

User Engagement in Internet Video Platforms: A Case Study of Bilibili (Postprint)

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Abstract

With the development of new media technologies, users have gradually moved beyond passive information consumption to become active participants in Internet content production and dissemination, rendering their prosumer identity increasingly salient. In recent years, Bilibili has facilitated user participation in content creation and, through its distinctive content presentation and user engagement modalities, has emerged as a formidable competitor to video platforms such as iQiyi and Youku. Consequently, this study employs a participatory observation methodology to investigate user participation in Internet video platforms, using Bilibili as a case study. By analyzing the patterns and characteristics of user participation on Bilibili, this paper examines the current obstacles impeding such participation and proposes targeted recommendations for the platform to enhance user engagement.

Full Text

Preamble

Research on User Participation in Internet Video Platforms: A Case Study of Bilibili

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Abstract: With the development of new media technologies, users have gradually moved beyond passive information reception to become active participants in internet content production and dissemination, with their prosumer identity becoming increasingly prominent. In recent years, Bilibili has provided conditions for user participation in content production and, through its unique content presentation and user engagement methods, has evolved into a formidable competitor to video platforms such as iQiyi and Youku. This study employs

participatory observation to investigate user participation in internet video platforms, using Bilibili as a case study. By analyzing the methods and characteristics of user participation on Bilibili, this paper examines current obstacles to user engagement and proposes recommendations for promoting user participation on the platform.

Keywords: user participation; Bilibili; participatory culture

The rise of new media technologies has established the internet as a crucial channel for information production and dissemination, permeating every aspect of daily life. The internet not only provides audiences with access to diverse information but also empowers them through technological affordances, enabling them to transcend passive reception and actively participate in the production and dissemination of internet content and cultural products. This transformation signifies that users are simultaneously consumers and producers of internet content, highlighting their dual role as prosumers. Under this trend, the concept of “audience” in communication processes has gradually been replaced by “user,” making user participation an essential component of internet content production and dissemination.

Internet users leverage various platforms to express their viewpoints, seek identity recognition among community members, and form collective power, thereby shaping diverse social and cultural forms and giving rise to numerous emerging cultural products and media phenomena [1]. Bilibili (hereinafter referred to as “B Site” or “Bilibili”), founded in 2009, is an internet video platform encompassing multiple content categories including animation, comics, games (ACG), music, knowledge, and film and television. The platform has distinguished itself from major competitors like Youku and iQiyi primarily through its unique content offerings and real-time interactive danmaku (bullet comment) functionality, gradually developing into China’s largest danmaku video website [2]. Unlike other domestic internet video platforms that rely on blockbuster film and television resources produced by the platform itself, Bilibili has constructed a relatively unique participatory cultural landscape by providing pathways for user participation in content production, earning particular favor among young users. Therefore, this paper selects Bilibili as a case study to investigate user participation in internet video platforms. By elaborating on the methods and characteristics of user participation on Bilibili and addressing the obstacles encountered, this study proposes corresponding solutions, hoping to provide a foundation for promoting user participation on the platform.

2. Conceptualization of Participatory Culture

Participatory culture, also known as participatory culture (the term is repeated in the original), was initially proposed by American communication scholar Henry Jenkins in his 1992 work *Textual Poachers*. Jenkins argued that “the increasingly sophisticated media technologies enable ordinary citizens to participate in archiving, annotating, appropriating, remixing, and recirculating media

content,” transforming media consumers into media producers through active engagement with media content [3]. This process creates a new form of media culture characterized by freedom, equality, openness, inclusivity, and sharing [4].

The new media environment has nurtured numerous video websites and content platforms that provide users with channels and tools for content creation and dissemination, gradually lowering the threshold for user participation in media text creation and allowing participatory culture to flourish in this context [1][4]. In his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Jenkins further elaborated on participatory culture, noting that users express meaningful values through the creation and sharing of works in their daily practices, which simultaneously helps them establish social connections and obtain identity recognition. He also proposed that “cultural convergence is not only a top-down, corporate-driven process but also a bottom-up, consumer-driven process” [5], suggesting that grassroots forces, when aggregated, can also influence and impact popular culture.

