AUDIENCE DESIGN AND CONTEXT DISCREPENCY:

HOW ONLINE DEBATES LEAD TO OPINION POLARIZATION

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how the technical layout of some online platforms shapes the way

individuals engage in public debate online. To do so, the research studies an empirical case of

how public debating on Weibo—China's equivalent to Twitter—leads to opinion

polarization. The technical layout of Weibo strongly influences how users debate with others.

The thread-based message structure fragments the interactional context, preventing users

from gaining a clear picture about other discussants and the ongoing conversation. Weibo's

technical design, which enables simultaneous interactions with multiple audiences (of which

many users are unaware), further complicates the debates. Consequently, users become

confused about their audience and where their replies are targeted, and subsequent

interpersonal tension sparks as they adopt interactive strategies (sharing personal experiences,

adding situational elaborations, and seeking solidarity through opinion) to reduce this

confusion. Ironically, these strategies often serve to further polarize opinions. A video

abstract is available at https://youtu.be/U5qdm6eiQ1M.

Keywords: online interaction; opinion polarization; technical affordance; Weibo; China

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INTRODUCTION

Self-presentation largely relies on the definition of our audience and the degree of their involvement in our interactions (Goffman 1959). Many factors, such as physical distance (e.g., Bell 1984; Labov 1966), contribute to how we perceive our audience. However, online settings have different technical affordances than conventional face-to-face (FTF) interactions. Online interaction studies have discussed how online settings constrain interactions due to the lack of contextual information and undetectable others (Menchik and Tian 2008; Robinson 2006; Zappavigna 2011). The lack of a physical copresence means that online users have a limited awareness of their audience, which is especially true in one-to-many interactions. This limited awareness of audience may lead online users to post in a way that does not take their background relationship with some of the readers into consideration, thus potentially causing problems when the latter interprets the posts' meanings (Tian and Menchik 2016). While existing online interaction research has often focused on self-presentation (e.g., Davis 2014; Ivana 2016), people also debate public issues. Yet, we know little about how online platforms as interactional settings influence people's engagement in public debates on social media, and the subsequent consequences on public opinions.

In conventional offline environments, discussions and debates on public topics will likely lead to polarized opinions due to social comparison and selective exposure to persuasive arguments (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Isenberg 1986; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Levinger and Schneider 1969; Myers 1975; Schkade, Sunstein, and Hastie 2007; Zhu 2013). When the internet appeared, many hoped that the democratization of ideas would follow (Benkler 2006) since it was believed that engagement in free sharing of ideas

and opinions, and exposure to diverse perspectives, would facilitate open-mindedness. To be sure, the internet has the potential to democratize, but that outcome is not guaranteed.

Drawing on existing scholarship about the distinctive features of online interaction (Menchik and Tian 2008; Tian 2017a, 2017b; Tian and Menchik 2016), our research examines how the technical layout of Weibo, a popular microblog platform in China, strips interactional context from interpersonal communication and consequently polarizes opinions. Launched in 2009, Weibo (translated as "micro blog") is one of the most vibrant cyberspaces in China. It is commonly used for engaging in public discussions, especially outside of one's own social networks (Poell, de Kloet, and Zeng 2014; Sullivan 2012). As the Chinese equivalent of Twitter, Weibo is a text-based platform with a 140-character limit per post. Interactions are also asynchronous and open to public viewing and commenting.

We examine a large-scale online debate and argue that Weibo's technical layout creates context discrepancy for online interaction, as opposed to the synchronous and unified offline context that people commonly depend on when conducting interaction within temporal and spatial boundaries (Goffman 1959, 1963). Weibo's technical layout conditions users' interaction, most notably by limiting users' ability to form a shared understanding about their audiences. Weibo makes it difficult to understand the audience group that users are addressing, the context of the discussion that others are speaking on, and who the audience is as social beings. We closely examined how people interact in asynchronous and text-based contexts while facing audiences that they may or may not knowingly address. We also observe how Weibo serves as an environment to facilitate such interaction.

In addition to technical affordances, Weibo users speak with broader and messier audience groups. This is different from the traditional network-oriented structure of communication, and adds further difficulties. To remedy context discrepancies, many users resort to three strategies to make better sense of Weibo conversations: (1) sharing personal

experiences, (2) adding situational elaborations, and (3) calling for solidarity with like-minded individuals. While these strategies can be observed in both online and offline communications, they are much more crucial on Weibo, a platform largely deprived of traditional FTF communication, because of the invisibility of its online audience and the *n*-adic structure of online conversation (Tian and Menchik 2016). Tian and Menchik (2016) coined the term "*n*-adic" interaction to indicate any particular moment when the discloser does not know the exact number of their interactants. The concept "n-adic" evolves from "dyadic" and "triadic" interactions, emphasizing the effect of the number of interactants. As a result, the strategies are more likely to heighten emotions and strengthen arguments on Weibo, which further divide opinions. From this study, we gain a clearer understanding of how distinctive features of online interaction lead online debates to polarize opinions rather than converge them.

Research Case: The Street Quarrel Incident

The research case was selected after 28 weeks of virtual ethnography, where the first author spent 12 hours each week on Weibo monitoring trending discussions. On April 21, 2014, Phoenix Television, an influential media outlet with over 1 million followers, posted a controversial weibo[2] (hereafter the "central weibo") about a street quarrel.

