Postprint: A Review of Key Issues in Intermittent Discontinuance Behavior of Social Network Users

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Abstract

[目的/意义]Intermittent discontinuance constitutes one aspect of negative usage behaviors among social network users. By analyzing representative domestic and international research findings, this study systematically organizes the knowledge system and key issues in this field, forecasts future research trends, and provides references for subsequent academic research.[方法/过程]Based on data sources such as CNKI and Web of Science, 54 key literatures were selected through keyword retrieval, citation tracing, and thematic analysis. A systematic review was conducted on three critical issues—research themes, theoretical frameworks, and research methodologies—and a framework for standardized research procedures was accordingly constructed.[结果/结论]Research on users' intermittent discontinuance behavior in social network contexts remains in its infancy, with considerable scope for advancement in terms of thematic granularity, theoretical richness, and methodological diversity. Future research trends in this field will involve investigating the influencing factors and formation mechanisms of such behavior from interdisciplinary perspectives spanning information science, psychology, sociology, and journalism and communication, examining the interplay between facilitating and inhibiting factors as well as the combined effects of external social environments and psychological-emotional experiences.

Full Text

Preamble

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A Review of Key Issues in Research on Social Network Users' Intermittently Discontinuous Behavior*

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Abstract: [Purpose/Significance] Intermittently discontinuous behavior represents a form of passive usage behavior among social network users. By analyzing representative research findings from domestic and international sources, this study systematically reviews the knowledge system and key issues in this field, and accordingly forecasts future research trends to provide reference for subsequent academic research. [Method/Process] Based on data sources including CNKI and Web of Science, 54 important articles were selected through keyword retrieval, tracing retrieval, and thematic analysis. A systematic review was conducted on three key issues: research topics, research theories, and research methods, and a framework for normative research processes was constructed accordingly. [Result/Conclusion] Research on users' intermittently discontinuous behavior in social network contexts remains in its infancy, with considerable room for development in terms of the granularity of research topics, richness of theoretical models, and diversity of research methods. Based on interdisciplinary perspectives from information science, psychology, sociology, journalism, and communication studies, future research trends will involve in-depth exploration of influencing factors and formation mechanisms of social network users' intermittently discontinuous behavior from dual perspectives of promoting-inhibiting factor interactions and comprehensive effects of external social environments and psychological-emotional experiences.

Keywords: social network; intermittently discontinue; systematic review

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With the deep usage of social networks, users increasingly perceive negative effects such as usage overload and fatigue, leading to various degrees of passive usage behavior. In social network research, the post-adoption stage of technology or product innovation diffusion has shifted focus to users' discontinuous

usage behaviors, such as reducing usage frequency, temporarily suspending or interrupting use, permanently discontinuing use, or switching to other social platforms. Based on the severity of passive usage, these behaviors can be categorized into three levels: severe, moderate, and mild. Severe passive usage includes permanent discontinuance and switching behaviors, while mild passive usage includes reduced usage frequency. Moderate passive usage, which lies between these extremes, primarily refers to temporarily suspending social network use but potentially resuming later—this is termed "intermittent discontinuance" [1-3]. According to T. Ravindran et al. [4], intermittent discontinuance comprises three dimensions: intermittent break, controlled discontinuance, and suspended discontinuance. Intermittent break refers to users temporarily disengaging from a technology or product; controlled discontinuance refers to self-regulating the duration and frequency of technology/product usage; suspended discontinuance refers to temporarily stopping use of a technology or product but resuming later. All three forms indicate that users have not completely abandoned the social network and may return, representing a dynamic and continuous adoption pattern [1].

As the most typical and widespread moderate passive usage behavior, intermittent discontinuance has important value for research: (1) Academic value. Literature tracing reveals that intermittent discontinuance has been studied historically in product innovation diffusion and related fields. While recent social network applications have provided broader research perspectives and richer content, attracting increasing attention from academia and industry, research in this specific context remains relatively fragmented and insufficient. Systematic literature review to summarize existing research systems provides beneficial supplementation to the knowledge base and valuable references for future researchers. (2) Practical value. The emergence of intermittent discontinuance poses threats to the sustainable development of social network technologies, products, and services. In-depth analysis of its causes and formation mechanisms offers significant value for development, design, and operations. For instance, based on differences in user negativity levels, social network service providers can customize personalized operation solutions and precise customer management, dynamically tracking, portraying, identifying, and warning against users' intermittently discontinuous behavior to timely improve service quality and maximize customer relationship repair.

