Conceptualizing ephemerality in online marketing communication for consumers and firms

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Abstract

Purpose – Consumers send billions of messages with high ephemerality each day, yet the effects of this type of communication are relatively unknown. Online ephemeral communication refers to sending and receiving information with a predetermined, finite lifespan in computer-mediated environments. The purpose of this paper is to conceptually understand online marketing communications with high ephemerality relative to messages with low ephemerality within a consumer’s goal system.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is an attempt to conceptually understand how high ephemerality differs from low ephemerality, particularly as online ephemeral communication has emerged and is widely used by consumers and firms. Goal systems theory is applied to understand how ephemerality is a means for consumers to reach their communication goals.

Findings – Consumers are more likely to use messages with high ephemerality to impress with narrowly relevant content, regulate emotions, build social relationships, persuade others through peripheral cues and protect privacy, but messages with high ephemerality are less likely to help consumers manage their impression, acquire or share useful information or present strong arguments. It is also proposed that messages with high ephemerality can help marketers increase interest through frequent peripheral cues, including fun and friendly content, drive sales by creating a sense of urgency and increase loyalty, but are less likely to increase awareness, build interest through flattering or informative content or drive sales through transactional messages.

Research limitations/implications – This study primarily advances the goal systems literature by introducing ephemerality. The defining feature of ephemerality, lifespan, also has research implications for studies of word-of-mouth marketing. The propositions in this study are ready for empirical investigation as to when consumers and firms choose to send messages with low or high ephemerality.

Practical implications – Firms need to understand how consumers are using messages sent with low and high ephemerality in order for firms to best move consumers through the sales funnel.

Originality/value – To the best of the author’s knowledge, this is the first paper to differentiate messages with low and high ephemerality, identify the presence and effects of ephemerality in offline and online communication and explain how and why sending messages with low or high ephemerality can help consumers and firms reach their communication goals. There is only one other paper in marketing on ephemerality in online marketing communications and no other conceptual work.

Keywords Ephemeral communication, Online marketing communications, Digital marketing, Online communication, Word-of-mouth, Social media, Marketing communications

Paper type Conceptual paper

History began when messages could be recorded. Recording reduces ephemerality. The advent of drawing (circa 40,000 BCE), writing (circa 3200 BCE), printing (15th century CE), photography

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and videography (19th century CE) and blockchain (21st century CE) made it possible for information to persist relatively unchanged over time. Prior to these innovations, which allow people to send messages with low ephemerality, humans relied exclusively on sending messages with high ephemerality, such as gestures and talking. Sending messages with low ephemerality did not replace sending messages with high ephemerality, but they did dramatically expand the way people could interact. Those who were able to adapt were rewarded. Ancient societies, such as the Aramaeans, capitalized on low ephemerality by using written records of ships and deliveries at ports, to surpass rival collectives in commercial endeavors (Gnanadesikan, 2011). The adoption of the internet exacerbated the shift from high to low ephemerality. Websites, e-mail, blogs, forums, review sites and social media commonly store and display content unless and until they are manually deleted. New ways to record information and reduce ephemerality have been the catalyst for changes in communication, until recently.

Interestingly, the last few years have seen the emergence of new technologies permitting online ephemeral communication. Online ephemeral communication is defined as messages with a predetermined, finite lifespan in computer-mediated environments. Use of online ephemeral communications is surging, especially in social media. Snapchat, which used its ephemeral technology to disrupt the social network industry, last reported handling 3.5 billion messages per day (Smith, 2017). Now all prominent social media have added ephemeral features within their platform(s). Messages sent with high ephemerality are most often referred to as Stories on Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, WeChat and other platforms. The fact hundreds of millions of people are sending online messages with low and high ephemerality points to a paradigmatic change in how people communicate online. Most internet users, once having no choice but to send messages with low ephemerality, now choose the ephemerality of their messages.

Although the uptick in use of online ephemeral communication is new, ephemerality is not a new phenomenon or only online. Ephemerality operates on a continuum. Messages can last millennia (e.g. cave drawings), years (e.g. websites, journal articles and letters), 48 h or less (e.g. social media Stories) and some are rarely, if ever, recorded (e.g. most offline conversations, phone calls and livestreams). Ephemerality is commonly used by consumers and firms to reach communication goals. It is well understood sensitive conversations are had in-person or over the phone and not through e-mail correspondence, using high ephemerality as means for achieving the goal of privacy. Coupon codes are often distributed through e-mail and social media campaigns and less often through livestreams or personal selling, using low ephemerality as a means for achieving the goal of distributing information.

Very little is known about ephemerality in communication and much less in the marketing literature (see Table 1). Existing empirical works on ephemerality are mostly in the communications literature; they are descriptive and adopt the uses and gratifications framework (Ruggiero, 2000) to explain adoption of Snapchat. The lone conceptual piece (also in communications) discusses the value of “data prevention” for users, government and the environment (Welsh, 2020). Only one prior work exists in marketing which explicitly tests ephemerality (Wakefield and Wakefield, 2018) while the limited others implicitly compare low and high ephemerality with mail and phone calls (e.g. Hall, 1995; Roscoe et al., 1975). A broad conceptual framework is needed to first understand how and why consumers and firms can benefit from sending online marketing communications with low or high ephemerality. Specifically, this conceptual paper contributes to the marketing literature by identifying an important, underexplored area: ephemerality in online marketing communications. This work also contributes to the literature by integrating ideas from goal systems theories (Kopetz et al., 2012; Kruglanski et al., 2002; Van Osselaer and Janiszewski, 2012) with empirical research on ephemeral (Kreling et al., 2022; Wakefield and Wakefield, 2024; Wakefield and Wakefield, 2018) and word-of-mouth (e.g. Barasch and Berger, 2014; Berger, 2013; Chen, 2017; Ordenes et al., 2019) communication to (a) differentiate messages with low and high...
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<td>Empirical</td>
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<td>Hall (1995)</td>
<td>Empirical</td>
<td>Phone and mail</td>
<td>Self-perception</td>
<td>Surveys conducted by phone pressured respondents more than mail surveys</td>
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Table 1. Prior research on ephemeral media in communication (continued)
A goal systems approach to understanding ephemerality in online marketing communications

To understand ephemerality in online marketing communications, we need to know how ephemerality is a means for consumers and firms to reach their communication goals. The focus is on goals, which are defined as mental representations of desirable end states (Huang and Bargh, 2014; Van Osselaer and Janiszewski, 2012), because they guide behavior across a wide range of situations, from purchasing coffee to crafting a marketing strategy (Kopetz et al., 2012). Goals determine how and why consumers use media (Rubin, 2009; Ruggiero, 2000), such as tuning in to a television program or tracking the stock market. Goals also determine what consumers talk about, such as market information that might help the sender feel important or valuable (Alexandrov et al., 2013; Berger, 2014) and influence a variety of a consumer’s decisions, such as buying, selling or saving (Huang and Bargh, 2014; Kruglanski et al., 2002; Van Osselaer and Janiszewski, 2012). Similarly, goals guide the behavior of firms by directing them to pursue certain strategies while eschewing others, such as managers planning to hire or fire to achieve the appropriate company size (Greve, 2008). Following Kruglanski et al. (2002; also Huang and Bargh, 2014), the term “goal” is used broadly to refer to any source of motivation (i.e. need, want, hope, obligation, objective, desire and gratification), regardless of whether it is short or long term in focus, concrete or abstract, conscious or unconscious.