> [A child urinated on a Hong Kong street, causing an intense quarrel
>
> between the Mainland Chinese parents and Hongkongers]... The adults
>
> berated each other as the child cried loudly. The couple then lifted the

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[2] In this paper, we use "Weibo" as a proper noun with a capital "W" to refer to the service. A "weibo" with a small "w" is used as a verb and is used equivalently to a Twitter "tweet" in English.

child up, grabbed their stroller and attempted to leave the scene, but a Hong Kong man also grabbed the stroller to stop them. The mother stated repeatedly that "There was a line outside the toilet and the child was in a hurry. What else could I do?" Someone recorded the confrontation with a camera. [please fix formatting, if possible; try to delete the page break]

The weibo included two videos and four photos of the incident. The videos were poorly shot[3] and interpreted differently on various platforms.[4] After the videos were posted onto Weibo on

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[3] The authors wrote the following description after viewing the video (available at https://youtu.be/yMX6K3f2FJY): The video captured the confrontation between two Cantonese-speaking Hongkongers (a man and a woman) and a Mainland Chinese family. The Hong Kong woman told the couple: "Don't leave" (0:02) after witnessing the incident. The Mainland mother screamed and protested, picking up the stroller (0:15). She pointed at the Hong Kong woman, and then at the ground, shouting indiscernibly. The Hong Kong woman yelled at the family, asking them not to leave. The mother, attempting to leave but was blocked by the Hong Kong man, pushed her stroller into the man. The man then yelled, "Don't you dare hit me again!" (0:33). The father, who was holding his child, pushed the Hong Kong man away and grabbed the stroller. The Hong Kong man grabbed the stroller too, saying "Don't let them get away" (0:43). To which, the mother yelled in Mandarin, "Let go!" The man responded in Cantonese, "You hurt my leg!" The mother, who did not understand Cantonese, reasserted, "Let go!" and added "Don't you know that you're scaring my child?" The man answered, "I don't know (that I'm doing that)." The mother then slapped the man's hand to make him let go of the stroller, to which the Hong Kong woman shouted, "She just hit him!" (0:52). Suddenly, the father put down his child in front of the crowd. The mother said, "Now I'm giving my child to you, are you happy?" (0:55) and then added, "Did you really have to do this to our little one?" When the Hong Kong man kept holding on to the stroller, the father yelled at him in Mandarin, "Don't you have children? Don't they pee?" The mother then added, "I already lined up for a long time. What do you want me to do? The child is about to wet his pants. Answer me, don't you have children?" (0:30). Similar

April 21st, 2014, the incident went viral and hundreds of thousands of users expressed opinions.

The case stood out against other trending topics such as a Mother's Day campaign, several celebrity breakups, multiple political corruption cases, and the missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370. The choice of the case was based on three criteria to ensure representativeness: generalizability and inclusiveness (it engaged a wide audience), controversy (it elicited varied and conflicted opinions), and low political sensitivity (the

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exchanges ensued for five minutes until the police arrived. The child was crying throughout the entire incident and several witnesses videotaped the incident.

[4] The original video, titled "MK Teenager vs. Strong Country Men," is no longer available but has been re-uploaded multiple times. As of May 22, 2018, it is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E45YkTSMVj0. The video was first uploaded to YouTube with the provocative title "MK Teenager vs. Strong Country Men." MK stands for "Mongkok" which, when used as an adjective, denotes the specific subculture around Mongkok and the teenagers who spend their time there. Strong Country Men is a derogatory term for the Mainland Chinese in light of their newfound power and wealth. The video was a new addition to a collection of YouTube videos that depict the inappropriate behaviors of Mainland Chinese tourists. In contrast, Phoenix Television offered a more sympathetic tone over the same video (e.g., the mother's hand-slapping was omitted while her assertions of the long waiting were emphasized). The ambiguity of the video also invites further controversy surrounding the incident.

discussion was not censored by Weibo).[5] During the observation period, this street quarrel was a rare case that simultaneously fulfilled all three criteria: it was large-scale and hotly debated but was not subject to political censorship. By examining such a public debate and its interactional process, we can explore the conditions of online debate that lead to polarized opinions.

Opinion Polarization and the Internet

The polarization of opinions is both a static state and dynamic process (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996). As a static state, polarization is the degree of opinion division based on preset spectra and as observed in political attitudes, voting behaviors, and ideologies (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006; Mouw and Sobel 2001; Wu 2014). As a dynamic process, opinion polarization means enhanced attitudes and heightened emotions throughout the interaction (DiMaggio et al. 1996; Moscovici and Zavalloni 1969). Moreover, adopted stances are reinforced after group activities such as political conventions (Isenberg 1986; Myers 1975; Schkade et al. 2007; Zhu 2013). Here, we focus on opinion polarization as a dynamic process.

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[5] Hong Kong-Mainland China conflicts were not politically sensitive when the dispute occurred. Social conflicts in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and overseas were less censored in China (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013) until a series of political disputes between the central government and pro-democratic Hong Kong locals (Ong and Lin 2017). The censorship was drastically increased after the Occupy Central Movement, which caused the shutdown of Instagram in China (Wan 2014).

Existing research has identified two main causes of opinion polarization during group discussions in offline environments: social comparison, and selective exposure to persuasive arguments and information. The desire to be accepted and avoid being labeled as deviant motivates the alignment of opinions, thereby silencing minority voices while accepting and reinforcing existing opinions (Levinger and Schneider 1969; Noelle-Neumann 1974). Selective exposure is the tendency to selectively favor those with similar opinions and, thus, accumulate supporting evidence and persuasive arguments that strengthen existing opinions (Isenberg 1986; Sobieraj, Berry, and Connors 2013; Sunstein 2008). However, these factors have trouble explaining online opinion polarization because polarization still occurs despite the open and generally anonymous platforms where people are less bounded to specific social groups and more easily exposed to diverse perspectives.

While the internet potentially instigates open-mindedness, existing internet studies present different, and somewhat contradictory, insights about opinion polarization. On one hand, such studies have drawn from indicators such as network segregation and news consumption to suggest that opinions on the internet are not polarized (Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic 2015; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2011), but the internet can serve as a moderating platform for opinions (Flaxman, Goel, and Rao 2016). Empirical evidence also showed that even though people are less likely to view online content that conflicted with their opinions, social media use increased their exposure to ideologically diverse information (Bakshy et al. 2015). Similarly, survey data showed that frequent online contacts potentially reduced people's perceived social distance with outgroups (Lissitsa 2017).

On the other hand, researchers have also mapped out polarizing attitudes among social media users (Flaxman et al. 2016; Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell 2010; Wu 2014; Yardi and boyd 2010). They argue that the internet and social media have created a more convenient environment for socialization with like-minded groups and the avoidance of

"counter attitudinal material" (Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng 2011:350; Stroud 2008; Yardi and boyd 2010). Therefore, the internet has created echo chambers (Sunstein 2008) and empirical evidence increasingly suggests that internet users have even more polarized attitudes after engaging in online discussions (Hollander 2008; Wu 2014). The question then is: how does free discussion become so polarized and rigid online?

