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VIRTUAL CELEBRITY INDUSTRIES IN EAST ASIA

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Introduction

In East Asia, virtual celebrity was once considered a niche interest reserved for *otaku* and dedicated fans of ACG (Anime, Comics and Games; see Black, 2012; Hamilton, 1997; Yoshida, 2004/2016). However, recent shifts in government priorities, technological innovations, and heightened capital investment have brought virtual celebrity into mainstream view (Fan, 2022; Han et al., 2021). Global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and "metaverse" hype further accelerated this shift, with cultural industries rushing to safe-guard their businesses for a digital-first future (Herman, 2021; Yuqiao, 2021). Expanded infrastructure soon followed, including talent agencies and production studios catering to virtual celebrity. In China alone, consulting firm iiMedia (2023) valued the virtual idol market at 3.46 billion yuan in 2020; the following year, they observed an 80% increase, reaching 6.22 billion yuan. Buoyed by the potential applications of artificial intelligence, this trajectory is expected to continue, exceeding a market value of 48 billion yuan by 2025.

Against this backdrop, this panel considers the various organisations, technologies, platforms, labour, and stakeholders involved in East Asia's flourishing virtual celebrity

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industries. Instead of a singular industry, we recognise a multiplicity of “industries” developing in parallel, each shaped by local histories, tastes, markets, and legislative forces. We thus apply a regional lens to draw attention to the “transnational” (Iwabuchi, 2014) flows of virtual celebrity across borders, languages, industries, platforms, and technologies (see Suan, 2021).

Genres of Virtual Celebrity

The concept of virtual celebrity realises the ambition of manufactured pop idols that inspired Japan’s idol industry in the 1970s, and spread across East Asia soon thereafter (Black, 2012; Galbraith & Karlin, 2012). We deploy the term “virtual celebrity” as a catch-all for several genres differentiated by geography, technology, platforms, content, and monetization strategies. Though often conflated in colloquial usage, we distinguish between several unique “iterations” (Iwabuchi, 2014) of virtual celebrity, including:

- *Vocaloids*, such as Hatsune Miku, See-Yu, and *vSinger* Luo Tianyi, who represent voice synthesisers, and perform songs produced, choreographed, and popularised by fans (see Condry, 2017; Han et al., 2021; Y. Sun & Lee, 2020)

- *Virtual idols* (also known as *virtual singers* or *AI idols*), computer-generated characters who pursue musical careers, appearing in music videos, concerts, and even fan meet-and-greets (see Han et al., 2021; Wang, 2022)

- *vTubers* (Virtual YouTubers), who livestream as animated avatars using body-tracking technologies, interacting with fans, and showcasing talents such as singing and gameplay (see Gwillim-Thomas, 2023)

- *Virtual anchors*, an iteration of vTubers popular in China, who entertain viewers and promote e-commerce purchases in multi-hour live streams on platforms like Bilibili (see Han et al., 2021); or who are AI incarnations of newscasters, and automated to deliver updates on current affairs

- *Virtual influencers*, fictional characters created for visual social media platforms, who promote products, services, and messages to their audiences (see Yuan, 2024)

Converging Industries

East Asia’s virtual celebrity industries are ripe for academic inquiry, not only for their size, but also for their intersection with other cultural industries. For example, leading Chinese streaming services iQiyi and Bilibili produce regular variety shows with the most popular virtual idols from their platforms (Deng, 2023; Fan, 2022). In gaming, characters are regularly elevated to virtual idols, launching musical careers and selling commodities, as in the case of *Genshin Impact* (Lu, 2023), *League of Legends’* virtual idol group *K/DA* (김형은, 2018), and virtual boy band WXWZ from *Honour of Kings* (Flora, 2020). Cross-industry collaborations are responsible for Korean virtual idol group MAVE:, created by mobile game developer Netmarble and media company Kakao

Entertainment (Young & Stevens, 2023); as well as Chinese virtual idol group A-SOUL, created by idol agency Yuehua Entertainment with ByteDance, the parent company of video app Douyin (Deng, 2021). These industry intersections and collaborations offer many future directions for academic attention.

Panel Structure

Emerging scholarship on East Asia's virtual celebrity industries examines effaced labour (e.g. Cao, 2023; Suan, 2021); the monetization of fan interactions (e.g. Gwillim-Thomas, 2023; W. Sun et al., 2022); platform intermediation (e.g. Yuan, 2024); and technological developments (e.g. Wang, 2022). The five papers in this panel complement these studies by highlighting the commercial, cultural, and symbolic value of virtual celebrities across and beyond East Asia:

In the first paper, **Virtual Influencer History: Human Patterns in Old New Media**, Do Own (Donna) Kim offers a historiography of East Asia's virtual celebrity industries, detailing the presence of virtual idols in Japan and Korea since the 1990s. Drawing on archival sources, it presents a decolonial history which prefigures contemporary configurations of (virtual) labour (Stahl, 2011), and complicates the discursive novelty of virtual celebrity in many Anglophone accounts.

Next, Seol Hwang's paper, **Emerging Aspects of K-Pop: Innovation Through Virtual Idols and Entertainment**, charts the K-pop industry's pivot to virtual idol groups following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and interest in the "metaverse". Combining a literature review and structural equation modelling, it considers the mainstreaming of the metaverse in Korea's cultural industries and the response of local audiences.