3. Methods of User Participation on Bilibili

Initially oriented toward youth subculture groups of ACG enthusiasts, Bilibili has attracted numerous users through its unique content presentation and user participation formats, gradually evolving into a large-scale internet video platform covering multiple content zones including animation, gaming, music, and film and television. Currently, user participation on Bilibili primarily manifests in three forms: video production, danmaku commenting, and interactive video engagement.

3.1 User-Generated Video Content

Compared with traditional video websites, Bilibili primarily relies on user-generated content (UGC) and stands as one of China’s most active UGC video platforms. Users who upload videos on Bilibili are known as “UP creators.” Through content migration, new meaning extraction from existing texts, and original creation, these UP creators provide Bilibili with rich and diverse content that attracts young audiences and serves as a crucial factor driving the platform’s development [6].

Initially, Bilibili primarily catered to ACG enthusiasts, and UP creators would migrate famous ACG content from Japan or other countries to the platform for domestic audiences. In this process, UP creators merely migrated existing texts without directly producing new meanings, yet they significantly influenced the dissemination and development of ACG culture in China. Additionally, users extract new meanings from existing texts by interpreting professionally produced films and television series based on their knowledge backgrounds. Creators such as “Muyu Shuixin” and “Forward Four Screening Room” produce entirely new video texts and meanings through video editing and interpretation of film

and television content. Finally, individual UP creators produce original videos through filming and editing, uploading new texts to Bilibili for presentation and dissemination. Most Bilibili UP creators have not received professional training, yet it is precisely this amateur creativity that generates more diverse creative elements, making their works more outstanding in both form and content compared to content on other video platforms.

3.2 Danmaku Participation

Danmaku, derived from the Japanese word “Danmaku” meaning “dense, moving objects,” refers to user comments displayed directly on the video screen on Bilibili [7]. Danmaku constitutes the core of Bilibili’s development and is entirely user-created. Through the process of posting and viewing danmaku, users demonstrate their productivity and creativity while achieving identity recognition and emotional resonance through interaction.

Explanatory danmaku represents a typical form of bullet comment that supplements video content, reflecting user participation and productivity. For instance, when UP creators upload foreign video resources without translation to provide timely content, some audiences provide translation texts through danmaku to supplement the video content. This practice not only demonstrates user participation in Bilibili’s content production but also showcases collective intelligence. Furthermore, when users encounter favored content, they express their excitement through collective danmaku flooding.

To further enhance user participation experience, Bilibili introduced intelligent anti-obstruction danmaku technology that distinguishes danmaku content from video content by segmenting human figures in videos and presenting them in front of the danmaku. This approach preserves users’ immersive viewing experience while ensuring clearer presentation of danmaku content.

3.3 Interactive Video Participation

With the development of new media technologies, video creation has become more versatile, and video types have diversified. In 2019, Bilibili launched a new creative format called “interactive video,” opening this functionality to UP creators and lowering the threshold for interactive video production, enabling more users to participate in interactive video content creation [8]. Traditional video models unilaterally narrate stories and plots to audiences, lacking interactivity. As an innovative video format, interactive video builds upon traditional models by setting relevant options within videos, allowing users to choose plot directions based on their preferences and participate in video creation [8]. For example, in the interactive video *If You Traveled Back to Become a Famous Ancient Minister, How Many Days Could You Survive?*, users become the protagonists of the story and can click different options to determine subsequent plot developments, garnering widespread user appreciation. This format diversifies plot development possibilities in Bilibili videos, enriches user participation

methods, and provides users with immersive experiences.

