

The Construction of Distributed Trust on Bilibili Under the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This study explores the construction of distributed trust under today's networked environment. Focusing on diaspora micro-influencers' COVID-19-related videos on Bilibili, this study aims to explore: How platform-specific features of Bilibili enhance the construction of distributed trust; the dynamics among a diversity of sources on trust building; and the ways in which the content of uploaders' videos and users' comments contribute to the formation of distributed trust. The results show that user participation, particularly participatory surveillance enabled by platform-specific features, plays a key role in the construction of distributed trust. Although it has new characteristics, we can also see that the formation of distributed trust is not a replacement of the old model but only an outcome of its transformation and evolvement.

Keywords: distributed trust, trust building, social media platforms, Bilibili, COVID-19

In the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic, which forced most people to stay at home, many individuals have turned to social media not only for entertainment but also for essential health information and guidance. As Limaye and colleagues (2020) suggest, unlike past pandemics, COVID-19 occurred in a highly digitalized world in which almost everyone is virtually connected through social networks. In China, Bilibili, one of the most popular video-sharing platforms, has quickly emerged as one of the leading channels for entertainment and communication during the time of lockdown and self-quarantine. According to Bilibili's 2020 Annual Report on Environment, Society, and Governance (Bilibili, 2021) published on July 28, 2021, the platform received a total of 530,000 video uploads related to COVID-19 in 2020. Other 2020 statistics are also striking: The average monthly number of video submissions reached 5.6 million, a 115% year-over-year increase; and the average monthly active uploaders (known as Up主 on Bilibili) increased by 96% year-over-year to 1.8 million.

Among uploaders on Bilibili, diaspora micro-influencers, migrants with 1 to 100,000 followers who produce content in the language of their home countries on social media platforms, have become

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one of the highlights of Bilibili (Zhang & Zhao, 2020). They tend to produce videos related to COVID-19 including local health and journalistic information as well as personal experiences about the pandemic for audiences in their home countries who do not have access to the local media because of a lack of linguistic proficiency and tightened media control. As Feng (2020) indicates, those videos uploaded by diaspora micro-influencers on Bilibili can be seen as a supplement to the top-down governmental narratives on overseas outbreaks since these videos recorded the pandemic from a personal perspective.

As van Dijck and Alinejad (2020) argue, social media networks are a double-edged sword in a global pandemic: They have the potential to spread essential health information, enhance public engagement, and keep the public physically and mentally safe; at the same time, they can also be weaponized to spread misinformation and destabilize institutional trust. This is especially true in an increasingly digitalized world where the flow of information has shifted from a linear to networked model. As a central power in this shift, the growing dominance of social media platforms not only changes *whom* and *what* to trust, but more importantly *how* trust is built in the digital age (van Dijck & Alinejad, 2020). This phenomenon is more evident during the pandemic, as many individuals place their trust in complete strangers (e.g., micro-influencers) on social media as sources of information. The recent popularity of COVID-19-related videos on Bilibili shows that the shift of communication from one-to-many to many-to-many has further transformed the structure of trust from a "hierarchical top-down orientation to a more horizontal one," with people preferring local and personal sources as more trustworthy (Osburg & Heinecke, 2019, p. 22). This method of acquiring and validating information among individuals in networks tends to contrast with trust in traditional media, in which professional institutions with specialized knowledge are often responsible for information dissemination and validation. Botsman (2018) refers to this new trust model that is driven by new technologies as "distributed trust" and emphasizes the fact that "trust can now flow directly between individuals without the need for traditional institutions" (para. 1). Building trust on social media is key in facilitating public engagement and participation, as well as ensuring that accurate information is disseminated rather than an infodemic during the global crisis (Limaye et al., 2020).

With the increasing number of active users on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic, much less is known about how trust is built within the context of a distributed mediascape where there is a transformation from a centralized and hierarchy-based trust to a decentralized and networked-based trust (Osburg & Heinecke, 2019). Although academic studies concerning trust building on social media platforms have been conducted, these studies are largely from cognitive and digital marketing perspectives (Chen, Liu, Liu, Chang, & Yen, 2021; Kang, 2010; Merz, 2019; Sundar, 2008). For instance, focusing on relationship marketing between vloggers and viewers under the commitment-trust theory, Chen and associates (2021) explore different factors (e.g., expertise, self-disclosure, social and physical attractiveness) under the moderation of trust on three Chinese social media platforms—Weibo, TikTok, and Bilibili. The results reveal that trust shows a moderating effect on relationship commitment between viewers and vloggers and on purchase intention. Although these studies can shed light on the relevance and impact of different factors on trust building in the context of social media, they ignore the role of technology-enabled interactive features as well as the dynamics among a diversity of sources (e.g., platform, uploaders, users) in the construction of trust. In addition, although the platform Bilibili has recently drawn much academic attention, most media scholars focus on the nature and functions of

