Existence and Experience in Social Media Spaces

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Existence and Experience in Social Media Spaces

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Abstract

This paper provides a social science and humanities-based theoretical overview of the transformative effects of social media. The major extant theories of experience and social interactions, most of which predate the emergence of the electronic social media, are reviewed and impacts of the wide scale, real time, pervasive use of the social media are explored to demonstrate how the social media are changing our individual and collective consciousness. We demonstrate that the social media are not just a medium of communication, but also an engine of social change due to the ease with which users can create networks and enact identity performances. This review is done with a lens focused on experiential consumption.

Keywords: Social Media, Electronic Networks, Social Networks, Facebook, Twitter, Experience, Experiential Consumption

Introduction

A network of humans has a special kind of life of its own…. The science of social networks can explain a lot about the human experience.

- Christakis and Fowler (2009)

When e-mail first came into being in 1971, it marked the dawn of computer networked communication (Howard and Jones, 2004). Forty years later, online spaces that allow rapid – often instant, via mobile technology – communication to a user’s network using text, often supplemented by visual material, started proliferating rapidly (Economist 2010). Usually referred to as “social media”, such networks are transforming
the nature of experience – at the primary level for the person experiencing, and at vicarious levels for those with whom the primary experience is shared. They are also changing social networks themselves. This is of interest because networks have dramatic effects on their members – as consumers, creators, influencers, exchangers and more.

Social media sites are no longer a fringe activity or media for primarily the under-30 demographic. In March 2010, for the first time, more users visited Facebook than Google, marking a 185% increase for the site as compared to a 9% increase for Google.¹

The proliferation of social media and ensuing experiential transformations are changing markets – and marketing – for all products and services where sharing of experiences is important. For the United States and other developed markets that are arguably in the “Experiential Economy Era” (Pine II and Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999; Ye-Chuen and Diwan, 2008) this includes the majority of businesses. Most businesses are incorporating experiences with multiple consumer touchpoints. Often with mobile devices in hand, consumers are sharing with their networks what they experience. Once an experience has been, for example, facebooked or twittered, it is no longer the same experience but rather something collective in the Goffman (1956) sense of the term, created and colored by the network.

There is mounting anecdotal evidence of how things are changing in terms of lived and shared experiences, and indeed – more fundamentally – in terms of existence, as social media claim increasing slices of time and attention of increasing numbers of people (Economist 2010).
In addition to the changes at the practical level of lived experiences, the proliferations of social media are creating strong imperatives for fresh theoretical rethinking and redirection.

This paper provides a social science and humanities-based theoretical overview of the transformation of experiential consumption, laying the groundwork for understanding the reshaping of markets and marketing by social media. The paper begins with a review of the major extant theories of experience and social interactions, most of which predate the emergence of the electronic social media, and reflects on the value of such theories for social media. It then looks at those major aspects of the social media that motivate theoretical reevaluation and renewal of phenomena that entail interactive and shared experiences. Informed by analytical insights into electronic social media, the last major section of the paper suggests several directions for revisiting and theorizing of experience in interactive settings – with a special view of impacts on marketing and consumption.

The theoretical palette used in this paper is eclectic – not by design but by necessity. In terms of technology, economics, and culture, social media are emergent entities – with changing features and functions and corresponding changes in uses and behaviors. It is not possible to capture all aspects of social media phenomena in one coherent theoretical frame. We have chosen instead to draw from a number of theoretical sources that help understand the main aspects of experiential consumption in social media spaces.

While the paper is primarily theoretical in orientation, selective evidence from ongoing qualitative investigations is brought in at some places to illustrate the points being discussed.
Review of Theories of Experience and Social Interactions

When experience is shared, it is no longer a purely psychological phenomenon – it moves into theoretical realms that are social-psychological, sociological, and cultural. There is much debate as to whether the seismic shift from face-to-face social interactions to social media interactions erodes or enhances social exchanges. In actuality, it does both and has a mixed bag of positive and negative effects. These effects are on such a grand scale that they necessitate updating social theories. Although it is still too early to predict the full consequences of the use of the technology, this paper begins a process of theoretical renewal.

Dramaturgical Self, Theatricality of Experience

In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Goffman (1956) asserted that society is not homogenous and because of that, we act differently depending on our environment or audience. Working in the tradition of the symbolic interactionists, Goffman showed that life is a form of theater and that individuals must act their parts so as to maintain order in the social world. Goffman maintains that the self is a “peg” upon which “something of a collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time” (Salerno 2004, p. 183). Maintaining the image of self is dependent on the social establishment and demands around the peg. Goffman (1956) believed society works on the premise that if one behaves in a proper fashion, such social compliance bestows some rights on the person to be socially accepted and to be treated well.

In his later work Asylum Goffman (1961) focused attention on the dramaturgical self-presentations of people who carry various types of social stigmas. Because the stigma makes them socially unacceptable, the reaction of others affects the natural identity adversely – and creates impulses for suppressing it. People with stigma,
therefore, make compensatory efforts to manage front stage impressions while also working to exercise control of their environments to maintain their own unique identities. Stigma is defined broadly – it can range from a physical deformity to a personality or character flaw. It can also be situational such as not having an MBA when searching for a managerial job (Salerno 2004).

In online settings of globally oriented users, geographic barriers crumble and heterogeneity increases. In the Facebook status reports that many scroll through daily, the postings (besides being in English) are sometimes in Italian or French or even in Chinese characters. Electronic social media, thus, offer opportunities to enact aspects of self (such as affinity, ethnicity, language familiarity, sexuality, elements of cultural capital) that are very meaningful to certain in-groups of the person posting, but that represent exotica or alien forms to the larger group. Facebook and similar social media settings are thus like postmodern fairs, where parallel performances are going on – some immersive and highly significant, others somewhat exotic and only partially decipherable, and a third set that is totally alien and undecipherable. The relevance depends on the audience. Social media represent a freer social reality than the one that Goffman theorized about in the second half of the twentieth century. The following are some illustrative excerpts from a new social media form called Foursquare that is attempting to go beyond Facebook and not only link people in the cyber world but also link people in face-to-face situations. Some experts are also excerpts from Facebook:

[Illustrative Foursquare posts from authors’ extended network, following major snowfalls that paralyzed New York City, February 2010]

“Stay in and watch the weather from indoors as if you're in a snowglobe. Stay in, snuggle up and catch up on some blogging, netflix or hulu”

“Look out for people with overly-huge umbrellas...they're deadly”
“grab a trashcan lid, piece of cardboard, cafeteria tray and get to sledding!”

