Chapter 9   **Synthesis of findings**

The previous four chapters described the empirical investigations that constitute this thesis, and presented findings from four interconnected studies individually. Together, these studies illuminate the various consumption phenomena in CME, and inform us about the technological mediation of consumers' lifeworlds. It is now desirable to bring these studies together in a single framework to extend the thesis that contemporary consumers' consumption practices in a CME impact upon their senses of 'having', 'being' and 'doing'. This chapter aims to synthesize these findings, and relate them to the research aims.

9.1   Research Aims, Studies and Findings.

My first research aim related to the possibility that consumers differentiated between real and virtual in terms of consumption, and that when they opted for a simulated virtual product, they were knowingly replacing a tangible product. It was prompted by the view that consumers have now come to believe that they are encapsulated in a 'present' which is qualitatively and existentially different from the other 'here and now', and that simulations are the new consumables. The study found that the participants differentiated between virtual and real in terms of consumption, and that for some of them simulated consumables had in fact replaced the tangible, and in many cases, had done so irreversibly.

The second research aim was to explore if these simulated consumables comported the potential of becoming objects of possession, and whether they played a part in self extension? The study found that many simulated consumables were indeed replacing longstanding forms and objects of possession, but that consumers did not necessarily view such simulations as on a par with tangibles in terms of possession value. Participants considered simulations fickle and non-permanent, and thus unworthy of

emotional attachment. Lack of consumer agency and control over simulations, and the technological systems in which they exist, emerged as barriers in incorporating them into any sense of self, and thus their role in self extension was found at best to be rather tenuous.

My third research aim was to explore how consumption in CME was mediating consumers' social lifeworlds. This study was focused on relationships, structure and interactions in families. It found that consumption in CME empowered individual members, and that such empowerment transformed the roles members assumed within the family. It also found that members who gained a mastery of CME technologies gained an empowered status, which often resulted in the disempowerment of other family members.

My fourth research aim was to explore how simultaneous consumer-marketer empowerment in cyberspace impacted market structures in general, and marketplace discourses in particular. To this end two studies were conducted on eBay. In the first study I found that consumers were making full use of their empowerment in this alternate marketplace by assuming multiple roles. I also found certain malleability in the adoption of roles and found that consumers could glide in and out of roles such as buyer, bidder, watcher and seller at will and with ease. In the second study on this theme I found that consumer empowerment also resulted in consumers playing a significant role in market structures, and that empowered consumer-marketers were using the same practices as marketers in other marketplaces. And finally it was discovered that consumer-marketers used this empowerment to foster their own ideological agendas.

Post-modern orientations in consumer research were instrumental in providing an initial insight into consumption behaviour in mediated environments. It is fitting that findings are now traced back to inspirations by examining how they add, question,

subtract, subvert, confirm or modify these philosophical positions. The next section will synthesize the findings from these studies and trace them back to their philosophical underpinnings.

9.2   Synthesis of findings – conceptual lineages

It was proposed in the literature review section that the post-modern notion of simulacrum is almost an extension of Northrop Frye's (1964) critique of imagination. Frye asserts that we as a human race are confronted by a world of nature oblivious to our values and desires. We respond to this confrontation by striving to turn the natural into a 'human world' through reconstructing the physical environment and creating an alternate human experience.

Consumers' lifeworlds are permutations and combinations of a range of lived experiences. Although individual lifeworlds can be unique, they are all constituted by similar lived experiences. Post-modern (hyper)reality asserts that there is no longer any consistently identical and identifiable figure of 'being' which stands out against the ground of 'not-being', that all referentials intermingle in circular moebian inferences (Baudrillard 1988). Baudrillard argues that human reality is nothing but a human creation that is discovered by individuals through their lived experiences, and that we use simulacra as '*weapons against reality*' to create alternate lived experiences. This implies that simulacra are used to negotiate, challenge and subvert reality, and that lived experiences can be created as much in the imaginary as in the real, thereby making imaginary the reference of real, its own pure simulacrum.

Postmodernism focuses on shifting surfaces rather than on a search for origins and structures. Some argue that a post-modern orientation in research places more value on creating and collecting narratives than on exploring and explaining the underlying

reasons for them. Critics of postmodernism argue that the over-emphasis on fragmentation belies a continual quest for finding, reuniting and completing one's own self; that the rhetoric of fracture ignores appeals for integration and wholeness. It is also argued that cyberspace is perhaps more explicable in terms of phenomenology than hyperreality.

