Stevie Suan iD

Performing Virtual YouTubers

Acting Across Borders in the Platform Society

Virtual Youtubers and Anime-esque Acting

Recently, Virtual YouTubers (henceforth Vtubers) have become a popular and profitable type of internet content production and consumption. In fact, many Vtubers are the top earning super chat users on the YouTube platform (as of December, 2020) (Morrissy 2020). Vtubers, as defined by Hirota Minoru, managing director of the Panora news site that focuses on Vtubers, are productions that utilize motion capture technology to animate 2D/3D characters and that use livestream and videos to distribute their content (2018, 45). Gaining in popularity on YouTube in Japan around early 2017, Japanese Vtubers now have fans around the world who watch them with subtitles, and there are Vtubers who perform in various different languages. Described by popular anime YouTuber Gigguk as "a genre comprised of real people using normally anime themed virtual avatars to create content online," Vtubers are "anime avatars" that do indeed present the same character designs and modes of expression that are commonly found in anime, except they are acted out in YouTube videos (Gigguk 2020). In some sense, Vtubers might be conceived of as "improv" acting as an anime-esque character (especially in the livestream versions).

Indeed, although Vtubers tend to feature content similar to other YouTube personalities, much of their means of expression is similar to anime. While each Vtuber uses different technologies, in general, the digital avatar replicates the movements of the person performing the character (with varying degrees of complexity, from basic movements to full-body motion capture), and facial recognition technology that translates the human facial expression to one of the many codified facial expressions commonly found in anime (e.g. arched eyes for smiling). Interestingly, many of these technologies are even used in the anime (and game) animation industry, which now regularly features motion capture (e.g. 2019's *Ultraman* and 2020's *Ghost in the Shell: SAC_2045*) to animate the character acting. Utilized outside of anime narratives and franchises

by Vtubers, these methods are now employed to present a certain character (and/or brand) on YouTube, often in real time. The focus of this chapter will be on this type of acting, which merges motion capture and anime's codified expressions and designs, as employed by Vtubers. I will examine the operations of this new type of performance as a means to unpack the various dynamics implicit in Vtubers as their performances intersect with issues of selfhood expressed through media technologies, and how this connects to contemporary modes of transnationality.

In order to do so, I will focus on Vtuber pioneer, Kizuna AI and her YouTube channel, A.I. Channel and the "multiplication/duplication controversy" that occurred on her channel in 2019. Kizuna AI, who portends to be a "super-AI" with the figure of an anime character, was/is not only the most popular Vtuber (based on the number of subscribers), but also one of the most sophisticated in terms of expression. Kizuna AI features a complex 3D model of her character utilizing (almost) full-body motion capture, facial recognition technology, and with a presence across multiple different platforms (e.g. Twitter, Niconico, Bilibili). Starting in November of 2016, Kizuna AI quickly skyrocketed to success, with nearly three million subscribers on YouTube. This popularity is not isolated to Japan, as evinced by subtitles and official messages regularly appearing in multiple languages, with many fans in Japan, Korea, the US, UK, the Philippines, and China (she has one million subscribers on her Bilibili channel), among other countries. Her popularity even grew to the point that she was named an ambassador for the Japan National Tourism Organization. Along with short YouTube content videos performing skits, playing games, and/or making light commentary on a particular topic, she also releases music videos and livestreams (responding to fans in the chat, playing games, and concerts), and collaborates with other Vtubers. Initially managed and owned by the company Activ8 and their in-house agency upd8, Kizuna AI was later moved to her own company Kizuna AI Inc. in 2020, where they officially acknowledged the role of Kizuna AI's central actress Kasuga Nozomi, who is now also an advisor to the company.

The reasons for these shifts were partly due to the complex reaction by fans to the sudden (literal) multiplication of her character, and the consequently precarious role of Kasuga, whose involvement was, at the time, never officially confirmed by the secretive Activ8/upd8 company. It is this controversy that will be the focus of this chapter. To give an overview of the event that led to the scandal, beginning in March 2019, the A.I. Channel released a series of ten videos entitled "Kizuna AI's Everyday," which multiplied Kizuna AI to pro-

duce four different versions of her.[1] Ostensibly, as the narrative goes, because Kizuna AI is a virtual character, she considers it beneficial to have herself replicated (like other digital media). Over the course of the series, the videos that introduced the initial versions went through a process of inquiry regarding what specifically makes a character unique, as they attempt to differentiate these new versions of AI. Although much of the content is silly, it does openly engage with certain inquiries, such as "how does one perform a character?" and "what are their limits in regard to producing an individual?"

Implicitly, however, other questions about selfhood, agency, and expression in the digital age come to the fore. While the above-noted inquiries are played out for comedic effect, they also explain the introduction and development of the three new characters to A.I. Channel. These new characters were portrayed as new additions to the "A.I. Party" but effectively seemed to leave Kasuga out and/or replace her appearances entirely. Fans began to become concerned for Kasuga and felt betrayed that she was getting pushed to the side now that Kizuna AI had become so popular on the back of her efforts. In some senses, the video series can be seen as anticipating such a reaction, as much of the narrative across the short series concentrates on the changing voices of the new replicas and their new "personalities," so to speak.

Part of the reason for the negative response by fans was the way that Kizuna AI was duplicated. Though the voices changed, the character design of the Kizuna AIs was kept largely the same throughout the series. It was also discovered that the company (at the time, Activ8) fully owns the character rights. This drew attention to the fact that, whatever Kizuna AI's character is, it is a composite of technologies and designs and voice actress (as well as Activ8's direction) that is not owned by the lead performer Kasuga. As such, all profits are kept by the company, and this multiplication meant a further reduction of the role of Kasuga (perhaps against her wishes).

This situation was further complicated by the fourth version of Kizuna AI introduced at the end of the series, who is not only voiced by a Chinese voice actress in Chinese, but is mainly active on Bilibili. This brings attention to important transnational and transplatform currents, as Kizuna AI is an "official cultural diplomat" for Japan, but now also has an official Chinese "version" of herself on Bilibili. Her movement across platforms, nations, and languages thus raises questions about the contemporary intersection between digital, national, and cultural boundaries. Building on recent research in Asian Studies and

---

1 Much of this timeline is a summary of having watched the events unfold on various platforms (YouTube, Reddit, Twitter, and various blogs), but user posted summaries can be found (fakcheater 2019; Harmonyano 2019; Kanrinin 2019).

Media Studies, on how the transnational and transmedia intersect in the digital age, this chapter will explore how the assemblage of Kizuna AI's character performance operates across technologies and platforms. This Vtuber performance brings into relief a certain tension and convergence across individual, digital, and national borders, in what has been called by Marc Steinberg and others the "platform society" (2019).

In order to explore this line of inquiry, I will first analyse the mechanics of Vtuber performance, detailing how the technologies and techniques intersect with different modes of performance and the resultant configuration of dispersed agency. With these mechanics in mind, I will then examine the specific videos of the multiplication scandal and the subsequent fan reactions. Subsequently, I will detail how this series of events exposed some of the contemporary tensions regarding the performance of selfhood, which is now reliant on digital platforms. Here, the relationship to (neoliberal) individualism is revealed to be in tension with a more contemporary mode of existence that might be called "dividuality," in part facilitated by transnational digital technologies. On the one hand, the modern notion of the individual overlaps with the "container model" of the nation state, presenting a mode of existence that meshes with the "walled garden" of the platform. On the other hand, the dividuality of the Kizuna AI duplicates brings into focus the transnational and transplatform, a different mode of existence on both the micro (the self) and macro scales (the regional) that is beginning to take shape.

Mechanics of Vtuber Performance

Embodied and Figurative Performance

Before examining the multiplication of Kizuna AI, I would like to analyse the enactment of the Vtuber character itself and the technologies utilized in the performance. Although there is little official information on the specifics of the technologies used to perform Kizuna AI, there are certain conjectures that can be confidently made. There are definitely motion capture technologies, 3D modelling, and facial recognition, all of which is utilized with Kasuga as the central performer. That said, she is not performing alone. It is very conceivable that Kizuna AI's performance involves some animators or animation supervisors that adjust the motion capture and the other supposedly automated systems to produce a certain aesthetic. At the minimum, there are surely editors for most videos (except, in cases of live streaming, though animation supervisors are probably on stand-by, or were already involved in tweaking the system before hand).

In any case, what is an important element here is the supposedly automated element that translates the movements into the animated model seen as Kizuna AI. This itself is a change, even if subtle, as the 3D anime-avatar-body cannot directly reproduce all the same movements as the human body can (or even other motion capture technologies). The specific anime-avatar-body of Kizuna AI enables some movements over others (for instance, her specific hairstyle with longer hair will move differently than the avatar-body with shorter hair). There is also the apparently automated "shifting" of the facial expressions, read through the facial-recognition technology, which "translates" the actor's facial expression to certain codified expressions, often taken from the repertoire commonly utilized in anime. As Vtubers are often seen as "anime characters" performed through the use of the above-mentioned technologies by people, I would like to bring in concepts I have developed elsewhere in regard to anime character performance – namely embodied and figurative acting – to further explore how there are clashing and coinciding notions of selfhood implicit in the techniques of these modes of acting. Both of these modes of performance I have conceptualized in relation to anime, building on and deviating from the ideas of animation scholar Donald Crafton (Crafton 2013; Suan 2017a).

I will begin with embodied acting. This type of performance is perhaps best known for producing a sense of "realism" that appears to originate from some interior space and externalized in the unique, gestures, movements, and facial expressions of the actor playing the character. Much of this is developed from Stanislavskian acting from the theatre and the related Method acting from film, and is effectively implemented in animation by Disney's animators from the 1930s onwards (Crafton 2013, 37–41). In animation, the performance of embodied acting is revealed in the subtleties of the movement of the character, whose tiny tweaks of facial expressions, the manner of walking, the speed of their gesticulations, all appear internally driven, and ultimately individualize that character (Suan 2017a).

The ability to accurately "capture" such expressive, unique movements of individuals is part of the appeal of motion capture technologies, building from the tradition of embodied acting of stage, film, and animation. Interestingly, motion capture technologies have also been associated with Method acting, which, according to Mihaela Mihailova is "effectively drawing a historical lineage to Stanislavski's system" and linking this to classical conceptions of cinematic performance. In fact, Mihailova notes how such an emphasis is actually at the exclusion and expense of the animators who are integral to the final performance product, with this view of motion capture focusing on the singular, individual performer whose motion is "captured" (2016, 44).

