Platformed playworkers: Game video creators’ affective labour and emotional labour on Bilibili

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Abstract
This article investigates the game video creators’ playbour on Bilibili, a leading Chinese user-generated content platform with a focus on animation, comics and games. The creators’ labour involves creating content through affective labour and managing the fan communities through emotional labour, situated in a network production model. Current studies of platformed playbour either interchangeably use affective and emotional labour or rarely discuss the interplay between the two concepts. We argue that it is important to recognize their nuance and investigate their relationship. Our research clarifies the difference between affective labour and emotional labour and discovers the conflict between the two types of labour. We argue that the conflict derives from enhanced alienation of leisure activities caused by platformization of playbour. Although the video creators consider strategies to solve conflicts, they can barely escape from the unequal labour relationship, constructed by the platform. This study involves semi-structured interviews with 13 playworkers, one Bilibili employee and three advertisers. The playworkers’ Bilibili channels were also observed online from 2019 to 2020.

Keywords
platformed playbour, Bilibili, video creators, emotional exhaustion, China

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Introduction

The platform video industry has become increasingly prevalent in China. In the past decade, the number of Chinese online video users has increased from 284 to 944 million, respectively, making up 62.1% and 93.4% of all Chinese Internet users (CNNIC, 2011, 2021). The first Chinese user-generated content (UGC) video platform was Youku; launched in 2006, it enabled individual creators to upload pre-recorded videos (Li, 2012). When China entered the Web 2.0 era in the 2010s, it became convenient for users to make videos and hold livestream podcasts anywhere, anytime, underpinned by developments in ICT (information and communication technology), including the birth of 4G communication and mass production of mobile smart devices. UGC video platforms became even more popular, especially short-video platforms such as Kuaishou and Douyin. Platformed video creator gradually becomes a vocation. The development of this industry could not have existed without the Chinese government’s two aims: ‘Internet plus’ and ‘mass entrepreneurship and innovation’. The two agendas, respectively, encourage the application of ICT to various industries and inspire citizens to start up businesses, with the purpose of boosting economic growth with ICT as an indispensable tool. Situated in this context, this study selects a Chinese UGC video platform, Bilibili, to discuss game playworkers’ platformed labour.

Most existing studies of video creators’ everyday work are contextualized in terms of YouTube and Twitch and Chinese platforms have not received proportionate attention. We situate our research on Bilibili and introduce the specificity of this context to enrich existing discussions. Bilibili is the most influential Chinese UGC platform that is specifically centred around ACG (animation, comic and games) content. According to its financial report in the third quarter of 2021, this platform has gathered 267 million MAU (monthly active users). Among these active users, around 130 million (50% of MAU) have created videos for Bilibili (Bilibili Q3 Financial Report, 2021). Those creators produce over 10 million videos monthly (ibid.). Official data are not publicly available about how many game video creators are active and how many videos they create. But in Bilibili’s list of the top 100 most popular video creators in 2020, 19% of them produced game videos (Bilibili Website, 2020). This percentage presents the significance of the game sector for the whole platform. Those game video creators’ labour in this sector generates 27% of the platform’s revenues (Bilibili Q3 Financial Report, 2021). To be a content creator in the game area, a person must be a game player first and then become a producer. These game players’ leisure activities, including playing games and hanging around Bilibili, become a form of work. The blurred division between leisure and work breaks the Fordist dichotomy of work and non-work and reconstructs people’s understandings of the two aspects of their everyday life.

In this article, we examine the game video creators’ platformed labour. Three questions are investigated: (a) What working conditions are constructed by the Bilibili platform? (b) What is playworkers’ labour content on the platform? (c) How do the playworkers interpret their work and respond to the working conditions on platforms? We find that the business model of Bilibili centres around a fan economy, constructing certain working conditions of playworkers. Playworkers’ labour on Bilibili consists of two parts: creating game videos and managing fan communities. The former builds a self-brand based on playworkers’ creativity, earning audience’s recognition through sharing knowledge and playing skills. Thus, they develop connections with viewers based on similar aesthetics and passion for games. The latter part of the labour focuses on emotional interaction with fans, where the playworkers adjust their emotions to satisfy their fans’ expectations. The playworkers aim to maintain a family-like relationship with fans to hopefully sustain their attention, underpinning the need to monetize these followers’ attention. Our research shows that playworkers autonomously divide their labour into two parts. They are passionate about content
creation, involving spontaneous affect, but struggle with interaction with fans that require them to perform emotions. They think that if they are too close to fans, some fans would abuse that intimate relationship to intervene in their labour, which harms their freedom and autonomy of creation. But freedom and autonomy are key elements to guarantee their creative labour and must be defended.

The contradictions between the two parts of labour lead us to focus on the relationship between emotional and affective labour on the platform. In previous studies of platformed labour in English, the two concepts have been used interchangeably, but it is necessary and important to distinguish nuance between them (Guo and Li, 2021). Some Chinese-based studies have acknowledged difference and relationship between these two concepts (Guo & Li, 2021; Liu, 2019; Yue & Cai, 2021; Zhu & Huang, 2020). But they either involve pure theoretical discussion or analyse empirical data involving only one of the concepts. They rarely study the interplay between the two kinds of labour within one empirical case. Our study makes three contributions to this area. Firstly, it draws on psychological concepts of affect and emotion to make a conceptual distinction between emotional and affective labour of platformed playbour. Secondly, we find that excessive emotional labour causes a common occupational disease among playworkers – emotional exhaustion – which erodes the playworkers’ affect in creating videos. Finally, we examine how platforms play a subtle but key role in enhancing tensions between the two kinds of labour. The empirical data in this study comes from our interviews with 13 gameplay video producers, one Bilibili staff member and three advertisers, as well as a year-long observation of 13 interviewees at Bilibili.

**Literature review and research method**

‘Playbour’ was first used by Julia Kücklich (Kücklich, 2005) to describe the game players who modify games out of interest and to develop new ways of playing. Their leisure activities then become labour and generate value for game companies. With the development of UGC platforms in Web 2.0, the game players’ workplace extended from games to UGC platforms (Hyunwoo and Shin, 2019), bringing about a new form of playbour: platformed playbour. The playworkers hold game-related livestreaming podcasts and make pre-recorded videos on platforms. The business logic of platformed playbour is to monetize the audience’s attention through commercial advertising and paid subscriptions (Törhönen et al., 2018).

