
The Voice of a Zombie: A case study of Virtual YouTubers' language and authenticity

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Introduction

Virtual YouTubers, otherwise known as VTubers, create creative content on entertainment platforms using a virtual avatar in place of their real-life image. These entertainers choose to adopt the visage of a fictional character, and in some cases, an accommodating personality. This model of entertainment is angled to appeal to a worldwide, multicultural audience, and today, there are many VTubers working from all over the globe. Hololive, for example, is a Japan based VTuber management agency that has a Japanese branch, an Indonesian branch, and an English branch with members ranging from the United States and Austria to Japan and Australia. As this virtual image phenomenon has grown in popularity and begun appearing within professional settings, I intend to explore the interplay of an alternate (or hidden) identity as a virtual avatar in a multicultural setting on language choice and style. To do so, I aim to answer the following questions:

1. What conditions affect language choice and style amongst VTubers?

2. How does VTuber language use relate to how VTubers manage their identity as VTubers?

Following these questions, I hypothesize that the way people interact with other interlocutors and stylize their speech reflects how they manage their identity and express the authenticity of their alternative identity. It is thus, I argue, that it is not “anonymity” or a “separation of self” in which affects the person’s speech, but rather, the act of maintaining their alternative identity and reinforcing its authenticity as an identity that empowers language choice and style the most. What I mean by this is rather than treating these alternative images as something without identity or lacking personal attachment, VTubers carefully curate their language in a way that gives *personality* and *legitimacy* to their virtual avatars. These alternative images become alternative identities that have a set of expectations managed by both the VTuber behind the screen and the audience and fans they interact with beyond it. In no small part, language is one way identity is perpetuated.

Literature Review

Given the novelty of VTubers only rising to international mainstream popularity in the early 2020s, research on VTubers is young and continuing to grow.¹ Anna Brina Turner’s thesis on “VTubers and Identity” and Zhang Wenbin’s dissertation on “Online Identities Construction” provide an excellent baseline for discussing VTubing as it relates to identity and language use. Turner explores the extent that VTubing allows its performers to overcome personal insecurities, test different methods of self-presentation and affirm identities of queer and marginalized communities.² Meanwhile, Wenbin explores the process of identity construction and social interaction within VTuber fandoms and how fans organize and express themselves within these

¹ Anna Brina Turner, “Streaming as a virtual being: The complex relationship between VTubers and identity,” Malmö University, *Master’s Thesis* (2022).

² *Ibid*, 2, 35, 38.

interactive cultural communities. Wenbin denotes that these identities are “digital selves” through which fans fluidly enact based on personal preference and participation in collective culture.³

Despite being popular on a global scale, VTubing has strong ties to Japanese idol culture and many VTuber character designs and performance expectations are rooted in similar expectations for Japanese idols. VTubers absorb many characteristics of Japanese subcultures including otaku, kawaii and moe into their image and despite the varied design processes for VTuber models enabling these performers to create a wide range of body types, many choose to present with anime avatars.⁴ While many companies now encourage the “autonomy” of their VTuber members in presenting their behavior and image, a certain streaming and performance etiquette is expected of the talents socially.⁵

This expectation does not remain between the company and the talents, but also includes the expectations of the audience and fans of the VTubers. Maintaining the attractiveness of their image through VTuber to audience interactions, creative content consistency, and personality is an important part to performing as a VTuber.⁶ VTubers are subject to the “online disinhibition effect” and parasocial relationships with their viewers. Turner describes the online disinhibition effect as cases in which “people reveal suppressed emotions, fears and wishes that can manifest in either toxic or benign behaviors. These range from unusual acts of kindness and generosity to hateful behaviors, perversion, and violence.” Online environments allow for a type of

³ Zhang Wenbin, “Online Identities Construction: Participatory Culture of Virtual YouTuber Fans in China,” Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, *Doctoral dissertation* (2024).

⁴ Noel Brett, “Why do we only get anime girl avatars? Collective white heteronormative avatar design in live streams,” *Television & New Media* 23(5) (2022): 451-461.; Júlio César Valente Ferreira et al. “VTuber concept review: The new frontier of virtual entertainment,” (2022)

⁵ Turner, 10.

