Consumer Knowledge, Empowerment & The Internet:

Critical Research Into The Provision And Use Of eCommerce

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Abstract

From a Critical Social Theory (CST) perspective this research critiques assumptions that the internet brings about consumer empowerment through increased product information, and opportunities to communicate and share knowledge with companies and other consumers. It demonstrates that this assumption derives from the technologically determinist school of Information Systems (IS) thinking which is grounded in the myth that technology *per se* brings huge benefits, including wealth and empowerment. Illustrating that information systems development traditionally lacks a sense of "audience" failing to provide what the users want, it suggests that this phenomenon merits more sophisticated consideration of not only the technology, but also of eCommerce providers and users. The research demonstrates that complex phenomena such as that under study here require a multi-method approach to explore the range of voices or relevant perspectives of the stakeholders.

A lens for reviewing the power relations governing the construction and use of consumer knowledge is developed and applied. The knowledge construction lens is used to review the synthesized findings from the multi-method assessment to reveal how congruence is connected to extant power relations, and positions those findings in the context of information provider / user relationships. Drawing on both theories of hermeneutics and semiotics the phenomenon is initially explored from the perspective of both companies and customers through questionnaires and reviews of commercial websites. This phase of the research sets the scene for a series of twenty-two in depth interviews with individual consumers to explore their experiences of using the internet in commercial activity.

The research concludes that vast incongruity in the needs and values of customers and companies exists. Consumer empowerment remains a myth. Ingrained company / customer power relations distort communication and prevent 'true' empowerment. In the shadow of company power, customer inertia and feelings of powerlessness remain strong. Ultimately this serves companies well as increased buyer power continues to be regarded as a threat to competitive advantage.
Chapter One

Introduction To The Area of Concern

This chapter gives an overview of the research and sets it within a context. It outlines the problems and ideas that have informed the development of the work, and gives an overview of the research.

Customer and company aspirations and expectations of eCommerce are not aligned. Companies have adopted a technological determinist approach, whilst customers have adopted a technological constructivist approach. An analogy is drawn between eCommerce and knowledge management. A knowledge gathering / knowledge sharing dichotomy is emerging. Companies are ‘gathering’ knowledge about customers, whilst customers are sharing knowledge of their experiences of products and companies with each other.

The evolution of the research from interpretive exploration of how the internet is empowering customers, to Critical Social Theory (CST) inquiry as to why the internet is not empowering customers is presented. Customer empowerment through eCommerce is identified as a myth as the aim of the research becomes: To critique the assumption that the internet will bring about consumer empowerment through opportunities to communicate and share knowledge with companies and other customers.

A reflection on the research process discusses the challenge of reconciling the PhD format with CST research. The methodological approach and contribution to knowledge are presented. Following the ‘sense of audience’ principle the structure of the thesis is outlined and a summary of each of the chapters is given to guide the reader.
1.1 Context and Origins of the Study

This research proposes that customer and company aspirations and expectations of eCommerce are far from aligned. While companies value the internet as a unidirectional, transactional channel, customers value the connectivity and potential for communication that the internet offers. This dichotomy could be said to reflect two extremes of technology adoption. In the first wave of eCommerce companies rushed to establish a virtual presence and generally adopted a transactional approach. The technology was available to facilitate online ‘virtual’ retail, so that was what companies did. Market analysts, and investors generally believed that these new internet start-up companies or “dot coms” would supplant traditional business models and change the face of business forever (De Kare-Silver, 2000). Newspaper headlines declared “Britain prepares for boom.com. Exciting times are ahead for the stock market as internet start-up companies get set for flotation” (Keegan, 1999) in a fervour of optimism. However, within a matter of months, headlines such as “Net bubble@burst.com: Analyst warns that only a few big online firms will survive” (Martinson, 1999) replaced the optimism of the initial wave. The stakeholders were not ready for eCommerce, they had not seen it evolve, or more importantly they had not been involved (actors) in its construction. The success of this phase of eCommerce demanded too much immediate change. It was a technologically determinist, reactionary phenomena seeking to bring about ‘revolutionary’ change in the retail industry, and it was largely rejected (Howcroft, 2001).

eCommerce clearly illustrates the determinist / constructionist dichotomy (table 1 shows the characteristics of the determinist / constructivist dichotomy). In their rush to adopt the new technologies companies are adopting a technologically determinist approach to integrating the internet into their processes and practices. This is in marked contrast to the approach consumers are taking. In the technological integrationist or constructivist tradition, and echoing the work of Bijker (1999), ordinary people are constructing the World Wide Web, shaping the way it is used in a recursive, proactive and evolutionary process. Elster (1983) identified two approaches to the “study of technical change” (Bijker, 1999).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DETERMINIST - STRUCTURED</th>
<th>CONSTRUCTIVIST – UNSTRUCTURED</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Companies Adoption of Electronic Commerce</em></td>
<td><em>Customers Adoption of Electronic Commerce</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard Engineering Technical Controlled and rational Predictive Revolutionary</td>
<td>Underpinned by ‘Technical scientific’ discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assumptions</strong></td>
<td><strong>Assumptions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requirements known, and can be identified at start.</td>
<td>Need to be able to predict and control, have solutions and answers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable business environment.</td>
<td>Grounded in the belief that technology per se brings revolutionary change and untold benefits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasks can be carried out in an orderly linear fashion, away from customer.</td>
<td>Hyperbole of effect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start with a problem and find a solution.</td>
<td>Requirements unclear and not easily / readily identifiable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grounded in the belief that organisational issues paramount and integrated into the problem definition and IS solution.</td>
<td>Organisational issues paramount and integrated into the problem definition and IS solution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing org/business environment.</td>
<td>Close collaboration with clients/users/stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incremental and iterative development in consultation</td>
<td>Learning to live with uncertainty and fallibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grounded in the belief that the benefits evolve over time as the technology is shaped by the actors.</td>
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Table 1. Characteristics of the Determinist / Constructionist Dichotomy
adapted from (Beuhring, 2004)
In the first approach technological change is a rational goal directed activity, such as the adoption of the internet to improve sales targets. In the second approach the emphasis is on technical change as a “process of trial and error, as a cumulative result of small and mostly random modifications” (Bijker, 1999), such as the gradual evolution of newsgroups and consumer review web sites. Bijker goes on to suggest that “trial-and-error models, often cast in evolutionary terms, have specific advantages over models that stress the goal-oriented character of technological developments” (Bijker, 1999). Levine et al capture the essence of this:

“....we’re organising: building and extending the Net itself, crafting tools and communities, new ways of speaking, new ways of working, new ways of having fun. And all this is happening, has happened, so far without rules and laws, without managers and managed. It’s self organising. People by the millions are discovering how to negotiate, cooperate, collaborate – to create, to explore, to enjoy themselves.

But what’s the point, asks business? Business always wants there to be a point, a goal, an objective, a plan. Otherwise, how would we manage?” (Levine et al. 2000)

In terms of commercial activity on the internet, companies have adopted the “goal directed approach” (Elster, 1983), whilst consumers have adopted a “trial-and-error or evolutionary” approach, using the internet to construct and share knowledge about products and companies. Consumers are using the internet as a knowledge exchange forum, claiming neutral territory away from the commercial web as their own. There has been an increase in the amount of sites such as epinions.com (see Fig.1), notacceptable.com, bitchaboutit.com and DooYoo reviews (see Fig. 2) where consumers have conversations with each other, and share their experiences or stories of interacting with companies and using products. Significantly, they are constructing and sharing knowledge together.
This phenomenon is supported by both Polanyi’s, and Nonaka and Takeuchi’s work. Outlining Polanyi’s (1966) theory of knowledge, Nonaka and Takeuchi suggest that “scientific objectivity is not the sole source of knowledge. Much of our knowledge is the fruit of our own purposeful endeavours in dealing with the world” (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). ‘New knowledge’ is created by people as they interact with others in society. The potential for this interaction has increased significantly through the internet.

Figure 1. epinions.com

| Dabs.com? Think twice....... (27.05.03) by cebcom [read review] | cheap | varied selection | terrible customer service | unhelpful | ignore statutory rights | ★★★★★
| Fine until you have a problem with the product or the delivery. Then they're utterly hopeless. (01.08.02) by AndvHills [read review] | fairly competitive prices | swift delivery if your item is in stock | very difficult to get in touch with - hopelessly long hold queues and 24+ hours to respond to your e-mails | no sense of priority given to customers who have been messed around repeatedly | predictions of when items will be in stock are misleading | ★★★★★

Figure 2. DooYoo Reviews
In comparing the companies’ approach to adopting the internet with the consumer’s approach, a dichotomy emerges. This can be illustrated through the concept of “consumer knowledge”. For companies “consumer knowledge” is knowledge about the consumer’s lifestyle, preferences and significant life events that the internet enables them to harness for marketing purposes and ultimately to improve sales figures (Rowley, 2002). They are operating in a knowledge gathering culture in keeping with practices such as data mining to facilitate customer relationship management. In contrast, for customers “consumer knowledge” is knowledge consumers have about different products, companies and services. Knowledge is constructed through conversations and the internet facilitates conversation amongst and between a wide circle of individuals through chat rooms, discussion forums and even email. On neutral web space away from the commercial sites a knowledge sharing culture is evolving. Here the potential impact of the internet is vast (Levine et al. 2000), and largely under utilised or valued by companies. Significantly, this phenomenon was not planned. Discussion forums, review sites, chat rooms and communities have all evolved as people have shaped the way that the internet is used.

The internet offers great opportunities to access the rich knowledge that consumers construct about products, services and companies they experience. It is unique in facilitating communication; businesses and consumers can now interact and share information and experiences or knowledge in ways that could not be realised in traditional retail channels. However, companies fail to capture the true potential of the internet for business. Attempts to assimilate highly social learned behaviours such as shopping and banking with the solitary new environment of the PC internet have merely culminated in the use of crude semiotic devices, aligned to prior learning and cultural forms such as virtual shopping carts and virtual checkouts, neglecting the communication potential of the internet that consumers most readily make use of. Research by eStats shows that

“Over 80% of people using the internet do so solely to send e-mail or gather news and information. Only 17.8% of people using the Internet list shopping as being a primary motivation” (eMarketer, 2001).
Electronic Commerce is still evolving, but it is clear that this new channel offers enormous potential for both consumers and businesses. The internet could change the ways in which consumers interact with each other and with companies. Enabling these two sides to communicate and create and share knowledge together has enormous potential for both businesses and consumers.

This research explores uses of the internet in consumption practices. Drawing on the theory of the 'personalisation strategy' and on the 'socially constructed models' of knowledge management identified by McAdam and McCreedy (1999), it focuses on the consumer experience. It explores the idea of a synergy in eCommerce and the potential to access knowledge possessed, created and exchanged by consumers, and the benefits that both companies and consumers could derive from the appreciation of this form of exchange.

1.2 Evolution and Definition of the Research

This research has been a process of evolution, reflection, and repositioning. It initially set out to explore how the internet is empowering customers through an interpretivist approach. A literature review suggested that this empowerment could be through increased opportunities for consumers to communicate with each other and with companies (Kollock, 1999; Kozinets, 1999; Hoffman and Novak, 1997). Further literature proposed a link between eCommerce and knowledge management (Holsapple and Singh, 2000; Giga Information Group, 2001) suggesting that the synergy in the eCommerce / knowledge management relationship could bring mutual benefits to company and customer (Rowley, 2000). Through the link between the 'communication capabilities of the internet', 'knowledge management' and 'empowerment' defined in the literature and encapsulated within Zuboff's observation that managers "gain power by exercising control over communications and knowledge" (Zuboff, 1998), the initial research area and objectives began to emerge.

The focus on communication and knowledge management pointed to the adoption of the socialisation approach which has communication at its core (Demarest, 1997; McAdam
and McCreedy, 1999). Further, the focus on empowerment and the context of eCommerce pointed to McAdam and McCreedy's (1999) model of the socialisation approach to knowledge management (Fig. 8, p 44). This model proposes that through socialisation knowledge is created, disseminated, embodied and used, bringing about business benefits and "employee empowerment". It was decided to adapt this model and instead focus on how eCommerce brings about business benefits and consumer empowerment through communication.

However, the initial phase of the research, which explored the features of eCommerce that customers and companies value, exposed a misalignment. The companies asked appeared to value the unidirectional, transactional features of eCommerce whilst the customers who participated claimed to value the interactional features, particularly those which facilitated interaction with other customers. At the same time "wider empirical evidence" (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002) such as conversations with friends and colleagues, and news stories about internet fraud (The Guardian, 1999) or unsatisfactory service appeared to challenge the assumption that eCommerce empowers customers. However, the dominant societal view still remained that eCommerce is empowering customers (Levine et al. 2000; Department of Trade and Industry, 1999; Bakos, 2001). A conflict, or challenge to the status quo was emerging. The notion that customer empowerment through the internet is no more than a myth began to arise.

At this point the research began to take a new path. The study became more questioning in approach. On reflection, the researcher realised that rather than ask 'how are customers being empowered?' perhaps she ought to be asking 'are customers being empowered?' As Howcroft states, "proclamations to the effect that we are entering into a new age should be examined critically rather than simply accepted without question" (Howcroft, 2001) and the research began to take on a new form.
## Core Concept

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Concept</th>
<th>Impact on Research process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A</strong></td>
<td>How are consumers empowered through the internet? (Interpretation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B</strong></td>
<td>Why aren’t consumers empowered by the Internet? (Critical Determinism)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C</strong></td>
<td>Can consumers ever be empowered? (Critical Interpretivism)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D</strong></td>
<td>How can eCommerce companies improve business strategies and communication with customers so as to meet their needs and empower them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How can policy makers be ‘awoken’ from the illusion of consumer empowerment through the internet? (Critical Social Theory)</td>
</tr>
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Table 2. Tracing the Core Concepts of the Emerging Research in Relation to CST
Through a review of the methodology and philosophy of research literature (Chapter 3), research methodology seminars, and discussions with colleagues the researcher began to recognise a ‘fit’ between the evolving empirical research and the Critical Social Theory (CST) paradigm. From this point the methodology and empirical research became intertwined as the core concepts and research objectives were formed. Table 2 illustrates the stages a critical inquiry often progresses through, and the impact each stage had on this research.

The CST approach to research actively places the researcher as a socially and historically situated person, with bias and \textit{à priori} belief, at the centre of the inquiry. The researcher noted that this suggests two research studies in one. The empirical research (are consumers empowered by the internet?), and the methodological research (the process of carrying out CST research). Whilst the empirical research was not carried out through a Participative Action Research (PAR) approach, the methodological research arguably is: The CST researcher carrying out research, engaging with the CST research community, aiming to contribute knowledge to the field, and bring about change. Here Gidden’s theory of the double hermeneutic is embraced. Kim notes that the notion of the double hermeneutic rests on the assumption that “partial and imprecise knowledge shared by the social agents can be corrected through the injection of the sociological knowledge ‘from without’” (Kim, 2004), put simply it is ‘theory informing practice.’ This realisation led to the formation of the research objectives.

1.3 Research Aims and Objectives

The above section illustrates how this research became a study to \textit{critique} the assumption that the internet will bring about consumer empowerment through opportunities to communicate and share knowledge with companies and other customers. The aim was to do this by:
1. Demonstrating that this assumption derives from the technologically determinist school of Information Systems (IS) thinking (grounded in the myth that technology per se brings huge benefits, including wealth and empowerment).

2. Illustrating that information systems development and adoption traditionally lacks a sense of ‘audience’, failing to provide what the users want, and therefore ‘disempowering’ them.

3. Showing, through a Critical Social Theory approach, that the established and reified power relations between companies and customers act as a barrier to consumer empowerment.

The evolved objectives of the research therefore became:

1. To investigate how consumers use the internet in commercial activity (Insight).

2. To critically evaluate the assumption that consumers are empowered by the internet (to debunk or expose the myth that customers are empowered by the internet) (Critique)

3. To make recommendations for eCommerce to customers, companies and government policy makers (Transformative Redefinition).

4. To extend the use of the Critical Social Theory approach to empirical research.

5. To employ and reflect upon a multi-method approach to research.

McAdam and McCreedy's (1999) model of knowledge management was still adopted. However, instead of exploring how the process of knowledge creation, dissemination, embodiment and use were happening in eCommerce, the focus shifted to explore why the process was not happening.
1.4 Myths of eCommerce

A myth is “a traditional story based on historical events that explains popular conception of current practices” (Covi, 2000) in this case online retail. Barthes states that myth appears “as a magical object appearing in the present, without any trace of the history that produced it.” (Barthes, 1973). Through deconstruction of the myth the forces that gave rise to it are exposed. The deconstruction of myth is a recognised research method, that has “previously been applied in the IS field” (Howcroft, 2001) by, amongst others, Hirscheim and Newman (1991), Covi (2000) and Grover and Ramanlal (1999). This method fits well with a critical study into a technologically determinist assumption that the internet is empowering customers.

Through a literature review of both academic sources and “wider empirical evidence”, which is central to CST research, five strands, or smaller constituent “mythemes” (Levi-Strauss, 1986) of the myth that the internet brings consumer empowerment were identified:

1. eCommerce will revolutionise retailing.
2. eCommerce offers greater choice and convenience
3. eCommerce offers greater access to information
4. eCommerce enables better communication (C2B and C2C).
5. eCommerce brings about personalisation of services to customers.

The myths were then deconstructed drawing again upon wider empirical evidence and upon the experiences of the participants of the research. The following chapters will unpack these strands and show how the myth that consumers are empowered by the internet can be deconstructed Chapter 8 (Deconstruction of the Myths Surrounding eCommerce) gives a more detailed illustration of the deconstruction of the myths.
1.5 Methodological Approach

As outlined above in Section 1.2 Evolution and Definition of the Research, a Critical Social Theory (CST) approach is adopted. As an emergent approach in Information Systems (IS) research there are few guidelines on how CST research should be carried out (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). This remains true four years after this research began (Howcroft and Trauth, 2004). Therefore, it became the researcher’s responsibility to select the most appropriate methods for the task.

It was recognised that eCommerce and the notion of consumer empowerment is a complex phenomena with a wide range of stakeholders, or actor involvement. Complex phenomena such as this require a multi-method approach to explore, or create a ‘hologram’ of, all relevant perspectives. Senge’s principle of the hologram is of great relevance here. Senge (1993) writes of “holographic reality” where each actor “represents the whole image from a different point of view” and further that:

"Through organic integration, advocates who can also inquire into others' visions, open the possibility for the vision to evolve, to become "larger" than our individual visions. That is the principle of the hologram” (Senge, 1993)

The hologram is a useful metaphor; a three-dimensional image created by interacting light sources. However, the “component pieces of the hologram” are not identical. Each piece represents the whole image from a different point of view. The researcher attempted to create a hologram of eCommerce from the different perspectives considered here. The two viewpoints given greatest consideration are those of the company and the customer. However, through reviews of relevant literature and consideration of “wider empirical evidence” (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002), the viewpoints of academics, Government agencies and wider society, as well as the view of the researcher contribute to the hologram. Through the multi-method approach adopted here the research employs not merely triangulation, but “chrystalisation” (Richardson, 2000), again a three dimensional view echoing the hologram effect.
The research was in three phases. Phase One was an interpretivist study to explore which features of eCommerce companies and customers value in order to build up the picture or hologram (Chapter 5 Understanding eCommerce from a Company and Customer Perspective). This was designed to be a comparative study and so needed to employ the same method with both customers and companies. For a number of reasons including access issues and timescales given deeper consideration in Chapter Four (Study Design) a questionnaire was used. The questionnaire included Likert scale questions and more open qualitative questions.

Following the analysis of the questionnaires in phase one, the customer perspective was explored in more detail. A semiotic analysis of the websites of participating companies was conducted in phase two, in order to analyse the way that the companies positioned themselves in relation to their customers through the chosen discourse (Chapter 6 Provision of eCommerce: A Semiotic Analysis). A series of in-depth interviews with people accustomed to online commercial activity was then carried out (Phase three Chapter 7 The Customer Experience). Analysis of the “evidence” (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002) of all three phases shows how the myth of consumer empowerment through the internet can be deconstructed. This is discussed in detail in Chapter 8 Deconstruction of the Myths Surrounding eCommerce. Conclusions are drawn from the research and are related back to McAdam and Mcreedy’s (1999) model of knowledge management.

The combination of methods which build up the hologram of the phenomena under study including views and experiences from actors, linguistic analysis of websites and reviews of social theories draw upon Wittgenstein’s “triadic relationship between language, action, and social reality” (Kim, 2004) or what Bloor refers to as the “self-referring” (Bloor, 1997) character of social institutions.

1.6 Contribution to Knowledge

This research will make both an empirical and a methodological contribution. The empirical research will inform the fields of eCommerce and knowledge management. It
will be of value to eCommerce practitioners, offering an insight into the ways in which consumers may use the internet in commercial activity. In exposing the belief that customers are empowered through eCommerce to be a myth grounded in technological determinism, the research will contribute to information systems theory and consumer studies. Through the recommendations made specifically to customers, practitioners and government agencies in the conclusions of this research an attempt is made at transformative redefinition, or of informing practice through the theories developed.

The research will be of interest to academic communities in numerous fields including e-Commerce, knowledge management, information management, consumer studies, and sociology of technology. The United Kingdom Government has expressed a need for research into e-Commerce and consumer knowledge (Department of Trade and Industry, 1999, 2000. The outcomes of this research will inform both fields.

On a methodological level, as an emergent and interdisciplinary field, philosophies and methodologies for researching the internet are undeveloped. This was evident at the time the research began in the tentative adoption of interpretive methodologies, and in the development of new or integrated methodologies by those in the field of internet research (Howcroft, 1998; Sudweeks & Simoff, 1999). It was intended that the research would contribute to the debate around ways in which the internet and related social practices can be conceptualised and researched.

This study applies a multi-method CST approach extending the use of CST as an IS research paradigm. In its combination of methods it provides a unique methodological contribution to knowledge on the value and pitfalls of multi-method approaches for researching complex IS phenomena. Finally, CST, unlike other forms of research, does not end with a published academic account even if it does uncover some injustice. The knowledge needs to be re-packaged with a suitable sense of audience and published through suitable channels to exploit the double hermeneutic of social research. Therefore, in the tradition of critical research, and echoing Gidden's double hermeneutic (Rose, 2000; Kim, 2004) it is hoped that the new knowledge presented here “can lead to emancipation
"and progress" (Johnson and Duberley, 2000) in the relationship between companies and consumers, and in the recognition and acceptance of CST research through publication not only in academic journals, but in practitioner journals, customer guides and even through conversation with fellow researchers, colleagues and students.

1.7 Reflection

A research project of this nature in such a fast paced and developing field is a challenging task to undertake. Theories and ideas that were new and exciting at the outset of the project are now well established within the field, and the literature reflects this. One advantage of researching in such a dynamic field has been the energy with which researchers, academics and practitioners from a diverse range of disciplines have engaged with the issues and questions that continue to emerge.

Through presentations at conferences, and submission of papers to various publications for review, the researcher has had the opportunity to gain valuable feedback on this research at each stage of the project. Through the review process and both formal and informal discussion with other academics and practitioners in this and related fields, ideas and approaches have been challenged, reflected upon and refined or discarded. This process continues today with comments and suggestions for further research, reflecting the dynamic and interdisciplinary nature of the field.

1.8 Structure of the Thesis

One of the most challenging tasks of this research was to reconcile the methodology adopted; that of Critical Social Theory (CST), with the traditional linear structure of the ‘ideal type’ PhD thesis. A reflection on the research process in Chapter 10 explores the issues surrounding this conflict more fully. However, following the ‘sense of audience’ principle it was considered important to offer an overview of the structure adopted to help the “implied reader” (Barthes, 1990) in their interaction with the text.
Critical Social Theory (CST) research recognises that as the research progresses it takes unexpected turns. It follows then, that a complete review of relevant literature before embarking on the design of the study is neither possible nor desirable. Instead CST proposes that attention should be directed to the literature on philosophy and methodology as this will provide insights into choosing and gathering the data (Dick, 2000). In this thesis, an introduction to the area under study is given in the form of a traditional literature review illustrating the background to the project (Chapter 2). In the following chapter attention is directed to the philosophical and methodological literature (Chapter 3). These reviews have not been updated to incorporate 'new' literature as this would change the view of the landscape from which the researcher initially set out. However, recent relevant literature is reviewed throughout the chapters as appropriate to facilitate understanding of the issue under discussion.

Similarly, in the traditional thesis ‘data collection’ and ‘data analysis’ are separate chapters, segregating the two tasks. This segregation is not possible in the CST approach where collection and interpretation of ‘evidence’ are simultaneous and continuous interwoven tasks. In this thesis the collection and interpretation of evidence for each of the three phases of the research are combined in a chapter (Chapter 5 Understanding eCommerce from a Company and Customer Perspective, Chapter 6 Provision of eCommerce: A Semiotic Analysis, Chapter 7 The Customer Experience). There are occasions when it was deemed ‘too rebellious’ to follow the structure that would perhaps have told the story of this research more authentically. These points have been highlighted for the reader enabling them, if they so wish, to skip to a different section before returning to their current place with some idea of the new insight that the researcher gained before approaching the next task (for example see Section 4.6 Developing a Research Framework and Objectives).

To assist in both structuring and evaluating this research Alvesson and Deetz’ three tasks of CST research were used. As an evaluative tool this framework ensures that the research makes “at least a modest contribution to all three tasks” in order to avoid “totalizing” “myopia” and “hyper-critique and negativity” (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002). It also offers an alternative method of charting the progress of the research. Rather than the traditional linear
progression (literature review, data collection, data analysis, conclusions) the progress can be charted in terms of insight, critique and transformative redefinition. These tasks are used as headers on the pages of the thesis to illustrate progress. For some chapters two tasks appear (e.g. Insight / Critique) illustrating that these tasks overlap having no defined boundaries. Throughout this thesis, repetition of Alvesson and Deetz tasks works as a musical theme might within a larger piece; to signpost the ‘audience’ through repetition and variation to the coda, where transformative redefinition and insight combine in the page header, almost indicating a return to the beginning. However, this is a return to the beginning with the new knowledge that this piece has given; an insight for future research.

1.9 Summary of the Chapters

This section gives an overview of each of the chapters in the thesis, to introduce the flavour of the concepts, ideas and theories that will be discussed in far greater detail throughout the thesis. It aims to give the reader an overview or map, and to assist them in their navigation and construction of the ensuing text.

1.9.1 Chapter One

This chapter gives an overview of the research and sets it within a context. It outlines the problems and ideas that have informed the development of the work, and gives an overview of the research.

Customer and company aspirations and expectations of eCommerce are not aligned. Companies have adopted a technological determinist approach, whilst customers have adopted a technological constructivist approach. An analogy is drawn between eCommerce and knowledge management. A knowledge gathering / knowledge sharing dichotomy is emerging. Companies are ‘gathering’ knowledge about customers, whilst customers are sharing knowledge of their experiences of products and companies with each other.
The evolution of the research from interpretive exploration of how the internet is empowering customers, to Critical Social Theory (CST) inquiry as to why the internet is not empowering customers is presented. Customer empowerment through eCommerce is identified as a myth as the aim of the research becomes: To critique the assumption that the internet will bring about consumer empowerment through opportunities to communicate and share knowledge with companies and other customers.

A reflection on the research process discusses the challenge of reconciling the PhD format with CST research. The methodological approach and contribution to knowledge are presented. Following the 'sense of audience' principle the structure of the thesis is outlined and a summary of each of the chapters is given to guide the reader.

1.9.2 Chapter Two

The aim of this chapter is to set the research in a context, to define the area of research, and to show how this work 'fits' with and adds to the appropriate current body of literature. The literature in three key areas (knowledge management, eCommerce and consumer studies) is reviewed to show 'current thinking', or to paint the landscape from which the researcher set out. It is emphasized that CST theorists state that a complete 'up front' literature review is not in keeping with the paradigm. Literature is reviewed throughout the thesis at appropriate points to illustrate how this work adds to current literature.

Approaches to knowledge and knowledge management are reviewed. The socialisation approach, emphasising that knowledge cannot be ‘managed’ but rather systems can be put into place to facilitate its creation and exchange, is adopted as a lens to explore eCommerce. The synergy of knowledge management and eCommerce is suggested and explored through a review of eCommerce literature. The extent to which the myth of consumer empowerment through the internet is held is illustrated. The redefinition and shaping of the contemporary consumer is considered through consumer studies literature and sociological theories of power.
The review draws together the concepts of knowledge management, eCommerce and consumer power in a dialectic relationship which illustrates how the research objectives began to develop.

1.9.3 Chapter Three

This chapter presents a discussion of methodological and philosophical approaches to knowledge creation through research, and offers a critique of traditional approaches. It is acknowledged that the contribution made to a thesis by a chapter devoted entirely to the debate surrounding philosophical approaches to research is a contentious issue. However, as this research purports to make a substantial methodological contribution, it was considered necessary to review the literature in a bid to offer insight into the current state of affairs in keeping with CST. The importance of the philosophical and methodological literature in shaping CST research is illustrated. The origins, characteristics and limitations of three dominant paradigms (positivism, interpretivism and Critical Theory) are discussed in relation to IS research. The process of selecting a research paradigm is outlined.

This chapter develops the background for Chapter 4 Study Design which will 'stake out' a narrower territory or range of approaches bearing a closer relevance to this research, and justify the choices made in the selection and construction of the methodological approach adopted.

1.9.4 Chapter Four

Chapter four reflects on the journey taken in this research, outlining the processes involved and decisions taken in the design of the study. It reports on the process of developing the research framework and objectives. It discusses the fundamental issues underpinning the research, and evaluates and justifies the selection and adoption of the philosophical approach (Critical Social Theory) and data gathering and analysis techniques selected for use. The interest in the reflection on the process (or journey) of research is a key element in critical research. The conflicts encountered and the periods of reflection which assisted in resolving those conflicts are presented. This chapter does not aim to set up a mechanistic
process to ‘test’ out a thesis or hypothesis. Instead, it aims to show how, through a process of conflict, reflection, negotiation and improvisation the research was carried out. Moreover, this chapter reflects on the challenge of reconciling CST research with the traditional linear structure of the PhD.

The design of each of the three phases of the research is outlined. Phase one compares and contrasts the views of companies and customers on eCommerce expressed in a questionnaire. Phase two gives a semiotic analysis of the websites of participating companies. Through discourse analysis three types of company or approach to eCommerce are identified (Controlling, Didactic, and Participatory.) This analysis of the company / customer interface seeks to gain a deeper understanding of company approaches or ‘orientations’ towards customers through eCommerce. The intention was to illustrate if and how the company / customer dynamic is changed by this new channel of interaction. Phase three explores the customer experience in more depth through a series of twenty-two semi-structured interviews. Content and discourse analysis are used to analyse the recordings, transcripts and field notes.

The chapter concludes with a reflection on the multi-method approach to IS research, and argues that multiple methods are necessary to access the multiple voices of the stakeholders in the complex phenomena under study here.

1.9.5 Chapter Five

This chapter presents the findings of phase one of the research. In order to determine divergence (or dissonance) and alignment, companies and customers were asked to state the importance of a range of seven key eCommerce facilities identified through literature and website reviews. Significantly, analysis of this data showed great divergence. Whilst consumers placed a high value on the facets that facilitate interaction and communication with each other, companies placed most value on the internet as a marketing facility. The data is presented graphically, and a richer picture is created through the use of qualitative data on company questionnaires and narratives in the consumer interviews. This phase in
the research explores the attitudes and values of the key players in the field. The results are neither representative nor generalisable. However, the conclusions drawn assist in setting out the parameters of the area of concern for further exploration from the consumer perspective through semiotic analysis of websites and interviews with customers.

1.9.6 Chapter Six

This chapter reports on phase two of the research. It aims to investigate the link, or interface, provided by the participating retailers and the customers they serve. The field of semiotics is introduced, and the focus defined. The analysis offered here draws on the social semiotics of Halliday (1978), and uses Lemke’s three functions of semiotics (presentation, orientation, organization) to structure the analysis. A parallel is drawn between Lemke’s functions and Habermas’ four claims to validity of speech acts (Habermas, 1984). Through the discourse and content analysis three company types or approaches are identified (Controlling, Didactic, Participatory.) The implications of this for customer empowerment are discussed. The chapter concludes that eCommerce in its current form is not empowering customers, but merely providing another channel for companies to ‘manage’ or control the long established company / customer, or producer / consumer, relationship.

1.9.7 Chapter Seven

This chapter reports on phase three of the research, the customer experience explored through semi-structured interviews. In keeping with the CST approach the interviews were analysed from a discourse of empowerment. The lack of empirical CST research to offer guidance to the new researcher is reflected upon. Walsham’s (2001) approach, making extensive use of participants’ commentary is adopted in this chapter. Whilst Avgerou’s (2002) approach, making no use of commentary, but referring to themes which emerged, is applied in Chapter 8. Four general themes emerge from the interviews; The Internet, Interaction with Commercial Organisations, Customer-to-customer Interactions, and Power. The themes are general, allowing diverse narrative threads and recognition of the
multiplicity of voices within each theme. Two critical incidents are recounted and a close analysis is given of each. The second incident shows customer to customer knowledge sharing effecting some action and going some way to empowering the customer.

The chapter concludes with a reflection on the CST practice of returning to research participants with outputs of the research, in this case interview transcripts, in order to bring about transformative redefinition.

1.9.8 Chapter Eight

This chapter launches a direct challenge to the myth that eCommerce brings consumer empowerment. Each of the five strands of the myth outlined in Chapter 1 (section 1.4 Myths of eCommerce) namely: eCommerce will revolutionise retailing, eCommerce offers greater choice and convenience, eCommerce offers greater access to information, eCommerce enables better communication (C2B and C2C), eCommerce brings about personalisation of services to customers, is deconstructed drawing upon both the wider empirical evidence, and the empirical data generated in this research. The chapter concludes that buyer power continues to be regarded as a threat to competitive advantage. The illusion or myth of customer empowerment through the internet could be serving the interests of companies well.

1.9.9 Chapter Nine

This chapter outlines the contribution this research makes to existing knowledge and draws conclusions from both the analysis of the data generated in the course of the research, and from the research process itself. Firstly, it will focus on conclusions relating to the empirical theme of the research (that of eCommerce). Secondly it will address the methodological conclusions. The conclusions will be presented in relation to the objectives of the research. Further, as this research was conducted from a Critical Social Theory perspective it will be evaluated against the framework proposed by Alvesson and Deetz (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002) and outlined in Chapter 3 (section 3.3.3.2 Critical Theory in IS
Recommendations will be made to the various stakeholders. A final section will outline the contribution made to knowledge.

As with all Interpretive and CST research the conclusions drawn are not generalisable. The researcher does not claim to have discovered the 'truth' about how all companies, customers, or researchers behave. This is an interpretation or critique offered by one researcher with a range of biases and *à priori* beliefs. However, theories generated are transferable and could inform future practice and policy making.

**1.9.10 Chapter Ten**

This chapter will reflect on the research process undertaken in this study. The reflection will highlight limitations and inform future research. In a Critical Social Theory approach to research, reflection is a core element of the process. In keeping with this, reflection has been incorporated throughout the research and writing up phase. However, this section will develop those issues and ideas and consider their impact on future work. The main issues which are considered in this chapter include; reconciling CST research with the PhD process, the multi-method approach, and empirical and methodological limitations of the research. Critical Theory is presented as a staircase of events, with each step moving closer to the ultimate aim of empowerment. This research is evaluated against the staircase. A more general reflection on CST research using this project as one of two case studies is currently in progress (Nolan and McLean, 2005).
Chapters 1 & 2

Exploring the area of enquiry:
The researcher’s voice
The academic’s voice

Chapters 3 & 4

Research methodology & Study Design:
The researcher’s voice
The academic’s voice

Chapters 5, 6, 7

Empirical research & analysis: Three phases
Company & Customer Voice

Chapters 8, 9 & 10

Analysis, conclusions and reflection:
The researcher’s voice

Figure 3. A Summary of the Research Process
Chapter 2

eCommerce, Knowledge Management and Customer Empowerment: Constructing the Myth

The aim of this chapter is to set the research in a context, to define the area of research, and to show how this work ‘fits’ with and adds to the appropriate current body of literature. The literature in three key areas (knowledge management, eCommerce and consumer studies) is reviewed to show ‘current thinking’, or to paint the landscape from which the researcher set out. It is emphasized that CST theorists state that a complete ‘up front’ literature review is not in keeping with the paradigm. Literature is reviewed throughout the thesis at appropriate points to illustrate how this work adds to current literature.

Approaches to knowledge and knowledge management are reviewed. The socialisation approach, emphasising that knowledge cannot be ‘managed’ but rather systems can be put into place to facilitate its creation and exchange, is adopted as a lens to explore eCommerce. The synergy of knowledge management and eCommerce is suggested and explored through a review of eCommerce literature. The extent to which the myth of consumer empowerment through the internet is held is illustrated. The redefinition and shaping of the contemporary consumer is considered through consumer studies literature and sociological theories of power.

The review draws together the concepts of knowledge management, eCommerce and consumer power in a dialectic relationship which illustrates how the research objectives began to develop.
2.1 Role of the Literature Review

According to Bell, the purpose of the literature review in a research project is to:

“...stimulate ideas which had not previously occurred and assist in the formulation of the specific research questions to be investigated and help devise a theoretical or analytical framework” (Bell, 1999)

Further, Woodruffe states that the literature review should:

“...attempt to posit the work temporarily to demonstrate how the literature at the time informed and shaped the research from the outset, but also to demonstrate how the newer literature has been acknowledged and incorporated throughout.” (Woodruffe, 2001)

This chapter attempts to show how ‘current thinking’ in the literature of the field at the time influenced the research from the outset, and how the more recent literature has continued to shape this work. It will construct the concept of eCommerce as Knowledge Management through a review of the literature in three main fields that influenced this research.

- Knowledge and Knowledge Management
- eCommerce
- Consumer Studies

The review explores the key theories in each area and discusses how they relate to or inform this study. Throughout the thesis appropriate literature will be reviewed to illustrate specific points, or to show how this work adds to the current literature. The emphasis is on reviewed journals, however, consideration is given to other key works, including government publications, trade journals and less conventional sources such as consumer group leaflets and electronic publications.
It is important to note at this point that this research will take a Critical Social Theory (CST) approach, with its emphasis on a reflective and iterative (hermeneutic) journey rather than a linear pursuit of ‘truth’. This requires a flexible and responsive approach as the researcher cannot know where the data will lead her, making the choice of literature difficult. At the start of the inquiry it may not be possible to know which literature will later become relevant. The terms ‘deconstruction’ and ‘reconstruction’ describe a crucial process for the critical enquirer. The essence of critical research is to locate the central concept, entrenched within the whole structure, and to critically analyse that through deconstruction. The deconstructive-reconstructive process lies at the heart of the dialectical analysis and involves:

“...a constant shuttling backwards and forwards between abstract concept and concrete data; between social totalities and particular phenomena; between current structures and historical development; between surface appearance and essence; between reflection and practice” (Harvey, 1990).

Dick (2000), goes so far as to say that it may make sense to postpone reading until the relevance of literature can be judged easily, which in turn, may have consequences for the structure of the eventual thesis (Nolan and McLean, 2005). In continuously acknowledging and reviewing literature relevant to the field in the light of new discoveries or paths taken in the process throughout the thesis, this researcher has attempted to satisfy both the requirements of the traditional PhD thesis and advice of prominent critical theorists. This has proven to be a complex task and will be given more detailed consideration in Chapters 9 and 10 (Conclusions and Reflection and Future Research).

To begin to construct the concept of eCommerce as a knowledge management platform, facilitating the creation, exchange and use of company and customer knowledge and so benefiting both parties, the term “knowledge” must be explored.
2.2 Knowledge

It is incredibly difficult to define the concept of “knowledge”, not least because of its interdisciplinary nature. Academics from numerous disciplines continue to debate the definition of knowledge from a variety of paradigms or epistemological stances. Scarborough noted that definitions are proposed with a purpose,

“the sprawling and eclectic literature and the ambiguity and definitional problems.... allow different groups to project their own interest and concerns onto it.” (Scarborough, 1996).

It is generally agreed that there are scientific, philosophical and sociological starting points in defining knowledge. The wider and richer definition offered by the management domain (or perspective) draws on these theories. Some consideration will be given to them in order to show the development of the definition of knowledge from a knowledge management perspective. (The definition of knowledge from a variety of paradigms is given more detailed consideration in Chapter 3 Knowledge Creation Through Research)

It is evident that there are two clear strands in the debate surrounding the definition of knowledge. The first is the traditional or positivist view of knowledge as facts or truth, based in a single discipline, usually a science. Plato is generally regarded as being the first to develop a theory of knowledge (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). From a rationalist perspective, he saw knowledge as ‘truth’ attainable only through reason and pure objectivity, independent of the subject pursuing it. Knowledge, he claimed is “justified true belief” achieved through rational reasoning grounded in theories, laws and concepts. Alternatively, from an empiricist perspective, Aristotle contested Plato’s views stressing the importance of observation and sensory perception. This debate provided the foundations of the “philosophical inquiry of knowledge” (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995) This traditional “factual” form of knowledge is hierarchical and defined. The elitist nature and high
ontological level of this way of describing knowledge fuel the concept that knowledge is power.

The second view of knowledge derives more from interpretive sociology and its theories of knowledge. It is linear rather than hierarchical, transdisciplinary and less defined or prescribed. Sociologists argue that knowledge can be produced by and shared amongst a greater number of people in a far wider range of situations. Rather than having an intellectual or theoretical focus it emerges from day to day activities, or problems encountered in everyday life. Mannheim (1991) contested the rationalist's ideas of knowledge as "truth", proposing that there was an association between forms of knowledge and social structure - that interaction within social groups conditions belief. He postulated that if all beliefs could be socially located then "true belief" or objective "truth", and therefore "knowledge" in the traditional positivist sense, could not exist. Knowledge therefore is a shared set of beliefs that perform the function of social cohesion.

Other interpretive sociologists have developed Mannheim's sociology of knowledge stressing the role of the autonomous individual in knowledge production. They propose a theory of "common-sense knowledge", "knowledge I share with others in the normal self-evident routines of everyday life" (Berger and Luckmann, 1971) or "knowledge as a body of truths about reality that guide everyday life" (Dant, 1991), an "autopoietic" (Von Krogh et al. 1994) or "evolutionary knowledge". Holzner develops Berger and Luckmann's theory applying it to areas beyond everyday life, including work life and ideological communities (e.g. religious groups.) (Dant, 1991). This type of knowledge is so internalised that it is almost "subconscious" and has much in common with Polanyi's theory of "tacit" knowledge. Polanyi states that "We know more than we can tell" (Polanyi, 1966). He argues that people actively create knowledge by processing and ordering their own experiences. This "internalised" or "tacit" knowledge is difficult to "codify" or write down. It is "personal, context specific and therefore hard to formalize and communicate" (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Yet through vicarious learning, or even "trial and error", it enables members of a community to know how to function effectively, or simply how to behave in a way which is "acceptable" to society (Goffman, 1959).
One clear trend that emerges from the dichotomy of scientific and sociological theories of knowledge is the move from a view of knowledge as absolute, permanent and objective, to a focus on its subjectivity, and dynamic or evolutionary nature. Burgoyne et al. note that,

"...philosophy of science has largely been replaced on the intellectual agenda by the history and sociology of knowledge which emphasises cultural and historical processes rather than rationally superior knowledge" (Burgoyne et al. 1994).

This new approach values knowledge gained through experience, and knowledge that we draw upon in our daily routines and practices.

2.2.1 "New" Knowledge

A dictionary definition from 1983 of the term "knowledge" reflects this view:

"The facts, feelings or experiences known by a person or group of people. Awareness, consciousness, or familiarity gained by experience or learning" (Collins, 1983)

There has been a discernable shift from a passive acceptance of static knowledge to an awareness of the need to engage actively in the creation and exchange of fluid knowledge. Academics from many disciplines have highlighted the emergence of a "new" type of knowledge. Drucker notes that knowledge as "normally conceived by the "intellectual" is something very different from "knowledge" in the context of the "knowledge economy" or "knowledge work"" (Drucker, 1992). At the most basic level, it is generally agreed that this "new" type of knowledge is "information with meaning" (Amidon and Skyrme, 1997) (See Fig. 4), and forms part of a processing hierarchy that enables decision and action (See Fig. 5):
Drucker defines knowledge as “information that changes something or somebody - either by becoming grounds for action, or by making an individual (or an institution) capable of different and more effective action” (Drucker, 1992). Similarly, Stehr notes that “the value which resides in knowledge is linked to its capacity to set something into motion” (Stehr, 1994). The belief that “knowledge is power” is rooted in the potential of knowledge to enable action, or to effect some change in behaviour. This point is of great relevance to this research which poses the research question “are customers empowered by the internet?” More specifically, does the internet facilitate the exchange of knowledge from
company to customer and customer to customer and ultimately bring about more effective action? These ideas will be explored through the empirical research.