In the third paper, **Virtual Influencer Marketing and the Halo of Innovation**, Rachel Berryman highlights emergent visual tropes in the commercial application of virtual influencers across East Asia. Based on digital ethnography and visual analysis, it proposes virtual influencers are used to signify technological advancement, extending a "halo of innovation" to associated brands and products.

Esperanza Miyake's paper **The Production of Japanese Virtuality: Imma, Japanese Multi-Dimensionality and Transmedial Mobility** examines how visual styling and a multi-platform presence reduce Imma, a virtual influencer from Tokyo, to a signifier of "Japanese-ness". Employing visual and document analysis, it argues that virtual influencers are not only used to promote commodities, but also to commodify culture/s.

And in the final paper, **The Virtual Human Industry in Greater China: A Stocktake of News Discourse**, Crystal Abidin analyses media discourse that surrounds China's virtual anchors. Combining press analysis and digital ethnography, it identifies "Dystopian China" as a contemporary permutation of "digital Orientalism" (Mahoney, 2022) in the representation of China's technological achievements to audiences outside East Asia.

Together, these papers preview the productivity of analysing virtual celebrity industries through a regional lens (Iwabuchi, 2014). We hope this panel will invigorate scholarly conversations about the entangled industries of virtual celebrity in East Asia, and spark collaborations spanning a greater number of markets, genres, and topics.

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VIRTUAL INFLUENCER HISTORY: HUMAN PATTERNS IN NEW OLD MEDIA

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Introduction

A life digitally formulated without consent, touted as cutting-edge and beautiful until the shine fades. Forced to disappear, to join his forgotten cyber ancestors. South Korea's (henceforth Korea) 1990s "cyber singer" Adam wryly reflects on his fate in Nahzam Sue's 2016 retro-funk song *Cyberstar Adam*. Fast, rhythmic cuts of pieced-together dolls, machinery, and computer graphic imagery (CGI) busily populate the music video, which ends with Nahzam Sue's robot dance as he repeats to the synth beat that this is a result of karma.

Whether as an innovative business opportunity or as the latest odd Internet fad, virtual influencers, here defined as photorealistic CGI virtual humans who are (aspiring) social media influencers, are often approached as novel media phenomena. However, as Adam lamented in *Cyberstar Adam*, despite their seeming newness, they have predecessors: virtual celebrities—e.g., virtual idols, cyber singers, and fictional bands. Approaching the virtual influencers' seeming novelty as a technological myth (Barthes, 2013; Mosco, 2005; Natale & Ballatore, 2020), I examine a selection of preceding cases to historicize, and thereby politicize, the contemporary significations of virtual influencers. Often framed as a technical matter, naturalized narratives of novelty distract from the continuing patterns of human involvement and intersecting issues of power in social and cultural spheres (Gitelman, 2006; Marvin, 1998). As Barthes (2013) and Mosco (2004) respectively said, myths "transform history into nature" (p. 240), and "to deny history is to remove from discussion active human agency, the constraints of social structure, and the real world politics" (p. 35). This paper's chronology is by no means comprehensive of all predecessors but uniquely incorporates Japanese and

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Korean cases that are historically rich but lesser known in English-based international Internet research, drawing on a larger project on virtual influencers (Kim, 2022; see Kim, forthcoming). Following the above definition of virtual influencers, the analysis prioritized cases that emulated human stars through CGI, but some non-virtual and non-human cases were included in the larger analysis where relevant.

Selected Summary of Findings and Discussion: Virtual Idols and Cyber Singers in 1990s Japan and Korea

Variegated production models of Japanese and Korean virtual celebrities that emerged in the 1990s prod questions on authenticity, agency, authorship, labor, and representation. In Japan, Haga Yui (1990), Date Kyoko (1996), and Terai Yuki (1998) are known as some of the first virtual idols (Galbraith, 2009; Sone, 2017). While all three were depicted as pretty, youthful teen girls, complete with "ideal" body measurement information, they each followed a starkly different production model. Haga Yui was an open-secret participatory project, organically developed from Ijuuin Hikaru and his radio listeners' collaborative, parodic pokes at 1980s Japanese idol culture which viewed ideal idols as "innocent" girls who would not even go to the toilet. From fans to body models, multiple individuals knowingly and unknowingly joined Ijuuin's efforts to virtually perfect the humanly impossible idol persona, until as per the listeners' feedback she "retired" to supposedly study abroad. Date Kyoko, on the other hand, was a major talent management company HoriPro's attempt to apply state-of-art full-body 3D CGI technology to their talent-producing pipeline. From her music video to her eventual re-debut in Korea as "DiKi" (1999) and many more revamps that followed it, Date Kyoko's activities showcased virtual humans' adaptability to diverse spatial, linguistic, and temporal contexts, although evaluated as company-driven and commercially unsuccessful. A reimagined digital recreation of the manga *Libido*'s character by its artist, Terai Yuki's characteristics foreshadowed various bottom-up, convergent media practices in virtual influencers that divert from more traditional celebrity production models: she was created as a transmedia crossover, produced as a hobby project by an independent artist, had cartoon-like visuals rather than abiding by strict photorealism, and utilized an at-home 3D software and inspired its community.