danmu interface on the platform (Hsiao, 2015; Yang, 2020; Zhang & Cassany, 2020) and the subculture phenomenon (e.g., youth culture, participatory culture, fansubbing community) derived from the platform (Chen, 2021; Lu & Lu, 2021b; Yin & Fung, 2017). Of particular concern in this present context is the lack of recent research on media platformization and audience reception studies on Bilibili during the COVID-19 crisis (Schneider, 2021; Zhang & Zhang, 2020). Schneider (2021) discusses the political implications of Bilibili on the creation of “networks of socio-technical engagement that generate recursive feedback loops of community sentiments” (p. 62) during the COVID-19 crisis. The study highlights the power of platform mechanics, including the default setting, *danmu*, and the mobilization of nationalist sentiments. With the aim of exploring the impact of COVID-19 on the content production of we-media and the actual audience’s reception of these videos, Zhang and Zhang (2020) focus particularly on gourmet videos on Bilibili. The content analysis reveals that gourmet videos have been modified in different ways, for instance, by relating the content to social problems and personal experience caused by COVID-19, to attract audiences.

To the best of our knowledge, the issue of trust building on the social media platform Bilibili has not been addressed either within trust building research or Bilibili platform research. To bridge this gap, this study explores the construction of distributed trust on Bilibili by drawing on van Dijck and Alinejad’s (2020) networked model of knowledge communication and Metzger and Flanagin’s (2008) analytical framework of trust in the digital age. Focusing on diaspora micro-influencers’ COVID-19-related videos, this study aims to explore how platform-specific features of Bilibili enhance the construction of distributed trust; the dynamics among a diversity of sources (e.g., the platform, users, and uploaders); and the ways in which the content of uploaders’ videos and users’ comments contribute to the building of distributed trust. We hope the results of this study can enhance our understanding of the way distributed trust is built in this rapidly evolving digital world and call for more future research on the construction of distributed trust on social medial platforms.

Trust in the Digital Age

Trust is generally considered to be social glue and is a foundation for social cohesion and order (Liu & Lu, 2020). In media and communication studies, trust is often defined as “the believability of information,” depending on the expertise and trustworthiness of the source and message of information (Flanagin & Metzger, 2014, p. 2). According to Botsman (2017), trust has evolved through three main stages in human history: First, local trust based on one-to-one interactions in small local communities; second, institutional trust, which is an intermediated trust depending on institutions and organizations that create an essential foundation for an organized industrial society; and third, distributed trust, referring to trust that “flows laterally between individuals, enabled by networks, platforms and systems” (p. 258). From professionals to “people like me” and from top-down centralized institutions to decentralized networks, the growing prominence of distributed trust does not mean the other types of trust have completely disappeared; only that the new type takes a more dominant position (Botsman, 2017, p. 19). This transformation from institutional to distributed trust can be further explained by the networked model of knowledge communication proposed by van Dijck and Alinejad (2020), which is shown in Figure 1.

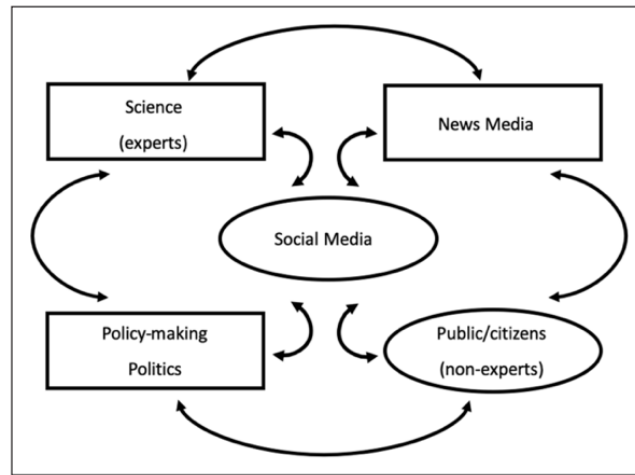


Figure 1. The networked model of knowledge communication van Dijck and Alinejad (2020) proposed (p. 3).

Driven by advances in networked digital technologies, the institutional model of knowledge communication, based on “linear vectors of information flows” among professional institutions, has gradually transformed into a networked model, where social media plays a central role in facilitating the flow of information among all relevant participants, including scientists, news media, government authorities, and the public (van Dijck & Alinejad, 2020, p. 1). As Figure 1 shows, the once hegemonic status of professionals in informing news media and government authorities has been disrupted because social media platforms give all individuals opportunities to disseminate information. This phenomenon undermines traditional trust hierarchies as a new trust model has gradually been established in which trust does not necessarily require direct mediation by professional organizations or the government. This establishment of a new trust model has been evident in the popularity of social media platforms like Bilibili during the COVID-19 pandemic. Networked technologies allow users to interact with others like never before and have enabled people to put their trust in peers, friends, or even strangers to acquire essential health information. However, this does not mean that the formation of distributed trust among individuals on social media platforms is not linked with other participants since these participants are “interrelated parts of an information and communication system” (van Dijck & Alinejad, 2020, p. 4). Participants such as government authorities and news media still play a role in the formation of distributed trust. It is the dynamic activities among these participants that ensure that trust not only exists among people in the community but also exists in the platform, which is a key element that distinguishes distributed trust from other types of trust (Botsman, 2017). This is evident in the regulatory system of Bilibili and the remix of scientific evidence and data graphs from news media in uploaders’ videos, which will be discussed in detail in the data analysis section.

