Experiences on the Loose: The Shaping and Reshaping of Experiences in Social Media

Victoria Rolandsson[1] and Annakarin Nyberg[2]

[1, 2] Department of Informatics, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

[1]*victoria.rolandsson@umu.se,* [2]*annakarin.nyberg@umu.se*

ABSTRACT

The use of social media has exploded during the later part of the last decade, and today we share a lot of our experiences online or become parts of experiences shared by others. In this paper, we explore how experiences are shaped and reshaped in social media. Through an explorative study, we see indications of what happens with experiences over time and that this has consequences for offline contexts. Inspired by the Springboard Metaphor, four analytical concepts are proposed, namely temporality, density, scope, and control. The concepts contribute in facilitating a more nuanced discussion in terms of experiences in relation to social media.

Keywords: *Experience, Social Media, Facebook, Analytical Concepts of Experiences.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Information technology has become a salient part of our everyday life, and we no longer make a clear distinction between the physical and the digital [1]. This is particularly evident in the use of social media, where on and off-line work and private life experiences coalesce, and hierarchies, contexts, and relationships meet within our digital networks [2]. Accordingly, it is not only important to understand how social processes, such as the co-creation of experiences, are developed, starting in either the digital *or* the physical world. Rather, we need to adopt approaches and develop conceptual models spanning our entire daily lives, as frameworks that are not spanning all contexts will offer a misleading understanding.

The potential, as well as challenge, in relation to experiencing and reliving happenings in digital contexts, have, for example, previously been explored within research focusing on the exercise of power online [3]. Also, the shaping of experiences has been explored within HCI and tourism, for example, in the work of Jafari [4], which later on was developed by Mossberg [5] within the marketing sector. The purpose of both Jafari's and Mossberg's work, have been to understand and describe experiences. However, to serve as a basis for researching, analyzing and understanding the specifics of how digitally contextualized experiences are shaped and reshaped through social media, it needs further development.

This paper takes its point of departure in the reciprocity between the digital and physical world in terms of *experiences*. The aim is to explore how the experience of a happening might move between these intertwined worlds while becoming shaped and reshaped by us as users as well as the social mediums technical functions and the design thereof.

20 respondents have been asked to participate in an explorative study and reflect, in written, upon their social media use, with a specific focus on how the experience of a happening is shaped and reshaped through their use of Facebook. The data is analyzed based on *experience near* versus *experience distant* concepts [6].

The data analysis show indications that, in contrast to earlier attempts to describe experiences as temporal and spatial excursions within a distinct frame [4, 5], experiences shaped in social media become *ongoing* with a potential to be shaped and reshaped over and over again and in ways that the initial experiencer may not have intended or even have control over. An experience might be *let on the loose*, for good and for bad. Additionally, we see indications of reciprocity between experiences in the digital and the physical, i.e. the digital experience can be seen as an ongoing process with potential to spill over on the physical, as well as the opposite.

The main contribution of this paper is four analytical concepts of experiences. It offers the possibility to, in a more nuanced way, discuss how an experience starting

either in the physical or the digital, leads to experiences being shaped and reshaped in a reciprocal fashion between contexts. The concepts are inspired by the earlier work by Jafari [4] and Mossberg [5], briefly mentioned above, and further described later on.

2. RELATED WORK

In this section, we present relevant research from two different perspectives. The first is from the design perspective (2.1-2.2), which is then followed by the socio-technical perspective (2.3-2.4), in order to set a broad foundation for the following parts of the paper.

2.1 User Experience (UX)

When studying experiences in relation to digital technology, the field of User Experience (UX), a central part within the Human-Computer Interaction discipline, is a natural point of departure. As technology has come to be quite salient in most parts of our everyday life, so has UX within research and design. User Experience refers to "(...) experience(s) derived from encountering systems" [7, p.6]. It is about creating high-quality experiences, rather than preventing usability problems [8], by highlighting aspects of interaction such as user affect, sensations, meaning, emotions, experiences, hedonism and aesthetics [9].

2.2 Experience Design (XD)

As a further extension of User Experience, Experience Design have developed, considering the design of high-quality experiences for users of products and services. Here the idea is to move beyond the instrumental [8] and focus primarily on why a product is used, rather than what is done with it and how [10]. "The experience approach to designing interactive products, thus, starts from the assumption that if we want to design for experience, we have to put them first, that is, before the products" [10. p. 2-3].

