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Legitimizing video-sharing practices on local and global platforms: a multimodal analysis of menu design, folk genres and taxonomy

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Abstract

There have been extensive public and academic debates on the role platform algorithms play in shaping social media (sub)cultures. Little attention, however, has been paid to how platform (sub)cultures are discursively constructed by the design of the platform interface. This study examines Bilibili, a leading Chinese video platform, and investigates how it discursively frames video-sharing culture through platform menu design. We developed a three-level analytical framework that includes: 1) a multimodal social semiotic analysis of Bilibili's menu design; 2) a contrastive analysis of

YouTube’s video menu, and 3) a focused analysis of *guichu* or *kichiku* videos (as a linguistic phenomenon, a transcultural practice, and a multimodal semiotic artifact). Our findings reveal that Bilibili discursively frames and legitimizes video-sharing practices by establishing a folk taxonomy of video genres and integrating subculture into its menu design. Furthermore, Bilibili controls access to cultural knowledge through explicit (gatekeeping) and implicit (semiotic) measures, in contrast to YouTube’s visual and superficial taxonomy. This study unveils different discursive strategies platforms use to shape unique online video cultures.

Keywords

Platform studies, platform governance, multimodal social semiotics, Bilibili, YouTube

Introduction

The rise of TikTok/Douyin has garnered global interest in Chinese video-sharing practices and culture, capturing both popular imagination and academic research. In this paper, we focus on video-sharing practices in China by examining the popular platform Bilibili, also known as Site B. Bilibili emerged in 2009 as an ACG-themed (Anime, Comic, and Games) video-sharing site following its predecessors AcFun (Site A) and the Japanese prototype Niconico. The platform is characterized by its distinct “danmu” or “danmaku” (“bullet curtain” or “barrage”) commentary feature, which

overlays the video frame. In the earlier stage of its development, the platform was known for its ACG content and unique video practices such as “*Guichu*,” discussed in this paper. Over time, Bilibili has successfully transitioned into a mainstream platform, as evidenced by the remarkable success of its live-streamed New Year Gala¹, “The Most Beautiful Night of 2023,” which attracted 344 million viewers at its peak. Statista reports that Bilibili had 326 million monthly active users (MAUs) in the final quarter of 2022 (Statista, 2023a), approximately one-eighth of YouTube’s global MAUs. While often referred to as the YouTube of China (Lockett and McMorrow, 2021), Bilibili’s core user demography (under 24) is closer to that of TikTok (Statista, 2023b, 2023c). In a promotional video for its Nasdaq debut, Bilibili proclaimed itself as “the iconic brand for online entertainment serving young generations in China” (Chen, 2018). Bilibili presents a fascinating empirical site for investigation due to its unique position at the intersection of mainstream social media and youth subcultures.

Discourse analysts has drawn attention to Bilibili’s *danmu* commenting culture, especially its multimodal features (Zhang and Cassany, 2020, 2023) and the grassroots community practices facilitated by *danmu* (Yang, 2020; Zhang et al., 2023; Zhou, 2022). However, there remains a critical gap in understanding the institutional efforts of Bilibili in establishing and promoting video-sharing practices. Through specific actions

and strategies of design and marketing, Bilibili cultivates its video-sharing culture, manifested in annual events such as the Bilibili New Year's Gala and attracting both fans and mainstream viewers. In this study, we seek to understand how the platform shapes video-sharing cultures beyond algorithmic control, specifically exploring video-sharing practices that are foregrounded by and promoted on the platform interface.

Our study is situated at the intersection of two research traditions on (video-sharing) platforms: platform studies and multimodal social semiotics. Moschini (2018) proposed the integration of two approaches through a multi-layered framework for studying social media platforms. The model combines the fine-grained, systematic multimodal discourse analysis with the material-technical aspect of platform studies, examining both communicative practices and software architecture. While adopting the analytical tools of multimodal social semiotics, our study deviates from technical investigation in Moschini's model and focuses on the forces of platform governance to reveal the institutional power of constructing and framing video-sharing practices on Bilibili.

This research also speaks directly to recent developments in platform studies and the de-westernization of platform studies (Steinberg and Li, 2017). Gillespie (2010)

highlights that internet companies work discursively, not just politically, to frame their services and technologies, fundamentally impacting the media consumption and production of millions of users. While recent platform studies have focused on market structure, regulation, or political economy, we adopt a micro-level perspective, examining the semiotic and discursive framing of video categories as manifested through platform menus, using YouTube as a comparative reference point. This analysis deepens our understanding of Bilibili's distinct video culture as a participatory community and habitat for both ACG and mainstream fans.

To investigate how Bilibili frames its video-sharing practices, we devise a three-step approach. First, we focus on a specific and representative section, the platform menu, located on Bilibili's index page. We analyse the semantic relation between menu items, which offers insights into the discursive principle underlying how the platform organize and categorize videos. We then compare the framing and design of video menus between Bilibili and the global site YouTube, showing how the two platforms discursively legitimize different types of video-sharing practices. Finally, we zoom in on the unconventional video category known as *guichu*, created by Bilibili users, which has evolved into a unique video-sharing practice on the website. Before discussing our

analysis, we will first look at how social media platforms have been studied, respectively, through the lens of platform studies and multimodal social semiotics.

Platform studies and its interdisciplinary scope

Platform studies is an interdisciplinary field that scrutinizes the roles and impacts of digital platforms on culture, society, politics, and the economy (Van Dijck, 2013; Van Dijck et al., 2018). This approach views social media (SM) platforms as complex ecosystems, including cultural, social, and economic dimensions and leading to societal shifts similar to industrialization (Van Dijck, 2021). The analysis of platforms thus involves a comprehensive analysis across multiple interconnected domains. This includes *technical aspects* like algorithms and user interface design, as well as *the digital economy*, covering elements such as advertising and data monetization. Other domains comprise *cultural production*, highlighting the role of content creators, and *content moderation*, focusing on how platforms manage and regulate content (Gillespie, 2018; Poell et al., 2022). Central to platform studies is the concept of “platformization,” a term encapsulating the power of platforms. It refers to “the penetration of economic and infrastructural extensions of online platforms into the web, affecting the production, distribution, and circulation of cultural content” (Nieborg and Poell, 2018: 4275). This phenomenon underscores the multifaceted

influence of platforms, extending their reach beyond the technical or digital sphere into broader societal contexts.

As digital platforms increasingly intertwine with various societal sectors, there has been a growing concern about the *governance* of platforms. Traditionally, governance referred to the government's role in rule-making and service provision. This concept has now evolved to include non-governmental entities, such as social media platforms. In the context of platforms, governance refers to the systems, policies, and processes that oversee and regulate the functioning and interactions within and surrounding digital platforms (Gorwa, 2019). Through platform governance, SM companies manage user behaviour, content, data, and interactions, as well as relationships with external legal and regulatory frameworks. The increasing reliance on algorithmic content moderation, aimed at efficiently managing vast amounts of data, is a notable trend in governance. However, as suggested by Gillespie (2020) and Gorwa et al. (2020), such overreliance also raises concerns of transparency, accuracy, and potential biases in algorithmic decision-making.

