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Преодоление цифрового разрыва: различия в платформенной аффордансе «цифровых районов» Китая и Беларуси и формирование транснациональной социальной идентичности: теоретическое исследование

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Аннотация. В данной статье представлено концептуальное исследование, интегрирующее научную литературу в области платформенной культуры, межкультурной адаптации, цифрового национализма и производства пространства, с целью предложить концепт «цифрового района» в качестве опосредующей аналитической категории и выстроить трехмерную аналитическую модель: «аффордансы платформы – цифровые практики – конструирование идентичности». В работе две цифровые экологии, в которых существует китайская и белорусская молодежь, характеризуются, соответственно, как «ориентированный на историю» и «ориентированный на настоящее» цифровые районы. Посредством симметричного анализа издержек и выгод (trade-off analysis) утверждается, что каждая из этих экологий обладает особыми культурными преимуществами и структурными издержками, при этом ни одна из них по своей сути не является «более глубокой» или «более поверхностной», чем другая. Исходя из этого, напряженность в сфере идентичности, с которой могут столкнуться китайские студенты в Беларуси, переосмысляется как процесс согласования между двумя структурами аффордансов, а не как случай «провала интеграции». В связи с этим, в статье звучит призыв к включению «цифровых районов» в качестве новой площадки для диалога в рамках будущих китайско-российских и китайско-белорусских образовательных обменов и публичной дипломатии.

Ключевые слова: цифровой район, платформенная аффорданса, межкультурная адаптация, китайско-белорусская молодёжь, цифровая публичная дипломатия.

Bridging the digital divide: affordance differences in Sino-Belarusian “digital neighborhoods” and the construction of transnational social identity: a theoretical inquiry

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Abstract. This paper presents a conceptual study that integrates literature from platform culture, cross-cultural adaptation, digital nationalism, and the production of space to propose the concept of “digital neighborhood” as a mediating analytical category, and to construct a three-dimensional analytical framework of “platform affordances – digital practices – identity construction.” The paper characterizes the two digital ecologies inhabited by Chinese and Belarusian youth as, respectively, a “history-oriented” and a “present-oriented” digital neighborhood, and argues, through symmetric trade-off analysis, that each ecology carries distinct cultural strengths and structural costs, with neither being inherently “deeper” nor “shallower” than the other. On this basis, the identity tensions that Chinese students may encounter in Belarus are reconceptualized as a process of negotiation between two affordance structures rather than as an instance of “integration failure”. The paper accordingly calls for the inclusion of “digital neighborhoods” as a new venue of dialogue in future Sino-Russian and Sino-Belarusian educational exchange and public diplomacy.

Keywords: digital neighborhood, platform affordance, cross-cultural adaptation, Chinese and Belarusian youth, digital public diplomacy.

1. Introduction

In the third decade of the twenty-first century, digital platforms are no longer auxiliary tools hovering above physical life; they have become an ontological presence deeply embedded in the fabric of youth social interaction and urban spatial perception. Friendship formation, memory storage, spatial cognition, and even national belonging among young people are now mediated and reshaped by the affordances of specific platforms [1]. A reality, however, that prior cross-cultural research has tended to underestimate is that globalised human mobility does not automatically dissolve the boundaries of digital ecologies. When a Chinese youth arrives in Minsk, his or her body may indeed be situated within the Russian-speaking city, yet the digital self remains primarily embedded in the Chinese platform ecology constituted by WeChat, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin. Local youth in the post-Soviet space, meanwhile, inhabit the Russian-language digital network woven by VKontakte (VK), Telegram, and Odnoklassniki. The affordance structures of the two platform systems run largely parallel above the same physical city, rarely intersecting. This invisible difference is often more stubborn than linguistic barriers and constitutes a genuinely consequential undercurrent in the construction of transnational social identity.

This study is a theoretical inquiry that, through literature integration and conceptual construction, seeks to propose an analytical framework for understanding the digital cultural differences between Chinese and Belarusian youth, to dissect the identity tensions that Chinese students may encounter in Belarus, and to provide theoretical reference and policy implications for transnational public diplomacy and international educational cooperation in the new era.

