

RESEARCH ABSTRACT

Treatment of Consumers by Internet-enabled Businesses: Ethnographic Pilot Study

The Me2B Alliance, a nonprofit dedicated to consumer rights in the digital world conducted an ethnographic pilot study to understand people's primary concerns regarding how they interact with online businesses. The Me2B Alliance plans to use this information, and that of subsequent studies, to develop criteria for a certification seal that would indicate that a product or company meets a certain standard for behavior.

Findings of this small-scale study indicated that participants saw themselves as having a relationship with the brand or product itself, rather than with the company that made the product. Overall, corporate behavior was not a factor that overrode other factors when participants were deciding whether or not to use a connected product. The most important factors were convenience, usefulness and the ability to connect with friends and family. Even when participants had negative views of a company or product, these factors could override those negative views.

In this study, a catalogue of digital harms consumers may encounter when using connected products was also collected—one that was generated bottom-up by participants without biasing them toward specific categories. The harms could relate to either production or consumption of goods and services.

Perceptions of digital harms may be considered an index of participants' implicit attitudes regarding digital consumer-producer relationships as unstable and unknowable. When consumers participate in a traditional (not online) business transaction, they do not worry about being harmed because they believe they understand the rules of the transaction, and that they share this understanding with the producer as well. In contrast, the rules for engaging in online business transactions may be inherently

unknowable because they are unstable over time, variable across organizations, and not standardized either through convention or regulation.

When consumers understand the rules and expectations of the transaction, they are empowered to advocate for their own wellbeing. Online, the lack of mutual understanding of the rules of engagement causes consumers to feel powerless. Interview participants indicated that knowledge and agency were important to them when looking for brands to trust online.

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