As an interdisciplinary field, Platform Studies examines platform governance through diverse lenses such as technology, law, sociology, and media studies. In this study, as

linguists and semioticians, we aim to enrich the existing body of research by employing a discursive and semiotic approach to studying platform governance. For this purpose, we refer to the concept of *discursive legitimation*, a key focus in critical discourse analysis. Discursive legitimation examines how language and communication play roles in making certain ideas, practices, norms, or entities socially acceptable and justified (Van Leeuwen, 2008). In our examination of the video-sharing platform Bilibili, we pose two key questions: 1) What specific practices does Bilibili emphasize and legitimize through its video-sharing features? 2) How does the design of Bilibili's interface impact the visibility and distribution of content?

The design of menus and user interfaces is not just a technical choice but also a governance decision. It influences how users navigate the platform, what content they see, and how they engage with it. Analysing menu design from a governance perspective allows for an understanding of how Bilibili discursively frames and prioritizes certain practices or content, guiding user behaviour and shaping the platform's culture.

Current theories and models in platform studies have primarily been developed based on U.S.-based platforms, leading to calls for de-westernizing the field (Davis and Xiao,

2021; Steinberg and Li, 2017). This includes a focus on the ideological and cultural nuances of local platforms. Consequently, several studies have explored Chinese video sites like iQiyi (Wang and Lobato, 2019) and TikTok/Douyin (Kaye et al., 2021). However, Bilibili, a major Chinese video-sharing site, has not been as thoroughly investigated in terms of platform studies and platform governance. Existing research often centres on self-regulatory mechanisms (Chen and Yang, 2023) or content creators (Wang, 2022). But Bilibili stands out for its vibrant community of anime, comic, and game enthusiasts. This community initially flocked into the platform for its ad-free streaming and unique *danmu* commenting feature. While this group plays a pivotal role in creating and nurturing a distinctive video culture in a bottom-up manner, there is a notable gap in research regarding the platform's role in and influence on the community's video-sharing practices. This study speaks to this gap by examining Bilibili's institutional role in shaping and sustaining online video culture. Understanding the nuances of platform governance here is essential for a comprehensive view of Bilibili's position in the global digital media landscape, particularly concerning content creation, sharing, and consumption practices.

A multimodal social semiotic approach to social media platforms

There has been a general interest in social media from discourse analysts (e.g., Benson, 2017; Page, 2018; Tagg et al., 2017). Sociolinguists, applied linguists and semioticians have explored how platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have reshaped how people interact, form communities, and construct identities. These evolving linguistic and social practices challenge traditional notions of language norms and discourse strategies, opening up new areas of study of multilingual, multimodal meaning making online (Androutsopoulos, 2015; Barton and Lee, 2013).

Among various approaches to understanding communication and interaction on social media, a particular approach is social semiotics and multimodality. The multimodal social semiotic approach is distinctive in several ways: 1) it emphasizes the social, historical and cultural contexts of communication, in addition to the semiotic functions of a variety of modes and media; 2) it recognizes that the interpretation of semiosis is not static but changes over time and across different social settings; and 3) it understands that meaning is co-constructed by both the message creator and the audience (Adami, 2009, 2014). Expanding on this approach, Djonov and Van Leeuwen (2013) and Zhao and colleagues (2014) introduced the concept of “semiotic technology,” a framework to understand the interplay between technology (such as software like PowerPoint) and semiotic practices. Their analysis positions PowerPoint

not merely as a tool but as a semiotic practice that encompasses three dimensions: the design of the software, the multimodal composition of slideshows, and their presentation. By analysing software design through a social semiotic lens, insights emerge into how designers conceptualize meaning-making and the influence of these conceptions on users' utilization of software features. For instance, designers may provide certain choices (like layout, features, interface elements) and embed specific meanings in the software to encourage or discourage the use of certain functionalities. This design process, however, is also shaped by discursive and sociocultural norms, as well as by user feedback and behaviour. This perspective highlights the dynamic relationship between software design and user engagement, where each influences and is influenced by the other.

The concept of "semiotic technology" initially centred on software as a semiotic tool. However, Zhao and Zappavigna (2018) expanded this model to study hardware (like smartphone cameras) and social media platforms, integrating them into the semiotic technology framework. Their study of the "selfie genre" reveals how the meaning-making process of this digital artifact is influenced by various elements: the devices used for capturing, the software for editing, and the platforms where they are shared. In the context of social media sites like Instagram, the design and affordances, such as

“like” buttons, comment sections, and sharing functions, shape specific types of social interactions and connections. Moreover, the continuous technological advancements in cameras, apps, and social media platforms are evolving in tandem with how people capture and utilize selfies. This evolution points to a more holistic and interconnected view of semiotic technologies. These technologies are not merely passive tools for communication but actively participate in the creation and interpretation of meaning, highlighting a symbiotic relationship between technology and communication practices.

Responding to Zhao and Zappavigna’s call to rethink analytical tasks and research questions in semiotics, our study embraces the inclusive and dynamic concept of “semiotic technology.” We aim to investigate the video-sharing site Bilibili, viewing it as a semiotic technology that influences users’ meaning-making and negotiation through its menu design. Our approach builds upon and extends Djonov and Van Leeuwen’s (2018) analysis of ResearchGate as a semiotic technology, deepening the understanding of how design influences platform use and transforms traditional communication and interaction forms. Our work is topically related to Yang (2020), who conceptualizes Bilibili’s *danmu* interface as a semiotic technology fostering online co-viewing, participation, and screen-filling comments. However, the multimodal social

semiotic framework has yet to be applied to investigate Bilibili's webpage (menu) design. This design incorporates unique functionalities that recontextualize and potentially transform the social practice of video-sharing.

In social semiotics, discourse is considered as social practices. As described in Van Leeuwen (2016: 138), "Discourses are ultimately modelled on social practices... However, discourses will *transform* these doings". This process is known as recontextualization, through which practices are turned into discourses, selecting and altering various elements. SM platforms also use discourses to construct and shape video culture, however, certain elements may be foregrounded while others are left out. Using multimodal social semiotics as our analytical framework, we seek to investigate how Bilibili enacts its power to discursively and multimodally frame video-sharing practices. Specifically, this research addresses three central research questions:

- How does Bilibili discursively frame video-sharing practices through its platform menu design?
- Are there any differences in the discursive framing of menus between Bilibili and YouTube?
- What specific semiotic practices does Bilibili's menu design particularly encourage or facilitate?