2 Literature Retrieval and Sample Overview

2.1 Literature Acquisition and Analysis Methods

Data acquisition comprised three steps: (1) Keyword retrieval. Based on existing literature, preliminary Chinese and English keyword ranges were identified around social networks and intermittently discontinuous behavior. Using the Delphi method, three experts in information systems and social networks supplemented and refined these keywords. Given rapid industry development, many empirical studies focus on highly representative social platforms with large user

bases, which were also included. Literature investigation showed research concentrated between 2005-2018, so retrieval was limited to this timeframe. Final keywords combined social network terms (social networking sites, social media, SNS, forums, microblogs, WeChat, etc.) with intermittently discontinue terms (intermittent use, discontinuance, discontinuous usage, passive usage, social fatigue, etc.) for searching Chinese databases (CNKI, conferences, theses) and English databases (Web of Science Core Collection, Emerald, EI, Elsevier). (2) Tracing retrieval. To compensate for potential omissions from keyword searches, tracing retrieval was employed by examining references of representative literature to comprehensively identify all relevant studies. (3) Literature screening. To ensure relevance and accuracy, after browsing, screening, relevance checking, and duplicate removal, 54 highly relevant representative articles were finalized, including 35 English and 19 Chinese articles, with 50 journal papers and 4 master's/doctoral dissertations. Disciplines primarily focused on journalism and communication, library and information science, computer technology, user information behavior, and internet research.

This study employed systematic review methodology to analyze sample literature. Systematic review, also called systematic literature review, refers to a systematic, reproducible method for synthesizing existing literature on a specific research question, topic, or phenomenon. Originating in medical fields, it has been gradually applied to social sciences, education, and library/information science [5]. Through comprehensive reading and evaluation, this study systematically summarized literature from research topics, theories, and methods perspectives, then constructed a conventional research framework for social network users' intermittently discontinuous behavior.

2.2 Overview of Domestic and International Research

By compiling domestic and international research on intermittently discontinuous behavior and plotting publication years against document counts, development trends were visualized. Statistical analysis revealed that international attention began earlier, with few publications before 2012 and steady development; significant growth started in 2013. Domestic literature grew rapidly after 2015. See Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

Intermittently discontinuous behavior is a derivative product of mature social network development. Since related industries developed much earlier abroad than domestically, research shows similar patterns: (1) Embryonic stage (pre-2012). Beginning in 2003, platforms like Facebook, MySpace, WhatsApp, Twitter, and YouTube emerged internationally, drawing academic and industry attention to discontinuous usage phenomena. However, as social networks had not yet reached saturation and platforms continuously optimized products and services, negative effects were largely "neutralized." Although some scholars noted intermittently discontinuous behavior, research output remained low. (2) Development stage (2013-2014). Popularization of mobile smart terminals, massive information influx, and frequent privacy incidents increased users' physiological

burdens and psychological pressures. The "Facebook vacation" phenomenon prompted academic attention to negative emotions and passive usage consequences, with research output growing rapidly. (3) Explosion stage (post-2014). Research on social network user behavior deepened, with increasing studies examining how gender, age, personality traits, and usage characteristics affect intermittently discontinuous behavior, further developing the theoretical system.

Domestic development trends were similar but lagged behind, remaining in exploratory stages. Since 2008, China's social network platforms proliferated rapidly, represented by QQ, Weibo, and WeChat. After Zhang Mingxin and Ye Yinjiao [1] defined intermittent discontinuance in 2014, literature on Chinese mainstream social media exploded, with studies by Zhang Yanfeng et al. [6], Guo Jiahang [7], Zhang Shuwei [8], and Qiu Jiaqing et al. [9] exploring influencing factors of discontinuous or passive usage from burnout/overload perspectives. However, this stage suffered from single analytical perspectives and non-systematic content, failing to clearly explain formation mechanisms or categorize discontinuous usage and social burnout levels. Through continuous tracking research, current domestic and international research has converged in topics and methods. Overall, domestic research still offers considerable exploration space in subdivided areas based on individual factors (personality traits, usage characteristics, social relationship types), subjective emotional perceptions, and social environmental factors.

3 Research Topic Analysis

Based on content and methodological differences, research topics can be subdivided into four main types.

