

3 The “heart of social media”: Configuring Love Buttons, Hearting, and Members’ Gender and Feelings

My email client delivers lists of messages that are punctuated by hearts.¹ These hearts accent titles and replace words in messages. When these emails are part of marketing messages, I am supposed to read the associated hearts as the love that brands and products have for me, the consumer. They also model the kinds of love and enthusiasm that I am expected to convey in return. The tendency to render these hearts as red magnifies the associated narratives about intense emotions and evokes the familiar and scripted sentiments of Valentine’s Day. Such heart icons directly address and engage me as an individual. They constitute me and other readers as feeling buyers and friends, as individuals who are in some form of relationship with the sender, and as people who will respond with heartfelt sentiments. The producers of such messages and their heart icons thus constitute feeling individuals and address these readers as some version of “you.” By design, they incorporate intensity and care into settings and interfaces. Texted heart emoji, heart buttons, and other online hearts punctuate Internet engagements with feelings. They speckle the digital with programmed and bodily intensities and assert that corporeal individuals are emotionally experiencing these texts while they are in front of screens. Thus, hearts render touchscreen experiences that are about being emotionally touched.

Online representations of hearts widely circulate. The Global Language Monitor listed the heart and love emoji as the top word in 2014 because of its prevalence.² Journalists reported on the *Oxford English Dictionary’s* (OED) addition of the heart emoji in 2011.³ The OED normalized the heart emoji and shaped it to fit the terms of the dictionary by including the listing in its textual form under the term “heart.” The OED also identifies the colloquial function of the heart icon, which it associates with insignia

and logos that employ the “symbol of a heart to denote the verb ‘love.’”⁴ Even with the OED’s historicization and textualization of the heart symbol, many reporters reacted negatively to it being listed in a respected dictionary and to its more general connotations. For example, Alexandra Petri identifies the dictionary’s inclusion as “embarrassing” and as being similar to the purportedly age-inappropriate behavior of your “grandmother wearing glittery makeup and jeggings.”⁵ Petri also engages in ageist and misogynistic judgments in associating the heart with childish and feminine things. Such responses are echoed in the binary structures and evaluative sentiments that I analyze throughout this chapter. I consider people’s and sites’ correlations of heart and love throughout this chapter. I also note the kinds of bodies and relationships that are associated with hearts and love. For instance, the term “love” is linked to familial and heterosexual bonds. Many social networks, especially those that address women, deploy heart icons as a means of evoking heterosexual unions, femininity, and loving feelings that tie individuals to sites. Numerous individuals also reject hearts because they identify them as too feminine, childish, and gay.

The heart is part of an elaborate series of new media mood emoticons, emoji, and expressions, which also include angry and crying faces. Social networks use heart and other selectable buttons to structure participants, relationships, sites, communities, and brand attachments. Photo-sharing sites like Pinterest and Instagram and social commerce sites like Etsy and Modcloth offer coded buttons with heart representations that encourage participants to express loving and heartfelt feelings when favoriting people, goods, and content. Social networks also incorporate coded features and narratives about love, heart, and hearting into their self-conceptions. As a method of addressing online representations of hearts and associated conceptions of love, I outline some of the popular uses and definitions of hearts and then analyze the ways Etsy, Facebook, and Twitter employ them. I argue that hearts are used to configure individuals and amplify their sentiments. This configuration includes the association of women with hearts and the implied loving and emotional sentiments. Yet the digital correlation of women and femininity with hearts and love is not inherently productive for the referenced subjects in all settings. While hearting is a useful way of connecting with some consumers and asserting brand identities, these practices also diminish women because they are identified as low and contaminating. Scholars should study such representations of hearting and

loving because they have a significant influence on digital engagements and the ways online identities are understood.