The digital platform refers to a space that allows the UGC, many-to-many communication and datafication of human behaviour, facilitated by ICT (Grinnell, 2009). Those main functions then bring about new business models and make human activities ‘provided through, on, or mediated by platforms’ become platform labour (EU-OSHA, 2017). Due to the diversity of working conditions, platform labour can be categorized as unpaid users’ activities that produce content and data for the platforms (Fuchs, 2014); labour that handles user data and makes data tradeable for the platforms and third parties (Fumagalli et al., 2018); on-demand paid work provided or facilitated by the platforms (van Doorn, 2017); and work in the gig economy (Graham and Woodcock, 2019).

Although they have their differences, various types of platform labour share some characteristics, such as flexible working time and workplace (Drahokoupil and Jepsen, 2017) and individualized responsibilities in the form of self-employment (Fleming, 2017; Neff, 2012). These characteristics bring both opportunities and problems for platform labour. Platforms enable some marginalized unemployed people to be employed and allow people to reconcile work and time as they please. However, platform labour also leads to a lack of labour protection, no control of working time (Drahokoupil and Jepsen, 2017), omnipresent surveillance (Zuboff, 2015) and severe peer competition caused by gamification (Scholz, 2017). Our study will continue to criticize the asymmetrical power relationship between the platform and workers from a Marxist perspective. Two concepts are
central to our analysis: affective labour and emotional labour. Hochschild views emotional labour from a sociologic perspective to analyse how an airline company requires flight attendants to manage their emotions and provide good service experiences for customers (1983). Emotional labour is performative with the purpose of living up to certain social expectations (ibid., 2017). Affective labour – coined by Hardt and Negri (2000) based on Lazzarato’s (1996) concept of immaterial labour – has a broader meaning than emotional labour and refers to all labour involving human affect. Products of affective labour include social networks, forms of community, biopower (Hardt, 1999). These two terms help us conceptualize the Bilibili game video creators’ labour process and enrich the discussion about the alienation of platformed labour.

Affective and emotional labour have been significant in recent research about platformed labour, especially video creators’ labour that aims to build affective bonds with audiences (Guarriello, 2019; Hearn and Banet-Weiser, 2020). We find most English-language studies use the two terms interchangeably to characterize livestreamers’ work (Johnson & Woodcock, 2018; Törhönen et al., 2018) and seldom differentiate between them. Some recent Chinese studies about platformed video makers, however, recognize a difference between the two concepts. Liu comes back to the connotations of emotion and affect. She categorizes emotion as a response to external stimulus and defines affect as human nature and instincts that always exist. Liu (2019) also notes connections between the two whereby emotion is an expression of human affect in a certain context (2019). Aligning with Liu’s categorization, Guo and Li (2019) differentiate emotional and affective labour. The former is a result of external requirements from employers and social anticipation from customers, while the latter is more spontaneous (2021). Different features of the two results in different methods for studying them. Because emotion is influenced by external elements, scholars use quantitative methods to understand participants’ emotional labour by operationalizing different elements as variables (Hu and Yu, 2019). Considering the difficulty of quantifying affect, most discussions about affective labour are based on theoretical reviews (Guo and Li, 2021; Zhu and Huang, 2020; Liu, 2019) or qualitative empirical research (Yue & Cai, 2021). Hu and Yu’s (2019) discussion about ‘deep acting’ in emotional labour manifests similar influence on platformed workers with affective labour, which inspires human instinct and affect. Scholars acknowledge that either deep acting in emotional labour or affective labour could reduce alienation and enhance platformed workers’ subjectivity back to labour (Zhu and Huang, 2020; Hu and Yu, 2019). Although they realize platformed labour still instrumentalizes human affect and emotion, they are optimistic about platformed creators’ working conditions. Because they think compared with employees in traditional service industries, platformed creators are subject to fewer external requirements and have more autonomy (ibid.). However, in our study, we present the working conditions of the platform and show that video creators’ autonomy is very limited. There is also a common gap in both Chinese and English studies. Scholars use the two concepts mainly to conceptualize the labour of building connections in human communication. Affective labour is also applicable for analysing video creators’ affect in content creation, which is discussed in our research.

In-depth interview was the main method used to collect data. To recruit participants, we networked with two Bilibili staff, who worked closely with video creators, through our acquaintance’s introduction. They helped post our recruitment notice in some video creators’ working chatgroups. Considering that the number of fans directly represents a video creator’s degree of professionalism, we used stratified sampling to select participants according to their size of fan base, below 10,000, from 10,000 to 100,000, and above 100,000. We stopped our recruitment when data was saturated, with 13 game video playworkers interviewed. To ensure the rigour, validity and credibility of our research, we used a triangulation method, interviewing three advertisers and one employee of the
Bilibili advertising department and comparing their answers with the playworkers’ responses. Table 1 shows the interviewees’ basic information. The duration of interviews varied from 120 to 240 minutes. A one-year online observation was also carried out on Bilibili from June 2020 to September 2021. We collected data from the 13 video playworkers’ channels, including videos and messages they posted, as well as comments from viewers. We focused on how the playworkers created game videos, performed themselves, interacted with the audience to establish connections with fans and inserted commercial advertisements into videos. When observing that some playworkers adjusted their entrepreneurial strategies, we conducted additional interviews with them.

**Table 1. Profile of interviewees.**

| No | Name | Gender | Category          | Creating Game Videos from | Number of Fans (Thousand) |
|----|------|--------|-------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1  | Jun  | Male   | Advertiser        | —                         | —                        |
| 2  | Xiao | Male   | —                 | —                         | —                        |
| 3  | Lin  | Female | —                 | —                         | —                        |
| 4  | Xue  | Male   | Bilibili staff    | —                         | —                        |
| 5  | Bing | Male   | 2018              | 12                        |
| 6  | Shan | Male   | 2015              | 6                         |
| 7  | Zeng | Male   | 2020              | 22                        |
| 8  | Jiao | Male   | Game video        | 2017                      | 36                       |
| 9  | Ning | Female | 2018              | 829                       |
| 10 | He   | Male   | Creators          | 2015                      | 17                       |
| 11 | Dan  | Male   | 2013              | 181                       |
| 12 | Ma   | Male   | 2018              | 2                         |
| 13 | Yue  | Male   | 2018              | 9                         |
| 14 | Mo   | Female | 2016              | 46                        |
| 15 | Bai  | Male   | 2017              | 294                       |
| 16 | Qing | Female | 2020              | 41                        |
| 17 | Mei  | Male   | 2019              | 84                        |

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**Platformed playbour centring around the fan economy**

The video creators’ labour is situated in a network production model, with the Bilibili platform at its core (see Figure 1), mediating the playworkers’ relationship with audience, advertisers and MCNs (multi-channel networks, that is, a form of agency to negotiate business cooperation on behalf of the contracted video creators). By creating content, the video creators attract loyal followers to form fan communities. The characteristics of the fan community, including the number, activity level and consumption capacity, are key indicators to evaluate a playworker’s influence and commercial value.

