

## Chapter 7 **CME and Consumer Empowerment**

### **7.1 Introduction**

As preliminary data from study one and two were analysed, it became evident that consumer empowerment is likely to emerge as a dominant theme. In study one, where consumers were finding empowerment by opting for simulated products, they were also disempowered by the ephemeral nature of simulated possessions. In study two, it was evident that individuals were finding new roles, and enhancing their existing roles in family structures. At that point it became an automatic decision to explore the various dimensions of consumer empowerment in cyberspace. eBay as a site for consumer empowerment in cyberspace emerged from within the data of the first two studies. This study thus resulted from realignment in direction to focus specifically on empowered consumers in cyberspace.

This informant network for this study comprised grounded as well as cyber informants. It comprised a cohort of consumers on eBay from the UK and Ireland, and was accessed during a two year immersion in eBay, the world's largest marketplace and auction site. Informant networks, my modes of encounter and data collection techniques for this ethnography are outlined in chapters 3 and 4. This chapter presents a thick description of this ethnography, using a blend of website data, informant narratives and ethnographer's lived experiences.

### **7.2 Fluid marketplaces and consumer empowerment**

Online auctions such as Ubid and eBay have emerged as novel platforms of consumption experimentation in cyberspace. As a popular platform of acquisition, exchange and

disposal, online auctions boast hundreds of millions of members and several million items for sale at any given time (Ariely and Simonson 2003). The 150 million eBay members worldwide buy and sell online, sending or receiving real money, and receiving or despatching tangible objects. eBay may be a marketplace in cyberspace, but it has real connections to local societies globally. Seen in this light, buying/bidding/competing/playing/selling on eBay are forms of cyber-experiential consumption that have a direct association with an individual's real lifeworld.

Two significant characteristics make online auction sites distinctly different from other types of marketplaces. The first is that very few of the buyers or sellers on such sites are businesses or large corporations; individuals themselves act on both sides of a transaction. Millions of items are bought and sold every day on such sites. Sometimes a buyer becomes a seller and the reverse at others. Both roles are played interchangeably. Auction sites like eBay act as consumer-consumer exchange platforms. Perhaps it is because of this freedom of consumer interaction in these fluid marketplaces that participation in online auctions has emerged as a major form of consumption in cyberspace. The second characteristic that distinguishes an online auction from other types of marketplace is that it allows a consumer to become a marketer. Selling would seem to have finally entered the realm of common consumption and consumers are increasingly using it as a mode of consumption.

In the rest of this chapter, I begin by explaining the dynamics and mechanics of my subject site – eBay. I then present an emic sequential analysis of the eBay experience interwoven with etic interpretations, followed by a look at how and why selling is as much an act of consumption as of buying on eBay. Finally, I argue that online auctions impart ultimate empowerment to consumers, by allowing them to assume a variety of possible roles in these fluid marketplaces.

**eBay: Mechanics and Dynamics.** eBay is ecologically dissimilar to any other retail or exchange format and environment. It has its own econo-socio-cultural dynamics which are globally diffused. Because it acts primarily as a contemporary means of lateral as well as vertical cycling of useable but unwanted possessions, it is arguably a cyberspace rendition of the vestigial archaic bazaar.

eBay offers a variety of auction formats, but the most commonly used is the traditional time restricted, open bid, single item, highest bid wins format (Vincent 1995). Bidders can bid for any item as long as the seller's conditions of payment and postage/collection are adhered to. Bidding is a global synchronous event, and keen bidders soon learn the art of cinching – following the bids to the last few seconds before topping it by a minimal amount; bidders with fast broadband connections are at advantage here. Once the auction is over, the seller sends an invoice to the winner who has the option to pay electronically. Upon receipt of payment the seller sends or hands over the item and the transaction is completed. At this point both seller and buyer can leave feedbacks for each other, which becomes a permanent part of record and reputation. Such feedback which plays a part in establishing seller reputation sometimes affects the final selling price of an item for some categories. Member reputation as a buyer, however, has little impact on activities on eBay.

There are two broad dimensions of consumption through eBay. First is buying by way of searching, following, bidding and competing for an item and the second is by taking the plunge and selling an item. Although it was found that these two dimensions often exist symbiotically and interchangeably, in terms of thick description, I feel that they are best presented independently.