This study draws on Metzger and Flanagin’s (2008) three dimensions of trust in the digital age as a framework to explore the construction of distributed trust in Bilibili. According to Metzger and Flanagin (2008), trust in media can be conceptualized in three dimensions: Source, the place or person that provides the information; medium, the channel used to disseminate the information; and message, the communicated content itself, including the quality, accuracy, use of evidence, authority, and currency of the information.

Compared with the traditional media environment where “there were typically a limited number of sources and high barriers for access to the public dissemination of information,” the nature of the information provider in the digital age has shifted as anyone can be the source of information (Flanagin & Metzger, 2014, p. 3). The information provider is no longer a single source but a wide variety of sources since information production and dissemination have become easier than ever before. Furthermore, digital technologies have provided users with huge opportunities to create and disseminate information to a larger audience all over the world, which is evident in the rise of user-generated content (UGC) on social media platforms.

Because of this dynamic of a networked environment, people often do not distinguish between the source and the medium of information since networked technologies have altered people’s ability to determine these concepts (Metzger & Flanagin, 2008). For example, videos uploaded by influencers on social media platforms can have at least three sources: Influencers who create the message, the social media platform through which the video is disseminated, and users who select the video for commenting or sharing. The boundaries between these three concepts tend to be even more blurred by technology-enabled participatory features. As we will show in the data analysis section, users who are enabled by platform-specific features (e.g., *danmu*) can also be seen as one source of a message.

Research Method

About Bilibili

Initially a fan-created platform for animation, comics, and games (ACG), Bilibili, also known as B 站 (B site), has become the largest youth culture community and one of the leading video-sharing platforms in China (Chen, 2020). In addition to its deep-rooted cultural orientation toward ACG and free access to all content, Bilibili distinguishes itself from other online video platforms in China (e.g., Youku, iQiyi) through its emphasis on UGC and user participation (Yang, 2020). Driven by the development of digital technologies, interactive features like *danmu* have become a signature of the platform. These features not only allow ordinary people to participate in the production and dissemination of content but also encourage its users to communicate with other users and establish social ties with each other on the platform (Lu & Lu, 2021a). The sense of participation and interactivity achieved through technology-enabled features strengthens the bonds between the platform and the users, and between the uploaders and the users. This contributes to creating a sense of co-creation atmosphere within the community. Bilibili’s active user participation and diversity of interactive features offer a great opportunity to study the construction of distributed trust, which can inform our understanding of how trust is built in today’s networked media environment.

Data Collection

Following a manual search for keywords including *haiwai yiqing* (海外疫情—overseas epidemic), *xinguan* (新冠—COVID-19), *meiguo yiqing* (美国疫情—U.S. epidemic), *yidali yiqing* (意大利疫情—Italy epidemic), and *yingguo yiqing* (英国疫情—U.K. epidemic), and based on platform recommendations on Bilibili, six videos (19 min 37 s) were collected from four Chinese diaspora micro-influencers located in countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Italy. The inclusion of these countries in the keyword search was due to the fact that they were among the countries with the highest number of cases

at the beginning of the pandemic and had attracted more attention than other countries. Six videos are included in this study since they are the top videos created by the micro-influencers (1–100k followers) under manual keyword search at the time of this study, which was from August to October 2021. Table 1 shows the detailed information for each video. In this study, the reason for focusing on the top videos recommended by the platform is that these videos usually “guide how most users experience these environments” (Schneider, 2021, p. 52) and thus tend to have more forms of user participation (e.g., posting comments, *danmu*), which provide a condition for analyzing the construction of distributed trust on the platform. The data in this study also include viewers’ *danmu* and comments since the consumption of *danmu* and comment is as important as consuming video content. These comments can also be seen as the source of information that inevitably shapes users’ trust building on the actual content. Since the platform does not allow downloading *danmu* directly, we watched each *danmu* by using the *danmu* list next to the video interface. Because of time limitations, we took screenshots of only the top three comments under each video. We watched each video and took notes in terms of the content (e.g., personal experiences, authoritative information, criticisms on local policies).

Table 1. The Six Selected Videos.