Online sites, especially settings that address women, often reference and represent hearts. They also list a variety of elements as the “heart of social media.” Site designers and reporters associate what they describe as the “heart of social media” with such things as authenticity (a concept that I consider in chapter 4), blogs, customers, relationships, and sharing. For instance, Jonny Evans reports that people’s ability to “publish their own content” and purportedly be empowered by individual expressions is the “heart of social media.”⁶ Other people relate a charming video of a rounded cat meowing while being exercised and other humorous and uplifting representations of people and animals with capturing the “heart of social media.”⁷ Such posts generate hearts in the form of Facebook and other reactions.⁸ They also work to pinpoint and thereby produce a center or centers and an affective network of online communication. Social network sites and technology companies, in a similar manner to the hearts in emails, use the term “heart” to connect people to interfaces, products, and feelings. Thus, people feel with and for the cat and, according to Apple, locate the heart in technologies. Apple claims that at the “heart of iPad Pro lies the new A9X, our third-generation chip.”⁹ Through such texts, the company emotionally animates technologies and links them to human functioning, as I suggest in more detail in the introduction and other parts of this book. Such emotive links between animate and inanimate things are purported to provide people with physical connections.

Etsy and other ecommerce sites often connect participants’ bodies and feelings to online settings. For example, Etsy’s “About” page asserts that the “heart and soul” of the site is its “global community.”¹⁰ It uses the phrase to evoke and intermesh the hearts of readers, the essence and feelings of the site, and passionate community. Etsy ordinarily has content on the front part of its site that references impassioned feelings, familial connections, and consumer sentiments. In one such panel, viewers are encouraged to “Find your perfect ‘I do’ details. Shop wedding.” A photograph of the back of a bride’s head appointed with a flower crown accompanies the text. The advertisement and associated link relate love and marriage commitments to an additional “I do” of purchasing wedding elements, and correlate the site with intense consumer feelings and physical events. Etsy addresses everyone with directives to buy and articulates the consumer reply in the form

of an “I do” that “marries” individuals to the site. By depicting the back of the bride’s head, Etsy further renders viewers who are looking at the site as consenting shoppers. Yet Etsy also depicts the woman buyer as not everyone because the back of her neck is visibly light-skinned. The site tends to configure its sellers and buyers (who are also demarcated as crafters and consumers), as I suggest in previous literature and later in this chapter, as white heterosexual women.¹¹ This is somewhat different from, but can also work with, the usual gender scripts and association of programming and technological aptitude with white heterosexual men.

In this chapter, I connect the scholarship on gender scripts, which I have outlined and elaborated upon in chapter 1, to Steve Woolgar’s related research on “configuring the user.”¹² I employ the literature on brand love and community and the continental philosopher Roland Barthes’s theory of photographic punctum and intense bodily sensations to consider the digital production of sentiments.¹³ I demonstrate how these texts provide critical frameworks for considering the ways sites employ hearts and associate them with particular forms of love, relationality, and identity. I continue my considerations of gender norms from previous chapters and suggest how culture correlates hearts and love with women and girls, femininity, queerness, excessiveness, and intense relationships. These associations influence people’s employment of heart icons, reactions to them, and the ways individuals who use hearts are understood. This includes how heart icons magnify and change individuals’ feelings and encourage responses. Cultural criteria and many individuals’ investments in pleasing others mean that such phrases as “I am in love with you” and “I lost my heart to you” are mandates for the addressed subjects to feel the same way and to reply, preferably with a version of the same impassioned phrase.

My review of people’s expressions about their love for social networks, products, and members suggests how heart and love narratives render gender and sexual norms and queer attachments, including affection for brand communities. In the advertising industry, brands that generate impassioned feelings are sometimes described as “lovemarks.”¹⁴ Such companies as Etsy, Facebook, and Twitter work to attach people to their brands as a means of configuring individuals and sites. Due to the impassioned connotations of heart icons, people experience them as intense expressions and respond with similar intensities, including love and revulsion. Heart icons can also be part of the banal everydayness of online expressions and touchscreen

engagements, which is distinct from intense and specific digital passions. Nevertheless, individuals in such social networking sites as Twitter, as I suggest later in this chapter, expressed extreme negative feelings when the site replaced the star with the heart button as a method of favoriting tweets. Twitter participants’ concerns about having their identities tainted by hearting evoke the leaky interface that I discuss in chapter 2. I argue that such emotional and coded reactions demonstrate how individuals negotiate the feelings associated with online sites as a means of maintaining their identities. I also consider how sentiments reemerge as part of participants’ refusals of such content. Thus, my analysis suggests ways of studying the connections between other online practices and feelings.