There are three specific features of the Bilibili platform, which should be clarified before describing the playworkers’ labour process. Firstly, Bilibili emphasizes building communities based on a shared interest in ACG. By giving monetary incentives and recommending the creators’ content, Bilibili encourages the playworkers to spend energy and time interacting with their followers and forming fan communities. Fan communities provide a sense of belonging to both creators and viewers, motivating playworkers’ content production and underpinning further
monetization of the audience’s attention. Secondly, Bilibili allows medium-length and long-length videos, between 5 and 10 minutes or longer than 20 minutes. In contrast to short videos less than 3 minutes that provide visual stimulus, the longer videos on Bilibili can contain in-depth and informative content. Since the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020, serious content about knowledge sharing on Bilibili has increased by 16.7% and content designed only for fun decreased by 3.2% (Meigushe Report from NetEase, 2021). This presents Bilibili users’ preference to learn in an entertaining way. Thirdly, Bilibili’s mechanism to recommend content to users is not dominated by algorithms alone but is influenced by human editors. The human editors effectively reduce algorithm bias for new starters with less influence and guarantee that innovative content can get proportionate exposure. The last two features appeal greatly to the entrepreneurial video creators whose core product is in-depth knowledge. Our respondents think that Bilibili is the most suitable Chinese video platform to start from scratch. They are more willing to produce content there and their career development is reliable on Bilibili.

The characteristics of Bilibili determine the playworkers’ labour process. There are two parts of their daily work: content creation and interaction with fans. The playworkers’ way of making videos can be categorized into ‘outputting knowledge’ and ‘recording while playing’. Making a video that outputs knowledge takes around a week. The playworkers need to search and sort out information about the games’ culture, history and digital devices and express their own opinions and comments. ‘Recording while playing’ videos, mainly presenting the playworkers’ superior gaming skills, takes less time, around 2 days. Video creators who choose this production model also work as live-streamers who podcast their process of playing games to the audience and make recordings. Then they select and combine the most exciting moments to make videos. Apart from creating content, the video creators need to spend time communicating with the viewers and maintaining a close relationship with loyal followers. They reply to comments, launch live podcasts and organize fan chat groups. The video creators’ labour can earn monetary incentives from the platform and fans’ donations. Our interviewees told us that the sum of these two parts of income is less than 100 yuan monthly, almost unpaid and too little to support daily life. Their main resource for income is business cooperation with advertisers. Only with a certain number of followers are playworkers
qualified to engage in commercial partnerships. This means they need to bear unpaid labour and accumulate fans at the beginning stage to later get paid by advertisers.

Bilibili attracts commercial advertisers with its number of active users and then mediates the commercial cooperation between playworkers and advertisers. The platform appeals to high-quality video creators in two ways: through its unique recommendation mechanisms and its intellectual property protection service. Similar to other video platforms, such as Douyin and Kuaishou, Bilibili uses algorithms to make recommendation for users. But uniquely, Bilibili also involves human reviewers’ labour to correct algorithm bias. In a recommendation mechanism which is purely based on algorithms, video creators with more followers find their content more exposed to audiences. That leaves limited opportunities for novice video creators with fewer fans to get recommended by algorithms and attract users’ attention. Another feature that makes this platform attractive to video makers is its copyright protection scheme, which aims to protect creators’ intellectual property. To solve plagiarism problems, which occur frequently among almost all video creators, Bilibili has established a foundation to help creators protect their copyright. With certain algorithms, Bilibili can detect whether creators’ content on Bilibili is plagiarised and uploaded to other video platforms and then informs the original creators immediately. Video creators can apply for legal assistance and protect their rights with one click on Bilibili. These two mechanisms manifest how Bilibili cares about video creators’ rights, which is different from other platforms that prioritize viewers’ interests. This pro-creator ecology means that Bilibili stands out among other video platforms and becomes a first choice for novice content creators.

With high-quality creators and its community culture, Bilibili retains loyal and active users. The number of active users directly presents the platform’s influence, attracting advertisers to cooperate with Bilibili to monetize users’ attention together. In terms of business cooperation with advertisers, Bilibili has a special way of inserting commercial advertisements. Other video platforms, such as YouTube and some Chinese platforms, like Youku, IQiyi or Tencent Video, usually use patch advertisements. Those ads are pre-recorded short films, provided by the advertisers directly, which are inserted into videos by the platforms, similar to TV advertisements. This means that the audience’s viewing is always interrupted by patch ads. To improve the audience’s user experiences, Bilibili abandons patch advertisements and delegates the tasks of inserting commercial advertisements to individual playworkers. Advertisers approach video creators and invite them to insert advertisements into their videos. When video creators accept these invitations, they need to brand the product with their own narratives and performance on behalf of the advertisers. Compared with patch advertisements that appear abruptly, advertising products in this way is more subtle and gentle, described as ‘soft advertisements’ by our participants. The key to being soft is to make reasonable links between an advertised product and the playworkers’ original content. For instance, when a playworker shares with audiences how interesting a game is, they may then brand a mouse or keyboard for better game experience in the next minute. If creators find it is difficult to make links, they may reject the advertiser’s invitation.

In order to bridge the communication between playworkers and advertisers more efficiently, in 2020 Bilibili launched the Spark Project as a fair for commercial cooperation between both parties. The video creators can set prices for their labour power and the platform assesses whether this price is reasonable according to big data and algorithms. The advertisers can select playworkers in this project. Once cooperation is achieved, the platform charges 50% of payment as commission fees. Advertiser Jun told us, ‘It is inefficient for us to approach the video creators one by one. Platform helps us find the most suitable one. Bilibili is an intermediary bridging and smoothing the business cooperation’. When the advertisers select the playworkers as potential collaborators, they can see the user data of the fan base, provided by Bilibili. Three indicators of fan communities are focused
on: the number of fans, the frequency of fans’ interactions (i.e. whether the fans are active or not), and demographic information that presents the fans’ consumption capacity. The payment is calculated based on the number of fans. Video creator Qing observed, ‘How much I charge advertisers depends on the number of my fans. Now I have 40,000 fans. Six percent of 40,000, that is to say, 2400 RMB is income that I get from making a video with commercial advertisements’.

