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Virtual “sweet relationships” in Japan: Navigating affection through technology. Communal practices, behaviors, and latent socio-cultural meaning

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Abstract

A number of Japanese VRChat users practice “sugar” (osatō). The term implies a “couple acting cute with one another.” Through qualitative textual analysis of twenty-six blog posts published by the practitioners and in depth-interviews of eleven authors, this paper investigates “sugar” behaviors, rituals, and latent socio-cultural meanings. This pioneering paper about the phenomenon contributes to the de-westernization of studies about virtual affective practices. The findings conclude that by extending their bodies through avatars, individuals present an image of “hybridity” and temporally “hack” hegemonic expectations.

Keywords: virtual love; relationship practices; osatō; technology; affective behavior; Japanese society.

Resumen

Varios usuarios japoneses de VRChat practican el “azúcar” (osatō). El término implica una “pareja que actúa de forma simpática con el otro”. Mediante el análisis textual cualitativo de veintiséis entradas de blog publicadas por los practicantes y entrevistas en profundidad a once autores, este trabajo investiga los comportamientos, rituales y significados socioculturales latentes del “sugar”. Este trabajo pionero sobre el fenómeno contribuye a la desoccidentalización de los estudios sobre las prácticas afectivas virtuales. Los resultados concluyen que, al extender sus cuerpos mediante avatares, los individuos presentan una imagen de “hibridez” y “hackean” temporalmente las expectativas hegemónicas.

Palabras clave: amor virtual; prácticas de relación; osatō; tecnología; comportamiento afectivo; sociedad japonesa.

Introduction

On the Japanese side of VRChat¹, some players pose as cute girl couples, celebrate their union in churches, buy matching rings, and pat each other on the head. The practice is called “sugar” (*osatō*), meaning a “sweet relationship in VRChat.” In a country where the birthrate and marriages are declining, individuals are diversifying their romantic emotions notably by turning to virtual love that is tantamount to “real” love (Yamada, 2017). Given our increasingly digital society, investigating close relationships formed using virtual reality holds greater potential for understanding human life experiences and behaviors (Huang and Bailenson, 2019). The purpose of this short, pioneering study is to take the first step into the “sugar” world and to explore the following questions: what is “sugar;” what are the behaviors; and what is the context? To do so, Donna Haraway’s cyborg theory is used as a theoretical framework to explore the affinity between technology, relationships, and affection.

The Cyborg Manifesto (Haraway, 2016) puts forward the idea that the technological development of the 20th century, and with it, the cyborg (machine and organism, creature of social reality and fiction), transgresses and breaks down the fundamental binary boundaries that have structured our understanding of the world, such as the opposition between male/female, and organism/machine. Notably, the cyborg figure allows for kinship between boundaries and contradictory identities, implying hybridity and not exclusivity among fractured identities, fluid and running into one another. Communication technologies are tools for reconfiguring our bodies and as Haraway writes, “Why should our bodies end at the skin?” (2016, p. 61). The Internet enables a form of cyborg identity, drawing our attention to ways in which we construct “realities” of self in both virtual and “actual” worlds, questioning the naturalness of human intimacy (Honey and Morgan, 2013). For instance, existing as an avatar is one way of being a cyborg, with the body extended technologically through the virtual

character (Cruikshank, 2001). The cyborg metaphor can be deployed as a manner of thinking about love “as not solely embodied by humans as bounded beings” (Schoemaker Holmes, 2010, p. 34). As such, it opens to possibilities of coexisting in the “actual” world and in the imagination by co-producing life technologically and animating things we love (Kovacic, 2021). In this paper, I investigate how “sugar” practitioners navigate the virtual space by expanding the boundary of human connection. What are the alternative forms of affective behavior with bodies that are extended technologically through representations of the self as fictional characters? But why talk about virtual relationships and user behaviors in Japan? Based on a recent large scale quantitative survey, “Social VR Lifestyle Survey 2021,” that I conducted with Virtual Bishōjo Nem, a metaverse celebrity and persona, amongst 1069 Japanese users, 38% responded to having fallen in love in VRChat and 29% have engaged in a romantic relationship with someone they have met in social virtual reality. The phenomena of affection taking place in a virtual environment through avatars should not be underestimated as it is far from being a rare occurrence. By focusing on Japanese VRChat users, this research contributes to the de-westernization of studies about virtual behaviors. Attention to non-hegemonic ways of kinship could enable a greater understanding of latent socio-cultural context. My goal is to provide an introduction that can be used as a base for future research.

