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**Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science**

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**eBay: Creating value through ECO-merce**

Summative Memorandum

Consumer Psychology (PB417)

Candidate 35339

London School of Economics and Political Science

Department of Psychology and Behavioural Science

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**Case Background**

In 1995, Pierre Omidyar founded eBay as an auction site for pre-owned items. eBay was a pioneer in ecommerce and online peer-to-peer resale. The years in which revenue generated by eBay was highest were 2011 to 2013. Its revenue decreased sharply in 2014 after a security breach but has recently been on the rise (Wikipedia, 2020). eBay has developed into a platform for trade beyond peer- to peer resale, including small businesses, new products, and an area for local offers. The range of used and new items sold on eBay is wide and somewhat hard to define. There are 182 million eBay users worldwide (2019) and 700M items listed on the platform. Currently, 79% of goods sold on eBay are new (ebayInc, 2020).

eBay competes with the likes of Amazon (founded in 1994) and Etsy (founded in 2005), occupying a middle ground between Amazon's industrial approach to selling and Etsy's ethical-items-only strategy. Being in the middle means pressure from one side to be competitive in terms of offer and pricing, as well as pressure from the other side to show civic engagement. With ecommerce expecting further growth in the next years (Statista, n.d.), pressure on eBay and the likes to stand their ground on the market will remain. In addition to competition between ecommerce platforms, strikes, consumer activism and boycotts against unethical practices are forces to be reckoned with, especially for giants like Amazon (Paul, 2020, see also Eidelson & Soper, 2019).

Word count: 235

## Letter

Dear Mr Iannone,

eBay prides itself on being a buzzing marketplace enabled by people and open to all and I applaud initiatives to empower small businesses, especially in these unprecedented times. Despite recent efforts for a better buying and selling experience, which may already be paying off, I believe eBay has lost touch with its users. Simplifying buyers' returns process and facilitating purchases for volume-based discounted products are certainly intelligent improvements. However, they fail to consider the reason why eBay was founded in the first place as well as the main reason why buyers turn to the platform.

eBay was founded with the purpose of selling used items in an auction-based process, but this is no news to you. Currently, most goods sold on eBay are new, which stands to show that it has moved away from its original purpose. The sell-through rate of used items outperforms new items (all countries except US), which is an indicator for the fact that consumers reach to eBay to buy and sell used rather than new items. This may be because of Amazon, a competitor, being more top-of-mind when it comes to buying new items online.

With the sharing economy and peer-to-peer online resale on the rise, this is the perfect momentum for eBay to overhaul its strategy and establish itself as the default option for online reselling and buying of used goods (WGSN, 2020). From the analysis in the previous paragraph, it emerges that eBay outperforms its competitors in trade with pre-owned items. Second-hand items are a means to consume more sustainably, and increasing sales thereof is an opportunity to take a leap into a future oriented towards sustainability. In the text that follows, I will introduce three solutions to funnel purchase of second-hand items. eBay is a company with many different facets and tackling all of them is beyond the scope of this essay. The solutions I propose in this memorandum focus on the customer experience side of eBay's online platform, specifically for those who turn to eBay for pre-owned products. My elaborations are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1:

Problem	Solution	Implementation	Supporting concepts	
Product design	Overcrowded site	Clean aesthetics	Simplifying homepage	Visceral dimension: choice overload, aesthetics,
	Navigation is effortful	Facilitating goal-directed navigation	separate landing pages for new and used, changing default option to used items	Behavioural dimension: affordances, motor fluency, embodiment
	Lack of brand community	Creating a brand community using the eBay logo	Selling branded items, logo <i>détournement</i> (eg. DHL x Vêtements)	Reflective dimension: social signalling, identity, status, postmodernism
Reluctance to engage with used items	Emphasizing uniqueness in used products	"My story" tab as default in product descriptions	Narratives, endowment effect, anthropomorphism	
eBay Local is not reaching its potential	building an interactive community	Example: Freitag, meetups and swapping offers	Sharing, gift-giving, reciprocity, access-based consumption, social capital	

### **Product design**

The first part of my solution concerns the design of the eBay user experience. Installation Theory on systemic change suggests that systems (in this case eBay as platform for exchange) have three layers, so my solution addresses each of these layers with a suitable strategy (Lahlou, 2018). The suggested roadmap is also coherent with Norman's (2004) perspective on product design, where he identifies three dimensions: the visceral, the behavioural, and the reflective.

