

The Distinction among China's Internet Platforms: Analysis through Bourdieu's Theory

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Abstract. As long as there is culture, there is a Distinction. The distinction is presented as people from different social classes having a different judgments of taste in art forms such as music, photography, and movies. The Internet has been developed for decades and has formed a rich Internet culture, the newest form of culture; people also have different tastes in it, which is still because they belong to different social classes, comparing the long-length video platform represented by Bilibili and the short-length video platform represented by Tiktok and Kwai, the differences in their user groups are not just a commercial phenomenon. From Bourdieu's perspective, it can be found that each Internet platform has a particular culture corresponding to the tastes of a particular social class, which is a distinction. This article will use Bourdieu's distinction theory to analyze the distinction among China's Internet platforms, which reveals there is a symbolic struggle of social classes on the Internet.

Keywords: Bourdieu, Distinction, Internet Culture.

1. Introduction

The Internet has completely changed people's lives in modern society, especially in terms of culture. Although traditional arts, such as painting, music, or drama, are still in an important position, now people are more exposed to Internet culture. In addition to the digital exposure of traditional culture on the Internet, the Internet has also developed a series of new cultures, such as online video, online games, and social media. At the same time, there are still different classes in any society; it can simply classify them as the upper and the lower class. Their tastes are different, for Internet culture is no exception.

In China, one of the countries most widely used the Internet in the world, there are various Internet platforms, and different groups of people prefer different Internet platforms. This phenomenon can be learned from some business reports [1, 2]. Taking video platforms as an example, several large video platforms have different user groups. These user groups have particular tastes, and if studying the content on these Internet platforms, one can find that different groups of people choose to use different Internet platforms because the content among the platforms is significantly different. The content within a single platform is similar; it can be said that each platform has a unique culture to attract a particular user group.

Moreover, there is a very obvious phenomenon that users of long-length video platforms discriminate against users of short-length video platforms [3]. What Internet culture a group of people prefer can represent their subjective identity on which class they belong to [4]. It is a group of people who consider they are belong to a upper class and discriminate against the public. They believe that the public's aesthetic is inferior, their own is superior, and the culture that conforms to their aesthetics is the superior culture; they often criticize, even ridicule, and despise the culture that the public prefers. This is actually what Bourdieu calls a Distinction, which is represented by judgments of taste, and the difference in judgments of taste is caused by a difference in social class [5]. In the past, it was thought that different user groups chose to use different Internet platforms just as a commercial phenomenon and business researchers have done much research on this phenomenon. However, looking at this phenomenon from a cultural perspective, a new result can be drawn. From Bourdieu's point of view, different social classes have different aesthetic dispositions, which is the deeper reason

[5, 6]. Aesthetic dispositions cannot be developed naturally. It requires long-term study and practice and is closely related to the cultural capital acquired from school education and family; people with more cultural capital are cultural aristocrats [5, 7]. Aesthetic dispositions distinguishing different social classes is an objective requirement of legitimate art-cultural aristocrats are those who have the ability to appreciate legitimate art, and they have a completely different aesthetic than the public. As a cultural practice, the judgment of taste is manifested by the cultural aristocrats criticizing the public's aesthetics and thinking that only their aesthetics are legitimate [5]. This article will take the video platforms in China as an example, where the differences and opposition between different social classes are the most intense and use Bourdieu's Distinction theory to analyze the distinction on China's Internet platforms.

2. The Distinction among China's Internet Platforms

On China's Internet platforms, different platforms have different user groups. Taking video platforms as an example, Bilibili, a Chinese version of YouTube, is a typical long-length video platform. According to the survey of Quest Mobile, Bilibili ranks first in the two lists of "Generation Z prefers apps" and "Generation Z prefers pan-entertainment apps"[1]. It can be found that most of its user groups belong to Generation Z. The short-length video platforms represented by TikTok and Kwai do not have a particular user group; their user groups are diverse. These users are ordinary people in China. Moreover, there is a contempt chain, which means Bilibili users usually discriminate against users of TikTok and Kwai.

