Original Article

Popularising Vlogging in China: Bilibili's Institutional Promotion of Vlogging Culture

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Abstract

Vlogging culture has experienced rapid growth in China since 2018. Central to this expansion, social media platforms have played a dominant role in popularising vlogging culture. By conducting a digital ethnography of the Chinese user-generated content platform Bilibili from September 2019 to May 2022, this article explores the institutional power of platforms in promoting and shaping vlogging production and practices in China. Beyond the function of intermediating, Bilibili shapes vlogging as an intensive production and interactive practice with high performativity to compete for visibility. This article theorises four ways that Bilibili popularises vlogging culture in China: pillarising discourses, metric-based monetisation, advertising mediation and vlog-focused campaigns. In taking this approach, this study sheds light on the institutional power of platforms in promoting and shaping cultural production. In addition, it uncovers the precarity embedded in the promotion strategies, notably the interplay with the platform economy in the context of China.

Keywords

platform governance, institutional promotion, vlogging culture, platform economy, China, Bilibili

Introduction

Vlogging (video blogging) is a video genre that presents and shares people's daily lives on social media platforms. Popular in the West due to the widespread YouTube coverage (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Strangelove, 2010), vlogging in China has experienced rapid growth since 2018. With

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the state-based promotion of the short video industry (Lin & de Kloet, 2019), video-sharing and social media platforms launched a series of campaigns and favourable policies to promote vlogging. Douyin extended the time limit of video submissions from seconds to five minutes. Sina Weibo created 'vlog college' and hosted 'school vlog' workshops nationwide to guide new and young vloggers to produce and share. Bilibili began hosting campaigns for vlogging promotion in 2018. Due to the competition and collaboration among different platforms in China (Craig, Lin, & Cunningham, 2021), vlogging quickly found its place in the Chinese socio-economic-cultural context and is now intensively practiced in China. Bilibili stands out as 'one of the fastest-growing vlog communities' in China: 460,000 vloggers produced more than 1.45 million vlog posts, reaching 3.3 billion views by 2019 (Sohu, 2019). Therefore, the following research question is put forward: how does Bilibili popularise vlogging culture as a user-generated content (UGC) platform?

Established in 2009, Bilibili was initially known for anime, comics, games (ACG) content and its *danmaku* feature (bulleting commentary system) among *Erciyuan* (literally two-dimension) enthusiasts. Following a decade of development, over which time it accumulated many young and loyal users, it has become a comprehensive UGC video-sharing platform. Apart from the ACG content, Bilibili has accommodated various hobbyist communities and expanded its market share by adding sections such as lifestyle, fashion, entertainment, knowledge, news and more to the homepage curation. During this transformation, vlogging grew to become a more central component in the content offered by Bilibili. This was part of an active strategy by Bilibili to promote vlogging content on its platform. Between December 2018 and October 2020, it hosted 19 vlog-focused campaigns that provided vlog production participants with financial rewards and cultural acknowledgement. For example, it promised to boost the traffic of vlog posts with 50 billion views (*baoguang* in Chinese, or impressions) annually and offered 1 million RMB (approx. 154,000 USD) as a monthly reward or 'incentive' to users participating in vlog-focused campaigns.[1] These campaigns have promoted vlogging culture by calling on the vlogging production and competition of regular users. This resulted in the formation of a vlog community that incorporated various stakeholders including vloggers, audiences, advertisers and third parties (e.g. universities, state media). Bilibili had revealed its ambition to popularise vlogging content and practice in China. Furthermore, as a youth-oriented platform, Bilibili mobilises and attracts a lot of young users to engage in vlogging production and monetisation (Wang & Picone, 2022). As such, Bilibili also provides a typical case to explore the interplay between Chinese youth's vlogging participation and the platform economy.

In international studies on the influence of platform power on vlogging culture, platforms are considered to sustain, distribute and capitalise the vlog content (Duffy et al., 2019). On the one hand, vloggers and vlogs are increasingly dependent on the platforms to support, disperse and monetise vlogs (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Yet, on the other hand, vlogging is datafied on platforms to maximise how content is accumulated, circulated and monetised (Bakioğlu, 2018; Casilli & Posada, 2019; Z. Zhang, 2020). These different perspectives enrich our understanding of the dominant power of platforms, which greatly influences vlogging productions and practices. However, less attention is paid to the institutional power of platforms in popularising vlogging culture, especially in the context of China where vlogging culture is interwoven – and flourishes – into the platform economy in today's China. This entanglement results in a complex interplay between vlogging as creative content and commercial commodity (Craig et al., 2021). Against this backdrop, this article provides an explicit case to understand the ambition of platforms in fostering an emerging culture while simultaneously monetising it.

To explore how platforms promote vlogging culture, I conducted a digital ethnography of Bilibili between September 2019 and May 2022. This article starts by positing vlogging culture in the

context of China which is entangled with the platform economy. Next, it looks at the existing literature to frame the platform's institutional power in vlogging production and practice. After explaining the methods, this article delineates four ways that Bilibili strengthens its institutional power in promoting vlogging and meanwhile shaping vlogging culture. The final section discusses the institutional promotion of Bilibili for vlogging culture in China and proposes precarity that is embedded in the institutional promotion. Rather than merely an algorithm-driven 'conduit' for social interaction, Bilibili unleashes its institutional power to empower Chinese people to express themselves with some profiting from the content they generate – which intensifies the vloggers' struggle with platform-dependent visibility and monetisation.

Vlogging, short video market and platform economy

An anglicism and portmanteau, 'vlog' was initially an alien concept for many of the users on Bilibili. When vlogging culture emerged in China, the main video streaming sites sustaining vlogs were YouKu and Tudou (SinaTech, 2020a). At that time, vlogging had neither attracted much attention, nor were there many people who produced content under the term 'vlogs'. Since 2015, the platform economy, which refers to the 'internet accumulates monetary capital using freely available content created by unpaid user labor' (S. Wang, 2020), has prospered due to the combination of the government's 'internet plus' policy that encourages entrepreneurs and small start-ups to innovate by applying internet and information technologies, and the rising emergence of innumerable short-form video platforms (English.gov.cn, 2019, Lin and de Kloet, 2019). The short-form video refers to 'video content that is shorter than five minutes distributed via digital media platforms' and features 'low-cost production, highly spreadable content, and blurry boundaries between producers and consumers' (Kaye, Chen, & Zeng, 2021). The content covers various topics including beauty, lifestyle, games, cooking, technology, and travelling. As a genre of short-form video that revolve around documenting and sharing one's daily life, vlogs provide a way of presenting, commodifying and self-branding vloggers' personae (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Biel, Aran, & Gatica-Perez, 2011; Marshall, 2014; X. Wang & Picone, 2021). Furthermore, it narrates a scenario to insert the advertisements, and the exposure of personal life makes it more convincing to fans and followers (Abidin, 2019; Duan, 2020). In addition, it attracts traffic to the platforms: numerous people download the platform applications and binge-watch vlogs (S. Wang, 2020).