### 7.3 Consuming by buying “do all idiots shop at e-Bay! Am I one?”

My immersion in eBay gave me an understanding of how individuals buying through eBay were not necessarily after day-to-day consumables. Instead, they sought out-of-the-ordinary possessions, items on which they place higher value than on mundane everyday purchases. Also, much of buying on eBay can be categorized as impulse, and many times buyers end up owning items they would not have otherwise bought. Buying on eBay is a multi-layered activity sequentially comprising searching (looking of items of interest), following (watching a few items of interest as they go through the process of auction), bidding and competing (incrementally increasing bids competitively near the end of auction). These activities are now described in detail.

**Searching:** As the first step in buying on eBay, searching is an aesthetic and informative consumption experience (Schlosser 2003). Although searching can be either random or goal directed, it was found that hardcore buyers (as well as sellers) tended to specialize in their domains by limiting their searching to one or two areas of interest. Out of hundreds of categories of items on eBay, hardcore eBayers tend to keep a close eye on one or two categories by visiting them regularly, making watch lists and keeping record of ongoing as well as past auctions. One of my informants, who was a regular trader in one specific category on the UK site, described his searching on eBay as follows.

*oh I visit the site everyday, you know, I mean em spend about half hour on items ending soonest, em then look at items newly listed, you know what I mean, Ahh yeah well you can say I always know what is on sale (oq1103, phone transcript).*

This informant used multiple levels of search even within this one category. Since it was humanly impossible to keep track of the 20,000 or so items in this category, he would spend an hour each day, first searching the items ending soonest, and then going to the bottom of the list to look at items newly listed. This is a very sophisticated technique for searching eBay. By looking at the items ending soonest, bargain hunters can spot potential

items which they could cinch at the last second below market price. By looking at the items newly listed, they could identify potential items which had a buy-it-now-price. Sellers are often unaware of eBay going prices, and it is not uncommon to find items offered for a quick sale at far lower prices. Hardcore eBayers like *oql103* are always on the lookout for such bargains and often fund their eBay hobby through resale of these items.

The desire to watch and follow certain auctions may emanate from practical and real needs, but it is often the case that once consumers find a category they fancy, they become hooked. This immersive and addictive quality of online auction is reflected in an introspective field note.

*---after the first purchase (a 1394 data cable) at an insanely bargain price, I am drawn to the eBay on a regular basis, looking for items on offer and follow them through to find what did they sell for, even though I do not have a need (quote from researcher's field note).*

Hardcore eBayers soon learn that following specific categories pays huge dividend, and may result in discovery of a whole new range of products. One female respondent, who was a regular in the clothing category, recounted how a quest for period clothing on eBay opened whole new vistas for her.

*I am quite tall and have rather large feet, so you can imagine my excitement every time I came across Victorian clothing that fit me. There were a huge collection of hard to find items like bustles, corsets, and hoop skirts to choose from. I was in heaven. (Leila, from eBay community chat line).*

**Watching:** It is also common among hardcore eBayers to watch items of interest keenly by adding them to a list of 'watched items' on their personal eBay homepage called 'My eBay'. Watched items are the items an eBay member is keen to acquire, but is not quite ready to put a bid on. Experienced eBayers use this list to cinch desirable items by putting in a bid at the last second. Where a member can bid on an unlimited number of items, eBay UK allows each member to watch only 30 such items. Frequent watchers often like to

watch many more items than they are allowed, and one of my informants disclosed his secret mode of watching more items than technically possible as follows,

*My watch list is limited to 30 items, mainly because of limit by eBay. And then I add more items to watch list by bidding on them very little amounts which will not win but will add them to my bidding list (tudor\_rye).*

Such utilization of all available means to watch and follow as many items as possible is perhaps explained through the prism of value assessment (Carmon and Ariely 2000). It was found that often such value assessment fuelled the desire for the item and subsequent bidding. Consumers sometimes bid for items they did not need or want, but simply because they were going at a bargain price. One of my informants realized that watching an item through its auction process often resulted in an unwanted emotional attachment and subsequent purchase. He commented,

*oh you do tend to do that – you know, I mean bid on something going cheap and win, and then when it comes to pay --- darn, why did I do that! (oql103, phone transcript).*

**Bidding:** Searching and watching an item is often followed by bidding, which can be an emotionally charged and competitive process. Although most of the items on offer on eBay are used or pre-owned, and do not carry any warranty, inexplicably, bidders routinely bid as much for these ‘used’ items as they would pay for them in ‘new’ condition from a regular marketplace. The etic view of such a practice is that competitive bidding often outranks objective value assessment in the final moments of an auction. It is complemented by an emic view from one of my respondents.

