

The Role of Platform Affordances in Shaping Audience Engagement on Bilibili and Weibo

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Abstract. In the era of digital media, the affordances of online platforms have a profound influence on users' participation patterns. This study uses Weibo and Bilibili, two representative social media platforms in China, as examples to explore how their distinct affordances impact users' social interaction, content participation, and emotional connection behaviors. The research adopted comparative study and qualitative content analysis methods to systematically sort out the core characteristics of the two platforms in terms of functional architecture, content ecosystem, and community structure. Research has showed that Bilibili has built a deeply engaging environment centered on interests through its professional User-Generated Video (PUGV) ecosystem, real-time bullet screen interaction, and creator incentive mechanisms. User behaviors include collaborative learning, recreation, and the stable construction of micro-public identities. In contrast, Weibo has evolved into an information platform centered on hot events, with functions including trending topics, reposting, and hashtags. The way users participate in Weibo is more focused on emotional expression and event-driven short-term interactions. This research not only applies the platform affordances framework to the Chinese context at the theoretical level, revealing the complex interrelationships among platform design, user behavior, and cultural background, but also provides practical guidance for content creators to formulate effective communication strategies and for platform operators to optimize product design.

Keywords: Platform Affordances, Audience Engagement, Weibo, Bilibili, Comparative Research

1. Introduction

With the rise of digital platforms, the production and dissemination of digital culture mainly rely on the construction and operation of online platforms, and the affordances of these platforms are closely related to user engagement. In this ecosystem, algorithmic recommendations, traffic distribution, and commercial mechanisms influence what content users encounter, while the functional design of the platform further shapes the interaction patterns of users. In the Chinese context, Weibo and Bilibili are two typical platform models: the former centers on topic dissemination and promotes extensive participation; The latter encourages in-depth interaction through interest communities. It is of great academic research value to analyze how the affordances of these two platforms affect user engagement.

The concept of platform affordances in this study follows the relational perspective [1]. They note that Gibson understood affordances as a relational property, a relationship between body and environment, rather than merely a technical feature. Marshall further observes that people are witnessing a shift from representational media to presentational media and forming individual-centered micropublics and affect clusters [2]. This implies that audience engagement on social media is not merely functional interaction but rather an act of emotional connection within specific contexts. Regarding comparative studies, DeVito et al. observed significant variations in perceived self-presentation affordances across platforms [3]. Research confirmed that differences across platforms must be accounted for when examining self-presentation behaviors. Comparative research on international social platforms is extensive that Dvir-Gvirsman, Sude, and Raisman compared news engagement patterns on Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms based on users' perceived affordances [4]; Oz, Shahin, and Greeves found that differences in Facebook and Twitter's perceived accessibility influence users' willingness to express opinions [5]; Hase et al. emphasized how news organizations adapt content across platforms to suit audiences [6]. Within the Chinese context, single platform studies are more common. Regarding Weibo research, Fan et al. revealed Weibo's brand marketing logic as centered on relationship networks, clarifying which post types drive young users' engagement [7]. Research on Bilibili primarily focuses on danmu (bullet comments), with Wang exploring how Bilibili's danmu functions as a media interaction form, fostering users' virtual community belonging through shared viewing, specific linguistic symbols, and commentary [8]. In summary, while existing research has demonstrated the distinct platform mechanisms and user engagement patterns of Weibo and Bilibili, studies on these platforms remain fragmented, lacking a systematic comparative perspective. Cross platform affordance based comparative studies are well established in Western social media contexts, yet they remain underutilized in explaining Chinese social media behaviors.

This study aims to fill the gaps in existing research and explore how the differences between Weibo and Bilibili on affordances affect users' behavioral patterns in social interaction, content engagement and emotional connection. For this purpose, this study adopts the methods of comparative research and qualitative content analysis to systematically compare the popular content and user participation methods of the two platforms, and conducts in-depth analysis from aspects such as interface design, interaction mechanism and community norms.