This relationship to the presence of an individual actor is also observed by Tom Gunning, who notes the importance of the voice in presenting "the

authenticity of physical presence" of actor Andy Serkis in the motion capture animation for Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings* (2006, 333). Likewise, for Kizuna AI, the voice helps tie the motion captured image to the figure of the human celebrity performing. Though Kasuga had a minor career as a TV anime voice actress, she did not receive much recognition until her role as Kizuna AI. Seen as the main figure behind Kizuna AI, Kasuga rose in prominence in conjunction with the Vtuber. Similar to Serkis, Kasuga is not just performing the voice of Kizuna AI, she also enacts the movement. But it is the voice that is seen as most important to fans, and Kasuga is still referred to primarily as a "voice actress" rather than actress. The voice can thus be seen as central to individualizing the character as well as Kasuga herself. This may be seen as connecting to the individualizing tendencies of embodied acting, the motion of which motion capture purports to capture. Because of this, there is a presumed correlation of the individualized motion that is captured with a celebrity figure (a real-world individual) that supposedly produces those unique motions. As the voice actress is also doing the gesturing, the merging of the embodied acting with the voice acting results in what might initially be perceived as a highly individualized performance for the character of Kizuna AI who is identified with Kasuga the voice actress.

Yet, Gunning asserts that while the voice may imply a physical presence, the animated image "shows a greater degree of independence" (Ibid., 334). Motion capture, as Gunning describes, "involve[s] technology intervening on the human body in action and breaking it down into visual units," the body's movements are processed into data, resulting in "the creation of an artificial mobile human figure" (Ibid., 332–333). Referring to precursors of cinema and motion capture technology in the kinetoscope and chronophotography, Gunning notes how the images of human figures in motion against black backgrounds (and in chronophotography, white buttons and lines on a black figure to "map out" the elements necessary for the "essential plotting of motion"), there is a sense of independence of those figures from the place where they were filmed; distinct from other approaches to cinema, which presented spaces of depth and environment, these early precursors to motion capture allow the human figure to be disassociated from their direct surroundings (Ibid., 331–332). Similarly, the captured movement as well as the anime-avatar itself seem to have an inbuild divisibility: the movement is mapped out and dissociated from the performer onto the anime-avatar, which itself can be displaced onto any background.

This leads into the second type of acting in figurative performance, which relies on pre-existing codes that are reiterated in combination to create the sense of a character's selfhood. This should not be seen as the opposite or entirely dissociated from embodied performance. In fact, the two types of per-

Figure 1. Various versions of Kizuna AI performing, the two on the right enacting the same anime-esque figurative acting code of arched-eyes for smiling (A.I.Channel, 2019d).

formance are mutually implicated in one another, even if certain techniques of performance tend to gravitate to one tendency over the other. This is certainly the case for anime, where the character acting tends towards figurative acting in the nearly ubiquitous usage of a repertoire of conventionalized codes for expression. Instead of the individualized, unique motions of embodied acting, figurative acting tends to favour the reiteration of certain codified expressions, such as the arched-eyes for smiling, making the iris and pupils of the eye smaller to express fear and/or shock, or turning the eyes into > < marks to (often comically) express certain types of sadness or pain. Although I have focused on facial expressions here, figurative acting codes in anime include types of walking, running, and a whole variety of gestures, many of which are cited in the performance of Vtuber characters. While only some anime-esque bodily gestures are repeated by Vtubers by reproducing the movements via motion capture, the majority of facial expressions are directly cited from anime by Vtubers via facial recognition technology.

This process of citation is actually fundamental to figurative acting in general, as each code is only legible in relation to prior iterations of that code, making each enactment forced to stay within a certain range of expression in order to be understood. As such, each iteration of a figurative acting code is always in some relationship to prior examples, and appear less as if they are from "in" the character, and more like citations "on" the character. Moreover, the codes are not individual and unique to that character, but come from outside of them, not isolated to the bodies that enact them, enabling very different spatial dynamics than the internal/external expositions of embodied

acting. Because of this reliance on prior iterations, there is the sense that the characters are drawing from a repertoire or "database" (Azuma 2009) of such conventionalized expressive codes.

In the case of Vtubers, this is somewhat literal, as the facial recognition technology reads the facial expression of the human actor and then "translates" that into the figurative code from anime. When figurative acting codes are used in established performing arts (such as Noh or Topeng), the human actor goes through vigorous training to learn the repertoire of codes and reperform them, gaining some sense of proficiency for the codes (which they must succumb to in order to learn), then becoming the arbiters of their proper execution (i.e. judging what is and is not "proper form," and serving as examples to be reiterated) (Suan 2017a, 9–10). But for Vtubers, the animators who initially create the expressions refine the codified movements (themselves from anime), and keep them in a literal database to be recalled. Afterwards, the software reperforms the codes based off of the actor's expressions. In some sense, then, the facial recognition (a combination of the technological apparatus and the algorithms mapping the human facial expression to a decided upon codified expression for the avatar) takes over control from the actor in favour of the limited range of the figurative codes that are decided upon by the facial recognition software – that is to say, while the human actor can learn to manipulate the software to produce certain expressions, which human facial expression is mapped onto the Vtuber character model and when precisely that switch occurs is at least partially done by the software.

The switching between codes is also important to anime's particular brand of figurative acting. Characters are built by switching between various different codes, with certain codes (e.g. smiling, or grimacing) utilized more frequently. In addition, this switching is afforded by certain types of animation. While embodied acting tends to rely on minor movements with smooth transitions between them, often exploiting the lush, full movements of full animation (even with motion capture), anime's figurative acting developed from limited, cel animation. In anime, swift, jerky cuts between different image compositions dominate the type of animation in anime (even with the usage of computers), and this enables the sudden switches between codified expressions, allowing sometimes jarring jumps between emotional registers (from euphoria, to sobbing, to violent anger all in a few frames).

The rapid switches between emotional registers enabled by the quick cuts are something shared both by limited animation in anime and YouTuber editing across the world, whether Virtual or not. In many YouTube videos, the image compositions do not change to the extremes that anime often does, but there are sudden jump cuts to different expressions and images that regularly appear. In this sense, there is a visual format that provides an easy acceptance of ani-

me's conventions of rapid switching of codified (facial) expressions, allowing for a relatively smooth remediating of anime's figurative acting performance in the YouTuber format.

Youtube editing tends to have its own rhythm distinct from anime, guided by a different logic, not necessarily based on visuality, as the voice is so important to maintaining a flow. Here once more the importance of the individual (voice) actor comes to the fore. Indeed, the idiosyncrasies of individuals becomes part of the appeal of many YouTube personalities, and Vtubers are no different. However, it is not simply that the facial expressions are figurative acting codes and the bodily gestures in motion capture are embodied acting – the relationship is slightly more complex than that division. While the facial expressions are almost always those done by anime characters, some of the hand gestures (re-animated by motion capture) appear to be the movements commonly enacted by female *geinōjin* (celebrity) actors seen on Japanese TV. There is also the influence of musical idols, like when playing the part of a curious and cute character, including certain head tilts, hand gestures, or the manner in which the characters lean in towards the camera. These also become part of a figurative acting repertoire because they are not to be considered unique to the character, but rather codes that signal they are a certain type of character, regardless of whether it is based on a human celebrity or anime character. Furthermore, although the voice tends to tie the character to the human voice actor, there is an element of figurative performance involved, as the type of vocal performance is within the range of anime-esque voices (*animegoe*), a way of speaking and inflecting the voice that must be trained for and practiced. Indeed, as noted above, Kasuga herself has performed in different anime TV series. What gives the anime-esque voices an element of figurative acting is that they are highly stylized modes of vocal performance commonly employed in TV anime. Though each voice actor has their own "grain of the voice" (c.f. Barthes 1978), there is certainly overlap in the timbre, tones, and ranges of expression that are recognizably distinct from everyday speech in Japanese.

In sum, in the performance of Vtubers, there is a tension in the production of individualism under the combination of embodied acting's motion capture and figurative acting's infinite reproducibility of (data-fied) expressive codes. With the various modes of division and disassociation at play in Vtuber performance mechanics, it is not necessarily strange to see the splitting of Kizuna AI into multiple different characters. For the utilization of motion capture already presumes a "transference" of movement from Kasuga to the avatar. This process of transferring embodied movement meshes well with the iterative enactments of figurative acting codes, which are themselves already multiples of prior instances of those codes. Furthermore, Kizuna AI was also already

repeated across media before the duplication scandal hit, as there are many viewers who would make illustrations of the character and posts them on the various other platforms Kizuna AI utilizes. In this sense, Kizuna AI was already split into different versions of herself before she officially multiplied, a topic I will touch on below.

Dispersal of Agency

Partly because of the sensitivity of the motion capture technology, even in these figurative movements by the actor, there is a sense of uniqueness that is foregrounded in the resulting performance. Even the figurative expressions become utilized at certain moments that appear somewhat specific to Kizuna AI, due to the "stutters" of the facial recognition software, not always effectively switching to the next expression. Broadly, the stutters are highlighted when the facial recognition is slightly too slow, when what is said does not quite align with the facial expression, or when the movement of the body (often the hands) are not fully articulated, and it comes across as disjointed or awkwardly placed. Often, these different types of stutters can occur at the same time.

As Hirota notes, it is frequently such stutters or "gaps" between the various elements that constitute a character that provides much of the allure of Vtubers (2018, 50). These gaps make it difficult to conceive of Vtubers as a seamless individualized character in the modern sense: a self-contained, human individual who is indivisible, internally consistent, and whose interior intentions allow them to operate on the external world (the conceptual backbone for embodied acting). Against such an individual character, the Vtuber is visibly composed from different technologies working with (and against) the human agent, the gap coming into view when the technologies stutter, or purposefully exposed by the human to create an "interesting" (*omoshiroi* in Hirota's words) juxtaposition.

