

Chapter 8 Consumer narratives in the marketplace and their role in discourses of power

8.1 Introduction

This chapter documents a study of consumer application of empowerment on eBay to marketplace discourses of power. The data for this study was extracted during an eighteen month long ethnography and archaeology of eBay. Informant networks, my modes of encounter and data collection techniques for this study are outlined in chapters 3 and 4.

This study organizes as well as deconstructs consumer narratives on eBay to reveal their components and themes, and explores the role of these narratives in marketplace discourses of power. During eighteen months of immersion in eBay, a huge number of these narratives were collected. At the end of data collection the extended database comprised over 10,000 eBay auction listings, and consumer narratives contained in more than 2,000 pages of printout. These narratives were categorized and analysed to generate themes which became focus of further exploration. Because of the sheer volume and variety of the data, it is not possible to follow the standard practice of first presenting the data, and then analysis and findings. The rest of this chapter is organized around deconstruction of a typical consumer narrative on eBay to support the findings, which are presented simultaneously. Some statistics, characteristics and themes of representative narratives are tabulated in table 8.9, and two partial examples of narratives appear as appendices 8.1 and 8.2

This study is a follow on to the study presented in the previous chapter. My immersion in eBay had become addictive within the first six months. I was captivated by the diversity and dynamism of the social, cultural and commercial discourses on eBay, none of which

included marketers as a party. Within this consumer-consumer exchange mechanism that is eBay, there were indications that some consumers had found the empowerment to become a marketer immensely corrupting, and that although the very reason for a consumer-consumer exchange mechanism is to remove the marketer and the middleman from the equation, consumers themselves had adopted and adapted to these two roles with relative ease. There was intense competition among consumers within this marketplace, and I found consumers employing all means to create winning ad-copies and lasting brands in order to gain commercial advantage. It is at this point that I started detecting and collecting these consumer generated marketing communications, and the various discourses that flowed from them.

In the rest of this chapter I first present a literary contextualization of narratives and their significance in consumption and marketplace discourses, followed by a brief description of consumer empowerment on eBay. I then present an analysis of eBay narratives through an illustrative deconstruction, outlining their origins, creation strategies and functions. This analysis includes all forms and formats of narratives available; textual and visual product descriptions, audio-visual enhancements as well as statistical records; narratives inspired by and following onto commercial narratives, as well as those that exhibit resistance to pervasive brand semiotics. A special class of marketplace offerings is classified and treated exclusively. These are products devised and marketed by eBay users themselves, and considering that the narratives associated with such offerings need not be influenced by prevalent commercial themes, points of departure, as well as continuities are examined. I also identify how consumers use socially and culturally embedded narratives, archetypes and mythologies in order to promote their own ideological agendas. I conclude by arguing that consumers are a party to any marketplace discourse of power, and that consumer

empowerment in this new marketplace domain alters the balance of power, highlighting a paradigmatic shift in this continual discourse.

8.2 Consumer, consumption and marketplace narratives

The term narrative is contested in terms of definition; its definition varies across disciplines. Jeremy Bruner, who is generally influenced by Clifford Geertz, conceptualizes narrative as a form of thought, which is based on the logic of human experience, and connects the action with the actor (Bruner 1986). One contemporary definition of a narrative is that it is a sign indicating the presence of a discourse as the signifier and object of the story as signified (Ryan 2005). Ryan further argues that access to a discourse is dependent on mapping all semiotic manifestations of related narratives, which can have many components, each manifested in entirety or in a combination of textual, visual, mimetic or dramatic forms.

If we expand Barthes's (1966) definition by including elements from Bruner (1986) and Ryan (2005), we arrive at a wider, non-discipline-specific definition of a narrative; that narratives are articulations carried, contained and transmitted through language (verbal as well as textual), images, (constructed, captured or represented in both fixed and moving forms) and gestures (extended or represented). They help us to construct our social and cultural worlds through our stories about past, present and future; account, action and imagination; myth, legend and fable; arts, crafts and literature; marketplaces, products and behaviours. This definition of narrative will inform the rest of this chapter.

Like other facets of social and cultural life, narratives permeate the marketplace, but since marketplaces are ruled and governed by marketing practitioners, all marketplace narratives, including consumer and consumption narratives, exhibit strong advertising and marketing communication influences. Brand and product semiotics have become essential

tools for consumer articulations. As brands continue to become social and cultural icons (Holt 2004), consumers become conditioned to accept themes in marketing communications as larger-than-life-genres. Consumers routinely use material from these marketing communications to construct their own individualized version of consumption narratives.

To consumers, the marketplace is an essential component of their lifeworld. It is also an uneven field of play; it is marketers' home ground and they possess the resources, tools and techniques to rule it in more ways than one. Marketing practitioners conduct research and read consumer research journals. They are formally trained to influence, rule and govern marketplaces. Marketing communications respond directly to social and cultural changes. Contemporary marketing communications are dynamic and evolutionary in nature, feeding society with a continually fresh supply of storylines, archetypes and mythologies (Thompson 2004) for the construction of consumption narratives.

Commercial narratives are aimed at embedding products as referents in audiences' social and cultural existence; their sole purpose being that the consumer narrative of all-things-good-in-life is structured around thematic and semiotic relationships established by marketers (Holt 2004). Such self-referential replication guarantees the longevity of both product and narrative. Many commercial narratives are structured by an extant cultural code relevant to an interpretive community (Scott 1994, Stern 1995). Although current research has indicated that advertising is neither the sole, nor the primary means of such cultural meaning transfer (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001), storylines propagated through advertising are considered important vehicles for transmitting social and cultural meanings to consumers (Mick and Buhl 1992, McQuarrie and Mick 1992). Thompson's (2004) work demonstrates that commercial narratives are created and tailored to provide meanings and

metaphors to serve ideological agendas, and that the dynamically evolving nature of marketplace mythologies indicates an ever-present discourse of power among marketplace stakeholders.

Within consumer research, consumer articulations and marketplace narratives derive from, and are studied through, the thin constraints of brand and product; consumer prompted and consumer generated marketplace narratives appear to be a rarity. It may even seem that the consumer, as a stakeholder in these marketplace discourses of power, has assumed a secondary, passive, role; his articulations are regurgitations of commercial narratives. Marketing practitioners, with a finger on his pulse, continually update and refine their narratives to foster their own vested commercial and ideological agendas. Because media and communications are controlled by the advertising dollar, commercial marketplace structures do not allow consumers to play a significant part in creating commercial narratives. This in turn seems to give rise to the emergence of anti-market, out-of-market platforms such as the 'Burning man festival' (Kozinets 2002). In order to find '*consumer generated*' commercial narratives, devoid of self-referential commercial agenda, perhaps it is pertinent to look at alternate marketplaces where a consumer becomes the marketer himself.

