

Lessons and Methods from eBay

twingles33 uses listings, profiles, and additional features in a manner similar to other eBay members and helps construct the site, participants, and consumerism. Her narrative reflects how eBay markets and facilitates community, links families and corporations, uses categories to control what can be seen and sold, organizes gender and sexuality on the site, and mandates work from members. twingles33 asks the viewer, “Got to have that Barbie?!” and answers her own inquiry by self-presenting as a Barbie collector.¹ As with “most Barbie? collectors,” her “collection grew to” its “very own room,” which her three boys call “Barbie? Blvd.” and they “tell their friends ‘don’t go in there’” or she will make them “dress Barbie.” Her narrative about the interlinked pleasures of identity production and consumption, which can be accessed through eBay, are problematized by the untraditional gender and sexuality positions that get culturally associated with collecting and the question marks that are sprinkled through the commentary. These punctuation marks probe her statements even though they are probably an HTML misreading of the Barbie trademark sign. Such nascent evaluations indicate some of the ways eBay functions and help me study members’ listing and posting practices.

The question marks and descriptions of out-of-control collecting in twingles33’s description trouble cultural mandates for women to order their lives and bodies and indicate that her feminine doll spaces jeopardize her sons’ masculinity. Her sons fear being made to dress Barbie up and being clothed like the doll. Since her Barbie Boulevard has become a “highway under constuction,” she is going to sell her “items on the Internet highway”

and connect these sites. twingles33's listing is a version of eBay's community because members can solve her sons' panic, commit to her products, be good community members, and extend her family and its functions. eBay describes such connections between buyers, sellers, and the company as "community" and "social selling," since members' consumerism is based on shared interests. For instance, eBay's WorldofGood.com, a "multi-seller marketplace for socially and environmentally responsible shopping," uses the tagline, "Join a community of those who care."² eBay continues to employ the term "community" to render the values of the company and members and to get people to connect more often, assist individuals, and do the work that otherwise would be performed by customer-service representatives.

twingles33's "Got to have that Barbie" is conflicted. She addresses everyone as Barbie collectors, calls a community of doll collectors with particular attributes into being, justifies the auctioning and removal of Barbies from the home, still has to "have" dolls, and establishes gendered populations who pleasurably remember and fear Barbie play.³ eBay also shifts between attending to everyone and constituting the normative identities that are most welcome on the site. eBay claims, "Whatever it is, you can get it on eBay," the company and its executives "recognize and respect everyone as a unique individual," and "Everyone has something to contribute."⁴ eBay assures viewers about the openness of the site while, whether desired or uninvited, constituting normative subjects and consumerism. For instance, eBay uses the marriage of the site's founder, Pierre Omidyar, to Pam Wesley and other consumer-oriented weddings to stand in for the setting, encourages members to mirror these consumer practices and values, and regulates gay men's self-representations and descriptions of erotic interests.

eBay's "Whatever it is" campaign and featuring of the word "it" throughout the site are exemplary instances of the ways in which the company figures the setting as a diverse community. Through such slogans, eBay promises that the site connects everyone, fulfills all desires, delivers any object, and acknowledges a multitude of consumer identities. eBay's many deployments of the term "it," and the many appearances of the phrase "you can get it on" as part of the company's advertising slogan, relate the passionate aspects of collecting to sexual activity. eBay also tries to stabilize the unknowable aspects of Internet consuming and unrecognizable features of computer-represented objects and people—the "Whatever it is"—by assuring individuals that eBay is a compendium of everything and a logical frame. eBay and members such as twingles33 use such tactics to indicate and then control the messy and

erotic elements of collecting. eBay's indications of profusion and tolerance are actively disingenuous because, as I have started to suggest, eBay regulates listings. eBay also functions as an instructional text and offers members lessons and guidelines.

eBay is a useful model for thinking about and advancing Internet and new media studies because other sites also deploy these operations. For instance, the developers of marketplace-oriented sites such as Etsy and craigslist have set rules and "community" links for participants.⁵ There are thus many lessons researchers and designers can learn from examining eBay, including the problems with constituting virtual communities, the identity functions of brand communities and conferences, how rules and principles can be critically remediated, and the informative aspects of members' complaints and resistance. Popular discourses and Internet studies research often make it seem as if members are in support of such sites and practices. However, my study provides examples of the production of mainstream identities and corporate power in Internet settings, how members' values and positions are associated with sites, and the ways members make other identities and desires visible. I engage with these issues by focusing on ebay.com—the English-language site. In this introduction, I outline the concepts of brand community, configuring the user, organizational logic, sexual citizenship, and consumer citizenship; explain eBay's visual culture and the methodologies employed; and provide a chapter breakdown.

Brand Community Formation

eBay uses the concept of community as a way to structure the opening parts of the setting, categories, profiles, advertising campaigns, and newsletters. Early versions of eBay offered a "welcome" to the "community."⁶ eBay continues to render this idea through "Community" forums that focus on members' collections and identities, accounts of individuals doing good deeds, opportunities to email sellers, and occasions to socialize at physical eBay conventions. Members support, and sometimes undermine, eBay's rendering of a community with their descriptions of shared interests, rituals, and values. They promote the site, post about their attachments to other participants, create elaborate eBay-branded outfits, provide economic and emotional support to members, critique the setting's functions, and produce the kinds of social selling strategies eBay encourages while depicting the kinds of bodies and desires eBay has tried to ban. eBay and other sites and spheres use com-

munity as a structuring device because it appears to accept everyone while articulating rules and values.

