

STRUGGLING FOR CONTROL: HOW MEMBERS OF AN ONLINE COMMUNITY WORK TOGETHER FOR INDEPENDENT GOALS

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, buyers and sellers exist cohesively, but recently the dynamic environment of Internet stores and auctions have confounded this traditional buyer-seller relationship in a virtual reality. Online auction sites, like eBay, present a significant and unique opportunity for market researchers and consumer behaviorists who wish to explore this virtual marketplace. This paper presents findings from an interpretive study concerning social processes involved in bidding on the Internet auction site *eBay*. Following grounded theory tradition, interviews provide rich data regarding the dynamic social forum of Internet auction sites, and their dissimilarity from both traditional retail venues and online stores.

The primary objective of this study was to understand and explore the experience and process of bidding for items on eBay. A qualitative approach employing the grounded theory method was chosen in order to facilitate theory construction using the interview data. Ten eBay bidders were interviewed. The recorded interview data were analyzed using the coding methods presented by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The trustworthiness of the data was assessed using credibility, transferability, dependability, comfirmability, and integrity.

Congruence was found in participants' stories that can be understood by the key category of *Struggling for Control*. *Struggling for control* is defined by the presence of tension within an individual, where she or he is placing responsibility on her or himself to monitor and control consumption driven emotions and behaviors, and the tension that surfaces to control for the homeostasis of the community for which they are members, in this case, the eBay community. This struggle for control exists within a community of buyers and sellers who interact with each other in a virtual sense, define some of their own rules, manage their relationships, and form expectations of other members that are more personal than expectations from traditional online retailers. The theme of controlling exists both interpersonally, in a private environment, and intrapersonally, in a public environment, as participants struggle to feel confident about their actions, emotions, buying behavior, and social interactions. Three main categories were found to support the key category: 1) *pro-acting/reacting behaviors*, 2) *emoting*, and 3) *social structuralizing*.

"Pro-acting" represents unsolicited steps taken by bidders that include actions needed to begin searches, modify their searches or bids, or pay for won items. "Reacting" represents steps taken by bidders that have been influenced by an action or actions taken by others, i.e., another bidder or the seller.

Additionally, the data indicate that the participants experienced a wide range of emotions that were either predictive of the action/reaction or were post induced, such as a rationalizing emotion associated with cognitive dissonance. These emotional displays appeared to have the potential to affect other bidders in the community. Emotions play a significant role in self-control, buyer-seller relationships, and in the maintenance of community structures. But in fact, research in the area of emotions in exchange settings is relatively new.

Maintaining the social structure for which the participants assumed responsibility was an important dimension of being a bidder on eBay. Each participant developed a sense of responsibility to the auctions and the sellers, as well as developed expectations for the conduct of other members of the eBay community. Maintaining and controlling for the social structure encompasses three main properties: playing by the rules, communicating, and satisfaction.

Online auction bidding decisions and strategies provide an interesting look into psychological factors of buyer behavior and the bidding/buying process. Several literature domains were reviewed following data interpretation, as per grounded theory tradition. These domains include emotions, symbolic interactionism, trust, internet behavior, compulsive buying, satisfaction and attitude towards consumption. From a sociological perspective, this study suggests some kind of "bidder culture" that should be explored further. Several other areas for further research are suggested.

References Available on Request.