Michael Gibbons’ approach to knowledge generation reflects both the objective and dynamic creation of knowledge. Gibbons refers to two strands of knowledge - “Mode 1” and “Mode 2” knowledge (Gibbons, 1994). He states that:

“In Mode 1 problems are set and solved in a context governed by the, largely academic, interests of a specific community…. Latterly, this has tended to imply knowledge production carried out in the absence of some practical goal. In Mode 2, by contrast, knowledge results from a broader range of considerations. Such knowledge is intended to be useful to someone whether in industry or government, or society more generally and this imperative is present from the beginning. Knowledge thus produced is always produced under an aspect of continuous negotiation, i.e. it will not be produced unless and until the interests of the various actors are included ….. Knowledge production becomes diffused throughout society.” (Gibbons, 1994).

It could be argued that the essence of “new” knowledge derives from Mannheim’s (1991) Sociology of Knowledge. Davenport and Prusak echo these definitions suggesting that knowledge is a framework of experiences and values against which new experiences can be evaluated and internalised:

“…knowledge is a fluid mixture of framed experiences, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. It originates and is applied in the minds of knowers. In organizations, it often becomes embedded not only in documents or repositories but also in organizational routines, processes, practices and norms.” (Davenport and Prusak, 2000).
This cognitive view of knowledge, and the recognition that “new” knowledge can be “embedded not only in documents or repositories but also in organizational routines, processes, practices and norms” (Davenport and Prusak, 2000) suggests the distinction between “formal” and “informal” knowledge, and has much in common with Polanyi’s theory of “tacit” knowledge drawn upon significantly by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995). The concepts of “tacit” and “explicit” knowledge have great relevance to this research and will be given more detailed consideration.

2.2.2 Forms of Knowledge

Drawing on Polanyi’s theory of tacit knowledge, Nonaka and Takeuchi attach great importance to the dichotomy of explicit and tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is a traditional kind of knowledge, “something formal and systematic” (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). It is knowledge that can be conceptualised and communicated either formally using a system of symbols (language, codes, numbers) or informally through the spoken word. Significantly it can easily be communicated or shared as written procedures, theories, laws, or formulii through procedural manuals, directories, databases, or even exchanged in meetings.

Tacit knowledge or ‘silent knowledge” is much more difficult to define. It is the most basic form of knowledge, or “the first manifestation of knowledge about any subject” (Wiig, 1993). Deriving from an individual’s personal experiences, it is entrenched in “ideals, values or emotions”. This experiential or “nonconscious” (Wiig, 1993), knowledge evades conceptualisation, and so cannot easily be communicated or shared. Nonaka and Takeuchi place “subjective insights, intuitions, and hunches” in this category of knowledge. Taking the concept of tacit knowledge further they argue that:

“To be more precise, tacit knowledge can be segmented into two dimensions. The first is the technical dimension, which encompasses the kind of informal and hard-to-pin-down skills or crafts captured in the term “know-how”. A

\[1\] “Tacit” derives from the Latin \textit{tacitus} past participle of \textit{tacere} to be silent.
master craftsman, for example, develops a wealth of expertise “at his fingertips” after years of experience. But he is often unable to articulate the scientific or technical principles behind what he knows.

At the same time, tacit knowledge contains an important cognitive dimension. It consists of schemata, mental models, beliefs and perceptions so ingrained that we take them for granted. The cognitive dimension of tacit knowledge reflects our image of reality (what is) and our vision for the future (what ought to be). Though they cannot be articulated very easily, these implicit models shape the way we perceive the world around us.” (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995)

The implications of this for a study to debunk a widely held myth are significant. The cognitive dimension reflecting “our image of reality (what is)” and “our vision of the future (what ought to be)” suggest a process of reconciling the promise / practice, or myth / reality dichotomy. It could be suggested that in the struggle to reconcile the tacit knowledge of ‘what is’ with ‘what ought to be’ people become more accepting of the widely held (mythical) belief, or the status quo.

Tacit knowledge resides in every one of us and influences the way we respond, make decisions, or simply conduct our daily lives. It is through tacit knowledge that we drive to work avoiding traffic jams, negotiate the supermarket, choose the freshest fruit and interact with the cashier. It is knowledge that has become so internalised that we have “lost conscious access to it” (Wiig, 1993), and this is only recognised when a new experience challenges what we automatically know and we struggle to make sense of it.

“What do people want, when they want knowledge? Nothing more than this: something strange must be converted into something known. Is our need to know not just this need for the known, the need to find something that doesn’t disturb us, between all the weird, the unusual, the dubious?” Nietzsche (1882) quoted in (Beijerse, 1999)
This echoes the concepts of “new knowledge”, “mode 2 knowledge” (Gibbons, 1994), and knowing through doing (socialisation). It has resonance with the take up of a new way of shopping such as eCommerce, as well as with the search for knowledge about unfamiliar products and companies which will be explored throughout the following chapters.

In summary, a logical / social dichotomy can be identified in the literature. “Knowledge” has evolved from “mode one” (Gibbons, 1994), the objective or explicit scientific domain of the privileged few. The subjective or tacit beliefs, feelings and values that assist all individuals to function in the world are beginning to be recognised as knowledge. Outlining Polanyi’s theory, Nonaka and Takeuchi suggest that:

“Scientific objectivity is not the sole source of knowledge. Much of our knowledge is the fruit of our own purposeful endeavors in dealing with the world” (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995).

“New knowledge” is created by people as they interact with others in society. Significantly, this “new” knowledge is becoming as valued as traditional forms of knowledge:

“In this new era, wealth is the product of knowledge. Knowledge and information - not just scientific knowledge, but news, advice, entertainment, communication, service - have become the economy’s primary raw materials and its most important products.” (Stewart, 1997)

It is possibly here that the myth of consumer empowerment through the internet has its roots. Knowledge in the form of “news, advice, entertainment, communication, service” is recognised as an important product bringing “wealth”. The internet facilitates communication and exchange of this form of knowledge, and so in the determinist tradition must bring “wealth”; financial wealth to those who sell (business benefits) and a wealth of knowledge (suggesting empowerment) to those who buy. However, as Walsham (2001) notes the human and business process and practices cannot be disregarded when heralding a revolutionary new technology. The implementation, subsequent evolutionary use of the
technology, and the management of the processes are of significant relevance to the benefits achieved. For this reason, the next section will consider knowledge management theory.

2.3 Knowledge Management

As knowledge is increasingly recognised as a valuable resource, organisations struggle to find strategies to harness and exploit it effectively. There are many generic and widely accepted definitions of Knowledge Management,

"Knowledge Management is the explicit and systematic management of vital knowledge and its associated processes of creation, organisation, diffusion, use and exploitation" (Amidon and Skyrme, 1997)

"...the process of creating, capturing, and using knowledge to enhance organisational performance" (Bassie, 1997) and

"... about encouraging individuals to communicate their knowledge by creating environments and systems for capturing, organising and sharing knowledge" (Martinez, 1998).

However, in exploring definitions of knowledge management and strategies to manage knowledge, the debate has focused on how knowledge is created and conceptualised.

"In trying to define Knowledge Management it is important to see what we regard as knowledge, because it is this definition which determines the way we look at Knowledge Management" (Beijerse, 1999).

Knowledge creation and conceptualisation are context dependent, and as such are the subject of much debate. It could be argued that the debate centres around the scientific/social dichotomy apparent in the definitions of "knowledge" (as discussed above in section
2.1 Knowledge. This is evident in the distinction between the “codification” ("people-to-documents") and “personalisation” ("one-to-one dialogue") approaches to Knowledge Management (Hansen et al. 1999). McAdam and McCreedy (1999) identify and critique three models or concepts of knowledge used in a management context:

1. Intellectual Capital Models
2. Knowledge Category Models
3. Socially Constructed Models

Table 3 shows the key thinkers and characteristics of each of the approaches to Knowledge Management.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Key Thinkers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Capital</td>
<td>• Objectivist stance.</td>
<td>Stewart,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Knowledge is objectified, measured, valued and controlled.</td>
<td>Edvinsson,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Focus is on explicit or tangible knowledge.</td>
<td>Van Buren,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Neglects social processes.</td>
<td>Roos &amp; Roos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge Category</td>
<td>• All knowledge can be identified and categorized.</td>
<td>Nonaka &amp; Takeuchi,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Focus is on dichotomies (e.g. tacit / explicit, personalized / codified).</td>
<td>Hedlund,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Cursory consideration of social processes.</td>
<td>Carayannis,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Earl.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socially Constructed</td>
<td>• Constructivist stance</td>
<td>Clarke &amp; Staunton,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Holistic approach to knowledge</td>
<td>Demarest,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Knowledge cannot be controlled</td>
<td>McAdam &amp; McCreedy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Focus is on communication and knowledge created through social processes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Approaches to Knowledge Management
2.3.1 Intellectual Capital Models

A number of those active in the field of Knowledge Management adopt an objectivist stance. (Van Buren, 1999; Roos and Roos, 1997; Edvinsson, 1997). Edvisson published his work at Skandia, a company that adopted an "Intellectual Capital" approach to Knowledge Management. Indeed Skandia was "the first company in the world to publish a supplement to its annual report on the company's Intellectual Capital philosophy and activities" (McAdam and McCreedy, 1999). The essence of this model of knowledge management is to value the knowledge assets. To achieve this goal intellectual capital models generally divide assets into three categories, human capital, structural capital, and customer or business capital. Knowledge assets are classified in order to be measured or valued, most commonly through a Balanced Business Scorecard, and ultimately managed for effect or goal directed outcome (Stewart, 1997; Rust et al. 2000)

It is frequently suggested that the intellectual capital model of knowledge management "assumes a very scientific approach to knowledge and assumes it can be commodified" (McAdam and McCreedy, 1999). The intellectual capital approach to knowledge management is a codification approach. It is argued that such an objective approach must necessarily focus on explicit or tangible knowledge and "pays little attention to people, individually or collectively, unless the knowledge assets being considered cannot be separated from them" (Spender, 2000). The intellectual capital approach to knowledge management demands that a company identifies their knowledge assets objectifying or commodifying them. This concept of knowledge as one of a collection of corporate assets that can be identified, valued and controlled often fails to recognise the social processes involved in knowledge creation and management. This is reminiscent of both technologically determinist and positivist theories.

It could be argued that it is this approach that the companies have taken in adopting eCommerce. Through gathering data about customers, both openly (asking people to register with the site) and more surreptitiously (planting cookies), to enable more effective marketing strategies companies could be said to be adopting the intellectual capital approach to managing knowledge about customers.
2.3.2 Knowledge Category Models

McAdam and McCreedy define knowledge category models of knowledge management as those that "categorise knowledge into discrete elements" (McAdam and McCreedy, 1999). This model has common ground with both the intellectual capital model and the socially constructed model. The "categorisation" of knowledge involves a degree of objectivity or commodification, while the knowledge creation process has social implications. Nonaka's model of knowledge creation falls into this category. Nonaka states that:

"The cornerstone of our epistemology is the distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge...... A spiral emerges when the interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge is elevated dynamically from a lower ontological level to higher levels.

The core of our theory lies in describing how such a spiral emerges. We present the four modes of knowledge conversion that are created when tacit and explicit knowledge interact with each other. These four modes - which we refer to as socialization, externalization, combination and internalization - constitute the “engine” of the entire knowledge creation process.” (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995).

Other knowledge category models include Hedlund’s N-Form Organization (Hedlund, 1994); McLoughlin and Thorpe’s model based on programmed knowledge and knowledge gained by questioning insight; Boisot’s model of codified and uncodified knowledge (McAdam and McCreedy, 1999), Carayannis’ Organizational Knowledge Network (OK Net) (Carayannis, 1999); and Earl’s model based on the constructs of knowing and knowledge (Despres and Chauvel, 2000).

Critics of the knowledge category approach to knowledge management question the legitimacy of categorising or classifying knowledge. Classification or “systematic placement in categories” (Collins, 1983) implies a scientific approach to an object or commodity that can be controlled “perhaps this model implies a mechanistic approach to
knowledge categorisation" (McAdam and McCreedy, 1999). It could be argued that the dichotomy of constructs characteristically set up in these models (explicit / tacit, uncodified / codified, programmed (P) / questioning (Q)) offers a “unidimensional” or exclusive view of knowledge at the expense of the wider, richer view, and suggests that all knowledge can be identified and placed into one of the opposing categories.

Knowledge category models make reference to social processes for transforming knowledge. In the SECI model of knowledge conversion, Nonaka suggests that through socialisation a process of knowledge transformation from tacit to tacit, tacit to explicit, explicit to explicit and explicit to tacit occurs (Nonaka and et al. 2000) (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7). The theory, however, as most other knowledge category theories, neglects to examine the process of socialisation in any detail. The over simplification of the role of socialisation in knowledge creation is a criticism frequently levelled at knowledge category models.

Figure 6. Four Modes of Knowledge Conversion. (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995)
2.3.3 Socially Constructed Models

The definition of "new" knowledge adopted by those in the domain of Management has roots in the scientific, philosophical and sociological theories and debates, but offers a wider, richer view of knowledge. This definition, which centres on cognitive knowledge created by people in their day-to-day lives, suggests that knowledge is an unmanageable social phenomenon.

Similarly, this "social paradigm of knowledge construction" (Burgoyne and Reynolds, 1997) as a Knowledge Management model:

"assumes a wide definition of knowledge and views knowledge as being intrinsically linked within the social and learning processes within the organisation .... it does not assume any given definition of knowledge, but rather invites a more holistic approach to knowledge construction" (McAdam and McCreedy, 1999).
Knowledge emerges as a result of purposeful activity. This view of knowledge best accommodates “new” knowledge - knowledge intrinsically linked with human cognition. It has been argued that in taking the socially constructed view of knowledge “managing knowledge” is impossible, rather we must support the process by which knowledge emerges and is applied” (Venters and Wood, 2000).

Examples of socially constructed models of knowledge management include models focusing on the processes of knowledge construction, embodiment, dissemination and use, (Clarke and Staunton, 1989; Demarest, 1997; McAdam and McCready, 1999), and models including knowledge policy, infrastructure and culture (Kruizinga, Heijst, et al. 1997). Socially constructed models of knowledge management have much in common with the theories and practices of learning organisations and the development of “communities of practice” where the emphasis is on social networks and communication. However, “very little exists within the literature linking communication and Knowledge Management” (Venters and Wood, 2000), a relationship that “we should be …. placing at the heart of our investigations” (More, 1999). This approach has resonance with technological constructivism and Critical Social Theory.

2.3.4 Adoption of a Knowledge Management Approach.

This study will focus on models of the Knowledge Management that emphasise the socially construction of knowledge through communication. In contrast to knowledge category models this approach places socialisation at its centre. The over simplification of the role of socialisation in knowledge creation in knowledge category models, and the implied scientific or objective approach to “categorising” knowledge caused the researcher to reject that approach for this research.

The socialisation approach to knowledge management does not assume one given definition of knowledge, but adopts a more holistic approach linking knowledge to social and learning processes. This holistic view allows the models to “be used to represent the key dimensions of knowledge management in the widest possible sense” (McAdam and
Reid, 2000). Similarly, it accepts that knowledge cannot be managed, but rather its creation and exchange must be facilitated through communication. This renders the socialisation approach to knowledge management suitable for a consumer focused exploration of e-Commerce as knowledge management exploring the creation, and exchange of knowledge from business to consumer (B2C) and from customer to customer (C2C).

The model that will be adopted is a version of Demarest's (1997) adaptation of Clarke and Staunton's (1989) model, modified by McAdam and McCreedy (Fig. 8) (McAdam and McCreedy, 1999). The development of this model is influenced by Cleggs' (1989) 'circuit of power' model and emphasises four stages in the knowledge management process, “knowledge construction”, “knowledge embodiment”, “dissemination” and finally “use”, but it adds “emancipatory enhancements” through employee use of knowledge and subsequent empowerment. The model will be adapted to adopt a consumer focus in order to explore consumer empowerment through the use of knowledge created by companies and other customers and disseminated through the internet. (See fig. 9).

Figure 8 Socially Constructed Model of Knowledge Management
(McAdam and McCreedy, 1999)
Relating this model to eCommerce, the scientific paradigm of knowledge construction would include manuals, instructions, directories or technical specifications of products, or scripted standardised communication. The social paradigm would include conversations in chat rooms or on discussion boards and consumer reviews; actual experiences of interacting with products and companies, or unscripted spontaneous conversations with company representatives. Dissemination would be the method or ease with which the knowledge is shared, or the accessibility of that knowledge. The use of the knowledge has two strands. Firstly, the use by the company to bring about business benefits through improved communication and participation with customers. Secondly, the use by customers to enable action or changed behaviour in their interactions with companies bringing about empowerment. Knowledge embodiment is the process by which new knowledge becomes internalised through new practices, routines and norms. This phase would follow effective and sustained engagement with the process of the socialisation of knowledge about companies, products and customers through this new channel.
It is interesting to note that some eCommerce websites include features associated with knowledge management practices. For example, frequently asked questions (FAQs) (www.focusdiy.com), 'Ask the expert' facility (www.blockbuster.com), 'chat to our advisors' (insurance4u.com), and customer reviews (www.amazon.com). Theoretically the internet and socially constructed knowledge management appear to have a synergistic relationship. Whilst knowledge management "has communication at its heart" (More, 1999), the internet facilitates communication across the globe. The next section will consider the literature on the internet and eCommerce in order to set this research in context.

2.4 The Internet and e-Commerce

When this research began the internet was still a relatively new technology. This literature review reflects this in its attempt to paint the landscape from which the researcher set out.

2.4.1 The Internet

Perspectives and definitions of the internet are multi-disciplinary, eclectic and plentiful. Researchers and academics from various fields including computer science, information systems and social sciences have attempted to define the phenomenon of the internet. However, two approaches to researching the internet can be clearly identified; the information retrieval or "Information Superhighway" view, and the communications view.

"...research on the Internet generally divides into two main categories.... The first has to do with the abilities to search and retrieve data from large data stores ...The second research area is into the interactive communication capabilities of the Internet" (Costigan, 1999).

This has resonance with the strands of the myth that the internet empowers customers. Three of the five identified have roots in either the communicational or informational capabilities of the internet:
1. eCommerce offers greater access to information
2. eCommerce enables better communication (C2B and C2C).
3. eCommerce brings about personalisation of services to customers.

Since the development of the World Wide Web (WWW) in 1989 and navigation browsers in 1994, the internet has facilitated access to information held globally through an ever increasing and uncontrolled volume of web sites, currently estimated to be between fifty and sixty million. However, it is argued that the WWW has brought about an information boom and will ultimately lead to information overload. “The sheer volume of information has made the access of this information almost impossible”, (Costigan, 1999) and has lead to the view that “the internet is not an information highway; it is in reality only peripherally about information.” (Jones, 1999)

Communication theorists offer a contrasting view of the internet proposing that it is in the interactive communication capabilities - e-mail, chat rooms, MOOs (multi-user domains object oriented), MUDS (multi-user domains or multi-user dungeons) - of the internet that its value and impact lie.

“The Internet is a social space, a milieu, made up of and made possible by, communication.” (Jones, 1999)

It is a

“...computer network system that directly supports the interaction of people with other people” (Kollock and Smith, 1999)

It is generally agreed that “technology has its most profound effect when it alters the ways in which people come together and communicate” (Kollock and Smith, 1999), and that those who hold the power dominate the communication channels (Habermas, 1984; Zuboff, 1998). Through e-mail, IRC (inter-relay chat), MOOs and MUDs, newsgroups and even simple hypertext links, the internet has the potential to change the ways in which
individuals and organisations communicate. It is often noted that the internet is “greater than the sum of its parts” (Costigan, 1999). It is evident that the Information Superhighway and the interactive communication features of the internet have great synergistic value. In facilitating communication, which is neither time nor spatially dependant, the internet creates a continuous global forum for the creation and exchange of information and experiences or knowledge.

As Slevin notes:

“The Internet has expanded at a phenomenal rate, integrating various modes of conventional communication including radio and television into a vast interactive network. Its use has already reshaped the conditions of mediated experience for many millions of individuals and many thousands of organisations throughout the world ..... It opens up new opportunities for dialogue and deliberation, empowers people to make things happen rather than have things happen to them, and facilitates new forms of solidarity and cooperation.” (Slevin, 2000).

Kollock illustrates this. Building on Rheingold’s (1994) suggestion that online communities operate a “gift economy” he argues that “there are fundamental features of online interaction which change the costs and benefits of social action in dramatic ways” (Kollock, 1999):

“In comp.lang.perl, a discussion group devoted to the computer language Perl, participants routinely help others out with their technical questions and contribute new computer code for others to use. An accomplished Perl programmer can charge $75 per hour. In a number of discussion groups for lawyers, participants routinely offer each other detailed legal advice concerning cases on which they are working. The lawyers report that they often refuse to give similar information over the phone or charge up to several hundred dollars an hour for the same advice.” (Kollock, 1999)
Not only does the internet change the physical way in which we communicate, but it changes the social dynamic and the very content of what we communicate. This implies enormous potential for the creation and exchange of knowledge.

In 1994 Bernes-Lee et al noted that:

“The world-wide web was developed to be a pool of human knowledge, which would allow collaborators in remote sites to share their ideas and all aspects of a common project .... The Web does not yet meet its design goal as being a pool of knowledge that is as easy to update as to read. That level of immediacy of knowledge sharing waits for easy to use hypertext editors to be generally available on most platforms.” (Berners-Lee et al. 1994)

It is evident that this goal could now be achieved.

2.4.2 e-Commerce

As an emergent and multidisciplinary field, definitions of electronic commerce are plentiful and diverse. Wigand notes that:

“The term electronic commerce is poorly understood and frequently used to denote different meanings, very often depending on the individual’s job function, professional orientation and background, focal product or service, and type of information technology deployed” (Wigand, 1997).

Similarly, Holsapple and Singh note that:

“...the EC (electronic commerce) landscape .... Is characterized by a great variety of topics, diversity of functional orientations and lack of definitions” (Holsapple & Singh, 2000).
The term electronic commerce emerged in business fields in the 1970s and grew to encompass business conducted by telephone or fax, electronic funds transfer (EFT), and electronic data interchange (EDI); essentially business-to-business transactions (Turban et al. 2000; Plant, 2000). With the rise of the internet and particularly the development of the World Wide Web electronic commerce as a consumer channel has evolved. Possibly due to roots in the business world, the terms eBusiness and eCommerce are often used interchangeably as definitions overlap:

“E-business embraces all aspects of the use of information technology in business. It includes not only buying and selling, but also servicing customers and collaborating with business partners. The narrower term, e-Commerce ...... focuses on marketing or business transactions” (Rowley, 2000)

and:

“Electronic commerce is an emerging concept that describes the process of buying and selling or exchanging of products, services, and information via computer networks including the Internet” (Turban et al. 2000).

In the initial start up period two clear approaches to developing an electronic presence emerged: the informational approach and the transactional approach. The informational approach focused on building brand presence, and informing the consumer’s buying decision, while the transactional approach focused on facilitating the retail process - exchange of product or service for financial value. There was a general belief that a transactional approach offered greater competitive advantage. This can be seen in the surge in virtual companies or “dot coms”, and in the numerous early definitions of e-Commerce that focus on electronic transaction alone:

“EC provides the capability of buying and selling products and information on the Internet and other online services” (Kalakota and Whinston, 1997)
"EC is the use of computer networks to conduct business - basically the buying and selling of goods and services - electronically with one’s suppliers customers and / or competitors.” (Hayashi, 1996)

This “Trading View” (Holsapple and Singh, 2000) or transactional approach offers limited leverage of the potential of electronic commerce and may account for the number of failed virtual start up companies.

More recent attempts to define e-Commerce are more eclectic:

“(EC) is an approach to achieving business goals in which Internet technology enables or facilitates execution of activities in and across value chains as well as supporting decision making that underlies those activities” (Holsapple and Singh, 2000).

and:

“.... allows businesses to identify and communicate with a far wider range of potential consumers and even build an ongoing relationship with these consumers, based on their enquiries and historical purchasing habits” (Marshall and Finney, 2000).

Researchers and practitioners of e-Commerce are beginning to recognise that commercial internet sites need to be more than merely “transactional” to succeed.

“A web site that provides a benefit to the users, like knowledge content starts the process of creating a community of value. Unobtrusively adding sales content to the site is the way your company grows.” (Smith et al. 2000).

Given that consumers currently use the internet to research products and services, but frequently fail to complete transactions online, it is to a company’s advantage to focus on areas other than the transactional function of their web sites. It has even been argued that
e-Commerce should attempt to replicate the way people shop in the “real world” and “create a sense of community and opportunities to communicate” (IPA, 1995).

“Direct-to-consumer electronic commerce may not succeed, primarily because consumers will shun its perceived convenience for the social benefits of shopping in person and interacting with sales personnel and other shoppers. Some electronic providers have offered an alternative to social shopping by creating virtual communities” (Urbaczewski et al. 1998).

Further, research has suggested commercial benefits of new ways of allowing customers to interact with companies such as online communities:

“There appear to be commercial benefits for organisations providing virtual communities on their Websites. Many .... people would like to use a virtual community to communicate with the company itself.” (Evans et al. 2001).

Electronic Commerce is still evolving, but it is clear that this new channel offers enormous potential for both consumers and businesses. Kozinets suggests that:

“...a cultural battle is in the making. On the one side are consumers who are just beginning to unite online (and through it, in person) in order to assert social power, to unite and to claim symbols and ways of life that are meaningful to them and the communities they build. On the other are the marketing and other corporate industries who seek to understand these consumers, to address their concerns without "giving away the store" and also to understand how best to take advantage of the many opportunities the new information media (such as the World Wide Web) present as a vast forum for direct sales and advertising” (Kozinets, 1999).

Enabling these two sides to interact and share knowledge has enormous potential for eCommerce.
The idea of a "battle" between customers and companies over the commercial internet had an impact on the shaping of this research.

The internet is gradually changing the ways in which consumers interact with each other and with companies. In this more evolved definition of e-Commerce "information or content is not merely transmitted from a sender to a receiver, but instead, mediated environments are created by participants and then experienced" (Hoffman and Novak, 1997). This strikes resounding chords with the socially constructed model of knowledge management. The synergy of the internet and knowledge management is potentially vast. Companies with e-Commerce functions could build on that synergy and maximise the benefits for themselves and for their customers.

2.5 The Consumer, Knowledge and the Internet

The Oxford English Dictionary defines consumption "in terms of using up; destruction; waste; amount consumed; wasting disease" (Mackay, 1997). Williams notes that with the "onset of capitalism 'consumer' became the antithesis of 'producer'" (Williams, 1988) from an economic discourse. In recent years, consumer research has attempted to shake off the negative associations of the words 'consumer' and 'consumption'. Instead it has begun to focus on a new informed and 'savvy' consumer interacting with, rather than consuming, products and building up knowledge from their experiences. Hirschman and Holbrook (1986) and Woodruffe (2001) challenge the traditional approach to consumer research, arguing that consumption is not something that people "do to" products, but "an interactive phenomena" (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1986) "which involves the experiences accumulating in consumers as they interact with products" (Woodruffe, 2001). This both echoes the concept of 'new' knowledge created by people as they interact with others in society, as Nonaka and Takeuchi propose:

"Much of our knowledge is the fruit of our own purposeful endeavors in dealing with the world" (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995).
and has resonance with Slevin's idea that the internet "empowers people to make things happen rather than have things happen to them." (Slevin, 2000). The combination of 'new' consumerism, 'new' knowledge, and the facilities offered by the internet suggests the potential for a consumer to "effect some new action" or empower themselves.

It is frequently suggested that the internet would facilitate this new consumer experience, and bring about "true" consumer empowerment:

"The Internet invites participation. It is genuinely empowering" (Levine et al. 2000)

The idea that technology in general, and more specifically the internet will bring about a social revolution is not new (Howcroft, 1998). It is particularly prevalent in both academic and journalistic writings on consumers and the internet. Business literature states that customers empowered through the internet bring benefits to the organisation. William Bluestein of Forrester Research claims that "It's a hot trend.... Companies that empower their customers" (Stewart, 1997). While consumer rights groups welcome the power that the internet bestows upon consumers:

"The power of the consumer? In reality, individuals have very little clout in their everyday dealings with big companies. Now the Net is shifting the balance and giving consumers hitherto undreamed-of opportunities to be more forceful with firms." (Pitt et al. 2002)

Reinforcing the belief that the internet empowers consumers, consumer groups and Government agencies list "more opportunities to shop on the Internet" (Office of Fair Trading, 2003) as a change in market forces that empowers consumers:

"Changes like these allow consumers to get a better deal. They create competition and choice. This enhances consumer empowerment" (Office of Fair Trading, 2003)
This has strong links with the myth that because eCommerce ‘offers greater choice and convenience it empowers customers’ which will be unpacked in the following chapters.

Wathieu et al note that “with the advent of increasingly sophisticated information technologies” companies are providing customers with increasing levels of control (Wathieu et al. 2002). For example they say customers can now specify product features, consult experiences of other customers, and control their exposure to advertising. However, they go on to question whether increased consumer control necessarily brings empowerment. The illusion of empowerment is perhaps achieved through the redefinition of the consumer construct as ‘in control’. Several new identities have been bestowed upon the consumer in recent years. The contemporary consumer has been constructed as “unmanageable”, “chooser”, “communicator”, “explorer”, “hedonist”, “activist” “rebel”, “citizen” (Gabriel and Lang, 1995), as “informed”, “responsible” (Department of Trade and Industry, 1999) and simply as “good” (Hodgson, 2002). A number of writers have noted the power of the discourse of marketing in shaping the consumer construct, (Rose, 1990; Knights and Sturdy, 1997). Further, Hodgson discusses “the field of marketing as a regime of power/knowledge based on technologies of objectification and subjection.” (Hodgson, 2002). Significantly it is the marketing function with which eCommerce is most often associated (Strauss and Frost, 1999; Breitenbach and Doren, 1998); companies marketing to consumers in a bid to influence choice and decision. This has resonance with ideologies of power which focus on the ability of one actor or agent to influence the behaviour of another (Weber, 1947; Dahl, 1957). However, these approaches to power are frequently criticised for their focus on the “consequences” of power which offers a “scientific” (positivist) and “commoditised” view (Barnes, 1988). The focus on ‘agency’ and decision making places power as a commodity at the foot of the individual. It fails to recognise that “non-decision-making may also be an exercise of power”, that failure or refusal to act could illustrate unequal power relations (Abercrombie et al. 2000). Similarly it ignores the ‘process’ view of power, that power relations are created over time and continue to be reaffirmed through the structure of society. For Marx, power is a structural relationship existing independently of individual will, but intrinsically bound up with “economic and class relations” (Abercrombie et al. 2000). The dominant class perpetuates
a ‘world view’ which supports their position. They may do this by continuously ‘reconstructing’ through discourse the subordinate class. For example, commercial providers may “shape the wants or interests” (Abercrombie et al. 2000) of customers through the discourse of advertising. Foucault, taking a process approach stresses the role of discourse and “expert knowledge” in exercising power (Rouse, 1994). This research takes a process or structural view of power, and draws upon discourse analysis, to illustrate how customer / company power relations are maintained through discourse.

This research has been influenced by the interest in consumer empowerment through the internet, and the frequent assertions that the internet will bring about a consumer revolution and will empower consumers. Experiences recounted to the researcher in the preliminary stages of this research appeared to challenge that assumption. This challenge to what was increasingly becoming the status quo, along with a review of the literature in three key areas (eCommerce, Knowledge Management and Consumer Studies) influenced the formation of the research objectives.

2.6 eCommerce and Knowledge Management

A literature review suggests that people currently use the internet to research products and services, and often fail to complete transactions online (eMarketer, 2001). Consumers are not ready to fully embrace online purchasing to the extent expounded by many commentators and stakeholders. Instead, they more readily make use of the communication and information retrieving capabilities of the internet. Research by eStats (eMarketer, 2001) suggests that:

“..over 80% of people using the Internet do so solely to send e-mail or gather news and information. Only 17.8% of people using the Internet list shopping as being a primary motivation” (eMarketer, 2001).

Similarly, According to the First Quarter 2001 Global Internet Trends report from Nielsen NetRatings, (Pastore, 2001) one in six European adults used the internet to seek pricing or product information for products and services. Only one in eleven adults actually made an
online purchase in the same period. The report suggests that consumers worldwide are more likely to use the internet to browse or collect information about products than to actually buy online (see Table 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nation</th>
<th>Browsing</th>
<th>Purchasing</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>13%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<td>Italy</td>
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<td>Netherlands</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
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<td>Norway</td>
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<td>14%</td>
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<td>Singapore</td>
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<td>7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
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<td>3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
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<td>26%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
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<td>17%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Online Purchasing and Browsing Behaviour by Nation. Adapted from Nielsen NetRatings, (Pastore, 2001)

Qualitative research with consumers supports this, suggesting commercial benefits of online communities (Evans et al. 2001; Brewer, 2000).
Socio-constructivists argue that it is through communication and social interaction that knowledge is created. This may be knowledge about products on the market, or the quality of customer services departments of various companies. Through the internet the potential for consumer connectivity or interaction is vast. A person can exchange opinions and experiences of a product or company with thousands of other consumers. She can read a customer review of a book, and then read how useful that review was to others before making her decision to purchase. Finally she can add her own ratings. She can compare the experiences of consumers who purchased different brands of camera a year ago. Reflect on their experiences of using the product and interacting with the company before deciding which brand she should purchase (Brewer, 2000) (e.g. See http://www.epinions.com/). Through the internet a whole new panacea for such conversations has opened up.

It is frequently argued that through this connectivity the consumer is empowered. It was this assertion that shaped the initial objectives of this research. The idea that through the communication capabilities of the internet, consumers are coming together, creating and sharing knowledge and ultimately becoming empowered, has strong echoes of McAdam and McCreedy’s model of the socialisation approach to knowledge management (McAdam and McCreedy, 1999) (see Fig 8). The model has “emancipation” as a core outcome of the process. For the purposes of this research, it was adapted to focus on “consumer empowerment” rather than “employee emancipation” (see Fig. 9).

Further illustrating the adoption and incorporation of tools and techniques from the field of Knowledge Management into eCommerce, primary desk based research reviewing commercial websites highlighted the use of features such as Frequently Asked Questions Databases (FAQs), ‘Ask The Expert’ facilities, communities, and message boards. A literature review also highlighted the connection between eCommerce and Knowledge Management as an emergent issue. (Holsapple and Singh, 2000) argue that ‘EC (e-Commerce) research and KM (Knowledge Management) research efforts have proceeded in a largely independent fashion’. They ‘identify a need for investigations of the interplay between EC and KM’. The Giga Information Group explicitly identified the next phase of e-Commerce to be ‘eKnowledge Management’ (Giga Information Group, 2001).
McAdam and McCreedy's model incorporates "business benefits" as an outcome of the process. The benefits of business-to-customer and customer-to-business knowledge exchange and consumer empowerment for businesses have not been explored in any great detail in the literature. Significantly, these issues have been addressed most frequently from the "intellectual capital" or customer capital approach to the management of consumer knowledge. For example, Stewart states that:

"Empowered customers enormously increase the amount of information a company has about its market (and customers have about it), but turning this knowledge into customer capital – a long-lived asset whose value is greater then the mere sum of transactions – requires the ability to respond flexibly to individual customers’ wants" (Stewart, 1997)

The combined outcome of business benefits and consumer emancipation illustrated in McAdam and McCreedy's model fits well with the objectives of this research, and addresses the deficit of literature on the business benefits of customer empowerment from a socialisation approach to the management of knowledge. In engaging in empirical research into the processes of B2C and C2C interaction on the internet through a knowledge management lens this gap will be addressed.

2.7 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has explored the concept of eCommerce as knowledge management forum. It began by showing how consumers construct knowledge in their everyday interactions with products, services and companies. Secondly it considered how the internet offers the potential for consumers to communicate and share their knowledge with companies and with other customers, and suggested that this could bring about mutual benefits. The review of the literature has illustrated that the belief that the internet is bringing about a power shift in the company / customer relationship is widely held. This research was influenced and shaped by the pervasive belief (or myth) that the internet empowers consumers and through this brings benefits to companies and customers. The adoption of a model of socially
constructed knowledge management as a lens to explore eCommerce was justified. Both this literature and the methodology literature considered in the next chapter helped to shape the emergent research objectives stated in Chapter One, section 1.3 Research Aims and Objectives.
This chapter presents a discussion of methodological and philosophical approaches to knowledge creation through research, and offers a critique of traditional approaches. It is acknowledged that the contribution made to a thesis by a chapter devoted entirely to the debate surrounding philosophical approaches to research is a contentious issue. However, as this research purports to make a substantial methodological contribution, it was considered necessary to review the literature in a bid to offer insight into the current state of affairs in keeping with CST. The importance of the philosophical and methodological literature in shaping CST research is illustrated. The origins, characteristics and limitations of three dominant paradigms (positivism, interpretivism and Critical Theory) are discussed in relation to IS research. The process of selecting a research paradigm is outlined.

This chapter develops the background for Chapter 4 Study Design which will 'stake out' a narrower territory or range of approaches bearing a closer relevance to this research, and justify the choices made in the selection and construction of the methodological approach adopted.

3.1 Research Methodology

The inclusion in a PhD thesis of a chapter devoted entirely to the debate surrounding epistemological and ontological approaches to research is a contentious issue. The researcher has engaged in many discussions as to how much attention should be given to the philosophy of knowledge creation in a PhD thesis. It is sometimes argued that such a chapter would add nothing new to the discussion. However, this researcher took the active decision that such a section should be included here for a number of reasons. Firstly, this research aims to provide a contribution to knowledge not only in relation to the empirical theme (that of eCommerce), but also to the field of research methodology or more
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specifically to Critical Social Theory. Secondly, as a critical theorist reflecting on the research process, it is important to demonstrate an awareness of the historical context and traditions that have shaped the position from which the researcher starts out; the critical researcher is a historically and socially situated agent. Finally, Alvesson and Deetz' (2002) three tasks of critical theory research are adopted as a framework for the evaluation of this research – both empirical and methodological. In order to address the initial task, that of \textit{insight} or deep understanding, an awareness of the wider context (historical, economic, cultural and political) of the situation under study is necessary. Thus, a discussion of the traditions, ideologies and conflicts within research philosophy is a valuable and necessary element of this work. Dick (2000), proposes that the reflective researcher who does not follow a straight and narrow path in their research journey may not know at the outset what will become relevant, making a traditional literature review difficult. Attention, he suggests, should instead be focused upon the methodological and philosophical literature as this will provide insights into choosing and gathering the data (Nolan and McLean, 2005). This researcher has chosen to take this advice and has benefited from a greater understanding of the philosophy of knowledge creation. Further, as with all research, a review of the current literature and emergent issues define the yardstick by which the contribution to knowledge will be judged. This research aims to make a contribution to knowledge through the methodology employed, and so demands such a yardstick.

Avison and Fitzgerald outline the importance of an explicit philosophical approach in designing a research project,

\begin{quote}
"A methodology is a collection of procedures, techniques, tools and documentation aids... but a methodology is more than merely a collection of these things. It is usually based on some philosophical view, otherwise it is merely a method, like a recipe." (Avison and Fitzgerald, 1995)
\end{quote}

It is increasingly important for researchers to reflect on the research process, engaging with ontological and epistemological issues in selecting the most appropriate method of enquiry
for the research question. Positivist approaches to research have long dominated, particularly in the fields of information systems (IS) (Walsham, 1995), management research (Goles and Hirschheim, 2000) and consumer research (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000; Woodruffe, 1996) that inform this study. Johnson and Duberley argue that:

“This dominance is not the result of a well-thought-out stance towards research, rather it is often the result of an attempt to copy the natural sciences or sometimes an unthinking (some might say naïve) empiricism” (Johnson and Duberley, 2000).

In recent years there has been evidence of researchers in the field questioning and moving away from positivist assumptions (Walsham, 1995; Galliers and Swan, 1997; Klein and Myers, 1999), or even explicitly welcoming other approaches (Rose, 1998).

Conferences include tracks on methodologies and epistemologies, and journal editorial boards are professing to be more accepting of interpretivist or critical work. As IS and management researchers begin to challenge positivist approaches to research it is vital that they engage with and reflect on their own approach to research, and develop an awareness of epistemology and ontology. The reflexive researcher should address the questions of what they are claiming to know (ontology) and how they are claiming to know it, or how they will justify that claim (epistemology).

Ontology is derived from the Greek words ‘ontos’ (being) and ‘logos’ (theory, knowledge or account). It is a branch of metaphysics dealing with the essence of phenomena and the nature of their existence. To consider the ontological status of something is to ask whether it is real or illusory. Similarly, epistemology is derived from the Greek words ‘episteme’ (knowledge or science) and ‘logos’ (theory, knowledge or account), and is generally taken to mean “the theory of the origin, nature and limits of knowledge” (Craig, 1999). Epistemology refers to the assumptions made about knowledge and how it can be created or obtained (Myers, 1997; Hirschheim, 1992), and is the
Traditionally, 'valid' research has been grounded in science and prioritised over 'non scientific' or 'subjective' enquiry. The dominant perspective has been of an objective phenomenon or "reality" which exists independently of the researcher (Chua, 1986), and which can be observed, analysed and disseminated objectively through a "theory-neutral language". In recent years this dominant perspective has been challenged by IS and management researchers and issues such as the social construction of reality, researcher subjectivity and theory-laden language have been recognised and embraced. In the light of this progression, it is essential that researchers in the field engage with these issues and develop and maintain an awareness of their own influences and assumptions that have informed their work.

The next section presents a discussion of the role of ontological and epistemological assumptions in creating knowledge through research.

3.2 Construction of Knowledge

Ontological assumptions are concerned with what we are claiming to know and how we perceive ‘reality’, whilst epistemological assumptions are concerned with how we are claiming to know what we purport to know, or from which vantage point, assumptions, or premise we are starting out (Hirschheim, 1992). Guba and Lincoln (Lincoln and Guba, 1994) provide a useful insight into 'inquiry paradigms'. They propose three fundamental and interconnected questions that a researcher could reflect upon in order to ascertain to which inquiry paradigm she belongs, and so ground the underlying assumptions of the knowledge she is constructing through research. These questions are as follows:

1. The ontological question concerning the nature of “reality”. Does a “true reality” exist or is reality subjectively constructed through a process of negotiation or à priori belief?
2. The epistemological question concerning the "knower" and her relationship with what can be "known". For example can "reality" be objectively observed and result in "true" findings, or are findings subjectively created?

3. The methodological question concerning how the inquirer goes about researching what she believes can be "known". Should a researcher set out to verify a hypothesis or to uncover and interpret phenomena through "hermeneutic elaboration"?

As discussed in the previous chapter (Chapter 2 Constructing the Concept: eCommerce as Knowledge Management), it is evident that there are two clear strands in the debate surrounding the definition of knowledge. The first is the traditional or positivist view of knowledge as facts or truth, based in a single discipline, usually a science. Plato is generally considered to be the first to develop a theory of knowledge. From a rationalist perspective, Plato saw knowledge as "truth" attainable only through reason and pure objectivity, independent of the subject pursuing it. Knowledge, he claimed is "justified true belief" achieved through rational reasoning grounded in theories, laws and concepts. Alternatively, from an empiricist perspective, Aristotle contested Plato’s views stressing the importance of observation and sensory perception. This debate provided the foundations of the "philosophical inquiry of knowledge" (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

The second view of knowledge derives more from interpretive sociology and its theories of knowledge. Mannheim (1991) contested the rationalists’ ideas of knowledge as "truth", proposing that there was an association between forms of knowledge and social structure - that interaction within social groups conditions belief. He postulated that if all beliefs could be socially located then "true belief" or objective "truth", and therefore "knowledge" in the traditional sense, could not exist. Knowledge therefore is a shared set of beliefs that perform the function of social cohesion through consensus. Consensus Theory asserts that any "true belief" is only a socially established convention between those who share a particular paradigm or frame of reference. "Truth" therefore, is a term attached to a set of
beliefs that have managed to prevail in a particular social context (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). This theory is closely linked to Relativism, “whereby there are no universal truths” (Schwandt, 2001). For relativists, warranted (i.e. valid and reliable) knowledge, truth and reason are always relative to some historical epoch, place, cultural event or paradigm. However, Johnson and Duberley warn against “incipient and debilitating relativism” in epistemic reflexivity. With reference to Bourdieu (1990) they advocate instead an epistemic reflexivity which:

“...entails systematic reflection by the social scientist aimed at making the unconscious conscious and the tacit explicit so as to reveal how the social scientist’s social location forms a sub-text of research which conditions any account – an analysis of analysis. This must entail some form of metatheoretical examination of the presuppositions which researchers have internalized.” (Johnson and Duberley, 2000)

The researcher must reflect on their underlying assumptions and make them explicit. One way in which this could be achieved is by stating where her beliefs lie in relation to epistemological issues, or to which particular paradigm or frame of reference her research subscribes. The next section will present a more detailed consideration of “inquiry” or “research paradigms”.