#### **Aesthetics are more important than you think**

Even though it has changed over the years, the eBay website still presents customers with an overcrowded homepage. Having too much to choose from can undermine goal-directed search and lead to poor decisions, or worse, prevent customers from choosing at all, making them give up on their purchase intention. My proposition is to restructure the eBay website adopting a clean, appeasing aesthetic. The new design also simplifies navigation and provides an intuitive access to second-hand products, as evidenced on the sitemaps in Figure 1.

#### **Design affects behaviour**

Simplifying navigation overlaps with the behavioural dimension of the product, which will be improved by facilitating access to second-hand ware and website navigation overall. Good behavioural design incorporates purpose, performance, and usability. This means that how customers on eBay use and navigate the website should be incorporated into the design. To do this, I propose to make separate landing pages for used and new items. Customers should be able to set their own default landing page under the preferences tab, according to their needs (Figures 1 and 2). This also ensures that buyers and sellers of new items are not unfairly disadvantaged by the new feature.

#### **If nobody's seen it, did it even happen?**

This part of the design process addresses the social dimension of product use (Norman, 2004). Shopping on eBay is not usually something people pride themselves of, but thrifting has been linked to a treasure-hunt mindset (Ferraro et al., 2016). While it is hard to predictably influence social status given by the use of eBay, a good start to increasing the reflective dimension would be to provide a means of signalling belonging to the eBay community. The *détournement* of well-known corporate logos (as DHL or Boots) has been a hugely successful fashion trend recently (theguardian.com). In this logic, eBay could give branded merchandise (eg.: stickers, clothing, phone-cases) to loyal customers, or even go a step further and cooperate with a fashion designer, like DHL did with Vetements (theguardian.com). This kind of cooperation could be an additional revenue stream, while reinforcing eBay's brand community.

#### **Reluctance to engage with used items**

eBay has a strong interest in reducing stigma associated to second-hand, therefore presentation of used items should be adapted. By emphasizing a product's uniqueness and related stories, sellers could bargain a higher price and buyers will be more inclined to think about buying a product connected to an anecdote (Slater

& Rouner, 2002). This is why there should be a “My story” default option in product descriptions for sellers to include a narrative.

### **eBay as a community**

With the idea of a brand community in mind, I invite you to consider the clothing brand Freitag as a case for offering customers to exchange their belongings within a brand community (see Figure 3). This is easily implemented in eBay Local, where a “swap” option could offer the opportunity to trade one item for another. “eBay local ambassadors” could organise small scale meetups to further improve the community. Maintaining a strong and loyal brand community is undeniably an asset for ecommerce platforms looking to stand out against their competitors while staying afloat through shifts in consumer mindsets.

If you are interested in theoretical justifications of the suggested changes, I suggest reading the elaborations on the following pages. I hope my solutions succeed at framing sustainability and civic engagement as a window of opportunity for value creation.

Looking forward to a new eBay with more old things,

Kind regards

Word count: 1000

## Theoretical background

### Introduction

Providing access to and facilitating economic exchange between several user groups, eBay qualifies as a Socio- Economic platform (SEP). SEPs support transactions, offering an opportunity for value creation and diversification beyond monetary transactions. Value creation in transactions lies at the core of my arguments: eBay could create value by adding the social and environmental dimensions to its conceptualization of value. Starting with investments in form (product design), eBay should establish a stable structure with a certain lifespan to format situation and action on the platform. Next, eBay should focus on the products sold on the platform, since those constitute short-term value in form of immediate customer needs. The last step takes a long-term perspective on transactions, focusing on building social capital for more future opportunities and long-term value creation.

The first part of my suggested solution addresses the physical layer of the platform by proposing improvements in all three dimensions of product design identified by Norman. The second part of my solution addresses the psychological layer by trying to overcome psychological barriers in trade with used items. Finally, the third part addresses the institutional, or social, layer of the installation by investing in the creation of a social ecosystem around the platform.

### Product design

The three layers suggested by Installation Theory (Lahlou, 2018) are paralleled by Norman's (2004) three dimensions of product design, including a visceral dimension, a behavioural dimension, and a reflective dimension. I suggest an improvement in each of the dimensions to improve valence, usability, and meaning of the eBay user experience:

#### Visceral dimension

Among the three dimensions along which product design should evolve, the visceral dimension is the one that affects experience in the most subliminal way (Alba & Williams, 2013). Situated in the aesthetic structure and organisation of the website, the visceral dimension affects valence and instinctive judgement, that is, whether the experience will elicit a positive or a negative feeling Norman (2004).

