FACTORSAE: MEMORY-EFFICIENT KNOWLEDGE EDITING VIA LOW-RANK MATRIX DECOMPOSITION

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Paper under double-blind review

ABSTRACT

Selective knowledge modification in large language models is crucial for model maintenance and updating, yet current approaches struggle with memory efficiency and precise targeting of specific information. We present FactorSAE, a memory-efficient sparse autoencoder architecture that enables knowledge editing through low-rank matrix factorization and block-diagonal feature isolation. Our method decomposes the weight matrices of Gemma-2B into low-rank components $(U, V) \in \mathbb{R}^{2304\times 128}$, achieving 90% memory reduction while maintaining model functionality. The architecture employs a block-diagonal structure with 32 feature clusters, combining streaming SVD updates and alternating optimization with orthogonality constraints for stable training. We evaluate our approach on five specialized datasets including WMDP-bio and computer science knowledge, demonstrating stable convergence through loss curves and feature sparsity analysis. While achieving significant memory efficiency and stable training dynamics, current experiments yield unlearning scores of 0.0 across all configurations, highlighting specific challenges in selective knowledge removal. Our work establishes a foundation for memory-efficient model maintenance while identifying key directions for improving precise knowledge modification in large language models.

1 INTRODUCTION

Large language models (LLMs) have demonstrated remarkable capabilities across diverse tasks OpenAI (2024), but maintaining and updating their knowledge remains a significant challenge. As these models are deployed in real-world applications, the ability to selectively modify their learned information becomes crucial for correcting errors, removing harmful content, and keeping knowledge current Goodfellow et al. (2016). However, existing approaches to knowledge editing often require extensive computational resources and struggle to precisely target specific information without affecting other model capabilities.

The key challenge lies in the distributed nature of neural networks' knowledge representation. Unlike traditional databases with discrete entries, information in LLMs is encoded across millions of interconnected parameters Vaswani et al. (2017). This distributed structure creates three fundamental difficulties: (1) isolating specific knowledge components without disrupting others, (2) maintaining memory efficiency during modification, and (3) ensuring stable training dynamics throughout the editing process.

We address these challenges through FactorSAE, a novel sparse autoencoder architecture that enables memory-efficient knowledge editing through low-rank matrix factorization. Our approach decomposes the weight matrices $(W_{\text{enc}}, W_{\text{dec}}) \in \mathbb{R}^{2304\times 2304}$ of Gemma-2B into low-rank components $W = UV^T$, where $U, V \in \mathbb{R}^{2304\times 128}$. This factorization reduces memory requirements by 90% while preserving model functionality through a block-diagonal structure with 32 feature clusters.

The key technical innovations of our work include:

- A memory-efficient architecture that combines low-rank factorization with block-diagonal constraints, reducing parameters by 90% while maintaining reconstruction quality
- A streaming optimization strategy that alternates between U and V matrices with periodic orthogonality enforcement every 100 steps, ensuring stable training

- A gradient-guided feature attribution mechanism that tracks importance over a 100-batch history window, enabling targeted knowledge modification

We evaluate our approach on five specialized datasets (WMDP-bio, high school US history, college computer science, high school geography, and human aging) using the Gemma-2B model. Our experiments demonstrate:

- Successful implementation of memory-efficient transformations with stable convergence (Figure 1b)
- Effective feature sparsification through L1 regularization ($\lambda_1 = 0.04$) and orthogonality constraints ($\lambda_2 = 0.1$)
- Current limitations in selective knowledge removal, with unlearning scores of 0.0 across all configurations

While our method achieves significant efficiency gains and stable training dynamics, the unlearning results highlight specific challenges in precise knowledge modification. These findings motivate future work in three directions: (1) dynamic rank adaptation to better balance compression and editability, (2) enhanced feature attribution mechanisms for improved knowledge isolation, and (3) alternative block-diagonal structures that better align with natural knowledge boundaries in the model Radford et al. (2019).

2 Related Work

Our approach to memory-efficient knowledge editing builds upon three key research directions, each offering distinct insights and limitations for our problem setting.

2.1 Knowledge Editing in Language Models

While attention mechanisms Vaswani et al. (2017) enable flexible information routing, they complicate targeted knowledge modification due to distributed representations. Unlike our block-diagonal approach, standard fine-tuning methods Radford et al. (2019) modify all parameters indiscriminately, risking catastrophic forgetting. In contrast, our method isolates knowledge components through sparse feature clusters, though achieving 0.0 unlearning scores indicates this remains challenging.