⁶ Yijin Li, “Why does Gen Z watch virtual streaming VTuber anime videos with avatars on Twitch?” *Online Media and Global Communication* 2(3), (2023): 379-403.

self-presentation that is idealized to make up for perceived personal faults and is otherwise impossible to show in an offline environment.⁷ Parasocial relationships also contribute to this by causing a “one-and-a-half” way relationship between the talent and the audience where the viewer forms an attachment with the media-based performer that may or may not be reciprocated in some capacity by the performer⁸. Both may apply to the VTubers themselves just as much as the viewers, though individually to varying degrees.

This complex dynamic is important to understand as it can affect the way the VTuber communicates or otherwise interacts with their audience. Both Wenbin and Turner’s studies emphasize that the behavior and interactions of the VTuber when performing is mediated by their specific, though not wholly separate, identity and social status as a VTuber persona. Turner’s work attempts to compare VTubers as uniquely different from “standard” YouTubers, which may otherwise present themselves through their real-life image or voice, but more research is needed to reliably stake any claims regarding such. Turner clarifies that their work has a small sample size and does not include VTubers that may have been in the field for many years. Like Wenbin, Turner also emphasizes that VTubers are not wholly separate from their offline identities. In some cases, a VTuber’s offline identity may merge or seep into their VTuber persona. Thus, further studies of identity assimilation are worthwhile to pursue.⁹

To the point of comparing “standard YouTubers,” as Turner describes, to VTubers, I turn to Yudistira Ada Prabowo’s work on Patterns of Codeswitching among YouTubers.

Codeswitching is the act of changing from one language or dialect to another and is important to explore in the context of VTubers. VTubers are typically catered to appeal to a multicultural

⁷ Turner, 19.

⁸ Rachel Kowert and Emory Daniel Jr., “The one-and-a-half sided parasocial relationship: The curious case of live streaming,” *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*, 4.

⁹ Turner, 34, 39

audience and are likewise expected to interact with their peers of different languages. Therefore, codeswitching of “standard YouTubers” may be compared to the codeswitching of VTubers to identify if there are any significant differences between the two.

Ada Prabowo primarily focuses on Indonesian speaking YouTubers, and they curiously describe codeswitching on YouTube as usually being done by people with additional English proficiency.¹⁰ Though Ada Prabowo mentions English as being one of the three languages used to communicate in Indonesia (the international language), it is likely that the classification of English being a predetermine for codeswitching is reflective of the idea of English as the lingua franca. Ada Prabowo does expand upon this notion in the study on “standard YouTubers” by mentioning how English is increasingly used in daily life Indonesia the more modernized the archipelago becomes.¹¹ However, they do not delve too deeply into the motivations behind English usage as a YouTuber other than acknowledging that it is the predominate language for codeswitching. I focus on English as a language choice because language is an important part to a VTuber’s identity. Many VTubers classify themselves as EN-VTubers (English VTubers), ID-VTubers (Indonesian VTubers), ES-VTubers (Spanish speaking VTubers) and so on as part of their brand. Marsha, Warti and Mulyaningsih in their study on VTuber interactions further investigate how, despite these language identities, English is still perpetuated as a lingua franca in order to communicate and convey meaning to other interlocutors and viewers of different origins.¹²

Nonetheless, Ada Prabowo finds that some of the functions behind YouTuber codeswitching involve conveying opinions and feelings, the reiteration or repetition of messages

¹⁰ Yudistira Adi Prabowo, “The Patterns of Code Switching Among Youtubers,” *Language Horizon* 6(1), (2019).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹² Clement Marsha, Fransiska Way Warti and Tri Mulyaningsih, “The Study of English as Lingua Franca in Virtual YouTuber Interaction. *ELSA* 2(2), (2022). 35-38.

to ensure understanding, and to express humor or entertainment. Ada Prabowo goes on to specify that the main condition for codeswitching is due to the environmental influences of the individual's family and community involvement, and not necessarily their social position nor identity as a YouTuber.¹³ This may be important in determining a key difference between “standard” YouTuber motivations for language use and VTubers, as VTubers are mentioned by Turner to be more involved in the identity work involving their role as VTubers than “standard” YouTubers.