3.3 Philosophical Perspectives and Inquiry Paradigms

In 1979, Burrell and Morgan developed a “typology of paradigms for the analysis of social and organisational theory” based on the different approaches to, philosophical underpinnings of, and assumptions about social science and the nature of society (See Tables 5) (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Morgan’s work in particular proposes that reality is invariably experienced subjectively through the lens of a particular paradigm (Morgan, 1986; Johnson and Duberley, 2000). Building on Kuhn’s (1970) concept of “paradigm”, Burrell and Morgan define a “paradigm” as “commonality of perspective which binds the work of a group of theorists together”, and propose four different research paradigms:
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**functionalism**, which aims to explain the *status quo* and how the individual elements of a social system interact together to form an integrated whole; **interpretivism**, which seeks to understand the meaning given by individuals to social roles and institutions, and how shared visions of reality emerge and are maintained (Johnson and Duberley, 2000); **radical structuralism** which focuses on the structure and analysis of economic power relations and seeks to identify processes that could lead to social change; **radical humanism** which focuses on all forms of power relationships including ideological, psychological, and social, and seeks to enlighten and emancipate those under domination.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Ontological Assumptions</strong></th>
<th><strong>Subjective</strong></th>
<th><strong>Objective</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reality is interpreted by the individual. It is socially constructed (nominalism).</td>
<td>Reality is external to the individual. It is a “given” (realism).</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Epistemological Assumptions</strong></th>
<th><strong>Subjective</strong></th>
<th><strong>Objective</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knowledge is relative. Researchers should focus on meaning and examine the totality of a situation (antipositivism).</td>
<td>Researchers should focus on empirical evidence and hypothesis testing. Looking for fundamental laws and causal relationships (positivism).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Assumptions about Human Nature</strong></th>
<th><strong>Subjective</strong></th>
<th><strong>Objective</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Humans possess free will and have autonomy (voluntarism).</td>
<td>Humans are products of their environments (determinism).</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Methodological Assumptions</strong></th>
<th><strong>Subjective</strong></th>
<th><strong>Objective</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understanding the world is best done by analysing subjective accounts of a situation or a phenomenon (ideographic).</td>
<td>Operationalising and measuring constructs, along with quantitative analysis techniques and hypothesis testing, will uncover universal laws that explain and govern reality (nomothetic).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Burrell and Morgan’s Assumptions about the Nature of Social Science. Adapted from Goles and Hirschheim (2000)
Regulation | Radical change
---|---
Society forces uphold the status quo. | Society tends to oppress and constrain its members.

Table 6. Burrell and Morgan’s Assumptions about the Nature of Society. Adapted from Goles and Hirschheim (2000)

It is generally acknowledged that Burrell and Morgan’s work has been very influential in highlighting the inappropriateness of and dissatisfaction with the dominant paradigm of functionalism, or positivism, in IS research (Goles and Hirschheim, 2000; Willmott, 1993). However, Burrell and Morgan’s key assertion that the four paradigms are “incommensurable” (mutually exclusive) is a contentious issue. While some support their claims arguing that the epistemologies, ontologies, and methodologies that each paradigm is based on are in essence so completely opposed as to negate any possible overlap (Schultz and Hatch, 1996), others argue that although the core assumptions of each paradigm are incompatible, the boundaries cannot be so clearly defined (Gioia and Pitre, 1990), or even actively promote “multiple methods, theories and philosophical approaches to information systems research” (Goles and Hirschheim, 2000; Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991; Walsham, 1995; Mumford et al. 1985). In a later work Morgan (Morgan, 1983) himself largely rejects the grid produced with Burrell as being oversimplifications having obsessions with the “map rather than the territory.”

Alternatives to Burrell and Morgan’s framework have been proposed. Lincoln and Guba (1994) suggested four underlying research paradigms: positivism, post-positivism, critical theory and constructivism, and have recently adapted this to include the participatory paradigm (Lincoln and Guba, 2000) in the light of work by Heron and Reason, (1997). Whilst other researchers (Chua, 1986; Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991; Ngwenyama and
Lee, 1997) suggest three distinct epistemic approaches: positivist, interpretive, and critical. Drawing upon Chua (1986) and Habermas (1984, 1987) these three paradigms or approaches can be mapped to a research objective or goal. Firstly, positivism is a means-ends oriented approach which aims to produce knowledge in order to achieve predefined concrete goals or ends. Research in this paradigm generally seeks to find mechanistic-causality laws and to increase human control over the phenomena under study. Secondly, Chua suggests that the interpretive (Interpretivist-Constructionist) approach seeks to increase understanding of a situation rather than to establish causal relationships or statistical generalisations. Finally, drawing on the work of Habermas, Chua defines the goal of research in the critical paradigm as emancipatory, aiming to point out the weaknesses of existing, in particular dominant, theories or practices. This “three-fold classification” (Myers, 1997) is adopted to structure the discussion of research paradigms offered here.

### 3.3.1 The Positivist Approach to IS Research

Although the roots of positivist theory can be traced back to Descartes in 1637, and even as far as back as Plato, the term “positivism” was coined by August Comte (1798 – 1857) as a signifier (Saussure, 1965) for a philosophy of knowledge based on strict empiricism. Comte drew upon and transformed empiricist and rationalist theories in defining a scientific basis for knowledge. He distinguished this type of “dependable empirical knowledge” from the knowledge claims of the disciplines of theology and metaphysics, identifying three “chronological stages in the development of knowledge” (Johnson and Duberley, 2000): the theological or fictitious; the metaphysical or abstract; and the scientific or positive characterized by the “positively given”, or that which is available through sensory perception (sense-data).

Positivism has been defined in numerous academic writings and research projects over many years (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Lincoln and Guba, 1994; Johnson and Duberley, 2000). Goles and Hirschheim (2000) summarise positivism as being based on five pillars:
1. **Unity of the scientific method**: The accepted approach for knowledge acquisition (the scientific method) is valid for all forms of inquiry whether the study relates to animate or inanimate objects, human, animal, or plant.

2. **Search for Humean causal relationships**: The aim of positivist research is to find regularity and causal relationships in order to produce generalizations and laws. The research process is based on reductionism where the phenomenon under study is further and further reduced into its constituent parts.

3. **Belief in empiricism**: For positivists the only valid data is that which is experienced through the senses.

4. **Science (and its process) is value-free**: Positivism maintains that there is no intrinsic value position in science. Science transcends all cultural and social beliefs held by the scientist (or researcher).

5. **The foundation of science is based on logic and mathematics**: Logic and mathematics provide a universal language and a formal basis for quantitative analysis - a valuable tool for positivists in the search for causal relationships.

"Positivism" is often used as a generic term to include the "distinctive twentieth century brand of positivism" proposed by the Vienna Circle (a group of socialist and liberal intellectuals based in Vienna during the 1920s and '30s) known as "logical positivism". The different versions of positivism are united by the epistemological principle that warranted knowledge about the world emanates form the scientist's ability to objectively access empirical data about social and natural reality (Nolan, 2003).

The positivist approach to knowledge construction has been challenged on many counts. It is frequently argued that Comte selected from the empiricist and rationalist traditions, disregarding both doubt and scepticism, in order to propose a scientific methodology through which a world of objective facts could be rationally observed. In Comtean
positivism knowledge about the social and natural world is limited to that which can be objectively observed and described through value-free language. Lincoln and Guba (1994) liken positivist research to observation 'through a one-way mirror', which prevents values and biases from influencing outcomes, resulting in replicable findings that are considered as 'true'. An objectivist, or realist, ontology or view of a world which can be objectively observed, described and understood is central to this epistemological approach.

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, positivist approaches have long dominated in the fields of IS, management and consumer research. A positivist approach can be taken to both quantitative and qualitative research. Myers (1997) quotes Yin's (1994) and Benbasat et al.'s (1987) work on case study research as examples of a positivist approach to qualitative research to illustrate this point. According to Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991), IS research can be classified as positivist if there is evidence of formal propositions, quantifiable measures of variables, hypothesis testing, and the drawing of inferences about a phenomenon from the sample to a stated population.

A major criticism of positivist approaches to research in this field is that it lacks relevance to society and individuals (Schon, 1995; Johnson and Duberley, 2000). Hesse (1980) suggests that the basic posture of the positivist paradigm is both reductionist and determinist. It is argued that positivism’s preoccupation with finding causality and generalisable laws, and with the validity and reliability of the research fails to explore and address practical problems which are “messy, confusing and incapable of technical solution” (Schon, 1995). This accounts in some way for the turn away from positivism in IS and management research to more interpretive, and critical approaches.

### 3.3.2 Post Positivism

A “postpositivist” movement has been identified and credited with the beginnings of the shift in scientists’ belief towards the view that true objectivity is beyond reach. Popper challenged the “inductionist and verificationist” (Popper, 1959) principles of positivism, proposing instead the hypothetico-deductive method of deduction and falsification. He
concludes that “The empirical basis of science has nothing “absolute” about it. Science
does not rest on solid bedrock” (Popper, 1959), and that science can in principle falsify any
knowledge through empirical data, but it can never prove a knowledge claim (Johnson and
Duberley, 2000). Popper’s critique of positivism does not refute the core features of the
paradigm. However, in its challenge to “true objectivity” we can see the seeds of a “new”
set of paradigms for knowledge creation.

3.3.3 The Interpretivist Approach to IS Research

Klein and Myers (Klein and Myers, 1999) note that what has been called the Interpretive
paradigm (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) is in fact a large and diverse family of paradigms as
there are many different forms of interpretivism. Schwandt offers a “sketch” and critique of
interpretivist theory (Schwandt, 2000) based on three epistemological stances:
interpretivism, hermeneutics and social constructionism. Whilst Boland (1985) argues that
the philosophical base of interpretivism is hermeneutics and phenomenology. It is generally
agreed that the hermeneutic tradition lies at the heart of interpretivism (Gadamer, 1975;
Ricoeur, 1981). The term “hermeneutics” refers to the interpretation of meaning. Friedrich
Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is generally believed to be the founder of hermeneutic theory
as we recognise it today. He defined it in terms of exegesis – the interpretation of texts – or
as “the art of understanding practiced in reading classical, biblical and legal texts”
(Schwandt, 2001). A key theme of hermeneutics is that the meaning of a part can only be
understood in relation to the whole. Similarly, the parts make up the whole and so it can
only be understood in relation to those parts. This inter-related process of understanding
forms what is commonly referred to as the “hermeneutic circle” (Gadamer, 1975), where
interpretation relies on further interpretation all of which takes place within a context or
cultural tradition.

Interpretivism and hermeneutics arose as a reaction against positivism by the
neo-Kantian German historians and sociologists (Dilthey, Simmel, Weber) in the late
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Schwandt, 2000). A central belief promoting the
reaction was the idea that the human sciences are fundamentally different from the natural
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sciences. Human sciences aim to understand human action (Verstehen), whilst natural sciences aim to explain social, behavioural and physical phenomena (Erklären).

Interpretivism and hermeneutics are generally classed as the Verstehen tradition in the human sciences. Wilhelm Dilthey was a key thinker in proposing the adoption of hermeneutics into the epistemology and methodology of the human sciences. He argued that the human sciences aimed to understand meaning from the actor’s point of view by “grasping the subjective consciousness of action from the inside: “Nature we explain; psychic life we understand!” (Schwandt, 2001). In order to do this Dilthey proposed that the social enquirer must engage in a “psychological re-enactment or imaginative reconstruction of human actors” (Schwandt, 2001) to understand human social life and history.

Wildelband (1848-1915) and Rickert (1863-1936) developed Dilthey’s ideas arguing against the “psychologism” (reduction of objects of consciousness to mental states) inherent in his philosophy. Wildelband argued that the differences between the natural and human sciences lay not in the objects that they studied, but in the methods they used to study them. For Wildelband any kind of object (a text, human being or natural phenomena) could be studied by either method; explained (Erklären) or understood (Verstehen).

Building on the work of his predecessors, Max Weber (1864-1920) proposed an interpretive sociology (Verstehende sociology) founded on an understanding of actor’s perspectives of their social actions. He proposed that human action is both open to and requires interpretation to be understood, and that explanation of that action could only be predicted based on interpretation. Verstehen then, is an interpretive understanding of the world. As a method it assumes that the meaning of human action is inherent in that action and that the researcher’s role is to uncover that meaning (Schwandt, 2001). However, an action can hold different meanings depending on the system or context to which it belongs. The recent television advertisements for HSBC, illustrating the different meaning of one gesture in a range of contexts or cultural traditions, capture the essence of this. To find meaning in an action requires interpretation, and interpretation is influenced by the beliefs and feelings about the world that the interpreter holds. It is on this foundation that the
interpretivist research paradigm is built. It can be argued that this accounts for the diversity of approaches within the paradigm (e.g. social-construction where “reality” is created through communicated accounts of the world, within shared systems of intelligibility, usually language (Gergen, 1999), phenomenology, some approaches to feminism). Within each of these interpretive approaches it is the researcher's task to interpret the meaning of actions within their social context. In so doing the researcher is constructing a 'reading' of these meanings according to her own way of interpreting the world.

Interpretive approaches to IS and Management research are increasingly prevalent in the literature (Walsham, 1995; Galliers and Swan, 1997; Klein and Myers, 1999), and the emergent trend has produced a plethora of definitions of “interpretivist research” (Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991; Myers, 1997; Alvesson and Deetz, 2002). The different branches of interpretivism are united by their epistemological principle that warranted knowledge about the world emanates from the subjective interpretation of a socially constructed reality. In their paper on interpretive field studies Klein and Myers propose that research can be classified as interpretive:

“...if it is assumed that our knowledge of reality is gained only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, documents, tools and other artefacts. Interpretive research does not predefine dependent and independent variables, but focuses on the complexity of human sense making as the situation emerges. It attempts to understand phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them” (Klein and Myers, 1999).

They go on to propose a “set of principles for the conduct and evaluation of interpretive field research”. These seven principles are echoed in Goles and Hirschheim’s five pillars of positivism (see page 70) (Goles and Hirschheim, 2000) and assist in illustrating the basic assumptions of interpretivism (see Table 7)
### Summary of Principles For Interpretive Field Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. The Fundamental Principle of the Hermeneutic Circle.</strong></td>
<td>All human understanding is achieved by iterating between considering the interdependent meaning of parts and the whole that they form. This principle of human understanding is fundamental to all the other principles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. The Principles of Contextualization.</strong></td>
<td>Requires critical reflection of the social and historical background of the research setting, so that the intended audience can see how the current situation under investigation emerged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. The Principle of Interaction Between the Researchers and the Subjects.</strong></td>
<td>Requires critical reflection of how the research materials (or “data”) were socially constructed through the interaction between the researchers and participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. The Principle of Abstraction and Generalization.</strong></td>
<td>Requires relating the idiographic details revealed by the data interpretation through the application of principles one and two to theoretical, general concepts that describe the nature of human understanding and social action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. The Principle of Dialogical Reasoning.</strong></td>
<td>Requires sensitivity to possible contradictions between the preconceptions guiding the research design and actual findings (“the story which the data tell”) with subsequent cycles of revision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6. The Principle of Multiple Interpretations.</strong></td>
<td>Requires sensitivity to possible differences in interpretations among the participants as they are typically expressed in multiple narratives or stories of the same sequence of events under study. Similar to multiple witness accounts even if all tell it as they saw it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7. The Principle of Suspicion.</strong></td>
<td>Requires sensitivity to possible “biases” and systematic “distortions” in the narratives from the participants.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Evaluating Interpretive field Studies. Adapted from Klein and Myers (1999)
Klein and Myers acknowledge the criticism that in proposing a set of principles for conducting and evaluating interpretive research "we are violating the emergent nature" of the paradigm in IS research. However, they argue that the proposed set of principles "are consistent with a considerable part of the philosophical base of literature on interpretivism" and hence offer a useful insight into the interpretive research paradigm.

3.3.4 Limitations of Interpretivism in IS Research

The interpretivist research tradition has been subject to much criticism from both the positivist and the critical paradigms (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Fay, 1987; Hammersley, 1992). Whilst the positivists claim that interpretive research is biased, lacks validity and reliability, and often fails to offer generalisable theories, the critical researchers point to the failure of interpretivism to examine conditions which give rise to situations or to affect any change. It is argued that both positivism and interpretivism are reliant on a "regulation theory of society" (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) which lacks any analysis of the agents of social control which legitimise and regulate socially constructed meaning (Howcroft and Trauth, 2004). From the critical perspective, Fay (1987) quoted by Howcroft (1998) summarises the major limitations of interpretivism as a research philosophy:

1. The interpretive perspective does not examine the conditions (often external) which give rise to certain meanings and experiences.

2. There is an absence of the explanation of the unintended consequences of actions – actions which cannot be explained by reference to the intention of the humans concerned (for example the unintended consequences of reinforcing the power of members of a group over a period of time).

3. The interpretive approach does not address the structural conflict within organisations and society, and ignores the contradictions which may be endemic to social systems. This perspective cannot account for situations where participants’ accounts of their actions are inconsistent with their actual behaviour, and therefore
cannot analyse the means by which actors may be blinkered in their self understanding.

4. The interpretive perspective neglects to explain historical change; that is, how a particular social order evolved and how it is likely to change over time. This perspective "systematically ignores the possible structures of conflict within a society, structures which would generate change".

It is these limitations that have prompted an increased interest in a critical research philosophy in the field of IS (Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991). The essentially "social nature of activities associated with the development, implementation and use of IS" (Howcroft and Trauth, 2004) and the establishment belief that technology is an agent of revolution and change inevitably leads to a consideration of issues of power, control and emancipation. Issues most effectively researched through a critical lens.

The next section will consider the development and key epistemological and ontological beliefs within the critical research paradigm.

3.3.5 The Critical Approach

Kincheloe and McLaren state that it is difficult to "explain more precisely what critical theory is" (Kincheloe and McLaren, 1994) for three reasons:

1. There are many critical theories, not just one.

2. The critical tradition is always changing and evolving.

3. Critical theory attempts to avoid too much specificity, as there is room for disagreement among critical theorists. To lay out a set of fixed characteristics of the position is contrary to the desire of such theorists.
Conscious of this, the next section will attempt to offer an outline of the development of critical theory and give consideration to the general themes of this research philosophy.

The critical research paradigm generally refers to the theoretical tradition developed by the “Frankfurt School” (1920s and 1930s), a group of German-born social scientists including key founding figures such as Horkheimer (1895 – 1973), Marcuse (1898 – 1979), Adorno (1903 – 1969), Fromm (1900 – 1980), and of the second generation of critical theorists Jurgen Habermas, a student of Adorno. (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). Within this school:

“Traditional views on science were rejected, positivism was criticized and attempts were made to develop social theories that were philosophically informed and of practical political significance. Horkheimer and his colleagues confronted the neutral, objective researcher who follows specified methodological rules for acquiring knowledge about limited and testable causalities, with the independent, critical and socially and politically committed intellectual.” (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000).

Alvesson and Skoldberg go on to show how, inspired by Marx, Weber, Kant, Hegel and Freud, the members of the Frankfurt School rejected the idea of social science as a means of developing ideas about the universally accepted invariant regularities and fixed patterns in social relationships and processes. Instead they saw it as a means of clarifying the relationship between apparently given, empirical social conditions and the historical and social contexts in which they developed and evolved. They maintained that social phenomena are best understood as changeable elements in a dialectical social development. The researcher contributes to this through their approach to and discussion of the institutions under investigation. According to the Frankfurt School the social science researcher should develop an independent and critical stance towards society, its institutions and modes of thought, calling attention to contradictions in the way society functions. Critical Theory, in sociology and philosophy, is shorthand for Critical Theory of Society or Critical Social Theory (CST) (Wikipedia, 2004).
A key theme for critical theorists is the manipulation and objectification of people into passive conformists in the “machinery of society” (Alvesson, 1996). However, the belief that people are “potentially autonomous, capable of self-reflection and critical questioning” (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) is essential to the preoccupation with emancipation which is the essence of critical research. From the position of an objective (realist) ontology and a subjective epistemology, critical researchers “assume that social reality is historically constituted and that it is produced and reproduced by people” (Myers, 1997) through language, behaviour and a common belief system. Social order is dependant upon domination and suppression of rebellion. These various forms of social, cultural and political domination constrain a person’s ability to change social or economic situations, thereby preventing emancipation (the elimination of the causes of alienation and domination Myers and Avison (2002).

Arguing that Burrell and Morgan’s analysis of research paradigms favours “dominant traditions of the past”, Alvesson and Deetz draw upon consensus-dissensus theory to offer an alternative approach to highlighting the difference between research philosophies. The consensus-dissensus approach “draws attention to the relationship of research to existing social orders” and is useful in highlighting “what makes critical theory different from other research programmes”, Alvesson and Deetz (2002) argue that:

“Research perspectives can be contrasted based on the extent to which they work within a dominant set of structurings of knowledge, social relations, and identities, called here a “consensus” discourse, and the extent to which they work to disrupt these structurings called here “dissensus” discourse”

Table 8 illustrates the characteristics of consensus and dissensus approaches. Research perspectives adopting a consensus approach include the traditional, pre modern and interpretive, whilst those adopting a dissensus approach include postmodern, deconstructionist and critical theory. The key differences are summed up as:
The “mirror” metaphor gives way to that of the “lens”, noting the shifting analytical attempt to see what could not be seen before and showing the researcher as positioned and active. For dissensus-style research, the generative capacity (the ability to challenge guiding assumptions, values, social practices and routines) of an observation is more important than representational validity” (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002)

Dissensus research is in essence “anti-positive” (Knights, 1992). For researchers within the critical theory paradigm the main task is one of social critique “whereby the restrictive and alienating conditions of the status quo are brought to light” (Myers, 1997). Slaughter states that critical research:

“...requires researchers to construct their perception of the world anew, not just in random ways but in a manner that undermines what appears natural, that opens to question what appears obvious.” (Slaughter, 1989)

Further, Kinlochoe and McLaren note that rather than:

“...cling to the guardrail of neutrality, critical researchers frequently announce their partisanship in the struggle for a better world.” (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000)

The Critical Theory researcher is not satisfied with “merely increasing knowledge” (Horkheimer, 1972) but seeks some practical “transformative” effect. This will be given more detailed consideration later in this chapter (see section 3.3.7 Critical Theory in IS Research)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consensus</th>
<th>Dissensus</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Suspicion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hegemonic order as natural state</td>
<td>Conflicts over order as natural state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naturalization of present</td>
<td>Present state is historicized and politicized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration and harmony are possible</td>
<td>Order indicates domination and suppressed conflicts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research focuses on representation</td>
<td>Research focuses on challenge and reconsideration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mirror (reflecting) dominant metaphor</td>
<td>Lens (seeing / reading) dominant metaphor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validity central concern</td>
<td>Insight and praxis central concern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory as abstraction</td>
<td>Theory as opening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unified science and triangulation</td>
<td>Positional complementarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life is discovery</td>
<td>Life is struggle and creation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher is autonomous / free agent</td>
<td>Researcher is historically socially situated agent</td>
</tr>
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Table 8 Characteristics of the Consensus – Dissensus Dimension.
Adapted from Alvesson and Deetz (2002)
3.3.6 Habermasian Critical Theory

Habermas is a key figure in Critical Theory, and many researchers adopt a “Habermasian” perspective. Habermas’ work has “concentrated on building a systematic philosophy in which theory and communicative action are of pivotal importance” (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002). Habermas identifies two views of reality or “the world” constructed by two very different “historical learning processes” (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002). The first is the system world where interactions are imperatives given by the unquestioned reproduction of cultural values and norms (e.g. employer power over employees). The second is the lifeworld where interactions and patterns of meaning are created and recreated, guided by communicatively achieved understanding (Habermas, 1984).

However, communicatively achieved understanding is only possible where there is “undistorted communication” or free discussion based on “goodwill, argumentation and dialogue” (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002). Habermas argues that through undistorted communication consensus and communicative rationality can be achieved. However, there are many barriers to achieving undistorted communication including tradition, authority, power, status, fear, insecurity and misunderstanding. These barriers, or states, prevent discussion and rational argument in an open forum from taking place and prevent consensus which could lead to mutually acceptable decisions and action. Habermas (1984) proposed that “where power is present, communication is systematically distorted”, and further that through the domination of the communication space by the more powerful party undistorted, rational discussion cannot be achieved. For example, in a meeting held to discuss a change in an organisation the Managing Director and Human Resources Manager dominate the discussion leaving little time for the workers to voice their concerns. Communication is systematically distorted and consensus cannot be achieved. Habermas argues that language and the structure of communication itself do not produce any barriers to “the ideal speech situation”. However, the asymmetrical “distribution of chances to choose and to apply speech acts” (Habermas, 1984) brought about by power and status between the participants prevents the creation of the ideal speech situation.
In keeping with the key focus of critical theory, the Habermasian perspective strives for emancipation and enlightenment, arguing that this could be possible through free and undistorted communication. However, power frequently acts as "a barrier to the free and unconstrained realization of the human interest in achieving rational truth or enlightenment" (Clegg, 1989). The Habermasian approach is often criticised for its naive or "benign and benevolent view of human kind" (Vattimo, 1992), and for an overemphasis on the potential for rationality and consensus (Burrell, 1994). However, it provides the CST researcher with an invaluable insight into the role of communication in the maintenance of the status quo and the quest for emancipation and enlightenment.

3.3.7 Critical Theory in IS Research

The use of a critical theory paradigm in empirical research remains "very much in the making with no examples or strict methodologies available" (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996). Despite the socio-political nature of the implementation, use and management of information systems which lends itself well to a critical theory approach, with a few exceptions (Rosen, 1985, Rosen, 1988; Nolan, 2003; Richardson and Richardson, 2002), there is a distinct lack of critical empirical research in information systems and management research (Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991; Howcroft and Trauth, 2004).

As the literature on Critical Theory and empirical data analysis is sparse offering the researcher little guidance, it is not obvious how data analysis should be carried out within this paradigm. (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000; Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000). It is possible that the lack of critical empirical research and subsequent dearth of 'guidelines' discourages researchers from attempting such an approach. The contribution that can be made by critical researchers therefore is vast. A small number of strategies or frameworks have been proposed. Alvesson and Skoldberg suggest that:

"... a possible research strategy could be to pick out something from within a broader empirical context which throws light on the undertaking or theme in question, and which is amenable to a critical interpretation (that is, touches upon
aspects associated with the construction of reality, strongly asymmetrical relations of power, ideology, autonomy and communicative distortions) and to concentrate upon that. We could call this methodological strategy an intensive critical interpretation, or close reading” (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000).

Alvesson and Deetz propose three overlapping tasks of critical research which could be adopted as a “framework” or guide. The tasks include **insight, critique and transformative redefinition** (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002).

1. **Insight.** This task concerns the process of understanding how accepted knowledge and objective views of events and interactions are created and sustained. It explores the conditions that gave rise to the current “reality” or *status quo*. Insight allows themes which are to be empirically researched to be related to their wider context (historical, economic, cultural and political) in order to allow a greater understanding of the situation under study.

2. **Critique.** The second task is to deconstruct the *status quo* or accepted reality, it is to “counteract the dominance of taken-for-granted-goals, ideas, ideologies and discourses” (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002). Critique aims to deconstruct conventions and accepted social orders, to question passively accepted power structures and hierarchies, and expose contradictions within their fostering cultures. Alvesson and Deetz suggest that this task opens up the conversation between the researcher and the researched, a “conversation that exceeds the partialities of each other” through the constant mutual questioning of assumptions held by society and by the researcher. This has resonance with Morgan’s analogy of research as conversation (Morgan, 1983).

3. **Transformative Redefinition.** The third task is to attempt to bring about change in the light of the new knowledge created in the course of the research. This is the most difficult of the three tasks to achieve, as it is dependant upon the recognition and acceptance of new knowledge and the adoption of new practices by others acting within ingrained structures and cultures.
Alvesson and Deetz (2002) argue that these three tasks overlap, or "function together". Recognising that it may be difficult to address all three tasks and that many critical researchers focus on one, they advocate "at least a modest contribution to all three tasks" in order to avoid "totalizing" "myopia" and "hyper-critique and negativity."

Harvey (1990) offers another "framework" or guide to carrying out empirical critical theory research adopted by Nolan in his research into learning and knowledge in the small business (Nolan, 2003). Harvey proposes that Critical Theory is:

'. . . based upon a number of building blocks which, . . . should not be considered as discrete units to be placed next to one another, . . . but as elements which are drawn together in various ways in the process of 'deconstruction and reconstruction'. (Harvey, 1990)

These seven elements are abstraction, totality, essence, praxis, ideology, history and structure:

1. **Abstraction.** For Harvey, in critical theory research the task or building block of abstraction "attempts to reveal underlying structures which specify the nature of the abstract concepts, but which themselves have been assimilated uncritically into the prevailing conceptualisation" (Harvey, 1990). This is similar to Alvesson and Deetz task of insight, concerning how norms and systems become reified into an objective and unquestioned reality.

2. **Totality.** The second building block to critical theory is that social phenomena should not be studied in isolation, but within their wider social and cultural context to guard against reductionism and myopia through a micro-approach.

3. **Essence.** Essence is fundamental in the deconstructive process. It is concerned with a set of constructs that inform interactive processes and the nature of what lies beneath those constructs and interactions. For example, in this research the essence may refer not to the
day-to-day interactions and transactions of retailers and consumers, but to the power / dependency relationship and the features of communicative action present in the relationship.

4. **Praxis.** This has echoes of Alvesson and Deetz transformational redefinition. Praxis is "what changes the world", or the appraisal of the potential for change within the situation under research.

5. **Ideology.** Following a usage of the term established by Karl Marx (1818 – 1883), ideology refers to the accepted structure, hierarchies, attitudes and beliefs that shape a culture and obscure or distort the truth. This echoes both Alvesson and Deetz’s task of critique and Habermas’ theory of communicative distortion.

6. **History.** Interpretations of history reconstruct the past, and it is the role of the critical theorist not to accept taken for granted assumption about the past and how it shapes the culture and society. Nolan (2003) states that “Harvey emphasises the importance of this, not just in terms of the events but also reflexively, 'in terms of the situatedness of the researcher'”.

7. **Structure.** The seventh building block relates to the structure of a social system or society which is a holistic entity made up of interrelated and interdependent elements. The structure of the society is self regulating through a common culture and set of shared beliefs. Social research and in particular critical theory research must call this into question.

It is argued that adopting Harvey’s “building blocks” can guard against reductionism and add the “necessary rigour” (Nolan, 2003) to a research enquiry. The building blocks can also guide researchers through an empirical critical research project. However, such a detailed framework can serve to limit or constrict the researcher. For this reason, in this critical study Alvesson and Deetz framework of three tasks has been adopted to add the necessary rigour (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002).
3.3.8 Limitations of Critical Theory in IS Research

A limitation frequently leveled at critical theorist, particularly by positivists is the issue of bias in research. As an epistemological approach that openly strives to expose power and domination and seeks to bring about emancipation and enlightenment critical theory has little to defend itself from such a charge. The usual response to such a criticism is that all research is inherently biased and that "the only difference is that the critical researcher is more likely to acknowledge (or even defend) their explicit bias" (Howcroft and Trauth, 2004).

Some opponents of critical theory, and indeed some critical theorists themselves argue that the dominance of the Harbermasian approach (with its focus on communicative action) to Critical Theory in IS research is unnecessarily limiting. They call for a greater acknowledgement and inclusion of other critical theorists and approaches (Brooke, 2002; Doolin and Lowe, 2002). However, this research focuses on communication between companies and customers and so justifiably draws on Habermas’ theory.

3.4 Selecting a Research Paradigm

As Kuhn argued, “there are no independent ‘facts’ upon which to choose between paradigms” (Kuhn, 1970). The “paradigm wars” (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998) cannot be resolved by “proofs” as there is no prior agreement on the assumptions adopted. It is rather a debate between social groups who speak different languages and use different assumptions. The reflexive researcher must select the paradigm that best suits their own beliefs and assumptions about the concept or field of enquiry they are to research. Johnson and Duberley (2000) offer a matrix for mapping the various approaches to undertaking research based on ontological and epistemological assumptions (Fig. 10). This matrix could be a useful tool for researchers to identify with which philosophical approach their work aligns. The bottom right quadrant maps a domain of ontological and epistemological subjectivism. Researchers in this epistemic community (postmodernists and some conventionalists) believe that language creates rather than represents reality. This paradigm is based upon the ‘denial of the possibility of a theory-neutral observational
language' (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). For them reality is subjective and therefore multiple realities, constructed through language, exist.

Fig. 10 Epistemic Domains. Adapted from (Johnson and Duberley, 2000)

The bottom left quadrant seeks to marry objectivist ontology with subjectivist epistemology. Members of this epistemic community (Critical Researchers and Pragmatists) claim that while reality exists independently of our efforts to understand it, it is not “cognitively accessible in a neutral manner” (Gill and Johnson, 1997), rather the prior values, knowledge and theories of an observer influence what he or she sees. Similarly they would argue that assumed reality is accessible only through a theory-laden observational
language, and that “reality” is not an objective construct, but a social construction that has been reified into a form of “reality”.

The top right quadrant represents an area of ‘incoherence’. The combination of a subjectivist ontology and an objectivist epistemology results in a paradigm that is difficult to make sense of.

Within the top left quadrant lie the positivists and neo-positivists with objective ontological and objective epistemological assumptions. For researchers in this domain reality exists independently of our efforts to understand it, and can be passively observed. “Truth” can be discovered through the neutral observation of the facts of reality. This quadrant is the domain of those who seek to “measure” or quantify an assumed reality.

In mapping their beliefs about the world and how it is constructed, observed and understood onto this matrix, a researcher can begin to define which philosophical approach best fits both their beliefs and research.

3.5 Conclusion

It has been proposed that new knowledge is created through purposeful endeavour. An endeavour such as a research enquiry becomes more purposeful with an awareness of the philosophical beliefs underpinning it (e.g. for the critical enquirer the purpose is the pursuit of emancipation). In the creation of knowledge through research an awareness of the assumptions underpinning the researcher’s ‘view of the world’ is of great importance. The ontological and epistemological approaches guide the path of the research. The reflective researcher must have an awareness of this in order to appreciate the contribution and limitations of the knowledge she is claiming to contribute through the research.

Ngwenyama and Lee (1997) and Hassard (1991) illustrate the effect of adopting a different philosophical approach on a research project suggesting that opposing paradigmatic assumptions would send the research in a different direction. This chapter presents a discussion and critique of methodology and philosophical approaches to knowledge.
creation through research, and outlines the considerations in selecting a research paradigm. Following on from this, Chapter Four will outline the processes involved in the design of this study. It will discuss the fundamental issues underpinning the research, and evaluate and justify the selection and adoption of the philosophical approach (Critical Social Theory) and data gathering techniques selected for use.
Chapter 4

Study Design

Chapter four reflects on the journey taken in this research, outlining the processes involved and decisions taken in the design of the study. It reports on the process of developing the research framework and objectives. It discusses the fundamental issues underpinning the research, and evaluates and justifies the selection and adoption of the philosophical approach (Critical Social Theory) and data gathering and analysis techniques selected for use. The interest in the reflection on the process (or journey) of research is a key element in critical research. The conflicts encountered and the periods of reflection which assisted in resolving those conflicts are presented. This chapter does not aim to set up a mechanistic process to ‘test’ out a thesis or hypothesis. Instead, it aims to show how, through a process of conflict, reflection, negotiation and improvisation the research was carried out. Moreover, this chapter reflects on the challenge of reconciling CST research with the traditional linear structure of the PhD.

The design of each of the three phases of the research is outlined. Phase one compares and contrasts the views of companies and customers on eCommerce expressed in a questionnaire. Phase two gives a semiotic analysis of the websites of participating companies. Through discourse analysis three types of company or approach to eCommerce are identified (Controlling, Didactic, and Participatory). This analysis of the company / customer interface seeks to gain a deeper understanding of company approaches or ‘orientations’ towards customers through eCommerce. The intention was to illustrate if and how the company / customer dynamic is changed by this new channel of interaction. Phase three explores the customer experience in more depth through a series of twenty-two semi-structured interviews. Content and discourse analysis are used to analyse the recordings, transcripts and field notes.
The chapter concludes with a reflection on the multi-method approach to IS research, and argues that multiple methods are necessary to access the multiple voices of the stakeholders in the complex phenomena under study here.

4.1 Introduction To The Research

When this research began in October 2000 eCommerce was a new and exciting phenomenon, holding up the sceptre of the utopian view of a technological information society. The remit of this research was intentionally open to allow issues and themes to emerge as the researcher engaged with the subject through academic literature, newspapers, magazines, television programmes, commercial websites, and interaction and discussions with companies, colleagues and friends.

At that time, key issues about eCommerce in academic literature, newspapers, and television items or programmes were issues such as the importance of branding in eCommerce, logistics and delivery, security, attracting ‘eyeballs’ (Levine et al. 2000) or visitors to a site, how to convert visitors to buyers, and web site design. These issues were considered for this research, but were eventually rejected, partly on the grounds that they were already fairly well explored and established areas (branding, security, website design), Strauss and frost, 1999; Timmers, 2000; Turban et al. 2000) but mostly as they appeared to disregard the customer’s view or experience. For example commercial website design was explored from the perspective of how design could help to increase “conversion rates” (visitors to buyers), “lock customers in” to a relationship with one company (McLean and Blackie, 2002), or encourage them to give away information about themselves to assist in future marketing activities. The theory and practice of eCommerce was developing in the technologically determinist, top down (company to customer) tradition.

This realisation highlighted a contradiction in the way society was fostering the phenomenon of eCommerce. The technologically determinist approach has the “ideological function of furthering the vested interests in technical change” (Howcroft and Trauth, 2004) i.e. those of the company. However, the myth that eCommerce would bring about untold
customer benefits and ultimately consumer empowerment was both pervasive and persuasive; a largely unquestioned assumption. This inherent contradiction prompted the researcher to consider the idea of customer empowerment through eCommerce.

Much of the focus for the assertions that the internet will bring about consumer empowerment has been on the potential of the internet, and the opportunities for communication and access to information. The needs, attitudes and experiences of the consumer, whom the advocates of consumer empowerment through the internet claim it serves, have generally been neglected, if not ignored. The commonly held belief is that if information is power then through product, company and market information available over the internet, consumers must be empowered. Experiences recounted to the researcher in the preliminary stages of this research appeared to challenge that assumption. This challenge to what was increasingly becoming the status quo influenced the formation of the research objectives and methodology.

At the same time, in order to immerse herself in the situation under study and gain a deeper insight the researcher was reviewing and using commercial websites to purchase and research products. She was struck by the frequency of features such as Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) lists, review pages, discussion forums, and the occasional “Ask the Expert Facility” (www.blockbuster.co.uk, www.focusdiy.co.uk). During discussion with the research supervisor the connection between these features and the field of knowledge management (with which the researcher was already familiar) became apparent. Knowledge and the relatively new discipline of knowledge management have the issues of power and empowerment at their very core. It was at this point that the idea to construct the concept of eCommerce as knowledge management forum (see Chapter 2) emerged. A literature review (see Chapter 2) highlighted the connection between eCommerce and Knowledge Management as an emergent and important issue (Holsapple & Singh, 2000; Giga Information Group, 2001). Further, the potential for communication capabilities offered by the internet had echoes of the socialisation approach to knowledge management, which has emancipation as a core outcome, (see section 2.3.3 Socially Constructed Models)
and the research began to evolve. The following sections will discuss the role of the researcher and illustrate how this research was planned and subsequently developed.

### 4.2 The Role of the (PhD) Researcher

For the PhD researcher a unique situation is created. Their work takes place within a long and established tradition, not only the tradition of academic research itself, but the tradition of the PhD. Numerous books such as *How to get a PhD* (Phillips and Pugh, 2000) or *Authoring a PhD Thesis: How to Plan, Draft, Write and Finish a Doctoral Dissertation* (Dunleavy, 2003), Post Graduate research seminars on “Writing the Ideal PhD Thesis”, and the rows and rows of successfully completed theses in the university library contribute to the construct or shared belief of how a PhD thesis should be structured, the language it should use and the issues it should address. Working within such a tradition can lead to an unquestioning adoption of the accepted structure and language. Experimentation and innovation paralysed by the desire to produce such an “ideal type thesis” and successfully complete the PhD. The traditional structure of a thesis including chapters such as ‘literature review’, ‘data gathering’, ‘data analysis’ and ‘findings’, and the importance given to issues of reliability, validity and generalisability has grown out of the positivist approach to research, but pervades as a legacy in PhD theses from many disciplines and across the paradigms. For the Doctoral researcher who selects a different approach the task can be very daunting. The “paradigm wars” (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998) concerning assumptions and language, engage a new enemy within PhD research; that of the legacy of the academic tradition of the PhD thesis. For example, a thesis traditionally includes a section titled “Data Gathering” where the methods used to gather the data are meticulously explained and justified. However, the student who is challenging the positivist approach to research will, in their reading, encounter theories such as:

“A predominant image seems to represent research as *mushroom-picking*.... All the talk about the collection of data, the capture of data, the codification and classification of data..... expresses a naïve empirical view and stands in opposition to more reflective research ideals” (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000)
And

"The true critical theory researcher eschews the "bookkeeper mentality which is so typical of method-minded scholars" in favour of a broader view of empirical data which could include material that turns up in a variety of situations from talking to friends to newspaper advertisements or publicity brochures" (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000)

Amongst interpretive and critical researchers there is even the view that justifications of methodologies are "discussions which have been had" (Whitely, 2004) and need not be reopened in each and every research paper.

Given this, the new researcher is presented with a difficult dilemma: how to satisfy the traditional or normative view of a PhD thesis whilst researching and writing within their selected research paradigm. Section 4.2.1 Phase One: Insight (below) reflects this. Whilst attempting to describe the methodology adopted here, the researcher was aware of the conflict between the tradition of the discourse of the PhD and the developing discourse of Critical Theory research. A number of successful PhDs which adopted the Critical Social Theory approach courageously 'gloss over' or simply omit a specific section outlining the minute detail of their selected methodology (Nolan, 2003). Discussions about how the critical researcher can satisfy the requirement of a 'methodology' section in a research paper, whilst maintaining the integrity of critical research are prevalent (Howcroft and Trauth, 2004; Whitely, 2004) In fact, in the course of this work the researcher frequently experienced the tension or hostility of the "paradigm wars". The rejection of a conference paper was accompanied by a reviewer's comment that "This research is based on non-scientific, anecdotal evidence". This paper was later accepted for a journal (McLean and Blackie, 2004a). It had been reworked, but the "non-scientific, anecdotal evidence" remained and was considered 'valid' within the context of the epistemological premise of that journal.

Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) suggest that the tensions between research paradigms stem from how the role of the researcher is defined, or more specifically, the metaphor adopted
to explain that role. Traditionally, positivists see the role of the researcher as uncovering the existent and awaiting “truth” (Researcher-Discourer). Inevitably, this leads to a preoccupation with data collection and analysis, validity, reliability and generalisability. For those who see the researcher (qualitative and quantitative) as a collector or (“mushroom”) gatherer of data, to be used “to make a delicious dish that can be prepared according to the recipe book” (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) priority is given to the meticulous collection and analysis of large amounts of data. Whilst this approach facilitates the research process by setting out a clear set of guidelines and rules, it encourages a monolithic approach.

