

# The Seller's Experience in Consumer-to-Consumer E-Commerce

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**Abstract.** Digitization has reshaped the retail landscape and changed the way that consumers buy, use, and dispose of products. One such development is the rise of consumer-to-consumer electronic commerce (C2C e-commerce) platforms. These platforms complement and compete with existing forms of retail, which is why studying the characteristics of customer experience in these platforms is both managerially and academically interesting and topical. The purpose of this study is to explore and analyse the selling experience on C2C e-commerce platforms. More specifically, the paper (1) identifies the phases that make up the selling experience as a process and (2) characterizes and analyses these experiences. A qualitative research approach is used to generate these insights. This study contributes by focusing on the seller's perspective and investigating it from the experiential perspective, which has remained relatively overlooked in prior research. Nonetheless, the seller's experience is vital, as it is the supply of used goods that determines whether C2C markets can be established in the first place.

**Keywords.** Consumer-to-Consumer (C2C); E-Commerce; Customer Experience; Retailing

## 1 Introduction

Digitization is redefining the nature of retailing. The locus of attention is extending towards new forms of retailing platforms and business models that go beyond the traditional logistical heritage. One characteristic of this retail transformation is two-sided markets (Gassmann et al., 2014), or platform business models (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010). Platform business models accumulate a wide array of

demand and supply, thereby, connecting sellers with potential buyers in an effective way. In addition, they serve buyers through aggregating supply, providing convenient access to a vast array of used goods and offering a venue for establishing communication as well as other mechanisms for facilitating transactions, such as logistics and payment.

Consumer-to-consumer (C2C) e-commerce is an interesting and increasingly important form of platform-based business models. C2C e-commerce is defined as consumers transacting (i.e., both buying and selling from one to another) electronically (Leonard, 2011). A few years ago, C2C commerce was estimated to represent as much as 80% of all e-commerce in China (Hoffman et al., 2012); additionally, the number of Chinese C2C companies has risen rapidly (Statista, 2018a). Furthermore, more recent studies have concluded that approximately 65% of U.S. consumers use different online marketplaces to buy used goods (Statista, 2018b). This development is exemplified through eBay's gross sales, which rose to over 90 billion USD in 2018 (Statista, 2018c).

Consumers transacting among each other is not a new phenomenon per se – neither for consumers nor scholars. In the 1980s, consumer researchers were already focussing on understanding how consumers acquired used goods and sold their excess products (Belk et al., 1988; Sherry, 1990). However, digitization has reshaped the nature and extent of the phenomenon to a new level, which has also generated interest among scholars. This has resulted in the exploration of the phenomenon from multiple perspectives, such as consumers' utilitarian and hedonic motivations (Chang and Chen, 2015), the role of platforms (Cheung et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2017), social C2C e-commerce (Chen et al., 2016), C2C consumer profiles (Saarijärvi et al., 2018), and C2C e-commerce implications (Yrjölä et al., 2017). Prior literature has also addressed the interlinkages between important retailing constructs, such as C2C platforms' website quality and consumer satisfaction (Fan et al., 2013) or consumers' excitement and higher prices (Vragov et al., 2010).

Despite the activity concerning C2C e-commerce research during the past decade, it is still in its infancy. While the number of users as well as suitable platforms for C2C e-commerce transactions has been increasing (e.g., Statista, 2018a; Statista, 2019), competition among different platforms has also intensified. This exerts pressure on developing consumers' buying and selling experiences in order to remain competitive among all platforms. Only by delivering superior experiences can platforms attract an adequate amount of buyers and sellers and establish their *raison d'être*. Gaining theoretical insight into the characteristics of digital experiences is also generating increasing scholarly attention (Marketing Science Institute, 2016). However, despite the relevance of consumers' experiences in buying and selling used goods via different C2C e-commerce platforms, research on the determinants of such experiences, and how digital platforms could facilitate those experiences, has remained unexplored.

The purpose of this study is to explore and analyse the selling experience on C2C e-commerce platforms. This is achieved by focusing on the phases and characteristics of the C2C e-commerce selling experience. Hence, the study adopts a seller's perspective, which has been a marginal focus in prior research. However, understanding the key characteristics of the selling experience is critical, as it is the supply of used goods that eventually determines the extent to which C2C e-commerce markets can eventually exist.

To address this purpose, we briefly review relevant literature on the customer experience and C2C e-commerce. We follow by describing the applied research methodology for the data generation and analysis, and we present and discuss the results. Conclusions, limitations, and suggestions for further research conclude the present study.