*why do people bid prices up over the new cost? It's simple. People think eBay they think cheap stuff. Then they see something they want, then stop thinking. They bid and bid until they win and gladly pay the price because in their minds they 'got it at a good price' because it was off eBay (Unstable).*

Competitive bidding can be an irrational state of mind. My own experience has been that extreme excitement can be derived from the act of bidding itself. Some new bidders reported a high adrenalin rush, ecstasy and thrill in the final minutes of bidding, when they

frantically refreshed their screens to follow and compete for the item till the last second. One informant commented on the experience of bidding in the final moments as follow,

*I don't do drugs, but know the feeling!!! It's the best you can do with your clothes on... ha ha ha.* (modelmaniacnutter, telephone transcript).

In the final minutes of an auction, value assessments may take a back seat and intense competition and rivalry may take over. It is not unusual to find some bidders going the extra mile in preparation for bidding, by using proxy-bidding services that automatically submit a small incremental bid in the final seconds. Some others even follow their opponents' activities, buying history and tendencies in order to improve their own chances of success. Where many hardcore bidders only bid to win when they see a bargain, many new bidders bid to win irrespective of the price. For instance in one of my own auctions I asked a new member who had no purchase history if he was serious in his bids. He replied:

*I am new to this, and I have lost every thing that I bid for, but not this time, I am serious and will win your item.* (modelmaniacnutter, e-mail).

The sorrow of losing in competitive bidding is evident in this quote, and it also appears that this sorrow outweighs both his need for the item and value assessment. Not surprisingly, he eventually won the item at about twice the price I paid for it on eBay a couple of months earlier. As my own experience grew, I learnt to spot and cultivate these new bidders, and my solicitation techniques were instrumental in my doubling the initial capital within the first eight months of the study.

Some experienced bidders however can distinguish between the desire to win and the actual winning of an item. One experienced eBayer summed this up very rationally and philosophically,

*but when you overbid the seller wins, not the fool who outbid the sane ones* (Sport\_Pilot).

**Competing, winning and losing:** Most literature on real-life auctions has foregrounded variations in value assessment and decision dynamics to explain the differences between

the logical thinking and irrational behaviour of bidders. However, in stark comparison, I found that emotional competition and non use of value assessment in actual bidding characterised the eBay bidding process, making the bidding a distinct mode of consumption in itself. I also discovered that for many consumers this process of bidding was an end in itself.

This irrationality of bidders and winners often benefits sellers, some of whom realize that winners may not consider the value of an object at the time of bidding, but may end up with a form of winner's remorse peculiar to eBay. One of my respondents described his brother's approach:

*my brother sells baseball cards on eBay. He says folks have bid \$100 for a \$5 card. He regularly returns money of folks who are totally out of the ballpark (heh, heh) on bidding price (Pinball).*

Consumers who reflect on their consumption experience often find that emotional competitive bidding similar is in many ways to other types of consumption such as betting and gambling. One respondent had a very rational view of the addictive nature of bidding on eBay and his account captures this dimension of experiential consumption very effectively:

*It's a gambling thing !!!!! you might get outbid from your maximum, and you think 'I can beat this guy' !!! so you go a little more, and more, and more, and more..... Yes I have done that. I am a big idiot too. (cmsrp)*

Because of this highly charged experiential nature of bidding, it is only after the bidding has ended and participants have had time to reflect, that emotional responses develop. Winners may end up with a 'Winner's curse' for paying too much and losers may carry a 'loser's remorse' for not trying hard enough (Ariely and Simonson 2003, Greenleaf 2004).

