Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowship: 2017 proposal

The effects of message ephemerality on communicators

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Requested Support: $3,810
Goals of proposed research

We seek to learn more about how people process and evaluate messages transmitted via ephemeral channels, in which content is not permanently recorded but rather disappears after a set amount of time or number of views. This type of communication is becoming increasingly prevalent, as most clearly reflected by the high popularity of the ephemeral social network Snapchat, currently valued at over $20 billion. The uniqueness and novelty of ephemeral communication has led to interest by researchers from multiple fields, from legal studies to communication architecture (Ganzenmuller, 2014; Ambrosin et al., 2014). However, other than a few papers which have explored just usage patterns in the specific app Snapchat (Bayer et al., 2016; Vaterlaus et al., 2016; Piwek & Joinson, 2016; Utz, Muscanell & Khalid, 2015), there has not been significant research on the topic of ephemeral communication channels within psychology and marketing. We hope to add to the literature by exploring ephemerality from these important contexts.

Since ephemeral communication limits exposure to the message, receivers may process such messages differently. For example, they may devote more attention to the message and remember it better than they would a perpetual message. Furthermore, the type of processing and the focus of attention may be affected by the ephemerality of the message. Specifically, the limitations on exposure characteristic of ephemeral communication may drive receivers to focus and remember more salient aspects of the message (e.g., images versus text), and be more influenced by different types of persuasion attempts (e.g., simple messages versus elaborate arguments).

Beyond the unique ways in which receivers may process ephemeral messages, we are also interested in exploring how the content people decide to send is affected by the ephemerality of the channel, and by perceptions of the receiver’s processing of the message. Since advertisements – a main source of revenue for companies producing social networks and communication applications – often have the same format of user-generated content in the platform (e.g., ephemeral), reducing some of the uncertainty regarding consumers’ reaction to messages of different nature is a highly practical challenge.
**Description of planned methodology**

We want to study how ephemerality affects attention to, memory of, and attitudes towards transmitted content. To measure attention, we intend to use physiological methods such as eye-tracking, pupil dilation, and skin conductance; to assess memory, we will ask participants to recall information from messages they have seen; and to gauge attitudes, we will employ traditional survey methodology with choice and likert-scale questions.

Study 1 will examine the effect of ephemerality on memory and attitudes of messages. Participants sampled via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk will observe a message (e.g., a post on social media recommending a product). They will be randomly assigned to one of two channels; in one condition (*ephemeral channel*) they will be told that they cannot see the message again, and in the other condition (*perpetual channel*) they will be told that they can observe the message as many times as they want. We will then ask participants a series of questions to measure their memory of the post and their attitudes towards the message, the sender, and the recommended product.

Study 2 will look more closely at the processing of the message. Participants sampled via a behavioral lab will see a similar message to the one used in study 1. However, we will also measure a set of physiological indicators of attention, such as pupil dilation, eye-tracking, skin conductance, etc.

Study 3 will focus on perceptions of other people’s processing of ephemeral communication. Participants sampled via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk will take the role of the sender, and decide what content to send through ephemeral versus perpetual communication channels. In the context of a communication platform, they will either choose between different given messages (e.g., an ad with more or less text), or generate their own content, for example by writing text or taking a picture.
**Explanation of why funding is being sought**

I am seeking $3,810 in financial support for funding of data collection and travel to present the project to the research community. Participants sampled via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk will receive financial compensation for participating in the studies. Studies conducted in the behavioral lab in which physiological reactions are measured will take longer to administer than standard questionnaire-based studies, and will thus cost more.

We hope to share our findings with other scholars by presenting them at top marketing and psychology conferences: the Society for Consumer Psychology and the Society for Judgement and Decision Making. While the marketing department grants students $1000 per year for research and travel, it is sufficient to cover only a part of the work I hope to conduct and present to the research community. The following table summarizes the estimated expenses for the project.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Cost per unit</th>
<th>Number of units</th>
<th>Total Cost</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Payment for running studies</td>
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<td>Society for Consumer Psychology conference (Dallas, TX)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total Costs</strong></td>
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<td><strong>3,810</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I hope that the Wharton Risk Management and Decision Processes Center will support through the Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowship our attempt to study how a novel and popular form of digital communication – ephemeral messaging – affects interpersonal as well as commercial interactions.

Please do not hesitate contacting me with any question regarding my research, and thank you for your consideration.
References


