

Importance of experience among young consumers

Dalma Vincze

It is difficult to understand motives behind the consumption of young consumers. Understanding the function of consumption is considered to be one of the most important tasks in the field of Consumer Behavior. The different functions of consumption have become a central issue in consumption studies. This paper tries to shed new light on the phenomenon of experience consumption as a new function of consumption, besides fulfilling needs and demonstrating status. The chosen method for this investigation was to conduct a netnography on a group of 18-22 years old Facebook and Instagram users. This 3-month-long investigation revealed that these young consumers mainly post pictures that made them happy or proud. These results further our knowledge of experience since our subjects want to feel themselves unique, and want to consume goods and services that have the capacity to provide fun. We think that our findings might be useful for understanding one more aspect of the consumption of young people.

Keywords: consumer behavior, consumption, Generation Z, experience, netnography

1. Introduction

Consumption is one of our daily tasks, so that is why we really want to obtain and understand an answer to our main question: *‘Why (from what motivation) we consume, and what motivation can be discerned behind the consumer decision?’*

The disciplines which have investigated the phenomenon of consumption, have always more or less agreed about there being a main motivation behind buying goods or services, and that was fulfilling needs. After some decades, status consumption became the focus of investigation. There was a lot of basic discussion about the symbolic aspect of goods and services. To a large extent, status consumption was raised to the main motivation behind the phenomenon. Meanwhile a new idea has come into focus, we have to take into consideration that the aesthetic, intangible and subjective elements of consumption should pertain to a phenomenon: hedonic consumption. In fact, we need to recognize experience gained as the motivation of hedonic consumption.

According to the results of my previous research – deep interviews and focus group investigations – it is clear that 18-22-year-old consumers are not motivated only by fulfilling need. Similarly, they do not feel the importance of communicating their – non-existent – high social status. On the contrary, they feel the concrete need to have fun either alone or in community, and want to take part in some kind of experience consumption. To get acquainted with this phenomenon, I needed more details and I needed to use such methods that were able to give me more and special insights. My investigation focused on the appearance of experiments in young consumers’ online-social media activities. My research question was: *‘How can we notice experience (or the communication of experience) in social media posts of young consumers’*

That explains why I chose photo collage combined with interview, and on the basis of findings, subsequently to conduct a 3-month-long netnography. In point of netnography I observed altogether 20 people's (13 female and 7 male) profiles (born from 1995 to 1999) including the profiles of photo collages as a subject. The photo collages interviews were conducted in May 2017, and the netnography compiled from the 1st of June to the 31th of August 2017.

Consequently, I have to say that according to the visible posting activities on Instagram, it is one of the main channels for communicating experience. On the contrary Facebook is rather for organizing events and information gathering or communication. Basically, the focus of Facebook is '*staying in touch with each other*' and '*I'll let you see what I am doing*' is the function of the Instagram posts.

2. History of consumption – Experience consumption as a third level

According to Corrigan (1997) the primary function of consumption was to solve a problem, satisfy a need. This is the first level of consumption (Simányi 2005), but we came a long way to modern consumption nowadays. Scientists from the field of sociology of consumption, and the disciplines that have investigated consumption, have more or less agreed that the main and primary function of this phenomenon was indeed fulfilling needs. In traditional societies, there is a finite (limited) number of needs to be filled, and any wants and desires anyone might have would relate quite directly to this rather narrow sphere. Traditional consumer would regard with surprise instances of consumption outside the boundaries determined by tradition. In contrast, the modern consumer considers with alarm anyone who does not want to consume more and more, who does not seem to be interested in new want and desires (Corrigan 1997).