“Try adventuresome commuting... Dust off your dogsled and take that to work!”

[Illustrative Facebook posts from author’s extended network about “Holmes on Homes”, a series on HGTV, accessed March 18, 2010]

“Does anyone hate Holmes on Homes as much as I do?”

“Tom and I love Holmes.”

As these quotes illustrate, social media conversations depend on familiarity with the context. In location-specific Foursquare, there was totally shared familiarity with the massive snowfall and there were many comments (we presented just a sampling), while in globally-dispersed Facebook, comments came from only those well familiar with the TV show.

In conventional social settings, stigma becomes readily known – either directly in a face-to-face encounter or indirectly through hearsay. Electronic media, especially text based, can either remove stigma altogether or offer means to attenuate it because stigma is placed upon individuals by social circles. Conversely, social media can be used to reinforce social stigma. The dizzying array of social affiliations that one can join online enable the creative social entrepreneur to find an audience that will accept his or her performance. In the online context, Goffman’s theories of giving the audience what they want may need to be updated to something like finding the audience that will grant the individual acceptance.
Figure 1: Photographic Self-Representation by a Facebook User

(Reproduced with permission)

One Facebook user posted the two photos shown in Figure 1 among his 65 profile photos. A retired and openly gay airline employee in his late 60s, he has chosen an alternative lifestyle that entails continuous sharing of experiences. Giving up his primary residence, putting all of his belongings in storage, he constantly travels the world and posts updates via social media. Facebook is his primary means of communication with his network. His performance – his “presentation of self in everyday (virtual) life” in Goffman terms – is well received as demonstrated by the following comments on his photos:

[Illustrative Facebook posts from authors’ network, March 12, 2010]

“Very cool.”

“Great pic, You must be a happy and funny person 😊”

“Oh Happy Cees. Lookin good sport.”

In the visual parts of their profiles, people present themselves in ways that attempt to be alluring or funky or aesthetically distinctive. Some of the people, for example, use a Warhol-like rendering of their snapshots, to signal a very artsy style. The point here is not that people are putting their front stage performance online and searching for or inviting an appropriate audience but that electronic social media offer a playing field that is considerably “more level” than face-to-face settings. Because of the “leveler playing field” and online anonymity, “electronic dramaturgy” is often very different from the dramaturgy of face-to-face experience. Protected by the control and partial insulation afforded by cyber environments, reversals of roles and styles could occur. People who are
self-effacing “wallflowers” in face-to-face settings could blossom into colorful personalities online, and individuals who are flamboyant in face-to-face settings could turn into silent lurkers.³

[From an interview with a user]

“I don’t really actively post on it a lot. I’ll post if I take photos and come back from a trip or something. I don’t do regular status updates or anything like that, as other people do. So I use it more as a way of listening to what’s going on, and keeping up to date on people, but I don’t use it to put a lot of information out.”

Assimilation and Idiosyncrasy in Everyday Life

In The Practice of Everyday Life, Michel de Certeau (1984) examines how people individualize aspects of mass culture – they appropriate elements from seemingly conformist cultural panoply to build their own identities and maintain the illusion of individuality. In de Certeau’s work, the related theories from Kant, Wittgenstein, Bourdieu, Foucault and Detienne are reexamined in light of de Certeau’s proposed theoretical model which is primarily about negotiation of traditions, language, symbols, art and articles of exchange in everyday situations. Michel de Certeau finds everyday life to be a constant subconscious struggle against the pressures of assimilation that are exerted by external or institutional forces. The goal of the work is to peer behind the curtain of conformity to see what lies backstage.

To de Certeau, institutional actions and resources constitute “strategy” – a term he employs to group the range of symbolic, spatial, and other means that create and cement the self-perpetuating “authority” of the makers and maintainers of the dominant order. The response by individuals is termed “tactical” and its main goal is to fulfill personal or small-group needs beneath an appearance of conformity. Tactics are not overtly
subversive or confrontational, but ways for individuals to negotiate their way through life with styles and personalized “habitable” spaces that the weight of institutional conformity cannot crush. One must use tactics to assert individuality.

Online social media open up countless new virtual spaces for tactical actions of individuals and small groups. In the sense of “tactics” that de Certeau employs, electronic social media reduce the costs and efforts for tactical actions by individuals and small groups. Most owners and operators of social media platforms, however, are wary of extreme electronic representations, and have links such as “Report”, “Report Abuse”, or “Block This Person” – as ways to check extreme forms of electronic behaviors. The costs of policing such behaviors, however, are very high. For the most part, operators and managers of electronic media hope that a “modicum of conformity” and decorum will be maintained through the shared good sense of millions of users who – it is hoped – will shun and block out extreme non-conformists. In this sense, the new electronic institutional forms being created by the electronic social media are widening the “zone of conformity”, allowing for expressions of viewpoints more diverse than in physical institutional settings.

On Facebook, to illustrate from the biggest contemporary social media site, it takes just a few minutes of work to create a “group”, a cluster of interests that can be kept open to all or be opened selectively to some. Through “Wall Posts”, photos, videos, and external hyperlinks that are dedicated to the group (rather than a person), the virtual group creates a new place/space for collective habitation or sojourning. Does this create a new space of “democratized strategy”, a space controlled by individuals and beyond the reach of the resource-rich authority of traditional institutional forces? It is too soon to
say, since the social media are new and still unfolding in their impacts. The parameters of such group spaces – what forms are allowed – are controlled by the managers of social media, but the specific content is not. How these contesting forces will play out remains to be seen.

