



Exploring reflective learning during the extended consumption of life experiences



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study explores the potential for personal transformation resulting from reflective learning that occurs during the extended consumption of life experiences. Extended consumption refers to activities that consist in re-experiencing a life experience, for instance sharing stories/photographs or blogging.

Methodology: Using a directed qualitative content analysis, Hubbs and Brand's (2010) framework is applied to analyze the content of 19 travel blogs and develop an understanding of different forms of consumer learning occurring during the extended consumption experience.

Findings: The analysis of the travel blogs provides evidence of three forms of reflective learning during extended consumption: emotional, critical and personal reflection learning. Although a high proportion of the blog narratives do not go beyond surface learning, most bloggers use a combination of the three forms of reflective learning, signifying different levels of reflection. Experiences that produce emotions of high valence and situations that point to differences between the bloggers' home culture and the destinations' characteristics appear to trigger reflective learning, in some instances providing evidence of personal transformation.

Originality/value: This research contributes to the experiential consumption literature, providing evidence of consumers' development and transformation during extended consumption, and showing how even negative experiences lead to self-learning.

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1. Introduction

Consumption experiences range from the mundane to the extraordinary. Besides satisfying utilitarian needs, they also provide consumers with opportunities for fantasy, feelings and fun (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982) and personal growth (Arnould & Price, 1993). "Life experiences" (Cooper-Martin, 1992; Schmitt, Brakus, & Zarantonello, 2015) and experiential purchases ("purchases made with the primary intention of acquiring a life experience": Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003, p. 1194) have generated growing interest because evidence suggests that they contribute to greater well-being and happiness than material items (Gilovich et al., 2015; Zhang, Howell, & Capriarello, 2013). Furthermore, experiential purchases seem "to imply or at least prime an experience that lasts in memory and is significant for the individual for personal development and growth" (Schmitt et al., 2015, p. 167). Yet, the post-consumption stage of experiential purchases/life experiences is under researched, as scholars and practitioners privilege the managerial problem of how to design experiences which satisfy consumers and ensure their loyalty (Schmitt, Rogers, & Vrotsos, 2004; Smith & Wheeler, 2002).

Schmitt and Zarantonello (2013) note that while interest about how consumers use and remember the products they purchase has increased over the last two decades, literature on experiential purchases lags behind: it does not address how life experiences, which are closely connected to the self (Carter & Gilovich, 2012), may still produce self-developmental value during an "extended consumption" stage, after the main consumption event. As Alba and Williams (2013) observe, consumers are known to savor their memories of enjoyable and meaningful experiences. The retelling of holiday moments during a dinner with friends or the sharing of photographs, may add to someone's life story or enhance their identity. Recent models of consumption experience (Payne, Storbacka, & Frow, 2008; Tynan & McKechnie, 2009) call for the consideration of outcomes such as customer learning, enjoyment, entertainment, skills, nostalgia, fantasizing and evangelizing as part of the post-experience stage. Such outcomes influence consumers' decisions, future actions and self-development (Caru & Cova, 2003; Cova & Dall'i, 2009), yet the focus on the pre-consumption stages, and, at the post-consumption stage, on the dominance of managerial concerns, sidelines them.

With experiential purchases, consumers are more likely to share stories with others, including through social media (Capriarello & Reis, 2013). In particular, blogs, and specifically consumption-oriented blogs, can act as introspective accounts of how the products or experiences relate to consumers' lives, allowing them to internalize the

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symbolic meanings embedded in these products (Zhao & Belk, 2007). Hence, they present an opportunity for researchers to understand experiential purchases or life experiences as a form of ‘unobtrusive research’. Blogs as naturally occurring data may allow the capture of their performative function, which is one of the benefits of retelling one’s stories to others. Empirical studies show how individuals use blogs to provide evidence of personal growth or enhanced identity from experiences (Davis, 2010; Huffaker, 2006). Blogs also enable consumers to “write down” the recollection of their experiences, hence facilitating self-reflection beyond what might happen otherwise. Insofar as they can be conducive to reflection, blogs can act as learning journals, providing the blogger with mechanisms to document their own understandings and behaviors as they develop (Hall & Davison, 2007).

An examination of blogs as narratives which can facilitate reflective learning contributes to literature by uncovering the value of experiential purchases or life experiences for personal transformation. Reflective learning captured in blogs constitutes an important outcome, as consumers’ ‘re-experience the experience’ in another form, hence extending the value of such experience.² This study explores the potential for personal transformation resulting from reflective learning that occurs during the extended consumption of life experiences. Travel blogs, which can provide rich consumption accounts of life experiences, serve to explore the link between narratives and learning.