Such "gaps" invite questions about location of character and agency: Where is the actual locus of character creation? Is it the software: the rendering software or the facial recognition software? Or is it really the character designer who made the designs? Or is it the character actor? What about the voice actor (who could, theoretically, be distinct from the motion captured actor, or animator, as in the case of anime itself)? Or is it the people directing the whole process? Upon closer analysis, such "gaps" reveal that the Vtuber character is not just an avatar, but a composite of all the human and non-human actants involved (actors, character models, motion capture, facial recognition technolo-

Figure 2. Ai-Ge, the Chinese Kizuna AI version, posing with various illustrations made by fans in Japan and China, part of the ecology of appreciation (A.I.Channel, 2019m).

gy, figurative acting codes, etc.).[2] As such, there is a dispersal of agency in the very enactment of the character, despite the focus on the individual human actor.

Perhaps part of the appeal of Vtubers is that this dispersal of agency in the performance of character is not isolated to them. Indeed, one can see similar issues in daily communication practices with the use of filters in common SNS imaging applications, whereby someone films or photographs themselves but the software's filters apply shifts to colour, facial shape and expression, as well as overlaying dynamic imagery on the video or photo of the person. All of these elements are interacting to produce the final product, but the effect of the filter is so apparent that it is hard not to at least consider that the filtering software is a significant actant in the final process, perhaps over that of the human subject in the photo. In fact, this very dynamic is engaged with in a video by Kizuna AI, playing with different layers of agency, acting, and imagery. A rare live-action video, it features the point-of-view of a woman using a cellphone in an office, utilizing an SNS application filter to capture the real-time acting of the Kizuna AI character on a tablet, which is supposed to turn her face into a baby or an elderly person (A.I.Channel 2019n). In this video, the gaps are once more highlighted, as the software appears to have

---

2 Although I generally prefer the word "actor" to consider the agency of non-humans, I use the word "actant" here, drawing from the theories of Bruno Latour, for ease of explanation, as I refer to the human actor Kasuga so often (Latour 2005).

trouble properly "reading" the Vtuber, bringing to the viewer's attention to the importance of the software in the performance.

The dispersal of agency in the performance of the character also spreads beyond the Activ8/Kizuna AI Inc. production room and YouTube channel into the fandom. In fact, there are direct ways that fans participate in the production of the character. Nanba Yūki describes how fans produce an "ecology of appreciation" (*kanshō no kankyō*) via creating a network of inter-referenced fan "products" (*purodakuto*). These include animated videos, manga, and illustrations, among other products. Although fans often reference these works to create further works (such as a popular illustration that is used to create an animated video), these fan works are also remarked on by the actual Vtuber who is the central subject of these products. For Nanba, each of these fan creations are specific interpretations (and/or criticisms) that become shared among fans, many of them becoming quite widely circulated, and over time this accumulated recognition becomes an "interpretive convention" (*kaishaku-tekina kanshū*) of that Vtuber. Though these interpretations do compound over time, they also change as new interpretations and re-interpretations enter into this network of fan products. All of this is shared between fans and the Vtuber and is the process through which the "persona image" of the Vtuber is constituted. Because of this fan participation in the persona image of the Vtuber, these changing interpretive conventions via the ecology of appreciation becomes an important lens through which all the Vtuber's behaviours, actions, and speech is understood by these fans (Nanba 2018, 122–123). As such, in many ways the means by which fans interpret and produce this persona image is central to the performance of the Vtuber, and is subsequently another actant in the operations of Vtuber performance, beyond the control of the actresses and Activ8 (or any other owners).

This, in practice, crosses platforms and national boundaries. For example, in one of Kizuna AI's videos on YouTube, AI is shown reacting to a number of videos made by fans that depict her in various media, performing various actions and scenarios. For instance, there is a short animation video of her acting in a common anime scenario of a schoolgirl getting angry at someone for making her wait. There is also a short computer animated *chibi*-version of a Kizuna AI figurine dancing to energetic music – to which AI even remarks that she would like such a product of her (as merchandise). While the first appears to be from Twitter and posted by Japanese fans, the last one is actually from Bilibili by a Chinese fan (A.I.Channel 2019l). In such videos and interactions with fans, the ecology of appreciation operates across media platforms and across national boundaries, even directly affecting Kizuna AI herself. Beyond Kizuna AI, these cross-platform, transnational "meme reviews" of fan produced images and videos are common practices by other Vtubers.

Multiplying Kizuna AI

Switching Characters

With this understanding of Vtuber performance mechanics, from the complex engagement with embodied and figurative acting through the technologies and techniques utilized, to the resultant dispersal of agency involved in the constitution of Vtuber characters, it is worthwhile examining how these operate in the "Kizuna AI's Everyday" video series and consequent multiplication of Kizuna AIs. Usually, Kizuna AI's videos are short one-shots filled will jokes, clips of her playing games, or singing songs (both covers and originals). However, the "Everyday" videos were a relatively rare string of ten short videos that directly built off of each previous video. However, it is hard to state that the narrative was cohesive. Instead, the series is filled with silly gags and appears not to be aimed as serious explorations of the notion of character. That said, there are events that occur in the videos that help illuminate certain elements of the performance of character for Vtubers and how characters themselves "diversify" through such techniques, which will in turn reveal the operations of contemporary modes of existence in the platform society (to be taken up in the following section).

The first video (#1), "Would you believe me if I said there were 4 Kizuna AIs?," has Kizuna AI take the stationary camera, which she usually speaks into, and "detaches" it, turning it into a selfie-like video that she holds with one hand as she moves around the blank expanse within which she usually talks (A.I.Channel 2019b). This move mimics many of the human YouTubers who move around their homes or the world, filming as they talk to the camera – the camera even artificially distorts her face with a slight "fisheye" curve like similar cameras used by YouTubers. As she moves around, she introduces 3 other versions of herself, each doing a different activity (e.g. one playing games, the other dancing).

At this point in time, all the voices appear to be performed by Kasuga, whose higher pitched voice sounds vaguely like Mickey Mouse (a description used to tease her in some videos). In the next episode (#2), these AI's wonder if "(n)Kizuna AI's= 1 Kizuna AI?" and question if they can evolve beyond a "split" of the one character (A.I.Channel 2019c). Over the course of later episodes, they begin to ask if she changed form if she would still be Kizuna AI, turning into various 2D versions of the character, including a "cel-anime" 2D version of AI (#3) (A.I.Channel 2019d). Later, they ask what "elements" (*yōso*) are shared by all the Kizuna AI, referring to a number of screenshots from previous videos. Ultimately, they mention certain catch phrases and her "cuteness" but focus on the character design element of her *pyoko* ribbon (#4) (A.I.Channel 2019e). They

all then shift their modes of speaking (different types of formality and tone), mimicking the gestures and the iconic voices and speech patterns of characters like Furuhata Ninzaburō and Ikari Gendō (#5) (A.I.Channel 2019f). This continues into the next episode (#6), where the four of them switch between different anime-esque voices, such as a more serious female character, an adult female newscaster, an "*ikebo*" deep, sultry male voice, a female vocaloid, and finally a childish girl's voice (A.I.Channel 2019g). Along with the voice actress changes (but perhaps not the body of the person in the motion capture suit), the gestures also change to correspond to the new voice and content of the speech which correlates to that character type.

This focus on switching roles is not necessarily unique to these videos, as the first Kizuna AI often performs various skits and parts (such as working at a snack-bar in Kansai, speaking in the Kansai dialect) (A.I.Channel 2020b), or parody scenes from anime (such as an advertisement for earphones that parodies the final episode of the *Evangelion* TV series) (A.I.Channel 2019a). In many of these examples, AI also acts as a different character, sometimes with new voices inserted, or a different set of gestures. In this sense, just like the interchangeable figurative acting codes used to visualize expressions and the mapping of the motion captured actor's movement onto the character avatar, other parts of Kizuna AI were switched in and out for comedic or dramatic effect. In the "Kizuna AI's Everyday" videos, this is all just dramatized and somewhat narrativized across the series of videos, with some sort of direct inquiry about these operations, drawing attention to the act of their divisible elements.

This is addressed in the next episode (#7), where the adult female voice-AI notes that "when there are a number differences [like this], it is called 'diversity'" (*Kōiu fū ni iroirona chigai ga aru jōtai wo 'tayō-sei' tte iu ndesu ne*), continuing with "[i]f humans all have various differences, if I want to connect with many people, I should acquire more diversity" (A.I.Channel 2019h). They all agree, one even stating that she wants to "become an anime (series)" (*animeka shitai*), and want to explore their various possibilities. In the following episode (#8), the random generator box (a large pink box sometimes used in various episodes to provide various prompts) scolds the four Kizuna AIs (each apparently voiced by Kasuga once more), stating: "Can you stop using 4 people for one person's statement?" (A.I.Channel 2019i). Afterwards, they all decide that they want to "acquire diversity" and one decides to "install" something to achieve that goal.

In the next video (#9), one of the AI's has a new anime-esque female voice (sounding more mature than Kasuga), and they all compete with who can say something in the most "sexy" voice, resulting in a tie between the first and new voice (A.I.Channel 2019j). At the end, two of the AI's want to "install" a new

voice. Consequently, in the final video a third voice appears, this one with an anime-esque, still youthful, but less high-pitched voice than Kasuga's. This final episode (#10) includes skit performances where there are mini-narratives which re-perform some common tropes of romance and *moe* anime, visual novels, and dating simulation games, all performed by the new "youthful" voice: a high-school student having waited for a crush, asks to walk home with them from school; calling a love interest on the phone as they are picking up this friend/love interest for school but the friend overslept (A.I.Channel 2019k). At the end of the episode, the last Kizuna AI without a new voice is shown still installing, frozen in place.

Taken together, these episodes evince a number of operations in the performance of Vtuber characters. Firstly, the reliance on "otaku media," in particular anime, as sources for citations of character types, facial and bodily expressions (anime's figurative acting codes), voice acting and speech patterns (for certain anime character types and the recognizable "anime voice"), as well as for various situations and jokes. Because the characters' costume, "database" of facial expressions, and character avatar did not change (except when they became 2D), the result was 4 different versions of the same character where the differences emphasized were the gestures and the voices that the characters have that creates the "diversity" they sought to acquire. Furthermore, just like the combinatory switching of figurative acting, all of these elements appear to be able to be switched in and out to create another "version" of Kizuna AI. Moreover, there is an emphasis on performance itself, in that the characters seemed to enjoy (especially in the final episodes) the act of directly performing various skits, acting out different types of characters.

