

Managing Anime Employees in the Virtual Office: A Case Study of hololive

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Abstract: Virtual YouTubers (or VTubers) are online personas of transnational fame who perform on digital streaming platforms using animated, motion-tracking avatars which are usually drawn in an anime style. Some of the biggest VTubers are now managed by corporate entities. The largest of these, Japan's hololive, situates its VTubers in a virtual office with virtual anime talent managers, and the CEO of the network's parent company even appears in mixed reality settings. This article therefore poses the question: why might a company in the business of futuristic trends such as the metaverse choose to reproduce its own highly conventional organizational structures in anime style? By examining playful depictions of managing virtual performers in hololive's own YouTube videos, this paper argues that stories of VTuber management are indebted to the conventions of anime's transnational, transmedia nature. This playfulness in turn represents an invitation to audiences to play with these conventions, and with the concept of the talent management organization itself.

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Introduction

On the comments of a YouTube video uploaded to a Japan-based channel which as of October 2024 boasted 2.6 million subscribers¹, an outpouring of emotion, as one of the channel's personas announced that they would be appearing no more. One English language comment describes her as “special. “I can’t stop crying” says another in Japanese. The video is a farewell to A-chan one of the stars of the biggest company currently managing virtual YouTubers (VTubers). But A-chan had no channel of her own, nor an official fanbase. Instead, she was an anime representation of a talent manager working for hololive¹, the virtual talent agency itself.

In this article, I argue that through anime depictions of their own virtual talent management, hololive, the agency in question, is inviting fans to invest emotionally and contribute materially to its expanding IP business. I will begin by explaining what a VTuber is, before outlining three key aspects of how hololive represents itself as an agency in anime form.

What is a VTuber?

VTuber is an abbreviation of the term “Virtual YouTuber”, “a digital content creator whose actions and voice are expressed through an animated character”.² Their “anime-like visual characteristics”³ are performed by a nakanohito (“person inside”), a real person behind motion-tracking technologies who typically broadcasts from their own home. VTubers chat to their subscribers as their animated avatars, sing, do comedy skits, and play video games, and even sometimes host virtual concerts.⁴ Although VTubers became “corporatized” around 2018 with the entry of Japan-based

¹ The name is officially stylised with a lower-case initial h.

talent management organizations such as hololive into the marketplace⁵, I argue that whilst VTubers may bear a resemblance to both virtual influencers and virtual idols, two earlier genres of animated persona, VTubers combine features of both; the fan-fuelled “peer-production”⁶ of the inherently transmedia virtual idol, and the social media “liveness”⁷ of the (virtual) influencer.

VTubers are becoming embedded in contemporary Japanese popular culture, with a single performed by hololive VTuber Hoshimachi Suisei charting in the top 50 Japanese singles of 2024⁸, whilst a VTuber character appears as a plot point in the hit video game franchise *Yakuza*⁹. Their transnational popularity has been used to promote baseball events in the US¹⁰, restaurant chains in Taiwan¹¹, and motorbikes in Indonesia¹²

The IP-licensing, merchandise strategy of hololive’s virtual YouTube business can be considered a novel iteration of Japan’s anime-centered transmedia model; the “media mix”¹³, but what is especially interesting about the case of hololive is its positioning as an corporate talent-management entity where fans around the world are invited to play with both the brand’s animated intellectual property and the concept of the agency itself.

Virtual talent managers

A-chan, the talent manager with her own animated virtual persona, is a hallowed part of the lore of how hololive came to exist. Once a voice heard in the background of early videos, in 2018 she was given her own motion-tracking model. Although A-chan supposedly started out as a hobbyist helping her friend set up as a VTuber in

the medium's early days, when she was one of only two employees of hololive¹⁴, her total commitment to her job as a talent manager is portrayed in surreal appearances on hololive's main YouTube channel. In one video, A-chan describes her busy daily routine by first literally smashing through the hololive office window to her desk, "raring to go", working through lunch, snacking at 16:00, drinking two canned coffees at 19:00 (when she planned to stop working), and finishing late ("as usual") at 21:55 whilst surrounded by 10 cans of energy drinks. She locks up and leaves the office (again, through the window).¹⁵

In another short-form animated video, A-chan's mentee, a young talent manager called Nodoka, arrives at work at 09:00¹⁶, and tries and fails to persuade A-Chan, who is typing furiously, to take a lunch break. It is made clear that being a talent manager for hololive, is at best not a 9-5 job, and at worst, outright exploitative, but this is played for laughs. Indeed, as Matanle et al.¹⁷ observe in their survey of women's working practices as portrayed in Japanese manga, dedication to an organization in Japan is often portrayed humorously in popular culture as a "distinctive national variety of capitalism".

In another official video created to mark A-chan's departure from hololive, A-chan finishes her day's work in the hololive office, but hololive VTubers then accost her repeatedly with additional tasks, which become increasingly surreal and specific. After A-chan breaks the window to the office in an attempt to escape, her colleague and fellow talent manager Nodoka calls her back to the office where it turns out they needed to keep her there for a farewell reception¹⁸. The video bears the hallmarks of a fan created parody remix video of anime known as a MAD video that is part of the

vernacular “database”¹⁹ of otaku tropes; except it is, in this case, created by a large company.

