Chapter 10 **Contributions and Conclusions**

Having synthesized the findings from the empirical chapters, it is now desirable that the contributions of these findings are highlighted, and this document is concluded by reflecting on the research process and outcomes. This chapter will thus aim to take a reflective look at the dissertation as a whole, discuss its significance, validity of the chosen methodologies, and will conclude by identifying limitations of this research, as well as possible directions for further research.

10.1   Contributions

The original intent and objective of this study was to add to the evolving stream of research on consumption in mediated environments. The broader objective was also to explore any other related dimensions of consumption of 'simulated products' that emerged during the course of study. Although this implies that the predominant focus of the study was to provide a contribution to theory, given the peculiarities of research subject and field, contributions to methodology also emerged during its operationalization. Additionally, in common with many similar researches focusing on consumers in an emerging consumption arena, consequential contributions to the practice of marketing also flowed from the findings of the research.

Some of these major contributions can be classified in three categories of theoretical, methodological and practice. Table 10.1 summarizes these contributions under these three categories and the remainder of this, as well as the next section (10.2) discusses them briefly.

Contribution to	Theoretical area	Contribution to knowledge
Theory	Product and consumption experience	Contributes to emerging redefinition of the notion of product by arguing for existence of simulated consumables and virtual products. A further related contribution is made by finding 'selling' as much a mode of consumption as any other.
	Possessions and self extension	Contributes to the construct by arguing that self extension is as much external and material in nature, as much it is internal to the core existence of an individual.
	Consumer empowerment	Argues that consumers use empowerment to redefine their roles both in market and social spaces.
Methodology	Netnography	Argues for the merits of an archaeological approach to cyberspace research and proposes 'Deep-web Cyber-Archaeology' as a new research technique.
Practice	Marketing communications	Argues that bricolage of advertising copies on eBay contain unsolicited consumer opinions which can benefit the marketers in refining their marketing communications.

Table 10.1, Contributions of this thesis

10.1.1 Contributions to theory: Study of consumption has historically been as much product centred as much it has been consumer focused. It is only recently that consumer research has extended beyond the Kotlerian notion of products and services, and explorations of their acquisition, possession and consumption. By finding that in many ways simulations act as products, and that consumers are increasingly replacing longstanding forms of products with their virtual counterparts, this thesis extends the definition of products. It also replaces the term 'product' with the term 'consumable', which can be used to expand the notion of product and its consumption. By considering simulations on a par with other established forms of possessions, this thesis also finds that self-extension is as much external and material in nature, as much it relates to an individual's sense of being. This dimension is further discussed in section 10.2.1 later.

Further, the study of consumption has traditionally viewed consumer as the 'buyer' of a consumable. Seldom has consumer research addressed other possible consumer roles in a marketplace. This thesis finds that many consumers adopt the role of a marketer and a

seller to expand their consumption universe, and that for many consumers selling is as much a mode of consumption as acquisition. In the context of eBay, this thesis also finds that there is a certain role-malleability among consumers in cyberspace, and consumers glide in and out of these roles seamlessly to enhance their consumption experience.

And finally, in the context of families, this thesis finds that technology is a mediator in roles and relationships in micro-social units. It finds discourse of power central to a family structure, and finds that media technologies are used by family members for renegotiation of their roles.

10.1.2 Contribution to methodology: This thesis makes a contribution to research methodology in cyberspace by introducing Deep-Web Cyber-Archaeology as a research tool. Treating cyberspace as a cultural artefact, this thesis argues for gathering sequentially linked consumer trails that reveal rich data on individuals and their consumption over time. Such a deep-web cyber-archaeology has the capacity to reveal public data, which provides a researcher with the opportunity to observe current as well as past consumer behaviours. Rather than divorcing virtual from the real, cyber-archaeology will possibly create bridges, linking consumers' physical and phenomenological worlds.

This thesis also argues that without digging deeper in cyberspace, individuals cannot be tracked or traced, and thus peculiarities in consumption and experimentation appear as discrete acts and often connections are permanently lost in file archives. Deep-web cyber-archaeology is an unobtrusive observation of naturally occurring behaviour, and has the ability to reveal many previously unnoticed consumption practices. In theory, having access to a capable deep-web search engine makes it possible to track a consumer in cyberspace over time. Because the historiography created by archival data

is at best partly contextual and relative, it is also suggested to use deep-web cyber-archaeology in tandem with netnography to establish comprehensive contextual connections with consumers' life-worlds.