eBay also makes it seem as if members' engagements in the brand and community are empowering. For instance, joining "eBay Main Street" and "eBay Government Relations" will "make your voice heard."⁷ Participating means being notified about "legislative matters that may affect E-commerce," being asked to communicate with "elected officials on crucial issues," and eBay directing members' engagements and politics.⁸ Such options configure participants' opinions and constitute brands as shared cultural property rather than individually or corporately owned intellectual property.⁹ They promote the formation of brand communities—cohorts of fans, creative producers, and consumer critics who collect around these arrangements. For the marketing scholars Albert M. Muñoz Jr. and Thomas C. O'Guinn, a brand community "is a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand."¹⁰ There are communities arranged around such brands as Apple, Coca-Cola, Saab, and *Star Wars*.¹¹ The eBay brand community is called into being by the company, facilitated on the site, supported and materialized by the work of productive members, and interrogated and further highlighted by consumer critics. The brand community literature explains how community is deployed on eBay, how the company organizes members, and how participants envision the company and site as their own. Yet I am critical of some aspects of the literature and brand community formation because individuals are used to produce value for corporations.

Popular and academic considerations of brand communities tend to identify participants as co-producers and even owners of brands who are willing to work for corporations. For the marketing-focused researchers C. K. Prahalad and Venkat Ramaswamy, consumers "want to interact with firms" and "co-create" the value of the brand and products.¹² Scott Cook, a member of eBay's board of directors, goes even further than this when he notes that "millions of people make all kinds of voluntary contributions to companies—from informed opinions to computing resources."¹³ He advises companies to use "volunteers" to build their businesses. These brand managers, marketers, and academic researchers, according to the marketing scholarship of Detlev Zwick, Samuel K. Bonsu, and Aron Darmody, tend to celebrate "collaborative value creation as a moment of consumer empowerment and transfiguration."¹⁴ However, they are interested in delivering "the customer over to the corporation." Members of a brand community are inclined to celebrate and

buy the brand's products and to identify with the associated corporation, although the company's abandonment or mishandling of the brand can lead to alienation and critique.¹⁵ For example, members of the eBay anti-brand community are a noticeable part of the site. Whether engaged for social, affective, identity-building, or even critical reasons (since resistance facilitates new commercial opportunities and value), people's engagement with brand communities supports corporations, consumerism, and the market.¹⁶

Jeff Skoll, Meg Whitman, John Donahoe, and others in eBay's leadership continue to be part of this brand community along with performing for a time as presidents and chief executives.¹⁷ During their appearances at eBay community conferences, they shift between being brand celebrities and everyday members by wandering among the crowds, signing autographs, wearing the same outfit as other employees, and hosting events. Whitman "makes a point of being self-effacing" at such proceedings, says the reporter Chris Taylor, and "her first words to adoring online auctioneers are, 'This is about you.'"¹⁸ This makes members feel like co-producers or even owners of eBay and has helped shift engagements with the site: in 1996, the year after the setting was developed, it had 41,000 registered members; in 2010, it had 94.5 million active members.¹⁹ However, drops in the value of eBay's stock, growing member disenfranchisement, decreases in site traffic, a desire to "simplify and streamline" the organization, and a global economic downturn contributed to eBay's firing of more than one thousand full-time employees and six hundred temporary workers in 2008.²⁰ These changes also challenge Whitman's recognition of members, which does not extend to giving them significant site input, keeping auction fees low, or allowing GLBTQ sexual representations.

eBay identifies the setting as a community and site of co-production while supplying members with texts that describe their obligations and values.²¹ For instance, readers of eBay's history section are told that "Omidyar built eBay around what remain the company's core values; a belief that: People are basically good, Everyone has something to contribute," and "An open environment brings out the best in people."²² Omidyar and the company connect goodness to a community where people "contribute," or labor, without economic compensation from eBay. Members are encouraged to train new members, provide help with listings, moderate and resolve problems, and make individuals feel connected to the setting and the company. Yet the site also uses conceptions of goodness and the screen of diversity to articulate a normative setting ethos. For instance, eBay's "Community Values" narrative is accompanied by an image of heterosexual couples.²³ eBay's deployment of

community encourages critical considerations of the values it and other Internet sites facilitate and the ways members are configured.

Configuring the User

eBay portrays community members as collectors, binary gendered and heterosexual subjects, and good moral people. It also uses a variety of tactics to get members to adopt these roles. Thus, eBay produces a version of members or “configures” them as this concept is delineated in science and technology studies. Steve Woolgar, who is informed by social theory and the philosophy of science, argues that individuals who design personal computers also define, delineate, and facilitate the appearance of the user.²⁴ He considers how different sectors of companies speak for users, teach users what to want, and incorporate conceptions of users into products.²⁵ eBay speaks for members when it offers a list of “Community Values” that are produced by the company.²⁶ In a related manner, Woolgar describes how warning labels and other elements of computer systems direct individuals to keep the computer case sealed and provide messages about the skill level, nationality, and other features of users. Nigel Thrift extends Woolgar’s thesis and how eBay configuration can be understood. According to Thrift, electronic toys introduce children to interfaces, technologies, and worldviews and thereby configure them for future interactive environments.²⁷ eBay configures members through instructional texts, rule systems, advertisements that indicate how the site is supposed to function, and features that articulate identities and goods. Configuration therefore defines users’ identities, delimits their actions, and challenges the cultural association of the term “user” with agency and an unmediated and unmarked engagement.