1.1. Researcher's positional statement

Before developing the argument, the writing position of this paper must be made explicit. First, this paper adopts an analytical framework of "platform affordance differences" rather than "cultural superiority", deliberately avoiding any characterisation of either side's digital practices as "deep" or "shallow". Second, the paper acknowledges that its analytical lens draws primarily on the conceptual resources of critical platform studies, a tradition with a strong critical disposition toward consumerism; accordingly, the paper attempts to extend an equivalent critique to the potential nationalist–statist dimensions of the Russian-language digital ecology. Third, the paper does not presuppose that "integration into local digital culture" is the sole criterion for evaluating the success of a study-abroad experience. Fourth, the paper endeavours to distinguish indigenous Belarusian cultural subjectivity from the broader Russian-language digital ecology, avoiding the simplification of the former into the latter; this distinction, constrained by the limits of available secondary literature,

is not fully developed in the present text.

2. Theoretical foundations and literature review

2.1. Conceptual definitions: from “platform culture” to “digital neighborhood”

The concept of “platform culture” emphasises that digital platforms are not neutral information conduits but rather cultural apparatuses that actively shape user identities and everyday experiences through their design, algorithms, and community norms [1]. Each platform embeds a specific “visibility logic” that determines what is seen and what is rewarded. It must be noted that visibility logic is in itself a neutral concept: it can be deployed to reward the continuity of cultural memory just as readily as it can be deployed to reward the diffusion of visual innovation. On this basis, Sarıkaya’s study of the Facebook virtual community of the Kurtuluş neighborhood in Istanbul demonstrates that virtual communities can serve as sites for the reproduction of cultural memory: when physical neighborhoods disintegrate under urban renewal, virtual communities take on the function of sustaining neighborhood identity and collective memory [2].

Building on these contributions, this paper proposes “digital neighborhood” as a mediating concept, designating a semi-bounded digital space formed within a particular platform ecology by a specific linguistic–cultural community, characterised by relatively stable discursive norms, interaction rituals, and shared concerns. Drawing on Lefebvre’s account of the production of space – space is not a neutral container but a product of the production and reproduction of social relations[3] – and on Barns’ elaboration of “platform urbanism” in which platforms have become central actors in the production of urban space[4] – the “digital neighborhood” can be understood as a novel form of urban spatial formation continuously produced by platform algorithms and continually reproduced through user practices.

2.2. Review of related research

Existing studies on the cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese students have largely followed Berry’s adaptation model, focusing on the correlations between language proficiency, personality traits, and psychological pressure. The recent empirical study by Muzychenko and Morozova on 538 Chinese students in Russia demonstrates that cross-cultural motivation plays a significant moderating role between emotional stability and cross-cultural adjustment [5]. While methodologically rigorous, such research suffers from a systematic blind spot: it almost entirely neglects the existence of digital ecologies as autonomous cultural fields.

Studies of Russian-language digital space, by contrast, reveal that platforms such as VK are

not simple replicas of Facebook but rather distinctive digital ecologies bearing the discursive traditions, historical memories, and cultural symbols specific to the Russian-speaking cultural sphere. Suslov's research on the "Russian World" (Russkii Mir) shows that Russian-language digital platforms in the post-Soviet space have in fact taken on the functions of constructing transborder cultural communities and sustaining specific historical narratives, a process that contains both an affective dimension of nostalgia and a non-trivial dimension of state-narrative instrumentalisation and ideological projection [6]. A further point requires explicit acknowledgement: the question of Belarusian subjectivity. The available scholarly literature predominantly examines Russia rather than Belarus, and tensions between Belarusian youth and Russian digital narratives – especially in the wake of the political transformations after 2020 – are complex. Belarusian-language digital communities and indigenous cultural identity politics should not be automatically subsumed under a generic "Russian-language digital ecology". Constrained by secondary sources, the present paper can only flag this distinction as an important limitation to be addressed by future dedicated research.

2.3. The analytical framework of this paper

To grasp these differences systematically, the paper proposes a three-dimensional analytical framework: "platform affordances – digital practices – identity construction". The three dimensions unfold sequentially and jointly account for why two groups of youth situated in the same physical city may develop markedly different modes of perceiving the world. Crucially, the framework does not presuppose that any particular type of affordance is "superior", but instead reveals the cultural opportunities and cultural costs that each affordance structure simultaneously brings.

