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When the Self Goes Online:
A Preliminary Investigation on the Social Functions of Memory-Sharing in the WeChat versus Face-To-Face Contexts

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Autobiographical memories (AMs) are memories of one's personally significant experiences. Individuals tend to converse and share AMs with social others. Such memory-sharing serves various social functions, including building intimacy with others, teaching and informing others and eliciting from and/or providing empathy to others. Face-to-face conversations have been the conventional mode of memory-sharing. Yet in this digital age, it is increasingly common for memory-sharing to be conducted via mobile messaging applications such as WeChat. Sharing memories via texting on WeChat may require greater cognitive load and motivational effort, and entail lesser social cues and personal touch than conversing face-to-face. Correspondingly, while sharing AMs face-to-face or via WeChat may both serve social functions, these functions may be served to a lesser extent via WeChat than face-to-face. This study thus examined the social functions of memory-sharing in the face-to-face and WeChat contexts.

Participants were 40 college students (aged 18-25; 33 females) and his/her friend (aged 18-25; 30 females). Participant-friend pairs shared two AMs either via WeChat (20 pairs) or face-to-face (20 pairs). After memory-sharing, friends responded to questionnaires assessing social functions of memory-sharing.

Memory-sharing in both WeChat and face-to-face contexts showed intimacy and empathy functions. Yet, memory-sharing in face-to-face context showed greater intimacy and teach and inform functions than memory-sharing in WeChat context.

Findings underscore that the act of memory-sharing is taking place beyond the face-to-face context to include the digital context. Albeit less than optimal social functions served compared to face-to-face memory-sharing, digitized memory-sharing does serve some important social functions that matter.

Keywords: autobiographical memories, social functions, intimacy function, teach/inform function, empathy function, WeChat, face-to-face

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