Methods and analysis

To examine how videos and video-sharing practices are organized, displayed, and legitimized on Bilibili, we focus on video menu design. Video menus encapsulate how the platform conceptualizes and implements taxonomy, promoting specific genres of video and video practices. These sections are visually salient, as menus are typically located prominently on the front page and easily accessible, such as a menu bar at the top centre of the webpage. This guides both frequent users and newcomers in exploring and utilizing the site. The multimodal resources used to represent a menu item will also influence users' interactions with the site. Genres featured in the menu are often the most common or popular ones at the time, providing insights into the framing of video-sharing practices on the platform. In short, the menu serves as a representation relevant to and reflective of platform governance of design and practices, making it an ideal semiotic construction for multimodal and discursive analysis.

We have developed a three-level analytical framework to analyse the video menu on Bilibili. **The framework reflects the inherently cyclical nature of discourse analysis, designed to be dynamic and adaptive as the analysis deepens, i.e., from one platform**

to another, from general video menu to specific video types, etc. The resulting framework is multidimensional rather than hierarchical, incorporating multiple levels that interact and inform one another to offer a distinct perspective on Bilibili video culture.

The first step focuses on the multimodal construction and discursive framing of Bilibili's video menu. Following the multimodal social semiotic approach, we first unpacked the visual design of the menu, including icons, typography, interactivity, position, and contextual elements. Next, we delved into the discursive framing of the video menu and examined the lexico-semantic relationship of the video genres featured in the menu, e.g., synonymy, hyponymy, and meronymy, as described by Martin (2015). The semantic network underpinning the menu forms a hierarchy of information and guides users' access to specific video genres. The term "genre" refers to the overarching theme or style of videos, e.g., comedy, drama, documentary, animation, etc., and is most appropriate for describing Bilibili's menu. Other terms such as "video types" or "categories" carry broader connotations for video groupings and are used occasionally and interchangeably in this paper. The related term "channels" only applies to the case of YouTube.

Data was coded by the first author and then by the second author. We followed an integrated and theory-driven coding principal, which is standard in social semiotics and discourse studies. As suggested by Potter (2009: 615), discourse research “differs from other approaches such as grounded theory and traditional content analysis where coding is intrinsic to the analysis. Here coding is more of a preliminary task that facilitates analysis.” We coded data by directly applying the concepts embedded within our chosen theoretical framework. In cases of doubt, we browsed the corresponding video channels and examined recommended videos and related terminologies. The first author engages with Bilibili both as an insider (with a 10-year user account) and as a researcher (with prior work on *danmu* commenting), while the second author primarily approaches Bilibili from a research perspective. Together, our extensive experience and deep familiarity with the platform equip us with the essential background knowledge necessary for an in-depth analysis of video genres within the Chinese context.

To deepen our analysis of Bilibili’s video menu and its distinctive features of anime, comic, and gaming content, we took two additional steps. First, we conducted a comparative analysis of the video menus of Bilibili and YouTube to explore the similarities and differences in the design and framing between the two sites. This

comparison gives us further insights into how different video-sharing platforms shape and legitimize video-sharing practices by creating a video taxonomy on their menu interfaces. The comparison with YouTube provides a broader perspective on how mainstream, global video-sharing platforms differ from or align with Bilibili's approach to content categorization and community engagement.

In the last step, we zoomed in on *guichu* videos which feature a user-generated grassroots video remix style and has evolved into a distinctive video-sharing practice on Bilibili since its inception. We traced the historical origin and semantic change of the term "guichu," as well as the transcultural social practice it embodies. Our multimodal analysis illustrates how *guichu* operates as a "semiotic artifact" (Zhao et al., 2014), i.e., a semiotic resource with a material form, which incorporates selections from various semiotic modes (colour, size, and layout) and digital media, serving as a dynamic platform for audience interaction and engagement.

As discussed in the previous two sections, our analysis is informed by two key concepts: platform governance and discursive legitimation. These concepts, drawn from meso-level and discourse theories (Wodak and Meyer, 2016), respectively, guide our analysis of Bilibili. Specifically, they help us to contextualize the discourse within

broader social structures and contexts. Through the theory of platform governance, we explore the mechanisms, rules, and practices utilized by Bilibili to manage its platform, including content moderation and community organization. The theory of discursive legitimation allows us to investigate how Bilibili constructs and communicates legitimacy concerning its video culture, which is realized multimodally through menu design, user interface, and multimodal choices. Additionally, the study aligns with the notion of validity in discourse analysis, i.e., “in the form of ‘performativity’ i.e., demonstrating a plausible case that patterns in the meaning of texts are constitutive of reality in some way” (Hardy et al., 2004: 21). The interpretative nature of validity in qualitative discourse approach stands in clear contrast with the focus on accurately measured patterns and replicability, which characterizes content analysis.

Discussion

Menu design of Bilibili

As shown in Figure 1, Bilibili’s homepage features various components vying for the user’s attention, including:

- a top banner with superimposed texts, providing access to sub-sites such as live-streaming, game centre, offline events, etc., a search box, and sections for the members;

- a horizontal menu bar, which lists the different types of video genres;
- (below the menu bar) a slideshow on the left, showcasing new releases, advertisements, campaigns;
- and featured videos that continue to appear as users scroll down.