This study holds significant importance both theoretically and practically. In terms of theory, it applies the concept of platform affordances to China's social media context. By comparing two representative platforms, Weibo and Bilibili, it deepens understanding of the relationship between platform characteristics, user behavior, and cultural context. From a practical perspective, content creators and marketers can leverage this research to formulate more precise communication and marketing strategies based on different platform affordances. Moreover, platform operators can clarify how to design products to better attract and retain audiences. Finally, it can help ordinary users understand the platform mechanism more comprehensively, allowing them to consciously shift from simple content consumption to more active participation and interaction.

2. Platform mechanisms and ecosystems

2.1. Functional architecture

Bilibili and Weibo have different functional designs. First, Bilibili is built around a system where users can upload videos. This is called PUGV, which means professional users generated videos. These videos are often medium or long in length and cover areas like animation, games, education,

and daily life. To help creators, Bilibili gives them a dashboard with data about their viewers and how people watch their videos. Moreover, Bilibili has ways for creators to make money, like the Charging Plan and paid membership. The Charging Plan lets viewers pay to unlock special videos, which is like giving a tip to the creator. So, these tools encourage people not just to share videos casually but to create high quality content. This mix of community and money-making is a key part of Bilibili's design.

Another important feature is the danmu system. Danmu are comments that fly across the screen in real time. As Wang says, this does more than let people comment at the same time; it makes watching a video a group activity, which makes people feel they belong [8]. In addition, Teng and Chan point out that danmu uses different fonts, colors, and movement to show fan identity and unity [9]. So, it turns watching alone into a social experience by letting viewers write notes, react, and talk right on the video. For example, in game livestreams, danmu often has game tips or funny jokes, showing how the platform mixes fun with participation.

Weibo's design is more about sharing news and talking about events quickly. Hase et al. say Weibo works like Twitter, where short, timely updates are used for breaking news [6]. This is different from Bilibili's model, which focuses on deep, creator generated content. Weibo works best with short posts on phones. Its main functions include the Hot Search list, which shows popular topics in real time; the repost button, which lets information spread fast; and hashtags, which group posts by theme. During big events, the Hot Search list can change in minutes, bringing millions of users into the same discussion. This design makes information easier to see and share, making Weibo the center of public conversation in China.

Weibo has other ways to keep users active. For example, its Super Topic feature creates a special space for fan clubs. It includes simple and fun elements like daily check-ins and leaderboards. The VIP membership program also gives users extra benefits, such as customized profiles and higher post exposure. These features show that Weibo is not only a fast, event-driven platform, but also tries to build user loyalty and a sense of identity.

2.2. Content ecosystem

Bilibili and Weibo also have distinct characteristics in terms of content. Bilibili mainly focuses on medium and long videos. Most of them go from a few minutes to half an hour. And these videos usually center on content which is high-quality and full of professional knowledge. For instance, some channels will explain complex social or scientific topics, while game creators will produce longer narrative content. Such format naturally helps to interact more deeply with the audience and cultivate a loyal community, where viewers will regularly come back to watch subsequent series of videos or follow content in specific fields.

Furthermore, one of the features of Bilibili's culture is secondary creation. This means users often remix, reedit, or add new subtitles to movies and other videos. These creative acts are highly valued by the community. Therefore, Bilibili is not just a place to watch videos but also a space that supports creativity and collaborative work.

In contrast, Weibo's content is short and moves very fast. Most posts are simple text, images, memes, or short videos about what is happening right now. This creates a constant flow of posts that change with the news. During major events, Weibo often becomes the main place for official news, eyewitness reports, and public reactions all together. At the same time, entertainment topics often become very popular, showing how the platform mixes news, gossip, and humor. As well, Weibo's content logic is about being current and spreading widely. Zhang shows that posts with strong emotions or moral arguments, like during the AI Cheating campaign, get much more interaction than

factual or policy content [10]. This shows that on Weibo, moral feelings often work better than clear information.