2.3 The Social Shaping of Technology

How we relate to technology affects how we take it on and use it. For example, we have traditionally been talking about extremes in terms of how we approach technology. Kling [11] talks about a technological utopia and anti-utopia, which also can be related to Lie & Sørensen's [12] categorization where technology can be seen as a villain or a hero. To view technology as a villain almost impossible to tame [12], or as the root of the creation of an anti-utopia is to view technology as pushing towards a destructive society [11], which lies in line with the technological determinism. It is an approach often set against the perspective of socio-constructivism in relation technology,

which make visible people's possibilities to shape and reshape technology themselves, as they invite it into their everyday life.

Somewhere in-between these, we find a third perspective – Social Shaping of Technology – which takes into consideration, the social capabilities made possible by technology, as well as the unexpected and surprising ways in which we use and create meaning through our technology use [13]. From this third perspective "we need to consider how societal circumstances give rise to technologies, what specific possibilities and constraints technologies offer, and actual practices of use as those possibilities and constraints are taken up, rejected, and reworked in everyday life" [14, p. 45].

2.4 Domestication of Technology

Often occurring with the approach of Social Shaping of Technology is the Domestication approach to technology, developed in the 1990's. Within the Domestication, research focus came to be set on household [15] and, later on, the increasingly context-including concept of everyday life [16]. Furthermore, three general areas of interest emerged [17], which covered; the creation of a set of practices, such as routines related to a technology; the creation of meaning and roles of artifacts in relation to identities created among people involved in the domestication process; and it also covered cognitive processes related to learning and meaning making [17]. Aune [15] described the domestication concept as a support for us to see how the computer is adapted to our daily life, as well as how our daily life is adapted to the computer – a kind of two-way process. Accordingly, in line with the Domestication perspective, technology should not be regarded as a deterministic process, neither should it be recognized as neutral, as people in their daily life are affected by the process as well.

In conclusion, in this section, we have outlined two perspectives from which experiences are approached within Informatics research. From the design perspective, the focus on experiences in relation to technology has become a salient part, as technology penetrates most aspects of our everyday lives and we expect more from it than to just work without errors. On the other hand, the socio-technical perspective demonstrates our fundamental view on the relation of technology and use thereof, i.e. how technology is shaped by use as well as how the use is shaped by the design of technology.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to approach the intangible and subjective notion of experiences, and in this specific case in relation to social media, we will use the Springboard Metaphor, as well as developed versions of it, as the base of reference. The

metaphors work as facilitators when attempting to view, describe and talk about experiences.

The Springboard Metaphor, presented by Jafari [4], has its roots within tourism research (see picture 1). It was used as a base of reference when developing the Tourist Model, which describes the temporal and spatial movement of a tourist from the ordinary to the nonordinary. Six components and processes are proposed, where the tourist leaves its everyday life to jump off the trampoline into a nonordinary experience, starting with a sense of liberation, freedom and revival, followed by the inevitable process of the return to everyday life.

The metaphor was later on developed by Mossberg [5] to describe experiences and service encounters, as "(…) all experiences can be viewed as temporal excursions from everyday life" (ibid. p. 80, authors' translation). Mossberg combined the Springboard Metaphor with Pine & Gilmore's [18] Experience Realms, adding the dimensions of customer participation, and connection or environmental relationship to the experience (see picture 2). The Springboard Metaphor is useful when researching experiences, as it describes a temporal movement, relevant in trying to understand people's experiences [5].
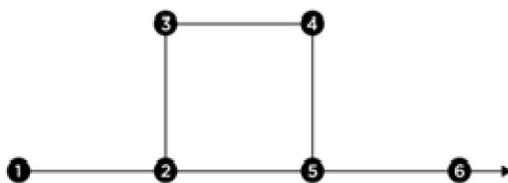

