

# Social media and memory: how can Facebook enhance memory activity?

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**Abstract:** *The essay explores the growing influence of Facebook, a location-based social application, on personal memory archiving. Facebook can contribute to memory storage, offering new ways for users to record their current feelings, ideas and experiences, especially as related to places. In this sense, the location services facilitate the documentation of memory, and Facebook makes it possible for people to locate a place and remember what happened at that place. Facebook also encourages users to create new memories, including place-based memory and social relational memories, and various location functions such as the Nearby tab provide a wide variety of choices of places users may be interested in. Due to the increased popularity of sharing and commenting on updates on Facebook, social interactions have also been enhanced, which enables people to make more social memories.*

**Keywords:** *social media, Facebook, memory, place*

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, people have gradually come to live in a media obsessed world in which users compulsively capture and share moments of their lives, “creating tens to hundreds of gigabytes of data existing somewhere between mobile devices and social media” (Folger, 2016). Mobile applications and social network platforms such as Facebook allow people to record their experiences in different places, using locational services, sharing the places they have been to as well as creating new place-based memories and social relational memories. Rather than being a “static object” held in the mind (Özkul & Humphreys, 2015), Kuhn argues that memory is instead the “active practice of remembering”, which while related to the past can be (re)constructed. (Kuhn, 2010, p.6; Özkul, 2015). Özkul defines memory as “the activity and product of remembering” (Özkul & Humphreys, 2015). However, such memories and experiences are tied to place to the extent that a memory of events can be regarded as recalling “where they took place” (Folger, 2016). As a result, the significance of Facebook in terms of its effects on personal memory generation and storage was intensified immensely when it developed further as a location based social platform from its initial more inchoate form.

## 2. Facebook: documentation of memory

Recently, rather than using physical carriers such as photos or written records, people are more likely to capture and archive their memories on mobile devices or online platform (Folger, 2016). These individual memories have gradually become wearable and shareable via the growth of mobile phones and applications (Reading, 2009). Although Facebook was created for online social interactions rather than individual memory preservation or long-term recording of personal life. However, Facebook can serve as documentation of personal memories in daily life, recording the places, persons, events, or feelings that permeate users’ lives. Facebook can thus be regarded as a repository of memories via the profiles posted on the platform, which include text videos, and photographs. Even where posts seem to be trivial or meaningless, they represent components of users’ daily lives, or at least, of a view of life that people wish to present (Sinn and Syn, 2014). More importantly, the location features of Facebook can promote individual memory archiving by recording users’ profiles with their personal life stories and experiences.

### **2.1 Memory and place**

As mentioned previously, memory tends to be closely related to place. Kalin and Frith (2016) note that “place and memory share a deep cultural history in rhetorical studies”, Places can thus be understood as holders of memory (Nora, 1989; Kuhn, 2002; Özkul and Humphreys, 2015), especially when people strive to recall the past. Without the elements of places in a memory, it is hard to construct a “complete mnemonic experience” (Casey, 2000, p. 184). Contemporary wearable technologies, which include Facebook, are thus likely to offer new impetus to the relationship between memory and place (Kalin and Frith, 2016).

Facebook seems to have made a commitment to building a seamless location-sharing world within its social networks. Instead of simply marking a place on a map physically, the location services in Facebook are thus playing an increasingly important role in the process of documenting personal memory. The automatic location functions mean that people’s experience and memories are more easily linked with places and, as a result, the location services and communication features Facebook offers combine to create a useful way for users to record their own individual histories by contributing to personal memory storage. The functions of timelines and photos with location stamps are thus analysed in further detail to examine this phenomenon below.

### **2.2 Timeline: a unique autobiography**

A timeline documents the past by means of location information and personal posts. When Zuckerberg first explained the feature of the timeline at a conference, he claimed that: “Millions of people curate stories of their lives on Facebook every day and have no way to share them once they fall off your profile page...we have been working on ‘timeline’ all year...it’s the story of your life and completely new way to express yourself. It has three pieces: all your stories, your apps and a new way to express who you are” (Barnett, 2012). Facebook thus “provides a new medium” (Davies, 2015) through which the user is able to express themselves, to share personal or collective experiences and generate the narrative of their own stories.

Although each user’s page only carries a fragment of personal memory, this can be connected by means of the timeline and integrated into a narrative “autobiographical memory” (van Dijck, 2007, p77). According to Garde-Hansen (2009), therefore, “Facebook is a database of users and for users; each user’s page is a database of their life, making this social network site a collection of collections and collectives”. The data carry the personal information thus constructs the life story, while the timeline is the tool used for both storytelling and the collection of memory. As Zuckerberg announced, the profile on Facebook should “feel like your own home” (Baym, 2011).