Material and Methods

To explore the cultural circuit of virtual romantic relationships amongst Japanese users in VRChat, my fieldwork took place solely online and I deployed textual analysis (qualitative content analysis) and in-depth interviews. Qualitative analysis is an important tool for understanding emotions and thoughts of human behavior. Qualitative textual analysis is a method that deploys a small number of texts and focuses on examining the content and meaning (for example, the interconnections of meanings inside and outside of text) or the structure and discourse (Lockyer, 2008, pp. 865–866). Within the textual analy-

¹A massive multiplayer online game, that can be played on desktop or in virtual reality, allows its users to talk to each other using avatars

sis, qualitative content analysis (method for analyzing interviews, narratives, responses to open-ended questions, speeches, media, etc.) organizes qualitative textual data into clusters of similar categories to reveal patterns and less obvious context (Heidi, 2008, pp. 120–121).

This research took place March 14, 2022, to August 24, 2022. The textual material consists of personal journal entries. A total of 117 entries over the span of four years were consulted on popular Japanese blog website Note, VRChat users' websites, and other journal websites. Twenty-six posts from 24 writers were selected based on the user's engagement in a production of a value system and discourse about the following themes: define *osatō*; present relationship practices; and discuss the relation between the "actual" and virtual worlds. The following hashtags in Japanese were used during the investigation to gather material #osatō, #osatō VRC, and #osatō VRChat. First, the content was translated from Japanese into English. Second, the texts were divided into meaning units. Third, those units were condensed into codes. Fourth, the codes were separated into categories based on similarities. Following my units of analysis and coding rules, I examined each textual material in my sample, recording the characteristics of "sugar" used to describe the virtual behavior. All direct citations from blog posts and songs were anonymized. Finally, theoretical triangulation was used to reestablish context and uncover practices or processes across a multitude of sources and methods of data collected online. Based on collected information, 12 writers were confronted with data for semi-structured in-depth interviews in more than one installment, allowing the informants to reflect or clarify their thoughts. Those interviewed were made to know the nature and purpose of the study. Being concerned with the accurate portrayal, my purpose is to grasp my informant's visions. To ensure such, interviewees were involved in different stages of the study. Given that my approach is non-essentializing in that it presents the diversity of virtual partner behaviors and practices, I note conflicting statements and differences.

Results: A taste of "sugar"

Who practices "sugar" and why?

Before VRChat, one could find the metaphorical expression "spitting sugar" or "spitting sand" in manga, anime, novels, and games during lovey-dovey scenes between characters or when one is embarrassed by hearing a sweet love story, making them "spit sugar" (in some cases represented by sand-like texture). Some believe that "sugar" is a derivative of the Japanese slang for "sweet relationship." However, according to collected data, "sugar" practitioners are unaware of the term's history in regard to VRChat. Nevertheless, virtual couples have existed long before VRChat. Informants explain that "there have long been cases of people entering into relationships in MMORPGs [online games] and other forms of entertainment." They note a difference with other form of "net game romance" (*netoge ren'ai*): "There is no such thing as a system marriage, so the romance is born from communication as in the real world, not from data or settings."

