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“As Uploaders, We Have the Responsibility”: Individualized Professionalization of Bilibili Uploaders

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The prevalence of social media blurs the boundaries between consumer and producer, work and play, and leads to new social roles, professions, and identities (e.g. blogger, YouTuber, micro-celebrity). However, we still lack a clear understanding of how people come to identify with these new roles and how individual professional development is digitally mediated. This paper presents a study based on Bilibili, a popular Chinese social media platform featuring user-generated videos, and highlights a professionalization process through which individuals consciously distinguish between the roles of uploaders and consumers, develop a shared work ethos around the role of the uploader, and, as uploaders, improve their technical-professional expertise. We conclude by discussing individualized professionalization as a concept that describes the bottom-up and community-based process of professional development for User Generated Content (UGC) taking place in contemporary digital media environments.

CCS Concepts: • Human-centered computing → Empirical studies in HCI.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Online Creative Media, User Generated Content (UGC), Professionalization, Profession

ACM Reference Format:

1 INTRODUCTION

One of the cultural trends in the 21st century is the emergence and continuous growth of the “creator economy” [59, 60]. Online platforms, like YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, encourage and profit from their users’ creative work, blurring the boundaries between content producers and consumers, amateurs and professionals, and giving rise to hybrid roles, such as prosumer [58] and pro-amateur [22]. Some content creators are able to attract extensive attention and gain enough influence on the Internet to develop a professional career. In popular imagination, this kind of online creative work suggests more freedom and flexibility, and even promotes the romantic ideal of getting paid to do what you love [20], making “content creator” one of the most appealing professions of the 21st century. Successful content creators are what Marwick refers to as “micro-celebrities” [49], referring to individuals who have achieved a substantial degree of online influence.
Despite the glamorous appearance, becoming a micro-celebrity entails considerable professional challenges, intensive labor, and various strategies [36]. In addition, only a handful of individuals can succeed to make a living out of creative work [20]. Furthermore, compared to traditional work, online creative work requires that individuals shoulder the cost of training and equipment and manage without employee benefits typically associated with traditional occupations. At a time that celebrates creative work, self-entrepreneurship, and neoliberal ethos, the individual, amateur or not, often seeks a way to become a professional.

HCI researchers have been interested in understanding the professional development associated with digital technologies [39, 48]. The focus has been primarily on how people in certain technology-related occupations, such as graphic designers [48] and UX practitioners [39], acquire essential knowledge and develop a professional identity. Less attention has been paid to grassroots users growing into these professional roles. There is extensive research on User Generated Content (UGC) and the phenomena of micro-celebrities [36, 49], with some focusing on the process of professionalization on related platforms [31, 37, 74]. However, they looked primarily at how traditional professionals and institutions are involved in the original UGC platforms [37], and how these platforms present new job opportunities in corresponding industries (e.g. software engineer) for active participants [3]. There has been less work on how individuals on these platforms identify with the role of content creator, learn and grow to achieve the status of micro-celebrity, and even turn it into a full-time occupation.

In this paper, we present a study of Bilibili, a video-sharing platform featuring user-generated videos in China, to understand the process of how individuals grow into the new occupation of content creator. Our study is based on semi-structured interviews with 13 Bilibili users with varied degrees of involvement, ranging from mere consumers to full-time uploaders, i.e., the micro-celebrities on the platform. We describe the trajectory of how uploaders are transformed from ordinary consumers into audience-oriented and competent producers. Drawing inspiration from Wilensky’s use of profession to emphasize expertise and moral norms, and Johnson’s view of professionalization as the process of seeking to gain status in accordance with the ideology of profession [34], we trace the processes through which individuals went from casual postings to identifying as uploaders, changed their attitudes from self- to audience-oriented, developed technical competencies, and adopted normalized video creations practices. What we highlight is that, through continuous interactions with their individual strengths and interests, the socio-technical structure of the Bilibili community, and the socio-cultural patterns of offline reality, uploaders not only improved their skills and acquire the requisite knowledge, but also identified with the emerging shared meanings and moral norms of being uploaders.

We contribute to the HCI literature in two ways. First, we characterize an individualized, bottom-up, and community-based professionalization process taking place in the “creator economy” or contemporary digital media environment. It is quite different from the professionalization process of traditional occupations, which is occupation-oriented, organizationally-driven, and training-based. Second, we present empirical insights into the socio-technical affordances that mediate this professionalization, yielding implications and reflections for further research in this direction.

2 BACKGROUND AND RELATED WORK

In this section, we will briefly review the notions of profession and professionalization in the literature, as well as research on the digitally mediated professionalization in and around UGC platforms.

1In this the paper, we will use consumer, audience, and viewer interchangeably.
2.1 Profession and Professionalization

Profession usually refers to a job in which practitioners possess expertise in a certain area. It has been an important phenomenon in the modern world. Historian Stephen Richards Graubard has commented that “the professions are as characteristic of the modern world as the crafts were of the ancient”[27]. However, the notions of profession and professionalization have been so loosely applied to a wide range of occupations in modern society that Wilensky raised the question: “Is it the professionalization of everyone?” [70]. In general, a profession has been mainly defined by a set of “traits,” such as specialization and the existence of work rules [52]. At the same time, its boundaries have been ill-defined, so there has been no clear-cut interpretation of what counts as a profession and what does not [10]. Freidson has observed that scholarly efforts to define professions tend to locate common and shared patterns across occupations that have been referred to as “professions” in a primarily inductive way; this, he noted, is oftentimes circumscribed by concrete cases, thus landing on the wrong characteristics, such as private associations, as necessary for obtaining professional status [23]. Nonetheless, it is commonly agreed that a profession is a kind of social status to be achieved and secured. Relatedly, professionalization describes the process through which an individual becomes a professional.

Organizational studies have identified two general approaches to professionalization: one from the bottom-up, and the other, from the top-down. In the former, practitioners’ spontaneous activities secure professional status, while the latter emphasizes the active role played by the state in initiating and administrating the profession. For example, a comparative study of occupations that have been developed into recognized professions, such as accounting and engineering, in the UK and Germany, found that while the professionalization process is more bottom-up in the UK, it is more top-down in Germany [53]. A study in the context of the significant expansion of student enrolment in vocational programs in Scandinavian countries’ universities identified a trend of “professionalization from below” [54]. A study of care practitioners of early childhood in Ireland demonstrated that while the state sets top-down regulations and carries out inspections to make practitioners qualified, the participants’ job titles and responsibilities show neither clarity nor coherence and that these educators have few chances for further education and development [51]. Wilensky observed that pre-existing power-structures, such as organizational pushes in the form of professional associations, often coming before the formation of technical and institutional bases, could become barriers to the “natural history of professionalism” [70].

In this paper, we follow Wilensky and consider moral norms, or service ideals, and technical competency as the essential elements of profession [70]. While technical competency and a professional knowledge base are generally believed to be essential to a profession, Wilensky has also emphasized that an adherence to norms is also essential as it characterizes the profession. He argued that the “degree of professionalization is measured not just by the degree of success in the claim to exclusive technical competence, but also by the degree of adherence to service ideals and its supporting norms of professional conduct.”[70] We will also consider professionalism as an ideology, e.g. expertise and moral norms, and professionalization as the process of gaining status in accordance with that ideology [34]. Additionally, this paper will explore the process of professionalization from an individual perspective: how individuals, rather than the occupation as a whole, achieve professional status through their interactions and socialization.

