

Research on the Use of ‘Alt Accounts’ in the Context of Social Media Migration: A Case Study of Weibo ‘Alt Accounts’ (Postprint)

Authors: Li Jingkun

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Abstract

Social networking occupies a significant position in contemporary life. The continuous evolution of media modalities endows individuals with greater autonomy in media selection and facilitates social media migration. Existing research has predominantly focused on cross-platform migration, while few studies have examined migration practices within the same platform. Based on in-depth interviews with 11 Weibo secondary account users, this study investigates—from the perspective of social media migration—the changes in individuals’ social relationships and self-disclosure resulting from migration from a main account to a secondary account, and further elucidates how secondary accounts fundamentally concern how individuals navigate the self in a networked space where public and private spheres intersect. Additionally, this paper reflects upon its own research contributions.

Full Text

Preamble

Research on “Secondary Account” Usage in the Context of Social Media Migration: A Case Study of Weibo “Secondary Accounts”
(Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing 102600)

Abstract: Social networks occupy a significant position in modern life. The continuous evolution of media forms grants individuals more autonomous media selection rights and facilitates social media migration based on the affordances of various platforms, leading to fluid changes in persona, relationships, and self-disclosure. While research on “social media migration” has garnered widespread academic attention in recent years, the concept of “Cyber Migration”—users switching from one social network platform to another—emerged at the dawn of social media [1]. Previous studies on social media migration have primarily

focused on cross-platform migration, often linking it to social media fatigue. Building on this foundation, scholars have further noted that attention migration in social media migration refers not only to repeated bidirectional movement across different platforms but also to switching between different accounts within the same platform [2].

Keywords: social media migration; secondary account; Weibo secondary account

Social media has become an inseparable part of daily life, where we establish connections with others and shape our self-image. Simultaneously, the continuous evolution and expanding boundaries of social media have created a polymedia platform usage environment, providing users with more autonomous and expansive media selection rights and making it easier to engage in social media migration based on the affordances of various platforms, thereby unfolding fluid changes in persona, relationships, and self-disclosure. Although research on “social media migration” has received considerable academic attention in recent years, the concept of “Cyber Migration”—defined as users switching from one social network platform to another—appeared at the birth of social media [1]. Previous research on social media migration has predominantly concentrated on cross-platform migration and is frequently associated with social media fatigue. On this basis, scholars have further pointed out that attention migration in social media migration refers to both repeated bidirectional movement across different platforms and switching between different accounts within the same platform [2].

In 2018, a British survey of 20,000 secondary school students’ social media usage revealed that 30% had two accounts on the same platform, 10% had three or more accounts on the same platform, and 57% had accounts unknown to their acquaintances [3]. This phenomenon of maintaining multiple accounts on the same platform also applies to China. In recent years, while the proliferation of social platforms has brought convenience, it has also exposed individuals to more complex public opinion fields and public spaces, making self-disclosure more cautious. Faced with the contradictions and tensions between public space and private expression, some users experience social media fatigue [4], while others seek alternative paths within the same platform by migrating to “secondary accounts” distinct from their primary accounts. According to an iMedia Research report on Chinese social media users, 43% of respondents use 3-4 applications, with the top three being WeChat, Sina Weibo, and QQ. Compared to WeChat and QQ, which primarily function as instant messaging tools for acquaintances, Weibo tends toward a public space for heterogeneous groups to interact. According to Weibo’s Q3 2022 financial report, Weibo’s monthly active users reached 584 million in September 2022, a net increase of approximately 11 million users year-over-year [5]. This massive influx of users has also made the public opinion and expression spaces individuals inhabit increasingly complex, with external challenges and scrutiny growing. Consequently, some users have begun migrating within the same platform, creating Weibo “secondary accounts” distinct

from their primary accounts. Previous attention to social media “secondary accounts” has often focused on their functional affordances and domestication, account types, and self-presentation. However, research on secondary accounts should not merely examine media use based on a single account but should also consider the processes of migration and fluidity. This study adopts the perspective of social media migration, focusing on individuals who create Weibo “secondary accounts” distinct from their primary accounts within the same platform. Using qualitative semi-structured interviews, it examines changes in social relationships and self-disclosure during the migration process and attempts to imagine the individual circumstances and social ecology reflected behind users’ migration to secondary accounts.