Configuring Feelings

Barthes offers a theory of intense embodied experiences, which can be related to the functions of heart icons and repetitive indications of loving people. He employs the concepts of *punctum* and *studium* to explain how photographs influence viewers, and he associates *studium* with the general societal aspects of images and surfaces that do not move him. *Studium* occurs when spectators only “take a kind of general interest” in images and engage through the “rational intermediary of an ethical and political culture.”¹⁵ *Studium* conveys a “body of information.” *Punctum* “will break (or punctuate)” the cohesive photographic surface and the uniform cultural meanings of photography. According to Barthes, these temporary and unscripted ruptures emotionally influence the viewer and destabilize bodily coherence. His conception of photographic *punctum*, which has been identified as a form of affect and feeling, offers methods of considering how people respond to heart icons and how these symbols are related to and distinguished from the associated texts. Barthes’s theoretical notion of *punctum* foregrounds the deeply embodied, unshareable, and queer experiences that individuals have with representations. His related arguments evoke many of the features of online heart icons and representations, including the ways they make the viewer passionately feel, pierce the text and viewer’s experiences, and link the individual to representations, while being distinct from the more stable emotive aspects of these sites.

Heart emoticons, emoji, and related representations render a sensitive surface and interface. Such representations punctuate sites, messages, and

surfaces with feelings. These effects are related to the aspects of sensitive photography and viewing that Barthes describes. In Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu's study of photography, they argue that Barthes conveys the complexities of feeling photography.¹⁶ According to the photography theorist Shawn Michelle Smith, Barthes encourages individuals to have an "affective response" and to employ an "affective mode of approaching the photograph."¹⁷ Barthes establishes a theory of feeling viewership by identifying punctum as "that accident which pricks," "bruises," and is "poignant" to the individual.¹⁸ Punctum (and the heart) "rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces" the viewer. This "wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument" punctuates the photograph so that it is "sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points."¹⁹ Barthes's evocations of the "prick" and excessive emotions cause scholars like Brown and Phu to argue that the punctum is queer and enacts a version of Barthes's gay desires, which are more overtly described in his posthumously published writing.²⁰ From these frameworks, I offer a critical model that can be used to consider the sensitive, feminine, and queer aspects of online hearts, including the ways normative subjects avoid the connotations of hearts. Hearts and their associated arrows, which may be implied even though arrows are ordinarily not represented along with online hearts, are imagined piercing and emotionally influencing the bodies and positions of viewers. Digital arrow-pointers and their linked hand-pointers also establish individuals' relations to documents and settings.

Barthes's notions of punctum and studium are further connected to the affective aspects of the digital by his indication that studium is "of the order of *liking*, not of *loving*."²¹ Barthes's differentiation between liking and loving is related to distinctions between interface like buttons and the use of the heart to convey more impassioned feelings. Certainly, icons function at the level of studium, which Barthes suggests works to "inform, to represent, to surprise, to cause to signify, to provoke desire."²² However, heart icons also create brief flashes and sensitive feelings in viewers, including excitement, anger, and embarrassment. The distinctions between Twitter's initial identification of the star as favorite and its later offering of the heart as like and love are, as I suggest in more detail later in this chapter, aspects of the site that generate a great deal of alienation and other emotions.

Hearts are also related to studium and more general societal formations because of the ways they configure individuals' feelings and specify the

people who are expected to participate. Hearts are thus employed as part of what Woolgar describes as “configuring the user.” He outlines how writers employ varied techniques to entice individuals and to “control the relationship between reader and text.”²³ He relates such practices of configuring individuals to advertising and sealed packaging that guarantee that no one has tampered with products and that act as a form of consent to licensing agreements. Through such formulations, companies and designers represent users, instruct individuals about their needs and desires, and incorporate notions of users into products. These processes of configuration are productive for companies. For example, Etsy configures members as brides and lovers of weddings because of the consumer-oriented features of contemporary weddings and the cultural association of brides with wedding labor. These wedding figurations successfully mesh with Etsy’s interests in having participants work for and love the site and the associated goods. Weddings also provide familiar and heartfelt notions that efface the economic, structural, and technological aspects of the site.

