To Share Or Not to Share: the Ironic Effects of Sharing on Consumer Memory

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How are consumer memories about consumption episodes affected when these experiences are shared with others? We suggest that sharing consumption experiences can both enhance or decay memories depending on the experience’s characteristics, the sharing partner’s characteristics and their joint interaction.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers often share their experiences with friends and strangers through social interactions but whether sharing enhances or attenuates memory is little understood. Our research addresses this gap and explores the effect of social sharing on consumer memory. We propose that while social sharing can enhance memories through rehearsal, it may also facilitate forgetting by reliance on a “group mind”, i.e. believing conversational partner(s) will remember it, thereby reducing the motivation to personally remember the experience (Wegner 1985). We further suggest that this effect is moderated by identity-relevance such that memories high (low) in identity-relevance are more (less) prone to the transactive effect because people have higher motivation to protect identity-enacting memory and therefore are more likely to transfer these precious memories to the safe repository.

Study 1 was a 2 (identity-relevant vs. irrelevant) x 2 (shared with close friend vs. acquaintance) between-subjects study. 51 students read a shopping scenario, which was either relevant or irrelevant to a student identity (Coleman and Williams 2013), and wrote down a conversational script for how they would recount their experience to their best friend/new classmate. We recorded sharing content to ensure the same amount of encoding and sharing. They then participated in several unrelated studies for 60 minutes prior to recalling their shopping experience. This corrected recall constituted our dependent measure.

An ANOVA revealed a significant interaction between social sharing and identity-relevance on recall ($F(1,47) = 17.5, p < .001$). For identity-relevant experiences, consumers forgot more after sharing their experience with best friends as compared to classmates ($M_{best\_friend} = 1.83$, $M_{new\_classmate} = 5.00$; $F(1,47) = 9.86, p < .01$); results reversed for identity-irrelevant experiences ($M_{best\_friend} = 4.11$, $M_{new\_classmate} = 1.13$; $F(1,47) = 7.78, p < .01$). Thus, study 1 supported our contention that sharing identity-relevant experiences would result in memory decay when shared with close others.

Study 2 used 48-hours delay measure to provide a more conservative test and added another sharing condition - best friend with poor memory - to test whether TMS truly underlies our effects. Since we posit that the forgetting effect is due to belief in a safe collective memory system, forgetting ought to be mitigated if the sharing partner is perceived to have poor memory, rendering them an unsecure repository. 93 students participated in a 2 (identity-relevant vs. irrelevant experience) x 3 (sharing with new classmate vs. best friend vs. best friend with poor memory) between-subjects study. The procedures were similar to study 1.

ANOVA revealed a significant interaction between identity-relevance and sharing partner on recall ($F(2,87) = 9.07, p < .001$). For identity-relevant experiences, consumers remembered more of the experience when it was shared with a classmate than the other two conditions ($M_{best\_friend} = 1.08$, $M_{new\_classmate} = 4.40$, $M_{best\_friend\_poormemory} = 2.95$; $F(2,87) = 4.67, p < .02$); for identity-irrelevant experiences, consumers forgot more in the new classmate and best friend with poor memory conditions than the best friend condition ($M_{best\_friend} = 3.18$, $M_{new\_classmate} = 1.06$, $M_{best\_friend\_poormemory} = 1.50$; $F(2,87) = 2.63, p < .08$). These results provide evidence for reliance on a transactive memory system as the underlying mechanism.

Study 3 used gender rather than student identity prime (Berger and Heath 2007) and adult consumer samples to generalize our results. We added a condition wherein we informed respondents in advance that they would share their experience with a best friend. If we found no differences between the being informed and non-informed sharing conditions, it suggests a retrieval rather than encoding disadvantage. Furthermore, if sharing activates TMS, eliminating sharing should revive the identity advantages in recall. 157 MTurk workers participated in a 2 (identity relevant vs. control) x 3 (knowing about sharing with best friend before encoding vs. not knowing before encoding vs. no sharing) between-subjects study.

We found a significant interaction of the two independent variables on corrected recall ($F(2,152) = 9.09, p < .001$). In the identity relevance condition, informed sharing with best friend and no informed sharing with best friend had no significant differences ($M_{knowing\_best\_friend} = 2.03$, $M_{not\_knowing\_best\_friend} = 2.21, p > .75$) but they were marginally significantly different from the no sharing condition ($M_{no\_sharing} = 3.22$). In control, the “informed sharing” and “no informed sharing” with best friend conditions did not differ, but they both reported better memory than the no-sharing condition ($p < .001$, $p < .02$).

Study 3 replicates and extends study 2 by documenting memory decay for identity-relevant information after sharing with close others. Further, the results support retrieval-based forgetting rather than encoding-based forgetting as the mechanism for our results and also suggest that the act of sharing is critical to initiating TMS.

Study 4 further investigated the relationship quality of different transactive partners as a moderator. Past research in TMS has shown that people regard the Internet and digital cameras as transactive partners, resulting in poor encoding. We tested whether these seemingly secure transactive partners interfered with memory retrieval to the same degree as human partners. For further generalization, we used a different identity (nationality) along with a new experience (travel).

Two hundreds and fourteen American MTurk workers participated in a 2 (nationality primed, versus no prime) x 3 (transactive partner: close friend, Facebook, digital camera) between subjects study. Respondents were primed (vs. no prime) with American identity and imagined traveling to Hong Kong. During travel, participants received a visitor guidebook containing 15% discount coupons for 12 brands (6 American and 6 international brands). Recognition of these twelve brands as another dependent variable. After the scenario, participants were provided photographs about their experience (e.g. Hong Kong tourist spots) and shared their experience verbally with their best friend or on Facebook or imagining having taken these photographs with their digital camera. 48-hours later, we measured memories of the experience and brand coupon.

An ANOVA revealed a significant interaction between sharing partner and identity relevance ($F(2,209) = 3.37, p < .04$). The simple effect of social sharing was significant ($M_{best\_friend} = 4.27$, $M_{Facebook} = 5.75$, $M_{digital\_camera} = 6.66$; $F(2,209) = 4.62, p < .02$) in identity relevance but not in control condition ($p > .78$). For identity-relevant experience, sharing on Facebook and taking photos with a digital camera did not differ significantly ($p > .2$). However, sharing the experience with a best friend showed poorer memory than when sharing on Facebook ($p < .04$) or compared to taking photos with digital camera ($p < .01$). When the experience was identity irrelevant, there...
are no differences (NS). Similar results were obtained for recognition of identity-relevant brand promotions.

Study 4 results suggest that although technologies such as digital cameras and Facebook can act as transactive partners, they may not viewed as comparable to human transactive partners.

Our research contributes to an understanding of when and why forgetting may occur after social sharing. Theoretically, our research examines TMS as the underlying mechanism and social identity preservation as the driving motivation for memory distortions; two phenomena not yet accounted in the marketing and consumer psychology literatures. To our knowledge, our results are among the first in consumer research to investigate the motivated forgetting in pursuit of identity preservation.

REFERENCES