Given the current literature, analyzing the divergence (or convergence) of a static opinion landscape is insufficient. A preset spectrum of attitudes could oversimplify complicated stances and it could be problematic to conclude that changes in attitude are due to the internet and social media. Therefore, a dynamic perspective is important in inspecting the polarizing (or mediating) effects of social media, given that online communication is still interpersonal as communication is driven to develop social relationships (Walther 1992, 1996) and carried out through virtual interaction (Menchik and Tian 2008).

The dynamic perspective calls for a qualitative examination into how interaction and discussions are shaped by the internet and social media at the micro-level. Then, the question is, under what conditions would online debate lead to polarized opinions, and why? The answer requires examining a public debate online as the interactional process to elucidate how a discussion is carried out by users and the outcome it produces.

Interactional Context, Audience Design, and Weibo's Layout

People evaluate and interpret their interactional context to calibrate behaviors (Cooley 1902; Mead 1934), and these actions depend on, reflect, and further contribute to "collective meaning creation" (Fine 1993:70). Before the internet age, such interactional contexts are usually offline, coherent, unified, and physical; and many studies have examined how offline actors develop different interpretations and reactions in shared environments (Bell 1984, 1999; Goffman 1959, 1963; Schegloff and Sacks 1973).

Bell (1984:159) highlighted audience design as one particular aspect of this process, noting that people "take account of their hearers to design their speeches." People evaluate their interactional context and subjectively differentiate their audience into four categories: the addressee (known, ratified, and addressed in the second person by the speaker), auditor (known, ratified, and referred to in the third person), overhearer (known but not ratified), or eavesdropper (unknown and unratified) (Bell 1984, 1999). As the speaker shifts their perception about who the audience is, their behavior varies also.

For online interaction, people also go through audience design when they address Bulletin Board System (BBS) thread readers, chat room members, and the netizen public (Robinson 2006; Shum and Lee 2013). Scholars, however, argue that such audience design is impaired on the internet (Davis and Jurgenson 2014; Livingstone 2004). This is most notably demonstrated through "context collapse" as social media pulls different audiences from various networks and situates them in one place (boyd 2008; Marwick and boyd 2011; Shulman 2017), leading to ambiguous audiences (Davis and Jurgenson 2014; Litt 2012). Moreover, online communication can be asynchronous as internet users are not obligated to provide immediate responses, eliminating the temporal restraints of communication and allowing users to conflate different interactional contexts (Walther 1992). Also, interaction on social media largely depends on text or pictures, which are more difficult to interpret meaning from as opposed to FTF interactions since paralinguistic cues, gestures, and body language are absent (Menchik and Tian 2008).

Tian and Menchik (2016) further pointed out that people are interacting with unknown interactants online. In FTF interaction, recognizing the identity of one's audience comes about naturally as situations shift. In contrast, n-adic communications are directed towards a non-unified audience whose invisibility makes the discloser unable to determine the exact number of participants or the time they enter or exit the interaction. In fact, people

may enter the conversation long after the disclosure has been posted. In an *n*-adic interaction, participants are not visible to each other but anyone can jump in at any time and interactants can point to a past exchange's utterances with accuracy and certainty because it is so easily recorded. These *n*-adic interactions may lead to mismatched expectations and embarrassment, as users cannot know for sure whether the information one leaves on social media are considered during other encounters (Tian 2017a, 2017b).

The *n*-adic structure of online interaction affirms that the major difference between online and offline interaction is the ability to implement audience design. On Weibo, audience design is further complicated due to its specific technical layout.

First, as illustrated in Figure 1.1, Weibo has a thread-based information structure, which was later partially adopted by Twitter in 2017. The layout is different from early-stage Twitter, where each comment acts as an independent tweet in a searchable discussion pool facing all users (see Figure 1.2).[6] Similar to the BBS, on Weibo, each weibo establishes a thread that goes into the searchable pool, but under each weibo thread there is a semi-public comment section. This section is publicly accessible but is not searchable. As a result, this structure generates numerous public and semi-public discussion spaces that coexist on the platform and host vastly different participants.

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[6] Twitter, much like Weibo, has its own technical layout and affordances. Its open tweet pool has an output limit, making it not completely public. In late 2017, Twitter also enabled the "thread" function, which generates a thread under each tweet or retweet. Users' replies (similar to Weibo's "comments") resultantly have a different status on the platform. Although still searchable and can be viewed as an independent tweet, replies won't immediately show up on users' timelines but live in a different timeline section called "tweets & replies."

[INSERT FIGURE 1.1 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 1.1 Information Structure of Weibo

[INSERT FIGURE 1.2 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 1.2 Information Structure of Twitter

In order to reduce confusion about interactions in Weibo's multi-layered environment, we now label the participants based on their actions on Weibo:

Original poster: a user who posted the original weibo and started the first thread (the original weibo's comment section).

Reposter: a user who reposted the original weibo. S/he generates a new repost visible to her/his followers and the searchable, public pool. The repost can just be a duplication of the original post, but also can be a post with the reposter's remarks (as with Twitter's "retweet with comment" function). Meanwhile, the repost opens up a new thread for comments.

Commenter: a user who posted in the comment section.

The labels above are not mutually exclusive because Weibo users have the option to carry out simultaneous postings, which further complicates the communication. For instance, if a commenter is writing under a reposter's thread, s/he can select "simultaneously comment on original weibo" (Figure 2), sending the comment to both the reposted and the original weibo. Similarly, Weibo allows a user to "repost a weibo while leaving a comment," making the user both a reposter and commenter. In this scenario, the user addresses their followers and the public as a reposter, while addressing the original poster and the semi-public as a commenter.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 2. Option to Simultaneously Provide Comments to Author of an Original Weibo

As illustrated by Figures 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3, Weibo's technical layouts make interaction drastically different from FTF scenarios. A speech on Weibo can (and must) simultaneously cater to multiple spaces, thereby addressing different audience groups. However, Weibo users don't have full control over whom they are addressing, nor do they know if they themselves are being addressed.