2.2 Digital Technologies and Occupational Professionalization

In HCI and related fields, there has been increasing interest in the role digital technologies play in transforming the nature of work and occupational identities. One particular stream looked at how occupational practitioners gather on online platforms to form communities of practice to support their professional development. For instance, in studying
online communities and UX practitioners, prior work identified the valuable roles online communities play in the support of knowledge production and sharing [40], particularly as a catalyst for individuals to identify the status of their occupation and to construct a professional identity [39], as well as for the community to reach a consensus regarding its possible future [38].

Studies of online creative communities, in which people do not just communicate but also share creative work with each other, have also illustrated the values of online platforms in supporting the professional development of creative work, such as graphic design [48] and streaming [65]. For instance, work-sharing sites can support skill development through exposure to others’ work and interactions around created artifacts [48]; And audiences can evaluate their created work and motivate individuals to become more productive [11]. However, amateurs and professionals, or novices and experts, play different roles and have different expectations of these online communities. Professionals, who benefit from amateurs’ sharing online, can encourage and help amateurs [11]. Although amateurs expect more online feedback, experts value their offline identities over their online ones [48].

In recent years, considerable attention has also been drawn to marginalized occupations. Social media sites, such as Facebook, provide powerful platforms for individuals, like temporary migrant workers, to obtain preliminary forms of (semi)professionalism, and gain social recognition [26]. A study of an app-based beauty/wellness service in India showed that platformization, including the “enterprise discourse” and disciplining exercised by the platform, helped service workers to achieve professional status [57].

Other studies have revealed the alternative roles of technologies in professionalization. For example, the use of ICTs could lead to deskilling and reduced autonomy for employees and more control for employers [9], and even engender de-professionalization or re-professionalization [55]. While the use of ICTs might result in varied consequences in different areas of work, what is certain is that ICTs can make many occupational practices more volatile, such as UX design, and ride-sharing services [40].

2.3 UGC Platforms and Professionalization

While it started out in community-based cultures, UGC became ubiquitous with the arrival of Web 2.0 and social media. Online platforms provided important technological and commercial conditions for UGC to be monetized and commercialized, giving rise to the so-called “creator economy” [59, 60]. In this type of economy, creative work, such as a social media post or video, is the primary form of economic production, and platforms have greatly eased the availability of entry for everyone. Recent research has explored various aspects of the creator economy, such as the precarity of creative labor [18] and creator governance [14].

The creator economy has encouraged countless people to turn their personal lives and self-expression into an online business by sharing blogs, pictures, and videos and then monetizing the attention they receive [7, 24]. Based on the level of participation, influence, and monetization, different categories of members can be identified. Some categorize producers into casual, aspirational, and expert [29]. Others distinguish between regular and promotional [1]. Those who have attracted broad attention and a significant number of followers have been called micro-celebrities [61]. Compared to those in the mainstream media, high prestige micro-celebrities employ practices that express relatability, authenticity, and accountability [42].

Previous work reveals all kinds of strategies employed by content producers to achieve and secure the status of micro-celebrity. Studies show that the sharing of personal lives is the most engaging to audiences [15], and is a way to promote social inclusion and a shared sense of experience [16], often associated with self-branding and drawing an audience closer [25]. Practices, such leveraging intimacy, that creators use to enhance their relationships with the
audience and realize its monetary value are often called affective labor [56], or relational labor [5], the other side of story of how fans perform affective labour for their idols [72].

Much work has focused on the tensions/negotiation between economic purpose and the maintenance of authenticity and accountability by producers, often based on the analysis of contents presented online and the comments responding to the content [11, 35]. For instance, studies have shown the coexistence of two contradictory points of commercial need, self-branding and a cultivation of closeness with the audience, and looked at how online celebrities simultaneously perform their roles as users/fans/audience members and producers/influencers/celebrities [25]. While some have turned content creation into their full-time job, studies have also emphasized that this applies only to a handful of creators [7, 20]. Overall, while related literature has documented all kinds of micro-celebrity strategies and practices, little work has been done to understand how grassroots users develop and grow into this role.

Professionalization has also been commonly identified on UGC platforms, although it can mean different things in different studies. For example, one study showed that the YouTube platform, originally meant for UGCs [37], became increasingly institutionalized or professionalized, with the emergence of institutions involved in making content and the direct inclusion of Professional Generated Content (PGC). More often, however, research has identified the presence of professional opportunities through participation in new digital media, e.g. finding employment in related companies [3]. Another study of different digital media (gaming, writing, and social media sites) found that participation in these media help teens develop professional competencies, such as knowledge about digital languages, ideology, and ethics (e.g. detecting stereotypical media representations) as well as management skills (e.g. managing content across platforms in addition to one’s own time and other resources) [21]. Nonetheless, none of these studies have looked at how new professional roles emerge and how individuals come to identify with these roles on UGC platforms.

3 BILIBILI

Our study is based on Bilibili, one of the most visited online UGC video platforms in China. Approximately one out of every two young Chinese people under 24 uses it [6]. Different from other popular video-sharing platforms, such as Douyin (known as TikTok overseas), which sets a limit of no more than 5 minutes per video, Bilibili features long videos. Established in 2009, Bilibili was originally a site for animation, comics, and game (ACG) enthusiasts who wanted free access to ACG videos found hardly anywhere else. Early in its development, Bilibili was full of pirated content that its users downloaded or recorded from other sites and reshared, and these users were called “uploaders”2. While more and more ACG content flooded onto Bilibili, other types of uploaders, who posted original video content, also rose to the surface. For instance, Bilibili became a major hub for fan-made videos, audio remixes, and TikTok style videos [46]. Today, UGC has become the main type of videos uploaded on Bilibili, and played a critical role in Bilibili’s development and transition into a UGC platform. Despite Bilibili’s considerable shift towards offline life content, anime, gaming, and video and audio remix content is still prominent [17]. This history makes Bilibili different from YouTube, which was created, from the beginning, as a UGC platform.

In recent years, Bilibili has ramped up its copyright regulations. On the one hand, it cooperates with copyrighted video sites and purchases the rights to PGC, such as movies and cartoons. On the other hand, it maintains a series of content policies and programs to support UGC. For example, “Bilibili Creation Incentive Program” provides monetary incentives to those who have reached a certain number of fans or views. While this platform-generated income is hardly enough for an uploader to recover the cost of making a video, let alone live off of, this mechanism helps provide a

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2This term continues to be used today and will be used in this paper to refer to those who make and share their own videos.
sufficient source of quality videos on the platform. Nowadays, nearly 70% of the audience flow is attracted to uploaders' original content, with the rest attracted to movies, animation, and TV series from official sponsors or UGCs shared from other platforms [66]. Like YouTube, commercial advertisements are the main source of revenue for Bilibili uploaders. However, while YouTube itself attracts the advertisers and splits the money with YouTubers based on the number of views each video receives through the YouTube Partner Program [47], uploaders on Bilibili negotiate directly with the advertisers.