The timeline certainly seems to be an effective storyteller for personal memory. Through the timeline incorporated into Facebook, the user may find it easier to recall what happened when, where they were, and link events to other precious memories in their lives. For many users of Facebook, the timeline assists them in creating online reification of self-expression via storytelling and memory creation (van Dijck, 2016). As well as recording milestones in users’ lives, timelines can reflect mundane individual life events and collect trivial daily stories that would otherwise be easily forgotten. Due to its automatic collection and integration features, timeline acts as an enormous digital profile, constructing people’s mediated memories based on their posts on the platform. The type of memory recorded and curated by timeline thus belongs to the category of “social network memory” (Hoskins, 2009) as well as the category of “mediated memories” (van Dijck, 2007). Hoskins (2009) argued that the events or memories curated are straightforwardly produced on social media rather than mediated by external media; thus, events posted on Facebook have the potential to be misinterpreted or changed by their inclusion on social media (Garde-Hansen, Hoskins, and Reading, 2009). For instance, some users of Facebook may post supposititious information and locations for personal purposes such as self-promotion. Despite their not having experienced the events as posted, however, these can also be regarded as mediated memories. Consequently, the introduction of the timeline has had a great influence on personal memory archiving.

### **2.3 Location stamps: meaningful mnemonic**

Another example is the photos with location stamps, which allow the user to develop better memory storage. As the main self-presentation service of Facebook is the update status, which is the means by which pictures, videos, and text can be posted on the platform and shared by users. All statuses posted

online record users' experiences of daily life or their current mindsets, contributing to the development of personal memory. However, of the various types of updates, photos with locations posted on Facebook seem to play the most important role in terms of constructing "repositories of memories" (Kuhn, 2010). Photos have been regarded as basic tools for documenting memory for a long time (van Dijck, 2008), but Burnett (2004) emphasises "the value of memory, place, and original moments" in photography, thus encouraging the shift to digital memory storage. That is relevant as many of the photos posted on the Facebook contain abundant information to help people recall persons, places, or experiences in their past. However, van Dijck (2008) insists that the value of these pictures is not to "fix" personal memory but to allow the user to reassess the past and reflect on their future life. Thus, the photos posted on Facebook not only work to conserve personal memory but also have a profound impact on the framing of the past and the future.

### **3. New memories created with Facebook**

Facebook encourages users to create new memories, including place-based memories and social relational memories. As a location-based social application, Facebook provides a wide variety of information about places users might be interested in, and by using the location features and places recommended by Facebook, users can enjoy additional convenience from mobile social applications as well as enlarging their experiences of different places. Thus, the location service of Facebook can promote the creation of new memories by supplying choices about places. Facebook is also a social application which provides users with a communicative platform. Through the functions of sharing and commenting, people can express themselves and exchange ideas, feelings, or experiences with others. During online communication via Facebook, social interactions are enhanced, thus enabling people to make more social memories. The Nearby feature, for example, not only provides information on nearby places but can also help users to find friends nearby, strengthening their connections with existing friends. Based on the acquisitions of Gowalla, Instagram and Glancee, Facebook's launch of Nearby provided a location-based service with three main aspects of information about local resources: nearby places, nearby friends, and nearby deals (Wilken, 2014).

#### **3.1 Nearby**

With the addition of Nearby, Facebook enhanced users' experiences of places, thereby contributing to the creation of new memories. The first attempt at location-based business on Facebook, Nearby provides "a list of businesses and landmarks" (Constine, 2012d) close to the user based on locational information harvested from their mobile device. Rather than simply offering a list, however, the businesses recommended by Facebook are sorted and well analysed based on user preferences, star ratings, location, check-ins and the "recommendations of friends and other users" (Constine, 2012). By offering a combination of information in a brief manner, this offers users a time-saving way to discover "nightlife, shopping, restaurants, coffee, hotels and outdoors" (Constine, 2012). Facebook then also developed Places Pages with more details, such as links to business hours, "Like" buttons, contact details and so on.