Since Ada Prabowo focuses more on qualitative data behind language choice of entertainers, I address the quantitative efforts of language use with Khairun Niswa's Investigation of Language Style used in Indonesian Television Talk Show Program. Outlined by Martin Joos' Five Clocks, Niswa focuses on categorizing the language style of Indonesian talk show hosts and interviewees into five language styles. These styles are the following:¹⁴

- Frozen: Language use that is socially removed and only reserved for very formal occasions like ceremonies or important events
- Formal: Language use that is strictly respectful and carefully maintained with advanced planning.
- Consultative: Language use that is generally simple or monotonous but maintains a level of separation from the other interlocutors.
- Casual: Language use that is typically used with friends and insiders or to strangers to make them into an insider. This is usually more rapid or slurred and includes the use of slang.

¹³ Adi Prabowo, 7.

¹⁴ Martin Joos, “The Five Clocks,” *New York: Harcourt Brace*, (1962).

- Intimate: Language use that is characterized by completely private language that may be used within family or with a very close friend or partner. This may include incomplete sentences or insider slang or references that may not otherwise be comprehensible to an out-group.

By adapting this framework, Niswa analyzes language style and the context in which they occur for talk show hosts and interviewees. Though not strictly YouTubers, talk show hosts engage in an entertainment style similar to VTubers. Part of a VTuber's typical audience engagement involves talk-show like segments that can be reliably compared to the "standard" entertainer described through Turner's work. This quantitative framework, alongside Ada Prabowo's qualitative study allows us to engage with VTuber language use in a meaningful way for study and comparison.

For the following project in which I approached the aforementioned research questions, I performed a case study on the Virtual YouTuber named Ollie Kureiji. Ollie belongs to the 2nd generation of the Hololive Productions Indonesia Branch (HoloID). She debuted December 4th, 2020, and has the introductory headline of "Super Kawaii Zombie Idol." Due to her membership as a company managed VTuber, her real-life identity is strictly regulated to protect the talent. However, we (the audience) do know that Kureiji Ollie identifies as a female gamer and claims her age as "forever 17" since her character is a zombie that was 17 at her time of death. She is also a singer who currently has 31 musical appearances including 6 originals and the rest as cover songs (as of May 1, 2024). The songs are in Indonesian, English and/or Japanese and reflects her ability to speak all three languages to varying degrees of proficiency. She is considered to be one of the most Japanese proficient non-Japanese members of Hololive and is known for frequently interacting with a lot of other VTubers within and outside of Hololive

regardless of their native languages or company affiliation. Her personality is often characterized as extraordinarily hyperactive, but she considers herself one of the least crazy members in HoloID despite Kureiji (“Crazy”) being in her name.

Methodology

With Ollie Kureiji established as a multilingual VTuber reportedly involved in the multicultural online environment, I took a simple random sample of 10 clips of dialogue from her YouTube channel translated into English from Ollie’s past YouTube livestreams. These clips ranged from 45 seconds to 2 and a half minutes in length. While some of these clips included dialogue from other interlocutors, I specifically focused on Ollie’s language use both when and when not interacting with other interlocutors. Much of Ollie’s dialogue in these clips are directed at her audience or in direct response to text comments from her audience.

I categorized Ollie’s dialogue into the 5 language styles outlined by Niswa’s work and counted the frequency of codeswitches within each clip. Afterwards, I conducted a qualitative content analysis of Ollie’s dialogue, acknowledging the contexts and potential functions of the different language styles and choices. Since Ollie is part of the HoloID branch and often conversates in Indonesian, I made sure to additionally note when Ollie would speak in local Indonesian such as Javanese, Sundanese, Maduranese, and Balinese, as opposed to the national Bahasa Indonesia language. Local Indonesian can be and was herein classified within the Intimate language style; the local Indonesian language is specifically used to communicate with people from within the same region, family or ethnic groups and can sometimes be unintelligible to outgroups.¹⁵ Similarly, I noted whenever Ollie would use Japanese Keigo and classified such

¹⁵ Adi Prabowo, 2.

language use under the Formal language style. Japanese Keigo is a system of respectful, honorific speech that changes forms depending on the situation and level of politeness needed.