One institutional authority that the owners and managers of major commercial social media will not give up is that of advertising in all electronic spaces created by users. Since the use of most electronic social media is free, the source of revenue and profits for social media companies is advertising. In this sense, the contemporary electronic social media are comparable to radio or early television (in the United States) where programming was free so long as the viewers subjected themselves to advertising messages. As programming costs rose and tastes became segmented and fragmented, broadcast television and radio moved beyond free on-air delivery and to subscription-based delivery methods such as cable, satellite, and to pay-per-use methods that could extract revenues directly from listeners and viewers (while also maintaining most of the revenues from commercial advertisers).

It will be interesting to observe how the new social media evolve in this respect. So far, the “programming” in the new media is mostly by the users, but the injections of (and proportion of) externally created programming (such as games, trivia quizzes, etc.) are rising slowly but steadily. The innovative feature of such externally-launched programming on the new media is of course the employment of users as workers (Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody 2008). Postings such as “Hey, I took the Jungle Beast quiz … and I am, not surprisingly, a Panther…” allow presentational boasts and at the same time promote and expand the gaming universe.
The owners and managers of the new social media are no doubt working furiously to analyze the value-creation and value-extraction potential (in the form of more effective advertising, for the moment) of the thousands of programming gimmicks they are trying out. If the expected revenues and profits do not follow, it would not be surprising to see the new media doing a TV/radio-style turn, with paid channels and pay-per-use programming. In this sense, there could be conditions in the social media of the future wherein the authority and strategy of the institutional owners would be reasserted, ending to some extent the free, exuberant users-control-all democratized phase. Indeed, Richard Stallman of the Free Software Foundation stated that Facebook and similar “cloud platforms” that store vast amounts of user data on their servers represent “a trap aimed at forcing more people to buy into locked, proprietary systems that would cost them more and more over time” (Johnson 2008).

**Experience as Simulation**

Baudrillard (1994, 1996) constructed theories in the traditions of other contemporaneous French thinkers such as Deleuze, Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida and Lacan who all shared an interest in semiotics. An overarching belief informing Baudrillard’s theories is that an object’s meaning is only understandable through its relation to the meanings of other objects. In Baudrillard’s view, human society is based on self-referentiality and he portrayed society as always searching for a sense of meaning or “total” understanding of the world, which remains elusive. For Baudrillard, a complete understanding of the minutiae of everyday life is impossible. As a result, he theorized that people become drawn to a “simulated” version of reality, or hyperreality. He argued that the excess of signs in the late 20th century global society caused an effacement of reality.
This is because the “globalized world” operates at a level of the exchange of signs and commodities.

Electronic social media create interesting twists of reality and hyperreality. At one level, the virtual world of electronic social media – almost by definition – is not real; or perhaps it is the new postmodern reality – characterized by a collapse of time and space and a pervasive ephemerality. Baudrillardian hyperreality may be taking root in social media spaces – where the copy has more power than the original and people are desirous of the imaginary, simulated world over the real world. But is it hyperreal and simulated? In many ways, electronic social media are bringing back the mundane aspects of everyday life, similar to the type of existence and experience in premodern settings where one had considerable direct awareness of the experiences of others in the neighborhood, the village, or the city block. In the premodern settings, major individual experiences – births, weddings, deaths, etc. – became shared communal experiences by a sort of proximity default. The intense mediated simulations of high modernity were in fact ways to partially “reenchant” the world disenchanted by modernist, fragmented individualization of life. The new social media suddenly bring back the intrusive, shared existence and mundane day-to-day experience of the premodern era, albeit via electronic opt-in networks that have global reach. The premodern gossiping village neighbors become the postmodern e-gossiping electronic friends on Facebook:

[Illustrative Facebook posts from authors’ network, February 26, 2010]

“Just came back from a little walk on South Beach, Miami… Going to have Breakfast then spend a whole day in Miami. I like it…”

“Oh my God I think I have to listen to Mariachi till morning again because of my neighbors!!! I hate it!!!”
“Looks like the winter is winding down, and the spring time is near. Wait..did we even have a winter?”

“Not enough snow in CT!!!

The quotidian reenchantment of the new social media, thus, is very different from the spectacular attempts of reenchantment via simulated, Disneyfied, anonymous spaces; or the mega televisual media spectacles that create major experiences such as watching the Superbowl, the Olympics, or the World Cup. New social media reenchant the mundane aspects of life through a sort of bonhomie generated through shared minutiae of daily existence. In the spaces of the new social media, there is constant specacularization of the quotidian – in miniaturized forms.

**Non-experience in Non-places in ‘Supermodernity’ and Oblivion**

Augé (1989), French cultural theorist and ethnologist, is known for his theory of ‘supermodernity’. In his conception of supermodernity, there is both an intensification of certain elements of modernity – including excess – and homogenization. A characteristic of supermodernity is the creation of an endless series of ‘non-places’. Non-places have no discernable histories or identities: they are completely interchangeable and often temporary. The internet, and by logical extension, social media sites are just such non-places. Further, Augé’s theories expand existing conceptions of local to incorporate complications of the global whole. In *Domaines et Chateaux* (Homes and Places) Augé (1989) focused on four key aspects of communication technologies: (1) the paradoxical increase in the intensity of solitude brought about by the expansion of communication technologies; (2) the strange recognition that the other is also “I”; (3) the non-place, the
ambivalent space that has none of the familiar attributes of place (see also Meyrowitz 1986 in this regard); and, (4) the loss or oblivion of memory. Augé further examines the cavernous gap between language and experience and the ambition of his work is often to lessen it.

In *Oblivion*, Augé examines the use of time and its connection between memory, forgetting and meaning. He asserts that memories are not factual objects waiting to be recalled but rather more akin to a movie screen on which bits of memory are projected to conceal and reveal and create a palatable, identity-laden fiction.

