Cries From the Goblin Market: Consumer Narratives in the Marketplace

Shakeel Siddiqui, Dublin City University, Ireland
Darach Turley, Dublin City University, Ireland
Farida Rifai, HSE, Ireland

Although narratives permeate marketplaces, contemporary market structures militate against consumers creating their own commercial narratives. However, alternate marketplaces such as online auctions allow consumers to become marketers themselves, lead to a sense of empowerment and thereby redress this disequilibrium in marketplace structures. This paper looks at consumer-generated commercial narratives on eBay and finds that not only does consumer empowerment in this alternate marketplace contribute to marketplace discourses of power at large, but that consumers also use these narratives to both foster and further ideological agendas.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13588/volumes/v35/NA-35

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Cries from the Goblin Market: Consumer Narratives in the Marketplace
Shakeel Siddiqui, Dublin City University, Ireland
Darach Turley, Dublin City University, Ireland
Farida Rifai, HSE, Ireland

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The contemporary understanding of consumption is that it comprises mutable and malleable sets of acts that go beyond acquisition, use and depletion of consumables; consumption is a narrative of empowerment aimed at self-articulation. When consumption is viewed as a narrative, the study of consumer behaviour in turn becomes a search to understand consumption narratives. However, within consumer research, consumption narratives are typically studied through the lens of either brand semiotics or normative cultural identity.

Like other facets of social and cultural life, consumption narratives permeate the marketplace, but because marketplaces are ruled and governed by marketers, these narratives are generally more marketing communication inspired than what might be termed consumer originals. Thompson’s (2004) work demonstrates that commercial narratives are created and tailored to provide meanings and metaphors to consumers to serve ideological agendas, and that the dynamically evolving nature of marketplace mythologies indicates an ever-present discourse of power among marketplace stakeholders. Because ordinary market structures do not empower consumers within exchange (Holt 2002) or allow them to freely create commercial as well as consumption narratives, some consumers may turn to alternate platforms such as flea markets (Sherry 1990) or the burning man festival (Kozinets 2002).

This paper explores online auctions as alternate marketplaces where the consumer becomes the marketer, and studies ‘consumer generated’ commercial narratives. Selling in online auctions is primarily aimed at disposal, but consumer experimentation has resulted in popular sites like eBay becoming as much a platform for social and communal action as a platform for acquisition and disposition. This paper looks at narratives on eBay, to study how consumers create narratives that are imbued with social and cultural meanings and metaphors, archetypes and mythologies in order to promote their own ideological agendas.

Methods and Findings: Making use of an eighteen-month immersive ethnography on eBay, this article takes a broad overview of consumer generated narratives on two of the largest eBay regional websites, US and UK eBay. The extensive database (over 10,000 listings, more than 2,000 pages of printout) included many forms and formats of narratives: textual and visual product descriptions, audio-visual enhancements as well as statistical records, narratives that were inspired by and followed on commercial narratives, as well as originals that resisted pervasive brand semiotics.

Consumer empowerment through alternate marketplaces: In the relevant research literature there is arguably no universal definition of an ‘alternate marketplace’, but ordinarily a marketplace entails the presence of a buyer, seller and offering in a common place, a place where buyers and sellers exist in non-overlapping spheres. Online auctions where consumers act on both sides of a transaction represent a significant change in this centuries old marketplace structure by allowing a role malleability which effectively dissolves the buyer-seller boundary and makes the consumer a potent force in contemporary marketplace discourses of power (Siddiqui and Turley 2005).

eBay empowers a consumer by allowing her to play the roles of marketer, communicator, audience and buyer and thus grants her ultimate authority in her market interactions. Empowered consumers use this authority to create narratives of action, and apply them to both constructive and deconstructive ends.

At one level, consumer narratives on eBay highlight the sense of bargain hunting common to the larger eBay community, and underscore its alternate market ethos. At another level, these narratives also indicate a commonality of interest which results in the emergence of multiple communities of collectors and consumers centered on material objects and brands as well as ideologies. We found that these narratives are used both constructively and deconstructively to foster various ideological agendas.

Discussion: If the Foucauldian view that social and communal movements always invoke resistance to prevailing power structures is applied to alternate marketplaces, this 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 2004) based on the attribution of an emancipatory universal to a particular social group (Poster 1984). In the case of eBay, simply being advertised on this platform 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. At one level, these themes are essentially an indication of a resistance to contemporary market structures and assume that removal of the profiteering middleman from the equation is in best interest of the consumer. However, this ‘removal of middleman’ assumption is counterbalanced 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 metaphors to be contradictory, they can be seen as representing 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-entrepreneurs in quest of the Marxian prospect of becoming an active subject in the very economy they are trying to escape.

References
Advances in Consumer Research (Volume 35) / 811


Czarniawska, Barbara, and Pasquale Gagliardi (2003), “Narratives We Organize By” Goteborg: Goteborg University Press.


Rossetti, Christina (1862), Goblin Market and other Poems, Cambridge, Macmillan, (also printed in Text from Christina Rossetti, Poems (1890) Fisher Rare Book Library, Toronto).