Regarding content, the content of TikTok and Kwai are mainly short-length videos. Most TikTok and Kwai videos are just seconds to minutes long. Much of their content is uploaded by individual users, not by professional users for commercial purposes; they are User Generated Video (UGV). The videos on Kwai are mainly about "Laotie" culture, which means "fellow", showing people's daily life, while TikTok's position is a music community platform, so videos on Tiktok are mainly music videos [2]. These videos generally use the most popular pop songs as background music. In some videos, especially in Kwai, characters usually perform exaggerated performances to make the audience laugh.

However, Bilibili mainly includes long-length videos, such as animation, films, documentaries, TV series, variety shows, and courses; they are Occupationally Generated Videos (OGV). When Bilibili was founded, it imitated the Japanese video platform Niconico, which is a platform with ACG culture, which means animation, comics, and games. It is a subculture [8]. At the beginning of its establishment, Bilibili was a platform to attract particular groups by subculture. At present, Bilibili has more diversified content, but most of them are long-length videos. There are also UGV on Bilibili, but the content is completely different; some of them are Professional User Generated Video (PUGV). According to research reports from securities companies, the five fastest-growing categories on Bilibili are humanities and social sciences, emotions, animals, food, and popular science. Among them, the growth rate of popular science videos reached 1994% in 2020 [1].

There is an obvious phenomenon that Bilibili users discriminate against TikTok and Kwai users. In Bilibili, Kwai was used as the keyword to search, and the retrieved video content mainly evaluated Kwai as "rustic", "embarrassing", "vulgar", and other negative adjectives. In Bilibili, Tiktok was used as the keyword to search, and more negative comments appeared. Negative content such as "TikTok get out of Bilibili", "I hate the background music from Ticktock", "TikTok is trash," and so on appeared in the bullet screen and comments of many videos [3].

In May 2020, Bilibili produced a short film called "Houlang", which means "The Next Generation". This short film showed the image of Bilibili. The short film claims that "what you love is your life" and "you have the right to choose". The characters in the short film use iPad Pro to learn foreign languages, make Gunpla models, travel abroad by airplane, perform cosplay, and play classical musical instruments; all of these are very luxurious hobbies for Chinese people. Even some characters in the video are racing cars, diving in the sea, and skydiving from a jet. These activities might be too luxurious even for people in Western countries, they are not popular entertainment of the public, and

they belong to the rich. The protagonist of the short film is He Bing, a very famous drama performer in China. Bilibili believes that this short film shows the lifestyle of its user group. Many Bilibili users agree that the lifestyle this video showed belongs to them. However, the short film was widely criticized by society, and even some users of Bilibili criticized it; they thought it was unacceptable. In the comments of the video, it can be found that some users thought that the life of the characters in the short film is far away from them, even felt sad after watching it because their life is not at all like what this short film said. The lives of young people shown in the short film are all playing. However, in real life, this may only be what young people do in two or three months of the 12 months of the year. Most of the Post-2000s are now either studying in the college or working with diligence, which is not shown in the short film.

In June 2020, just one month after Bilibili produced "Houlang", Kwai, the software at the lowest end of the contempt chain, also produced its promotional short film "Kanjian", which means "To See". The protagonist of the video is Huang Chunsheng, a character who was ridiculed at Bilibili. He is not a professional actor, just an ordinary citizen in Liaoning who used to attract audiences with exaggerated performances. This video shows the lives of ordinary Chinese farmers, workers, and even the disabled group who are widely discriminated against. Some of these people come from ordinary cities, while others come from remote and poor villages. The video pointed out that many people are biased and put forward the slogan "Do not walk into ordinary people's life indifferently", which is aimed at Bilibili and its user group. After this video was produced, it was praised by society, and some Bilibili users appreciated what the video expressed. Some people agree that very few successful youths do not represent the next generation of China, and their attitude towards Kwai has changed.