Affective labour: building connections with the audience

Most Bilibili video creators have been ACG enthusiasts and loyal users of the platform. Their sense of belonging to the community culture and playground atmosphere and desire for peer recognition motivates them to become producers. However, it is not easy to please Bilibili’s audience and obtain their recognition. Bilibili audiences were described by advertisers Jun and Xiao as ‘expert ACG hobbyists who are extraordinarily particular about content’ and prefer ‘in-depth knowledge and thoughtful content’. With the rapid development of the UGC video platforms, more and more users have become video creators, especially after the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2019 when people needed to work from home. Zeng is one of those creators and he told us, ‘I began making videos during the pandemic because I was bored at home’. Exposed to serious peer competition, attracting one-off viewers to subscribe to channels and become followers depends on whether the affective connections, such as a shared aesthetic for games and a common cultural identity as players, could be built in the videos. To better conceptualize the labour process of building bonds with the audience through pre-recorded videos, we introduce Hardt and Negri’s (2000) term ‘affective labour’. Affective labour presents in two aspects in this study: the playworkers’ passion for games and the affective connections that they build with their fans.

Affective labour derives from the playworkers’ passion for the games. All the video creators in the Bilibili game sector had been game enthusiasts before they created their first video. Their initial motivation was to obtain pleasure and satisfaction from creation. The UGC platforms enable hobbyists to become producers, which is described as convergence culture by Henry Jenkins (Jenkins, 1992). The blurred division between a player and a worker leads to them ‘manufacturing consent’, as coined by Boraway (2008) to characterizes labour at the stage of monopoly capitalism. This term denotes that capitalism designs work like a game and attracts workers to willingly engage in labour and creating products. Then workers’ proactive engagement in production is interpreted as workers’ consent to give their product to capitalism voluntarily. We find Burawoy’s discussion about ‘manufacturing consent’ applicable to our research and helps to conceptualize playworkers’ working conditions. Situated in Bilibili where their labour is gamified, video creators also voluntarily engage in playbour and obey the labour rules set by the platform, and essentially giving consent to their labour relationship with the platform. The platform makes the most of the playworkers’ interest-driven labour and gamifies their playbour, which is similar to how Burawoy uses a game metaphor to describe the labour process. To motivate more users to engage in production and cultivate the potential workforce, the platform designs production as a rushing game, encouraging the users to produce as many videos as possible within a given time, ranking their performance by number of views and likes, and giving different levels of rewards to game participants. Playworker He once joined a campaign requiring him to ‘make four videos within 21 days’. The participants who completed the task on time only got very few monetary incentives from the platforms. Since videos with commercial advertisements are forbidden to join such campaigns, the playworkers’ labour in the rushing game is mostly unpaid. Although the creators know they are unpaid and intensive labour damages their physical and mental conditions, they still have to play the game and obey the platform rules because a campaign participant could have their content
recommended by the platform and be exposed to more audience. Video creator Qing explained: ‘If you want to accumulate more followers, you have to keep updating your videos. Once recommended, we will appear on the front page of Bilibili. If we keep creating content and appearing on the front page, the viewers will give a subscription’.

In this rushing game of production, people’s affective labour does not help the playworkers escape from platform economy. Instead, as Hearn argues, their affect is instrumentalised and becomes part of production (Hearn, 2008). We argue that affect is a key factor in the gamification of labour driven by the platform. Game playworkers choose to become productive users of the platform and create content from their experience of affect in games. They do not build an employment relationship with platforms, and it is possible for them to escape from the exploitative structures of the platform at any time. However, they give consent to the platform’s labour rules and voluntarily devote their labour, even without proportionate economic compensation. This is because the platform manipulates playworkers’ passion for games and transforms their passion into motivation of labour. By creating a playground atmosphere and encouraging ‘participatory culture’, the platform attracts more users to be producers who are driven by passion. Video creators’ labour is gamified by the platform, which sets demanding but also achievable targets of labour and provides uncertain rewards. Gamification of labour and uncertain remuneration fully stimulate video creators’ affects in creation, making them willingly push themselves hard to complete labour tasks and win possibly considerable rewards. playworkers are fully immersed in the joy and satisfaction of creation and endure a subordinate position in the labour process.

During the labour process, the playworkers objectify their affects for games and incorporate it into their content. They usually choose the game that they love to create relative videos. By conveying their love for the game in the videos, they attract a group of followers with shared interests and create a sense of empathy and belonging in the fan community. Video playworker Dan looks for the interesting parts of the game and puts them into the videos to build affective bonds with his fans: ‘Fans may not have enough time to explore the game fully. I can do this for them and present the best parts. When they watch how I play, they can experience the game better than playing by themselves. A fan relationship is formed between us’. However, unlike other Chinese video platforms, such as Douyin and Kuaishou, Bilibili users prefer to get in-depth specialist knowledge in videos. Playworker He said, ‘If a video creator can’t provide an interpretation of the game culture or share extraordinary techniques, it is difficult to be recognized by the Bilibili users’. This makes the playworkers’ creative process similar to cultural journalists, as discussed by Johana Kotisova (Kotisova, 2020) in relation to journalists who need to set professionalism by detaching and objectifying their subjective affection and presenting a neutral position. However, in our research, the playworkers’ purpose is not to be objective and neutral, instead, they need to be a game expert with strong personal traits. Playworker He said, ‘Without ones’ own personality, it is difficult for the audience to remember a playworker’. A game video playworker not only needs to objectify their passion for the games to create videos, but also needs a second subjectification of their creation. Game video playworkers need to firstly devote themselves to games with passion. Then they objectify their passion and write comments on games by reviewing their playing process and reflecting on their own feelings. They thus create an identity as experienced players and professional commentors, differentiating themselves from their audience who play games just for fun. When they convey their opinions, they do not show an objective and neutral position, which would suggest boredom and a lack of personality for audiences. Instead, they need to selectively present some ‘true self’, with strong personal traits and some subjective opinions to impress the viewers. But they cannot show their subjective position too much. Otherwise, the audience may think the video creator
lacks professionalism. Playworkers need to strike a delicate balance between being subjective and professional and objective.

