Analysis of the Influence Factors of Social Media Fatigue among Chinese WeChat Users: A Perceived Overload Perspective

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Abstract: WeChat is one of the main social media platforms where users obtain information and socialize in China. Nevertheless, a certain number of users generate a feeling of exhaustion from it and show a discontinuous use behaviors recently, which is defined as social media fatigue. The method of literature analysis is applied to this study, trying to probe the influence factors of the burnout of the social media amongst Chinese WeChat users, from a perceived overload perspective. Subdividing perceived overload into information overload, social overload and context overload, this paper puts forward a novel term "context overload" and discusses each of the above perspectives. The research finds that all these aspects positively impacts social media fatigue. The large quantity and low quality of the information increase the possibility of encountering social media fatigue. Additionally, strong ties and weak ties online friends contribute to social overload and social media fatigue in different way. Finally, dealing with a flattened context which is a mixture of separate contexts in real life also leads to social media fatigue. The paper desires to help social media develop healthily as well as people make better use of social media by analyzing these issues.

Keywords: social media fatigue, influence factors, perceived overload, WeChat

1.   Introduction

Since social media represented by WeChat appeared in people's lives, they have been playing an increasingly crucial role in disseminating information and providing platforms for netizens to socialize. Owing to these functions which make people's lives more convenient, social media, in particular, WeChat have been attracting users for a long time. However, with the development of social media, they have been deeply integrated into users' real lives and some problems with social media have emerged [1]. Consequently, some users are overwhelmed by a feeling of exhaustion when they utilize social media, and show a tendency to escape from them. Scholars define this phenomenon as social media fatigue.

This phenomenon arouses great interest in academia, and scholars investigate it from diverse aspects. Some of them concentrate on studying drivers of social media fatigue. One of their findings is that perceived overload, mainly including information overload, social overload and system feature overload, contributes greatly to social media fatigue. In this paper, perceived overload

consists of the first two dimensions and context overload. Because too many separate contexts merging into a flattened in one the context of social media is a common phenomenon. In addition, dealing with this complex context increase people's perceived burden, arousing the feeling of weariness [1]. Academically, there are few previous researches classifying perceived overload in this way in terms of investigating influence factors that cause social media fatigue.

The methodology of literature analysis is applied to this paper, beginning with clarifying the definition of social media fatigue as well as perceived overload. Then, it classifies perceived overload into three dimensions, analyzing the influence factors of the burnout of the social media amongst Chinese WeChat users from these aspects. Lastly, some advice is put forward for social media platform and users, aiming at easing adverse impacts of social media fatigue. As for the significance of this research, it points out the improvement that social media can make to retain users. It also lies in helping users enhance their media literacy, making better use of social media, particularly WeChat.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Media Fatigue

Since the phenomenon of social media fatigue emerged, this has aroused widespread interest and investigation among scholars. A great number of academics started to discuss what social media fatigue is. Although there is no totally clear definition currently, the scholars clarify this term from three perspectives, psychological, behavioral and psychological-behavioral mixed viewpoints respectively.

From a psychological view, scholars regarded social media fatigue as negative sentiments. Thara Ravindran et al. conducted research using a mixed methodology of in-depth interviews and activity analysis. They found that the social network fatigue was multiple emotional experiences caused by using it, which contributed to the feelings of anger, annoyance, exhaustion, loss of interest and reduction in motivation [2]. Shuwei Zhang et al. defined social media fatigue as a phenomenon of psychological tiredness, for instance, boredom, burnout, and lower motivation, related to the usage of social media [3]. Haofei Meng considered this burnout as a recession of enthusiasm and a feeling of weariness [4]

Some scholars tried to define social media fatigue using the behavioral perspective. In this case, social media fatigue was a behavior of discontinuous use. Laura F. Bright et al. stated that the fatigue of social media was a retreat from it, resulting from perceive overload [5]. Hui Li et al. pointed out that social media fatigue was a discontinuous media-using intention or behavior, including reduction of use or even quitting from social media [6].

Through a psychological-behavioral mixed angle, Ji Cheng defined social media fatigue from two views. Psychologically, it was an emotional exhaustion and behaviorally, it was a reduction of using social media or even a quit from it [7].

In this paper, social media fatigue is considered as a strain both in psychological and behavioral since social media provide tremendous items which exceed the users' ability to cope with them.

2.2. Perceived Overload

Psychological research conducted by Susan Saegert used perceived overload to describe that an individual's perception of things outweighed personal processing ability [8]. Pamela Karr-Wisniewski et al. clarified cognitive overload in three categories, information overload, communication overload and system function overload [9]. In the social media research domain, Ae Ri Lee et al. introduced the above-mentioned classification into their study, investigating the impacts of these kinds of overload that led to social media fatigue [10]. In Haofei Meng's paper, the

author adopted Pamela Karr-Wisniewski's classification. Also, Meng's research applies Stressor-Strain-Outcome(S-S-O) model for the research, regarding information overload, social overload and system feature overload as stressors, to probe the process of their impacts on users' social media use [4]. Hong Liu et al. continued to use these three dimensions and they demonstrated definitions of them by referring to and summarizing the former studies [11].