[INSERT FIGURE 3.1 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 3.1. Addressing an Audience in Basic FTF Communication

[INSERT FIGURE 3.2 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 3.2. Audience Design Problems on Weibo (without Simultaneous Posting)

[INSERT FIGURE 3.3 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 3.3. Audience Design Problems on Weibo (with Simultaneous Posting)

Although users can use Weibo syntax to somewhat manage recipients, like placing "@" in front of usernames, this is a limited feature. One cannot speak into an audience group under a repost without addressing the reposter (or vice versa). Similarly, if a discussant wishes to debate in a comment section, they have no choice but to present the argument to other commenters as well as the original weibo's author—even if those individuals are not the intended or desired audience for the discussant's remarks.

The multiple audience groups, therefore, are technically assigned to users, disrupting users' traditional way of audience design through spatial and temporal evaluation. On Weibo, users have little knowledge of their actual audience, more so than other online platforms, and context discrepancy occurs due to the *n*-adic nature of Weibo. However, users from multiple audience groups feel entitled to be part of the original post or any repost on the topic because of Weibo's automatic attribution system. This makes audience design even harder for Users A, B, and C, as we will later illustrate.

METHOD AND DATA

To study how interaction takes place on Weibo, we adopted virtual ethnography as the main research method. This method is widely used in examining the rich contents and subtleties in conversations, interactions, and large-scale online movements (Kozinets 2010). This qualitative approach provided an entry to the firsthand information about Weibo users' activities; the immersive experience also helped the researchers explore Weibo's interface and further develop analytical methods.

From October 2013, the first author conducted the first phase of virtual ethnography by spending 12 hours each week over 28 weeks on Weibo to monitor trending discussions. The street quarrel debate was selected as the study case at the end of April 2014. The authors then spent 8 hours a week from May to August 2014 observing and documenting popular and related weibos based on: (1) the contents of the original weibos, reposts, and comments; (2) the general opinion developing over time; and (3) the interaction among discussants.

Although numerous weibos contributed to the discussion, the virtual ethnography exercise demonstrated that the most vibrant user interactions were in the comments sections of popular weibos. Therefore, we specifically conducted qualitative content analysis on the comments and reposts from the central weibo, which triggered dialogue and elicited the most reposts (N=136,621) and comments (N=75,248).

To do this, the first author used a FireFox browser add-on "DownThemAll" to crawl Weibo's mobile site and download the comment and repost sections of the first weibo as

static HTML files that contained texts, photos, and users' public data. The first author further extracted conversations from these files using computer regular expression techniques.[7]

In all the 75,248 comments, the researchers retrieved comments that began with the system-generated text "@UserA: Reply:@UserB," which indicated the comment is a reply to another comment. After grouping the replies that have the same participants and sorting them based on timestamps, 6,834 conversations were retrieved.

There are 5,859 accounts that participated in those conversations, of which 2,847 (48.59%) self-reported as male and 3,012 (51.41%) as female. Among all discussants, 1,022 (17.44%) self-identified their location as in the Guangdong province, which is within the vicinity of Hong Kong. Residents of large cities, such as Beijing (9.11%), Shanghai (5.41%), Zhejiang (5.38%), and Jiangsu (5.29%), also frequently participated. The self-identified Hong Kongers accounts for 2.5% of the discussants, which is disproportionately higher than in general Weibo demographics (Weibo Data Center 2014).

Through the combination of virtual ethnography and qualitative content analysis, we analyzed two aspects of the discussion: discussed content and communication strategies. In terms of the debate's content, we adopted thematic analysis to look for topics with high recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness (Boyatzis 1998; Owen 1984) and mapped out the main themes of the discussion, which helped to contextualize the nationwide debate

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[7] The conventional data-collecting method on Weibo is through the application programming interface (API). However, it is not suitable for the nature of this study as it only allows users to retrieve the most recent 1,000 results. Third party databases such as the University of Hong Kong's Weiboscope were built to periodically crawl data. While effective for longitudinal monitoring, using such databases would critically diminish the interactive nuances sought in this study.

involving dozens of thousands of weibos. It is also worth noting that the research did not engage in traditional coding procedures or assign each weibo or comment a coded theme. In order to inspect Weibo's layout and user interactions, the posts were treated as a dynamic part of a conversation (e.g., in the debate, a user's swearing would not be singly coded as a "personal attack" because it is likely an outcome from several frustrating exchanges revolving around various issues). Instead, we qualitatively examined relevant weibos, reposts, and comments.

As part of our qualitative analysis, we wanted to remain sensitive to *what* users were posting about, as well as *how* users navigated Weibo's format and how their interaction proceeded. We focused on three thematic questions:

1. Which arguments kept repeating in the debates?
2. On what grounds do Weibo users justify their positions towards different sides?
3. How do the discussants interpret the case and situate it in its social and cultural contexts?

We identified four recurring and dominant themes from the debate: (1) civility: some argued that public urination is indecent and unacceptable, while others stated that tolerance is important for civility, making photographing public urination worse than public urination itself; (2) children's privacy: opinions were expressed on the proper way to handle toddlers' toilet needs. Fierce debates ensued over who should be held responsible for the child's distress; (3) media ethics: many discussed whether Phoenix TV intentionally manipulated their reporting; and (4) nationalism: debates included cultural differences between Hong Kong, which is a previous British colony, and Mainland China. Hostility between the two rapidly escalated post-handover, especially with the large number of Mainland visitors to Hong Kong. Nationalistic discourse, a theme that is commonly observed between Hong Kong-Mainland disputes, emerged again with the commonly abused labels: Hongkongers as

colonial servants to the western world, and Mainland Chinese as "barbarians," "locusts," and such (Ong and Lin 2017).

In terms of communication strategies, the research examined how and why Weibo users interacted in certain ways. To do so, we looked specifically into how Weibo users (1) made their initial arguments, (2) responded to challenges from opponents, and (3) justified their arguments and continued the conversation.

Three communication strategies emerged in the debates: sharing personal experiences, adding situational elaborations, and seeking solidarity through opinion. After naming the strategies, the authors validated their labels against the online observations and made minor revisions to better capture the intricacies of the online debating process.

CONTEXT DISCREPENCY AND COMMUNICATIVE DIFFICULTIES

During the heated discussion, Weibo users engaged in fierce debates that were fraught with communicative difficulties: discussants were confused about who they were addressing, their social relationship with the audience, how and why a conversation was initiated, and why the conversation continued when they thought it was concluded. This is because Weibo's technical layout limited their options for audience design, obscured identity markers, imposed a word limit, and facilitated asynchronous interactions.

