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Book Review: Buy it Now: Lessons from EBay.

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Buy it now: Lessons from EBay. 2012. Michelle White. Duke University Press.317pp. (Paperback) ISBN 9780 8223 52402

Reviewed by Busisiwe Magagula¹

Buy it now: Lessons from EBay is an informative book based on the author's research on EBay. The book analyses and critiques the processes of EBay as an online shopping site. Over the years EBay has developed into a site whereby people can buy items that they need and those that they would like to collect. The book, 'buy it now- lessons from EBay describes the culture of the EBay system. The book depicts EBay as a self-regulating system, a community driven by 'consumerism and heteronormative values'. It is a place where people are made to feel that they belong within a community, which is characterised by collectors of items that are deemed to be valuable to those who visit the site. The members share their collective tendencies through their sharing of similar interests and values. They rely on one another for help in regard to purchases that they may want to make on the site by offering one another advice on products that are sold on the site and also which sellers to avoid on the site.

Consumers are encouraged to participate in the selling and buying of goods and as such they are the ones that regulate the site. They are also responsible for creating the value system of the internet site, without it being explicit to them. They regulate the gender roles that ought to be adhered to by the members and if they refuse to 'stick to the rules' they are ostracised by other members who adhere to the traditional gender roles that are displayed on the site. This is evidenced even by the owners of EBay (Pierre Omidyar and Pam Wesley) who have placed their wedding picture on the home page to display that only traditional heterosexual relationships are encouraged in the site. Members who belong to other sexual orientations are placed on the back burner of the site on the over 'adults only' pages. Although EBay is considered an online 'community' it is not all inclusive. White notes that, "forms of heterogender monogamy are incorporated into EBay's brand community identifications, stories and organisational logic". EBay echoes the traditional gender roles played out in the American community. Members are encouraged to participate by voicing their opinions about EBay on the EBay main street and EBay government relations but if they differ from the voices of the majority they are then excluded by the other members. The members' community involvement as such maintains the existence of the site.

EBay promises community but doesn't guarantee communication unless individuals are engaged in an economic transaction. EBay conferences- members look forward to meeting one another at the EBay live conferences where they will reinforce their online relationships and share their experiences. Members who are at the conference share their experiences of the conference with those who are unable to come to the conferences through live audio streaming of the conferences. Members that are idolised by other members because of their invaluable opinions and insight about products on e-bay are even paid for by other members so that they can attend the conference because it would not be the same without them; they rely on them to create the ambience of the conference. Members also show sympathy to those who could not attend the

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conference because of family responsibility, money issues and some other life events. Some members even treat the conferences as family holidays; they take their families with to take part in the activities of the conference. In this way the EBay keeps members enthralled and eager to work for the company.

A culture of brand affiliation is also reinforced through the conferences and EBay branded items. Members are encouraged to purchase items that are displayed at the EBay conferences, those that are worn by EBay employees. EBay enthusiasts are encouraged to buy a collection of EBay items rather than single items so that they can place themselves at the conferences and also to have their own collectables. These collectable items take the form of EBay pins, lanyards and cards. They are encouraged to view the items that they collect as investments which will have greater returns in future, however some EBay member have argued against the value of having such collectibles, because there is nothing they can actually do with them.