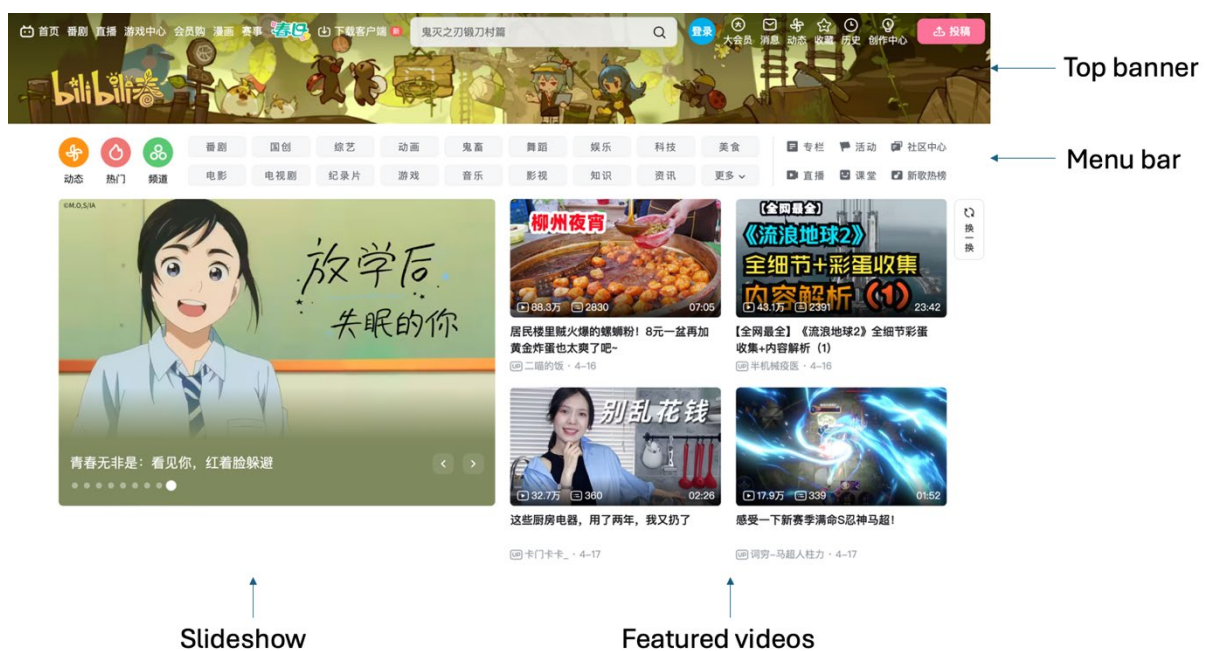


Figure 1. Homepage of Bilibili

The top banner’s design and theme change based on the time of the year or special events. For instance, during the Chinese New Year, the homepage usually displays festive decorations. The top banner in Figure 1, captured on April 19, 2023, featured

The Bilibili Girls (Bilibili 娘, the platform's virtual mascots) and other animated characters playing among leafy trees. The superimposed logo "Bilibili 春 (Bilibili Spring)" comprises several visual elements symbolizing the season. The top half of the "i" letters in the site name Bilibili is replaced with icons (flowers, lightbulbs) while the strokes in the character "春" (spring) resemble tree branches and buds. The logo is displayed in bright yellow (rather than the blue the site logo is usually associated with) corresponding to the banner, suggesting a sunlit playground amidst treehouses. Chen Rui, a significant figure in the development of Bilibili as the Chairman and CEO of the company, emphasizes that the platform aligns with the interests and preferences of a younger user base (Chen, 2018). The animated characters and imaginative setting are strategic choices that reflect the community's collective identity.

Bilibili's homepage prominently displays colourful visual resources such as banners, slides, and cover images. In contrast, the video menu, as shown in Figure 2, consists of black and white textual items separated by grey rectangles. The menu is centrally positioned on the webpage, adding a sleek and modern component to the vibrant and rich visual context, indicating a subtle governance over other salient elements. On either side of the menu, users can access various popular sections of the site, each illustrated with a pictorial representation, in contrast to the video subsections (of

different genres) which are represented purely in text. Bilibili’s video menu employs a traditional linear design, which is compact, space-saving, and structured (Bailly et al., 2016). Individual items in the menu are visually indistinctive (two or three characters in a grey rectangle), requiring users to hover over an item to activate the submenu (Figure 3).

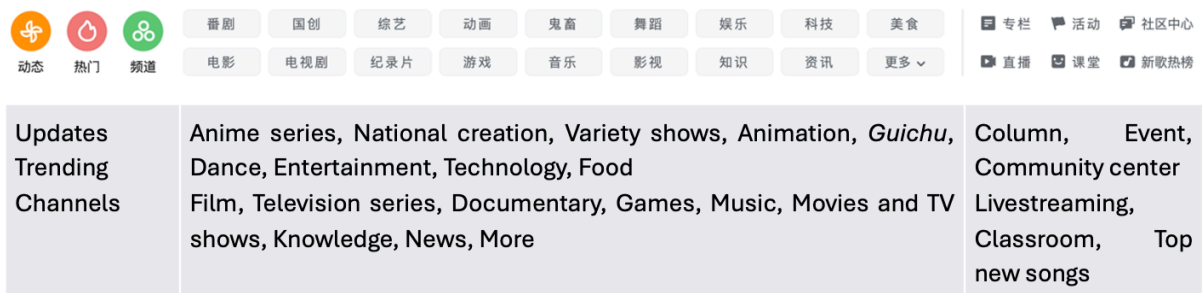


Figure 2. Menu taxonomy of Bilibili

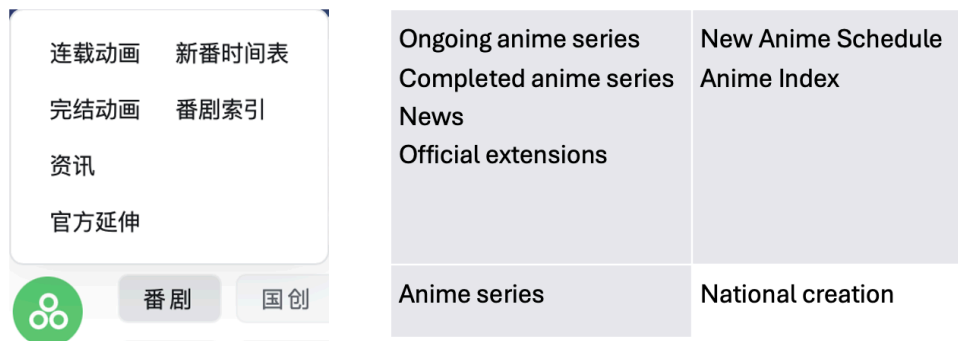


Figure 3. Upward expanding submenu of “Anime series”

Wang and Lobato's (2019) study on iQiyi, a major mainstream Chinese video-sharing site, reveals a similar menu design with traditional aesthetics. The authors note that iQiyi's menu offers comprehensive categories to "integrate its diverse audience into a common, shared, stable online television experience—in which all viewers are offered the same news, current affairs and celebrity gossip—and to didactically guide viewers towards useful content" (Wang and Lobato, 2019: 10). Their analysis confirms that video menu is a crucial form of platform governance, however, the specific framing of audience and video practices on Bilibili are significantly different, as we continue with the analysis of individual video types.

As shown in Figure 2 and 3, it becomes apparent that establishing hierarchical or logical relationships among first-level genre labels in Bilibili is challenging. Conventionally, menu items can be organized alphabetically, numerically, semantically, or by their frequency of use (Bailly et al., 2016). However, these criteria do not apply to the layout of Bilibili's 19 menu items (Figure 2), as there is no apparent alphabetic or numeric order (Chinese characters can be arranged alphabetically based on the first alphabet in the pinyin of a character). There is also an overlap between related categories, for instance, "Anime series" and "Animation", or "Film", "Television series", and "Movies and TV shows". The popularity or updated frequency of each category is

not publicly shown. Instead, a certain level of knowledge about Bilibili's video culture is needed to distinguish different video genres, and this vernacular understanding of Bilibili's video-sharing practices serves as a prerequisite for accessing the video hierarchy. On the other hand, the overlapping of categories could also enhance video accessibility, as the menu encourages curious users to explore and find relevant content beyond their usual interests.

