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“Have It Now!”: Ebay and the Acceleration of Consumer Desire

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on data gathered from in-depth interviews with experienced eBay users living in the South of England, this paper accounts for how consumers' interaction with eBay accelerates cycles of desire. It is argued that because eBay never ceases to signal new possibilities in finding desired goods, it sets in motion accelerated cycles of revelation, characterised by unexpected surprises and opportunities where desired goods can be acquired quickly. This however, undermines the possibility of pleasure associated with a state of desire by radically shortening the various stages of the cycle.

Despite calls for a more concerted effort to redirect consumer research into the arena of consumer desire or passionate consumption (Belk 2001; Belk et al. 2003; Belk et al. 1996), to date, conceptual or empirically grounded research remains marginal at best. Notwithstanding, several authors make a case for seeing consumption as being driven by internal, imaginative idealisations of objects of consumption and that it may very well be the associated pleasures of crafting daydreams and longing which lies at the heart of consumerism. Key themes can be teased out from consumer centred narratives on desire; that desire is a powerful cyclic emotion which delivers longing, pleasure, discomfort and disappointment (Belk et al. 2003; Belk et al. 1996; Campbell 1987; McCracken 1988). Belk et al. (2003) call this a cycle of desire, Campbell (1987), a “cycle of desire-acquisition-use-disillusionment-renewed desire” and McCracken (1988) describes this as a vicious cycle propelled by the chasm between lived and idealised reality, where a search for displaced meanings—idealised meaning purposefully removed from lived reality—traps consumers in forever wanting more goods, so idealised lifestyles or states of being be achieved. According to Belk et al. (2003), the cycle is accelerated by the desire to desire, the hope for hope, and the fear of being without desire, and is further animated by tension between morality and seduction. Desired objects require nurturing, they need to be animated to be luring; they need something a kin to a prolonged courtship where an imaged future can be contemplated (Belk et al. 1996). This exploit in self-seduction fuels the intensity of desire itself, making longing and yearning as Campbell (1987, p.86) puts it “the main focus of pleasure-seeking.”

In the animation of desire's cyclical movement, external sources like magazines are presented as sorcerers of desire and consumers, willing apprentices (Belk 2001) or “dream artists” (Campbell 1987) who enjoy the pleasures associated with daydreaming and yearning. In such relationship, the cycle is fuelled by consumers' psychological energies, who, with the help of external sources, craft future scenarios of an idealised living or state of being once a desired object is owned. Previous research into marketing sources that feed flights of fancy, including window displays (Benjamin 1970; Falk and Campbell 1987), specialty magazines (Belk 2001; Belk et al. 2003), women's magazines (Stevens and Maclaran 2005) and catalogues (Carrier 1995; Clarke 1998) has shed light on how consumers manufacture and inflame their desire for goods. While the use of media for consumer daydreaming is not new, the scope and scale of eBay probably is resulting in it becoming a significant resource for such activity. Even more than previous sources already studied eBay invigorates the “cult for the new”, through an always changing influx of goods. More significantly perhaps is the fact that eBaying is more than browsing activity but rather a composite of consumer practices, including temporary ownership of goods and actual material ownership through purchase, which here we call DVC. At one level, eBay may fuel desire by becoming a “knowledge project” (Knorr Cetina 2001) for its users or an epistemic object of consumption (Zwick and

Dholakia 2006a; 2006b) which reveals itself progressively through interaction, use, examination and evaluation. That eBay is always in the process of being defined and acquiring new properties as it sheds old ones may make it a perennial source for things to potentially desire. Besides a resource for the imagination, DVC, makes a nexus between the ideal confinements of daydreaming located in the mind and material consumption and introduces an interim liminoid like state, that of the digital virtual, which plays a duplicitous role as a source to fuel desire and a platform for its actualisation. Such developments can be explained by locating them in what Rob Shields (2003) calls an “ontological tetrology” that reinstates the relationship between the virtual and material as real. In such a configuration there is an inseparability between the material and the virtual where the latter is a type of “ideality that must be performed,” or “actualized as material” (Shields 2003, p.4) in order to subsist. So, whilst daydreaming is pleasurable, it always seeks actualisation, be this through purchase of an expensive house or embarking on an exotic holiday. The digital virtual is also, to borrow Victor Turner's (1988) famous dictum “betwixt and between stages,” where transgressive behaviour may take place that otherwise wouldn't (Shields 2000; 2002), for instance succumbing to desires that may otherwise be seen as inappropriate indulgences.

