



# A Study on the Changing Trends of Popular Videos on Bilibili

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**Abstract.** The day June 26, 2022 marks the 13<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the Bilibili, a website with videos and bullet comments. The video platform, born as a platform for the content of anime, comics, and games, has completed a successful attempt to break the circle in a unique way. Its new features are fully reflected in the videos of uploaders. This has enabled Bilibili to expand its user base, gain more social recognition, and achieve higher commercial value, breaking the labels of “minority” and “fragmented” given by previous researchers. However, under this trend, some shortcomings have been exposed in the process of platform development, such as the problem of pan-entertainment and the lack of ideological guidance and supervision. This paper analysed the relevant data from the perspective of mass communication. Regarding the changing trend of the video hotspots on Bilibili, the research found that the old content persists while the new content is going through a significant de-labelling process. Meanwhile, the subcultures and mainstream culture intermingle with and promote each other. Finally, this research proposed suggestions for the problems in this process by combining the feedback from some users. It is to provide some effective references for studying the future video dissemination practice of this website.

**Keywords:** Mass communication, Subculture, Video platforms, Bilibili.

## 1 Introduction

In the speech at Bilibili’s 13<sup>th</sup>-anniversary celebration, Bilibili’s founder Rui Chen said, “the products that we usually use, such as Weibo and iQIYI, are younger than Bilibili in terms of age, but the interesting thing is that people always think that Bilibili is the younger one” [1]. With the gradual advancement of the “circle-breaking” strategy which means breaking through a certain small circle and being accepted or recognized by more people, Bilibili’s influence has now exceeded initial expectations and has even impacted a portion of the video media market that was dominated by mainstream entertainment media. In this process, Bilibili has burst into full life since its creation and

has continued to adjust its direction and expand its video coverage. Now it has become a diverse video platform that retains anime, comic, and game (hereinafter referred to as ACG) culture and even provides information on education and politics, and continues to open up the marketing landscape. Bilibili, as a video website with “Generation Z” as its main user group, brings a series of circle-breaking and transformative practices, such as the establishment of the documentary category in 2016, the presence of mainstream media in 2017, and the addition of the knowledge category in 2020. Bilibili has seized a position in the video market, combining minority culture with popular culture at the same time. It also allows the exchange between different video communication features, thus revealing its unlimited creative potential. The analysis of the content production features and development trends of the video broadcasting platform represented by Bilibili is conducive to providing relevant theoretical knowledge for the video platform to realize its own commercial, cultural, and social values. The suggestions in the paper also provide direction for the study of the online video communication phenomenon in the 5G era.

In recent years Bilibili’s “breaking the circle” phenomenon has become a high-frequency term in the research literature. As the Chinese scholars Zhao and Hou said, “Bilibili has played an active role in building bridges or windows for intergenerational dialogue. It is trying to explore the interactive path of platform-side commercialization and social linkage promotion in the new media environment” [2]. Some studies focus on specific video content or uploaders in a particular category, providing theoretical support for later research about the changing video hotspots on Bilibili from a more macro perspective. For example, a study examines new knowledge-based videos added to Bilibili, which states that the use of new technologies in short videos is a media power applied to the transformation of the knowledge society. Knowledge-based short videos are in the process of information transition from shallow to deep and are reconstructing a logic of knowledge production and dissemination [3]. Another study on the communication strategy of mainstream media stationed on Bilibili also points out that after mainstream media such as CCTV News and the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League moved into Bilibili, serious political news or social hotspots were combined with Bilibili’s unique ACG culture, and this appropriate entertainment was loved by many people [4]. Quantitatively, little literature considers how the video sector on Bilibili has changed in recent years. As to the research methods, there is more use of documentary analysis and less quantitative research. Among the studies that use data analysis, the process of analyzing samples tends to be “small and precise” in order to facilitate in-depth research on a particular category. However, there is less research on more sample-based group analysis. Bilibili has experienced the process of “back wave”, “into the sea”, and finally “happy meeting”. The new hotspots in one or two categories can certainly reflect the changes in communication in a certain period, but Bilibili’s overall evolution is more worthy of studying. Bilibili has been making changes and attempts in the dissemination strategy of short videos, using online technology in terms of the precise targeting of users and the radiation range of content. This has led to the development and innovation of Bilibili’s video production and interaction with mass media. This process deserves a more in-depth and specific study. In the past studies of

Bilibili, some scholars have conducted research on both media technology and commercial logic. They are limited by thinking in opposition to the ACG content, overemphasizing the conflicts between mainstream culture and subculture, culture and capital, technology and mind, and criticism and entertainment.