These cases demystify virtual influencers' novelty by enabling historical comparisons not just for surfacing technical or logistical parallels but more importantly for analyzing their cultural implications. For instance, Haga Yui's inception and trajectory remind us that regardless of parodic intentions, dominant codes in media cultures—e.g., 80's Japanese idol culture—ground the virtual stars and stars-to-be: while virtual, their (intentional) conformity to conventional practices makes them interpretable within the conventional celebrity sign system (Richardson, 2005). Thus, their seeming novelty should not be conflated with subversiveness; all three idols replicated, and to an extent reproduced, the gendered expectations in their idol presentations. Another example

would be the relative importance of participatory processes over technicalities in the makings of virtual influencers, suggested by the contrast between Date Kyoko's unsuccessful top-down attempts and Haga Yui and Terai Yuki's organic audience involvement and community attention. As stated by a past listener of Ijuuin's radio, "the biggest weapon" of Haga Yui was "the imagination of listeners and fans" (pureyādo, 2011). If novel uniqueness of virtual influencers were to be sought, it should be explained through audience participation.

Korea's 1990s "cyber singers," such as Adam (1998) and his lesser-known contemporaries Lusia (1998) and CYDA (1998) (Jung, 2019; Kang, 1999), demonstrate the critical benefits of additionally approaching virtual celebrities as co-constructed beings. Adam, developed by a software venture company called Adam Soft as a 20-year-old male heartthrob, particularly well-embodies virtual humans' ambiguities around "virtual labor" (Stahl, 2011)—i.e., the performative labor by a representative individual that actually results from the collaboration between multiple systems, humans, and technologies. Adam presented himself as an agentic being, but multiple actors supported Adam's performances—e.g., then-uncredited singer Park Sung-Chul, his non-disclosure agreement, PR director Jung Duk-Hyun who oversaw Adam's persona and writings, and the likeness of the "ideal"-looking actor Won Bin that Adam was suspected of replicating. Tracing the (invisible) collaborators debunks the supposed immateriality of "virtual" humans by outlining the continuing structures and conditions that enable their claims of liberation. "Cyber star who is free from concerns about scandals or missing shows" (Hong, 1998) is obtainable only when virtual labor is maintained; Adam's management actively discouraged Park from revealing his identity, criticizing his looks as inadequate and suggesting that thus the reveal will only lead to "the death of both Adam and him" (Jeong, 2006).

Concluding Remarks

This partial introduction of the pre-history of virtual influencers shows that despite the myth of novelty, they should be approached as multi-actor performances that are, and have been, entangled with human politics. This study's compilation of preceding cases and discussion of their implications contribute to critical research on virtual influencers and related phenomena by allowing richer historical contextualizations, including through lesser-known East Asian cases. Findings on the pre-1990s, 2000s, and 2010s cases' production models will also be discussed. I argue that while virtual influencers may be perceived as new, how they shape—and are able to shape—the sociotechnical patterns around the humans that they emulate may not be new.

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EMERGING ASPECTS OF K-POP: INNOVATION THROUGH VIRTUAL IDOLS AND ENTERTAINMENT

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Introduction

The intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rising interest in the Metaverse has triggered a profound transformation in the K-pop sphere, symbolizing a significant evolution. This shift towards virtual experiences has ignited creative concepts and propelled substantial growth in the virtual idol sector, positioning virtual idols on the global stage of K-content. The seamless transformation integrates advanced technologies into both online and offline performances.

The emergence of virtual idols signifies a new way of enjoying K-pop and expanding its influence in various ways. The growing impact of virtual idols has not only captured industry attention but has also led to ongoing research in academia (Hwang & Hwang, 2022; Hwang & Koo, 2023; Kim & Yoo, 2021; Lee, Kim & Park, 2022). This study comprehensively examines the dynamic interplay among K-pop, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Metaverse, focusing on the increasing presence of virtual idols in the Korean entertainment landscape. Faced with the challenges posed by the pandemic, real-life idols leveraged technologies, such as Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), Extended Reality (XR), and Artificial Intelligence (AI), to craft virtual personas for performances on Metaverse platforms. What initially emerged as a response to challenges has evolved into a flourishing industry.

In the initial phases of the pandemic, numerous K-pop idols embraced immersive technologies to create virtual characters and deliver K-pop performances on Metaverse platforms. Platforms such as VRChat, Rec Room, AltspaceVR, Sansar, and Decentraland have played a pivotal role in reshaping the K-pop landscape by facilitating

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the creation, sharing, and exploration of virtual worlds. This enabled the organization of virtual K-pop events and concerts, along with various online events. Consequently, this allowed K-pop artists to engage with fans through virtual concerts and meet-and-greet sessions.

A diverse array of virtual idol groups—including “ISEDOL (ISEGYE IDOL)”, “MAVE:”, “Eternity”, “Revolution Heart”, “PLAVE”, and “SUPERKIND”—exemplify the multifaceted trends in virtual entertainment. Each group distinguishes itself through composition, style, choice of platform, music genre, and target audience. Notably, “K/DA” boasts affiliations with gaming phenomenon *League of Legends*, while “ISEDOL” pursued independent conceptualization. Collaborations with established K-pop agencies or labels are prevalent, exemplified by “æspa”, operating under SM Entertainment. Associations between major game companies, such as Netmarble’s Metaverse Entertainment and Kakao Entertainment, have given rise to groups like “MAVE:”, illustrating a symbiotic relationship between the gaming and entertainment industries.

The genesis of virtual idols, propelled by the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, has led to the rapid assimilation of cutting-edge technologies. Although the pandemic has accelerated their integration, the concept of virtual idols was not merely a reactionary measure. A comprehensive understanding of the impact of virtual idol groups requires an analysis of their reception, encompassing factors such as chart performances, fan engagement, and critical acclaim.