A range of metaphors for the role of the qualitative researcher which challenge the approach of meticulous adherence to strict methods of data collection and analysis in uncovering the “truth” have been proposed. The proponents of these metaphors argue that they “encourage other, more ‘interesting’ views of the research process” (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). These metaphors generally draw upon the creative arts and professions, emphasising that the researcher does not uncover some pre-existing ‘truth’, but creates and constructs a picture or theory through an interactive process. Asplund suggests that the research process can be likened to the authorship of a detective novel, formulating and resolving a mystery (Asplund, 1970). Van Maanen (1995) also suggests that “research is authorship”. Whilst Janesick (1994) likens research to dance and later extends the metaphor to suggest the researcher as a dancer and the design of the research as choreography (Janesick, 2000). Janesick uses two unrelated forms of dance to explore the metaphor, a minuet (with its “confined approach” and “prescribed set of steps”) and improvisation (which is “spontaneous and reflective” requiring the “individual dancer to interpret an idea, given a set problem or context in which to work.” (Janesick, 2000).

Denzin and Lincoln write of the “Qualitative Researcher as Bricoleur and Quilt Maker” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), arguing that during the course of a research project the researcher may “take on multiple and gendered images” from *bricoleur* (a “Jack-of-all-trades or a kind of do-it-yourself person” (Lévi-Strauss, 1966), to film or quilt maker. The essence of both Janesick and Denzin and Lincoln’s analogies is that
qualitative research is a flexible, iterative, collage freely created by the researcher, drawing upon tradition yet prepared to adopt new approaches and to *improvise*:

"The design of the study begins with some fixed movements: precise interviews are planned, observations are scheduled, documents are reviewed and analyzed. In this way the researcher is like the choreographer/dancer of the minuet. At the same time, within the parameters of the interviews, information is disclosed that allows the researcher to improvise, to find out more about some critical event or moment in the lives of the participants. So the researcher begins to use the techniques of the improvisational choreographer / dancer. Even the act of charting observations or interviews is sometimes improvisational. One interview may lead the researcher to find out that another individual may become part of the study, for one reason or another. One document may lead to many more and so on." (Janesick, 2000)

Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln suggest that:

"The qualitative researcher as *bricoleur* or maker of quilts uses the aesthetic and material tools of his or her craft, deploying whatever strategies, methods, or empirical materials are at hand (Becker, 1998). If new tools or techniques have to be invented or pieced together, then the researcher will do this. The choices as to which interpretive practices to employ are not necessarily set in advance. The “choice of research practices depends upon the questions that are asked and the questions depend on their context” (Nelson et al. 1992), what is available in the context, and what the researcher can do in that setting.” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

Flick suggests that given the innovative, flexible, reflective nature of qualitative research it is “inherently multi-method in focus” (Flick, 1998), whilst Richardson (2000) rejects the concept of triangulation in favour of “crystalisation”, each view of the situation under study
is like light hitting a crystal and reflects a different perspective of the incident (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), all of which help to create the quilt, montage, or dance of the research.

These metaphors of the role of the researcher and concepts of research design influenced the design of this work. Multiple methods were used, and the views of companies and customers sought to create a picture of the perception, adoption and use of eCommerce from the different perspectives. The following sections set out the philosophical approach and process of the design of the study.

4.3 Philosophical Approach

This research was influenced by the interest in consumer empowerment through the internet, and the frequent assertions that the internet will empower consumers. The commonly espoused belief is that if information is power then through product, company and market information available over the internet, consumers must be empowered (Pitt et al. 2002; Office of Fair Trading, 2003). The connection made in the early stages of this research between eCommerce and the socialisation approach to knowledge management (see 4.1 Introduction) appeared to support the “constellations of commonly felt meaning” (Zuboff, 1998) view or status quo that customers would be empowered through the internet. By communicating and sharing knowledge about products and services with companies and other customers over the internet the two outcomes of business benefits and customer empowerment proposed by the adapted version of McAdam and McCreedy’s (1999) model appeared to be attainable. Still, it remained the case that experiences recounted to the researcher by friends and colleagues appeared to challenge the prevalent view that the internet was empowering customers, or at least empowering the “online market”. However, in reality there is no “online market”. just as there is no “digital divide”. These divides and segments that appear to exist in some reified form are actually constructs of a long established system with ingrained power relations: economically rich / economically poor, retailer / customer, technologically advantaged / technologically disadvantaged.
The selection of the philosophical approach for this research was very much an interactive process. In the initial stages as a response to the predominant view that the internet was bringing many benefits and empowering customers an interpretivist approach was selected. It is established that CST research often starts out from an interpretivist stance (Walsham, 2001, McGrath, 2004). The researcher aimed to hold up the mirror of interpretivism and show how eCommerce was being adopted by consumers. She aimed to understand the status quo or accepted “state of affairs” (Collins, 1983); how business to customer and customer to customer communication had improved so that knowledge was shared, businesses benefited and the customer was empowered. However, the challenge to this generally accepted situation appeared to be gaining volume. Friends and colleagues recounted stories of dissatisfaction with eCommerce services. Newspapers carried more and more articles on internet fraud or lack of security. Drawing upon Janesick’s metaphor in section 4.2 (The Role of the (PhD) Researcher), it was at this point that the minuet gave way to improvisation. The researcher recognised that the work had taken an unexpected path and that the approach would require some reconsideration. As noted in section 4.2 above, Asplund suggests that the research process can be likened to the authorship of a detective novel, formulating and resolving a mystery (Asplund, 1970). At this point the mystery was formulated: The status quo was that the use of the internet in commercial activity is beneficial and empowering, yet the “broader empirical evidence” (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) such as friends’ and colleagues’ narratives and newspaper articles recounting internet fraud or simply dissatisfaction with online shopping increasingly appeared to challenge this belief, suggesting a “dissensus approach” within this research (See section 3.3.5 The Critical Approach). On reflection the researcher decided that the most effective lens or ‘magnifying glass’ to investigate this mystery would be that of Critical Social Theory. The next section outlines the reasons for and implications of this choice.

4.3.1 The Adoption of the Critical Social Theory Approach
Within Critical Social Theory research, the goal is emancipatory, aiming to challenge existing, dominant, theories or practices and attempting to bring about transformative
action. Critical Social Theory (CST) "attends to issues such as power, domination, conflict, and contradiction" (Ngwenyama and Lee, 1997). Through an iterative and reflective process, it became obvious that this research would indeed be mounting a challenge to the existing, dominant theory that eCommerce was empowering consumers, and the CST lens was adopted. The implications of this for the selection of methods to collect data or gain insight into the new relationship between customers and companies facilitated by the internet were vast. As discussed in chapter three (3.3.7 Critical Theory in IS Research) there are few examples of empirical critical theory research, few guidelines for the critical researcher to follow and even fewer dictates on what constitutes empirical data or how that data should be gathered. As Howcroft and Trauth note:

"A range of methodological issues emanate from the decision to conduct critical research. One is whether there are any methodological principles that are specific to this kind of research or whether one can simply use any methodology suitable for the study of IS in general" (Howcroft and Trauth, 2004)

Both the adoption of the Critical Theory philosophy and the practical restraints within such a small scale research project influenced the selection of methods for this research. Having explained the epistemological approach that this research took, it is fitting to consider the methods used to explore the situation under study.

4.4 Researching the Problem Situation.

The primary research or data collection was in three phases. The first phase was carried out early in the research project to assist in understanding the problem situation, or "gaining insight" (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002). Czarniawska-Joerges (1992) refers to data collection as "insight gathering", and that phrase fittingly describes the function of phase one of this research. This phase explores the attitudes and values of the key players in the field (both companies and consumers), and assists in setting out the parameters of the area of concern for in-depth exploration from the consumer perspective. As discussed above, the researcher felt that to ignore the voice of the companies would result in an incomplete picture of the
The situation under study. However, it is increasingly difficult to find companies who have the resources to take part in academic research, and this inevitably influenced the design of the study and selection of methods.

As discussed in 4.3 *Philosophical Approach* above, at this point an interpretivist approach was adopted as the research was explorative in nature. However, the approach was to change after initial insight into the problem situation was gained. On reflection, it could be suggested that the nature of Critical Theory research is essentially serendipitous. Rather than *setting out* to liberate or emancipate, the researcher generally stumbles across a situation of conflict and contradiction (i.e. the feeling of alienation amongst online customers where the *status quo* is that online customers are empowered), and then sets about deconstructing and attempting to transform that situation. This notion will be discussed more fully in the conclusions and reflection (Chapters 9 and 10).

### 4.5 Phase One: Insight

The first phase is designed to give a sense of the emergent issues or insight into eCommerce for both companies and consumers. It explores reasons for eCommerce take up by customers and companies across seven eCommerce facilities ranging from transactional to relational facilities as follows:

1. Communicating With Consumers
2. Making Sales
3. Marketing Activities
4. Links to Related Websites
5. Providing Information on the Company
6. Hosting an Online Community
7. Links to Consumer Reviews

These facets were selected following a review of the literature on eCommerce, conversations with friends and colleagues who use commercial websites, and the
The researcher also drew on the theory of socially constructed knowledge management (Demarest, 1997; McAdam and McCreedy, 1999) in defining the seven facets, ensuring that facilities that enable both high and low levels of interaction from company to consumer, consumer to company, and consumer to consumer were included.

It is acknowledged by the researcher that a subjective approach was taken in the selection of the seven features or facets of eCommerce for inclusion in this research. Theories and issues in academic and popular literature, and discussions with colleagues and friends were drawn upon in compiling the list. As Alvesson and Deetz (2002) quip, "the old objective / subjective fight could be had", and indeed is given detailed consideration in Chapter 3 Knowledge Creation Through Research. It is important to make explicit the fact that the researcher's own interests, interpretations and biases, inevitably influenced the design of the study. Alvesson and Deetz state that:

"Something called subjectivity could be demonstrated in all research programmes. For example, studies of management are partly a result of cultural tradition and of 'subjective' interests, values, and pre-structured understandings. One's own life history, belongingness to a specific research community, and everyday experience inform how one thinks and acts in relationship to the subject matter. These have an impact on the questions asked, the language used and, by implication, the results produced." (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002)

In acknowledging this, the researcher does not present "a false image of objectivity" (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002). This is in keeping with the Critical Social Theorist's belief that "they cannot be mere observers. CST researchers believe that by their very presence they influence, and are influenced by, the social and technological systems they are studying." (Ngwenyama and Lee, 1997). To 'objectively' select a list of eCommerce features to explore for significance with customers and companies would not be possible.
In phase one, insight was gathered from both literature, companies and customers to attempt to understand the situation under study. A purist positivist approach would dictate that the participants used should be a probability sample taken objectively and without bias, whereas Critical Theory researchers "employ theoretical or purposive, and not random sampling models." (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). In keeping with the Critical Theory approach adopted here, the purpose of this research is not to enable generalisation from sample to population, but to uncover emerging and transferable theories. Robson states that,

"The principle of selection in purposive sampling is the researcher's judgement as to typicality or interest. A sample is built up which enables the researcher to satisfy her specific needs in a project" (Robson, 1993)

Insight was sought from employees closely connected with the eCommerce function of the company. The aim of this phase of the research was to explore whether customer and company aspirations and expectations (and so provision and use of the internet) were aligned or in conflict. It was designed to give insight into the viewpoints of two key stakeholders in eCommerce. The next two sections will outline the methods and processes involved in gaining this insight.

4.5.1 Insight From Companies

The researcher considered it important to explore the 'minds' and processes of companies involved in eCommerce in order to gain insight into the situation under study and to create a holistic critique. However, it proved difficult to find companies with the time and resources to commit to the project. This is an increasing problem for academic researchers attempting to gain access to both private and public companies. Sprigg et al noted that in their research into call centres for the Health and Safety Executive:

"This process of access negotiation with multiple organisations took many months. In one instance we had been steadily negotiating access with a major
organisation for a period of over eighteen months, only to have the access fall through at the ‘zero hour’" (Sprigg et al., 2003)

The PhD researcher with a limited amount of time to complete a research project is not able to spend so many months negotiating access, and so other methods of access must be sought if the companies’ perspective is not to be ignored.

The companies who participated in the research are all retailers that appear in *British Companies: Best of British Shopping High Street Stores* listings (British Companies, 1999). The list comprises one hundred and six companies. Eleven of these were excluded as they were considered to be service industries rather than retail companies (six banks, two travel agencies, two bookmakers, and one mail delivery company). A further six companies were excluded as their primary function was not considered to be retail (two portals to retail companies, one record label, two charities). Two other companies were not registered in the UK, or their websites were produced and maintained outside of the UK thereby excluding them. The final group of companies comprised eighty eight UK based retail companies. All the companies were ‘well known’ high street names with established websites.

Initially, the researcher began to contact the companies by telephone and email to request their participation in the research. It proved incredibly difficult to secure time with a relevant member of the company to carry out an interview, many suggesting that it would be more practical and desireable for them to participate by questionnaire. For this reason it was decided that postal questionnaires would be used to gather data from companies. A criticism traditionally levelled at postal questionnaires is the generally poor response rate and the reduced depth of information likely to be gathered (Moser and Kalton 1971; Berger, 2000). The response to this has been the increasing adoption of closed questions or Likert scale questionnaires which are quick to complete but may bring only superficial data (Foddy 1994; Hussey and Hussey 1997; Foddy, 1994). In this phase of the study Likert scales were triangulated (Todd, 1979) with more open ended questions. Further, it is recognised that the response rate to postal questionnaires is generally low, particularly in Business research. Berger notes that:
"Business researchers are finding it harder and harder to get 50% response rates... companies are beginning to discourage employees from spending their time responding." (Berger, 2000)

Common or acceptable mail response rates are frequently cited as between 25% to 35%. In this research project the response rate was 36%, and therefore considered acceptable. However, for CST researchers who draw on “wider empirical evidence” (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) sample size and response rates are not a key concern. The stance taken to the interpretation and use of the evidence is of greater relevance.

The postal questionnaire was used to ‘collect data’ from eighty eight UK based retail companies. The questionnaire was addressed to the ‘e-Commerce Manager’, and asked companies to rate the importance, from extremely important to not at all important, of the seven facets of eCommerce outlined above, and to give reasons for their adoption of eCommerce, and ways of assessing the success of their eCommerce facility (See appendix 1 for company questionnaire).

The data collection approach and the quality, or depth, of subsequent data has resonance with the format and quality of customer to company exchanges. This will be given more detailed consideration in Section 4.9 Using Multiple Methods to Explore Multiple Perspectives.

4.5.2 Insight From Customers

In order to gain insight from consumers for this phase of the research similar questionnaires were distributed. This enabled a level of ‘comparison’, or seeing the same phenomena from a different viewpoint (Vickers, 1970). To ensure consideration of stable usage patterns the group of participants was made up of consumers who are experienced internet users and have engaged in commercial activity (transaction, product / company research) on the internet for at least two years. The participants were recruited through mailbox postings at two universities in the North West of England. Participants were professional staff such as
lecturers, researchers, professors, information professionals, administrative workers and students. The questionnaire asked consumers to rate the importance of the same seven features of eCommerce, adapted to take a consumer viewpoint (communicating with companies, making purchases, receiving marketing messages, links to related websites, access to information on the company, access to an online community, and links to consumer reviews), and to give any further information about their experiences of eCommerce. They were also asked to state whether they would be willing to participate further in the research, by giving an interview. (See appendix 2 for customer questionnaire)

4.5.3 Insight Overview

The results of the self-evaluation of companies’ eCommerce propositions and the values they place on the facets of eCommerce were contrasted with customer values and expectations to determine divergence, alignment and conflict. This insight shaped the research framework and objectives. It also informed the second phase of the research (Insight / Critique); a semiotic analysis of the websites through which the actors in this research meet and communicate, and a more in-depth exploration of customers’ experiences of interacting with companies through the internet.

4.6 Developing a Research Framework and Objectives

The inadequacies of the linear, text based PhD thesis begin to emerge here. It was on the analysis on the questionnaires that greater insight was gained into the situation under study. Ideally this analysis should be presented here in order to show the evolving journey that the researcher took. However, the traditional approach in a PhD thesis is to outline the design of the entire research project before offering any analysis. The researcher will attempt to conform to the expected format here, but with a sense of the “implied reader” (Barthes, 1990), or ‘sense of audience’ will attempt to point out where this format is not ideal and could hamper understanding. However, as Giddens argues, no matter how hard one works at maintaining an acute sense of audience, unanticipated and unintended consequences are
inevitable (Giddens, 1993). It is hoped that the researcher’s sense of audience here will elucidate by minimising unanticipated and unintended consequences for the reader.

Phase one of this research highlighted a conflict or *dissonance* in the viewpoints of customers and companies. The eCommerce features they claimed to value did not align. This insight along with the anecdotes and news stories which suggested a less than ‘empowering’ phenomena led to the development of the research framework. From this deeper insight into the views of the actors in this socio-technical phenomenon (eCommerce) the problem situation emerges. The problem situation in this research can be defined as:

1. Consumers use the internet to communicate and research rather than to buy. Participating retail companies have wrongly perceived the potential of the internet for business.

2. Knowledge about products, companies and services is important to consumers, yet due to the misalignment in (1) companies do not provide this, or provide it in the wrong format.

3. Through improved access to information and knowledge the internet is expected to bring about consumer empowerment. However, due to the misappropriation of the internet into commercial activity (and the pre-existing power relations), businesses fail to capture the communication capabilities and so consumer empowerment and business benefits are limited.

Through this research framework, the research objectives began to evolve and can be defined as:

1. To investigate how consumers use the internet in commercial activity.
2. To critically evaluate the assumption that consumers are empowered by the internet (to debunk or expose the myth that customers are empowered by the internet)

3. To make recommendations for eCommerce to customers, companies and government policy makers (Transformative Redefinition).

4. To further the use of the Critical Social Theory approach in empirical research.

5. To employ and reflect upon a multi-method approach to research.

In summary, this research began as an interpretivist study. Having gained a deeper insight into the situation the researcher discovered a myth to expose. The researcher's ambitions then shifted to the development of a Critical Theory of eCommerce, devising a set of activities to explore the extent to which this myth was an unchallenged part of the "constellations of commonly felt meaning" (Zuboff, 1998) that characterises eCommerce companies and customers. Those activities are outlined below.

4.7 Phase Two: Website Analysis. Insight / Critique

This phase in the research is designed to investigate the interface between companies and customers in eCommerce. Informed by the insight gained in phase one of this research, it was decided that the actual provision of eCommerce needed further exploration. In this exploration the researcher made use of semiotic analysis. Semiotic analysis incorporates discourse analysis and content analysis and facilitates both insight into, and critique of, the implied relationship between the actors involved. Semiotics is particularly appropriate as a method of analysis here as it is in keeping with both the construction and perpetuation of myth (Barthes, 1973), and with the CST research paradigm (Cobley and Jansz, 1997)
As discussed in Chapter 1 Introduction, CST research involves the gathering and interpretation of data simultaneously. Semiotic analysis is well suited to such an approach. In a traditional linear style PhD the method and tool of analysis would be explained in great detail here. However, in this case that would necessitate the repetition of much of the discussion in Chapter 6 Provision of e-Commerce: A Semiotic Analysis. For this reason, a discussion of semiotics as a method of analysis will be followed by a simple overview of the process carried out in this research. The reader is directed to Chapter 6 for a more detailed account of the semiotic analysis of the participating companies' websites.

4.7.1 Overview of Semiotics

Semiotics, a branch of linguistics, is “the study of signs” (Abercrombie et al. 2000), or the “study of the functioning of sign systems” (Cobley and Jansz, 1997). More specifically, “it is the discipline which connects meaning, meaning making, communication and culture through an understanding of acts of signification” (French, 2002). In semiotics, a sign is understood to be “an object or entity that carries information” (Schwandt, 2001), for example a word, gesture, or picture.

There are many semiotic discourses and traditions, the most renowned being those of Peirce (1839-1914), and Saussure (1857-1913). However, the establishment of a discipline of semiotics is generally attributed to Saussure:

“A science that studies the life of signs within sociology is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it semiology (from the Greek semeion 'sign'). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. Since the science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence.”

(Saussure, 1965)

For Saussure, language is a system of signs, and the starting point for the analysis of this system (or semiotics) is the distinction between the signifier (word) and the signified.
(concept) (e.g. the sound image ‘dog’ and the concept ‘dog’). Our familiarity with language perpetuates the idea that the signifier and the signified are inextricably linked. “We feel as if dog is a label for something which exists unproblematically, in some ultimate and incontestable way” (Belsey, 1980). It appears to us that words stand for pre-existing concepts. Saussurian semiology contests this, proposing that the nature of the bond between the signified and the signifier is arbitrary. To illustrate this he points to the “different division of the chain of meaning in different languages” (Saussure, 1965), giving the example of the single French word ‘mouton’ and the English differentiation between ‘mutton’ that we eat and ‘sheep’. Culler offers another example, the distinction between ‘river’ and ‘stream’ in English based on size alone, and the French distinction ‘fleuve’ and ‘riviere’ based upon whether or not it flows into the sea (Culler, 1981). For Saussure, language forms a system of differences. Each sign (made up of signifier and signified) holds meaning as a consequence of its difference from other signs, and through agreed rules and established conventions a “speech” or “linguistic” community which understands the code or discourse is created. Saussurian theory emphasis the distinction of langue (a system of differences between signs), and parole (individual acts of speech). This approach focuses on a pre-existing set of signs, or “a cupboard, housing all the possible different signs which might be pulled out and utilized” (Cobley and Jansz, 1997).

Other traditions of semiology build upon Saussure’s theory but challenge certain aspects of it. Post-structuralists, such as Benvenista (1902-76) challenge the focus on the arbitrariness of the link between the signified and the signifier, arguing that “the connection is learned at such an early age by sign users that virtually no separation between the two is ever experienced” (Cobley and Jansz, 1997). Lacan’s (1977) renowned example illustrates this point. He shows two identical public toilet doors one with ‘Ladies’ and one with ‘Gentlemen’ written above. A pre-existent understanding of Western culture enables an individual to form a conception of what lies beyond, and so to observe the established cultural law.

This example highlights a corner stone of semiotics; that signs and language are “social facts”. Only a social group can generate meaningful signs. The tradition of social semiotics
(Halliday, 1978; Eco, 1976), often used in analysis of media and literature, focuses on this. For Halliday, the *langue* / *parole* split is not so clearly defined. He “restates the importance of acts of speech”, arguing that:

“It is here, between speaker and hearer that language is generated, and the social context actually appears within the utterance rather than existing externally in a system” (Cobley and Jansz, 1997)

Inherent in the internet is not only the communicative function (awareness of addressee / addressee) (Jakobson and Halle, 1956), which is a recognised element of semiotic analysis of genre such as literature and advertising (both print and broadcast), but a previously unheard of potential for *interactivity*. Given this, the focus of semiotics in eCommerce should shift to the social semiotics derived from the work of Halliday (1978), (quoted in Cobley and Jansz, 1997).

Through its focus on shared meaning within a speech community, semiotics is often used as a method of analysis in research which focuses on any form (verbal or non verbal) of communication. It is the ability to bridge and unite opposing perspectives, disciplines, domains and discourses that has lead to the adoption of semiotic theories by not only researchers, but representatives of a wide range of fields (advertising, mathematics, computer science, education). The mediated understanding allows signs to be used effectively to evoke a certain feeling or set of values in a reader.

Through semiotic analysis of commercial websites which provide the “text” or interface between companies and customers an understanding of the implied relationship between the company and the customer, and its cultural context can be achieved. Semiotic analysis “goes beyond the immediate impact of a sign to ask questions about the wider meanings and social functions of sign systems” (Abercrombie et al. 2000), and so offers a suitable mode of analysis for the context of electronic commerce which combines a range of signs including pictures, words, and even hypertext links.
Semiotics is primarily concerned with the meaning of signs and symbols in communication. It has frequently been used as a method of analysis of multi-media artefacts such as print and broadcast advertisements, and film, but also in the analysis of "text" in the field of literary criticism, or interview transcripts in social science research. Interestingly, the etymological root of the word "text" is texere, to weave (Holland, 1980), and so consideration of internet websites as text is surprisingly in keeping with the discourse of creating or weaving an artefact. The essential idea in semiotic analysis is that words/signs can be assigned to primary conceptual categories, and these categories represent important aspects of the phenomena under study. For example, on a gambling website (e.g. http://www.national-lottery.co.uk), pictures from well known games such as snakes and ladders may be used. The shared meaning or discourse here is of childhood games with the inherent associations of family values, fun, and innocence, a world away from the 'reality' of gambling (for further discussion see Bull and McLean, 2005). A semiotic analysis would explore the "intention" of the company and the impact of the selection of symbols from such a discourse on the site user. The potential for interactivity and construction of an individual personal text through the use of hypertext links resonates with the theories of social semiotics and discourse analysis where meaning is negotiated through interaction between the author and reader. Drawing upon previous knowledge, or prior recognition of signs and symbols the user constructs their own experience of a website. However, through the selection of well recognised symbols rooted in specific discourses the company can influence the experience and value associations invoked in the user. Through the recognition and interpretation of those symbols meaning can be created. This is precisely what phase two of the research aims to investigate.

4.7.2 Semiotic Analysis of Participants' websites

In order to structure the analysis of the websites of the participating companies a coding sheet of website features was constructed (see Chapter 6 Provision of eCommerce: A Semiotic Analysis. Figure 15, page 151). The features were selected following a review of actual websites and of eCommerce literature discussing common features. As this is a study concerned with the interactions of the actors in eCommerce (companies and customers) the
focus was on the level to which features facilitated communication and social interaction. The bottom of the coding sheet included features of low interaction (e.g. company history), whilst the top of the sheet included features of high interaction (e.g. chat facilities). A coding sheet was marked up based on the content of each website. Following this content analysis, the companies were divided into three “ideal types” (Ulrich, 2001; Nolan, 2003), Contollers, Didactics and Participants. A discourse analysis was then carried out on each group of companies with the aim of gaining deeper understanding of their approach or “orientation” (Lemke, 2002) to their online customers (see Chapter 6 Provision of eCommerce: A Semiotic Analysis for further discussion of this phase). The intention was to illustrate if and how, the company / customer dynamic is changed by eCommerce, if a new and empowering interaction is facilitated through electronic interaction.

4.8 Phase Three: The Customer Experience.

The third phase in the research explores customer’s experiences of eCommerce. In explorative research, it is important to survey relevant groups with ‘high experience levels of the phenomena under study’ (Pettigrew, 1990). This research focuses on the individual experiences of those who have used the internet in commercially related activity. Interpretive researchers employ theoretical or purposive sampling to ensure participants have a high level of experience of the phenomena to be researched. Direct postings of questionnaires within two Universities in the North-West of England were initially used to contact consumers. Snowball sampling (Robson, 1993) or the encounter strategy based on principles of snowballing (Arber, 1993), (asking respondents to suggest other possible participants) was then adopted to build up the number of participants. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with twenty-two participants, each one lasting between thirty and sixty minutes (see Fig 11 for illustrative questions and theme domains and appendix 3 for the interview schedule). Interviews were recorded with the permission of the participant, and verbatim transcripts were produced from the recordings. In analysis, the researcher made use of transcripts, recordings and field notes. Initial analysis made use of pattern coding and theme analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This method of analysis is an iterative process involving data collection and analysis simultaneously, complimenting
the reflexive approach adopted in critical research. Opportunities for reflection (a key part of critical research) are almost ‘built in’ as the data generation and data analysis phases overlap and interweave. In this method of analysis, theory-laden language and the researcher’s subjective interpretation is acknowledged. According to the Critical Theory paradigm all research is value-laden as the researcher makes subjective choices in methods of data collection and analysis. The researcher’s own experience and interests will have a role in informing the study. The grounded theory approach, which bears many similarities to pattern coding and theme analysis, actively recognises the positive contribution and insight that the researcher’s own experiences can bring (Hughes and Howcroft, 2000). Similarly, Woodruffe argues that in consumer research “if humanly possible the interviewer must be subjective” and that “it has been demonstrated that new kinds of approach to consumer research mean that the personal, the subjective and the experiential are not only acceptable but essential.” (Woodruffe, 1996).

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<th>Domains</th>
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<td>*What does the Internet represent to you?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Has any area of your life changed as an effect of the Internet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researching Products</td>
<td>*Tell me about your experiences of researching products on the Internet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Do you feel that you can learn more about a product on the Internet than through other channels?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buying Products</td>
<td>*Tell me about your experiences of buying products on the Internet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>*Tell me about your experiences of communicating with other consumers through the Internet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Tell me about your experiences of communicating with companies through the Internet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*How do you feel about companies contacting you through the Internet?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge Management</td>
<td>*Tell me about your experiences of communicating with other consumers through the Internet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Tell me about your experiences of communicating with companies through the Internet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Have you published your own reviews / opinions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Do you feel you have access to a range of perspectives through the Internet?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>*Where would you look to find out about a product through the Internet?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*How far would you say the Internet empowers you as a consumer?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 11 Illustrative Questions and Theme Domains.
In explorative research an in-depth understanding of the experiences, beliefs and opinions of participants is essential. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher flexibility to explore interesting lines of enquiry throughout an interview. It also allows the participant the time and space to tell their own story. This method of data collection was considered most appropriate, and has contributed to the emergence and development of the theme of consumer empowerment through the internet that became a central theme of this PhD research.

4.9 Using Multiple Methods to Explore Multiple Perspectives

This research is a discourse of eCommerce. It seeks to explore the negotiation of the discourse between companies and customers as eCommerce develops, and to give customers a more powerful voice. Looking beyond the rhetoric of the determinist myth that eCommerce brings about consumer empowerment the research exposes the 'reality' beneath. In proposing ways in which the internet could be used to give consumers more power, and in the critical tradition, it aims to emancipate the customer.

Significantly it was the "broader empirical evidence" (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002), the voices of friends and colleagues, and the researcher's own experiences, or "anecdotal" evidence, which helped to formulate the aim of the research (to debunk the myth of consumer empowerment through eCommerce). In a purely positivist approach preoccupied with generalisability, reliability, validity and sample size this "evidence" would not have been heard, and the research would have continued with a consensus approach attempting to confirm that eCommerce is indeed empowering customers. A Critical Social Theory (CST) approach permits all voices to be heard. In fact it actively promotes the use of "data" ("wider empirical evidence" Alvesson and Deetz, 2002) from any source in its pursuit of emancipation.

Given the enormity of this research subject (eCommerce), and the vast range of experiences from so many different perspectives it is essential to acknowledge and take into account the different voices involved in the eCommerce dialogue, those of the academics, government
agencies, practitioners, company representatives, popular media, and customers. It is also important to recognise the effect of the researcher’s voice, the “narrative ‘I’” (Eco, 1981, Belsey, 1980) who is subjectively recounting this vast range of experiences. In the critical or dissensus approach to research the researcher is “named and positioned”, and is “a historically and socially positioned agent” (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002), influenced by research traditions and her own experiences.

In keeping with Denzin and Lincoln’s suggestion that the researcher takes on “multiple and gendered images” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), it is fitting that the research mirrors these different voices in its design or methodology. Flick suggests that given the innovative, flexible, reflective nature of qualitative research it is “inherently multi-method in focus” (Flick, 1998), whilst Richardson rejects the concept of triangulation in favour of “crystalisation” (Richardson, 2000), each view of the situation under study is like light hitting a crystal and reflects a different perspective of the incident (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), all of which help to create the quilt, montage, or dance of the research.

Drawing upon the root metaphor of researcher as “author of detective novel” (Asplund, 1970), formulating and attempting to resolve a mystery through the consideration of many different perspectives, multiple methods were used in this research. The views of academics, practitioners, customers and wider society were sought to create a picture or hologram of the perception, adoption and use of eCommerce from multiple perspectives. For Bakhtin, “integral positions” or multiple views of the same situation can be articulated through voices, and in the search for meaning he argues that we require a sense of awareness of the ‘others’ word:

“...through the layering of meaning upon meaning, voice upon voice, strengthening through merging, the combination of many voices (a corridor of voices) that augments understanding, departure beyond the limits of the understood.” (Bakhtin, 1986).

Multiple methods are required to access the multiple voices. Morgan argues that the critical research perspective “calls for the use of various interpretive research methodologies to
analyse the social construction of power relationships, together with more structural modes of analysis to reveal the nature of the social, political and economic contexts within which such activities are set”. He proposes that “The distinctive nature of the (critical) research strategy in practice stems from the critical stance from which such techniques are used” (Morgan, 1983) Not content to merely “understand” a phenomenon, critical theory aims to deconstruct and critique the systems that led to the phenomena or situation under study.

For critical theorists then, the approach to the analysis of the data is more imperative than the method of collection. To look beyond the obvious and question general assumptions in a bid to reconstruct a situation or phenomena and bring about emancipation requires a dialogue or iterative process of data collection and analysis. This can be achieved through multi-method research which facilitates the investigation of a phenomenon from many different viewpoints, or through many different voices. This research draws heavily upon Alvesson and Deetz three overlapping tasks of critical research (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002) outlined in detail in Chapter 3 (Section 3.3.7 Critical Theory in IS Research). It could be argued that each task gives voice to a different viewpoint, and therefore may require a different method of research. To complete these three tasks, each serving a different function, or telling the story through a different set of voices a multi-method approach is essential. Alvesson and Deetz’ framework is used as a ‘lens’ to synthesise and review the process and findings of this research (see Fig.12). The three tasks are used as an evaluation tool (in Chapter 9 Conclusions) to illustrate how the research has both met its objectives, and made “at least a modest contribution to all three tasks” in order to avoid “totalizing” “myopia” and “hyper-critique and negativity” (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002).

Alvesson and Willmott (1992) draw attention to the fact that Critical Social Theory has always encouraged the creative borrowing of ideas from different schools of theory and practice. The common thread is usually the emancipatory interest rather than the detailed following of any one particular theorist. As a result, there are few examples of empirical Critical Social Theory research, few guidelines for the critical researcher to follow and even fewer dictates on what constitutes empirical data or how that data should be gathered.
According to Avison and Fitzgerald (1995) a wide range of methods are appropriate for the study of IS including conceptual study, mathematical modelling, laboratory experiment, field experiment, surveys, case studies, phenomenological research, hermeneutics and action research. As proposed above, for critical research the stance taken to the data, or the interpretation is more central than the method of collection.

Figure 12. The Voices in this research mapped to method and Critical Theory framework (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002); the lens through which the phenomenon is investigated and the results synthesized.
Therefore, if the researcher remains actively engaged and questioning in the analysis, the IS research method or methods most appropriate to the study should be selected. Similarly, if a research phenomenon is one with a range of perspectives, then the method most appropriate to accessing that perspective should be utilised.

Interestingly, in his work on the multi-view methodology Wood-Harper quoting Vickers states that:

"The field of Information Systems Methodology is composite because it is made up of views seen from different perspectives. Each view selects its own relevant facts in relation to its own values. As Vickers (1970) says:

"Each view needs to be described from its viewpoint, sometimes in its own language – just as a sociologist, a rioter, a bystander, and a policeman need to give the different accounts of the “same” riot…. But the differences between them are due not only to ignorance and error but to a difference in viewpoint which, by making different facts and values relevant causes ... the resulting accounts to be neither conflicting nor cumulative but complementary." (Vickers, 1970)

We agree with Vickers’ exposition except that sometimes the views could be conflicting” (Wood-Harper, 1985)

It is precisely this ‘conflict’ that critical research focuses on, eschewing the belief that order and consensus are natural and normal states. This account of multi-view suggests that exploring each viewpoint through appropriate methods facilitates the researcher’s awareness of conflict and opens up the critical dialogue.

Both the adoption of the Critical Social Theory philosophy and the practical restraints within such a small scale research project influenced the selection of methods for this research. The researcher considered it important to explore the ‘minds’, processes and experiences of all voices involved in the eCommerce dialogue in order to gain insight into the situation under study and to create a holistic critique. Accessing these different perspectives within different contexts, traditions and constraints (or discourses) required
different approaches. The methods used to engage with each discourse and each of Alvesson and Deetz (2002) tasks are outlined in the next section.

1. Insight: To gain insight into the situation a literature review was carried out. This is a traditional method of “understanding” the phenomena under study, but in critical research it takes on a new relevance, allowing the researcher to understand how the historical and social context of the phenomena under study arose. Here the voice of the academic / historian / government agency is heard. In this case literature from the disciplines of consumer studies (to understand the consumer / producer dichotomy), socio-technology (to understand the myths surrounding technology) and information and knowledge management (to understand the information provider / user dichotomy) were explored.

Simultaneously, in order to gain insight into the degree of congruence between internet-based business information provision and consumer needs and to assess how congruence is connected to extant power relations, a method enabling direct comparison of the company and customer voices was sought. However, it proved difficult to find companies with the time and resources to commit to the project. Feedback from companies approached suggested that they would respond to a questionnaire, but could not spare the time involved to give interviews. This echoes the level of interaction that companies frequently afford to customers. A written response to a questionnaire using language from a corporate script (pre-planned and lacking in spontaneity) fits with the companies’ established discourse and method of communication (written not verbal, pre-planned not spontaneous). Two companies did agree to give interviews, but insisted on having the questions in advance to “plan” responses. An example of such a response from a corporate discourse is given below:

“In today's competitive business environment it would be unwise not to have an internet presence. We use the internet in many respects, not least to answer many of the questions that consumers such as yourself pose to us. In addition to just our website, consumers can take advantage of our Sainsbury's To You
direct delivery service. Indeed, some 25,000 customers have used the service to date every week, and the service is expanding.” (Davis, 2001)

On reflection, the researcher considered that the company view should be described “from its viewpoint... in its own language” (Vickers, 1970), and that a written questionnaire would fit with such a discourse. Questionnaires are often quoted as a method linked with the functionalist perspective (Silverman, 1998) which:

“...is concerned with providing explanations of the status quo, social order, social integration, consensus, need satisfaction, and rational choice. It seeks to explain how the individual elements of a social system interact together to form an integrated whole” (Hirschheim and Klein, 1994)

A questionnaire was used to collect data to gain insight into the phenomena under study (eCommerce and the interactions between companies and customers). This is an example of Critical Social Theory research borrowing from other paradigms in a bid to gain insight from the perspective of those who accord to the consensus approach and perpetuate the status quo.

The questionnaire included Likert scale questions on how much the company valued particular aspects of eCommerce, and some open questions concerning the company’s motivations for adoption. An analysis of this data will be given in chapter 5, and can be found in (McLean and Blackie, 2004a).

Through the literature and the views of the companies (the most powerful voice in the dialogue), some insight was gained into how the current situation came about. This phase gave insight into how the myth that eCommerce would bring about a power shift across the entire producer / consumer relationship was constructed and perpetuated.

2. Critique: In order to facilitate a direct comparison of the companies’ and customer’s viewpoint the same likert scale questionnaire, again with some open questions relating to
usage of the internet in retail was adapted and sent out to customers. The questionnaire was also used to identify customers with relevant levels of experience of eCommerce who would be willing to be interviewed. Initial analysis showed incongruence between the features that the companies valued and the features that the customers valued (see Chapter 5, *Understanding eCommerce from a company and customer perspective*), indicating some conflict in the two viewpoints of experiences.

Semi-structured interviews allowed participating customers to tell of their experiences in their own words. The researcher, who significantly, now became ‘the interviewer’, had only six pre-planned questions which were only used as prompts to guide the dialogue when necessary. Some theme (or content) analysis of the twenty-two interview transcripts was carried out. Themes were intentionally general to avoid distilling the pluralism or multiplicity of voices within the interviews, and some semiotic (discourse) analysis was used to analyse the participants’ stories.

Similarly, and again to facilitate a comparison, semiotic (discourse) analysis of the websites of companies who returned questionnaires was conducted. The website is the text through which the companies address customers in the eCommerce dialogue, and analysis of the voice of addresser and implied addressee gave valuable data which can be contrasted with the discourses of the customers’ stories.

Along with anecdotes recounted to the researcher, and increasingly dissenting stories in the popular media, the analysis showed a conflict of interests and served to debunk the myth that the internet empowers customers (McLean and Blackie, 2004a). The eCommerce dialogue appears to be developing between consumers (C2C), while companies continue to communicate through a pre-written, corporate script that ensures that they maintain the power in the producer / consumer relationship.

3. **Transformative Redefinition**: This is the most difficult stage of critical theory to achieve. In this phase the researcher’s voice is the most prevalent. The researcher attempts to synthesise and reflect on the interpretation of the data and on the research process. She
attempts to disseminate the new knowledge constructed in the course of the research in an attempt to bring about change in the phenomenon under study and in research practices. It is difficult to achieve transformative redefinition in established systems such as the producer / consumer relationship of the capitalist economy through the publication of research results. However, it is hoped that through publication in academic journals, attendance at conferences and discussion with members of the interpretative community (Fish, 1980) of researchers generally, and more specifically Critical Social Theorists, challenges can be mounted to the established order of research practices.

In a reflection on this research process parallel themes (power imbalances and distorted communication) in the subject matter and the research process emerged. The interest in the reflection on the process (or journey) of research is a key element in critical research. This research was carried out through a process of conflict, reflection, negotiation and improvisation where ideas, assumptions and even objectives were reconsidered and adapted (McGrath, 2004). A method not usually associated with the interpretive or critical research traditions was employed as the established order of research paradigms and methods was challenged.

Significantly, major companies who fail to engage with independent or “academic” researchers often participate in research carried out by major corporate consultancies. If researchers resign themselves to an inertia brought on by the inability to gain unrestricted access to organisations to carry out action research, observations, and in depth interviews we will be left with one homogenous organisational voice distilled and presented in the discourse of corporate consultancy reports. If, however some insight into the practitioner’s voice can be gleaned through less immersive research methods the critical researcher should be prepared to adopt such methods in the pursuit of wider empirical data to inform the quest for emancipation. Power frequently acts as “a barrier to the free and unconstrained realization of the human interest in achieving rational truth or enlightenment” (Clegg, 1989), in this case an enlightened approach to research design.
Insight

Habermas argues that through undistorted communication consensus and communicative rationality can be achieved (Habermas, 1984). However, there are many barriers to achieving undistorted communication including tradition, authority, power, status, fear, insecurity and misunderstanding. These barriers, or states, prevent discussion and rational argument in an open forum from taking place, and prevent consensus which could lead to mutually acceptable decisions and action, or emancipation. Further, he proposed that through the domination of the communication space by the more powerful party undistorted, rational discussion cannot be achieved, and power and control persist. Lincoln and Guba note that in research methodology:

“Let us be very clear: The issue of control is deeply embedded in the questions of voice, reflexivity, and issues of postmodern textual representation ... but only for new paradigm inquirers. For more conventional inquirers, the issue of control is effectively walled off from voice, reflectivity, and issues of textual representation, because each of those issues in some way threatens claims to rigor.” (Lincoln and Guba, 2000)

As Critical Social Theory researchers it is our duty to shake off control, use our voice, reflect, and question the established combinations of research paradigms and methods and to bring about “transformative redefinition” (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002) wherever appropriate.

4.9 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has presented the philosophical approach and methods adopted in this research. Further, it aimed to present the problems facing the PhD researcher generally in challenging the traditional PhD discourse and in particular in adopting a CST approach. These issues will be explored more fully in Chapter 10 Reflection and Future Research. The next chapter will present the “findings” or insight gathered in phase one of the research (insight), setting out the societal context for phase two (critique) which explores the consumer experience of using the internet in greater depth.
Chapter 5

Understanding eCommerce from a Company and Customer Perspective

This chapter will present the findings of phase one of the research. In order to determine divergence (or dissonance) and alignment, companies and customers were asked to state the importance of a range of seven key eCommerce facilities identified through literature and website reviews. Significantly, analysis of this data showed great divergence. Whilst consumers placed a high value on the facets that facilitate interaction and communication with each other, companies placed most value on the internet as a marketing facility. The data is presented graphically, and a richer picture is created through the use of qualitative data on company questionnaires and narratives in the consumer interviews. This phase in the research explores the attitudes and values of the key players in the field. The results are neither representative nor generalisable. However, the conclusions drawn assist in setting out the parameters of the area of concern for further exploration from the consumer perspective through semiotic analysis of websites and interviews with customers.

5.1 Introduction to Phase One

Drawing upon the empirical material collected in the first phase of the research, this chapter offers an insight into the conflicting interests of customers and companies in the design, adoption and use of eCommerce. It illustrates how the company perspective appears to uphold and perpetuate the myths surrounding eCommerce, whilst the customer experience challenges or deconstructs those myths. The conclusions drawn give an insight into the phenomena under study, and assist in setting out the parameters of the area of concern for further exploration from the consumer perspective.