As a magical source of enchantment eBay may intersect with a desiring subject in little known ways which require our attention. The basic question underlying this inquiry is what happens when consumer desire is mediated through a digital virtual space like eBay, where potentially what is desired can be easily found and had? In addressing that question, three related concerns are unpacked. To begin with, how eBay's materially elusive nature and lack of ontological stability may frame the ignition, sustenance and consummation of desire. Secondly, if and how, its liminoid stature enables the actualisation of blocked consumer desires. Finally and perhaps more significantly, to explore what the framing of desire through a technology like eBay do to the experience of consumer desire itself.

RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of the study was to obtain first-person accounts of consumers' experiences of eBay to fuel and actualise desire for goods and their reflections on such experiences, so as to produce a nuanced narrative around global themes or patterns (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989; Thompson 1990). A series of in-depth interviews with 35 experienced eBay users who had volunteered to participate were carried out between September 2008 and November 2009, with the average interview lasting approximately 1 hr. 20 minutes. The pool of respondents, included participants from a range of ages and backgrounds living in the South of England who had described themselves as avid, or regular eBay users. Following interpretivist research conventions, the sample was small since the aim was not to attain a statistically representative sample or produce generalisable theory; rather, variation in experiences. Most interviews were carried out in respondents' homes and in front of a computer logged onto eBay, so that they could refer to their past and more recent eBay activity. In total, 54 hours of data was interpreted. Data interpretation took place by way of a part-to-whole reading, made up of individual interpretation of interviews at an ideographic level, and then the identification of global themes across all interviews, which are now discussed (Thompson 1990; Thompson et al. 1989).

EBAYING AND THE ACCELERATION OF CYCLES OF DESIRE

In this section how consumers actually use eBay to fuel and actualise desire for goods is explored by mapping out key moments in cycles of desire as they run their course through eBay use—ignition, acceleration, re-ignition and satiation. We find that the material elusiveness of eBay, with its ill-defined contours and “in the making” ontological stature requires consumers’ psychological investment to animate its continuous unfolding nature, and that this, to begin with, is an activity which delivers emotional excitement. The search for things to want can be seen as a process of self-seduction, but over time it germinates seeds of discontent as it accelerates a cycle of desire and acquisition, producing satiation or disenchantment in some users.

Igniting Desire

eBay can be seen as a trigger of dormant, unfilled wishes and sorcerer of new wants. It does so by awakening a desiring mode through the provision of hope that an elusive item at the right price can be found in its fluctuating landscape of goods. For almost all eBay users, and for some more than others, first experiences on eBay are often recalled as intense episodes of searching and monitoring activity galvanized by the hope that a desired item can be found—a childhood toy, an expensive motorbike wished for as a teenager. Similarly, for the collector of miniature aircraft or figurines, eBay signalled the possibility that a missing piece could be about to be listed. In both instances, eBay acts a catalyst for desires which could not be easily actualised through channels of material consumption like shops or car boot sales, because they were too difficult to find or expensive to afford. Linda’s use of eBay to find a long lost toy is illustrative of this.

Linda, a part-time working mother of two young girls recalled fond memories of playing with a Sindy house she owned briefly as a child, but one she had to part with. She was prompted to use eBay in part to source affordable toys for her children, but also in the hope that a personal golden past could be re-enacted through the acquisition of toys she remembered from her childhood.

“I had a Sindy house bought for me one Christmas and my dad tried to put it up and there were bits missing. He lost his temper and we took it back to the shop and I never got it. I was gutted and they got me this piece of cardboard, it’s in the corner actually over there, instead: Like I say, it didn’t have all the bits so my dad just took it back to the shop and they got me this crossover cheap one instead. I thought I wonder if they do those houses on eBay and I think I finally spent £50 on it last Christmas, having found it on eBay after searching for it for a while. I went a little crazy I couldn’t believe all those Sindy things could be found there.”