![Easter Memories 2010 from a Facebook User](image)

**Figure 2: Easter Memories 2010 from a Facebook User**

Social media provide new platforms – combining text and visuals – to manufacture and frame memories. These new media represent shared screens for projecting identity-laden fictions (see Figure 2 for some of the mentioned pictures):

*Illustrative Facebook posts from authors’ network, April 5, 2010*

“Off to have breakfast with the Easter Bunny!”

“Hanging with the bunny after brunch.”

“Wonderful pictures. I love all of the big smiles. Love the great card too, great pic!”

*From an interview with another user*

*Interviewer: Do you have any other friends that are sharing messages during experiences?*
User: Yes, I have quite a few people I hear from. I have a friend of mine that, as far as traveling concerns, went on a really long motorcycle drive, and he’s really proficient with using his Facebook through his phone. So you’d be getting updates, like, literally, right off of his Harley Davidson. You know, going through Mount Rushmore and going through the American West via motorcycle.

Interviewer: Oh, that’s neat. Now, do you usually respond to this and other friends?

User: Yeah, I usually do. For the most part.

Interviewer: And what kinds of things do you [post]?

User: Encouraging words, like ‘sounds great,’ ‘looks great.’

Interviewer: So, it all seems like it’s pretty positive.

User: Oh yeah, it’s all positive. I don’t see a lot of negativity using, and I don’t Tweet, so that’s one thing. But I don’t really gather a lot of negativity in Facebook. I don’t see people sharing unpleasantries.

Interviewer: That’s interesting.

User: …. Only recently, I saw a friend of mine react to something on Facebook negatively, and the person defriended them immediately. It was an odd situation. But otherwise no, it seems to be all positive sharing of information.

For most adults, social media, thus, create virtual spaces that are pleasant, supportive, and amicable – electronic extensions of the culture of affirmation that originated from America and is propagating globally. The connectivity in real time using mobile devises also calls into question our notions of solitude. When we are connected but alone, are we alone?

Electronic social media are still too new and emergent to lend themselves to the types of analytical methods that Augé employs, but his approaches do provide interesting questions to explore. Are social media such as Facebook the ultimate non-places, or are
they the new habitus and the new (virtual) habitation – practices and places that are intimately familiar, personal, and culturally rooted in the everyday lives of people? Is one of the main purposes of the social media to facilitate the creation of memory in Augé’s sense of the term? Are users carefully pulling out bits and pieces of experiences to project on the screen and is the audience serving the role of strengthening this fabrication by bearing witness and providing affirmation? Early evidence seems to indicate that there is a trend among adult users to eschew any negative aspects of the story (as opposed to teenagers and younger users). Therefore, it does seem that bits of experiences are chosen selectively by the user – and are woven into shared social tapestries that are reinforced by the user’s network providing affirmations. If any seriously negative information is to be shared using social media, the protocol seems to be to create an action oriented virtual group to oppose something undesirable, such as animal rights groups that oppose abuse of animals. In terms of instances of negative and unfriendly commentary on social media, there are obvious exceptions – including cyber bullying – that seem to occur with young users, and are addressed later.

**Social Media as Spaces of Collective Consumption**

The exploration of “The Mobile Communication Society” by Manuel Castells and associates is particularly relevant to an examination of how social media are being used and how experiences are being transformed by social media. Through several case studies, they demonstrate that people using internet enabled cell phones are able to set up “powerful, broad, personalized, instant networks of communication” (Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qiu and Sey, 2007, p. 221). These networks may be very powerful
indeed as in the case of the Philippines where mobile technologies were used to oust a sitting president before his term ended.

Reinforcing Castells’ insights are some observations about the way that mobile devices are intersecting with social media to build networks. As one user in our ongoing studies notes:

[Phone Interview Transcript]

Social Media Consultant: It is real-time, relevant conversation and observations. You know, kind of during an experience. Real time. What does that do? That also introduces me directly to a number of people I never would have known. All of a sudden, you look around the room and you go ‘oh, there’s that guy.’ You see the picture. You see the picture on Twitter. ‘Oh, that’s him.’ Or, you know, I’ve had people who then will direct message me. That’s when it’s not available to everyone, it’s like an email. But it’s direct message that they’re following you… where they will say ‘wow, you said some interesting things. Do you want to get together at the conference for a drink and discuss it further?’ So it also then enables like-minded business people to have a business relationship at the point of there…

Networks can also be infiltrated by “outsiders” as in the case of the United States where protesters and police used wireless technology to coordinate and monitor activities (Castells et.al 2007). This demonstrates an important aspect of mobile communication with social media. The virtual space created is not easily limitable to an intended audience only.

Increasingly, the ‘infiltrators’ are often business people trying gain relevant insights about their consumers. We are on the cusp of this emergent trend:

[Phone Interview Transcript]

Interviewer: Now, do you think this is going to change companies’ relationships with their clients?

Social Media Consultant: I mean, everybody thinks of Twitter as ways that people use it as promoting or different things, but it’s not. The real power of
Twitter is in the conversations. Is in the relationships. Is in the relevancy and timeliness of a conversation between corporations and their customers. It also changes it because instead of having the old-fashioned focus group in the old days, you can now get information straightaway.

Examples of other electronic interlopers in social media spaces include lawyers, who have found that the electronic traces left behind in the social media spaces are a treasure trove of evidence for legal cases such as those involving divorce (Luscombe 2009):

Lawyers, however, love these [social media] sites, which can be evidentiary gold mines. Did your husband’s new girlfriend Twitter about getting a piece of jewelry? The court might regard that as marital assets being disbursed to a third party. Did your wife tell the court she’s incapable of getting a job? Then your lawyer should ask why she’s pursuing job interviews through LinkedIn. “It’s now just routine for us to go over with clients whether they have an active presence on the Web and if they Twitter or have a MySpace page,” says Joseph Cordell of Cordell & Cordell, a domestic-relations law firm with offices in 10 states.