Video	Video Title	Uploader	Upload Date	Views	Followers (by Nov 2021)
1	“This is the funniest news in the US during the pandemic, the Super Bowl comes to an end!” (Li Sanjin Alex, 2021a)	Li Sanjin Alex	09/02/2021	275,000	59,000
2	“Why are Americans so anti-vaccine? Watch this video and you’ll know.” (Li Sanjin Alex, 2021b)	Li Sanjin Alex	20/01/2021	300,000	59,000
3	“Brits: Sunny day and we’re going out!! British police: Heartbroken.” (Things in the UK, 2020)	Things in the UK	05/04/2020	63,000	78,000
4	“Racism in the UK during the epidemic: Tell me to go back to China, see how I fight back.” (Small talk about UK by Xiong Ge, 2020)	Small talk about UK by Xiong Ge	12/05/2020	1,652,000	4,987
5	“Why are more and more overseas Chinese	Li Sanjin Alex	03/12/2020	27,700	59,000

	in the US no longer taking the pandemic seriously? Is it because of numbness?" (Li Sanjin Alex, 2020)				
6	"Italy's death toll caused by the COVID-19 has surpassed China, 40% of the population are still wandering the streets! The real situation of the pandemic in Italy." (Yingzi Steffy, 2020)	Yingzi Steffy	24/03/2020	84,000	3,551

Data Analysis

Medium: Platform-Specific Features of Bilibili

Our analysis took into account Metzger and Flanagin's (2008) three dimensions of trust in the digital age. The boundaries between these three dimensions are not mutually exclusive and therefore, they were analyzed separately in this study only for focus and clarity. We focused primarily on the platform-specific features of Bilibili and how they contribute to enhancing the construction of distributed trust on the platform. As Sundar (2008) notes, the affordance of interactivity dramatically distinguishes digital media from traditional media. Technology-enabled interactive features play a key role in the construction of trust in a networked digital environment as existing research has found that users tend to have high levels of trust when a social media platform offers a greater level of interactivity and allows easy and efficient retrieval of additional messages (Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, & McCann, 2003; Yang & Lim, 2009). On Bilibili, the interface of an uploader's video contains two main parts: The video interface and the comment section. Figure 2 shows the video interface, which contains several interactive features at the bottom, including likes, B coins, saves, and shares.



Figure 2. The video interface of Bilibili (*Things in the UK, 2020*).

The B coins feature is a unique affordance on Bilibili. Users can only earn coins by logging into the platform every day or by uploading videos on the platform. Unlike the monetization scheme on other social media platforms such as the YouTube Partner Program on YouTube (Kopf, 2020), B coins do not bring direct revenue to the uploaders. The feature allows its users to send coins, though these have no monetary value, to uploaders to express their support and acknowledgment of the content. Although the specific logic underlying Bilibili's algorithm is unknown to the public, the platform indicates that while other video platforms put more emphasis on the number of views, Bilibili has a strong emphasis on the quality of content in its recommendation algorithm, with coins, saves, and shares being given more weight than the number of views. While it is unknown whether the ongoing technological development will further transform the platform from a social networking site into a service ecosystem that involves larger economic action (Alaimo, Kallinikos, & Valderrama, 2020), for now, this B-coin feature not only increases user participation but also contributes to optimizing Bilibili's recommendation algorithm based on user feedback, prioritizing good content and further building a good community atmosphere.

These "surface features," as Sundar (2008) notes, have a profound influence on the construction of trust (p. 76). Users tend to be more attracted by these technology-enabled affordances of interactivity and agency so they can access the quality and credibility of information. Metzger and colleagues (2003) refer to these surface features as dimensions of attractiveness and dynamism and argue that entertaining interactive features and a diversity of choices can all have positive effects on users' building of trust. Additionally, the openness and convenience of interactivity on the platform are reflected not only in the positioning of these features (i.e., right below the video) but also in the newly created "one button three

clicks” (一键三连) function, which allows users to simultaneously like, send coins, and save an uploader’s video by pressing and holding the “like” button. These features also encourage users to participate in the construction of a type of social endorsement or collective endorsement, which is a “fundamentally network phenomenon” that is central to trust building (Metzger & Flanagin, 2008, p. 10). The number of endorsements, such as likes, B coins, shares, and saves, can influence trust building because users tend to have the thought that “if others think that it is a good story, then I should think so too” (Sundar, 2008, p. 83). Based on the data of what other users like and support, users can then make quick decisions on the quality and trustworthiness of uploaders’ videos. Unlike the construction of trust in traditional media, which derives more from a source’s qualifications and expertise, trust in networked social media platforms like Bilibili relies more on social or collective endorsement by many users, achieved through technology-enabled interactive features.