Desire within the context of this experience can be explained by summoning McCracken’s (1988) reading of displaced meaning. For Linda, ideals of a gentler and kinder existence are safely located in her childhood memories, this idealised reading of her past, where “she could happily play for hours” are bolted onto her Sindy house, making it a concrete bridge promising some form of meaning retrieval.

Ignition of desire for goods also resulted from consumers’ browsing activity, and here the use of eBay appears to fulfil similar functions to those attributed to other sources to enchant goods. Two types of browsing orientations emerged, one being narrowly focused on a particular known object, and a second underwritten by the chance of eBay producing an unknown something to

desire. Two examples should help exemplify this, one involving Peter, a motorcycle enthusiast in search of a new bike and Mark, a self-professed eBay addict who spent many hours a day browsing through eBay listings. Peter discovered as an adult that he enjoyed riding bikes after he took a driving test and found himself an eBay habitué of the Motorcycles section. At the time of the interview, he owned two bikes, but was looking for a retro-styled Triumph. He detailed his search in the following way:

“I would look at the picture and think what is that? It’s a Kawasaki, it’s only 125, I can ignore that. GS750, 1979, it’s too old. V-Strom, too new, too expensive, I’d be scared of dropping it. BSA, 1926, that’s a nice idea but I haven’t got a garage so I can’t store it. I’d look at the Triumphs and see 2007 Bonneville, one bid £3,000, that’s cheap, less than five miles from this location. Have I seen this one before and look through the pictures and think I don’t like the tank, that’s horrible but other than that it looks all right. Then read the description and see if they’ve given—So, yes, I’d look through the description and see what it tells me about it.”

Occasionally an item like the Boneville bike seizes his attention via its aesthetic quality. In these moments, he monitors his reaction to the object, wondering if it “speaks” to him by igniting daydreams and the possibility of a new self. For Peter as he later explained, the new Bike signifies the possibility of becoming a better rider.

The second mode of manufacturing desires is produced by a more aimless drifting where respondents navigate their way through a melange of stuff in search of something to want. Take Mark, a young father of two who drove trucks for a living and habitually checked eBay for things to want as illustrative:

“Every day I’m checking just in case there’s something on there I want and, of course, if it’s on a two day listing and I’m not on the computer I’ll miss it, it’s just one of those things. But it’s like having all the channels on the Sky TV looking through all of them if something’s better on the next channel. Like I say, remind you of your youth, so stuff you had when you were kid, you don’t necessarily have to buy it. You can click on and, of course, you type in the first letters of what you want to see and then it comes up with an inventory of all other things. You think, crikey, yes, I’ll click on that, I’ll have a look at that. Even when you sign out of eBay you sign out and it takes you to the front page, and there’s a little matrix of squares in the bottom left hand corner saying ‘you might also like.’ Of course, you can spend two, three hours just looking at different stuff.”

In this narrative, Mark simply jumps from one item to next, with navigation progressively revealing a never ending list of things to want. We may explain these modes of eBay use as fuels of consumer desire that require monitoring, interpretation and evaluation, in order to ensure that what is imagined can be actualised as a material purchase. Since eBay never stops signalling its possibilities—for Linda, the possibility that a Sindy house may be listed, for Mark that something desirable may appear—it sets up a cycle of revelation and discovery, always unclear and ill-defined; full of surprises and promises. We can see this hope that something to want is about to appear as a search for tangible bridges onto which to “hook” an ongoing daydream, whether this is for a perfect collection or an altered state of being or way of life. In this pursuit, respondents eagerly read incoming eBay alerts, logged onto eBay to browse at length through its listings, always keeping an eye on

their personalised eBay area where desired objects can be tracked. In describing such process, respondents frequently made the connection between eBaying and entertainment, with observations during interviews substantiating claims that the search for desired goods is a meaningful and enjoyable act of consumption.