Based on collected data, the romance is described as a "VRChat couple;" "avec;" a "virtual reality partner;" an "object of romantic interest;" a "dependent interest;" "not equal to lover or couple;" a "special relationship;" a "special friend, more than a friend or a confidant;" a "pseudo-love relationship that is close to a lover but is consummated within the metaverse;" a "romantic relationship;" a "honeymoon;" or "not necessarily a romantic relationship." However, the main understanding is that "sugar is a sweet relationship." There are different types of couples, for instance, there are those who are "sugar couple like lovers," others are "sugar couples like best friends" where users, after getting to know each other, may meet outside or start playing other games together. Some are married or romantically involved with someone in the "actual" world and act as partners or best friends in VRChat, or role-play a romantic relationship, while some prefer not to be categorized as "sugar" (Iwasa and Matsu, 2022, p.119). Moreover, "sugar is not limited to 1:1 couple" and some engage in "polysaccharides" (*tatōrui*, a chemical term to describe long chains of carbohydrate (sugar) molecules), i.e., polyamorous relationships, because

“in the world of virtual world you are not tied to one person.” One user tells me: “In the real world, I have a wife whom I love, and in the virtual world, I have multiple people who I cherish.”

As jargon, “sugar” avoids bringing “vivid concepts of real-world romance to VRChat” and gives the impression of “lightness.” The partners are perceived by the “atmosphere” of a “sweet relationship:” it is “sweet, *kawai* [cute and lovable] and soothing to look at,” expressing feelings beyond “real gender.” It is a “seasoning,” a way to add “a little accent to your life.” However, the “sweet relationship” is ambiguous, and its meaning varies from person to person. Moreover, as will be demonstrated in this paper, “virtual reality partners” are self-aware, conscious that their practice is a “fleeting dream,” a “state of fluffy existence.” Previous research has also shown that VRChat users note a sense of irony when it comes to virtual love (Pedersen, 2021, pp. 46–47). In the present case study, some mention that their behavior is a “joke,” an “artificial sweetener” (*jinkō kanmi-ryō*). Whatever it is, what is the purpose of “sugar”?

Users note that when one spends an important number of hours in virtual reality worlds it is reasonable to expect some to develop feelings. However, we could ask ourselves what are the merits of the “pseudo-love relationship”? One user writes, “‘sugar’ is a concept that Japanese users have come up with on their own.... If there is any benefit from sugar, it will be mostly in the mental aspect.” According to collected data, individuals who engage in the virtual practices enjoy communicating, are stimulated by their partner’s activities and encourage them, and are “typically mentally and physically tired and want to be healed and try to heal.” Because “sugar” is “cute and soothing,” VRChat romance could provide participants with emotional support, such as nurturing, enjoyment, self-realization, approval, healing, and fulfillment. Informants explain that as they are healed through “sugar,” they feel energized in the “actual” world where they are tired of work and personal life issues. According to users, the cost of the VRChat relationship is almost zero, and, as there are no physical limitations and economic spending involved, the “healing can be enjoyed easily.” Similarly, “it is

easier for people to be close to each other. Without being bothered by the other person’s gender, age, or title.” Thus, “even if they are of the same sex, a healing effect may be created.” As another participant writes, “we are all lonely” and individuals come to VRChat to find some form of healing.

To provide such emotional care, partners have the following characteristics: being open-minded, serious, kind, honest, cute, supportive, encouraging, passionate, present, devoted, caring, and allowing dependence. Users believe that those who are suitable for “sugar” must “think well of their partner,” “discuss things thoroughly,” and “read the atmosphere.” According to them, “personality” is the most important element because “romance in the virtual world is solely determined by whether or not the person is fun to talk to.” Others also mention being attracted to gestures, attentiveness, and voice. While “sugar” relationships claim to challenge and be different from “actual” world relationships (Nem, 2022, p. 225), one could argue that they are still embedded in traditional values that one seeks out in a partner, such as devotion, care, and seriousness. As one user writes, “‘sugar’ itself reflects the traditional partner relationship in the real world, such as exchanging rings.”