Individualization

Eventually, in later videos outside of the "Kizuna AI's Everyday" series, each of the versions of Kizuna AI get their own nicknames: "Ai-chan" for the first Kizuna AI (Kasuga) and "Love-chan" and "Aipii" for the two later versions. The third version is eventually revealed to be "Ai-Ge" in another video, introducing her as a Chinese version of Kizuna AI who speaks with a similar inflection as Ai-chan but entirely in Chinese (A.I.Channel 2019m). The backstory is that Ai-Ge has installed the Chinese language pack (and it is implied that this is the fourth Kizuna AI from the final episode). Ai-Ge also has a distinctive costume, which has various traditional knot patterns that imply certain stereotypes of Chinese clothing, and the character features a lot of red, making her costume easily stand out from the other characters as clearly culturally marked.

Figure 3. Love-chan (left, with the # mark), Ai-chan (middle), and Ai-pii (right, with the * mark) all in the same basic 3D model for Kizuna AI (A.I.Channel, 2019o).

There is also the "gamer Kizuna AI" (which has a separate costume) as well as another AI version named "Black-Ai," which appears in an all-black costume and speaks in a lower octave, both played by Kasuga (although it seems the other voice actresses each switch into "gamer Ai" occasionally). However, though "gamer Ai" is just a version of Kizuna AI that focuses on gaming, the Black-Ai character's persona is not like the first Ai-chan. Instead of a bubbly persona, Black-Ai is overly realistic and blunt. She is a "darker," haughtier version of Kizuna AI, playing on tropes from anime characters of a similar type. Black-Ai's performance is also accompanied by a different set of repeated facial expressions and bodily movements. Instead of Kizuna AI's resting pose of a wide-eyed look of interest and a minimal smile, she has on a slight smirk and a sceptical look most of the time; rather than Ai-chan's exuberant gestures (e.g. waving her arms wildly), Black-Ai is much slower moving, as if she is bored by the conversation she is having. Additionally, Black-Ai's performance is very different to that of the other AI versions, as Love-chan and Aipii try to keep the same type of facial expressions and movements as the original Kizuna AI. Even the Chinese Ai-Ge attempts to do the same, but in the Chinese language and new character avatar. Though the character designs and voices are distinct, the overall impression attempts to assert that these newly multiplied versions are all simply different versions of the original Kizuna AI.

All of this seems to gravitate around the affordances of the modes of acting and the technologies drawn upon to perform Kizuna AI, but in contradistinction to earlier modes of conceptualizing human performance. Put

differently, many of the "gaps" of the conception of a modern performance of character – that is, the human actor, enacting a unified, rational character, the modern individual who is not permeable, with agency and autonomy – are brought to the fore. In effect, this reveals how different Kizuna AI is from such a character, while also highlighting the modern individualistic view in relief. Indeed, the very idea of splitting Kizuna AI and differentiating the new versions from the first versions seems to paradoxically support the notion of an "original" and "lesser copies" – which is precisely the reactions the fans had. In other words, on the surface this duplication event would appear to reaffirm the oft-remarked rise of the derivative, the negative fan response reveals a lingering (if not favouring) of the modern individual. Indeed, it is very hard not to compare the newer versions to the original Kizuna AI, which has become all too apparent to me as I have been writing this article. Though I want to stress the potential of the various versions of Kizuna AI, in the process of writing I have to resort to labelling the "first" and multiplied "versions" to make the explanation of this complex dynamic easier to parse for unfamiliar readers.

In any event, what occurs is a constant swaying between these two poles: the individualistic character and this dispersed character now multiplied, just as the technologies of motion capture and facial recognition (which are made to capture and produce individualism) become overlaid with figurative codes (which tend to reliably (re)produce certain patterns). Even as the individualistic elements are violated (e.g. a different voice actress speaking through AI's mouth), their violation tends to provide some sort of affective response only in relation to the individualism it is disturbing. The result is that the individualism is always a ghost in the background, there but not there, unshakeable. For instance, when Kizuna AI acts through figurative acting "normally" – without different voices, for example – she has to constantly reinforce that she is a singular character. Indeed, she almost compulsively repeats her name and personality qualities, as if there is some anxiety over her not being actually her.

The multiplication of Kizuna AI also highlighted the importance of the central voice actress Kasuga. Fans were upset because Kasuga was seen as getting pushed out of the franchise. In this way, the focus on the individual was not just Kizuna AI, but the human central in the performance. The fact that in later videos Love-chan and Aipii did not have newly designed avatars was not received favourably. For fans in multiple places and languages, it was seen as if the individual Kasuga was positioned to be replaced, resulting in much discussion on the internet and a significant dip in popularity as many fans actively unsubscribed. In response, a # and * marks were placed on the head of Love-chan and Aipii respectively to differentiate them (A.I.Channel 2019o), and later they received costumes that were similar to but distinct from that of Ai-chan. Eventually, Love-chan and Ai-pii were given entirely new

character designs that do not resemble Ai-chan and put onto their own channel with a different set of Vtuber technologies that make them more 2D with less complex motion capture capabilities. Gamer Ai was given her own channel that focuses on games, Black-Ai makes the occasional appearance, and Ai-Ge still persists relatively unchanged from her initial form, but operating mainly on Bilibili (a topic I will address more later). After all of these changes, the company Kizuna AI Inc was formed with Kasuga officially recognized as the central voice-actress. When these changes settled in, the negative fan reactions effectively died down.

(Ir)replaceable

I raise all this here because the entire "Kizuna AI's Everyday" "episode" in the history of Kizuna AI reveals certain underlying dynamics. The fact that the human component of the voice actress can be replaced by another voice actress brings the Kizuna AI character to a realm of performance distinct from other, human YouTubers. Usually, YouTubers sell their individuality, their personal quirks, style, mannerisms, knowledge, etc., and cannot be replaced because of that (only fall into unpopularity or quit). But for Kizuna AI, the individualism-as-product that sustains many YouTube personas, becomes replaceable – a concept anathema to the notion of individualism itself: by definition, an individual is unique and irreplaceable. Yet here the distinctiveness of the character is able to be replicated, the original replaced and even multiplied, enabled by the technologies that afford this performance. As such, the tensions between individualism and replication echo those in the modes of the performance, whereby the embodied acting of the human movements (themselves riddled with conventional modes of idol and *geinōjin* gestures) and the figurative acting of the anime-esque facial expressions.

Consider the differences between the personalities: the first voice actress, though very similar in timbre of the voice to the second voice actress (Love-chan), is identifiably distinct from Kasuga, and eventually gets a different stylization than the voice used in "Kizuna AI's Everyday" final videos (#9 and #10). Though hard to pin down or specify, the first voice actress (Kasuga, for Ai-chan) felt a bit sillier, more spontaneous and dynamic, as if she fully embraced the ridiculousness and absurdity of her performance as Kizuna AI, obviously pretending to ignore the façade of her character as an actual AI. The second still retains many of the character attributes of silliness and delighting in ridiculousness played for laughs, but has a bubbliness that seems a bit forced, as if she is quite cognizant of the role she is playing, a second level of performance that is, in Richard Schechner's words "showing doing" of the character (2013,

28). This same issue is replicated across all the different versions of Kizuna AI, from those that sound similar to the third (Ai-pii), who sounds more like a "younger sister" (*imōto*) anime character type, and the fourth (Ai-Ge), who speaks in Chinese. In each case the issue of reenacting Kizuna AI as the same yet distinct is evident in these newer versions, constantly "showing doing" as they perform towards a certain "model" of Kizuna AI.

Here, it is apparent that the replacement voice actress also loses some agency, as the character, although always in process of constitution in each video installment, must retain some degree of consistency to earlier video installments. Because of this, the actor must stay within the previously established boundaries of that character, a specific field of expression within which she must enact Kizuna AI to be recognizable to earlier performances. Maintaining such a relation to the earlier iteration of the character is in some ways built into the technologies that enable the performance: the facial expressions are pre-determined, as is the avatar design itself. But the vocal range of the voice, as well as the particulars of the bodily gestures must also be recognizable. The vocabulary, scripts, and/or scenarios used in the videos must also be similar to previous iterations (or change slowly enough over time to provide some sense of "character development"). In this sense, even the directors and owners of the Kizuna AI character (at the time, Activ8/upd8) are actually constrained by the previous iterations of the character and cannot freely act. Indeed, they must walk a tightrope because fan reactions could be adverse if they deviate too far from the established parameters.

In fact, such occurrences have happened in relation to the duplication controversy. Fan reactions were so disapproving that Activ8 actively censored the comments that reacted negatively to the multiplication of AIs. This censorship can be seen as an attempt to control the ecology of appreciation of the character, but ultimately resulted in further negative reactions. In one case, Chinese fans boycotted the character, with 100,000 fans unsubscribing in one week (Morrissy 2019). Broadly, the fans were upset at the treatment of Kasuga in particular, whose performance was viewed as central to not only building the character but the Kizuna AI brand itself. There were speculations from fans that, due to the surge in popularity of Ai-chan, Kasuga was exhausted by overextending herself and these newer versions were created to help ease the burden off of Kasuga. This was partly based on Kasuga's somewhat cryptic messages on her personal social media voicing her frustrations and stress about the events. But the fact that Aipii and Love-chan were simply "duplications" or "multiplications" of Ai-chan, often performing in place of Kasuga and not seen as completely separate characters, was a point of contention. Fans felt that they were not receiving the actual Ai-chan when Love-chan or Ai-pii were the performers at events they paid for. It was as if fans were not receiving the

same product because Kasuga was not herself always performing, giving the impression that Kasuga in particular was getting betrayed by the company that owned Kizuna AI, despite her integral role in its development and performance.