EBay continues to promote heterosexual values and influences its members to adopt these roles through the display of wedding dresses, engagement rings and encouraging women to talk about the 'wonderful' spouses on the site. These values are depicted further by the separation of male and female items on the site to produce its members. The author further suggests that EBay 'crafts narratives about normal heterosexual roles in order to maintain heteronormativity'. These roles are further perpetuated in their advertisement of the site, with masculinity being related to purchasing items on the site, that is, those who purchase on the site are more masculine because they paid less on EBay than other less masculine men. EBay's search engine also destabilises fixed identity positions and the cultural boundaries between gay and straight. They also depict technology users as heterosexual people. With men using the technologies to work and women who use them to protect their children (sticking to the normative heterosexual roles). The constant depiction of weddings and other rituals relating to heteronormativity continue to perpetuate heterosexual roles while claiming to deliver new technologies. Romance and the depiction of heterosexual relationships are important to EBay as they feed the consumerist culture. Traditional female roles facilitated by suggesting that it is the woman's role to organise the wedding and find all the outfits for the wedding party, and wedding attire is conveniently placed in the wedding dress section. With the wedding dresses women are encouraged to diet so that they can fit into their wedding dresses and become the perfect 'bride' or rather find a dress on the site that will hide all their flaws. There are also males on the site who sell wedding dresses and they actually wear them. It is ironical because they are still regarded as heterosexual men whereas those that do not hide their gay or lesbian orientation are often ostracized on the site because of their sexual orientation. There are some who on the site sell dirty wedding dresses and claim that it is okay to do so because of the memories that are attached to them and because 'they are going to get dirty anyway'. This diminishes the value of items that are sold on the site or rather change perceptions of items that are sold on the site.

Black Americana items are listed under the "'collectibles> cultures & Ethnicities and collectibles > Postcards > cultures and Ethnicities'". Black cultural items are listed under collectables which possibly denotes that black culture is collectible, something that can be purchased. The site also displays tendencies of discrimination against black people and Hispanic people by depicting them as well below the white population. The depictions in the form of historical slavery items that diminish the current gains of black Americans and America in general because they recreate the past inequalities that placed them at the lower end of American society. The ability to buy and sell black Americana representations supports the continued

commodification of African Americans by Caucasian Americans. African Americans are displayed as “thick lipped faces on cereal boxes, sloppily dressed figures in sheet music”. Depictions of black Americans in this manner makes them look like they struggle to develop an empowered, agentive sense of self. These displays of African Americans in these ways further discriminate negatively and further stereotype them in society. Not only is black culture commoditized and discriminated against, the way in which black people are depicted on the site as with monkey features, shows the total disregard of blacks as a people by manufacturers of the miniature toys. European white culture is not depicted in any way on the site as it is assumed the norm.

The book also shows the disparities that are in society in that men are allowed to view lesbian content, without that affecting their masculinity. Almost any action by two women depicted as lesbian content sells more on the site. Other pictures that are of the same essence but not placed on the lesbian or gay interest pages sell lesser than those that are on the lesbian/gay pages. Males are the ones who mostly buy from the lesbian content pages and also resell the items at a later stage at a higher price. White distinguishes between two lesbian representations. The differences are in the way that lesbians display their sexual preference. There are the ‘Femme’ who retain the traditional female ‘looks’ without trying to be butch. And there those who show their orientation through wearing clothing that is regarded as masculine. There is a tension on how men display masculinity and how females display masculinity. Women are said to display masculinity better than men can. Women, who refuse to take the traditional female roles... ‘always provide a challenge to binary gender and cultural assumptions that a natural relationship exists between men, masculinity and power.’ And as such gender is not a natural, authentic position but rather an imitated position. It is also interesting to note that males who visit the lesbian pages and buy items from the pages are also regarded as lesbians as the pages are meant for lesbian interests.

EBay has positioned itself as a site where people can get almost anything at just a click. It offers people the ability to buy items conveniently, without having to move from where they are. It clearly describes contemporary culture, which is characterised by consumerism, collectivism in the midst of gender, racial and economic disparities; as a result of its fluidity information is easily accessible, and as such the values, attitudes that are held by the majority of society will be transferred more easily to others. EBay recreates the inequalities that exist in the American society, that is, inequalities that are in the form of gender, sexual orientation and race. It shows how the majority of society still holds to traditional stereotype view, which excludes others in order to hold on to a society that was and not what it has evolved to presently. The book is informative indeed and clearly shows the way in which social media is a powerful force that influences people’s perceptions and how these perceptions are then reiterated in every day society.