To impress the viewers with their unique personal traits, the playworkers also objectify their bodily features and create a personal label. The body has always played an important role in affective labour (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Farrugia, Threadgold and Coffey, 2018; Kolehmainen and Mäkinen, 2021). The human voice is a body part that viewers pay great attention to. Among our 13 interviewees, only four show their faces on camera and the rest mainly show their voice. By adjusting their voice, the playworkers perform specific characters to the audience. Playworker Jiao strategically presents ‘an energetic and amusing voice to make people laugh’. Zeng, a male video creator, invites his female friend to read scripts and dub his videos. Zeng explained, ‘because I think the gaming industry [where male players outnumber female consumers], of course, prefers that [female] voice’. Gender is an important component of affective labour. We have found that female playworkers are more likely to gain the attention of a wider male audience in the game sector, especially through their bodies. Sometimes the viewers pay more attention to their physical appearance rather than the content of the videos. Ning was the only female playworker to show her face in her videos among our playworker interviewees. Her physical presence makes her more recognizable and striking. During our 1 year observation, her number of fans increased from 300,000 to 800,000. Her progress was the fastest among her counterparts. Many comments below her videos relate to her appearance, such as ‘pretty’, ‘cute’, and someone jokingly calls her ‘wife’. Bai, who is reluctant to show his face but still wants to impress the audience with his bodily features, uses a cartoon character to represent himself and appear in the videos: ‘My hair is curly and my friends usually compare me with a sheep. Then I invited someone to design a character with curly hair and two horns. A character is personal and makes people remember me’.

Affective labour is a process of self-valorisation (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Shiloh, 2018), helping the playworkers to build a self-brand in their own gaming channels (Hearn 2008; Marwick 2013; Risi, Briziarelli and Armano, 2019). Video makers introduce ‘who I am’ and ‘my aesthetics of gaming’ in detail. Affect is an important component of subjectivity. In its psychological definition, affect is often used to describe feelings that are stable, deep and enduring, involving social significance, such as love of truth, appreciation of beauty, etc., referring to the values that constitute the self (Maio and Olson, 1995; Schwartz, 1992; Breckler and Wiggins, 1989; Susan and Shelley, 2020). The psychological definition of affect has influenced sociological research on the affective turn. Deleuze and Spinoza argue that affect is different from ordinary feelings or emotions because affect emphasizes human’s spontaneous productivity rather than passive reaction to external stimulus. Related researches about affective labour follow this argument and claim that affective labour has a relationship between subjectivity and labour (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Hardt, 1999), which can produce not only good feelings or appropriate states of mind in others, but can also generate social networks, forms of community and biopower (Hardt, 1999, p.96). Based on this theory strand, playworkers’ creative labour on Bilibili belongs to affective labour, connecting video makers and viewers with human affect. Playworkers establish self-brands through the objectification of their subjectivity, by sharing game knowledge and culture (Nicholas, 2014) and then building affective connections, such as cultural identity, with viewers (van der Westhuizen, 2018). Returning to the discussion about the specific labour process, Ning’s and Bai’s case studies suggest that the greater the audible, visual or physical presentation of subjectivity, the more likely self-branding will generate a social response (Short et al., 1976). With years of working experience in the media industry, video creator Mei believed that self-branding is ‘the essence of playworkers’ [labour]’ and ‘hard currency [in the fan economy]… no matter how the video industry changes’. He chooses Bilibil to start up his business because the platform mechanism allows playworkers to form self-
brands in the community culture. Playworker Zeng confirmed Mei’s view, ‘Compared with other video platforms, audiences on Bilibili have the strongest interest in the creators behind the videos. They will form communities out of shared interest in a specific video creator. But users on other platforms care more about content itself’. The community culture nurtures self-branding and makes the playworkers more reliant on Bilibili at the beginning of their entrepreneurship.

**Emotional labour: managing relationships with fans**

On the UGC video platforms, the close relationship with fans is the foundation of monetization. Once they join in the business cooperation, their labour is transformed into capital for the platform and the advertisers (Raun, 2018). Bilibili staff Xue told us what advertisers care about is the creators’ ‘ability of converting’, that is to say, the capacity of monetizing the fan relationship and bringing revenues to the advertisers. However, the playground atmosphere and the community culture based on affective bonds makes the Bilibili audience less tolerant of commercial advertisements. It is awkward because the more commercialized a playworker becomes, the more discontented their fans will be. We observed that playworker Ning was complained about by her fans because she had inserted too many commercial advertisements in the last month. Ning comforted the fans by holding a prize draw among her followers. But the event was actually another form of advertisement for the prizes.

When the playworkers are paid by advertisers, it is more significant for them to maintain close connections with their fans, because annoying and losing them also means monetary loss in future commercial partnerships. We found that making videos is cyclical and staged labour but interacting with fans becomes the playworkers’ daily work. Managing a good relationship with fans, as described by all playworker interviewees, becomes part of their business to guarantee future smooth commercialization. Video creator He compared himself with ‘counter staff who needs to keep smiling and treat the customers friendly’. Their description suggests that the playworkers clearly recognize that the interaction with fans is a performative service labour. This is in line with Hochschild’s concept of ‘emotional labour’ in her study of flight attendants (1983). Considering the playworkers’ awareness of the performative nature of their communication with fans, we categorize this part of labour as ‘surface acting’ in emotional labour without spontaneous inner motivation.

The platform provides the playworkers with three methods to interact with fans. One is the pop-up (see Figure 2), where all the viewers can give immediate comments on any parts of the video content (Yang, 2020) and the playworkers can post replies, without their IDs being identified. The second is the public comment section below the videos, where the playworkers can respond, with a ‘video creator’ mark attached to their IDs. The third is Bilibili private message, where the fan can have a one-to-one private chat with the playworkers. Among all these methods, the playworkers prioritize the comments section, which publicly shows all the viewers the interaction process. Playworker Qing told us that appearing in comments ‘creates a sense of personal and kind character’. That is to say, in maintaining fan relationships and earning income from advertisers, playworkers need to perform feelings and emotions that may be very different from their genuine feelings. Emotion, according to contemporary emotion theories, refers to an individual’s transient, specific responses to situational stimulus. Emotion is categorized into six aspects: pleasure, sadness, anger, surprise, fears and jealousy (Susan and Shelley, 2000: 408–410; Richard and Philip, 2015: 356–368; Dennis and John, 2014: 421). Pleasure and surprise are two emotions that are frequently expressed by the playworkers to their fans. This is in line with Hochschild’s discussion about emotional labour in *The Managed Heart* (1983). What is different is that the playworkers’ interaction with the audience is not face-to-face. Their emotional labour takes place in the virtual
space and is subject to rules that are prescribed by the platform. This space enables them to hide their real emotions behind the screen and to conduct ‘surface acting’ (Hochschild, 1983) without having to reconcile their actual feelings with the performed emotions.