10.1.3 Contributions to practice: Although making a contribution to the practice of marketing was not an original intent behind this study, in the context of eBay, it was found that consumers were very successfully modifying marketers' original advertising copies, as well as creating entirely new ones. This finding makes a significant contribution to the practice of marketing by suggesting that such a bricolage of advertising copy contains unsolicited consumer opinions which can benefit the marketers immensely in refining their marketing communications.

10.2   Finding the unexpected

Any extensive study should hopefully unearth previously undiscovered phenomena that make a significant epistemological contribution. Often such contributions may challenge and extend existing theory. So it was natural in the course of this study to anticipate some findings that would challenge existing theoretical positions. However, as it turned out, the most surprising element of this study was that it ended up confirming a number of theoretical positions that had been seriously questioned during the early literature review phase. These are now discussed in detail in the following sections.

10.2.1   Simulations as possessions: The first surprise was to find that although simulated consumables were replacing the tangible, there was little evidence that they comported the potential for self extension. This confirmed the validity of established notions on materiality and possessions (Richins 1992, 1994, Belk 1990).

Objectification of a possession assumes a central role in the whole process of creating and maintaining the construct of 'possession'. It appears that even though we might exist and interact in the disembodied domain of cyberspace, we are still conditioned to exist and respond to a material world, where constructs like possessions, no matter how abstract, still need tangible foundations. Simulations in a CME may replace the real and tangible, but they do not replace tangible possessions in terms of value and association quite yet. It was found that instead of yellowing pages and fading leather, the plastic carcass of the computer may now represent possession of an encyclopaedia or a picture. It can be argued that it is the computer, as the tool to access our possessions, which becomes 'mine', and that what is possessed through that computer only remains 'mine' as long as the physical hardware exists as a material possession.

On the surface, the concept of 'self-extension' through possessions may appear to be a highly tangiblized, materially oriented notion with little room for explaining dematerialization in general, and its impacts on the individual's construction of self and identity in particular. Belk himself acknowledges this limitation by contending that "*perhaps the role of possessions in self definitions will diminish*" and that "*perhaps the possession of experiences or virtual experiences will become more critical*" (Belk 2002). However, surprisingly, materiality emerged as a valid and strong basis for explaining consumption and possession in mediated environments, not least for providing comparisons and contrasts.

10.2.2 CME as a source of paradox: The second surprise was to find that, in terms of consumption, CME technologies are not that unique. At the start of the study it had not been expected that Mick and Fournier's (1998) work could be borne out in the findings. After all, cyberspace is hardly comparable to everyday artefacts such as washing machines and toasters, and findings from that cohort of technologies would hardly

283

apply to simulation technologies. But informant after informant, narrative after narrative, the notion of empowerment kept emerging as a paradox associated with simulation technologies. For instance informants 'really liked' the idea of simulated consumables, yet at the same time considered them as fickle and non-permanent. Many 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. Mick and Fournier's characterization of paradoxes of technology, its ability to simultaneously fulfil and create needs, was amply evidenced in my exploration of simulated consumables and possessions. These new technologies and products were aimed at replacing the existing; at the same time they necessitated the adoption of whole new technological regimes that gave rise to the four widely cited responses of *ambivalence, technophobia, connectedness and resistance.*

10.2.3   Empowerment as a dominant theme: The third surprise was that empowerment emerged as a common theme among all four studies. In study one it was evidenced in notions of disempowerment in terms of control of possessions. In study two it emerged as the most significant theme and was found responsible for transforming individuals' roles within families. In study three it was evidenced in buyer seller role malleability and consumers' ability to choose marketplace roles freely. In study four it was evident that consumer' actions in alternate marketplaces were challenging dominant forces, and that consumers were using this empowerment to foster ideological agendas.

Discussions on social and cultural impact of the internet in literature review were generally focused on issues such as technological determinism, commodification, decentralization, anarchy, self-presentation, gender and ethnicity. This lack of support

to the theme of empowerment in the literature is really surprising. Poster (1995) argues that the characteristics which allow these new media and communication technologies to assist in collective identity formation at the cultural level also challenge prevailing social and political structures, forces and ideologies. Because the technological structure of cyberspace empowers individuals through easy and unbounded access, its impacts upon society, culture and market structures are profound.