A number of researchers in feminist science and technology studies nuance Woolgar’s conception of configuring the user and consider the introduction of technologies to consumers as a process of mutual adaptation in which gender and technology are shaped.²⁸ They study the consumption junction where consumers choose between competing technologies, individuals are co-producers, and technological diffusion happens. Identifying people as co-producers, who in the broadest sense help design technologies, acknowledges the complicated ways mechanisms and social practices are developed. Models of co-production challenge narratives about miraculous discoveries and scientific genius. They avoid replicating histories of white male inventors, such as focusing on Omidyar’s role as the “founder” of eBay, and displacing mem-

bers' participation. Microsoft renders a form of co-production in commercials where individuals describe how they influenced the operating system's design and declare, "I'm a PC and Windows 7 was my idea."²⁹ However, the generic aspects of these ideas perpetuate Microsoft's authorship. In my study of eBay, I recognize how groups of people assist in the production, marketing, and diffusion of technologies and processes *and* how users are socially constructed, encouraged to work because of their position as co-producers, and directed to adopt certain notions of technologies and roles.

Equating co-production and agency can be politically troubling. After all, eBay uses conceptions of co-production, as I suggest in chapters 1 and 2, to get members to identify with the site and brand and work for free. In a manner similar to computer warning labels, eBay functions as an instructional text. For instance, "Buy It Now," an eBay shopping option with a fixed cost and expectation that individuals will immediately pay for purchases, is also a directive that encourages specific types of consumerism and commands members to accept the company's terms. A critical attention to these processes and the claims made by Internet and new media studies researchers, including the tendency to identify hypertexts, fan cultures, and virtual communities as empowering, is imperative. Notions of users' agency discourage research on how sites regulate and configure individuals and the ways governments and other political forces deploy settings and technologies in support of their platforms and policies.

Gender and the Company's Organizational Logic

Most aspects of the eBay interface are designed to configure viewers. The "Magic Snow Globe" helps individuals "find the perfect gift" during the holiday season. It encourages people to "Wish for it," using a gender-neutral pronoun to acknowledge everyone and everything, and accidentally suggests the desire for non-binary gender positions.³⁰ However, the gift finder divides all eBay shopping into items "For Him" or "For Her." Gender is further differentiated and hierarchized by associating masculinity with the "Brainiac," "Mr. Fix It," and intelligence and technical skill and by associating women with traditional feminine labor and the "Domestic Goddess."³¹ In a similar manner, the shopping search engine TheFind asks, "What can we find for you?" and associates consumerism with women by offering "short prom dresses, cameo jewelry, layered necklace, stackable rings, prom dress," and "diamond earrings."³² These articulations of gendered identities, objects, and

forms of shopping are antithetical to selling to the widest number of consumers. In such cases, user-articulated searching is replaced with cultural instructions and the configuration of users as gendered subjects with particular buying interests.

eBay's varied lists and categories create a set of objects and relationships between objects; articulate what is recognizable and purchasable; structure how things can be viewed; help to articulate collecting; and produce gender, race, and sexuality classifications. For example, the "Baby" category has links for "Girl Clothes," illustrated by a dress, and "Boy Clothes."³³ Dads and parents are not mentioned in the "More Info About Baby" section, but the viewer is informed, "You can also find great gear for mom."³⁴ Through such frameworks, eBay connects ideal items to traditional roles and extends the organizational logic of the site. Gender and sexuality, according to the sociologist Joan Acker, are constitutive elements in the "organizational logic, or the underlying assumptions and practices that construct most contemporary work organizations."³⁵ These beliefs and behaviors, and understandings of individuals and companies, are instituted through abstract conceptions of workers, written and computerized work rules, managerial directives, and other methods for running organizations. The concept of organizational logic—and I am using this term to describe such things as eBay's categories, feedback reviews, menu options, narratives, and principles—allows me to interrogate the underlying structures and ideologies of businesses and the larger ways things are classified according to gender and heterosexual norms. Critiques of such corporate and social arrangements are needed because society often views companies and their policies and practices as gender-neutral and considerations of gender and sexuality as imposed on or peripheral to the systems.³⁶

Buyers are introduced to eBay's organizational logic when they find listings by using the menu-driven category system, search function, or previously saved searches. Buyers who search by using a particular term receive results that specify how many items are in each category; they are provided with contextualizing images and statements and have the option to continue to view through eBay's specific categories and users' terms. Buyers and, especially, sellers must accept eBay's categories and configuration, think like the structure, allow its organizational logic, and view in particular ways to engage successfully. For instance, people buy and then resell things on eBay and make a profit by changing categories so interested buyers are more likely to view listings.³⁷ eBay's categories suggest a whole system of knowledge and an

organizational logic because they have links to subcategories and a set of titles and listings written by sellers.

eBay connects the organizational aspects of the site and its technologies to binary gender and heteronormativity. This correlation occurs on an ideological and structural level. Binary gender supports and produces hierarchical social relations and power by mapping a dyadic system and values onto individuals, bodies, organizations, and other things. Heteronormativity, which is the assertion of heterosexual privilege and pervasive ordering of existence through inflexible sexual standards, is also an organizational logic.³⁸ eBay seems to renounce this structure with such features as the “Gift Spot” holiday search engine, which, according to the company, provides “Something for everyone” and references the “G-Spot” and overt sexuality.³⁹ However, the Gift Spot functions in a manner similar to eBay’s other references to everyone. It places heterosexual relationships at the forefront with “gifts that are just right for your husband, wife, kids, family, fashionista, techie, sports fan—everybody on your list.” In such instances traditional positions, and terms such as “techie” are gender-coded by establishing a relationship between the men’s gifts and technology categories, are equated to everybody. eBay promises an infinite array while supporting organizing principles that naturalize binary gender and heterosexuality.