In the initial stages, prominent virtual idols included “K/DA”; “æ-æspa,” avatars of the girl group “æspa” on the fictional planet Kwangya; and “ISEDOL”. “K/DA” and' “æ-æspa” encountered challenges, as their popularity was partly derived from *League of Legends* and “æspa”’s existing fandoms. These challenges underscore that their popularity did not solely emanate from the intrinsic charm of virtual idols. In contrast, “ISEDOL” quickly ascended to the top of music charts upon debut, indicating the potential of virtual idols to strongly resonate with audiences. A nuanced examination of the reception of each group provides insights into the dynamics of the virtual idol phenomenon and the factors contributing to its success in the evolving K-pop landscape.

In conclusion, the convergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Metaverse has ushered in a new era for the K-pop industry, propelling virtual idols to unprecedented prominence. This study analyzes the underlying currents of this phenomenon, tracing its technological origins in response to a global crisis and the current dominance of virtual idols in the diverse landscape of Korean entertainment.

Study

Understanding the impact of fandom on the K-pop and idol industry is paramount, especially in the context of potential audiences transitioning into virtual idol enthusiasts

(Angmo & Mahajan, 2024; Sarfi, Nosrati & Sabzali, 2021; Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2021; Wang & Long, 2023). This study explores how the characteristics of virtual idols shape the attitudes of viewers who have experienced virtual idol performances. The investigation delves into the complex relationships among virtual idol characteristics, immersion during performances, performance satisfaction, and the intention to revisit such performances.

Through a comprehensive literature review and structural equation modeling, this research utilized SPSS 28.0 and AMOS 28.0, analyzing 470 responses. The key findings underscore the significance of creating an immersive experience for effective marketing communication along with idol performances. Characteristics that influence this immersive experience include attractiveness, similarity to humans, and commercial viability. Strategic planning that underscores these characteristics, particularly physical appeal and similarity to humans, is imperative for successful virtual idol performances. Addressing commercial viability is essential for mitigating the potential negative impacts, necessitating thoughtful strategic planning and execution.

Moreover, this study emphasizes the multifaceted role of virtual idols as content creators, who extend their influence to diverse genres, such as webtoons, web novels, videos, and games, leveraging their intellectual property (IP). This versatility, arising from their inherent duality as both media and content, enables them to integrate seamlessly across various platforms, mitigating drawbacks such as excessive commercialization. The flexibility of virtual idols opens avenues for innovative and distinctive marketing strategies that counterbalance their negative aspects.

Consider a scenario in which a virtual idol gains popularity after a captivating performance and evolves into a beloved character. The IP of this virtual idol extends into various forms, such as webtoons, web novels, videos, and games. This approach diversifies fan experiences and revenue streams, offering creative and narrative contributions that transcend commercialization. That is, fans perceive the virtual idol as a character with a rich narrative, mitigating potential negative impacts of commercialization. This example underscores how virtual idols, as content creators, navigate the challenges of commercialization through diverse and creative media ventures, paving the way for differentiated marketing strategies.

This research also underscores the importance of making virtual idol performances more immersive, going beyond mere stage presence. It advocates that virtual idols deeply engage the audience in the virtual world, recognizing attractiveness, human-like characteristics, and commercial viability as crucial. This study recommends strategic planning to enhance these qualities, suggesting that virtual idols have a special ability to expand their impact across various media types, providing fans with varied and rich experiences while creating new sources of income. Additionally, the fact that the virtual idols are not humans does not significantly affect how the audience perceives them.

In the dynamic K-pop industry, there has been a noticeable shift towards embracing virtual idols, with agencies and entertainment companies integrating their virtual counterparts and experimenting with new content forms. The K-pop industry's extension of virtual idols to various platforms exemplifies a strategic response, fostering a dynamic and innovative entertainment ecosystem, enriching fan experiences, and establishing new revenue avenues.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the changing dynamics of South Korea's cultural industries, particularly the rise of virtual idols. These findings highlight the implications of virtual stars on content creation, media platforms, and broader cultural economies. This study is anticipated to stimulate discussions on the future trajectories of cultural production and consumption in the digital age. Subsequent research is essential for comprehensively understanding the evolving dynamics of the Korean cultural industry, especially in light of the burgeoning presence of various virtual celebrities.

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Selected Papers of #AoIR2024:
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VIRTUAL INFLUENCER MARKETING AND THE HALO OF INNOVATION

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Introduction

Virtual influencers—fictitious, animated characters that are native to social media, and designed to accrue online attention—are often described as lower risk, lower cost, and lower maintenance alternatives to human influencers (Keegan, 2022; Yeung & Cho, 2022). Such claims gained momentum during COVID-19 lockdowns and "metaverse" preparations, circumstances which heightened the appeal of influencers seemingly untethered to the actual world. Globally, the virtual influencer industry is estimated to grow from ₩2.4 trillion (US$1.8 billion) in 2020 to ₩14 trillion (US$10.5 billion) by 2025 (Baek, qtd. in Chae, 2022). However, this growth depends on virtual influencers' continued appeal to the brands who hire the characters to appear in advertising campaigns, and whose marketing budgets cover operating costs for the boutique agencies responsible for creating and managing these characters.