What I would like to point to here is the issue of transference of what was initially seen as an individual quality. Specifically, the first Kizuna AI was seen as a unique individual, a character that could not be replaced, and the core of that character was seen to be the first voice actress (Kasuga). However, as noted prior, so much of the Kizuna AI character relies directly beyond any one person's control: character designs and facial expressions from anime and manga, which are forcibly enacted reliably through 3D modelling and facial recognition technologies, gestures that mimic Japanese TV celebrities and idols, and the interaction between a complex fan base and a directorial and animation team/company, which all plays out across multiple different media platforms.

In a sense, the reliance on figurative acting and motion capture helps ensure that transference is possible at all. This includes the facial expressions and character avatar most apparently, but the bodily gestures of the various human actors who now appear on screen acting together, can maintain a sense of uniformity and similarity via the characteristic gestures of Kizuna AI. Effectively, the mimicking of Ai-chan, which was produced largely through the individualized movements of Kasuga's through motion capture (embodied performance), becomes the subject of repetition, attempting to turn those movements into figurative acting codes. That said, it is also clear that the gestures of the other characters are not always the same, the individualizing tendencies of embodied acting still seeping through. Though Love-chan will attempt to stand like the first Ai-chan – leaning slightly forward and to the side, hands extended outwards slightly – occasionally a momentary distinction in the subtleties of the stance will arise as she moves to the next gesture, such as a unique hair flick or hand movements for explaining something.

This also appears in the performance of the voice actresses themselves. The first Kizuna AI reveled in the silliness of her character and played the part of the spacy, naïve heroine from anime and manga in real time. But despite carefully enacted gaffs, moments of performing goofiness, and a general sense of childish playfulness, she would occasionally get the upper-hand, especially in interactions with people online with witty comebacks, clever lines, self-deprecating humour, or an impressive display of knowledge. In fact, she was often sharp or snarky. For example, when performing a livestream during the COVID pandemic in Japan, a user requested to "Please wash my (male) hands" (*boku no te wo aratte kudasai*), and upon reading it out loud, immediately responds with "You wash your own hands!" (*jibun no te wo aratte kudasai*) in a playfully scolding voice (A.I.Channel 2020a, 15:38). Immediately afterwards, she returns to a softer tone and explains the importance of washing hands, performing in

a cuter tone. The chauvinistic comment was immediately disarmed through her tone in a comedic manner and her response was reacted to positively by the fans in the super chat. Such instances display Kasuga's quick wit and impressive control of her voice and ability to effectively utilize the limited facial gestures by working with the motion capture and facial recognition software (this time, without any "gaps"). Here, Ai-chan was able to effectively move between emotional registers (as her facial expressions did, matching her vocal and facial tone), expressing the complexity of the performance of the Kizuna AI character: spacy but sharp, playful but forceful. This is, in many ways, an effect of the improvisational acting skills of Kasuga, and reveals part of the sense of personality of the Kizuna AI character through her acting. The other Kizuna AI versions attempt to recreate a similar characterization, and the scripted skits as well as edits on games do evince a degree of sustaining that character across the various people and technologies. But none of them seem to have the same punchiness as the first Kizuna AI.

It is also worth noting that around the time of the controversy, Kasuga made her own YouTube channel by appearing live on camera, and while fans did support her, it was clear that Kasuga alone was not Kizuna AI, even though she was a fundamental part of Ai-chan's performance – the dressings of the motion capture, character avatar, facial recognition technology and anime-esque expressions (as well as all the other animators, editors, and script writers) are all part and parcel of the Kizuna AI performance. Unfortunately, it is not the case that Kasuga owns those necessary technological apparatuses, nor the broader Kizuna AI character itself, even though she is an integral part of that assemblage. Here, once more, there is an underlying current of the tensions between individualism and this more divisible sense of self in the character, which I will address below.

Platformativity and the Vectorialist class

Character, Platform, Self

Not isolated to the performance of Vtubers, the intersection of individualism and a more divisible conception of self seems endemic to the contemporary era, a time where the platform is all-pervasive in our daily lives and expression of self. As Steinberg asserts, "the rise of the conceptual model of platform as universal mediation device within management theory and its effectuation in actual platform practice marks the infiltration of managerial logics more fully into the social body, producing what we now call the platform society" (2019, 9). For Steinberg, the "platformization" of our world is so deep that

nearly everything becomes a platform of sorts, from YouTube to characters (cf. Condry 2013) to brick-and-mortar stores, leading us into an era of the "platform society."

To further explore how the performance of Vtuber characters relates to the enactment selfhood in the platform society, I would like to bring in Thomas Lamarre's notion of platformativity:

> To embark on an analytics of the infraindividual intra-actions between self, character, and platform, we might think in terms of platformativity, which is say [sic], a sort of performativity related to platforms. Judith Butler's now-classic articulation of performativity concerned the human individual reiterating itself, with iterations bringing an affective infraindividual potentiality to the surface, enabling repetition with difference. In platformativity, both characters (or media content more broadly) and platforms (and thus infrastructures) actively exert pressure and play an active role, or more precisely an intra-active role. Platformativity, then, concerns the iteration of selves, characters, and platforms that generates the compositional plane underlying their interactions, thus giving a compositional force to them (Lamarre 2018, 206).

For Lamarre, the platform, character, and self begin to take on "degrees of semblance" with one another: "As the platform becomes both character-like and selflike, so the character becomes platformlike and selflike, and the self becomes platformlike and character-like" (2018, 208). Here, "from the depths of the farseeing platform, the character reaches out. In the intimacy of the character, the platform pushes back" (Ibid., 210). However, Lamarre is not just discussing platforms like YouTube, but television and anime specifically, revealing how supposedly new media are actually already implicated in prior media and technologies, and vice versa.

Specifically, Lamarre notes how TV's broadcasting flows are segmented (e.g. opening, commercial, story A, commercial, story B, commercial, ending, preview). Consequently, "as the anime character makes its appearances in segments with different codes, such as songs, stories, and commercials, it oscillates between discrete and nondiscrete existence in a specific manner" (Ibid., 215). Moreover, "because the different segments by design entail different audiovisual codes, as the anime character crops up in different kinds of segments, it comes to incorporate the nondiscreteness of anime and to embody it within what appears to be a discrete body. There are different ways of assessing this combination of discreteness and nondiscreteness within the anime character" (Ibid., 213). For instance, a character from an anime about saving a spaceship in another galaxy from invading aliens may show up in a commercial set in contemporary Japan to advertise insurance. In this sense, the character exists in startlingly different contexts, but each instance (anime and insurance commer-

cial) will show them acting in the mannerisms proper to that context. As such, the character appears to break beyond the bounds of the anime series, but at the same time appears as a singular character that is somewhat consistent.

With this in mind, Kizuna AI constantly has to oscillate between her discrete and nondiscrete properties. In some senses, the repetition of the character in various new situations in each Kizuna AI video implies that she is a discrete character. She maintains a consistency of character design, voice, and general personality. Here the assemblage of the various performance modes and technologies align with the acting of Kasuga to point towards a sense of individualism. But the fact that the character is a Virtual YouTuber, implies that her discreteness is thus dependent on the platform itself. Indeed, as noted above, the anime acting of figurative performance developed from limited animation meshes well with the established conventions of YouTube editing (e.g., rapid cuts eschewing visual continuity for jerky movement across different image compositions). In this sense, her very modes of expression of self and character are dependent on the conventions established on the YouTube platform and anime.

At the same time, Kizuna AI's performance as an anime-esque character is precisely what forces her beyond the singular platform into other media and platforms. In order to sustain the performance, there needs to be a reliance on other codes that extend beyond YouTube into the anime media-form. Here she intersects with broader anime-fan cultures, such as the derivate works culture (*nijisōsaku*) where fans illustrate characters they like. This is the ecology of appreciation whereby Kizuna AI's extended performance is dependent on those fan activities, which are far better served on other platforms like Twitter, where images can be posted.

Subsequently, the character of Kizuna AI herself becomes platform-like, operating as a means to generate further products and commerce. As if both evidence of and reaction to the platform-like character, Activ8 forms the new company Kizuna AI Inc for Kizuna AI herself to focus on this character for monetization (character as a platform) but also to contain her (forcing a discreteness upon her). It is this later point that becomes important, as Kasuga was an integral part of the performance but did not necessarily have any ownership or control of the character to profit off AI's proliferation. Consequently, the important point to raise about such performances are both implicit and explicit in the "Kizuna AI's Everyday" videos: What is the actual limit of the character? Who controls the differences and semblances of the character? Is it the company that owns that character? Is it the actress Kasuga? Is it beyond the platform of YouTube?

These ambiguities between a sense of the discrete and nondiscrete are mirrored in the mechanics of her performance: in the embodied acting and motion

capture technology, translating the movements of the actor onto the character model, the facial recognition technology switching between figurative acting codes in response to facial expressions, as well as the specifics of the timbre of the voice, the mode and manner of speaking, and the quick wit of Kasuga. All of these are implicated in the very enactment of the seemingly discrete character, while evincing her nondiscrete existence, as the above elements are all necessary for the performance. A case in point, the iterative operations of figurative acting already implies that specific expressive codes can be switched in and out in performance to actually produce a sense of personality; or how the motion captured is separated from the body and context of its enactment and transferred into a separate 3D avatar-body. As such, that simply switching in and out an actor for the motion capture and/or voice actor is a possibility is built into the performance mechanics of a Vtuber. Consequently, it would also imply that the selfhood of the character could multiply, as was the case with Love-chan, Aipii, and Ai-Ge.

While this all may appear specific to Vtubers at first, I would suggest that this is actually a common mode of existence in our platform society. Many of us depend on platforms to present a personal brand, to advertise ourselves to potential employers or customers, or simply to interact with friends and family. The media we post is often filtered through some software (such as the literal filters on platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, etc.) that present our images, and auto-correct software, along with emoji, GIFs, LINE stamps/stickers, and memes, which become elements we not only share but utilize as fundamental blocks of communication. In some senses, we perform with various technological apparatuses, "citing" many codified images (from memes to LINE stickers) to express ourselves on platforms (and in the case of LINE stickers, many of these are literally cited from anime). While the visual techniques and some of the technologies are different from that of Vtubers, the broader operations of the performance bear resemblance to our performances of selfhood in everyday life: the platform becomes a necessary place to present your self, and the self becomes something like a character, a role that you play across platforms.

