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## **RECLAIMING ‘THE EXPERIENCE’: SOCIAL MEDIA, THE ‘METAVERSE’, AND EXTRACTIVE IMAGINARIES OF EXPERIENTIAL ENHANCEMENT**

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### **Introduction**

In the introductory video to their vision for the ‘Metaverse’<sup>1</sup>, Mark Zuckerberg and his colleagues repeat the word ‘experience’ more than 60 times. Enhancing users’ experience is frequently what social media use to legitimate and justify their actions (Beer 2019). The ‘experience’ – and how social media frame, appropriate and exploit it – is the topic of this paper.

In this theoretical-methodological intervention, I start from a close reading and a digital technographic (Berg 2022) analysis of Zuckerberg’s introduction to the idea of the ‘Metaverse’ to argue that a critical-phenomenological disposition is urgent for examining the dispute for ‘the experience’ and for challenging how certain platform-centric ideals of ‘the experiential’ (particularly, notions of ‘active’ and ‘embodied’ experience) become incorporated and habituated.

### **Social media and the matter of experience**

Despite the discourse of openness and connectedness that is often reproduced by social media, in the last decade an increasing body of critical scholarship has been scrutinizing the extractivist, exploitative nature of mainstream platforms (van Dijck 2013; Zuboff 2019). The growing interest in platform capitalism and data colonialism (Couldry and Mejias 2019) foregrounds how human experience is central not only to social media’s rhetoric but also to their advertising-driven business models.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/RealityLabs/videos/561535698440683/>

The central argument of this paper is that the colonial inclinations of mainstream social media are manifested not only in their data-extractivist operation, but also in how, through the construction of ideal usership through discursive material configurations (Docherty 2020), they manage to normatively frame our conceptions and imaginaries of human experience. The presentation on the so-called 'Metaverse', I suggest, is a fertile site to observe how those configurations operate, and the notions of the experiential they are trying to construct.

### **The 'metaverse' and the experiential**

In presenting the next stage of his company, Zuckerberg calls it a transition from '*the social internet*' to '*the embodied internet*'. My analysis suggests that the central narrative here is an alleged shift from a technoscape premised on 'engagement' to one based on 'immersion'. That is, after normatively framing what is an 'active' experience', the next stage seems to focus on our ideas of 'embodied experience'.

Mainstream platforms inform our conception of what 'sociality' is (Carmi 2020). The ideal user of our current 'social internet' has been the 'actively' engaged user (Docherty 2020) – the one who likes, clicks, comments, shares. Indeed, when interviewing social media users for a previous project, I identified that scrolling an endless stream of content, for instance, is generally assumed to be a 'passive', 'mindless' task (Lupinacci 2021). This is, in my view, the unquestioned, naturalized reproduction of 'engagement' as the ideal, valued attribute of social media practices. This conception is platform-centric insofar as 'active experience' is reduced to those practices that more clearly generate quantifiable data footprints.

Allegedly, the novelty brought by 'the Metaverse' would be a sensorially richer, more immersive mediation in which, "*instead of looking at a screen, you're going to be in these experiences*". Meta claims that human interaction should finally become more "*natural and vivid*" as "*devices won't be the focal point of your attention anymore*". The transition to this 'embodied internet' would mean the beginning of a new era for human interaction, "*where you're in the experience, not just looking at it*". In emphasizing notions of immersion, social and co-presence, and teleportation, as well as the access to people's gestures, movement, and facial expressions, the company is discursively constructing the (future) ideal user as someone whose corporeality is fully available for mediation (and, presumably, data extraction). Subjecting the body to objectification is then how "*to unlock a lot of amazing new experiences*".

Bearing this in mind, I posit that what is needed is a critical framework that approaches the topic of social media and their self-proclaimed experiential enhancement not by focusing on how effective those interfaces that seek to provide 'immersion' are, but rather by dedicating attention to processes of naturalization of certain normative ideals and types of interactions with technology. The lens of habituation, I argue, offers us a less 'platform-centric' vocabulary for the examination of how power relations become incorporated into everyday life.

## Critical phenomenology and habituation

Phenomenology is the study of everyday, taken-for-granted experiences, and is concerned with the examination of how the world ‘appears’ to us through our senses (Merleau-Ponty 2012). The starting point of a critical phenomenology of social media is the understanding that, in these platforms, ‘appearances’ are never neutral or organic (Couldry and Kallinikos 2017; Carmi 2020). Rather than reproducing the attribution of media’s power and taken-for-grantedness to their pervasiveness and ‘saturation’, phenomenology frames this as a result of active processes of habituation (Highmore 2011; Pedwell 2021).

Yet, focusing on habituation should not stop us from acknowledging the fact that these habits are often orchestrated and oriented. As coined by Chun (2017), “habit is ideology in action”. It is precisely in understanding this enactment between habit and ideology, and the contested experiences resultant from it, that a critical phenomenological disposition is useful. In this context, ‘experience’ is both what social media platforms (claim to) deliver, and the resource they cultivate, extract, and exploit for commercial purposes. In short, I argue that a critical-phenomenological perspective is productive for scrutinizing social media precisely at the intersection of embodied affect and the political economy of platformization, whilst centering specifically what is so often framed as the driver of technical mediation: human experience.

## Concluding remarks

Scholars have long critiqued the use of the adjective ‘social’ to distinguish certain types of technologies and practices. Perhaps, then, we need the same dedication and scrutiny in critiquing this attempted possession of ‘the body’ by Silicon Valley ideology. Embodiment, as understood by phenomenology, is a basic condition of our being in the world (Merleau-Ponty 2012) – there is, therefore, no such a thing as a ‘disembodied’ internet that needs to be fixed, regardless of what *Meta* might try to make us believe.

Ultimately, through the introduction of their vision for the next technological tide, platforms such as Facebook are also colonizing our conditions of imaginability – the ways in which we can dream and conceive of possible futures (Haupt 2021). In setting the vocabulary and expectations for what the future of mediated communications ought to look like, as well as “*the technology that needs to be invented*” for the concretization of these ambitious plans, Zuckerberg and his counterparts are also controlling the narrative of technological development in the direction that best favors their own interests. Despite the overly reproduced emphasis on incrementing ‘the experience’, they are mostly supporting the endurance of their extractivist, (meta)data-driven operation.

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