4. Characteristics of Bilibili User Participation

4.1 Circle-Based Stratification: Content Zones and Tag Usage

“Circle” represents a manifestation of internet user participation, referring to the process where like-minded users continuously gather inwardly around shared identities [9]. Circle-based stratification in Bilibili user participation primarily manifests through content zone categorization and tag usage. In its early development, Bilibili primarily produced animation and comics content. As different users joined and content diversified, the platform adopted content zone categorization to help users distinguish content. Additionally, stratification is reflected in users’ employment of tags, which indicate video content and themes and serve as important mechanisms for distinguishing user interests. Compared with zone categorization, tags are more granular. For instance, when fans create edited videos of their idols, they tag the videos with the idol’s name, allowing users to find these videos through name searches. Tagging often represents a form of “circle-based self-entertainment,” signaling “this is our circle; please refrain from casual criticism if you don’t understand.” This practice reduces the occurrence of random or derogatory danmaku to some extent. Members participate in content production across different zones and tags based on identity recognition. However, even within the same “circle,” values remain diverse, and members are not forced to change their viewpoints, resulting in more specialized and diversified video works on Bilibili.

4.2 Entertainment-Oriented: Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Topics

The convenience, speed, and anonymity of the internet facilitate user content production. On Bilibili, satire, humor, and teasing appear to have become universal methods for content production and communication. Whether addressing entertainment topics or public issues, deconstructing, reconstructing, and representing topics through humorous approaches has become a fundamental element for viral video dissemination.

The video series *The Great Qin Verbal War Empire* exemplifies entertainment-oriented adaptation of the historical drama *The Qin Empire*. Through comedic editing and concise presentation of original dialogue, the series deconstructs and reconstructs the story of “Shang Yang’s Reforms,” presenting the spiritual core and patriotic sentiment within a humorous shell. This video has achieved 3.796 million views on Bilibili and attracted 11,000 danmaku comments. Through secondary creation and danmaku commentary, users have not only promoted the popularity of *The Qin Empire* drama but also brought vitality and life to this historical content. Beyond entertainment topics, Bilibili users also participate in public issues through similar formats. For instance, military expert Zhang Zhaozhong’s explanations of international military situations have been

remixed into “ghost animal” videos, indirectly drawing attention to domestic and international military affairs and making previously inaccessible political and military topics more approachable.

4.3 Capital Intervention: Platform Incentives and Corporate Incentives

As the platform has developed, user participation on Bilibili has increasingly exhibited strong economic intervention characteristics. First, this is reflected in the platform’s incentive system for users. High-quality video content and danmaku constitute the foundation of Bilibili’s survival. From this perspective, Bilibili emphasizes user incentives through a coin system that allows viewers to reward favored videos with virtual coins. Building upon this coin system, Bilibili has also implemented a “charging” system that enables users to financially support preferred content and UP creators, with these “charges” converting into income for UP creators. This diversified incentive system fosters a positive user participation atmosphere and promotes sustained, active user engagement in content production. Additionally, the dissemination power of Bilibili content has gradually attracted attention from film and television production companies, which hope to leverage user participation to create secondary creative works that can rapidly “break circles” and expand their commercial products’ reach. The secondary creation competition for the drama *Winter Begonia* required users to create mixed-cut videos using footage from the drama and upload them to Bilibili. These developments demonstrate that participatory culture is inseparable from commerce and society, with the economic intervention in Bilibili user participation continuously strengthening.

5. Obstacles to Bilibili User Participation

5.1 Copyright Controversies

Bilibili’s video content primarily relies on UP creator submissions, with migration of domestic and foreign film and television resources and secondary creation of related videos serving as the main methods of content production. Copyright disputes surrounding such videos have remained a hot topic in academic and industry circles. Although Bilibili has implemented content review and built its own copyright system to address this issue, the problem remains difficult to resolve for a platform centered on user-generated content. As copyright receives increasing attention in China, this issue has become more prominent. On May 28, 2021, iQiyi, Tencent Video, and Youku jointly condemned Bilibili’s copyright infringement. The three companies stated that mere hours after the premiere of *Friends: The Reunion* on their platforms, complete episodes and numerous clips appeared on Bilibili. As rights holders for the show’s distribution in mainland China, the three platforms expressed severe condemnation of such behavior that disrespects intellectual property, openly engages in piracy, and disrupts order in the online video industry. In response to such issues, Bilibili has removed large

amounts of user content for copyright reasons, which to some extent hinders user participation.