The preoccupation with, or emphasis on, showing multiple viewpoints is fairly well established in critical theory research (Walsham, 2001; Avgerou, 2002), and, depending on
the viewpoints or perspectives adopted can give “a rich picture of life at individual, group and organisational levels” or even at “organisational, national, and cross-national” levels (McGrath, 2004); the “holograph effect” (Senge, 1993). As previously discussed (Chapter 3 and Chapter 4) there are relatively few critical empirical studies which new researchers can draw upon for guidance. Those studies which can be referred to, frequently adopt vastly differing approaches. For example, in his critical work *Making a World of Difference: IT in a Global Context* Walsham (2001) uses extensive commentary from his research participants to support his arguments and the theoretical concepts through which he presents them. In contrast, although Avgerou interviews her research participants for her work *Information Systems and Global Diversity* (Avgerou, 2002) she “makes no use of commentary” from them, instead relying upon “her detailed descriptions of historical and cultural context…. Without making use of “talking subjects” to comment on how the conflicts arising came to bear on them personally” (McGrath, 2004).

As discussed in Chapter Four *Study Design*, Critical Social Theory research places a distinct lack of emphasis on empirical material (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000), and is even criticised for “letting researchers down altogether in this respect” (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000), giving few, if any, guidelines for the presentation of empirical research. (Bourdieu et al.1991). It is within this context that this empirical material is presented and interpreted.

5.2 Analysis and Interpretation

The aim of this phase in the research was to gain insight into the views and values which companies and customers hold about eCommerce, and to consider whether those views and values are aligned or in conflict. There is a long established dichotomy in the perception of the relationship and power balance between customers and companies (outlined in Chapter Two *eCommerce, Knowledge Management and Empowerment: Constructing the Myth*). Whilst phrases such as “customer is King” and “the customer is always right” have fostered a myth of the all important, powerful customer, it is generally acknowledged that consumers of the capitalist, mass production era hold very little power. However, it is
suggested, by the pervading technologically determinist view, that the internet will bring revolutionary changes to the world of retail causing a dramatic shift of power from companies to customers (Levine et al. 2000; De Kare-Silver, 2000). This view is upheld by the creation and maintenance of a series of myths concerning the benefits that eCommerce will bring to the consumer (these are discussed more fully in Chapter Eight Deconstruction of the Myths Surrounding eCommerce). The interpretation of the empirical material offered in this chapter suggests that the participating companies have taken a technologically determinist approach, their reasons for eCommerce adoption and the features and facilities they value appearing to buy into and uphold the myths. Whereas the participating customers speak of more evolutionary changes, place value on eCommerce features which the participating companies claim not to value, and recount experiences which challenge or deconstruct the myths of consumer empowerment.

The next sections will offer an interpretation of the empirical material collected from companies and then from customers. Conclusions will be discussed and an attempt will be made to account for the incongruity or divergence and misalignment in customer / company perceptions and values. A substantial part of this chapter was published as “Customer and Company Voices in eCommerce: A Qualitative Analysis” in Qualitative Market Research an International Journal (McLean and Blackie, 2004a)

5.2.1 Methods of Analysis

Response rates to the questionnaires were 34% for company responses, and 86% for customer responses. Respondents were asked to rank their opinion on the importance of each of the seven facilities (1. Communicating With Consumers, 2. Making Sales, 3. Marketing Activities, 4. Links to Related Websites, 5. Providing Information on the Company, 6. Hosting an Online Community, 7. Links to Consumer Reviews) using a four point Likert scale. (Chapter 4 section 4.5.1 Insight from Companies). From these responses it is possible to build a profile of interest in a particular category for business and customers that demonstrates interest or importance, or indifference.
In order to contrast the degree of fit in a category between company and customer expectations the responses were weighted to account for the different number of customer and company responses and the percentage of customer respondents within each scale point subtracted from the corresponding company value. Thus if the responses between customer and company expectation were matched the resulting outcome would approach zero. If however customers placed more emphasis than companies within a scale point this would result in a positive outcome. Conversely a negative result would occur if companies placed more emphasis on a scale point relative to customers’ responses.

The outcomes of these comparisons do not produce results of quantified relative importance in the positivist tradition. Statements such as category A is twice as important to companies than customers, or category 3 is 50% more important than category 2 should not be derived from the outcomes. This research in not intended to be representative or generalisable. Specific implications can be drawn and viewed as general tendencies rather than generalisable statements (Walsham, 1995). The analysis of these questionnaires does however allow a graphical image of congruity between customer and company expectations (Fig.13). There are three intuitive evaluations to be made within a category:

1) A flat, near zero response in all four points of the scale indicates that customer and company expectations are well aligned.

2) A positive gradient slope (sloping from front to top back), indicates that companies are over valuing the importance attached of this facility relative to customer aspirations, and hence potentially over providing.

3) A negative gradient slope (sloping from top left to bottom right), indicates that companies are under valuing the importance of this facility relative to customer aspirations, and hence potentially under providing.
Figure 13: Relative Importance of eCommerce Facilities to Customer and Company

Figure 13 shows the relative importance of each facility to customer versus company. It illustrates that companies and customers were closely aligned in the importance they placed on only one of the seven categories; 5. Information about the company. The remaining categories showed a misalignment in the importance attached to them, the greatest divergence being in category 3. Marketing. However, 4. Links to related sites, 6. Online Communities, and 7. Links to consumer reviews also showed substantial differences in the levels of importance placed on them by companies and consumers. The remaining two categories 1. Communicating with customers/ companies and 2. Sales showed a marginal misalignment.

Table 9 summarises which facets were valued by the companies and customers who participated in this research, showing a vast incongruence or misalignment of interest.
Facet One: Communicating With Companies / Customers

Facet Two: Sales

Facet Three: Marketing

Facet Four: Links To Related Website

Facet Five: Information About The Company

Facet Six: Online Communities

Facet Seven: Links To Consumer Reviews

Table 9. Incongruence of Provider and Customer Values

5.2.2 Interpretation

The next section will consider the emergent trend in each category in turn, using qualitative data from questionnaires and follow up interviews with the consumers to create a richer picture of that trend.

Facet One: Communicating With Companies / Customers

This facet of eCommerce showed a marginal divergence in the importance attached to it by companies and customers. The general trend is that companies regard the ability to communicate with customers as more important than their customers do. Electronic business-to-customer communication has strong links with marketing and this is reflected in the wider divergence found in facet three: Marketing. The fact that consumers assigned
little importance to the ability to communicate with companies through a website was qualified during interviews carried out with consumers. Many participants noted that companies frequently fail to respond to customer emails.

“At least if you’re hanging on a telephone, even if its for an hour you know you’re hanging on a telephone and somebody eventually is going to have to speak to you that day. Whereas e-mail they can leave for a week and you’ve got no idea when they’re going to e-mail you back, you know. I mean with some companies you might be checking your e-mail every hour and still not getting any response so that can be quite frustrating.” (Interview 12, Female, 32)

Some commented that when companies do reply to email it is with a standard script from the theatre of retail with the illusion of ‘personalisation’ through the use of a personal name. This standard script frequently fails to address the customer’s question, and they are forced to fall back on more traditional methods of communication. Participants commented that a personal and specific email rather than a standard reply which didn’t address their particular problem would greatly improve their perception of a company. Some participants attached little importance to this facet of eCommerce as they simply preferred to speak to a company representative than use email to contact them.

“I must admit I like to deal with someone that I can talk to”
(Interview 1, male, 48)

One participant commented that he regarded communication with companies via the Internet as “a one way thing” (Interview 11, Male 30) where communication is from company to customer preventing, rather than facilitating, social interaction and exchange. This was reflected in the comments made by companies regarding their reasons for establishing a web presence. Motivations for eCommerce take up included “As a marketing tool” (Companies 31 and 22), “To give information to our customers” (Companies 48 and 32), and “To raise brand awareness” (Companies 84 and 35). These motivations portray a view of a passive consumer who is marketed to, and given information which the company
controls. Significantly, none of the reasons given by companies for establishing a web presence focuses on interaction or conversation with customers. Although many of the companies questioned stated that they greatly valued the ability to communicate with customers that the internet facilitates, this research suggests that in practice what they actually make use of is the ability to communicate to customers.

This can be interpreted through Habermas' theory of distorted communication (Habermas, 1984). The companies dominate the communication space emphasising their established position of power in the customer / company relationship, and bringing few benefits to the customer. However, they perpetuate the myth that the internet enables better company / customer communication by claiming to value this facility.

Facet Two: Sales
The relative importance of this facet to customer versus company was rather surprising. Although only a marginal divergence, the customers who responded attached greater importance to the ability to make purchases than the surveyed companies did. The companies surveyed were high street retailers with bricks and clicks strategies. In the qualitative data many companies commented that online sales made up only a small part of their total sales figures. The importance customers attached to the ability to make purchases online is qualified in the interview data:

"Well the only time I’ve actually used it to buy anything was when I needed to buy some world cup stickers for my nephew and the only means of accessing them was over the internet. That’s really the only time I’ve done any Internet shopping" (Interview 9, male 42)

"The range of the products that they sell in the online shops is almost unlimited so you can find it and they deliver it to you as well" (Interview 8, male 24)
The consumers questioned value the ability to purchase online, particularly for products that are unavailable elsewhere. The participant quoted above noted the diverse range of products available through the internet, and it is this aspect of online sales that is of value to them. Some companies stated that their reason for eCommerce take up was to provide “multi channel retailing” (Company 29) and to “enable our customers to purchase online” (Company 67). However, many companies who responded stated that their eCommerce facility was designed to “help customers research to shop in store” (Company 8) or “to draw customers into the physical store” (Company 73) illustrating why they did not necessarily over emphasise the ability to sell products over the internet. The incongruity here is actually of great significance to small niche market companies. Customers state that they value the ability to purchase an unlimited range of goods not found in the high street that the internet offers. Through the homogenisation of our high streets and shopping centres it is increasingly difficult for small specialist, stores to reach their ‘target market’, and for customers to buy individual, specialist products. It is perhaps here that a greater congruity between eCommerce sales and take up could be found. It is potentially smaller specialist companies who target a niche market who could most benefit from eCommerce both in terms of sales and in participating with users through online communities. This will be identified as an area for future research in Chapter 10 Reflection and Future Research.

Facet Three: Marketing
Marketing was the facet that showed the most dramatic incongruence. Companies attached a great deal of importance to the ability to use the internet for marketing activities. The ability to build brand image and advertise globally, gather knowledge about customer preferences, lifestyles, routines and significant life events is a very valuable asset to a retail business, and it is this aspect of eCommerce that companies have focused on. Companies stated that their reason for establishing a web presence was to have “a marketing presence throughout the world” (Company 4) or as “a marketing tool” (Company 79). One company actually stated that they measure the performance of their eCommerce facility through “data base recruitment” (Company 65).
In contrast, it is this aspect of eCommerce that consumers are most wary about. This interview participant expressed his concerns over the fact that companies use the internet to gather information about customers:

"I’ve filled in enquiry forms and that sort of thing, where they are basically gathering data on me....I just don’t like the idea anyway because all they need to do is put in your postcode and your name and there you go! They’ve got you! And how do they link that up with other databases? You don’t know do you?"

(Interview 4, male 49)

Customers attached little or no importance to the ability to receive marketing messages and promotional information via the internet. Similarly this area prompted the most vehement responses from the interview participants. Little distinction was made between unsolicited messages and those from companies in which the participant had expressed some interest. Electronic marketing was experienced as a form of organisational power over consumers. Narratives frequently included images of closing down communication channels. Promotions and marketing messages were experienced as an annoyance, adding no value to the consumer experience, and in some cases prompting the participant to cease dealing with the company responsible. These extracts from the consumer interviews illustrate how strongly the participants felt.

"I don’t like getting advertising material. I don’t read it because if I want to find out about something then I will find out about it. So it just goes in the bin"

(Interview 10, female 52)

"I hate it. It irritates the hell out of me. I hate being bombarded with junk e-mail. I can’t stand it. It’s the scourge of the internet. I really think that it needs controlling there’s no control, you know with the internet it’s unstoppable isn’t it? It’s going to put people off"

(Interview 6, male, 38)
"I don’t like having to look at advertising. If you log onto the internet you’re becoming increasingly bombarded with stuff coming into your computer. You come off the internet and you realise that there’s three or four windows up of advertising stuff and you weren’t even aware that they had come into your machine and I don’t like that. They do it so that the window is slightly shifted so that you can’t get to the cross. Somebody’s thought all this through and it’s just irritating and they should be shot.” (Interview 5, male 41)

Marketing through the internet has not developed into the personalized and targeted one-to-one marketing messages that we were promised. This remains a myth and will be explored in more detail in Chapter 8 Deconstruction of the Myths Surrounding eCommerce. For these consumers, mass messaging from a corporate script addressed to a named person does not add value to their experience of online retail. Significantly, the consumers participating in this research assigned very little importance to marketing as a facet of eCommerce. Again, the incongruence in the value customers and companies place on marketing over the internet reflects the power in the customer / supplier relationship. Customers have been encouraged to give away information about themselves and their preferences with the promise of tailored, relevant and personal marketing. However this promise has not come to fruition and many customers are left feeling angry and powerless under a mountain of electronic junk mail or SPAM. These issues will be considered more fully from the customer perspective in Chapter 7 The Customer Experience and Chapter 8 Deconstruction of the Myths Surrounding eCommerce.

Facet Four: Links To Related Website
This category relates to the idea of linking commercial websites to interest related sites, or other related services, not to competitors’ sites. For example, a DIY store may link to an interior design site with tips on choosing colour schemes, a toy company may provide links to a child development website with an independent guide to developing skills through play, or an airline company may link to hotels or car hire. Including such links would suggest a ‘sense of audience’ and an awareness of the wider information or knowledge needs of that audience. Again this category showed a marked incongruence in the relative
importance consumers and companies attached. Companies who responded considered this facility to be of little importance, whereas participating consumers rated it as very or extremely important. Qualitative data from two interview participants illustrate why customers regard this facet as valuable.

“If there’s links to another site, say it was the manufacturer, you can go and see what else they’ve produced whereas if you’re in a shop you’ve got to wait until someone is available or if you’re looking through magazines, that information isn’t necessarily there.” (Interview 3, female, 27)

“I’ve booked flights through Easyjet... Then from doing that I’ve then linked to other sites, a hotel site booked hotels and then also booked car parking at the airport so it was all just done sitting at a computer, whereas before you’d have had to go out and be making phone calls so yes, it saves time.” (Interview 10, female, 52)

Customers attach great importance to the ability to access a range of related information and services through one gateway or entry point. Their expectations are of a seamless experience. This research suggests that participating companies are under providing in this category. The companies are failing recognise the potential for partnering and alliance strategies that the internet facilitates to improve the customer experience by supporting customer information and knowledge needs.

**Facet five: Information About The Company**

This was the only category that showed a flat, near zero response on the graphic representation of responses, indicating that customer and company expectations are well aligned. Company and consumer responses illustrate that they attach equal importance to information about the company such as company history, staff profiles and contact details. This is borne out both in the literature on issues of trust and eCommerce and in the responses from interview participants in this research project. One participant recounted
how he had telephoned a company to check that the details given about a company on their website were correct.

“When I asked them their address, I said well what’s your address you know just a little thing, questions just to sort of like check whether their address is what they say it is on the web site, just to make sure.” (Interview 6, male, 38)

Others commented that a short company history telling how old the company is, how they began trading and other such information made the company appear more “reliable” and “trustworthy” (Interview 1, male, 48). This research suggests that company and customer expectations are well matched with the actual provision in this category.

However, information about a company, including the history and key staff profiles, is all part of the marketing machine, building brand image and equity. Frequently asked questions about participating companies’ histories were company (rather than customer) originating, taken from a corporate discourse. Further, literature on corporate website design encourages the divisive use of symbols such as staff photographs or long company histories to foster trust (Jarvenpaa and Tractinsky, 1999; Corritore et al., 2001; Riegelsberger et al., 2003). Company profiles could be seen as manipulating customers’ trust, invoking their history in a bid to stamp authority or ‘power’ upon the relationship with the customer. It is significant that ‘brochureware’ websites (websites where companies have done little more than upload company brochures), provide one way static information with a corporate discourse which lacks interactivity, sense of audience and user participation. Significantly the interview participant above felt the need to resort to another channel (the telephone) to validate for himself the information given on a website. Finally, it is of great relevance that information about a company and its presentation on a website is controlled by the company, further establishing the power relationship between company and customer. These issues will be explored in relation to the semiotics of commercial websites in Chapter 6 Provision of e-Commerce: A Semiotic Analysis
Facet Six: Online Communities

The analysis of the data on access to online communities showed a negative gradient slope (sloping from top left to bottom right), indicating that companies are under valuing the importance of this facet relative to customer aspirations. Consumers use online communities based around shared interests to exchange knowledge of products and services provided by companies. For customers “consumer knowledge” is knowledge possessed by fellow consumers. On the internet they are building a knowledge sharing culture where stories are told, advice given and opinions shared.

“If you’ve got a complaint about a company you can put it in a very public space. Customers do actually know that there are particular web sites out there on which they can put their opinions down” (Interview 2, male, 37)

“...you can go onto like a discussion forum where people are talking about it and you can ask specific questions about something, the specifications or any specific requirements it may have before you buy it,... if you’ve got a lot of knowledgeable users out there it’s handy to chat with them.”

(Interview 8, male, 24)

Consumers value the potential to communicate with each other that the internet offers them. This research suggests that companies are currently under providing in this category. This under provision suggests a lack of a sense of audience, or what the customers want. It also suggests that companies are now so locked into their corporate states that they have forgotten how to communicate and create a sense of community that marketplaces of the past enjoyed. Companies appear to fear the free communication that the internet offers to customers, and regard facilities that enable this as unimportant. Meanwhile customers are participating in online communities, on neutral ground away from the commercial web, and unrecognised by the companies. This lateral customer-to-customer communication does little to inform companies and improve products and services, therefore limiting consumer empowerment. For companies to become involved in such discussions, or to participate in these communities, would require them to engage in ‘unscripted’ spontaneous
conversations, something that many companies shy away from. Possible strategies for such participation will be discussed in Chapter 9 Conclusions.

Facet Seven: Links To Consumer Reviews

This facet has much in common with the previous one. The results here showed vast incongruence. Consumers placed a high value on this facet whilst the companies surveyed placed little or no value on it. It is widely accepted that Amazon have established a successful online retail business, and consumers frequently mention the customer reviews as a strong factor in Amazon’s appeal (www.amazon.co.uk). Interview participants spoke enthusiastically about consumer reviews and stated that they would influence a purchase decision

“And then for software, buying games software, I regularly go on line just to check particular reviews and also check reader reviews and that will influence whether I buy that particular product” (Interview 2, male, 37)

“I do take notice of reviews. Even if they’re just written by other consumers, yes I read reviews, I would take notice of those, yes.” (Interview 9, male 42)

Despite this, companies explicitly stated that they regard this facet to be of little or no importance, a major misalignment in company / customer aspirations. One retailer actually stated that “we need to understand better how to do this in a way that customers feel adds value” (Company 28). The fact that responding companies placed little value on this facility suggests a lack of customer-centricity in the design of eCommerce services. It may also suggest a sense of fear at the loss of control over information about the company’s products and services. Significantly interview participants stated that they placed more trust in reviews on neutral sites rather than on the companies own site, acknowledging that companies have control over reviews on their own websites. The incongruity here points to a lack of a sense of audience in the design of eCommerce facilities. These issues will be discussed more fully in Chapter 6 Provision of eCommerce: A Semiotic Analysis and Chapter 7 The Customer Experience.
5.3 Conclusions of Phase One

Significantly, in contrast with the companies, consumers placed a high value on the facets which facilitate interaction and communication with each other (consumer-to-consumer). Participating companies placed more value on the marketing facility (or ability to communicate to customers). Levine et al note that the internet has facilitated conversations in the “marketplace” between customers and that it also has the “potential” to open up cross boundary (marketplace to company) conversations, but so far has failed to do so:

‘The same technology that has opened up a new kind of conversation in the marketplace has done the same within the corporation, or has the potential to do so.’ (Levine et al. 2000).

Corporate, scripted marketing messages are not enough to convince the customer of the value of online marketing. They merely perpetuate the myth of personalisation and enforce the boundaries and power relations between customers and companies. Habermas proposed that “where power is present, communication is systematically distorted”, and further that “power would act as a barrier to the free and unconstrained realization of the human interest in achieving rational truth or enlightenment” (Clegg, 1989). The participants of this research do not construct a view of the internet as opening up communication channels with companies where social interaction may facilitate the construction and exchange of knowledge. However, they do communicate and construct and share knowledge amongst themselves away from the companies’ sphere of control. Figure 14 illustrates the dissonance between information provision through eCommerce and the information needs of customers.
This phase in the research cycle sets the scene for more in depth exploration of customers' experiences of using the internet in commercial activity. It illustrates the valid justification that there is incongruence between the provision of eCommerce and the facilities that customers value. A technologically determinist approach has been taken to the adoption of eCommerce. Many of the participating companies stated that their motivations for establishing a web presence came from the fact that "everyone else was doing it" (Companies 40, 68, 84, 60), or that their take up was a response to the "internet gold rush" (Company 40), or that they did it "to keep ahead of the competition" (Company 79). Their reasons for eCommerce adoption lack a constructivist view or sense of audience. Failure to engage the actors in a participatory approach to IS design and implementation (Barki and Hartwick, 1994; McKeen and Guimaraes, 1997) rarely brings an effective match between provision and need. The incongruence in company provision and customer needs suggested here points to a lack of empowerment. Through the technologically determinist approach the entrenched power imbalance between customers and companies is not resolved in eCommerce.
Chapter 6

Provision of eCommerce: A Semiotic Analysis

This chapter reports on phase two of the research. It aims to investigate the link, or interface, provided by the participating retailers and the customers they serve. The field of semiotics is introduced, and the focus defined. The analysis offered here draws on the social semiotics of Halliday (1978), and uses Lemke’s three functions of semiotics (presentation, orientation, organization) to structure the analysis. A parallel is drawn between Lemke’s functions and Habermas’ four claims to validity of speech acts (Habermas, 1984). Through the discourse and content analysis three company types or approaches are identified (Controlling, Didactic, Participatory). The implications of this for customer empowerment are discussed. The chapter concludes that eCommerce in its current form is not empowering customers, but merely providing another channel for companies to ‘manage’ or control the long established company / customer, or producer / consumer, relationship.

6.1 Semiotics in Internet Research

As noted in the previous chapter, many retailers commented that they developed a website as a response to peer pressure, or because the competitors in a field were doing so. The emphasis was on external competitive forces and technology as a ‘silver bullet’ or quick fix which would automatically bring benefits and increased profitability. The focus appears to be the technologically determinist approach to the internet with website as artefact, rather than to what it could facilitate or improve through its interactive and communicative features. Failure to consider the business interface prior to exploring the customer experience would leave a gap or void in this study.

In analysis of this interface between customers and companies the researcher draws upon the field of semiotics which is defined in Chapter 4, section 4.7 Phase Two: Website
Analysis). This phase in the research bridges or unites the company and consumer perspectives. It is precisely the ability to bridge and unite opposing perspectives, disciplines, domains and discourses that has lead to the adoption of semiotic theories by not only researchers, but representatives of a wide range of fields (advertising, mathematics, computer science, education). Through semiotic analysis of commercial websites which provide the interface between companies and customers the diverse range of voices (company, customer, academic, researcher) can be united or crystalised.

"Semiotics represents one of the main attempts - perhaps the most enduring one - at conceiving a transdisciplinary framework through which interfaces can be constructed between distinct domains of inquiry. Other endeavours, such as the unified science movement of the 1930s or cybernetics and general systems theory in the 1950s and 1960s, met with only limited success. By contrast, semiotics remains a credible blueprint for bridging the gaps between disciplines and across cultures, most likely because of its own intellectual diversity and pluridisciplinary history, as well as its remarkable capacity for critical reflexivity. [...] Semiotics and its outgrowths are not a closed chapter in the history of ideas. The dynamics of this fundamental, overarching inquiry keeps upsetting the epistemological landscape inherited from two centuries of disciplinary marshalling. It opens channels of communication among faculties and traditions, builds pressures on artificial partitions, connects levels, constructs interfaces, and awakens the mind to serial, lateral, and holistic thinking." (Bouissac, 1998)

The ability of semiotics to construct "a transdisciplinary framework through which interfaces can be constructed between distinct domains of inquiry" suggest an ideal tool for adoption in interdisciplinary multi method research such as this. Indeed, through the combination of methods and the very "incommensurability" that is derided, new meanings can be constructed. Lemke notes that in semiotics, through the combination of cultural conventions and "modalities" (a modality being a "mode" or "manner" as in "of or relating
to a statistical mode” (Collins, 1983) previously undeveloped meanings or knowledge can be constructed.

“Consider also the issue of cross-modal translations. Even though a culture may create conventions about how, say, a painting is to be described in words, or commented on in scholarly fashion, or how a mathematical equation is to be graphically represented, text, image, and other semiotic forms are sui generis. No text is an image. No text has the exact same set of meaning-affordances as any image. No image or visual representations means in all and only the same ways that some text can mean. It is this essential incommensurability that enables genuine new meanings to be made from the combinations of modalities.” (Lemke, 2002)

It is not the intention of the researcher to analyse eCommerce per se through semiotics here. Extending the field of the semiotics of consumer research (Mick, 1986; Clarke et al. 1998; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1981; Holman, 1979) to the internet, and the semiotics of the internet (Lemke, 2002) to eCommerce specifically would be an interesting project addressing a gap in the current literature. However, it is beyond the scope of this inquiry and would be a huge task. This will be considered as a future research project in (Chapter 10 Reflection and Future Research).

In this analysis, the communicative action informed by social semiotics will be central. The aesthetic function which focuses upon the artefact of the website, analysis of signs and symbols such as colour, layout and other design features and what they communicate (the aesthetic function or “orientation toward the expression itself” (Mukarovsky, 1976) will not be the main focus of analysis. It could be argued that this approach is the one taken by many companies. The Aesthetic function “focuses on the message for its own sake” (Hawkes, 1977), or in the case of eCommerce, the website for its own sake. This echoes the reasons given by companies for developing a website considered in Chapter 5. Having a web presence is considered important regardless of the content, facilities or extra value it offers. The limited research using semiotics to interpret or critique eCommerce
sites to date has taken this approach, focusing on the semiotics of Human Computer Interaction (HCI) or graphical user interface, and of cross-cultural design (French, 2002), and stressing that:

"...the interface component is seen as being mission critical to the success or otherwise of a typical e-commerce site. More specifically the central notion being that 'shared-meanings' i.e. matching heterogeneous stakeholder expectations, needs, cultural and organisational culture and context to a final artefact involves consideration of surface level semantics (intended meanings) as well as subtle aspects (unintended meanings) (French, 2002).

This approach strongly adheres to Saussurian theory with a strong distinction between langue (a system of differences between signs) and parole (individual acts of speech) and an emphasis on a pre-existing set of signs, or "a cupboard, housing all the possible different signs which might be pulled out and utilized" (Cobley and Jansz, 1997). It also assumes that it is possible or even desirable to meet diverse stakeholder needs in one final website (artefact). Further, it could be argued that this approach fails to capture the difference between eCommerce and other forms of company to consumer communication. Inherent in the internet is not only the communicative function (awareness of addressee / addresser) (Jakobson and Halle, 1956), which is a recognised element of semiotic analysis of genre such as literature and advertising (both print and broadcast), but a previously unheard of potential for interactivity. Given this, the focus of semiotics in eCommerce should shift to the social semiotics derived from the work of (Halliday, 1978). For Halliday, the langue / parole split is not so clearly defined. He "restates the importance of acts of speech", arguing that:

"It is here, between speaker and hearer that language is generated, and the social context actually appears within the utterance rather than existing externally in a system" (Halliday, 1978)
In this analysis, the communicative action informed by social semiotics will be central. What is communicated (content) and how it is communicated (discourse) are key. Drawing upon Halliday’s work (1978) Lemke highlights three “semiotic functions” of all text, image, and multimedia or “multimodal” communications, these are: presentational, organisational and orientational.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semiotic Function</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Presentational** | - What recognizable actors or participants in processes and relationships are presented?  
- What relationships are presented as existing (past, present, future, conditional, contrafactual) among these participants?  
- What typical or recurring relationships are presented in the text/artifact? |
| **Orientational** | - Who is the intended user/viewer/reader of this text/artefact? What indicators are there of an ‘anticipated audience’  
- How does the text position the source relative to the user? in relations of power? dominance? intimacy? formality?  
- What does the text/artifact offer the user by way of information? services? options for action? What does the text/artifact request or demand of the user or constrain in action? How? |
| **Organisational** | - What constitutes the whole text or multimedia artefact under analysis? how do you know what is and what is not a part of it? Does it have a definite boundary or frame in space?  
- What is the most salient visual element? Where is your eye drawn to first? |

Table 10. Lemke’s (2002) Three Semiotic Functions
Table 10 outlines the definitions of the three functions. These semiotic functions have remarkably resonance with the four “claims to validity” in the reconstruction of day-to-day language which, according to Critical Social Theorists, lie at the very heart of ordinary language (Forester, 1983). These are:

1. **A Truth claim**: Referring to the existence of some state of affairs. (Has resonance with the presentational).

2. **A Legitimacy claim**: To be “appropriately in context” as the same words mean different things in different situations (Has resonance with the orientational).

3. **A Sincerity claim**: That the speaker really means and intends to say what is being said (Again, has resonance with the orientational).

4. **A Comprehensibility or clarity claim**: That what is said has an ordinarily clear and coherent meaning. (Has resonance with the organisational).

According to Forester, these four claims derive from the understanding that:

“...communicative interaction involves both content and relationship. Claims regarding “truth” and “clarity” relate to content, and those regarding “legitimacy” and “sincerity,” to relationship of speaker and listener.”

(Forester, 1983)

Through the acceptance of these claims to truth, clarity, legitimacy and sincerity “speakers shape the beliefs, consent, trust and attention of those with whom they speak” (Forester, 1983). In this case, the companies shape the beliefs, consent, trust and attention of the customers they communicate with through their websites.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semiotic function</th>
<th>Defining questions</th>
<th>Manifestation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presentational</td>
<td>What existing state of affairs is presented?</td>
<td>Company history, recognisable logo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a truth claim)</td>
<td>What relationships are presented as existing? In what context?</td>
<td>Prior experience of supplier / consumer relationship drawn upon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Root discourse - Capitalist system</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientational</td>
<td>What is the stance toward the viewer / user?</td>
<td>Mode of address (use of imperatives or commands) &quot;go to checkout&quot; or caring, advisory, making a proposal “don’t forget…” “you may wish to…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(A Legitimacy claim &amp;</td>
<td>How does the website position the source relevant to the user (in terms of power, domination, intimacy, formality)?</td>
<td>Guide/Visitor relationship. Company more knowledgeable about the products and customer needs, and also about the website.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a sincerity claim)</td>
<td>What does the text offer or demand of the user?</td>
<td>Provider / consumer of information and products.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Source/user relationship construct “we want you to enjoy…”, “Follow this link for more information…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Uses of personalisation “Hello John Brown. If you aren’t John click here”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational</td>
<td>What constitutes the whole text? Is there a definite boundary?</td>
<td>Links to other sites, Pop ups, Banners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(A comprehensibility</td>
<td>What is the relationship of text to images?</td>
<td>Product images and descriptions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or clarity claim)</td>
<td>What is the most salient visual element?</td>
<td>Images of company employees and accompanying text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How is cohesion achieved?</td>
<td>Cooperate standardisation (colour scheme, layout, use and position of logos)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11. Illustrating the Four Claims to Validity of Communicative Interaction and the Characteristics and Manifestations of Lemke’s Three Semiotic Functions to eCommerce.
Lemke suggests that in both design and evaluation, or interpretation, of websites there is a customary obsession with the presentational at the expense of the orientational and organisational functions. This is borne out in the focus of current literature on the semiotics of the internet, and in the approach of organisations to web design. Conflicts and contradictions in this research support this. Firstly, the misalignment or incongruence of the interests and values of companies and customers (see Chapter 5) in relation to commercial website features and facilities shows a lack of consideration of organisational and orientational functions in the design. Secondly, a further conflict or incongruence was identified through the analysis of the website reviews. Companies which claimed to value a particular feature or facility of eCommerce frequently failed to incorporate or facilitate it in their website (McLean and Blackie, 2003a). This points to a preoccupation with the presentational, and suggests a lack or breakdown in communications between the strategists and the web designers resulting in a website designed without consideration of orientational and organisational functions. Similarly, through the link made here with truth claims in speech acts, this preoccupation with the presentational suggests a need to present the company / customer relationship as an established hierarchical order.

This chapter draws upon semiotics as a method of analysis, more specifically upon content analysis and discourse analysis. Myers notes that:

"One form of semiotics is "content analysis" (...) The researcher searches for structures and patterned regularities in the text and makes inferences on the basis of these regularities." (Myers, 2004)

Another form of semiotics is 'discourse analysis'. A discourse is:

"A set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events (...) The things that people say or write, can be thought of as instances of discourses, as occasions where particular discourses are given the opportunity to construct an event in this way rather than that" (Burr, 1995).
It is argued that through discourse, relationships are constructed and defined (for example: language as shared meaning (Wittgenstein, 2002), and situated communicative actions (Habermas, 1984). In this case, through the discourse of the capitalist economy people are made into "consumers", and through the discourses drawn upon in company / consumer interactions the power balance in the relationship is defined. It is this construction of the customer / company relationship through the discourses drawn upon in commercial websites (as text) that this chapter explores. Interestingly, the etymological root of the word "text" is *texere*, to weave (Holland, 1980), and so consideration of websites as text is surprisingly in keeping with the discourse of creating or weaving an artifact.

Semiotic theory dictates that *anything* can function as a sign. Given this, the semiotic analysis of just one commercial website could be a huge task. Drawing upon the field of literary criticism, now well versed in semiotic analysis: "The range of interpretive tasks open to literary semiotics is too vast, then, to permit an exhaustive critical enquiry." (Serpieri, 1986). For this reason, it was decided that a defined focus and a framework for analysis would be necessary. The core issue under study here is the facilitation through the internet of communication between customers and companies, and the extent to which this enables knowledge creation and exchange, and ultimately customer empowerment. With this in mind and informed by the philosophies of semiotics and the social construction of knowledge where "knowledge is [constructed] and transferred through participation in social networks" and "the dominant metaphor is the human community" (Scarbrough and Swan, 1999), a tool for the analysis of commercial websites was developed (See Figure 15). The key objective was to identify groups of signs or signifiers that could be seen to emanate from a specific code or discourse. The focus was on the level at which the features of the website facilitated communication and social interaction. However, actual websites and the eCommerce literature were referred to in selecting features for inclusion, and the coding sheet was constructed through an iterative, hermeneutic process. The subjective nature of the construction of such a tool for evaluation is recognised. The websites of participating companies were analysed for features that enable communicative action, interaction, and thus the creation and exchange of knowledge. The coding sheet was created from a
constructivist perspective and includes features that enable both high and low levels of interaction from consumer to consumer, and from consumers to company.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High Interaction</th>
<th>Present on site</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consumer Controlled</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chat Rooms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulletin Boards</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsgroups</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer Reviews</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer Ratings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links to Reviews / Ratings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer Instigated FAQs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design A Product</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call Back Facility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e-mail Named Dept / Employee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities / Games</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Didactic Knowledge</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive Lifestyle Pages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalised Websites</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask The Expert</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e-mail the General Company</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice / Guides / Tips</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifestyle Pages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conditioned Knowledge</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logos / Brands</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual Shopping Carts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual Checkout</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reproduction</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company Designed FAQs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company History</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low Interaction</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company Controlled</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 15. Coding sheet: Tool for the Analysis of Commercial Websites.

Tools and techniques of high interaction that encourage personalised and dynamic knowledge creation and exchange, feature at the top of the coding sheet. The centre of the coding sheet includes features that draw on conditioned and "expert" knowledge. Whilst the bottom of the checklist features low interaction tools and techniques providing access to codified and static artefacts of knowledge reproduction. The website of each participating company was evaluated according to this coding sheet. Content analysis was carried out to explore the occurrence of "structures and patterned regularities in the text" (the websites),
in order to “make inferences on the basis of these regularities” (Myers, 2004). Reflecting the dynamic and serendipitous nature of both knowledge and website creation the data resulting from this phase of the research does not allow for representative generalizations. However, it offers a “snap shot”, or momentary insight into the company / customer relationship constructed though the website interface.

6.2 Analysis

From the content and discourse analysis of the website evaluations three clear types of company emerged. Features present on a website frequently clustered around one area of the coding sheet resulting in a “patterned regularity” across a group of websites (Truex, 1996; Myers, 1997). Some companies provided websites with few opportunities for interaction giving only controlled information. Their evaluations showed clusters around the bottom of the coding sheet. Others had features offering advice, activities, and opportunities to request specific information (email the company, ask the expert). Evaluations of these companies gave a cluster around the middle of the coding sheet. Finally, some companies provided websites with opportunities for communication, interaction and knowledge construction. Evaluations of these websites yielded a cluster around the top of the coding sheet. In seeking reasons for this, three types or categories of eCommerce provision are proposed each based upon their core website features (through a content analysis), and discourses drawn upon in constructing and defining the companies relationship with the customer. This approach constitutes a “proven method” for developing analytically useful categorisations of complex social phenomena by defining “ideal types” (Nolan, 2003). Ulrich outlines this methodology stating that:

“Ideal types need not be “realistic” but they should characterize in pure form, as it were, some crucial features ... that in reality combine to the phenomena in question and in terms of which we can better understand those phenomena. Such a categorization could then help us understand and examine the extent to which concrete actions are assuming different standards of rationality” (Ulrich, 2001)
This methodology has been adopted here to characterize the features of the different approaches identified through semiotic analysis to eCommerce. In this case the “types” are of categories of approach to eCommerce provision.

These categories summarise the styles adopted in eCommerce provision (See Appendix 4 for breakdown by sector):

- The Controlling Company (12 companies of this type)
- The Didactic Company (15 companies of this type)
- The Participatory Company (3 companies of this type)

The next section draws upon the content and discourse analysis to illustrate the characteristics of the “types”. To assist in this analysis, table 12 at the end of section 6.2 maps the company types to Lemke’s three semiotic functions and outlines the features which serve each function.

6.2.1 The Controlling Company

This type of company is in sole control of the knowledge or information it chooses to share through the website. Its preferred features are those which reproduce artefacts of static or codified knowledge. Features such as company history, or frequently asked questions (FAQs) databases, designed by the company with the primary function being to capture and codify knowledge are common. The controlling company allows customers few opportunities for communication or interaction with the company. Further, it does not facilitate communication or interaction with other consumers or related companies where exchanges would be beyond its control. Although passive, the web presence of the controlling company is dictatorial in the selection of features, and ultimately information and knowledge, about the company and its products that it allows consumers to access.

A commercial exchange or sale involves a degree of interaction and participation with the customer. The controller’s websites consistently show significant resistance to facilities
enabling participation. A proportion of the Controllers do not have an online sales facility. Instead their approach is designed to “draw customers into the physical stores” (Qualitative data response from one Controller - Company 73). The orientation of the website suggests a power imbalance and a controlling relationship.

In terms of Lemke’s Organisational function (Lemke), none of the companies classified as Controllers included links to related websites (e.g. a DIY store may choose to provide a link to a site with interior design tips and guides, or a toy store may link to educational advice and child development sites). They preferred to have a very definite symbolic boundary or sphere of control. According to Epstein, “symbolic boundaries are lines that include and define some people, groups and things while excluding others” (Epstein, 1992). In the literature on symbolic boundaries (Bourdieu, 1984; Goffman, 1990) it is recognised that they play an important role “in the creation of inequality and the exercise of power.” (Lamont, 1992) The symbolic boundary of the website is not only a boundary between the company and the customer, but a way of exercising power over the customers’ experience.

The Controllers who offer few opportunities for communication and interaction, preferring to disseminate codified, explicit knowledge, often give information about the company on their websites. Providing information about the company generally involves the use of static codified artefacts of knowledge reproduction such as a company history or an annual report. Through these artefacts information can be disseminated in a dominant, formal corporate style, presented as ‘true fact’ or “accurate information” (key reason for adopting a website given by one controlling company Company 7) allowing little opportunity for user involvement in constructing the company / customer relationship. The customer is constructed as passive receiver of non negotiable factual information about the company and its products or services. The root metaphor of the discourse adopted by controlling companies is the company as provider of truth.

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6.2.2 The Didactic Company

A didactic approach is one that "intends to instruct, especially excessively. Containing a political or moral message" (Collins, 1983). Its preferred features are 'Ask the Expert' facilities, lifestyle pages with guides, tips and advice. The didactic company adopts the role of expert adviser / instructor. Snowden proposes the existence of 'expert' and 'non-expert' cultures, which are differentiated by the forms of language used (Snowden, 1998). Nolan notes that "In the former culture, the members use a meta-language, which communicates expertise and prohibits entry by non experts, whereas a non expert culture will exhibit commonplace language accessible by anyone" (Nolan, 2003). This illustrates the essence of the difference between the "Didactic Company" and the "Participant Company" proposed here. Websites classified as Didactic are characterized by features such as guides, activities and 'Ask the Expert' email facilities. They do not incorporate features which enable interactive company to customer and customer to customer communication or socialisation.

The website evaluations found that whilst some of the companies in this group provided company histories and reports, others used 'Ask the Expert', games and activities, or tips and guides to give information about the company in a less obvious way. Therefore, this split in values across the group could reflect different approaches to the role of 'educator' adopted by the Didactic companies identified in this research. It also reflects the mix of explicit and tacit knowledge used in a didactic approach.

Through features such as a database of FAQs initiated by customers, the didactic company sets itself up as the "wise expert" offering help and advice in the form of stock answers from a corporate script, or 'expert culture' as Snowden proposes. The games and activities often found on the didactic company's website are reminiscent of the "learning through play" approach to education. Similarly, in keeping with didacticism, the advice, guides and tips features often contain a political or moral message. For example one company's website has a style guide promoting a product connected with a charity:

"We support Fashion Targets Breast Cancer with these exclusive flip flops. Featuring the famous target pattern associated with the cause, and a
complementary lime green sequined strap, these flip flops are not only a summer must-have but £3 from every sale goes directly to Breakthrough’s programme of breast cancer research.”

Another company has a wine guide with the reminder:

“And don’t forget those who may be driving home, under the age-limit or off alcohol for whatever reason. Always offer non-alcoholic alternatives. So people don’t feel too left out, make something fun and different”

The Didactic Company provides features for communication with its customers, but has clearly defined “roles”, setting the company apart as the “expert” to educate rather than to interact and share knowledge with. In the examples given above, the orientation is of knowledgeable expert company to a customer who is in need of advice on fashion (“flip flops are not only a summer must-have”), on the social graces of organising a party (“don’t forget those who may be off alcohol”), and in need of moral direction (“£3 from every sale goes directly to Breakthrough’s programme of breast cancer research” “Always offer non-alcoholic alternatives”).

In terms of organisational function the websites of Didactic Companies had a less well defined boundary than did the Controllers. Didactics more frequently provide links to related websites permitting the user to explore beyond the companies own sphere of control. For example a DIY store chose to provide a link to a site with interior design tips and guides reinforcing both the theme of home improvement (presentational function) and the source’s role as educator of the visitor / customer (orientational function).

This idea of the ‘all knowing company’ offering us advice and moral guidance that appears to be in our own interest is reminiscent of Foucault’s theory of social control (Burr, 1995). In the hierarchical, authoritarian company /consumer relationship constructed through the discourse of the capitalist economy the company has the stamp of authority, and thus moral guidance such as that offered by the didactic companies in this research acts as a form of
social control. More than that, there is a distorted understanding of the relationship in operation here. An acceptance of this helpful, advisory company construct offering advice which we may take up resulting in the purchase of the flip flops, or extra non-alcohol drinks masks the "real material state of affairs" (Burr, 1995), i.e. that the company wants us to purchase more products with vast price mark ups enabling them to increase their profit margins. The understanding of the relationship or, more precisely, of the position of the customer is distorted by these widely accepted beliefs that the company is the expert and knows what consumers need. Through this "false consciousness" (Marx and Althuser in Poster, 1984) and the real state of affairs (that companies exploit and make vast profits from consumers) is masked. This is particularly effective where the root metaphor of the discourse adopted by a company is that of company as educator. Two authoritarian roles (educator and commercial provider) combine to effectively obscure the power relations at work, yet control the customer and, society at large through the collective false consciousness.