The *danmu* feature, which enables real-time bullet comments and remains one of the most popular interactive features on Bilibili, also plays a key role in constructing distributed trust on the platform. This feature allows users to communicate directly with uploaders as well as other users. As Yang (2020) notes, unlike most online video platforms where the comment section is often positioned under the video interface and “the viewing of media content and discussions of it remained two separate things” (p. 254) the *danmu* feature on Bilibili enables a truly interactive experience that tends to be more live and socially engaging. When users open a video, the *danmu* feature is turned on by default, which not only increases ease of participation but can also elicit more responses from viewers. Viewers are encouraged to join the discussion and leave comments rather than being 路人 (passersby, a term used by netizens to refer to viewers who solely watch and leave). This way of encouraging users to express and exchange opinions on videos they watch enables all users to become assessors of the content anytime and anywhere. The *danmu* feature can thus contribute to increasing the perceived socialness of the platform, which is an important element in establishing a sustainable trust relationship between the user and the platform and in turn further increases users’ intention to the action of self-disclosure (Zarouali, Brosius, Helberger, & De Vreese, 2021). Because *danmu* is kept for archiving and viewers will often watch a video with comments from previous viewers, users thus become a source of information and their feedback on the content can then influence other users’ trust building on the video. In addition, the real-time interactivity of *danmu* also has positive effects on users’ trust building since the real-time affordance can “create an authentic experience while being geographically stationary,” and people tend to have high levels of trust on real-time activities in a virtual environment (Sundar, 2008, p. 87).

Under the video interface is the comment section, as shown in Figure 3. The comments in this section tend to be longer and more well-thought-out feedback than *danmu* on uploaders’ videos (Wu, 2020). The top three comments in this section are the ones that have received the most likes, emphasizing the importance of social endorsement and its role in users’ construction of trust.



Figure 3. The comment section under Video 4 (Nuomisansan, 2020).

As social media platforms become increasingly interactive, users are now participating in the production of collective media content. Metzger and Flanagin (2008) indicate that the real value of interactivity is in giving users the opportunity to move beyond being just receivers to also being sources of information. These interactive features on Bilibili, or what Picone and associates (2019) term “small acts of engagement” (e.g., commenting, liking, sharing), enable the construction of trust among individuals, reflecting the very nature of distributed trust in the digital age (p. 2011). As our analysis demonstrates, through mutual interactions and social endorsement, a new way of building trust among individuals has been established in the digital age that greatly differs from traditional media.

Source: Dynamics Among Different Sources

In this section, we focus primarily on the ways in which various Bilibili community rules govern the dynamic activities among the three sources (i.e., the platform, users, and uploaders) as well as how they impact the construction of distributed trust. The networked model in Figure 1 shows that governance is an essential element in the communication system because of its potential impact on other participants involved. Unlike traditional media that often rely on top-down regulations, social media platforms tend to adopt more “complex and coregulatory governance frameworks” (Flew, 2019, p. 4746). The following discussion shows some examples from Bilibili.

As stated in Bilibili’s (2020) Annual Report on Environment, Society and Governance, trust building is one of the corporate values of the Bilibili platform, which pays high attention to the legality and rationality of its content as well as strictly complies with relevant regulations and laws. Uploaders are required to follow the *Bilibili Creation Conventions* (Bilibili, 2019a) shown in Figure 4. The conventions are based on the *Provisions on the Governance of the Online Information Content Ecosystem* approved by the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC). The link to the official website of CAC is also listed at the bottom of the conventions, providing authoritative evidence for the review process of the platform. As Fisher, Flew, Park, Lee, and Dulleck (2020) note, the inclusion of links to authoritative sources can enhance disclosure transparency and thus improve the trustworthiness of the source. The provisions issued by CAC list not only the regulations regarding content production and user interactions but also those governing the

management of the online platform itself. As can be seen, although Bilibili has been introducing its own regulatory structures on content and user behavior, it is still in a heteronomous position with regard to the state's governance. This combination of self-regulation and government regulation, as Cusumano, Gawer, and Yoffie (2021) argue, might produce better outcomes than invasive government intervention alone in the digital age.



Figure 4. Screenshot of Bilibili Creation Conventions (Bilibili, 2019a).

According to the *Bilibili Creation Conventions*, nine types of content are strictly forbidden on the platform. One convention that is most relevant to the focus of this study is that the platform prohibits the publication of rumors and inaccurate information that are contrary to the facts, fabricated, or not based on facts. The platform adopts a two-tier content-review process to thoroughly review the content in videos, comments, and *danmu* to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the information on the platform. The uploaded content is first reviewed by an artificial intelligence review system, which automatically flags and filters out the content that might violate the conventions. The suspicious content is then manually checked by a professional content-review team, which has the right to delete the content if it is clearly proven to be a rumor and contains inaccurate information.

