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eBay's Digital Culture: Friction-free Capitalism in a Consumer Heterotopia

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Abstract This paper examines how the online auction site eBay reflects both the commodified nature of the internet and the medium's communitarian and participatory character. Making a case for the participatory potential of consumer culture, I suggest that in eBay's case, commodification does not necessarily preclude participation. I describe eBay's customer support boards and feedback system in relation to the internet's communitarian values and describe eBay's auction pages in terms of the internet's participatory culture. The second section of this paper is comprised of a case study of two liminal sections of eBay where non-normative retail transactions take place. Through a qualitative observation of eBay auctions for white power music and gay 'scally' clothing, I argue that these can be best understood in terms of Michel Foucault (1998)'s notion of 'heterotopia.'

Keywords eBay ; Consumption ; Internet ; Music ; Racism ; Homosexuality ; Clothing.

1. Introduction

eBay is a virtual auction site once described as a virtual flea market (Cohen, 2002) but it is also equal parts exurban retail park and outlet mall. In this paper I describe how eBay's development has in many ways paralleled the internet's historical trajectory from communitarianism to capitalism. I then describe how eBay, in spite of its commodification, continues to be a site for the kinds of online community and participatory dynamics that characterise internet culture. Finally, in the last section of this paper I employ two case studies to demonstrate how despite the commercial character of eBay, certain sections of the site enact the sort of non-normative counter-sites that Foucault might describe as 'heterotopias.' Following Communications scholar Michele White's methodological example (2006; 2010a; 2012), I do so through a close visual, textual and theoretical reading of eBay listings for white power music and used menswear. Using auction search terms, I sought these listings out over the course of April and May 2014. I selected this purposive, non-random sample of auction types because their non-normative political and sexual content places them at the margins of eBay's consumer culture. The specificity of the political and sexual interests these auctions cater to indicates a strong connection between the auction pages and the consumer subcultures they are a part of.

2. Friction-free capitalism

While the internet's earliest antecedent, ARPANET, was set up by US Defence Department during the Cold War to better-coordinate the work of research institutions, many of the scientists who used ARPANET came from the campus counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s (Abate, 2000). This was a culture that valued democracy, individual freedom, participation and community. The internet was privatised and commodified as it expanded in the 1990s, but the original libertarian emphasis on freedom remained. In this new, highly-commercial culture, freedom and participation were recast in the language of entrepreneurialism (Castells, 2001; Dyer-Witherford, 1999; Schiller, 1999). eBay's development followed much the same pattern, with its founder Pierre Omidyar subscribing to the communitarian and libertarian ideals of the early internet pioneers. Soon after its launch as AuctionWeb, Omidyar posted an open letter outlining eBay's values which stated: "We believe that everyone has something to contribute" and "We recognise and respect everyone as a unique individual" (Jarrett, 2006, p.101). Omidyar actually started eBay as a response to the commodification of the web by big business. Omidyar disliked the cold way in which the emerging e-commerce sector was treating consumers as "wallets and eyeballs" (Cohen, 2002, p.4) and wanted to create a site with the liveliness and sociality of the Usenet groups that he had frequented in college. Reflecting the communitarian and libertarian values of ARPANET, Omidyar told eBay historian Adam Cohen

If you come from a democratic, libertarian point of view, having a corporation just cram more and more products down your throat

doesn't seem like a lot of fun....I wanted to do something different, to give the individual to be a producer as well as a consumer (p.7).

On eBay, anyone could make money: Omidyar's faith in the communitarian and participatory ethos of the early internet culture had inadvertently led to the development of one of the internet's most profitable business models.

While entrepreneurialism superseded communitarianism in defining eBay, the site continues to subscribe to libertarian ethos, albeit in neoliberal form. This is the libertarianism of Robins and Webster's (1999) 'technoculture,' a dogmatic belief in individual potential and the power of the market that fits neatly within the reigning ideology of neoliberalism. In the neoliberal discourse surrounding the internet, democracy is equated with the free market (Freedman, 2002). Mike Wilson, then the vice president in charge of eBay site operations, told the Washington Post in 1999 that Pierre Omidyar's philosophy was to "make as few rules as possible and get out of the way." Omidyar envisaged eBay as the 'perfect store,' where each auction determines the 'true' value of an item (Cohen, 2002). By facilitating person-to-person commerce with as little infrastructure as possible, eBay brings an ever-increasing range of goods within its orbit, establishing their market value and thus commodifying them. It is intended to be the purest form of commerce, an e-economy completely unencumbered by regulation. In this sense, it is a realisation of Adam Smith's ideal-type liberal economy, fulfilling Bill Gates' (1995) libertarian vision of 'friction-free capitalism' on the internet.