At the beginning of the playworker’s entrepreneurship, they usually respond to every viewer’s comment. When they have a stable group of fans, the creators selectively respond to some comments. The video creator Mo tells us, ‘I will definitely reply to some loyal followers’ comments. Also, I will reply to some long and sincere comments from the viewers who have watched my videos very carefully’. These interactions with fans are recorded as data by the platform and presented as their ‘interaction rate’. That rate, described by Bilibili staffer Xue, becomes ‘an indicator to evaluate the video creators’ working performance’, determining whether their content can be recommended by the platform and whether they are qualified for business cooperation. The playworkers’ emotions are constantly influenced by real-time data, including the number of views, likes, comments, the users’ donations. The fluctuation in data traps them between ‘motivation to increase the interaction rate’ and ‘fears that the rate will decline’. On the one hand, they try to work harder in their content creation and engage in the rushing game of production. For instance, creator Ma told us he set his best interaction rate as a goal and motivate himself to make a better video, which ‘must be better than the previous ones’. On the other hand, they need to spend plenty of time and energy interacting with viewers. The uncertainty of the users’ response in platformed labour makes the video creators blame themselves when data is not ideal and they forget that the algorithm’s recommendation mechanism is out of their control.

Outside of the platform, the playworkers also establish their own fan communities in QQ or WeChat chat groups. These social media platforms are specifically designed for everyday communication, making the followers feel closer to the creators. Chat groups provide a relatively closed

Figure 2. Pop-ups in Bilibili
space and a sense of belongings for the loyal fans with similar interests. Apart from daily chats, the playworkers hold some online activities for their fans. Zeng held online matches among fans and gathers his followers to watch the game tournaments together. Bing guided some fans to complete difficult parts of the game. Dan sent gifts to his loyal fans at festivals. Besides regularly giving benefits to their followers, as the organizer, they need to maintain a peaceful and harmonious atmosphere within the groups. If they see conflict among the fans, the playworkers need to appear and mediate the disputes. Bai said he would remove anyone that sent ‘nonsensical statements’ in the chat groups. The responsibility of those fan communities from Bilibili is highly individualized to the playworkers and becomes their additional workload. This part of labour is not evaluated by the platform, cannot bring direct payment, and even needs the video creators to spend money hosting activities or purchasing gifts.

However, managing a fan community is an indispensable part of the playworkers’ emotional labour. Video creator He defines himself as ‘service staff’ and his ‘goal is to make the fans happy’. When interacting with fans, the emotions that are expressed by playworkers are not spontaneous, but rather contrived and adjusted to the fans’ expectations. Their labour of performing emotions belongs to emotional labour that must obey feeling rules and social structural norms (Hochschild, 1983). To sustain their fans’ attention and keep them in the fan community, the playworkers have to hide their real emotions behind the screen, provide their followers with positive emotions and try to become close friends with them. Although the video creators see their followers as customers at heart, in their interactions with fans, playworkers often call their fans ‘family’ and ‘brothers’ to build close connections. This is in opposition to affective labour that emphasizes spontaneity and the value of the subject. In terms of the game video creators’ interpretation of their labour in their interaction with fans, they think managing the relationship with followers is a troublesome but necessary task. Playworker Mo believes that maintaining a fan community really drains her emotions. She feels too exhausted to keep up with the fans’ comments all the time. But she never reveals any of her true feelings to her fans, always presenting a joyful character through her performance. She patiently replies to the fans’ comments, leaving warm, lively messages such as ‘Get some rest’ and ‘I hope you are happy!’ Maintaining a humanized interaction with emotional labour increases not only the fans’ loyalty and attachment to the playworkers’ personalities but also their tolerance to the commercial advertisements. Therefore, the video creators can take part in future business cooperation more smoothly. Commercialization of playbour helps maintain the video creators’ physical maintenance and supports them to continue creating content with affective labour.

This emotional performance also influences video creation. The video creator Bing said, ‘I tried to play other games. It was a pity that most pop-up comments said, ‘I do not understand this game. I will quit.’ If you play game A for a long time, your fans will not be happy to see you play other games’. Bing’s encounter left him with the dilemma of attracting new fans with new games or consolidating his existing fan base. The stronger their connections with the fans, the harder it is to break that dilemma. At the same time, the video creators need to be cautious with their expressions and conduct self-censorship in their scripts to avoid causing the viewers’ discontent. Creator Ma told us, ‘I never express my real thoughts fully to the audience’. Zeng was once misunderstood by viewers, ‘I commented on two gamers and my attitude was neutral. But some viewers did not think so and they scolded me in the comments’. After that unpleasant experience, Zeng always doublechecks his scripts and avoids making potentially controversial comments. Almost all play-workers encountered linguistic violence. The playworkers became careful about personal information and maintained a safe distance from viewers, even the loyal fans. The playworker He said, ‘Some fans may take some private chat records out of context and damage the video creators’
reputation’. Mo and Bai admitted that they care about personal safety so they never show their faces in their videos to avoid being tracked by their viewers.

**Emotional exhaustion and work strategies**

Long-term engagement in the ‘surface acting’ of emotional labour results in emotional exhaustion (Choi and Man, 2013; Kong and Jeon, 2018). Playworker Bai complained, ‘Emotions are big issues for the video creators. I have to stay up for days to finish a video. But the users’ responses cannot live up to my anticipation. There are also some annoying comments from fans. All these cause emotional problems’. Emotional problems made Bai so anxious and upset that he needed to pause his job of making videos and rest for a while. Bai’s peer, Dan, had a worse situation. Dan had run his own Bilibili channel since 2013. But he gradually found that interaction with fans exhausted his passion for both content creation and the games. Dan fell prey to confusion, self-doubt and fears, ‘My initial motivation of making videos is my love for games. But I feel I am away from that starting point. Am I making videos for my love or for something else? I am scared that maybe in 10 years, I will lose interest in games totally. It is horrible that I lose my hobby in this way’. Although Dan acknowledged, ‘I am obliged to hold activities and make fans happy’, he felt that he could not do emotional labour anymore.