A closer examination reveals more categories that do not follow conventionalized semantic rules in Chinese. For instance, "Anime series (番剧)" refers to original Japanese anime series, whereas "Animation (动画)" refers to derivative work such as music videos, figurines, dubbing, etc. Chinese animated series, together with a few other genres (e.g., audio drama, glove puppetry, etc.), are referred to as "National creation (国创)". That is, "Animation" would be the hypernym including "Anime series" and "National creation". Rather, they originate from the shared practices of Bilibili users who consume and create anime and anime-related fan art, who adopted and popularized the labels themselves. Similarly, "Film (电影)" and "Television series (电视剧)" consist of licensed audio-visual products and are not hyponyms of "Movies and TV shows (影视)", which refers to cuts, reviews, commentaries, etc. Another example is "Dance (舞蹈)", which can be treated as a hyponym of and hence included in the

category “Entertainment (娱乐)”. It is, however, listed separately as a menu item, as Bilibili is known for dancing styles inspired by anime or video game characters referred to as otaku dance (宅舞). Dance videos, tutorials, and competitions are platform-specific and integral to Bilibili’s video-sharing practices. While detailed information on the exact process of menu item creation at Bilibili isn’t readily available, it’s evident that the platform recognizes and formalizes these user-generated categories. Creating a menu item for platform-specific practices and genres highlights the distinctive video-making and sharing practices of the platform while promoting certain genres to (potential new) users.

Menu design of YouTube: A comparison

To better understand the uniqueness of Bilibili’s video menu and its role in shaping the video-making and sharing practices on the platform, we will provide a contrastive analysis of YouTube’s menu design. As seen in Figure 4, the main page of YouTube is highly personalized, presenting a continuous stream of recommended tags and videos as users scroll down. Unlike traditional pagination, an endless scroll contains a user-driven, multiple-vector-following experience within a single interface, enabling users to effortlessly receive new content (McKelvey and Hunt, 2019) based on algorithmic recommendations. To access the menu, however, users must go to the left sidebar.

YouTube’s sidebar automatically resizes its content to fit the window/screen dimensions of a user, transitioning from a compact, icon-based view to a detailed layout as the window size increases (Figure 4). In contrast, Bilibili’s menu stays the same size, lacking in such adaptability. The sidebar functions as a navigation menu, allowing users to access different sections and features of YouTube. The “Explore” section (Figure 5) offers curated suggestions for discovering trending content, including videos, podcasts, shopping, learning, etc. The subsequent “Browse channels” allows users to explore and add YouTube channels, grouped under different categories, which constitutes the video menu under analysis.

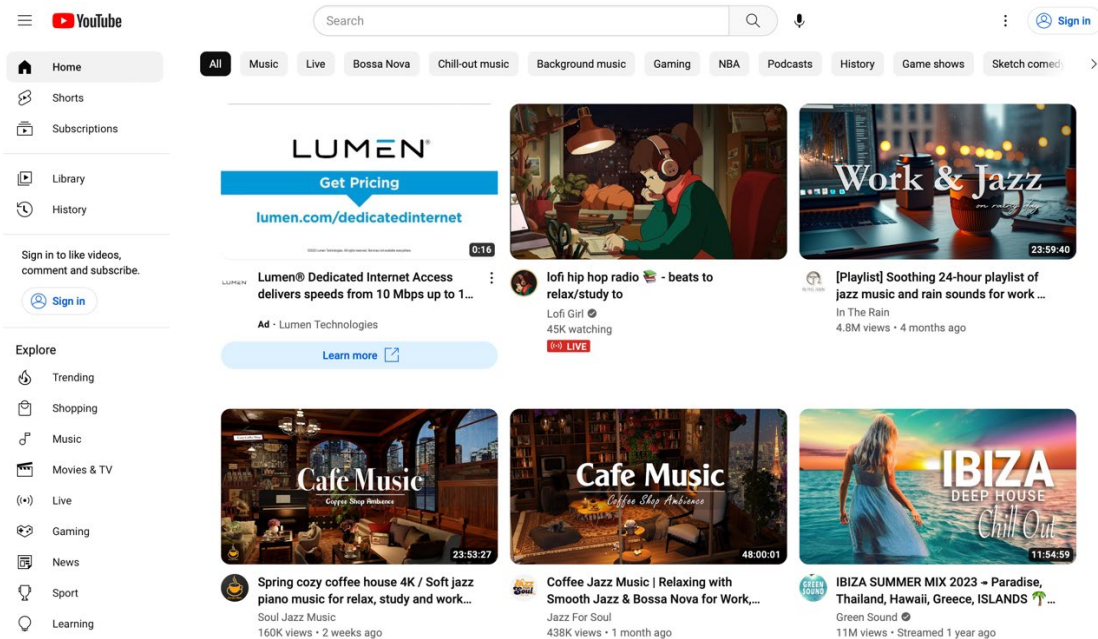


Figure 4. Homepage of YouTube (retrieved on April 29th, 2023)

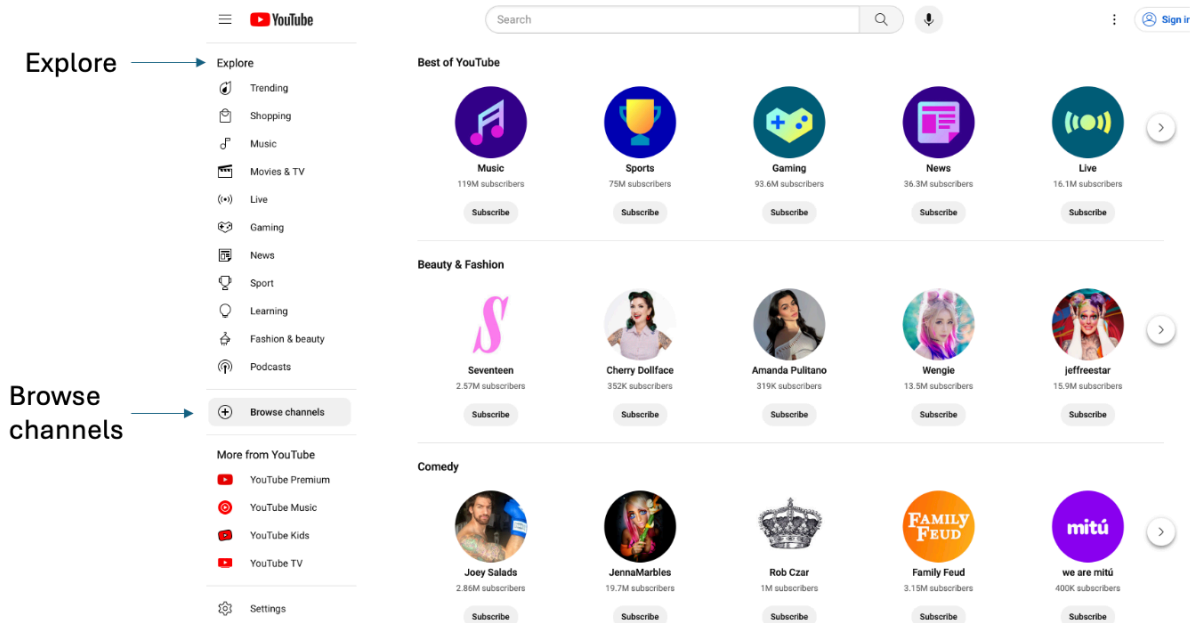


Figure 5. Menu design of YouTube (retrieved on April 29th, 2023)

The “Browse Channels” page on YouTube is arranged in a visually appealing grid design, with rows of channels situated beneath a header that displays the category name. Each category is evenly framed, showcasing 16 algorithmically recommended channels. The top recommendations are displayed on the page, while the rest can be accessed using the “next” icon (>). The most salient feature in a menu item is a circular and colorful profile picture accompanied by the channel name in black and white, the

number of followers, and a “subscribe” button. The visually salient icons offer users an engaging and efficient way to navigate and explore content on the platform.