3.1 Basic Theoretical Research and Application of Intermittently Discontinuous Behavior

Intermittently discontinuous behavior represents a special type of passive usage behavior characterized by moderate severity, dynamic nature, and relative reparability compared to other passive usage types. Clarifying its definition, connotation, and extension is essential for scientific research. In 2014, Zhang Mingxin and Ye Yinjiao [1] expanded the discontinuance concept and provided a specific definition. In 2015, C. York and J. Turcotte [2] further explained the "Facebook vacation" phenomenon. Overall, domestic and international discussions on intermittently discontinuous behavior remain in early stages, with relatively few keyword-focused studies primarily concentrating on wearable technology user behavior [10-11]. Social networks differ significantly from other specific technologies/products in innovation diffusion, and as a recent hotspot for intermittently discontinuous behavior, studying this phenomenon in social networks enriches the user behavior research system.

3.2 Qualitative Research on Social Network User Fatigue, Negative Emotions, and Intermittently Discontinuous Behavior

Literature analysis, in-depth interviews, and grounded theory are common methods. K. Koroleva et al. [12] used semi-structured in-depth interviews with grounded theory to construct a framework model of Facebook information overload formation mechanisms, identifying antecedents and behavioral consequences. T. Ravindran et al. [4] combined behavioral tracking and in-depth interviews to identify five fatigue-causing factors: social, content, immersion, platform, and lifecycle aspects. Liu Luchuan et al. [13] and Li Hong and Li Wei [14] used literature analysis to integrate and elaborate on social media burnout emotions and passive behaviors. Qualitative research holds important value for new field exploration. Since the existing knowledge system of intermittently discontinuous behavior lacks mature, robust theories and frameworks, many potential influencing factors and user psychologies remain unexcavated. In-depth user interviews can obtain first-hand materials and uncover critical factors overlooked in existing research systems.

3.3 Quantitative Research on Social Network User Fatigue, Negative Emotions, and Intermittently Discontinuous Behavior

Such studies typically combine questionnaires with structural equation modeling, integrating classical theories and models from interdisciplinary fields to propose hypotheses and construct research models. L.F. Bright et al. [15] integrated the limited capacity model, technology acceptance model, and unified theory of acceptance and use of technology, verifying that social media confidence, self-efficacy, privacy concerns, and usefulness affect social media fatigue. A.R. Lee et al. [16] introduced the person-environment fit model and stress-strain interaction theory, concluding that social network information and system characteristics cause information, communication, and system function overload, leading to social network fatigue. Notably, structural equation models have limited variables, causing existing research to inadequately explore "discontinuance" and "intermittence," with perspectives often confined to single overload perception and fatigue viewpoints.

3.4 Empirical Research on Social Network Users' Discontinuous Usage Behavior

Discontinuous usage includes reduced frequency, temporary abandonment, and permanent termination—previously the most studied area with the most publications. O. Turel [17] verified that satisfaction and habit inhibit discontinuous usage, while discontinuous self-efficacy and guilt promote Facebook discontinuous usage. C. Maier et al. [18-19] explored discontinuous usage based on usage stress and switching stress, validating effects of individual characteristics, usage features, and social relationship features. S. Zhang et al. [20] verified that perceived system function overload, information overload, and social overload all trigger social network fatigue, leading to discontinuous usage. A. Luqman et

al. [21] found excessive socializing, hedonic, and cognitive factors cause social fatigue and technostress, prompting people to leave Facebook. Different usage behaviors have distinct influence mechanisms and repair strategies, but existing research lacks detailed differentiation.

4 Research Theory Analysis

Literature analysis shows that many studies follow and borrow classical theories from IS/IT fields, such as innovation diffusion theory [1-2, 22], planned behavior theory [6, 23], technology acceptance model [15], and unified theory of acceptance and use of technology [22]. However, as research progresses, scholars increasingly recognize that key influencing factors and interaction mechanisms of social network users' intermittently discontinuous behavior are extremely complex, with single-field theories and models insufficient for complete analysis. Consequently, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research from psychology, marketing, behavioral science, informatics, sociology, and clinical medicine has become mainstream, including the following perspectives:

4.1 Stress-Based Research Perspective

The Stressor-Strain-Outcome Framework (SSO) and Cognition-Affect-Conation Pattern (CAC) are widely applied. SSO decomposes stress processing into three parts: identifying stressors, stimulating user burdens, and burdens leading to corresponding behaviors. S. Zhang et al. [20] built an SSO-based model, finding that perceived system function overload, information overload, and social overload cause social network fatigue and dissatisfaction, leading to discontinuous usage. CAC divides user behavior into cognitive, affective, and behavioral intention stages. Peng Lihui et al. [24] used the CAC paradigm to explain how privacy concerns (perceived risk, perceived benefit) promote social media burnout through social media attitude mediation from a "rational cognition-preference response-behavioral tendency" information process perspective.