I discovered that such buyer's curse and loser's remorse immediately after the end of auction – the point at which it is likely to be the highest – are strongly influenced by the degree of psychological ownership of the item in question, and the emotional investment

bidders made in the process. A consumer might have spent several hours detecting a desirable item; he may have watched it over a week, looking at the description and pictures to assess its final value; he may have spent hours considering his bidding strategy and amount. This process creates a certain sense of attachment to the item on auction; prospective watchers may start to own it before they actually do, and may even plan their consumption rituals and practices around it. Losing the item in competitive bidding by a small incremental amount can thus be very stressful. One respondent captures this very effectively:

*when you lose an item by a quid, that's daft. I mean I know I can go over my estimate by a quid or two, no problems, but sometimes I don't do that, and then bitch about it for hours (Jack, telephone transcript).*

This part of eBay's thick description reveals that searching, finding and bidding for possessions on eBay are not entirely and solely preparation for future consumption. For some consumers the process itself is an act of consumption, and an end in itself. It also highlights the experiential nature of competitive bidding, which has the propensity to be as addictive and emotionally charged as betting and gambling.

#### **7.4 Consuming through selling on eBay. "I make money by selling Junk on eBay"**

Auction sites such as eBay are unique in that they allow consumers to become marketers. Consuming by way of selling is a significant characteristic that distinguishes an online auction from other types of marketplace activity. Becoming a seller and a marketer is an automatic right of an eBay member, and consumers are increasingly using it as a mode of consumption.

An individual may decide to sell an item on eBay for two main reasons; she can sell for disposal of unwanted objects, or she can use the process of selling as a source of a rich consumption experience, generating entertainment or recreation. Although there are close

linkages between both forms of selling, a thick description of these two types is best presented individually. In the following section, themes of selling for disposal, followed by selling for recreation would be discussed. Since mechanisms on eBay remain the same for two types of selling, description of selling process which is presented in the first part applies to selling for recreation as well.

**7.4.1 Selling for disposal:** In the cyclic process of consumption of objects, disposal is the final act, a rite of passage preceded by selection, acquisition, usage and collection. Unfortunately most researchers limit their attention to the earlier phases of the process, and seldom explore disposal.

When disposal is effected by means of a mediated environment, it has the propensity to become an act of consumption in itself. Like other platforms of commercial exchange of unwanted possessions, eBay has monetary motives at its core, but as we shall see, consumers have found additional motives for selling on eBay.

Disposal by way of selling on eBay is a highly ritualized act for most consumers. It begins by selecting and finding items to be sold. This selection is highly context dependant and varies from individual to individual. Although most sellers on eBay are offering items they no longer desire to keep, they seldom apply the notion of ‘one man’s trash, another man’s treasure’ to their selling practices. Careful eBayers would only offer those items they were certain would not disappoint buyers. Interestingly, female members were more involved in selling practices than their male counterparts. One female informant, who had made selling on eBay a regular family activity, described the process of item selection as follows:

*Jack and myself have put a carton at the foot of the table in the study where we keep putting things to be sold on eBay. It is interesting what goes in the box, like one time when he was a little tiff, he put our cat in – needless to say the poor soul didn’t want to be sold, you should have seen what he did to the other stuff in the carton (Clare, flowers\_only).*

It appears that Clare has turned the practice of selling on eBay into a household ritual, in which other members also participate. It is also apparent that for Clare and Jack, selling on eBay has entered routine household discourse, and mediates other discourses as well.

Once this selection is complete, the items have to be photographed and faithful descriptions written. I found a photograph to be the biggest selling tool on eBay and that many sellers were continually experimenting with them to improve an item's visibility and attraction. Similar items with different descriptions and photographs perform differently, and items with clear and detailed photos and description generally attract higher final bids. Another of my female informants was proud of her photographic abilities, and the dividend they brought. She commented:

*I have experimented with taking photographs, and would say that I am pretty good at that. Most of my stuff sells for more than others', and I would say much of it has to do with my photos (Kate, get\_yer\_tak).*

Detailed description is the other side to ad-copy on eBay. Experienced sellers know that buyer satisfaction, and their own credibility as a seller, are dependant on close matching of the description and actual condition of the item. Many eBay sellers take their role as 'copywriters' very seriously and invest considerable energy and attention in this process. Writing accompanying descriptions can be a very involved process, and I found that the roles of owner and copywriter are often fused together; sellers express their passion and emotional attachment to items in the descriptions they pen. One informant captures this very effectively:

*I am very creative with descriptions, and I like doing them. To me a description is not only what the item looks like, but also what it means to me (Roycaunce).*

Including emotions in item descriptions is perhaps one way of discharging a possession by enacting a final rite of passage. For some consumers this emotional disposition took centre stage in times of disposal; it was obvious that by investing such effort in description, they were endeavouring to pass on their own meanings and emotions to the new owner.