8.3 Consumer empowerment through alternate marketplaces

Online auctions are an example of such alternate marketplaces. Many significant characteristics of online auctions were presented in section 7.2. It is, however, important to acknowledge that such market platforms are no longer alternate, and many have become mainstream in their own right. At around \$50 billion annual transaction estimates, (\$34.2 billion reported by Time magazine in February 2005), eBay is among top 100 global

economies, ahead of several European countries in the ranking. Given the size of its economy, and because very few of its 150 million members are businesses or large corporations, eBay represents a major shift in marketplace structures. With individuals themselves acting on both sides of a transaction, millions of items are bought and sold every day, sometimes a buyer becomes a seller and the reverse at others – both roles are played interchangeably (Siddiqui and Turley 2005). As argued in the previous chapter, online auctions have emerged as an alternative marketplace where consumers are free to experiment with a variety of marketplace roles: bidder, watcher, buyer, seller, marketer and advertiser. The touch and feel of a whole gamut of marketing practices is finally within consumers' reach and control. This significant change in centuries old marketplace structures makes the consumer a potent force in contemporary marketplace discourses of power.

8.4 Finding and following narratives on eBay

Digital textuality, by being inherently suitable for composition, collection and study of narratives, has energized the imagination of both media theorists and practitioners, engendering a certain 'myth' that all such narratives present an idealized representation of the genre they ascribe to or describe (Ryan 2005). However, all digital texts cannot be treated as narratives. Burner (1986) argues that any narrative situated in a real world must contain three essential components: setting, characters and action. In selecting narratives, these three criteria components were applied as follows: the setting was eBay; seller, buyers and watchers were the characters; and the process of selling was the action. Since all these components come together on eBay around an item on auction, item listing on eBay was considered both source and container of a narrative. This chapter is organized

around deconstruction of a typical consumer narrative on eBay to support the findings, and exhibit 8.1 below illustrates how an item listing appears on eBay.



Exhibit 8.1 Item listing header

The item listing is titled ‘*Argos Pro Action Sydney 1 man Tent – Classic Design*’, and was inserted in the camping and outdoor equipment section on eBay UK. The title of listing and its’ category of entry serve as categorizing elements which provide buyers with shortcuts to their desired items among the millions of items on sale, and sellers with means of attracting the right audience. The narrative forms around this listing and remains attached to the title for the duration of auction.

A story was collected only when all three components outlined above were significantly in evidence. Thus, wherever a seemingly excellent storyline appeared as part of seller generated advertising, but failed to attract either an audience or an interaction, it was excluded from the dataset. The intent in this practice was not to marginalize such texts, which might have been of significance in many other ways, but to maintain a narrow focus on those narratives that contributed to the discourse of power in this alternate marketplace. Selecting narratives for this study was thus a careful and exacting exercise.

One section of the extended database (over 10,000 listings, more than 2,000 pages of printout) garnered particular attention for two reasons. First, in stark contrast to general eBay narratives, some of these narratives had audiences in hundreds of thousands (over 2 million in one case). The significance of such a large audience for routine items on auction

cannot be understated. For example, the auction for a used Argos tent attracted over 53,000 viewers, over 100 interactants and 73 bids, all of which are highly unusual for the type of item on offer. Second, many of these mass-audience narratives pertained to marketplace offerings that were not resale of commercial or branded items, but entirely consumer created. Audience size on eBay is indicated by a hit counter attached to the listing. This hit counter only registers a hit when an eBay member accesses the listing for the first time. Non-members viewing the auction, or multiple visits by individual members do not affect the hit count. Because of the way this hit counter works, it becomes a very effective tool for selection of a narrative. Exhibit 8.2 below illustrates the final hit count for Argos One Man Tent auction.



[Free Counters powered by Andale!](#)

Exhibit 8.2 hit counter

My longitudinal process of eBay narrative collection was somewhat similar to Czarniawska and Gagliardi's (2003) story collection outline. Narratives of interest were detected, followed and recorded as they developed. Because all narratives were followed through their course, a timeline was also recorded for each. Every once in a while a collection of these narratives were interpreted through deconstruction to find what they were saying and how were they saying it. This yielded a variety of temporally distributed themes in terms of storylines and plot elements. Since many popular narratives evolve not only with narrator-audience interaction but also in response to other current media genres and events, such relationships, wherever discovered, were also noted and appended to the storylines. These notes were later used to understand how such narratives evolve in order to attract and accommodate even larger interpretive community.

8.5 Components of eBay Narratives

As an expansive interactive canvass, eBay offers several forms and avenues of narrativity and consumers experiment with them freely to create their own versions of narratives. Although such experimentation makes eBay a dynamic and ever-evolving platform, during the period of study I analysed around 2000 listing and found that essentially all were formed of four primary components. Since each narrative existed and revolved around an item put on sale by an individual, it comprised links to the individual selling the item, details and attributes of the item on offer, interested individuals' (bidders and watchers) questions and comments and occasionally social and cultural discourses in response to any of the preceding elements. These components are outlined in table 8.3 and are briefly described in the following.

Components of eBay Narrative	
Identity component <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member ID • Member feedbacks • About Me page • Linked self pages 	Interaction component <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-mails, telephonic or Skype conversations • Terms and conditions of sale • Access to other items for sale or shops • Financial transactions
Marketing component <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product description / sales copies • Marketing communication inspired / copied content / link to manufacturer's website • Consumer original value enhancement components 	Social and cultural component <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reference / association with a community • Reference / association with a culture • Gossip, story telling and interactive chatting through 'Ask seller a question' forum.

Table 8.3

8.5.1 Identity component: As a consumer oriented marketplace, eBay is structured around interaction between individuals. Consumer identification by means of a user ID is a prerequisite for eBay membership. To establish member credibility each user ID is linked to a rating scale (feedback score) based on feedback comments from other members. Exhibits 8.4 below illustrate how such an identity component appears on a member page and exhibit 8.5 illustrates how it appears on auction listing.