The human geographer Nigel Thrift extends Woolgar’s thesis about configuring the user and asserts that electronic toys introduce children to interfaces, technologies, and the associated belief systems.²⁴ Electronic toys thus articulate expectations about children’s adulthood and future engagements with sites and devices. Digital products and online sites configure participants through log-in and personalized messages, terms of service agreements, rule systems, instructional videos and texts, hearts and other mood icons, and representations of how the site is supposed to function. Touchscreen-based and other digital devices and online sites configure individuals’ identities and communities’ characteristics. These processes of configuration also delimit participants’ actions and beliefs. For example, heart icons and related narratives about love tend to configure people’s intimate relationships with sites and technologies as emotive rather than skill- or knowledge-based. Pulsing and bursting hearts are intended to convey, or even to produce, intense and escalating feelings in individuals.

Scholars have questioned the inflexibility of Woolgar’s theory of configuration and suggested that the structuring of participants is a more flexible process that can be refused. Anne Sofie Lægran and James Stewart, who study new media, describe Woolgar’s theory as a mechanistic assessment that privileges designers’ perspectives over that of users.²⁵ Yet as I suggest in chapter 1, iPhone and other mobile phone buyers often support the

positions of designers and manufacturers and enforce gender norms. Thus, participants' interests should be integrated into theories of configuring the user and gender scripts rather than remaining isolated areas of investigation. The research on gender scripts by such scholars as Madeleine Akrich, Majken Kirkegaard Rasmussen and Marianne Graves Petersen, and Nelly Oudshoorn, Els Rommes, and Marcelle Stienstra indicate how designers, companies, and individuals associate technologies with particular kinds of people.²⁶ Products convey expectations about who will use technologies, what kinds of bodies and interests will be recognized, and how devices will function. The associated gender scripts tend to be deeply normative and are the consequence of the meshing of technology producers and designers' worldviews with those of adopters and consumers. These scripts ordinarily correlate advanced technologies and technological skills with men. Practices and representations that are deemed to be frivolous, including shopping, chatting, and hearting, are associated with women. As these gender frameworks and the associated responses suggest, gender and other identity scripts are imbued with and generate feelings, including people's pleasure in identifying with technologies that are designed for them and anger and border patrolling when these privileges are interrogated. In this chapter as well as throughout this book, I demonstrate how online participants collaboratively and emotionally extend and dispute gender conventions and other technology scripts.

People often distinguish online configurations of sentiments from the feelings that are associated with ideal film viewers, who are rendered as masculine and male, and who are encouraged to take more distanced and critical stances in theaters. Mary Ann Doane considers and counters these constructions of ideal male viewers by pointing to how women are structured as being too close to their own representations.²⁷ Women have been historically associated with "weepies" and more recently with "chick flicks," which do not have the elevated connotations of mainstream genres. Younger and very engaged viewers are also seen as too impassioned and close to the screen when watching action and horror films. Cultural conceptions of distanced and elevated cinema viewers may be extended into other media environments via increases in the size of home screens and may be depleted by binge media viewing attachments and habits. Feminist film theorists highlight the ways the ideal male viewer is associated with the position of the apparatus and the empowered

gaze of white heterosexual male protagonists, which render women as what Laura Mulvey describes as “to-be-looked-at-ness.”²⁸ Hearts, as I suggest in this chapter, shift such frameworks and are more likely to emphasize feminine to-be-touched-ness. Companies’ and online sites’ employment of hearts should encourage scholarly acknowledgments of such practices and their influences in Internet, screen, and media engagements. For instance, my research on the functions of love and hearting would expand considerations of fannish interests and the ways weepies and chick flicks are gender coded as feminine and emotional.

Defining the Heart and Loving Feelings

The history of the heart is also a chronicle of touching and being touched. Researchers have proposed varied ideas about how heart-shaped icons were developed and associated with love and related sentiments.²⁹ The heart shape was employed as a means of representing foliage in examples from antiquity. During this period, people’s use of the silphium plant and its heart-shaped seedpods and fruit as aphrodisiacs and contraceptives may have been factors in connecting this shape to love.³⁰ The heart shape is also widely related to the human heart even though they are visually and functionally different. As P. J. Vinken’s book about the heart notes, the shape was employed in northern Italy in the early part of the fourteenth century and was informed by an error that Aristotle made in an anatomical text.³¹ While anatomists corrected this mistake in the sixteenth century, the scalloped heart was already widely established. Starting in about 1480, French playing card designs included hearts.³² Yet the Catholic Church, as Keelin McDonald reports, claims that the modern heart shape and its association with love and devotion appeared in the seventeenth century, when Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque had a vision of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, with a red heart surrounded by thorns.³³ Twentieth-century versions of the heart include the “I ♥ NY” campaign that promoted state tourism and was featured on T-shirts, mugs, and other goods.³⁴ In the New York tourism campaign, the heart is meant to convey the term “love,” but it is understood as “heart” in other usages.