In addition to the conventions that govern uploaders' content creation, the platform also encourages participatory surveillance among users, which is evidenced in the entrance exam in the registration process and the community norms. Among online video platforms in China, Bilibili is the only website that requires its users to pass an entrance exam to send *danmu* and comments. This is one of the reasons *danmu* on Bilibili is considered to be of higher quality than on other platforms (Zhang & Cassany, 2020). To use the comment functions, new users must pass a compulsory entrance exam consisting of 20 multiple-choice questions about the community norms. As Yin and Fung (2017) suggest, unlike those "strict and cold-blood regulations," Bilibili tends to "portray its policies as norms and manners," in which each user has an equal weight of responsibility and obligation to the construction of a harmonious and reliable community environment (p. 140). Figure 5 shows the community norms that encourage users to report inappropriate content in uploaders' videos as well as in *danmu* and comment sections. Users who break the platform-specific *danmu* etiquette (弹幕礼仪; Bilibili, 2020) and commenting etiquette (点评礼仪; Bilibili, 2019b) will be reported. As indicated in its etiquette, the platform encourages posting reliable and

responsible comments while prohibiting the publication of illegal, aggressive, vulgar, misleading, and fabricated comments. It is clear that the platform adopts this method of entrance exam to teach each user the rules of the community and to instill a sense of participatory surveillance, which can enhance the formation of trust building on the platform, from the very beginning of joining the community.



Figure 5. Screenshot of the community norms of Bilibili (Bilibili, 2019a).

This way of building trust through participatory surveillance is also evident in the establishment of a disciplinary committee (风纪委员会) on Bilibili. The role of the committee is to arbitrate the violations reported by users, vote on whether a violation has been committed, and impose appropriate penalties. Users

who apply to become a member of the committee must show a high level of participation in the community and have no record of violations in the last 90 days, and as per the terms can function as members for a 30-day term at a time. Each member can vote 20 cases maximum each day, and each case has a voting period of 30 minutes. If more than 60% of the voters see the content violates the rules, the user is subject to penalties, ranging from their account being temporarily frozen for a few days to its permanent ban, depending on the severity of the violation. The account that disseminates false or inaccurate information will be permanently closed after three occurrences of violations. If more than 60% of the voters do not see the content as a violation of the rules, no action will be taken. When the votes of both for and against do not exceed 60% of the total, the case will be voted again. The members vote on each reported case based on the detailed committee guidelines (Bilibili, 2018) and the penalty regulations (Bilibili, 2017). Users who break the rules are listed in the "little black room" (小黑屋), as shown in Figure 6. The "little black room" displays not only their account names but also the detailed reasons for penalties and their corresponding penalty results, which increases the transparency of the process of participatory surveillance.



Figure 6. Screenshot of the "little black room" on Bilibili (Bilibili, 2017).

As stated in Bilibili's (2020) Annual Report, an average of 680,000 users participated in liking, reporting, and voting on the platform daily, helping the community to deal with more than 210,000 pieces of harmful comments and danmu. As Cusumano and colleagues (2021) suggest, proactive self-regulation, as illustrated by the disciplinary committee and the "little black room" on Bilibili, tends to be more effective when different sources (e.g., users, the platform) work together to both create a good community environment and avoid a tragedy of the commons. The establishment of the disciplinary committee and the "little black room" not only shows prohibited behavior to users but also positions the platform itself as "powerful gatekeepers of online speech and implicitly as regulators of digital communication" (Flew, 2021, p. 218). The process of content review on Bilibili differs from that of traditional media since the former is often ex post. Users and the platform act on content that has already posted rather than "making editorial decisions about what content to distribute" (Flew, 2021, p. 245). Such gatekeeping strategies emphasize the fact that Bilibili relies on user participation for trust building as the burden of information review shifts

from professional gatekeepers to individual users. Heinecke (2019) uses the term “disintermediation” (p. 7) to discuss this phenomenon as she argues that the traditional role of professional gatekeepers as pure intermediaries has eroded since everyone in the digital age can access information directly and participate in information evaluation.

In addition to the aforementioned community rules and activities, a few other platform-specific features on Bilibili can also influence the building of distributed trust. For instance, a user’s membership level ranges from level 1 to level 6 depending on the user’s participation and involvement; the user’s “moral integrity value” (节操值), a number that is lowered by reported inappropriate behavior and represents the user’s credibility on the platform; and an uploader’s “electromagnetic force” (电磁力) number, which is strongly affected by credit score and indicates the uploader’s social influence as well as credibility. Metzger and Flanagin (2008) call this method of rating an individual based on certain dimensions “tabulated credibility” (p. 11). They argue that a rating system, such as the one adopted by Bilibili, can be consequential for trust building because users with a positive reputation or higher scores will receive a high level of trust and vice versa.

The above analysis demonstrates that the relative lack of professional gatekeepers and editorial review process on the production and dissemination of UGC on Bilibili can be largely compensated by participatory surveillance, which functions as a new standard for quality control. Our analysis shows that unlike in traditional media where content often undergoes “certain levels of factual verification, analysis of content and editorial review” to improve trust building (Metzger et al., 2003, p. 295), in a networked environment with its diversity of sources, trust-building relies more on “a relatively democratic surveillance system” (Yin & Fung, 2017, p. 140). Each user is empowered with the responsibility and obligation to regulate others and transforms into a potential surveillance tool. This system not only benefits the creation of a more user-friendly community but also enhances the construction of distributed trust on a social media platform.