Dan’s story further proves the existence of tensions between emotional labour and affective labour. Emotional exhaustion could even overwhelm playworkers’ affective labour. Affective labour is a subjective production. The core of affective labour is playworkers’ love for games, making the creators willingly sacrifice leisure time to produce satisfying videos. We observed that when playworkers really love some high-quality games, they will recommend these games voluntarily, without the need for business cooperation initiated by game companies. They genuinely feel it is worth sharing good games with viewers and make recommendation videos out of a sense of passion. This spontaneous and voluntary labour is not paid for by the game companies, but the playworkers enjoy a sense of creativity and fulfillment (Kim and Lee, 2020). Emotional labour, on the other hand, is subject to the platform’s and advertisers’ requirements, including its emphasis on the community culture, recommendation mechanism around interaction rate and specific methods of advertisement insertion. In order to get paid in business cooperation, the playworkers need to obey the rules set by Bilibili and the advertisers and suppress their real emotions to keep communicating with fans daily. As Hochschild argues, the workers will suffer from anxiety, fears and boredom derived from their non-spontaneous emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983).

We assert that the conflicts between the playworkers’ emotional and affective labour should be attributed to the enhanced alienation of leisure activities caused by the platformisation of labour. Bilibili clearly delineates between the two tasks of video creation and fan interaction. Such a division is similar to Goffman’s theory of theory of dramaturgy (2008) where everyday life is compared to a theatre with frontstage and backstage spaces. People perform on the frontstage to convey specific information to the audience, while the backstage refers to private space to rest and prepare for performance (ibid.). However, we argue that the platform now subverts Goffman’s categorization. Creating videos to convey information to the audience is the playworkers’ main labour content on Bilibili and is supposed to be a frontstage performance. This labour process should have been represented in the platform’s metrics for work performance and remuneration. However, the specific labour process of making videos and how value is generated through playbour is hidden behind Bilibili’s playground atmosphere and becomes a behind-the-scenes work. The platform creates an illusion of participatory culture and induces more users to engage in decentralized production as video creators. At the same time, that illusion retains playworkers’ passion for
games and motivates their creativity, making creators feel that the platform is helping them to do what they desire (Scholz, 2017) and the job they choose can fully represent themselves (Fleming, 2005). The platform subtly aligns the goal of profit extraction with the playworkers’ career aspirations (Butler et al., 2011) and any potential resentment or resistance to labour rules of the platform dissipates. On the other hand, fan interaction, as human communication which belongs to backstage performance, is always presented on the frontstage in the platform metrics (e.g. number of fans, views and likes) and constantly subject to the gaze of viewers, the platform and advertisers. By using the metrics to evaluate the playworkers’ work performance and calculate their income, the platform makes the creators attach great significance to fan interaction. We argue that this subversion by platformisation of playbour reinforces the alienation of leisure activities. Backstage content creation occupies the playworkers’ leisure with fun-like work and frontstage fan interaction instrumentalizes human interaction as part of production and a monetary resource. The enhanced alienation makes it difficult for the creator to differentiate ‘playing games for fun’ from ‘playing games for work’. Bai told us, ‘Sometimes I want to play games for fun. But once logging in the game, I feel obliged to record my playing so that I will not miss any materials for my videos… Games cannot bring fun to me anymore’. Ning shared similar feelings to Bai. She has abandoned her previous hobbies, playing games and has chosen other ways of relaxing, such as watching films. By excluding games from her leisure time, Ning tries to avoid alienating her passion for games.

However, the playworkers are not passively subject to emotional exhaustion. They have developed some strategies to cope with the problem. Some playworkers have chosen to manage their fans’ behaviour. Bai, a video creator, admitted that, ‘A main problem for video creators is emotion’. He complained about how his fans’ misbehaviour bothers him and causes emotional problems that even influence his creation. He thus decided to regulate his fans’ behaviour by setting a series of behaviour regulations for his fan community in his QQ and WeChat chat groups. Any group members who misbehave will be removed from the group by Bai. By strengthening the management of fans’ behaviour, Bai makes the atmosphere in the fan community live up to his expectations, which relieves his emotional problems from undesirable interactions with fans.

Some video creators choose not to earn a living by monetizing viewers’ attention on platforms. Instead, they aim to establish an employment relationship directly with game or video companies. Playworker Zeng decided to ‘sell my ability to make videos and do outsourced work for different game companies. My Bilibili channel is evidence of my capacity’. Dan and Qing were waged employers of game companies, both of whom thought being hired by game companies helped them avoid the anxiety and fears of failure in a playworker’s career. Dan got his job offer from an acquaintance he knew when he created videos on Bilibili. Their Bilibili channels become personal CVs to present their ability to create content when they look for jobs. At the same time, their working experience as video creators on Bilibili endows them with not only essential professional skills, including content creation and the ability to manage affects and emotions, but also to expand personal networks, which become social resources for future job-seeking. We call this kind of social resource that they accumulate during playbour ‘biographical capital’ (Cohen, 2002; Risi et al., 2019). With the term biographical capital, we mean a composite capital. This capital encompasses the playworkers’ personal networkings as social resource, their professional knowledge and skills, and the ability to manage, mobilize and redress emotions and moods, which are obtained through their working experiences. To a certain extent, the accumulation of biographical capital has helped some playworkers escape from the uncertainty of the fan economy and relieve their emotional problems. But this perspective also makes them keep working on and improving themselves. They view their life as an enterprising project, ready for investment and future profit. They can bear
present difficulties if they see their labour as a means of self-investment to accumulate biographical capital and anticipate a better future.

However, the biographical capital itself is full of uncertainty as well. Ning shared a friend’s story with us: ‘I know a video creator who already has 600,000 to 700,000 followers. But he abandoned making videos and now takes other jobs. Because he cannot monetize his fan relationship’. For the playworkers, accumulating biographical capital is more like hope labour. When they are unable to get decent payment, the playworkers justify their unpaid labour as a means of creating a positive future (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013; Mackenzie and McKinlay, 2021). Bai’s strategy to manage fans’ behaviour and enhance the influence of self-branding have similar aims, waiting for his personal brand to bring about a promising future. Thus, we argue that the playworkers’ strategies to deal with emotional exhaustion do not free them from the alienation of leisure activities and, at the same time, the creators become increasingly self-reliant and self-responsiblized in their work and interpret their hardship as an investment in their future.