A prevalent belief is that older individuals are more focused on their relationships with close friends and that they have smaller and physically proximate social networks – and therefore such older people are less apt to use social media (Castells et.al 2007). Although this may be the case for certain segments of older users, the over-50 segment’s use of social media is growing rapidly. These segments are reconnecting with weak tie relationships – former co-workers, classmates and neighbors – and often making new weak-tie as well as strong-tie connections in the process of rekindling old ties. Here are some samples:

[Message on LinkedIn network of one of the authors, when the messaging parties reconnected after 35 years. Names altered for privacy, spellings not corrected]

Ramesh,

Wow! From a disenchanted grad student to [you marrying] Malini Deb, [getting] a PhD, a sabbatical indulged in poetry...and now a prof? A lot to catch up on and happy that life has treated you well.
Strangely enough, my wife Sumati also went to Wharton...and now in marketing in the pharma business. We have two kids; Amit trades money for a botique firm im in Chicago and my daughter Priya is a consultant for Bain....at the moment she’s been posted in Sydney, Aus…

Still can’t believe that I’ve been in close touch with KP, Vikram, Sammy, Hari J (now at Wharton) and many of your other classmates ....and somehow lost track of you!

Best,

Venky

[Email message received by one of the authors, after a lapse of 41 years. Names altered]

Hello Brother Ramesh!

I am writing this as a result of discussion I had with my daughter Neeta this evening....she prompted me to Google her name and see the results.

The next person I could think of was

......YOU...............

I am at present with her in Los Angeles, and we are spending time with our two-month old grandson.

Regards

Sunil

It seems that with regard to social media, age is far less relevant than the psychographic makeup of the users. A user in his late 60s describes his experience as follows:

[Interview with a Facebook user. Names masked for privacy]

Trent and I have a friend in common, Sally. Sally has a good friend in South Africa, who she put me in touch with on Facebook. It’s a guy about my age. We have common interests. I’m going to go to South Africa at some point in the next few months to visit because we have a lot in common. Our backgrounds, we’re
both Roman Catholic. We both went to Catholic schools. We have similar things to laugh about.

In “The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture” trilogy, Castells (1996, 1997, 1998) presents a thorough examination of how people create meanings in their lives though collective action. Castells (1996) states: “Our societies are increasingly structured around the bipolar opposition of the NET and the Self” (p. 3). The network is replacing traditional hierarchies and the self represents the personal practices of an individual trying to carve out an identity and make meaning in a culturally changing landscape.

This meaning making is taking place quite frequently through the solicitation of agreement. People seem to be using facebook to check in with others to say: “This is what I see and feel… do you see and feel the same”?

[Illustrative Facebook posts from authors’ network, March 22, 2010; immediately after the historic vote in U.S. Congress on Health Care]

“Health Care Reform Bill Passes,”

[Auto-inserted Facebook comment:] Two people like this

“HoooRaay!! It’s REALLY happening!”

“I hope it works, I’m afraid that insurance companies are going to raise rates and force drug co.’s to make prescriptions unavailable.”

“You’re kidding, right Lee? Insurance companies are ALREADY raising rates unaffordably and Drug Companies are ALREADY making prescriptions unaffordable. We ALL have to have insurance to bring down the rates… no more lifetime caps on health care coverage and no more losing your insurance or not being able to get insurance because of pre-existing conditions! This is Progress!”
In sum, social media add new facets to Castells’ concepts: not only are mobile technologies being used to mobilize networks, mobile technologies are also building networks via the social media which can be infiltrated by unintended users. Further, prior to the exponential growth of social media, older individuals had small social circles. These were comprised of close, strong-tie associations – with proximate face-to-face relationships and some electronic contacts. Social media have altered such relationships dramatically, making age less relevant than the psychographic profiles of the users.

**Sensemaking in Social Media Spaces**

According to Batchelor (1997), life – in and of itself – is neither meaningful nor meaningless. He posits that meaning and its opposite are infused in life by language and imagination. Life’s ambiguities are often resolved by consulting with another person, or several other people, to build consensual definitions (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Persistent mutual ambiguity reduction can strengthen social systems – this is the key to the concept of sensemaking (Weick, 2001). In sensemaking, people build cosmologies or coherent worldviews jointly. A detailed exposition of Weick’s views of sensemaking is outside the scope of this paper but a few key points must be noted. The focus of Weick’s work on sensemaking is generally in the context of organizations. Sensemaking is an ongoing conversation intended to develop sets of ideas with explanatory possibilities driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. The conversation is retrospective. Issues of both identity and reputation are involved in sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Ambiguity reduction, according to his theory, results in increased discussion and interdependence with loose-tie networks. Persistent ambiguity reduction can tighten loose systems (Weick, 2001). A person may perceive that whereas he or she does not know what is going on,
everyone else does. This situation may lead to an inversion of the aforementioned relationship between discussion and ambiguity. There is greater individual confusion if one thinks others understand, and this could decrease the amount of discussion (Weick, 2001).

Weick’s theories were developed prior to the epidemic and viral spread of social media. Social media are being used as sensemaking tools but the wider research community is just beginning to scratch the surface of how this is happening, the extent to which it is happening, and the impacts of the trend. Research indicates that adults are dipping into multiple social networks – giving them ready access to various networks within and outside their organizations. Fifty two percent of social media users report having more than one profile. This indicates that there is overlap between the 73% of profile owners who are on Facebook, the 48% who are on MySpace and the 14% who are on LinkedIn (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith and Zickuhr, 2010). Questions about how the expanded networks – the near-instantaneity and inhibition-transcending qualities of social media – are transforming the processes of sensemaking need investigation. In social media sites maintained by organizations, the rapidity of sensemaking forays becomes evident. Further evidence is the proliferation of conferences for professionals such as the forum on “Social Media’s Role in Decision Making by Business Professionals” (Bulmer and DiMauro 2010).

The following interchanges occurred at a university’s Facebook site within a span of 24 hours:

[Postings on the Facebook page of a university, name masked, in March 2010]

University: Do you have ideas about how the university can reduce its carbon footprint and become a more environmentally sustainable institution? Then come
share those views at a forum about university's draft Climate Action Plan, March 17 from 3:30 to 5... Read the plan at the link below, then share your best ideas to improve it.