Literature Review

Social media migration originated from the term “Cyber Migration,” with scholars drawing inspiration from biological “migration” to define “Cyber Migration” as the behavior of users switching from one social network platform to another [1]. This definition does not specify the direction, time, or space of migration. Under the development of social media, scholars have further divided social media migration into platform migration and attention migration. Platform migration refers to abandoning a social media platform for an extended period and shifting to other platforms, often without returning to the original platform, and may even involve deleting data or deactivating accounts [1]. Attention migration refers to users allocating their attention to different social platforms during different time periods [2]. Meanwhile, platform migration and attention migration are not independent concepts but fluid relationships that can transform at any time, with attention migration sometimes serving as a preparatory state for platform migration [1].

Current research on social media migration primarily consists of attribution studies. For instance, regarding platform migration in social media migration, scholars Yu Junying and Wu Yao used the PPM model to examine and review the current research status on user switching behavior in social media platforms [3]. Zhuang Rui, Yu Deshan, and Yang Rui investigated the motivations behind young users’ social media platform migration using QZone as a case study [4]. In cross-platform migration research, “social media fatigue” has become a key focus. Three Korean scholars, studying over 100 social media users, found that the main factors in migration were interaction overload, negative relationships on platforms, and “media fatigue” [5]. Xiong Yiyao and Dong Chenyu also emphasized in their research that interaction overload—the fatigue generated by excessive connections—is the first important factor driving users to engage in platform migration [2]. In research on attention migration, some scholars, starting from the polymedia environment, have summarized three types of personal satisfaction that attention migration brings to users: escaping the unavailability within platforms, managing social relationships across platforms, and performing different self-images [6]. Attention migration is also frequently linked to

the concept of “platform swinging.” For example, Lu Xinyuan et al., based on grounded theory, explored users’ swinging behavior across multiple social media platforms and found that platform, user, social, and contextual factors all significantly influence users’ platform swinging behavior [7]. Building on this, scholars have further pointed out that attention migration refers to both repeated bidirectional movement across different platforms and switching between different accounts within the same platform [8]. However, migration and switching between different accounts within the same platform have rarely been addressed in previous social media migration research. This study attempts to examine the process of users migrating within the same platform by creating different accounts, using “secondary accounts” as an entry point.

“Secondary accounts” refer to subordinate accounts distinct from primary accounts—one or more additional accounts created beyond the “primary account” [EB/OL]. Generally, the creation of secondary accounts tends to be motivated by private factors, with users preferring to avoid connecting with too many social relationships [1]. When Li Yawei et al. explored the usage motivations of Weibo “vest accounts” (i.e., secondary accounts), they also found that secondary account users often link fewer social relationships to ensure relative safety of their expressed content [2]. Additionally, some scholars categorize secondary account usage as an unconventional social media usage pattern [3]. Building on this, Wang Zijian and Li Lingling focused on the three-fold affordances of “secondary accounts” and emphasized users’ domestication of secondary accounts and social media [4]. However, “secondary accounts” on social media platforms do not exist independently; current research tends to focus on individuals’ single accounts within platforms without adequately addressing the connections and combinations among multiple accounts. Wang Yun and Liu Sijia brought secondary account research into the perspective of multiple account practices, examining users’ self-presentation [5]. This study builds on previous research by adopting a social media migration perspective to discuss the use and practice of secondary accounts, not limited to individuals’ self-presentation within a single secondary account but focusing on the fluid process of migrating from primary to secondary accounts to explore changes and experiences in social relationships and self-disclosure, and to imagine the individual circumstances and social ecology behind secondary accounts.

Based on the above literature review and conceptual 梳理, this article proposes the following two research questions:

RQ1: How are social relationships reshaped in accounts after users migrate to secondary accounts?

RQ2: What individual circumstances and social ecology are reflected in within-platform migration?

Research Methods

To answer the research questions, this study employs qualitative semi-structured interviews. Compared to quantitative research, this approach better captures the subtle considerations behind secondary account usage and facilitates exploration of subjects' self and internal experiences, making it suitable for understanding processes and meanings [6]. The interview outline primarily covers three aspects: first, an investigation of respondents' Weibo secondary account usage, including duration of use, number of secondary accounts, and attention allocation time across multiple accounts; second, changes and reasons for migrating from primary to secondary accounts, including differences in social relationships and reasons, differences in self-disclosure and reasons, differences in usage feelings, and experiences with social media fatigue; third, reflections and meanings behind migrating to secondary accounts, including whether there is a fragmentation of self-image, reasons for preferring to post emotional content on secondary accounts, how to handle secondary accounts if discovered by acquaintances, and feelings about Weibo's public space versus secondary accounts' private territory.