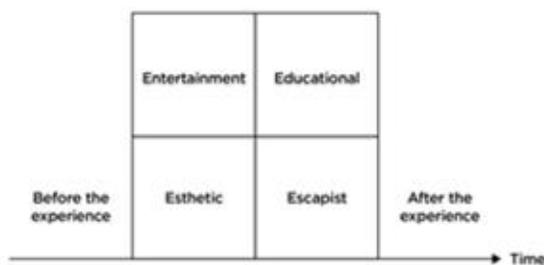*Fig. 1. The Springboard Metaphor*

Fig. 2. The Experience and Cust omer Behavior Framework

Recently, based on the prior work of Jafari [4] and Mossberg [5], The Density of Events Model (DEMO) was developed as to cover experiences in relation to events [19]. It includes two enriching aspects, i.e. temporality and density, as well as the origin of enhanced density. Temporality refers to what happens before, during and after an event, in the sense that the experience of an event is not solely tied to the core event. Rather, it can be initialized prior to it as well as extended afterward. The density of an event refers not only to the physical world affecting an experience - the digital world can affect it as well, e.g. the use of digital technology, such as smartphones and social media, can create a denser experience of an event. Accordingly, the enhanced density of the experience can have its origin within the physical world or in the digital world. Examples in the physical world could be a designed VIP lounge while an example in the digital world could be comments and likes on a guest's posted pictures in social media.

However, to serve as a basis for researching, analyzing and understanding the specifics of how digitally contextualized experiences are shaped and reshaped through social media, it needs further development.

4. METHODOLOGY

In this study, 20 respondents were asked to, in writing, reflect upon their social media use, with a specific focus on three major aspects of how experiences are shaped and reshaped. Firstly, the subjects reflected on their view of the shaping and reshaping of experiences in social media, preferably by providing their own examples. Secondly, they discussed what happens with digitally contextualized experiences over time. Thirdly, they reflected on what influence digitally contextualized experiences might have for other contexts and vice versa.

The study was conducted in December 2015. 13 (65%) of the respondents were female and 7 (35%) were male. Furthermore, the mean age was 22,2 years old and the mean of self-estimated activity on social media on a scale of 1-5 (where 1 = not active at all, and 5 = read and post regularly) was 2,75.

In the analysis of the data, we used the American social-anthropologist Geertz work on concepts near versus far from the experience, i.e. experiences near versus experiences distant [6]. Concepts that are close to the experience consist of that which the respondents themselves, colloquially, would use to describe how experiences are shaped and reshaped in social media. The, so called, experience distant concepts are those which in this case are used by us as researchers to bring forth, describe and explain what we see, e.g. by using theoretical frameworks. It is of importance that both concepts, near as well as distant from the experience, refer to the same experience while they can be said to be on different distances. According to Gilje & Grimen [20], the experience near and the experience distant concepts describe differences in degree, rather than absolute contradictions. The question of what should be referred to as near versus distant from the experiences depends on the experiences we carry with us and varies depending on which society we are in. By using these concepts one can reach, what Geertz [21] calls "thick descriptions", which

means a description intending to describe the underlying meaning of the action.

In what follows, the analyzed data will be presented in two steps. The first step is more experience near while the second step is experience distant.

5. THE STUDY

In this section, the study will be presented in terms of three themes, in an experience near fashion [9]. The themes are based on the major issues brought up in the study.

5.1 Theme 1: The reshaping of experiences over time

The respondents were asked to reflect upon how their experiences are shaped and reshaped in social media, preferably by providing their own examples. All respondents, except two, shared stories of situations where a picture, text, film or link had been posted at one occasion and later on reconnected to. The examples included posts ranging from a few weeks old to several years old. Additionally, the examples showed user driven actions, such as tagging, new comments, likes, and sharing, as well as technology driven actions, such as, "Your memories on Facebook" and "You and NN have been friends for X years", seeking to reconnect to previous happenings and experiences. The respondents also expressed that it differs whether an old post is reconnected to by oneself or by an acquaintance.

Approximately half of the respondents experienced it as boastful and embarrassing to push up ones own posts in the feed.

"The first time you see a post it is relevant and current. Repetitious posts are annoying especially if it is positive happenings. Then the person is experienced as cocky." – Female, 20.

Most of the respondents also expressed a sense of embarrassment when others push old posts in the feed.

"Reposts are never fun. It is only annoying!" – Male, 23.

However, many still experienced it as quite fun, for example referring to nostalgic feelings.

"How I react depends on what kind of post it is. If it is a positive memory I feel happy, maybe even happier the second time around, if quite some time has passed. I remember and feel nostalgic." – Female, 21.

In sum, most of the respondents in our explorative study express that experiences are shaped and reshaped over time in social media. This occurs in their feeds, from the initial posting to it reappearing at one or several occasions later on. Experiences are shaped and reshaped by the person herself, or by others, it is experienced as positive as well as negative and can be initialized either through the shape of the design of the technology or by user driven actions.