3. Analysis through Bourdieu's Theory

Different Internet platforms have different user groups. For this phenomenon, many researchers, especially business researchers, have analyzed the user groups from the aspects of age, gender, region, and others. They believe that these factors directly cause the difference in user groups choosing Internet platforms. However, from Bourdieu's point of view, the deeper reason is that different social classes have different aesthetic dispositions. Bourdieu pointed out that the content of legitimate art is subject to form, and only those with certain cultural capital have aesthetic dispositions to enjoy legitimate art. So there is a phenomenon that people will pay more attention to the form and style of legitimate works than to their content.

Similar phenomena have occurred in fields far away from legitimate art, such as Internet culture. Internet culture is a new form of culture that is very different from traditional art forms and almost impossible to learn from school education. The different choices of Chinese users for Internet video platforms are typical cases. Most of the time, they do not care about the content of the video but only about which platform the video is on because they believe that videos on a particular platform have a particular style. Even though TikTok and Kwai have some similar content, Bilibili users still refuse to use them.

According to research reports from securities companies, 12.31% of Bilibili users come from first-tier cities, the richest cities in China, while this rate is 7.42% among TikTok users and 4.86% among Kwai users [1,2]. The research reports also assert that the users of Bilibili are mainly "Generation Z" [1]. They belong to the intellectual class-a upper class. They not only live in the richest city but also are very young. They are under 36 years old, and most of them are under 25 years old [1]. In China, they are generally university students, or graduates, who have at least one bachelor's degree, and some even have higher diplomas. Generation Z has a high consumption capacity, especially the capacity of online consumption. One of the reports showed that among Generation Z, 9.2% consume more than ¥3000 per month, 21.6% consume ¥2000 to ¥2999 per month, and 41.4% consume ¥1000 to ¥1999 per month in 2022 [1]. By contrast, according to a report by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, China's monthly Per Capita Disposable Income in 2021 was only ¥2925. There are nearly

10% of them whose just online consumption exceeded the average disposable income of ordinary people in China. It can draw the result that the consumption capacity of Generation Z is much higher, which proves that they have a better economic condition. However, the users of Tiktok and Kwai are diverse. They come from all over China, are of different ages, and are engaged in various professions. They can represent ordinary people or the public.

The situation may be different in western countries, but in China, "Generation Z" was first used to refer to people born between 1980-1984; the new "Generation Z" refers to a generation born between 1995-2009, who connected to the Information Age when they were born, and they were greatly influenced by information technology, instant messaging devices, smartphones, so it is also called "the Internet Generation" [9]. However, not everyone born in this period corresponds to the definition of Generation Z. A report shows that children in first-tier cities have several years earlier connected to the Internet than children in other regions [10]. China is a country with a huge gap between rich and poor, people are unequal in wealth. On the Internet, there is also an inequality, and the internet extends inequality to other dimensions [11]. Only a few wealthy families buy their children smartphones and computers at a very young age. Parents of these children are at least middle class. Children from low-income families face greater life pressure, so it is difficult for them to be exposed to the newest technology. When they are able to get these devices, the culture they have received from the Internet is much different from those of children of wealthy families received.

Generation Z, who acquired more cultural capital from school education and family, also acquired more cultural capital from the Internet. This makes them have a particular aesthetic disposition in the field far away from legitimate art. They became the cultural aristocrats of the Internet, who believe only the culture that meets their aesthetic dispositions is legitimate, and they have the privilege to judge the culture. They discriminate against the culture of Tiktok and Kwai, discriminate against people who prefer these cultures, and even ridicule and despise them.

Long-length videos such as animations and films enjoyed by Bilibili users are difficult for Tiktok and Kwai users as public to appreciate. The public did not have aesthetic dispositions to appreciate those works. Those belonging to the public, from their birth, acquired less cultural capital from their families or schools than those who later became intellectuals. The public prefers direct enjoyment. Fast-paced pop songs and exaggerated performances can make them more directly happy. Long-length videos can only make them bored. It can be inferred that the intellectual class and the public have completely different aesthetic dispositions, therefore, different judgments of taste.