This is best exemplified by Phil's experience. Phil, a successful 27 year-old store manager working for a big pharmaceutical company describes how he became "OCD in trying to find every single piece that was ever made" to complete a collection of small figures that didn't belong to him. During a two year period when he was a bit bored in a previous job [he] didn't like much," Phil searched eBay for Camberwick Green figurines his girlfriend's mum collected. He recalls being on eBay for "maybe half an hour, maybe two, have something to eat and then back on it again," and how he felt "obsessed by it." The obsession transpired in browsing practices that could produce the "cheapest" price, including setting up email alerts for every single piece as well as a complex database system to monitor the fluctuation of goods on eBay and identify gaps in the collection. The task was formidable as he had to source 150 pieces of a collection he was not very familiarised with, this sometimes included monitoring over 100 items at once.

"Thinking about it, it might have been that I was looking for when I was in my previous job when I was at work because I'd set up—you can set up for eBay to alert you when something is listed with a particular thing in the title. I had lots of items there in my eBay area at one point, like five pages or more. So I did this spreadsheet with all of the pieces and then I set up these alerts on eBay for each of the codes of each piece. So eBay would then email me or send me a message when something was listed."

He later added how much he enjoyed finding items:

"Just finding them and especially if I found them spelt wrong or whatever, something obscure. If I found it a strange way that was more exciting than just finding it normally. The website was called fatfingers.com so obviously a play on people typing. Of course, by doing that because things were spelt incorrectly people searching for something specific spelt correctly it wouldn't bring those items back because they were spelt correctly."

We can see here a relational practice binding eBay and users like Phil and Peter, through the use of interactive tools, like email alerts and search engines which enable the actualisation of the imagined, like Peter does, when he looks for a superior bike, and for Mark, the possibility that things to want will come into existence as eBay's catalogue morphs. These passages are also interesting as they elucidate the mode of engagement which drives the unfolding of eBay and the requirement to be constantly connected to the auction house in order to actualise desire through acquisition. This we can see producing, to borrow from Featherstone (1998), an enhanced sense of *flânerie* where greater control can be exerted over the search process, as items can be searched for at global scale and specified to the smallest detail, as Peter does, in determining the style of the bike he is after. Such practices end up generating changes in the cycle of desire, most notably in accelerating the speed in which desired items can be found and acquired.

Accelerating Desire

Ebay use accelerates the cycle of desire through three key practices: the quick acquisition of desired items, the removal of moral

consequences attached to purchases and the temporary ownership of digital virtual representations of desired goods. To begin with, eBaying accelerates the cycle of desire by making the once rare easily found and the too expensive, affordable. For example, Chloe an academic tutor who liked good quality home furnishings, but lacked the financial means to acquire them revelled in describing how she was able to get expensive items at bargain prices.

"You wouldn't get a wool rug that size for £70 in a shop and it happened to be one that had caught my eye earlier that day. So I knew what it looked like, I knew what it felt like, I knew the quality of the rug because I'd already seen it in the shop. I have done that before. I have seen something in a shop, maybe curtains in Laura Ashley or something, and I've thought, well, I can't afford Laura Ashley's prices. So I will literally write down the name in my little notebook, come back and have a look on eBay. You can bet your life you'll get it."

The necessary distance that had once separated Chloe from this expensive rug is abridged with the dissolution of a prohibitive tag line. What would have taken years to be found or saved for, can be found in minutes at an affordable price, with as little as typing in the correct search words. This ease is further supported with George's experiences. George, a collector of miniature Ferrari cars and historic aircraft noted just how much easier it was to find collectables on eBay in comparison to sourcing them from stalls at Goodwood Events or Festival of Speed.

"I had a fairly clear idea of the exact thing I wanted so you can obviously type it into eBay and search for it, and then I might be looking for one with a particular colour scheme or a particular sticker on that was a certain race, something like that. Straightaway on eBay you get a whole page and you can say that's not the one I want, that's not the one I want but the one down the bottom of the page think, well yes, that's the one. It's just so quick and easy to compare very similar products like that from all around the world just with a few clicks really. It makes it so much easier. As the years progressed one car came out every year so it was growing by one car a year really but then when I started using eBay I could get two or three of the older ones as well. So in a very short space of time I got a lot more of the cars. Once it becomes so easy on eBay like it does it almost becomes an obsession. You think I've got that one now I'm going to get the next one and get the next one, so it very quickly allows a collection to grow I think like that."