To some extent, the entanglement with the platform economy boosts the production of vlogging in China. Bilibili noticed the potential of vlogging culture and became devoted to promoting vlogging production and engagement in China.

An institutional perspective in platform studies

In examining platform power in influencing cultural production, Nieborg & Poell (2018) argue that cultural industries increasingly depend on platforms. These platforms are experiencing a shift due to platformisation: 'the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally affecting the operations of the cultural industries' (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). In this perspective, platforms provide a space to sustain and disperse vlogs, and greatly influence vlog production, curation and monetisation on platforms. More than just technical intermediaries, platforms are considered institutional mediators who are 'shaping the performance of actors in the cultural field' (Dijck, 2013, cited in Kim and Yu, 2019). Poell, Nieborg, D. B. and Duffy (2021) propose an institutional perspective to examine the platforms' institutional power in influencing cultural production by exploring platform markets,

infrastructure and governance. In this perspective, platforms are considered as (1) 'multisided markets', which refers to their institutional connection that aggregates economic transactions, mediating between end-users and content and service providers (Poell et al., 2021, p. 56); (2) platform infrastructures, which refers to 'platform databases and networks' that 'provide cultural producers with the economic and material affordances to create, distribute, market, and/or monetise cultural content' such as 'the gateways, interfaces, tools, and associated documentation to access these systems' (Poell et al., 2021, p. 80); (3) platform governance, which 'structures how content can be created, distributed, marketed, and monetised online, affecting the regulation of public space more generally' (Poell et al., 2021, p. 118). This study follows this approach to examine how Bilibili enhances its institutional power of promoting and shaping vlogging culture in the context of China.

By attracting a growing number of producers to 'create, distribute, market, and monetise content', platforms are becoming central markets in cultural industries (Poell et al., 2021, p. 74). The strategies that platforms employ to boost and transfer the producers into economic actors are at the forefront of platform market studies. The study of Korea-based Webtoons (Kim and Yu, 2019), for example, emphasises the platform as a driving force in the success of the digital comic in Korea. The platform adopts a 'quasi-editorial' role as they 'directly commission creators' (Kim & Yu, 2019). However, the authors critique two aspects of the institution of Webtoons. First, unlike the traditional publisher in the comic industry, it does not offer creators 'economic capital, technical training and expert advice' (Kim & Yu, 2019). Second, although its low-entry barriers attract 'mass amateurisation' leading to abundant production, it also causes an intensively competitive ecology that only benefits the top-tiered winners (Kim & Yu, 2019). Following the popularity principle, which refers to the value hierarchy, competition system and winner-takes-all effect (Duffy et al., 2019), the middle- and basic-tiered creators are offered limited visibility and minimal revenue. Contrary to what the rhetoric of neutral intermediaries adopted by platforms suggests, this inequality is rather 'a feature than a bug' of the 'in-demand economy' (van Doorn, 2017). In this economic model, platforms also involve the producers in the system of calculating and categorising, by gamifying their production and performance evaluation (Sun, 2019).

UGC platforms maximise the economic value of producers by commissioning them with labour-like contracts rather than partnerships. They boost cultural production by offering financial revenue for producers, however, they also utilise producers as labour to create profit for platforms. Furthermore, when a platform reaches its target for content and producers, it begins selecting partners by implementing invisible increases to the monetisation entry bar: for example, the YouTube Partner Program (YPP) formulated the tiered revenue-sharing regulation and assigned advertising-friendly content greater visibility and revenue, thereby shaping the content production (Caplan and Gillespie, 2020). Confronted with abundant video output, YouTube steers the platform away from content creators and towards content 'monetisers' to maximise its own benefits (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020). In this perspective, the commission of producers as monetisers, rather than content creators, reduces the autonomy of the producers. This then compromises the sustainability of their revenue as a subordinated role on the platforms (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). In this case, YouTube shapes the content into advertising-friendly videos with a tiered revenue calculation program. At the market level, the institutional power strengthens the connection between producers, audiences and advertisers. This provides a method of monetisation for producers yet intensifies the pressure on producers' authentic self-presentation and self-promotion due to the advertisement-oriented monetisation system on profit-driven platforms (Duffy et al., 2019; Poell et al., 2021).

Regardless of the commission contract or tiered revenue monetisation, the economic value of producers is decided by their visibility. This refers to 'the ranking, ordering, and "discoverability" of cultural content' on the platforms which, to some extent, is influenced by the curation of platforms

that categorise and order the content and services on platforms (Poell et al., 2021, p. 130). Poell et al. (2021) generally distinguish curation in two ways – editorial curation and algorithmic curation – and both are considered deeply rooted in the platforms' norms and values. It has become a common strategy for platforms to filter and shape creators' content through the lens of platform-based norms, strengthened by the content (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). Craig et al. (2021) highlight a process of pillarisation on social media platforms. Pillarisation originally referred to 'a society as divided into a number of "pillars" being compartments standing for the networks of organizations belonging to religious and ideological subcultures' (Maussen, 2015). Borrowing this definition, the platforms can be considered as being segmented 'by class and location as much as by affinity or interests' (Craig et al., 2021, p.86). They take Chinese platforms Douyin and Kuaishou as examples (Craig et al., 2021). The former cultivates the middle-class users based in Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities while the latter targets rural users (Craig et al., 2021). I also borrow this concept and pinpoint the specific feature the platforms embrace to attract specific groups of audiences and vloggers. Herein, vloggers confront challenges when they produce under such a shaping power from platforms. To gain more visibility, the vloggers on YouTube often produce advertising-friendly content, such as makeup tutorials, to interweave into their daily vlogs (Bishop, 2019). As Papacharissi (2010) argues, vloggers perform a networked self on the platforms which is negotiated with and structured by the online context and politics of the platforms.