Back to the promotional short film of Bilibili, *Houlang* can represent not only the aesthetics but also the lifestyle of Generation Z in China. Most of them are university students or graduates. Bourdieu said, "All those vendors of cultural goods and services seeking to prolong the fusion of leisure and work, militancy and dilettantism, that characterizes the student lifestyle [5]." Bilibili is doing the same thing that Bourdieu says these "vendors of cultural goods" are doing, which is to extend the typical lifestyle of students to the fields beyond school education. The theme of the short film, "what you love is your life", also the slogan of Bilibili, is a kind of "fusion of leisure and work, militancy and dilettantism". Taking up the question of the relation between social class and lifestyle, Bourdieu develops a relatively straightforward sociological argument, location in the class structure is causally related to a subjective system of dispositions. This, in turn, engenders a variety of consumption practices which, as expressions of the same dispositions, cohere with one another semantically and thus exhibit the unity of a lifestyle [12]. In this way, the user group of Bilibili thinks they are successful because they are distinct from the lower class, which is manifested by a completely different lifestyle from the lower class, and from Bilibili, they can get the cultural capital to develop their disposition. Bilibili also obtained the best return on cultural capital.

Although some Bilibili users criticized *Houlang*, most of them still discriminate against short-length video platforms like Tiktok and Kwai. Some Bilibili users criticizing the video "*Houlang*" are just showing the rebellious spirit of Generation Z; after expressing their criticism, they are continuing their lifestyle as they used to. Bourdieu said, "tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance (sick-making) of the tastes of others [5, 13]." Bilibili users'

discrimination against Tiktok and Kwai users is "visceral", which stems from their long-term accumulation of cultural capital and makes them form completely different tastes, and taste is almost impossible to change; it is the surest sign of a particular class.

4. Conclusions

Using Bourdieu's theory to analyze, it can conclude that different groups of users choose to use different internet platforms because they have different tastes, and the class they come from determines their tastes. The upper class, such as the intellectual class, has accumulated more cultural capital, and they have the privilege to judge which culture is legitimate. This is true even for internet culture - a culture that only became popular in China at the end of the twentieth century. The lower classes, or the public, have accumulated less cultural capital from the Internet because their economic conditions are poorer, which causes them to be exposed to the Internet later. So the forms of Internet culture they acquired are completely different, which the lower class appreciate is to be considered vulgar by the upper classes. The Internet culture that is preferred by the upper class is actually the "high culture" in the Internet culture, and the culture that is preferred by the lower class is the "low culture" in the Internet culture. There is an exclusion between the "high cultures" of the privileged cultural groups and the "low cultures" of the lower class or so-called public.

The upper class uses various derogatory adjectives to describe the culture that the lower class prefers, and they make no secret of their discrimination. Similarly, from the examples of Bilibili's and Kwai's promotional short films, the Houlang and the Kanjian, it can be found that the lower class also criticizes the culture preferred by the upper class. They think that the bourgeois lifestyle corresponding to this culture is too far away from their real life. Those young bourgeois in the short film claimed that they represent the next generation of China, which is very unacceptable to the public.

When the public criticizes Houlang, they are actually criticizing the culture of the upper class. This criticism is a symbolic struggle. Because the upper classes have accumulated more cultural capital, they have the privilege to classify cultures, thinking that one form of culture is superior and the other form of culture is inferior. For Internet culture, they classify short-length videos as inferior and long-length videos as superior. Criticism from the public is a denial of their privilege. This can be seen as a revolt of the ordinary people against the cultural aristocrats, which is like the earliest bourgeois revolt against the religious aristocracy hundreds of years ago. Bourdieu elucidated the hitherto forgotten dimension of class struggles, which is a symbolic struggle, and this struggle is a struggle about classification.

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