As Steinberg asserts, contemporary platform capitalism involves "the total mediation of life by platforms, via intimate devices such as mobile phones and the ecosystems they bind us into" (2019, 207). We rely on platforms to present this selfhood, and the data we produce through this process becomes part of the larger information economy, data that we do not necessarily own. With this in mind, it is worth considering how this connects to aggregates of data points becoming what is digitally defined as my "self" and how the self itself is constantly spread out across different media platforms. Indeed, the self is literally performed across multiple platforms, where the same person (often with their full name as their moniker) has a Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and

more, each platform having their own restrictions and media filters, their own ways of constraining (and enabling) expression which the user/self has little control over, but can utilize to perform a character/self on the platform.

Vectors of Information and Selfhood

For Steinberg, the current era of platform capitalism involves the extension of "a logic of flexibility and just-in-time and precarity that were already part of articulations of post-Fordism, this time refigured under the total managerial logic of the mediatory platform [...] the expansion of the management of mediation in the foundation of the platform economy" (Ibid., 206). Indeed, as will be shown below, the "management of mediation" is part of the operations of performing selfhood by both Vtubers and human individuals in this platform society that occurs through a similar combination of embodied and figurative acting modes of performance.

Steinberg's notions of platform pervasiveness and its shifts in contemporary capitalism broadly can be seen as meshing well with the conception of technologically induced changes in capitalism by Mackenzie Wark (2019). For Wark, the new information economy (which is very dependent on platforms), has resulted in the creation of two new class formations: the "vectorialist class" (who control the vector of information) and the "hacker class" (who constantly create information to be monetized – I will be employing the term "user class" instead here). There is a profound asymmetry between these classes, as the information produced by the user class is funnelled entirely to the vectorialists who own and manage the platforms.

Importantly, there is very little that a user can do that does not produce more information to be monetized by vectorialists. Every post, every click, every search is all producing information, more data to be collected, analysed, organized, and sold for profit by the vectorialists. Furthermore, as noted above, platforms are now unavoidable in our daily lives. Not operating on them can mean invisibility on the internet and have detrimental effects to our personal lives and livelihoods. In this sense, we are forced to participate in platform production. Martin Roth discusses this very dynamic and builds off of the work of Ōtsuka Eiji, who sees a broader compulsion to express ourselves online as a new form of labour (which is largely uncompensated) (Roth 2019, 119–20). Indeed, in some senses the platform "outsources" the work of content creation to the users (cf. Steinberg 2019, 206).

What is crucial for the topic at hand is that much of the usage of the platforms through which the data is extracted from is often seen as an expression of selfhood. We post about our commonplace interactions, upload pictures

of our friends and family, search and purchase goods for daily life, watch videos that entertain us—all actions which produce further information that is profited on by vectorialists. Consequently, the general idea is to keep users on the platform to continue to mine their actions for further profit. Moreover, these data points can, through sophisticated tracking and analysis present a general "image" of a single user and with shocking accuracy make predictions and suggestions for anything from entertainment content to products to news articles. The cycle then repeats: more information, better predictions, more time spend on the platform, more information, etc. This presents a feedback loop that Roth notes is part of the modes of exchange in digital space: users provide information for the convenience (e.g. better suggestions) the platform provides (2019, 112).

All that said, these platforms also provide the ability to project oneself out into the world with relative ease. Any video uploaded may suddenly go viral and spark a potential success for the user. Much of the appeal of YouTube and other user created content platforms is the accessible ability for self-expression that was not available before the advent of internet technologies. As such, becoming a YouTuber, one can produce almost any type of media content they are capable of and express themselves to the world; YouTubers can then become individualized creators who receive some degree of success for their content production, especially as the platform (among others) provides various avenues to monetize the content produced.

But the picture is not so rosy as individual freedom made manifest through proper engagement with the platform. Content producers are themselves under the sway of the vectorialists who own the platform and control how information is extracted and what is done with it. The result, for Wark, is that users become less like individuals in the modern sense and more like "dividuals," "units of being smaller than an individual" (Ibid., 98). Indeed, as one becomes data-ified, one is split into different qualifying data-points, spread out across platforms. The resultant "dividuality" is part of the transformations that were discussed by Gilles Deleuze in the early 1990s as a shift towards "control societies," where there is a general sense of "freedom of movement" from place to place, but access is governed and limited in practice through various technologies of control (1992). Gerald Raunig further develops the conception of "dividuality" from a variety of sources, and sees both a potential for an alternative mode of existence from modern individualism, and the distressing features of contemporary life under current modes of capitalism where one is forced to participate. For Raunig, the potential of dividuality lies in a sense of selfhood that can include others, involving a dividing that links as it splits (2016).

In consideration of all of this, in my view, as the contemporary perform-ance of selfhood is spread out across platforms, as our data-points begin not just to define us but to present commodities for purchase, news and enter-tainment for consumption that are further pulled into our sense of selfhood, what strings us together is a semblance of individualism that sustains this assemblage. However, the dividuated information that helps comprise the self is not just external to the individual, but also beyond their control. As a result, there is a fundamental tension between these two differing modes of existence.

To put this in terms of the performance mechanisms discussed here, much of the practice of expression of selfhood on platforms engages with the same dynamics of embodied acting and the production of individuals. In some senses there is a notion of confession involved in personal expression online. What is posted on Twitter is supposed to be your internal opinions, an admittance to the world of your thoughts; the videos by YouTubers a type of revelation, or an expression of personality and individually acquired knowledge, technique, and expressive style. The shift towards verifying Twitter accounts or utilizing your real name on YouTube displays how there is a sense that it is a specific individual self making those statements. Viewers peer into the inner lives of peers, professionals, and businesses, but there is something personal about their expressions, otherwise parasocial relationships would not develop. At the same time, many Twitter accounts and YouTubers openly appear to be playing a role, a character that is performed on those platforms. Sometimes, this is for comedy, sometimes for political presence, and people are both hired and fired for the stances they take on these platforms (in particular Twitter). This is where the self-character-platform dynamic comes into play, as the self plays a character on the platform which is then capitalized upon by an individual (sell-ing ads, products, or moving towards celebrity and/or politics). Interestingly, the character-self on the platform then begins to function like a micro-platform as they attempt to monetize their role, following some of the general business strategies that platforms do: create a niche, provide a service to that niche, acquire a large enough following/user base, which is then utilized to provide ads or sell products to.

It is also important to note that the data collected from the actions done on these platforms is not owned by the performer, but by the platform. How-ever, the performer has access to certain degrees of data to optimize a sense of return on investment for the actions on these platforms. Even on a rudimentary level, one can see how many viewers saw the video on YouTube or which comments received the most likes, and respond to making more content in a similar vein to build the brand. One can even compare yourself to others who are in a similar niche via their visible metrics. In other words, one can manage the responses to the content and actions posted online to optimize the

character presented. This facilitates a sense of (neoliberal) individualism in the very enactment of selfhood as character on platforms: the self is turned into an individual character that is meant to optimize economic production as they compete with other characters on platforms – what Jason Read calls "homo economicus," but here as selfhood enacted as character on platforms (2009).

Perhaps a more salient example than those above is the actual utilization of these platforms to consume the content posted on them. The user generates different types of data depending on what they select, subscribe/follow, and how long they spend viewing each piece of content. On the platform side, this data (among other pieces of information) is then used to generate a profile for that user, construct groups of users with similar actions, and to assign each user to a specific group to not only serve that user better ads and products, but also suggest content that is specifically tailored to that user's data set. What holds the external data produced by the many choices of consumption that we enact online is the idea that it is an individual user making those choices, to better target that specific consumer or allow for the creation of further group profiles. Even though some of these data sets are used to create various group profiles (themselves a combination of external data points from various users) to predict behaviour, their value is premised on accurate application of a group profile to an individual user who would then purchase (or sell) targeted products. Indeed, much of the sense of convenience of platforms is that their suggestions/content is tailored specifically to the user individually. These operations are premised on the idea that the user's actions are specific to their personal (internal) interests and/or needs, and that they externalize that through their actions on the platform. Broadly, then, there is a sense of interiority that is externalized like the individuals produced by embodied acting.

In sum, on any one platform, the data points users create can be seen as utilized to constitute a single individual who can be targeted for various ads and products. Importantly, the very externality of these posts and data (which are presumed to come from us individually) are important for sustaining the notion of such an individual to be monetized as data for analysis, advertising, and profit. In other words, there is a presumption of an individual created from these data components by platforms, but the reality is these are dividual, external elements that are strung together to produce a sense of a whole individual. Every action done is in some sense dividing that user up, creating a profile that is created by all the various data points. In fact, the self that is constituted by this data can be seen as a type of character made up entirely of these external data points. That is to say, there is no inside or outside to this platform data-character-self as individuals supposedly possess. Instead, they are simply an aggregate of all that data. In this way, the operations of constituting a data-self

are far closer to that of figurative acting. The fact that users are usually spread out across various different platforms further shows the dividuality of users: as data points may not string together across platforms (although data can be sold across companies), a supposedly single self is actually divided across various platforms each with their own data-set-self for that user.

It is this particular combination of embodied and figurative acting tendencies (of which, there could be many others) that underlies the operations of performing the self as character on platforms in the contemporary world. In some senses, Vtubers performances can be seen as visualizing this particular interrelation between embodied acting and individualism on the one hand, and the operations of figurative acting and dividuality on the other. Here the individual comes to the fore in the embodied performance of motion capture and the voice actor. At the same time, the Vtuber character performance is visually composed of information, an avatar that utilizes codified, anime-esque elements, all of which are beyond the performer's direct control. Indeed, the character itself is not owned by the central human performer.