Communal practices and behaviors

What are considered analog forms of intimacy, courtship, and affective behavior migrate into the digital realm and new media forms (Pettman, 2009). Virtual world inhabitants transform existing rituals and practices, imagining new elements filled with personal references and reinforcing the feeling of belonging in a collective celebration of creativity and kinship (Servais, 2016). “Sugar” is no exception as the community develops couple practices and re-imagines existing affective rituals. First, I want to present a generic step-by-step process of engaging in “sugar.” The relationship starts in an instance² of VRChat or in one of its “date locations.” Some also meet through mutual friends, meeting events, mat-

² There are four types of instances in VRChat. Public: anyone can enter the world. Friend+: the room owner’s friends and friends of the world owner can enter. Friend: only the world owner’s friends can enter. Invite: only those who are invited by the world owner can enter.

ching parties, hobbyist circles, game worlds, and through social networking service such as Twitter using the hashtag #StartedVRChat (#VRChatHajimemashita). Once they send a “friend request” or accept one, they become “friends” and can “join” one another. After some time, one of the users “confesses” their feelings. Some prepare a romantic situation to create an ideal scene, “just like a real-life marriage proposal.” Others ask their friends for some help to time the confession: “We were having fun with a few friends in public, and the others dropped off to run errands, etc., and we were alone, so I moved to a private instance and confessed.” Once the individuals have agreed with each other, “sugar” is established. Those who decide to make their relationship public and “long for the status of being in a sugar relationship” post a “#SugaReport” (#OsatōHōkoku) on Twitter. Each report is accompanied by photos where the partners appear wearing matching rings, holding hands, kissing. The post receives celebratory comments from other users such as “congratulations!” or “best wishes.”

“Sugar” takes place across different networks, with users daily communicating outside of VRChat on Discord or Twitter. When it comes to the virtual space, couples spend time with their friends, watch videos, attend events, flirt publicly, have a drink with music in a world where they can relax, practice “sleeping in VR,”³ and visit virtual worlds where they take photos, a crucial element that enables individuals to share their “cute selfies” on Twitter that serve as memories. While some enjoy “public” or “friend”/“friends+” instances, it is also common for couples to “stay together in a private world,” where they can “spend time confiding in each other about problems that are difficult to talk about” and engage in erotic practices (“do sex in private”). After some time, the issue arises of “if you do not marry, the sugar relationship ends up in ‘salt’ [oshio].” Typically, the “sugar ceremony” (oshatō-shiki) takes place amongst close friends who gather in a Western-type church world, exchange rings or matching avatar accessories, throw the flower bouquet, and take photos. “Special friends” get ma-

³ Users sleep together in a virtual world while being physically alone and wearing a virtual reality set-up in their respective, separate “actual” world locations.

ried because “like real couples, they want to monopolize their partner.” Another user says that given the norm of “polygamy” and short-term relationships, some “want to draw a line from that, assuring and strengthening their relationships at the same time.” Informants are conscious that it is “pseudo” and “play marriage” enabled by the virtual space imitating practices for the enjoyment of “the atmosphere of getting married.”

Some sweet partners engage in “precious” (teetee) behavior, a slang form of “precious” (tōtoi). According to users, it is believed that the word originated when the word tōtoi could not have been pronounced properly due to an emotional reaction and was uttered as “teetee.” It is used to describe “kawai, cool and heavenly existences” or “something that is too adorable to handle.” Maria, who writes about VRChat culture and wanted to be mentioned adds that “teetee behavior in VRChat’s sugar refers to cute, beautiful sugar girls making out with each other.” Another user adds that tōtoi originated in girl’s manga (shōjo manga), thus is not only limited to girl-girl scenarios, and yuri (lesbian) genre. Although the term did not emerge from the “sugar” culture and is not only attributed to those who act as “lovers,” when used in that context it is a “friendly remark made by those who have seen sweet behavior of sugar flirting” and “mainly occur when they see an ‘affectionate friendship’ or ‘skinship’ [sukinshippu].” “Skinship” is avatar-skin-to-skin contact, such as petting each other, sleeping together, or any other virtual avatar tactile behavior. Given that “sugar” is “gender ambiguous, ‘skinship’ is likely to occur between players.” But in what way is it ambiguous?