This paper combined qualitative and quantitative research methods to address the changing trends of video content on Bilibili. It focused on the following core questions: Which types of videos on Bilibili are consistently favored by users? How do the users think of the video characteristics of Bilibili? Are there some viable solutions to the problems brought about by the change? The research process started with an award called “Top 100 Uploaders” (hereinafter referred to as “Top 100”), which is a comprehensive evaluation of video creators in terms of professionalism, influence, and innovation as a sample base. The uploaders in the list represent the general direction and the highest capacity of video creation on Bilibili. In order to obtain a more representative sample for the study, the study chose the uploaders who had been awarded twice or more times in the four years from 2018 to 2021 as the subjects. Finally, it selected a total of 89 valid samples that met the relevant conditions. The study analyzed the categories to which they belonged and the times they were on the list and the years. It linked these with the numbers of likes and followers to sort out and summarize the data worthy of in-depth qualitative analysis. There is a trend that the number of traditional ACG content is growing steadily, with new content being de-labeled with obvious effect, and both are breaking the circle in both directions. On the other hand, in-depth interviews with Bilibili users were conducted. The interview gave priority to “Generation Z” Internet users, who have grown up with the rapid development of both the internet era and Bilibili. They have more experience with Bilibili culture and longer and more intense use of the video media, and are representative, as the largest proportion of people using the site. The information was obtained from seven subjects through online text conversations, including three men, four women, one school student, and six persons who already work. The focus of this study was to get the interviewees’ feelings about the changes in Bilibili's videos in recent years. The interviews show that users are accepting the changes in Bilibili's video hotspots. Also, they can find interesting or valuable videos on the site. Even if there are still some shortcomings, they will not be deterred from continuing to use the site. In response to the questions about the conflicts in user interaction and the limitations of the video function, this paper also gave feasible suggestions, such as strengthening the guidance on the rules of interaction and developing commercial cooperation in the form of “live + e-commerce”. It also sought to explore the deeper integration and intertwining of video communication strategies and social aspects from the perspective of users.

## **2 Analysis of Research Results**

### **2.1 Stable Development in the Traditional Category**

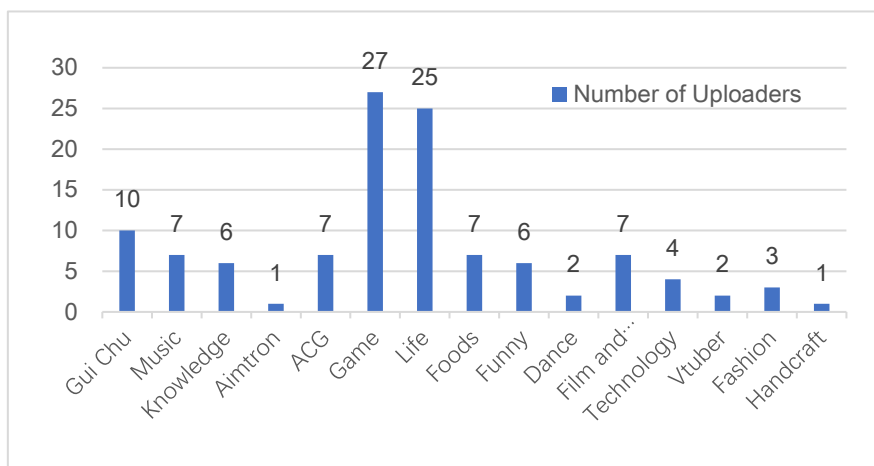
In the beginning, Bilibili targeted a young user base, with ACG as its main content and a User Generated Content model as its main feature. “Bullet comments” is the most

symbolic form of interaction. Under such a characteristic website style, the earliest users' interest was deeply rooted in animations and games, which has continued to the present. ACG videos have always been the most popular content on the website.

This phenomenon is also reflected in the list of "Top 100" from 2018 to 2021. Combining the video content of the uploaders on the lists with the current categories on Bilibili, the top three categories in terms of cumulative numbers are "auto-tune remix-themed content (guichu)", "game" and "living", which can be seen in Table 1. In Figure 1, there are 10 uploaders in the category of "auto-tune remix-themed content", 27 under "game", and 25 under "living".