As illustrated in Table 1, YouTube’s menu features only 8 video genres (in addition to the multifarious “Best of YouTube”), in contrast to 18 categories on Bilibili. The categorization contains “common-sense” media genres, resulting in a straightforward, flat, and shallow taxonomy. To offer users a more diverse range of content and avoid over-specifications, some genres are combined with others, such as “Beauty & Fashion,” “Cooking & Health,” and “Film & Entertainment.” Genres like “Sports,” “Music,” and “Gaming” also appear in “Best of YouTube,” forming platform-run and “channels” with high subscription numbers. By doing so, YouTube strategically prioritizes the placement of certain genres over others, thereby increasing their visibility. This approach reinforces the platform’s role as a curator for content organization and promotion

Best of YouTube	Popular on YouTube, Music, Sports, Gaming, News, Live, YouTube, Virtual Reality
------------------------	---

Genres	Beauty & Fashion
	Comedy
	Sports
	Music
	Tech
	Gaming
	Cooking & Health
	Film & Entertainment

Table 1. Menu taxonomy of YouTube

So far, we have analysed the menu design of Bilibili and compared it with that of YouTube. This analysis aims to illustrate the first way in which Bilibili discursively frames video-sharing practices—through establishing a folk taxonomy of video genres. This intriguing and unique system of classifying and organizing video content is not based on conventionalized semantic rules. Rather, it relies on the grassroots understanding and shared practices of Bilibili users. This system of cultural knowledge is, in turn, legitimized through the menu design of the platform. For those lacking this

knowledge, such as newcomers, casual fans, or mainstream social media users, Bilibili's video menu may appear confusing, overlapping, or inaccessible. This is in stark contrast to YouTube's discursive framing of video practices, which is built on common-sense categories and relies more heavily on algorithmic metrics (i.e., recommendations, promoted genres, and top trending videos). The difference in menu design, on the one hand, reflects the different origins of the two sites, with Bilibili starting as a fan site and YouTube as a general video-sharing platform. On the other hand, it is likely to facilitate different types of video-sharing practices, both in terms of content generation (what types of video genres are likely to be made and how they spread) and viewing (who has access to what types of videos and how). This is a clear example of how digital platforms can use their interface and structure to shape user behavior and cultural norms (Gorwa, 2019).

Guichu/kichiku videos

In this section, we zoom in on a specific item featured in Bilibili's video menu, *Guichu* (鬼畜). *Guichu* refers to a type of fan-made video content that involves remixing (Leppänen et al., 2014) existing video footage with fast-paced, frequent sound repetition to create a new and often absurd narrative. Originating in Bilibili under the influence of Japanese subculture, *guichu* has become immensely popular, spawning its

own subculture practices and communities. In this section, we explore this phenomenon through the lenses of linguistics, transculturality (Shafirova et al., 2020), and multimodality, illustrating the background and significance of integrating a grassroots vernacular practice into the institutional menu design.

Figure 6 shows the linguistic evolution of *guichu*, elaborated and revised using linguistic and subculture references² and Peking University CCL Online Corpus (diachronic corpus). The term is a compound of two lexemes: *gui* (鬼) and *chu* (畜), deriving from Middle Chinese translations of Sanskrit terms used in Buddhism. With the introduction of Buddhism in Japan, the term was borrowed into Japanese, becoming *kichiku* and referring to violent or disturbing content. In the 2010s, the term *kichiku* was borrowed yet again by early Bilibili users, and re-introduced into Chinese as *guichu*. This time, *guichu* bears a new, distinct meaning, diverging notably from its Japanese connotation, and giving birth to a unique video-sharing practice on and beyond Bilibili. The etymology of *guichu* illustrates how local meanings can be (re-)shaped by dynamic cultural interplay, and how Bilibili's community values and trends can shape the platform's content. This knowledge is essential for us to understand the governance strategies Bilibili adopts to align with its user base's interests and cultural practices.

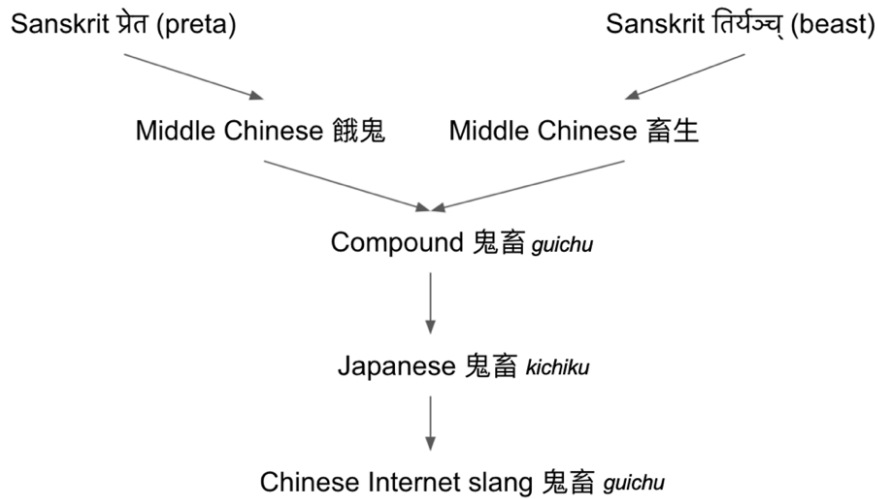


Figure 6. Etymology of *guichu*

Guichu emerged on Bilibili through transcultural flows, which involve fluid cultural identification and meaning-making across boundaries in digital communication (Shafirova et al., 2020). The origins can be traced back to the early 2000s when a series of bizarre McDonald’s commercials aired on Japanese television, featuring Ronald McDonald performing a gimmicky gesture and yelling “Ran Ran Ru”. These commercials inspired numerous fan-made parodies on Niconico, including a viral video titled “M.C. Donald was obsessed with dance? Final *kichiku* clown Ronald M³.” The term *kichiku* in the video title refers to the demonic destroying power of a famous video game figure (Flandre Scarlet from Touhou Project) whose theme song was used

in sync with Ronald McDonald's movements. When Chinese fans uploaded the video to Bilibili (TSA, 2012), viewers borrowed the term *kichiku* from the title and code-switched it into *guichu* (the Chinese pronunciation of the two kanjis) to describe the then-unfamiliar practice of video production. However, rather than focusing on the remixing, Bilibili users showed greater interest in the editing style, which involves rapid repetition, rhythm, synchronization of sound and movement, and syllable-level manipulation of source sound materials to create new sentences or sound effects with little relation to the original materials (Zheng, 2016). As more videos of this kind emerged on Bilibili, *guichu* evolved into a specific, grassroots video-editing technique on the platform.