Male-to-male couples with cute girl appearances

When it comes to VRChat, there are heterosexual couples, those “who do not care about gender in the VR world,” those “who care about gender in the VR world and choose a partner of a specific gender” and “those who care about gender in the actual world but not in VR world.” However, “most couples are male-to-male in cute girl avatars.” In other words, “sugar is played between men due to the male/female ratio of players.” Some of

those male users deploy voice changes, cute moves, etc., obscuring not only their real names, backgrounds, social positions, and physical appearance, but also gender and sex, making “everyone look cute.” To be a fictional character is to play with multiple signs of identity, shaped by existing cultural practices, communal practices, and imagination. As recent research shows, almost 90% of Japanese users are male with just under 80% using feminine avatars, and for 5% of the users the physical sex of their virtual romantic interest is irrelevant (Nem, 2022, p. 220). Thus, as one user writes, “there are men who ‘have no choice’ or ‘choose the same sex partner because of the brain illusion of using a feminine avatar,’ but would prefer a female user.” Nevertheless, informants explain that individuals of the same sex get close to each other on VRChat where both parties use cute girl avatars (perceived to be highly attractive and making them approachable) leading to “sugar.” They consider their partners as “same-sex friends,” a “good, close male friend,” some being “good friends in reality and a couple in virtual reality.” In other words, it is “an extension of heterosexual same-sex friendship.” According to users, the majority are heterosexual and “‘sugar’ is becoming a new form of sexuality” where participants engage in romantic behavior outside of their typical spectrum of sexual preferences. One participant explains that “sugar” is rooted in a culture where a “cute girl avatar has a very masculine voice and slurping sake with legs wide open, without people saying, ‘If you are going to use a cute girl appearance, you should be a little more conscious of that’.... For many people, real gender is not an important issue.” According to blog entries VRChat is mainly populated by men with “pretty girl” avatars who search for those who resemble them. Moreover, due to the lack of direct physical contact users can “make-out” with cute girl characters “regardless of the body’s gender/sex.” As another informant points out, “Whether the sugar couple is of the same or opposite sex in the real world, the partner that each perceives is a ‘kindred spirit in the form of a cute girl’ and real-world gender is not important.” However, due to men’s heterosexuality, users claim that the other partner’s appearance must be

cute, even if the behavior does not match the “filter of the feminine avatar.” One informant says that the cute girl appearance enables users to

perceive their partner as pseudo-heterosexual. Many male-male couples using beautiful girl avatars are also heterosexual. This means that often, they are people who should not have romantic feelings for men in the real world. I believe that feminine movements (cute moves) are one element that can be used to develop romantic feelings for a partner who is really of the same sex.

As such, it is “a special relationship that is based on the sensibility of heterosexuality but is not influenced by gender.” The male-to-male with feminine avatar pairing is advocated as being a “gender neutral romance” by the community: “You can fall in love without regard to the other person’s gender or appearance” because VRChat provides the “freedom to choose the gender of avatars and voices.” The physical body’s gender and sex seems to be an afterthought, with kindness and cuteness being the main requirement: “There is so much insecurity in modern Japan that many people have come to believe that it no longer matters what gender a person is as long as he or she can provide healing.” However, it is questionable whether the phenomenon is gender-free, given that it involves heterosexual men being attracted to feminine avatars. One user mentions that most male-to-male “sugar” couples selectively choose male partners because “the relationships are easier,” “avoiding the constraints of male-female relationships such as being judged by attractiveness, appearances, social status, wealth, etc.” Another adds: “while avoiding such annoyances, you still can have a partner who looks cute.” According to informants, “majority of men are interested in whether the other person is cute,” and “it is natural to ask the other person to be kawai and to behave as kawai as possible.” Using cute girl avatars “help straight guys ‘fall in love’ with other straight guys.”⁴ According to Maria,

4 It is paramount that those cute moves are not a requirement for “sugar” to occur and some even claim that “couples do not need kawai moves.” As one user points out, those who do cute moves do so because they find it attractive, independent of whether they are in a relationship. In other words, while cute moves and “precious” behaviors are part of the “sugar” landscape, they belong to a broader

“as long as it is cute it does not matter what sex you are.”