**Table 1.** Basic information of the uploaders who were two or more times on the list of the Top 100 Uploaders

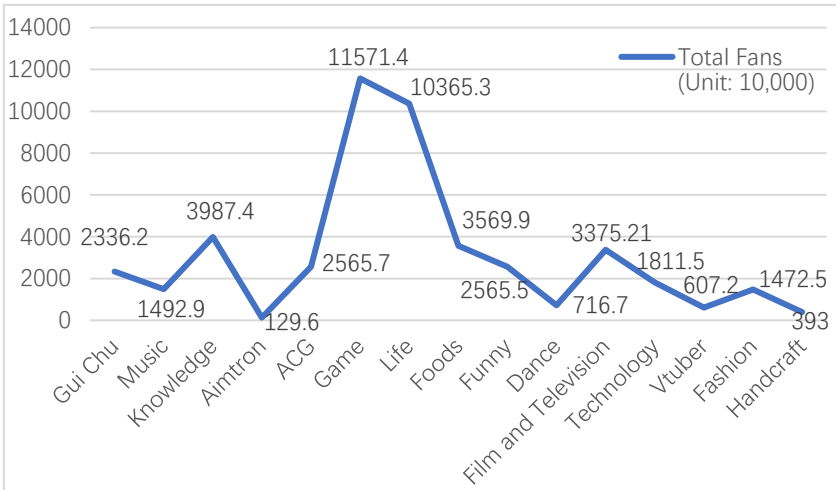
Category	Uploaders	Fans (Unit: 10,000)	2018	2019	2020	2021
Game	27	11571.4	21	24	16	8
Life	25	10365.3	15	24	17	6
Gui Chu	10	2336.2	8	9	3	3
Music	7	1492.9	7	6	2	2
ACG	7	2565.7	5	5	7	1
Food	7	3569.9	2	6	6	5
Film and Television	7	3375.21	4	6	7	4
Knowledge	6	3987.4	0	3	6	3
Fun	6	2565.5	2	6	4	1
Technology	4	1811.5	2	4	3	2



**Fig. 1.** The categories of the uploaders who were two or more times on the list of the Top 100 Uploaders

As a category that existed at the time of Bilibili's birth, the auto-tune remix-themed content category is one of the three important categories of Bilibili. It is the category that can best represent the "ACG" of the website except for the anime category. The

“auto-tune remix-themed content” refers to a form of video with a high rate of editing and synchronization of sound and picture, in order to achieve a brainwashing or hilarious effect [5]. Videos with auto-tune remix-themed content are a kind of subversion of traditional videos, standing in opposition to mainstream culture and expressing the rebellious spirit of young people. They are representatives of the online youth subculture, which reflects the creative attitude of “Generation Z”. Although the proportion of “auto-tune remix-themed content” in the “Top 100” has declined from 2020 onwards, there are three videos from this category in the top five videos of the top-viewed, and the highest one was viewed more than 90 million times [6].



**Fig. 2.** The number of fans of the uploaders who were two or more times on the list of the Top 100 Uploaders

Another top category also shows a long-lasting trend. Among the top 10 uploaders for four consecutive years, five of them are from the game category. The total views of them exceeded 53.1 billion and the number of “likes” exceeded 3 billion, occupying an absolute “head position”. Figure 2 shows that the “game category” has the largest group of followers on the website from the total number of fans. The current content of this category covers live game, secondary creation, teaching, and live broadcast and involves stand-alone, mobile games, board games, audio games, etc. It has formed a category with a complete creation system and combined with emerging media marketing methods, and it tries to achieve greater commercial value. Bilibili has become one of the largest game video platforms in China and is the largest single-player gathering place for stand-alone independent game content in China [7]. As Wolfgang Kramer said, “the game and the real world are both interconnected and independent of each other, which can reflect the common experience between people and the spirit of equality and freedom” [8]. This is one of the reasons why the game area can continue to attract creators and audiences and make them co-produce highly resonant phenomenal works that are relished, rebelled, and satirized at the moment.

The living category wins due to its wide coverage of video content. The video forms of the living category are flexible. There are a plenty of secondary categories such as funny videos, travelling, home, and daily life. In *Social Dramatic Theory*, American sociologist Erving Goffman said, “the essence of social life is performance and individuals choose different stages to present themselves because of such a wide range” [9]. The living category concentrates on the flexible creation and use of “memes” in the consolidation of the “subculture” circle. Its inclusiveness of content allows users to refer to various special symbols or words for communication when they interact. From the daily sharing and funny videos in the beginning to the *three farming* (*Sannong*, which includes “agriculture, rural areas, and farmers”) and craft videos that have soared in popularity in recent years, the style of the living category is not only limited to nonsense and ACG elements but also shows cultural exchange. Under the background of the epidemic, people’s desire to show and perceive life is constantly increasing, and the living category is becoming more and more blossoming.