Previous research has found that female users on the Weibo platform far outnumber male users and participate more actively in daily Weibo activities [7]. The researcher recruited 11 daily active Weibo users with two or more Weibo accounts through personal social connections and posts on Weibo and Douban groups, conducting 30-60 minute in-depth interviews with them. Among the 11 respondents, 3 were male and 8 were female, aged 20-30. All respondents participated voluntarily and were informed about the research content and privacy protection measures, including anonymity. Due to the pandemic, all interviews were conducted online via Tencent Meeting and Feishu Meeting, with full recordings made with respondents' consent. Afterward, the researcher transcribed all interview recordings verbatim and conducted further data analysis using the qualitative analysis software Nvivo12 to derive research conclusions.

Table 1: Basic Information of Respondents

For different social platforms, users will place different social relationships on different platforms to achieve "region behavior" in social relationship management [1]. Numerous previous studies have shown that users will avoid connecting with too many social relationships in secondary accounts [2]. Therefore, fluidity and migration between accounts on the same platform often bring about segmentation and changes in social relationships. In these interviews, respondents all segmented and managed the social relationships from their primary accounts, constructing new social relationships after migrating to secondary accounts and engaging in corresponding self-disclosure and social practices.

Migration Transit Station: Continued Social Relationships and Restricted Self-Disclosure

The increasing connections in social networks extend social relationships while also creating more relational burdens and social pressure [3]. However, social media is fundamentally relationship-based and connection-oriented. Under the tension between connection and disconnection, some users choose to select and segment social relationships from their primary accounts during migration to secondary accounts, retaining some relationships in their secondary accounts to achieve relative balance between social and expressive needs. One of Respondent S10's secondary accounts, for instance, mutually followed friends from his primary account with whom he had close relationships and frequent interactions.

This within-platform migration that retains partial social relationships is often related to “context collapse” caused by identity transitions that lead to multi-layered social relationships on the primary account. Previous research has noted that “identity transition” is a primary reason why young users migrate away from QZone [4], as changes and transitions in real-life identity, such as entering higher education, graduating, or starting work, affect people's social media usage [5]. Meanwhile, social media technology merges social environments that are separated in real life, and identity transitions bring changes to online social relationships, causing individuals to construct social relationships on their Weibo primary accounts that include multiple identities such as classmates, colleagues, and close friends. When diverse relationships from different contexts are gathered on a single social media platform and within a single context, “context collapse” occurs [1]. Therefore, some respondents indicated that after migrating to secondary accounts, they would reshuffle the social relationships from their primary accounts, retaining some relationships to satisfy their own needs for social interaction. “I've been playing on Weibo for a long time. When I was ‘immature,’ I followed many middle school and high school classmates. As my values have stabilized over the years, I've also made some similar and close friends, and we follow each other on Weibo. So my primary account became like a small ‘Moments’ circle. I don't want to show some of my thoughts to my classmates, so I chose to apply for a secondary account, which follows some of my previously close friends.” (S2)

The social relationships that continue after further screening and selection represent, for some, an expression of intimacy. However, all respondents indicated that the degree of self-disclosure in Weibo secondary accounts with existing acquaintance relationships remains influenced by social relationships. Content posted in secondary accounts may overlap with that in primary accounts, and because the two accounts share some social relationships, the “mask-like” feeling of self-presentation on social media becomes more pronounced when posting identical content. S10 stated: “When sharing the same pictures in both accounts, I sometimes worry that some friends seeing them twice will think I'm performing, and I myself feel a sense of fragmentation.” Therefore, for users seeking more space for self-expression during within-platform migration, sec-

ondary account migration that retains partial acquaintance relationships does not represent their final “destination” but rather functions more as a transitional “transit station.”

Rebuilding Social Territory: Subcultural Practices and the “Freshness Loss” of Secondary Accounts

Interaction with strangers in social media environments is “de-rolled,” meaning that when only interpersonal attraction factors are considered, both parties’ social roles and positions are temporarily suspended [2]. In migrating from primary to secondary accounts, some users choose to abandon the social relationships constructed in their primary accounts and interact with strangers in their secondary accounts. From a pure social media perspective, impression management costs decrease in an environment completely independent of acquaintance social networks [3]. Suspending real-life identity contexts endows relationships with “de-sensitivity,” and interacting with strangers in secondary accounts can reduce the pressure and anxiety present in real-life relationship interactions, matching the privatized needs of secondary accounts and making communication more focused and pure. Self-disclosure willingness also increases, and connections with strangers based on interests and emotions are more free and casual than real-life relationships. “The people I mutually follow in my secondary account are strangers I met on the internet, due to shared interests or common discussions on certain topics. In my secondary account, I can freely express my views, positions, and interests because there are no friends based on real-life relationships here.” (S3)