My informants are conscious of stereotypical gendered behavior, using it as a tool to craft an alternative identity and acquire desirability and healing. To appear “desirable” and “cute,” participants do *kawai* moves such as “exaggerated movements like characters in an anime” or using “a lot of body language that Japanese people do not often use.” Users claim that *kawai* moves “amplify the attractiveness of cute girl avatars,” “facilitate being liked by others,” and “help hack the sense of distance between us.” However, cuteness can cause doubt about the genuineness of their relationship: “it can be just me falling in love with him because he is using a female avatar” or “this love may not be possible if he was using a different avatar.” Nevertheless, in the end, “cute girls heal because they are *kawai*.” Users stabilize and destabilize the heteronormative narrative while imagining a world inhabited by fictional characters with real behaviors, relationships, and consequences.

Discussion

What social and gender identity changes in Japan is “sugar” mirroring? Japan faces man-made social pressures and natural disasters that are reflected in a constant state of precarity and anxiety (Rosenbaum, 2020, p. 450). Users mention their uncertainties: “recession, distrust of politics, and lack of hope for the future.” Another adds:

In the area of work, there are low salaries, service overtime as a matter of course, bosses not being kind to their subordinates, power harassment, sexual harassment, poor working environment, and so on. In terms of human relations, people say something if they are not constantly connected via line, Instagram, etc., they have to go to drinking parties they do not want to go to with workmates, they cannot break up with friends they do not want to associate with, etc. In the case of marriage, the government’s support is weak, there are not enough vacancies at daycare centers, and so on.

Moreover, according to informants, Japanese virtual *kawai* practice.

society places a great importance on social status, education, income, and appearance:

What you do, how much money you can earn, what position you hold, what you look like. There may be more people who feel complex and blocked by these things... In the world of VR wearing an avatar obscures what kind of person the other person is, so we might be free from such a feeling of entrapment.

However, another user is quick to note that the avatar’s appearance and user’s status within the virtual world might be relevant factors for choosing a virtual partner.

Furthermore, participants note that many young adults live without partners:

The proportion of adults in their 20s without a partner (lover) is men approximately 70%, women approximately 50%. It is possible that men, who find it particularly difficult to form romantic relationships, may become dependent on life on VRChat through sugar relationships in VR.

Another user claims that “more than 70% of men in their 20s do not have a girlfriend,” partially due to long working hours that make it “very difficult to build relationships outside of work in terms of time and energy.” Due to constant stress and “recent lifestyle changes, an increasing number of individuals do not have time to think about marriage or do not want to get married.” According to users, those issues

make us want to turn our eyes away from reality. Therefore, it is only natural that people prefer VRChat, where they can get away from the painful reality and enjoy the unreal without worrying about troublesome human relationships, hierarchy, and so on.

One informant mentions, “We believe that VRChat is not favored because of problems in contemporary Japanese society, but because people who do not fit into contemporary society are attracted to VRChat.” Thus, we could consider the cyberspace of “sugar” as a simple “escape” from persisting social malaise, considering it “just another method to fill the void within, and cancel any emotional subscription to the human dimension of the potential partners” (Gräjdian, 2018, p. 189) on the other side of the digital screen, especially

amongst men. However, following such narrative reinforces social mores and does not account for users' creative practices when it comes to affective behavior and negotiation of alternative forms of affect. It would be wrong to interpret the interest for the digital as an attempt to avoid feelings of alienation from the "actual world" or solitude (Hidenori, 2018, p. 158). Rather, we could argue that users temporally "hack" the societal expectations that cause pressure and "work hard to spend time with your sugar partner" rather than simply working "to make ends meet and then coming home tired and alone." "Sugar," and VRChat as its arena, become tools to "be more conscious of enjoying oneself in life" and "to casually interact with others without the time and physical cost of traveling and meeting up with others."