6.2.3 The Participatory Company

A participatory company promotes what Snowden refers to as a "non expert culture" (Snowden, 1998). Nolan notes that "a non expert culture will exhibit commonplace language accessible by anyone" (Nolan, 2003). This echoes the theory of personalised knowledge, and knowledge construction through social interchange. In this approach, knowledge is socially constructed and based on experience. As Scarbrough and Swan note, the dominant metaphor of socially constructed knowledge is the human community and the critical success factor is trust (Scarbrough and Swan, 1999). Similarly, participatory companies are those who provide opportunities to interact with an emphasis on the human community. There is a body of literature on user participation in information systems design, some of this has been cited in previous chapters. However, this generally refers to the initial 'back office' design of the system. The idea of participative commercial websites puts a new spin on participative design. Participatory companies' websites feature facilities of high interaction with facilities for dynamic social exchange and few static artefacts of codified knowledge. This research suggests that in the participatory approach to
eCommerce, knowledge can be socially constructed through communication and interaction between companies and customers, and amongst customers.

The preferred features of this type of approach to eCommerce are features of dynamic interchange with a range of opportunities for communication or interaction with the company, and other consumers. Features such as 'contact a named member of the company', consumer reviews, newsgroups, and online communities are characteristic of this approach. The company participates with consumers in pursuing knowledge about the company, its products and services. They are mutual participants in the construction of the company / customer relationship. One Participatory company stated that "specific consumer content (e.g. reviews)" is a key feature of their website.

Organisationally, Participatory companies are those whose websites feature links to related sites such as consumer review sites beyond the companies own boundary, sites of partners, and affiliates, or those with a thematic connection. For example, a music retailer in the participatory category provides links to music themed chat rooms. However, significantly, the company controls the content of its own website and in its selection of links to other sites maintains some control over the customers' experience beyond the boundaries of its own site. Orientationally, an unusual twist on the construct of company as provider of information and customer as seeker of information appears on the same site. The site hosts a "music gossip" forum. Visitors to the site are invited to email responses to questions such as "what music have you been playing this week?" to be posted on a bulletin board. Here, on a site with a "non expert culture" the customer becomes provider of information to other customers. Further, through the selection of the word "gossip" ("email us at gossip@xxxxxxx.com") the company is constructed as a friend, someone with whom you may sit down, relax and have a good old gossip.

Interestingly, the three companies that fell into the Participatory category were two book retailers and one music retailer. These are commodity type products with much competition from other eCommerce retailers. These companies are employing a "differentiation strategy" (Porter, 1996) through this participatory mode. Where there is a central interest
around which a community can be built the participatory approach is achievable and effective. The orientation is constructed less around an expert company / inexpert customer and more around a mutual C2B and C2C interest. Establishing an online community within a retail companies’ website involves a high level of participation. An online community facilitates socialisation and dynamic social interchange between members, in this case customers, and depending on the level of involvement, company representatives. However, it must be remembered that the forum in which this interaction takes place is the territory of a commercial enterprise. Ultimately the company has the power of censorship and controls the content of customer offerings. As Habermas (1984, 1987) states, those with the economic power control the communication space, and so power distorts communication preventing the ideal speech situation, or unfettered communication on equal terms.

The root metaphor of the discourse adopted on the participatory company’s website is one of company as peer or even friend, someone you would like to visit again. Again, this discourse creates a false consciousness and masks the “real material state of affairs” (Burr, 1995). The understanding of the relationship or, more precisely, of the position of the customer is distorted by the masquerade of the company as a “friend”. As with all commercial websites, the participatory companies have the key aim of selling products and making a profit. The “real state of affairs” is that in its approach the Participatory company markets products and services through other customers. Similarly, collecting such information enables the company to construct knowledge about customer’s tastes for marketing purposes. From a Foucauldian perspective this production of knowledge about us as customers can be used to control us whilst (through use of an established social discourse) appearing to be in our own interests.
### Table 12 Company Types in Terms of Lemke’s Semiotic Functions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company Type</th>
<th>Presentational</th>
<th>Orientational</th>
<th>Organisational</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Controlling</td>
<td>Sequential text&lt;br&gt;Corporate feel&lt;br&gt;Static reproduction of &quot;brochureware&quot;</td>
<td>Authoritarian company: controlled consumer.&lt;br&gt;Expert culture</td>
<td>Defined boundaries, few links.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didactic</td>
<td>Links to “educational” or “lifestyle” sites.&lt;br&gt;“Text book” format</td>
<td>Knowledgeable / expert company: inexperienced, less knowledgeable consumer.&lt;br&gt;Expert culture</td>
<td>Links to related sites connected to thematic and orientational function</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory</td>
<td>Many hypertext links.&lt;br&gt;Highly interactive.&lt;br&gt;User autonomy: Creates own experience of company</td>
<td>Peer : Peer or friend: friend&lt;br&gt;Mutual participants in the construction of the company / customer relationship.&lt;br&gt;Non expert culture</td>
<td>Links to related sites. Ads for partners and affiliates</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 6.3 Conclusions of Phase Two

A semiotic analysis of retail websites illustrates that the ingrained power relations of the established order of the capitalist economy or “consumer society” remain strong. Although a new channel, eCommerce does not exist in a vacuum, but within a long established tradition of company / customer culture, interactions and hierarchies. This (ideology) code or discourse is drawn upon in obvious ways such as the use of brand names and logos, and the adoption of the shopping trolley icon or basket concept (see Fig. 16) to create a sense of familiarity. However, the new medium enables the adoption of discourses which are less familiar in the company / customer relationship to mask ingrained power relations or the reified “reality” of the situation.
In the interaction with a commercial website two levels of “consumer” are constructed; The consumer of the product or service, and the consumer of the text (website). Turning again to the field of literary criticism, or more pertinently textual analysis, Barthes’ distinction between the passive consumer of the readable (lisable) text and the active producer of the writable (scriptable) text takes on a new relevance here (Barthes, 1990). The readerly (lisable) text is aimed at a passive consumer and so “stabilises and meets the expectations of the reader” (Belsey, 1980) through familiarity (e.g. checkouts, logos, passive consumption). The writerly (scriptable) text is aimed at a consumer who is actively involved in creating meaning or constructing a relationship with the author, and so “is a text that discomforts the reader and creates a subject position for him/her that is outside of his/her mores or cultural base” (Belsey, 1980). In this case, the writerly text can literally become writerly. Not only can the customer actively construct meaning as she interacts with the website, but she is invited in and encouraged to help create the text by contributing reviews, emailing or ‘chatting’ to company representatives. The three types of company approach identified here (controlling, didactic, participatory) could be seen as part of a metamorphosis from the readerly (controlling) to the writerly (participatory). At first glance it would seem that the approach of the participatory company offering the opportunity for the consumer to assist in creating the ‘text’ is attempting to deconstruct the established order of things. However, it could be argued that instead this participatory approach creates an “illusion of complicity between the author and the reader”, between the company and the customer, giving more, not less validity to the dominant ideology. For Barthes (1990), the writerly text becomes polyphonic (incorporating a multiplicity of voices), yet the reader
may not recognise the plurality, or may, within their own context of the established order of things, elevate one discourse above another. In their mode of writing or discourse, the company can “lead readers to select and privilege” one voice over the others (Belsey, 1980). For example, in a FAQs list within a commercial website multiple voices are at work, the many customers who have (or are supposed to have) asked the questions and the company who responds from the privileged discourse of ‘knowledgeable expert’. Similarly, within a reviews section a company may ask “Was this review useful to you?” setting themselves up as adjudicator, with an implication that in contrast to the other text on the site, the reviews may not be useful, or even ‘true’.

In exploring Foucault’s view that power is an effect of discourse, Burr points out that:

“...We can exercise power by drawing upon discourses which allow our actions to be represented in an acceptable light.....To define the world or a person in a way that allows you to do the things you want is to exercise power”

(Burr, 1995)

This semiotic (content and discourse) analysis of commercial websites suggests that eCommerce in its current form is not empowering people. Instead, it is providing another channel for companies to construct or define the ‘consumer’ in a way that allows them “to do the things they want”, to ‘manage’ or control the long established company / customer or producer / consumer relationship. Companies are continuing to orientate themselves as knowledgeable, providers of information and products to less expert consumers. Yet the myth that consumers are more in control, informed, and empowered remains strong.

Finally, this chapter offers a semiotic theory of eCommerce. The researcher is aware that in the field of social semiotics interpretation of meaning is key. Here the researcher’s interpretation is presented and related to the wider societal context and to the responses given by companies to questions about their adoption of eCommerce. It is interesting to consider here the ‘sense of audience’ principle, to frame this interpretation in the context of Gidden’s theory that no matter how great the sense of audience is, unanticipated and unintended consequences are inevitable. Put another way, companies cannot anticipate how
customers will interpret or experience their websites. Similarly, in accordance with the
"Intentionalist Fallacy" (Barthes, 1990), or the false assumption that the meanings of a text
are determined mainly by the stated or implied intentions of the author, we cannot assume
that the companies intended the interpretations made here. What is important is that the
meanings both intended and interpreted are created within the context of the company /
customer relationship and a new medium for communication. As Lemke notes, in focusing
on the presentational and relying on "familiarity with genre conventions" actor roles are
ignored in favour of established institutional roles and so power relationships are
reproduced, unquestioningly taken for granted (Lemke, 2002). The theories developed here
concerning the interface between customer and companies could stimulate discussion about
the effect of commercial website design and inform future practice.
Chapter Seven

The Customer Experience

This chapter reports on phase three of the research, the customer experience explored through semi-structured interviews. In keeping with the CST approach the interviews were analysed from a discourse of empowerment. The lack of empirical CST research to offer guidance to the new researcher is reflected upon. Walsham’s (2001) approach, making extensive use of participants’ commentary is adopted in this chapter. Whilst Avgerou’s (2002) approach, making no use of commentary, but referring to themes which emerged, is applied in Chapter 8. Four general themes emerge from the interviews:

1. The Internet
2. Interaction with Commercial Organisations
3. Customer-to-customer Interactions
4. Power.

The themes are general, allowing diverse narrative threads and recognition of the multiplicity of voices within each theme. Two critical incidents are recounted and a close analysis is given of each. The second incident shows customer to customer knowledge sharing effecting some action and going some way to empowering the customer.

The chapter concludes with a reflection on the CST practice of returning to research participants with outputs of the research, in this case interview transcripts, in order to bring about transformative redefinition.

7.1 Introduction To The Customer Experience

Several themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews with customers. The themes were intentionally general ‘umbrella themes’ allowing diverse experiences and narratives to build up the rich picture of customer experiences, so as not to distil the multiplicity of voices within the texts. It is acknowledged that both the interpreter and the lens used to

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analyse the narratives of the participants of the research will distil the experiences. All interpretations of texts recreate the experience anew. However, the Critical Theory researcher, with her core objective of exposing and addressing domination is consciously aware of bias and subjectivity in interpretation. Through the idea of the interpreter creating a “mystory” or “my story” from the experiences recounted by others, Lincoln and Denzin propose that:

“These narratives begin with the string of personal memory, epiphanies, and existential crises in the person’s biography. The writer moves from these moments into critical readings of those personal, community, popular, and expert systems of discourse that offer interpretations of such experiences. From these critical rereadings, the author fashions a mystory. In these tellings the writer claims ownership over a story previously interpreted from within other systems of discourse. These interpretations are, accordingly, replaced by empowerment narratives suited to personal, political and community purposes.”

(Lincoln and Denzin, 2000)

The purpose of this research is to explore the widely held belief that the internet empowers consumers. The expectation that data will be analysed through an empowerment discourse is clearly set up for the implied reader. The personal purpose is the interest and political orientation of the researcher; the political purpose lies in the praxis or transformative redefinition that the research will propose for eCommerce practices; whilst the community purpose speaks to the community of CST researchers in drawing upon and extending knowledge of the Critical Theory research paradigm.

The interpretations are made through the critical theory discourse or a discourse of empowerment. Within the participants’ narratives, language from discourses of power and control and oppression and revolution was frequently used. Quotations from the text (interview transcripts) are included and are heavily drawn upon in a bid to maintain the pluralism or multiplicity of the voices within that text and avoid the creation of a “grand narrative”, “metanarrative” (Lyotard, 1984) or “unification” (Schwandt, 2001). The
researcher was challenged on this approach during a conference presentation including "dramatic readings" (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) of quotations from these interview transcripts. The challenger (Mitra, 2003) asked if it would not be better to make general points from these interviews than to give individual narratives. The researcher responded that this would be very difficult as these are individual people's stories. At this point in the research, she did not completely appreciate the issues at stake in this question. Following a lengthy period of reflection on this point, and with a greater understanding of the underlying philosophical undertones the researcher maintains this position. These are individual experiences and narratives and should be presented as such. Harvey and Myers, (1995) argue that "generalisable knowledge is often neither relevant nor meaningful, in which case we are better off understanding specific contexts, even though story-telling approaches may be misinterpreted or misrepresented as non-rigorous".

Adopting a critical approach can be problematic for researchers, not least because there are relatively few critical empirical studies which new researchers can draw upon for guidance. It is not obvious how data analysis should be carried out within this paradigm. (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000; Kincheloe and McLaren, 1994). Alvesson and Skoldberg suggest that:

".... a possible research strategy could be to pick out something from within a broader empirical context which throws light on the undertaking or theme in question, and which is amenable to a critical interpretation (that is, touches upon aspects associated with the construction of reality, strongly asymmetrical relations of power, ideology, autonomy and communicative distortions) and to concentrate upon that. We could call this methodological strategy an intensive critical interpretation, or close reading" (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000).

In the light of this, this analysis will concentrate on four "themes" that emerged from both the broader empirical context and a theme analysis of the interviews and offer a critical interpretation. This method is a form of semiotic or discourse analysis, and is in keeping with the semiotic analysis of commercial websites given in Chapter 6 Provision of
eCommerce: A Semiotic Analysis (for a detailed consideration of discourse analysis see Chapter 6). The four themes are as follows:

1. The Internet
2. Interaction with Commercial Organisations (B2C and C2B)
3. C2C Interaction and Communities
4. Power

Table 13 shows the narrative themes which contribute to the general or ‘umbrella’ themes selected.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General theme</th>
<th>Narrative themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The Internet</td>
<td><strong>Information</strong>: range of perspectives, overload, companies gathering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Interaction with Commercial Organisations (B2C and C2B)</td>
<td><strong>Barriers</strong>: website design, channel integration, dishonesty of companies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Communication</strong>: failure to reply, standard corporate reply.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Marketing</strong>: SPAM, ‘pop up’ ads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. C2C interaction and Communities</td>
<td><strong>Community</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Equity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Trust</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Power</td>
<td><strong>Company / Customer boundaries</strong>: Corporate marketing script</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Empowerment / Control</strong>: Invasion, revolution, resigned apathy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 13 Narrative Themes Contributing to the General Themes of the Interview Analysis.
Following the critical interpretation of the interview transcripts in terms of these themes, two participant’s stories or “critical incidents” will be selected for “intensive critical interpretation, or close reading” (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000).

The few examples of empirical critical research frequently adopt vastly differing approaches to data analysis. For example, in his critical work *Making a World of Difference: IT in a Global Context* Walsham (2001) uses extensive commentary from his research participants to support his arguments and the theoretical concepts through which he presents them. In contrast, although Avgerou (2002) interviews her research participants for her work *Information Systems and Global Diversity* she “makes no use of commentary” from them, instead relying upon “her detailed descriptions of historical and cultural context... Without making use of ‘talking subjects’ to comment on how the conflicts arising came to bear on them personally” (McGrath, 2004). This research makes use of both approaches. This chapter will quote extensively from the interview transcripts to support the discussion. The following chapter (Chapter 8: Deconstruction of the Myths Surrounding eCommerce.) adopts Avgerou’s approach, making no use of commentary from the interviews, but referring to themes which emerged to assist in the deconstruction of the myths embedded in the cultural and historical context of the business / consumer relationship.

### 7.2 The Internet

In order to ‘set the scene’, the theme analysis begins with an analysis of how the participants perceive the internet. Through the narratives of what the internet represents to participants the context for the other three themes is created. A common thread runs through participants’ views of what the internet represents to them. It is seen as a source of information (or knowledge), and a means of communication:

“It’s a huge body of information.... Like huge libraries ...So it represents a huge body of knowledge really, more so than anything”

(Interview 6, male 38)
"A source of information really on anything" (Interview 10, female 52)

"It's actually made communication a lot easier for me"
(Interview 9, male, 42)

"It's very easy to get in touch with people all over the world, and I find that
very empowering, a very positive sort of thing. In terms of a source of
information, if you want to know anything, it's all there"
(Interview 5, male, 41)

In terms of communication, the focus appears to be on personal communication rather than
commercial / transactional communication. For example, "It's easy to get in touch with
people all over the world". The notion of "keeping in touch" comes from a discourse of
domesticity and friendship, suggesting it is the ability to communicate with friends and
family wherever they may be that is "empowering" for this participant.

When asked directly about their use of the internet in commercially related activities,
participants frequently referred to the information available about different products rather
than the communication / interaction features of the internet or the ability to purchase:

"We used it just to gather information really relating to the product"
(Interview 2, male, 38)

"It tells you instantly all the information about it .... you can go
on and compare the different prices that they have for the same thing."
(Interview 8, male 24)

More significantly, they referred to the range of perspectives of information or
discourses (expert, non expert, customer, professional) available through the internet:
"Because it’s available, it’s accessible. I’ll get information about the product itself whereas before you’d rely on a salesperson to give you that information. I’ve got there from other sources so it’s different ways of getting information on products that I’m going to purchase" (Interview 12, female 32)

Further illustrating the idea of the internet as source of information, a participant who was planning to buy a camcorder commented that he gathered information from a range of internet sources before making purchasing a purchase:

“It was on company websites, and a lot of reviews were actual consumer reviews, bulletin boards as well, all were consumers. A lot of them were like … using these professionally whether it’s for weddings or whatever, so they were very technical… There were some criticisms against the camera that we were buying, but the group of people on the bulletin boards were all professional people who would actually notice that sort of difference.”
(Interview 2, male, 38)

Information from companies, fellow consumers and professional users was drawn upon here. However, the suggestion that the professional’s reviews were “very technical” and that criticisms were of things that only experts “would actually notice” implies a conflict of interests between the expert/non expert culture (Snowden, 1998) or “speech communities” (Saussure, 1965). This suggests that access to information from a range of perspectives or discourses is not necessarily empowering to the customer. In fact many participants remarked that they experienced information overload, “there’s too much information” (Interview 3, female, 27), and “You can spend so much time just trying to find the information that you want” (Interview 6, male, 38).

The internet represents “information” and/or “communication” to all of the interview participants in this research. These aspects of the internet have been drawn upon in the construction of the myth that the internet empowers customers. However, closer questioning and critical analysis suggests that internet users experience information
overload, information redundancy (for example where the information is from an 'expert perspective'), and speak of the internet as facilitating communication with family and friends rather than in a commercial context. Further, the facilitation of information gathering by companies is seen as another way for companies to control and exploit customers:

“I've filled in enquiry forms and that sort of thing, where they are basically gathering data on me.....I just don't like the idea anyway because all they need to do is put in your postcode and your name and there you go! They've got you! And how do they link that up with other databases? You don't know do you?” (Interview 4, male, 49)

The discourse of suspicion and uncertainty here echoes the form of oppression used in Bentham's panopticon "this model of undetected surveillance keeps those watched subordinate by means of uncertainty." (Lyon, 1993)

The following sections will explore these issues in greater depth.

7.3 Interaction with Commercial Organisations

Even though participants related that the internet has opened up communication and information channels, their narratives invoked a strong sense of barriers separating customers and companies. Narratives using language which constructed dichotomies of oppressor / oppressed, and metaphors of power and control, invasion, and revolution were pervasive. Participants constructed images of companies as uncommunicative, deceitful, and controlling. They recounted how they waited for days for replies to emails, then got only an automated reply rather than a personal communication, or were “lied to”, or given inferior quality goods. It is significant that many participants spoke of how companies collect information about them. The concept that “information is power” is brought to mind and suggests strongly asymmetrical relations of power between the companies and the customers.
The barriers participants experienced separating them from companies ranged from poorly designed or inefficient websites:

“Some websites you get a list of topics and it could be in there, it could be in there, so you click on here and that gets you to somewhere else where it might be there or it might be there. It’s a labyrinth and you get fed up with it. They’re thrown together by people who write PC software” (Interview 5, male, 41)

“When something hasn’t worked and I’ve found a blockage that I couldn’t get around, you know it gives you very negative feelings. Because you’ve got nobody directly to speak to it can be very frustrating. It’s almost like dealing with a faceless bureaucracy kind of thing – you know, there’s simply no way around the system and it leaves me feeling useless” (Interview 4, male, 49)

and lack of channel integration:

“I emailed them and I had to ask them by email could they give me a phone number to contact them..... They emailed me back with a telephone number and I phoned up, but I couldn’t have done that from their website alone so that was a problem” (Interview 12, female, 32)

To a more negative construct of companies as dishonest and deceitful:

“...they lie. Companies are selling products that they haven’t got in stock” (Interview 2, male, 38)

“Of course you hear loads of stuff like ... if you order online you get not so fresh produce. ‘Let’s get rid of it on our internet buyers’” (Interview 1, male, 48)
Interviewer follows up with:

‘Do you buy groceries online?’

Respondent elaborates with:

‘No I don’t. I wouldn’t buy fresh produce anyway, I wouldn’t trust them’

Another barrier to consumer / company interaction was lack of a personal response to emails, delays in responding or simply failure to reply at all. Significantly one participant responded that:

“If you talk to someone it’s just that you feel like they’re doing something about it. It might not actually be any different it’s just a perception. If I get something personal saying “so and so has received you order blah blah”, you know, you can tell when it’s not just an automatic reply” (Interview 6, male, 38)

The same participant commented that if an email:

“Just sits there for 5 days in an email box and nobody reads it and you’re just “Well what the hell’s going on”? (Interview 6, male, 38)

This suggests that although the internet has the potential to facilitate communication, companies are not necessarily adopting strategies which enable improved communications with customers. Standard automatic replies are not perceived as opening up communication channels, but reinforce the perception of barriers between customer and company.

In stark contrast to having to wait for days for personal replies to emails, customers are frequently bombarded with electronic marketing communications. This can be interpreted as “communicative noise”, or the tendency for communication space in social situations to be distributed asymmetrically in accordance with status hierarchies (Habermas, 1987). In this situation the companies hold the higher status and have the power to dominate the communication space with their chosen messages (Alvesson, 1996). Electronic marketing
messages prompted strong reactions expressed in terms of power relations and, in many cases, ending rather interestingly with imagery of closing down communication channels, or of revolutionary action:

“I don’t like getting advertising material. I don’t read it because if I want to find out about something then I will find out about it. So it just goes in the bin”
(Interview 10, female, 52)

“I hate it. It irritates the hell out of me. I hate being bombarded with junk e-mail. I can’t stand it. It’s the scourge of the internet. I really think that it needs controlling there’s no control, you know with the internet it’s unstoppable isn’t it? It’s going to put people off” (Interview 6, male, 38)

Interviewer follows up with:
“So you wouldn’t be likely to respond to a promotional e-mail?"

Respondent replies:
“If someone starts bombarding me with emails I’d just refuse to buy anything from them just out of principle.”

and from a rather more revolutionary discourse:

“I don’t like having to look at advertising. If you log onto the internet you’re becoming increasingly bombarded with stuff coming into your computer. You come off the internet and you realise that there’s three or four windows up of advertising stuff and you weren’t even aware that they had come into your machine and I don’t like that. They do it so that the window is slightly shifted so that you can’t get to the cross. Somebody’s thought all this through and it’s just irritating and they should be shot.” (Interview 5, male, 41)
In the narratives of the participants in this research, the internet does not facilitate communication with companies, nor does it enable the erosion of organizational boundaries, but appears to strengthen them. For them, the social processes that encourage knowledge construction are not taking place on commercial websites. A valuable source of knowledge about products and services, is not being heard by companies.

7.4 Customer-to-customer Interaction and Communities.

A major theme that emerged from the interviews was the sense of “community” between customers. Participants were not asked directly about their participation in, or membership of online communities, but the theme strongly emerged. One participant noted that the internet is “a very good way of making contact with like minded people” (Interview 9, male, 42). Field notes made by the researcher immediately after each interview frequently highlighted one point at which the participant became animated and enthusiastic. The change in tone was in stark contrast to that used in narratives of researching and buying products or in communicating with companies and was invariably linked to narratives of interactions with other consumers. One participant became animated when talking about the website of a farm where she regularly takes holidays:

“There’s a place we go in Scotland who now have a website where you can keep up to date with the site. Because I’m into pigs and I collect pigs and this particular place we went was on a farm and they had pigs, so she puts photographs of the pigs on the website and you can email and ask how the pigs are. She obviously sends out marketing information too about, you know, we’ve just bought another cow or whatever and they’ve built up a real base of people who go. She’s even got a forum, I mean she’s got the right idea.” (Interview 3, female, 27).

For another, it was a self-help group for a specific medical condition that sparked enthusiasm (Interview 4, male, 49):
“My wife was looking at medication, certain medicines that the doctor had recommended and before taking them, she’d sort of heard that they might be harmful and she’s gone on there to collect all kinds of research. She got a lot of information on it which altered what she actually settled for, got a lot of information about medical conditions and was much more informed about what options she should take and that sort of thing.” (Interview 4, male, 49).

A third participant spoke very animatedly about ebay:

“Then because I had some questions I actually emailed the fella and he was just brilliant because he kept e-mailing me back saying ‘Hello, Susan. Now let me just tell you about this game that I’m sending you’ and it was brilliant, it was like making a new friend. It was really, really good. I was very impressed with ebay. It’s like a community. It’s like you see names coming up time and time again and you can read what they’ve done in the past with other people and how good they’ve been and things like that. They say things about you and you say things about them, it’s a two way thing so it’s worth it”
(Interview 12, female, 32.)

This contrasts greatly with another participant’s comment that corporate marketing messages are ‘a one way thing’ (Interview 11, male, 30), preventing social interaction and exchange and dominating the communication space.

These accounts also illustrate how meaningful and valued interchanges are most frequently constructed around an area of interest rather than within a purely commercial interaction. More significantly, even though participants spoke of how they valued reviews by other consumers ‘because they had no reason to put any falsities on there’ (Interview 4, male, 49) a totally different belief about consumer reviews within a commercial website emerged:

‘It’s whether you would actually trust that as a source. Would they actually put very disparaging comments from consumers on their particular site or would
they just be full of glowing reviews for their products?’
(Interview 3, female, 27)

Illustrating an awareness of the control companies could exercise over the messages communicated by other consumers. Another participant noted that:

‘If you wanted something a bit less biased perhaps you could go to a forum, there’s lots of forums where they discuss anything and everything so if you wanted to know what someone really thought about a subject you’d go on one of those.’ (Interview 6, male, 38)

The data collected from the interviews and from the researcher’s own experiences and observations of consumer-to-consumer exchanges on the internet shows a more equitable exchange. Interview participants spoke enthusiastically about consumer reviews and stated that they do consult them and are influenced by them. However, some said they were wary of consumer reviews on commercial sites as this would be under the control of the company and may therefore be edited versions of reviews. Wathieu et al identify this as an area of important research in relation to eCommerce and customer empowerment posing the research question:

“Do consumers differentiate between firm-controlled or consumer advocate websites, in terms of trusting the information provided about other consumers? (Wathieu et al. 2002)

This research suggests that they do differentiate, and further that they look more favourably on consumer websites than on firm-controlled sites.

There is a sense of unity and collective action in consumer-to-consumer interaction, but this is contained away from the commercial sphere of the World Wide Web with little direct impact upon companies. It is almost as if two worlds are evolving. The first is the world of the established order, the companies, government agencies and academics who perpetuate
the myth that the internet is empowering 'consumers'. The second, the counter-culture of
individuals, coming together in new ways to discuss products and services, or carry out
commercial transactions between themselves (e.g. www.epinions.com, www.ebay.com).
However, for this counter-culture to have any impact on the established order and, from the
critical theory discourse, bring about transformative redefinition these worlds must begin to
intertwine. Given the ingrained company / customer power relations in the established
capitalist economy this will be difficult to achieve. The theme of power in the customer /
company relationship will be given more consideration in the next section.

7.5 Power
A discourse of power and control was prevalent in the narratives of the interview
participants. There was the occasional hint of rebellion. However, this was often tempered
with a sense of resigned acceptance on the part of the customers. Critical to this is the sense
of communication breakdown between companies and consumers. One participant narrated
his experience of house hunting on the internet:

“I saw one yesterday, phoned up and it was gone because they haven’t updated
their website. Well why not? This is really annoying especially over something
like that... I mean, I, being the kind of person I am, I was [makes action to
imply speaking on the telephone] WELL WHY NOT?”
(Interview 1, male, 48)

When asked what the response from the company was, the participant responded “Oh, they
just gave me some line, you know”, suggesting a resigned acceptance of a corporate
message in spite of his self construct as a confident and assertive person (“I mean, I, being
the kind of person I am...”).

Habermas proposed that “where power is present, communication is systematically
distorted”, and further that “power would act as a barrier to the free and unconstrained
realization of the human interest in achieving rational truth or enlightenment” (Clegg,
The model of Knowledge Management proposed for this explorative research is a model of socially constructed knowledge, which brings about consumer emancipation and business benefits. The process of socially constructing knowledge depends upon effective communication networks. The participants of this research do not construct a view of the internet as opening up communication channels with companies where social interaction may facilitate the construction and exchange of knowledge. When asked how commercially orientated use of the internet could be improved, one participant responded that they would like to see more transparency or transaction tracking devices. It was significant that the language he used to express this constructed an image of the company as a fortress to be invaded, three times he used the phrase “you could go right into the company”:

“If you could search right into the company without having to phone them up, you could track the progress of where my house purchase is just now, where my will is just now where my injury claim is just now...I think some companies are starting to put these gateways in to go right into the company so you don’t have to talk to anybody, but the security implications must be a minefield because you go right into the company” (Interview 1, male, 48)

This image of invasion also reinforces the idea of organisational boundaries, and barriers between companies and consumers.

Significantly, the participants generally did not feel that the internet empowered them as consumers. Some participants did say they felt empowered, quoting convenience, choice, or competitive prices available through the internet. However, the same respondents commented that they tend to return to the same sites, or only use “well known and well trusted” companies’ websites (Interview 8, male, 24), implying limitation. One participant commented that through the internet “you’re in charge of where you go” However this statement was qualified:
"...You’re in charge of where you go. If there’s links to another site, say it was the manufacturer, you can go and see what else they’ve produced" (Interview 3, female, 27)

This has echoes of a reliance on, or even subjugation to the controlling type of company identified in Chapter 6. Although the participant states that the customer is in charge of where she goes, the implication that this autonomy is limited by the links the company have built into their website is strong. It is the company then that is actually “in charge of where you go”.

Generally participants responded that the internet was “potentially very empowering” for consumers (Interview 6, male, 38) or simply that they did not feel empowered by it. Several participants commented that they were aware of websites where consumers can post their complaints or reviews of companies, but commented that they hadn’t done that as “they just hadn’t got round to it” (Interview 3, female, 27) or because “there’s not much point” (Interview 8, male, 24) implying a resigned powerlessness.

Participants had very low expectations of companies, anticipating poor service and accepting it as the norm, in some cases blaming or mocking themselves for expecting more:

“I’ve done home shopping…. and that was a bit of a nightmare to say the least. It was at Christmas so I didn’t expect anything different….To be fair, I didn’t expect it to be brilliant, especially with it being Christmas….I’m surprised it actually came at all.” (Interview 3, female, 27)

This participant’s narrative will be given more consideration in section 7.5 Critical Incidents.

Gaventa (1980) suggests that where ingrained power relations exist as reified reality apathy, fatalism, acceptance and resignation become the “norm”. The narratives of the
participants in this research appear to demonstrate such feelings, illustrating apathy and resigned acceptance of the poor service and negative experiences they encountered. At the end of each interview the participants were asked how commercially orientated use of the internet could be improved. Responses ranged from “I’m not really a future thinker” (Interview 21, female, 38), to “It depends on what services companies would like to offer via the internet” (Interview 2, male, 38) with a sense of political inertia, and the implication that it isn’t for the customers to make demands, but for the companies to decide what they will offer to us. This reinforces the construct of “consumers” as passive takers of whatever is offered to them and rejects the possibility of participative information systems design.

7.6 Critical Incidents

Critical incident analysis is both a method of data collection and analysis. It is usually used as part of a wider research framework to explore a particular aspect of the phenomena under study to a greater depth. The process involves the description and analysis of a specific event or story. In the case of this research, the descriptions (or narratives) of the events were constructed during the interviews. Reflecting on the theme analysis of the interviews (above), the researcher decided that closer analysis of a number of critical incidents would offer a richer picture or more “intensive critical interpretation” (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) of some of the relevant issues.

7.6.1 Online Grocery Shopping Incident.

The first incident is taken from Interview 3 and is the story of an online grocery shopping experience.

Respondent: I’ve done home shopping and that was a bit of a nightmare to say the least. It was at Christmas so I didn’t expect anything different. Half the shopping was missing. Where online it had said things were out of stock were in stock and things that it had said were in stock were out of stock and some of the products were at the sell by date. They were really good the company. They sent someone out the next day with a replacement but
it was the time period, and it was literally the last minute of that time period when they arrived that sort of thing. To be fair I didn’t expect it to be brilliant especially with it being Christmas.

**Interviewer:** So you said that the company was “good”?

**Respondent:** Yes, I rang the helpline and within minutes the local store that did the delivery was on the phone. They then rang back after it had been resolved to apologise and asking if I wanted the manager to ring me and all this, but they didn’t have proper carriers for home shopping. Like one item per carrier bag. It was more stressful than going to the shop I think, because walking down the hall with hundreds of bags where you’d be a bit more organised yourself. But I think they were new to it themselves.

**Interviewer:** Which company was it?

**Respondent:** Asda, I know Tescos and Sainsburys are a bit more organised but I tried them because our dog eats their dog food – that’s one thing that was wrongly delivered. Because I thought I’ll do a big shop and then we’ve got it until the end of January, so most of it was dog food. But the way they came, bottles of wine in carrier bags and not in holdalls and you know it wasn’t a very good experience. We’ve not done another big shop since because we’re still eating it.

**Interviewer:** Did you have to pay to get it delivered?

**Respondent:** No because it was over £100. I can’t be totally disheartened about it because it was Christmas and I’m surprised that it actually came at all because it must have been bedlam. You had to book your slot like two weeks in advance because it was so busy at Christmas whereas now I’ve been on the web site and you can get it tomorrow so they never had enough people working on it. But for food shopping if they got themselves organised I’d do it all the time because I hate supermarket shopping. Plus you know I’ve got a back problem so I can’t lift heavy things when I’m on my own anyway. It is
convenient but then you still have to carry it from the front door I might as well wait until my husband is there.

Interviewer: Were you satisfied with the service generally?

Respondent: Yes generally, my husband actually took the phone call and they wanted to know what the problem was and he said "well she wasn't too happy about the lettuce," which is about all he remembered. But the funny thing was, the lettuce was that day's date, and it was just a comment because half of the shopping was missing. They said "is there any other problems?" I just said "well actually, all the fresh produce that I got all had today's date and it wasn't delivered until 9.00 pm and I wasn't going to eat a whole lettuce by whatever", so they said "OK, we'll send you another one for free". The next day they brought one and it had that day's date on it, so it was the same thing over and over again. If they would have asked me, I suppose I..., because my expectations weren't too high, but somebody else would expect it perfect, you know and they'd have said it was worse.

In this narrative the tone of low expectation and acceptance of poor service dominates. The participant readily reiterates an excuse for such poor service "it was Christmas" four times, as if providing a justification or defense for the company. Further, she comments that the company "were new to it themselves" with the implication that this absolves them of responsibility for poor service.

Her description of the online ordering system gives a sense of confusion and disorder:

"Where online it had said things were out of stock were in stock and things that it had said were in stock were out of stock and some of the products were at the sell by date."

However immediately following this is the line "They were really good the company", before she goes on to say how the delivery arrived on the last minute of the allocated time period. The entire narrative is rich with the juxtaposition of complaints, praise and
justification. This participant appears unable to simply state that the experience of online shopping with this company was a negative one. It is as if she is “towing a corporate line”, unable to voice a criticism against the dominant company without a justification or some praise to soften the blow. Her complaints become a “suppressed discourse” (Foucault, 1980), hidden in praise and justification in a bid to maintain the “established order of things” (Sim and Van Loon, 2001) Interestingly, at the end of the narrative the participant projects her dissatisfaction onto “somebody else”:

“...because my expectations weren’t too high, but somebody else would expect it perfect, you know and they’d have said it was worse.”

Perhaps it is the participant’s alter ego “a close and trusted friend who almost seems part of yourself” (Hyperdictionary, 2000) almost yourself, but not quite. Distant enough to voice an opinion that you, yourself would suppress, that would have said “it was worse.”

Turning to the participant’s narrative and interpretation of the company’s response to this situation, it is interesting that the company “rang back after it had been resolved to apologise and ... asking if I wanted the manager to ring me”. The fact that the manager did not ring to apologise is significant. Asking the customer if they would like the manager to ring them serves two purposes. Firstly it reinforces a status hierarchy through the idea that a higher authority is invested in the manager. This is an important person who doesn’t make telephone calls to customers unless they are pre-arranged. The customer must almost ‘request an audience’ with the manager as one would with a Prime Minister or a Queen. Secondly, it shifts the responsibility of this squarely onto the customer, almost asking “are you that important?” “Ought you really to be taking up the manager’s time?” The whole discourse reinforces the power of the company over the customer.

This participant highlights another interesting failure in eCommerce. Home ordering and delivery of groceries is a service that could be of great benefit to the housebound and people with disabilities. She comments that she has a “back problem” and can’t lift heavy things so home delivery should be convenient. However, “...you still have to carry it from
the front door" “Like one item per carrier bag. It was more stressful than going to the shop I think, because... walking down the hall with hundreds of bags” and ultimately, “I might as well wait until my husband is there”. A facility which could bring benefits to a marginalised group in society serves to reinforce the established order of things and perpetuate this hegemony.

Finally, the participant’s narrative ends with “If they would have asked me...”, but significantly they did not ask, and so she did not tell. Communication remains distorted, the ideal speech situation between companies and customers cannot be brought about simply by eCommerce adoption. Ingrained power relations continue to distort communication. Customers continue to accept substandard service and companies do not hear or respond to feedback which could help to improve their services. The cycle continues.

7.6.2 A Community of Dissatisfied Customers

The second incident illustrates both customer-to-business and customer-to-customer interaction. It is the participant’s narrative of finding negative comments from other customers about a company she was dealing with.

**Interviewer:** Have you got any particular experiences of researching products online?

**Respondent:** Well, I suppose so. We’re buying a new house and we had a look at a web site, we did a search on the web on Google at the company who is building the houses and we came up with some sites that were saying “This company had built these houses and the standard of building was appalling.” That made us think quite seriously about whether we should proceed with what we were doing. That was unexpected, I wish I’d not found that.

**Interviewer:** Who’d written them?
**Respondent:** It was people who had bought the houses and were not satisfied with them and they were telling about their experiences and they had set up a web site like for people who had had similar experiences from all different developments.

**Interviewer:** So did you decide to do anything about that?

**Respondent:** Well we decided to ask more probing questions about how they guaranteed the standard of work..... workmanship to build and what foundations they were going to use in the ground, you know that they were building on etc etc. Did they make sure that their electricians were accredited or whatever and do they inspect and test the electrics and you get a certificate to, you know, to prove that, so it just made us more cautious. But you should be because you’re spending a lot of money and you should be, but perhaps you’re too nice about things, so it just made us a lot more inquisitive, asked more questions about what they were doing and how they ensured the quality.

**Interviewer:** That sounds good because you at first you said “I wish I hadn’t found this” but its good that you did isn’t it?

**Respondent:** Yes, it is, but you read it and you think “Oh my God!”

**Interviewer:** Is this before you’d signed?

**Respondent:** We had signed, we hadn’t exchanged contracts, but we’d put money down, a reservation fee down which was about £250, which is when you compare it to the thousands of pounds that you spend buying a house, its not that much, but you still think.

**Interviewer:** Did you tell them that you’d found this web site?

**Respondent:** Yes

**Interviewer:** What did they say?
Respondent: “We’ve got a certain amount of customers that are happy and there might be the odd one that is dissatisfied and it’s their right to say what they want.” They were kind of saying that they had nothing to hide and they addressed the questions that we had.

Interviewer: It’s good because you might not have known the questions to ask.

Respondent: I wouldn’t have asked those questions, I would have presumed that if someone is building houses and has been for a number of years knows what foundations to use and if they’re NHBC registered and inspected then that should be enough to guarantee the property but it’s not.

In theory, this group connectivity or customer-to-customer discussion group set up by people who had negative experiences with the company for those who had negative experiences with the company should be empowering; customers coming together for collective action against a substandard company. On initially hearing this narrative the researcher happily interpreted it as an example of customer empowerment through connectivity with other customers. This was going to be evidence of how the internet does empower customers. However, following repeated readings and reflection any sense of empowerment, or praxis is difficult to identify.

The participant begins by recounting how they looked for information on the internet after they had signed a contract and paid a deposit to this company. When they found the negative experiences of other customers it “....was unexpected. I wish I’d not found that.” This participant expresses a wish to have remained ignorant of the knowledge that other customers had experienced poor service from the company she had agreed to do business with. This would have absolved her of having to take any action. In finding this information there is an implied call to action which this participant clearly does not want. There is an implied dissonance in the customer experience. Having gained this information the customer is required to take an active role rather than the customary passive one that ‘consumers’ take.
On reflection, the participant noted “that made us think quite seriously about whether we should proceed with what we were doing”. Significantly, this information did not cause the participant to renge on the contract, and they *did* proceed. Further, the participant comments “perhaps you’re too nice about things” suggesting the power imbalance between companies and customers which fosters a submissive acceptance of corporate scripts. However, the knowledge or experiences that other customers were sharing within their community did enable these people to ask “more probing questions” and made them more “cautious” indicating a glimmer of *praxis*. Use of the knowledge exchanged within the community of disgruntled customers effected some action on the part of this customer, going some way to empowering her.

The company’s response to the customer experiences on the website is interesting. The participant narrates this as:

“We’ve got a certain amount of customers that are happy and there might be the odd one that is dissatisfied and it’s their right to say what they want.”

There are enough dissatisfied customers with the motivation to set up an online community, therefore there must be more than the “odd one” who is dissatisfied. The company comments that the customers “have the right to say what they want to say”. However, they fail to respond to them. They have a right to speak, but presumably not a right to be heard, or to a response. A different company approach which goes some way to addressing this lack of customer-to-company engagement through the internet will be considered in Chapter 9 *Conclusions*.

The participant’s closing lines that regulations and standards or NHBC registration should be enough to guarantee work, highlights the failure of government agencies to protect consumers; a failure that continues in spite of the pervasive and mythical belief in consumer empowerment and collective action through the internet.
7.7 The Customer Experience and *Praxis*

In keeping with the philosophy of critical research, the transcripts of these interviews were shown to a number of the participants for their agreement that this is a ‘true’ representation of their experiences. For the critical researcher, change or *praxis* is the motivation for the creation of new knowledge. *Praxis* “is what changes the world” (Harvey, 1990), which means that “the subjects of research are analysed in terms of their potential for developing group action against prevailing oppressive social structures.” (Nolan, 2003). For the critical theorist intent on bringing transformative redefinition or emancipation the process of discussing interview transcripts and interpretations with participants can serve this purpose. In discussing the record of the interview and how it has been rewritten, or interpreted, with the participant, the opportunity arises to introduce ways in which the participant could attempt to change a situation or emancipate themselves. In some research projects (Stahl, 2004) this could be a very contentious issue with many ethical concerns. However, given the focus of this research (eCommerce and the interactions of companies and consumers) encouraging new approaches or actions is unlikely to rouse damaging emotions.

The researcher returned to the participant who had railed against electronic pop up advertisements:

> You come off the internet and you realise that there’s three or four windows up of advertising stuff and you weren’t even aware that they had come into your machine and I don’t like that. They do it so that the window is slightly shifted so that you can’t get to the cross. Somebody’s thought all this through and it’s just irritating and they should be shot.”