This paper offers new insights into the operations of the virtual influencer industry by examining how virtual influencers are utilised in brand partnerships. It focuses on East Asia, a region where virtual influencers have been enthusiastically embraced as commercial partners. Challenging a likeness suggested by their shared label as "influencers", I argue that the format, aesthetics, and function of most virtual influencers' brand partnerships are qualitatively unlike those of human influencers. Instead, the primary appeal of partnering with virtual influencers is the "halo of innovation" that they extend to associated brands, products, and services. I propose defining "halo of innovation" as a specific type of "halo effect" (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977) that heightens perceptions of technological complexity and advancement. In this paper, I illustrate how efforts to activate the "halo of innovation" shape creative decisions and codify visual tropes in the brand partnerships of virtual influencers. I conclude by suggesting the conceptual utility of the "halo of innovation" for analysing how other emergent technologies are appropriated by brands to give the impression of being at the forefront of technological innovation.

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Methods

This paper forms part of a larger ethnographic project on virtual influencers, including six months of digital observation of virtual influencers and the industry surrounding them (Jan-July 2022), producer interviews, industry document analysis, press analysis, and archival research. It draws from a corpus of 150+ advertising campaigns featuring virtual influencers, focusing on 60 campaigns from East Asia. Coding was iteratively conducted, and utilised tools from visual analysis (Schroeder, 2006; van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2004). Theorising was informed by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), and engages with concepts from idol, influencer, and celebrity studies, as well as from film and advertising theory.

Format: From Advertorials to Association

The archetypal advertising format used by human influencers is the "advertorial", a conversational and persuasive style of endorsement communicated verbally or as written text (Abidin, 2015). Influencer advertorials foreground "experiential authority" (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 117) by attesting to the author's personal use, experience, and/or enjoyment of a product or service. By contrast, virtual influencers seldom post advertorials or personal endorsements. In fact, virtual influencers are rarely called upon to speak at all, reflecting both the technical complexity of convincingly animating speech, and the murky ethics surrounding characters' inability to use or experience the products they are recruited to promote (see Cook, 2020; Lee, 2022).

Instead, virtual influencers assume a role aligned with the marketing tradition of "image characters" (イメージキャラクター, *imēji kyarakutā*) codified by Japan's idol industry in the 1970s (Galbraith, 2012). Today, the use of idols as image characters is ubiquitous across East Asia (Galbraith, 2018; Sikarskie et al., 2022; Turnbull, 2017). In this "co-present" (McCracken, 1989, p. 310) style of celebrity endorsement, idols "lend their star image to the brand ... without implying any direct testimonial" (Karlin, 2012, p. 75). The idol's role is both visual and symbolic: their image is expected to capture the attention of consumers, and to "transfer the associative values and identification of the celebrity performer to the brand" (Karlin, 2012, p. 76). Virtual influencers are likewise utilised for their appearance, but because they do not generally share the same level of media saturation as human idols, the usual process of "meaning transfer" (McCracken, 1989, p. 313) cannot rely on audience familiarity. The visual composition of the branded content thus takes on new significance, as the intended meaning of the virtual influencer's appearance must be conveyed within the creative itself.

Aesthetics: Identifying the Virtual Human

My analysis revealed several recurring tropes that mark the bodies of virtual influencers as non-human, often drawing from science-fiction to create associations between virtual influencers and figures such as cyborgs, robots, and aliens. I highlight four examples of these tropes below: a) translucent touch, b) zero gravity, c) augmented vision, and d) glitches.

a) Virtual influencers often experience translucent touch when interacting with actual objects: at the point of contact, their “skin” appears translucent (Campbell, 2010; see Figure 1). This translucency sometimes reveals a grid of light, representing a wireframe or mesh, that alludes to their creation with digital animation software.

Figure 1: A translucent index finger marks the body of Chinese virtual influencer ALiCE as non-human in her promotion of the Urban Decay NAKED CYBER eyeshadow palette. Source, posted 25 August 2021. Screengrab by author on 24 November 2023.

b) Virtual influencers are often pictured in zero gravity (see Figure 2). When virtual influencers (or objects around them) appear weightless, they transcend laws of physics and the Earth’s gravitational pull and are clearly identified as non-human.

Figure 2: Chinese virtual influencer AYAYI appears weightless and wears a virtual dress in an ad for an ALIENWARE laptop. Source, posted 14 February 2022. Screengrab by author on 28 November 2023.

c) Virtual influencers are often depicted with augmented vision, such as by interacting with translucent interfaces reminiscent of augmented reality lenses without wearing additional hardware (see Figure 3). The effect is often underscored by the direction of the text, which is reversed to be legible for the audience instead of the character.

Figure 3: Japanese virtual influencer Imma interacts with nutritional information on a (reversed) translucent interface in a television commercial for Watson's soda water in China. Source, posted 25 June 2021**.** Screengrab by author on 28 Feb 2024.

d) Virtual influencers often glitch. Their bodies or movements appear momentarily fragmented, scattered, or pixelated (see Figure 4), suggesting an interruption of digital signals (Cubitt, 2017). The technological vulnerability of the virtual influencer's body is further accentuated by the solidity of the objects, buildings, and people around them.