The stasis of traditional societies meant that one could learn the exact pattern of consumption, such as the finite number of things that enter into consumer consciousness. This way one could learn the proper modes of consuming relatively easily. In industrial societies, consumption is not a matter of rational calculation or of irrational impulse, but a strong sense of duty, an obligation to engage in want satisfaction as an end in itself. In modern societies a general orientation to consuming is required – what may be consumed is not fixed in number or kind, and may be undergoing rapid change. '*There is not much that we desire very particular things, although it happens, but it is rather that we want to want, we desire to desire, and we want new and different things in an endless pattern of discontent* (Campbell 1983, p. 282).' In modern societies there is a crucial feature of the role of the modern consumer. The primary obligation is to want to want all the time, under all circumstances. In the case of consumers, there is no innate disposition to want to want, but it is something to do with the effect of a particular form of civilization. Campbell says there is an ethic underlying consumption, such as for Weber there was an ethic underlying production, so if production can be linked to the Protestant work ethic, then consumption can be linked to Romanticism. Romanticism was a reaction against industrial societies and all it stood for, such as materialist and rationalist philosophies and the role of science, which were important during the period of the Enlightenment. Romanticism was also able to provide a new way of experiencing the world for the masses.

Like there was a first level of consumption, there was a second level as well. While this fulfilling needs-conversation was dominating scientific discussions, a whole new finding came to light: The idea that consumers and their objects communicate positions in the social world, and that that is more fundamental than any idea of simply fulfilling a particular concrete need. During the 1950s there was a substantial discussion concerning the symbolic aspects of products (Gardner–Levy 1955). That was the so-called status consumption. The typical symbols of social status were a big house or a fancy car. According to these findings, scientists also claimed that demonstrating consumption was actually equal with status consumption. We have to make a distinction between necessities and luxuries at this point. The main difference is that necessities derive us satisfaction by giving us what we need for existence, relieving discomfort, filling the lack of discomfort. For the feeling of pleasure, we do not actually need to have luxuries for real. Although of course we may have them. In fact, these are two contrasting models of human action: satisfying needs and pursuing pleasures.

While scientists were claiming that fulfilling need and communicating social status were the main motivation behind consumption, meanwhile another new point of view has appeared, that could be called the third level of consumption. Hereby, the esthetic, intangible and subjective aspects of consumption pertain to a phenomenon that we shall refer to as ‘hedonic consumption’ – with experience in its focus (Hirschman–Holbrook 1982). How does pleasure-seeking operate? Campbell says there are two different kind of hedonism which can be discovered in the field of consumption (Corrigan 1997).

Let us compare traditional and modern hedonism: Traditional hedonism means searching for pleasure, it is the search for sensations. Traditional hedonism was common among the wealthy elite whose satisfaction could be guaranteed. In this situation they tried special practices to gain pleasure, for example, in form of eating, or drinking, and in general, they sought to control objects and events in the world in order to gain pleasure from them. On the other hand, modern hedonism can be found in all or any experiences, so from this point of view, the experience of life itself seems to have become the seat of pleasure. Mainly it means finding pleasure in control over the meaning of things (Corrigan 1997).

Experience has become the keyword of modern marketing solutions and thinking, and that is why it could also become one of the most widely investigated research topics in service marketing among other fields (Pavluska 2014). As a result, several disciplines have started to discover experience by many methods in many situations, and with the help of their findings solve a concrete problem, or understand a situation. At this point we have to mention Maslow (1964), who was the creator of Peak experience, and Csíkszentmihályi’s (1990) Flow Experience from the field of psychology. According to Flow theory, there is a so-called perfect experience, when the subject changes her/his attitude and feels the ability to control his or her own life. The author also thinks that happiness and searching for happiness could be the main motivation in the case of Flow experience and behind experience consumption.

While psychology was investigating and sociology was creating the conception of experience economy, economics created its own approach, and experience has appeared in its searching focus. The marketing scientists and researchers

were starting to deal with experience in an explicit way and its economic value aspect in the 1980's (Holbrook–Hirschman 1982). At the end of the 1990's economics created experience economy (Pine–Gilmore 1999) and a new product category was created namely the experience good.

The economic value of experience was investigated by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) in their basic study about experience economy and experience consumption. According to the authors, the kernel of consumption could be the possession of the meaning or potential of the concrete goods. The authors also introduce 'hedonic viewpoint' as an important extension of traditional consumer research. They have argued that consumption besides fulfilling needs could give joy, could be free-time activity, can offer aesthetic joy and spur the imagination, and can cause emotive responses. So, in this way, consumption can be described with symbolic aspects, hedonistic response, the aesthetic aspect, and so consumption is a special state of mind. These factors could lead us to name this special state of mind as experience consumption.