Having originated with a niche focus on ACG, Bilibili has fostered a distinctive subculture through some unique mechanisms. In its early stage, it integrated Danmu, a video commentary system that allows viewers to directly post comments on top of videos, from the Japanese animation site, NICONICO, attracting a large number of enthusiasts who preferred its improved non-delay Danmu system over that of similar sites, such as AcFun. Most of its original users were youth, who were primarily attracted to Bilibili for its ACG. “Uploading for love” is an expression first voiced by an uploader to mean that he made content motivated by love rather than any other purpose, such as money. The slogan became widely popular later on, and was eventually adopted as the ethos of the community.

People can freely join the platform and consume content by simply creating an account. With real name verification required by the Chinese government, users can also upload videos. However, if they want other more active forms of participation, including providing comments, posting Danmu, saving content, and sending messages to other users, they need to pass a cumbersome admission test. The test is composed of multiple choice questions regarding comment etiquette, platform rules, and other fields of interest, such as sports, animation, and celebrities, based on the users’ choice prior to the test. Questions are randomly selected and are auto-graded. Passing the test, which means that a user’s score is higher than certain grade, has become a status symbol, and also reinforces a sense of identity within the community. Moreover, Bilibili’s video content and comments are filled with terms, rules and symbolic language. Understanding and having a familiarity of these terms and rules makes one recognized as a community member. While there is no formal division between the roles of audience members and uploaders, uploaders are mostly self-identified or socially recognized based on their update frequency and the quality of their videos.

On other video platforms, such as YouTube, Douyin and Kuaishou, a multi-channel network (MCN) has long been an integral component in the institutional video ecosystem that helps commercialize and monetize video content [71]. Bilibili, however, was more cautious about adopting this approach, for it seemingly did not align well with the community ethos of producing videos out of “love”. Nevertheless, Bilibili officially launched its collaborative portal for MCN agencies in November 2020 (right after this study started) [43], in hopes of helping uploaders create a better balance between content creation and commercial operations. However, at the time of our study, none of our informants had yet worked with any of the MCN agencies. As such, YouTube and Bilibili, the two largest UGC video sites in the world, have very different user bases, community cultures, and commercial models.

4 METHODS

We employed a qualitative study to understand the professional development of uploaders on Bilibili. We made a specific effort to recruit uploaders as our main informants, with the screening criteria that they had a relatively consecutive uploading period of greater than 6 months and attracted more than 1,000 followers. We also intentionally recruited some viewers, in order to derive insights about the audience’s perspective. The only requirement for these participants was that they had a history of regular Bilibili use for at least 6 months to ensure that they had already formed viewing habits and had sufficient experience with the platform and the community.
We recruited a total of 13 Bilibili users as our informants. They were of varied levels of participation on the platform, including full-time uploaders as well as mere consumers with no videos uploaded at all. To get participants, we first turned to our own social networks and personally asked friends to introduce us to qualified Bilibili users. We recruited 4 viewers and 4 uploaders this way. These uploaders introduced us to 3 more uploaders through either personal relationships or Bilibili-supported networking groups for promising uploaders in the same area. We also designed a recruitment flyer describing the purpose of the study and the study’s procedure, and sent it through Bilibili’s messaging system to eligible uploaders. Two more uploaders were recruited this way. Table 1 shows the profile information of our informants, in which P1 to P9 identified as uploaders and the rest mere consumers. P9, recruited from our own social network, is special in that she is not only an uploader, but also currently employed as a Bilibili editor. Most of our informants are college students or young people who just graduated and started to work, consistent with Bilibili’s user age distribution skewed heavily towards 20s. At the time of our study, none of our informants had yet considered working with business-driven MCN agencies, or had their own team to help operate their accounts. Although working with MCN agencies or their own teams could be an option further down on their journeys, the professionalization processes associated with them deserve separate studies and are beyond the scope of this paper.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with our informants, primarily through voice calls as our participants were geographically distributed. We designed an interview protocol, comprised of questions covering their experiences and the details of video-making and uploading, including the participants’ first video, the one they personally found most impressive, and their most recent video-making and uploading experience. We also asked how they learned and mastered video-making techniques, what tools they used for video-making and editing, and how they interacted with their audience and fellow uploaders. Although we used the same interview protocol for all our informants as a guide, we usually changed our questions slightly, or the order in which we asked them based on their answers, to ensure a natural conversational flow and to collect data as rich as possible based each individual’s unique experiences. Moreover, some of the informants also agreed to share a few screenshots of their Bilibili dashboard with us, which we found interesting and illustrative of some of their points. As for the audience member informants, the interviews mainly focused on their viewing experiences, who they followed and how they followed them, as well as their interactions with others on the platform. All the interviews lasted between one to two hours based on the extensiveness of the participants’ experiences. Every informant was given 100 RMB (about 15 USD) as compensation for their contribution to the study. Our study was approved by the home institution of the first author. We explicitly stated our intention and provided study information before every interview. All data was collected with the permission of our participants and will be anonymized in this paper. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed with their consent.

Grounded theory approach [63] was employed for the analysis of the interview data. Three authors conducted open coding on the transcript independently. They then went through the transcript line by line, and used a higher level of code abstraction to summarize the points in the data. Axial coding was conducted with rounds of discussions among the authors in an attempt to find links between the codes, and sort and group the codes into sub-categories and into larger categories. Finally, for the selective coding, the development of moral values and expertise emerged as the core themes from the data, which corresponded well with Wilensky’s notion of profession and were identified as recurrent and central themes representing the phenomena of the study. Representative quotes were translated into English from Mandarin and used for illustration purposes for this paper.

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3Bilibili editors are employees who audit and censor videos according to the government and platform’s rules, and formulate topics that they think may attract a lot of attention and coordinate with uploaders to create corresponding content.
5 FINDINGS

In our study, we found that Bilibili, hosting a distinctive subculture on the Chinese Internet, affords a unique path towards professionalization. In this section, we elaborate on these professionalization processes so as to articulate what becoming a micro-celebrity on Bilibili entails.

5.1 Identifying Meanings and Moral Norms of Being an Uploader

While many UGC platforms, such as Twitter, Reddit, TikTok, and YouTube, all seem to view their users as both content consumers and producers, blurring the boundary between content consumption and production, our participants consciously distinguished between the roles of consumer and uploader. The perceived distinction was so clear that participants stressed a few particular processes that an ordinary user must go through to assimilate the social meaning and moral norms of the uploader role in the Bilibili community. Specifically, our uploader informants revealed the unexpected moment in which they started to recognize the value of uploading, and the cognitive processes during which they became aligned with the meaning and moral norms of the uploader.

5.1.1 Assigning unique meanings to uploading on Bilibili. Our uploader informants attached a sense of uniqueness to Bilibili even when they first chose it among the wide range of platforms, such as Weibo and Douyin. P8 reported:

“I tried Douyin but gave it up. I was not used to that atmosphere…I’ve also synced my works to Weibo, and gave it up too. After I tried around…I still feel I like Bilibili’s atmosphere the most.”

P7, who downloaded Bilibili before 2008, was among its first group of users, and described himself as loyal to the platform. His experience was emblematic of our uploader informants. These young people, all of a similar age with similar interests formed a community and developed an attachment to the platform during its early days. Having identified something unique in the Bilibili community, they were culturalized into it and continue to spread and recreate its culture.

