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The Development and Tension of Context Collapse Theory from the Perspective of Media Evolution

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Abstract

This paper explores the conceptual proposal and developmental context of "Context Collapse", reviews its theoretical origins and research traditions, and distinguishes the interpersonal interaction differences between new media and traditional media eras embedded in this concept. By sorting out existing literature, this study identifies two distinctive theoretical traditions that lead to divergent academic interpretations and subsequent scholarly controversies over Context Collapse. Furthermore, this paper reflects on the cross-cultural research practice of the theory and argues that it is necessary to explore localized theoretical support within Chinese socio-cultural contexts to enhance the explanatory power of Context Collapse for the social behaviors of Chinese internet users. This study clarifies the theoretical veins, ideological resources, internal contradictions and tensions of Context Collapse, and explores the possibility of localized adaptation of the theory in China, so as to lay a solid theoretical foundation for subsequent research.

Keywords

Dramaturgical Theory; Context Collapse; Technological Affordance; Interactionism; Social Context; Face Concept

1. Introduction

The popularization of the Internet in China has spanned three decades, during which individuals' media-mediated existence has been continuously deepened. Rapid technological advancement has improved platform services, and deep mediatization has enabled online platforms to integrate diverse social fields migrated from offline reality. Such integration superimposes multiple offline scenarios into cyberspace and constructs complex social contexts that combine consanguinity, kinship, alumni relations, and interest-based connections. Affected by these hybrid and overlapping contexts, users have to adopt strategic adjustments in their online social practices. When users' social strategies fail to adapt to complex performative scenarios, the risk of performative failure rises sharply, leading to the

inevitable occurrence of context collapse.

Proposed by Boyd, Context Collapse Theory has become a hot academic topic in recent years due to its strong explanatory power for social media practices in the new media era and its great theoretical development potential. Nevertheless, the theory is derived from social media practices in Western countries, especially Britain and the United States, and its localized adaptation in the Chinese context remains insufficient. Local academic exploration of the theory's indigenous application has therefore become a vital research direction for Chinese communication scholars. On this basis, this paper systematically reviews domestic and international literature on Context Collapse Theory, clarifies its developmental trajectory and inherent theoretical tensions, and explores the possibilities of localized theoretical adaptation for future empirical and theoretical research.

2. Theoretical Origins: From Symbolic Interactionism and Media Context Theory to Platform Affordance

Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman was among the earliest scholars to examine the relationship between interaction and context in everyday life. In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Goffman proposed that daily social interaction is essentially contextual performance. In social scenarios, society functions as a stage and social members act as performers who present themselves strategically to shape impressions on others. He established the classic dichotomy of "front stage" and "back stage": the front stage refers to the public domain where standardized social performances take place, while the back stage is the private area for performers to prepare and relax. Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory pioneered the theoretical insight into the interactive relationship between individual behavior and social context.

While Goffman focused on separated offline contextual performances, Joshua Meyrowitz extended the theoretical framework to electronic media scenarios represented by television. Integrating the ideas of Goffman and McLuhan, Meyrowitz proposed the concept of "merged contexts" in No Sense of Place. He argued that electronic media blur the boundaries between front and back stages, masculinity and femininity, adulthood and childhood, forming a transitional "middle stage" with uncertain and complex performative rules. In the middle stage, performers need complex judgments to adopt stable and safe social strategies to avoid performative failure.

Different from Goffman's focus on static offline contexts, Meyrowitz emphasized context integration driven by electronic media technology. In the new media era, internet technology has further transformed partially merged electronic contexts into thoroughly superimposed and multi-layered digital contexts, bringing more complex decision-making, practice and feedback mechanisms for user behavior. Against this backdrop, Boyd formally proposed the Context Collapse Theory.

Boyd argued that digital environments reshape social interaction patterns. Physical absence weakens embodied self-presentation, and limited participatory mechanisms encourage users to rely on technological tools to assist online self-performance. Since digital information is stored in collapsible, searchable and superimposable bit form, online social contexts become increasingly complicated and multidimensional, generating persistent tension between users' self-expectation and digitally constructed social reality. In response, users tend to adopt two strategies: conforming to universal public expectations by suppressing authentic self-expression, or adhering to genuine expression despite the risk of social misunderstanding.

Boyd further refined the concept of "collapsed context" in 2008. Social media replicates offline one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many social scenarios online, forming increasingly intricate digital social environments. Boyd defined such digitally constructed collective social spaces as "networked publics", which complicate contextual evaluation mechanisms and trigger the collapse of originally segmented social contexts. Technological convenience expands the boundary of online sociality and amplifies contextual collapse in many-to-many relational structures, blurring the division between private and public domains. Regulating social boundaries and regaining interactive initiative have thus become critical issues in internet-mediated social interaction.

Boyd highlighted the decisive role of technology in contextual integration. When technological development erases the boundaries between online and offline spaces and integrates segmented audiences into unified platform contexts, context collapse inevitably occurs. Social media users are forced to adopt universal social strategies to adapt to diversified contextual norms, which intensifies social anxiety and may lead to strategic failure, relational rupture and impaired self-development.