According to the traditional marketing point of view, the focus consumption is the service or the particular good. In contrast, the hedonistic viewpoint says we can find the experience in the process of consumption everywhere, any point of the service could be an essential element of experience giving. In brief, the supply is not the product, but the promise of the experience by possessing the product or service. For these reasons, the experience – consumer experience – is a kind of mental or emotive phenomenon that is created inside the consumer (Pavluska 2014).

To understand the consumer experience, we have to acknowledge that Consumer Experience is the part of the hedonistic viewpoint. Thus, hedonistic consumption – besides fulfilling needs – should be defined as those elements of consumer behavior that relate to the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of product use (Hirschman–Holbrook 1982). According to Pavluska (2014) consumption, and this way the whole consumer experience, contains functional – rational and emotional aspects as well. Kotler and Keller (2012) agree that the holistic marketing viewpoint could be a good foundation for creating experience marketing, and that experience-focused consumer behavior needs a broader and deeper perspective.

3. Method and Subjects

Because of the fact that young people could spend hours on different online platforms – even 10-12 hours (Guld–Maksa 2015) – and use these forums to reveal their consumption to others, I presumed that the pictures and videos that we can see on their social media profiles are able to communicate something about their consumption. I believed that an online observation form, namely netnography could give me valuable information. Before conducting netnography I used photo collage technique interviews with 3, 20-21-year old female subjects.

Collaging is a projective technique in which participants are required select images that represent how they think or feel about a particular topic. The participants then explain to the interviewer the reason they chose each image. The collage becomes a tool through which participants are able to express needs and feelings that they might not otherwise have been able to articulate verbally (Landgarten 1993). Photo collage

investigation was necessary because I wanted to be sure what dimensions, feelings, and motivations I could expect to observe during the process of netnography. According to Horváth and Mitev (2015) photo collage technique could be suitable for investigating the thinking process of today's consumers, because the systems to classify this volume of stimulus – like these pictures – are able to represent the voluntary self-representation of participants. This information enabled me to better understand the posting method and to look for typical patterns in this process. So in conclusion, I think the private profile of each subject on any social media application they use – and the collage is given by all the photos they post – could be a special form of voluntary self-representation.

The photo collage interviews were conducted in May 2017. The photos were collected from 'average' photos as commonly seen in social media posts, and I looked for very similar shots among Google pictures. The original photo collage technique says that the collage is made from magazines and newspapers pictures, but in this context, there were ready, purposefully selected photos, and it made the technique similar to the online collage version of this technique. One limitation to be mentioned was the fact that these pictures were external to the original context and became one of many others the subject could choose from. I think it was not a huge problem, because the focus here was on the result and the complex meaning of the creation and not the source of these pictures or photos. Finley (2001) says that there is another advantage to this technique, namely the picture became part of another new story, and helped the subject to recall memories, feelings, emotions, experiences that had hardly been articulated until now.

Netnography is ethnography adapted to the study of online communities (Kozinetz 2006). This method is almost 15 years old, even though it has hardly been used in consumer behaviour researches. The great advantage of this technique is that the researcher is able to observe the thinking structure and decision-making pattern of a particular online groups in their natural surroundings via publicly available online communication channels. In fact, the research conducted in this way was able to gather a lot of information about these groups. As a disadvantage, we have to take into consideration typical ethical dilemmas, such as the permission of the subject to publish results. In my paper there will be not any citation, our aim was only to discover the main tendencies and average consequences. My subjects allowed me to use their summarized posting activities, but I am not able to show the original photos or exact texts, only the # categorization and associated feelings. I will use nicknames and the real age of the subject.

There are other disadvantages to this technique. One of these is the researcher has to know the observed group well. This was the aim of the photo collage interviews conducted. I never reacted to any of the posts and never got involved in any of the conversations. Another disadvantage is simultaneously one of the biggest advantages: this method is quite flexible. At the explanation of the results we have to take into consideration that this is an observation and we have only very few subjects. Consequently, we cannot make general statements, but the process was suitable for exploratory, pilot research. According to Kozinetz (2002) the first step to conduct a netnography is the so-called Cultural Entrée. It means that the researcher needs to collect more and more information about the channels he / she will use for data gathering, and about what kind of information is acceptable. According to Gál et al.