It is noticeable that the previous studies mainly categorized perceived overload as information overload, social overload and system feature overload. What needs particular explanation is the relationship of communication overload to social overload. In this essay, the former is regarded as a part of the latter, which is based on past studies' definitions. Communication overload describes that frequent online communication requests exceed users' demands and perceived capacity, making users worn out [12]. As a weary feeling, social overload happens when the users have to interact with too many people online, which far outweighs user's ability of socialization [12]. Communication is one of the ways of socialization, thus in this paper, social overload also contains the meaning of communication overload.

In social media, the technical framework of it makes the separate situations in real life merge into one, which means users of social media have to face more audiences and participate in more contexts at the same time [1]. Scholars defined this phenomenon as context collapse. The occurrence of context collapse will lead to more activities of cognition processing, increasing the burden of cognition [1]. Thus, this paper regards this phenomenon as a type of perceived overload and defines this as context overload; a number of different contexts crowd into one in social media platforms, making it challenging for users to deal with the context that consists of various situations. This generally exceeds users' perceived capacity to cope.

3.   Influence Factors

WeChat is a social media widely accepted by Chinese users for obtaining information and interacting with other people. This comprehensive platform is able to provide tremendous information and link users wherever they are and whatever their relationships are. Plus, due to the technical framework of WeChat, this social media compresses separate contexts into a flattened one. Although the mentioned-above characteristics facilitate users' life to some certain extent, exposure to too much information, other people and flatten contexts will stimulate perceived overload. Perceived overload in WeChat positively impacts social media fatigue, arousing the feeling of exhaustion and the behavior of discontinuous use.

3.1.   Information Overload

Gaining information and knowledge is one of the most crucial needs for people to use social media. On the one hand, there are multiple approaches to obtaining information in these platforms. Taking WeChat as an example, netizens gratify their needs by reading the articles uploaded by official accounts, viewing the clips through channels (shipinhao in Chinese) or checking the moments (pengyouquan in Chinese). On the other hand, users who receive massive information have to cost more time and energy to analyze and pick up the useful information. Nevertheless, everyone's cognitive capacity for processing information is limited, thus excessive information input may exceed it, which is called information overload [13]. This phenomenon always happens on social media represented by WeChat. Both the quantity and the quality of the information can cause this type of overload.

3.1.1. Quantity Aspect

In terms of the quantity aspect, firstly, WeChat users receive diverse information from friends or chat groups, including information about notices, personal lives, gossip and so on. Secondly, the official accounts that users subscribed to before and channels push articles or short videos frequently which always have attractive titles or covers, and numerous fragmented news or messages flooding towards users. Some of these are useless and meaningless, however, it is hard to simply skip them owing to the catchy titles or covers. Reading them is just a waste of time and arouses a feeling of disappointment and annoyance. Clearly, in most cases, the amount of information far exceeds users' perceived ability to deal with them perfectly, they can not integrate, absorb or utilize it. Such information overload will trigger social media fatigue, psychological discomfort and discontinuous behavior [13].

3.1.2. The Quality of Information

Besides, the quality of information also influences social media fatigue. The quality in this paper means whether the information in social media can gratify users' needs or not. These demands consist of, firstly, finding out what are the present settings, society even the world going on, moreover, seeking advice that can direct users' action in daily life, then, learning some practical knowledge and broadening their province [14]. Looking into the information in social media, a quantity of time and energy is consumed by WeChat users to obtain the information that they desire. Nevertheless, it is widely admitted that social media provide massive but fragmented information that cannot be systematized. If users desire to form a comprehensive information system through social media, they have to select useful messages they want in a pile of meaningless information, which is highly possible to encounter information overload. This overload results in annoyance and fatigue for users of social media. Also, the low usage efficiency of social media will lead to a reduction of use it [15].

3.2. Social Overload

Social overload describes a situation where users need to spend longer time as well as more energy unwillingly on interacting and maintaining a social relationship with other people, which possibly leads to mental weary as well as discontinuous use [3]. In WeChat, there are two types of friends in the contacts list, strong ties and weak ties respectively. Strong ties are those who have similar interests or information with the user. The user and these persons are intimate, and they maintain their relationship through affective factors, like family and close friends. While the weak ties are people who are not totally familiar with the user. They become net friends simply due to some accidental intersections in life or workplace. Obviously, they are not intimate and they do not have to upload their relationship with heart.

In WeChat, strong ties and weak ties with friends in contacts list cause social overload in different ways. Too much social support that is requested by strong ties friends can make users worn out, and ultimately result in social media fatigue. When users receive social support requests like mental and physical back from intimate persons, it is hard to just refuse their demands. Because, firstly, users have to satisfy the needs of intimate people so as to maintain social capital. Secondly, what needs to particularly consider is the issue of "face" (mianzi in Chinese). When someone that users are close to ask for social support, the users are not able to give suitable and effective support to him or her. They are prone to be considered as an incapable person, thus losing face. Consequently, receiving and giving means users bearing great burden in psychology.