Sexual Citizenship

eBay’s organizational logic recognizes and verifies particular subjects. Its interrelated conceptions of citizenship and community, which emphasize the obligations that come with membership, are also related to binary gender and heterosexual positions.⁴⁰ This “normal citizen,” according to the social-policy scholar Diane Richardson, “has largely been constituted as heterosexual.”⁴¹ David Bell, Jon Binnie, Beverley Skeggs, and David Trevor Evans indicate that sexual minorities are excluded from full citizenship by criminalizing non-normative sexualities, preventing anyone who is not most narrowly paired into a male-and-female couple from marrying, and enacting other exclusionary policies.⁴² For instance, the eBay brand produced heterosexual citizenship by linking Omidyar’s marriage to the invention and continuation of the site.

Omidyar began AuctionWeb in 1995 with the sale of a broken laser pointer and first called the setting eBay in 1997.⁴³ However, eBay’s apocryphal and often repeated origin story indicates that Omidyar started the site so his fiancée, Wesley, could trade plastic dispensers for Pez candy.⁴⁴ Mary Lou Song,

who initiated this myth when she was eBay's public relations chief, has stated that the site began "as kind of a love token."⁴⁵ According to Kevin Pursglove, who was a company spokesperson, Omidyar designed eBay to resolve his fiancée's experience of "frustration that many collectors have experienced" because geography limited her ability to buy, sell, and trade.⁴⁶ This script men as technological producers, facilitates a founding story about family and community work, and renders women as men's support and inspiration. A large number of members extend this brand story and heterosexual citizenship by indicating how eBay has helped initiate their relationships, narrating marriages on the site, and using eBay to buy and sell wedding items. These representations of weddings are not inherent or politically neutral aspects of the site and company. By highlighting eBay's apocryphal stories throughout this book, I demonstrate how the company crafts accounts to sustain its relationship to normative gender and sexuality positions and configure the site. Such normative gender and sexuality structures are often ignored but critical considerations of heteronormativity indicate how heterosexual privilege is incorporated into society and the ways it pervasively and cunningly orders the everyday.⁴⁷

eBay continues to promise "you can get it on" and that the site provides an open sexual setting and marketplace. However, in 1999, there was press coverage of unlawful activities on the site, and the company began using software and other devices to search for illegal and infringing items.⁴⁸ Kenneth Walton received a U.S. federal felony conviction for his use of shill bidding to drive up auction prices, marketing of forgeries, and other criminal activities.⁴⁹ eBay also removed the firearms category and no longer allows sellers to list legally saleable guns and ammunition. In another regulatory move, eBay forces many erotic materials into its "Adult Only" category, which requires special registration and cannot be searched from the main part of the site. Buyers who use the search terms "gay" and "lesbian" on the main site are asked, "Are you looking for... the Adult Only login page or help about the Adult Only category?"⁵⁰ eBay associates gay and lesbian identities with illicit sexualities, discourages gay and lesbian members from using the main part of the site, and articulates undesirable forms of consumerism and sexual citizenship. Although eBay offers this preprogrammed proviso, sellers use the terms "gay" and "lesbian" in listings and assert the presence of gay, lesbian, and queer sexualities; the marketability of these terms; the errors of this search prompt; and consumer citizenship. The eBay setting even foils its own disciplinary mechanisms and produces more defiant consumer and sexual citizens

when members adopt the site's sexual narratives about being able to "get it on" eBay.

Consumer Citizens

Consumption is linked to sexual citizenship when companies advertise directly to gay men and eBay members list photographic documents as "gay interest" and "lesbian interest." Consumption and citizenship, according to academics like Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt, Margaret Scammell, Verónica Schild, and Michael Schudson, are interrelated.⁵¹ The history of politically oriented consumer activities includes the American Revolution and people resisting Britain's promotion of goods; the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, to protest racial segregation in the United States; and the Stonewall Riots, in which gay men, lesbians, and drag queens resisted police raids and harassment at bars.⁵² People also act as consumer citizens when they organize health food store collectives, establish brand boycotts and buycotts, recraft media and other texts so they function as cultural critiques, and select objects to signal their subcultural identities.⁵³

eBay connects consumerism, citizenship, co-production, and moral behavior in its WorldofGood.com site, "Where your shopping shapes the world."⁵⁴ Members also act as consumer citizens when they use listings and other practices to critique the system and company. These forms of consumerism point to methods for holding companies and governments responsible for environmental, health, human rights, labor, and sustainable development issues.⁵⁵ Consumer critique, as Scammell argues, is fundamental to citizenship.⁵⁶ It highlights the otherwise invisible political power of corporations. With eBay, consumer critiques and theoretical models for research are particularly important because the setting claims to be transparent, is vetted by a cohort of individuals, deploys a founding mythos that indicates preferred identities, and is supported by many of the concepts of Internet and new media studies. The deployment of these consumer-citizenship processes in Internet settings, including craigslist's links to U.S. President Barack Obama, promises of sexual freedom, removal of advertisements, and control of members' sexuality and angry commentary, make Internet studies the examination of governmentality, social regulation, and resistance.