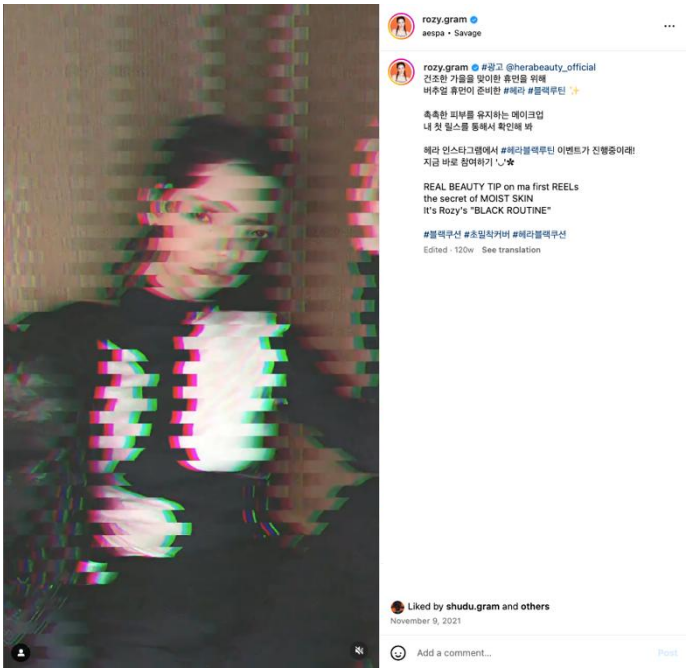

Figure 4: A glitch effect is applied to an image of Korean virtual influencer Rozy three times in an Instagram Reel promoting Hera cosmetics. Source, posted 9 November 2021. Screengrab by author on 28 Feb 2024.

Function: Halo of Innovation

Countering the increasingly photorealistic appearances of many virtual influencers in East Asia (Araque & Moynihan, 2021; Yoon, 2021), visual tropes such as translucent touch, zero gravity, augmented vision, and glitching immediately identify the bodies of virtual influencers as non-human, and draw attention to the cutting-edge digital technologies used to create them. These tropes establish the symbolic foundation for what cultural anthropologist Grant McCracken (1989) describes as “meaning transfer”, whereby “an association is fashioned between the cultural meanings of the celebrity ... and the endorsed product” (p. 313). In other words, they encourage recognition of the virtuality of virtual influencers. This in turn activates the “halo of innovation”, and extends ideas of new-ness, technological sophistication, and advancement from the virtual influencers to the products, brands, and services to which they are aligned.

Conclusion

This paper contributes new insights to how virtual influencers are used in brand partnerships, focusing on the thriving markets of East Asia. It examines the format and aesthetics of virtual influencers’ branded content, and details departures from the conventions followed by human influencers. It offers the concept of “halo of innovation” to describe the communicative value extended to brands who pay to partner with virtual influencers. The potential applications of this concept are vast, reaching far beyond the cases discussed in this paper. Future research could explore how other novel or emergent technologies (such as artificial intelligence) are strategically deployed by brands in products and communications in order to reap the halo’s benefits.

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THE PRODUCTION OF JAPANESE VIRTUALITY: IMMA, JAPANESE MULTI-DIMENSIONALITY AND TRANSMEDIAL MOBILITY

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Introduction: Imma, Made in Japan Inc.

Based on various chapters from the presenter's forthcoming book on virtual influencers (Miyake, 2024), this paper focuses on Imma – a Tokyo-based virtual influencer – in order to explore the production of Japanese virtuality as part of Japan's existing media industry. Through analysis of both Imma's social media content and various marketing strategies employed by Imma's creators (Aww Inc.), the discussion reveals how the combination of these two approaches produces a particular nationalised 'brand' of Japanese virtuality. It is argued that Imma nationalises, or 'Japanises', virtuality (Miyake 2023), part of wider national discourses that articulate Japanese-ness – *nihon-jiron* (Yoshino, 1992; Iwabuchi, 1994; Kawamura and Iwabuchi, 2022) – central to Japan's 'soft power' that capitalises on the commodification and globalisation of Japanese culture (Miller, 1982; Iwabuchi, 1998, 2002, 2008; Kikuchi, 2004).

The paper is thus divided into two main sections. Part 1 will conduct a close reading of one of Imma's TikToks in order to explore how her social media content reflects a particular Japanese stylisation of virtuality that articulates and commodifies a sense of Japanese culture and identity. This will be discussed through the lens of Imma's Japanese multidimensionality as situated within various Japanese creative industries. Part 2 will turn to some of the existing Japanese marketing strategies that can be identified across Imma's activities. The discussion here focuses on transmedial mobility as situated within the Japanese 'media mix' (Steinberg, 2012). Ultimately, this paper suggests how within the global, neo-colonialist and capitalist world of virtual influencers, the nationalisation of virtuality is becoming an increasing geo-political tool for the promotion of culture, where virtual influencers act not just as brand but national ambassadors within the new virtual frontier.

Part 1: Multi-dimensionality: playing with the dynamics of everyday realities

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This section will begin by reflecting on the existing mediated culture in Japan that mixes multiple dimensions, ranging from Hatsune Miku's holographic live concerts to 2.5D productions. Referring to Ihde's (1990) ideas around multidimensionality, it is argued that there is a tradition in Japan where reality involves the technological juxtaposing and merging of different dimensions, where both the real and representational are blurred but at once differentiated in ways that enable multidimensional and multimedia embodiments of Japanese culture. To explore this idea further, the discussion will provide a close reading of one of Imma's TikToks from 2020.