Enjoying oneself through a form of virtual play provides individuals with the possibility of "reconstructing reality and modifying its aims, perspectives, and values" (Dalton-Bul, 2014, p. 139) at an individual and micro-community level. Users explain:

Everyone who is exhausted is sure to seek healing. And I believe that what Japanese VRChat players arrived at in their pursuit of healing was "sugar" and the cute moves of their sugar partners. I believe that the main reason is "I want unrealistic healing that I cannot get in my daily life or in reality."

Others also highlight the convenience of obtaining healing "without the need to think about financial or future concerns." Not only are users forming a community around a common practice and establishing appropriate behaviors and practices that were presented in this paper, VRChat becomes a space where individuals relish making a space for themselves "where you can be your true self." VRChat culture "natives," as they call themselves, claim that with "sugar," "by eliminating the various 'filters' of age, gender, title, etc. that intervene in the physical world, we may be able to accelerate the essential communication between souls, and realize a more ideal society" (Nem, 2022, p. 224). It is not uncommon for virtual relationships to be perceived as more idealized and positive than those in the 'actual' world (Gilbert et al., 2011, p. 2045). Similarly, "sugar" is perceived as a

state that grants access to things otherwise unavailable, such as "being praised even for trivial things" and being "respected for their personality" in a "culture that puts everyone into the same mold."

Past research has shown that virtual spaces can be those of an intimacy making culture, questioning naturalized notions of kinship that were built on biological or social arrangements (Boellstorff, 2010, p. 157, 170). The "sugar" culture claims to avoid those arrangements by choosing their virtual partners not based on their "actual" world appearance, gender, sex, or social status. Elements that according to informants Japanese society plays a great importance on: "Most men and women think first about whether the partner is beautiful, has a high social status, in other words, whether they have enough money, etc." However, users are quick to note that it is due to the virtual nature of the relationship "that it is possible to have a pseudo-relationship without worrying about physical appearance, social status or gender in real life." The digital lives with their practices and behaviors, find "alternatives" to hegemonic notions of kinship practices, producing life as a community through technology and imagination. Creative potential arises from the hybridity of machine and organism as users' virtual bodies are not fully machine (there are not artificial intelligence or robots), and not fully bounded as human due to their anime-style digital representation and obscured "actual" physical characteristics. Communication technologies recraft not only our understanding of what is body and gender with avatars, but also that of kinship. "Sugar" is not against existing relationship practices of the "actual" world, rather, a desire for an alternative and a temporary "hack" of existing norms. The movement is not excluding and there is a myriad of fractional identities and contradictory standpoints.

Conclusion

With their bodies extended technologically through avatars, affect goes not only beyond the hegemonic heterosexual narrative but also has virtual world specific preferences that differ from those of the "actual" world. For example, there are heterosexual men who

engage in male-to-male “sugar” practices with cute girl avatars and claim to be homosexual solely in VRChat while married to a woman in their daily life. As users explain, based on their personality and behavior individuals can be perceived as “more feminine or masculine,” breaking down the binary and creating fractional identities that are not afraid of kinship with and as fictional beings enabled by machines (PC) and communication technologies. “Sugar” presents imagery of hybridity, that of co-habitation as physically bounded individuals and that of virtual characters caressing each other’s heads and taking pictures in front of a whale swimming in the clouds. Without challenging the authenticity of the “actual” world norms, “sugar” practitioners make space for themselves as individuals, temporally “hacking” hegemonic expectations and proposing an alternative.

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