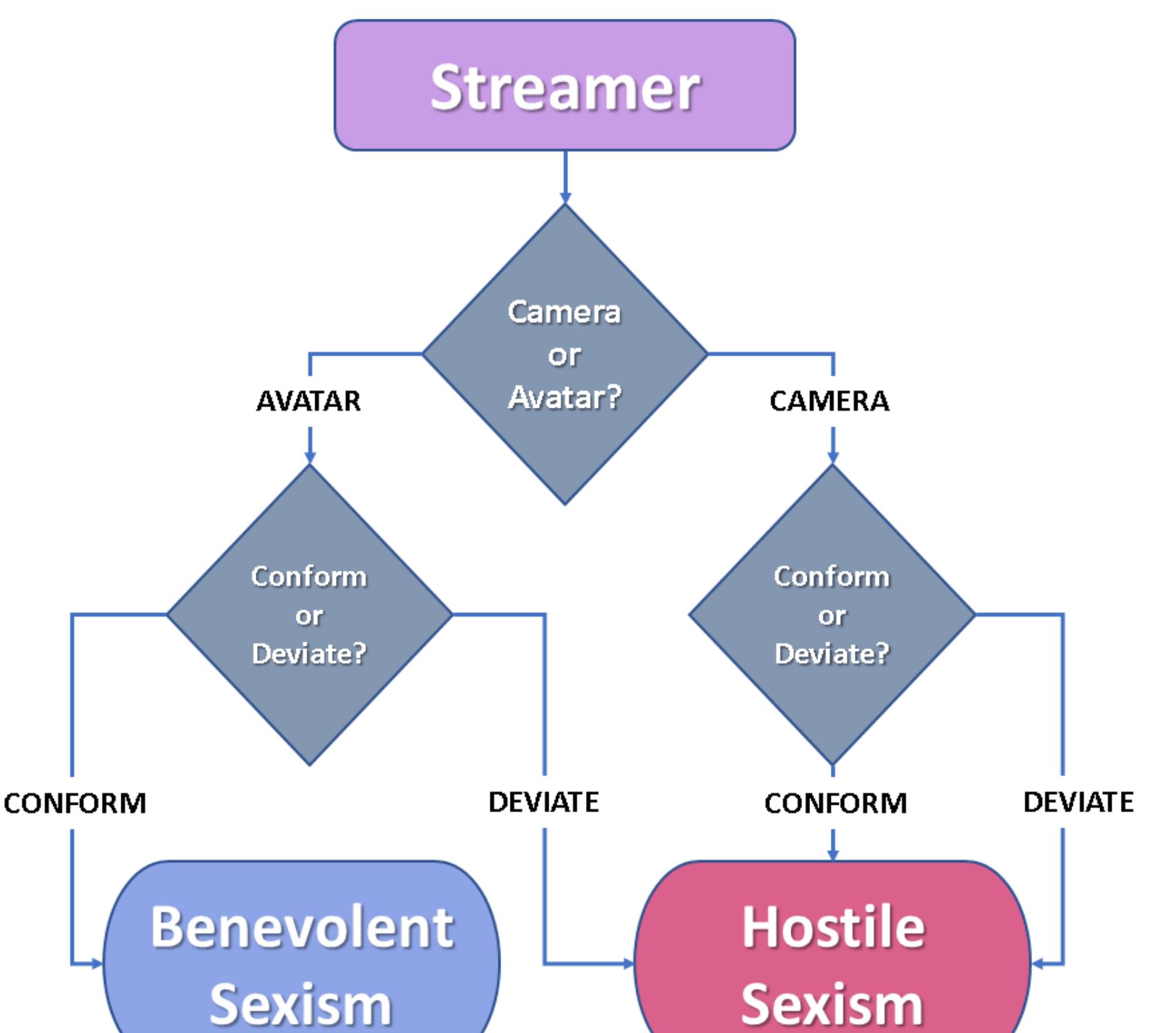
Streaming plays an important role in the modern Internet as a method of communication and entertainment. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized its importance by connecting people across time and space during a time when many were isolated.



The Nijisanji VTuber Finana Ryugu playing a game on a livestream.

VTubers first appeared in 2016 and they are an evolution of how we use avatars to communicate in a digital medium and a new way to stand out in the oversaturated **attention economy**. Understanding how an audience interacts with the avatar without seeing the nakanohito is necessary as the real and digital worlds become increasingly intertwined.

III. FINDINGS



The double bind of streaming as a VTuber or a real-person streamer.

Real-person streamers and VTubers are both targeted by ambivalent sexism, but VTubers seem to be treated more favorably than their real-person counterparts when they conform to audience and gendered expectations. However, they are targeted by hostile sexism if they deviate from expectations.

IV. DISCUSSION

- + VTubers' behaviors were seen as more endearing or positive even when their actions were identical to real-person counterparts.
- + Because they are seen as fictional, female VTubers are not seen as invaders in spaces belonging to gamers.
- VTubers are targeted if they deviate in a way that is incongruent with their avatar's established character or if they deviate from standards in a way their audience disapproves of.
- Real-person streamers are judged more negatively than their VTuber counterparts regardless of if they conform or deviate from gendered expectations.

The amount of **affective and emotional labor** that streamers need to be successful is amplified when a streamer is a woman. Moderating one's appearance and engaging their audience in a warm and welcoming manner to foster **parasocial relationships** between the audience and the streamer is vital to a streamer's success. However, female streamers are in a **double bind** where they are judged regardless of how they behave and perform on camera.

VTubers do not show their face to their audience, but there is still an imbalance because the audience is in a PSR with the avatar and not the nakanohito. Violating an audience's expectations can lead to a VTuber being targeted by hostile sexism.

V. LIMITATIONS

- Race, ethnicity, and an avatar's perceived race, etc. were not considered in the scope of this study.
- VTubers and streamers who are nonbinary, transgender, or conceal their gender identity were considered but were not a focus.
- Lack of empirical, statistical research on sexism as experienced by Virtual YouTubers compared to their real-person counterparts.



The Nijisanji VTuber Kishido Temma interacting with his audience on a "free talk" stream.

Male VTubers were not considered in this study as information about male streamers and VTubers did not appear during the research process, and audience interaction with male streamers was not a focus of the initial research question. I was more interested in how livestreaming – a career that requires hefty amounts of affective labor and technical skill – intersects with sexism which is rampant in gaming spaces.

The VTubers I focused on in my study were also primarily conventionally attractive **bishōjo** type characters with light skin and Japanese, Asian, ambiguously white, or raceless nonhuman characters.

VI. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- What role do factors like race and age play in streaming as a Virtual YouTuber?
- What would an empirical study on VTubers and sexism demonstrate?
- Are independent VTubers – those not affiliated with an agency – held to the same standards?

VII. CONTACT & FURTHER READING

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Scan the code for references and more info!

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