The most overt form of confusion can be observed from some Weibo users' complaints. When interacting with unexpected "others," many gave responses that seemed puzzled, embarrassed, and annoyed while the "others" appeared to find it normal to respond to a public weibo/comment. This inconsistency between the intended and actual audiences was exemplified in Comment #21041, where j****i (male, Singapore) asked his friend in a comment:

Why did someone give me a comment? And he even reposted it!

When users see someone else's weibos or comments, they have very little information to determine its intended audience. In offline environments, such ambiguity is considered a typical form of miscommunication (Bell 1984; Goffman 1959), yet it is much more prevalent and almost inevitable on Weibo because of the simultaneous-posting function.

Unlike the offline world, Weibo users can only employ a few different settings to define their intended audience, and each comes with a combination of other groups. The frustration of failing to target one's intended audience is exemplified by Conversation #5397 between a Zhejiang woman (R***6) and Guangdong man (J****n).

> R***6: […]I wish I could have slapped those two guys.
>
> J****n: Beating up people in Hong Kong? Are you stupid? I'm afraid you won't be able to handle the civil lawsuit.
>
> R***6: It's none of your fucking business.
>
> J****n: You scumbag.
>
> R***6: You're such a loser. You have so much time on your hands to rant online. I don't want to talk to you…

"It's none of your fucking business" and "I don't want to talk to you" most prominently demonstrates the context discrepancies in Weibo's environment, but the communication difficulties also take shape in subtler forms. Under the comment section of the central weibo, numerous comments appear out of place, such as:

> Because this couple are not the Beckhams.
>
> (Comment #74581, y***g, female)

> […]You sound like you know the truth, so show us the last part of the video. Don't you know that you have no credibility in Mainland China now? Don't play favorites with Hongkongers and don't cause trouble, you slutty cunt.

From the observations made during virtual ethnography, such seemingly out-of-place comments were made towards certain reposts instead of the central weibo, but intentionally or unintentionally made it to the central weibo as a simultaneous post. The first comment was regarding a rumor that David and Victoria Beckham were treated differently by Hongkongers when their children urinated in public. The second comment directly addressed Luqiu Luwei, an influential journalist who might have misspoke in one of her reposts.[8]

With a nationwide discussion and extensive media coverage, the central weibo's comment section had an influx of speeches made under drastically varying premises: personal banter among friends, emotionally charged tirades against Phoenix TV, pointed arguments towards a particular commenter in the semi-public arena, or brief curses that contained no clear indication of their target.

Users' lack of control over their audience can also be exemplified in their explicit attempts to regain control of their conversation.

First, discussants frequently used Weibo's blacklist functions to terminate unwanted interaction. Some even gave clear warnings. In Conversation #5412, user m***c (female, Jiangsu) ended a conversation with B***k (female, Beijing), saying,

> Don't keep talking to me. I have blacklisted you.

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[8] Admittedly, users could encounter the Beckham rumor or Luqiu's remark somewhere else and then leave an angry comment under the central weibo—and many did that. However, the comments *inspired* by additional information and those *misdirected* to central weibo were often communicated in different ways: the former tended to preface certain contexts to establish the comment while the latter addressed nonexistent persons or events under the central weibo.

Some users, however, blacklisted others without warning, which agitated those opponents immediately after they realized they could no longer use the "reply" button to interact with the blacklister. The remaining option is to post their responses in the comment section as a general comment. For instance, g*****e (male, Beijing) protested in Comment #41852, saying, "reply to m***a, if you are brave, please do not reply to someone first then blacklist him. This is not brave at all…." The comment is formatted wrong, because the user hand-typed the "reply to m***a", imitating a system-generated text string. It indicates the user m***a (female, Chongqing) quietly blacklisted g*****e, who was clearly upset about the one-sided termination of the conversation. Similarly, many people who got blacklisted attempted to resume the debate by leaving comments using "@" to address their blacklisters. The efforts were usually in vain, because the blacklisters would not receive @ notifications from the blacklisted.

The fragmented, discrepant contexts in Weibo's public discussion would be rarer in basic offline settings. In spatially, temporally, and socially bounded contexts, there is turn-taking interaction. Each turn presents new information about the interactional context as a reaction and an expectation of an immediate response (see Figure 4). Facial expressions also lend clarity, so there is not only a unified and continuous context, but misunderstandings are contemporaneously addressed, acknowledged, and remedied (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974).

[INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 4. Conversation in a Unified (Offline) Setting

While existing literature has studied a general deprivation of facial expressions, body language, and identity markers in online environments (e.g., Derks, Bos, and Grumbkow 2007; Robinson 2006; Walther and Parks 2002), little research has discussed how platforms

like Weibo disrupt users' capacity to gauge who they are interacting with. This confusion is further elevated when the central weibo is reposted tens of thousands of times. Figure 5 depicts a simplified juxtaposition between the public discussion in Weibo users' eyes and how the discussion might have started in reality.

[INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 5. Weibo Comments in Users' Eyes vs. Comments with Context

The situation is similar to an *n*-adic interaction (Tian and Menchik 2016) but with some distinctive variations. On other online platforms, the messages of senders are posted on their own page and situated in their own series of disclosures. However, messages of Weibo users often appear in spaces entirely different from their own. Meanwhile, Weibo viewers also do not know why the message is in a particular place nor whether they are its intended audience. Therefore, the resultant confusion is much harder to rectify than that elaborated in Tian and Menchik (2016) because *n*-adic interactions do not require users to take the information exposure created by the Weibo system into account.

Context discrepancies are also aggravated by the fact that Weibo is primarily a text-based platform, which restricts the use of semiotic tools like identity markers during online debates. Without the capacity to gauge social statuses of the audience (e.g., age and gender) and adjust behavior accordingly, users can only use Weibo's overt information to evaluate their audience, such as the "V" symbol next to a username that indicates the account is "verified." Initially used to verify public figures, "V" is frequently mentioned in debates as a rhetorical weapon to silence opponents because those with verified accounts "should speak more carefully." Similarly, the number of followers is another identity marker that people use to hold the more popular ones accountable, for example:

> Really? There are that many verified, crowned people supporting the
>
> child? As a "mainlander," I support the "Hongkongers."