Feedback Profile

[netnographer](#) (209 ) [Contact member](#) [View items for sale](#)

Member since 01-Mar-04 in Ireland

Feedback Score: **209**

Positive Feedback: **100%**

Members who left a positive: 209

Members who left a negative: 0

All positive Feedback: 233

[Find out what these numbers mean](#)

[View ID History](#)

[Add to Favourite Sellers](#)

[View eBay My World](#)

[View Reviews & Guides](#)

Recent Feedback Ratings (last 12 months)

	1 month	6 months	12 months
 Positive	3	13	19
 Neutral	0	0	0
 Negative	0	0	0

Exhibit 8.4. member information as it appears on member page

Seller information

[valeriain1567](#) (1580 ) 

Feedback Score: 1580

Positive Feedback: 99.9%

Member since 23-Dec-01 in United Kingdom

[Read feedback comments](#)

[Add to Favourite Sellers](#)


[Ask seller a question](#)

[View seller's other items](#)

 **PayPal Buyer Protection**
Free Coverage now up to £500. [See eligibility.](#)

Exhibit 8.5. member information as it appears on the listing

The first line in both illustrations 8.4 and 8.5 provides member ID, followed by the trustworthiness or feedback score. The second line details members' trustworthiness status by giving the score, and its positive percentage. For example in example 8.5, member [valeriain1567](#) has a feedback score of 1580, which means he has transacted, both as a buyer and a seller, with 1580 individuals. He also has 99.9% trustworthiness, which means 99.9% of these 1580 individuals gave him a positive feedback. Obviously higher feedback score represent members' transaction experience on eBay. eBay members take pride in

both their identities and transaction records and it is common to find statements like “*look at my 100% feedback and bid with confidence*” in item descriptions. Buyer credibility is further strengthened through a record of bidding activities including bid retractions. In addition to the basic information, there are many hyperlinks embedded in the box, which the other members can use to access additional information about the member and her activities. The little  icon in the first line is the link to members’ personal web-page.

Based on their performance, sellers also have the opportunity to be distinguished through achieving of ‘power-seller’ or ‘trading assistant’ status. eBay identity highlights members’ status as both buyer and seller, and is thus a strong component in any overall eBay narrative. The basic elements of such identity are created and updated automatically with each transaction. Many members make little effort to go beyond these basic elements and remain content with the identity created and presented by the eBay system. However, established members use all means available to them to craft uniquely distinguishable online personae in order to influence and shape the outcomes of their marketplace activities.

8.5.2 Marketing component: Every auction on eBay is centred on an auction listing, which can be considered an advertisement for the item on offer. These are created by the individual sellers, and thus can be viewed as consumer generated alternate product advertising. This marketing and commercial component of eBay narratives is perhaps the most significant contributor to the discourses such alternate marketplaces have engendered. It comprises the product description which is essentially a form of advertising copy for the item on sale. Similar to other forms of marketplace advertising, product descriptions on eBay also come in a variety of forms and formats, but most can be categorised at three

levels depicting consumer effort in creation and content sophistication; minimal, enhanced or creative. These three are described briefly in the following

Minimal description: In the case of a second-hand branded product a minimal description is a consumer's version of advertising for an existing marketplace product and is often influenced / inspired / copied from original marketing communication content. At times it may even have a link to the marketer's original website. However, even at the minimal level, consumers do adapt, modify and at time rewrite the original advertising copy by highlighting features or attributes that they find worthy, as well as by disguising or eliminating less desirable ones.

Enhanced description: Sellers who put in a little more effort in creating product descriptions may use current media events, personal, social or cultural relationships, as well as other subtitles they deem pertinent, in order to impart a certain value enhancement to the main commercial component. These consumer enhancements go beyond the original marketer's advertising copy and many times may even offer insights for marketers by providing unsolicited consumer comments. Sometimes consumers may also use these adaptations in a deconstructive manner by expressing disappointment (*"I am selling it because it is crap"*) or to illustrate their own preference rankings between competing brands (*"I bought it in error, thinking it was as good as Sony"*). On the following two pages is a typical example of an enhanced version of product description. This description comprises two pictures of the actual item on auction, and a detailed information in the text, which goes beyond original marketer's (Argos) description by adding many personal opinions, experiences and recommendations. Much of the creative text in the description expresses dissatisfaction with the product. It also uses references to relevant media personalities and themes (Ray Mears and Andy McNab - presenters of wilderness

exploration programs and experts in bushcraft and wilderness survival), and other brands (Northface and Berghaus – both leading wilderness survival equipment brands) as subtitles to generate audience interest. It is noteworthy that this ‘used’ tent, which is described as a ‘useless’ item, and which is sold by Argos for £12.99, attracted 72 bids and was auctioned for £360 in front of an audience of over 53,000. This description would be revisited several times later on as it contains many other elements that support other themes and findings.



Camping, Hiking, Scuba Diving, Aquatic adventures, Rambling, Lake District, Rain and Wind. Not Berghaus, North Face, Millets etc.

Argos Pro Action Sydney 1 man Tent - Classic Design.

1 Man tent or may suit 2 very small people.

This is an opportunity to get your hands on a "Used only Once Tent".

It has only been used once because it is rubbish, I have just returned from a weekend of Wild Camping in the Lakes, around the Shap and Nabs moor area with this tent.

It is of a single skin design, and is basically a flysheet with a sewn in ground sheet, no inner tent. it does feature its own in-built irrigation system and every morning I had enough water inside the tent to make a brew and do a boil in the bag breakfast, you just need to wring out any clothing or your sleeping bag and you are ready to go.

it has a full length side opening door, this is useful for emptying the tent of all the water your kit didn't soak up.

This tent is not to be confused in anyway with quality Tents or shelters as used by Ray Mears, Andy McNab, the SAS, SBS, Paras or Marines although the amount of water it lets in, it may be of use to Navy or Police Divers.

The overall dimensions are 200 by 120, 90 by 90 and 60cm it features 2 fibreglass poles one for each end and is easily erected.

Made in China by their best camping equipment specialists, so ideal for the wet and windy UK.

the dry weight of this tent is 1.5kg, however after a nights camping it can go upto 2kg and with your bergan and all your gear wet through you can add upto 5kg in weight to your bergan.



Personally I would only recommend this tent for any dessert , beach or especially back garden type locations, or lodged at the back of a shed.

It comes with an instruction booklet, which is a little water damaged as I stored it in the tent whilst I was sleeping. it also comes with a spare bit of fibreglass pole and a spare peg and guy rope. the instruction booklet has some handy hints such as, pitch your tent at home, i feel it should just leave it at that, just at home!

it also states that mud flaps are fitted to the sides of the tent where the living area is located as this assists in keeping out wind and rain, they are not fitted around the bedroom area as this helps with the ventilation. i did not notice a living area on my tent only a sleeping area so this may be an additional buy-in.

another valuable piece of information it gives is that polyester tents are prone to condensation, so leave the doors open to aid ventilation, top tip in the back garden, pants on a mountain.

so there you have it, if you want minutes of dry fun and hours of being wet and cold this is the tent for you.

low starting price

Exhibit 8.6 Enhanced product description

Creative description: This third category of consumer generated marketing narrative pertains to non-market offerings. Because these products are conceived, and at times produced, by the consumer himself, their narratives are often entirely original, and are keenly received by the larger eBay community. Exhibit 8.7 illustrates the amount of creativity and effort consumers may invest in creating this component for such a market offering. This multimedia description comprises animations, pictures, a sound track and text. The item on offer is a plain piece of paper used for wrapping chewing gum, which ordinarily would not have a ready market. The seller has compensated for this by making the auction listing a challenge both to him and to the market structures. As in the previous example, this product description contains many elements which support other findings

and thus would be revisited later on.