The consumer research of John F. Sherry and Mary Ann McGrath chronicles how marketing and shopping are connected to love. People render shopping as an amorous pursuit when they indicate that they “love” to

shop and “fall in love” with selected goods, companies, and stores.³⁵ According to the literature on brand love, people are connected to brands through such experiential feelings as trust, passion, and commitment.³⁶ Rather than seeing these feelings as distinct from people’s love for animate things, brand love makes the company and goods seem to be alive and highlights the ways brands are supported by workers, sellers, buyers, and animate attachments. Technology companies, as I suggest in the introduction, often render their products and people’s experiences with devices as animate. People’s embrace of touchscreens and related forms of brand love make devices into corporeal skins and a corollary for individuals. In their research on brand love, Barbara A. Carroll and Aaron C. Ahuvia indicate that feelings for brands “may not be perfectly analogous to the feelings one has for other people” but they can be “considerably more intense than simple liking.”³⁷ This too may shift between forms of Barthes’s *studium* and *punctum*. Brand love, as Carroll and Ahuvia argue, “includes passion for the brand, attachment to the brand, positive evaluation of the brand, positive emotions in response to the brand, and declarations of love for the brand.”³⁸ For instance, companies like Etsy reference love in slogans and other design elements.

Brand love is designed to intensify people’s feelings for companies and products. The associated affective amplifications are often aspects of online settings and engagements. According to Susanna Paasonen, Ken Hillis, and Michael Petit, the term “affect” emphasizes intensity and describes a “quality of excess,” or “more than.”³⁹ They associate intensity with people experiencing sites and avatars as material and being delighted when finding desired prices online. Intensities might also be correlated with different-colored heart icons and the emotions that they convey, including varied kinds of passionate and fraternal feelings. For instance, Emojipedia identifies the solid red heart, which was the “Heavy Black Heart” before the development of color emoji, as a “classic love heart emoji, used for expressions of love.”⁴⁰ The red heart’s conveyance of a version of what Paasonen, Hillis, and Petit identify as excess should be related to the repetition of the term “love” in the definition.

In a variety of online sites, heart and love are emphasized, but so is hate. These frameworks for loathing may be intensified on sites that encourage anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiments, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, misogyny, racism, and related forms of hate. For instance, the Stormfront site, which identifies its constituency as “White Nationalists” and the “new, embattled

White minority!" includes angry emotional icons that can be added to posts.⁴¹ The site was created by Don Black, a Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan and white supremacist, in 1995 and was the first major online hate site. It offers the ability to add "smilies," or "small graphical images that can be used to convey an emotion or feeling," to posts.⁴² While there is a "kiss" smilie, there is no code for "heart" or "love." A representation of anger and varied expressions of bad feelings are available. Individuals can employ smilies to convey "Mad," "Banging head against wall," "smash" or "frustration," and four forms of "bang," where the smilie angrily shoots a gun at a target. Stormfront's smilies reflect and encourage a belief system and site that are focused on hating and harming dismissed and disenfranchised people.

Barthes's notion of punctum provides a useful means of intervening in Stormfront's violent smilies and the feelings produced by heart icons because it also "refers to the notion of punctuation."⁴³ Emoticons, emoji, and related symbols are often used to frame and conclude sentences. They also punctuate texts with feelings.⁴⁴ Physical expressions are limited in many online engagements. In written texts, including online communication, nuanced emotions and tone of voice can be conveyed through such punctuation as exclamation and question marks. Some reports have argued that using periods in emails and text messaging is too formal and lends an ominous valence to communication.⁴⁵ Employing all uppercase letters, as I have previously noted, is also scorned by many online participants as shouting. In Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández's Facebook research, she notes how the ability to intensify and amplify feelings through visual icons and other digital affordances has supported online hate initiatives.⁴⁶ The distinct aspects of digital communication have been addressed in varied proposals for conveying sentiments. For instance, the computer scientist Scott E. Fahlman recommended an early form of emoticons on a bulletin board in 1982 as a method of distinguishing between serious and joke posts.⁴⁷ The scholarly acknowledgment of these plans and an associated close reading of such things as repetitive punctuation, words, and emoticons can identify how feelings and other cultural belief systems are produced online.