In this way eBay allows for the speedy completion of collections, by presenting users, as George explains with "cars to want". Often respondents had started and finished two or three collections or like George were collecting two different ones at the same time. The process of generating a want is also accelerated. Leah, a 31 year old aeronautical engineer, who described herself as a bit of tomboy, had used eBay mainly to look for 1970s cars and objects from her childhood reflected on a particular incident when she bid for a ring (a category she is usually not interested in):

"I was going through jewellery and found a ring that I wasn't looking for, didn't know obviously existed and then found it on there and just thought I have to have it. I liked it that much I wanted it straightaway and was stuck to eBay for like the last 24 hours of the bidding to make sure I got this damned ring which I don't wear anymore. At the time it was key that I had it and I found it. I wasn't looking for it and then stumbled

across it and decided to buy it, and ended up spending £150 on something that I wasn't actually looking for, it was like I had to have it now!"

As Leah's experience shows acceleration has its own flavour of emotional climaxes, where consumers let themselves "have" what they desire. For Leah, the very speed in which desire is felt is accelerated and experienced intensely during a 24-hour period. Often caught in the excitement of the auction and the fear that a desired item may not appear again, users like Leah gave into seduction, suspending momentarily the kind of moral constraints which characterise expensive purchases such as these. For Leah this meant spending "good money" on something that is usually "not really her." We can see a temporary suspension of dangers associated with high value purchases, including internal restrictions dictated by codes of morality which have blocked the actualisation of desire, where consumers let themselves have what their heart's desires. Whilst such experiences may seem as exemplars of impulsive consumer behaviour, we cannot easily label them as such, whilst intense and powerful, there was a time, albeit brief where longing and anticipation is felt.

A second related practice through which desire is accelerated included experiences where anticipation is heightened through a liminoid state of "almost owning." Martin, a software engineer with a penchant for leisure boats described how he played a complex game he termed eBay roulette:

"I came up with the game by accident by bidding on something to improve its price and then accidentally nearly winning it (I had to remove my bid) but then I thought on reflection that it gave me a buzz and I upped the anti a few times. I pick the items quite at random but quite often they are fantasy cars or boats. There was a stretch limo the other week that looked like a yellow American cab. It was on for about £15000. I bid it up a grand but it eventually went for about £20K not a roaring roulette success I know but enjoyed being the lead bidder for an hour or so. It's almost like you own it for a brief period and you sort of buy into its life story. That doesn't work for everything but you can enjoy the possibility of ownership and being in the lead even if you know that you don't want or can't afford it if you did win."

As temporary "almost owners" consumers give into the fantasy of an associated lifestyle, for Martin this included imagining "new situations and people you will come across if you had a stretch limo." When asked to expand on the significance of such experience, he added that he liked entertaining the thought of owning an expensive car even though he knew it was an expense he couldn't justify or afford. Here eBay provides a liminoid space through which users, like Martin, could transgress the boundaries of moral valuations dictating what is to be sanctioned as an appropriate purchase, including foreseen social consequences others will make or internal inhibitions restraining the actualisation of some desires, because they are deemed frivolous or irresponsible (Belk et al. 2003). In this way the negative anticipated social consequences associated with harbouring and giving into desire can be displaced, so that the pleasures associated with succumbing to desire through digital virtual ownership experienced.

Re-igniting Desire

The revelation that there were new objects to desire often emerged from the search activity itself, where the exploration of eBay presented consumers with potential things to desire by way

of exposing gaps in a collection or new product complements. For example, Linda's discovery that other Sindy items could be bought, was serendipitous. She tells us how just the act of typing in Sindy in the search engine made many options to want apparent:

"I just put in Sindy and then if you put a space and then 'h,' then it would bring you the options of horse, house. I was going to buy a Sindy caravan but that went for stupid money. There was a tent as well. I never had the tent when I was little and there's a swimming pool. Yes, if you just put like Sindy. I think you have to put another letter, don't you, before it brings up the list and then I put 's' for swimming pool and of course clothes you put in. I just went mad once. I went through a real addictive phase of going and looking at Sindy things."