There is established literature examining Bilibili's infrastructure, especially the *danmaku* feature that allows the audience to message instantly and spontaneously with the other audience members, thereby enhancing the community-oriented participatory culture, grassroots creativity and collective identities (Z. T. Chen, 2020, 2021; G. Wang & Zhang, 2021; Ding, Yang, Li, & Zhang, 2021). However, the aspects of markets and governance, embedded in Bilibili, rarely receive attention in terms of cultural production promotion. In the early days of Bilibili, it emerged in the Chinese online context as a niche platform attracting sub-cultural communities. Scholars noticed its potential to generate a public space where the dominant power of capital and politics could be resisted through community-based communication, most notably reflected in the *danmaku* feature (Yin & Fung, 2017). However, in less than three years, state-based accounts such as the Communist Youth League, Agencies Xinhua News Agency and China Central Television (CCTV) emerged on the platform. Tencent (a giant tech platform company in China) gained control of the platform, and Bilibili became deeply intertwined with the state and capital. It is contextualised in the Chinese internet ecosystem which is based on 'state-based guidance and intervention' (Cunningham, Craig, & Lv, 2019). It needs to harmonise with the national ideology to eliminate vulgarity and promote 'positive energy' (X. Chen, Kaye, & Zeng, 2020; X. Zhang, 2020), and must favour commercially-oriented content to attract investments. Compared with the tensions perceivable on YouTube between user-generated content and commercially-produced content, community building and generating advertising revenues, and content moderation and maintaining neutrality (Gillespie, 2010), Bilibili has (so far) kept its promise to never integrate in-stream advertising in video. However, it still needs to consider the interests of various stakeholders including advertisers, third parties, creators and audiences (Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards, & Sandvig, 2018) – a balancing act that structures vlogging production and practices on the platform.

Methodology

To explore the institutional power of Bilibili in popularising vlogging culture in China, I followed a digital ethnographic approach combining ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews with nine vloggers on Bilibili between September 2019 and May 2022. During ethnographic

observations, I took fieldnotes about the vlogging campaigns hosted by Bilibili from December 2018 to October 2020 (see appendix 1.1). I browsed the campaign section on Bilibili's homepage and selected all campaigns (n = 19) relevant to vlogging (containing the keyword 'vlog' in titles or subjects), and noted the topics, slogans, descriptions, regulations, rewards, comments and curation (i.e. vlog posts and vloggers as winners or references). I searched for information, for example, 'how can I increase my beta score' on Bilibili, and also collected data from the comments or published posts from other users. This article protects users' personal information by only disclosing public materials, for instance homepage curation screenshots.

I also conducted in-depth interviews between April and May 2022 to explore the vloggers' interaction with Bilibili. By looking into the curated posts and comments on Bilibili's campaign websites, I identified 42 vloggers who either left comments to share the experience of campaign participation, or their profiles and vlog posts were curated on the websites as winners, which represented active engagements with the vlogging promotion of Bilibili. After contacting with them via direct messages on Bilibili, nine vloggers (see Table 1) took part in the interviews via voice calls or text messages on WeChat (an instant messaging application in China).

Interviewees were asked three questions: (1) how did they participate in the campaigns? (2) what aspects of the campaigns were the most interesting to them? and (3) what did they like or dislike about participating? I adapted these questions and added sub-questions according to their different responses, which mostly related to reflections on their use of Bilibili in terms of vlogging practices. The interviews were between 30 to 60 minutes in duration. The interviewees provided consent to use their interviews in this study. And pseudonyms are used in this article to protect their privacy.

After the data collection, I conducted a thematic analysis adopting an inductive approach, using the software Maxqda. I began by going through the data and identifying different themes. Next, I created a codebook to define these themes: for example, discourse, monetisation, mediation and campaigns. Last, I grouped the relative themes resulting in the emergence of four ways that vlogging culture is promoted by Bilibili: (1) pillarising discourses; (2) metrics-based monetisation; (3) advertising mediation; and (4) vlog-focused campaigns.

Table 1. Overview of nine interviewees, data collected in May 2022.

	Vlogger Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Followers	Experience
1	Xiaozhou	22	Male	5782	2 years
2	Ami	28	Male	17,000	3 years
3	Luoke	30	Female	11,000	5 years
4	Yuyuan	22	Female	259	4 years
5	Huanhuan	28	Female	34	4 years
6	Jerry	28	Female	112,000	4 years
7	Juzhang	29	Female	145,000	3 years
8	Cheng	26	Male	141,000	3 years
9	Xiaotian	24	Female	2221	2 years

Four ways Bilibili promotes and shapes vlogging culture in China

Pillarised discourses

Compared to YouTube, which provides 'an open space for amateur participation, then struggling to fit that participation with viable revenue streams—usually advertising' (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020), Bilibili provided vloggers with leading topics to produce vlogs about. In doing so, Bilibili tried to familiarise both potential vloggers and new audiences with the unfamiliar term of vlogging. In campaigns to stimulate vlogging, Bilibili held up an image of 'what vlogs should/can be'. In my exploration of the vlogging campaigns on Bilibili, I found that the topics, slogans and descriptions embody 'youth-oriented, middle-class and commonly accessible' discourses to create and maintain its pillarisation (see Table 2).

The key topics recur around lifestyle and life attitudes, and suggest the invisible gate of higher educational background, middle-class sociality and consumerism for the vlogging content. However, the topics are accessible to regular vloggers. To relate to the everyday life of young people, the demonstrated scenarios are common and generalised (i.e. school, home, street, etc.). Taking the No.8 campaign as an example, the slogan 'everybody can be a vlogger' calls for mass participation, and provides five courses tailored to three identities including students, workers and couples as demonstrations (Figure 1), which covers most of the positions and situations in youth society. Bilibili also cooperates with third parties to promote and attract more young producers to try vlogging. Third parties narrate the discourse that vlogging is well accepted and popular among young-generation peers. For example, in No. 4 'school vlog competition', Bilibili invited 24 Chinese universities (based on diverse ranks and regions) to encourage their students to participate. In cooperating with universities, Bilibili promotes vlogging as a creative way for young people to develop and self-actualise, and directly encourages vlogging as a beneficial practice among Generation Z.

Furthermore, it narrates a community-based gathering on the platform to attract mass participation in vlogging by adding descriptions related to the copious number of users who have made vlog submissions:

'In this competition, nearly 10,000 uploaders shared their lives through vlogs (No.2 campaign)'.