Reviewing the characteristics of the development status for the three classic analyses, the “rebellious spirit” of the subculture is a high-frequency word that cannot be ignored. This is attributed to the fact that “Generation Z”, Bilibili’s largest audience group has a strong desire to express self-emotion and wants to gain the attention of the group. They form a circle belonging to specific groups and declare war on the shackles and obstacles in the real world. Bilibili gives such groups a platform to express themselves, allowing them to obtain a community separate from the real world and regain a certain psychological satisfaction, which is the key to maintaining high user activity.

## 2.2 The Effect of “De-labelling” New Content is Remarkable

In previous studies, Bilibili was often labelled as a “subculture circle” due to the special platform positioning of the ACG cultural gathering place at the time of its creation. Subcultures originally existed as a form of confrontation between marginalized groups such as the black, working classes and reality, or as a characteristic of different regions, religious beliefs, etc. [10]. With the development of the Internet generation and the enhancement of social and cultural inclusiveness, the meaning of today’s “subculture” has been supplemented and extended. Now scholars classify it as a cultural phenomenon formed by a young group with similar interests and cultural identity. However, some people still have stereotypes such as “non-mainstream” and “marginalization” when referring to this word. Bilibili also realizes that ACG content based on “ACG” will inevitably be labelled as “youth” and “entertainment”.

To achieve the goal of expanding audience circles and awareness, Bilibili started a new content six years ago. In 2016, the release of a documentary called *Masters in Forbidden City* became an important turning point in breaking the label. This historical and humanistic documentary from the CCTV Documentary Channel has exploded on Bilibili and now it has more than 10 million views. This incident started the era of “watching documentaries on Bilibili”. On January 2, 2017, the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League officially settled on Bilibili. Since then, the official media which were created by government departments began to expand their territory on Bilibili and post videos representing official political positions which have gained more

than 9 million subscriptions. The members of the subculture are highly motivated and independent and have strong receptivity, so they make this process from “de-politicization” to “politicization” possible. On June 6, 2020, Bilibili launched a new primary video category – the knowledge category, which rapidly became one of the most vivid content. In the past 2021, the scale of creators in the knowledge category on Bilibili has increased by 92%, and more than 183 million users studied here; among the videos created by professional users, the pan-knowledge content has reached 49%. The original video platform is getting closer to an “encyclopedia-style website”. In 2021, 14 creators of the top 100 uploaders are from the knowledge category and their total numbers of “views” exceeded 3 billion. The saying that “Bilibili is a well-known study website” has been given a new connotation once again.

In the past, Bilibili was jokingly called “a little poor platform” by its users, due to its aim of setting a simple platform for people who were interested in ACG to watch videos and create a community. Today, Bilibili has broken people’s presumption that the “subculture” groups are separated from or run counter to the mainstream culture by the improvement of the breadth and depth of its content. Bilibili endows audiences and creators with more potential and multi-dimensional possibilities and also allows more scholars or Internet users to see its “undefined” side, thus attracting people to continuously open new perspectives to observe and explore such a young and vibrant video website.

### **2.3 Blending in Collision: “Breaking the Circle Mutually” between Subculture and Mainstream Culture**

The arrival of the new media era also means media integration. The increasing demand for cultural exchanges between different groups is inevitable and is an Internet trend that cannot be avoided. Under such an external environment, Bilibili plays a role as a bridge to connect mainstream culture and subculture. In addition, today’s Bilibili users continue to pay attention to the video content of ACG and can also gain professional knowledge, share personal insights, and even get global news to have a broader perspective. Users of different ages and backgrounds can interact across time to gain a stronger sense of belonging. In May 2020, Bilibili and six mainstream media including CCTV News and China Youth Daily released a video titled *New Generation (Hou Lang)*. One day after the video was launched, it caused phenomenal swiping on social media such as Weibo and WeChat and was viewed as much as 7.7 million times only on Bilibili [11]. The video is to show the vitality of the “Generation Z” and to express the expectation of the New Generation to continuously realize their self-value and social value. This video is one of Bilibili’s most successful outcomes. Although several “chicken-soup-parts” were considered by some audiences as “brainwashing” elements, this video has indeed become the most successful fusion of and collision between subculture and mainstream culture on Bilibili. The comment that “if beauty represents itself with diversity and integrity, the world will be blessed with harmony and unity” covers a large area of the bullet comments in the *New Generation* series videos. This sentence also represents an ideal balance between mainstream culture and subculture. When mainstream culture is spontaneously integrated into Bilibili’s audience circle, it will