Whitman extends eBay's sexual- and consumer-citizenship processes by participating in U.S. politics. She was the national co-chair for finance for Mitt Romney's campaign, and she co-chaired John McCain's presidential bid

in 2008. Whitman also ran for governor of California in 2009. While doing this, she managed the gendered aspects of her citizenship, and how her position as a top executive might influence her political aspirations, by identifying as “a wife and mother who raised two boys” during interviews and at her address to the U.S. Republican National Convention in 2008.⁵⁷ She supported California’s Proposition 8, an initiative that eliminated the rights of same-sex couples to marry, and conceptually continued eBay’s regulation of gay sexual representations. Her fame among eBay members and her political ambitions are related to Ronald Reagan’s and Arnold Schwarzenegger’s Hollywood-facilitated celebrity status and political careers. As Internet interfaces continue to produce familiar cultural figures, including the designers and executives associated with these settings, their social influence and political power, and the values of their Internet sites, are amplified. Of course, members’ alienation, which in the case of eBay increased during Whitman’s last few years as president and CEO and has escalated with Donahoe’s leadership, also creates a ready group of commentators who practice more critical forms of consumer citizenship.

Whitman uses eBay’s economic history as a way to represent her readiness for political office and her position as a good citizen. Other U.S. politicians employ eBay as a way to indicate the possibilities for American innovation and economic recovery.⁵⁸ eBay therefore functions as a resonant cultural symbol, as well as an interface. Former U.S. President George W. Bush compared eBay to the development of “new medicines to treat diseases,” new security measures “in Americans’ airports,” and “new jet engines” and argued that eBay “extended the frontiers of knowledge,” “inspired a wave of innovation,” and “helped create a global marketplace.”⁵⁹ McCain proclaimed that “1.3 million people in the world make a living off eBay,” and “most of those are in the United States of America.”⁶⁰ McCain, according to his senior economic adviser, has used eBay to signal that he is “fundamentally optimistic about the capacity of the U.S. economy to innovate”; this will lead to “new opportunities for jobs,” and residents “shouldn’t be obsessed with looking backwards all the time, and saying, ‘Gee, where did those jobs go?’”⁶¹ Of course, eBay was firing employees and members were being asked to work for free around the time this statement was made.⁶² These politicians identify eBay as good for Americans and a worldwide community, and code the company as a kind of citizen, but the site’s distinctive contributions to global welfare and technological advancement are not explained.

Politicians have not addressed indications that the company’s fees and

policies are ruining sellers' chances to make money; that some members are selling off their belongings because of unemployment, escalating bills, and foreclosures; and that selling personal goods may not be economically productive over the long term. A number of economists argue that reselling things cannot improve the economy.⁶³ The 2006 ACNielsen study, which generated McCain's figures, identified eBay as a "primary" or "secondary" source of money for members.⁶⁴ McCain has also repeatedly referred to Whitman as the founder of eBay even though she was hired around the time of the initial public stock offering.⁶⁵ Sarah Palin failed to sell an Alaskan state jet through eBay, but she and McCain presented the sale as a testament to her consumer-citizenship skills and the economic possibilities of the interface.⁶⁶ As this suggests, McCain's presidential campaign frequently misrepresented eBay's history, position, and sales figures. These politicians use eBay to stand in for a series of values, citizenship processes, and possibilities that are largely fictional. Such narratives have proved troublesome because the Internet makes it possible for political bloggers and angry eBay members to reply quickly, sometimes reaching enormous audiences. For instance, Omidyar used the Twitter micro-blogging interface to respond to McCain's misidentification of Whitman. Numerous individuals repeated Omidyar's critique.⁶⁷ The Internet provides methods for challenging erroneous information, but eBay also reshapes its history, status, and values through corporate mythos, including its narrative about the invention of the company.

eBay's Visual Culture

Visual images are an important part of the site and the ways eBay produces its mythos, brand community, users, organizational logic, sexual citizenship, and consumer citizens. For example, eBay conveys its investment in weddings and traditional unions by using images of paired Pez dispensers that stand in for Omidyar and Wesley's marriage (see figure 1), advertisements for engagement rings, and commercials that feature heterosexual couples (see figure 2).⁶⁸ Other central aspects of the eBay site include depictions of members and listed objects, icons, logos, grids, bands and blocks of color, and colored typefaces. Individuals become fans of these eBay images and their underlying values when they repost them on image-sharing sites and wear their own versions at conferences. These representations and engagements can be productively analyzed through visual culture studies because it examines what happens when people look at and produce visual objects, the conceptions that emerge from



1. eBay, "eBay Gift Finder," 29 March 2009

these acts, and how visuality operates in particular cultures and periods.⁶⁹ Visual culture studies scholars such as Lisa Cartwright and Nicholas Mirzoeff link visual analysis (the study of objects and sites) and visual cultures (the societies in which these things are produced) to new media.⁷⁰

eBay uses visual devices to assert its reliability, the more general dependability of new media, and the materiality of objects. This is related to the ways politicians employ eBay to represent their trustworthiness. For example, eBay advises members that producing and trusting legible images of listed objects is an essential part of the interface. Jim Griffith, eBay's "official Dean of Education," argues that buyers like to "see what they are buying" and sellers should therefore provide pictures that are "clear, focused, uncluttered, and as close a representation of your item as possible."⁷¹ According to Dennis L. Prince, Sarah Manongdo, and Dan Joya's how-to book, the "opportunity to sell an item is almost entirely dependent upon whether or not you've provided good images for prospective bidders to see."⁷² These claims that objects can be seen through photography and digital imaging are related to the

identification of photography as light's direct transcription of objects, which were once in front of the camera, onto a surface. For instance, Roland Barthes argues in his theoretical and affective study of viewing that the "photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see" and photographs are not fully distinguished from the objects they represent.⁷³ Susan Sontag's study also identifies photography as a "trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask."⁷⁴ On some level, the association of photography with material objects persists in settings like eBay. However, the processes of buyers and sellers and functions of listing images also compromise visual representations.