'By the end of 2019, more than one million vloggers are recording their lives on Bilibili. Wherever you are in, you can find like-minded fellows (No. 11 campaign)'.

By mentioning large financial rewards (No.18 'have chance to share 100,000 RMB with submission'; No.13, 'share 50,000 RMB with submission' for all the participants), it capitalises on a fear of missing out to mobilise users to join and share in the financial rewards. Successful stories of ordinary vloggers are shown on the curated campaign pages. These pages offer regular vloggers

Table 2. Three dimensions of discursive words embodied in the titles, slogans and description of the 19 vlog activities.

Dimensions	Discursive Words Embodied in Text-Description of Vlog-Focused Campaigns
Youth	School, studying, new semester, knowledge, curve wreckers, pretty guy
Middle-class	Holiday, travel, party, ritual, lifestyle, city, cuisine, career
Ordinariness	Everybody, document, personal, wherever, everyday, experience, millions of vloggers, carve up

Figure 1. Three demonstrated cases in the No. 8 campaign, screenshot, May 2021. (a) The diary of being a school vlogger (b) How to produce good vlogs as working people (c) 7 tips and tricks for couple vlogs.

(who do not have a large follower base) additional visibility in addition to the algorithmic recommendation. Both ways urge users to try vlogging and compete for financial or cultural rewards.

After evaluating each campaign (most are competitions), the winning posts were curated on the homepage. Taking the No. 2 campaign as an example (see appendix 1.2), the themes of majority of the winning posts were famous universities (Cambridge University, Peking University), bustling cities (Hongkong, Singapore) and delicate lifestyles and products (skincare, healthy life, makeup). This further validates the idea that the discourse adopted by Bilibili invites vloggers to present a performative identity – youthful, living a higher-end lifestyle – while still expecting the audience to resonate with their 'ordinariness' and 'everydayness' by showing scenes from daily life. As this example shows, Bilibili is trying to shape vlogging into a pillar that stresses a youthful, higher-end lifestyle but still relates to ordinary, everyday lives. This pillar relates strongly to Bilibili's user demographics – mostly young people with higher educational backgrounds,[2] which somewhat shapes the themes in vlogs.

The interviewees considered this pillar as representing a 'tone' embedded by Bilibili and that featured in the characteristics of the content it dispersed. The interviewees mentioned that the vlogs on Bilibili were 'delicate yet authentic' (personal interviews with Luoke, Yuyuan and Juzhang, April 2022). As interviewee Yuyuan explained, 'the delicateness of Bilibili vlogs is not that kind of fake delicateness, instead, it is very sincere' (personal interview with Yuyuan, April 2022). Interviewee Juzhang reflected that her vlogs had a much larger audience on Bilibili than the other platforms, mostly because her style fitted the tone of Bilibili, in other words, matched the Bilibili audience. According to the response from Juzhang, Bilibili is distinct from other platforms in terms of its content type, style and targeted audiences. Compared to pillars formed by other social media platforms, such as Douyin and Kuishou, which target more staged performances, Bilibili attracts an explicit audience group that prefers vlogging everyday life, unique personalities and lifestyles.

Furthermore, Bilibili promotes such content with pillarised discourses and urges vloggers to fit their content into this pillar, thereby further shaping the vlog content on Bilibili.

The discursive work illustrates a participative atmosphere and leads to mass but pillarised production of vlogs, where Bilibili promises vloggers both cultural and financial rewards, and also sets up systems to realise them accordingly.

Metric-based monetisation

The monetisation of vlogging on Bilibili can be categorised in two ways. The first way is to join the regular monetising programs (long-term, not limited to vlogging, but applicable to all genres of content and creators on Bilibili). The second way is to participate in the vlogging promotion campaigns (temporary, vlog-focused), with the participants having the possibility to receive rewards accordingly. In both ways, vloggers confront performance evaluation systems. In this section, I look at how these systems work in the regular programs.

Regular monetising programs play an important role in fulfilling the financial promises for vloggers. In 2018, Bilibili proposed the *Incentive Program for Creation* (IPC hereinafter) to motivate creators, that is, the creators who join this program can receive revenue provided by Bilibili. This program 'provides comprehensive evaluation and corresponding income for the self-produced content created by uploaders'. It aims to provide a longstanding monetisation mode for the creators and 'reduce the cost and pressure of content creation, increase confidence and motivation to continue creating' (Bilibili, 2018).

Participants who want to join this program need to meet the requirements. In IPC, Bilibili has developed its own scoring metric, called *Beta,* to evaluate the quality of the content. The *Beta* incorporates three aspects – creativity score, influence score and credit score. Once the *Beta* achieves a fixed level (creativity score or influence score ≥55, and credit score ≥80), the creators are eligible to apply to join the incentive program. Among these three aspects, creativity evaluation is divided into small and quantified tasks. By completing different *tasks* (see Table 3) and accumulating creativity points, vloggers can increase their creativity scores, and the *Beta* can accordingly be levelled up, corresponding to tiered affordances. For example, if vloggers achieve 80 scores in every aspect, they are awarded the possibility to draw raffles on Bilibili, which is an interaction with their audience. In turn, this interaction can increase the 'influence scores' in the *Beta* evaluation system.

As the regulation describes,[3] creating original content and interacting with audiences can add creativity scores in the evaluation system on Bilibili. To achieve the required scores, creators need to frequently produce content and actively interact with the audience in various ways (e.g. reply to

Table 3. Tasks for new vloggers to accumulate creativity *points*, retrieved in May 2021.

Tasks	Creativity Points
Submitted the first video	+500
Submitted a video	+400
Accumulated total 10 likes for submissions	+100
Shared self-made video to other platforms	+100
Followed the 'Bilibili Creativity Centre' account	+50
Watched a tutorial in Creative Writing Academy	+20
Added watermark into original video	+20

comments). A creator shared the experience – achieving 55 points of *creativity* by submitting content every day, and persevering for 46 days – in a text post on Bilibili:

> 'No matter what, just keep updating content every day! Even if you do not have anything to post that day, go ahead and make a "check-in," or post an *update*...The fact is that updating every day is greatly benefiting your account anyway' (Xixiyingshi 2020).