4.2 Overload-Based Research Perspective

Overload Theory (OT), Limited Capacity Model (LCM), and Feature Fatigue Theory (FFT) are commonly applied. Overload factors in existing literature mainly include platform technology overload (system function overload, service overload) and subjective perception experience overload (information overload, social overload, communication overload, connection overload). K. Koroleva et al. [12] found that information quality, value, and comprehensibility significantly affect users' information overload perception. C. Maier et al. [19] found that social network usage level, number of friends, subjective norms, and social relationship types all influence social overload. LCM posits that individuals have limited information processing capacity; once information exceeds cognitive load, fatigue emerges from inability to process it, commonly used to depict information overload psychological mechanisms [8, 15]. FFT suggests that more

product functions increase learning and usage complexity, causing dissatisfaction and complaints, leading to "feature fatigue." D.V. Thompson et al. [25] found excessive product functions cause feature fatigue, shortening product lifecycle. Zhang Shuwei [8] validated system function overload's effect on social fatigue and dissatisfaction based on FFT.

4.3 Emotional Experience-Based Research Perspective

Privacy Calculus Theory (PCT) and Five Factor Model of Personality (FFM) are widely applied. PCT involves users' trade-offs between privacy leakage risks and service adoption benefits for decision-making. Existing studies often incorporate benefits, risks, and related important variables/dimensions, such as Peng Lihui et al. [24] integrating perceived risk and benefit to analyze privacy concern cost-effectiveness. The FFM, developed by P.T. Costa and R.R. McCrae [26], divides personality into neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, often used to test moderating effects of individual characteristics. C.C. Lee et al. [27] found neuroticism positively promotes social fatigue while other personality traits negatively affect it, with extraversion having the most significant impact. S. Sajjad et al. [28] found introverted users are more susceptible to social overload. Additionally, given that intermittently discontinuous behavior vacillates between satisfaction and dissatisfaction, Status Quo Bias Theory (SQBT) [29] has been introduced to explain why dissatisfied users don't permanently leave. Maintaining status quo preference is a rational decision based on inertia and costs. J. Recker [30] found perceived inertia, perceived sunk costs, perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, and perceived work barriers all inhibit discontinuous usage intention.

4.4 Other Perspectives

A.R. Lee et al. [16] used the person-environment fit model and stress-strain interaction theory to find that social network information and system characteristics cause information, communication, and system function overload, leading to social network fatigue. Liu Luchuan and Li Xu [31] used psychological contract theory to find that perceived social value and information value both significantly negatively correlate with psychological contract violation, leading to exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect behaviors. Shen Xiaoliang and Li Yangjun [10] and X.L. Shen et al. [11] examined influencing factors of intermittently discontinuous behavior from psychological perspectives of ambivalent attitudes, emotions, and satisfaction.

5 Research Method Analysis

Table 1 summarizes common data collection methods. Most early studies tended to use single methods, primarily questionnaires administered online or offline through snowball, random, or cross-sectional sampling. Recently, combining multiple data sources has become a trend, such as "scenario experiment + ques-

tionnaire" [18, 25, 29] and "tracking experiment + in-depth interview" [4]. Y. Sasaki et al. [32] combined website and questionnaire data using time series analysis and regression to examine information processing by users experiencing information overload, avoiding inherent biases from single-source data and making results more rigorous and convincing. In experimental methods, scenario experiments and periodic behavioral tracking experiments are favored. Additionally, focus group interviews, semi-structured interviews, and in-depth interviews [4, 12, 31, 33] are popular.

Table 2 summarizes common data analysis methods. Structural equation modeling is most widely applied, primarily using SPSS, Smart PLS, and AMOS software. Some studies also used qualitative methods [4, 12, 33]; grounded theory effectively excavates deep, easily overlooked potential influencing factors in intermittently discontinuous behavior formation mechanisms and is thus widely used.

6 Research Framework Analysis

This study systematically analyzes the normative research process framework through summary and induction. Empirical research processes typically include: (1) Research question identification—determining research questions based on a population, conducting preliminary literature surveys, and addressing gaps in existing empirical research through appropriate analytical perspectives and theoretical backgrounds. (2) Scientific research design covering platform selection, data collection, and data analysis to explore key influencing factors and interaction mechanisms of user behavior. Based on this basic approach to empirical research on social network users' intermittently discontinuous behavior, a research framework was formed, shown in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper].