Message: The Content of Uploaders’ Videos and Users’ Comments

To explore the ways in which the content of uploaders’ videos and users’ comments enhance the construction of distributed trust, this section focuses on the content of six videos as well as their corresponding *danmu* and comments. We found that micro-influencers tend to create COVID-19-related content from diverse perspectives, such as personal experiences, authoritative information, subjective opinions, and criticisms on local policies, to enhance trust building. Feng (2020) suggests that compared with COVID-19-related information from state media in China that often adopt a “wartime narrative” and “military language,” micro-influencers’ videos offer an “alternative to the top-down government narratives” and are more informative, personal, and local (p. 1). This has also been supported by our findings, and the following describes some examples.



Figure 7. Screenshot of the latest map of COVID-19 cases in the United States (Li Sanjin Alex, 2020, 00:27).



Figure 8. Video clip of local TV news broadcast in Milan (Yingzi Steffy, 2020, 00:46).



Figure 9. Screenshot of local police's tweet on Twitter in the UK (Things in the UK, 2020, 01:40).

Figures 7 to 9 show that scientific data and news information were included in the videos as evidence to increase the level of trust in their content. Video 5 by Li Sanjin Alex includes the screenshots of the latest map of COVID-19 cases (Figure 7) and daily statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) of the United States; Video 6 by Yingzi Steffy contains video clips from a local Milan TV news broadcast (Figure 8) and screenshots from online newspaper Rai News 24; and Video 3 by Things in

the UK includes screenshots from Camden Town and Primrose Hill Police's Twitter account (Figure 9). The facts and data, as van Dijck and Alinejad (2020) suggest, are the basis of scientific evidence because they are "the result of methodical and empirical observations" (p. 2). This inclusion of authoritative information from traditional mass media in uploaders' videos can enhance trust building because, as Metzger and associates (2003) argue, the use of high-quality and relevant evidence (e.g., up-to-date and authoritative information) is one of the key dimensions of content credibility. In addition, Fisher and colleagues (2020) also highlight the importance of localism in trust building, as survey research shows that among audiences local news tends to attract a higher level of trust than general news. As the abovementioned examples show, remixing local journalism and health information in their videos not only allows uploaders to disseminate the latest information about the global pandemic and show their audiences how other countries confront the pandemic but also improves the level of trust in their own content. This way of building trust through authoritative and local information is also found in users' comments, as shown in Figure 10.



Figure 10. Users' comments under Video 2 (Yitongyaqian, 2021).

In Video 2, the uploader Li Sanjin Alex (2021b) said that "many Americans are reluctant to get vaccinated during this pandemic because of the Tuskegee Experiment once conducted in the US" (00:57). Figure 10 shows one comment, which has received the most likes under this video, that includes a link to the official CDC webpage containing a detailed timeline and information about the experiment. The inclusion of this official link not only increases the credibility of the uploader's information itself but also shows that users' comments can enhance the construction of distributed trust among uploaders and users.

Our data also show that micro-influencers tend to create their COVID-19-related videos not only to offer localized experiences but to also tell personal stories. In the six videos we collected, personal COVID-19 experiences were included to increase the authenticity and credibility of their content, such as the experience of being discriminated (Video 4), the discovery of their close friends testing positive for COVID-19 (Video 6), and showing local people refusing to wear masks in the park (Video 3). In one "follow-me" video for example, the uploader recorded an instance of discrimination he received for wearing a mask in Birmingham city center in the United Kingdom. The uploader recorded his conversation with a woman who told him to go back to China and the uploader asked her to repeat herself. The live-action and "talking-to-the-camera" filming style marks the authorship of the video and enhances the trustworthiness of the content because people are more likely to trust audiovisual content as "seeing is believing" (Metzger et al., 2003, p. 307). Additionally, Zhang and Zhao (2020) indicate that telling personal stories is an efficient way of establishing a sense of intimacy and inviting viewers to emotional sharing and bonding. This emotional aspect of personal stories can influence viewers' trust perception as existing research shows that focused

(i.e., in a specific time) and personal (i.e., authentic personal experience) content tends to be more persuasive and trustworthy (Kang, 2010). This video had attracted 2,685 *danmu* and 3,820 comments in total by the time of this study, which indicates that the inclusion of personal stories in uploaders' videos can also facilitate user participation and thus enhance distributed trust building. We found that users tend to support and build trust with uploaders by leaving comments about their similar experiences and deep feelings (Figures 11 and 12). This affective exchange between influencers and users, as Merz (2019) notes, exhibits a deep and intense, rather than superficial, level of social interaction and thus demonstrates new possibilities for building trust in the digital age.



Figure 11. Users' comments under Video 3 (Yigexiongliangemiao, 2020).