To foster transcultural creation, Bilibili established an independent *guichu* section in 2014, allowing fans to upload videos featuring various editing techniques (e.g., Autotuning, Vocaloid, etc.). These videos utilize a wide array of source materials ranging from celebrities and newsreaders to reality TV guests and cartoon/anime characters. In addition, a subsection called Tutorials and Demonstrations was created with the aim of nurturing new uploaders from the community and sustain the growth of *guichu* culture. Many commonly used raw materials have become *guichu* memes or canons, inspiring new creations within the *guichu* community (Liu, 2019). A famous,

long-lasting canon on Bilibili is the Fuhrer, which features clips from the 2004 German film *Der Untergang* (“Downfall”) where Adolf Hitler, portrayed by Bruno Ganz, rants about his impending defeat in World War II. The “Hitler rants” scene has been widely parodied online, with creators adding humorous subtitles to ridicule Hitler’s reactions. Unlike most parodies posted on YouTube, which rely on incongruous subtitles or “fakesubs” (Díaz-Cintas, 2018) for humour, Bilibili’s *guichu* videos split and remix the original footage to create new performances. As a result, Hitler can be seen singing pop songs like “Nobody” or “Oppa Gangnam Style”, playing Chinese card games, or dancing to the Social Shake (a Chinese online dance sensation)⁴.

Through Bilibili’s video interface (*danmu*), *guichu* videos transform into *multimodal semiotic artifacts* that encourage audience participation and generate humorous interpretation. In a popular *guichu* video based on the Fuehrer canon, user comments appear overlaid on the screen, spatially and temporally locked to the video’s timeline for subsequent viewers to enjoy (Figure 7). However, the *danmu* feature is limited to users who have passed a membership quiz (<https://account.bilibili.com/answer/base> [after registration]) and demonstrated expertise in fan culture and platform traditions, e.g., identifying content and style of popular videos on the platform, and following netiquettes when interacting through *danmu* commenting. This requirement ensures

that only users with a certain level of knowledge and understanding of Bilibili’s video culture can participate in commenting on videos.

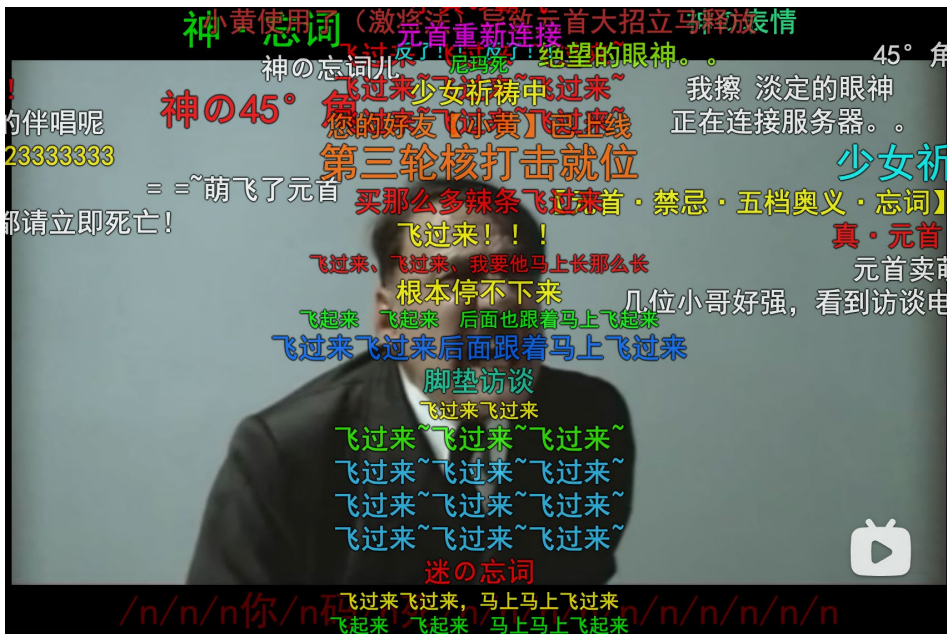


Figure 7. Screenshot of the *guichu* video “[Fuehrer rap] Canon Rock” on Bilibili (<https://www.bilibili.com/video/av97029>) (accessed 26 July 2023)

In addition to comments on Hitler’s desperate and uncertain expression, a significant number of comments focus on the re-edited and fragmented German dialogue, playfully misinterpreting it based on phonetic transcription (a creative form of mondegreen). This technique is called *kong’er* (空耳; “empty ear”), a loanword from

Japanese (*soramimi*), and is widely used in *guichu* videos. For example, the famous line *Und doch habe ich allein* (“And yet, I am alone”) was interpreted by Bilibili viewers as *wo dao hebei sheng lai* (我到河北省来) which translates as “I have come to Hebei Province,” a northern province in China near Beijing. Fegelein, Hitler’s adjutant, was translated as *fei guolai* (飞过来), meaning “fly here” (fixed top comments in Figure 7). In *guichu* videos, fixed top comments are used significantly more frequently than rolling or bottom comments (Miao et al., 2016). As demonstrated in Figure 7, they are mostly used to repeat punchlines and memetic expressions, which in turn inspire other users to produce similar *guichu* videos incorporating these lines or videos with new narratives.

In summary, through embedding *guichu* videos into the *danmu* interface, Bilibili legitimizes multiple authorships (as illustrated in Figure 8) : 1) original video producers; 2) the uploader or material curator, and 3) commenters and “fake” subtitlers. Simultaneously, the platform serves as a curator in video recommendation (high ranked videos are explicitly indicated below the title) and exercises authorial power in establishing a vernacular taxonomy for *guichu* video culture.