In some cases, like Linda's "addictive phase" eBay use produced small ad hoc collections of goods as the search often insinuated the existence of other linked items to be had. Similarly, Martin had accumulated three small boats this way, as well as Peter who was keen to complement the bikes he already had with a superior one.

Another common experience for eBay users was re-igniting desire through the sale of goods that had been desired but labelled "mistakes" once owned. Disappointment with once desired goods is a quick aftermath, borne out of the realisation that the actualisation of the ideally possible through material consumption, the dress, the watch and even a collection do not live up to what was imagined. This together with the possibility that a better item is about to be listed, swiftly reenergised a desiring state, where disappointment or boredom is transformed into anticipation, as desire is refocused on another good. For Kelly, this involved a coveted top. Kelly is a 28 year old administrator who at the time of the interview was living in a shared accommodation with a close friend. Together they organised fancy dress parties, which Kelly thoroughly enjoyed as this gave her a chance to wear the "wildly eclectic outfits" she had collected from her visits to charity shops and eBay. Finding clothes is an enterprise she takes seriously as she puts it: "I kind of got bullied a little bit at school for being a bit different in the things that I wore. I'd like to wear things that were very striking, not necessarily fashionable." She recalled an incident involving a top she wanted badly:

"I bought a really nice top with all of this pop art on it and it was a vest with a v-neck. I thought that's amazing, I've got to have it. I bought it and it was one of those bidding wars when you're waiting to the last two minutes and then you put the bid in because you want it so bad. Then you put your bid in and then someone else bids and it kind of makes you want it even more because you know that there's someone else that wants it. I bought it and I paid over the odds for it because I was kind of stupid and wanted to outbid this person, the competitive edge again I guess. When I got it was a really horrible material and it was really unflattering. I had to mourn it for a bit because I loved it so much on the PC screen and I hated it when I got it, and so I had to go through like a mourning period where I couldn't quite let go of it and I'd try it on a few times. After I'd come to terms with the fact that it was hideous I just sold it on."

Whilst there is an attempt to make the purchase work through a period of mourning, the realisation that the top wasn't "the one" sets in motion a series of linked episodes, where items are bought and sold on eBay promptly, producing something akin to promiscuous consumer behaviour practices (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth

2009). Here disappointment or guilt over consequences attached to a mistake, “it wasn’t me” or “it was too expensive” are counterbalanced by the possibility that they can be sold off easily on eBay. For example, Steve, a young, recently married air traffic controller, who admired Steve McQueen and the fashions of the 60s and 70s, and in particular luxury watches, like the ones “McQueen also owned,” ended up buying and selling a few, in the search of “the one:”

“The first one I saw advertised on eBay and then contacted the seller and bought it from his place in Basingstoke. The second Rolex was one that I bought on eBay from a jeweller’s in northern England somewhere who were advertising it. I paid Paypal for that and then sold that one on eBay. Then I bought another one, a third Rolex, and that was on eBay as well. I think that was from America because that was bought in New York and then I sold that on eBay as well... The first Rolex, the model was a Submariner and that was the one that the money being tied up in a watch got the better of me so I sold it. The next one that I bought was a Sea Dweller which is similar but slightly heavier, slightly thicker, and it didn’t quite sit well on my wrist. It was only because somebody at work had one that I thought that’s quite nice, tried it on but actually wearing it day in, day out, it just didn’t sit right so I sold that one.”

Steve’s experiences bring to the fore the ease with which “mistakes” can be sold off. The fact that he can recoup money investment enabled him to extend his search for “the watch” and appears to diminish moral restraints imposed in the actualisation of desire, producing interlinked cycles, where ownership is tentative.