Person A: University Climate Action Plan? This is a joke right?

Person B: The university can turn off the lights in the buildings overnight. They are kept on 24/7 and I’ve seen the monthly electricity bills

Person C: Climate controls that actually WORK in the buildings? Just a thought...

This illustrative sensemaking conversation exhibits emergence of participative decision processes, expression of skepticism, and direct proffering of advice – all occurring in rapid succession. Social media facilitate such interchanges, although their organizational impact is probably small at present in settings such as the university mentioned above.

One of the cases that Weick analyzes is the Mann Gulch Fire during which 13 people died, including highly trained firefighters called “smokejumpers”. Weick argued that in the moment of crisis, the sensemaking system of the professional firefighters broke down, resulting in tragedy. Since that tragic fire incident, no firefighting deaths have been reported in the Mann Gulch area because changes were made in the communication system. Forest Service firefighters are now equipped with back up radios and better training.

To make an analogy to the Mann Gulch situation, social media – when used well and with quality information – may be likened to the back-up radio and training; they change the system positively if the information is of good quality.

There is also evidence that people are using social media within the organizations for sensemaking, in particular as pertains to sensemaking about people (DiMicco and
Millen, 2008). It must be noted that while social media can ameliorate communication and sensemaking, they can also be destructive and exacerbate already negative situations as in the case of a 15-year old girl who committed suicide after being bullied in school and cyber bullied on Facebook (LaBella 2010). The harassment even continued after her death when her tormenters posted cruel comments on the girl’s Facebook memorial page (Kennedy 2010). In this case, the constructed cosmology of the loose informal organization that spanned the school and after-school was destructive and victimized a young girl.

In the contemporary context, an analysis of an organization’s sensemaking is incomplete if it does not include consideration of the networks of individuals outside the organization who are connected to people inside the organization by the growing webs of social media. Whereas in the period prior to social media, people may have had smaller networks, they now can easily reach outside of their organizations to reduce ambiguity. Some examples:

[Illustrative Facebook posts from authors’ network, March 25, 2010, illustrating a travel consultant reaching outside the organization network to her Facebook and Twitter networks]

Travel Consultant: Thousands of tweets today at the Eye for Travel Social Media Strategies conference that I chaired today and yesterday in San Francisco - making it the #3 trending topic on Twitter for 2 consecutive days! Wow! Follow the fun at #smtravel on Twitter. My typing fingers are numb :)

Person A: (Travel Consultant), I have been retweeting like mad. Feel like I am there.

Person B: After being at the conference and binging on Twitter I have decided to check myself into the Twitterholics Anoymous program to get help. It lasts 140 hours or 140 days—I can’t remember. I’ll send out a tweet to find out.

[The number 140 of course is used as a humorous reference to the 140-character limit on Twitter messages]
Not only are individuals seeking information from outside their organization and bringing it back to their organization, they are also taking information from the organization and spreading it throughout their networks. Russo, Watkins, Kelly and Chan (2006) cite the following interchange they observed in an electronic community:

Magnaklor: ‘…can anyone shed any light so to speak on Alcyone the central star our solar system is supposedly tracking on a spiral up and down cycle that lasts 24,000 years. There is a growing school of thought on the www that by 2012 we will be fully immersed in its photon band for a period of 2000 years’ (Jul 27th, 2006 at 11:14 pm).

In response to this concern about celestial happenings, a member of the community responded by providing linkage to a science museum website that explained such processes occurring in the solar system. Another user reported that she was extending the social network by linking others to the museum website:

Annette: ‘Thanks for the info... I’ve linked all my family and friend to this page and hopefully they’ll circulate it around the world’ (Annette Aug 4th, 2006 at 11:59 pm).’

Social media are often used by individuals and groups who find it very difficult to make sense of things that are complex, and sometimes pathological; but the expertise about such things does not exist within easily reachable proximate networks. Examples include people who are in the midst of crises such as large scale disasters or individual hardships such as serious illnesses. Social media allow them to share information and give and receive support, widening the sensemaking network (Palen, Vieweg, Liu, Huges, 2007).

[Excerpt from Interview]
**Interviewer:** You know what I was kind of intrigued to talk with you about was how you see people using it for a cause or to support one another during a bad experience, like an illness?

User: Oh, yeah, definitely. I have a friend who just went through for the last year, stage four cancer, and just came out good right now, knock on wood. And she would post. That’s how she would communicate with all of us. She had a caring bridge page too. It’s that page, where it’s like a journal you write when you have a terminal illness. It’s kind of like a blog, it’s not like Carrie’s blog, but it’s similar to that though. It also organizes like meals. It’s good if you don’t know what it is, because that means you haven’t had to deal with people who have it. A lot of people who do updates on that.

*Interviewer:* It is almost like a virtual way to be there, and it’s less obtrusive in a sense.

User: Exactly, exactly. I think that can be a little bit more manageable, like you said, less obtrusive, you don’t have to really give up your privacy kind of thing. You know, you can give people the updates, and then also too, it saves all the people who are involved too, because they don’t have to call around to everybody after every therapy or scan appointment. Like, you know, she would post ‘I’m going in for the scan,’ and if we didn’t hear for a couple of days, we’d know it wasn’t good.

In sum, “no organization can be understood apart from its wider social and cultural context” (Scott 1995, p. 151) and since sensemaking is derived as much from the subtle, the small, the relational, the oral, and the narrative as it is from the large, general sustained and procedural (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005), the impacts of social media on sensemaking warrant consideration. Social media are undeniably part of the cultural landscape, including the terrain of organizational and interorganizational sensemaking.

**Integrative View of Existing Theories**

With the exception of the works of Castells and associates, the theories discussed so far were not developed to address electronic environments and social media. Yet, theories that deal with self-presentation, space and place, simulacra, and sensemaking are
acquiring renewed relevance with the rise of social media. This is because social media are creating virtual worlds that have many characteristics of the physical world, and existence and experience – life as lived – are happening partially (and in incrementally higher proportion, for some people) in social media contexts. Social media are becoming to some extent a social mirror – reflecting aspects of corporeal life, and reflecting back in various ways on the physical existence.