Once photographs and descriptions are in place, the items are ready to be 'listed' or put on auction. It is at this time that decisions about starting and reserve price (Kamins, Dreze & Folkes 2004), length of auction, region of sale and postage and packing are made. It is interesting that submission of an item for listing can be a rite of passage in terms of disposal for many, as this is the time when the possession is discharged of emotionally. One informant captures this succinctly as follow:

*when I put the item on sale, I consider it sold, I don't touch it afterwards till I have to pack it. To me it is as good as sold and gone, even though many a times there is not a single bid on it. (flying\_fifer).*

This emotional discharge and disposition is often linked to the process of auction. Once an item was on auction, an emotional transference may sometimes take place whereby the process of auction itself may comport emotional aspects of the possession for sale. For many disposers online representation of their possession may even become a fascination. They may get up in the middle of the night to see how it is doing, how many people have seen it, how many are watching it and what the current bid is. This interesting dimension emerged out of my own experience, but is also echoed in the following account by an informant:

*I eventually plucked up the courage to register as a seller with eBay.co.uk. This was in the early days of the UK site when you could count the number of items listed..... for a seven day auction. I watched and watched every hour, and waited for someone to put a bid, I added many new lines telling how good the item was and that people should bid on it. At the very end of seven days someone placed a bid. I was so excited, it was only for £4.00 but it was like magic to me (Mary, from eBay community chat line).*

Keeping a close eye on the item becomes a routine practice during this phase. Sellers check whether there are any queries about the item and answer them promptly. It is evident that much like 'cinchers', many sellers follow their items right down to the last second. Many sellers plan and execute the auction very thoughtfully, often making it a part of their daily routine. As one informant reveals, sellers may extract enjoyment from even a routine auction:

*oh I like to keep an eye on it. I usually submit a seven-day listing on Sunday evening, so when it finishes the next Sunday I am around to watch it. I like to see bidders fighting to win my item – makes me kinda proud of myself (Kate, get\_yer\_tak).*

Once the bidding is over, the seller expects a prompt payment from the buyer to complete the sale. Although it is not uncommon for buyers to back out of a sale, I did not encounter any instance in which the seller was unwilling to complete the transaction due to financial reasons. eBay sellers seldom suffer from seller's remorse, and most sellers seem happy with the price they get for their unwanted possessions. It was also interesting to find that highly used and discarded possessions with low apparent financial value could often attract high final bids while unused and brand new items could go for rock bottom prices. This very peculiar dimension of online auctions was not obscure to sellers, as one informant commented:

*When I sell stuff on eBay I get ¼ of what it's worth. Unless it is junk then I get twice what's it worth. (Amishwarlord).*

Once the auction has ended, the seller has an option to send an invoice as per the payment conditions of the auction. Exhibit 7.4 illustrates how payment and postage section of a listing appears on eBay.

**Postage, payment details and return policy**

**Payment methods accepted**

- 
- 
- Personal cheque
- Postal Order or Banker's Draft

<b>Postage Cost</b>	<b>Services Available</b>	<b>Available to</b>	Will post to United Kingdom.
£5.50	Seller's Standard Rate	United Kingdom Only	

**Postal insurance**  
Not offered

**Seller's payment instructions**  
Postage and packing will be paid for by the buyer. the prices quoted for postage are uk first class where possible. Due to the increasing amount of Mail that is going missing if you value the item then i will quote for special delivery. Signed for mail is not recorded by the Royal Mail, so gets lost too. i always get a proof of postage and will gladly pass this onto you in the event of a lost package. If international then postage will be set accordingly.

*Exhibit 7.4, postage and payment conditions on eBay*

Many sellers show a certain commercial flexibility here:

*I don't send invoices, over the last three years I think I have sold 70 or so things. I don't like to rush people, let the people pay themselves and they usually do within a week or so. (Geornesh).*

When payment is received, the seller packs and posts the item. Since most sellers on eBay are non-professionals, some very creative and ingenious ways and means are devised in order to reduce postage costs and minimize damage. While some sellers used standard cartons, bubble wraps and foam sheets, in my own transactions I also received items packed in food packaging, disposable foam plates and rags torn from lingerie. Such attempts to reduce costs seem to be a part of this consumer-consumer exchange mechanism that eBay offers. Some attempts at cost reduction were quite inventive, as revealed in the following:

*We send a lot of items each week and are often looking for packaging. Once when my wife worked in a surgical company, we sent out items in boxes which stated 'this box may contain body parts'. I'd like to have been a fly on the wall when the recipients got those! (Joy, eBay community chat line).*

In summary, the process of disposal of useable but unwanted possessions through eBay is a relatively protracted act of consumption. At on one level such disposition makes room for new consumables, at another level, however, the process itself becomes a much cherished and engrossing act of consumption in its own right.