Participants identified community feedback on their initial uploads as carrying special meanings. Their initial uploads were rarely deliberate, and some cited rather casual reasons such as storing their personal videos and memories or sharing stories just with their close friends. However, they often received overwhelming reactions from
an unexpected, and usually much larger, audience, inspiring them to reconsider what it meant to upload. During interviews, participants shared with us how they appreciated the unforeseen moments of receiving positive feedback, often beyond their expectations. P2 was so surprised by enthusiasm for her videos that she even felt a bit embarrassed. P4 also described the experience as surprising: "The number of viewers soon reached over 10,000, and it was so much higher than what I imagined. I imagined it could be, could be tens of people to watch." She felt she then became so attracted to the audience’s praise, and was determined to upload more. Eventually, it turned into a life habit. As such, while participants would post casually in the beginning, audience feedback became an important motivator for them to keep uploading more videos as was similarly shown in [48] and became an integral component of their experience of being a Bilibili uploader.

Through audience feedback, especially private messages, the uploaders came to appreciate the social significance of uploading, viewing it as something beyond self-expression. P8 stressed that her audience’s private messages, not the number of views her videos received, gave her a sense of value as an uploader:

"Some fans told me in their private message that they got dates by following my tutorials...I felt it was worth it. Even if the video was only watched by a number of viewers, it was worth it. I was very happy. It was the highlight and [gave me] a sense of achievement."

P2 had a similar experience and said that she got a personal message several times, and she felt that her content contributed to society. Almost all of our uploader informants pointed out that uploading was not only individually meaningful for them, but also socially meaningful to others. P4 summarized it this way: "For me to make the Vlog, first it is to share my life, and second, I hope it can also help others." This sense of meaning became part of what defines being an uploader as a social role.

On the other hand, limited audience feedback indicated to the uploaders that there was a lack of resonance in their content, even if it was a big hit. P8 shared such an experience:

"It was a long time ago, last year, when I uploaded a fitness video...Probably it happened to step on the recommendation algorithm, and [it] got over 500,000 views shortly, but it did not bring many followers...and the interaction was also not good."

From this, P8 learned that good video content is that which carries unique messages or meanings to others, and subsequently attracts audience feedback.

5.1.2 Embracing audience-oriented moral norms. While initially encouraged by unexpected, positive feedback, our uploader informants soon realized that being an uploader required so much more than an occasional success. In particular, they highlighted the importance of being audience-oriented for meaningful engagement on the platform. That is, a successful uploader not only focuses on self-expression, but tailors their videos to their audience. P8 gave an example of a video she made that taught her this mindset:

"The one I devoted the most to was a video I made last time, although I have deleted it...um...For that video, I had been working on it continuously for a whole week, but the feedback was far from being good, and that caused attitudinal change on me. Because it really took me quite some efforts, but I made a...a fatal mistake. That is, I was too self-absorbed. I neither considered it from the audience’s perspective, nor paid attention to whether they could understand."

P4, who enjoyed some initial success, later realized that to retain her audience, she needed to go beyond pure luck and approach the videos from an audience’s perspective:
“The number of views of my video got plummet all of a sudden, and there was not much exposure then. It was at that time that I realized that, oh, video uploading was not something that you do randomly, that you just edit and upload it.”

Through experiences like these, our informants came to see that in order to receive positive feedback, they should be audience- rather than self-oriented. For example, P9, after receiving an increase in views, changed her video names from “week 1”, “week 2”, etc. to something more descriptive. This was a clear instance of a user’s transition from merely uploading videos to behaving like an uploader.

Overtime, the uploaders developed a sense of responsibility for the videos they created. P6, a full-time uploader, put it this way:

“It is not so interesting if you just go out to play for two days and shoot. Because if I am just a passerby, I will not find it attractive. Because it is just your life, not mine. I think, as uploaders, we have the responsibility to present quality content to the audience. I will not just make day-to-day accounts, because not every moment of life is fun.”

P8, after making a video, would check from the audience’s perspective to ensure the video was worth watching, meaning that people would learn something from the video and not waste their time. This audience-oriented attitude was also shared by the audience, as P13, an audience member, explained: “If you want to [be an uploader], you want to make sure it is high quality. Otherwise, it is a waste of others’ time, which is not good.” In other words, our uploader informants developed an audience-oriented attitude by moving from simply uploading videos and enjoying the audience feedback to trying to create value for their audiences.

Our informants shared several ways to keep their content audience-oriented. First, they leveraged the audience data made available on the platform. Our uploader informants commonly drew from the dashboard’s audience data to find out the number of views a video had, the views corresponding to more specific parts of the video, and any increase in followers. For instance, P2 paid great attention to how long people watched a video rather than the number of views, as an indication of how well a video was perceived by the audience. The different types of audience data helped the uploaders learn all kinds of tricks to ensure a good watching experience for their audience members. For example, they learned that the beginning of the video was critical to capture a viewer’s attention, and to do that, they would put a collection of the most exciting moments as a summary of the video at the beginning. In addition, sharing personal experiences could also make videos, such as tutorials, more engaging, as similarly found in previous work [15]. It was also common for participants to follow the feedback directly from the audience to improve their videos, as described by P6:

“Some would say, the rhythm is not so good or there is no rhythmic point, or other places that are not so good. They, the audience, would use Danmu or comments to give you such feedback.”

As such, our uploaders took advantage and made interpretations of various audience data to understand and ensure a quality watching experience.

Second, our uploader informants watched and analyzed others’ videos to acquire new video-making practices and techniques. For instance, based on her own watching experiences, P8 learned that a vertical channel, i.e., focusing on one particular theme, was preferred by audience members as they would better know what to expect. Also, informants commonly reported watching “how to” videos [44] to improve their technical skills, such as editing, or to help them choose better tools. In fact, being an uploader made them more analytic when watching others’ videos, and helped them learn related knowledge and skills accordingly. For example, P5 would closely examine videos he liked and then...
picked up the skills for his own special effects: "If you watch [a video] several times, you would learn how they edit it, and you can try to imitate it for that effect. Overtime, you will know." The uploaders would also compare popular videos on the platform with their own to identify ways to improve. For instance, P4 reported that she would watch videos similar to hers to see why they were such a hit and analyze aspects, such as the title, cover, special effect, and storyline. P3 said that he learned the importance of a story’s flow through such comparisons. Moreover, the uploaders took the audience’s feedback of others’ videos into account when thinking about how to develop their own videos, as in a case reported by P6:

"For example, here, [in]their videos, ...there is a change in audience feedback, e.g. there is a lot of Danmu, and I will know that the feedback is good, and I will know this is the effect that I should learn."

As such, the uploader informants not only drew on feedback from their own videos, but also paid close attention to the videos of other uploaders, and the feedback these uploaders received, as a way to polish their own work and learn to make it better.

Our informants acknowledged that making high-quality, audience-oriented videos is not an easy task, and highlighted endurance as key. P5 described video-making as a lonely process because of the length of time it takes one person to conceive of an idea, shoot it, and then finally edit and cut it. P8 offered a similar description:

"You are all alone by yourself, speaking to yourself in front of a camera, with emotions, and then, editing is also a very long process. You might sit there for a whole day, and quietly watch an episode again and again, by yourself, and there is nothing to talk about, and there is no input [from anyone else] either. There is a lot of tedious labor, all manual labor."