3. Online Community

Embodying the neoliberal values of what Dan Schiller (1999) calls 'Digital Capitalism,' one of the keys to eBay's success is its commercial exploitation of the communitarian values discussed above. Online communities have existed since to the early days of ARPANET, when users created email lists to discuss common interests (Castells, 2000). Online communities were commodified as companies realised that they could make money by selling users to each other, with CompuServe and Prodigy providing spaces for online sociality as early as 1978 (Grossman, 2001). Online communities have been a subject of much interest in internet studies (cf. Freie, 1998; Putnam, 2000; Rheingold, 1993, Wellman & Gulia, 1999) but eBay is not an online community as such. Rather, eBay uses the values of online community to advance its own popularity and profitability (Fernback, 2007; White, 2012). While Omidyar built AuctionWeb to reflect the sense of community that he had found in USENET groups, he also did so to save time and money: eBay's support forums were created because Omidyar did not have the time to answer all the questions he was getting from users. Omidyar also included a form of email within the system, so that users could contact each other rather than contacting him (Cohen, 2002). As eBay expanded, it established a customer services department, but attempts to contact eBay are still deflected to the support forums in the first instance. eBay also hosts a number of non-technical discussion boards, mimicking the

communitarian tone of online communities, with names such as 'The Park,' 'The Homestead' and 'The eBay Town Square.'

The feedback system is another profit-oriented form of online community found on eBay. Van Swol (2006) argues that eBay's feedback system builds trust to overcome the sense of risk that comes with anonymity. The feedback system ties users together in a loose community by allowing users to rate one another and builds confidence in sellers by making this information accessible on members' profile pages. Van Swol suggests that by mimicking the values of online community, eBay returns to the old-fashioned reputation-based values of what Van Swol calls the 'Town Square.'

4. Active Consumer Culture

While eBay is an undeniably ruled by the values of the market, it nonetheless retains aspects of the internet's participatory culture. Scholars have frequently condemned consumption as wasteful, spirit-deadening frivolity, with consumers portrayed as gullible pawns manipulated by elites (cf. Bauman, 2007; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972; Veblen, 1973). Other scholars of consumer culture like Twitchell (1999), Fiske (1989), Lash and Urry (1994) counter this notion by arguing that consumption plays an important role in post-traditional societies (Giddens, 1991) as a symbolic and material resource for the construction of identity. The symbolic dimensions of consumption are of particular interest to Denegri-Knott and Molesworth (2010a; 2010b), whose work on digital virtual consumption builds on Campbell's (1989) suggestion that consumption is driven not by needs but by daydreams, with consumer culture providing a repository of images with which to imagine the ideal self. Haug (1986) similarly argues that 'commodity aesthetics' imbue a commodity with an image of use value that encourages potential consumers to imagine themselves as the sort of person who would own it. Slater (1997) notes that under postmodernism, there has been an extension of 'commodity aesthetics' causing even material commodities to become increasingly non-material, for the real object of consumption is not the commodity but its image, mediated through advertising and design. This follows Baudrillard's (1998) argument that with the mediation of advertising in consumer society we consume sign-values rather than material things.

eBay, then, acts as a site for the consumption of images as much as things. With Benjamin (2002) having described Baudelaire's flâneur as a sort of consumer of visual experience co-opted by the phantasmagoria of the department store, scholars of consumption describe today's shopper as a modern-day flâneur (Falk & Campbell, 1997). Featherstone (1998) notes the similarities between web-browsing and flânerie, leading Lehdonvirta (2012) to speak of a digital flâneur strolling through the online arcades. In this sense, the eBay user is engaged in an active form of consumption, drifting through eBay looking for images through which to daydream. At the same time, in keeping with the participatory, many-to-many dynamics of internet culture, eBay users not only consume images on eBay, they also produce them. Because eBay blurs the lines

between buyer and seller, it is of particular interest to Denegri-Knott and Molesworth (2011), Laughey (2010) and White (2010b). In a special issue of the *Journal of Consumer Culture* dedicated to advancing "understanding of consumption in the context of... participatory web cultures" (Beer & Burrows, 2010, p.4), these scholars look at how eBay has broken down the binary opposition between production and consumption.