## **2 Theoretical foundations and the conceptual framework**

Today, customers interact with firms through a myriad of touchpoints in different kinds of channels, which has increased both scholars' and practitioners' interest in the concept (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Customer experience is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon, involving hedonic, interactive, novelty, comfort, safety, and stimulation dimensions (Otto and Ritchie, 1996; Klaus, 2013).

While there are many different approaches to what customer experience eventually comprises, there is a wide consensus on its multidimensional nature; the customer experience can be understood as a customer's cognitive, emotional, behavioural, sensorial, and social response to a firm's offering, and it emerges during the customer's journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). During this, the customer's experience occurs as a result of different touch points, i.e. the direct and indirect interactions between the customer and the firm. Lemon and Verhoef categorize these touchpoints as brand-owned (interactions that are designed and managed by the firm), partner-owned, (interactions that are jointly designed, managed, or controlled by the firm and/or its partners), customer-owned (the customer's own action beyond the control of the firm or its partners), and social/external-owned (interactions that are influenced by other customers). This journey is often divided into different stages: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase. Another way to approach the customer journey is through the traditional decision-making process: the recognition of needs, the search for information, the comparison of alternatives, the transaction, and post-transaction behaviour.

This categorization of touch points and the different stages offer a well-established basis for analysing the selling experience in C2C e-commerce. In the context of the C2C e-commerce experience, the role of platforms is critically important today, as platforms facilitate many types of interactions between the buyers and sellers. Due to their roles as connectors between demand and supply, many C2C

companies are good examples of two-sided market business models (Gassman, Frankenberger, & Csik, 2014). Moreover, C2C platforms exhibit a low degree of company control and a high degree of consumer control over the transactions (Yrjölä et al., 2017). As customer control over the service experience contributes to the overall experience (e.g. Klaus, 2013), C2C commerce provides an interesting context for study. From the buyer's point of view, the C2C activities can also be conceptualized through economic, functional, emotional, and symbolic value (Yrjölä et al., 2017), which can also be used for profiling consumers on the basis of the type of value they perceive (Saarijärvi et al., 2018).

This experience develops through different stages and occurs as a result of interactions in multiple channels (e.g., website and face-to-face). Most importantly, the selling experience emerges through different touchpoints. In comparison with other industries, the C2C e-commerce experience is naturally characterized by the major role of other customers. Furthermore, the nature of interaction between the seller and buyer is critically important in shaping the overall experience.

### 3 Methodology

In line with an explorative approach, this study adopts a qualitative methodology to understand the phenomenon of the C2C selling experience within its context. Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with consumers who had engaged in C2C e-commerce activities as sellers during the past year (Table 1). These informants shared their experiences in an interactional way, which allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the process and characteristics of their selling experiences.

Table 1: Study informants

Informant	Gender	Age	Self-assessed level of experience in selling products
A	Female	23	Low
B	Male	23	Low
C	Female	23	High
D	Male	24	High
E	Female	49	High
F	Male	50	Moderate
G	Male	49	Moderate
H	Male	49	High
I	Male	39	Very high
J	Male	23	Moderate
K	Female	27	High
L	Male	53	Low
M	Male	25	Very high
N	Female	23	High
O	Female	22	High
P	Male	24	Low
Q	Male	24	Low

R	Male	80	Very low
S	Male	23	Low
T	Female	77	Very low

The data were analysed in two stages, both of which were informed by prior research on customer experiences, thereby, following abductive rather than inductive logic. First, the authors identified and categorized the phases that make up the selling experience. Second, a closer description and comparison resulted in a characterization of the selling experience. These findings are discussed in the following section.

## 4 Findings

To fulfil the research purpose, identifying and analysing the C2C selling experience, we present a tentative framework herein (see Figure 1). This framework results from an iterative process between the data and theory, i.e., the analysis of the empirical data is informed by the prior literature on customer experience. The literature provides theoretical guidance in understanding the phenomenon of the C2C selling experience. This framework, including the selling experience phases and characteristics, is discussed next in three stages.