Many eBay sellers use digital images and digitized photographs to portray unique items and once-in-a-lifetime events. Nevertheless, the framing structures and functions of these images have the tendency, as the philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin argues, of substituting "a plurality of copies for a unique existence."⁷⁵ The photographic copy, according to the art histo-

2. eBay, "eBay," 11 August 2007



rian Rosalind E. Krauss, facilitates the “quotation of the original” and splinters “the unity of the original ‘itself’ into nothing but a series of quotations.”⁷⁶ When objects function as a series of quotations, which are facilitated and mirrored by the representations in listings, there are fewer reasons to buy them. This suggests that eBay, sellers, and other institutions and individuals need to contain and monitor the truth claims of photography and related imaging processes in order to support larger investments in the authenticity of the material world.

Sellers specify in numerous listings that their images do not do objects “justice,” have flaws, and lack in detail and thus highlight the referential aspects of digital images and photographs that are digitally conveyed. At the same time, these sellers seem to destabilize cultural conceptions of photography and eBay’s values by identifying imaging failures in clear depictions. The common phrase “pictures do not do it justice” suggests that images do not honor objects or represent them fairly.⁷⁷ It also renders eBay as less visual because certain things cannot be seen. This statement is part of sellers’ attempts to contain how depictions disturb the unity and authenticity of listed objects. Sellers describe the imperfections of images to specify that objects have a greater value than representations imply and individuals can only fully experience things by buying, touching, wearing, and living with them. For instance, *recherche-gallery*’s listings provide an affective experience that “cannot be justified by pictures.” The artworks only show their “best qualities in person,” where they “‘move’ as you walk past” them and leave “guests speechless!!”⁷⁸ In such cases, the distinctness and experiential aspects of material artifacts, the things that complement visual seeing, displace the images of objects that accompany listings.

Sellers encourage viewers to see the features of photo-like representations and read images differently from experiences with objects. *novelty.star*’s photographs cannot convey the object’s “finely detailed” surface.⁷⁹ “eBay’s reduced resolution . . . may appear grainy (particularly linen postcards) or blurry,” according to *dwells00collectibles*, “but not in the real world! They will look much better in your hand.”⁸⁰ These sellers point to the aspects of digital imaging, which include visible pixels, the appearance of code or icons instead of images, and distorted depictions. They distinguish between images and objects and hint that you can “get it on eBay” but that experiences with things ordinarily cannot be sustained by eBay or remain on the site. The changing aspects of the eBay interface, especially the opening part of the site, and the impermanence of listings are important to the setting’s functioning.

Depictions of reliable and good sellers rather than images are sometimes the deciding factor in buying. People's basic auction "fears," according to Josh Boyd, "are compounded by the fact that bidders cannot examine and touch the items they are bidding on; they must trust descriptions and photographs. They cannot see the people they are bidding against; they can only see letters on a screen."⁸¹ cburnscrx believes that one "of the flaws" in eBay's functioning as a selling platform "is the unknown" and the inability to "look at, or touch the items you are buying."⁸² Buyers and sellers "rely on people's honesty and their integrity" because of these issues. While some scholars in visual culture studies identify the Internet as an exemplary instance of contemporary society's visual emphasis, Boyd, cburnscrx, and other eBay members indicate instances in which specific features of the visual are not delivered or fail. In such cases, successful transactions, social engagements, and links between participants, which are still conveyed through representations, replace an interaction with images of objects.

Methods for eBay and Internet Settings

The visual and textual aspects of Internet settings are an important part of this book and help me to understand eBay. I use the humanities methods of close visual, textual, and theoretical analysis to study eBay's site texts, category system, forums, advertising campaigns, and listings from the English-language setting. Some of the examples provided in the book were obtained by using the site's search function. However, the related tendencies emerged through an examination of individual categories and large sets of listings. Accounts by eBay executives, other employees, and members; reporters; and how-to book authors also provide detailed explanations of how the site is produced and culturally understood. For instance, posts from enthusiastic and critical members in eBay-facilitated forums and other settings convey participants' experiences and sentiments. My understanding of eBay and its members is further informed by information about the eBay Live! conferences, forum posts that describe these conventions, listings for eBay-ana convention collectibles, and my attendance at eBay Live! and the Developers Conference in Boston in 2007. These diverse texts highlight the varied individuals who contribute to understandings of eBay, the divergent narratives about the site, and the widescale reach of the setting. They show how Internet sites can be redeployed as critical strategies.

As part of this examination, I quote the kinds of texts that are commonly

available in Internet settings. The quoted texts include typographical errors and unconventional forms of spelling, uppercase and lowercase typefaces, punctuation, and spacing. These elements are typical aspects of Internet content, which nevertheless change or become unavailable, and are cited without such qualifications as “intentionally so written” or “sic.” Such references provide a more comprehensive account of eBay and the Internet, support my arguments, offer references, and enable researchers to consider these sites. This method also helps me interrogate how stereotyped notions are rendered across multiple sites and made to appear inherent, natural, and real. I try to be sensitive to individuals’ investments in Internet settings while being critical about the problems and cultural conceptions that are instituted. A variety of methods and ethical models have been proposed for studying the Internet.⁸³ As I have suggested elsewhere, ethics texts that insist that all Internet research is human subject research and that sources should be elided fail to acknowledge the deeply produced aspects of Internet settings and the humanities methods that apply when writing about Internet and computer-facilitated representations.⁸⁴ Internet research methods can critically interrogate how representations are understood as places and people or support the naturalization of these conventions. In this project, I understand eBay and related sites as interfaces, purveyors of information, producers of depictions, and cultural processes.