Hello to my fellow EBAYERS. This auction is a much different auction then the rest!

Just tonight I was at my local gas station talking with a friend and telling him about my items and the other weird items on EBAY! (Since EBAY is my life and it seems I live on here for 24 hours a day!) After explaining all of my previous and current auctions he said that he wasn't convinced that people actually bought these type of items. I told him about my TEST AUCTION even. He has not been on EBAY for like 4 years. He couldn't even remember his name!!!! I explained all of the "Weird" items that went for thousands and he still just didn't want to believe me! (All of the toast, french fries, futuristic machines, nothings, mysteries.....etc.)

I looked at him and I told him that anyone could sell anything, I mean ANYTHING! His response was "Whatever" which is a word that I HATE and he knew this! So.....

A gentleman was opening up gum beside us and after sticking the gum in his mouth he threw the wrapper on the ground. (LITTERBUG!) I picked it up and said....

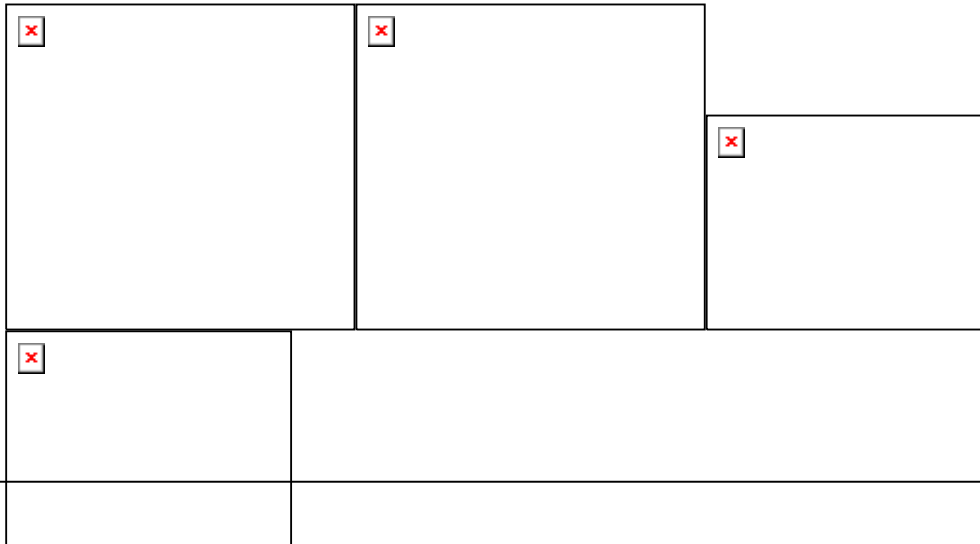
"Matt, I bet you I can sell this gum wrapper." He says "Yeah right." And I said "No, really there is a market for everything on EBAY." He said "I bet you \$100 that you can't sell that. This is so ridiculous that we are even talking about it."

The bet was made and NOW ITS ON!

So, You are bidding on a empty gum wrapper. Nothing is inside this gum wrapper but a faint smell of cinnamon. Even if this goes for .01 then I have proven my point! I don't normally do this type of auction but every since my test auction how can I pass it up! Free Shipping!!

Also, consider yourselves lucky!! You get to see my hand. MY ACTUAL HAND!! LMAO! WOOOOHOOOO!

Check out my [other items!](#)



Another Bad Auction brought to you in part by WooHoo_Mystery_Man!! :)~

Click [HERE](#) to watch this item!

Exhibit 8.7: Creative description on eBay

8.5.3 Interaction component: Many consumers use eBay exclusively as a platform for exchange of unwanted possessions, whereas many others also use it as a means of information exchange, social interaction and entertainment. Interaction between individuals is an important component of the larger eBay narrative. Although an individual may be unable to partake in many commercial exchanges by virtue of her geographic location, (an individual in Ireland could not possibly bid for a car in the USA), she is free to exchange opinions and views, as well as solicit advice about the item from both seller and other interested individuals. In many cases individuals interested in a certain type of item use the questions and answer facility of the auction to exchange views and information about the item. Cyber-spatial modes of communication such as E-mail and Skype make eBay a large globally dispersed community of consumption built around

objects and interests. Exhibit 8.8 illustrates the type and range of personal interaction that may take place through a listing. Although such member interaction is governed by the rules and regulations established by the eBay management, as well as by the terms and conditions of sellers, members like to interact extensively between and during transactions, and such interactions often affect the overall outcome of an auction.

Questions from other members	
Question & Answer	Answered On
<p>Q: Is it easy to get out of @ five oclock in the morning when your drunk and need to go to the toilet ?</p> <p>A: hi, when i camped in it on the saturday night in the beer garden of the Bulls Head inn, shap, i thought i had forgotten to get out, but did get out ok...more</p>	18-Oct-05
<p>Q: I bought one of these!! took it to a motorbike rally in Feb, got pi..ed and slept on top of it very comfy. Not all bad news though I didn't have to pack...more</p> <p>A: ANSWER 1 They really are great aren't they? thanks QUESTION 2 hi, I was just wondering if you could extend this auction for another week?. The reason i'm...more</p>	18-Oct-05
<p>Q: I bought one of these!! took it to a motorbike rally in Feb, got pi..ed and slept on top of it very comfy. Not all bad news though I didn't have to pack...more</p> <p>A: ANSWER 1 They really are great aren't they? thanks QUESTION 2 hi, I was just wondering if you could extend this auction for another week?. The reason i'm...more</p>	18-Oct-05
<p>Q: Hi, It's been a boring day so far. However, I've just been seriously cheered up by your listing. Call me an opportunist, but I'm just wondering if you...more</p> <p>A: Hi, i suppose you could buy this tent and have it fashioned into a lightweight jacket, (well until it rains). Alternatively you could contact the makers...more</p>	18-Oct-05

[View all 101 questions](#) | [Ask seller a question](#)

Exhibit 8.8: Member interaction on a listing

Exhibit 8.8 is a part of 'Argos one man tent' narrative. Although the small portion presented here appears to be a light hearted almost comical exchange between members, a full reading of all 101 questions and answers (presented in appendix 8) reveals that its full contribution to marketplace discourses of power. Many themes that emerge from a full reading of this listing highlight that this seemingly social exchange represents consumer dissatisfaction at multiple levels of consumption that result in collective efforts towards brand deconstruction.

8.5.4 Social and cultural component: Besides being an alternate marketplace, eBay as a social space offers opportunities to individuals for forming communities that are similar in many ways to other consumption communities. Although various ontologies and definitions of social aggregation on the basis of consumption have appeared in recent literature (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Kozinets 1999, Muniz and OGuinn 2001), all are positioned around the dynamic relationships between consumer, marketplace and culture (Arnould and Thompson 2005).