De-structuring in cyberspace – by imposing new structures within which interactions occur – has restructured marketplaces. New drivers defining economic, cultural and technological dominance have installed a regime of consumer empowerment based on freedom of action and increased consumer participation. This freedom has promulgated an egalitarian ethos which has effectively eroded institutional hegemony in cyber-market-scapes. Self-organizing groups in cyberspace not only create consumer-consumer exchange mechanisms, but also reduce the number and levels of intermediaries in this marketplace. The notion of liberation is based upon contests and victories over the dominant ideologies and forces within socio-cultural structures. Social theory focuses on consumption as playing a central role in the way our social world is constructed. It is argued that consumption can be conceptualized from cultural, social and psychological perspectives as being a prime site for the negotiation of conflicting themes of freedom and control (Shankar, Cherrier and Canniford 2006).

Bauman (2000) argues that in contemporary societies, above all forms of freedom, individual freedom manifests itself best as consumer freedom. This freedom is often used for individual and collective resistance against the imposed meanings of dominant cultural categories. It is potentially liberating to escape from dominant social meanings through construction of authentic, subjective, individual expression. Among many consumption discourses, empowerment and freedom have recently emerged as prominent features of consumer research. Some contemporary researchers argue that

consumers seek freedom to discover their true selves, through authentic self cultivation by engaging in libratory consumption practices (Belk and Costa, 1998; Celsi, *et al*,1993; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). However, notions of empowerment in consumer research generally emerge from a position that far from being free, contemporary consumption discourses trap consumers in the market, even when engaged in 'anti-market' or 'out-of-market' activities (Holt 2002, Kozinets 2002). These notions are perhaps not ideally placed to explicate the true impact of consumer empowerment in marketplace, none-the-less they indicate the presence of an empowered position which is reformulating many marketplace discourses.

10.3   Reflections on research methods

> *Padma, if you're a little uncertain of my reliability, well, a little uncertainty is no bad thing. Cocksure men do terrible deeds. Women, too.*

> from Midnight's Children, Salman Rushdie (1982), p.208

To begin with, I acknowledge that reflections are interpretations, and cannot stand as claims for validity. Further, reflections are made at the end of a process, and generally emanate from an informed and illuminated position. It is therefore by definition that reflections critically evaluate achievements at the end of the process.

One primary benefit of ethnography is that both emic accounts and etic interpretations are drawn up after prolonged interaction with a diverse cohort of respondents. Such a practice becomes self validating in that achievement of the status of a native involves incremental understanding of situated lifeworlds. Further, evolving ethnography, with its focus on drawing etic positions simultaneously with data collection, prevents many possibilities of gross errors in final interpretations, by highlighting deviations during

the process of data collection and analysis. I must confess that even after a very critical evaluation of the choice of my research methods, I find them suitable for the purpose.

However, such a justification does not allow me to forget the limitations of my research methods in following fluid consumption phenomena in consumers' multiple states of existence. I have come to recognize these limitations by finding that the variety and fluidity of contemporary consumption scenarios present an ethnographer with immense challenges. Contemporary lived experiences, as products of countless possible life-worlds, are ever evolving and thus many may remain uncaptured. Fluidity in means and modes of consumption allows a consumer to use any of the countless permutations and combinations of social, cultural and technological components to create a unique life-world. I found that although ethnography can be used to paint a picture of these lifeworlds, it cannot frame the context in totality with all the details.

I have also come to recognize the limitations and complexities of conduction of simultaneous multiple ethnographies. I found it easy to get lost in the personal 'experience near', which on many occasions overshadowed my understanding of the reason behind the activity. Creating an 'experience-near' account requires ethnographer to be engrossed in the activity to a level which creates asymmetries with his role as a researcher. I am heavily indebted to my supervisor for frequently reminding me the purpose of my activities.

I also found Daniel Miller's ethnographic orientation towards exploration of cyberspaces to be a very valid technique, as it provides an ethnographer with the means to connect his findings to individuals and their social world, as well as to validate findings and interpretations. In comparison, I found netnography to be extremely limited in its application. Because much of the content in cyberspace is textual in nature, ethnography of cyberspace yields numerous textual narratives that can be

analyzed and interpreted in a variety of ways. Many of these texts are dormant and historical, and thus may not always be current or represent consumers' lifeworlds. This can be the most surprising methodological find of this research, as I started this study under a heavy influence by Netnography and with a subjective bias towards Daniel Miller's approach.