It is true that Amazon-style e-shops now take up a much greater proportion of eBay than they once did (White, 2012), but eBay is still, in part, an online jumble-sale where individuals and dealers sell second-hand and special-interest goods. In an early description of the participatory aspects of subcultural consumption, McRobbie (1988) argues that the second-hand clothing markets of 1980s Britain are subcultural spaces that have autonomy from the dominant culture, create opportunities for subcultural entrepreneurs and flatten the distinctions between merchants and sellers. The second-hand market revives the use-value of goods, extending their life beyond the demands of the original consumer, with the economy of taste determining the item's value. On eBay it is not manufacturers or advertisers but sellers who provide the photographs and written 'narratives' (Barthes, 1983) that imbue commodities with 'imagined use-value' (Haug, 1986).

eBay sellers, through textual description of items, thusly work to 're-enchanted' commodities (Shields, 1992) by associating them with the symbolic values of lifestyle and subcultural groups. For example, we find listings for 'mod' shirts and 'new age' statuettes. With its huge range of categories, eBay caters to the sort of interest-based communities that characterise online culture (Sunstein, 2001; van Alstyne, & Brynjolfsson, 2005). These are online manifestations of consumption-based lifestyle groups (Chaney, 1996; Featherstone, 2007; Slater, 1997; Stebbins, 2009) or 'cultures of consumption' (Mort, 1991). eBay is of central importance for one such group in particular: collectors. The site is used by collectors of everything from vintage radios (Ellis & Haywood, 2006) to vintage clothes (Lovász, 1996). As Belk (1995) notes, collectors often define themselves in terms of consumption practices and the commodities they own. eBay provides users such as collectors with an important repository of images with which to imagine themselves in relation to the wider lifestyle group.

Lest I be accused of 'cultural populism' (Frank, 2000; McGuigan, 1992) I should make it clear that I do not mean to suggest that every time someone finds a bargain HDMI cable on eBay, they are partaking in an empowering experience. I recognise that eBay is, on the most part, overwhelmingly banal. What I am arguing here is that in the same way that eBay provides a space for online community, those sections of eBay that cater to the niche interests of consumption-based lifestyle groups also provide a space for pseudo-participatory culture where consumers are not merely passive 'dupes' (Slater, 1997). In this online space, 'prosumer' buyers and sellers are involved in the active production of subcultural identities and shared meanings (Jenkins, 1992; Lash, 1994; Ritzer, 2010). In keeping with the character of internet culture, these watered-down forms of online community and participatory culture exist

within the context of consumer capitalism and in spite of commodification.

5. Heterotopia

Just as studies of the commodified space of shopping malls often reveal them to be places in which visitors creatively find pleasure and distraction in ways the developers never intended (Miller et. al., 1998; Presdee, 1986), eBay provides a space in which, to borrow the parlance of Michel de Certeau (1984), eBay members find their own 'uses.' This includes the imaginative and visual forms of consumption that I discussed in the previous section of this paper, but also the buying and selling of items that contravene the spirit, if not the letter, of eBay rules. These eBay practices constitute the alternative, non-normative spaces of consumption that we could describe as 'heterotopias.' Heterotopia is a term that Foucault (1998) uses to describe 'other' or 'different' spaces - liminal counter-sites that destabilise normative relations. Both Bury (2005) and Chun (2006) appropriate this term for their discussions of the liminal aspects of internet culture. If we approach space as shaped discursively by social practices (Bury, 2005, Shields, 1991), then heterotopia provides a useful framework for understanding the spaces of consumption that are created within certain sections of eBay.

One such marginal space is the online market for neo-fascist white power music. Zickmund (2000) has described how the anonymity of the internet and its freedom from censorship have made the internet a haven for extremist groups like white supremacists. The communitarianism and libertarianism inherent to the internet's lauded ability to foster online communities and protect freedom of speech has helped isolated individuals on the extreme Right to come together (Sunstein, 2007). As a retail space, eBay makes white power commodities available to such individuals, fostering participation in a shared culture of consumption through the circulation of pamphlets, books, records and clothing that are otherwise difficult to obtain because they are offensive and sometimes illegal. If consumption is part of a process of imagining the self in relation to consumption-based lifestyles (Chaney, 1996; Featherstone, 1987), then looking at and buying white power auctions on eBay reinforces the bond between individuals and the community of white-power music fans. As Frith (1996) argues, individuals join music subcultures in their identification with the aesthetic consumption choices of others, imagining themselves as the sort of person who might buy a particular record or go to a particular concert.