It is worth noting that the directions button for Nearby not only accurately locates the user but also provides user-friendly options. When the user decides to visit a place displayed Nearby, a directions button links to a maps app on their mobile phone, making it much easier for users to access the places they are interested in. The combined functions of Nearby allow users to figure out where they want to go or what to do at a place and how to get there most effectively. In this way, the Nearby feature bridges gaps between customers and businesses and services. As a locative service, Nearby also facilitates a much closer relationship between individuals and place. Tutters and Varnelis (2006) argue that locative media "can reconfigure our everyday life as well by renewing our sense of place in the world" due to the application of freely accessible geographic data. Such applications promote new relationships between physical and digital spaces, merging local information, spatial and social relations, and feelings of presence and proximity. Schwartz and Halegoua (2015) also recognise the way in which location-based social media applications gradually "promote new relationships between physical and digital spaces, local information, and social relations".

Nearby provides flexible choices for users in their daily lives while silently changing their sense of place. Thanks to the variety of businesses recommended by Nearby, the user can enjoy various places and services of which they might otherwise have been unaware. In addition, the memory practices of users with regard to place are enhanced and developed. As Humphreys (2012) suggests, most location-

based social media users recognise their participation in locative services, and places are recorded and added as a memory aid (Humphreys, 2012).

The Deals page was also launched by Facebook based on location services. This page allows users to find deals being offered nearby which they can then share with friends (Hicks, 2011). Compared with ordinary online shopping platforms, Deals not only benefits Facebook financially but also allows development of a pool of location data and personal information, laying the foundation for follow-up development. Although Deals provides users with discount information, it uses any take up to access users' personal information, tracking their footprint with regard to shopping habits. However, while some users identify the location service functions and potential risks to privacy, few stop using the service (Toch and Levi, 2013). Facebook as location-based social application has been assimilated into people's everyday lives, the participating in individual memory generation.

The Nearby feature not only provides information about the places and discounts around a particular location, it also helps users to find friends nearby. Users can search for Nearby friends as well as examining the digital "profiles of people who are close in physical proximity" (Copeland, 2012). This use of location-based technology can thus increase offline social interactions. When turning on the Nearby Friends function, the users will "occasionally be notified by their friends" who are nearby (Hustad, 2014). In a sense, Nearby thus strengthens connections with existing friends and promotes social relational memory, especially offline memory, as when people notice they have friends nearby, they are more likely to organise meetups with each other.

As pointed out by Hustad (2014), location-based technology seems to be most popular among young people, but it is accepted by most of the users on Facebook. By offering recommendations of known people nearby or stranger users might be interested in, Facebook provide users with new ways to develop social relationships or to choose their communities (Saker and Frith, 2018). Compared with arranging meetups offline or meeting new people randomly, the users of Facebook appear to prefer online interactions with acquaintances, and during these online interactions, people tend to construct new memories based on their social networks. Hoskins regards this as "networked memory", which is unconscious and technological, while Van Dijck (2007) argues that the memories created on social network sites tend to be "collective memory" as people experience a connection between public events and their individual experiences of those events. Similarly, Brockmeier (2002) points out that collective memory improves the "shared memory of a commonly inhabited and similarly experienced past". Thus, the users on the Facebook create not only personal memories but also collective memory.

In its basic function as a social media application, Facebook enables people to "create their own content and to engage with the content posted by others" (Sinn and Syn, 2014). Rather than creating memory insularly, people are thus involved in both determining the creation of individual spaces for themselves and curating content for the public on Facebook. By means of simple operations such as updating statuses or commenting on others' posts, Facebook allows users to share ideas, places, and stories with friends whether globally or nearby. By tracking the actions, stories, and interests of friend groups (Bumgarner, 2007), the memories generated by friends can be spread by means of social interaction (Hirst and Echterhoff, 2012). Thus, users can promote collective memories by browsing others' posts and communicating with each other. By offering both location services and social services, Facebook thus makes it possible for users to strengthen their social connections, contributing to social memory and personal memory development.

The Nearby feature in particular provides more choices for users based on offering a variety of information about places and deals nearby, not only strengthening the relationship between user and place but also creating memory practice for different places. More importantly, the Nearby function bridges gaps between users who wish to communicate with each other and make new friends offline based on location, enhancing the creation of collective memory.