People continue to develop specialized dictionaries as a means of producing and grappling with online terminology and representations. These texts have also structured the identity of online sites and digital cultures by articulating outsiders. The Jargon File, which was first produced in 1975, and the associated *Hacker's Dictionary*, which was published in 1983, include information

about hacker culture and definitions for varied computer and Internet terms.⁴⁸ The current online version of the Hacker's Dictionary, which is an updated version of the print text, articulates the early and continuing functions of emoticons when indicating that they are "virtually required under certain circumstances in high-volume text-only communication forums."⁴⁹ The "lack of verbal and visual cues" in such settings can cause comments to be "badly misinterpreted (not always even by newbies)." With this proviso, the Hacker Dictionary also ranks people's technological and communication skills based on their time using online forums. Paul Andrews's *Seattle Times* article from 1994 provides negative views of newer participants and emoticons when informing the "newbie" that "Overuse of the smiley is a mark of loserhood!"⁵⁰ The "problem" of excessive emoticon use is associated with unknowing individuals when Andrews suggests, "Smileys have infected commercial networks as well, especially America Online." He identifies emoticons as nothing but noise and the "equivalent of crackling and popping on a cellular phone." Andrews's comments indicate how emoticons are represented as contaminating, especially when they are related to repetitive use. He conveys a technological bias in suggesting that the people who accessed the Internet through such systems as America Online did not understand digital settings and were not technologically skilled. In doing this, he provides a script about online expertise and class that is related to the gendered and raced scripts about dirty touchscreens that I consider in chapter 2.

Individuals' online employment of hearts are emphasized and sometimes dismissed in specialized dictionaries and encyclopedias. The online Emojipedia's search bar mentions the term "heart" and the smiling face with heart-eyes.⁵¹ It thereby renders heart emoji as initial and exemplary cases. Emojipedia also encourages the reproduction of such symbols because a "Copy and paste this emoji" option is an aspect of each definition. Dictionary.com defines a variety of heart emoji and the specific feelings that they represent. For instance, it associates the black heart with "feeling angst-y," "misunderstood," and "emo" and having a "dark twisted soul, morbid sense of humor," or loving sad things.⁵² According to Dictionary.com, heart icons articulate particular kinds of people and their feelings and behaviors, including emo-identified individuals who are engaged in subcultural music and fashion.

Dictionary.com indicates that "I ♥ u" can be understood as "I love you" or "I heart you" and conveys the continued flexibility of such symbols.⁵³ This influence on the meaning of texts is based on where hearts are placed

and how many are employed. For example, Dictionary.com identifies a heart at the end of a sentence as the “classic.” It also describes people’s tendencies to frame a “statement visually by putting a heart at both the beginning and end of it,” to use a number of hearts for “emphasis,” and to employ the heart as an “intensifier to express affection.”⁵⁴ Heart icons decorate and elaborate upon members’ online names and are employed in “social media handles in order to cultivate a certain type of online persona.” For instance, autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) YouTube video producers use hearts and other symbols in their names and posts, as I suggest in chapter 4, to underscore their practices of loving and virtually touching viewers. Hearts intensify texts when people repeat the symbol and employ such icons as the beating heart. Online dictionaries also deserve critical analysis because they control and intensify the ways new media languages are understood.

Aly Trachtman posts to the student-oriented FlockU and suggests that “DOUBLE PINKS” hearts are employed “when you want to be girly, and flirty. Men who use this are probs gay, but weirder things have happened. This is definitely a ‘go-to’ color for women.”⁵⁵ People’s readings of hearts are based on varied contextual cues, but Trachtman specifies that hearts are associated with binary gender and sexuality positions. She indicates that this identity script is especially likely with pink hearts, which she correlates with femininity, women, and gay men. This correlation of emotions to gender positions and sexual identities is common. According to Steven L. Arxer’s research on masculinity, emotional expressions are associated with femininities and nonnormative masculinities.⁵⁶ Emotions are believed to stigmatize men and normative masculinity because they are viewed as excessive and correlated with bodies that are seen as too much, including women, gay men, and people of color. Cultural norms insist that femininity should be connected to women, needs to be kept in check, should be enacted only in traditional ways, and is polluting when intensely performed or linked to unexpected bodies and things. Individuals use these structures to unfortunately suggest that men who engage in feminine things are gay and to indicate that femininity taints men and their masculinity.