2. Literature review

2.1. Life experiences and their extended consumption

Growing literature on experiential purchases provides evidence that these products contribute to greater well-being than material items (Zhang et al., 2013). Experiential purchases are those which enable life experiences (Gilovich et al., 2015). Compared to material purchases, experiential purchases: a. are physically closer to the self; b. more likely to be mentioned when people tell their life story; c. overlap more with people’s sense of who they are; and d. yield greater insight into people’s true selves (Carter & Gilovich, 2012): “Experiential purchases tend to provide more enduring satisfaction in that they more readily, more broadly, and more deeply connect us to others” (Gilovich et al., 2015, p. 155). Guevarra and Howell (2015) also stress the importance of experiential products and material possessions that afford new life experiences (e.g., running shoes) because they contribute more to well-being and happiness as well as memories, which are crucial for personal development (Schmitt et al., 2015).

Marketing research on experiences remains focused on the measurement and management of experience marketing, and decision making implications (Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013). Models of consumption experience (Payne et al., 2008; Tynan & McKechnie, 2009) and empirical evidence (Schmitt et al., 2015) suggest that experience outcomes include customer learning, meaning, self-realization, happiness, enjoyment, entertainment, skills, nostalgia, fantasizing and evangelizing.

This research raises the key question of what happens after the consumption of a life experience and specifically how consumers might draw more value from ‘extending’ the consumption experience. During the remembered consumption and nostalgia experience, photographs and stories may prompt a ‘re-experience’ of the experience with friends, leading to the classification of memories (Arnould, Price, & Zinkhan, 2002), or triggering a redefinition of the self. Hence, this research focuses on ‘extended consumption’, which entails activities that happen subsequent to the main consumption event and are focused on a form of re-experience of the main consumption event, leading to the production of value and identity development. This would include sharing stories (written or oral); videos and photographs of experiences

with friends (online and offline), which occur immediately after the main consumption event or in everyday lives as conversation pieces.

With the advent of social media, extended consumption becomes more significant for researchers who seek to understand the value of life experiences. Stories of life experiences are more likely to be shared with others (Caprariello & Reis, 2013). Blogs, which consist of recollections of experience, may also facilitate self-reflection beyond what happened, providing consumers with opportunities for deeper learning and, in some instances, an implicit or explicit expression of change themselves or personal growth. Hence, alongside their performative function, blogs, similarly to learning journals (Hall & Davison, 2007), provide insights on consumer learning during the extended consumption of experiential purchases or life experiences.

2.2. Extended consumption and consumer learning

Marketing scholars define consumer learning as the process by which individuals acquire the purchase and consumption knowledge and experience that they can apply to future behavior (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000). Research mostly focuses on consumers learning about the object of their consumption (e.g., Gregan-Paxton & John, 1997; Iyengar, Ansari, & Gupta, 2007; Poynor & Wood, 2010); it rarely considers the outcomes of learning for consumers’ self-development and empowerment (Jayanti & Singh, 2010).

Several models of consumption experience suggest consumer learning as an outcome of experiences, but do not investigate it empirically. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) suggest that the consumption of experience could entail such consequences as fun, enjoyment, feelings of pleasure; and learning can arise from the stream of associations (imagery, daydreams and emotions) that occur during consumption. Payne et al. (2008) contend that customer learning involves proportioning (a learning which involves customers taking one step backward to reflect on their own processes and how they engage with a supplier) and reflecting on how the value proposition relates to their lives and aspirations. Tynan and McKechnie (2009) include learning as one of several outcomes of experience. These works suggest that consumer learning can be one form of value that consumers take away from their experience during its extended consumption and can consist of both ‘object-directed’ and ‘self-directed’ learning. Yet, extant experiential consumption literature has not explored consumer learning and self-development as possible significant long-term benefits, alongside happiness, satisfaction and well-being. Consequently, the research draws from management learning and education literature to consider the potential for reflectively learning from experiences.

In line with the central tenet of experiential learning, according to which experience is the trigger for learning through a transformation of understanding (Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2001), consumer learning can signify a change in the self and can have a lasting, transformational impact when it affects consumers’ self-concept. Travel experiences are good examples of experiential consumption where consumer learning comes in the form of newly acquired practical skills, knowledge, practical wisdom and self-consciousness that contribute to self-development (Chen, Bao, & Huang, 2014; Falk, Ballantyne, Packer, & Benckendorff, 2012). Experiences such as these advance social connection as they prompt more conversation and storytelling (Schmitt et al., 2015). Therefore, such story-telling instances constitute opportunities to explore consumer learning occurring during extended consumption.

Story telling uses autobiographical reasoning skills to understand the self; and retrospective reflection and other markers of the mature self-authorship are fundamental instruments in identifying self-development (McAdams, 2013). Different events produce different opportunities for the development of self-understanding and personal growth (McLean, 2008). “Experiences that challenge one’s sense of self (Pals, 2006), that are emotionally disruptive (Rimé, Mesquita, Philippot, & Boca, 1991) or that are self-defining (Singer & Salovey,

² We are grateful to a reviewer for having encouraged us to develop this idea.

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