Great pressure is placed on vloggers as this evaluation system counts the submissions, updates and interactions. In the evaluation of *Beta*, low-frequency creation decreases both the creativity and influence scores. Compared with creativity scores, the influence score is more stringent. The evaluation of influence is based on the metrics of audience engagement, for example, the number of subscriptions, likes, views, saves and coins (a virtual currency on Bilibili that is an important metric related to the popularity of vlog posts). How the scores are then calculated is unknown. Vloggers simply *guess* that the number of subscriptions, likes and coins weigh more in the score calculation. Hence, a very normal practice of vloggers – asking viewers to 'click one button for three functions (*yijiansanlian* in Chinese)' – generally happens at the end of the post, reminding viewers to like, save and add coins to the post. To increase the *danmaku* numbers, another popular practice is to call on followers to send the same word into the *danmaku* board together, for example, 'don't you think the food is yummy? Please type "yummy" on the public screen (*danmaku* board)'. These practices shape vlogging with greater interactivity and make it more a performance rather than a personal presentation. The evaluation forces vloggers to stress the value of interactive audience engagement. To some extent, this can be the deciding factor leading to a recommendation of a homepage appearance that can significantly increase visibility – emphasising the performativity of the vlogging practice.

After intensive production and interaction, regular vloggers may qualify for the general monetisation program. However, the revenue-calculating rules are unclear. As Bilibili describes in the IPC, the incentive is calculated based on multiple indicators such as content value including the likes from audiences, content popularity and content verticality (the relevance with the targeted audience) (Bilibili 2018). It is opaque and hard for vloggers to control. Popularity evaluation seems to overlap with the metric of likes and learning how to achieve high 'verticality' in the vlog production remains unknown. A similar problem exists in vlogging promotion activities. Using the example of the No. 15 campaign, the regulations state that 'the official editors will select three quality submissions to receive a special bonus of 1500 RMB (approx. 233USD) based on a comprehensive evaluation, including the topic, views and likes'. The metrics are quantifiable, but the combined score is hard to predict, and it seems the evaluation of 'topic' mostly depends on editor subjectivity. These unclear rules cause much guesswork for the creators. As interviewee Ami expressed, 'personally, I feel that Bilibili's algorithm is not as regular as other video platforms, for example, Douyin. The posts on Bilibili are not recommended to the next level of the traffic pool because of good metrics' (personal interview with Ami, April 2022). Interviewee Luoke stated that Bilibili recommended the posts or vloggers that already have a high number of views or a large follower base. Here, the algorithm continues to play a powerful role as greater exposure can lead to more likes and popularity in a specific audience-traffic pool and bring in higher revenue, as re-inforced by the *winner-takes-all* dynamic on Bilibili.

Interviewee Huanhuan reflected the tricky rules of monetisation on Bilibili: vloggers can receive the virtual currency called 'shells' on Bilibili through participating in monetisation programs, however, the 'shells' can just be withdrawn in cash when they reach 100. As a vlogger with four years' experience, Huanhuan received only 30 shells so far (April 2022), so she could not withdraw

them. Huanhuan explained that 'if there are some vloggers who can withdraw the "shells," it means they have devoted a lot [of vlog posts to accumulate "shells"]. And that might be the strategy of Bilibili [to promote vlog production]' (personal interview with Huanhuan, April 2022). Here, Huanhuan considered monetisation of Bilibili to be highly time and energy consuming. She further perceived it is an institutional strategy that Bilibili employs to push vlog production and participation.

Advertising mediation

Apart from IPC, Bilibili implements two additional monetisation programs – Mutual Rewarding Program (*xuanshangjihua* in Chinese) and Firework Program (*huahuopingtai* in Chinese) – and attempts a quasi-MCN (Multi-Channel Network) role. MCN refers to the intermediary firms that provide professional guidance on content production and management services for creators (Craig et al., 2021). In Bilibili's case, it attempts to directly build networks for the vloggers and advertisers through these two extensive programs.

The mutual rewarding program and firework program provide extensive ways to mediate between vloggers and advertisers. The mutual rewarding program functions as a way for creators to receive advertising orders (proposed by advertisers on Bilibili) that can be added to posts as purchase links, allowing the audience to directly order the products. The earnings of *advertising* pieces are calculated according to the views of the advertisement; the earnings of *advertorial* pieces will be calculated according to the actual commission based on the specific share ratio with different advertisers. The firework program is processed in an extended platform (huahuo.bilibili.com) where Bilibili provides reference prices, order management and settlement services for creators and advertisers (SinaTech 2020b). In this program, Bilibili mediates between matched vloggers and advertisers (Kejisuoma 2020). It recommends suitable creators for advertisers and proposes a reference price. Vloggers then decide whether to accept the contract or not. In this case, Bilibili standardises the price and contract to help the creators avoid conflicts of interest, and to help the advertisers find vloggers in specific niche communities. Both programs encourage vloggers to create commercial content such as advertisements and advertorials.

Going beyond the function of an intermediator (Nielsen & Ganter, 2017), Bilibili takes the institutional responsibility to manage different stakeholders. By doing this, Bilibili provides the basic- and middle-level vloggers with advertising opportunities, which are still the main method of monetisation in the vlog industry; meanwhile, it regulates the cooperation between vloggers and advertisers with negotiated contracts, processes and prices to prevent industry disorders. Furthermore, Bilibili requires vloggers to submit advertising information when uploading posts. As such, it turns advertising in vlogs into a normalised practice, making vloggers more confident and leading them to point out the advertising or sponsorship, instead of concealing it in the content.

In the interviews, Jerry acknowledged Bilibili's support in bridging vloggers and advertisers. She also appreciated that Bilibili afforded vloggers the opportunity to monetise with dignity: 'the firework platform certainly lets vloggers "stand" to earn money. Now, the advertising cooperation can be processed on the platform, which is a protection for vloggers. Before submitting the vlogs, the branders sent the money to the platform, similar to Alipay. I received money after I sent the video from my side, which could be considered as a protection for both sides' (personal interview with Jerry, April 2022). Yet, she disclosed that the support for monetisation was very limited: 'how to say, except this, it actually does not help vloggers very much in receiving advertising orders and monetise, it mainly counts on vlogger themselves' (personal interview with Jerry, April 2022). This

was collaborated by interviewee Luoke who reflected that these kinds of cooperated vlogs often received very few views, which was also a risk for vloggers who wanted to attract audiences.

Vlog-focused campaigns

Basic-tiered *video uploaders* (not limited to *vloggers*) expect visibility and traffic. However, because of their limited number of followers and the way the metrics of popularity are designed, these producers are still in a precarious situation. It is risky to solely rely on the recommendation of the black-box-like algorithm. As explained in the previous modes, the guesswork has become another kind of labour. How is it possible to break out of this vicious circle? (See Figure 2) This is a core issue that algorithm-oriented platform producers cannot circumvent. Bilibili is aware of this point and takes advantage of it, intentionally or not, to promote vlogging on the platform.