The virtual jimusho

The jimusho, or vertically integrated talent agency, as a recognizable brand, is an indispensable part of the Japanese entertainment industries. Since the 1990s, fans of *otaku* media both inside and outside of Japan are increasingly aware of the “production apparatus” behind pop performers in Japan²⁰, to the extent that the jimusho itself, or indeed idol management, has become an anime trope, featuring in recent anime such as *Oshi no Ko* (2023-2024, My Favorite Idol)²¹, and *If My Favorite Pop Idol Made It to the Budokan, I Would Die* (2020, *Oshi ga budôkan ittekuretara shinu*)²², all based on serialized manga comics, and further adapted into profitable theatrically-released films, an established media mix approach outlined by Denison²³.

hololive’s parent company are, in turn, aware of the value of fan production with “lax copyright enforcement regarding reedits (sic) of streams” involving its VTubers²⁴, evidenced in hololive’s own *Derivative Works Guidelines*²⁵. In one video, presented in the style of a role-playing game, the video displays images of A-chan and hololive’s newest talent management recruit Nodoka in the hololive office, with a textbox at the bottom matching the spoken dialogue.²⁶ In another video, the mundane office space of desks and chairs is magically transformed into a field of flowers, which hololive VTubers frolic in²⁷.

I argue that the playful virtual space of the hololive office reflects the encouragement what Zaborowski describes as “characteristics...dynamically co-created by the original producers... in an interpretative community of fans²⁸”, which in turn serves

COVER Corp.'s IP strategy. For example, jokes shared between livestreaming hololive VTubers and fans, who may "tip" VTubers using YouTube's SuperChat feature²⁹, become part of official IP, with a long-running joke related to hololive VTuber Oozora Subaru's impression of Donald Duck resulting in fans creating anime duck characters, which were in turn reincorporated into an official mascot. This is akin to what Galbraith describes as the "labor of love" at the heart of the Japanese idol industries³⁰, where labor-intensive fan activities become mutually beneficial to *jimusho* themselves.

The virtual CEO?

Motoaki Tanigo, the CEO of hololive's parent company COVER Corp., is a regular "real-life" presence in his agency's mixed reality VTuber content. Known in the world of hololive as YAGOO (pronounced "ya-go") after a misreading of his given name by a VTuber in the agency's earlier days, he has a background in character media and intellectual property, having worked for e-commerce and gaming companies that included partnerships with Hello Kitty's IP owner, Sanrio³¹, a company that has itself now moved into virtual experiences, including a "three-dimensional computer graphics (3DCG) reproduction of Sanrio Puroland, a real-life theme park operated by Sanrio based in Tokyo" featuring multiple VTubers.³²

A mysterious and charismatic male creative director, producer, or CEO is a mainstay of the Japanese talent management of young women, and indeed in the creation of VTuber antecedents such as virtual idols³³, with the "auteur-like" qualities of such a figure being well-established³⁴. However, Motoaki is not secretive; he presents himself as interacting directly with fans and VTubers. In one example from a concert video organized to commemorate the pink-pigtailed Minato Aqua's leaving the hololive agency (in Japanese idol vernacular, "graduating"), the real-life Motoaki is

depicted in an office in conversation with Aqua's animated representation, musing on his reasoning behind creating a VTuber agency.³⁵

In another video example, he wanders through a virtual gallery space, introducing a variety of upcoming projects associated with the hololive English strand, including the debut of a new roster of English-speaking VTubers.³⁶ Video comments joke that Motoaki is their favorite performer in the agency, their "best girl", a fannish sentiment echoed in a video of the CEO making an (apparently surprise) appearance at a gathering of cosplayers dressed as hololive VTubers, where he is greeted with shouts of "YAGOO!"³⁷. I argue that presenting CEO Motoaki Tanigo as a knowing participant in fan practices reflects something of what Salter and Stanfill³⁸ describe as the "fanboy as auteur", where men in visible positions of creative control within large media franchises are able to flaunt their "geek" credentials, leading to a further blurring of boundaries between PGC and UGC.

Conclusion

In presenting tongue-in-cheek, mediated narratives of managing virtual talent, I argue that the virtual talent agency hololive is not only "(inviting) the user to create content"³⁹ on their behalf, but also obfuscating some of the possible inequity involved in that labor. Moreover, as Lu et al.⁴⁰ argue, "Currently, we have a limited understanding of the labor contributed by different types of streamers... and of the policy options that might be leveraged to regulate the industry and to protect labor rights", As a study of the virtual representation of anime performance, this article cannot hope to answer the question of how nakanohito themselves feel about their own work.

However, by highlighting how hololive presents its own anime talent management in ways that knowingly play with tropes of entertainment production within the broader Japanese media mix, I hope to have encouraged consideration of how the (meta-)organization of virtual work is solidifying and transforming, and how we might interrogate these to encourage a safe and sustainable virtual streaming industry.

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