Means refer to behaviors consumers and firms take to achieve their goals (Kopetz et al., 2012; Kruglanski et al., 2002). Consumers (and firms) talk, type, text and post a variety of
content in a variety of ways to communicate with a variety of people. Whether they decide to send online marketing communications with low or high ephemerality depends on which option is the best means to achieve their most accessible communication goals (Van Osselaer and Janiszewski, 2012).

Goal systems refers to a hierarchy of one or more goals and means. Achieving full professor status (goal) can be accomplished through publishing meaningful work (means). Multiple goals can be accomplished by a single means (multifinality; Kruglanski et al., 2002) just as a single goal can be reached through multiple means (equipfinality; Baumgartner and Pieters, 2008; Kruglanski et al., 2002). A marketing consultancy could use social media competencies to gain business for themselves and their clients (multifinality). A candidate could earn a job offer after years of school, resume building and networking (equipfinality). Goal systems can even be unconscious (Kopetz et al., 2012), activated by the environment or time of day, such as feeling the need to eat breakfast foods in the morning and dinner foods in the evening (Markman et al., 2007). Some means are more instrumental than others, leading to repeated use of some means for achieving any given goal (Kopetz et al., 2012). These more consistent connections can be considered cognitively fused (Kruglanski et al., 2023).

Applying goal systems theory, ephemerality is an instrumental means, often substantiated offline, for consumers and firms to achieve certain goals through online marketing communications. The objective of this paper is to develop a broad framework of ephemerality with a focus in application in online marketing communications. This includes a series of propositions and predictions of when sending a message with high (or low) ephemerality provides a more (or less) effective means for consumers and firms to achieve their different communication goals. The framework is conceptualized in the Figure 1. A communicator (consumer or firm) may benefit and choose messages with low or high ephemerality to achieve their goal. These choices are influenced by the channel, audience and message features in each context.

Features of ephemerality
The defining feature that distinguishes messages with high ephemerality from low ephemerality is lifespan (Feature 1; F1). Unlike messages sent with low ephemerality, messages with high ephemerality auto-delete or are never recorded. Messages with high ephemerality tend to have a much shorter lifespan. Consequently, there are two other

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**Figure 1.**
Conceptual framework

**Communication Goals**
- Consumer Goals
  - Impression Management
  - Information Management
  - Emotion Regulation
  - Social Bonding
  - Persuasion
  - Privacy
- Firm Goals
  - Awareness
  - Interest/Desire
  - Action/Sales
  - Loyalty

**Channel Features**
- F1: Accessibility
- F2: Ease of Sharing
- F3: Reach

**Audience Features**
- Desired Response
- Active Goals

**Message Features**
- Message Content
- Message Frequency
- Transactional vs. Relational

**Outcomes**
- Communicator chooses to use messages with low/high ephemerality
- Communicator benefits from using messages with low/high ephemerality

**Source:** Author’s own work
prototypical, though nonessential, features that differentiate most messages sent with high ephemerality compared to low ephemerality (see Table 2): messages with high ephemerality are more difficult to share (Feature 2; F2) and they tend to reach a smaller audience (Feature 3; F3).

Messages with low ephemerality can be shared; in many scenarios, as easily as one or two taps or clicks. Examples include forwarding e-mails, tagging friends in posts, sharing posts and copying and pasting direct messages to forward to someone else. In addition to manual sharing, social networks and content aggregators often use algorithms to automatically share content with low ephemerality. Messages sent with high ephemerality, conversely, are difficult, if not impossible, to share. Most face-to-face and phone conversations are never recorded. The purpose of social media would be defeated if users or an algorithm are allowed to easily share a message sent with high ephemerality. All messages, particularly online, can be covertly recorded, but most users expect messages sent with high ephemerality to not leave their network.

Messages with high ephemerality have limited reach for several reasons beyond shorter lifespans and difficulty in sharing. First, these messages mainly reach pre-existing connections, limiting exposure to new audiences. Second, not reaching a new audience reduces the incentive to create broadly appealing or high-quality content. Third, such content is even less marketable because it is unscheduled and unlabeled, making it hard to find. As a result, these messages are more likely to reach socially close individuals who do not expect high-quality content and can easily find it. Socially close individuals are more likely to feel a bond over repetitive interactions (Fournier, 1998; Nielson, 1998), be located geographically near the sender (Meyners et al., 2017) and do not expect high-quality content from each other. All these considerations work to reduce the potential reach of online marketing communications with high ephemerality. For example, even though people view

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<th>Prototypical Examples</th>
<th>Low: Longer Lifespan</th>
<th>Ephemeralty</th>
<th>High: Shorter Lifespan</th>
<th>Narrower Reach</th>
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<tr>
<td>Blogs, online forums, mail, e-mail, social media, &quot;Posts,&quot; SMS Messaging</td>
<td>Social media “Stories”</td>
<td>Livestreams</td>
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<th>Defining Feature</th>
<th>Low: Longer Lifespan</th>
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<th>High: Shorter Lifespan</th>
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<tr>
<td>F1: Lifespan</td>
<td>&gt;48 hours (Implicit)</td>
<td>24-48 hours (Explicit)</td>
<td>&lt; 1 second</td>
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Prototypical Features:
F2: Ease of Sharing
How easy is it for recipients to share content?
Very easy. Many platforms support and highly encourage sharing content. Limited. Sharing within a network is easy but sharing outside of a network typically requires multiple steps with multiple apps. Limited. Sharing requires memory and accurate representation.

F3: Reach
How many people are exposed to the message?
Larger numbers. Smaller numbers. Smallest numbers.

Notes: These features make large differences between offline and online communications, especially between consumers and firms. Firms can quickly reach a large audience using paid media not used by consumers offline and online (out-of-home advertising, radio, tv, print, search and display ads). To keep the length manageable and draw more connections between consumers and firms, offline messaging and all paid media are not considered.

Source: Author’s own work
two times more videos on Snapchat than YouTube (Aslam, 2019a, 2019b), each of the top viral video campaigns in 2018 were on YouTube (Agnew, 2019), using low ephemeral.

Finally, social media algorithms seem to favor Posts over Stories. Instagram Posts reach at least 60% more followers than Stories (Cucu, 2021; Harrison, 2023) and are recommended to new networks (Instagram, 2023).