Some individuals choose to segment the social relationships from their primary accounts and migrate to secondary accounts to complete their own subcultural interest practices, and the natural attributes of secondary accounts are also well-suited for subcultural expression outside the mainstream, making it easier for individuals to integrate into interest-based communities using their secondary account identity. This type of online relationship developed through shared interests reveals that secondary accounts help individuals segment intimate relationships from primary accounts while also shaping new community connection methods [4]. During interviews, celebrity fandom emerged as an important reason why many respondents chose to open secondary accounts. S11 is a “fan-girl.” Her primary account mainly posts daily life content mixed with a small amount of celebrity-chasing updates. Due to the restrictions of her primary account’s social relationships, she consciously examines her language when posting celebrity-chasing content. In her celebrity-chasing secondary account, however, her praise for favorite stars is more direct and intense. She stated: “Posting celebrity-chasing updates on my primary account—first, sometimes the explicit language damages my image among acquaintances, and second, if I can’t control myself and flood the feed, it affects the experience of my mutually followed friends. So I chose to apply for a dedicated secondary account for celebrity-chasing. My secondary account is all fellow fans who like the same star, and

our content expression is similar. Flooding the feed in the secondary account is the default and even brings new ‘material’ to other celebrity-chasing friends.” In the process of creating a secondary account for celebrity-chasing, S11 also made like-minded friends and even arranged to participate in offline “support activities.” This offline relationship developed through social media secondary accounts as a medium demonstrates that secondary accounts help some users break free from the expression rules brought by intimate relationships in primary accounts, thereby establishing new online social capital.

S4 admitted that she applied for a secondary account to disguise herself as a “solo fan” and join a certain star’s fan support club. To create the “solo fan” identity, S4 posted celebrity-chasing content in her secondary account entirely centered on that star, and her group activities also focused solely on that star. However, the transience of emotions, lack of stability, and decentralized power relationships can easily lead to rapid fan turnover, repeated power games in fan circles, and consequently, mobilization failure or wasted organizational strength [1]. When S4’s feelings toward the star changed during her celebrity-chasing practice, her secondary account usage changed accordingly: “For various reasons, I’ve already ‘un-fanned’ and no longer participate in his support club activities. After un-fanning, I basically haven’t logged into this secondary account again.” When respondents abandon their personal secondary accounts, they are actually interrupting opportunities to interact with related groups. From this perspective, when individuals establish social relationships with strangers in secondary accounts and engage in their own subcultural practices, due to the relatively independent status of secondary accounts, their maintenance intensity and freshness preservation are not stable.

Finding a “Private Plot”: “The End of One Circle Is Another Beginning”

For some individuals, social relationships containing acquaintances only need to exist in the public primary account, where they maintain and abide by social rules assigned by society or self-defined. On the other hand, their migration to secondary accounts becomes a new space to evade social rules [2]. Empirical data shows that many users do not just create one social secondary account; many individuals choose to create more accounts to further segment their interaction spaces. Throughout these interviews, among respondents’ one or more secondary accounts, there exists an account that functions to express emotional states. This type of account does not contain any social relationships or social presets and plays more of a “tree hole” role. The “de-socialization” nature enhances individuals’ imagination of private domains, giving users greater security and stronger self-disclosure willingness. “In my secondary account, I don’t deliberate over word choice or think about who will see this sentence and what their reaction will be. I only record my most authentic feelings at the moment. It allows me to express my inner thoughts without scruples, whether they’re some terrible emotions or some dark thoughts.” (S6) “Before, I was very afraid

of saying something wrong and being scolded, so I only dared to repost. Reposting meant that although I reposted it, it didn't mean I really agreed with the original post—if anything, don't judge me, judge the original creator. But in my secondary account, I can say whatever I want, so my willingness for self-expression is stronger." (S1)

Previous research results also show that emotion is the most frequent theme for secondary account users, who express private emotional experiences and feelings on Weibo, presenting all their joys and sorrows [3]. While having the freedom to express emotions and feelings in secondary accounts, this also reflects that hiding private emotions on public platforms is a silent rule in every internet user's heart. Users believe that public platforms are not suitable channels for disseminating private or sensitive issues, and expressing private feelings such as loneliness or negative emotions contradicts the mass usage norms of social media [4]. S8 stated that she only expresses emotions in her secondary account—first, she doesn't want acquaintances to see and come to comfort her, adding “trouble,” and second, her emotions belong only to her private self and she doesn't want them publicly judged.