Pleasant aesthetics have been found to be linked to reward signalling in the brain, and to contribute to perceived product performance through a so-called halo-effect (Reimann et al., 2010). This stands to show the importance of purposeful and pleasant design, which in the case of eBay could be improved by simplifying colour schemes and reducing the amount of (moving) stimuli on the landing page.

#### Behavioural dimension

Being faced with too many choices in online search results in choice overload, leading to paralysis, poor choices, and lower choice satisfaction (Oulasvirta, Hukkinen, Schwartz, 2009). The behavioural dimension should focus on usability of the platform by taking into account activity and goals of users during navigation (Lahlou, 2018). Behaviour moves within the funnel that is provided by the environment, and choices are made according to the meaning that can be derived from this environment. This is due to our behaviour being situated in our bodies and motor systems, described by the concept of affordances in ecological psychology (Greeno,



1994). The suggested improvement takes user activity into account by allowing for customisation of the landing page depending on what the user is looking for. Additionally, choices on the landing page are reduced and the search bar takes centre stage, allowing for more goal-directed navigation. It should be noted though that any change aiming to improve user experience is best started by investigating user goals and needs during navigation, rather than adhering to any other kind of vision (Lahlou, 2018).

### **Reflective dimension**

The reflective dimension of product design is defined by the social meaning created by consumption. That is, how users can signal to others that they are using a product and how this signalling affects the user's social status (Norman, 2004 see also Alba & Williams, 2013). Humans have an intrinsic and evolutionary need to signal social status and group affiliation (Mead, 1934). This need to signal can even have an impact on purchase decisions, as evidenced by an incremental effect of status priming on purchase of sustainable products (Griskevicius et al., 2010). There is a need of signalling social status, because this will ultimately be the justification for behaviours we can expect from our peers (Stoetzel, 1963). An indicator for the value of a resource is the quantity in which it is available and how it can be obtained. This mechanism is expressed in the treasure-hunt mindset of thrift shoppers (Guiot & Roux, 2010). The pride of having found unique items could be interpreted as costly signalling, in light of Signalling Theory (Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005).

In a postmodern consumer society, meaning is created by the act of consumption rather than the product itself (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Rigid modernist hierarchies of "high" versus "low" culture become blurred and objects' meanings are increasingly defined by their context (Baudrillard, 1981/ 1984, p. 79).

This phenomenon can be observed for example in arts with Marcel Duchamp's urinal sculpture (Duchamp, M. *Fountain*, 1917) as well as in fashion with high-end designers putting logos of mainstream companies on their clothing. eBay as a platform with large popularity and inclusivity fits into the mainstream category. In this line of reasoning, the company could venture into selling branded items to increase the cultural meaning of its (very characteristic and well-known) logo. For further illustration, Figure 4 shows an item featuring the old eBay logo for sale on Depop, a peer- to-peer fashion resale platform.

### **Emphasising uniqueness of used products**

While the previous suggestion takes into account the experience of eBay, this part of the solution addresses psychological barriers that individuals have when shopping for second- hand items. I herewith address the psychological layer of the installation, as identified by Installation Theory (Lahlou, 2018).

Purchasing used instead of new items has been linked to stigmatization and disgust (Ferraro et al., 2016). Second- hand items tend to be associated to modest social status and often elicit feelings of contagion from one user to another, leading to disgust reactions (Belk, 1988). According to Belk (1988), possessions are seen as an extension of their owner's identity, which can stand in the way of their transition between owners. Furthermore, people famously tend to overestimate the value of their own possessions when asked to sell them (endowment effect) (Kahnemann, Knetsch, Thaler, 1991). This discrepancy in how sellers value the product they are selling and buyer's perspective hampers sale.