Several of our uploaders commented that it was important to be able to endure loneliness in order to make popular videos. P6, the only full-time uploader in our study, said that he had put all his spare time into video-making during college with almost no other extra-curricular activities. Because of the intensive nature of the work, P12, who’d once made a fan video for his idol, never considered becoming an uploader as he did not think he could afford the time and labor cost of video-making and editing, especially on Bilibili, as it is much higher than on Douyin, even for a video as short as 5 minutes. P6 believed that achieving popularity on the platform required extensive time and labor during which the uploader worked alone. Thus, he made this inference about the offline personality of one of Bilibili’s most influential creators: “For the uploader [anonymized], I think he must be a shy person in reality. If you have a strong presentation online, you will be introverted in reality for sure.” As such, to become an uploader, it takes not only technical skills and an audience-oriented attitude, but also commitment and endurance along with it. Audience-orientation and endurance, then, are the moral norms that define the identity of uploaders, distinguishing them from those who merely upload a video occasionally.

5.2 Continual Professional Development

Being an uploader on Bilibili entails certain professional expertise, which makes it almost exclusive as a profession. P13 spoke from an audience’s perspective and explained why she didn’t consider becoming an uploader:

"You need to be good at all aspects of making a video, if you shoot on your own. You need to have somewhat professional equipment for quality images and stability so that others would be willing to watch, and then, you need editing skills.... To make something on your own, from conceiving at the beginning, designing a plot, and then editing and cutting later on...also the script writing, the use of music...it is quite complex...It takes certain professional expertise to do it...I am not qualified."
This suggests that, compared to other media content, quality video production is perhaps more challenging. In this section, we illustrate how uploaders continually develop their professional expertise through recurrent interactions with the socio-technical structure of the platform.

5.2.1 Stratification and aspiration for better. As uploaders, their levels of influence are stratified and made explicit by the platform, with the number of followers as the primary metrics. Bilibili has adopted various means to certify and reward uploaders who have reached a certain number of followers. P2 described how this system was both a reward and an incentive for more regular updates:

“I got a certificate when I had 6,000 fans... They were saying if you reached over 5,000 fans and if you could update how many videos how often...I forgot the concrete numbers...you would obtain a certificate.”

Our uploader informants also reported how the platform provides all kinds of support based on the number of fans they have, e.g. forming WeChat groups for them to support and learn from each other, providing traffic flow assistance and monetary incentives, giving suggestions for video improvements, and so on. Through this, the platform is able to mentor promising uploaders and help them reach higher levels of influence. It is worth noting here that the monetary incentive that the platform provides is far from sufficient to make a living. P2 described it as pocket money which worked as a subsidy, a view that was representative of how most our uploader informants saw the money. As such, the number of followers an uploader has determines what kinds of services, monetary return, or support they could get from the platform, through which their statuses are gradually stratified.

Our uploader informants saw the stratification feature as a career pathway that could help them try to reach a higher level of status. For example, P1 originally just wanted to make vlogs, but now is working towards increasing her traffic flow. P3 was not satisfied with mere sharing either, and would also like to become bigger and stronger on the platform:

“Making videos is fun for sure, but I am thinking, it is not necessary [to be an uploader] if you just want to ordinarily share your life. [But] that is just mediocre. Since you’ve determined to do it, you should become stronger and bigger.”

For P6, who is a full-time uploader, to move up the stratification levels was a way to deal with the peer pressure and competition in the market. As everyone else is also working hard, and he does not want to feel like he has fallen behind. To him, an increase of followers and influence works as a double-edge sword: on one hand, it makes uploading more rewarding and fulfilling; on the other hand, it also put more pressure on uploaders to produce better quality videos, and to do so more frequently. As a result, the uploader community culture has become one of working hard constantly to always achieve more.

Almost all our uploader informants held a vision that some day they could turn to uploading as their full-time job (although as of now, only P6 had realized this vision). In other words, they were aspirational labors [20], working towards a potential future. P7’s statement was quite representative of our uploader informants’ perspective:

“For future development, probably I will become full-time one day, but currently [I am] no way, no way [near there], and I have to look for a job. I have a vision for sure, but I do not know how to land it, and we will see how I develop.”

P6, who had already achieved this goal, recognized the capricious nature of the industry and did not see his position as stable, and thus his strategy was to always focus on what he is doing and figure out the future later. Our uploader
informants, no matter at what stage, all tried to do better and achieve more in the stratification system set up by the platform.

5.2.2 Regular update and expansion of domain expertise. As already indicated, working as a digital influencer takes not only one popular video but a continuous production of high quality videos. P4 stopped updating for a while, and it was hard for her to become popular again: “If you do not have stable uploading, you will be given up.” P10 confirmed this from an audience’s perspective: “Because you will kick out uploaders. When you browse the new updates, and if you find that this uploader has not been making videos or making terrible ones recently, you will unfollow him, right?” As such, to attract and sustain attention, there must be both continuous and quality uploading. In our study, almost all of our uploader informants reported that they updated regularly, most often weekly. For instance, P5 officially decided to be an uploader this past July, and (at the time of the study) had uploaded weekly since then. In other words, frequent uploading is an unspoken rule for being an uploader, which also requires personal discipline to maintain that regularity.

To have weekly updates of quality videos is not easy, and it pushes our uploaders to actively find a topical area and learn related domain expertise in order to have a stable output over time. P11, as a consumer, offered an observation of the life cycle of some uploaders:

“You can see that once they were very productive, full of energy, updating weekly. As creators, it was like [they were] in their youth, and they were especially popular... And slowly you will find that the issues they want to talk about or the things they care about have all been covered... In a video, [one uploader] said, ‘I am done telling you all my opinions about fashion, and I don’t need to output more’... So I feel their updating is slowing down... It becomes more casual, nothing very purposeful or strong anymore.”

P8 was still in the stage of actively looking for an area she could dig deep into and about which she could create continuous quality content “with steady streams of materials and inspiration.” P4 initially gained popularity by uploading tutorial videos on Han hairstyles, but after 4 years she felt that she needed to expand and deepen her domain of expertise by taking courses in makeup. P2 felt that her vlogs, or videos on everyday life, ensured that she had continuous material as long as she was alive and experiencing new things. However, for vlogs, it was also important to have a distinct character setting or positioning in order to be recognized and remembered by the community. Our informants, who were vlogers, were still actively looking for characteristics to define them. With the unspoken rules of being an uploader such as regular uploading and a sustainable output of quality videos, this is also where a major challenge is in becoming a professional. Stable quality output needs stable quality input, and, for individuals, that requires continuous learning.

5.2.3 Visibility and algorithmic understanding. In addition, to increase traffic flow and followers, uploaders also need to understand the platform and the algorithm that is mediating the videos and traffic flow. It is especially true today, as pointed out by P4, that having high quality videos is only part of the story. To get popular, uploaders also need opportunities for exposure provided by the platform. She had a video about Han clothing snap repairs and was very confident that it would be a hit as it was a topic that no other uploader had covered, but found it got little attention – only hundreds of views – in the first couple of days. In the end, she purchased traffic flow from the platform 4, which helped it become a hit in a couple more days with over 10,000 views.