You need to apologize to the little girl, and why do you still have so

many followers?

Interactions on Weibo provide a stark contrast to email exchanges with a known online group and Facebook interactions with many more identity markers—both scenarios facilitate users' efforts at audience design. When Menchik and Tian (2008) studied email exchanges within an academic community, they found that members who are connected offline adjust their speech to accommodate other perspectives and preface negative feedback in emails to mitigate potential perceived rudeness. Facebook users are also observed to take consideration of overlapped social networks before posting, and strategically maintain face even with unfamiliar interactants (Davis 2014; Ivana 2016). However, this type of adjustment is not observed on Weibo as users alienate other discussants by challenging opposing ideas. Thus, speculations based on limited public profiles often result in increased misunderstandings and frustrations.

The restricted means of audience design and lack of identity markers would not be insurmountable if users were given the space and time for clarification, but Weibo does not allow for this possibility either. First, the 140-word limit prevents detailed explanation that results in asynchronous and discontinuous conversations. Users often have a difficult time referring to previous speeches to build more elaborate arguments, leaving each comment isolated and decontextualized. Second, even if one has raised an argument, it will be quickly lost in the asynchronous environment as new comments quickly push older ones to previous pages. Much contextual common ground is lost and difficult to trace in this medium.

Within Weibo's technical layout, three common strategies are identified among users to cope with confusion. The first strategy, quite popular during debates, is to share personal experiences, yet this strategy often fails online. As the discussants shared their experiences, more disagreements arose, such as Conversation #1576 between a Hunan woman, p***j, and a Guangdong man, C***E. The interaction began with, "why didn't the child wear a diaper?"

C***E: If you don't want [the baby] to get wet, change the diaper. […]

p***j: Put up with it for a day or two? Are you stupid and without common sense? Children can't hold it. I'm speechless […] Put yourself in other people's shoes. What if you have a child and your child just couldn't hold it?

p***j explicitly used "put yourself in other people's shoes" three times, calling on the opponent's personal experience. C***E responded with his perspective. The differences in personal experiences, however, escalated their disagreement. Attempts were made to establish mutual experiences through 43 rhetorical questions.

C***E: I won't travel with my children.[…]

p***j: So, why don't you have any children? Who's gonna love your children if you don't love them? Is it wrong to take your children on trips?[…]

C***E: It's even more irresponsible if you travel somewhere without knowing the local customs[…]Are you forcing other people to accept your lifestyle? It's their home after all.

Rhetorical questions were a common tactic to elicit cognitive responses such as acknowledgement based on empathy and seemingly "common sense." However, the

responses depended greatly on the extent to which the other party was willing to engage with the experiences of others against prioritizing their own experiences (Petty, Cacioppo, and Heesacker 1981).

In Conversation #1576, no mutual acknowledgement was reached, and it descended into personal attacks. The insuing irreconcilable disagreement could not be resolved with 140-word messages.

In the second strategy, Weibo users recontextualized the debated case itself by adding situational elaborations. As different reposters presented their remarks while reposting to the central weibo, information was distributed—and therewith distorted—into a variety of threads. Meanwhile, users, possibly obtaining information from Weibo or other sources, aligned stories with their own preferences through active retelling. The increasing discrepancies between the interpretations then created further opinion polarization.

As previously discussed, users interpreted Phoenix TV's central weibo in many ways due its vagueness. The gender of the child was unmentioned at first and the extent of the public defecation and pedestrian photography was unclear. Therefore, people were able to re-elaborate the story to suit their leanings. This strategy is exemplified in Conversation #1372 between a Fujian woman, w***t, and an overseas woman, r***b:

> r***b: [Going to the bathroom] is supposed to be a very private issue. The Hongkongers are absolutely wrong, but if the parents could have found a quiet, secluded place and have the child urinate onto a diaper, this quarrel would not have happened…
>
> w***t: The toilets were too crowded, so the parents found a quiet place and laid a diaper underneath the child. Have your facts straight before commenting!

r***b: It doesn't matter where he urinated. How he did it is what matters.

What I'm trying to say is to remind parents to protect their children's

privacy and educate their children not to do their business in public.

Besides, there were so many people on the streets, how could you say it's

a quiet place? If that was the case, I'll apologize for what I said.

r***b prefaced her opinion by stating that "The Hongkongers are absolutely wrong" and moved the center of contention to "whether the child urinated in a quiet place." She also explicitly provided a means of being persuaded in the above exchange. To this w***t responded:

It was just a little kid. The toilet had lots of people. The child couldn't

hold it any longer, so they found the quietest spot but they couldn't

guarantee no one was around. And they used a diaper. The crowds didn't

show up until the dispute…

w***t carefully gleaned a series of situational elements that exonerated the parents. Incorrect details, such as the quiet spot, were added as truthful elaboration (Mongkok's sidewalks are hardly quiet at 11am because Mongkok is among the world's most densely populated areas). Similarly, "The crowds didn't show up" is a largely imagined detail. These, however, constituted an alternative situation that made sense to w***t herself—and r***b seems to be convinced.

If the audience does not have a strong existing opinion, situational elaboration would be effective for establishing a common context as demonstrated in Conversation #624 between a man (d***t) and woman (q***b) who are both from Jiangsu.

q***b: Taking pictures of a little girl's private parts, is this how

Hongkongers do things? Phoenix TV didn't talk about the real problem

here. I thought Hong Kong has rule of law and the media would be more

truthful […]

d***t: I find something strange. You see, she said she waited for a long

time and then she had to be in a restroom. If she could go on the street

with a diaper, why didn't she just do it in a restroom instead? Even if the

restroom was full of people, there should be space for a child.

q***b: I don't know much about the restrooms in Hong Kong. The

mother said that she was lining in front of a restroom on a street in a

shopping district. If the public restroom is like the ones in the Mainland,

there wouldn't be enough space. If the line was too long, she could only

wait outside. I felt the mother chose this spot because it is close to the

sewer. If the urine leaked onto the ground, it could go into the sewer.

d***t: Yes… If it was close to a sewer… it shouldn't be a big problem.