Some platforms, such as WhatsApp, WeChat and Telegram, let users switch between low and high ephemeral. Prominent e-mail platforms, including Google and Microsoft, allow e-mails to expire. Although it may seem the audience size, and, thus, reach, is set when an audience has been specified, the potential reach is still limited for the reasons noted when an online marketing communication is sent with high ephemeral compared to low ephemeral.

**When do messages with low or high ephemeral help consumers?**

The defining and prototypical differences between messages sent with low and high ephemeral result in a distinct set of advantages and disadvantages for consumers and firms to use ephemeral to reach their goals. In the next two sections, these distinctions are integrated with prior research to propose when messages sent with high ephemeral provide a more (or less) effective means for helping consumers (in this section) and firms (in the next section) reach their communication goals. Given the lack of empirical research on ephemeral in online marketing communications, the propositions should be treated as untested hypotheses and tentative guides for practitioners. Hopefully, future researchers will test these propositions, especially through experimentation.

Communications involve both an agent who sends a message and an audience who receives it. To keep the length and complexity of the discussion manageable, the focus is on the extent to which senders benefit from low or high ephemeral to reach their online marketing communication goals. The efficacy of a communication for the sender, however, depends on if and how the audience responds to it, so some effects on the audience are discussed.

Consumers have a variety of goals when communicating with others. Rather than attempt to discuss every potential goal, the focus is on six well documented in the literature. Five goals from Berger’s (2014) framework are discussed: looking good to others (impression management), acquiring and sharing information (information management), feeling good (emotion regulation), building relationships (social bonding) and influencing others (persuasion). The sixth goal is closely linked with online marketing communications and is becoming increasingly relevant to consumers as they transmit and receive information online: protecting privacy (Plangger and Montecchi, 2020). Using the features of low and high ephemeral (lifespan, ease of sharing and reach) and available literature as support, the next sections discuss how and when sending messages with low and high ephemeral help consumers reach these six goals when sending online marketing communications (see Table 3).

**Impression management**

One reason people communicate is to manage their impression (Goffman, 1978; Tamir and Mitchell, 2012). Impression management includes saying things to look good or signal a desirable identity (Berger, 2014; Moldovan et al., 2019). Positive impressions can be made with low and high ephemeral based on the relevance of the online marketing communication shared.

High ephemeral is a means for consumers to reach their goal of impressing others with online marketing communications that have narrow relevance—relevant for less time or a smaller audience. Before online ephemeral communications, face-to-face talks and phone calls were the regular highly ephemeral means to discuss politics, movies or purchases,
Table 3. When and how ephemeral communications facilitate consumers’ communication goals

<table>
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<th>Consumer goals</th>
<th>Are online marketing communications with high ephemerality a better means than online marketing communications with low ephemerality?</th>
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| Impression management | *P1a:* Online marketing communications with high ephemerality are a more effective means for consumers to make a good impression with less relevant content compared to online marketing communications with low ephemerality.  
Rationale: Some online marketing communications are only impressive for a short time and small audience, which fits well with the short lifespans (F1) and small audiences (F3) associated with high ephemerality.  
*P1b:* Online marketing communications with low ephemerality are a more effective means for consumers to make a good impression with more relevant content compared to online marketing communications with high ephemerality.  
Rationale: Messages with high ephemerality have short lifespans (F21), are more difficult to share (F2) and have a more limited reach (F3), all of which make them less effective identity signals when content is widely relevant across time and audiences. |
| Information management | *P2:* Online marketing communications with high ephemerality are a less effective means for consumers to solicit or share information compared to online marketing communications with low ephemerality.  
Rationale: Messages with high ephemerality have short lifespans (F1), which makes information unavailable when consumers may need it; are more difficult to share (F2), which makes it more difficult to transmit or receive information from socially distal audiences; and tend to reach a smaller audience (F3), which makes them a less efficient way to share and acquire information. |
| Emotion regulation | *P3:* Online marketing communications with high ephemerality are a more effective means for consumers to regulate their emotions compared to online marketing communications with low ephemerality.  
Rationale: Consumers feel less pressure to censor themselves since each feature of high ephemerality makes it less likely they will face future consequences. The audience is also more likely to offer social support. |
| Social bonding | *P4:* Online marketing communications with high ephemerality are a more effective means to form, build and strengthen relationships compared to online marketing communications with low ephemerality.  
Rationale: Messages with high ephemerality reach a smaller and socially closer audience (F3) of people with whom the consumer really wants to interact; messages with high ephemerality also seem more genuine because they are less likely to be motivated by impression management (P1a). |
| Persuasion | *P5:* Relative to online marketing communications with low ephemerality, online marketing communications with high ephemerality are a less effective means for consumers to persuade an audience high in motivation, ability and opportunity (through the Central route), but a more effective means for persuading an audience low in motivation, ability or opportunity (through the peripheral route).  
Rationale: Central route persuasion is less effective because the short lifespan of messages (F1) makes consumers less motivated to craft a strong argument and audiences are less receptive to informational content (P2); conversely, peripheral route persuasion is more effective because audiences are more receptive to emotional (P3) and social appeals (P4). |
| Privacy | *P6:* Online marketing communications with high ephemerality are a more effective means for protecting privacy compared to online marketing communications with low ephemerality.  
Rationale: Shorter lifespans (F1), difficulty sharing (F2) and smaller audiences (F3) are useful for privacy. |

Source: Author’s own work
partly because they were less likely to clutter inboxes or feeds than e-mail or social media. Social media Stories and livestreaming fit within a consumer’s goal system of sharing content with narrow relevance through channels with high ephemerality yet carry the additional advantage of not demanding specific people’s attention. Online marketing communications that are more narrowly relevant, such as photos or comments about current events or shopping trips, effectively achieve impression management goals through highly ephemeral means.

On the other hand, low ephemerality is an effective means for sharing impressive online marketing communications that are more widely relevant across time and audiences. Generally, consumers prefer online marketing communications that make them look good to remain visible for a longer period (Wakefield and Wakefield, 2018). Identity signaling is more effective and seen as more authentic when a person signals a consistent image for a long time (Crain et al., 2018). They select flattering photos for their profile pictures and arrange the best in a collage. Furthermore, online marketing communications with low ephemerality can rack up an impressive tally of audience views and shares (F2). The number of views and shares is publicly tracked for most videos, reviews, blogs and social media posts with low ephemerality. Higher numbers indicate more value. More value is more impressive. It is far more impressive to see a Post that has been Reposted many times than one that has not. Relatedly, impression management is more important when consumers broadcast to a large audience rather than narrowcast to a small audience (Barasch and Berger, 2014; Hogan, 2010). For example, Joe may receive greater benefit from sharing what looks good (e.g. an attractive selfie, an interesting article and a job promotion) if more are aware. Reaching a larger audience is far more likely for messages with low ephemerality, such as a journal article, social media post or blog, than messages with high ephemerality, such as a social media story, phone call or face-to-face conversation:

P1a. When content is narrowly relevant, online marketing communications with high ephemerality are a more effective means for consumers to make a good impression compared to online marketing communications with low ephemerality.