5.2 Theme 2: Experienced control

In the respondents' answers, examples referring to the experienced sense of control over posts and accordingly the creation of experiences occur repeatedly. Several express opinions in line with the idea that the moment we post something on a social media network, we loose control over the post as well as the experience. Anyone in our network can comment or like, in whatever way and whenever they see fit, including pushing old post up in the feed. The majority of the respondents express different ways to cope with the aspect of control.

"I have chosen to take control over my feed and what can be published. For example, no one can tag me in a picture making it appear in my feed. I need to approve the tag. I have also untagged myself in my friends old pictures." – Female, 21.

"To be tagged in someone else picture means that you don't have full control over the content. The picture can be of anything. Why do I have to be shared in social media?" – Female, 25.

"If someone shares a picture you don't have control over the material. Thus, you should go through all you pictures and tags to get rid of stuff you don't want to be shown." – Male, 21.

The respondents express great awareness of the fact that what is posted potentially will have a wide diffusion in contexts and for purposes that you do not have control over. For the same reason, almost half of the respondents, express strategies to counteract this. For examples, one can be restrictive of what one posts, untag pictures and go through ones feeds, i.e. to remove posts that one no longer can stand for. However, awareness is expressed of the fact that in the act of posting, one has potentially let the experience on the loose, and no longer have full control over it.

5.3 Theme 3: Consequences for other contexts

As mentioned previously, the digital and physical world is becoming increasingly integrated, making them difficult to separate. Accordingly, actions online may have consequences outside social media i.e. in the physical world. This includes other peoples' actions in relation ones posts. The respondents were asked to reflect upon whether or not what is played out in social media, spills over on other, physical contexts, and if that is the case, give examples of how that may happen and how it is experienced.

A majority of the respondents' shares examples of how experiences in social media, in one way or another spills over on experiences in offline context. Only a few of them express negative consequences, such as being exposed to bullying or condescending discussions outside the Internet as a result of actions online.

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"This usually doesn't happen to me but I have several times heard about colleagues political opinions being discussed during coffee breaks, generally from a negative point of view. It's maybe not the best for the individuals as they can't defend themselves there and then." – Female, 21.

Instead, most of our respondents highlight examples where experiences are amplified or prolonged.

"It is often positive if you meet for example the next day and reconnect to the post and discuss if it was good or fun. I only have positive experiences!" – Male, 20.

"I can write about an interest of mine and someone will discover that we have it in common and then we can talk about it outside social media." – Female, 25.

In sum, this explorative study shows that the respondents have experience of experiences being shaped and reshaped in social media – through one's own actions as well as design and technological functionality. The study also indicates that control is an important aspect for researching, analyzing and understanding the specifics of how experiences are shaped. Additionally, we see indications for reciprocity of experiences between different contexts.

6. EXPANDED EXPERIENCE MODELS

In this section, the data will be analyzed in a more experience distant fashion [6]. This means that we will use and refer to the concepts and theoretical frameworks presented earlier in this paper, in order to conduct a further analysis of the data. Additionally, based on the presented study, four analytical concepts to take into consideration will be proposed in order to better be able to talk about and discuss the complexity of experiences. These are temporality, density, scope, and control.

As expressed by others [4, 5, 19] time or *temporality* is an important aspect of all experiences. An experience has never been solely tied to a specific time and place as they always have been carried on in the shape of stories or rumors, but through the increased use of technology, the temporality aspects can be seen as increasingly fluid. However, based on our study we find that in order to discuss temporality aspects in relation to social media, a changed approach is needed, in the sense that temporality should be viewed as ongoing or even endless.

Further, the fact that technology has come to affect our experiences and vice versa, have lead to a new view on the *density* of the experience [19]. Sharing a picture during a visit at an amusement park and getting positive comments and likes, will accordingly make the experience denser. This notion is supported in our data, as several of the respondents share examples where the experience in the physical world is increased, i.e. has become denser, due to technology. For example, one of the subjects expressed how social media could facilitate in discovering shared

interests, which could be carried on when meeting in person.

While density can be understood as the height of the experience, i.e. the strength of it, which for example can be increased by adding more technology, it does, however, not say anything about the width or *scope* of the experience. In our data, we find that experiences move between different contexts, which is supporting previous research stating that we cannot make clear distinctions between the physical and the digital [1]. Accordingly, to be able to discuss this in a more nuanced matter, we suggest 'scope' as a valuable analytical concept of experiences.