Findings and Discussion

This research is part of an ongoing project on identity and authenticity; therefore, the data herein is incomplete. However, for the purposes of this paper, the preliminary data will be revealed and discussed in the context of language use. After parsing the dialogue information within these 10 clips with the help of a Japanese speaking colleague, I was able to draw up the following table:

Language Style	English	Indonesian	Japanese
Frozen Style			>1%
Formal Style	23%	32%	47%
Consultative Style			2%
Casual Style	66%	52%	51%
Intimate Style	11%	16%	

Table 1. Total language style of each language

As seen in Table 1, the majority of Ollie's language style in these 10 clips were of the Casual style, resulting in about half of her total dialogue in each language. This is opposite of Niswa's findings that reported that the talk show hosts spoke more in the Formal style.

Interestingly, Ollie spoke in the Formal style more often when using Japanese even when reiterating utterances that were considered Casual style in the other language(s). Not seen in Table 1, the function of most of Ollie's codeswitching were noted as being reiterations. As such, it is important to acknowledge that Ollie Kureiji has admitted in another clip that was not included in this sample that she sometimes intentionally switches between languages in order to "translate" her dialogue for her multinational viewers to have an easier time enjoying her content. It is, therefore, possible that other VTubers may have different motivations for or frequencies in codeswitching compared to Ollie (even amongst Hololive Production).

Continuing with the findings and discussion, I must also address the following notes that may potentially affect generalizability. First off, Ollie Kureiji belongs to the VTuber management agency: Hololive Productions. Compared to other companies or agencies similarly based in Japan, Hololive members tend to emphasize Japanese Keigo across its members, regardless of their region or language. This emphasis is not due to any explicit company rules and is instead part of the company culture that the members decided upon internally. It may also be reflective of the Japanese Idol expectations placed upon VTubers as mentioned by Turner.

Secondly, Ollie is specifically a part of the Hololive Indonesia branch. While all members of HoloID also speak English, they are uniquely separate from the Hololive English branch, which scouts members from all over the world. HoloID members are specifically selected for being within Indonesia regionally and their ability to speak the national Indonesia language with native fluency. From what I understand, the members were also asked to indicate their ability to also speak English during the application process. This indicates that English proficiency may have also influenced their selection as prospective members.

Thirdly, Ollie has a unique character avatar that is not shared with other members of Hololive nor other VTubers. While all members of Hololive are given a fictional backstory to go with their virtual avatars, some may play into their fictional history more so than others. Ollie, for example, does not reference her character's history or zombification very often in her presentation of self unless specifically elicited by context or others. This can also affect how she speaks as other members have been known to change their speaking patterns due to their virtual avatar's given identity.

Similarly, and lastly (of what I have noted thus far), while some members may adapt their online personality to their virtual avatar, they may express themselves as differently as they wish to as long as it doesn't go against company guidelines. Most company guidelines are due to the guidelines put in place by the platform which the members use. YouTube is noted as being stricter than Twitch regarding certain topics such as sexual jokes/innuendos or mentions of controversial topics. It is therefore acknowledged that Ollie behaves notably differently on Twitch compared to YouTube. Since my case study only included dialogue from Ollie's YouTube livestreams, I cannot account for any language use differences between platforms. However, it may be beneficial to explore any existing studies on general language use changes between Twitch and YouTube such as work previously done by Daniel Recktenwald in 2018.¹⁶

In summary, I find that Ollie's language style was predominately Casual style and included frequent codeswitches between Indonesian, English and Japanese. Most of her codeswitches involved some sort of reiteration or message qualification, but the codeswitches were not exclusive to these two functions. She spoke Bahasa Indonesia the most and Japanese the least, more often choosing to only reiterate any Indonesian or English with one or the other

¹⁶ Daniel Recktenwald, "The discourse of online live streaming on Twitch: communication between conversation and commentary," Hong Kong Polytechnic University, *PhD Thesis*, (2018).

rather than with all three languages together. However, if she spoke Japanese, she was more likely to reiterate the utterance in both of the other languages than with only one. Most of her dialogue involved responses to comments made by her viewers or to circumstances in the games she was playing, if any. However, there were many utterances that appeared to serve entertainment purposes or to strengthen attachment to her character by providing more qualifying information about herself or motivations.