P1b. When content is widely relevant, online marketing communications with low ephemerality are a more effective means for consumers to make a good impression compared to online marketing communications with high ephemerality.

Information management
Consumers often communicate to acquire information or offer it to someone else (Peterson and Merino, 2003; Barasch and Berger, 2014; Berger, 2014; Moore, 2015). Consumers can call friends or search product and service reviews (Peterson and Merino, 2003). Consumers consider product reviews an effective way to assist others by mentioning information they think the audience will find helpful (Moore, 2015). Discussion forums and crowdsourcing tools, such as X polls and Facebook recommendations, complement offline conversations and review sites as a popular way for consumers to gather information about what to buy (Doan et al., 2011).

When consumers specify the audience, low or high ephemerality may not alter effectiveness. Although high ephemerality may prompt quick, thus, less accurate (Berger, 2014), responses from consumers in face-to-face or phone conversations (Payne et al., 1996), the dynamic nature of communication allows for varied response times and channels (e.g. viewing an Instagram Story and following up through SMS text days later). Thus, the following arguments concern online marketing communications only for unspecified audiences.
Even with the option to choose high ephemerality, consumers goal systems continue to favor low ephemerality as the best means to garner a consumer's ideal audience for sharing and soliciting information online. The ideal audience is responsive and large. Online marketing communications with high ephemerality are not the best means for such an audience for several reasons. One, beyond reaching a lower percentage of followers in social media (F3), high ephemerality reduces the number of socially distant audience members. Although socially close audiences may be more responsive on a consistent basis, soliciting information on the internet is done under the assumption a socially distant person or panel is desired. Socially close audiences are inefficient for soliciting information. They may present bias, lack expertise or require much effort to gather a large enough group. For example, if Jack solicits recommendations for sightseeing in Paris in a Facebook post, both socially close audience members and socially distal audiences in and out of Jack’s network can respond, tag other people who have recently been in Paris and share the post. It would be much harder for anyone to share Jack’s request outside of his network if it were a Facebook Story (or offline conversation) that does not allow tagging or have its own web address (F2). Depending on privacy settings, some Stories on some platforms can be shared. However, it would still only reach the sharer’s Story viewers – which is another relatively small, socially close audience likely to include bias, unlikely to have wide-ranging expertise and available for a short time compared to the alternative.

Similarly, sharing information is also hampered by high ephemerality. Obituaries, recipes, movie reviews, unboxing videos, how-to guides and wish lists are not viable livestreams. Even information only needed for a short period of time, such as a coupon, event invitation or webinar link, is more helpful if available for a longer period of time to allow for planning and sharing to other interested parties. High ephemerality is a weak solution for sharing unsolicited information, thus, not a prevalent means in a consumer’s goal system:

\[P2\] Online marketing communications with high ephemerality are a less effective means for consumers to solicit or share information compared to online marketing communications with low ephemerality.

**Emotion regulation**

Another reason people communicate is to regulate their emotions, typically in attempt to feel better (Gross, 2008). Communicating is intrinsically pleasurable (Graham et al., 1993; Paulsel and Mottet, 2004). The mere act of “liking” a Facebook post or online review brings consumers joy (He et al., 2019). Consumers also attempt to regulate their emotions by venting, mobilizing social support, sharing a laugh and making sense of situations (Berger, 2014; McGraw et al., 2015). However, not all communication channels are equally effective means for regulating emotions. Messages with high ephemerality appear to be better suited for emotional tasks. Scholars have described sending messages with high ephemerality, such as on Snapchat, as “a funnier alternative” (Piwek and Joinson, 2016, p. 358) and argued Snaps are “perceived as more enjoyable” (Bayer et al., 2015, p. 1) than messages with low ephemerality.

There are two reasons why sending a message with high ephemerality more effectively helps consumers feel better compared to sending a message with low ephemerality. Each reason aligns with the notion that high ephemerality is a substantiated means within a consumer’s goal system for achieving emotional regulation. One, the shorter the lifespan (F1), the more consumers can freely express negative feelings and potentially controversial opinions. Over 70% of users actively censor posts on social media platforms (Das and Kramer, 2013). Since consumers sending messages with high ephemerality know their content will be accessible for a limited time, they do not need to be as concerned about
censoring their emotions or opinions. They are freer to say and stream whatever they think will make them feel better, with less worry about looking ugly or dumb in the future. Indeed, recent research shows consumers tend to be less anxious about sharing negative word-of-mouth when the message is sent with high ephemerality and can only be seen for a short period of time (Wakefield and Wakefield, 2018).

Two, because high ephemerality is associated with a more limited reach (F3), the audience is more likely to be a small number of close connections rather than a large number of close (friends and family) and distant (co-workers, acquaintances and friends of friends) connections. Although a stranger or co-worker may be fun to talk to on occasion, people generally find more pleasure in speaking with those close to them – spouse, family and close friends (Graham et al., 1993). Moreover, compared to weak ties, such as acquaintances or strangers, strong ties, such as friends and family, are more likely to provide emotional support for those wanting to vent, complain or try to work out their problems (Wellman and Wortley, 1990). In turn, consumers are more likely to choose conversing and chatting with high ephemerality when their focal goal is to have fun or feel better:

\[ P3. \text{Online marketing communications with high ephemerality are a more effective means for consumers to regulate their emotions compared to online marketing communications with low ephemerality.} \]

**Social bonding**

Social bonding, also called affiliation, refers to goals related to building alliances, forming partnerships, making friends and strengthening existing relationships (Berry, 1995; Wilson, 1995). Consumers attempt to build relationships by reinforcing shared views, talking about commonalities and disclosing personal information (Berger, 2014). Messages are more likely to help consumers strengthen relationships when the audience (a) is small and close, and (b) believes the sender is genuine (Baker, 1980). Both conditions are more common in online marketing communications sent with high ephemerality. This also holds true in offline scenarios which supports the theory that ephemerality is a common means within a consumer’s goal system and high ephemerality is preferred in many cases over low ephemerality to strengthen social bonds.

Messages with high ephemerality are more likely to reach a smaller audience of people with stronger ties to the consumer who sent the message (F3). Interactions with high ephemerality often occur between people who know each other or have explicitly invited or accepted contact information from one another. As a result, people are less likely to communicate by happenstance; anonymous interactions are limited by the lack of access. The smaller and closer audience for conversations marked by high ephemerality make these messages better tools for forging and strengthening bonds compared to messages with low ephemerality, where the audience is often socially distant or even anonymous. Furthermore, limiting the size of the audience deepens bonds by creating exclusivity. Close relationships must be exclusive. Sharing an idea, dream or promo code with high (low) ephemerality is one way to show a recipient a message is being sent with(out) them in mind.