With the expansion of the number of friends in WeChat, an increasing number of weak ties people are included in this platform. According to qualitative research conducted by Jiewen Hong

and Mengrong Duan, 80% of interviewees in their study have over 500 net friends in WeChat, and a high rate (60% —85%) of these friends are weak ties contacts [15]. Moreover, Jie Zhang and Yikun Ma found that in their research, the WeChat contacts of interviewees are generally more than 400, with a maximum of over 1000, causing the obstacle of interaction [16]. Numerous contacts in WeChat make social interaction and interpersonal communication more complicated inevitably. WeChat users have to switch between different interpersonal relationships and contexts frequently. They consume more time and attention on impression management, adding to the pressure on them. Gradually, users will be overwhelmed by feelings of anxiety and tiredness and reduce the frequency of checking the WeChat.

3.3. Context Overload

Context overload usually happens when people use WeChat moments. Initially, WeChat moments was designed as a circle social context, providing channels for users to encounter and understand more people who they may not familiar with [15]. However, the increase of contacts from different backgrounds and context makes the separate situations in real life merge into one [1]. According to Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, the performance in different stages maintains personal identity. In the social media context, "stages" mean the different social situations that users need to face [17]. Users participate in these situations by sharing something through WeChat moment. However, because of the invisibility of the audience and the lack of uniformity of them, it is frequent for users to experience context collapse.

When the context collapse occurs, separate contexts blend together. People from different contexts mingle together, and accordingly, users have to adjust their social roles and behaviors to the current fusion context. It is demanding for users to find out a universal social role and a set of universal behaviors to deal with fusion context. Consequently, users have to adjust their roles and behaviors, selecting the most suitable communication mode in order to avoid performance failure and keep a good self-image. Plus, some devices of WeChat are able to assist users to keep the self-images that they want. Attaching tags to different groups of people and setting viewable contents are significant approaches to reducing the adverse impacts of context collapse.

Each time users attempt to post something through WeChat moment, they have to consume tremendous time and energy on defining the context depending on the contents. Then, they need to imagine and infer which groups of people would view the specific posts [15]. Regardless of the assistance of some devices, this process is still demanding and time-consuming. Unfortunately, sometimes the outcomes of this process are not satisfactory, which may drive users to escape from these contexts [15]. Ultimately, context overload will lead to physical and mental exhaustion.

4. Advice

4.1. Social Media

It is clear that users will have discontinuous usage of social media after experiencing social media fatigue. The platform faces the risk of user loss. Therefore, social media needs to optimize its functions as soon as possible. The most critical measure is to improve its information dissemination mechanism.

Social media can realize personalized push through big data technology, helping users acquire useful information efficiently. What's more, the platform needs to control the distribution of commercial messages, preventing useful information from being submerged in commercial advertisements. Last but not least, providing a convenient and accurate information search system matters, so as to users can find out strong relevant information instantly.

4.2. Users

In order to lessen the unfavorable affects produced by social media fatigue, it is crucial to improve the media literacy of social media users and utilize social media positively. Initially, cancelling unnecessary subscription to official accounts and channels can effectively reduce meaningless information reception. Users can spend less time finding the information they need, avoiding being immersed in massive fragmented messages. Additionally, users can clear their net friends on their contacts list on a regular basis. "Dunbar number" indicates that 150 people is the upper bound to maintain close interpersonal relationships [15]. Above this threshold, WeChat users must use more unneeded energy to socialize, which eventually leads to social overload and social media fatigue. Thus, controlling the number of WeChat friends is an effective measure. Finally, the negative impact of context overload can be mitigated by opening WeChat alternative account (xiaohao in Chinese). This account consists of strong ties that are familiar to the users and a small number of contacts. Also, the social relationships in the alternative account are relatively simple. In such relationships, WeChat users can maintain the consistency of social roles and behaviors, which means the time and attention spent on adapting to complex situations greatly declines. At the same time, the possibility of social media fatigue decreases.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper examines the influencing aspects of social media weariness from the standpoint of perceived overload, which includes information overload, social overload, and context overload. Particularly, this paper proposes a novel term "context overload" and includes it into the scope of perceived overload, analyzing how a unique phenomenon known as context collapse leads to perceived overload and ultimately social media fatigue. It is widely admitted that social media significantly facilitates and enriches people's life, ranging from information acquisition to interaction. However too much information dissemination and social interaction will make WeChat users weary mentally and physically. In addition, context overload means users spend more time and attention on defining current context and select a proper social role to present themselves and interact, which causes a feeling of burnout. The paper puts forward some suggestions for them, in order to help social media platform, run healthily and users make better use of these applications.

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