(2016) and Kozinetz (2002) there are many channels for this gathering process, and to mention some typical forms, there are boards, which function as electronic bulletin boards (also called newsgroups); independent web-pages as well as web-rings composed of thematically linked World Wide Web pages; multi-user dungeons and chat rooms tend to be considerably less market-oriented in their focus; and online social media communities. I chose this last one because my previous results and desk research identified them as the most promising form. The netnography was conducted from the 1st of June from the 31st of August in 2017.

Photo collage interviews gave us insight into 3 subject's posting activity, and let us to know a little bit more about the attitudes and feelings behind posting a particular picture. During this interview I asked the subject to choose from the pictures and create a big collage with 3 different groups of pictures with in.

1. group was the pictures they would post in any of her profiles either on Instagram or in Facebook.
2. group was one they liked, but would not post because of some reason.
3. group was the pictures they would not post in any circumstances, and even had some bad feelings toward.

According to netnography the first group and its motivations were relevant, but the subject were talking about the second and third one as well. Besides these 3 subjects, during the netnography I was observing the Instagram and Facebook posting activity of another 17 subjects (18–22 year-old). All of my subjects were users of both social media platforms. The observed dimensions were the following:

- Posted pictures and videos: the average posting time, frequency (time between two posting), common themes: family, friends, holiday, food or drink, music festivals, extreme sports etc.
- hashtag use: mainly on Instagram: average number, and frequency, typical forms,
- Other forms of posting on Facebook: what kind of any other form of post can we see during the observation period

4. Photo collage insights

In this chapter I would like to present the three photo-collage-subjects (Letti 20, Detti 21 and Etelka 20) posting activity according to what they said during the interview. And after that I will introduce the summarized netnography results as well.

As I have mentioned, each photo collages subject had to choose photos that they had some feelings towards. The 3 categories are signed with green, blue and red frames:

- In the green frame are the pictures they would post or the pictures that are similar to what the subject would post on their profile either on Instagram or on Facebook.
- In the blue frame are the pictures the subject likes but would not post because of some reason,
- And finally, in the red frame are those pictures that the subject would not post in any circumstances.

She said about the blue framed pictures, that if she saw one, she would like it, or save it for herself. The messenger icon symbolizes that there is a possibility that she would send it for her friends to see but only in private mail.

The red-framed-pictures were chosen because of bad feelings toward them. It is interesting to see the pictures of music festival photos in this collection. It was because the subject lives near one of them, and does not like to hear the loud music and the crowds. Another main feeling behind the red framed collection is that she does not want everyone to know where she currently is and that is the explanation of why she does not post about any restaurant or catering venue.

'I do not want to know everyone where I am, if I'm having fun there, and when I came home, maybe I will post one or two pictures. Or not...'

5. Netnography results according to photo collage insights

I observed 13 more subjects and their posting activities on Facebook and on Instagram. They were all of my friends on both platforms, so I could draw connections between the picture to the situation and vice versa. I made a table to summarize what kind of obvious posting activity can be seen in these cases (Table 1).

The most popular theme was family photos, and accordingly the photo collage subjects mentioned it. I would like to underline the fact that the motivation behind Instagram posting seems to be consistent –namely that people post there more often and more intimate posts (mainly pictures and videos can be seen). In contrast, on Facebook we can see only a few posted pictures and videos. According to the summarized data:

- I observed 7 male and 17 female objects,
- and their profiles on Instagram and on Facebook,
- on Instagram the subjects follow an average 307 people, and are followed by 244 people,
- during this 3-month-long period there were 202 pictures and videos posted,
- Meanwhile on Facebook there were 281 posts but only 74 were personal videos or pictures. The other posts were memes, music videos, events, game links.