Another reason why messages with high ephemerality help consumers bond is because senders are more likely to be perceived as genuine (Kreling et al., 2022). Relationships are more successful when communication is constructive and positive rather than destructive and negative (Gable et al., 2004; Mohr and Spekman, 1994). However, a complimentary message may not have the same effect when the audience thinks the person sending the message has an ulterior motive (Kelley, 1973; Folkes, 1988). In messages with low ephemerality (assuming an audience greater than one), senders can impress a large audience.
for a long period of time (P1b). Thus, it can be unclear whether the desired response is to be friends, look good or both, since one way to make a good impression is to say positive things, both about oneself and others (Barasch and Berger, 2014). For example, a consumer may question whether a barista complimented him in a social media post because the barista was trying to make the business look friendly or whether it was because she genuinely likes him and wants to be friends. The audience is less likely to question the intent of a friendly gesture in a Story since the audience is smaller and is less likely to benefit the sender. Thus, consumers with a focal goal of building relationships should be more likely to use messages with high ephemerality compared to low ephemerality:

\[ P4 \] Online marketing communications with high ephemerality are a more effective means to form, build and strengthen relationships compared to online marketing communications with low ephemerality.

**Persuasion**

Consumers often communicate in an attempt to influence others to buy their favorite product, receive rewards or boycott a firm they think has treated them unfairly (Berger, 2014; Kupor and Tormala, 2018; Ward and Ostrom, 2006). When it comes to persuasion, a consumer’s goal system favors low ephemerality as better means to reach, and potentially persuade, a larger audience with a website, post or online review compared to a smaller audience with a short-lived social media Story or water cooler conversation. However, once they reach the audience, messages with high ephemerality may be more persuasive than messages with low ephemerality when the audience lacks the motivation, opportunity or ability to carefully process the message.

The elaboration likelihood model describes how the factors that persuade an audience depend on whether that audience is willing and able to carefully process the message (i.e. central route persuasion vs peripheral route persuasion; Petty et al., 1983; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). The prototypical characteristics of messages with high ephemerality and the motives consumers have for sending them make them a better means for peripheral route persuasion than central route persuasion.

When an audience is willing and able to carefully think about a message, they are more persuaded by the quality of an argument than by peripheral cues (Petty et al., 1983; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). Senders are less likely to share the necessary information (P2) or take the time needed to make a strong argument in messages with high ephemerality because of its short lifespan (F1) and small audience (F3). Why invest the time to research and present strong arguments in a high-quality document or video for a small audience, especially if the content will not be available days later? Because the sender is less likely to choose messages with high ephemerality for sharing information, and is less likely to include strong arguments, messages with high ephemerality should be a less effective tool for central route persuasion.

On the other hand, when audiences are not willing or able to carefully analyze a communication, they will be persuaded primarily by peripheral cues, including the extent to which:

- the message makes them feel good;
- they like the source of the message (Petty et al., 1983; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986); and
- they feel a sense of urgency created by a short lifespan (F1).

Messages with high ephemerality are a better fit for peripheral persuasion because they are more likely than messages with low ephemerality to make senders feel good (P3) and be
used for bonding with friends and close relations (P4). A consumer at a house party is more likely to be persuaded to see a movie, have sympathy for a social cause or agree that calories from fried chicken are “worth it” because a greater number of the messages will be emotional (P3) and from friends looking to bond with likeminded friends (P4). The same consumer thoughtlessly scrolling through X posts is less likely to come across as many of the same kinds of peripheral cues, since the audience includes more weak ties (P4) and people aiming to impress (P1b) or make a strong argument with informative content (P2). In addition, since consumers prioritize seemingly urgent tasks (Zhu et al., 2018), short lifespans (F1) create a peripheral cue by creating a sense of urgency:

\[ P5. \] Relative to online marketing communications with low ephemerality, online marketing communications with high ephemerality are a less effective means for consumers to persuade an audience high in motivation, ability and opportunity (through the central route), but a more effective means for persuading an audience low in motivation, ability or opportunity (through the peripheral route).

**Privacy**

As companies become better at tracking online behavior, consumers are becoming more concerned with protecting their privacy (Haythornthwaite, 2002; Plangger and Montecchi, 2020) and are weary of personalized advertisements (Kim, 2018; Kim et al., 2019). Because messages with low ephemerality are more permanent and easily recorded, they are not good for consumers who do not want messages they send and receive to link to their identity. Consumers often regret sending messages with low ephemerality, such as social media posts with risky content or e-mails containing financial or identifying information. On the other hand, high ephemerality has long been effective means for achieving privacy.

Messages with high ephemerality are better than those with low ephemerality for protecting consumers’ privacy. Snapchat was created to allow sending sensitive images to potential romantic partners without needing to worry about them being shared (F2) because they will not be accessible for more than a few seconds (F1; Gallagher, 2018). Messages with high ephemerality are also private because they are more likely sent to small, close-knit audiences (F3) who will not be able to share the message with a single click or tap (F2). This helps reduce the likelihood a consumer’s message finds its way to threatening audiences, including employers (Wakefield and Wakefield, 2024), stalkers, trolls or thieves. Finally, the audience of a highly ephemeral message should be less inclined to threaten others’ privacy by sharing their content with a larger network. Messages with high ephemerality are less useful for shaming or denigrating others to signal a virtuous identity because they are hard to share and reach a small audience (F2, F3). On the other hand, there is always some risk of recording, particularly online, using screenshots or additional recording devices. Even so, consumers with a focal goal of maintaining privacy who desire their audience not to share messages should be more likely to use messages with high ephemerality than those with low ephemerality:

\[ P6. \] Online marketing communications with high ephemerality are a more effective means for protecting privacy compared to those with low ephemerality.

**When do messages with low and high ephemerality help firms?**

Most firms hope their online marketing communications will move customers closer to becoming loyal, repeat-buyers. This involves building awareness, generating interest and
desire, prompting action and cultivating loyalty (Batra and Keller, 2016). Each step corresponds to a different communication goal for firms. These goals are often described as part of a sales funnel. Firms use messages with low and high ephemerality to communicate with consumers, trading direct messages or engaging by liking, commenting or sharing (Bozkurt et al., 2020). However, messages sent with high ephemerality are better than those sent with low ephemerality for reaching some communication goals (see Table 4).

This section operates on two assumptions. One, firms are likely to use paid and/or organic messages to reach consumers in various points in the sales funnel. As noted in Table 2, paid media (out-of-home advertising, radio, tv, print, search and display ads) will not be considered in favor of organic, or owned, messages. Two, firms will be better at reaching their communication goals when these goals align with those of the consumers. When messages are not aligned with the audience’s goals, the audience is less likely to receive, understand and respond favorably to the communication (Cesario et al., 2004; Labroo and Lee, 2006; Lee and Aaker, 2004).