study the unique bullet comment culture and meme culture, participate in the interaction of young users and experience an identity resonance. At the same time, sub-cultural circles are also trying to accept relatively serious political elements and explore the learning functions of Bilibili, rather than being limited by its usage of “entertainment”. In this process, a collaboration between the ACG group and mass media happens. The mainstream culture and subculture broke the barriers of communication virtually and get deep into each other’s circles, realizing the “out-of-the-circle” trend by maintaining and giving full play to the foundation of the original value [12].

### 3 Discussion of the Study

#### 3.1 Strengths and Weaknesses

After Bilibili’s successful attempt to break the circle, it has gained a wider user base and occupied more high-quality resources in the video media market. The spread of a positive platform culture helps to attract more new users to sign up and maintain the enthusiasm of existing users. According to Rui Chen’s data in his speech on Bilibili’s 13th anniversary, Bilibili consistently maintains a retention rate of over 80% in the 12th month of official VIPs [1]. Regular users are encouraged to become core users and uploaders, by posting videos on Bilibili. This is one of the reasons why Bilibili’s uploaders are able to produce new “hits” or hot videos. The high level of user activity and the relaxing atmosphere, as well as the diversity of output video styles, highlight Bilibili’s inclusiveness and diversity. It helps to expand the platform’s audience horizontally. In the process of breaking the circle, interaction with mainstream media can gradually break the stereotype of Bilibili from a broader and more convincing perspective, while the addition of the knowledge category has opened up a more functional area for Bilibili. The phenomena that ACG platforms get increasingly more serious knowledge and official media become approachable are exactly the kind of contrasting images that audiences like to see. The high quality of the videos and uploaders, as well as the excellent operation of the accounts, have made Bilibili more visible on many video and social platforms in the Internet era. Bilibili has gradually emerged on a larger stage now.

With development and progress, Bilibili still has some imperfections in terms of content quality and publishers’ regulation. The problem of being influenced by capital forces in the push mechanism is gradually expanding, too.

Among those who have won the Top 100 in the past, the numbers of uploaders “flopping” are increasing. This has led to the situation that users have to take the risk of ruining their reputation when following the uploaders in whom they are interested. For example, LexBurner, a former uploader with the largest number of fans in Bilibili for a while, made a strongly class discrimination comment about the anime *Jobless Reincarnation* in a live video in February 2021, which caused anger on multiple platforms. After that, he became the first uploader in Bilibili’s history to have his “Top 100” Award cancelled. His account was banned for 10 months and faced a huge compensation of 20 million RMB. In July of the same year, “Dang Mei”, an uploader under the beauty category, with nearly 10 million fans, posted a video of a Japanese otaku dance



shot in front of the Fushun Museum, which touched on sensitive historical issues. The Fushun Museum carries deep national wounds and humiliation. “It should never be used as a tool by Internet celebrities to gain popularity or be used for jokes”, said the Xinhua News [13]. Her account was eventually cancelled. The occurrence of such cases reflects the lack of value orientation on certain platforms. In the early days of Bilibili, there was no professional training for video creation, and the so-called “rules” were set up and observed completely spontaneously. Over time, this has led to various regulatory loopholes and negative impacts that would seep into new categories and lead to pan-entertainment. Most Chinese scholars explain pan-entertainment as “a trend of consumerism and hedonism at its core, using the modern media as its main carrier, with shallow and empty content. It seeks to relax people’s nerves through theatrical indiscriminate performances, thus achieving a kind of pleasurable thought” [14].

Another problem that stands out is the homogenization of content that prevails in the field of video creation. When a video or theme becomes hot, there will be a large number of uploaders competing to imitate it, resulting in piling up the output of similar videos, which reduces the quality of videos on Bilibili. This will discourage original video uploaders and lead to a vicious circle. If in such a situation some videos with similar content or format that receive capital promotion are recommended to the home page of the users, the experience of usage will also be greatly diminished.