Richard Sennett argues that in an intimate society, “limiting what is expressed to others, thereby sparing them the burden of one's inner troubles,” is a civilized behavior worthy of admiration [5]. Today, more and more people are beginning to believe in and accept this assertion, applying it to their own social relationships. Intimacy between people becomes a masked polite interaction, reducing disturbance and influence on each other, which serves as an important reference for self-image examination and judging others. Under these rules, people seem to enter an “image cocoon,” carefully managing their image to create a self that conforms to social norms and public imagination [1]. Meanwhile, mainstream culture's shaping and interpellation of strong images requires not only excellence in ability and wealth but also a strong inner self, making individuals' expressions of negative emotions appear more “vulnerable” and “pretentious.” Traditional Chinese concepts also require people to “restrain oneself and return to ritual” (The Analects, Yan Yuan), restraining personal desires and emotions to conform to ethical norms and ritual systems [2]. Therefore, some Weibo users choose to use secondary accounts to remove their masks and place self-disclosure in private domains.

Furthermore, the prevalence of individualism causes people to only pay attention to what they express and only 认同 viewpoints they consider correct. The lack of listening and communication between people, coupled with the playing out of online debates, leads people to hide their viewpoints and emotions to avoid conflict and judgment. However, once the self is in a more open and inclusive state, subtle changes may also occur in self-disclosure in secondary accounts and even in the existence of secondary accounts themselves. “I think expressing oneself in secondary accounts actually reflects many people's non-acceptance of voices and viewpoints different from their own. But when I become more tolerant and open to some different voices and viewpoints, I feel like maybe I

don't need a secondary account and can manage with just a primary account. It's like things you were previously unwilling to post for others to see seemed that way because you thought others couldn't accept you, but I actually think it's also a reflection of one's inner self—because I myself may also feel unable to accept viewpoints different from mine.”

Discussion

This study examines Weibo secondary accounts using qualitative semi-structured interviews to investigate changes in social relationships and self-disclosure when users migrate from primary to secondary accounts during social media migration. According to the research findings, all users migrating from Weibo primary to secondary accounts experience changes in social relationships, which mainly occur at three levels: First, some social relationships from the primary account are retained in the secondary account, and these retained relationships represent intimacy for users. Due to the presence of some acquaintance relationships, users' self-disclosure in secondary accounts is correspondingly restricted. Second, social relationships from the primary account are completely segmented, and social territory with stranger groups is rebuilt in secondary accounts. The “de-sensitivity” attribute of strangers enhances individuals' self-disclosure willingness. Individuals complete their own interest-based group activities and subcultural practices through secondary accounts and establish new online social capital, but the maintenance intensity and freshness preservation are not stable. Third, secondary accounts serve as private “tree holes” without establishing any social relationships, enabling full self-disclosure. However, the fact that emotional disclosure only occurs in secondary accounts with no attention reflects the disciplining of individual expression by social culture, traditional concepts, and self-will.

Simultaneously, cyberspace places user behavior at the boundary between private and public domains [3]. Situated in the digital network environment, we cannot achieve pure privatization, and the flexibility between public and private drives individuals to engage in self-correction and transform their actions. The issue of secondary accounts is essentially about how we manage ourselves in the network space where public and private intertwine. Secondary accounts do not exist independently and singularly; individuals seek balance in the network environment where private and public intertwine by opening multiple secondary accounts with different purposes. When users register secondary accounts beyond their primary accounts, it also means they have a brand-new opportunity to shape their online self. As Respondent S1 said: “No matter what happens in my life, it seems I can't restart it, but secondary accounts are different—you can always start another one at any time.” The final interview question was: “If your secondary account is discovered by unexpected social relationships, what would you choose to do?” Most respondents answered that they would conduct emergency management of the secondary account's content and migrate to the next secondary account. While secondary accounts give us freedom and security,

do they also, to some extent, reinforce our “self cocoon”? The current network environment and social ecology are also pushing us toward homogenized fields. We migrate from primary accounts to secondary accounts, and then from secondary accounts to one secondary account after another... But if one day we no longer need secondary accounts, would that signify self-openness, tolerance, and reconciliation?

This study brings the perspective of social media migration into secondary account research, endowing secondary accounts with fluid, migratory, and combinatorial motivations on the basis of existing research focusing on single-account presentation, and further providing more within-platform considerations for social migration. From a practical perspective, the social secondary account phenomenon reflects individuals’ circumstances in social networks and can, macroscopically, provide reflections for network environment regulation and standardization. For individuals, it can also help discover and examine external or self-imposed discipline, thereby better managing themselves in the online social environment. However, this study also has the following limitations: On the one hand, due to time cost constraints, this study’s sample size is insufficient; on the other hand, regarding individuals using multiple social secondary accounts, this article fails to provide more specific discussion. It is hoped that these limitations can provide ideas and directions for future research.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.