Figure 12. Users' danmu in Video 3 (Small talk about UK by Xiong Ge, 2020, 00:08).

Note. Translation of some *danmu*: "Support you! We can't really hold back our anger and say nothing, otherwise she'll do it to other people again next time."

"Support the uploader! I have 'one button three clicks!'"

"I've experienced the same in the UK, and I think saying nothing only makes them more aggressive and think you are weak."

Furthermore, we found that in their videos micro-influencers are also actively engaged in expressing their criticisms on government policies or local activities. Limaye and associates (2020) suggest that information presenting criticisms and openness about public policies or activities tends to be more credible than one-sided positive reporting. For example, in Video 1 the uploader Li Sanjin Alex (2021a) voiced his criticisms on the organizers of the U.S. Super Bowl, saying, "While the practice of replacing real

people with cardboard cutouts of fans inside the stadium has maintained social distance, the unmanaged chaos of the crowds outside the stadium has created a new point of infection" (01:54). The uploader also criticized many Chinese students in the United States for not taking the pandemic seriously. In the *danmu* and comments of this video, users showed their support and trust to the uploader by providing their own criticisms and experiences, including the following:

Some of my best friends who went abroad did the same thing, as if tens of thousands of people who were infected every day don't exist, and there were even people who went out with their kids without masks, which is really a sin! (Li Sanjin Alex, 2021a, 00:22)

Discussion and Conclusion

Focusing on micro-influencers' COVID-19-related videos, this study analyzes the construction of distributed trust on Bilibili and highlights the complexity of trust building in the era of participatory and mass self-communication under such a global crisis. As the networked model of knowledge communication shows, because of the growing dominance of social media in the networked distribution of information, the hegemonic position of institutions or professionals in information flows has been gradually disrupted (van Dijck & Alinejad, 2020). This shift of knowledge communication style has further affected the formation of trust. The transformation from centralized and hierarchical trust, verified by people with professional knowledge, into decentralized and networked trust, validated by sharing and interacting, challenges the analysis of trust building, as it involves "multiplicity of sources embedded in the numerous layers of online dissemination content" (Metzger & Flanagin, 2008, p. 74).

Our discussions on Bilibili show that user participation enabled by platform-specific features (e.g., B coins, likes, comments, *danmu*) plays a key role in the construction of distributed trust. These small acts of engagement on the platform can serve an editorial review function on the credibility of the content, and distributed trust is thus built through users' shared perspectives and experiences. As reflected in the platform's community manners and activities (e.g., *Bilibili Creation Conventions*, disciplinary committee), all sources, including the platform, users, and uploaders, share responsibility in establishing distributed trust. In particular, participatory surveillance among users is highly encouraged on the platform to ensure that the content of the information, which often includes authoritative evidence, local news, personal stories, and criticisms, is trustworthy and accountable.

Although distributed trust has these new characteristics, we can see that the formation of distributed trust is not a replacement of institutional trust but only an outcome of its transformation and evolution. The dynamic activities among different participants (e.g., news media, government authorities, users, social media platforms) on Bilibili show that the emergence of a new trust model is still entangled with the participants involved in the formation of institutional trust. This can be further explained by the structure of the networked model of knowledge communication, which not only adds new elements into the established institutional model but also blends with it while changing already existing mechanisms (van Dijck & Alinejad, 2020). As our analysis shows, the remix of scientific evidence and information from traditional news media in uploaders' videos not only helps professional institutions to disseminate accurate health information but also enhances the trustworthiness of their own content. The regulatory systems of

Bilibili show that the formation of distributed trust on the platform is hardly in an autonomous position because of the state's governance on user interactions as well as content production and distribution. This heteronomous status of the platform thus inevitably mixes the participatory surveillance of social media platforms with the editorial value of traditional mass media. Therefore, we argue that when exploring the construction of distributed trust on social media platforms, it is crucial to acknowledge the dynamic activities among these actors to account for its complexities and dynamics.

This article also highlights the importance of digital competence in the construction of distributed trust. As demonstrated by the interactive features on Bilibili, digital competence requires not only the basic skills and knowledge to use digital tools and devices but also a social component consisting of participatory skills (how to interact with others in the community) and moral skills (aligning one's behavior to community standards; Heinecke, Berg, & Hinkofer, 2019). We argue that digital competence is not only an essential skill for participating in public communication but is also an integral element to make trust building possible in this increasingly networked environment. Audience reception studies from the perspective of users (e.g., surveys, interviews) can be conducted in the future to provide empirical evidence about possible factors influencing the construction of trust on Bilibili. It is also worth comparing trust building on Bilibili with trust building on other social media platforms, both in China (e.g., Xiaohongshu, WeChat) and in other countries (e.g., YouTube), to explore whether the results apply to other contexts. This is particularly important in the context of the global pandemic as it relates to both the level of user participation in public communication and the dissemination of accurate health information that ensures people stay mentally and physically safe.

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