During the ethnography of eBay I detected that all narratives did not have a beginning, middle and the end, and that many were built around a drama which was freely choreographed by the actors, such that it became a never-ending-story. Because of the transience and temporality associated with cyberspace, actions are never final. Radical subversion of narrative coherence takes place when some participants inserted elements irrelevant to the narrative. In many such cases the original story teller often restores the balance by redirecting the story to its original focus. Cybernarratives often evolve as an interactive drama which foregrounds the tension between interaction and story; readers want to be writers, audience the actors. A cybernarrative is never final; new audiences keep coming and contributing according to their own interpretation. It was evident that the emergent story was embedded in the interactions which are best captured live. Retrospectively, had I known this at the beginning of the research process, I could have taken a much simpler approach to select data sources to generate final interpretations.

This amply highlighted the limitations of netnography. It is easy in both ethnographic and netnographic researches to begin considering text as the only content – that text is all there is. It has been argued that such an ethnomethodolgy of text assumes that all aspects of consumption behaviour can be found in texts recorded as articulations and interchanges between consumers. However, thoughts and experiences do not leave tangible traces. Even the best revelatory texts cannot capture and crystallize all elements of a consumption experience. A textual narrative is only a representation of a

real lifeworld; it is only a reflection of reality. Texts do not stand independent of contexts. These contexts are often impossible to frame and fathom from within the content of the text. This is why ethnographer's subjective lived experience is so vital to a study; an ethnographer needs to go behind and beyond the text to gain access to the true story of events, to consumers' real lived experiences. This revelation resulted in development of cyber-archaeological approach, which, once tested and refined, has the potential to become a useful tool for exploration of the cyberspaces.

10.4 Reflections on research process

Consumption in a CME is essentially a multi-sited phenomenon. One site is cyberspace. It is the consumption space that draws consumers and consumables together in an act of consumption. In terms of consumption, CME is the phenomenological world. Another site is the consumer's surround, his/her immediate social, geographical and physical world. This is the world in which a consumer physically exists even when immersion in CME makes cyberspace the phenomenological world.

First and foremost, ethnography lead me to the micro systems of consumers lives, bringing out what was significant to them, sequentially isolating and identifying the unusual and unpredictable, the changes and the variations. Through its primacy to systematic data collection in naturalistic settings, ethnography exposed me to what was significant in consumers' lives.

Second, because it involved extended experiential participation in diverse socially and culturally mediated consumption contexts which were alien to me, it allowed me to encounter and record revelatory moments, expanding my insight to the consumption

phenomena of the local. And finally, it allowed me to produce substantial and credible interpretations of behaviour by incorporating consumption dimensions which remain unarticulated in common consumption discourses and narratives.

Although I acknowledge that I cannot claim universal validity for any of my findings, within its own limited context, I found that evolving, multi-modal multi-sited ethnography was well suited for my fields of interest, by being adaptive, responsive and rigorous. My supervisor's continuous critical assessment and my own reflection resulted in an evolving understanding based on continuous enquiry. This critical focus and continual assessment was never aimed at achieving precision in findings, but at recording and understanding consumers and consumables, in part at least, from the point of view of how simulations embody, mediate and impact real lifeworlds.

In any ethnography there are issues of emic and etic ownership – as an ethnographer I own my lived experiences, and as a researcher I believe in my interpretations more than anyone else. But I am also aware of the fact that another viewer may have another view. Although as an ethnographer I cannot validate all aspects of my etic, as a researcher I am satisfied with the correspondence I find between emic and the etic.

To sum it up, I refer to Geertz to provide a valid, significant reflection on an ethnographic contribution. He comments,

> *I do not believe that anthropology is not or cannot be a science, that ethnographies are novels, poems or visions, that the reliability of anthropological knowledge is of secondary interest, or that the value of anthropological works inheres solely in their persuasiveness.* (Geertz, 1990, p.274)

Geertz also believes in ethnography as an authorial practice. Ethnographer is an author of a text which has scientific significance. For three years ethnography became my life, my love and my narrative. I have written a story of my encounters with people who

partly live and consume in simulated environments. I know it is not the whole story, I know I have not uncovered the whole truth, and I know there can be meanings beyond what I found and interpreted, but I believe what I present through this thesis is as scientific, as it is creative and artistic in nature.

10.5   Limitations of the study

To establish the relevance and validity of any research, its limitations must be acknowledged to provide a context. This study is no exception, and five of these limitations are now presented.

First, one of the most obvious limitations to this research is that, being ethnographic, the study was emergent in nature and was not designed with an empirical focus. The findings discussed are based on concepts that emerged from the data as they were collected in the field. The interpretation of these data then directed attention to the specific dimensions of consumption in the CME and their role in mediating lifeworlds. While integral to interpretive ethnographic research, this does mean that the population parameters which were directly responsible for some interpretations in this thesis were not as comprehensive as they might otherwise have been. Consequently, a more in-depth investigation with a larger sample of CME consumers, across a range of cultures, may serve to develop the findings individually.