Exiting Desire

Acceleration of consumer desire in some instances propelled a quick exit from a desiring mode, as if the intensity and speed with which desire is fed and actualised produce satiation for a product type in some users. Whilst objects acquired are not always disappointing once had, like Linda, who tells us of the wonderful time she has playing with her daughters alongside her beloved Sindy house, to obtain what one’s hearts desire with such speed, lessens the pleasures associated with wanting as well as re-configures the relationships consumers have with their desired objects, once owned. The forfeiting of the pleasure associated with a prolonged courtship with a good yet to be owned is captured by Samuel, an undergraduate student who had spent five weeks trying to find a designer shirt. He explains “the problem with eBay.”

“Well, it was the fact that I couldn’t have it and I had to look constantly. I mean I thought I’d found something and it was like nearly got it there but it’s just not there and I’ve got it here but it’s not just here. When I found it I just felt really happy and then I went on to the next the one. Then you go onto the next product that you’re looking for because you’re always looking for something else. That’s the problem with eBay.”

Other problems often emerged from the ease with which idealised meanings or ongoing daydreams could be tested. John, a business entrepreneur, who used eBay to buy a collection of guitars he desired as a teenager, but only now could afford, eventually sold them off on eBay, having found that they didn’t “produce the desired sound,” or “didn’t have the right look.” At the end he was happy to pass it on to “a chap who could play better than him,” recognising that his daydream of being a teenage rock star was now never possible. For other users, this exorcism stemmed from a point where

the excitement for a product type simply withers away. For instance, after Linda acquired a number of different Sindy toys, she felt they had enough, spelling an end to a six week period of monitoring.

Problems often were transferred to users’ engagement with once desired goods producing something akin to an estranged relationship between owner and good. Take Ken, a recently separated man and IT contractor, who had bought a Speed Devil boat for a ridiculously low price:

“Well, my mental problem with the boat because it isn’t a £100 boat. If you buy one on a normal website at a normal time it’s probably a £6/700 boat. It costs £88 a year to insure it; it costs £45/50 a year for me to keep it at the club. The biggest problem I have with the boat is the fact that it’s so cheap because it’s my hobby and therefore I should spend money on it.”

Part of the problem as he explains of having acquired his boat at such a reduced price is that he feels that he should invest more in his hobby.

For many respondents the emotional highs experienced as once novice users are experiences which in themselves become a source of longing. For Phil once his Camberwick Green figurine collection was completed, eBay didn’t seem a compelling place to be; others, like Mark and Martin ended using eBay as one stop shop to buy more mundane things. There are however notable attempts re-enchanted desire for commodities and eBay use. Martin for instance now finds the experience of selling more entertaining, as he explains his current selling phases is a result of him “running out of stuff to want or imagination to think of stuff to want.” Even the invention of eBay roulette is framed in terms of having run out of things to want: “I play when I can’t think of anything I want or can’t find a bargain usually Sunday afternoons.”

DISCUSSION

The main purpose of this paper was to document consumers’ experiences using eBay as a site for fuelling and actualising consumer desire. In doing so, it was hoped that a nuanced narrative accounting for how eBay intersects with consumer desire could be arrived at. Drawing on a body of literature dealing with desire and consumer daydreams as the locus of consumption and conceptualisations of DVC (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2010), and digital technology as epistemic objects of consumption, (Knorr Cetina 1997; Knorr Cetina 2001; Zwick and Dholakia 2006a; 2006b), eBaying is presented as DVC, through which consumer desire is accelerated by the coming together of eBay’s unfolding, materially elusive nature and consumers’ own psychological investment in manufacturing desires and reacting to them in various ways. In fact, eBay’s stature as an epistemic object is instrumental in structuring what is desired—by always displaying the missing elements of a collection and expanding the universe of what could be desirable.

Just like consumers who found themselves fuelling their own desire for commodities by perusing specialty magazines (Belk 2001; Belk et al. 2003; Stevens and MacLaran 2005) eBay users are accomplices in their own seduction purposefully looking for things to want. As raw material to craft enjoyable daydreams of ownership, photographic representations of goods and their descriptions may not be as compelling materials as those retrieved from seeing and touching an item or being exposed to the more professionally crafted messages found in magazines. However, this is offset by the ways in which desire is intensified through the auction format which magnifies “mimetic desire” (Belk et al. 2003), as users can see how much demand there is for a good, but mainly, from the feeling of control it creates in its users. On eBay, the interplay of

imagination and possibility, fantasy and reality is energised by a perceived sense of greater control and autonomy in crafting pleasurable daydreams. The types of autonomies discussed in Campbell's work, awarding consumers the ability to "unhook" daydreams from real objects, are potentially enhanced on eBay.