(Interview 5, male, 41)

It was anticipated that he would be a prime candidate to lead the *praxis* (or transformation) against controlling and dominating companies. However, his response was one of horror and surprise that he had suggested such dramatic action:
"I wouldn't have said that! I'm not a violent man! No, I wouldn't have said that!" (Follow up interview 5, male, 41)

Until he remembered how irritating he does actually find this advertising practice:

"It is annoying though isn’t it? They do it so that the cross is just off the screen. You have to move the box to get to the cross to close it down, and they've done it on purpose you know. It’s really annoying. *Laughs*"
(Follow up interview 5, male, 41)

This participant initially denies the strength of feeling he expressed in the first interview. Then begins to feel angry again as we discuss the issue. However, his ultimate response is to laugh at his own anger. Again, this shows a resigned acceptance, a sense of powerlessness. A sense of “Yes, but what can we do about it?” Herein lies the difficult task of transformative redefinition.
Chapter Eight

Deconstruction of the Myths Surrounding eCommerce

This chapter launches a direct challenge to the myth that eCommerce brings consumer empowerment. Each of the five strands of the myth outlined in Chapter 1 (section 1.4 Myths of eCommerce) namely: eCommerce will revolutionise retailing, eCommerce offers greater choice and convenience, eCommerce offers greater access to information, eCommerce enables better communication (C2B and C2C), eCommerce brings about personalisation of services to customers, is deconstructed drawing upon both the wider empirical evidence, and the empirical data generated in this research. The chapter concludes that buyer power continues to be regarded as a threat to competitive advantage. The illusion or myth of customer empowerment through the internet could be serving the interests of companies well.

8.1 The Myths of eCommerce

This chapter will challenge the benefits eCommerce is claimed to bring and deconstruct five of the most prevalent myths surrounding eCommerce, namely:

1. eCommerce will revolutionise retailing
2. eCommerce offers greater choice and convenience
3. eCommerce offers greater access to information
4. eCommerce enables better C2B and C2C communication
5. eCommerce brings about personalisation of services to customers

The deconstruction of myths is a fairly well established technique in both information systems and marketing research (Hirschheim R. and Newman, 1991; Grover and Ramanlal, 1999; Howcroft, 2001). According to Bolman and Deal “myths serve a number of functions, including the provision of explanations and the maintenance of solidarity and cohesion” (Bolman and Deal, 1984). They promote a consensus view and often perpetuate
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a shared misconception of the phenomena they describe. For example, Howcroft uses mythology to “provide some explanation as to why so many investors were lured into participating in the dot.com share bubble” (Howcroft, 2001). Through a series of seven myths she questions why so many investors were drawn into financially supporting so many internet start-up companies with no attempt to evaluate these companies “in terms of traditional market criteria and conditions based on rational assessment” (Howcroft, 2001).

“Mania” such as was seen in the dot.com gold rush is not a new phenomenon. In 1841, Mackay wrote:

“We find whole communities suddenly fix their minds upon one object, and go mad in its pursuit; that millions of people become simultaneously impressed with one delusion and run after it, till their attention is caught by some new folly more captivating than the first” (Mackay, 1995)

However, it could be argued that the phenomena of popular delusion has gained increased momentum through the technologically determinist myth that technology per se brings huge benefits, including wealth and empowerment. This section will explore the use of myths to establish and perpetuate the “dubious justifications” (Howcroft, 2001) for the claim that eCommerce is empowering customers. The empirical material presented in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 contribute to this discussion.

8.1.1 eCommerce Will Revolutionise Retailing

Initially, it was widely believed that the Internet would revolutionise retailing. De Kare-Silver writes of “the electronic revolution in retail”, an “inexorable force that will drive electronic commerce forward and reach out to make it so pervasive and accessible that it can’t fail to impact shopping habits”, and ultimately “In 30 to 40 years time (around 2030) there may be no shops at all” (Maurice Saatchi, quoted by De Kare-Silver (2000). De Kare-Silver goes on to give three scenarios which he states “are no longer stories from science fiction” In the first, while Jane is:
“Out relaxing and enjoying herself someone else is walking round the food warehouse picking her order. It’s then all delivered to her, as arranged, freshly picked and packed on Saturday at 10am just as she’s finishing breakfast. Next year her supermarket have announced that they will be providing her with special food supply bins for free. They’ll be fixed in a suitable place to the side of her house and there will be a digital lock on the lid. The supermarket delivery van can then deliver whether she is at home or not. Only they will have the digital key code and the food will be packed in special chilled containers keeping things fresh.”

In the next scenario, John goes to the shoe shop where he is:

“…..shown into a cubicle and invited to sit down in front of a computer screen. The instructions tell him to place his feet on special plates. He touches ‘start’ and his feet are photographed from a variety of angles and detailed measurements taken…..While he’s waiting a shop assistant has brought him some coffee and croissants and the daily newspaper. It’s all so civilised”

John can scroll though all the styles and colours of shoe available on the computer screen, and select any buckle or bow for any shoe. “If he needs help there is an assistant on call. But it is all very easy.” He can either collect his shoes in two hours or have them delivered to his house.

The third scenario outlines how, in response to an email telling him that the interest rate on his mortgage is about to go up, Peter goes online and uses a search engine to look for a mortgage with a better rate. He is able to select from two banks, one in London and one in San Francisco, complete the necessary forms and email his financial advisor to send through relevant documentation all within half an hour! The first time Peter went to get a mortgage he had to visit many banks and brokers, and wait in the bank to see the manager. Now he can do it within half an hour without having to communicate with another human at all.
These scenarios and others, such as the intelligent fridge that directly orders replenishments, frequently recounted in the popular media perpetuate the “hyperbole surrounding the Internet” (Walsham, 2001) and fail to address the distance between the promise and the practice or actual experience. The researcher's own experience of online grocery shopping, and those recounted by participants in the research were not nearly as perfect and relaxing as Jane's in scenario one (See the critical incident analysis Section 7.6.1 Online Grocery Shopping Incident). Further, as Howcroft argues:

“they are underpinned by an inherent determinism. This determinism is based upon the premise that technology drives societal change and also that the population is ready to embrace a technological platform that provides a new channel for commercial delivery.” (Howcroft, 2001)

User take up of new technology is generally more evolutionary, in the constructivist tradition (Bijker, 1999). A new phenomena or trend such as eCommerce does not revolutionise current behaviour as if causing a sudden break with the past tradition (Bell 1973; Webster, 2000 quoted in Howcroft, 2001), but evolves out of, and builds upon current practices. As Howcroft argues:

“Proclamations to the effect that we are entering into a new age should be examined critically rather than simply accepted without question”

(Howcroft, 2001)

The deconstruction of the myth that the internet will revolutionise retail involves consideration of the determinist / constructivist dichotomy and an acknowledgement that the impact of eCommerce will be incremental and evolutionary, building on traditional commerce and retailing practices, rather than revolutionary. For example, many people currently use the internet for personal communication only, and many retail companies (including large high street stores) use the internet for "brochureware" alone, adopting the WWW as an extra advertising channel rather than to radically change the way they do business. Most notably, sectors that show most evidence of being "revolutionised" such as
the music industry have encountered numerous obstacles such as legislative issues, and consumer resistance to new formats which suggests that new technology cannot revolutionise as if in a cultural vacuum, but needs to evolve and build on traditional practices.

8.1.2 eCommerce Offers Greater Choice and Convenience

The myth that through the internet customers are offered more choice has a number of strands. Firstly, it is claimed that the internet enables us to do business with any company wherever they are in the world. Through this “global economy” we are offered a greater range of products and a greater range of companies to select from. Secondly, there is the pervasive view that the internet offers us convenience in the form of 24/7 shopping (shopping, twenty four hours and seven days a week), with no need to leave home.

In terms of the construct of the ‘global economy’, facilitated by technology, and implying a sense of the “compression of time and space” and “of the world as a whole” (Walsham, 2001) a myth is formed that a “level playing field” is created. All the companies of the world no matter what size, no matter what location are purported to be competing on equal terms. As Howcroft notes, this suggests that eCommerce “enables small firms to compete on the same terms as the larger players....yet it must be remembered that the scalability and flexibility of the internet yields similar advantages for both large firms and small niche players.” (Howcroft, 2001), and therefore small firms remain at a disadvantage in terms of market share. The implication of this for customers is that larger firms have more resources to invest in establishing and running a web presence and infrastructure, effectively squeezing out, or buying up the smaller firms and continuing to dominate the market.

With this in mind, it is worth considering the importance of brand in the electronic marketplace. Within the context of the myth of increased choice for consumers an important contradiction can be identified. Whilst we are told that it is now as easy for us to do business with the small business on the other side of the country, if not the world, we are also advised that we should stay with “well known and trusted brands”:

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"Consumers can improve their security by shopping with reputable merchants whose products and policies they trust" (Department of Trade and Industry, 1999)

A plethora of academic literature and consultancy reports support this view theorising on brand power, brand and trust, and consumer confidence and brand. (McLean and Blackie, 2002; Brewer, 2000; Timmers, 2000). This is also borne out by the empirical data presented in Chapter 7 *The Customer Experience*.

Deconstruction of the myth of a greater choice of products and companies points to an increasing homogenisation of the commercial internet, mirroring that of our high streets and shopping centres. It is arguable that a new "superbrand" dominating all channels across a number of sectors and locations has been facilitated by the internet (McLean and Blackie, 2002) effectively narrowing down, rather than opening up, choice.

The second strand to the myth of greater consumer choice is that the internet offers us convenience and a greater choice of when we shop in the form of 24/7 shopping with no need to leave home. Besides ignoring the distance between the promise and the practice as discussed above (Myth number one *Commerce will revolutionise retailing*), this myth is rooted in the assumption that we all want twenty-four hour access to shops from home. Exposure to capitalist consumerism is no longer limited in time (to shop opening hours) or space (the high street or shopping centre), but literally follows us into our homes, and arguably wherever we go through the development of mCommerce (commercial activity over a mobile device such as a phone or PDA). Lyon argues that:

"The worker could once leave the capitalistic enterprise behind at the factory gates. Now it follows him home as a consumer. The same home was once regarded as a private haven. The computerized 'king' may now enter the 'Englishman's castle', at will. Indeed, the householder caries him in" (Lyon, 1993)
Similarly, Robins and Webster (1988) suggest that:

“Not only are we put to work inside the factory, but we are also put to work at home. We have been disciplined into spending our leisure time acquiring material goods and spending money in order to feed the capitalist economy.”

(Robins and Webster, 1988)

Robins and Webster see information and communication technologies as the vehicle through which consumerism is being spread into the homes and private lives of individuals (Lyon, 1993).

Deconstruction of the myth of greater convenience through the choice of when to shop, and the ability to shop from home, calls into question who this convenience actually serves. Whilst it does enable people to shop at any time of day or night from the comfort of their own homes should they wish to do so, it also allows the “capitalistic enterprise” twenty four hours a day seven days a week access to the ‘target consumer’.

This research takes a Critical Theory approach which emphasises reflection and an acknowledgement of how the research changed the researcher. The following is an anecdotal reflection on a timely event that happened whilst the researcher was writing this section of the thesis:

Whilst working at my home PC with broadband internet access I received the following email:
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From: "Fashion World" <general.enquiries@homeshoppingdirect2.com>
To: <rachel.mclean1@ntlworld.com>
Subject: **SPAM: Flower Wellington Boots - The next big thing.
Date: 17 September 2004 10:45

===

!!! FLOWER WELLINGTON BOOTS !!!

Dear Fashion World Customer

The next big thing on the High Street, available exclusively to you online, are these super-cool Flower Wellington Boots. These pretty flowered wellies are this season's MUST HAVE. Whether you want them to look pretty and practical, or fun and stylish, you simply have to have them!

Knowing that these are going to be one of our best sellers we are giving you the opportunity to pre-order yours. With only limited stock, you'll have to hurry to avoid disappointment, then when they arrive at the end of September you'll be guaranteed a pair.

Go on - order yours now
http://www.fashionworld.co.uk/page?pageId=167
Happy Shopping!

On reading this email I actually began to believe that I needed some “super cool flower Wellington boots”, after all, they are going to be “the next big thing”. I clicked through to the fashionworld.co.uk website, grateful that I had been given this “opportunity to pre-order... and avoid disappointment”. On seeing the “MUST HAVE” flowered wellingtons I came to my senses and closed down the web browser. Almost immediately, another email arrived, also claiming to be promoting “the next big thing” and warning me not to “get left behind”:
Don’t get left behind

Dear Ms McLean

We wrote to you recently to tell you about the latest way to manage your money. Online banking’s changing - for the better.

Forget logging in to loads of different sites to see your current account and credit card balances. All you need to do is log on to the Egg website.

With Egg Money Manager you can see your accounts in one place, whether they're with Egg or not.

Don’t get left behind
Register now:
http://e-mail.egg.com/a/tBBSrWIAP5U5YAS7fBTALxFSPJ-/egg2

This time I managed to resist the email instructing me to “register now”, and resolved to work at a non-networked PC in future, or at least until this thesis is complete.

The above anecdote illustrates how the internet allows the “capitalistic enterprise” twenty four hours a day, seven days a week access to the ‘target consumer’. It perfectly illustrates the theory that advertising campaigns “involve an exercise of power through the artificial creation of needs” (Abercrombie et al. 2000). It could be argued that advertising per se has this level of power, but traditional television advertisements (excepting TV shopping channels), billboards, paper based junk mail and so on do not actually facilitate an immediate response such as that encouraged by the discourse of advertising emails like the
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eamples above. Deconstruction of this myth suggests that in practice, choice is actually limited to a small number of well known brands, and the convenience of 24/7 access arguably serves the companies and more specifically the "capitalist enterprise" more readily than the individual.

8.1.3 eCommerce Offers Greater Access to Information

The myth of greater access to information via the internet is one of the most instrumental in the perpetuation of the myth of consumer empowerment (Pitt et al. 2002; Economist, 2004). The general belief is that access to such a volume of information on any subject at the click of a mouse must be empowering. However, access to information alone is not in itself empowering:

"In order to be an active and empowered consumer, individuals need to have access to the necessary information to make an informed decision, and also be in a position to understand and evaluate the information" (Harrison, 2002)

The information gathering stage of a person's decision to purchase is well established in the traditional models of buyer behaviour (Nicosia, 1966; Howard and Sheth, 1969; Solomon et al. 1991). However these models were generally developed before the 'information explosion'. An incomplete search could result in information incompleteness and asymmetry placing the consumer in a vulnerable rather than powerful position. The vast amounts of information available today mean that the ability to structure a search and evaluate information retrieved is an essential skill in the avoidance of information overload and the execution of a productive search. For example, Pitt et al hold up Edmunds.com as an example of information available to inform a buyer's decision:

"Generally, the Net provides a prospective car buyer with a wealth of information. Now an innovative web service, Edmunds.com (www.edmunds.com) takes this even further. It provides prospective customers
with the complete specifications of every model of every make of car available, including all the optional extras that can be fitted.” (Pitt et al. 2002)

They go on to argue that the customer can now enter the car showroom in a much more powerful position. However, not all individuals are able to effectively evaluate such information. Harrison draws the distinction between information as “relevant data” and advice which is “information shaped to the needs of the individual”:

“Whereas an information giver has a passive role (i.e. merely handing over relevant leaflets or giving a general explanation), an adviser actively interprets information offers opinions and probes beyond the immediate problem.” (Harrison, 2002)

Through the perpetuation of the myth of the informed consumer, customers could actually be experiencing a poorer service. Firstly, the responsibility for actively gathering information has been thrust on to the consumer. Terms such as the “prosumer” (Toffler, 1980) and the “responsible consumer” (Gilliatt et al. 2000) have emerged and a government white paper explicitly defines the “better consumer”:

“The better consumers are informed about what the market offers” (Department of Trade and Industry, 1999)

constructing the dualism of the good consumer/bad consumer hierarchy (Derrida quoted in Macey, 2002), with the implication that an uniformed customer is irresponsible. Again, this construction of the “informed consumer” as the norm is of benefit to companies. Information seeking and retrieval incur costs to the customer in terms of time, connection charges, print outs, subscriptions and so on. These are charges which have been passed to the customer by the company (Bakos, 1991). The “better consumer” is possibly doing the work of the company, cutting costs for them in terms of the need for informed staff, staff time and expensive manuals or brochures. Deconstruction of this myth is not intended to imply that information cannot empower, but that a certain level of skill is required to
retrieve and evaluate relevant information. Finally, a challenge to the hierarchy of consumer types suggested in the Government white paper *Modern Markets, Confident Consumers* (Department of Trade and Industry, 1999; perhaps it is the ‘worse consumer’ rather than the “better consumer” who places greater demands upon a company and so assumes the position of power or sovereignty.

### 8.1.4 eCommerce Enables Better Communication C2B and C2C

It is as a communication channel that individuals have most readily adopted the internet into normal routines and practices. Ironically, here the constructivist tradition or evolutionary user approach could actually be fuelling the determinist myth; people use the internet to communicate, the technology is available for people and companies to communicate electronically therefore eCommerce must be enabling better communication between companies and their customers. It is suggested that improved producer - customer communication is empowering to customers:

> “The experience of producer-consumer contact has been portrayed as rewarding and somehow empowering to the consumer, removing distance between the two parties” (Gilliatt et al., 2000)

This claim again ignores the gulf between the promise or expectation and the practice (see section 7.3 *Interaction with Commercial Organisations*). In theory, it is suggested that the internet could bring about a return to the market places of the past, where producers met customers face-to-face and talked about their produce; “marketplaces were conversations” (Levine et al. 2000). Through these conversations knowledge about products and production was exchanged. McAdam and McCreedy (1999) suggest that such informal communication, on an egalitarian basis, could facilitate knowledge creation and exchange. The determinist view is that the internet is facilitating customer to company communication and knowledge exchange and so empowering customers. The challenge to this is, as Walsham notes, “The communication capabilities of the Internet… (do) not eliminate the need to consider the human processes of communication and knowledge sharing.”
Further it does not eliminate the need to consider business processes and practices in relation to communication with customers. In practice, the internet appears to have opened up another channel for companies to disseminate a corporate line (Levine et al., 2000). Wider empirical evidence and the experiences of the interview participants in this research suggest that companies often reply to emails with a stock message from a corporate script which fails to address the questions posed, or simply do not reply at all.

E-mail is generally used by companies as a marketing tool to send out promotional marketing messages which individuals experience as ‘spam’, often quoted as the most annoying aspect of the internet. Companies have not adopted the internet as a means of personal B2C (business to consumer) communication. Few companies have adopted real time chat with customers into their day-to-day practices. Many don’t even respond to emails, or reply with a stock message that doesn’t answer the particular query. Current business practice means that customer communication via the internet amounts merely to marketing messages or SPAM (notably forcing consumers to purchase anti SPAM software) and falling short of the promise.

In contrast, the internet does appear to facilitate customer-to-customer communication. Through consumer reviews, discussion forums, chat rooms, newsgroups and most successfully through online auction sites such as ebay.com, customers are becoming connected, discussing products, companies and services, interacting socially and sharing experiences or knowledge. Consumers can read others’ experiences of products and services and so make a more informed decision over which product to buy. They can even add their own experiences of products and services. However, an interesting question is whether we are conditioned to look for some form of validation for sources of information. Some respondents in this research noted that they would not know whether to “trust” a personal opinion and would usually look for a symbol of validity such as a brand name or logo suggesting that the information was “trustworthy”. This need for validity of ‘trustworthiness’ effectively erases informal customer-to-customer information exchange on independent sites for those customers, and effectively ensures that companies also have
some control over the customer-to-customer discourse or C2C communication. As Foucault wrote:

"Discourse is created and perpetuated by those who have the power and means of communication" (Foucault, 1980)

Through the perpetuation of the myth that the internet can be harmful and deceptive, and our culturally ingrained need for authority's verification and validation of information, commercial companies could maintain control.

Significantly, through companies neglecting to engage in conversations with customers via the internet this medium allows only lateral customer-to-customer communication. It does not facilitate vertical or customer to company communication, reinforcing the boundaries or barriers and maintaining the company fortress. It could be argued therefore that two worlds are operating. The establishment business-to-consumer communications from the corporate script which mirror offline interaction; and the pocket of dissenters, laterally connected through the internet, muttering and complaining to each other, plotting a virtual revolution but in practice having limited transformative effect on the companies who choose not to listen. Interestingly, strategies suggested to companies who find that their services and products are the butt of "unfavourable hate or spoof sites" include pre-empting and buying "URLs for the firm's name precede by "I hate" or followed by "sucks"" or "offer to host the site" thereby gaining some control over the content, and ultimately "sue the site owner" (Pitt et al. 2002). This illustrates how the economic power of the companies enables control of not only business-to-customer communication, but also customer-to-customer communication. Companies can effectively buy up the rights of customers to publicly discuss their products and services.

Deconstruction of the myth that eCommerce enables better communication C2B and C2C shows that although the Internet has the potential to empower customers, current business practices ensure that companies maintain a powerful fortress, controlling communication and limiting its effect.
8.1.5 eCommerce Brings About Personalisation of Services to Customers

One of the key promises of the internet for individuals was that it would enable personalised, relevant and timely marketing. No longer would we be treated as a mass of consumers addressed through broadcast media whether we were interested in the product or not. The internet would enable tailored marketing, treating us as individuals, narrowcasting on a one-to-one basis (Peppers and Rogers, 1996) whenever we gave permission (Godin, 1999). As anyone with an email account, or who regularly carries out searches on the internet will know, the practice is worlds away from this promise. There are many strands making up this myth. The first is that companies send out personal marketing communications. In reality, companies send out a standard email to many people with the individuals name at the top. Inserting a personal name at the top of an email does not make it a “personalised communication”. The second is that promotional emails are tailored to the customer’s interests and needs. In practice, many people receive emails about products and services that they have no interest in whatsoever. This is hardly the personalised, targeted and timely marketing that we were promised. Finally, the concept of permission marketing, whereby a person gives their explicit permission for a company to send out marketing material to them, has been lost under a sea of unsolicited, or third party emails and pop up advertisements.

Personalisation of products and services via the internet could be regarded as the greatest mass delusion of recent times. We have been seduced into believing that by allowing information to be gathered about us we will get a better, more personalised service. In reality the practice of gathering knowledge enables companies to market more directly to us, to follow us into our homes, and to try to convince us that we need whatever they may happen to sell. It has been argued that this knowledge gathering is a mode of surveillance. It is the gathering of knowledge about the interests, preferences, routines and movements of individuals for the benefit of the company:

“...The link is made directly by Frank Webster and Kevin Robins, for instance, who argue that information technologies facilitate the massive extension of Taylorist principles of scientific management from the realm of production into
the realm of consumption. As they say, "teleshopping," global and targeted advertising and electronic market research surveillance all combine to establish a more "efficient" network marketplace" (Lyon, 1993; Robins and Webster, 1988).

Further, Gandy focuses specifically on ways that personal consumer data has "become a vital 'information commodity' within contemporary capitalism." (Gandy, 2000), assisting companies in their marketing strategies and creation of our consumer identities:

"By gathering 'electronic fingerprints', institutions are able to categorize consumers into 'types' and create consumer profiles (we are categorised and segmented). This information may then be used for marketing, or sold to other interests for a variety of purposes (by using the information we have provided, power may be exerted over us)" (Robins and Webster, 1988).

This trade in knowledge about customers, or in 'consumer identities' created from electronic data gathered about us (Poster, 1984), happens with neither our permission nor our knowledge. Ironically, the very aspect of eCommerce that promised to bring us a more personalised tailored service and so empower us as customers is now highly instrumental in enabling companies to exert power over us. Rather than communicate with customers to create mutually beneficial knowledge, companies gather knowledge about customers, sometimes without them even realising it. Several authors have likened this "electronic surveillance" (Lyon, 1993) to Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, or all seeing prison design (Boyne, 2000) which Foucault (1995) highlighted as being greatly significant to modern society. Foucault proposed that panopticism represents a shift from power over the body, as in corporal punishment, to power over the mind as inmates knew that they could be watched by guards at any time, but they never knew when they were actually being watched. As Robins and Webster note:
"The Panopticon is used to isolate and observe its inmates, and therefore, to place them in a position of vulnerability where power can be exercised over them." (Robins and Webster, 1999)

In Foucault's words, the inmate is:

"...seen but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (Foucault, 1995)

It could be argued that by following people into their homes, or in the case of mobile devices wherever they go, and tracking their internet movements or electronic footprints companies do indeed “isolate and observe” individuals. In some ways the means to observe is ‘normalised’ and overt through the need to register on company websites. Other methods such as cookie planting are less well understood, and more covert; surveillance without our knowledge.

Many criticisms have been levelled at the adoption of panopticism to interpret contemporary society. (Robins and Webster, 1999) effectively summarise these challenges: they oversimplify societal relations, they endorse technological determinism, they produce pessimistic representations of society, they reduce society to a prison, and the surveillance powers of information technologies are distorted (Kling and Allen, 1994). However, methods of technological surveillance have advanced since the writing of the sources they quote, and they do conclude that:

“One area of increasing importance to which the panoptic metaphor may be applied... is that of technological/informational inequalities. Gandy (1989) notes that there is an increasing inequality “between those who provide and those who gather personal information.” He argues that what we are seeing today is the creation of technological elites and technopeasants. There is a widening chasm of power between individuals and organisations which is
driven by coordination of computerization and telecommunications.“ (Robins and Webster, 1999)

It has been noted that one area where the panopticon metaphor has great relevance is in the commercialisation of the WWW (Gandy, 2000). The metaphor can be effectively adopted here to explore the myth of personalisation of commercial services through the internet.

8.2 Chapter Conclusion

The myths considered here are all strands of the overarching myth that eCommerce empowers customers. This section shows how each myth can be deconstructed, thus exploding the myth that customers are empowered through eCommerce. The empirical material collected in the course of this research supports the deconstruction of these myths.

In order to address the incongruity between online retail provision and the needs or requirements of customers, retailers who adopt eCommerce need to develop a greater sense of audience and consider the user’s requirements more fully. However, the relationship between “producers” and “consumers” is so culturally ingrained that a true shift in the power balance remains elusive. Customers were redefined as “consumers” with the rise of mass production and became passive objects of the marketing and sales activities of the capitalist enterprise (Levine et al. 2000). A significant twist to the ubiquitous belief that the internet empowers customers lies in the question ‘how far can commercial enterprises actually afford to empower consumers?’ Buyer power continues to be regarded as a threat to sustained competitive advantage and as such needs to be managed effectively (Porter, 1996). The maintenance of the status quo through distorted communications and an illusionary empowerment of customers through the internet could be serving the interests of companies well.
Chapter 9

Conclusions

This chapter outlines the contribution this research makes to existing knowledge and draws conclusions from both the analysis of the data generated in the course of the research, and from the research process itself. Firstly, it will focus on conclusions relating to the empirical theme of the research (that of eCommerce). Secondly it will address the methodological conclusions. The conclusions will be presented in relation to the objectives of the research. Further, as this research was conducted from a critical theory perspective it will be evaluated against the framework proposed by Alvisson and Deetz (2002) and outlined in Chapter 3 (section 3.3.7 Critical Theory in IS Research). Recommendations will be made to the various stakeholders. A final section will outline the contribution made to knowledge.

As with all Interpretive and CST research the conclusions drawn are not generalisable. The researcher does not claim to have discovered the ‘truth’ about how all companies, customers, or researchers behave. This is an interpretation or critique offered by one researcher with a range of biases and à priori beliefs. However, theories generated are transferable and could inform future practice and policy making.

9.1 Empirical Conclusions

As demonstrated by the research objectives outlined in Chapters 1 and 4:

1. To investigate how consumers use the internet in commercial activity (Insight).

2. To critically evaluate the assumption that consumers are empowered by the internet (to debunk or expose the myth that customers are empowered by the internet) (Critique)
3. To make recommendations for eCommerce to customers, companies and government policy makers (Transformative Redefinition).

This research is a study to critique the assumption that the internet will bring about consumer empowerment through opportunities to communicate and share knowledge with companies and other customers. The aim was to illustrate this by:

1. Demonstrating that this assumption derives from the technologically determinist school of Information Systems (IS) thinking (grounded in the myth that technology per se brings huge benefits, including wealth and empowerment).

2. Illustrating that information systems development and adoption traditionally lacks a sense of ‘audience’, failing to provide what the users want, and therefore ‘disempowering’ them.

3. Showing, through a Critical Social Theory approach, that the established and reified power relations between companies and customers act as a barrier to consumer empowerment.

Through the literature discussed at the beginning of this thesis the myth of empowerment was constructed and the extent to which it is held and perpetuated was illustrated, giving an insight into the situation under study. The empirical research deconstructed or critiqued the myth. Follow up interviews or informal conversations with participants attempted to bring about transformative redefinition, as will the conclusions and recommendations of this research. The work is evaluated through Alvesson and Deetz three tasks of Critical Theory research. (Table 14)

The initial phase of the research (Insight) provides an understanding of how the current circumstances arose. The literature review illustrates the assumptions and conditions that have formed the hierarchical power relationship between customers and companies and
constructs the myth that eCommerce is set to revolutionise this situation. Chapter 5 (Understanding eCommerce from a company and customer perspective) suggests a considerable divergence in the value placed upon a number of eCommerce features by companies and by consumers. This conflict of interests is an inevitable phenomenon of the historical, cultural and economic influences which have constructed the bipolar producer / consumer, or company / customer, relationship.

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<td><strong>Transformative redefinition</strong>&lt;br&gt;New knowledge - more democratic practices&lt;br&gt;<strong>Chapters 8, 9</strong></td>
<td>Greater communication B2C / C2B needed ideally on neutral ground.&lt;br&gt;Companies need to adopt greater customer-focus&lt;br&gt;Customers need to become more active&lt;br&gt;Government agencies should place responsibility back onto companies.&lt;br&gt;Papers published and presented may prompt discussion &amp; change.</td>
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Table 14. Examples of Evidence of Satisfying Alvesson and Deetz’ Three Tasks of CST Research. (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002)
Participating customers claim to value the facilities that enable them to interact with other customers, whilst companies value the less interactive marketing opportunities offered through the internet. A dichotomy of knowledge ‘farming’ companies (gathering knowledge about customers) and knowledge sharing customers (sharing knowledge about products and companies) emerges.

In part two (Critique), the incongruence in eCommerce provision and needs suggested in Chapter 5 was borne out. In-depth interviews with individual consumers with an emphasis on the experiential suggest that although customer-to-customer communication is facilitated by the internet, customer-to-business communication has not improved (Chapter 7 The Customer Experience). Chapter 6 (Provision of eCommerce: A Semiotic Analysis) identifies three different company “types” or approaches to eCommerce (Controlling, Didactic, and Participative). In each approach power relations still exist and “distort communication” (Habermas, 1987) to some extent. Barriers to communication and the perpetuation of power relations prevent consumer empowerment. Relating this back to the model of knowledge management adopted in the early stages of this research and adapted from McAdam and McCreedy’s model, the outcomes of “Business Benefits” and “Consumer Empowerment” through the construction and sharing of knowledge are not achieved through eCommerce. Ingrained and reified status hierarchies and power relations prevent free and unconstrained communication and socialisation between customers, or ‘consumer constructs’, and companies. Knowledge created through socialisation, or in Gibbon’s terms “mode two knowledge” is constructed through continuous negotiation between all involved actors or stakeholders:

“Knowledge thus produced is always produced under an aspect of continuous negotiation, i.e. it will not be produced unless and until the interests of the various actors are included.” (Gibbons, 1994)

Here, the interests of the various actors are not included. Continuous negotiation does not happen between customers and companies due to power relations and distorted
communication. Companies dominate the communication space and so “continuous negotiation” does not take place. Asymmetrical “distribution of chances to choose to apply speech acts” (Habermas, 1984) brought about by power and status between participants prevents the creation of the ideal speech situation. Therefore knowledge cannot be constructed or exchanged through conversation and socialisation. Knowledge (in this case a symbol of power) is controlled by the companies (panoptic effect). Gathering what they choose about customers, giving what they choose about the company, services and products by control of website content and domination of the communication space.

Customer-to-customer knowledge sharing takes place on neutral sites where some customers are ‘self-empowering’, but companies largely ignore this ‘counter-culture’.

Due to apathy, inertia, and belief that there “isn’t much point” as nothing changes as a result of customer-to-customer interaction, customers continue to be dominated with an illusion of empowerment. The evidence in this research supports the belief of critical theorists that where power-dependency relationships such as that of the producer / consumer exist the ‘actors’ within that relationship begin to adopt behaviours that reify the inequalities into unchallenged states of being (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002, Nolan, 2003). Further, in the situation under study here communicative behaviour, both business-to-customer and customer-to-business, is distorted through reified power relations. Customers unquestioningly accept the situation and discover their own ways of information gathering which are perceived by the power holders or companies as being “non-rational” (see 7.5.2 A Community of Dissatisfied Customers) and thus reify previous status hierarchies between the two parties.

Given this, transformative redefinition is the most difficult of the three tasks to satisfy. What is required is a rational means of overturning what Gaventa (1980) described as the "susceptibility to myths, legitimisation of ideologies: a sense of powerlessness" that resides in the customer / company relationship. However, it is almost as if a symbiotic relationship has developed, a tacit agreement to perpetuate this reified power-dependency evidenced in the routines, resigned acceptance, and suppressed discourse of action. The conclusions of this research are that:
1. Consumer empowerment does not appear to have been achieved, and yet remains the dominant perception.

2. Some consumers are self empowering to a degree through information gathering and knowledge exchange on the internet. However, through companies neglecting to engage with customers via the internet this medium allows only lateral customer-to-customer communication. It does not adequately facilitate vertical or customer-to-company communication, reinforcing the boundaries or barriers.

3. Customer-to-business communication has not significantly improved. Asymmetrical power relations still exist and “distort communication” (Habermas, 1984). Barriers to communication and the perpetuation of ingrained power relations prevent consumer empowerment in dealings with companies.

4. The long established power imbalance enables the perpetuation of the status quo (“Grand narrative” Lyotard, 1984). Whilst the creation and perpetuation of a myth holds up a spectre of empowerment, companies continue to perceive customer power as a threat to competitive advantage. The illusionary empowerment acts as an opiate preventing the emancipation of consumers.

In short, through the technologically determinist assumption that technology per se brings benefits and empowerment the true potential of the internet to evolve the customer / company relationship remains unrealised.

It is the intention of the researcher to attempt to bring transformative redefinition through recommendations. In keeping with the pluralist approach and the recognition of the various ‘voices’ or perspectives involved in this research the recommendations are aimed at a range of stakeholders:
9.2 Recommendations For eCommerce

In the CST tradition, strong recommendations are made to the stakeholders in eCommerce with the intention of enlightening, eliminating injustice and bringing about political action and change.

9.2.1 Recommendations For Companies

Companies need to adopt greater customer-focus in commercial website design and internet communications. Greater communication (B2C / C2B) is needed ideally on neutral ground where company control or censorship is minimal. This communication needs to attempt to capture the personalised, relevant, timely communication we were promised by the eCommerce hype. Standard responses, ‘pop up’ advertisements, and most of all SPAM email should be kept to a minimum, if not eliminated. The eCommerce dialogue appears to be developing between consumers (C2C), while companies continue to communicate through a pre-written, corporate script that ensures that they maintain the power in the producer / consumer relationship. Simply responding more immediately and personally to customer emails would go some way to redressing the power imbalance. Real time chat with company representatives would capture the interactive potential of this medium more effectively. Companies need to move away from the corporate message set out in the company script and engage in unconstrained conversation where possible.

Consumers are already utilizing the technology to communicate and share knowledge. Technology “has opened up a new kind of conversation in the marketplace” (Levine et al. 2000). Companies must now focus on the communication capabilities of the internet and use the technology to facilitate conversations across the corporate boundary. They must meet consumers on neutral ground and encourage consumer-to-consumer and consumer-to-business interaction in order to leverage a most valuable resource; the knowledge constructed by and embodied in the customers. In return they must share corporate knowledge with the consumer. Sinkula proposes that for organisations to learn from their customers:
“Particular attention should be paid to serendipitous, unsolicited, customer information, particularly that which revolves around complaints. Marketing managers must do two things to better listen to customers” (Sinkula, 2002)

Firstly he argues they “must process the information better”, and secondly they should “become more open to criticism” (Sinkula, 2002). This research suggests that before they can do this, companies must first learn to have conversations with their customers. Sinkula’s comments resonate with Senge’s theory (Senge, 1993) that for organisations to learn they need to establish the kind of trusted communications that break “learning disabilities”. Of particular relevance is the disability ‘I Am My Position’ where employees, allowed little autonomy, develop an inward looking approach which prevents knowledge exchange, or learning, from taking place. In abandoning the corporate script organisations could allow employees to see the holistic picture of the organisation and the relevance of their actions, particularly in interactions with customers.

The recommendations set out here are perhaps more fitting for Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) than to large high street retailers. SMEs tend to have a greater awareness of their customer base, or a greater sense of “audience” or customer-centricity (Bull and McLean, 2004). They often have a niche market strategy which facilitates communication around a specific interest. This is an area for future research which will be outlined in the following chapter (Chapter 10 Recommendations and Future Research).

A version of these conclusions has been published as eCommerce as Knowledge Management: Managing Consumer Knowledge in a volume on eMarketing practices. (McLean and Blackie, 2004b) In that volume recommendations were illustrated through the close analysis of an exchange in a discussion forum for fly fishers, which a participant in this research drew to the attention of the researcher. The analysis of the case shows a company director, his customers, and potential customers coming together on neutral ground, conversing on equal terms, and constructing and exchanging knowledge about the company, the products and even about potential new innovations. The recommendations
made following the analysis are a direct address to company managers and are reproduced as such in appendix 5.

It is acknowledged that customer power continues to be regarded as a threat to competitive advantage (Porter, 2001). However, exerting excessive power over customers may send them elsewhere to companies who do not use such aggressive marketing techniques. Knowledge possessed by consumers can only become a source of organisational knowledge if consumers are given a voice. In order to create value for themselves, companies must explore ways of harnessing the consumer-to-consumer conversations which are already taking place around virtually any topic of interest. Companies must facilitate interaction, and attempt to integrate communication and knowledge exchange with consumers into normal working practices.

9.2.2 Recommendations For Customers

As Collier states, although it is not necessary for an oppressed group to resolve their situation, it does not make sense to deny that they ought to do so (Collier, 1994). Customers need to become more active in order to redress the customer / company power imbalance. It is possible that by placing higher demands on companies and taking the time to share experiences of dealings with companies through reviews or postings on websites some small progress could be made.

Existing power relations tend to leave customers reluctant to challenge companies. However, the internet offers the potential for alienation and oppression to be replaced with collaboration and action. In taking action such as complaining directly to companies over poor service, or to government agencies over unethical or simply ‘annoying’ marketing techniques for example, power distribution could begin to become more equitable.

In recent months the researcher has discussed the conclusions of this research with a range of people with varied backgrounds and has been surprised by the number of people who have appeared quite outraged at the suggestion that the internet is not empowering
customers. As the discussion has progressed, and the researcher has conversationally deconstructed the myth of customer empowerment through eCommerce many of these people have adopted the defensive “yes but...” approach and vehemently defended the myth. It is as if they dare not suspend belief or question the widely held assumption for fear of losing something, some innocence perhaps, or some justification for their inertia or lack of action.

The concept of the traditional British unwillingness to complain (Porter, 1998; Voss C. A. et al. 2004) may be an interesting factor here. A cross cultural study of how willingness to complain could impact eCommerce may offer an interesting comparison and could be an area for further development of this research.

From the discourse of Critical Social Theory, a direct call to customers is for them to seriously consider whether or not the internet empowers them in their interactions with companies. To ask this question of themselves each time they engage in eCommerce, and whenever they feel unsure, or answer that they do not feel empowered, to reflect on what action they could take to attempt to redress the situation and empower themselves.

9.2.3 Recommendations For Government Agencies

Recommendations to Government agencies again involve a suspension of the belief in the myth of consumer empowerment via the internet. Concepts such as that of the ideal of the “responsible informed customer” (Department of Trade and Industry, 1999) should be shaken off. The focus should switch to that of the ideal of an ‘informing company’ where responsibility is placed with the companies. Initiatives such as introducing consumer education into the National Curriculum (August 2002) in order to furnish students with:

“...the skills, attitudes, knowledge and understanding necessary to become an effective consumer” as “Whilst laws and markets may change, these skills will enable people to move through life as effective consumers. It sets out to change
behaviour, strengthen responsibility, motivate to participate and to empower the consumer.” (Welsh Consumer Council, 2002)

do little to redress the power balance, instead formally instilling “effective consumer" behaviour into future citizens and "strengthening responsibility" for their own treatment in commercial interactions. The process at work here is often described as “self-fuelling” (Argyris, 1993), maintaining the status quo by routinely reproducing the context that inspired it, that is defining people in capitalist economies as “consumers”. It is apparent that rather than a ‘power shift’ there has been a ‘responsibility shift’. Through increased opportunities for consumers to be “informed” (Department of Trade and Industry, 1999) they are expected to be “responsible” (Gilliatt et al. 2000), or to accept responsibility for the way they are treated by companies.

To assist customers in taking on this responsibility, consumer groups such as the Office of Fair Trade should offer guidance to customers in how to demand better service from eCommerce providers. Advice on how to formally complain, and, where necessary, support through the complaints procedure should be more feely available. Ethics of practices such as marketing through SPAM, or surreptitious electronic marketing practices (Kaikati and Kaikati, 2004) should be considered and potential problems legislated against.

However, UK legislation is limited in its reach around the global economy. The international community must come together and draw up internationally acceptable standards or guidelines if legislation is to have any great impact. Significantly many of the Government publications on eCommerce focus on existing legislation with an advisory orientation; Government as advisor to companies on how to protect themselves against legal action, almost from a conspiratorial discourse; ‘companies and Governments against the consumer’. An email exchange with one company supports this point. The researcher found a link on a company website to an electronic bulletin board that did not appear to exist. On contacting the company for clarification the response was:
"Dear Rachel
We never noticed! I would imagine that the terms and conditions were inherited from our American parent company's site and obviously they were not checked for relevance, just legality." (Company Y, 2002)

The act of checking for legality but not for content or relevance implies a prioritising of protecting the company against possible legal action, over the needs, or possible confusion, caused to the customer. This approach appears to be endorsed by Government publications which have a strong focus on the company's legal requirements at the expense of the protection or simply satisfaction of the customer.

To redress this imbalance, national standards or guidelines for companies in levels of service provision and ethical behaviour should be produced and widely distributed. The focus of governments should be adjusted to encompass not just companies, but customers.

Finally, Government departments should lead by example. A news story which emerged in the closing stages of this work told how the UK's Inland Revenue website had "frozen" due to the large number of people attempting to electronically submit income tax returns close to the deadline for self assessment. The Department's response was that the penalty of one hundred pounds charged to those who submitted returns after the deadline would stand, and that "people should not have left it until the last minute" (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2005). This approach does not suggest a commitment to customer empowerment. Perhaps the Inland Revenue should have anticipated that people would "leave it to the last minute" and ensured that the technology they had in place was able to cope with such high usage. A greater sense of audience is called for.
9.3 Methodological Conclusions

The methodological objectives of this research were stated in Chapters 1 and 4 as:

1. To extend the use of the Critical Social Theory (CST) approach to empirical research

2. To employ and reflect upon a multi-method approach to research.

The researcher has empirically explored the adoption, use and conflicts within eCommerce through a Critical Social Theory (CST) lens. This has been carried out through a pluralistic, or multi-method approach. The insight, critique and transformative redefinition of the research process operates as a subtext throughout the work. The work is explicitly set within a discourse of power and conflict and draws heavily upon the work and theories of the CST philosophy. The reflection on the research process throughout the work and in the next chapter (Chapter 10 Reflection and Future Research) is a core characteristic of CST. In this case the reflection will extend knowledge of the application of the research methodology. As a significant objective of this research project and to further extend the contribution made to the field of research methodology, the extent to which the application of CST has satisfied Alvesson and Deetz three tasks of Critical Theory research (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002) will be assessed.