3. Theoretical Controversies: The Game Between Technological Determinism and User Agency

Due to its strong explanatory power for contemporary social media practices and inherent theoretical tension, Context Collapse Theory has aroused extensive academic attention and inspired continuous follow-up research. Meanwhile, scholars have raised two core controversies regarding theoretical limitations: first, whether context collapse is predominantly determined by technology or shaped by user agency; second, whether the Western-originated theory is universally applicable to social media practices in non-Western cultural contexts.

The first controversy is proposed by Jane and Gaskell, who criticized the technological determinism embedded in Boyd's theoretical evolution. They acknowledged the growing influence of media technology but emphasized that users have mature agency in technological adoption and social practice. They argued that Boyd's later theoretical development overemphasized technological affordances

while neglecting user initiative, leading to the over-generalization of context collapse phenomena. Context collapse is jointly shaped by multiple social and individual factors rather than technological factors alone, requiring more attention to user practice and subjective strategies.

The second controversy focuses on the theory's cross-cultural adaptability. Rooted in Anglo-American social media ecosystems, the theory fails to incorporate cultural diversity in global social media usage. Costa's ethnographic fieldwork in Mardin, Turkey, verified such cultural limitations. Residents in Mardin actively adopted diverse strategic interventions to regulate their online social behaviors and avoid contextual collapse, indicating that technological structural constraints do not necessarily lead to identical social outcomes in different cultural communities.

The existing controversies demonstrate the inherent tension and vitality of Context Collapse Theory. Scholarly critiques suggest that the theory should be examined from multi-dimensional perspectives to compensate for its theoretical deficiencies. Meanwhile, cross-cultural ethnographic research indicates that social media practices are deeply embedded in cultural contexts, necessitating localized exploration of theoretical tension in non-Western societies.

4. Tension Exploration: Localized Adaptation of Context Collapse Theory Across Cultural Contexts

Current academic discussions mainly focus on two dimensions: criticizing the technological determinism bias and supplementing cross-cultural localized explanations. Early domestic studies on technological affordances tended to adopt simplified functionalist interpretations. For instance, Dong and Duan introduced the concept of affordance to analyze online intimate relationships but treated technological affordance as a static structural variable without considering the interaction among technology, users and environments.

Subsequent research corrected such misunderstandings. Sun and Han pointed out the translation and paradigm bias of "affordance" in Chinese academia and advocated shifting from dualistic structure-agency frameworks to relational human-technology perspectives. Zhang and Ma further proposed the perspective of "relational affordance", defining affordance as a dynamic negotiation process among actors, scenarios and situational definitions rather than fixed technological attributes. Other scholars confirmed that platform affordances dynamically shape user behavior, cultural cognition and emotional experience.

A systematic review by Chen et al. demonstrated that affordance is a multi-layered and mutable variable shaped by technology, users and contexts rather than a fixed constant. Such theoretical revisions resolve the deterministic bias of technological affordance and confirm that context collapse is a dynamic outcome of the interaction among technology, culture and individual agency.

As a Western-originated theory, Context Collapse Theory cannot be directly applied

to Chinese social media practices without localized adaptation. Indigenous scholars have attempted localized theoretical innovation. In their research on WeChat Moments' "three-day visible" function, Zhang and Ma innovatively incorporated the traditional Chinese "face concept" into contextual collapse analysis. Network ethnography reveals that Chinese users' strategic behaviors such as visibility restriction, blocking and deletion are driven not only by technological contextual collapse but also by traditional face culture. Users restrain self-expression to avoid losing face and actively perform positive daily images to maintain social face, forming unique Chinese social media interaction logics distinct from Western practices.

Nevertheless, localized exploration of Context Collapse Theory in China remains insufficient. Further research is required to explore the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western social media contexts, facilitate theoretical dialogue between Chinese and Western media studies, and improve the localized explanatory framework of Context Collapse Theory.

5. Conclusion

By tracing the origin and evolution of Context Collapse Theory, this study clarifies the Western academic tradition of context-interaction research and analyzes its explanatory power and theoretical limitations in the new media era. Proposed on the basis of classic dramaturgical and media context theories, Boyd's Context Collapse Theory effectively explains Anglo-American social media practices but suffers from technological determinism bias and limited cultural applicability. Current Western studies have revised its deterministic tendency, while Chinese scholars have initiated localized exploration combined with indigenous cultural characteristics such as the face concept.

In future research, scholars can expand research from two aspects. First, empirical studies across diverse cultural backgrounds should be conducted to compare cultural differences in users' contextual coping strategies and improve the cross-cultural universality of the theory. Second, indigenous cultural concepts should be further integrated into theoretical construction to establish a context-specific analytical framework suitable for Chinese social media practices, promote theoretical innovation in cross-cultural communication contexts, and facilitate in-depth dialogue between Chinese and Western media theories.

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