

Co-Experiencing Interactive Technology: with a Cross-Cultural Notion

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we aim at taking the concept of co-experience further by explaining how interactive technologies take part in organization of experience. We draw theoretical framework from symbolic interactionism and open discussion of the role of culture in co-experience.

Author Keywords

User experience, co-experience, interaction, culture

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

CO-EXPERIENCE: THEORETICAL LANDSCAPE

Battarbee [1] has classified user experience frameworks into person-centered (need-based), product-centered (design checklists), and interaction-focused strands. As she also points out, a good deal of writing has had no theoretical grounding. In those few attempts in which the concept has been given a theoretical interpretation, it has usually been linked to pragmatist philosophy. In particular, building on Dewey's [4] philosophy, Wright et al. [12] distinguish sensory, emotional, spatio-temporal and compositional strands of experience and stress its sensory and emotional character over cognitive one. Also building on Dewey, Forlizzi and Ford [5] note that a good deal of experience is "subconscious," although it may also become "an experience," which is meaningful and memorable, having a clear beginning and an end.

However, as the advances in consumer products and available technologies are bringing new possibilities for product related experiences [1], those notions require a new

approach to user experience. In a good deal of research on product use, diverse ways of collaborative use are observed, and those findings illustrate how meanings of individual experiences emerge and change in social interaction [2]. This notion led to critiques of existing user experience frameworks which have missed social aspects of experience.

To address the problem of social action in user experience literature, Battarbee [2] introduced the notion of co-experience. She specifically posed the question of how meanings, emotions and actions in product use emerge and change in social interaction, by linking her notion to symbolic interactionism, following Blumer's [3] formulation of this framework.

As we shall argue, this concept opens a new kind of design space, focusing attention to issues like the role of emotions in interaction with products and systems. This is a conceptual paper looking at how this concept can be used to understand how people experience interactive technologies in cultural context.

CO-EXPERIENCE AND INTERACTIVE TECHNOLOGY IN CULTURAL CONTEXT

The roots of co-experience lie in symbolic interactionism. What people see as a proper way of acting in any situation depends on how they position themselves and others into it. In particular, what interactionists call role-taking plays a crucial role: identities and roles are key resources when people construe lines of action for any situation [9]. However, taking a line of action depends not only on how people define their roles to others but also on that technologies participate in situational definitions. For example, they may function as enablers of action, much as a stage in a play, suggest direction to action, or become a focus of talk and stories. Co-experience can best be treated as an intervening variable in conduct shaped by culture (Figure 1).

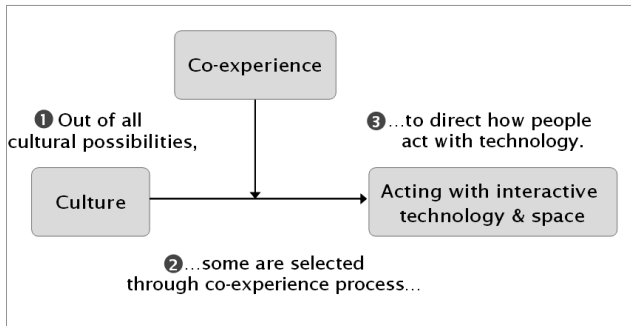


Fig 1. Culture, co-experience and action

For cultural comparisons, the most important co-experience process is the role-taking process dictated by role-identities constituted through socialization processes [9]. What people define as proper behaviors depends crucially on role designations that also set expectations to conduct. Technology may or may not support these definitions.

Now, role-taking functions differently depending on society and social environment. Battarbee inherited her idea of interaction from Blumer, understanding action as a labile process, reducing role-taking almost it to situational improvisation [1][3]. As structural interactionists argue, this view may have been appropriate in Chicago in the 1930s, but hardly in more tradition-respecting societies in which established role-identities play a far more crucial role in role-taking and through it in conduct, making social structure far more stable [9][11].

Building on structural interactionists, we can give a sociological interpretation for several observations about cultural differences. For example, in *high-context cultures* [6] like Japan and Korea one has to act not only in terms of situational requirements, but also, say, respect seniority and high-status more than *low-context cultures* in which people play down issues like honorifics and status. In low-context cultures, technology can be built for maximal efficiency without recourse to how it functions in social organization. Similarly, some of the claims of Hofstede's [7] study lead to technology-related hypotheses. For example, in countries with high uncertainty avoidance scores, it is up to high-status people to voice complaints about ambiguity or intrusions and take lead in reducing it.

Furthermore, as Inglehart notes, these patterns change with social change. As societies get wealthier, they drift from traditionalist through materialist to post-materialist values [8]. For example, in a study of social change in Korea, Na and Cha [10] have shown that young metropolitan Koreans are far more post-materialistic than their older and rural countrymen, who lean towards materialistic and traditional values.

IMPLICATIONS

To understand how people organize co-experience in interactive technologies and how it is related to their cultural backgrounds, we need to explore the concept of co-experience further in both theoretical and empirical studies. As discussed above, theories in symbolic interactionism and cultural dimensions enable us to hypothesize people's actions in co-experiencing interactive technologies. Then cross-cultural studies by involving real users will provide means to test the hypotheses.

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