The subjects were trying to post pictures they are proud of or made them happy. The most popular themes of the posts were family activities and events, food and drinks – such as cocktails and waffles or pancakes – feelings, extreme sports – bungee jumping, surfing, windsurfing– , free time activities – camping, sporting, fishing, having a trip or having a day on Lake Balaton, music festivals – Young Days of Szeged so SZIN, Balaton Sound, VOLT and Sziget music festivals were also mentioned and posted. In hashtag use (a tool for making content – centered groups) and the associated texts, we can imagine the experience behind the activity, and the desire to preserve this feeling by posting it on profiles. It is general, these kinds of posts are to be found on Instagram rather than on Facebook. In contrast, on Facebook we can see group-pictures of friends and families or selfies and landscapes, even more memes and funny videos or music videos. There are some more pictures that are linked from Instagram. For these reasons Facebook profiles look more depersonalized than Instagram profiles.

Table 1 Some interesting data about the posting activity of subjects

Subject' name	Year of birth	Gender	Pictures / videos on Instagram	All used #	Common used or interesting #	Pictures / videos on FB
Letti	1996	F	64	35	ZIN #fesztival:) #Balaton #Siófok #lakodalom	25
Detti	1996	F	4	6	coctail #sexonthebeach; #waffles #blueberry #sweethome	2
Etelka	1995	F	2	16	#mylove #balcsi #6.5év #exams #kethetbalaton #family # pihi #happy	3
Laura	1995	F	6	22	#summer #nemakarok hazamenni #balaton #hajókázás	4
Gábor	1996	M	13	30	#piknik summer #budapest #mik #afternoonwalk	2
Jácint	1997	M	6	0	-	2
Mercédesz	1996	F	13	7	#ilovenyc #warsaw #travel #budapest #hungary #mutimiteszel	3
Kamilla	1996	F	10	25	#sweet20 #sightseeingday #familyholiday museum #amphiteatre	6
Dalma	1995	F	19	22	fun #friend #crazy #girls #coctail	4
Stella	1999	F	2	0	-	2
Dominik	1997	M	4	4	#langolnivagyom #smoke #forpresident	2
Bence	1995	M	1	5	#cat #catlover #meow kings #pegasus	2
Rebeka	1996	F	6	5	#voltfestival #vegreszin #chill #suncity	2
Kornél	1995	M	3	2	#light #nice	2
Bianka	1995	F	18	17	#lastnight #wassogood #elegant #mom #love #engagement #traccsparty	3
Anton	1995	M	10	13	oppegyesküvő #sziget #bp #tenger	2
Anikó	1996	F	1	1	#ujvagyokitt	2
Dorina	1998	F	12	26	est #love #friendship #happy #sun #blackismycolour	2
Tamás	1995	M	3	3	#nicebulilding #somethingclear	3
Veronika	1996	F	5	5	#beginningofanewlife #concert #music #szin #havefun	1
Total	-	-	202	244	-	74
Average	1996	-	10	12	-	3

Source: Own construction

6. Conclusion

In my research I was investigating the symbolical consumption of generation Z (born from 1995 to 1999). Previously I was conducting focus group investigations and deep semi-structured interviews, and the results let me suppose that I will need to use another method capable of analyzing content. For these reasons I chose netnography.

Firstly, I conducted 3 photo collage interviews in May 2017. It was necessary because I wanted to be sure of the dimensions I would observe, what the main keywords were, and on which platform I should focus my research. I also sought to get some information about the attitudes, feelings toward social media posts and wanted to learn more about posting activity in general.

While we were conducting the photo collage interviews, the subjects said they were sure that there were typical goods and services, which were designed for giving people joy and making them to want to have more. In this category they mentioned: manicure, pedicure, music festivals, culinary festivals, concerts, cinema and theatre, exit games, and art pubs, extreme sports and travelling. They emphasized that it was very important to make people happy, i.e. selling them things they did not exactly need, but would make them feel joy, valued and competent. Furthermore, it was very important to take a photo of these and post it online, letting other people know about it. In the photo collage making process the subjects had to form 3 different groups of pictures. The first was of those they would post, in the second group were pictures they liked but would not post, and the third was what they would not post in any circumstances. The first-group-pictures were typically memories of events involving family and friends, food and drinks, and sometimes leisure activities. The subjects said it was important for them, that only a narrow range of their friends could see their post, maybe only the closest ones. This was much easier to effect on Instagram than on Facebook.