Chapter 3 (Knowledge Creation Through Research) gives an insight into the historical shaping of the current state of affairs in the field of research methodology and more specifically in IS research. This chapter shows the dialectics that have lead to the adoption of new research paradigms. It alludes to the tradition of the ‘PhD’ thesis, and the historical and social influences on the researcher. The notion of the ‘ideal type thesis’ is taken up in chapter four where the task of critique is satisfied (4.2 The Role of The (PhD) Researcher). The traditional structure of the PhD is deconstructed in relation to the adoption of a CST research approach. For example the requirement to conduct a literature review before setting out on the enquiry is in conflict with the critical approach to research. The reflective process of the multi-method research throughout Chapters 5-8 offers an iterative critique of
the research methodology which is chrystallised in Chapter 10 (*Reflection and Future Research*).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task and Chapters</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Insight</strong></td>
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<td>Conditions that gave rise to present “reality”</td>
<td>Traditional definition of ‘researcher’ / PhD student</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Chapters 1, 3</em></td>
<td>Expectations and traditions of research / PhD</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Purist approaches, idea of incommensurability.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Critique</strong></td>
<td>Critical evaluation of research paradigms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Status quo questioned, contradictions revealed</td>
<td>Pluralist approach and reflection</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8</em></td>
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<td>New definitions of ‘researcher’ / PhD</td>
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<td><strong>Transformative redefinition</strong></td>
<td>Recommendations to students, supervisors, examiners, programme coordinators.</td>
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<tr>
<td>New knowledge - more democratic practices</td>
<td>The research process has changed the researcher</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Chapters 8, 9, 10</em></td>
<td>Papers published &amp; presented on research methodology contribute to discussions and development of field.</td>
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<td>Government agencies should adopt more interpretive and critical research methods.</td>
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Table 15 Assessment of How the Application of CST Has Satisfied Alvesson and Deetz Three Tasks of Critical Theory Research

Again, **transformative redefinition** is offered in the form of recommendations.

Significantly, for this researcher the task of transformative redefinition in relation to the methodological conclusions of the research appears to be actually attainable by virtue of the fact that she is in continuous interaction with the research community. This is a strong
indicator for adopting Participative Action Research (PAR) in CST research projects. As a member of a group or community it is within the realm of possibility that the researcher can effect some 'real’ change. Through attendance at conferences, workshops, and simple day-to-day conversations with colleagues and research students, discussion is stimulated and, on occasion, action takes place. For example, a colleague involved in critical research is about to launch a new journal for CST IS papers (Richardson, 2004) bringing about substantial change in the field of IS research. On a rather smaller scale, at a recent conference on Critical Research in Information Systems at The University of Salford (summer 2004), this researcher’s discussions with a colleague lead to an idea for a paper on the serendipitous nature of CST research (Nolan and McLean, 2005), currently in progress. The more frequently CST papers become accepted by mainstream conferences the greater the chance of praxis (or transformative redefinition) within IS research methodology.

Although it is argued that:

“….information systems research has moved beyond the antagonistic dualisms that dominated its discourse over the last 20 years. Our community is now largely inclusive of diverse research traditions” (Boland and Lyttinen, 2004)

This is not borne out by the major IS publications. Interpretive research is now more accepted in practical terms, but not in terms of publication as “positivist research still dominates 81% of published empirical research” (Chen and Hirschheim, 2004). It is possible that the notion that the IS community is now inclusive is another myth which could be explored in future research.

Finally, it is both significant and relevant that this research process has changed the researcher. The entire process from selection of methodology to the near completion of the write up has necessitated and stimulated reflective practice. The critical researcher should be continuously questioning what appears to be natural and immutable, looking for injustices which could be exposed and acted upon. Future research projects already in progress illustrate that this researcher is now a committed Critical Social Theorist,
constantly questioning and receptive to conflict and dissonance within a given phenomenon.

The methodological conclusions of this research are that:

1. Critical Social Theory is most fittingly used as a research approach in Participative Action Research (PAR) projects. Effecting change from within is more attainable.

2. Critical Social Theory research and the PhD process are difficult to reconcile.

Again, in keeping with the pluralistic approach adopted and the recognition of the multiple voices involved in the field of research methodology generally and PhD research more specifically the recommendations relating to the methodological objectives of this research will be addressed to specific stakeholders.

9.4 Recommendations for Research Methodology

9.4.1 Recommendations For Researchers

Recommendations to future researchers stem from having the confidence to try out less conventional approaches and structures to the research process and the thesis structure. Researchers should question what appears to be the ‘obvious and natural way of things’. Periods of reflection in the research process assist in the questioning and understanding or ‘epiphany’ (understanding of the multiple layers of meaning) within a phenomenon. Researchers should consciously build reflection time into their activities. Further, whenever possible, researchers should engage in discussion with other researchers and colleagues as it is through socialisation and discussion that “a stray remark may set of the fireworks in the mind of another” (Harpham, 2004).
9.4.2 Recommendations For Supervisors and Examiners

Recommendations to supervisors and examiners follow on from those suggested for the researcher. They should allow research students the space to take their own journey of discovery in research projects, keeping an open mind and questioning the validity of the traditional ‘ideal PhD thesis’ for all research approaches. Further, they should consider the achievements of a thesis in its own context, approach and style rather than against a traditional ideal. This idea is explored in more detail in Chapter 10 (10.1 Reflection on the Research Process).

9.4.3 Recommendations For Programme Coordinators

Programme coordinators should ensure that PhD students are offered guidance in research methodology. When this researcher began her PhD no formal research methods instruction was offered. The HEFCE report (Metcalfe et al. 2002) and recommendations to implement a formal training year in PhD programmes will address this to some extent. Without this a research student could unquestioningly follow the approach advocated by a supervisor, or departmental tradition and fail to understand either the need to explicitly adopt a research paradigm or the research process itself. The Informatics Research Institute at The University of Salford does now offer a formal research methods training programme to all levels of research student in all schools.

9.4.4 Government agencies

Government agencies could lead by example in adopting more qualitative (interpretive and where possible critical) methodologies when researching phenomena such as consumer behaviour or the impact of eCommerce. Rather than seeking to prove or disprove a hypothesis in the positivist tradition, questioning and exploring could lead to more enlightened decisions, policies and legislation. Questioning the constructs of the “effective”, “informed” or “confident” consumer (Department of Trade and Industry, 1999; Welsh Consumer Council, 2002), could lead to more effective research in consumer issues.
and may begin to address the issue of empowerment. These recommendations could also be addressed to commercial research consultancies and the press and broadcasting companies.

9.5 Contribution to knowledge

The study provides an investigative review of both eCommerce and Critical Social Theory research. Through empirical research it explores the actual use and experiences of eCommerce, and shows that the myth that consumers are empowered by the internet is rooted in technological determinism, and is seriously flawed. Technology itself does not bring about revolutionary change. Change is brought about gradually, through the social shaping of that technology by the actors involved. The way that the technology is used reflects the social, political and economic conditions of its context (the producer / consumer relationship in this case). The recommendations explore the benefits that could ensue if widespread belief in the myth could be suspended. Within this potential for transformative redefinition lies a contribution to knowledge; government agencies, consumer groups, companies and customers could be enlightened by this contribution.

The research also makes a significant contribution to knowledge in the field of research methodology. Although critical approaches to IS research are beginning to become more widespread, this was not the case when this research began, critical approaches in PhD theses remain uncommon. Therefore the reflection on this research process provides a unique contribution to existing knowledge. For example, in adopting a pluralist approach to data collection the researcher is able to reflect upon the ‘fit’ of a range of approaches with the critical theory epistemology. Further, the researcher addresses the issue of reconciling the critical approach with the PhD mould. This could guide future PhD students, supervisors, examiners, research programme coordinators, and government agencies.

Finally, CST, unlike other forms of research, doesn't end with a published academic account even if that account does uncover some injustice. The knowledge needs to re-packaged with a suitable sense of audience and published through suitable channels to exploit the double hermeneutic of social research. Therefore, in the tradition of critical
research, and echoing Gidden's double hermeneutic (Rose, 2000; Kim, 2004) it is hoped
that the new knowledge presented here "can lead to emancipation and progress" (Johnson
and Duberley, 2000) in the relationship between companies and consumers, and in the
recognition and acceptance of CST research through publication not only in academic
journals, but in practitioner journals, customer guides and through conversation with fellow
researchers, colleagues and students.
Chapter Ten

Reflection & Future Research

This chapter will reflect on the research process undertaken in this study. The reflection will highlight limitations and inform future research. In a Critical Social Theory approach to research, reflection is a core element of the process. In keeping with this, reflection has been incorporated throughout the research and writing up phase. However, this section will develop those issues and ideas and consider their impact on future work. The main issues which are considered in this chapter include; reconciling CST research with the PhD process, the multi-method approach, and empirical and methodological limitations of the research. Critical Theory is presented as a staircase of events, with each step moving closer to the ultimate aim of empowerment. This research is evaluated against the staircase. A more general reflection on CST research using this project as one of two case studies is currently in progress (Nolan and McLean, 2005).

10.1 Reflection on the Research Process

One important discovery in the process of this CST research was how challenging it was to follow the traditional linear process of PhD research. One problem of using a flexible and responsive methodology such as CST is that the researcher cannot know where the data will lead her, making the choice of literature difficult. At the start of the inquiry it may not be possible to know which literature will later become relevant. The terms ‘deconstruction’ and ‘reconstruction’ describe a crucial process for the critical enquirer. The ‘key’ is to locate the central concept, entrenched within the whole structure, and to critically analyse that through deconstruction. The deconstructive-reconstructive process lies at the heart of the dialectical analysis and involves “a constant shuttling backwards and forwards between abstract concept and concrete data; between social totalities and particular phenomena; between current structures and historical development; between surface appearance and
essence; between reflection and practice” (Harvey, 1990). Dick (2000) goes so far as to say that it may make sense to postpone reading until the relevance of literature can be judged easily, which in turn, may have consequences for the structure of the eventual thesis. Attention, he proposes, should instead be focussed upon the methodological and philosophical literature, as this will provide insights into choosing and gathering the data. His proposal draws the distinction between what he terms research by recipe and “research as a performing art”. The difference is that, in the former case, the researcher acts like an apprentice who engages in ‘propositional’ learning from the supervisor and the literature, at the conclusion of which he can expect to know how to do one form of research. In the latter case, the researcher can expect to engage in research with whatever resources and understanding she can bring to bear, learning from experience. Such an approach to learning will be primarily through questioning inquiry, with the researcher examining her assumptions about the nature of knowledge and of methodologies; the approach adopted in this research.

As McGrath (2004) notes, critical researchers “criticize those “all-knowing” researchers, who develop their theoretical frameworks up front and then seem to find no reason to reconsider them during empirical work”. Unlike science, CST research does not aim to set up a mechanistic process to ‘test’ out a thesis or hypothesis. Instead, it aims to show how, through a process of conflict, reflection, negotiation and improvisation the research was carried out. A hermeneutic, iterative research cycle is more fitting than the linear process traditionally adopted in the PhD (see Fig 17). Although a familiarity with the literature in the field is an essential grounding when setting out on a research project, a complete ‘up-front’ review is impossible as the critical researcher is unaware of the twists and turns her path will take.

![Figure 17. “Espoused research archetype - a linear model” Reproduced from (Stubbs, 1998)](image)
This research set out to explore how people are empowered as consumers through the internet, and proposed that the empowerment could be through a form of knowledge management as proposed by McAdam and McCreedy (1999). A review of knowledge management literature and consumer behaviour was carried out. The path that the researcher then took encountered quite a twist. Through immersion in the research phenomena, and interaction with the stakeholders, the researcher began to sense that consumers were not empowered. Although customers were sharing knowledge through reviews of experiences with products and companies no grand scale company/customer knowledge management programme had developed and the research took a new path rendering much of the initial literature review peripheral to (whilst still informing) the core research question. Similarly, to the critical researcher existing literature means little in isolation, but must be “framed in the mêlée” (Nolan and McLean, 2005) of the situation under study. In CST research literature is drawn upon and ‘reviewed’ throughout the process and the truly critical thesis should reflect this in its structure. This is a difficult task to achieve and requires a degree of confidence and autonomy on the part of the researcher. This thesis has gone some way to satisfying this requirement. However, traces of the ‘conventional’ thesis remain as the contents of chapters, to an extent, can be identified as “literature”, “data collection”, “data analysis” and so on. However, in being open to and acknowledging the different voices of the various stakeholders in the research design and structure of the thesis, and in adopting Alvesson and Deetz (2002) three tasks of Critical Theory research to chart progress of the inquiry rather than the traditional linear research progression model, the effect of this has been minimised. It is in this way that the researcher has reconciled the requirements of CST research with the PhD process. This approach to research is not in itself ‘new’. The need for research to be an iterative, recursive and hermeneutic process is clearly outlined in the literature (Schon, 1995; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Giddens, 1993; Stubbs, 1998). What is still relatively new is the adoption of such practices in the convention of PhD research, and the acknowledgement of the difficulties in reconciling the two processes. It is significant that others researching towards a PhD have independently encountered this problem. When this researcher began to tentatively ask colleagues for feedback on drafts of her thesis several recounted their own dilemmas faced in reconciling the theory of the Interpretative or CST research process with
the 'ideal type' PhD thesis. Some had written of the problems in their own reflections (Nolan, 2003), one with remarkable similarities to this discussion (Stubbs, 1998). This is obviously an important issue that should be addressed. Discussions for a paper on the subject of the research process and the 'ideal type' PhD thesis are currently in progress (McLean and Stubbs, 2005), drawing on the notions of espoused theories and theories-in-use (Argyris and Schön, 1978); (Argyris, 1993), which are particularly enlightening and pertinent to this issue. ‘Whilst assessors may espouse the importance of considering progress against the linear model to students, their ‘backstage’ theories-in-use may be more sympathetic to the adaptive nature of research into complex issues’ (Stubbs, 1998).

### 10.2 Multi-method Approach

This research adopted a range of ‘data collection’ methods to access the different voices in this field. This researcher agonised over the adoption of a method associated with the positivist tradition, and frowned upon by the interpretivists (postal questionnaires), restricted by conflicts between research traditions, and the power those traditions impose over researchers. However, if a certain research method is the only way to gain access to a phenomena under study, or an aspect of that phenomena should we reject this as not fitting with our philosophy and leave that area unexplored? It is arguably more desirable to continue and to gain some insight from that perspective than to give up and gain none. As previously discussed, in critical research the researcher is “named and positioned”, and is “a historically and socially positioned agent” (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002), influenced by research traditions and her own experiences. The research traditions are long established, entrenched in a respected authoritative and powerful body of knowledge within an interpretive community (Fish, 1980). It could be argued that this power serves to maintain the status quo in research traditions and restricts creativity and innovation. As Critical Social Theory researchers it is our duty to question the established combinations of research paradigms and methods and to bring about “transformative redefinition” (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002) wherever appropriate. It is arguably this phenomenon that has led to the lack of guidelines or frameworks for Critical Social Theory researchers. New
CST researchers are to an extent unconstrained by methods deemed most suitable for research in this paradigm. Further, CST research makes use of “wider empirical evidence”, multiple methods of data collection are therefore inevitable.

Morgan argues that the critical research perspective “calls for the use of various interpretive research methodologies to analyse the social construction of power relationships, together with more structural modes of analysis to reveal the nature of the social, political and economic contexts within which such activities are set”. He proposes that each method alone is a way of seeing and not seeing, yet taken together a more holistic picture can be created (Morgan, 1983). This has resonance with Senge’s theory of the hologram where “each [method] represents the whole image from a different point of view”, and “advocates who can also inquire into others’ visions, open the possibility for the vision to evolve, to become “larger” than our individual visions” (Senge, 1993). Perhaps the multi-method (pluralistic) researcher is adopting a “systems view” of the research project, facilitating and encouraging learning in the hermeneutic tradition (Blaikie, 1993), each method constituting an interlinked element of a complex whole.

Morgan suggests that “The distinctive nature of the (critical) research strategy in practice stems from the critical stance from which such techniques are used.” (Morgan, 1983). For critical theorists then, the approach to the analysis of the data is more imperative than the method of collection. To look beyond the obvious and question general assumptions in a bid to reconstruct a situation or phenomena and bring about emancipation requires a dialogue or iterative process of data collection and analysis. This can be achieved through multi-method research which facilitates the investigation of a phenomenon from many different viewpoints, or through many different voices.

As proposed in Chapter 4 Study Design Denzin and Lincoln’s suggestion that the researcher takes on “multiple and gendered images” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), demands that the research mirrors these different voices in its design or methodology. Further, Flick suggests that given the innovative, flexible, reflective nature of qualitative research it is “inherently multi-method in focus” (Flick, 1998), whilst Richardson rejects the concept of
triangulation of *method* in favour of a multi dimensional “crystalisation” of *viewpoints* (Richardson, 2000), each view of the situation under study is like light hitting a crystal and reflects a different perspective of the incident (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), all of which help to create the quilt, or montage, of the research created and pieced together through the different stakeholder perspectives.

On reflection, the adoption of the different research methods to represent the different voices within this research was an effective and appropriate approach which has led to the achievement of the research objectives by looking at eCommerce from the range of stakeholder perspectives.

### 10.3 Limitations of The Research

#### 10.3.1 Empirical Limitations

Some of the empirical limitations of this research arise from the fact that it is a small scale research project. It was difficult to get the large high street companies that the research focused on to engage in immersive research methods which would be more in line with CST research. For this reason, and at the request of some of those companies, questionnaires were adopted to gain insight into the companies' perspective on eCommerce. The limitations of questionnaires as a research method are well charted (Foddy, 1994). However, an active decision to adopt this method and include the data returned was taken so as not to ‘block out’ the voice of an important stakeholder in the phenomena under study (see the reflection in section 10.2 *Multi-method approach* above). As designer of one’s own research project it is possible to exert such power and choose to include only the voices of those who agree to communicate in the researcher’s chosen way. However, this has resonance with Habermas’ theory of distorted communication, the researcher’s voice dominating the communication space, and would not give the range of perspectives of eCommerce adoption and use that this research sought to understand and critique. On reflection, perhaps more open-ended questionnaires could have been used to allow the companies who had more time available to offer more information.
qualitative information from companies would have allowed a more in-depth understanding of their perspective. However, it is a significant issue within this research that companies choose to communicate in pre-scripted, corporate style writing. They adopt this approach in interactions with customers, and many requested to be able to communicate with this researcher in this way. Two companies who did agree to give short interviews insisted on having the questions in advance to enable them to prepare answers. It is therefore arguably more 'representative' of their viewpoint and contribution to eCommerce that they should communicate with the researcher in the mode that reflects their day-to-day interactions.

The time scales involved in small scale PhD research projects impose some limitations on what can be achieved. It has been suggested to the researcher that a longitudinal study (interviewing the same group of individuals or analysing the same websites at intervals over a period of time), would be an effective way of exploring the use and effects of eCommerce to greater depth. However, time constraints did not allow this, and instead such a project is under consideration for future research.

10.3.2 Methodological limitations: In Pursuit of Praxis

This research contributes quite extensively to knowledge in the field of research methodology and so it is deemed important to consider the methodological limitations separately from the empirical limitations of the research. The methodological limitations are essentially twofold: the conflict of CST and power holders (in this case the retail companies), and research method, each one has at its core the issue of transformative redefinition.

Firstly, the conflict of CST and power holders. When it became obvious that this research was to follow a CST approach in debunking the myth of consumer empowerment through the internet, companies who had shown more than a passing interest became decidedly less interested. It is a difficult task for the lone researcher to show benefits of CST to power holders such as large retail companies. Here lies an important dilemma. Would it be best to adopt an interpretivist stance, seeking merely to understand rather than to change and
enlighten if this were to lead to greater access? Is it ethical not to declare at the outset the aim or motivation for the CST study in order to gain access? The issue of informed consent has specific relevance to the CST researcher. Not least because of the evolving nature of such research; the goals of the research may dramatically change from those declared at the outset if some great injustice is uncovered. The central concept here is praxis, and has resonance with Giddens “transformative capacity” which is “intimately connected with power” (Rose, 1998), and both Van Maanen (1982) and Grayling’s ideas. Grayling’s harsh criticism of contemporary academics that “…pass their time obscurely multiplying footnotes to unreadable, unread, and soon-forgotten papers to add to the great number published in recondite journals” (Grayling, 2003) begs the question “why are we researching; to publish or to change lives?”

The second issue is not entirely unconnected. Reflection on this research process has caused the researcher to conclude that participative action research (PAR) is the most effective method for CST researchers. In reflecting on the process of the research itself as a research project and so embracing Giddens’ double hermeneutic, the theorist (external actor) informing the practice (internal actor) (Giddens, 1993), the researcher is shown to be part of an active community within the discipline. Proposed changes to established research practices can actually be introduced to the community through everyday activity and routine for example by writing papers from a less well acknowledged perspective such as Critical Social Theory. This is synonymous with PAR research bringing about transformative redefinition. In contrast, in researching eCommerce provision by companies from outside the company through a less immersive method, transformative redefinition remains elusive. Reflection on the research process suggests that the researcher’s lack of power in relation to the organisations under investigation has a significant influence on the level to which the researcher can progress in the quest for enlightenment and transformative action. This echoes O’Neill’s challenge to Gidden’s theory of the double hermeneutic; the paradox of social reform. O’Neill proposed that we “need to lean upon institutions in order to change them. . . . What this means . . . is that we cannot gain a leverage upon institutions by standing entirely outside of them.” (O’Neill, 1995) Kim argues that “The paradox of social reform involves the avoidance of a reified version of social institutions [or perhaps of
myth] which cuts off their members from morally intelligent dialogue about the values, directions, and capacities of these same institutions". (Kim, 2004) As Gibbons notes, knowledge “will not be produced unless and until the interests of the various actors are included” (Gibbons, 1994) This resonates with Habermas theory of distorted communication, and the barriers to “intelligent dialogue” evident in the phenomenon under study here.

The question remains then, how critical can Critical Social Theory be when it stops short of praxis (translating the idea into action)? Is it enough to make recommendations (however “strong”) to policy holders when the researcher holds little authority to see the recommendations through to implementation? In a paper that emerged form a discussion around this very subject this researcher and a fellow Critical Theorist present CST in terms of a staircase of events, with each step moving closer to the grand aim of empowering the oppressed (see Fig 18) (Nolan and McLean, 2005) The ‘staircase’ or framework summarises explanations provided in the literature to the question: “What does Critical Theory purport to do, to achieve?” and represents an increasingly involved researcher, drawing nearer to achieving redefinition.

The critical ‘tradition’ according to (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000), utilises the interpretive approach, “combined with a pronounced interest in critically disputing actual social realities” and is sometimes known as 'critical hermeneutics', (Gadamer, 1994; Ricoeur, 1981). This assumes the inquirer and the phenomenon to be interactively linked. According to Orlikowski and Baroudi, (1991) CST reveals the historical, ideological, and contradictory nature of existing social practices, whereas for Myers (1997) it provides a social critique, helping to eliminate the causes of alienation and domination. Ngwenyama and Lee, (1997) considered CST to be a ‘first step’ towards forms of political action that can redress the injustices. It is seen as a deliberate attempt to move beyond an interpretation and representation of information systems phenomena, which explicitly accept and help preserve the status quo, to “the emancipation of organisational actors from false or unwarranted beliefs, assumptions, and constraints”. The staircase should represent the natural progression in the Critical Researcher’s quest for discovery. If the researcher was to
abandon at stage one (Interpret / reveal) or two (awaken / motivate) can they truly be called critical?

Key Concepts and Actions in Critical Social Research

CONCEPTS
Contradictions, oppression, truth, class, race, gender social realities, alienation, domination, false beliefs

CONCEPTS
Power, autonomy, apathy, fatalism, self-esteem, equality, democracy, collaboration context

Figure 18. The Critical Social Theory 'Staircase'
(with apologies to (Ulrich, 2001; Nolan and McLean, 2005)

The furthest this researcher was able to progress along the staircase fell between stages three (enlighten / emancipate) and four (redress / empower). Recommendations are made to companies concerning new ways of working or of communicating with customers. Suggestions are put to customers, consumer representatives and Government agencies that consumer empowerment through eCommerce is a ‘myth’ that should not be perpetuated. Reflection on the research process suggests that the researcher’s lack of power in relation to the organisations under investigation has a significant influence on the level to which the researcher can progress in the quest for enlightenment and transformative action. This echoes Rose’s suggestion in his critique of structuration theory that in order to gain “capacity to make a difference” (Giddens, 1993) “in an applied discipline, more direct ways of guiding practice are crucial” (Rose, 1998).
CST, unlike other forms of research, doesn't stop with a published scientific account (even if it is of some injustice); the knowledge needs to be re-packaged with a suitable sense of audience and through suitable channels to exploit the double hermeneutic of social research.

With this in mind, some interview participants were approached to discuss their interviews and the conclusions of the research with a view to moving one step further up the staircase, at least in the case of the customers. Critical Theory's ability to disrupt and challenge the status quo (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000) means that in certain situations empowerment can be a natural outcome from revelation, but only when the people to whom untruths are revealed have the will and power to change the situation for themselves. However, in this case little sense of empowerment was encountered as a “natural outcome” of the attempt at revelation. The actors in this situation appear to lack the will or the power to change the situation for themselves. Perpetuation of the myth of empowerment absolves them of the responsibility of taking any action to redress the situation. A more direct way of bringing about change would perhaps be for the researcher to write a summary of the findings of this research directly addressing consumer support groups such as Which? or Watchdog.

10.4 Future Research

This research has “sparked off many fireworks in the head” (Harpham, 2004) of the researcher. She has a number of ideas on how this research could be expanded upon, some have been mentioned in the previous chapters, all will be outlined here.

Firstly, the recommendations for companies set out in Chapter 9 (9.2.1 Companies) are perhaps more fitting for Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) than to large high street retailers. SMEs tend to have a greater awareness of their customer base, or a greater sense of “audience” or customer-centricity (Bull and McLean, 2004). They often have a niche market strategy (Porter, 1996) enabling them more efficiently to tailor services to their customers. A similar study focusing on SME’s provision of eCommerce may provide an interesting contrast to the ideas presented here. Further, it may prove less difficult to gain
access to SMEs enabling the use of methods of greater involvement and so yield richer data.

A longitudinal study of the same companies and customers that participated in this research may show a greater level of sophistication in their use of the internet in retail. More experience on either or both parts may result in the adoption of new strategies or techniques which could throw a new light on the aspects of eCommerce highlighted here. Follow up interviews with key respondents, further questionnaires to companies and another round of website reviews noting changes or new features could be an interesting follow up. Further, an international dimension of this work could be an area for future research. A cross-cultural comparison could yield insight on the consumers’ sense of ‘agency’, or responsibility and the impact this has on e-commerce interactions. For example, the ‘British unwillingness to complain’ characteristic (Voss et al. 2004; Porter, 1998) may have had an impact on the outcomes of this research. A cross-cultural comparison would explore such issues more fully, and address a gap in current literature.

Similarly, as suggested in Chapter 6 Provision of eCommerce: A Semiotic Analysis Extending the field of the semiotics of consumer research (Mick, 1986; Clarke et al. 1998; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1981; Holman, 1979) to the internet, and the semiotics of the internet (Lemke, 2002) to eCommerce specifically would be an interesting project addressing a gap in the current literature.

The researcher’s interest in online communities and discussion forums has grown as a result of this research. A possible research project could stem from this interest. Closer analysis of such forums with a focus on group dynamic, power and leadership issues, and issues of ‘community’ through discourse analysis would contribute to current knowledge on this theme. The researcher is currently involved in developing a new module (Open Source Communities Principles & Practice) for the Business Information Technology / Business Information Systems degree at Manchester Metropolitan University. This could prove to be an excellent example of teaching and research informing each other.
A related research project which was sparked off by a recurring theme in the analysis of customer interviews in this study is currently underway. The *EyeBelieve* project funded by a 'seedcorn research grant' awarded by the Research Institute of Business and Management, Manchester Metropolitan University, developed out of this research into consumers' uses of the internet in commercial activity. Participants frequently recounted empowering experiences of using the internet to find information and support for health related issues. Around the time of the call for proposals for the in house funding of seed corn research projects contact was made with "Eye Believe" a support group for patients who have had an eye removed usually (but not exclusively) due to ocular melanoma (cancer of the eye). The group is about to begin developing a community website as a response to a perceived need for information and support amongst the members (a technologically integrationist approach). The group is based at a North East England hospital. This initiative has the full support of the clinicians and aims to take a collaborative approach (service providers collaborating with service users).

Informed by the conclusions of this PhD, the methodology will be a participative action research (PAR) case study. The aim is to adopt a user-centric socio-technical approach to developing an online community to offer information and support to the group. The project will draw upon theories of knowledge creation and sharing through socialisation, customer relationship management in a health service context and the sociology of technology. In its initial stages the research was explorative. However, a conflict of interests immediately arose between the support group members and the health service representatives. Through this conflict it is anticipated that the research will now adopt a Critical Social Theory (CST) approach in aiming to empower the members of *Eye Believe* through their online community. A research in progress paper based on this project will be presented at UKAIS 2005 (McLean et al. 2005).

From a methodological viewpoint, the researcher is keen to explore the notion that the IS community is now methodologically inclusive. Although the general sense amongst the community appears to be that it is, in terms of publication in 'top' IS journals, this appears
not to be the case. The researcher proposes that this is another myth which could be explored in future research.

10.5 Publications Emanating from this Research

Parts of, or ideas from this research have been published or presented at conferences as follows:


Three papers are currently in progress:


Appendix One

Company Questionnaire
e-Commerce Manager
Argos Ltd,
489 – 499 Avebury Boulevard,
Central Milton Keynes,
MK9 2NW.

10th April 2002

RESEARCH INTO INTERNET SHOPPING

I am currently undertaking academic research into business and consumer views of Internet shopping. As part of this research I am seeking e-Commerce managers from top UK retail companies who would be willing to complete the attached questionnaire.

It should take no more than fifteen minutes to complete the questionnaire, and all information given will be treated as strictly confidential.

The second part of the research will involve interviews with consumers. It will explore buyer behaviour and the use of the Internet. Companies who complete the questionnaire will be offered early copies of reports on the findings.

If you require any further information about the project please do not hesitate to contact me or visit our website:

http://www.aee.salford.ac.uk/staff_profiles/rachel_mclean/rachel_mclean.htm

Please complete and return the questionnaire in the SAE provided by June 30th 2002.

Your co-operation is greatly appreciated.

Rachel McLean
RESEARCH INTO INTERNET SHOPPING

Please complete all questions whether or not your website actually facilitates online sales.

1. What were the main reasons for establishing a web presence?

2. What do you consider to be the key features of the company’s web site that enable you to meet the objectives stated in question 1?

1. _______________________
2. _______________________
3. _______________________

Please tick ONE of the following statements:

3. Which one of the following statements most accurately describes the company’s e-Commerce facility? Please tick ONE

- Very successful in meeting its objectives
- Satisfactorily meets its objectives
- Does not meet its objectives

4. How is performance measured?

5. Which one of the following statements most accurately describes the company’s attitude towards its e-Commerce facility? Please tick ONE

- e-Commerce is an integral part of the company’s services
- e-Commerce is a useful add-on to our established channels

245
Please circle the most appropriate option.  

* e.g.  

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6. In relation to the company’s web presence, how important are each of the following?

**Communicating with customers**

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**Making more sales**

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**Marketing activities**

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**Providing links for customers to other potentially useful websites**  
(e.g. DIY store links to sites on interior design)

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**Providing consumers with access to information about the company**  
(e.g annual reports, company history)

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**Establishing an online community.**

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**Links to consumer reviews of the company’s products and services.**

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Thank you
Appendix Two

Customer Questionnaire
RESEARCH INTO INTERNET SHOPPING

Have you ever used the Internet to:

- Find information about products you plan to buy?
- Find information about companies you plan to buy from?
- Buy products?

I am currently undertaking academic research into Internet shopping. As part of this research I am seeking people who have used the Internet in one or more of the above ways, and who would be willing to complete the attached questionnaire.

All information given will be treated as strictly confidential.

If you require any further information about the project please do not hesitate to contact me or visit our website:

http://www.aee.salford.ac.uk/staff_profiles/rachel_mclean/rachel_mclean.htm

Yours sincerely

Rachel McLean
RESEARCH INTO INTERNET SHOPPING

1. For how long have you been using the Internet?
Include time spent using the Internet for activities other than shopping. (e.g. e-mail)

Less than 1 year ☐ Less then 2 years ☐ More than 2 years ☐ More than 5 years ☐

2. Have you ever used the Internet to:

Find information about products you plan to buy?

Yes ☐ No ☐

Find information about companies you plan to buy from?

Yes ☐ No ☐

Buy products?

Yes ☐ No ☐

3. Have you ever subscribed to a newsgroup or online community relating to something you have bought or plan to buy?

Yes ☐ No ☐

4. Have you ever consulted other consumers’ opinions through the Internet about a product you are planning to buy?

Yes ☐ No ☐

5. Have you ever communicated with a company through the Internet about a product you are planning to buy?

Yes ☐ No ☐
6. Is there anything else that you consider to be relevant about your use of the Internet in shopping related activities?

7. In order to help classify your answers and to enable comparisons please would you answer the following questions:

Are you:

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<th>Male</th>
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Age 0-25 26-34 35-44 45-54 55+

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<th>26-34</th>
<th>35-44</th>
<th>45-54</th>
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What is your occupation? ___________________________

Do you have Internet access:

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<th>At home</th>
<th>Yes / No</th>
<th>At work</th>
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8. I plan to interview a selection of people who complete the questionnaire. Please indicate whether or not you would be prepared to be interviewed about your Internet shopping experiences as part of this new study.

Interviews will be strictly confidential and held locally at a time to suit you.

I am willing to be interviewed / I am not willing to be interviewed

Contact Details:

Name:

Address:

Telephone No:

e-mail address:

Thank you for your co-operation
Please circle the most appropriate option.
e.g.

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In relation to your use of the Internet in retail activity how important are each of the following?

**The ability to communicate with companies?**

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**The ability to purchase products?**

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**The ability to receive marketing messages and promotions?**

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**Access to links to other potentially useful websites?**
(e.g. DIY store links to sites on interior design)

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**Access to information about the company**
(e.g. annual reports, company history)

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**The ability to communicate with other consumers.**

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**Access to links to consumer reviews of the company’s products and services.**

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Thank you
Appendix Three

Interview Schedule
Consumer Interview Schedule

I am researching into how people use the internet in consumer related activities. I want to hear about your experiences, opinions, thoughts, lessons learned. So far I have looked at reports and research papers and commercial websites. Now I need some input from people who actually use the websites to gain a richer understanding of how people use the internet in consumer related activity.

The Interview will address the following issues:

- Your general views on the internet
- Significant changes (that the internet has brought about for you)
- internet in consumer activity
- Communication (business-to-consumer and consumer-to-consumer)
- General conclusions

1. What does the internet represent to you?

   Understanding & experiences of the internet.
   Opinions about what the internet is good / bad at.
   Whether their general expectations are met.
   How they think it could be improved

2. What has changed for you as a result of the internet?

   New things achieved / learned?
   Cultural shifts
   Any area of life that has changed significantly?

3. Tell me about your experiences of researching products online.

   How would you research a product through the internet?
   Where would you look?
   Why?
   Have you learned anything new? / had a change of opinion about a product or company?

4. Tell me about your experiences of buying products online (good / bad)
Communication

5. Can you tell me about any experiences of using the internet to communicate with or consult other consumers?

Have you ever shared your opinions of products / services online? why / why not?
Have you ever shared your experiences of a company online?
How much value would you place on the opinions of other online consumers?

6. Can you tell me about any experiences of using the internet to communicate with companies?

Are you more or less inclined to communicate with a company online?
How do you feel about companies contacting you through the internet?

Empowerment

7. How far would you say the internet ‘empowers’ you as a consumer?

Do you feel that you have more choices available to you through the internet?
(products / companies / time / space)

General Conclusions

8. How effective do you feel commercial websites are?

9. How would you like to see businesses using the internet for commercial purposes in the future?

This concludes the interview.

Thank you for your time.

255
Appendix Four

Company Types by Sector
## Company Type and Sector

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<tr>
<th>Company Name</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Product type</th>
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<tr>
<td>Austin Reed</td>
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Appendix Five

Airflo Managing Director in Discussion Forum
Conclusions and Recommendations Offered to Companies In a Book Chapter that Resulted From this Work. (McLean and Blackie, 2004b)

Knowledge possessed by consumers can only become a source of organisational knowledge offering business benefits to companies if consumers are given a voice. In order to create value for themselves, companies should explore ways of participating in the consumer-to-consumer conversations that are already taking place around virtually any topic of interest. It is essential that companies who do participate do so without appearing to dominate consumer territory with an obviously commercial motivation. Companies must facilitate interaction, and integrate communication and knowledge exchange with consumers into normal working practices, offering some benefits to the consumers. While consumers are aware that through the internet they have the potential to share their views of products and services with other consumers, unless their views are responded to by companies they can have little effect and fail to bring about ‘Consumer Empowerment’.

Consider the following example of a company director engaging in conversation with consumers (see fig. 19). This example was brought to the attention of the researcher by one of the interview participants. Following negative comments about the company’s products on a message board the Managing Director writes:

“Airflo’s historic problems clearly affect people’s opinions. To prove a point I would be happy to provide a FREE fly line to the first 30 people who respond on this forum with their details and model required. In return all I ask is that the line is tested and a fair review placed back on this forum. If you hate the product then come back on the board and slate it, if as I suspect you agree that the lines are some of the best available then please let everyone else know about it” Fish and Fly Messageboard (2001)
May I first introduce myself as the Group Managing Director of BVG Airflo. I have read the many comments on this forum relating to Airflo fly lines with interest.

If I may I seek to provide a little background and to address some of the comments posted on this forum.

The Airflo technology was truly ground breaking when it was launched, and to this day offers benefits unmatched by any competitor.

Like any new technology there were the inevitable teething problems. In Airflo's case these problems went on for far too long. Airflo's reputation, particularly for floating lines suffered tremendous damage.

I accept that large numbers of fly fishers purchased fly lines which were sub standard and did not offer the performance promised.

In 1995 I became the MD and the company was completely restructured with the focus placed firmly on long term R&D, thorough product testing and relentless quality control procedures.

The result was that by late 96 Airflo was producing some of the best fly lines in the World, export sales rocketed in markets unaffected by Airflo's prior reputation. In particular Airflo sinking lines have set the standards by which all others follow

You may be surprised to know that there are just four fly line manufacturers of any consequence in the World. Very positive comments on this board (placed by Anti Airflo people) on private label fly lines actually relate to product produced by Airflo. Airflo's historic problems clearly affect peoples opinions.

To prove the point I would be happy to provide a FREE fly line to the first 30 people who respond on this forum with their details and fly line model required. Those connected to the fly fishing trade need not respond.

In exchange for the free fly line all I ask is that the line is tested and a fair review placed back on this forum. If you hate the product then come back on the board and slate it, if as I suspect you agree that the lines are some of the best available then please let everyone else know about it.

Kind Regards

The following responses were posted:

'I appreciate the line sent.... Am unable to test for a week or so but a comment on the dispatch. I received the line within two days... That's up there with the best of them for delivery service' (Posting No. 86)

'I am extremely impressed with a Managing Director who is so in touch with his customers and the obvious faith he has in his products' (Posting No. 95)
'I would have no hesitation in recommending this line to any other angler'
(Posting No.100) (Fish and Fly Messageboard, 2000)

By engaging in conversation and exchanging knowledge with his customers the Director appears to have improved the reputation of the company and the products. In an earlier posting he even gains input for a possible new product to develop: ‘any chance of an intermediate, with non-stretch core, in double taper format?’ (posting 75). This interaction takes place on an independent message board. The customers are offered the power to improve or further damage the company’s reputation, and for their views to be archived for future members of the group. In this case, the Managing Director has achieved the business benefits of an improved reputation. This exchange will be archived and available to future customers for some time to come, and input from customers for product development.

Consumers are already utilizing the technology to communicate and share knowledge. “The same technology that has opened up a new kind of conversation in the marketplace has done the same within the corporation, or has the potential to do so.” (Levine, Locke, Searls, & Weinberger, 2000). Companies must now focus on the communication capabilities of the internet and use the technology to facilitate conversations across the corporate boundary. They must meet consumers on neutral ground and encourage consumer-to-consumer and consumer-to-business interaction in order to leverage a most valuable resource; the knowledge constructed by and embodied in the customers. In return they must share corporate knowledge with the consumer. Sinkula proposes that for organizations to learn from their customers:

‘Particular attention should be paid to serendipitous, unsolicited, customer information, particularly that which revolves around complaints. Marketing managers must do two things to better listen to customers…’ (Sinkula, 2002)

Firstly he argues they ‘must process the information better’, and secondly they should ‘become more open to criticism’ (Sinkula, 2002). This research suggests that before they can do this, companies must first learn to have conversations with their customers.
How can company representatives engage with an online community?

To be effectively adopted, this new marketing channel demands that you analyze how you communicate with customers, and challenge how you traditionally measure the success of this communication. Traditionally, classically hard outcomes such as complaints resolved or sales achieved are used to measure customer satisfaction and communication success. Participating in an online community initially offers less tangible benefits. For example, it may enhance the value of the knowledge socialised within the community to the benefit of both customers and companies, or improve the reputation of a brand.

The starting point is to recognize that you will have to adopt a new approach to communicating with customers; an approach that challenges many of your traditional assumptions about customer relationship management. You will need to accept that the power and position that you naturally project into conversations and interactions with customers are counter productive when interacting in this new channel. You are advised to remodel your ingrained communication patterns. Customers welcome natural speech through an individual human voice rather than a scripted corporate monologue. Discussion forums and online communities facilitate this kind of interaction.

For those most unsure of how to start, the best place is to take the position of the customer. Participate as a customer in forums discussing things you have an affinity to or feel passionate about (a sport, cars, music). Join in, contribute to the discussions and make time to do it regularly. You will quickly get a feel for the tempo and social ‘netiquette’ within the groups. These will be variable so don’t expect to replicate them in discussions about your company but you will see a range of examples of how to do it and how not to. Critically evaluate the exchanges that take place and reflect upon how effective they could be in relation to the forums your company could participate in.

Consider the contribution made by the Managing Director in the example above:

‘May I first introduce myself as the group managing director of Airflo? I have read the many comments on this forum relating to Airflo fly lines with interest.’
The Director succinctly establishes his position and invites himself into the discussion. It is extremely pertinent that he doesn't just 'barge in' and start to sell his product. Note the heavy use of first person 'I' and complete lack of references to the corporate line or 'what the company says' throughout the entire posting. This man has power within the organisation but he projects it very subtly, almost with a suggestion of 'You may want to hear my opinion, but you don't have to'.

He then moves quickly to establish the background and balance of opinion in the postings. He accepts the problem. He demonstrates a willingness to validate the customers experience and offers empathy with their issues. He then moves swiftly to the defensive:

'I accept that large numbers of fly fishers purchased fly lines which were sub standard and did not offer the performance promised. In 1995 I became the MD and the company was completely restructured with the focus placed firmly on long term R&D, thorough product testing and relentless quality control procedures.'

However, he just manages to avoid a 'yes, but' followed by a corporate line which may alienate customers as it demonstrates a lack of empathy and a negation of their experience.

He then switches to a pitch that borders close to a direct attempt to market the company voice in the community. He is walking on the edge of acceptance and rejection based on the customer's evaluation of his credibility to make such statements. It is a signature of this posting how swiftly it moves through these phases. It is fast but not slick in an obvious manipulative way. He retains a genuine voice of concern and natural tempo throughout. It reads like a stream of consciousness rather than stock phrases from a brochure or corporate script.

The second to last paragraph in the post is perhaps one of the most significant. The Director invites others in. From an early pitch that engages the individual he suddenly switches to the onlookers in the crowd and seeks to pull them closer to the action:
To prove the point I would be happy to provide a FREE fly line to the first 30 people who respond on this forum with their details and fly line model required'

He is challenging the community on conventional measures of product performance but also challenging the community to increase their collective knowledge of these products through their interaction. This is real skill with unmistakable echoes of marketplaces of the past. The Director moves beyond the attempt to develop a personal conversation with customers to developing an inherent right of focus within the community. He is seeking to host the dialogue, as distinguished from controlling it, and is increasing his importance as a credible central voice within the community.

To judge whether he succeeded, consider the responses and again witness the importance of the first person 'I' in the customer evaluations quoted:

'I appreciate the line sent.... Am unable to test for a week or so but a comment on the dispatch. I received the line within two days...That’s up there with the best of them for delivery service' (Posting No. 86)

'I am extremely impressed with a Managing Director who is so in touch with his customers and the obvious faith he has in his products’ (Posting No. 95)

'I would have no hesitation in recommending this line to any other angler' (Posting No.100)

If this does not convince you, consider the closing words of the Director himself:

'I would like to thank the visitors to this forum for their feedback. I have learnt a great deal from the discussions and thank you all for your input. Most of all I have confirmed my position that our reputation lies purely with floating lines produced prior to 96
I have learned from this forum that trial products are the best way to convince people of the performance of our fly lines. Thanks for your comments, as you can see they make a difference.

What is most significant is that nothing will make a customer happier in a discussion forum than the words 'sorry I got that wrong... let me try to put it right'.

All quotations are from postings on Fish and Fly Messageboard (2001)
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