In this research field, scholars typically select well-known domestic and international social network platforms as research objects, integrate or introduce new variables based on classical theoretical models across fields, and examine interactions among subjective, objective, and individual factors from specific perspectives to further describe and explain formation mechanisms and influencing factors of intermittently discontinuous behavior.

7 Research Trend Analysis

Based on the above analysis, this study conducted exploratory analysis of future research trends on social network users' intermittently discontinuous behavior, shown in Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper].

7.1 Theoretical Integration

User psychology and behavior are complex and dynamic, influenced by numerous factors. Interdisciplinary research offers more possibilities. For example, Ji

Zhongyang et al. [62] used psychology's PAD three-dimensional emotion model from perspectives of perceived control and emotional experience to analyze psychological perception evolution of social media user burnout. A. Dhir et al. [46] found from a stress perspective that compulsive use triggers anxiety and depression, affecting user mental health and causing social fatigue. Therefore, integrating psychology, sociology, marketing, and information systems will provide more comprehensive explanations of users' intermittently discontinuous behavior.

7.2 Methodological Innovation

Questionnaires have considerable subjectivity, and structural equation models can only test relationships among limited variables at a time, making it difficult to systematically reveal complex relationships among numerous factors. Future research can adopt Y. Sasaki et al.'s [32] approach of using "subjective + objective" complementary data for cross-validation, making conclusions more reliable. T. Ravindran et al.'s [4] behavioral tracking experiments can also be borrowed to dynamically describe intermittently discontinuous behavior processes through long-term user behavior tracking. Additionally, combining multiple qualitative analysis methods for exploration and verification often achieves theoretical and conceptual innovation.

7.3 Dual Research Perspectives

Some literature tends to view intermittently discontinuous behavior as the opposite of "continuous usage," but single perspectives of fatigue or perceived overload cannot reasonably explain why users don't completely abandon social networks. Zhang Mian and Lu Yaobin [63] and C. Walid [53] both conducted research from dual promoting-inhibiting perspectives, offering greater completeness and holism.

7.4 Granular Research Content

Current research suffers from overly coarse content and variables. Intermittently discontinuous behavior involves a process from initial adoption to abandonment, then to readoption or repeated alternation. Future research can longitudinally examine user psychological and behavioral changes across different stages within a timeframe to refine research processes. X. Xu et al. [22] found that discontinuance duration, usage intensity, social influence, communication service superiority, and price value promote users' readoption intention. Notably, existing research focuses more on the adoption-to-abandonment process while neglecting the crucial abandonment-to-readoption link, warranting increased attention in the future. Additionally, focusing on moderating effects of demographic variables or personality traits, or conducting refined categorical studies on different age groups, social classes, digital immigrants, and digital natives, holds important practical value.

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Author Contributions

Zhang Min: Proposed research ideas and implementation plan, revised the paper;

Meng Die: Conducted research implementation, literature collection, processing and analysis, and paper writing;

Zhang Yan: Assisted with paper revision.

English Title and Abstract:

Review of the Research on the Key Issues of Social Network Users' Intermittently Discontinuous Behavior

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Abstract: [Purpose/significance] Intermittently discontinuous behavior is an important part of the passive behavior of social network users. This paper makes an analysis of the research results at home and abroad, systematically sorts out its knowledge system and key issues of research in this field, and forecasts the future research trend accordingly, which can provide reference for the follow-up academic research. [Method/process] With CNKI and Web of Science as the data sources, this paper obtains 54 representative research related to this field through keywords retrieval, tracing retrieval and subject analysis, adopts the method of systematic review to integrate knowledge base through three key issues, including research topic, research theory and research method, and constructs the framework of normative research process based on this. [Result/conclusion] The study of users' intermittently discontinuous behavior in the context of social network is in the initial stage, and a large space remains for further study in terms of the subdivision degree of research topics, richness of theory models and diversity of research methods. Based on the interdisciplinary perspectives of information science, psychology, sociology, journalism and communication, it will be a future research trend to deeply explore the influencing factors and formation mechanism of social network users' intermittently discontinuous behavior from the perspectives of two-way balance of promoting factors and inhibiting factors as well as comprehensive effect of external social environment and psychological-emotional experience.

Keywords: social network; intermittently discontinue; systematic review

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