**Awareness**

The first step toward building awareness is exposing a consumer to a firm’s product. There are two reasons to believe that messages with high ephemerality are a better way for firms to increase awareness compared to messages with low ephemerality. First, most messages with high ephemerality reach a smaller audience than those sent with low ephemerality (F2, F3). The most concerning issue for a brand manager is a large number of consumers who are unaware of their brand (Rossiter, 2014). Second, since consumers are less likely to use messages with high ephemerality to solicit or share product information (P2), a firm may be more effective aligning with the consumers’ goal system. Therefore, highlighting new features on a Toyota truck is less likely to be effective when placed in Facebook Stories compared to the newsfeed. In addition to the smaller audience, the ad’s product information (P2) is less fitting among other highly ephemeral posts from consumers regulating their emotions (P3) and bonding (P4) and more expected among posts with low ephemerality from consumers attempting to impress (P1b) and solicit or share information (P2). Although it could also be argued firms could be more effective using high ephemerality with emotional appeals (P3) and peripheral cues (P5), the smaller audience associated with high ephemerality undermines any benefits at the entry point of the sales funnel:

\[ P7. \] Compared to online marketing communications with low ephemerality, those with high ephemerality will be a less effective means for firms to increase brand awareness.

**Interest and desire**

Will messages with high or low ephemerality more likely boost consumers’ interest? To build interest with high ephemerality, firms will need to:

- focus on peripheral rather than central cues to persuade consumers;
- send messages that are fun and social rather than flattering or informative; and
- communicate more rather than less frequently.

**Peripheral cues.** Firms that hope to boost interest and desire in their product by sending messages with high ephemerality should prioritize peripheral cues rather than strong arguments (P5). Peripheral cues that make consumers feel better (P3) or help them feel a connection with the source of the message (P4) should better align with consumers’ goal systems. Firms using a celebrity endorser to communicate with consumers may be
**Conceptualizing ephemerality**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firm goals</th>
<th>Are online marketing communications with high ephemerality a better means than online marketing communications with low ephemerality?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Awareness  | *P7.* Compared to online marketing communications with low ephemerality, those with high ephemerality will be a less effective means for firms to increase brand awareness.  
Rationale: Because they reach a smaller (F3), and less receptive audience (consumers are less likely to seek information when ephemerality is high; P2), sending online marketing communications with high ephemerality is a less effective means for increasing brand awareness. |
| Interest and desire | *P8.* Firms sending online marketing communications with high ephemerality will be more likely to increase interest and desire when the communication includes more peripheral cues, such as attractive sources and positive emotions; conversely, firms sending online marketing communications with low ephemerality will be more likely to increase interest and desire through making strong arguments.  
Rationale: Same as P5.  
*P9.* Firms sending online marketing communications with high ephemerality will be more likely to increase interest and desire when the content helps consumers have fun or bond with others.  
Rationale: High ephemerality is a means for consumers to satisfy emotional (P5) and social (P4) goals.  
*P10.* To increase interest and desire, firms will need to communicate more frequently when sending online marketing communications with high ephemerality compared to low ephemerality.  
Rationale: Because of their shorter lifespan (F1) and difficulty of sharing (F2), audiences are less likely to be exposed to high ephemerality, which makes wear-out less likely; it is also less expensive and less risky to release a higher volume of messages because of they have a shorter lifespan (F1) and reach a smaller audience (F2; F3) who which also adds roadblocks for those who may want to publicly shame a firm if it makes a mistake. |
| Sales      | *P11a.* Online marketing communications sent with high ephemerality will be less likely to generate sales because online marketing communications that are transactional are more aligned with consumers’ goals when viewing and receiving online marketing communications with low ephemerality.  
Rationale: Generating sales requires transactional messages, which are misaligned with consumers’ goal systems that are more likely to use high ephemerality as a means for sharing relational messages, such as those used for social bonding (P4).  
*P11b.* Online marketing communications sent with high ephemerality will be more likely to generate sales because their ephemeral nature creates a sense of urgency compared to online marketing communications with low ephemerality.  
Rationale: Consumers feel an offer sent with high ephemerality requires action since the original message, if not the offer itself, may not be available later. |
| Loyalty    | *P12.* Sending online marketing communications with high ephemerality will be a more effective means for firms to build loyalty compared to sending online marketing communications with low ephemerality.  
Rationale: Building loyalty requires relational messages, which align with consumers’ social bonding goal (P4). Consumers are more likely to bond with a brand when sending messages with high ephemerality because the audience is smaller (F3) and more private (P6). |

**Source:** Author’s own work

especially effective with high ephemerality, where peripheral cues are more likely to be persuasive (P5). Furthermore, the fleeting nature of a message with high ephemerality (F1) presents a sense of urgency not present in messages with low ephemerality, which could serve as an additional peripheral cue (Zhu et al., 2018):

>P8. Firms sending messages with high ephemerality will be more likely to increase interest and desire when the message includes more peripheral cues, such as attractive sources and positive emotions; conversely, firms sending messages with low ephemerality will be more likely to increase interest and desire through making strong arguments.

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Table 4. When and how low or high ephemerality facilitate firms’ communication goals
Being fun and friendly. What type of peripheral cues should firms use when sending messages with high ephemerality? Should they be flattering (e.g. “you have excellent taste”)? Signal credibility (e.g. using an expert source)? Offer a discount (e.g. a coupon)? Be fun (e.g. a popular meme)? Be friendly (e.g. a behind-the-scenes video)? Being fun, funny and friendly aligns with consumers’ goal systems related to hedonic goals (P3; Barcelos et al., 2018) and social goals (P4; Weinberg and Pehlivan, 2011), even in response to complaints (Béal et al., 2022). These goals should be more accessible when viewing social media Stories or chatting with a salesperson compared to reading blogs or e-mails. For example, Southwest Airlines shares Stories of employees treating luggage kindly and telling jokes while reading safety features:

P9. Firms sending online marketing communications with high ephemerality will be more likely to increase interest and desire when the content helps consumers have fun or bond with others.

Communication frequency. Researchers and practitioners have found sending too many messages to consumers runs the risk of wear-out (Godfrey et al., 2011) or opt-out (Kumar et al., 2014).

The most compelling reason firms should send a higher volume of messages with high ephemerality compared to low ephemerality is that more messages are necessary for bonding (P4) than impression management (P1), information management (P2) or making a strong argument (P5). Bonding almost always benefits from more frequent communication (Sherman et al., 2013), making it a substantiated means in a consumer’s goal system. On the other hand, impressing, informing and persuading can be carried out at high and low frequencies.