As such, Kizuna AI's performance mechanics mirror what Wark describes as the status of platform users (or rather, the user class broadly): whereby the information she produces, and the apparatuses that constitute her are not owned by her. Although Kizuna AI is distinct from the average user in that, from the onset she is a commercial entity, the potential to monetize oneself and your posts are ever-present on platforms. Continually posting on platforms, often with usernames that align across platforms (sometimes using actual names) creates a sense that any post that goes viral on any of those platforms can be traced back to one user. Sometimes, those accounts themselves become something to be bought and sold. In any case, the self here is multiplied and divided across different accounts and platforms (even if the usernames are the same, the user still operates as different data-set-selves across platforms). Similarly, as the dividual tendencies come into conflict with individualizing tendencies, it is no wonder that Kizuna AI would be conceivable as a character that would multiply, that the parts of her performance would split, and ultimately result in new characters. It also makes sense that this duplication was reacted to so negatively, as the individual has not vanished entirely, and the potential to replace Kasuga was astutely critiqued by fans. In response, the solution selected by the vectorialists was to further individualize all the new characters. What is even more intriguing about the specific case of Kizuna AI, is that this multiplication and individualization of the newer versions of the character are not isolated to one person, platform, or country. Consequently, considering Raunig's sense of linkage in dividuality, beyond the individual, there is also a constructive potential for creating connections across borders, both national and platform.

Figure 4. Ai-chan and Ai-Ge noting how they want to "connect with everyone in China" and reach the top of Bilibili in the video introducing Ai-Ge on YouTube (A.I.Channel, 2019m).

Platform Diplomacy

As noted above, Kizuna AI is dependent on her platform of YouTube (as a Virtual YouTuber) but also extends far beyond that. It should be stressed that platforms are not universal, not available everywhere, and do have operations that align with the borders of nation states even in the supposedly "stateless" internet. Indeed, the "walled gardens" of platforms can smoothly align with the "container model" of the nation state. There is also the issue of the nation within which the platforms are managed from and whose interests sometimes align. In order to address this, Steinberg takes up Dal Yong Jin's conception of platform imperialism in which "the overwhelming global dominance of US operating systems and web platforms on the global internet landscape and on the power over the distribution of cultural goods requires a resuscitation of the 'cultural imperialism' debates of the 1980s and 1990s" (Jin 2013; Steinberg 2019, 17). With the overlap of the national and the digital platform, platform imperialism raises the point of the national border crossing through the platform from one nation into another. Consequently, it might also be worthwhile considering the crossing of borders not just of states but of platforms themselves, in a type of "platform diplomacy." This is precisely what happens with Kizuna AI and her Chinese version Ai-Ge, a crossing of borders that is both transnational and cross-platform.

Although Kizuna AI is in some ways the "flagship" Virtual YouTuber, she does operate across platforms. Yet the very name of the type of character

(Virtual YouTuber) implies a deep relationship to the platform of YouTube. It is also important to note that in the PRC, YouTube and other platforms popular in the US and Japan are ostensibly not accessible, and so Chinese platforms, such as Bilibili for video streaming, are popularly used. As such, if Kizuna AI is to be an "ambassador" of sorts from Japan, is she from Japan the nation state or from YouTube (or YouTube Japan)? Furthermore, as Ai-Ge focuses on Bilibili, are these versions of Kizuna AI ambassadors to/from China or from the platform Bilibili? There is thus a type of ambivalence at play here between digital and national spaces in this cross-platform, cross-border interaction as they operate on platforms that seem to align with US interests (YouTube) and Chinese interests (Bilibili).

However, the situation is not a neat overlap between one nation and platform (e.g. the PRC and Bilibili) that interacts with another nation and platform (the US and YouTube) – these are all run through with transnationality. Indeed, as Steinberg notes "analyses of both platforms and the contents market must shift from a national to a transnational perspective" (2019, 212). For instance, Kizuna AI is supposed to represent Japan, but is "from" a US-based platform. Moreover, Bilibili itself has a transnational dynamic as it began as a place for Chinese viewers to engage with what is often seen as "Japanese media," in particular anime, and adapts Niconico's (a Japanese website) *danmaku* overlays of text. In any case, the point here is that Japan does not neatly fall between these platforms nor align with them (which both overlap and diverge from their respective nation states of the US and PRC), but "Japan" is articulated through and across them via Kizuna AI. For instance, Ai-chan only speaks in Japanese and in one of her ambassador videos teaches about bowing, which is also mirrored on the Bilibili site (A.I.Channel 2018; AIChannel 官方 n.d.).

One can see these transnational tensions in the different versions of Ai. For instance, the Chinese and Japanese AI talk to each other, but in separate languages. There are Japanese subtitles underneath Ai-Ge on YouTube, but on Bilibili there are Chinese subtitles for Ai-chan. In this sense, there are still barriers at play, and a hierarchy whereby the Japanese language is still primary for the YouTube audience, Chinese for the Bilibili audience (though Chinese subtitles are shown in the mirrored Kizuna AI Bilibili channel on YouTube). Broadly, Kizuna AI still seems to be an ambassador for Japan (despite infrequent cultural tourism videos), and the Chinese Ai-Ge was introduced as to be engaging with events occurring in China. In some ways, the Chinese Ai-Ge is also an ambassador of sorts, but it is, as noted above, unclear from where and to what, especially as she is positioned as a "multiplication," a version of AI.

This question becomes complicated in videos on the Chinese Kizuna AI Bilibili channel, where the Chinese Kizuna AI has some videos showing support for those in Wuhan during the Covid-19 isolation and the later release

of the lockdown. In this case, is it the character of Kizuna AI making this gesture of solidarity or is Ai-Ge entirely distinct? In either case, who does she represent? Japan, China, YouTube, Bilibili, and/or Activ8/Kizuna AI Inc? Is it all of them, none of them, or some combination of them? In some ways, this ambiguity makes her a complex transnational, transplatform, transcorporate character. Focusing more on the transnational, what I specifically mean by "transnational" is that she is not operating within the bounds of a single nation, that there is something that is operating across borders, but the national has not dissolved completely, as "China" and "Japan" are still at play as important coordinates for Kizuna AI. This is all the more complex when the Vtuber performance as "anime avatar" itself maintains a strong relationship to anime, which, despite its transnational elements on multiple levels, is often seen as a representation of "Japanese culture" (Suan 2017b, 2018, 2020).

In addition, in alignment with the observations of Marc Steinberg, Jinying Li, and Thomas Lamarre, the transnational overlaps with transmedia interactions, all of which occurs across media platforms (Lamarre 2015; Steinberg and Li 2017). Something is strung together here across these national and platform boundaries which exists as Kizuna AI, an aggregate which almost neatly aligns with the same formal operations in the specific acting performances of the character in YouTube/Bilibili videos: Kizuna AI is performed via a compound of various technologies and expressions with differing degrees of restrictions around the agency of the individual actants – human actress, motion capture and facial recognition technologies, and anime-esque patterns, all of which assemble to enact the character of Kizuna AI. Furthermore, the gaps and stutters between these actants seem to be generative, part of the appeal of the character, a necessary part of how she is constituted as a character as such. This also corresponds with the transnational/transmedia components of her character: she exists not in spite of, but across those gaps between the nations and platforms via the ecology of appreciation. Here, similar restrictions and affordances of agency in the character acting re-emerge on the "regional" scale. Kizuna AI is not necessarily beholden to any of those nations or platforms, and at the same time her very existence depends on them (as ambassador and Vtuber). This is a bind, because received coordinates and conceptions of place, person, and technology do not necessarily apply, but are concurrently required to sustain any activity at all.

This is the stalemate of the contemporary moment, whereby all the platform and national apparatuses continue to operate, but we are also operating across them. Agency is enabled in some ways and restricted in others via those same apparatuses, as well as across them. Although gaining a degree of celebrity, many of the workers (in particular the actresses) bear the burden of the lack of agency, and those at the top of the vector own this character, reap-

ing the rewards as they propagate and work across the platforms they utilize, framing the relations across them in terms of the national. But strung together across these complexities the entity that is Kizuna AI seems to act out all those tensions in a form that operates by traversing those borders. Importantly, the transnational fan reaction that shifted the ecology of appreciation seems to have been the key that pushed back against the multiplication of Kizuna AI in favour of Kasuga, evincing how crucial collective action is, even across borders and platforms. Indeed, it was many Bilibili fans (who are ostensibly located mainly in China) whose large-scale unsubscribing brought attention to the matter, supporting Kasuga in Japan, who operates mainly on US-based YouTube (though the channel is mirrored on Bilibili). But ownership of Kizuna AI, wherever she is, still seems to be in the corporation with her namesake – while Kasuga is recognized as integral to her character, she does not have full control, evincing the fault lines in (neoliberal) individualist notions of selfhood in the platform society. The irony here is that the technologies and platforms portrayed as giving a voice to individuals is ultimately what denies that autonomy as the information produced through expressing that selfhood is not owned by the person creating it. There is an important distinction between those who have explicit commercial aims and those who do not when performing online, but as noted above, part of the draw of platforms is that our public personas may lead to wealth generation (e.g. going viral, selling some products to your fans). Indeed, on YouTube, it is very easy to monetize any of the videos uploaded online. In the case of Vtubers, who are explicitly commercial in most instances, the great misfortune of Kizuna AI's character is that this bubbly self has so much potential to multiply across borders, but is caught in and dependent on the information vectors of her existence which she lacks the ability to control.

This situation is not unique to Vtubers. Perhaps the sudden rise in the popularity of Vtubers is precisely because of how effectively this type of online performance of self actually aligns with the contemporary mode of existence in the platform society, but presented in a deceivingly playful manner. This may also be why the multiplication of Kizuna AI struck such a nerve with fans, as it revealed how powerless Kasuga herself was in this system, shattering the illusion of playfulness and bringing the actual operations into relief. While Kizuna AI could be potentially multiplied, Kasuga could not. The dismissal of her integral role in the performance exposed how she does not own Kizuna AI, and that it is all too easy to replace her and still perform the character – a potential built into the mechanics of Vtubers themselves. As more Vtubers rise in popularity beyond Japan and YouTube itself, it is all the more imperative that we keep in mind these performance dynamics, and how we, as platform users, are caught in the same system.