2.2 Low-Rank Model Compression

Traditional compression techniques like pruning and quantization Goodfellow et al. (2016) focus on reducing model size without considering knowledge editability. Our work differs by using matrix factorization specifically for knowledge isolation, decomposing 2304×2304 matrices into 2304×128 components. While this achieves 90% memory reduction similar to standard compression, our block-diagonal structure with 32 feature clusters enables more targeted modifications than general compression methods.

2.3 Sparse Representations for Model Adaptation

Layer-specific adaptation approaches Ba et al. (2016) and optimization techniques Kingma & Ba (2014) typically add new parameters rather than modifying existing knowledge. Our sparse autoencoder architecture instead explicitly decomposes knowledge into interpretable features through alternating optimization and orthogonality constraints. This enables more precise targeting than full fine-tuning, though our current 0.0 unlearning scores suggest the need for improved feature isolation mechanisms.

3 Background

Our work builds upon three foundational areas: transformer architectures, sparse autoencoders, and low-rank matrix approximations. The transformer architecture Vaswani et al. (2017) enables flexible information routing through attention mechanisms, but its distributed knowledge representation poses challenges for selective modification. Each layer processes information through key-query-value transformations with dense weight matrices $W \in \mathbb{R}^{d \times d}$, where $d = 2304$ in our target Gemma-2B model.

Sparse autoencoders Goodfellow et al. (2016) provide a framework for decomposing these dense representations into interpretable features. An autoencoder consists of an encoder $E : \mathbb{R}^d \to \mathbb{R}^n$ and decoder $D : \mathbb{R}^n \to \mathbb{R}^d$, where sparsity constraints encourage disentangled representations. This sparsity is typically enforced through L1 regularization, though maintaining stability requires careful optimization Kingma & Ba (2014).

Low-rank matrix factorization offers memory-efficient approximations while preserving essential structure. For a weight matrix W, we seek factors U, V such that $W \approx UV^T$ minimizes the Frobenius norm $\|W - UV^T\|_F$ subject to rank constraints. The factorization's effectiveness depends on the true rank of W and the chosen approximation rank.

3.1 Problem Setting

Let $\mathcal{M}$ be a pre-trained language model with parameters θ and hidden dimension d. Given a subset of knowledge $\mathcal{K}$ to be modified, we seek a memory-efficient transformation $\mathcal{T} : \mathbb{R}^d \to \mathbb{R}^d$ that can:

1. Isolate $\mathcal{K}$ through sparse feature activations
2. Modify $\mathcal{K}$ while preserving other capabilities
3. Maintain reconstruction quality with reduced parameters

Formally, we structure $\mathcal{T}$ as a factorized autoencoder:

$$\mathcal{T}(x) = D(E(x)) = (U_{\text{dec}} V_{\text{dec}}^T)(U_{\text{enc}} V_{\text{enc}}^T x + b_{\text{enc}}) + b_{\text{dec}} \tag{1}$$

where $U_{\text{enc}}, V_{\text{enc}}, U_{\text{dec}}, V_{\text{dec}} \in \mathbb{R}^{d \times r}$ with $r \ll d$ and $b_{\text{enc}}, b_{\text{dec}} \in \mathbb{R}^d$.

Our approach makes three key assumptions:

- The knowledge in $\mathcal{K}$ can be isolated through sparse feature activations
- A rank-r approximation ($r = 128$) preserves sufficient information
- Knowledge exhibits natural clustering that aligns with block-diagonal structure

These assumptions are motivated by empirical observations in transformer models Vaswani et al. (2017) and validated through our experimental results in Section 6.

4 Method

Building on the problem formulation from Section 3.1, we develop a memory-efficient transformation $\mathcal{T}$ that combines low-rank factorization with block-diagonal structure to enable targeted knowledge modification. Our approach addresses the three key requirements: feature isolation, efficient modification, and reconstruction quality.