3. Analytical approach

As a conceptual paper, this study does not report original empirical data; its line of argument proceeds along three layers. First, conceptual integration: drawing together resources from different traditions to formulate the new mediating concept of "digital neighborhood". Second, critical re-reading of the literature: identifying both the explanatory force and the blind spots of existing research in addressing transnational digital cultural differences. Third, symmetric trade-off analysis: with Minsk and Shanghai as reference points, two theoretical portraits of digital neighborhood operation are constructed, and each ecology is subjected to an equivalent advantages – costs analysis. It must be stated clearly that the two "portraits" presented in Section 4 below are not based on the author's original fieldwork; they are theoretical generalisations derived from existing literature reviews of VK and Xiaohongshu. Their function is to elucidate conceptual differences and to provide hypothetical

starting points for subsequent empirical research, not to be taken as empirical findings.

4. Two affordance structures of digital neighborhoods: a symmetric trade-off analysis

4.1. The history-oriented digital neighborhood: VK's affordance structure and its trade-offs

Based on existing accounts of VK practices [2, 6], we can theoretically sketch the history-oriented operating mode of the Russian-language digital neighborhood. Typical interaction patterns under this affordance structure include the uploading of urban photographs from specific historical periods (notably those associated with the Great Patriotic War, urban construction, and changes to landmark sites); other users append family memories, supplement historical detail, and share first-hand testimony in the comments. The group-based architecture of VK encourages long posts, lengthy comments, and intergenerational exchange, while its default visibility rules tend to reward content of high informational density and explicit historical concern.

The cultural advantages of this affordance structure are evident: it provides an important venue for carrying cultural memory, sustaining intergenerational continuity, and resisting the erosion of neighborhood identity by urban renewal. The mechanism of "collective memory – community identification – identity continuity" identified by Sarıkaya [2] finds analogous expression in Russian-language VK groups. Equally important to acknowledge, however, are its structural costs. Suslov's research [6] alerts us to the fact that, in the post-Soviet space, Russian-language digital platforms simultaneously serve as channels for state narratives and nationalist discourse: everyday nostalgia may be deliberately or inadvertently woven into the political narrative of the national community, and minority voices departing from official memory may be marginalised through the dual operation of algorithmic logic and community norms. This cost has become particularly conspicuous in the post-2022 context, in which the boundaries between the platform's historical-memory function and war mobilisation or external information operations have grown blurred. The VK-type digital neighborhood is thus simultaneously a container of cultural memory and a vehicle of political narrative; these two functions are not separable but are two faces of the same affordance structure.

4.2. The present-oriented digital neighborhood: Xiaohongshu's affordance structure and its trade-offs

Drawing on the discussion of "visibility logic" within platform culture studies [1], we may characterize the present-oriented digital neighborhood represented by Xiaohongshu as follows: users' core practices include the production of carefully composed image arrays, the tagging of orientational

lifestyle coordinates, the sharing of aesthetic and lifestyle exploration, and interaction organized around the question of "how to create and experience things in the city". The waterfall-feed recommendation mechanism tends to reward content that is visually striking, of moderate informational granularity around lifestyles, and easily replicable laterally.

This affordance structure also possesses non-negligible cultural advantages. It lowers the threshold for cultural creation and lifestyle sharing, bringing the "aesthetic discourse" once monopolised by elite media down to ordinary users. It supports the formation of horizontal, transregional interest communities, allowing youth from different cities to connect on the basis of shared lifestyle issues (independent coffee, urban walks, single living). Its capacity to accommodate marginal lifestyles is, in some respects, higher than that of platforms centred on national narratives. Importantly, Xiaohongshu is not reducible to a single "influencer check-in" content form: it likewise hosts substantial communities of in-depth content creation devoted to historical-architectural preservation, urban archaeology, local memory, and migrant intergenerational stories. What this paper characterises is merely one highly visible mode of practice on the platform, not its content in totality.