In this narrative, eBay's material elusiveness with its "in the making" ontological stature demands consumers' psychological investment to animate its continuous unfolding nature. The need to further explore is such as Zwick and Dholakia (2006a; 2006b) explain not because eBay remains a stable absolute identity, but on the contrary, because its lack of ontological stability invites further exploration and evaluation. For eBay users interviewed, exploring and evaluating eBay entailed the adoption of search practices, that we may helpfully refer to as enhanced *fânerie* (Featherstone 1998), and within a taxonomy of DVC, it is this sharpened sense of autonomy which sped up cycles of desire. This, to begin with, is an activity which delivers much emotional excitement, where the *fâneur*-eBayer drifts through a landscape of commodities losing him or herself in enticing images, floating in a sea of new imaginings that generate new wants and maintain a dreamlike state of desire. This experience is punctuated with the dizzy heights of almost owing and giving into one's desire, with users recalling the buzz the chance winning a desired object produces.

eBaying, like the avid perusal through specialty and glossy magazines, confronts consumers with things to want but that those things can be immediately had is a new development. For instance in Belk (2001), Stevens and MacLaran's (2005) work, reading magazines in areas of interest is an exercise of fantasy consumption that seeks its actualisation through material consumption "some day in the future." On eBay, the future can be as soon as the day after. This actualisation of what resides in the imagination through material consumption and DVC produce a literal acceleration in the course of desire. Here, acceleration, works beyond the purely metaphoric function ascribed in the literature (Belk 2001; Belk et al. 2003) to describe the actual contraction in the course of desire, with the distance between its ignition, consummation and re-ignition radically shortened. In Belk et al. (2003, p.343)'s original text, acceleration is described as a dynamic relationship between the various elements animating the cycle, including the desire to desire, hope to hope, fear of being without desire, tensions between seduction and morality, realisation of desire and the re-initiation of the cycle focused on a new object. Here, the sentiment of desiring for desire's sake which animates the cycle is only partially forfeited through eBay use, as the acquisition of once desired items, represented in many cases, the start of a desiring mode for other linked items. Users suddenly discover that there is not only one but a range of possible "bridges to actualise displaced meanings" (McCracken 1988) or other possible items to hook an ongoing daydream onto (Campbell 1987; Belk 2001; Belk et al. 2003), thereby recycling the anticipation and excitement of pre-ownership quickly from one item to the next. In these accelerated cycles, guilt, disappointment all possible outcomes of acquiring what is desired, are effects which may be easily offset by a quick sale. So, a desiring consumer and eBay technology sustain each other, by transforming the contours of what is desired, and generating possible "new bridges" or by co-producing a chain of concatenated objects of desire to help achieve an idealised state of being or a perfect collection.

Acceleration of desire is not without problems. To begin with, the speed with which cycles of desire run their course on eBay may be robbing consumers of the pleasures associated with wanting (Campbell 1987). It is as if continued eBay use threatens the possibility to desire for desire's sake (Belk et al. 1996; Belk et al. 2003) by way of giving users a platform for easy actualisation

through virtual and material consumption. Easy actualisation revolves around acquisition only, and not around the more substantive promises of transformation which made those items mesmerizing to begin with. Hence, as a process of self-seduction over time it germinates seeds of discontent, as continued use, accelerates a cycle of wanting and acquisition, producing satiation transforming the once exciting search, into more mundane forms of consumption. When desire is experienced at the speeds of eBay; when desired goods can be wanted and had now, the long term courtship metaphor which has been used to describe consumer desire, where wanting rather than having is longed for, loses its explanatory hold, making the short-term affair a more telling trope: always exciting, intense but impossibly brief.

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