Our uploader informants learned about the relationship between the platform algorithms and traffic flow primarily after having long-term interactions with it. P5 told us:

4Only uploaders enjoying certain statuses are allowed to purchase traffic flow as a way for promotion.
“Gradually, I become aware of how the recommendation algorithms works on Bilibili. um...Usually in a few hours of my uploading, if I cannot reach to a certain number of views, it will never be recommended by Bilibili again ...it will stop there, within a 1,000 views...it may be recommended to visitors, when it gets to 200 or 600, the first flow...and then the second...it comes in waves, but [it] will [eventually] stop somewhere...”

Still, the algorithm remains puzzling to many. Some informants admitted that they could not explain the sudden popularity of one of their video creations. For example, P8 had a video with a sharp increase of views with over 500,000 accumulated views, but it was just one in a series of videos, so she did not know why it was such a hit. While many uploaders felt that they had a sense of how the algorithm worked, it was moments such as these that reminded them that it could still be unpredictable and was ultimately unknowable. Nonetheless, having knowledge of the platform’s algorithm has become an important part of the uploaders’ professional development as it allows them to better enhance their influence.

5.3 Entanglement of Online and Offline Contexts

Prior literature suggests that UGC is different from PGC in its heavy reliance on offline personal lives or the online performance of private lives [33]. Our study reveals a more complex picture in which the online and offline contexts are mutually constitutive.

5.3.1 Conditioned on individual experiences, capabilities and equipment. As similarly found in previous work [16, 33], uploaders commonly shared their offline personal lives on their videos. Naturally, some experiences were good video-making materials. Tourism, with its differences from day-to-day life, is commonly drawn on for video creation, and P1, P2, and P3 all began making videos when they were on a trip. The contents of living abroad also easily attract attention because many viewers have plans to study or live abroad but are not familiar with where they are going. When P4 went to the US to study, she made videos as she knew they would get views. During the pandemic, she was one of the first students to return to China, and by uploading a video about it, she was able to attract attention. P7 reported how she made her first video simply because she could not find the flour she needed to make bread and had to use an alternative product during Covid-19. She considered this aspect of her life unusual and worth recording.

Rather than just being simply a strategy for audience engagement [15, 25], our uploaders’ video-making is fundamentally life-oriented. That is, at least at their current stage, our uploader participants did not radically change their lives for the sake of making videos. Instead, they carried on with their lives as usual and made videos based on their everyday experiences and interests. Even when they knew that certain topics could be a hit, or become “traffic videos” as they call them, they would not make a video just for the purpose of traffic. P5 put it this way: “If sometimes I happened to experience something that is traffic related, I will do the traffic video, but if not, I will not make traffic videos deliberately.” Of course, while they would not change their lives for the purpose of video-making, the video-making shaped their everyday performance in order to strengthen the audience’s viewing experience. P3 described how she exaggerated her reactions for her videos: “I will do something to enhance the video effects. For instance, I was there for Chinese osteopathy, so I would turn my head...exaggerate my emotional expressions, and so on.” Additionally, when putting their personal lives online, different uploaders have different boundaries in terms of what is appropriate. For example, while P7 thought that making a video about her long distance relationship was all right, her boyfriend thought there were privacy issues and didn’t want this shared online.

However, uploaders don’t just vary according to which life experiences they are willing to share; how uploaders make videos and the topics they cover are dependent on their skills and interests. As P2 summarized:
“Actually I think it depends on everyone as an individual, because everyone has different situations. Some are suitable to do makeup videos, because they have mastered good makeup techniques...For uploaders like me, who have conversational type [of videos], it is important that we are engaging in a conversation. That is, when facing a camera, we act like we are engaging in a conversation with you. If you just recite the script, it will not be good...Um..I took hosting lessons when I was a child, so I am relatively good at it.”

P8 had difficulty when conversing with her audience, and she described herself as having Aphasia when facing the camera, although interestingly, she was totally fine when doing live-streaming. P1 said that she needed practice for things, such as speaking naturally in front of the camera. As such, uploaders’ personal skills and capabilities also greatly contributed to how they presented themselves online.

The uploaders’ video productions were also subject to various constraints, especially since uploading is usually work done alone. As videos are typically made by just one individual, uploaders are limited when it comes to what shots they can take and what content they can offer. For instance, after P8 wrote several scripts, she could not shoot them as she barely had anyone to assist her, e.g. to do camera movements. P4’s original theme was Han hairstyles, but once she had her hair cut, she had to wait for 4 month before she could make her next video. P7, who made videos about food, felt more constraints when living abroad in terms of what items she could feature for advertisements since some local products in China could not be delivered to her. Video quality is also very much dependent on what equipment the uploaders have. For instance, P7 commented that a camera could make a huge difference. She herself used a nice camera, with which, when she was cooking, she could focus on one point with the background blurred. She found that the effects were very soothing. P3 had worked as an assistant for a top uploader, and was enthusiastic about the experience of working with top-of-the-line equipment: "My god! They use the top top top top best series of camera! They have all kinds of lens, fixed lens, virtual lens, and telephoto lens, and so on...So the image is different, right?"

5.3.2 Patterned by cultural and social structures. Uploading is not simply individually, but also culturally and socially, impacted. In our study, we found that it was common for uploaders to leverage their offline socio-cultural capital to increase their influence. For example, some uploader informants were students from renowned universities, and they would use their university’s name to help attract attention. As a student from one of these universities, P1 mainly featured study experiences in her videos, and she found that if she put her university’s name in the tags, it would get more views. P5, also from a well-recognized university, confirmed such an effect. Other forms of cultural capital were also employed, such as generational symbols. P1 shared a story of how one of her uploader friends leveraged her birth date strategically:

“She was born in 2000 (and I was born in 1999)... although we go to school together and we are in the same graduate class... she will talk about the post-2000 generation’s romantic ideas. Things like that will usually receive a high number of views.”

As such, cultural and social capital, such as an institution’s name or a birth date, was leveraged by our uploaders to draw attention to their videos and increase their influence.

Moreover, the uploaders’ offline social relationships helped boost their accounts and motivated their video-making. P1, P5, and P6 all talked about how their classmates and friends helped by clicking on, following, and forwarding their videos as a way to show support, which had helped them get started. Many of P5’s videos were about several of his close friends hanging out together, and they were part of the reason why he made videos – for them to watch. P6 was also directly influenced by one of his classmates to start video-making:
"In my class, there was a classmate...he liked playing games, and liked making videos of game playing and uploading them. When I saw it, I thought it was fun, so I started to do it...I will do it together with him, and it is good for us to do it together."

Similarly, P2 and P1 were good friends, and they often interacted with each other and shared experiences for their videos. At the same time, the uploaders also needed to find ways for their roles as uploaders to fit into the existing offline social structure. Most of our informants started creating videos when they were still students. In China, full concentration on schoolwork is strictly required by both the school and parents, and other activities are not allowed to interfere. As such, video-making would hardly be permitted. When he started uploading in high school, P6 chose to do it behind his parents’ back. Even though his uploading has already been revealed to his parents and accepted as a way to make a living, he still deleted most of the videos he made in high school and only left the one he made during the winter holiday as a way to say “It was made during a break, [and didn’t] interfere with [my] studies.” As a college student, P1 still needed to justify her uploading to her parents by saying it was related to her journalism major:

“They will say, will it interfere with your studies? I say, This is [for] my major. This is for me to do practice with the media, otherwise how can I know the media ecology?”