Social media are changing our networks in terms of with whom, when, and why we connect. This dramatically changes our experiences, thus mandating serious consideration of how this impacts our lived experience. Do social media supplement, replace and or change face-to-face sociability and personal communications? How are experiences transformed by social media? How are marketers using the social media and what do they need to know about how consumers are using social media? All of these are important questions to consider. It is still too early to predict the full consequences of the social media but it is clear that for many, electronically mediated social networks are widening and experiences are transforming as a result.

**Emerging Theoretical Strands**

Social networks, especially the facile electronic ones, take on a life of their own; spawning properties and functions that are not controlled by individual members – who may not even be aware of the larger impacts of the networks they participate in, on society. Further, individuals may not be fully aware of the effects of electronic social networks on their identities and experiences and vice versa. There is a large body of evidence that interconnected people exhibit complicated shared behavior without explicit coordination or awareness (Christakis and Fowler, 2009).
Social media usage patterns vary widely – some users are connected nearly every waking moment while others connect only occasionally. Some users engage in elaborate performances online while others are primarily lurkers and spectators. For those that choose networks that are accepting of their performances, the social media are liberating and affirming. For others – primarily tweens and teens whose social media networks are identical to their face-to-face networks – the social media strengthen existing identity shackles and can reinforce stigma; these new media may become entrapping. Within this continuum, therefore, the impacts of social media vary greatly. Regardless of where one falls on the continuum of social media use and connectedness, by virtue of the fact that networks are being transformed via facile electronic connectivity, individuals within those networks are also being transformed – as are their experiences.

Given the emergent and malleable nature of the phenomena examined here, it would be foolhardy to suggest that we are at a stage of offering a comprehensive theoretical frame for grasping existence and experience in social media spaces. Nonetheless, our review does point towards theoretical strands that could eventually be woven at some stage into coherent conceptual fabrics. We conclude the paper by outlining these strands.

**Freer Presentational Reality**

For users who choose their networks, the social media provide a more free reality than that observed by Goffman in the closed society of the Shetland Islands. Rather than tailoring the performance to the audience, many social media users find the audience that will accept the performance. While tweens and teens are often trapped by their localized
situations, adult users of social media can easily de-friend or disconnect from those that are not accepting of their presentational online personae. This means out in the cyberspace, groups and networks are emerging that have wide cultural latitudes of tolerance and acceptance – something that marketers cannot find easily in physical settings.

**New Tactical Avenues, Possibly Democratizing Strategy**

In de Certeau’s terms, social media provide individuals with new tactical avenues to subvert strategy. The issue is still open as to whether or not individuals can coalesce through electronic connections in ways to create large social networks that are outside the influence spheres (the ‘strategy’) of large commercial, religious or political entities. Social media spaces certainly offer some tools to do so, but the tools – at present – are limited and constrained. Efforts are underway to created Open Source social media\(^5\) that could hold the promise for people forming “user-controlled” social networks that represent democratized and not corporatist strategy.

For some social groups – especially the very young who lack the sophistication and resources to choose their networks – stigma and the burden of ‘strategy’ is actually reinforced as the face-to-face social network gains electronic access to individuals in new, intrusive, more ubiquitous, often suffocating ways. There may be opportunities for organizations to offer escape hatches to those trapped in electronic networks. Of course, it would be a travesty if powerful commercial entities used such opportunities to re-trap the young in networks of brand adulation.
Quotidian Hyperreality: A New Reality?

To weave in Baudrillard’s theories of postmodern life into our emerging theoretical framework, the social media-simulated hyperreality draws people in. Unlike the dazzling spectacles of physical hypermodernity – mega-structures and events that strain to create enchantment, and yet whose allure fades after some time – the hyperreality of social media is feebly enchanting in quotidian ways. For many users of social media, segments of daily existence and experiences slide effortlessly into social media spaces. There is no need for intense or massive simulation and stimulation – the new worlds of social media are bricolages assembled by tiny labors of millions. These new world do not bedazzle, but they do cocoon comfortably – creating hyperreality that is pretty much indistinguishable from reality; and thus there is little reason to become sated or bored. For many, more time is spent on socializing via social media than in person. There are of course entrepreneurs that understand these new worlds – and these are not always the media and brand moguls of the past. To the extent social media will continue to grow, we expect some significant reshuffling of industrial hierarchies – somewhat akin to the changes that occurred with the web and e-commerce.

A Familiar Non-Place

The minutiae of daily life become glorified and celebrated in the social media spaces. In Augé-esque non-places (e.g., Facebook and MySpace), users are coming together to create memories that are not serially factual but are rather selected bits of experience melded into pleasant montages. The results are electronic spaces with fabricated, desirable, identity-infused fictional episodes that are assembled from familiar elements of daily lives. In the process, the non-place – the frequently visited social media
site – becomes intensely familiar; and virtuality begins to take on trappings of a parallel reality. For marketers and other organizations, this presents new challenges. Centuries of professional experiences in dealing with consumers (voters, parishioners), hitherto located in physical places, need to be rethought – ways of injecting commercial, political, and religious messages into these new non-places have to be crafted. Herein lies a dilemma: the more commercial social media spaces become, the less attractive they become as places to frequent and “hang out”.

**Sociality and Solitude**

On a conceptual level, social media demand a relook at the concept of solitude – is technology increasing solitude as Augé predicted or are the social media making solitude something that needs redefining? If one is alone but connected, surely this connectivity changes the experience of solitude. The loose form of “solitary sociality” offered by social media spaces is clearly different from the intense sociality of family life, work groups, and face-to-face friend circles. There are “conversations” in social media spaces – not the animate conversations of face-to-face settings but measured give-and-take on topics of mutual interest. For marketers, it has been challenging – but highly rewarding – to inject brand recommendations in face-to-face conversations. Many methods are being tried to do similar injections in social media spaces.