To increase the production of vlogging, Bilibili organised a series of vlog-focused campaigns, beginning in November 2018 (see appendix 1.1), to encourage users to participate. An examination of Bilibili's promises in the 19 vlogging promotion campaigns shows that they afford participants with rewards that are rarely received (see Table 4). One of the most important promises is *visibility*. For example, if the participants win the competitions, their vlog posts can be recommended by official accounts (i.e. reposting), curated on the homepage or the campaign websites or have a position in the weekly or monthly rankings. In addition, audience members can vote for them and their vlog posts.

The campaigns are favoured by fresh vloggers (i.e. vloggers with maximum 10,000 followers or 50,000 followers, defined differently in different campaigns) because some rewards are exclusive to them. Many video uploaders, who have not previously tried vlogging, participate to win these 'newbie benefits'. Bilibili assigns human editors to evaluate the participants' performance. To some extent, this remedies the limitation of the algo-recommendation system. For example, in the first campaign, Bilibili set up a 'seed user' chat group to connect high-quality vloggers with the platform, and to provide a bridge for influential vloggers to cooperate with one another and to form strong partnerships. Arguably, the vlog-focused campaigns bifurcate the circle (see Figure 2), by
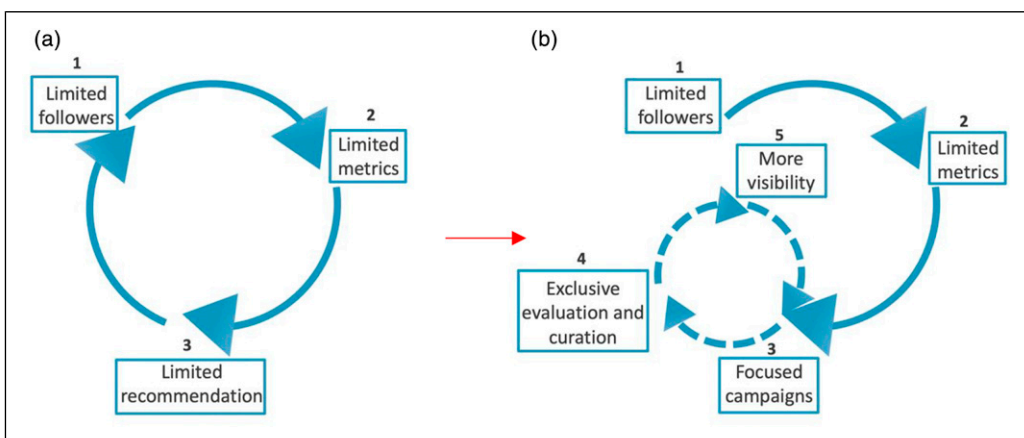
Figure 2. (a) Vicious loop about visibility: vlog posts with limited followers are confined by the limited algorithmic recommendation on other platforms. (b) Open circle about visibility: vloggers can potentially get extra visibility by participating in vlog-focused campaigns.

Table 4. Four categories of promises in 19 vlog-focused campaigns.

Rewards Category	Description and Examples
Financial rewards	An amount of money (usually thousands RMB for several winners)
Devices	Equipment for producing vlogs (e.g. mobile camera, microphone, wide-angle lens and tripod head)
Social capital	Visibility, vlogger networks, vlog identification (i.e. profile picture decoration), high-level membership
Third-party sponsorship	Sponsored gifts from the advertisers (e.g. Airbnb and OPPO phone)

supplementing an editor-evaluation system and extra visibility from campaign-based curation. It encourages vloggers to compete for visibility by producing high-qualified vlogs, potentially providing them with another racetrack and stimulating the agency and autonomy of vloggers.

The barrier to *participate* is not high. One only needs to submit a vlog post with a prescribed hashtag. But it is highly demanding to *compete*. Generally, participants need to upload several productions in one competition, and be available for the selection, otherwise participants can only receive a small gift (e.g. profile picture decoration). Even when the selection is decided by human editors, the metrics are still the most significant selection criteria. It is premature to conclude that the focused campaigns can overcome the precarity that vloggers experience as a result of the algorithm. Rather, vloggers risk being trapped by Bilibili's promises, and only fed with small rewards.

Most interviewees concurred that they frequently participated in vlog-focused campaigns because participation is very easy and only required checking if there were suitable choices of hashtags to add. They expected to receive extra visibility. Juzhang shared that she had participated in the campaigns when she was a 'new' vlogger with around 2000 followers. She won the 'best newcomer award' at that time, bringing over 90,000 views to that post. By comparison, most of her prior vlog posts had hundreds or thousands of views. Her participation also resulted in more than 10,000 followers, with the majority these followers showing 'higher loyalty' and following her 'until now' (personal interview with Juzhang, April 2022). According to Juzhang's response, the vlog-focused campaigns provide higher traffic and followers for the winning participants.

However, the number of campaign winners remains limited. Huanhuan reflected that although she participated in some campaigns, this did not harvest many views. Yet, she justified this participation and believed it could expand her visibility: 'if there was a suitable topic, I would definitely choose to tag [to participate in it]. If I added a tag, my vlog post would be put with all the other relative videos together in a centralised browsing section. Maybe some other vloggers would check out these posts, or maybe there would be some audiences who happened to browse this topic, and then they would check out some latest posts…I guess it might be the case, which would result in slightly higher visibility' (Personal interview with Huanhuan, April 2022). Huanhuan considered campaign participation an effortless and beneficial practice that was a tactical move for regular vloggers to increase visibility.

Interviewee Ami believed that campaigns just provided a channel for vloggers to be seen by the editors, yet this was dependent on whether the content attracted traffic to the end. He explained that it was the editors who picked up the vlog post and decided which could be curated and recommended on Bilibili.

Directly or indirectly, vlog-based campaigns stimulate the abundance of vlog production on Bilibili. They provide considerable comprehensive guidance for users who want to practice

vlogging at various stages of the vlogging process – from topic selection, tutorials to increase production value, to the promotion and monetisation of videos. In this regard, these promises stimulate many would-be users who have never produced vlogs to start vlogging on Bilibili.

