Engagement – Experiencing Magic in the C2c Online Auction

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Consumer experiences with C2C online auctions extend beyond the auction site. Phenomenological analysis of stories of experiences of C2C online auction users show how valued experiences lead to engagement. The essence of engagement is identifying with the experience, being emotionally connected, interested, passionate, motivated and enthusiastic to repeat the experience.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Consumer-to-consumer online auction experiences have become part of the daily lives of many consumers. Millions of consumers worldwide participate in C2C online auctions to browse, compete, win, buy, and sell goods. There appears something in the online auction experience that is especially engaging and drives ongoing use by many consumers. Research has yet to fully explain what consumer engagement is; an understanding of consumer experiences may help in this regard.

The experiences of the consumer in a C2C marketplace such as an online auction include experiences of the consumer as both a buyer and a seller (Belk, Sherry, & Wallendorf, 1988; Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005; Lee, Kim, & Fairhurst, 2009). The consumer’s online auction experience includes activities before, during, and after interaction with the auction site. Prior to going online, the consumer as seller prepares the goods for sale and decides on a promotional strategy (Chu, 2013). The consumer as buyer may have purchase priorities such as finding the perfect gift for a loved one that preempt their participation in the auction. Anticipated emotions, such as anticipated elation, may play a role in these auction experiences (Sierra & Hyman, 2011). While logged in to the auction site, the consumer as buyer or seller may experience the excitement of bids escalating and buyers competing for possession of an item (Chang & Chen, 2015). After the auction has closed, buyers and sellers communicate with each other and perhaps meet and socialise, sharing common interests (Chu, 2013). Something about the consumer’s online auction experience appears to drive consumer engagement with that experience.

A phenomenological enquiry was undertaken with a sample of C2C online auction users, to gain insights into the essence of engagement and the role experiences play as the basis of consumer engagement with the C2C online auction experience.

This research adopted an experiential view of the consumer (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). The experiential view is not constrained to just considering acts of purchase but considers all experiences of the consumer, including pre-purchase and post-purchase experiences, and interactions with other consumers (Arnould, Price, & Zinkhan, 2002). As the underlying context for this research is consumer-to-consumer interactions, with minimal interaction with the firm or the brand, the experiential view provides an appropriate basis for understanding consumer engagement in this context (Caru & Cova, 2003).

A phenomenological enquiry was undertaken. The researcher sought to interview consumers in-depth, one-on-one, about their idiosyncratic experiences with online auctions and the role engagement might play in their auction use. A purposive sample of 17 online auction users was recruited for interviewing, representing both genders, a mix of ages from the twenties to the seventies, and a variety of years of experience in the use of auction sites. After 17 interviews, no substantially new information was obtained from interviewees; theoretical saturation was reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). All interviewees were residents of Auckland, New Zealand and users of the Trade Me auction site.

Interviewees’ stories were narrative accounts that provided a rich description of some of their memorable, lived, subjective experiences relating to online auction use (Lopez & Willis, 2004). The narratives were examined with a descriptive phenomenological approach to analysis. Descriptive phenomenology seeks an objective account of consumers’ experiences and perceptions free from researcher bias (Dowling, 2004). Descriptive phenomenological analysis proceeds by first examining each consumer individually, and seeks to understand the significance of experiences for that individual. Analysis then seeks to describe the common meanings a group of consumers who experience the phenomenon have, in other words, to describe the ‘essence’ of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 1997).

Eleven research participants related stories of their auction experiences. In this paper, two examples of rich stories are presented and analysed. Each story concludes with an intrapersonal analysis of why the experience is meaningful for that individual, and why the experience might be a basis for this individual’s engagement.

An experiential view of the consumer emphasises the importance of examining consumer experiences as a worthy subject of research in its own right; that is, experiences are central to a consumer’s life and thus should be studied. This research shows how consumer experiences can play a key role in shaping consumer engagement.

The phenomenological analysis of consumers’ stories of their auction experiences helped understand what typical online auction experiences are and why remembered, valued experiences are important; helped understand the essence of consumer engagement, and why online auction users become engaged. The phenomenological analysis revealed the basis of consumer engagement is the rewarding auction experiences of interviewees.

The essence of engagement derived from these stories is that engagement appears to be about being emotionally connected with the auction experience ("I love it so much"), identifying with the experience ("it’s a big part of me now"), being highly interested ("it captured my interest"), passionate ("I am passionate"), motivated ("it’s motivating to have a look on there all the time") and enthusiastic to repeat the auction experience ("so I’m enthusiastic and that’s why I know I’ll use it again"). It all begins with a magical experience!

The research makes a theoretical contribution to knowledge by suggesting the dimensions of engagement in a C2C context. The research also proffers consumption value as a potential mediator explaining the relationship between experiences and engagement. Further research will quantify measures of experience, value and engagement in a C2C context, and test the relationships between these constructs quantitatively.

REFERENCES