**7.4.2 Selling for recreation:** Selling on online auctions, as a mode of recreation, has emerged as a fresh dimension of consumption in cyberspace. This type of selling is easily distinguishable from selling for disposal. Items offered in these recreational sales are either useless, have no monetary value, or are so creative and innovative that they do not have a readymade alternate market.

Recreational sales are less frequent and thus much more difficult to detect than sales for disposal purposes. However, after two years of ethnographic immersion, I was able to establish that selling for recreation is a regular event among a band of hardcore eBayers

across the world. Such recreational sales have their own place on eBay and a majority of informants encountered in this sub-network acted like members of a loosely defined club. This third phase of study however only uses data from the first eight months of the immersion, whereas data from the extended immersion forms the basis of the fourth stage reported in chapter 8.

Selling for recreation takes many forms on eBay. I found diverse means by which both sellers and audiences derived pleasure from the process. There were examples of the creative kind. For example, a couple in the US invited bids for naming their unborn child. Their listing may have started seriously, but soon turned into a social discourse with a mass audience. Over 30,000 individuals accessed this listing and over 300 watched it. There were 37 bids, pushing the final value up to \$13,000.

There were also many instances of unusual and hilarious items. In November 2004 there was a famous auction for a grilled cheese sandwich on eBay USA which apparently bore a likeness to the face of Virgin Mary. Its final value was \$28,000 and the listing was accessed by about two million people. In the public and media frenzy that followed, many parody and copycat auctions emerged. For example, *chewbacca's* freshly grilled cheese sandwich, which was made to order, and could have a likeness of George Bush, Devil, or any other biblical character, as long as the price was right. It was sold for only \$14.50 but attracted a sizeable audience.

Among other recreational sellers were examples such as member *ozonetap*, from Ireland, who auctioned 'things on my desk'. Although it attracted only one bid and sold for a mere £1, it had 128 watchers during the course of seven days. Another member, (*bodrumergoths*, UK) auctioned '63 pebbles from York'. These hand-selected pebbles attracted 3 bids and sold for £ 1 in front of 67 watchers. There were also examples of items and auctions bordering on the bizarre, such as *kimken76's* garden slug and another

unknown seller's auction for fresh faeces. Although these acts were purely recreation driven, most were transacted in the usual manner; buyers honoured their bids by paying and sellers their commitment through delivery.

I found that during the course of, and immediately after the end of these successful and public recreational auctions, sellers were often inundated with emails and messages from both audience as well as media. Thus I found it very difficult to access them during and immediately after the auction. Nonetheless, this study uses responses from seven sellers whose motives for selling were more recreational than dispositional. M (identity concealed by author at informant's request) was an eBayer who listed his wife's used underwear. He narrated his motives,

*all for bit of a fun really, was my wife's idea, perhaps too many champagnes after her birthday party – we pulled the listing off two days late.”*

Ozonetap was an Irish eBayer who listed 'things on my desk' which included a bent spoon, an empty coke bottle, a stapler and other odds and ends. He recounted how this was:

*bit of a craic – had one too many smokes and was bored to bits at work.*

It is obvious that for both of these informants their recreational sales involved experimentation in a new realm. For most recreational sellers the motive was primarily entertainment, but for some others, the act of selling could have similar or greater significance than for disposal sellers. It was also obvious that because recreational sellers considered selling primarily as a source of recreation, rather than for monetary gain, they were willing to loose out financially in the process. Questioned about the financial aspects of his activity, M equated the recreation he derived from eBay on a par with watching a movie. He recounted,

*We never thought of the cost, well look ah how much does a film cost, I mean say a video rental... I think the few quids spent on the whole thing was worth it, loads of fun really.* (M. Phone transcript).