The belief that reality is a human creation is not unique to postmodernism. Social constructionists also view reality as a humanly, socially and subjectively constructed state (Gergen 1985). Regardless of how imposing and objective they may seem, all realities remain humanly produced objectivity. In terms of consumption, reality is an outcome of oft repeated sets of social and consumption behaviours, which become accepted as institutionalized (correct) ways of being and consuming. This institutional world, which consumers recognize as reality and within which they situate their true selves, is the externalized product of human activity. Despite the objectivity that marks the phenomenal world in consumption experience, reality does not acquire an ontological status independent of the human activity that produced it. We create and recreate ourselves with a range of realities, all of which are distinctly human.

It is thus argued that in essence any 'reality' is a humanly created construct crystallized in individual perceptions and experiences and not a universal state of embodied existence; that simulated worlds can be as real as the physical and material world. I find that consumer lifeworlds fragmented between real and hyperreal do exist, and that consumers can play all roles (buyer, seller, bidder, watcher, storyteller, audience), and can feel all emotions (joy, sorrow, anxiety, agony, fear and pride) both in multiple windows, as well as in their embodied existence. Feelings, thoughts and emotions can originate from, and reside in, both simulated and material worlds. Consumption experiences are malleable and are used interchangeably to (re)define both self and the

other. Nicholas Humphrey (2004) declares that the substrate of self is a phenomenal experience beyond anything physical; to consumers these phenomenal experiences, which constitute their lifeworlds, can exist simultaneously or independently in both simulated and real worlds.

Such a position extends Frye's realm of human imagination, by including computer simulations. These simulations are perhaps collective embodied imaginations, and depict, not the world as it is, but a vision of the world as we desire it to be. Through these simulations we experiment with our fantasies, play with our imagination and satiate the desire for doing the undoable. Mediated environments are but products of technology; we have coloured the blank mechanical canvass of technology, installed drapes and plush covers, to make it homely. We create and populate parallel social and cultural worlds within the simulated worlds; we try to replicate our real world, and then manipulate it as per our imagination.

9.2.1 Blending of virtual and the real: products, possessions and practices: My first research aim was to explore whether consumers differentiated between real and the virtual in terms of consumption. My second aim followed on the first; if simulated consumables do exist, then do they comport the potential of becoming objects of possession, and play a part in self extension? The first study (chapter 5) revealed that mediated environments act as containers of both consumables and consumption spaces that are vital to the creation of lifeworlds. There are consumables in the CME, and consumers are increasingly replacing the tangible with the virtual. It also finds that although cyberspace has emerged as a phenomenal and experiential world, consumers appear to remain resolutely anchored in the material. It appears that consumers acknowledge and link their selves more to their embodied existence, and thus for many, the phenomenal experiences in cyberspace are not really the material of self-extension.

This study views CME as a manifestation of technology, and thus the effects of technology on the individual and her lifeworlds are explored on the assumption that technology is a configuration of materials and symbols that effect other materials and symbols, and that the relationship between technology and human beings is external to technology. This implies that consumers choose to consume either, or both, simulated and material consumables at will, and that their consumption choice for one impacts the other. The first study finds that the peculiarity with CME technologies is that they imbue a level of dematerialization which alters and transforms many aspects of consumers' subject position; individuals feel empowered by their consumption in CME, but also feel that they do not and cannot own and control their possessions or experiences in cyberspace. Consumer technologies are aimed at consumer empowerment, but to consumers this empowerment emerges as a paradox. Consumers were found replacing longstanding tangible possessions with simulated objects, learning new consumption practices and engendering new rituals, but at the same time were also concerned about their own agency and authority over these new virtual possessions.

The unique configuration of materials and symbols in mediated environments simultaneously empowers and disempowers individuals, thereby affecting their relationship with other materials and symbols. Simulation technologies, by diffusing the boundaries between virtual and real, install a new regime of relations between man and matter, and between matter and non-matter, reconfiguring the relationship of technology to the individual and his lifeworlds. Since all discourse on the impact of a technology emerges from, and is contextualized in relation to, some social and cultural standpoint, this reconfiguration also requires an examination of the relevant social structures.

My third research aim was to explore how this blending of virtual and real impacted on social networks of both an individual and society. The second study explored these social lifeworlds and found that relationship with technology mediated an individual's social relationships. Mastery of CME empowers an individual, and such empowerment alters social structures by altering the roles individuals play in them. This finding implies that transformation of the subject position of an individual through consumption of technology impacts not only on her individual lifeworld, but on social discourses and structures at large. Technology's impact on culture was also evidenced in the second study. CME technologies have affected cultures by modifying forms of interaction, behaviour and language. All of these have continually been adapted to fit CME technologies and their applications; expressions have become abbreviated, so have cognitive processing and emotions; shortcuts define emotional reactions and consumers have learnt to behave and respond in a technologically correct manner. Behaviours are largely defined by the application of, and access to technology. What used to be traditionally '*knock before you enter*', had previously become '*call before you visit*', has now turned into '*text before a phone call to schedule a visit*'. Interactive chat and SMS texts have become a way of life, whereby emotions are communicated and social discourses are conducted.