Even though frequent communication can increase bonding, there are still two problems – cost and wear out. Producing enough high-quality content to send multiple times per day, especially video content, could quickly become expensive. However, it is less costly for firms to communicate with high ephemerality because consumers do not expect these messages to have the same production quality as those with lower ephemerality (Dredge, 2017). Firms are more likely to invest in high-quality content when they expect the content to last a long time (F1) and go viral (F2/F3) than when the content will not be accessible for long, is not easily shared and is unlikely to reach a lot of people.

There is also less risk for wear out for those receiving messages with high ephemerality. If a person does not pay attention to an Instagram Story, they are less likely to notice or be bothered by frequent messages sent online with higher ephemerality compared to lower ephemerality (Carbone, 2019). Even consumers who do see a firms’ message cannot share it as easily with others (F2):

P10. To increase interest and desire, firms will need to communicate more frequently when sending online marketing communications with high ephemerality compared to low ephemerality.

Action
After building awareness and interest, firms need to drive consumers to take an action, typically by purchasing a product or service. When the main objective is to increase sales, marketers need to use transactional (i.e. focus on goods and services) rather than relational messages (i.e. focus on relationships with customers; Fruchter and Sigué, 2005). Transactional messages involve a strong call-to-action and often include incentives, such as coupons or discounts. Given that consumers are more interested in bonding when sending messages with high ephemerality (P4), they may be less receptive to transactional messages,
which tend to use utilitarian (“buy now and save!”) and informational (“new products available!”) appeals. Moreover, messages with low ephemerality are easier to access when the consumer needs them; a coupon or promotion can be found in an inbox days after it was received. Messages with high ephemerality are, thus, a less effective means for consumers to share transactional, marketplace information with one another (P2).

When firms are communicating with consumers who have interest in their products, the limited duration of a highly ephemeral message could create a sense of urgency and boost sales (Zhu et al., 2018). Consumers are less likely to perceive a text message or blog as time-sensitive compared to an Instagram Story or livestream. By creating a sense of urgency, calls-for-action in a message with high ephemerality might be more effective than similar calls in a message with low ephemerality.

Whereas the transactional language firms use to push consumers toward a sale may make a message with high ephemerality less effective, the perceived urgency associated with high ephemerality may make them more effective. Future research could uncover whether goal-misalignment or urgency has a stronger effect on motivating consumers to respond to firms’ calls-to-action:

**P11a.** Online marketing communications sent with high ephemerality is less likely to generate sales because online marketing communications that are transactional are more aligned with consumers’ goals when viewing and receiving online marketing communications with low ephemerality.

**P11b.** Online marketing communications sent with high ephemerality is more likely to generate sales because their ephemeral nature creates a sense of urgency compared to online marketing communications with low ephemerality.

**Loyalty**

Loyalty requires the firm to build and maintain an active relationship with the consumer (Keller, 2001). At this point in the consumer’s journey, the firm needs to rely less on transactional messages (e.g. coupons, discounts and calls to action) and more on relational messages (i.e. content that can strengthen the bond with the consumer rather than drive a specific action; Grönroos, 2004). Messages with high ephemerality should be a more effective means for strengthening relationships because consumers are more likely to link high ephemerality with bonding in their goal systems (P4). For example, the National Basketball Association uses Snapchat to share behind-the-scenes photos and videos of athletes bonding, such as a snap of LeBron James lifting weights with friend and ex-teammate Dwyane Wade. Firms can also facilitate relationships with their customers by soliciting feedback, by asking them to vote, provide ratings or offer their opinion about a new product (Sherr, 2018). Consumers may be less likely to pay attention to relational messages when their goal is to find product information or reviews (P2).

Another reason messages sent with high ephemerality are more effective to build loyalty is because the interaction is more private (P6) among a smaller audience (F3). Consumers may want to respond to a goofy Story without worrying about any future ramifications, and this type of private, low-stakes interaction is only possible when there is no long-term record of the interaction (F1) and it cannot be easily shared (F2):

**P12.** Sending online marketing communications with high ephemerality will be a more effective means for firms to build loyalty compared to sending online marketing communications with low ephemerality.
General discussion
People are sending billions of online marketing communications with high ephemerality, yet little is known about the effects on consumer behavior. This is an initial attempt to understand ephemerality from the perspective of the sender. As consumers and firms now regularly use high ephemerality, there are new opportunities and challenges for researchers and practitioners.

Messages with high ephemerality are more impermanent and difficult to share than those with low ephemerality. Because of these differences, messages with high ephemerality tend to have a different reach than messages with low ephemerality. Moreover, consumers have different reasons for choosing to send messages with high or low ephemerality. When sending messages with high ephemerality, they tend to care more about impressing others with narrowly relevant content (i.e. impression management goals), emotional content (i.e. emotion regulation goals), connecting with others (i.e. social bonding goals), protecting their privacy and using peripheral cues to persuade. When sending messages with low ephemerality, they tend to care more about impressing others with widely relevant content (i.e. impression management goals), seeking and sharing information (i.e. information management goals) and using strong arguments to persuade. The different features and motivations influence how and when firms should use high and low ephemerality to move consumers through the sales funnel.

Theoretical contributions
This work contributes to the literature in three significant ways. First, and most importantly, it adds a defining feature of messages, lifespan (F1), that theoretically impacts consumers goal systems in online marketing communications. Changes in lifespan have downstream impact, including two effects discussed extensively in this work: ease of sharing (F2) and reach (F3). For example, all messages on social media, even within the same platform, do not have the same lifespan (F1), which results in differences in how easily a message can be shared (F2) and the audience reached (F3). These differences relative to goal achievement advance the goal systems literature (e.g. Kopetz et al., 2012; Kruglanski et al., 2002; Van Osselaer and Janiszewski, 2012) by identifying ephemerality as a substantiated means used by consumers and firms in online marketing communications. Moreover, there is a growing demand for ephemerality at the extremes. Livestreaming and blockchain seem to be reaching the upper and lower limits of ephemerality, respectively, and are more popular than ever before. Understanding consumers goals when choosing to send online marketing communications with varying ephemerality seems imperative as popularity and uses expand in the marketplace.

Second, this work advances the word-of-mouth literature by introducing the concept of ephemerality. Prior conceptual work has considered differences in word-of-mouth in online and offline settings (Berger, 2014), yet no existing research includes a broad conceptualization of how consumers behave when sending messages with high or low ephemerality. Most research implicitly assesses word-of-mouth messages sent with low ephemerality. The current research introduces ephemerality to word-of-mouth research to understand why and when consumers choose to send messages with high and low ephemerality. To answer these questions, five common communication goals, along with privacy, are addressed with examples offline and online.

Third, ephemerality in communication can advance recent work in other consumption domains. This work complements work on liquid consumption, which focuses on consumption experiences offering temporary or short-lived value (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Bardhi et al., 2012). Both streams of research highlight a trend toward increasing
ephemerality in the marketplace. Just as liquid consumption lets consumers move seamlessly between products and experiences, high ephemerality allows consumers to move freely from conversation to conversation with less concern about long-term consequences that come with low ephemerality. Ephemerality in communication is another contemporary shift from solid to liquid products (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017).