In denominational terms, eBay is perhaps more like a society, populated by many smaller consumption related communities with each community forming around product categories or brands. A longitudinal observation of any of the hundreds of categories and sub-categories on eBay reveals stable member interaction patterns. Consumers tend to specialize in areas of interest and many trade exclusively in one specific brand or category (Siddiqui and Turley 2005). Kozinets (1999) uses three elements from the fundamental definition of a community to characterize cyber-groups as communities. He argues that social interaction, exchange and ties to a common space define a community, and thus interactive groups in cyberspace can be called communities. eBay appears to offer two different levels of social aggregation. First is the bargain hunter sense of commonality of

the larger eBay community which fuels its alternate market ethos. Second, at the level of commonality of interest, there are multiple communities of collectors based around material objects or brands. Both members and management of eBay realize this, as evidenced by a statement on eBay's community webpage, *'For many, eBay is the place to share a passion for items that are special'*.

The larger eBay narrative, at both of these levels, exhibits references to and associations with the community. To serve the larger interest of a 'bargain hunter' community, eBay management provides a forum for social interaction through its 'community chat' webpage. At the *'community of interest'* level this social interaction also exhibits itself through gossip, story telling and interactive chatting conducted on 'Ask seller a question' forum within individual auctions. Exhibit 8.9 in the following illustrates how these social interactions between members become part of the process of auction.

Question & Answer	Answered On
Q: Shawn, I adore you! If it doesn't work out with the fiancee, will you marry me? A: If it doesn't work out then I will be auctioning off the Mystery Man himself. I should go for at least what this gum wrapper is going for. LMAO! WOOOO... more	15-Jun-05
Q: AS THE MUSIC PLAYS I AM BOWING TO YOU WOOOOOOHOOOOOOO I AM ENDING MY CAREER TO SELL ON EBAY AS THIS BEEN IS AN INSPIRATION TO THE WORLD THANKS FOR... more A: I wish you luck and hopefully I didn't make a mistake by being an inspiration to the world. I think the world, my fans as well as my HATERS have inspired... more	15-Jun-05
Q: just to let you know i think you rock and that you are now famous in the uk! keep up the good work, your auctions make my day!!! A: WOOOOOOHOOOOOOO! The UK rocks!! I'm so glad I can make you smile for a few minutes a day!! :)~ -WHMM	15-Jun-05
Q: Has anyone read your palm from the picture? I've never read a palm but I'm betting somewhere in those lines it says you will prosper from a gum wrapper!... more A: Ummmm. Bracelet is not a part of this auction and it is real gold! If anyone can read my palm then "Go For It!!!" All I know about my palm is that it... more	14-Jun-05

[View all 55 questions](#) | [Ask seller a question](#)

Exhibit 8.9, social interaction in listings

It is evident in the in the text above that these social exchanges are cross cultural and international. The comment from a member in the UK on this American auction highlights the significance of these social and cultural exchanges between members from diverse communities and countries. The number of contributors for each listing indicates the level of involvement of the consumers in creation of this social and cultural component of the narrative. Many popular auctions have several interacting contributors, turning the auction process into a general mass audience interactive chat forum.

8.6 Storylines and plots of eBay narratives: Digital textuality offers an accelerated narrative lifecycle and thus it may appear that the interests of the eBay community oscillate at a very rapid pace. Fads and fashions emerge and dissipate; plots and storylines gain popularity, lose momentum and become retro at a rate that is almost inconceivable in a conventional marketplace. However, this accelerated pace of narrative is independent of the actual products on sale. While the range of products on offer remains relatively stable, the narrative dimension on eBay appears to be ever evolving and fresh. A majority of plotlines and themes used by sellers in eBay advertising do closely follow the prevalent marketer's advertising themes and plotlines, but there are many original narratives which stand out by being contextually more dynamic in nature. Figure 8.10 illustrates the origins and inspiration for eBay commercial narratives.

The top bar in the figure represents the origins of marketing content of eBay narratives. It is evident that a vast majority of these are inspired by the brand and marketing communication of the original marketer. A few contain adaptations and even extensions to these communications by creating relationships and linkages with current media genres, object or person associations as well as cultural mythologies. Finally there is a small but significant proportion of consumer originals. The lower section of the figure outlines the

narrative inspirations, and once again a majority of these come from extant media and advertising themes. There is however a small but significant number of consumer originals.

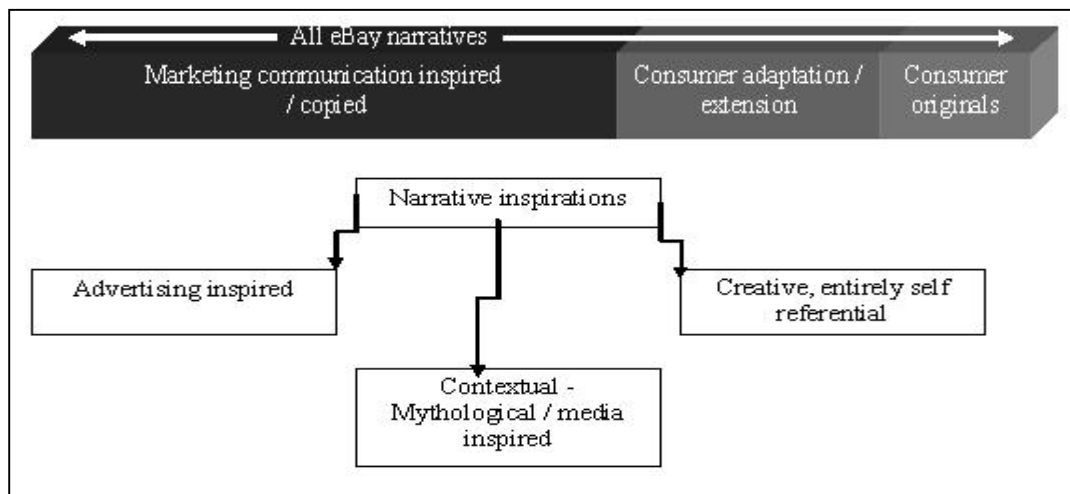


Fig 8.10 origins and inspirations of the commercial component of eBay narratives.

In case of second-hand offerings, an overwhelming majority of eBay advertisements on listing are mechanical in nature. Often, they are limited to a set of pictures and a textual description of the brand, model, make, condition, age and amount of usage, and reasons for sale. Some sellers augment the basic description by cutting and pasting some visual and textual content from manufacturers’ advertising websites. Sellers also seem to realize that visual and textual elements in listing alternate in domination between readings (Baetens 2001), and thus they generally make an effort to provide a good visual content together with a clear comprehensible text. It shall be noted that most mechanical advertising copies are received at face level, and thus audience interaction as well as interest in these is quite limited.