The fourth study revealed that in the context of cyber-narratives, 'real' has come to resemble the fictive. The principles of construction that individuals use in telling of their lives – temporality, intention, direction – are also used in constructing and presenting a lucid and compelling narrative on eBay. Such cyber-narratives are not taken as fact, but are consumed as social and literary constructions.

Together, these studies find that for many consumers cyberspace and the real world are not distinct entities; they seem to blend together such that each may become a part and

substrate of the other. This position does not necessarily dismiss or replace extant theoretical positions in the discipline. Contemporary technologies present consumers with paradoxes, and CME technologies are no exception. Seamless transition between real and the virtual worlds takes consumer effort, and it is evident that where some consumers, in Mick and Fournier's (1998) terms, practice resistance and ambivalence, others learn to glide in and out of both with apparent ease.

9.2.2 CME technologies and discourses of power: CME technologies appear to impact on social orders directly by altering the power structures within various social discourses. As products of technology, mediated environments accord consumers agency, which they can use to empower themselves. Both chapters six and seven indicate that consumers use this agency and empowerment to assume and experience a variety of roles, thereby challenging extant power structures. The traditional notion of domestic space is challenged when consumers choose to work from this space, or assume additional duties and responsibilities while remaining in that space. Technology has been instrumental in defining and separating domestic and work spaces. In an interesting turn of events, media technologies are now redefining the relationship between these two spaces by blurring the boundaries and allowing consumers to turn domestic space into a work space. Since immersion in cyberspace is independent of being in a physical space, consumers are free to experiment with a variety of roles from within their domestic space. In the context of chapter six we find that such experimentation alters the role structures in the family, and in the context of chapter seven we find that experimentation in cybermarketplaces affects the marketplace discourses of power by allowing consumers to become marketers.

The significance of mediated environments is not due to their technological uniqueness, but to the social transformation that they engender. New social phenomena always

invoke challenges to prevailing power structures and often appear as discourses of resistance (Foucault 1978). When these discourses of resistance originate as consumer actions, they have the propensity to emerge as social movements (Kozinets and Handelman 2004), based on the attribution of an emancipatory universal to a particular social group (Poster 1984).

Foucault's (1988) distinction between *technologies of domination* and *technologies of self* in effect portrays the discourse of domination and freedom, and of discipline and liberation. Shankar, Cherrier and Canniford (2006) extend Foucault's (1977) notion of '*disciplinary power*', to argue that it can be used to explain contemporary relationships between producers and consumers. They interpret Foucault's notion of disciplinary power as,

> *power is omnipresent and constitutive of our very existence; there is no owning, acquiring, escaping or losing it. Power is inscribed in discourses and language structures, operating through all our social practices, producing subjects – in our case consumers*' (p. 1014).

Such a notion of power may be understood to assert that parties to a discourse of power enter the arena with an ascribed level of empowerment, and that such discourses do not alter the power status of these parties.

However, Foucault (1980) also argues that power forms the subjects, which are socially constructed within discourses. Power distribution is not captured in a dualism of *haves* and *have-nots*. Another contemporary view of power is that it is not a top-down application of domination and agency (Bauman 1990, Bakhtin 1993); individuals are not given power by a superior authority/agency/agent, instead they are empowered by virtue of their own actions (Foucault 1988). Such a view of consumer empowerment suggests that such empowerment is internal to the consumer and not externally applied by a dominant authority. It can thus also be argued that consumers are not merely '*consuming subjects*', but that they are free to determine the role they play in their subject-object relationships.

Taking a view that empowerment is integral to self-concept, Henry (2006) suggests that market situation shapes sense of personal empowerment, and how this flows into consumption practices. Thompson's (2004) contemporary view on marketplace discourses of power suggests that consumer freedom to accept, reject or reformulate marketer proposed meanings and ideologies is indicative of consumer empowerment. This objectified view of power suggests that empowerment is almost always associated with disempowerment; that empowerment of one party is at the expense of the other party(ies) to discourses of power (Lincoln et.al 2002, Kozinets 2002).