Conclusion

This article delves into four ways that Bilibili used to foster vlogging culture in China, including pillarised discourses, metric-based monetisation, advertising mediation and vlog-focused campaigns. Based on these four ways, I argue that Bilibili enhances its institutional power in popularising vlogging culture in China, meanwhile, shaping vlogging into intensive and homogeneous production and practices. The institutional power also strengthens the structural pressure on vlogging that embeds inequality and precarity.

This article has three implications. First, it contextualises vlogging culture in China which is entangled with the platform economy. Examining the impact of Bilibili on vlogging culture within the 'market, infrastructure and governance' framework (Poell et al., 2021), this study stresses four ways formulated as an institutional promotion. Bilibili initiates discursive work by providing relatable and general topics, successful cases, 'scramble' atmosphere and cooperation with third parties (brands, universities, etc.) to tell a participative story that everyone can be a vlogger. Bilibili also enhances the multisided markets by affording mediated space and bridging vloggers and advertisers. The editorial recommendation system has the potential to remedy, or at least supplement the single algorithmic recommendation and curation. Furthermore, the vlog-focused campaigns and regular montisation programs indeed provide vloggers more opportunities to receive financial rewards and extra visibility. By doing these, Bilibili directly mobilises more users to engage in vlogging production and participation.

Second, this article uncovers the institutional power of Bilibili in shaping vlogging culture. Bilibili promotes vlog content that is 'youth-oriented, middle-class and accessible to ordinary people'. In the long turn, vloggers tend to present such relative content to gain more recommendations from Bilibili. The discursive work shapes the tone of the platform, and the platform tone further shapes the vlogging production, which may lead to the homogenisation of vlogs on Bilibili. With the mass production of homogenous content, the vlog market has become more and more competitive. It is harder for regular vloggers who do not have large follower bases to stand out in the vlogging market. Thus, a kind of intangible and platform-based pressure on vloggers appears: should they shoot the content that platforms promote or the content they authentically want to present? These two orientations sometimes conflicted with each other. As such, Bilibili provides a structured model for vlog creation, evaluation and promotion, turning the content into a homogeneous type and aesthetic, and further leading to a more competitive environment for vloggers. By exploring the institutional power of Bilibili, this article enriches the understanding of platformisation in cultural industries. It highlights that platforms not only provide a space for vloggers to produce and sustain vlogs, but also enhance 'shaping' power in vlogging production and practices. In the case of Bilibili, it sets up evaluation and monetisation systems, bridges advertisers and vloggers, and normalises advertising for vloggers. By doing these, vlogging goes far beyond a simplistic version of self-presentation, rather, it is stressed as a form of cultural production and commercial commodity. For individual vloggers, vlogging on Bilibili can be both a way that empowers vloggers to voice and present themselves, and a way that creates self-brands and starts entrepreneurship. Herein, it further leads to a tension between individual empowerment and the commodification of vloggers. Based on this, this article puts a ground for future studies to explore

vloggers' tactics and identities in coping with this tension during vlogging on profit-driven platforms.

Third, this study reveals the inequality and precarity embedded in Bilibili's institutional promotion of vlogging. To reach the standards in the monetisation programs, vloggers need to produce vlogs intensively. For example, some vlog-focused campaigns request vloggers to submit four vlogs in one month. And the 'beta' evaluation factors in the 'creativity' value, which is partially determined by the numbers of vlog updates. It turns vlogging into a form of immaterial labour, and vloggers are unpaid or underpaid concerning the limited financial rewards and significant time and energy consumption. Apart from 'creativity' value, vloggers need to attract the attention of their viewers and interact with them in order to increase their 'influence' value. It pushes vlogging even deeper into performative practices. Furthermore, the demands of vlog quality are high, yet the evaluation standards and the monetisation-calculation are opaque. The editorial recommendation more depends on the editors' selection criteria, which generally balances the interests of multiple parties, such as audiences, advertisers, the platform and the state's mainstream ideologies. Besides, Bilibili launches vlog-focused campaigns to enhance the accessibility of vlogging, with the goal of maximising vlogging participation and monetisation. Nevertheless, the 'bonus' for vlogging fades when abundant vlog posts pour into Bilibili. At the time of writing this article, Bilibili has hosted fewer and fewer promotional campaigns for vlogging, and accordingly, the rewards and benefits have decreased. This emphasises the significance of the vloggers' persona and performance in vlogs, which are key strengths in the vlog market. Looking into the four ways that Bilibili facilitates the promotion of vlogging, we can observe Bilibili's ambition to improve the precarious ecology for the vloggers through the intervention of the institutional modes, but there is still a long way to go.

This article addresses the impact on the regular vloggers but not the impact on wanghong vloggers (who have large fan bases): the different types of vloggers may represent different dynamics. Additionally, this study mostly focuses on the platform's policies and mechanisms. It pays less attention to the state's power and regulation, which are deeply rooted in the changes and developments of the platforms. In future studies, researchers can further examine the role that the state plays in reinforcing and supervising platforms. In addition, researchers can further examine the influence of platform power on the productions and practices of wanghong vloggers. Bilibili is not alone in shaping cultural production and practices. Comparing different platforms can illustrate a more fluid and complex ecology in the context of China.

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Notes

1. Information was retrieved from https://www.bilibili.com/blackboard/activity-vlogstar.html.
2. The average age of new users on Bilibili is 21, with 78% of users aged 18–35. In terms of educational background, the proportion of Bilibili users with a bachelor's degree or above is 10% higher than that of the entire network in China. Information is available on https://socialbeta.com/t/reports-bilibili-marketing-planning-2021-02-22.
3. More details can be found at https://www.bilibili.com/blackboard/help.html#/?qid=d959b00a9e934ad998fcadb431fe8b1b&pid=e7c4a9f6c4c74e0cbb0f6d39c5a872d0