On a crowded street in a shopping district, it isn't decent. It's a

misunderstanding between two cultures. The Mainland culture thinks it's

no big deal for a child to urinate on the streets, and there was a diaper

used. The Hong Kong side thinks that public urination is inappropriate

even for a child.

Although these two users reached an agreement, the details they added in an attempt

to create mutual understanding actually distorted the case even more. They recontextualized

the situation by adding elements (e.g., the parents chose a spot "closer to a sewer") to

increase the perceived validity of their opinion.

On a broader scale, elaborations and the creation of sense-making contexts have a

powerful impact. After the central weibo was posted, the discussion revolved around the use

of a plastic bag or diaper. With time, various pro-Mainland stories emerged and the most influential narrative came from the current affairs commentator, s***i.

In a post about the "four sins of Phoenix TV," s***i announced four details of the incident, which were largely inaccurate: (1) the parents had been waiting in line for a long time; (2) the mother used a diaper to absorb the urine; (3) the mother put the diaper back into her bag; (4) Hongkongers took pictures of the little girl's private parts.

The polarizing effect of this coping strategy is evident, especially by the last detail alluding to pedophilic behaviors: pro-parents arguments were substantially strengthened and consolidated under s***I's elaborated context. The evolution of the discourse can also be demonstrated by the shifting word frequencies of the debate. In the first eight hours of the central weibo, only 109 comments contained the gendered term girl (*nühai* or *nütong*), with 1,762 comments containing gender-neutral terms for child, "*xiaohai*" (or *haizi*, *youtong*, and *xiao pengyou*). But the gendered terms, alongside words such as "genitalia" and "private parts," quickly took precedence as the pedophilia-related rumor started to spread. By the 26th hour, there were 967 comments using gendered terms, which is more than twice the number of gender-neutral comments. The case then became about a girl who was sexually assaulted, with a much more extreme undertone accompanied by anger and hostility.

Preferred situational elaborations are further enhanced by the "like" button. Weibo lists several most "liked" comments first in the comment section, giving them more exposure and allowing users to collectively manage information visibility.

The claim that "the mother used a diaper" first appeared in Comment #120 by q***t (male, Australia) with fewer than 300 followers. This comment, however, received over 3,000 likes.

> For those who are harping on Mainlander manners, go check out how
> many drunken foreigners have urinated in Lan Kwai Fong first. Then go

check the YouTube video. The mother was holding a diaper to catch the

urine […].

Despite lacking evidence and influence, q***t offered more situational information and supported the pro-parents arguments by "clarifying" the situation. Therefore, when users were empowered to control the visibility of certain opinions, a cycle then emerged to skew and polarize information.

Theoretical frameworks such as the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann 1974) and information cascade (Easley and Kleinberg 2010) have been used to explain the behavior of online individuals in group activities as a result of imitation and conformity. This case, however, is beyond imitation and conformity, which coincides with the interactionist prediction that people tended to assign greater value to subtle context cues in dealing with the absence of FTF cues (Postmes et al. 2001; Spears and Lea 1992). Not only have the Weibo users created and inflated situational elaborations, the technical layout further lent visibility to these elaborations. Active commenters understand this mechanism well and explicitly try to take advantage of it.

I have reported @PhoenixVideo. It omitted some important news,

published an edited video and false news[…] Like this comment if you

agree with me.

(Comment #19185, d***r, other region)

Like this comment if you agree that Luqiu needs to apologize to the

parents.

(Comment #28712, l***b, Guangxi)

Not all attempts were successful, especially for several users who tried to mediate the debate, but whose responses were often buried deep. For example, C***i (female, other region) repeatedly posted 60 pro-parents responses under the central weibo. However,

receiving few likes and providing little in terms of discourse-shifting elaborations, her responses never became widely visible.

In the third strategy, Weibo users reinforced their solidarity by sharing their positions and othering opponents. This solidarity strategy is often utilized to collectively alienate a single opponent when multiple users argued against him/her. Personal experiences were also shared and situational elaborations added. For instance, prior to Conversation #2291, both y***q (female, Beijing) and q***q (female, Shandong) debated with w***x (male, Hong Kong). Both pro-parents discussants candidly drew on their observations to mock w***x, the common enemy.

> y***q: He's anti-communist. He's here only to cause chaos. He's evil-
> minded.
> q***q: If he got what it takes, then he'd just come and take over our
> country.
> y***q: Are you playing with him, too? This dork uses some funny
> language. I teased him all-night yesterday. I couldn't stop laughing.
> q***q: [crying laughing emoji]

Unlike the previous strategies, group solidarity was recontextualized through affirmation between those with similar stances. They mutually reconfirmed speculations about their opponents and encouraged each other to terminate dialogue with dissidents:

> Don't debate with this moron.
>> Comment #62356, z***s (male, other region) to s***s (male, Guangdong)

> Don't talk to that coward… You're being too civil to him.
>> Comment #73747, n***u (male, Beijing) to l***C (female, Hebei)

Let's just ignore her… Hong Kong and Macau people are so hoity-toity…

If she has the guts, then never come back to China, and spend the rest of

her life in that tiny place called Macau.

Comment #53775, z***t (female, Guangdong) to y***e (female, Guangdong)

The three strategies described above were used to empathize with a vaguely identified audience group, organize the obscure details of discussion topics, and affirm opinions in an open environment. Under context discrepancy, each strategy tended to lead to more opinion divergence but not without exceptions. Some users, on the other hand, successfully established common understanding during Weibo discussions.

In Conversation #1469, user n***n (female, other region) and x***u (female, Hong Kong) had opposing stances. Their conversation had a hostile beginning:

x***u: …Why didn't the child wear a diaper?

n***n replies to x***u: You think like this because you never had a baby.

You should ask other mothers why a 2-year-old should not wear a diaper,

or you can just search it on Baidu. You Hongkongers are so fancy. You

think it's just so "civil" to catch toddlers' publicly urinating.

However, the discussants' attitudes drastically changed once they realized they had a common social identity: mother.

x***u replies to n***n: I have a 3-year-old son.

n***n replies to x***u: If your son couldn't hold it and you couldn't find

a toilet nearby, would you force him to hold it? By the way, is your three-

year-old son still wearing a diaper? Baoma, come on, when the children

can alert adults about peeing, there is normally no need for diapers.