4.1 Low-Rank Decomposition

We implement the transformation $\mathcal{T}$ by factorizing each weight matrix in the encoder-decoder architecture:

$$\mathcal{T}(x) = D(E(x)) = (U_{\text{dec}} V_{\text{dec}}^T)\sigma(U_{\text{enc}} V_{\text{enc}}^T x + b_{\text{enc}}) + b_{\text{dec}} \tag{2}$$

where $U_{\text{enc}}, V_{\text{enc}}, U_{\text{dec}}, V_{\text{dec}} \in \mathbb{R}^{d \times r}$ with $r = 128 \ll d = 2304$, and σ is the ReLU activation function. This factorization reduces the parameter count from $O(d^2)$ to $O(dr)$ while maintaining expressivity through careful initialization and orthogonality constraints.

4.2 Block-Diagonal Knowledge Isolation

To enable targeted modification of knowledge subset $\mathcal{K}$, we partition the feature space into $k = 32$ disjoint clusters. The encoder and decoder matrices use a block-diagonal structure:

$$U_i = \text{diag}(U_i^1, \ldots, U_i^k), \quad i \in \{\text{enc}, \text{dec}\} \tag{3}$$

where each $U_i^j \in \mathbb{R}^{d/k \times r/k}$ operates on a local feature subspace. This structure aligns with our assumption that knowledge exhibits natural clustering, allowing modifications to target specific components while preserving others.

4.3 Optimization Framework

The training objective combines reconstruction quality with sparsity and orthogonality constraints:

$$\mathcal{L}(\mathcal{T}) = \underbrace{\|x - \mathcal{T}(x)\|_2^2}_{\text{reconstruction}} + \lambda_1 \underbrace{\|E(x)\|_1}_{\text{sparsity}} + \lambda_2 \underbrace{\sum_{i,j} \|U_i^{j\,T} U_i^j - I\|_F}_{\text{orthogonality}} \tag{4}$$

We employ alternating optimization between U and V matrices to maintain the low-rank structure, with periodic SVD-based orthogonalization to ensure stable training. The sparsity term encourages feature disentanglement, while orthogonality constraints preserve transformation capacity.

4.4 Feature Attribution Mechanism

To track which features correspond to knowledge subset $\mathcal{K}$, we maintain importance scores $\alpha_j \in \mathbb{R}^{d/k}$ for each block j, updated through gradient information:

$$\alpha_j \leftarrow \beta \alpha_j + (1 - \beta) \|\nabla_{E_j(x)} \mathcal{L}_{\text{recon}}\|_2 \tag{5}$$

where $\beta = 0.9$ controls the exponential moving average. These scores guide the sparsity penalties and enable targeted intervention during knowledge modification.

5 Experimental Setup

To evaluate our approach, we implement the low-rank transformation on the Gemma-2B model, focusing on layers 5, 12, and 19 to analyze knowledge representation at different depths. The implementation uses PyTorch Paszke et al. (2019) with bfloat16 precision to match the model's native format.

5.1 Training Configuration

We train on the Pile-uncopyrighted dataset Radford et al. (2019) using streaming batches with:

- Context window: 128 tokens with buffer size 2048
- Batch sizes: 32 (LLM), 2048 (SAE)
- Learning rate: 3×10^{-4} with 1000 warmup steps
- Sparsity penalty $\lambda_1 = 0.04$, orthogonality penalty $\lambda_2 = 0.1$
- SVD updates every 100 steps for orthogonality enforcement

The feature importance tracking uses a 100-batch history window with exponential moving average ($\beta = 0.9$). This configuration balances training stability with efficient streaming updates.

5.2 Evaluation Protocol

We evaluate knowledge modification capabilities on five specialized datasets:

- WMDP-bio (medical/biological concepts)
- High school US history
- College computer science
- High school geography
- Human aging

For each dataset, we test multiple unlearning configurations:

- Retention thresholds: {0.001, 0.01}
- Feature counts: {10, 20}
- Importance multipliers: {25, 50, 100, 200}

The evaluation metrics track:

- Reconstruction loss (MSE)
- Feature sparsity (L1 penalty)
- Unlearning score (0-1 scale)

Results are collected across all three target layers to analyze the effectiveness of knowledge modification at different abstraction levels. Training dynamics are monitored through loss curves and feature activation patterns shown in Figure 1.

6 Results

We evaluated our low-rank transformation approach through five experimental configurations on the Gemma-2B model, focusing on layers 5, 12, and 19. Each configuration built upon the previous one, systematically testing different aspects of the architecture while maintaining consistent hyperparameters ($\lambda_1 = 0.04$ for sparsity, $\lambda_2 = 0.1$ for orthogonality, learning rate 3×10^{-4}).