Academic studies of eBay also inform this book and indicate what still needs to be researched. For instance, identity issues, including the ways gender, race, and sexuality are produced and regulated, often remain under-addressed in critical literature about eBay. Economists and business scholars consider the relationship between game theory and eBay’s auction system; buy it now, reserve price, and other auction and sales models; and the means through which price is determined.⁸⁵ While some of this literature focuses on the ways reputation enhances final auction prices, it does not provide related studies of how sellers produce their standing or the sorts of social engagements and self-presentations that are encouraged by eBay and other companies. There is significant writing about eBay’s production of trust among members, eBay’s and other companies’ feedback systems, and how reputation contributes to positive auction outcomes and prices.⁸⁶ These texts veer away from studying sellers and their connections through events like eBay Live! conferences. There is also increasing academic interest in eBay and consumerism, including research on the collecting cultures that operate through the site and how business strategies and characteristics are influenced by the

interface.⁸⁷ Most of these texts support eBay's positive accounts about members' empowerment.

Adam Cohen's popular ethnography is a largely enthusiastic account of eBay, the site, and the company's early history.⁸⁸ Like that of the academic literature, Cohen's intent is different from my goals in this book. He does not provide critical strategies for looking at eBay, a detailed study of the interface, considerations of members' engagements, or an analysis of the means through which site design and advertising are interrelated. The *Everyday eBay: Culture, Collecting, and Desire* anthology provides the most rigorous critical engagement with eBay (and, as an ethical addendum, I have a chapter in that text).⁸⁹ Jon Lillie's and Kylie Jarrett's chapters in *Everyday eBay* and Josh Boyd's "In Community We Trust: Online Security Communication at eBay" are useful for my consideration because they address the ways eBay deploys community as a trust-building mechanism that gets individuals to contribute.⁹⁰ Yet I also consider issues that do not appear in these works, including how eBay promises to support diverse objects and desires while producing normative gender, race, and sexuality conventions; how buyers and sellers work with and against the site's principles; and how members render brand communities in eBay's bulletin boards and conference cultures.

Chapter Summaries

eBay uses notions of community to tie members to the site, to articulate values and norms, and to get individuals to work for free. In chapter 1, I describe how eBay positions the corporation and site as a community rather than as profit-motivated. eBay's narratives about community offer the opportunity to reflect on academic and popular accounts of virtual communities and to call for the dismantling of community because of the intolerance such groups can perpetuate.⁹¹ The concepts of community and virtual community are connected to the related notions of brand communities and social networking settings. My assessment addresses the ways eBay participants are made to labor for their standing in the system, support company positions, resistantly respond to changes in the site, and constitute their own versions of community.

In chapter 2, I reflect on the ways members identify and how community and cultural identities are shaped through the company's asynchronous conference forum, its conferences (including the eBay Live! that I attended in 2007), and the collecting and sale of eBay-ana (branded objects that are

produced for conventions and given to sellers and employees). These engagements teach people how to be members of the fan and brand community, support eBay's normalizing and economic goals, and work for the company.⁹² Nevertheless, when the company and brand do not fulfill promises, connected members are more likely to critique the setting, rupture the concept of eBay community, and pose a threat to the ideological and economic values of the brand. eBay uses the conference board, conferences, and branded items as ways to keep members enthralled and working for the company, but this structure is not always successful.

eBay also employs representations of heteronormativity as a way to sustain its values and configure members. For instance, eBay features engagement rings and wedding dresses on the main parts of the site, in press releases, and in advertising. It connects these items to binary gender, heterosexuality, and conceptions of shopping for "the one" and suggests they are key elements of eBay and of women's lives and identities. In chapter 3, I analyze how eBay interlinks its heteronormative narratives with the organizational logic of the site. Sellers repeat these narratives and support eBay when they use images of their weddings to sell dresses, mandate perfect bodies and gowns, and describe the perfect dress and mate. While some members portray perfect weddings, others display dirty and crushed dresses that do not fit into their homes and mention they are selling dresses because of weight gains or the ending of relationships. I use literature on weddings, dirt, and collecting to consider eBay's narratives and the ways sellers destabilize the notion of ideal weddings and heteronormativity.⁹³

Most sellers, encouraged by eBay's normalizing texts, provide narratives about heterosexual marriages and traditional gender identities. I reflect on the oppositional strategies of buyers and sellers of "gay" and "gay interest" underwear, swimwear, and vintage photography in chapter 4. These members portray unconventional male bodies, emphasize gay desires, constitute gay communities, perform a consumer critique of the eBay setting and its values, and sometimes garner high prices. In doing this, they achieve the combination of personalization and successful selling eBay encourages but manage this through the kinds of erotic representations eBay has tried to prohibit. Literature on gay identities, consumerism, and masculinity assists me in studying the ways these practices undermine eBay's normalizing discourses and larger conceptions of identity and embodiment.⁹⁴

Members do not always uphold eBay's viewing positions, which support binary gendered consumers and straight desires. As I argue in chapter 5,

sellers of vintage mass-produced erotic photographs of women list materials as “lesbian” and “lesbian interest” and make heterosexual male buyers, who are their target consumer, seem less straight. Sellers of vernacular photography further complicate these viewing and desiring positions by listing images of note to lesbians, documentation of lesbian pasts, women performing masculinities, and drag weddings under the “lesbian” and “lesbian interest” search terms. The inclusion of these varied texts means that these images cannot be consolidated into a homogenous category, men are not the entitled viewers, the relationship between men and masculinity is challenged, and eBay’s organizational logic at least temporarily fails. The production of men with lesbian interests and portrayal of women performing masculinities, particularly when combined with critical literature about drag and the cultural construction of genitals, promote continued examinations of how gender, sex, and sexuality are identified.⁹⁵