Between 1st of June and 31st of August in 2017 I was conducted netnography research. I observed the 3 photo collage subjects and 13 other people's Instagram and Facebook profiles. During these 3-month-long observations I saw altogether 202 pictures and videos on Instagram, together with 244#s. The main themes of the photos and posted explanatory texts were family events, vacation photos, free time activity videos – such as bungee jumping and videos from music festivals. VOLT, SZIN and Balaton Sound were also mentioned in the post. On the other hand, we noted a lot of attention paid to food and drinks. Meanwhile, on Facebook profiles we saw numerous links, memes and funny content and events but only 74 pictures and videos about the subjects.

Consequently, I have to say that in light of the visible posting activities on Instagram, it is one of the main channels for communicating experience. In contrast, Facebook is more for organizing events and information gathering or communication. We can see a lot of links, memes, funny content and events, but only 74 pictures and videos about the subjects. Briefly, the focus of Facebook is 'staying in touch with each other' and 'I'll let you see what I am doing' is the focus of the Instagram posts.

Finally, on the basis of these findings, I would like to build a model to help me measure experience consumption among young consumers. It seems like communities and social connections could play a huge role in pleasure seeking and experience consumption. On the other hand, the self-representing elements of this process and the opportunities for self-representation in the case of consumption at this age, should also be taken into consideration. I would like to prove my findings to date by quantitative methods. As I see it now, the three levels of consumption could also be an inspiration for my model, because I think behind experience consumption, we can discover third-level motivation.

References

- Campbell, C. (1983): Romanticism and The Consumer Ethic: Inimations of a Weber-style Thesis. *Sociological Analysis*, 44, 279–96.
- Corrgian, P. (1997): The sociology of consumption. Sage, London.
- Csikszentmihályi, M. (1990): *Flow. The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Harper Collings Publishers, New York
- Finley, S. (2001): Painting life histories. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing, Summer*, 123–162.
- Gál, T. – Soós, M. – Szakály, Z. (2016): Online fogyasztói csoportok azonosítása az egészségtudatos táplálkozás terén netnográfiai kutatással. In: EMOK XXII. Országos Konferencia – Hitelesség és Értékkorientáció a Marketingben Konferenciakötet, Debreceni Egyetem, Gazdaságtudományi Kar, Marketing és Kereskedelem Intézet, 119–127.
- Gardner, B. – Levy, S. J. (1955): The product and the brand. *Harvard Business Review*, 33, March–April, 33–39.
- Guld, Á. – Maksa, Gy. (2015): Fiatalok kommunikációjának és médiahasználatának vizsgálata. In: Törőcsik Mária (szerk.) *A Z generáció magatartása és kommunikációja*. Pécsi Tudományegyetem, 52–65.
- Hirschman, E. C. – Holbrook, M. B (1982): Hedonic consumption: emerging concepts, methods and proposititons. *Journal of Marketing*, 46 (3), 9–101.
- Holbrook, M. B. – Hirschman, E. C. (1982): The experimental expects of consumption: Cunsumer fantasies, feelings and fun. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 9, 2, 132–140.
- Horváth, D. – Mitev, A. (2015): Kollázstechnika, képasszociációk. In Horváth, D. – Mitev, A. (eds.): *Alternatív kvalitatív kutatási kézikönyv*. 337–356.
- Kotler, P. – Keller, K. (2012): *Marketingmenedzsment*. Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest.
- Kozinets, R. V. (2002): The Field Behind the Screen: Using Netnography For Marketing Research in Online Communities. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 39, February, 61–72.
- Kozinetz, V. R. (2006): Click to Connect: Netnography and Tribal Advertising. *Journal of Adverising Research*, September, 279–288.
- Landgarten, H. B. (1993): *Magazine photo collage: A multicultural assessment and treatment technique*. Brunner/Mazel, New York.
- Maslow, A. H. (1964): *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences*. Ohio State University Press, Columbus USA.
- Pavluska V. (2014): *Kultúra marketing, Elméleti alapok, gyakorlati megfontolások*. Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest.
- Pine II, J. B. – Gilmore, J. H. (1999): *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre & Every Business a Stage: (Goods and Services are No Longer Enough)*. Harvard Business Press, Boston.
- Simány L. (2005): Bevezetés a fogyasztói társadalom elméletébe. *Replika*, 51–52, 165–195.