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Appendix 1.1

Overview of 19 Vlog-Focused Campaigns

| No.	Campaign Titles	Slogans and Description
1	Vlog challenge for 30 days	Set up an unbreakable flag to cure procrastination in the last 30 days of 2018
2	Ideal life vlog exhibition	Be a delicate girl who make every day a special occasion! In this competition, nearly 10,000 uploaders shared their lives through vlogs. See which lifestyle is your ideal type?
3	'B' a vlogger	On Bilibili, using vlogs to record extraordinariness
4	School vlog competition	New semester, no delay in updating vlogs
5	Vlog city hunter	Call for participation: The most interesting vloggers in the world. How many cities have you visited? How many street foods have you tried? Which city are you standing in now, and what kind of life do you live? Vlog your lifestyle in the city, your culinary encounters, your travels, and let vlogging become the new way of seeing the world!
6	Summer days fighting—be a vlogger	The sea, swimming pool, ice watermelon, ice cream, barbecue and chirping of cicada… Everything in summer is full of energy and freshness. What new things have you tried this summer? Vlogging your summer challenges!
7	Vlog city hunter—the summer for foodie	Submit your food vlogs and get 10,000 free crayfish and free skewers at 'Life is a Skewer' offline shops!
8	Everybody can be a vlogger	A vlog is more than just a record of life, it is an expression of the extraordinary in ordinary life! Become a vlogger, now! We have created the following courses tailored to the student/worker/couple vlogger status, so start your vlogging journey!
9	My life attitude—Airbnb	A vlog is essentially a documentary of a person. A vlog with a personal style and attitude towards life is more likely to showcase beauty. Use vlogs to share your feelings and attitude towards life!
10	Vlog challenge for 30 days (edition 2)	It is the end of this year and the #30daysvlogchallenge is here for you. We invite you who have passion on life to start the 30-days vlogging challenge and bid farewell to 2019 with millions of vloggers.
11	2019 vloggers' party city	By the end of 2019, there will be over 1 million vloggers documenting their lives on Bilibili, so no matter what city you are in, you will be able to find like-minded partners. This December, we are calling on vloggers from all cities to have a good time to meet face-to-face and come together to form a group!
12	BW (Bilibili World) Chengdu Tianxuan vlog plan	Remember the joy of being featured in the BW live vlogs of millions of vloggers? Remember the joy of seeing yourself in the videos of your favorite vloggers? BW Chengdu will set sail soon, record your BW trip this time!
13	Winter holiday vlog—studying together	Winter holiday comes! It is time to become a curve wreckers! Record your learning process, share your experience and deliver your knowledge on Bilibili, complete your click-in and scramble 50,000 RMB. And your vlogs have a chance to be officially recommended by Bilibili!

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No.	Campaign Titles	Slogans and Description
14	My back-to-school style	Go back to school and change to be a pretty guy. It is a long way to school, but Dingding [an app similar to Microsoft Teams] will last forever
15	Come on 2020! vlog challenge	During the epidemic, many vloggers chose to document their lives with vlogs, bringing us closer together during the 'staying at home' days. Everything will be fine in the end, so join them in 2020 and become a vlogger and document every moment of your life!
16	Vlog challenge in spring	Flowering April, I have a date with Spring. Use vlogs to record your daily life in spring, or the feeling of back to school and workplace.
17	100 possibilities of vlogs	Bringing the world closer, and fall in love with it in a flash. Honor 30 Pro 5G
18	Life sharing session with vlogs	Submit your vlogs, scramble 100,000 RMB and get exposed on Bilibili homepage. How to make an attractive vlog? Share the wonderful life with millions of vloggers on Bilibili and join the community of vloggers
19	Working on vlogs during National Day	A big reward for the most dazzling vlogger during National Day holiday

Appendix 1.2

The Curation of the Winning Posts at the Homepage of Vlog-Focused Campaign
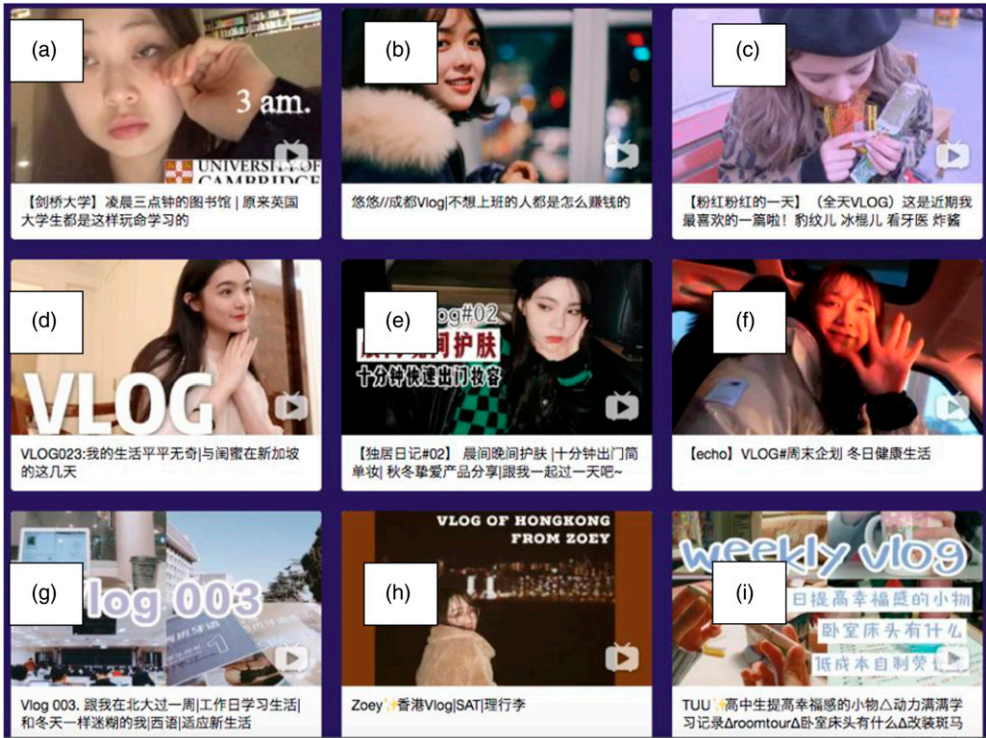
Screenshot. May 2021. Translated by the author.

(a) The Library of Cambridge University | British university students are studying like this
(b) Chengdu vlog | how can those people make money but do not work
(c) This is my favorite post recently! Leopard print, popsicle, visiting dentist, and frying sauce
(d) My life is so ordinary | travelling to Singapore with my best friend
(e) Morning skin-caring | ten-minute makeup tutorial | sharing favorite products in winter and fall | spending one day with me
(f) Sunday plan, living a healthy life in winter
(g) Spending a day with me at the Peking university | studying in weekdays | I am dazed as winter | Spanish | orient myself in the new life
(h) Hongkong vlog | SAT | packing packages
(i) Small products to improve the sense of happiness for high school students | motivated learning vlog | room tour | what is on the bedroom bedside | retrofit zebra

Author biography

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