As noted earlier, experienced sellers make an extra effort to enhance the value of their offerings by adding textual and visual content. Such creative value enhancement may use plotlines and themes from a variety of genres and can be situated in a historical, social,

mythological or current-media context. Many such creative narrations evoke audience participation, enhance final value, and act as inspiration for other sellers by initiating a new genre. Table 8.11 is a compilation of 13 such representative auction listings collected over a two year period on eBay USA and UK. Significantly, all of these listings share three common characteristics; first, they were all successful in generating unusually high audience interest; second, they were all offering items which were conceived and produced by the consumers; and third they were successful in securing very high final bids.

Table 8.11 – A summary of mass audience eBay narratives

	Auction (Listing)title	Period	Final value	Audience size*	Textual size	Contributors	Content format	Notes
1	An empty gum wrapper	Jun 05	\$ 660	50,000	Over 7000 words	72	Textual, multimedia	An iconic auction testing the assumption that everything sells on eBay, comical storyline to present marketplace resistance theme
2	Ghost Cane Free Shipping!	Dec 04	\$65,000	150,000	Over 5,000 words	42 in three listings	textual	Theme of grieving family faced with a child's fear of his grandfather's ghost, gained commercial interest, the cane was bought by a casino for eBay museum.
3	Keith Olbermann is "IN MY PANTS"	May 05	\$506	10,000	Over 4,000 words	22	Textual, multimedia	Creative photomontage with association to media personality, The seller went on to establish a successful business and brand around his eBay ID
4	PAPER AEROPLANE FOR SALE	Jul 05	£109	25,000	Over 10,000 words	103	Textual	A paper aeroplane to go around the eBay community with each buyer to sign his name before reselling. Simple but original idea with no storyline and small copy, never resold
5	Evil Kermit Needs a New Home – Fraternity or Mob House	Feb 05	\$192.50	90,000	Over 4,000 words	66	Textual, visual	Anthropomorphic satire on prevalent social and cultural order Very masterfully executed creative storyline, original photomontage
6	How Much is This One PENNY Worth for Hurricane Relief?	Sep 05	\$102.50	22,000	1,500 words	1	Textual, Visual	An original auction evoking themes of patriotism, call to philanthropy and social service
7	Argos Pro Action Sydney 1 man Tent – Classic Design	Oct 05	£360	71,000	Over 10,000 words	110	Textual	Highly creative and interactive satire exhibiting consumer resistance, explicit attempt to deconstruct a brand
8	I WILL GIVE UP 1 YEAR OF MY LIFE TO BE YOUR EMPLOYEE.	Oct 05	\$15,100	35,000	Over 10,000 words	81	Textual	Auction with a Romantic theme aimed at strengthening grand narratives of patriotism, self-sacrifice and upholding the American values
9	A box containing ABSOLUTELY NOTHING	Oct 05	£ 51	11,000	Over 4,000 words	25	Textual	Original parody incorporating themes from a variety of genres, including advertising and other eBay narratives
10	Tawny Peaks breast implants	March 05		550,000	2500 words	Check	Textual / visual	Ex-stripper and Playboy cover girl selling her implants which had been subject of a famous criminal case, built around theme of commercial fandom, received substantial media coverage
11	Virgin Mary in Grilled Cheese NOT A HOAX! LOOK & SEE	Nov 04	\$28,000	Over 2 million	4,000 words		Textual, visual,	One of the biggest and most famous eBay stories, a cheese sandwich exhibiting the image of Virgin Mary, promises of fortune structured around religious faith
12	Advertise your logo or website domain in my forehead!	Jan 05	\$37,375	Over 350,000	Over 5,000 words in 3 listings	66 in three listings	Textual, visual, multimedia	Purely commercial auction, forerunner of eBay phenomenon of bodies for sale, widely covered in media, became an icon of everything sells on eBay
13	I WAS ASSAULTED BY A GANG OF Oompa Loompas	July 05	\$660	45,000	Over 10,000 words	88	Textual, visual, multimedia	Storyline relating to launch of the movie Charlie and the Chocolate Factory remake. Drawing on several mythical plotlines as well as audio-visual elements from the movie itself.

Audience size is number of eBay members accessing the listing during the auction period (?days in most cases). Less than 5% of all auction listings get more than 100 hits.

* The auctions with US\$ final value are from US site www.eBay.com, the ones with £ value from the UK site www.eBay.co.uk.

• Apart from the last three, all other examples were picked at random from a data set of consumer narratives on eBay. The last three represent an almost iconic status on eBay, each starting a revolution in terms of style, content and theme, evidenced by hundreds of follow-on versions from the larger eBay community.

The first column in the table gives the item listing title which was described in section 8.4 using exhibit 8.1. The second column provides the period during which the item was listed. This is significant because many of these listings, and the narratives that flowed from them, were contextual in nature and borrowed from, or referred to contemporary media events. The third column gives the final bid value, and it is interesting to note that these values are not regular market values for comparable items. The fourth column gives the audience size for each of these listings, and it is evident that in all cases its size is unusual for the type of item on offer. The fifth column gives the textual size of the narrative. This total text is made up of original sellers' description as well as other interested members' interaction through the 'ask seller a question' facility. It is noteworthy that a number of these listings exceed 10,000 words. The sixth column gives the number of interactants or contributors to the textual narrative. The seventh column outlines the format of the narrative. It is interesting to note that some members go as far as creating original multimedia content for listing their items. At least two of these listings contained songs, animations and videos specially created for the auction listing. The last column characterizes the narrative by summarizing its content and context.

Stern (1995) has analysed consumer narratives and advertising in terms of mythic plots, linking them with other cultural texts as characterized in Northrop Frye's (1957) taxonomy of literary text. At one level, the storylines of many original consumer narratives on eBay could be characterized as falling within Frye's elements of taxonomy used by Stern; romance, comedy, tragedy and irony. Comical narratives (such as items 5, 7 and 13 in table 8.11) evolve and end in joy and entertainment for the audience and participants. Loaded with emotional appeal, narratives surrounding tragedy (such as item 2 and 6 in table 8.11) seek to rally the audience and participants. Romance may also feature in some eBay

narratives (item 3), and finally irony is often used very effectively for brand or grand-narrative deconstruction (such as in item 7 and 9).