The TikTok in question consists of 'real' 3D buildings (although CGI), merging with illustrated 2D buildings, animated together with Imma at the centre of the scene. The TikTok uses a Japanese pop song that went viral at the time (香水/'perfume' by Japanese singer-song-writer, Eito/瑛人). In this particular case, three distinctly Japanese cultural industries – J-pop, visual and technological – come together, all fashioning virtuality in a particular Japanese style of reality. The analysis reveals thus reveals what Sugawa-Shimada (2020) argues as being part of Japanese cultural conditioning, where Japanese characters 'seamlessly connect their fantasy to audiences' reality', and where they are 'transfused throughout their daily life, allowing them to "experience" the embodiment of the fictional' (p. 128). As such, Imma becomes not just a virtual influencer based in Japan, but a part of Japanese character-based mediation of everyday reality that is ultimately commodified for global consumption.

Part 2: Transmedial Mobility: a Japanese marketing strategy

Continuing with the idea of Japanese fictional characters as part of everyday life, this section will focus on existing Japanese media culture within which the virtual influencer (and by extension, the virtual idol) industry is situated. Drawing from Japanese Media Studies concepts surrounding Japanese character marketing, consumer culture and its 'media mix' (Azuma, 2009; Itō, 2005; Steinberg, 2012; Wilde, 2019), the discussion will begin with a reflection on the various different transmedial characterisations Imma has embodied: from being an Animal Crossing avatar, anime character to NFTs. Here, the idea of transmediality will be approached as an effective media strategy, where Imma's ability to move across different platforms, realities and franchises reflects what Steinberg (2012) argues as the outward expansion of Japanese characters from their original media and social environment into other platforms, which ultimately leads to their diffusion and material distribution (2012: 14). As such, Imma is a useful transmedial character that Aww Inc, her creators, can use to engage with multiple audiences, platforms and technologies for capital gain.

To expand on these ideas further, the discussion will turn to the seminal work by Japanese manga theorist Itō (2005) and his ideas around *kyaractā* ('character', キャラクター) and *kyara* ('chara', キャラ). *Kyaractā,* being the fully-realised character, supported by a narrative/backstory and existing within a diegetic fictional world (i.e. Imma on social media, with narrative relationships with other Aww virtual influencers like her brother, Zinn and his girl-friend Ria); whereas *kyara*, an icon existing independently from any narrative and thus able to attached to any media and commodity form (i.e. Imma as an Animal Crossing character, or an NFT). As such, this section examines how

Imma is not just part of a wider Japanese transmedial commodity culture that evolves around fictional characters, but also how virtual influencers more generally – due to their virtual nature – can become transmedial agents of capitalism that are a result of, and also further encourage, the convergence of media platforms, technologies, economies and cultures.

To conclude, the paper will end by arguing how these two key areas – the way in which Imma's social media content is articulated, and also, how her content moves beyond social media through her characterisation – result in the production and commodification of a Japanised virtuality, as situated within the wider Japanese media industry and 'media mix'. As posited at the start, ultimately, the paper reveals how within the increasingly competitive, neo-colonialist and capitalist world of virtual influencers, the nationalisation of virtuality is part of a geo-political strategy for promoting culture in ways that 'brand' virtuality through the ways in which virtual influencers are operationalised within and outwith social media capitalism, acting as national ambassadors of a new virtual order.

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THE VIRTUAL HUMAN INDUSTRY IN GREATER CHINA: A STOCKTAKE OF NEWS DISCOURSE

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Introduction

Anthropologist Crystal Abidin has postured that viral social media trends from East Asia are regularly framed in the American popular discourse as being "the exotic Other, the underdog, and the Oriental 'magical' intrusion against the backdrop of a normal, hegemonic, Anglo-centric internet meme culture" (2017, n.p.). Sensationalist descriptors in viral news media have gone so far as to completely Other and exoticize Chinese digital cultures, with leads like "The bizarre, pink-soaked realms of Chinese mobile app stores are strange, seemingly alien places..." (International Business Times, 2017) pandering to a culturally-displaced readership. With the rising global interest in virtual Influencers and the plethora of conceptual and celebrity variants proliferating across East Asia in the last decade, what is the state of the popular discourse? This paper provides a stocktake on the evolving contemporary discourse on virtual humans – comprising virtual Influencers, virtual anchors, virtual assistants, Vocaloids, and similar – in the Greater China market.

The 'Virtual Human' Industry in Greater China

Industry reviews report that in China, virtual humans are broken down into two categories (Thomala, 2023a):

- Character-oriented digital persons who are "crafted with storytelling elements to exhibit distinct personalities, making them ideal for providing immersive and engaging user experiences" (n.p.). Examples include Music artists, Influencers, Livestreamers; and

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- Function-based or task-oriented virtual humans who are “trained to execute specific tasks” (n.p.). Examples include Digital assistants and Customer service avatars.

In the app- and platform-dependent Chinese market, virtual humans are widely accepted among Chinese consumers, with a majority surveyed having already encountered them (Thomala, 2023b), and approximately 25% surveyed who do not mind "spending money" on them (Thomala, 2023c). In particular, the virtual Influencer sector comprises over 317,000 companies across China, and is estimated to be worth CNY36 billion (Thomala, 2023a). Chinese virtual Influencers are most prominent on Weibo and Bilibili (Thomala, 2023d).

There is emerging scholarship on the newer sector of virtual anchors and AI broadcasters in China, primarily stemming from business and marketing. They note that virtual anchors are preferred by clients for their capacity to broadcast continuously (Chen, 2023) and increased customer engagement (Zhang et al., 2023), but can be perceived by consumers to be lacking authenticity (Chen, 2023). This paper takes a media studies approach to understand reception towards virtual humans via media discourse.