Second, regardless of the volume, depth and richness of data, ethnographic researches tend to be broadly focused. Researches which seek epistemological expansion are often 'inch deep and mile wide', and at best are useful for ground-mapping. The true usefulness of an ethnographic study is in its ability to unearth new research directions. Understandably, this research too had a broad focus and expansive findings. Nonetheless, these finding can be useful in establishing directions for future research.

Third, the 'geographically local' of this ethnography was a society undergoing significantly noticeable economic and cultural transformation. A booming Cetlic tiger economy and migratory influxes have been transforming Irish consumption practices for some time now. Economic prosperity has also recently exposed Irish consumers to many newer forms of technologies. Given their relatively fresh appearance in the local society, consumer experimentation with these technological products is perhaps higher than what would otherwise have been. Because a majority of respondents for this study were based in Ireland, and were exclusively Irish nationals, the findings are therefore not generaliseable across cultures or geographies.

Fourth, because of the application of evolving ethnographic approach, research dimensions presented in this thesis represent focal practices of core informant group. All these dimensions were selected from the many examples of consumption in CME found in the informant groups. There were at least two other related explorations that were eventually dropped in favour of the stronger ones, and thus do not contribute to the findings presented in this thesis. Whereas such directional realignment is common to any ethnography, it does limit the extent and scope of findings.

Fifth, because all of these studies were focused at the individual level, the findings do not underscore the collective dimensions of consumption in CME in general, and cyberspace in particular. Individual lifeworlds are impacted by institutional and collective actions, and Robert Kozinets (1997, 2001, 2002) has very effectively demonstrated how these social collectives in cyberspace impact individual lifeworlds. However, given the fact that social collectives in geographic and cybersocieties are rarely constituted by the same individual members, simultaneous explorations in both of these regimes was not possible in all of the studies presented in this thesis.

10.6 Directions for future research

Several directions for future research emerge from this study. These can be categorized as originating from changes in technological environment, unsatiated theoretical concerns and gaps in methodological approaches. These are now discussed briefly.

Technological innovations redefine consumption practices, and media technologies are by far the most dynamic of all human technologies. Within the short period that marked the end of data collection, and incubation of this thesis, several new developments in technology and technological products redefined Irish consumption practices. Prices of personal computers and laptops declined, making them accessible to a wider consumer base. Large screen LCD televisions with HDMI capabilities appeared on the market, and at least in the urban areas several companies started offering internet ready cable television services. Personal media players have shrunk in size and pocket products such as Nintendo DS-Lite gained popular acceptance among both children and adults. Many of these new portable devices have now been positioned at adult population as memory and brain activity enhancers. Irish teenagers have also begun to follow their US counterparts by frequenting self-presentation websites such as Bebo, MySpace, Secondlife and Flick-R, and video-chatting has emerged as a new form of communication. Free media content in cyberspace such as on YouTube has captured the imagination of Irish consumers and already many consumers are experimenting by becoming telecasters on such sites. Convergence of media, reduction in the cost of mobile internet, and emergence of powerful new devices such as iPhone have all contributed to an explosion of consumption in mediated environments. All these advances in technologies engender new consumption regimes which necessitate revisit to the many theoretical concerns highlighted in this thesis.

In terms of theoretical concerns, it is my opinion that consumer empowerment in cyberspaces is a significantly under-researched area. There is no doubt that rich theoretical literature exists within consumer research that explains consumer empowerment to a certain degree, but there are very few empirical studies. At the end of this research journey, my own feeling is that all roads of consumption lead to consumer agency and empowerment. I feel that what is called consumer quest for identity creation and self expression can perhaps be called quest for empowerment, and so I can see many possibilities for future research in this domain.

Further, I would like to borrow from Belk to recommend exploration of experiential repositories which are now replacing possessions and their collections. In the context of this research, efforts to explore what dematerialization meant in terms of possessions revealed that it was not simulation that was replacing a possession, but experiences. Although it is not directly related to the outcomes of this research, but I find it an interesting unexplored domain.

In terms of methodological approaches, I think that Daniel Miller's call for applying a local approach to the understanding of consumption phenomena in cyberspace deserves an attention. I also think that Venkatesh and Nicosia's approach of exploring domestic space to access phenomena in cyberspace is significantly under-applied. I believe that together these two approaches have a lot of potential in uncovering how cyberspace mediates the real world.