However, as more and more people succeed in turning online content creation into a full-time job, older family members have also gradually become more accepting of uploading as a practice and as an actual career rather than just viewing it as goofing around.

6 DISCUSSION

In the preceding sections, we traced the bottom-up professionalization process of Bilibili uploaders with various levels of popularity. Through the process, as they moved from consuming to uploading, these individuals came to identify with the social meaning of being an uploader, changed their attitude from self- to audience-oriented, became self-disciplined to regularly post videos, and enhanced their professional-technical expertise. This was all done through continuous interactions with their personal strengths and interests, the socio-technical structure of the Bilibili community, and the socio-cultural patterns of offline reality, as opposed to the existence of specific institutional guidelines, rules, and moral causes put in place to steer them. To sum up, we uncovered a trajectory people undergo as they assumed the role of an uploader, moving from more personal and random video-sharing practices to more formalized and structured ones. If we consider a profession to be an ideology essentially defined by a knowledge base, technical competency, and service ideals, what we’ve unpacked here is a process of people working towards that ideology. Moreover, professionalization is a process without a predetermined end. As shown in the case of P6, uploaders will continue the process of professionalization in order to stay competitive in the market and aim for higher influence even after they have achieved the full-time occupational status.

This bottom-up process of professionalization is essentially more individualized, and distinct from the traditional, organizationally-driven and occupation-based professionalization process. We have focused on this particular group of uploaders, who we can characterize as in an early stage of their development. They do not represent all uploaders at all stages on the platform, and not all Bilibili uploaders will go through this professionalization process. Clearly, our informants are not comparable to the more successful micro-celebrities in terms of resources, level of commitment, and expertise, e.g. uploaders working with MCNs and with their own crews (such as Dao Yue She [62] and Bi Dao THU [67]). Nevertheless, this particular group allowed us to identify an emerging kind of professionalization process that was uncommon in a more traditional economy, but is likely playing an increasingly more important role in today’s...
In this section, drawing inspiration from identity theory as well as Wilensky’s notion of profession and professionalization, we look at individualized professionalization as a concept to understand the new professional development, as well as the new meanings of work and professional identity, enabled in a digitally-mediated world. We then draw on the case of Bilibili to discuss implications for design to support the process.

6.1 Individualized Professionalization

In the Bilibili community, the uploader role is distinct but also relational to the role of audience. The audience has existed since the early stage of the platform when it featured free animation videos, which enjoyed wide popularity among young Internet users. The uploader, on the other hand, is a new identity recently emerged through social interactions, with its own set of meanings that define who one is when one is occupant of this particular role called uploader [8].

Individualized professionalization denotes a process in which individuals, through digitally mediated interactions, come to recognize the meaning and norms of a certain type of work (video creation and sharing in this study), assume the role, and develop professional competency based on their personal strengths and other resources. It has long been acknowledged that professional identities are continuously constructed and challenged and that the meaning of work is established through interactions with customers, other co-workers, and managers [13, 28, 30, 50]. However, it is worth noting that the construction and development of the professional identities of uploaders did not start from an occupational role, but emerged from preexisting personal identities, such as student, game player, and fitness practitioner. As Brydges and Sjoholm pointed out, the key distinction between traditional labor and labor 2.0 is that the latter is initiated and organized by the laborer himself or herself, and not by an organization [7].

Our study also showed that it is the individualized nature of this work that determines what professional status uploaders can achieve. First of all, it puts limits on how productive they can be. As already observed by our audience informants, there exists a certain life cycle to the individual uploader – while very productive and energetic at the beginning stage, they gradually run out of material and become more casual and less productive over time. Making one popular video is hard, but continuously making popular videos is even harder. Different from established organizations that have proven methods to manage their output and growth, an individual can only ensure enough output by continually expanding his or her own knowledge base. This is clearly a key challenge the uploader informants in our study faced, especially those sharing experiences and expertise focused on one domain or area. As such, while any business has its life cycle, the life cycle of an individual business is defined by more limitations. After all, an individual only has so much time and energy. Even more so, as shown in the study, content creation is individual work, with no labor division, which limits what kinds of skills uploaders can leverage, what kinds of shots they can take, and what kinds of themes they can explore. While individuals are able to enjoy the creative autonomy of various aspects of video-making, it also sets limits on the kind of videos they can make, which are further determined by the specifics of their own situation.

We contend that it is the individualized nature of the work that distinguishes UGC from PGC, rather than the degree of professional quality, as is commonly assumed. As such, while today’s digital media technologies allow ordinary individuals to easily produce and provide content online, and we observed a professionalization process taking place, we do not mean to imply that the UGC produced by these individuals will ever be comparable to PGCs. The difference is not simply between amateurs and professionals, but between individual and collective/organizational work.
6.2 Contextualizing Individualized Professionalization

By emphasizing the individualized nature of the work, we are not suggesting that such professionalization happens in a vacuum. Rather, the process hinges on the uploaders’ continuous interactions and negotiations with the platform, as well as their broader social and cultural contexts. First, recommendation algorithms play a large role in the visibility and popularity of uploaders, but the algorithm’s processes, while somewhat predictable, remain largely opaque to them. Consequently, in our participants’ experiences, there is much uncertainty and perceived randomness in terms of who gets featured by the platform. The precarious nature of their digital labor resonates with user interactions with large, complex systems in numerous contexts, such as YouTubers dealing with various moderation algorithms [47] and gamblers’ experiences with slot machines [19], and intersects with users’ perceived agency and autonomy in complex ways.

Second, our uploader informants’ professionalization process and Bilibili’s unique community-based culture are co-constitutive, a key distinction from highly institutionalized and commercialized UGC platforms. For example, YouTube, following its acquisition by Google, has transitioned into a hybrid cultural-commercial infrastructure [45], in which YouTubers get to monetize their content through both the YouTube Partner Program and MCN agencies. Different from this concentrated attention to commercialization, Bilibili targets a primarily Chinese audience and puts a lot of emphasis on fostering a community culture through support for creativity and identity-building mechanisms. If the professionalization of YouTubers is to embrace monetization and become an entrepreneur, the professionalization of Bilibili uploaders balances the platform’s orientation towards community with monetization. On one hand, monetization is a key aspect of the professionalization, especially for those aspiring to become full-time uploaders; on the other hand, the uploaders must maintain a community-first, monetization-second image in front of their audience [73]. As such, the moral norms of being an uploader do not discourage monetization in its entirety, but dictate how uploaders are able to monetize.

Finally, as shown in the study, our uploader informants’ offline social contexts and networks play an important role in their uploading practices and the construction of their uploader identities, just as it has been found that a supportive social context and network can be highly valuable for the professionalization of creative industry entrepreneurs [41].