5.2 Difficulty in Protecting Creator Rights

With the development of new media technologies, the monopoly of traditional media institutions on cultural production has been broken, and ordinary audiences have achieved partial exemption from liability and even some legalization of rights related to cultural production. However, this does not mean that a truly fair and reasonable structure for cultural production rights has been established [10]. As a user-generated content platform, when Bilibili videos and danmaku gain increasing influence, marketing accounts often migrate this content to different platforms for commercial sharing to gain traffic, seriously infringing upon video creators' rights. Additionally, iQiyi's secondary creation competition encouraged users to submit works to Bilibili but later demanded their removal for copyright reasons, also severely violating creators' rights. These incidents demonstrate that relevant authorities have yet to establish clear regulations regarding individual video creators' rights and the ownership of secondary creative works, leaving grassroots creators in a disadvantaged position when competing with large corporations and hindering user participation on Bilibili.

5.3 Emergence and Deepening of the Participation Gap

Although internet information technology has made the process of user participation in content production more open and equal, the participation gap in cultural production continues to deepen due to differences in cultural competence and capital. On Bilibili, this manifests as participation remaining primarily among young groups and showing an elitist trend. Video production requires certain technical skills and cultural literacy, and popular UP creators in various zones often possess exceptional talents that enable them to participate in content production and gain recognition. For instance, a participation gap exists between Bilibili's "Top 100 UP Creators" and ordinary users due to skill level disparities, creating a divide in content publishing and danmaku participation. This gap positions "Top 100 UP Creators" as opinion leaders with greater discursive power [11]. The gradual expansion of this participation gap reduces participation enthusiasm among some users and represents a significant factor hindering the development of user participation on Bilibili.

6. Measures to Promote User Participation on Bilibili

6.1 Parallel Governance and Protection

To promote user participation in internet video platforms, it is necessary to further optimize participation mechanisms, explore possibilities for integrating commercial and cultural logics within user participation, and adjust and rationalize comprehensive governance frameworks. Early user participation on

Bilibili was less influenced by profit motives and more often manifested as “creating for love.” With the awakening of copyright awareness in China and the commercialization of secondary creative works, user participation now involves profit realization, which to some extent hinders engagement. To address this issue, comprehensive governance is required that both strengthens content review for copyright protection and protects the rights of original and secondary creators while implementing measures to incentivize user participation and enhance participation enthusiasm.

6.2 Strengthening Media Literacy Education

In the era of media convergence, media consumers are no longer merely consumers but have become producers and participants in convergence culture, necessitating enhanced media literacy education for users. Entertainment-orientation characterizes content production on Bilibili, which to some extent promotes content popularity, but some content has exceeded entertainment boundaries and developed toward vulgarization, which is detrimental to the development of Bilibili and user participation. Additionally, the deepening participation gap among Bilibili users reduces participation enthusiasm. To address these issues, media literacy education must be strengthened to improve users’ ability to discern content and their capacity to participate in content production, thereby promoting user participation on Bilibili and facilitating its long-term sustainable development.

In the new media era, platform power is gradually shifting from producers to users, with user participation becoming an important driving force for platform development. Bilibili has grown from a website initially established by ACG culture groups into a leading internet video platform in China, providing users with a platform for content creation and communication. Throughout its development, Bilibili and participatory culture have mutually reinforced each other, with user participation on the platform exhibiting characteristics of circle-based stratification, entertainment-orientation, and capital intervention. However, influenced by issues such as capital competition and copyright protection, user participation on Bilibili is facing certain obstacles. To construct an ideal participatory cultural environment, it remains necessary to promote parallel governance and protection on Bilibili while continuously strengthening media literacy education for users.

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