How Many Followers Do You Have? How Social Media Audiences Affect Consumer Memory

Li Huang, Hofstra University, USA
Frank Zheng, University of Texas at Austin, USA
Adrian Ward, University of Texas at Austin, USA

How do audiences impact the memories shared on social media? We find that the small audience size may trigger memory outsourcing and consequently attenuate memories shared. This memory decay is attenuated by enhancing the perceived heterogeneity of large group and increasing the audience anonymity.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Since word-of-mouth has been shown to attract new customers and increase sales (Berger and Iyengar 2013), companies have invested countless resources to encourage sharing consumption experiences on social media. Due to its connecting nature, social media allow people to either share with a few audiences (narrowcasting) or share with many people (broadcasting). Past research has only investigated how the audience shape what people share (Barasch and Berger 2014). Little is known about how the perceptions of audience impact the way the memories are remembered. We address this gap and propose that perceiving the audience size as small (large) will be more (less) likely to facilitate memory outsourcing and lead to memory attenuation.

Transactional memory systems (TMS) literatures suggest that close in-group members share responsibilities for remembering to enhance cognitive efficiency (Wegner 1987). The TMS partners can be the technologies and humans. For instance, perceiving the file has been saved on the computer (erased) lead to poorer (better) memory of the file (Sparrow, Liu and Wegner 2011). Participants’ memory for the museum tour was worse when they had taken photos with the digital cameras as compared to only observing the objects (Hendel 2014). Recent evidences suggest that social sharing may lead to memory decay if people outsource their meaningful memories to the close partners rather than strangers (Huang and Rajagopal 2017a).

Consumers can form close relationships with technologies and empower them potential partners. Huang and Rajagopal (2017b) find that sharing via technologies can lead to identity memory decay when the technological platforms have human interacting features (e.g. anthropomorphism). Social media, the most popular technological platforms people share their experiences, are special for their inherent social nature and thus should facilitate humanized perception. Thus, we expect that sharing on social media can lead to memory decay. Further, we predict that the audience on social media matters. The relationships are closer and the connections are tighter when the group size is small (rather than large) because more interactions are possible among all members. As the group size increases, the connections disperse and the relationships become more superficial (Cooley 2015). Moreover, the coordination (work cooperatively) is an important indicator of memory outsourcing. Prior research has found that the small group has better performance on the student group project because group members can coordinate better as compared to a large group (Michinov and Michinov 2009; Jackson and Moreland 2009). Palazolo et al. (2006) compare the network size (4 vs. 20) and reveal that smaller networks have greater TMS accuracy (knowing who knows what). These results suggest that in social sharing context, memory outsourcing should be more likely to occur in a small rather than a large group.

Study 1 tested the basic effect that the memory shared on social media will be weaker as compared to no sharing. 140 American Mturkers participated a one cell sharing 3 (writing and sharing on social media vs writing only vs. no sharing) between subject study for monetary reward. They were exposed to a travel scenario about a one-day tour to Hong Kong (tourism spot photos were provided). After encoding the same experience, they were randomly assigned to writing down this travel experience in details and share it on Face-
As predicted, when the audience heterogeneity was low, sharing with the small group resulted in greater memory decay as compared to the large group (M_{small} = 7.76, M_{large} = 5.47, F(1, 90) = 6.13, p < .02), replicating study 1 results; however, when the audiences became more heterogeneous, there were no significant difference between small and large size groups (M_{small} = 6.11, M_{large} = 5.90, F(1, 90) = .05, p > .81).

Study 4 tested that the advantages of memory outsourcing (and thus memory decay) of sharing with smaller group will be impaired by the audience anonymity. 94 American Mturkers participated a 2 audience size (small vs. large) x 2 audience anonymity (yes vs. no) between-subject study. Participants shared their travel experiences with a small (vs. large) anonymous (vs. non-anonymous) group on a travel discussion forum. Free recall and Recognition memories were measured after the filler tasks. The experience recognition measure required respondents to select details about the travel experience from a set of 24 statements (12 true and 12 false). Corrected recognition was computed by subtracting false recognition from true recognition (Dalton and Huang 2014).

An analysis of variance revealed a significant interaction between the audience size and audience anonymity on the free recall (F(1, 90) = 4.72, p < .01). When the sharing audience is non-anonymous, participants remembered fewer details when the audience size is small as compared to large (M_{large} = 6.12, M_{small} = 4.83), replicating previous findings; however, when the sharing audience is anonymous, the results reversed (M_{large} = 6.09, M_{small} = 4.48, p < .01). Corrected recognition of the travel experience showed the same patterns (F(1, 90) = 8.46, p < .01). The results imply that being able to identify “who may know what” is important for memory outsourcing. If the sharing audience is anonymous, the memory decay will be attenuated.

In sum, four studies demonstrate that social media can impact memories shared and the perceptions of audiences play an important role. The small audience size may trigger memory outsourcing and consequently attenuate memories shared. Increasing the perceived heterogeneity of the large group can make it function similar to the small group. Enhancing the audience anonymity can impair the memory decay caused by the small audience size. These findings have important implications for social media marketing. For example, encouraging sharing consumption experience may be detrimental to the brands if the sharer only has a few followers or if the sharer has a large size but diverse followers.

**REFERENCES**