**Conclusion**

This article has discussed how Bilibili transforms game players into platform-based playworkers. By building a production network centred around the fan economy, Bilibili involves game players, audiences, and advertisers in its business model. The interactions between the audience and the game video creators are recorded as data, which become a key index to evaluate the playworkers’ working performance and calculate their commercial value for further business cooperation with advertisers. Subject to this business logic, the game video creators undertake two tasks: creating videos and managing a fan community. They share their passion for the games with the audience and sell their online influence among their followers to the platform and advertisers to generate income.

Affective labour and emotional labour are two concepts which have been used interchangeably in previous studies. However, in our study, we find a clear division between the two in the game video creators’ daily work. Our contribution to this strand of scholarship is threefold. First, we differentiate the connotations of the two concepts while acknowledging their relevance by referring to the psychological definition of affect and emotion. Affective labour is applied to production of creative content, deriving from the playworkers’ subjectivity and spontaneous motivation. They objectify their aesthetics and passion for the games to output opinions and knowledge and build affective connections with audiences. Their bodies and personalities are used by themselves to establish personalized self-brands, impressing their audience, forming a group of followers with shared interests and enhancing their influence on platforms. Playworkers’ spontaneous production out of affects are gamified by the platform to create a participatory culture and playground atmosphere. The playworkers’ emotional labour, on the other hand, is a kind of after-sales service work to conduct interaction with their followers out of external requirements from the platform and advertisers. Bilibili is characterized with a rich cultural atmosphere based on fan communities. To keep the unique cultural icon, the platform requires playworkers to maintain a good relationship with followers and manage fan communities by setting the rate of fan interaction as a key index to evaluate playworkers’ working performance. For advertisers, the rate of fan interaction determines the playworkers’ commercial value, that is to say, how capable they are of converting users’ attention to money. To meet up those requirements, the playworkers have to conduct emotional labour, giving friendly, positive and warm response to their followers’ comments and messages in chatgroups, in order to endow fans with a sense of belonging. The fan interaction, mainly based on texts and emojis, makes it convenient for the playworkers to conduct surface acting of emotional labour and disguise their real emotions.
Second, this article discusses the tensions between affective labour and emotional labour, resulting in emotional exhaustion, a common occupational disease among the video playworkers. They fall victim to burnout (Freudenberger, 1974), anxiety and self-doubt when creating game videos and even lose interest in their favourite hobby, games. In order to cope with the negative impact of emotional exhaustion, the playworkers have developed several strategies. Some regulate the fans’ behaviour and take the role of authority with the strongest voice in the fan community. Other video creators have escaped from the fan economy and used their channels as biographical capital to seek stable and secure jobs in game or video companies. These strategies entail that the playworkers prioritize their affective labour for content creation because it is this part of labour rather than emotional labour that determines their productivity. Playworkers’ capacity of creating content with affective labour is their key competitiveness on platform economy. The stronger the ability they have, the more bargaining power they have in the market, which prevents their career development from being constrained by a specific platform’s labour rules. Different platforms may compete to build business cooperation relationship with those playworkers with the strongest ability of conducting affective labour, even at the cost of spending much money. Because those high-quality creators could help expand the platforms’ influence and increase their content quality.

Thirdly, we find that platformisation is the fundamental cause of emotional exhaustion. Bilibili is a very specific case whereby there is a clear division between affective and emotional labour, which enables us to thoroughly differentiate the two concepts and further find out how the suppression of emotions harm human subjectivity. Current studies about affective and emotional labour on platforms mainly focus on live streamers’ labour. Live streamers, who are directly exposed to the gaze of the audience, need to not only spontaneously initiate interaction but also give immediate emotional response through bodies and facial expressions, with affective labour and emotional labour deeply entangled. But our study focus on pre-recorded video creators’ labour and this main production model on Bilibili is very different from livestreaming. The gamified production model constructed by Bilibili, on the one hand, allows playworkers to indulge themselves fully in playing game and put their affect into content creation. On the other hand, they can spare time outside content creation to interact with fans. A very clear line is drawn between video creation and fan interaction, respectively, involving affective and emotional labour. This division subverts Goffman’s theory of dramaturgy. Video creation on the backstage occupies the playworkers’ private time and space with leisure-like work. And the labour process and value generated from this part of labour is hidden by the platform’s participatory culture and made invisible to the audience. On the other hand, interaction with fans is quantified as metrics (e.g. the number of views, fans and likes) to evaluate the creators’ work performance and commercial value, coming to the frontstage and under the constant gaze of fans, the platform and advertisers. Consequently, human interaction, which is supposed to be outside the capitalist production, now becomes part of capitalist work and present on the frontstage, requiring the playworkers to obey certain labour rules. Thus, we find that the video creators’ work strategies to cope with emotional exhaustion are hope labour, anticipating under- or unpaid present jobs to create a promising future. They interpret their current hardship as a form of self-investment. Generally speaking, the playworkers have limited space to respond to or resist the structural power – they are subject to the unequal labour relationship, which is dominated by the platform.

This study also enriches understandings of digital labour in contemporary China, situated in the globalized digital economy, and inspires future studies. With aspirations to earn greater global competitiveness through technological innovation and continue to obtain domestic economic growth, China has led a top-down digital economy and encouraged bottom-up creativity to engage in innovation and entrepreneurship. In this context, self-employed content creators on UGC
platforms becomes an increasingly popular vocation. With identity of user and producer entangled as playbour on UGC platforms, platformed labour not only creates new jobs but also new demands of consumption. That means on the one hand, labour supply in the digital economy increases by transforming customers into producers. On the other hand, the Chinese consumption-led economy, encouraging its huge population to consume commodities and increase domestic demands, is vitalized and leads to a boost in domestic economic growth. Comparing Bilibili with other Chinese video platforms, we also find that some Chinese UGC platforms, originally set up patterned like foreign counterparts, have moved past imitation and began to innovate. They have explored their own development pathways and become unique cultural icons of their own. Short-video platforms, such as Douyin and Kuaishou, gather vernacular creativity from marginalized groups. Bilibili, of whose users are more educated and younger than the users of other Chinese UGC platforms, attracts the knowledgeable next generation. The platform epitomizes how current Chinese youth obtains knowledge and entertainment and understands life and work. What they will bring to the state’s tomorrow is worth further exploration in the future.

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