### 3.2 Feedback from Users

According to the interview, “LV6” users have more experience and feelings than regular users in terms of length of use, preferences for and affection towards Bilibili. The first interviewee has been using Bilibili since 2013 and is the longest-standing user contacted. She said, “I signed up to Bilibili when I was in secondary school and have been spending 1.5 hours per day watching videos. I can feel that the partitions on Bilibili are being further refined and it’s easier than before to find the videos I want”. The same feeling was also mentioned by other respondents. “The content is becoming more and more diverse and colorful and it is no longer limited to its own orientation because it is a platform that is all-inclusive”. In addition to using Bilibili for entertainment, one interviewee with a master’s degree indicated another use – learning. “I immersed in a lot of professional courses on Bilibili during my exams. This not only saves you money but also allows you to adjust your study time very flexibly. Many teachers are from famous schools, so I appreciate such free knowledge sharing”. When mentioning the trend that mainstream culture and official accounts start to integrate into Bilibili’s cultural circle, they all said they could take it. As one said, “I like science videos. I get something out of watching them, and many of these videos are basically about 5-10 minutes long, which is good for watching in fragmented time”. Another interviewee said, “I feel that there are significantly more institutional certifications, and I think this may bring more attention to Bilibili”.

When facing the future development of Bilibili, there were varying degrees of expectation: “I hope more copyrights can be brought in the future”; “I hope some recommendations of an advertising nature can be reduced, allowing users to explore more freely”. Two of the interviewees praised Bilibili’s bullet comment culture, saying that

“compared to other platforms, Bilibili’s bullet comments don’t have the problem of time misalignment which may affect the viewing experience. Bilibili’s bullet comments are more varied in color and form, but they can be decorated by some very thoughtful people. Some representative bullet comments are even more interesting than the content of the video. Also, there is a very smart blocking switch if you don’t like them, and this is the feature that I think it’s worthy of being constantly developed”.

### 3.3 Opinions and Suggestions

Based on previous research and the first-hand user experience information obtained, this paper attempts to make suggestions on how to guide and shape Bilibili’s video trends in the future.

To begin with, for the platform, “no ads” and “bullet comments culture” are key to maintaining user activity in the long term. Compared to larger video platforms such as iQIYI and Tencent Video, who put advertisements ranging from 15-120 seconds before the video which cannot be skipped by users who are not VIPs, Bilibili insists on no advertisements before the video. On the other hand, the interaction of bullet comments is an important way for Bilibili users to communicate. While it produces a large number of phenomenal “memes”, it is also very likely to cause “cursing wars” between different circles of interest. The platform should not be slack in informing the bullet comments culture and leads to friendly user interaction, so as to create a more harmonious and interactive atmosphere.

Second, an ecological environment should be considered. A Chinese TikTok user recently said that he was warned several times during a live broadcast because he said sensitive words, yet many of these words are common in everyday life. In contrast, Bilibili’s live streaming environment is more inclusive. In this case, it is worthwhile to build on this advantage to make the “live + e-commerce” mode, or an in-depth knowledge session with a leading scientific institution. This will allow Bilibili to achieve diversification and greater commercial value.

Last but not least, Bilibili should insist on guiding the integration of subcultures with mainstream culture and the idea of “harmony in diversity”, as well as reducing “a certain rebellion and rupture of cultural interests and expressions”, as the scholar C.J. Qu said in his study [15]. As Han and Yu pointed out, Bilibili needs to create an image of a harmonious multicultural symbiotic online community proactively which will attract more members in a spiral cycle [16]. In this process, Bilibili has a social responsibility to make a proper and thorough review of video content to guide positive creative outputs.

## 4 Conclusion

In June, 2022, Bilibili has 77.5 million monthly active users, with a fourfold positive growth in total users in the four years since 2018, and 65% of users who registered 13 years ago are still active on the platform. As a video platform with a highly active “Generation Z” user base, the success of Bilibili is based on its in-depth research and

precise control of social and cultural trends and video media development. Bilibili has achieved a multi-dimensional “comeback” that cannot be replicated. Bilibili users always find the uploaders which they are interested in because these uploaders are always creating innovative videos that attract more new users. The vitality and value of Bilibili come from these uploaders who successfully create fresh content. In future operational practices, Bilibili should continue to maintain its vitality with ACG culture, continue to break the prejudice of the world towards the subculture, strengthen the ideological guidance in time, and create more opportunities for harmonious interaction with the mainstream culture.

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