To further explain the reciprocity between physical and digital contexts, i.e. scope, a model is presented (see picture 3), in which it is combined with temporality. It visualizes the movement of an experience over time, in terms of offline and online impact. An experience initialized in the digital world may have consequences in the physical world, where it is carried on and reshaped, and then further carried on online, and vice versa. This may be an ongoing and endless process, both due to user driven actions as well as the designed functions of the social media, i.e. through users continuing to share and discuss a topic or through social mediums such as Facebook owning all material uploaded by its users.
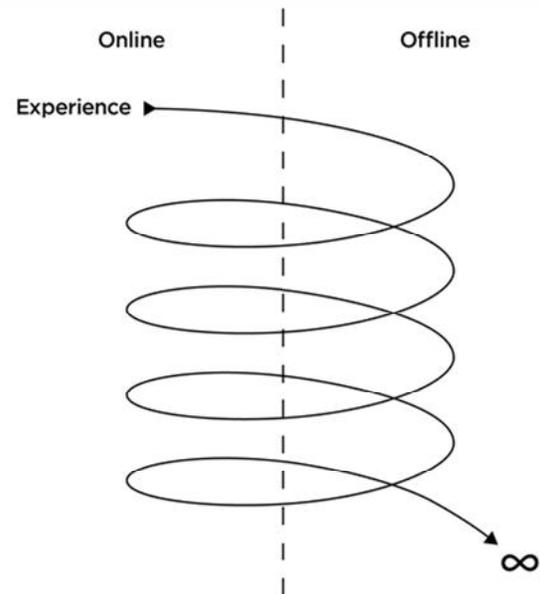

Fig. 3. The Temporality and Scope of Experiences

Finally, we found that our respondents reflect a lot upon the importance of feeling a sense of control of the experience in relation to social media. They express various strategies to maintain control of their material, such as untagging pictures, going through and removing pictures or having a restrictive attitude towards posting and sharing new material. In other words, our respondents express how experiences are let on the loose. In the moment an

experience is digitalized, in the shape of a picture or text, anyone can affect it by commenting, liking and reposting etc., out of the initial experiencer's control. Even without digital technology, control is lost when telling others about one's experiences, as they have the power to affect it through their reactions. However, the potential to lose control, as well as possible effects in terms of diffusion, is increased manifold when being digitalized.

6.1 Analytical Concepts of Experiences

To sum up, an experience may take its point of departure in the physical, i.e. traveling or going to a party, or in the digital, i.e. reading a newspaper or seeing a movie clip online. In the Analytical Concepts of Experience Model (see picture 4), this is presented on the left-hand side, where we have the experience and the distinction of its origin. Additionally, based on the analysis of our explorative study, we propose four analytical concepts, presented on the right-hand side in the model, contributing to a more precise and nuanced analysis of experiences in social media. These concepts were elaborated upon in the previous section. The strength of the model lies within the combination of the concepts in order to attain a holistic view.
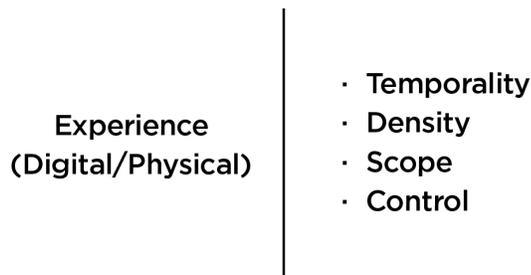
Experience
(Digital/Physical)

· Temporality
· Density
· Scope
· Control

Fig. 4. Analytical Concepts of Experiences

7. Conclusions

As a part of the efforts toward talking about, and creating an understanding of how our experiences are shaped and reshaped today when digital as well physical contexts are becoming increasingly merged, this work has led to the presentation of four analytical concepts; temporality, density, scope, and control. The main contribution of the concepts lies in that the precision of the discussions has enhanced. This is important, as we need to be able to have more frequent as well as more nuanced discussions of what it means that our everyday life is becoming increasingly permeated by digital technology.

In this context, questions related to future research refer to reviewing, developing and redefining the concepts. For example, the analytical concepts need to be tested in more advanced empirical studies in order to explore their potential. Additionally, important work on exploring the relation between the concepts remains to be conducted.

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