### **3.2 Check-in**

Except for the Nearby feature, Facebook launched another location-based service—Check-in which offers current locative information and status messages for users (Lee, Kuo & Hsu, 2013). The feature works for 'searching for a place nearby or adding a place to check-in' (Singel, Barber, Tiku, Simonite, Baker-Whitcomb, & Lapowsky, 2010) and sharing the location with friends. Users of Facebook are more willing to check in the places where they interested in, highlighting them and sharing locational information (Saker & Frith, 2018). In a sense, the places people check-in seem to be unique, unusual or meaningful for individual. One of the important significance of check-in is to express themselves via

displaying a specific location, personal lifestyles and social lives with selective places (Wang, 2013). While the feature of Check-in is not only a form of self-presentation but also a storage of memory. As Özkul and Humphreys argued, during checking in and sharing the locations, people tend to create new memories and 'build a sense of connection to a new place' (Özkul & Humphreys, 2015). Similarly, Lee, Kuo and Hsu find that memory storage is one of the motivation for using Check-in in their experiments (Lee, Kuo & Hsu, 2013). Hoskins emphasizes the effect of check-in on creating digital network memory, noting that check-in provide a bridge between memory and place (Hoskins, 2009). Not exactly the same, Özkul and Humphreys suppose that both of the place and technology promote to store the 'information about people and their experiences' contributing to memory achieving (Özkul & Humphreys, 2015). That is, Facebook is a both social and locative application working on the mobile device. Meanwhile, the feature of Check-in not only provide physical locational information but also provide clues to record and integrate personal stories and memory. McCarthy claims the memory storage function of check-in via an interesting example. He notes that he can point at the one of his check-in and tell his children 'This is where your parents first kissed' after 20 years (McCarthy, 2010). In the example, both of place and technology facilitate personal memory archiving. Check-in serves as locating and recording tool, allowing users to add memories into a physical location and documenting the memories. Without locative service on the Facebook, people may feel difficult to recall the old age. In some sense, locative service have potential to avoid memory disorder. That is, with the accurate locative information, McCarthy can easily recognize that is 'Ocean Beach in San Francisco' rather than Ocean Beach in Hawaii (McCarthy, 2010).

As mentioned previously, places can be regarded as are storage containers of memories. It is worthy noting that 'place is a location made meaningful through intentional interaction' (Frith & Kalin, 2016). In Facebook case, place is the site people embedded with meaning during the check-in. As Walker and Skowronski defined, memory is not to record simply but to give meaning to experiences (Walker & Skowronski, 2013) This form of digital memory archiving on the Facebook, enables individuals to organize and giving special meaning to their personal experience. They can look through their timeline to recall what happened in the daily like and see where they have been to; what they are interested in, how they displayed their personal life and search for places they checked in before as well as who they play with. This digital memories archive can be stored as online documents on the Facebook without the limitations of time. All of the memories saved on the Facebook will provide recourse for users to recall the past. Thus, the check in feature create and storage digital network memory which 'connects the past to the present' (Frith & Kalin, 2016).

However, Facebook also increases the risk of losing certain memories while preserving others. As Özkul and Humphreys (2015) mentioned, the mobility of devices may lead to damage to the integrity of memories saved on these devices. Similarly, Facebook, as a mobile and social application, may also lose memories. Facebook has become a location-based social platform created for "telling stories, beginnings and endings, developments and organization" (Sinn and Syn, 2014). All of these stories, experience or memories are preserved in a database owned and maintained by Facebook, and the user may thus lose their precious data due to sudden deactivation or attacks on Facebook accounts (Warren, 2008). Technical failure could also lead to the corruption of data (McCarthy, 2009), and while some lost data can be retrieved by technical means, other segments may be less retrievable. Ignoring the economic value of the mountains of data on the Facebook, the loss of its database could be equated to the loss of "personal history" and treasured individual memories for countless users (van Dijck, 2007, p35). The risk of losing data is an ineluctable defect of memory being documented on online platforms. However, it is hard to deny the flexibility and convenience of Facebook in terms of personal memory storage. In general, therefore, Facebook can be expected to have a great influence in terms of recording users' daily lives and thus contributing to individual memory archiving for some time to come.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In sum, Facebook, as a location-based social application, indeed provide users with platform to present themselves and to document their daily life. Thus, Facebook may serve the users well as a repository of individual memory and storyteller in the personal life. On the one hand, Facebook can contribute to memory storage, offering the new ways for users to record current feeling, ideas and experiences especially which related to places. The Nearby feature in particular provides more choices for users based on offering a variety of information about places and deals nearby, not only strengthening the relationship between user and place but also creating memory practice for different places. In a sense, the location service facilitates the documentation of memory. That is, Facebook make it possible for people to locate the place and remember what happened in the place. On the other hand,

Facebook encourage users to create new memory including place-based memory and social relational memory. The function of location such as Nearby provides a wide variety of choices about the places which the users may interest in. Meanwhile, with the sharing and commenting the updates on the Facebook, the social interactions have been enhanced, which enable people to make more social memories.

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