In fact, considering the individualized nature of the work helps us to understand the complex relationship between uploading as a profession, or rather, an online presentation, and offline social contexts and networks. The inconsistency between online and offline personal presentations often invokes negative connotations of content producers [4]. However, if we understand that the creator is just an individual with limited time and energy to present himself or herself in both online and offline spaces, we can understand that these two spaces are intertwined – the online and offline presentations rely on each other, and at the same time the more time and energy spent on the presentation in one space leads to less time and energy in the other. That is, online popularity relies on lengthy offline work done alone, and as such, one can even infer an uploader’s offline lifestyle simply based on his online presentation.

Based on our study, we suggest that individualized professionalization can offer a fruitful lens through which to understand the new form of professional development facilitated by digital technologies, characterized as more bottom-up, individualized, and community-based than the more occupation-oriented, organizationally-driven and training-based process of traditional professionalization.
6.3 Implications: Supporting Individualized Professionalization

Our study yields several design implications for UGC platforms to support individualized professionalization. First, platforms could consider ways to foster and cultivate a community-based culture for members to easily share their experiences and give honest feedback. The subculture origin of Bilibili, as well as the fact that a majority of its members are young and in a similar life stage means that their video work, whether subculture or life-oriented, can easily resonate among their peer members and help them build self-esteem so they begin to identify with the role of the uploader. Through the concept of “a looking-glass self,” Cooley emphasized that one of the main ways we come to understand who we are is through others’ reactions, or “reflected appraisals,” not unlike how we look in a mirror [12]. William James made an important point about self-esteem [32], which is defined as a function of one’s achievements and aspirations, and he noted that if one’s aspirations are low, then even a modest achievement can boost one’s self-esteem. As shown in our study, receiving their peers’ appraisal, especially sometimes in the form of private messages, greatly boosted the uploaders’ self-esteem and helped them to appreciate the social significance of uploading, ultimately leading them to identify and assume the uploader role. That is, when feedback that could more or less reflect the value of their work for the community was given, it allowed them to recognize and take up the role as well as the corresponding moral norms leading to more professional productions. Thus, UGC platforms could consider fostering core communal values and features that foster meaningful, constructive communication between content creators and their viewers.

Second, the bottom-up professionalization process also means that people are drawn to uploading to fulfill their interests, not merely for monetary gain. The demographic background of Bilibili users explains why the site provides a fertile ground for the bottom-up professionalization of the uploader. Since most of Bilibili’s users started using the platform when young, and many of the uploaders in our study are still students using their spare time for video-making, the uploaders are more relaxed and have less pressure in terms of making a living on their own. They mainly come to the platform for fun or play, not to make money, and when opportunities for financial return present themselves, many adopt an attitude of “let’s try and see”. For our participants, a financial reward was only part of the story, as they all have a personal interest in video-making, indicated in the community’s slogan “uploading for love”. This is to say, they will work, try things out, spend time developing and growing, and then explore whether they would like to turn video-making into a full-time occupation, as opposed to deciding to do so beforehand. With this population, the natural professionalization process towards an occupation becomes more pronounced. Thus, UGC platforms do not need to focus on transforming all content creators into full-time professionals. Instead, even for those who only occasionally create quality videos, UGC platforms could provide community-oriented incentives, in order to make amateur content creation more rewarding, not simply financially but also socially.

Third, besides their peers’ written feedback, the automatically-produced and readily available digital traces also provided the uploaders with important cues to keep them on the right track with their videos and help them with the continuous improvement of their expertise and skills for professional development. Previous work illustrates how audiences motivate and evaluate productions, as well as inspire individuals to become more active participants [11, 64], and we also highlight the important roles played by the digital traces left by audience members for the uploaders’ active participation and improvement. As shown in our study, Bilibili uploaders typically draw heavily on the digital traces that are automatically and immediately produced by the platform for analysis: how many viewers clicked on the video; how long they watched; as indicated by Damu, where the video invoked the most interest; how many viewers decided to follow them after watching, and so on. Our uploaders drew on digital traces like these to interpret how well their
videos were received and to get a sense of what direction they should take next. Moreover, the digital traces, particularly their number of followers, also made visible the different levels of digital influence, which the platforms’ certification and support mechanisms made even more explicit. Here, on one hand, this seems to confirm that “professions are an integral part of our system of social stratification” [69]. On the other hand, it also suggests social stratification, naturally signaled through digital traces, could be an integral part of professionalization, motivating and driving people to continually increase their competency and to progress towards a higher level. Thus, UGC platforms could consider ways to integrate both audience-generated feedback, automatic or written, and quantitative metrics for the creators’ growth.

Finally, it is important to have a shared repertoire from which people can draw on real work samples to learn and grow. Bilibili is, before anything else, a shared work site, around which people gather together to create, share, and watch videos. As shown in our study, these videos are not only there for an audience to watch, but also as an important shared repertoire [68] for creators to use to get inspired, analyze, and learn from. With this broad user base, the platform has gathered all kinds of videos that cover a broader range of topics than most people can imagine, including “how to” videos [44] which uploaders are commonly drawn to in order to acquire video-making skills. The work-sharing site itself is very supportive of creative skill development [48], and when the shared repertoires are combined with audience feedback, it provides a basis from which uploaders can analyze the correlations between different kinds of content and audience responses, providing clues in terms of how to improve their work. Thus, it could be beneficial if platforms could provide tools to help easily locate and analyze the compositions of exceptional quality work, ideally combined with digital traces as feedback, to further support these learning and analytic practices.

Today, digital technologies have increasingly played mediating roles in work and the delivery of services, between ride-sharing’s riders and drivers, renters and landlords, microwork requesters and workers, as well as the content producers and viewers that we focus on here. Different from gig work, the work we’ve labeled as “creative” is relatively more self-driven, with products and services being made based on creators’ own ideas. However, as shown in our study, through social interactions online, the viewers’ interests and experiences are also important factors that uploaders need to take into account when making videos. To some extent, it is similar to user-centered design in HCI [2]. However, what is noteworthy is that this service ideal is not taught in the training rooms. Instead, the creative individuals in our study learned it from making videos and receiving audience feedback online. In this respect, fostering a community-based culture, and allowing creators to face clients and customers directly, rather than enforcing it from the outside, appears an effective approach for them to adopt such an attitude.

7 LIMITATIONS

Our study’s interviewee sample only included early-stage, amateur uploaders who had recently started creating videos on Bilibili. The findings were able to characterize the uploaders’ professionalization process as “individualized” as they lacked institutional support for professional learning and growth. However, individualized professionalization may no longer hold for established uploaders supported by institutional resources, such as media studios and MCN agencies. Future work could look into the professionalization practices across the amateur/expert spectrum to gain a fuller understanding of professionalization at Bilibili and beyond.

8 CONCLUSIONS

Profession and professionalization are rather old terms, mainly used to describe how an existing occupation achieved a high level, or even exclusive level, of social status. However, when we recognize a knowledge base, technical
competency, and a service ideal as essential elements to define such status, and professionalization as a way to achieve that status, we find it could be fruitfully adapted to shed new light on understanding the individual development process that is taking place in contemporary digital media environments. In this paper, we present a study of Bilibili uploaders, as the informants presented in this study, eventually progress towards a larger team with more institutional support, which will engender a more traditional professionalization process? We do not yet know. With individuals going through and the limits it sets for the professional status they can achieve, that is becoming increasingly common in today’s digital media environment.

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