In summary, Bilibili builds a stable collection of video knowledge and subculture works, while Weibo keeps a fast-moving flow of comments that follows public attention.

2.3. Community structure

The communities on the two platforms form in different ways. On Bilibili, users usually come together around specific creators or interests, which creates stable groups. These groups develop their own slang and symbols, and repeated interaction strengthens the feeling of belonging. Loyalty grows when users follow video series or take part in community events, giving a sense of continuity and shared identity.

Unlike the stable networks on Bilibili, communities on Weibo are often formed around real-time events. Specifically, users quickly gather around emotional topics and then scatter when attention moves on. This matches Anderson's idea of Imagined Communities, which are formed by temporary emotional connection rather than long-term interaction [11]. As a result, communities on Weibo are very visible but short-lived. Sometimes, users also work together to make something more or less visible, showing that collective action can happen even in a fast-changing environment.

3. User participation and behaviors

3.1. Interaction patterns

How users interact on platforms shows clear differences. On Bilibili, the danmu system enables viewers to react in real-time, share jokes, engage in conversations, and add information. For example, in the show *Sisters Who Make Waves*, the screen is often full of messages like "So exciting!" or "The sisters look amazing!", which creates a feeling of watching together. As Wang notes, this interface creates not only a new mode of watching videos but also a new way to build and maintain a sense of community [8]. In learning videos, danmu acts like shared notes that, under a history lecture, users can highlight key dates or correct errors, making the video a group knowledge base. Some students even say Bilibili is like an online university. These actions show that Bilibili is for both entertainment and collaborative learning.

Creators also use data dashboards to improve their work, and fans support them through tools like the Charging Plan. For instance, for the food vlogger Shipindao, viewers pay to unlock videos, turning interaction into financial support. Tutorial videos by creators like Linkspicture often get detailed comments where viewers add resources, ask questions, or show their results. This creates a cycle of feedback between creators and audiences.

Weibo users, however, use simple tools like reposting, commenting, and liking to join trending talks. During the annual Gaokao exams, the hashtag Gaokao Cheers gathers posts from students and parents that spread instantly. In emergencies like natural disasters, users share firsthand reports, donation links, and updates, making Weibo a key tool for real-time communication. In entertainment, fans compete for the top comment by posting short, catchy phrases to get noticed. These patterns show that Weibo values quick response and visibility over deep discussion.

3.2. Participation strategies

The content environments also lead to different ways users participate. On Bilibili, users often do more than just watch. They write long comments, remix videos, or form study groups. For example,

Python tutorials often inspire viewers to add timestamps, explain steps, and answer each other's questions. These behaviors can be explained by what Reimer calls key external factors affecting social media use. The trustworthiness of the source, like a respected creator, encourages interaction [12]. The practical value of the content, like learning a skill, motivates participation. Also, the social expectations in Bilibili's learning communities promote helping each other and shared goals. So, user engagement is shaped not just by platform features but by a cooperative environment that values being helpful, learning together, and active contribution.

Secondary creation is also central. The animated film *Chang'an San Wan Li* led to many remix videos, from serious edits highlighting poetry to funny mixes with internet slang. Similarly, *The Story of Yanxi Palace* inspired comedy edits and new voice-overs. These examples show how Bilibili's culture encourages active creativity instead of passive watching.

On Weibo, participation strategies focus on speed and showing emotion. During Apple product launches, users post screenshots and instant opinions within minutes, creating a wave of comments mixing excitement and criticism. Fan clubs actively organize to get their idols on the trending list. They coordinate reposts, plan mass comments, and use unified slogans, turning support into a public performance. On serious topics, like the Double Reduction education reform, users react quickly too. Students, parents, and teachers post short messages of support or anger, and some use satire or simple arguments to make their point easy to share. These patterns show that on Weibo, participation is more about being seen and spreading messages than having long conversations.