In order to recognize the monetary as well as the non-monetary value of a product, I propose to foster dialogue on an object's past (when suitable), by using product descriptions in a storytelling format. Incorporating narratives and stories into product descriptions is a means of engaging buyers with more persuasive content as well as engaging dialogue and exchange on products. In this way, sellers can justify the value they see in their item and buyers may be able to relate more easily. Narratives tap into holistic forms of thinking, which is useful to counter scepticism (Petrova & Cialdini, 2011). Holistic thinking generates less counterarguments, since arguments are evaluated in light of their coherence, not in light of hard facts (Kahnemann, 2011, Chap. 19). Anthropomorphising a product by using the first-person perspective ("My Story") is another tool to make users attend to more relationship-oriented factors (Chandler & Schwarz, 2010).

### **eCommunity**

After having dealt with the physical and the psychological layers of the eBay platform, I now turn to the third and last layer identified by Installation Theory: the institutional layer. This layer is situated in socially regulated behaviour, for example social norms. While capital tends to be seen purely in monetary terms, Bourdieu (1986) identifies three forms of capital: Economic capital is monetary, cultural capital can be seen as accumulation of knowledge and tastes, and social capital is defined by which people and how many people we have access to (in Richardson, 1986, pp. 241-58). As an intrinsically social platform, eBay contributes to the production of bonds, reputation, status, and in a nutshell social capital.

Business models increasingly rely on access-based consumption rather than ownership-based consumption, driving active user communities and relationship marketing to engage customers (Belk, 2014 see also Rifkin, 2000). This can be observed in the case of Freitag (Figure 3), where bag owners are encouraged to swap their bags with other Freitag customers, excluding those who do not own one of their bags (Freitag.ch). While Freitag does not directly earn money through swaps, they maintain access to an active brand community, thereby building social capital. Social capital is what my solution has in store for eBay Local by creating a platform for trade with non-monetary value and an environment of exchange through local meetups. Thinking of the multiple stakeholders that are involved in eBay's activities, eBay Local could even become a platform for local sellers to build on.

### **Limitations**

#### **Neglected stakeholders**

The stakeholders on eBay are numerous. So many in fact, that a basic stakeholder overview would not do them justice. This memorandum chooses to specifically address the consumer experience side of the platform, while taking into account eBay's interest to remain a player in eCommerce. This is the biggest limitation, since for example sellers of new items may find themselves disadvantaged by the suggested changes. I do not see how my solutions can be profitable to them and so I appeal to the argument that sometimes, changes need to take place for the greater good. However, it should be noted that globally, more than half of all used items listed on eBay get sold, as opposed to one-third of new items (Lin, 2020). This statistic indicates that eBay could increase its sell-through rate by selling less new items.

**More goal-directed navigation means less browsing**

Eye-catching offers for bargains, prompts to look at certain product categories as well as advertisements will likely fall victims to reduction of stimuli on the homepage. This will yield a more satisfying shopping experience, but it shrinks spaces that could be monetized otherwise. On the one hand, it may make short-term promotion less effective. On the other hand, the activity resulting from these changes could give better insights into what customers are actually looking for. Additionally, this change could lead to less impulse-buying. Again, having less “space to sell” may not be profitable in the short term, but it could be beneficial in the long term.

**Conclusion**

The three-step solution within the framework of Installation Theory addresses different aspects of the platform eBay, suggesting improvements based on social scientific literature and research. With the main goal of creating new forms of value in economic exchange, monetary profitability is also taken into account. While the solutions brought forward have their limitations, they offer specific ways to create value in a sustainable way. As with any solution, success depends on implementation, which should be seen as integral part of the change process (Lahlou, 2018). Change needs to be seen as steady state, where user perspective is the key indicator for understanding what the windows of opportunity for change are. Thus, it is important to remain flexible even after implementation. Installation Theory describes a feedback loop between all three layers of the installation, so they cannot be seen in isolation from each other. In application, this would mean that the effects of changes should be observed and reacted upon continuously.