Stevie Suan

ORCID®

Stevie Suan 🆔 https://orcid.org/0000–0003-2159–6440

References

A.I.Channel. 2018. *[Institute of Japanese Culture] I'll Lecture on Japanese Bowing!* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cp-6hOZ_qk8.
———. 2019a. 【*Earphones*】 *What AI Shouted at the Heart of the World [ENG SUB]*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJEueFgMIeE.
———. 2019b. *If I Say There Is 4 Kizuna AI's Will You Believe Me? #1*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cWwohKOmgqA&list=PL0bHKk6wuUGJHfkIt17TY0rCjuZ083jPl&index=1.
———. 2019c. *There Are 4 Kizuna AI's There's No Way It's Not Efficient!? #2*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOHEv77qC4w&list=PL0bHKk6wuUGJHfkIt17TY0rCjuZ083jPl&index=2.
———. 2019d. *The Anime Style Kizuna AI Is Super Cute #3*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZPtKbKgW3g&list=PL0bHKk6wuUGJHfkIt17TY0rCjuZ083jPl&index=3.
———. 2019e. *I Wouldn't Be Myself without Pyoko Pyoko? #4*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5yUcx5lSEs&list=PL0bHKk6wuUGJHfkIt17TY0rCjuZ083jPl&index=4.
———. 2019f. *I Forgot How to Talk like Myself. #5*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmU0MvFdRCU&list=PL0bHKk6wuUGJHfkIt17TY0rCjuZ083jPl&index=5.
———. 2019g. *We Tried 4 Different Voices #6*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8R8Payipdeg&list=PL0bHKk6wuUGJHfkIt17TY0rCjuZ083jPl&index=6.
———. 2019h. *We Are Kizuna AI! #7*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VA5LNz0F5Y8&list=PL0bHKk6wuUGJHfkIt17TY0rCjuZ083jPl&index=7.
———. 2019i. *Unexpected "He" Has Begun to Talk!? #8*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31fMtfTR-N4&list=PL0bHKk6wuUGJHfkIt17TY0rCjuZ083jPl&index=8.
———. 2019j. *Sexy Voice Battle! Kizuna AI VS Kizuna AI!? #9*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KuJIyXK9yYw&list=PL0bHKk6wuUGJHfkIt17TY0rCjuZ083jPl&index=9.
———. 2019k. *What Will Hapened If Kizuna AI Was a Childhood Friend? #10*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I17_ia2vqX0&list=PL0bHKk6wuUGJHfkIt17TY0rCjuZ083jPl&index=10.
———. 2019l. 【*Anime*】 *Tsundere-Chan's Waiting* 【*Introducing Everyone's Submissions*】 . https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uvoxx3UR2LE&t=116s.
———. 2019m. *[Take Care!] This Is My Challenge, Nice to Meet You! [Chinese]*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXq7JMfpPuU.
———. 2019n. *Become a Grandma!?* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qbu3GhkT7Cc.
———. 2019o. *[AIC 3rd Anniversary] A.I'll Meet You in 2019*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxJPp_h-Pqw&t=116s.
———. 2020a. *Let's Talk?* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1q9mXiEbP8&t=907s.
———. 2020b. 【*Snack AI*】 *A Super Intelligent AI Consulted Human Problems in Kansai Dialect (It's Been a While Lol)*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eocyhw0D394.
AIChannel 官方. n.d. "【日本文化研究所】Japanese「鞠躬」明解！_ ▪哩▪哩 _bilibili." Accessed 30 June 2021. https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1St411Y7aH/.

Azuma, Hiroki. 2009. *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*. Translated by Jonathan E. Abel. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Barthes, Roland. 1978. *Image, Music, Text*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Condry, Ian. 2013. *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Crafton, Donald. 2013. *Shadow of a Mouse: Performance, Belief and World-Making in Animation*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1992. "Postscript on the Societies of Control." *October* 59 (Winter), 3–7.

fakcheater. 2019. "R/VirtualYoutubers: Full Timeline of Multiple Ai Project." Reddit. 8 November 2019. https://www.reddit.com/r/VirtualYoutubers/comments/co22i0/full_timeline_of_multiple_ai_project/.

Gigguk. 2020. *I Got Addicted to VTubers and Regret Everything*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJ9mH4YC6MY.

Gunning, Tom. 2006. "Gollum and Golem: Special Effects and the Technology of Artificial Bodies." In *From Hobbits to Hollywood: Essays on Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings*, edited by Ernest Mathijs and Murray Pomerance, 319–350. Amsterdam/ New York: Rodopi.

Harmonyano. 2019. "R/VirtualYoutubers: Kizuna AI Replacement Timeline and Theory, How Will It Ends." Reddit. 19 August 2019. https://www.reddit.com/r/VirtualYoutubers/comments/dtega9/kizuna_ai_replacement_timeline_and_theory_how/.

Hirota, Minoru. 2018. "Bācharu-ka suru hito no sonzai. VTuber no koshikata, yukusue." *Yuriika. Uta to hyōron, tokushū bācharu YouTuber* 07, 45–52.

Jin, Dal Yong. 2013. "The Construction of Platform Imperialism in the Globalization Era." *TripleC* 11 (1), 145–172.

Kanrinin. 2019. "Kizuna AI no naka no hito kōtai riyū! Henkō-go no seiyū ga gōka sugide Kasuga Nozomi wa intai? (Reasons for changing the person playing Kizuna AI! Is Kasuga Nozomi retired because the voice actor used after the change is too exceptional?)." Kaisoku entame biyori (Speedy Entertainment Forecast)). 13 July 2019. https://seidentest.com/kizunaai-nakanohitokoutai/.

Lamarre, Thomas. 2015. "Regional TV: Affective Media Geographies." *Asiascape: Digital Asia*, 93–126.

———. 2018. *The Anime Ecology: A Genealogy of Television, Animation, and Game Media*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1614013.

Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Mihailova, Mihaela. 2016. "Collaboration without Representation: Labor Issues in Motion and Performance Capture." *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 11 (1), 40–58.

Morrissy, Kim. 2019. "Chinese Kizuna Ai Fans Revolt Amid Rumors That the Original Voice Actress Is Being Phased Out." Anime News Network. 13 August 2019. https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/interest/2019-08-13/chinese-kizuna-ai-fans-revolt-amid-rumors-that-the-original-voice-actress-is-being-phased-out/.149993.

———. 2020. "Playboard: World's Biggest Superchat Earner Is Virtual YouTuber Kiryu Coco." Anime News Network. 22 August 2020. https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/interest/2020-08-22/playboard-world-biggest-superchat-earner-is-virtual-youtuber-kiryu-coco/.163103.

Nanba, Yūki. 2018. "Bācharu YouTuber no mittsu no karada. Pāson, perusona, kyarakuta." *Yuriika. Uta to hyōron, tokushū bācharu YouTuber* 07, 117–125.

Raunig, Gerald. 2016. *Dividuum: Machinic Capitalism and Molecular Revolution. Vol. 1.* Translated by Aileen Derieg. South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e).

Read, Jason. 2009. "A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity." *Foucault Studies*, 6 (February), 25–36.

Roth, Martin. 2019. "Digital Modes of Exchange: Structural Relations of Commodity, Control, and Community." *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 6, 110–134.

Schechner, Richard. 2013. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (Third edition). London/New York: Routledge.

Steinberg, Marc. 2019. *The Platform Economy: How Japan Transformed the Consumer Internet.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Steinberg, Marc, and Jinying Li. 2017. "Introduction: Regional Platforms." *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 4, 173–183.

Suan, Stevie. 2017a. "Anime No 'Kōisha'. Animēshon Ni Okeru Taigenteki/Shūjiteki Pafōmansu Ni Yoru 'Jiko' (Anime's Actors: Constituting 'Self-Hood' through Embodied and Figurative Performance in Animation)." *Animēshon Kenkyū*, 19 (1), 3–15.

Suan, Stevie. 2017b. "Anime's Performativity: Diversity through Conventionality in a Global Media-Form." *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 12, 62–79.

Suan, Stevie. 2018. "Consuming Production: Anime's Layers of Transnationality and Dispersal of Agency as Seen in Shirobako and Sakuga-Fan Practices." *Arts*, Special Issue "Japanese Media Cultures in Japan and Abroad: Transnational Consumption of Manga, Anime, and Video Games," 7 (3), 1–19.

Suan, Stevie. 2020. "Anime's Spatiality: Media-Form, Dislocation, and Globalization." Edited by Stevie Suan. *Mechademia: Second Arc (Materialities Across Asia)* 12 (2), 24–44.

Wark, McKenzie. 2019. *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* London/ New York: Verso.

Comment by Tani Levy

Stevie Suan's chapter provides a much-needed and multifaceted observation on virtual YouTubers (Vtubers) who represent a mode of online entertainment within the platform society that has gained immense popularity in recent years with fanbases all over the world. Serving as a comprehensible consequence of Suan's sound insights on performativity in anime, the chapter takes Kizuna AI, the Vtuber who started the trend in 2016, as an example in order to explore the interconnected, sometimes conflicting conditions that create the image of a Vtuber: the individual and their acting, which is determined by technological possibilities; corporate agencies that own the means of expression and direct their content creators for commercial aims; the appeal of anime-esque characters who make fanbases engage in an "ecology of appreciation" beyond national borders. Based on these observations, Suan identifies Kizuna AI as

a complex entity that transcends nations, media, corporations, and platforms, but that maintains a strong connection to Japanese anime. Consequently, the chapter invites profound discussions about agency, selfhood, and its online performance that are made visible by, but go beyond the Vtuber phenomenon and address the modus operandi within our platform society, making this chapter a welcome addition to contemporary media studies.

Comment by Juhyung Shin

Permit me to initiate a brief discussion with the author on the ideas presented in this chapter.

I agree with your suggestion that any media related to the concept of V-tubers serves a critical role within platform diplomacy. But what will the next generation of platform diplomacy consist of? Taking different forms of reality into consideration, what will replace V-tubers for our future selves?

The ongoing COVID-19 catastrophe has led to the Metaverse being deemed a new, alternative utopia, the ultimate space for human connection. I would like to know how you think the "new normal" has impacted V-tubers and other forms of hyper-content. With this in mind, we can easily expect this burgeoning phenomenon to dramatically shift the platforms we currently use to interact, express, create, and deliver our messages and thoughts. Thanks to the heightened rise of accessible technologies, any individual who craves this impending form of immersive communication has the ability to create original content, which includes media within the V-tuber platform.

I am curious about how you expect future renditions of V-tubers to emerge and develop? Do you expect these types to become more globalized while simultaneously maintaining their innate characteristics? Will these virtual formations resemble reality or reflect more exaggerated, fantasy-like aesthetics that only exist within a fictional world?

Truly, I would love to hear your thoughts.