eBay has an 'Offensive material policy' that prohibits the sale of such items and employs algorithms to detect disallowed words in order to prevent users from listing offensive items. Despite this, eBay remains a fertile ground for sourcing white power music and ephemera as code words are used to get around these rules. While the politics of white power music commodities may be despicable, the market for them is nonetheless reflective of the kind of active, subcultural entrepreneurialism discussed earlier in this paper. 'ISD' and 'RAC' are the

two words that sellers use most frequently in white power auction titles, imbuing their auctions with the symbolic values of the white power music subculture. ISD refers to the initials of Ian Stuart Donaldson, the late singer of the band Skrewdriver. Originally a non-political 1970s punk band from Blackpool, Skrewdriver went on to pioneer the white power music genre (Home, 1995). eBay policy explicitly bans Skrewdriver records, yet they are nevertheless widely available on eBay. With eBay auction titles chosen by sellers to maximise the number of 'hits' they will receive from searches, the term 'ISD' is included in titles to ensure that those with enough 'subcultural capital' (Thornton, 1996) to be 'in the know' will locate them. ISD is used as a code for all white power music on eBay, and a worldwide search for "ISD" in the music category on May 16th 2014 returned 416 results. Another popular keyword used by sellers of white power music is 'RAC,' which stands for Rock Against Communism - the name of an early series of white power concerts that has been adopted to describe the entire genre of neo-nazi music (Home, 1995).

The use of code words also characterises eBay heterotopias relating to sexual subcultures. 'GAY INT' is a term added to auction titles in order to draw potential buyers to items of 'gay interest' (White, 2006). A search for 'GAY INT' on May 16th 2014 reveals 11,063 items and a glance at the first page of 'hits' reveals a range of listings including posters of male models, a VHS copy of the film *Les Lunettes D'Or*, numerous types of underwear and a range of artistic photographs of nude men. While this is admittedly rather innocuous, it does take the user outside the parameters of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). However, when combined with other search terms, or used in specific subcategories of eBay, GAY INT can bring the eBay user into a sexual heterotopia that subverts dominant heteronormativity. Within the category 'Clothing, Shoes & Accessories' the term GAY INT returns 316 results. The majority of the auction listings are for underwear – thongs, jock straps and transparent boxers. Many of the auction photographs feature close-ups of the models' crotches. The photographs are highly eroticised, with the outline of the models' genitals featuring prominently, yet because there is no nudity, these auctions avoid being designated as 'adult content.' White (2012) has discussed how these listings are as much about the scopical pleasure of viewing and being viewed as they are about selling commodities. Returning to Denegri-Knott and Molesworth's (2010) discussion of imaginative consumption, we can see how in this context, eBay auctions invite fantasy and identification.

Another sexual heterotopia found on eBay relates to the clothing consumption choices of the gay 'scally' subculture. In Britain, the term 'scally' refers to white, working-class young men. Within a sub-section of the British gay community, working-class sexuality is fetishized in this 'scally' scene, where gay men dress in clothes associated with working-class youth and attend 'scally' nights at gay clubs (Johnson, 2008). The search term 'scally' in the men's clothing and men's shoes sections of ebay.co.uk on May 16th 2014 yields 806 and 30 results respectively. The vast majority of these auctions are for tracksuit bottom and athletic shorts. Both define the look of the white, working-class youths who are vilified within the British media discourse (Jones, 2011). While used

clothing sold on eBay has its own transgressive sexual frisson (Petit, 2006), these rather innocuous second-hand Reebok classics and Adidas tracksuits provide the opportunity to identify with and imagine oneself as a 'scally'. Walter Benjamin (2002) described second-hand clothes as commodities whose aura had decayed, revealing the capitalist mystification that is commodity fetishism. However the sexual fetishism of the 'scally' descriptor on eBay seems to re-enchant these commodities, rescuing them from the dustbin of history.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have described how eBay's commodification of communitarianism and participation mirrored broader development in internet culture. A central tenet of my argument has been that commodification does not necessarily preclude participation. Rather than denounce consumer culture, I have focused on the ways eBay acts as a repository for imagination and the formation of identity. One way I have done this is through my analysis of the eBay heterotopias relating to white power music and the gay scally subculture. While the former may be morally repugnant and have little in common with the latter, both provide crucial insights into the liminal spaces formed at the intersection of consumer culture and internet culture.

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