**Marketing implications**
To effectively leverage ephemerality, firms should change how they communicate to better align with consumers’ goal systems. Specifically, marketers should consider the effects of low and high ephemerality in online marketing communications. Companies often carry out a separate strategy for digital marketing (Kingsnorth, 2022), but may not look beyond brand personality as something that should be consistent offline and online. However, a more holistic approach may be warranted when it comes to helping consumers reach their communication goals. This conceptual work suggests consumers have the same goals sending messages online with high and low ephemerality as offline. In other words, moving a conversation with high or low ephemerality from offline to online may not change a consumer’s over-arching goal. For example, since consumers prefer most face-to-face or phone conversations with frontline workers to be more fun (P3), friendly (P4) and private (P6) than not, the same should be true for a routine livestream or a social media Story. This means routine livestreams, social media Stories and other messages sent with high ephemerality should focus less on impressing (P1) and informing (P2), which are a better fit for blogs, posts, letters, texts and other messages sent with low ephemerality.

Some brands have personalities that are more effective than others when sending messages with high ephemerality. For example, some brand sponsors of Major League Baseball have strong “fun, friendly and social” personalities (quick-service restaurants, snacks and beer) compared to others who are perceived as “traditional, reliable and straightforward” (credit cards, home and garden and banks; Wakefield et al., 2021). Brands with fun, friendly and social personalities, such as Taco Bell and Bud Light, should capitalize on this by aligning with consumers’ emotional and relational goals when sending messages with high ephemerality.

Finally, sending messages with high ephemerality may provide an effective means for firms to crowdsourc ideas from their customers (e.g. Nishikawa et al., 2017; Poetz and Schreier, 2012). Firms have found it challenging to elicit honest feedback online (King et al., 2014). However, because consumers feel less pressure to censor themselves when sending messages with high ephemerality, they may perceive less risk in suggesting an unusual and potentially innovative idea. Crowdsourcing may also be more effective this way because consumers are more likely to have an active bonding goal, and crowdsourcing works in part because it causes consumers to feel a closer relationship with the firm (Dahl et al., 2015). However, for crowdsourcing with high ephemerality to succeed at scale, firms need a mechanism to capture the crowdsourced ideas before they vanish into the ephemeral ether.

**Limitations and future research**
Three limitations of this work include the focus on the sender rather than the recipient, omitting paid media firms typically use and the potential for two interdependent concepts. Message recipients could have different goals, especially as they can rapidly switch from sender to recipient in conversation. Paid media also differ in ephemerality. These were omitted for the purpose of this study but doing so left out an important part of many integrated marketing communications strategies. Finally, firm goals and message content
could be interdependent. A firm trying to sell a product is likely sending transactional content to consumers, which may create a challenge for empirical studies.

In addition to testing the propositions empirically, there are several other paths for future research. Senders may have more than one goal, or a multifinal goal configuration (Kruglanski et al., 2002). A sender may want to inform and impress, while creating a sense of urgency to be persuasive. Future researchers could investigate the saliency of each goal when sending messages with high ephemerality.

Counterfinality refers to a goal system in which selecting a means or goal undermines another. Interestingly, this configuration can be more attractive. For example, Schumpe et al. (2018) determined the greater the pain endured in getting a tattoo, the more they found the tattoo as useful in reaching their impression management goals. When could high ephemerality be an attractive counterfinal means? High ephemerality could be a means for increasing social bonds when a sender shares a very impressive accomplishment. Giving up the larger audience, at least for the moment, signals the value of the members in the smaller audience.

The efficacy and adequacy of a firm’s message, particularly in paid media, can depend on a series of factors, including the type of product: hedonic vs utilitarian, mass vs niche, product vs service and price. Digital search and display ads may have low or high ephemerality, too, but have several differences with other paid media. A much deeper analysis can be made to further understand firms’ goals regarding ephemerality and additional factors in organic and paid media.

When ephemerality is implicit and a message must be manually deleted, it is up to each sender to approximate the lifespan of a message. A love letter and research paper are each deemed to exist “forever” although the latter may remain much longer. Does a sender expect different lifespans depending on the communication goal? Are messages meant for social bonding expected to be manually deleted earlier/later than messages meant for information management? Perceptions and expectations of ephemerality could be further investigated based on the objective of the sender.

Messages with high ephemerality can be considered a more clean, “green” way of communicating (Welsh, 2020). As green communications generate more interest, what is the environmental impact of choosing messages with high ephemerality? Can using them conserve energy? Could firms market “green” communication?

Consumers and firms with aligning communication goals should have better outcomes than those who are mismatched. What effects on brand equity or other outcomes come from (mis)aligning with consumers communication goals when sending messages with low or high ephemerality?

Social media platforms often provide users more options to add music, overlay graphics, emojis and captions and more, when they send Stories (high ephemerality) but fewer for Posts (low ephemerality) which may impact consumers as they consider ways to reach their goals. Why might consumers prefer to use these additional options when messages are sent with high ephemerality compared to low ephemerality?

Firms often use paid media in which the message could be perceived as sent with low or high ephemerality. A billboard on a consumer’s daily driving path is expected to be seen repeatedly while other consumers driving through town may only see it once. Do firms communicate differently based on their expectations of ephemerality in the medium? How does that affect consumers?

Finally, changes in ephemerality may have generational effects. Baby boomers have experienced the development and widespread use of low ephemerality. For Gen Z, low ephemerality in online marketing communications has been ubiquitous. What are the effects of a life lived inundated (devoid) of recordings? Low ephemerality may be associated with
selective exposure, passive consumption and personalized experiences which may influence preferences for experiences with high ephemerality interactions, such as are the norm in live experiences. Parsing out the effects of ephemerality use from internet use may be worthwhile.

**Conclusion**
The widespread adoption of high ephemerality in online marketing communications is a ripe environment for empirical research with substantial marketing implications. Goal systems, word-of-mouth and liquid consumption are notable streams of research where more work fits. Furthermore, the ubiquitous nature of online marketing communications makes future work on ephemerality a fit for many other research streams. Social media marketing, integrated marketing communications, omnichannel marketing and online reviews are only some of many worthy candidates. Just as firms of the past benefited from adapting to innovations allowing low ephemerality in marketing communications, today’s firms stand to gain as they embrace high ephemerality. A conceptual understanding of how consumers use ephemerality within their goal systems can be leveraged to capitalize as communication continues to evolve.

**References**


Further reading


Clark, B. (2016), “Mark Cuban showed me how to use his weird chat app cyber dust, and now I love it”, available at: https://thenextweb.com/apps/2016/02/11/mark-cuban-showed-me-how-to-use-his-weird-chat-app-cyber-dust-and-now-i-love-it/


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