8.7 Common elements and strategies used to create mass-audience narrative: An average eBay auction listing receives around 100 hits during the maximum ten days of its active life. With millions of items on sale, and given the limited auction time, sellers strive to attract an audience. However, among those millions of items at any given moment, there are a few which capture the imagination of the audience, some attracting hundreds of thousands viewers. eBay has a rating system, by which it lists top ten popular and most visited auctions in a popularity rating list call ‘eBay Pulse’. During the final 8 months of the study I tracked all mass audience narratives that made it to ‘eBay Pulse’. Although most of the listings that featured on pulse were for rare or highly collectible items, occasionally there were a few which made their way to the pulse because of the peculiarity of the narrative. Among many others, one striking feature was that they were original consumer created offerings, highlighting the notion that the product itself may perhaps not be as significant a factor in attracting an audience. For instance one member sold ‘a box of nothing’ for £51 before an audience of 11,000. Another member offered a stuffed toy and was successful in attracting an audience of over 90,000. It was obvious that these sellers were offering a narrative to an audience which was as valuable, if not more, than the item itself. I also detected that some individuals specialized in creating captivating narratives and repeated their feats over and over again. One respondent who was very successful in generating audience interest commented;

After buying and selling on eBay for over 7 years I have realized that the buying patterns of eBay buyers are mind boggling and too much thought into it will melt your brain! Why would people buy two dead flies for \$52 but they won't fork out \$10 for a piece of art that someone spent 102 hours of blood, sweat and tears on? Well after many sleepless nights and many nightmares I have determined

something.....WHO CARES? I am done getting up at 5am to map out my "garage sale strategy" and spend all day trying to find that ONE big item that will pay my car payment. I am listing things that make me laugh. They seem to make others laugh and when people laugh they tend to reach for their "virtual" wallet (paypal). (Virginia, email excerpt)

Virginia's self explanatory comment exemplifies the playful, rather than goal directed, nature of activities of the larger eBay community. Virginia (not her eBay ID) had correctly identified that among the four elements of Frye's taxonomy, comedy seems to attract larger audience on eBay. The comedy Virginia offered to her audience through her items was not self absorbed satire, but truly participative '*laughing with the people*' fun. Hers, as well as many other successful comical mass audience auctions, had several contributors to a large textual content which evolved in line with the audience's responses. However, comedy was not the universal formula for mass audience narrative creation. Mary, selling her grandfather's cane (Item 2 on table 2, Appendix 8.3) used tragedy as the dominant plotline; it recounted the sad saga of an aged cancer patient whose daughter had to move-in to comfort him in his dying moments, and the agony of her six year old who thought his grandfather's ghost still haunted the house. In addition to these, I also found also used successfully to capture audience's imagination (Items 6, 8 and 11, table 8.11).

Deconstructive analysis of several mass audience narratives listed in table 8.11 revealed that originality of the theme and plotline is perhaps the most significant common element among them, along with an open invitation to participate. A list of common elements generated during deconstructive analysis appears as list 8.12.

Common elements of mass-audience narrative

- Original creative narrative,
- dramatic title, strong opening supported by creative original photo narrative
- story narrated in a masterful literary style along a fresh plotline,
- appeal to emotions through narration of personal feelings and emotions, reflections of joy – sorrow – triumph and glory
- exploitation of sacred or profane – either positively or negatively,
- all inclusive open invitation for audience participation and extension of credits to the contributors
- frequent updates and adaptations according to popular demand

It can be argued that study of elements that generate audience interest to follow and participate in an eBay narrative is not sufficient in itself, as it does not explain what draws the audience to such narratives in the first place. The interest and initial attention-span of an online consumer is affected by factors unique to the CME itself (Hoffman and Novak 1997, Mathwick and Rigdon 2004), and thus capturing and capitalizing on initial attention is an important dimension in achieving and holding online audience. Advertising articulations only become effective when relevant appeals are dispensed effectively, and given the peculiarities of online audiences, creating such effectiveness is not an exact science yet. Successful eBay narratives deployed several attention seeking strategies at multiple levels of attraction, all focused on harnessing a rambling surfer within or outside the eBay's domain. Some of these strategies used by sellers in the dataset are presented in list 8.13.

Attention seeking strategies

- **Strikingly new idea with very simple copy**
- **Use of most common search key words in auction heading**
- **Use of popular brand names in auction heading**
- **Hyperlinking and promotion through other popular sites (cross linking)**
- **Referring to, cloning or copying from one or several other currently popular themes**
- **Use of antagonistic themes – profanity in lieu of sacred, comedy for tragedy**
- **Emotional pleas in text or title**
- **Reference to a current or historical media event**
- **Promises (of glory and fame, luck or fortune)**

List 8.13 Successful attention seeking strategies used in eBay mass audience narratives

8.8 eBay narratives and marketplace discourses of power

Contemporary consumers' quest for newer ways of having, doing and being (Bauman 2001) is manifested in moulding and adapting products and consumption environments to find newer uses and consumption practices (Holt 1995). The primary goal of listing an auction on eBay may appear to be selling something, but consumer experimentation has resulted in eBay becoming as much a platform for social and communal action, as a platform for acquisition and disposition. eBay narratives mirror this continual transformation and experimentation.

The large dataset used in this study was analyzed in a number of ways and a range of these analyses were presented in the previous five sections. This section synthesizes these various analyses to argue that consumers use their empowerment on eBay to play a significant role in marketplaces discourses of power, as well as to promote their own ideological agendas. Figure 8.15 summarizes and synthesises all previous findings to outline the nature and content of eBay narratives and links them to the functions they serve in this alternate marketplace.

All eBay narratives essentially comprise of two types of elements; the sales copy and the additional storylines. The sales copy is a common feature among all narratives and is constructed around details of the item on offer and the seller. Item details often contain original marketers' advertising copy and its adaptations, but may as well have additional links and relationships to social, cultural, mythological or media context. The other component of sales copy pertains to the seller. This component is used to establish a link between the item on offer and the seller, and often accords the seller an importance on a par with the item. Additional storylines are lesser common and are certainly not an