Such an objectified view of power also suggests that variety of choices to consume in a CME provides consumers with agency to assume roles that were traditionally outside of realm of consumption. Such role assumption alters the power-structures and reforms discourses of power. In chapter eight consumers used this agency in cybermarketplaces to actively engage in marketplace discourses of power, by adopting a consumer-consumer exchange mechanism that seems to resist the hegemony of marketers. We also see evidence of their active engagement and resistance in their attempts to subvert brands, as well as in pursuing their own ideological agendas.

Post-modern destabilization of identity and role categories permits a relatively free experimentation with a range of possibilities. We live in an increasingly fragmented, multi-role existence. It is not CME alone that fragments one's self and identity; multiplicity of selves and roles is inherently built into the contemporary lifestyle. It was found in chapter six that although consumption in a CME accelerated this fragmentation, through these new consumption practices consumers were not trying to escape the demands of contemporary times, but rather seeking the ability to make fluid transitions among these many roles and selves.

In the embodied world there are irreducible hierarchies built into social structures. Cyberspace appears to inculcate a diminution of prevailing hierarchies of race, gender, class, age and social status. This creates asymmetries in empowered positions between cyberspace and embodied world, as a result of which the relationship between cyberspace and material world is one of rupture and challenge. In the context of families it was found that teenagers and young adults assumed an empowered position in embodied social structures by gaining a mastery of technology. Such an empowerment challenged traditional family role structures and could possibly create a rupture. In the context of eBay it was found that self-assumed malleable roles, made possible by an automatic agency in these cybermarketplaces, challenged the power structures in embodied marketplaces. The challenge and rupture created by eBay is perhaps evidenced in it becoming such a huge global phenomenon.

9.2.3 Empowerment: what it does to us, what do we do with it? It is evident that consumers find new forms of agency in mediated environments that they turn into empowerment; things which they cannot do or achieve in the material world, are achievable in the virtual. Such empowerment is oft manifested as consequence free experimentation, but it is more than just fantasy and play as it alters role structures in social systems. Consumers imagine, and perfect their imaginations, in the virtual worlds and apply this learning to their real worlds, and thus there are symbiotic relationships (and in Baudrillard's term, moebian references) between real and virtual worlds.

Three characteristics of mediated environments separate them from the material world. These are immersion, agency, and transformation. *Immersion* in mediated environments is the feeling of being present in another place and actively engaged in it. Such an immersion is related to willing suspension of disbelief; when consumers are

immersed in an experience, they are willing to accept the internal logic of the experience, even though this logic may deviate from the logic of the real world.

Agency is the feeling of empowerment that comes from being able to take actions whose effects relate to the consumer's intentions. Although mastery of technology is one contributor to this agency, agency in CME is not mere manipulation of physical controls as normally associated with other technologies; commands and controls used to interface with the technology only grant an individual entry into this alternate world. The ultimate agency in CME is the ability to initiate, or partake in, social and interactive actions, defining the rules and often controlling and dictating the outcomes.

This agency manifests itself as empowerment and authority in cyberspaces. Consumers use this agency and authority for transforming personal lifeworlds in three ways:

1. *Transformation as masquerade* – To transform themselves into someone else for the duration of the experience, such as in role playing or gaming.

2. *Transformation as variety* – To experience a multitude of variations on a consumption theme, to exhaustively explore these variations and thus gain an understanding of the other side and the other self, such as the multiple roles on eBay, or any other example of simultaneous multiple roles in windows environment.

3. *Personal transformation* – To embark on a journey of personal transformation by enhancing abilities, gaining alternate experiences and understandings, such as by learning to do new things, and by assuming empowered roles in their real worlds.

The ultimate manifestation of consumer empowerment in mediated environments is renegotiation of roles in the embodied world. Consumption in CME impacts on a

consumer's lifeworld in more ways than one, not least by reorganizing her social world. CME technologies are social technologies, offering newer modes of socialization to consumers. They are often viewed as destabilizing existing communities and cultures. Within its limited context, this thesis finds that CME technologies are not being used to create sealed virtual communities, but to help real local communities seize the possibilities for knowledge, empowerment and social engagement, making them viable in a radically homogenizing Irish society. It finds that consumer empowerment in cyberspace is not corrupting and disengaging individuals, that traits borrowed from the local society, such as empathy, morality, generosity and civility are not being lost in cyberspace in counterculture revolutions, instead they are being returned to individuals and groups in the form of narratives of social action that make contributions to these local societies. Far from limiting or bounding local society by overly distracting, disengaging and dehumanizing individuals, CME technologies are embedding fresh focal practices which – although reformulating and restructuring society – provide a new nucleus around which society is forming.