### *Maturing selling motivations*

Consumers face multiple triggers that motivate consumers' selling behaviour on C2C e-commerce platforms. For example, these include lifestyle changes, status-seeking behaviour, decluttering, changes in personal relationships (e.g., moving in together, separation), or the fact that children get bigger and clothes become too small. These triggers initiate the selling process; in other words, they alter the consumers' need to consume a particular product. Some of these triggers are self-focused (e.g., willingness to get rid of excess items) while others focus more on other people (such as spotting a forum post by someone looking for a certain item). As depicted in Figure 1, this stage in the selling experience is largely characterized by customer-owned touchpoints: they are largely beyond the control of the platform. As the selling motivation matures, a consumer may not yet have initiated any interaction with C2C companies but, due to different triggers, may have decided to start the selling process. In addition, the customer is exposed to external influences, such as becoming aware that there is a growing demand for a particular used item or hearing positive word-of-mouth related to selling used items on particular platforms. Altogether, the first stage of the C2C selling experience is often beyond the control of the C2C company. Some examples are shown in the participants' interview responses below.

*Being young, I don't have that much money; so, I try to take advantage of every opportunity to earn something back, and selling something online is easy when compared to flea markets and the like. [...] I always try to*

figure out if something's worth the trouble. It's especially good when selling electronics because electronics are bothersome to dispose of or recycle. You can kill two birds with one stone; you get rid of the item, and you earn some money. (Participant D)

The last item sold was an old camera. I was cleaning our house and going through all the useless stuff we had, and I thought, "This camera hasn't been used in at least ten years." I figure I could earn something for it. After all, it would be a shame to just throw it away. (Participant E)

Skiing boots, because we had no use for them in the family. Our place is full of junk, so I wanted to get rid of them. It was fun to try...

"Take in Figure 1 approximately here"

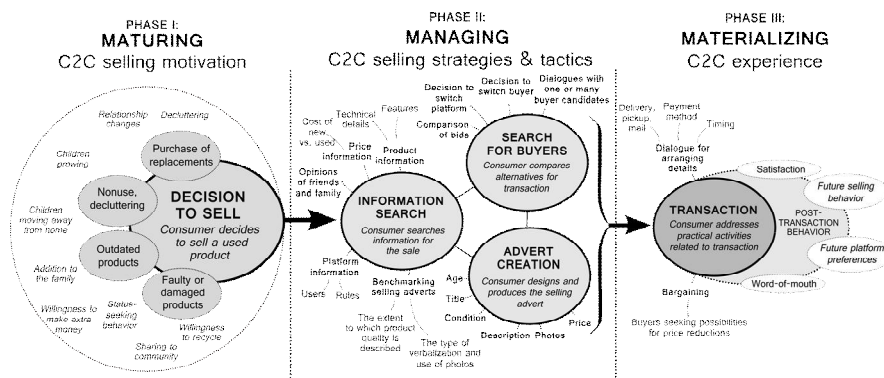


Fig. 1: The C2C selling experience

### Managing selling strategies and tactics

After the decision to sell is made, consumers search for information (e.g., available product and price information, opinions from peers), compare different platforms for where to sell the item (e.g., social-media-, auction-, or fixed-priced-based platforms), create the advert for the platform (e.g., a description, photos, setting the price), and search for buyers (e.g., converse with multiple buyer candidates simultaneously). Altogether, this phase is characterized by a high degree of active process management by the sellers. This was evident in the time and effort invested in these processes. In turn, most sellers reported that they had very short time-spans; they were quick to change platforms if they did not receive bids or replies fast enough. For example, participants B and E engaged in benchmarking

other sellers' behaviour while participant I described how the potential buyers sometimes approached him, as seen below.

*I paid attention to how others had sold theirs and with what kind of information, for example, how they described the condition or were there only the physical measurements. (Participant B)*

*I browse the ads that others have placed when I'm planning to sell something, like [the] Wii Fit. I looked at the titles and prices others had used. (Participant E)*

*I belong in a community of vinyl record collectors. There are over 70,000 of us in that group. [...] Many members have posted photos asking for help fixing their audio equipment and stuff. I'm there right away giving them advice on what they should do. So, this way, many people just approach me in [Facebook] Messenger and ask directly for advice. [...] And that's why many ask me whether I'd be willing to sell some item or another that I've posted pictures about. (Participant I)*

Altogether, these interactions are often parallel in nature; they are integrations of both brand-owned and external touchpoints.

#### *Materializing the experience*

After the transaction agreement, all practical issues related to the transaction need to be addressed. These include, for example, dialogue to arrange the transaction details (e.g., how the item is delivered). What especially characterizes this stage is the fact that interactions can be face-to-face and social; customer-to-customer can convert into human-to-human. This can have both positive and negative outcomes. For example, some buyers also try receive an additional discount by starting to bargain when the transaction takes place. In contrast, some sellers may even provide an extra discount when it is understood that the item is serving a good deed.