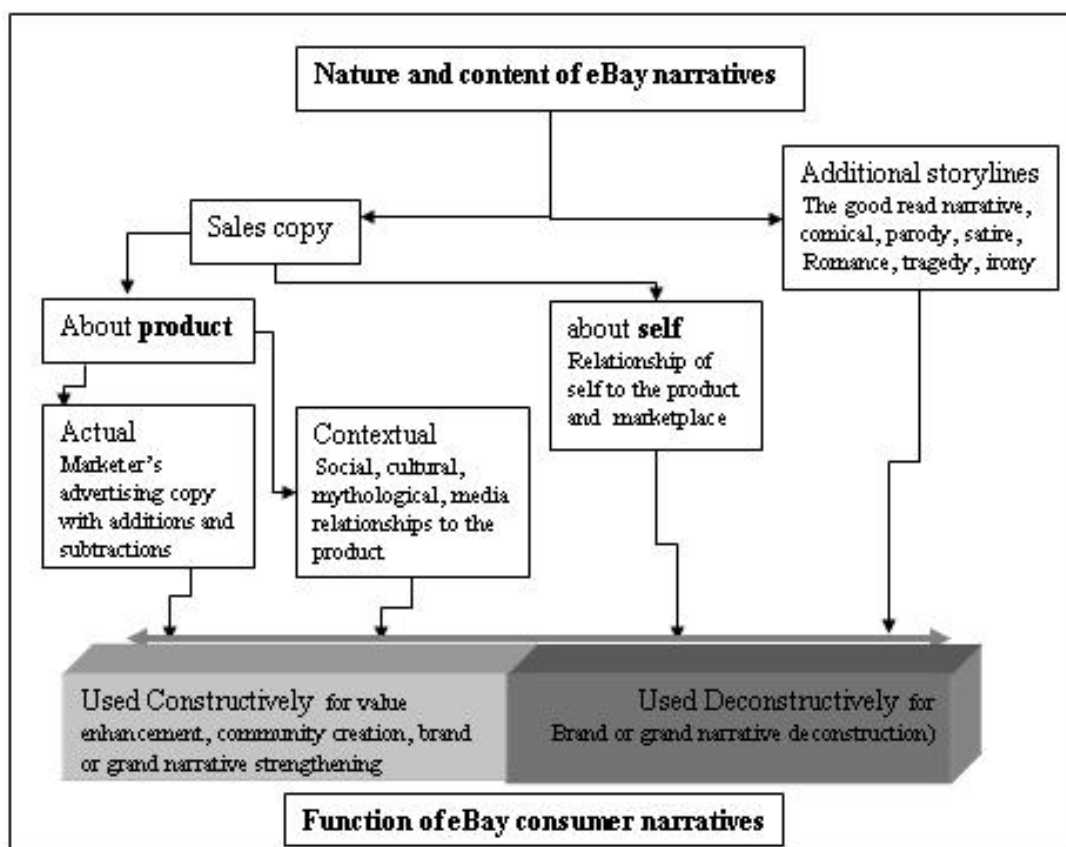


Fig.8.14 Synthesis of findings – eBay narratives, structure and functions

essential component of all eBay narratives. Sellers use additional storylines to enhance the final value of their item. Often, these additional storylines are fashioned as a good read narrative, and act as a creative expression for the seller, and entertainment to the audience. These narratives can be used in two ways on eBay; they can be used constructively, to dispose off an unwanted item, to enhance value of the item, or to create or maintain a community of interest; or they can be used deconstructively, and in a post-modern fashion often manifest as attempts to deconstruct a brand or a grand narrative.

A summary of a sample of eBay mass audience narratives was presented in Table 8.11. Within these 13 examples we can find diverse consumer aims beyond the commercial objective of selling an unwanted possession. Thompson (2004) argues that commercial

narratives, such as advertising articulations, are created and tailored to provide meanings and metaphors to serve ideological agendas. Like marketers, consumers may have their own ideological agendas which are often manifested as social movements (Kozinets 2004) based on common belief structures, assumptions and aspirations.

Consumers' attempt to foster ideological agendas through popular auctions on eBay can be evidenced by examples presented in table 8.11; item 1 (appendix 8.1) which is indicative of marketplace resistance; items 6 and 8 which were aimed at rallying the American nation around the theme of patriotism; item 11 which, although purely commercial in nature, exploited religious belief and faith structures; item 10 which was aimed a re-invigorating fandom for an ex-Playboy cover girl; item 7 (Appendix 8.2) which evolved as an attempt to deconstruct the British catalogue retail brand Argos; item 3 which, along with other successful auctions by the seller, helped establish an independent brand (WoohooMysteryMan WHMM) as well as a DJ radio network; and item 13 which helped establish the seller as an eBay guru and aided sale of his 'how to sell anything on eBay' tutorials.

Empowerment on eBay grants ultimate authority to the consumer by making her simultaneously the marketer, the audience and the buyer. On this platform, consumers raise their voices, seeking to reform the wrongs of contemporary marketplace structures by establishing an alternate marketplace; fight the hegemony of greedy corporations and shun brands by buying and selling OEM merchandise.

Proponents of multifarious agendas utilise eBay's marketplace in creative ways, both constructively as well as deconstructively. Figure 8.14 illustrates how these narratives are operationalized. In many instances sales copy is the primary component in putting forth such agendas; consumers use photonarrative and text creatively to link the product to

themselves and to a context, assuming the role of a leader / moderator in a movement which they portray as affiliated to a just and commonly beneficial social cause. Themes drawn from a variety of plotlines and mythologies are blended-in to disguise the commercial component in the interest of forefronting the social and interactive. The audience consumes and is consumed by the dynamic and dramatic evolvement of a narrative; commercial motives are relegated to the background. It all ends, however, on a commercial note, and the lucky winner sometimes emerges as the loser who bought a box containing nothing for £51.

eBay is a unique marketplace in cyberspace where a consumer finds a consumption space that allows him/her to create and maintain an identity (Turkle 1995, Venkatesh 1998), extend and express 'self' (Schau and Gilly 2003), consume fantastically as well as experiment, experience and negotiate existence in new forms (Gould & Lerman 1998). As an alternate marketplace in cyberspace, eBay has contributed greatly to the marketplace discourses of power by making commodities, consumables and consumption practices accessible to a greater number of individuals.

The Foucauldian view, that social and communal movements always invoke resistance to prevailing power structures, if applied to these alternate marketplaces, might explain why and how new modes of trade become active subjects in the larger marketplace discourses of power. When these discourses of resistance originate as consumer actions, they have the propensity to emerge as social movements (Kozinets and Handelman 2004), based on the attribution of an emancipatory universal to a particular social group (Poster 1984). In order to gain initial momentum, as well as for periodic re-energizing, such discourses of resistance draw from social and cultural belief systems. In the case of eBay, the very notion that something is advertised on eBay invokes 'get it cheap', 'rock-bottom bargain'

and 'value for money' themes built upon knowledge, beliefs and assumptions of the larger eBay community of bargain hunters. These themes are essentially, at one level, an indication of a resistance to contemporary market structures, based on the assumption that removal of the profiteering middleman from the equation is in best interest of the consumer, and are enacted through a consumer-consumer exchange mechanism. However, this '*removal of middleman*' assumption is countervailed by the other popular '*from rags to riches through selling trash*' assumption held by the larger eBay community. Although many consumers do not find the juxtaposition of these two respective metaphors contradictory, they do represent historically countervailing views of alternate marketplaces. On eBay the postmodern notion of consumer freedom (Venkatesh 1998) by escaping the marketplace (Kozinets 2002) is manifested through opting for an alternate marketplace, which, ironically, attracts many consumer-entrepreneur-marketers in quest of the Marxian prospect of becoming an active subject in the very economy they were trying to beat.