Especially for girls, they could catch malaria if their lower body is

constantly covered. Now that you are a mother, how could you ask such questions? Do you consider public breastfeeding an indecent thing, too?

The conversation witnessed a dramatic turn when x***u comes out as a mother of a three-year-old. n***n, initially hostile, immediately addressed her opponent as "*Baoma*," a Mainland Chinese nickname used in the community of young mothers. In the following conversation, n***n also started to preface her opposition with phrases such as "excuse my bad manners," a tactic rarely observed on Weibo but commonly observed in exchanges within close communities (Menchik and Tian 2008). x***u also reciprocated with a softer tone:

> x***u replies to n***n: I very much support breastfeeding. I breastfed my child until he was two!
>
> n***n replies to x***u: The biggest issue about this incident is the inaccurate reporting from Phoenix TV, then the idiotic teen who saw the child peeing on the street (her mother was holding a diaper, of course). If he was a decent man, he should talk to the mother, ask her nicely, and show her the nearest restrooms. If I were the mother, I would have killed that guy—excuse me, I probably don't have good manners.
>
> n***n further replies to x***u: Since you breastfed before, may I ask if you always needed to find some place where no one is around? Baby wants to have food, should baoma just ignore the crying and search for a hidden spot? Shouldn't we be more tolerant for children, elderlies and pregnant women?
>
> x***u replies to n***n: I usually go to the bathrooms in shopping malls! Then I bought a breastfeeding blanket. However, I don't have enough courage to breastfeed in public.

x***u replies to n***n: This really is the journalist's problem. Once I saw

a mom let her child pee into a sewer. I went to tell her about the nearby

restrooms, but she yelled at me! She said it was none of my business […]

As the conversation turns to breastfeeding, n***n gave up on her nationalistic

accusations ("You Hongkongers are so fancy") and redirected her criticism to media ethics

on an individual level ("This really is the *journalist's* problem"). Meanwhile, x***u also

agreed with n***n's shift to media ethics, although she was not completely convinced. In

general, this conversation was significantly de-escalated by the exchange of a shared

experience. However, that form of convergence only emerges in atypical circumstances.

During heated discussions, not many users could find a common ground as strong as

motherhood.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

While current scholarship focuses on network homophily and selective exposure to

persuasive arguments, we argue that opinion polarization on social media is also the outcome

of efforts to recontextualize discrepant contexts during online debates. To address the context

discrepancies caused by the difficulties in audience design, online debaters use three

strategies to recontextualize discussions, but these usually lead to further divergence.

Navigating through Weibo's technical layout with little context, users' interpretations of

shared personal experiences tended to lead to more irreconcilable speculations; their

situational elaborations usually conveniently decorated the facts; and solidarity enhanced

existing and problematic opinions due to reassurance from like-minded individuals.

This study asserts that nuances in the technical layout of a platform shape online

interactions. Weibo breaks down a unified interactional context into multiple contexts so that

subjective interpretations are inserted into derivatives of the original post. These contexts are

further facilitated by word limitations, simultaneous commenting and reposting, and the "like" button that promotes visibility of messages and preferred information but skews discussions. Without a shared context, comprehensive arguments cannot take place and rebuttals are cyclical.

We advance scholarship on the distinctive features of online interaction by emphasizing how the unique technical layout of some online platforms can confuse the way users think about their audiences, which consequently shapes the dynamics of the interactions. In doing so, this paper contributes to our understanding of online debate by showing how the difficulties involved in online audience design often lead to opinion polarization.

The research findings here affirm the fundamental difficulty in trying to manage a network-oriented structure of communication. Indeed, versions of these conflicts caused by audience design occur in offline environments. There are many fora (such as classrooms, lectures, conferences, and parties) in which new audiences enter mid-stream and the speaker must decide if they taken the newcomers into account in the speech that follows, but offline conversations have temporal and spatial bounds which narrow the audience of a conversation. Difficulties related to audience design are amplified in online interaction because of technical affordances. When turning to an online system, users must contend with multiple transitions away from the offline comparison. As pointed out by Tian and Menchik (2016), in an *n*-adic interaction, interactants can point to a past exchange's utterances with accuracy and certainty; therefore, the *n*-adic nature of online one-to-many interactions makes it almost impossible to have a bounded audience design, and the specific technical layout of Weibo makes users feel like entitled participants of conversations, which is why they expect to be addressed by the posts.

Weibo is one of the most academically studied Chinese online platforms because it was often regarded as most likely to bring about political change in China (Hassid 2012). It is fast, direct, and inexpensive, and therefore effective for the grassroots to report and quickly circulate information before censorship takes place. The anonymity it affords through the use of screen names also means less fear of sanctions. Thus, there are more opportunities and incentives to express views. However, Weibo is constrained by conditions both online and offline (Sullivan 2013). Leibold (2011), for example, found that Weibo contains misinformation and isolated voices, which would not necessarily lead to enlightened civic activism.

This paper contributes to the existing research on Weibo's role in public discussion and civic engagement in China by examining how interpersonal interactions are structured at the granular level. The lack of common context during online debates means that users form their own opinion community through alliances and give up open-minded rational debates. That is, in the desire to speak freely, there is a tendency to use violent dialogue rather than rational opinions, leading to further polarization of opinions.

The context discrepancy caused by technical layouts is not unique to Chinese microblogs and is in fact shared by most mainstream social media platforms. Twitter, for instance, added a similar thread-based structure to its platform in late 2017, making Weibo a unique pioneer to understand the upcoming changes in Twitter interaction. Therefore, the findings can be generalized to other platforms of varying degrees, depending on how they facilitate communication amongst users. A gap between the intended and actual audiences can be found on other open social media sites, where uploading a post is a simultaneous action before followers and the general public. Varying constraints on the means of interaction are also prevalent in all online platforms. Most mainstream social media share the

many-to-many and asynchronous conversation style of Weibo, and might have varying

trajectories for context discrepancy.[9]

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[9] For instance, when a picture is posted on Instagram, the image might simultaneously appear on the "Explore" page of nearby users. Context discrepancy can be found in this situation, but the trajectory does not align with the "repost at the same time" trajectory of Weibo. Instead, it follows a geographical location trajectory.

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