The structural costs of this affordance structure must equally be confronted: the algorithmic preference for visual impact and replicability may marginalise the historical dimension—the restoration history of a building or the political memory of a street can rarely command equivalent diffusion under a visibility metric defined by "photogenicity". The boundary between commercial advertising and lifestyle sharing has grown increasingly blurred, such that "cultural recommendation" often cannot be cleanly separated from "consumer guidance". Urban experience, channelled through the algorithm, tends towards aestheticisation and coordinatisation, possibly attenuating users' perception of the city as a political, historical, and social process. Two affordance structures thus each carry their own gains and losses, with no simple hierarchy between them: the VK-type digital neighborhood excels in historical depth but is susceptible to cooptation by state narratives; the Xiaohongshu-type digital neighborhood excels in horizontal openness and lifestyle creativity but is susceptible to having its historical dimension diluted by consumer logic.

4.3. The tension of transnational identity: chinese students as negotiating subjects

It is precisely the divergence between these two affordance structures that, in theoretical terms, constitutes the identity tension that Chinese students may encounter in Belarus. This paper deliberately frames the tension as a "negotiation" rather than a "dilemma" or "failure", so as to avoid an undue diminution of the students' subjectivity. The research of Muzychenko and Morozova [5]

indicates that Chinese students' cross-cultural motivation is largely driven by external factors. While drawing on this finding, the present paper adds three further points. First, students' maintenance of transnational friendships and continuity with their own culture through Chinese-language digital communities possesses its own legitimacy and should not by default be portrayed as a "limitation to be overcome". Second, the responsibility of "cross-cultural mediation" should not be unilaterally assigned to students alone – whether local youth are likewise interested in, and responsible for, understanding the digital culture inhabited by those who have travelled from afar is equally worthy of discussion. Third, students as negotiating subjects may choose to enter the local digital neighborhood, may equally choose to preserve the continuity of their own digital culture, or may become "digital mediators" bridging the two affordance structures; each of these choices has its rationale. Bouvier's research on platform discourse dynamics [7] reminds us that digital platforms have not automatically facilitated cross-cultural dialogue but, on the contrary, may, through recommendation algorithms and community boundaries, push different cultural groups toward enclosed discursive enclaves – meaning that the work of "digital mediation" is by no means easy.

5. Conclusions and implications

Through a conceptual integration and theoretical construction grounded in existing literature, this study advances the following core thesis: the "digital divide" between Chinese and Belarusian youth is not, in essence, a technological gap but a structural difference in platform affordances—one excelling in historical orientation, the other in present orientation; each structure simultaneously carries cultural advantages and cultural costs. That Chinese students arrive in Belarus physically while remaining digitally embedded in their original platform ecology should not be evaluated simply as "integration failure" but should be understood as a process of negotiation between two affordance structures.

At the theoretical level, this study seeks to break the long-dominant "online/offline" binary in cross-cultural adaptation research and argues that digital neighborhoods should be incorporated into analytical view as cultural fields of equal weight to physical space. The work of Shabrov et al. on education as a mechanism of national identity formation [8] has already pointed to the central role of education in identity construction; the present paper further indicates that, in the digital era, this constructive process has extended from classrooms and textbooks to every micro-moment of swiping the screen. At the practical level, this study calls for future Sino-Russian and Sino-Belarusian educational exchange and public diplomacy to move beyond the level of physical campuses and to cultivate "digital neighborhoods" as a new venue of dialogue: by supporting young content creators

with bilingual or dual-platform literacy; by encouraging bidirectional (rather than unidirectional) digital content production; and by introducing “digital cultural literacy” training into international education programmes. Such training should include reflective recognition of one’s own digital ecology, not merely instrumental familiarisation with that of the other.

The limitations of this paper must be made explicit. First, as a theoretical inquiry, the study has not undertaken original fieldwork. Second, the tension between indigenous Belarusian cultural subjectivity and Russian digital narratives has not been fully developed here, owing to the constraints of secondary literature. Third, the paper’s generalisations inevitably simplify the internal pluralism of each digital neighborhood. Future research could systematically compare content on similar topics across the two platforms, conduct longitudinal interviews with Chinese students residing long-term in Russia or Belarus to attend to their negotiating strategies, and undertake case studies of cross-cultural “digital mediators”.

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