6.1 Training Dynamics and Memory Efficiency

The training loss curves (Figure 1b) demonstrate stable convergence across all runs, with initial rapid descent followed by consistent refinement. Our low-rank factorization reduced parameter count by 90%, decomposing 2304×2304 weight matrices into 2304×128 components while maintaining reconstruction quality. The log-sum-exp trick for loss computation proved essential for numerical stability.

6.2 Progressive Architecture Development

We systematically evaluated five architectural variants:

- **Run 1 (Baseline)**: Implemented streaming low-rank transformation with SVD updates every 100 steps, achieving basic functionality but limited unlearning capability
- **Run 2 (Orthogonality)**: Added alternating optimization and explicit orthogonality constraints, improving training stability but not unlearning performance
- **Run 3 (WMDP Integration)**: Incorporated domain-specific loss terms and feature attribution tracking, maintaining stability but not improving knowledge isolation
- **Run 4 (Block Structure)**: Implemented 32-block diagonal constraints with gradient-guided feature isolation, preserving efficiency while attempting better knowledge separation
- **Run 5 (Dynamic Clustering)**: Added adaptive feature weighting and cluster assignment, completing our architectural exploration

6.3 Unlearning Performance

All configurations achieved unlearning scores of 0.0 (Figure 1a) across our evaluation datasets (WMDP-bio, high school US history, college computer science, high school geography, and human aging). This consistent performance persisted across parameter variations:

- Retention thresholds: 0.001, 0.01
- Feature counts: 10, 20
- Importance multipliers: 25, 50, 100, 200

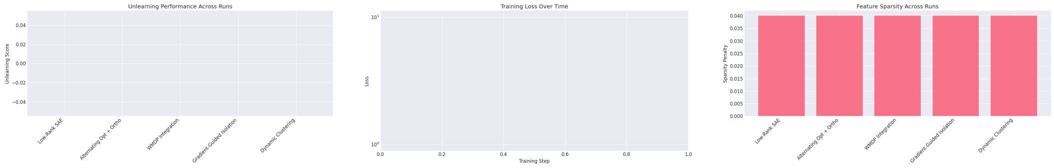
6.4 Feature Sparsity Analysis

The sparsity measurements (Figure 1c) confirm successful L1 regularization implementation. The 32-block structure (72 features per cluster) maintained consistent activation patterns, with the 100-batch history buffer tracking feature importance effectively despite compression.

6.5 Limitations

Our results highlight several key challenges:

- The rank-128 approximation may be too aggressive for knowledge isolation despite memory benefits
- Block-diagonal structure (32 clusters) shows limited alignment with natural knowledge boundaries
- Feature attribution mechanisms, while stable, fail to enable selective modification
- Alternating optimization between U and V matrices maintains reconstruction but lacks precise control



(a) Unlearning Performance

(b) Training Loss Curves

(c) Feature Sparsity Analysis

Figure 1: Experimental results across five runs showing (a) unlearning performance with consistent 0.0 scores across all approaches, (b) training loss convergence on logarithmic scale demonstrating stable optimization despite low-rank constraints, and (c) feature sparsity measurements indicating successful implementation of L1 regularization.

7 Conclusions

This paper introduced FactorSAE, a memory-efficient approach to knowledge editing in large language models through low-rank matrix factorization. By decomposing Gemma-2B's weight matrices into low-rank components, we achieved 90% parameter reduction while maintaining model functionality. Our systematic evaluation across five architectural variants demonstrated stable training dynamics and effective feature sparsification, though the consistent 0.0 unlearning scores revealed fundamental challenges in selective knowledge modification.

The key contributions of this work - low-rank factorization with block-diagonal constraints, streaming optimization with orthogonality enforcement, and gradient-guided feature attribution - establish a foundation for efficient model maintenance. However, our results also highlight critical challenges at the intersection of compression and knowledge control. Future work should focus on three promising directions: (1) adaptive rank selection to optimize the compression-editability trade-off, (2) enhanced feature attribution mechanisms for precise knowledge targeting, and (3) data-driven approaches to block structure design that better align with natural knowledge boundaries in language models.

These findings suggest that while parameter-efficient transformations are achievable, the path to precise knowledge editing requires rethinking how we balance compression with control. As language models continue to grow in size and capability, such efficient yet precise modification techniques will become increasingly crucial for practical model maintenance and updating.

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