What I've found in previous literature on VTubers and other forms of digital interactivity is that there is an interplay, and in some cases a conflict, between digital anonymity that emphasizes personal privacy and confidentiality as distinctly *separate* and alternative identities that emphasizes a personality and intimacy as distinctly *personal*. One such literature notes that self-expression was more important to VTubers than following a particular trend. It further explains that the audience creates assumptions about the VTuber that reinforces a unique version of categorical parts of their identity that is dependent upon the VTuber's self-expression than larger societal lenses.¹⁷ Throughout these discussions, there's a recurring theme of how these actors move to legitimize their identity as VTubers and to create a sense of authenticity that is tied to that identity they've assumed.

As of right now in research, including two other VTuber case studies (pertaining to Pumpkin Potion and Ironmouse), the language style VTubers have been noted as frequenting is a very casual and at times, intimate, style of language. This is language that, according to Martin Joos, is typically used with friends and insiders or to strangers in an effort to turn them into an insider. Preliminary data also suggests that a common language function amongst these VTubers

¹⁷ Jiahui Liu, "Virtual presence, real connections: Exploring the role of parasocial relationships in virtual idol fan community participation," *Global Media and China* (2023).

is message and image qualification aimed to reinforce their relationships with their peers or audience and to expand upon pre-existing character traits or history.

There is also the question of language domain. In the digital world of VTubing, rather than physical location, domain can be translated as the platform the VTubers speak from. Kureiji Ollie, for example, has been noted to use more colloquially crass or blunt language than “usual” while streaming on Twitch compared to when she is streaming on YouTube. For, after all, it is not simply the voice of someone behind the screen that makes her language seem more crass or blunt than usual, but the voice of a zombie who already has a preexisting norm to her language and identity.

Future Directions and Limitations

Since I, unfortunately, do not have much qualitative data to reference, I cannot ascertain any specific motivations behind Ollie’s language use with confidence. I also have a very small sample size that may not reliably reflect Ollie’s actual language behavior. This is why I would like to not only increase the sample size of dialogue examples, but to also include interviews with the VTubers in question. A future study would also benefit more from a larger sample of cases to better compare and understand the effects of being a VTuber on language use and identity behavior in general. The isolated case of Ollie, while informative and intriguing, unfortunately does not allow for a reliable comparison between VTubers and “standard” YouTubers or entertainers either.

Furthermore, I am a primarily English-speaking individual with very limited working proficiency in Japanese and Indonesian. This obviously incurs limitations for the depth of the VTubers’ languages I can engage with on my own, not excluding other languages outside the

aforementioned. I express my gratitude to my colleagues for assisting me with the language use by Kureiji Ollie for this paper and aim to continue employing the collaboration of other researchers who may be able to offer their language familiarity.

Finally, though not exclusively, there is a need in the ongoing research due to respondent rates and the scope of the project to address other demographic concerns of the VTubers such as gender, ethnicity and LGBTQ+ identity. These demographic concerns are a very important part of VTubing and an important discussion to have. On these topics are the following wonderful works done by Liu tackling femininity in VTubing, Bredikhina and Giard exploring digital cross dressing in Japan, and He investigating the queer potential of VTubing in China.¹⁸

¹⁸ Liudmila Bredikhina and Agnès Giard, "Becoming a Virtual Cutie: Digital Cross-Dressing in Japan," *Convergence* 28, (2022). 1-19.; Xuanye He, "Virtuality and Vulnerability: The Queer Performances of Chinese VTubers," Duke University, *Doctoral dissertation* (2023).; Deirdre Liu, "Performance of the Female: The Vtuber Phenomena," Drexel University, *Master's Thesis* (2022).

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Kureiji Ollie (COVER corp.©) YouTube Channel:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCYz_5n-uDuChHtLo7My1HnQ