Word count: 1855

Figures

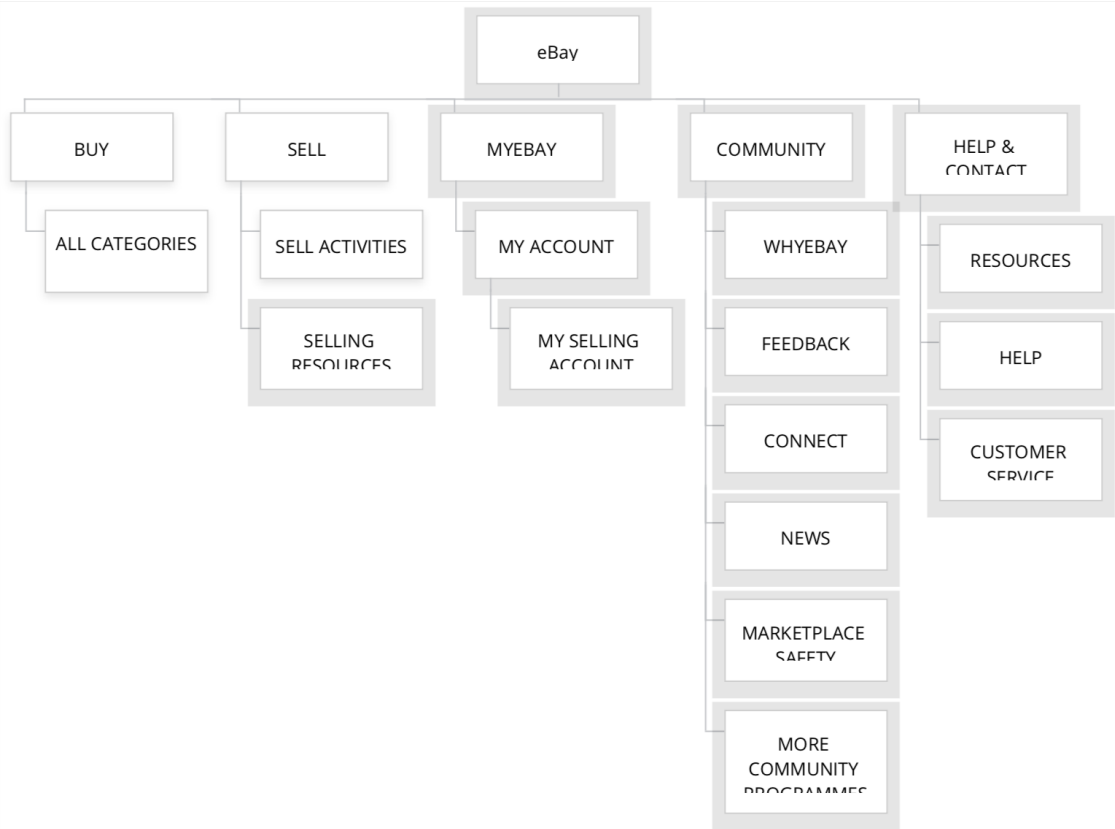


Figure 1a.: Basic sitemap of the current eBay

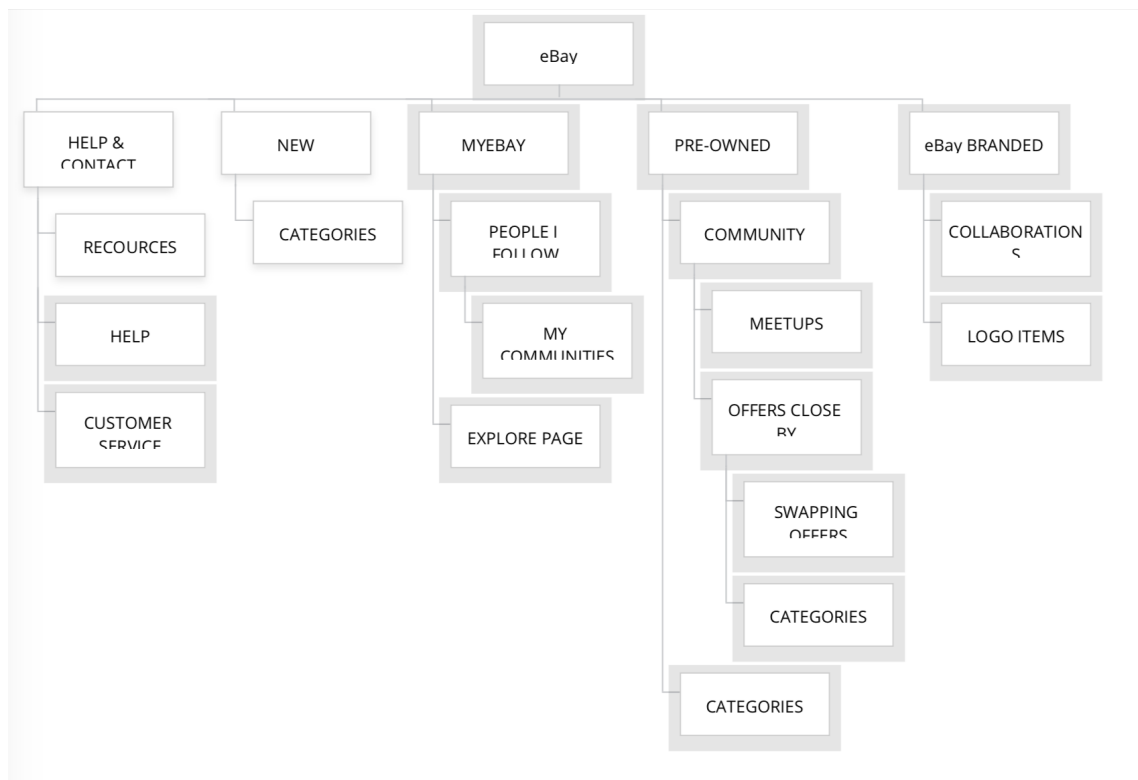


Figure 1b: Sitemap example for the new eBay, available for download at:

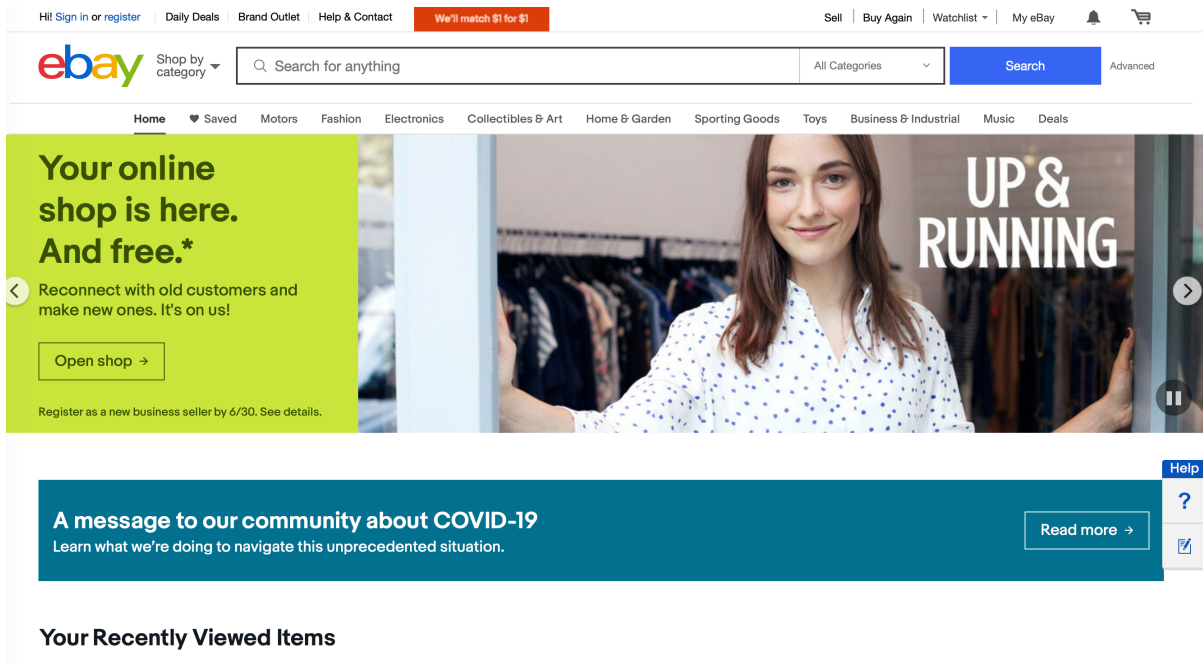


Figure 2a: The current eBay landing page

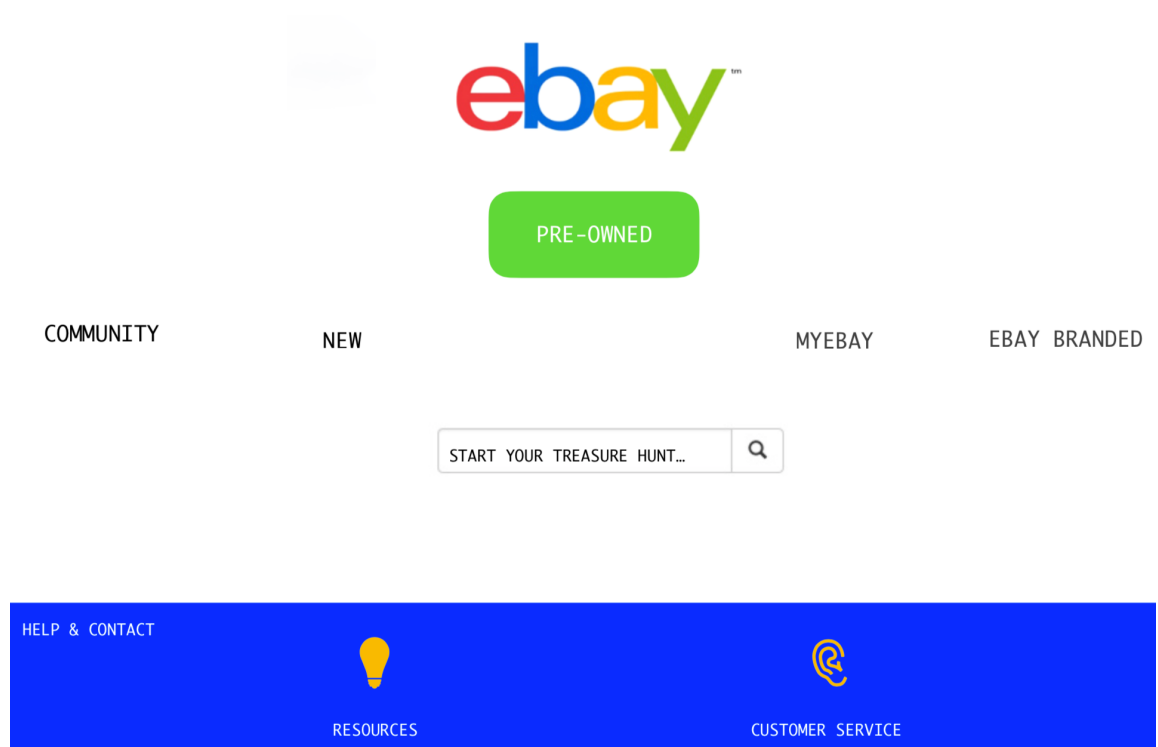


Figure 2b: An example of a template for a new eBay landing page



## S.W.A.P. – IT'S ABOUT GIVE AND TAKE

S.W.A.P. stands for Shopping Without Any Payment and is FREITAG's Tinder-style bag exchange for all our F-riends who've fallen in love with another bag and would like to hand down their old one hassle-free.

If you've fallen out of love with your long-lasting FREITAG bag but still have it, you can swap it for a new one.

1. To get started, you'll need to register at least one product and activate it for S.W.A.P.-ing. Then you'll be able to view other swappable bags.
2. If you like the bag and perhaps want to trade it for one of your own, simply swipe it to the right. If you don't like it, swipe it to the left and bring up the next bag. As you can see, it's just like the popular dating app.
3. You can then leave it to chance and wait until you get a match, which is what we call it when both of you like each other's bags. Or you could help things along by writing a friendly little note to the owner(s) of your favorite bag(s).
4. Then you can decide between yourselves whether, how and where you want to exchange bags. Basically, it's all about bag for bag. So, if you're swapping your F52 MIAMI VICE for an F733 ZIPPELIN, it might be a nice gesture if you offered a bit of cash for the bag on top.
5. When you're done, confirm your successful swap with us, enjoy the new object of your affection and pedal off happily into the sunset. Or something like that.

**Figure 3:** S.W.A.P means Shopping Without Any Payment

**depop** Search Sell Profile Logout

**acedeglace**  
Los Angeles, United States

Vintage eBay Collared/Polo Shirt

Official Y2K eBay merch. Pretty rare I think since I could not find any sign of eBay merch with the old logo anywhere. Closest I found was an eBay hat at Round Two.

For the eBoys and eGirls

Slightly worn condition, got a small stain but should be removable in the wash  
Shipping: \$5

Not: Amazon, Depop, Craigslist, 90's, 2000's, Apple, IBM, Netflix, Imran Potato, Supreme, Bape

**#SaleTime**

Price	\$55.00
Size	XL

LISTED 3 DAYS AGO

**Figure 4:** A “vintage” eBay shirt on sale for \$55 on depop, a fashion peer to peer resale platform

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