3.3. Community dynamics and identity formation

User engagement also creates different types of community identity. On Bilibili, a sense of belonging is often built within small circles focused on a creator or interest. Marshall's idea of Micropublics fits here that these are small, consistent spaces where people maintain a public identity over time [2]. Users develop shared slang, show fan badges, and value small interactions, like a creator replying to a comment. In music or education channels, audiences might use fun group names like "choirs" or "study groups," which show shared identity and separate insiders from outsiders. Over time, these practices build loyalty and stable online identities based on subculture participation.

Community bonds on Bilibili are also strengthened through regular habits. Many users post daily check-in comments under ongoing series, and creators' anniversaries are celebrated together. These repeated actions create a shared rhythm and make users feel part of a lasting group.

On Weibo, identity is tied to being visible in fast-moving talks. Users compete for top comments, organize comment control to manage narratives, or hope for reposts from influential accounts. These actions are about both personal attention and feeling part of a larger crowd. For example, during celebrity scandals, fans fill comments with support, fostering a sense of solidarity among strangers. During national events on Weibo, official accounts such as government agencies often unite large numbers of users through their posts. This creates a temporary Imagined Community centered around a collective focus on a single issue. Identity formation on Weibo follows this event-driven pattern that users gather around specific topics, experience short-term belonging, and then disperse. What matters most in these interactions is gaining momentary visibility rather than establishing enduring connections.

4. Conclusion

This study compares the affordances and engagement patterns of Weibo and Bilibili. The findings reveal that these platforms represent two different kinds of digital media in China. Weibo uses trending topics, repost functions, and short posts, which create a platform for wide participation. On Weibo, people mainly engage with current events, and they also use it for self-expression. In contrast, Bilibili is built on user made videos and bullet comments. The platform also supports its creators well. Because of these features, strong communities can grow and these communities are based on shared interests that keep users connected. This difference reshapes how users behave online. It influences not only how they interact and engage with content, but also how emotional ties are formed across the platforms.

This study shows two distinct patterns of user engagement. Specifically, the design of Weibo encourages a rapid and extensive participation model. In practice, user participation mainly involves the instant sharing of information, while emotional connections also revolve around the brief resonance of hot topics. In contrast, Bilibili has cultivated a different culture of deep collaboration. Here, users engage in immersive interactions within the community, and content participation emphasizes in-depth cultural consumption. In addition, the platform supports creative co-creation among users, ultimately building a lasting sense of belonging around common interests. Meanwhile, common interactive functions such as comments and sharing also perform differently on these two platforms. This important discovery confirms that platform affordances are relational, which means they play different roles in different environments. In addition, Weibo's imagined community and Bilibili's micropublic domain showcase two typical forms of presentation media. Therefore, these patterns clearly demonstrate how Chinese digital platforms have developed distinct user engagement models.

This study has obvious practical significance. Content creators and brands should be aware that they cannot simply reuse the same content across different platforms. Instead, they need to develop tailored strategies to adapt to the unique affordances of each platform. For instance, Weibo is more suitable for hot topics that can quickly spark discussions and lead to retweets. Bilibili, on the other hand, needs to continuously produce in-depth and professional content that can resonate with niche groups. For platform designers, functional updates are not "the more, the better". Every new feature should be considered for its compatibility with the existing community culture and interaction methods; otherwise, it may disrupt the participation habits that users have already formed. In addition, this research provides valuable insights for ordinary users. It helps people understand how the platform mechanism affects the content they see. This awareness can help users transform from passive consumers to more conscious participants, thereby better controlling their digital experiences.

This study also has certain limitations. The analysis mainly relies on the observation of the platform's functions and public content, thus making it difficult to gain a deep understanding of users' true thoughts and usage motivations. Future research can combine methods such as interviews and questionnaires to more directly explore how users understand and utilize these platform functions. In addition, applying this comparison framework to emerging platforms such as TikTok and Rednote can build a more comprehensive analysis system for Chinese social media platforms. It not only supplements this research but also provides a direction worth exploring for subsequent studies.

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