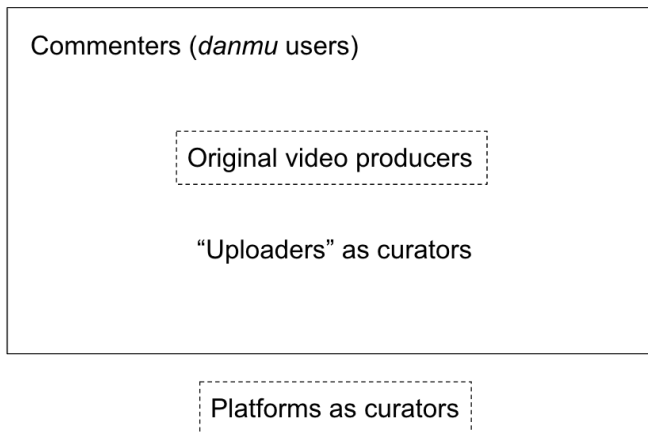


Figure 8. Multiple authorship in a *guichu* video

Bilibili also legitimizes its subculture by integrating specific video genres such as *guichu* into the menu design. With the rise of social media platforms, there has been a widespread practice of manipulating and repurposing existing cultural materials to create new meanings and identities. Scholars have investigated this phenomenon from different perspectives, such as “recontextualized vernacular spectacles” (Androutsopoulos, 2010), which focuses on how popular culture is transformed into vernacular culture, “entextualization” and “resemiotization,” which are more concerned with the linguistic and semiotic aspects (Leppänen et al., 2014), and “rescripting” that emphasizes the performative aspect (Georgakopoulou, 2015). Despite its prevalence, however, this practice is still considered peripheral in many ways due to limitations in terms of institutional recognition, legality, and cultural

significance. In contrast, Bilibili makes a deliberate effort to legitimize and showcase a specific subculture (recognizing diverse authorship roles, exercising curatorial power in video recommendation, setting up a vernacular taxonomy and integrating it into menu design). By doing so, the platform elevates the status of *guichu* practices, signalling their importance and cultural value to its user base and the wider audience.

Bilibili controls the access to the knowledge of video-sharing cultures both implicitly and explicitly. On the one hand, Bilibili's menu appears close-packed and lacking in visual hierarchy, without any salient visual resources to indicate the structure or meaning of video categories. This design requires a certain level of familiarity with the site's culture to navigate effectively, while making it challenging for general users to access and understand the platform's taxonomy of video genres. On the other hand, Bilibili enacts gatekeeping measures such as the use of a quiz that potential users must pass to gain access to the site's video-sharing and commenting functions. This quiz serves as a barrier to entry, ensuring that only those with a certain level of knowledge and interest in the site's culture can participate fully and contribute quality content to the community. For instance, memorable *danmu* punchlines in the *guichu* video serve as memes that facilitate the widespread of the genre and motivate new productions. By controlling access to the community in this way, Bilibili maintains the integrity of its

subcultural ecosystem, preventing it from being subsumed by mainstream social media culture.

Conclusions

In this paper, we developed a three-step methodological framework to analyse how Bilibili frames video-sharing practices. By focusing on platform menu design, we examined both discursive and multimodal strategies, using YouTube as a point of comparison. Our study shows that Bilibili's menu features a central and governing position, a conventional linear layout consisting of compact texts and lacking multimodal resources. As for discursive framing, Bilibili employs a vernacular taxonomy to categorize video culture. This taxonomy is based on grassroots folk understanding rather than common ground logic or semantic relations. Users need prior knowledge of anime, comic, and game culture to distinguish different genres of videos, such as "Animation," "Animated series," and "National creation." The epitome of this cultural taxonomy lies in the menu item "*Guichu*," which refers to a unique fan-made video editing style originating from Bilibili. Given its linguistic (re-)borrowing, transcultural re-appropriation, and multimodal creation, this genre is arguably among the most original and characteristic video productions on Bilibili. By integrating *guichu* as a genre label into the menu design, Bilibili legitimizes grassroots vernacular participation

and establishes a taxonomy based on community and local video-making practices. In contrast, YouTube adopts a simple, flat, and straightforward classification of common video genres (Music, Sports, Gaming), utilizing a framed and classified layout with an accessible visual hierarchy.

Overall, Bilibili's menu design frames video-sharing practices through a folk taxonomy, the legitimation of subculture, as well as implicit and explicit control of access to cultural knowledge. The differences in menu design reflect the different cultural and institutional contexts in which Bilibili and YouTube operate. While Bilibili prioritizes the integration of local subcultures into its menu design to create a highly contextualized video-sharing experience, YouTube emphasizes the ease of navigation and accessibility to a broad range of users with diverse interests. By comparing the menu design of Bilibili and YouTube, this research provides valuable insights into the complex interplay between cultural practices, technological affordances, and design choices in shaping digital communication. The findings shed light on the role of semiotic resources, such as genre labels and visual hierarchy, in controlling access to cultural knowledge and legitimizing certain subcultures.

While the primary findings of this research focus on the fandom-oriented video-sharing culture of Bilibili, the platform is experiencing significant changes within the rapidly evolving (social) media landscape in China. Bilibili is showing signs of becoming less subculture oriented and more mainstream-friendly, as evidenced by the presence of official accounts associated with the Chinese Communist Party, a broadening range of audiences, and increased interaction with state media. This gradual shift, referred to as “desubculturization” or “mainstreaming” (Zhou, 2022), has become a topic of intense discussion among Bilibili users. Many long-time users lament the loss of quality fan-made videos and criticize the influx of users from mainstream culture who may not be as familiar with subcultural practices, references, and *danmu* commenting etiquette (Author, forthcoming). What will happen when Bilibili is no longer the subcultural habitat for Chinese fans? What types of new video-sharing practices will emerge or converge, and then solidify as genres in a vernacular and dynamic manner?

Future studies are encouraged to investigate the contingent platform development and cultural production of Bilibili or apply the methodological focus on menu design to other digital media platforms. The three-level analytical framework (a multimodal semiotic analysis, a contrastive analysis, and a focused analysis) can be adapted to study a range of platforms. For example, the video streaming platform Viki, which is

more niche focus in terms of Asian television series content and also use a *danmu*-like commenting system (Locher and Messerli, 2023). Moreover, localized video-sharing practices such as *guichu* can also be critically examined, including their implications for transcultural fandom and memetic *danmu* creations.

Footnotes

¹ New Year Galas have been a culturally distinctive TV genre in China's mainstream media since the 1980s, see Feng D (2020).

² See <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/鬼畜> for the etymology of *guichu* and related terms, and <https://zh.moegirl.org.cn/鬼畜> for a fan-elaborated online encyclopedia entry on the origins and developments of *guichu* culture.

³ M.C. ドナルドはダンスに夢中なのか？ 最終鬼畜道化師ドナルド・M, available at <https://www.nicovideo.jp/watch/sm2057168> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q16KpquGslc> (accessed 26 July 2023).

⁴ Compare, for example, a parody video on YouTube "Hitler has coronavirus and he is mad!" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5R0UHGH8vA> and on Bilibili "Fuehrer Nobody: second version" <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Jx411w79d/> (accessed 26 July 2023).

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