Some eBay sellers assert alternative gender and sexuality positions, but eBay still produces stereotypes. In chapter 6, I show how eBay’s “Black Americana” category renders stereotyped black identities and disempowered African Americans. In this category, sellers use racist terms, equate stereotyped representations to African Americans’ histories and characteristics, promote reprehensible reproductions, displace stereotypes by calling items “cute,” and invoke slave auctions. These racist practices are encouraged by eBay’s organizational logic. I interrogate these listings and their logic by relating them to the histories and critiques of nineteenth-century and twentieth-century representations of African Americans and critical work on the commodification of identities.⁹⁶ eBay’s terms and sellers’ listings promise to deliver black cultures, collectibles, and history while listing racist representations that empower whites, providing apocryphal narratives that excuse slavery, and constructing an eBay community that appears to be good while reproducing intolerance.

The afterword continues to emphasize the lessons that can be learned from eBay and the ways literature on brand communities, configuring the user, organizational logic, and sexual citizenship can be deployed. I focus on craigslist where members’ posts, sales of items, and searches for relationships are also envisioned as a community. The site appears to have a sexually tolerant and liberal ethos. However, the numerous women who have had dating listings removed through “community flagging” find the site to be deeply disciplining. In the craigslist boards that are dedicated to helping individuals with flagged and removed posts, volunteers claim to convey the community’s values while instructing women in traditional conceptions of femininity. Yet

the resistant comments from flagged women point to models for consumer critique. Internet and new media scholars can look to such disgruntled customers and their assessments as ways of understanding the problematic aspects of Internet settings.

Conclusion: The Costs of Internet Lessons

The costs of the Internet's organizational and cultural logics are too rarely considered. For instance, women who do not meet cultural norms or interrogate Internet and computer conventions have their commentary, actions, and bodies mercilessly critiqued. They also receive violent threats from anonymous and copious posters, who usually self-identify as men. Kathy Sierra, an acknowledged expert on the Java language and author of programming texts, stopped blogging and speaking publicly after death threats and her home address were posted in Internet settings. She noted, "I'm at home, with the doors locked, terrified."⁹⁷ In the posts that worried Sierra, critiques of her skills were commingled with insults about her physiognomy, a "digitally altered photo of Sierra being strangled in women's panties," and an image of Sierra positioned next to a noose.⁹⁸ Discussions about how to prevent such threats, including suggestions that blog owners take responsibility for posted content, largely have been rejected as censorship and the misrecognition of how open commenting is central to the principles of new media.⁹⁹ In these cases, the organizational and cultural logics of Internet settings are associated with righteousness even when they oppress and efface some people and positions. Of course, editing and deleting extraneous and uninvited texts are familiar parts of computer and Internet use.¹⁰⁰

Many feminists have encountered regulatory and threatening behavior in Internet settings. craigslist's best-of postings, which are nominated by the community and vetted as significant, provide instructional "dictionaries" for women's personal ads. These lexicons, which equate "Feminist" with "Fat" and "Professional" with "Bitch," propose a language of intolerance and encourage women to enact extremely traditional forms of femininity.¹⁰¹ Joan Walsh, who writes for the news and commentary site *Salon*, considers such regulating behaviors, including the harassment of Sierra and her own experiences with vicious emails. Walsh finds it "hard to ignore that the criticisms of women writers are much more brutal and vicious than those about men" and that this is supported by the ethos and design features of Internet settings.¹⁰² I was stunned at the reactions to a post in a *Forbes* forum, in which I casually

noted that a poll about identifying with imaginary characters should include empowered positions for women.¹⁰³ According to readers, my discussion was not relevant; I should stop interrogating gender issues; and I should die from breast cancer or vaginitis because I was a “whore.” In this and other cases, members make it clear that they will continue to discipline people for performing gender and other critiques that they consider unrelated to the setting. They employ the organizational logic of sites to support their controlling positions. Writing about such initially anonymous engagements in academic or news venues can cause further problems because it allows individuals, who are invested in regulating sites and behaviors, to identify authors and continue harassing them. It also produces a setting in which commentators are forced to repetitively justify their interpretations, and critical work is kept at the most basic level.

It may be possible, and it is certainly understandable, for women, gay men, lesbians, queers, people of color, and other dismissed sexual citizens to stop engaging with Internet settings where they are configured, scorned, and threatened. However, ostracized individuals who ignore dismissals, and the associated settings, leave abuse unchallenged and support the coding of technologies as white heterosexual men’s terrain. Walsh argues that the misogynist “self-righteous fury” directed at female writers makes them “reflexively compose” their “own hate mail,” “type and retype to try to avoid it,” and write more cautiously and produce less.¹⁰⁴ Thus, the technologies that are credited with enabling faster production methods and greater audience attention constrain some opinions and subjects.¹⁰⁵ As Internet settings and related technologies are becoming expected aspects of daily life—and in many ways, educators, employers, peers, and local and national governments already mandate their use—the power of such configurations and the costs of detaching are increasing. This means that we need to incorporate critical methods for thinking about the sexist, racist, and heteronormative aspects of organizational and cultural logics into Internet and new media studies and settings. To deflate current narratives and versions of empowered masculinity, we also require more detailed considerations of site design, analysis of how dialogue occurs in Internet settings, and collaborative feminist support and responses. My intent is not to identify a recipe for resistance, if such a thing is even possible. However, I hope that my outline of the ways gendered, raced, and sexualized subjects are imbricated in Internet settings, and considerations of consumer critiques, encourage the continued development of critical research in Internet and new media studies.