**Acceleration of Sensemaking**

In addition to individual identity projects and memory creation, people are making sense of their worlds through ongoing online conversations using social media, expanding upon the sensemaking processes of the physical world that were envisioned by Weick. These virtual networks can be mobilized and are powerful beyond the scope of
the early mobile phone-based networks observed by Castells. In the social media spaces, there is an acceleration of sensemaking – processes that could have played out over days or weeks in physical groups and organizations often play out over hours and even minutes in social media spaces. Organizations and interorganizational networks could benefit from such accelerated sensemaking, especially if they develop the skills to learn from the rapid-fire processes that occur in social media spaces. Memes and viral flows – salutary or deleterious to the organization – can be detected very early, and possibly be influenced.

**Living Virtual Lives**

In the early years of networked electronic communication, those that led virtual lives – existence characterized by large swaths of the waking time spent in electronic worlds – were “techies”, early and deep adopters of networked communication technologies (Turkle 1997). Social media have enabled the practices of “virtual living” to diffuse very widely. If deep, pathological addiction to virtual worlds (such as every waking minute spent on multiuser online games) is the equivalent to heroine dependency, then the mild and pervasive use of social media is the equivalent of enjoying coffee – everyone does it and none is worse off for it. Many are using social media so frequently that their consciousness is divided between their actual experiences and their social media experiences. Photos are now taken for social media use and experiences are systemically shared. Profiles are engineered for desired effects. Many are finding the readily available social media cyber-affirmations preferable to more complex relationships. Loose ties have become sustaining to the point that some prefer their online relationships to their face-to-face ones. For the twenty something set, social media and face-to-face
relationships blur in to a cohesive entity with the use of location-specific social media sites like Foursquare. Social media users can easily shape their networks by adding friends or by de-friending. Geographic barriers crumble and time and space collapse. Users are giving updates on their experiences in real time and may receive instant feedback. For some, especially for those temporarily or permanently in locations that are remote – but even for those in cosmopolitan urban settings, social media are their primary means of socializing and they rarely unplug.

For business and other organized entities, this state of affairs is challenging. Of course, for the owners of major social media – Facebook in particular – there are obvious rewards in terms of advertising dollars. For others, there are some perplexing dilemmas. Unlike the use of email or e-commerce, the reasons for going to social media are largely non-instrumental: people go to these sites to hang out, much like turning on television. The “programming” on social media, however, is largely by the users – and thus mostly non-commercial. Injecting commerce or politics or religion or ideology into this programming mix is fraught with danger – overly commercialized (or politicized) virtual spaces may be abandoned by users, especially if other (non-commercial) virtual “hang out” alternatives are available. There are of course massive corporate efforts to colonize virtual spaces (every major brand has Facebook and Twitter pages), but the equivalent of “viewing advertising commercials while watching television programs” is simply not there. Several online media strategies are being experimented with – making TV programming available online, creating YouTube segments that are highly entertaining and are sponsored by brands, etc. – but how to integrate these online offerings with virtual lives in social media spaces remains a challenge.
These social media non-places are the new habitus. Memories are carefully crafted with their networks and select bits are saved making a more palatable reality. The copy shared with the user’s network takes on more value than the original. Users are empowered by their ability to reach outside of face-to-face networks, making connections more facile than ever before and thus making networks more powerful than ever before.

Concluding Observations
“Anything that we are aware of at a given moment forms part of our consciousness, making conscious experience at once the most familiar and most mysterious aspect of our lives.”
—Velmans and Schneider (2007)

The global question raised in this paper is: how is the prolific use of social media shaping our individual and collective consciousness and what are the ensuing effects on experiential consumption? Social media are changing our identities, our relationships, and our general awareness of others. These media are transforming how we craft, share and preserve our memories. In most cases, social media are empowering individuals and networks – and opening up some new, presentational spaces. In some circumstances, social media are reinforcing stigma and limiting freedom.

Many questions remain unanswered and since the social media platforms are relatively new and dynamic it is early to anticipate fully what new questions would emerge. On an applied level, specifically for marketers, choice defines the self (Markus and Schwartz, 2010) and questions remain about how choices are, and would be, made in light of the impact of social media. Overall, it is not entirely clear how businesses could tap into the power of social media without “killing the goose that lays the golden egg”, i.e., without commercializing such media to the extent that they lose their allure.
We are on the cusp of a blending of social interaction and technology. By looking at widely held social theories, this paper has laid the groundwork for exploring some of the changes in the nature of ‘experience’ of people, qua consumers but also more generally as human beings, brought about by this techno-social blending.

References


Endnotes

1 See Julianne Pepitone (2010)

2 Foursquare built up its location-based social networking so fast that by August 2010, Facebook was forced to respond by creating Facebook Places – a feature comparable to Foursquare. See conversation between ABC’s Linsey Davis and New York Times technology reporter Jenna Wortham (Davis and Wortham 2010).

3 It must be noted here that for some, in particular for many adolescents and teens, stigma can be reinforced by social media because these young people have not yet been able to expand their virtual circles beyond their proximate physical networks. There have been some tragic cyber-bullying incidents that have even led to teenage suicide (LaBella 2010).

4 Facebook entered into a partnership with Zynga, the company that makes and dominates social media games such as FarmVille and Mafia Wars. The deal implicitly values Zynga at $5 billion. See Samuel Axon (2010).

5 One such venture is Diaspora, positioned as “privacy-aware” and “personally-controlled” alternative to Facebook, with Open Source features that could unleash waves of innovations in social media spaces. Observers are mixed on the prospects of Diaspora – some pronouncing it dead-on-arrival (Yiannopoulos 2010) while others are withholding judgment (Albanesius 2010).
Our responsibility is to provide strong academic programs that instill excellence, confidence and strong leadership skills in our graduates. Our aim is to (1) promote critical and independent thinking, (2) foster personal responsibility and (3) develop students whose performance and commitment mark them as leaders contributing to the business community and society. The College will serve as a center for business scholarship, creative research and outreach activities to the citizens and institutions of the State of Rhode Island as well as the regional, national and international communities.

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