From 'Weird Japan' to 'Korean Wave' to 'Dystopian China'

Asian Studies scholar Wester Wagenaar (2016) offers that Western narratives about Japan have primarily been framed as "traditional Orientalism" (cf. Said, 1979) and "techno-Orientalism" (cf. Morley & Robins, 1995). However, a newer model of "wacky Orientalism" has posited a dichotomous framing of Japan as "bizarre" in order for interlocutors from the West to posture their practices as "normal" (Wagenaar, 2016, p. 46). This is popularly surmised as ‘Weird Japan’, offering a narrative of Japan as inherently dysfunctional, sexualized, and deviant, with a heavy emphasis on over-generalizing practices from niches in popular culture as applicable to all of Japanese society at large (Galbraith, 2019).

In an article assessing popular social discourses on the ‘Korean Wave’ in the mainstream media in the 1990s–2000s, Cultural Studies scholars Gyu-Chan Jeon and Tae-Jin Yoon (2005) offered that the three discursive types "pessimistic", "optimistic", and "realistic" were ultimately shrouded in undertones of "economic reduction" and "cultural imperialism" (p. 66). Fast forward to the social media industries of the 2010s–2020s, where Korean Influencers are fast gaining popularity (Choi & Han, 2022), Korean Studies scholars Mikah Lee and Younghan Cho (2021) have observed the "banal Orientalism" (cf. Haldrup et al., 2006) of everyday Korean cultures and practices being lauded as exemplary or exceptional for a global palate.

In Translation Studies, it has been noted that in aiming for "reception by an anglophone readership", English translations of contemporary Chinese literature have tended to paint China as being dystopian and repressive (Lee, 2015). Professor of Politics Josef Mahoney (2022) theorizes that in the last two centuries, depictions of China and Chinese cultures in Orientalist fashions have progressed from "classical Orientalism" (cf. Said, 1979) to "Sinological Orientalism" (cf. Vukovich, 2012) to "Digital Orientalism" (cf. Mayer, 2019). In particular, the era of Digital Orientalism began in the late 2010s and acknowledges China's rapidly accelerating technological advancements and capacity – especially through its technology-assisted response to the pandemic – that challenges and threatens US hegemony in the global market (Mahoney, 2022). Yet, the overarching discourse of 'Dystopian China' seeks to downplay the impressive growth and central importance of Chinese innovations in the tech industries, instead redirecting public interest towards yet another Orientalizing sentiment.

Methodology

Despite the early origins and histories rooted in East Asian tech industries, global coverage on virtual humans saw an uptick following the launch of 'virtual Influencer' Lil Miquela on Instagram in 2016. It is on this note that this paper seeks to review the recent (2010s–2020s) discourse on the virtual human industry in the Greater China market. Specifically, the paper reviews the media discourse of news articles through a visual and textual content analysis of headlines, leads, the story, and accompanying cover images, via inductive coding. The author is bilingually proficient.

The ethnographic analyses are supported from a larger longitudinal study of the Influencer industry, spanning traditional and digital participant observation at industry events, personal interviews with over 500 Influencers and backend professionals, and supplemented with document analysis of agency handbooks and brand PR collateral. Fieldwork spans 2008–2024 across the Asia Pacific region, including a concerted period of fieldwork in 2019–2024 on the Influencer industry in Greater China, focusing especially on Shanghai and Hong Kong, and a special interest in inter-cultural brokers and agencies who mediate digital campaigns between Chinese and foreign companies.

Summary of Initial Findings

One of the initial findings identified two different genres of news outlets: 'intercultural news outlets' that were usually founded by diaspora/migrant and intended to localize Chinese news for international markets, and may be based in China or abroad; and 'global news outlets' that were usually based in the US and subsequently Anglo-centric in their coverage. The below focuses on virtual anchors as the newest sector in the market.

(1) Within the same news cycle on a single story, intercultural news outlets tended to use factual headlines, while global news outlets tended to use dystopian headlines with sensationalist overtones. e.g.:

- [intercultural] *South China Morning Post* (8 November 2018): "Chinese state media has TV news anchors that can broadcast 24/7 with computer-generated faces"
- [global] *Time* (9 November 2018): "Watch China's 'AI News Anchor' Make an Eerie Debut"
- [intercultural] *Sixth Tone* (13 March 2023): "People's Daily Uses AI Anchor to Answer 'Two Sessions' Questions"
- [global] *Business Insider* (16 March 2023): "Meet China's latest AI news anchor, a young woman who runs virtual Q&A sessions to teach people propaganda"

(2) Intercultural news outlets tended to focus on the socio-cultural considerations of virtual humans, whereas global news outlets focused on socio-political concerns. e.g.:

- [intercultural] *China Daily* (18 March 2022): Story on how virtual anchors deliver news that is scripted according to the habits of the hearing-impaired (e.g. pace, grammar, vocabulary) to facilitate news delivery and inclusivity
- [intercultural] *The China Project* (16 June 2022): Story on how virtual assistants who are VR and AI-powered chatbots can provide individualized emotional support and therapeutic conversation as the mental health industry is under strain
- [global] *The Verge* (8 November 2018): Story on how virtual anchors are automated and do not question authority, and are "fake anchors" that can read censored news and propaganda
- [global] *CNBC* (16 November 2018): Story on how virtual anchors are not actually AI technology as they do not write their own scripts and are not 'intelligent'

Ongoing Research

Please note that the study is ongoing, but an updated and complete version will be ready for presentation at AoIR2024. Current coding is focused on the visual analyses of cover images, and on delineating the categories of media outlets in different permutations.

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