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ABSTRACT
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
“HEY!!! Finally... It's Snowing!!!!... oh wait, I was hallucinating again... still in the 90's today... Hrumph.” (Ron on Facebook)
“They’re playing one of Amy Winehouse’s last songs on the radio - “Our Day Will Come”. Makes me sad; so ironic. RIP, Amy.” (Kelly on Facebook)
“Copenhagen airport, sitting at Starbucks. They serve their coffee in porcelain mugs! How posh! But they also charge you €6 for a grande size latte.. posh, indeed :P” (Liisa on Facebook)

A well-known philosophical riddle asks: “If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” In the current age of near-instant global social media, one cannot help but wondering whether this thought experiment should now read as: “If something happened to you, and you did not Facebook it, did it really happen?” Social media with their real-time status-update and microblogging functions seem to be changing – even revolutionizing – the ways in which we keep in touch with others keep them informed about our lives.

Consumer experience is a widely elaborated concept in consumer research (Joy et al. 2004; Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1990). There exists a rich literature on consumer experiences and experiential consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Lofman 1991), which in many cases is posed as opposed to utilitarian consumption (Havlena and Hollbrook 1986).

Merriam Webster Dictionary defines experience as something personally encountered or lived through. The personally lived nature of experience has also been stressed in consumer research (Goulding et al. 2009; Randall and Wood 2005). Consumer research has trended to emphasize the extraordinary and the exhilarating (Arnould and Price 1993; Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993; Sayre 1999), while some authors have turned their attention to the everyday experiences (Thompson et al. 1990). Experiences have also been explored in relation to different consumption settings (Dholakia and Schroeder 2001; Firat, Pettigrew and Belk 2011; Thompson and Arsel 2004), making physical surroundings the core of research into consumer experience.

In this paper we discuss some of the ways in which social media have changed and are changing the nature of consumer experience (Havlena and Hollbrook, 1992). We argue that social media are shaping experiences in at least four distinctive ways: 1) by making experiences more public, widespread, and communal; 2) by rendering the mundane as significant; 3) by mediating the physical experiences; and 4) combined with technological advances, by flattening out the variety of experiences.

COMMUNALIZATION OF EXPERIENCE
If one were to stop at a café in the pre-social media era, the experience was likely to be private information, or at best information with very limited dissemination – “news” to be shared only with the person’s immediate social circle, defined largely by physical proximity. Friends and family in another city, let alone on another continent, would never hear about it. In the contemporary hyper-connected settings, as soon as she “checks in” to the café with her mobile phone or tablet, the visitor is instantly linked to her social networks (see the opening quote of Liisa). If the visitor decides to make a text-based comment (as Liisa does), her friends are invited and drawn into what would have been in the past just an individual experience. Now, not only do they know about her being in the café, but they can participate in the visit vicariously, commenting on and “liking” whatever she is doing physically and “saying” in a digital space. The visitor also filters her public experiences, as she depicts and shapes her public images through selecting the experiences she
wants to draw her friends into. From the seemingly mundane ponderings over the weather, and reports on the everyday occurrences, to the life-altering events of becoming a parent or getting married, the whole range of our experiences are thus becoming increasingly public, widespread, and communal.

**HYPER-SIGNIFYING THE MUNDANE**

Most of the experiences and information that are shared in social media spaces are mundane musing about ordinary occurrences. This is, of course, understandable as most of the things take place in our everyday lives, are mundane and ordinary. On social media such as Facebook, however, all the postings are shown up as “stories” in a “news feed”. The electronic spaces of social media— at least in their current stage of development— do not provide ways to prioritize or to signify the importance of stories. Thus, remarks about the weather or reflections on the song playing on the radio become just as important as posts about the economic crisis or the latest scientific discoveries. Social media are lowering the barrier of what is considered significant enough to share, and also making the mundane not just significant but even sometimes hyper-significant.

Thusly, Facebook postings, microblogs, tweets and other social media communications are undifferentiated spaces in terms of the relevance or importance. Since the connected networks of people (friends, contacts, subscribers) are attuned to paying attention to all incoming social media communications, the choices become stark and often binary: accept all or reject all such communications. From the senders’ perspective, the challenge is somewhat different: it they do not want to get blocked or “unfriended” in massive ways, they have to shape the messages, however trivial, in ways that appear clever, witty, and interesting. Thus, the ordinary is rendered significant also via deliberate efforts of those who manage large networks of friends, followers, or subscribers.

**MEDIATION OF PHYSICAL EXPERIENCE**

With social media the virtual world is “spilling into” the physical world, and intersecting and interacting with corporeal experiences. To “make” experiences and events tangible, to make them “actually happen”, people often feel that the corporeal happenings need to be published in social media.

Consequently, social media are often present as “co-observers” of what we are experiencing in the material world. As we need to be able to illustrate and portray our experiences online, we need to constantly record (via photo, video, voice or text) what is happening. Whereas having one’s mobile phone turned on during the dinner conversation used to be considered poor etiquette, nowadays the visible display of one’s smart phone is almost to be expected. Such electronic mediation of corporeal experiences has a two-fold impact: (1) the physical experience is shared with one’s social network in practically real-time, and (2) the physical experience if often enhanced by supporting comments and “likes” that often occur near-simultaneously — from remote and vicarious experience sharers.

**FLATTENING OF EXPERIENCE**

Technological advancements have made it possible to accomplish many of the things that previously required changing of locations, or specialized accessories and equipment, without ever leaving our own homes, or even our desks. With the right hardware and software it is possible to enjoy music, watch movies, read books, and run errands, etc. at any physical location where one has Internet access using a screen-based device. Thanks to social media we can now add one more item to that list: socializing and communicating with friends.

In a sense, then, experiences are becoming more confined in terms of physical environments, settings, accoutrements, and prosthetic elements: they are “flattening”, literally in terms of a flat screen; and metaphorically in terms of variety. While flattening has been going on for some time with the steady advance in technologies, social media have reinforced it. Sometimes portrayed in cartoons or amusing videos, but also often observed in everyday life, it is not unusual to see a group of young people in a shared physical space – but with each individual partly focused on a screen-based device. The flattened experiences are thus also increasingly becoming mediated experiences, with tendencies to shun corporeal face-to-face encounters and interactions.

**CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS**

Social media, especially those forms that connect us to others on a personal rather than merely on a professional and informational level, can have significant impacts on the nature and variety of consumer experiences. Facebook in particular has communalized experiences in ways that were not possible before, while at the same time turning even our ordinary and seemingly unremarkable doings and
thoughts into news. Moreover, we can observe an interesting interspersing of the physical and virtual worlds, which is facilitated by the constantly smaller and more portable technical devices profoundly altering our sense of location – we can now, in fact, be at two places all at once.

While marketing literature has recognized social media and other online environments as important contexts for co-creation, brand image building, and word-of-mouth communications (Fogel 2010; Kotzinets et al. 2010; Vanden Bergh et al. 2011), thus far there exists relatively little empirical research that addresses the nature of consumer experience in social media contexts. In this paper, we identified four significant ways in which social media are transforming and altering the nature of experience. These transformations discussed are not exhaustive at present, and certainly not in the constantly evolving future, but we hope to signal the changes that are occurring, and thereby provide a motivation for further empirical and theoretical explorations of the emergent impacts of social media on the lives of consumers.

REFERENCES