*That woman sent me a message asking where she could pick up the chair for her child. [...] So, the next day, she came over, and I carried the chair for her. She was about to hand me some money, but I said that's fine. I had meant to ask for five euros but decided to just give away. [...] The chair went for a child, so, I'm glad it went to good use. (Participant B)*

*The post office takes a small commission from the operation, but the buyer himself suggested that he'd pay for the delivery if I would just ship the item right away. For some reason or another, I think he trusted that I would send him a decent item. In a way, my side of the risk was completely removed that time. Although, every time you transact on Facebook, you do it by your own name and picture. [...] Even if you tried to create a fake profile, it would take quite a bit of time and effort to make it convinc-*

*ing, and, in those kinds of communities, like the one for boat aficionados, you can only get away with fraud once because the community instantly reports these guys, and there are these private investigator types of people that start checking up on these frauds. That way, the communities around certain hobbies are somehow easier or have lower risks involved because the community is so actively keeping watch and reacting to those frauds. There's a kind of social bond between the users. (Participant G)*

Altogether, in this phase of the selling experience, social interaction can shape the experience in a strong way, either positively or negatively. The touch points are largely external and social in nature and therefore heavily influenced by other customers.

## **5 Discussion and conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore and analyse the selling experience on C2C e-commerce platforms. A tentative framework for the selling experience as a process was introduced (Fig. 1), and three complementary phases and their respective characteristics were identified: maturing selling motivation, managing selling strategies and tactics, and materializing the selling experience. As a result, we discuss four implications.

First, because selling used goods is about more than utilitarian needs/motivations, companies wanting to enter this market should also display their value propositions through themes like community or environmental values. For the sellers, these dimensions of value propositions can offer important benefits as they search for potential platforms to be used in their processes. Second, because the C2C selling process consists of many phases and involves active management, platform companies might develop services that either reduce the need for active management by the sellers or eliminate/enhance some of these phases. Prior C2C research has shown that perceived trustworthiness is important for buyers (Hajli et al., 2013; Lu et al., 2010), but our data showed this to be the case for sellers as well. Therefore, platform players or retailers considering entry into the market should consider how to design the optimal degree of buyer/seller control and risk in these transactions. They need to develop appropriate mechanisms that both attract sellers and ensure trustworthiness for buyers.

Third, it is evident that many consumers engage in C2C transactions for more than merely economic or utilitarian needs (e.g., Saarijärvi et al., 2018; Yrjölä et al., 2017), and our data from the sellers also confirms this. Non-monetary benefits played a key role in triggering the process in the first place as well as in evaluations of satisfaction after the transaction. These included feeling good about helping others, getting to know new people, acting in an environmentally sustainable



way, wanting to try new things, and wanting to contribute to society or to a specific community. These are important post-transactional outcomes that could also be facilitated by platforms.

Fourth, related to aforementioned social factors, such as identity and community, play a large role in some of the C2C selling processes. For instance, for many of the sellers, it was important *to whom* they sold their items (e.g., peers vs. those who were less well off). Participant B, for instance, remarked, “I was satisfied to hear that the chair went to a child, so that there’s someone using it.” From some of the interviews, it was also apparent that sellers might see the act of selling an item as a part of status or identity building. This might have motivated them to sell certain items while they decided not to sell others. For example:

*I would be ashamed to sell my old belongings to anyone. I’ve had them so long that I belong in a museum already. I wouldn’t dare give them to anyone.* (Participant T)

These social factors were especially evident when the sellers talked about their post-transaction behaviour (e.g., evaluating the process and the outcome, positive emotions arising from nostalgia and from finding a new home for the goods).

Altogether, during these three phases, sellers mature the decision to sell, managing different types of selling strategies and tactics that eventually contribute to materializing the experience. Consumers take multiple criteria into account in their selling behaviour (e.g., channel selection criteria, different cues used to evaluate trustworthiness of a potential buyer, pricing considerations). Therefore, understanding all of the different activities related to the selling process can help platforms to better orchestrate the design and delivery of the experience.

C2C e-commerce platforms not only compete against traditional retailers but also against other platforms that focus on facilitating C2C transactions. Therefore, while they focus on delivering efficient exchanges, they must also pay attention to delivering seamless digital experiences – both for buyers and sellers. In the context of this study, focus was placed on understanding the phases and characteristics of the selling experience. With this understanding, companies can develop their business models and value propositions by addressing the issues consumers perceive as meaningful. This not only contributes to better customer experiences but also facilitates a circular economy and sustainability by enhancing consumers’ future intentions to continue using C2C e-commerce as a complementary means for consumption.

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