In exploring these recreation auctions, it appeared that recreational sellers also derived a certain pride from the act of selling. Most confided that they told friends and family about their listing; one informant even went as far as printing out the listing in full colour and putting it on his office wall.

I found that recreational selling, as an act of consumption, becomes a creative source of entertainment and recreation for the seller, watcher, bidder and winner. For each seller, there are several bidders who commit their money, together with maybe hundreds of watchers and followers. Many such listings created a stir on eBay and chat forums were replete with discussions about them. Sellers, bidders and watchers all participated in this act of consumption which is unique to eBay.

## **7.5 Conclusion: Buyer-seller role malleability.**

CME has broadened the scope of consumption for individuals by offering new consumables in new consumption spaces. Where auction houses like Christies are reserved for a very select few, online auction houses have become the proletarian bidder's paradise.

Sites like Ubid and eBay offer a wealth of opportunities to individuals to visit and spend time playing, competing, learning, buying and selling. The uncertainty, doubts, passionate want and one-upmanship in competitive bidding transform the act of transaction into a sophisticated act of consumption in its own right. Consumers in online auctions have a variety of motives. Some are there to acquire goods for consumption, some to dispose of useable but unwanted possessions, others (mostly housewives or senior citizens) who feel empowered by being able to complete such financial transactions successfully, while a select few also resort to selling on eBay for recreation or entertainment.

There is a certain degree of malleability in the buyer-seller distinction in this particular consumption scenario. In online auctions many bidders and buyers subsequently turn sellers. For some of these sellers eBay represents a convenient alternative platform for disposal compared to flea-markets, garage sales or swap-meets, for many others it is a platform for experimentation with selling as a mode of consumption. Where most of these sellers would have trashed their unwanted items rather than arrange a garage sale or go to the local flea market, they now gladly take photos of their unwanted possessions, spend hours writing catchy descriptions, format distinctive listings and submit them for auction. They then follow them on a continual basis till their auctions end, answer queries, pack them carefully and then maybe go to the post office as a final ritual. Throughout this behavioural sequence their emotional attachment to the process itself may at times exceed their attachment to the possession on auction. The disposal of useful but unwanted possessions through auction thus becomes a much cherished act of consumption over and above any monetary gains that may accrue.

More interestingly, some creative entertainment driven sellers are selling items that they do not physically possess or are simply worthless. For this particular cohort of sellers, the activity of selling itself is an act of consumption. eBay has not only emerged as an alternate platform for disposal, it comports whole new meanings for the act of selling. This type of online consumption is not purely cyberspatial as it has a direct connection to consumers' material world. It also appears to counter the claims that consumption in cyberspace creates a certain online-offline dichotomy that results in social alienation (Kraut et.al. 1998). eBay seems to be grounded as much in a local society as in cyberspace. The exponential growth in the number of consumers using eBay as commonplace mode of retail activity is more than likely underpinned by the wider social acceptance of recycling and reselling as normative modes of product disposal.

The eBay consumption experience is far from being purely hyperreal or virtual in nature. Because of the material and corporeal connections to these auctions, eBay activities have a close link with the consumer's real world. Participation in online auctions, as an expansive activity, cuts across domestic and personal rituals and discourses. It creates a seamless blending of online-offline consumption, where CME is used as an extension of existing forms and platforms of consumption, and in the process effectively erodes the distinctions associated with the two realms of consumption.

## **7.6 eBay and consumer empowerment**

Although the central theme of eBay is a commercial one, as with any other product or service, consumers have moulded and adapted it to their own benefit and usage, making it another marginal space of contemporary consumption (Crewe and Gregson 1998) in cyberspace. Increasingly, consumers are using it as a platform for consumption in a variety of forms: consuming the auction itself, buying to consume, and more interestingly, consuming by selling.

Motives and commercial gain notwithstanding, individuals enjoy their time on eBay as they consume their acts, passions and fantasies; watching, bidding, winning, losing and selling. eBay has emerged as an alternate platform for consumption integrated both in the physical and hyperreal worlds, empowering consumers through new modes of acquisition, disposal and consumption. It dilutes the axiomatic distinction between seller and buyer. No longer do sellers and buyers exist in non overlapping spheres, one being served and the other serving. On eBay an individual may become a seller or a buyer, both serve and be served, interact symbiotically and interchangeably in a mutual act of consumption.