Similar gender scripts are rendered on Urban Dictionary when craigums describes the <3 (or heart) icon as an “annoying way of putting a heart online mostly used by 15–17 year old girls who have nothing more to do than kiss boys that wear the same pants as them.”⁵⁷ This poster uses dismissive

terms and utterances to suggest that teen women do not do anything important. The example for these women's speech is, "OMGOMGOMGOMGOMGO MOMGO MOGM i <3 his pants." craigums escalates this misogynistic narrative by describing the related phrase "lyke omg" as a "code used by 14–16 year old girls that has yet to be decoded" and suggests that women's interactions are illegible.⁵⁸ While repetitive icons, acronyms, words, phrases, and punctuation are used for emphasis online, people's negative comments and the correlation of these practices to femininity are some of the ways women are deprecated. The associated indication that young women are invested in insignificant behavior renders stereotyped distinctions between women's frivolous technology engagements and men's more productive activities. These gendered hierarchies are also established in misogynistic narratives about women's purportedly inadequate mobile phone use, as I suggest in chapters 1 and 2.

Scholarly studies of gender scripts can be employed as methods of critiquing such texts. In this chapter, I further develop gender script literature to address identity scripts and suggest some of the ways these inquiries can be employed in considering the forms of communication that are associated with specific subjects, the ways gender scripts are intermeshed with race and sexuality scripts (such as linking women to white weddings or nonnormative men who wear the same pants), and how repetition functions. The related analysis might also address the ways the utility and multiple functions of symbols and texts are condensed and rigidified. For instance, the digital rhetoric scholar Elizabeth Losh's study of hashtags is a reminder that the # symbol, which some people now only associate with social media tagging, predates computing.⁵⁹ It supports nonhuman reading, as well as individuals' social media tagging, activism, and articulations of collective beliefs and sentiments. This includes enactments of and attempts to control feminist hashtag activism, which I address in the afterword. Yet the politics of hashtags and hearts, and the tendency to use these symbols multiple times, are displaced by Urban Dictionary posters' rendering of them as feminine, annoying, and noncommunicative.⁶⁰

The value of feminine communication is further dismissed on Urban Dictionary when Birdypwnsjoo argues, "<3 has been so overused it doesn't even mean what it looks like anymore."⁶¹ Birdypwnsjoo thus identifies the heart as ambiguous, worn out, and deceptive. Ulrecht indicates, "Apparently it means love or heart. It's all over Twitter at the end of girl's posts."⁶²

The use of the term “apparently” works to make it exceptionally obvious and distances Ulrecht from what are represented as excessive and overused bouts of feelings. The symbols themselves are “all over,” and thus understood as too much and contaminating. While Barthes indicates that the surprise of photographic punctum is supported by its processes of coming into being and evanescence, the <3 is sometimes figured as overexposed. As Birdypwnsjoo and Ulrecht propose, the employment of multiple hearts is often culturally dismissed as too insistent, too visible, and too repetitive, and thus as too feminine and queer.

Femininity and feminine excess have been understood by some second- and third-wave feminists as attempts to conform to male interests and normative heterosexuality, but the posts on Urban Dictionary highlight the negative connotations of feminine excess.⁶³ Adele Patrick’s research on feminine excess identifies how the “elaborate fashioning of femininity, in hair styling, clothes, and cosmetic acts has been read variously as ‘excessive,’ counter-revolutionary, radical, inappropriate, and ‘queer.’”⁶⁴ As she indicates, there are political utilities to enacting such positions when they distort expectations. This includes women’s refusal to establish themselves as appropriately classed and tasteful. Patrick suggests that women’s enactments of excess femininity can undermine cultural expectations of stable gender roles and thus function as a form of Sara Ahmed’s feminist killjoy.⁶⁵ However, craigums tries to enforce stable binary gender and sexuality positions when associating <3 with what are supposed to be women’s disproportionate and misconceived desires because of their interest in men who wear the same pants as them.

Men who wear women’s clothing are often culturally demarcated as engaging in inappropriate gender practices and being queer and gay. Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kate M. Miltner’s research foregrounds instances where heterosexual masculinity is challenged by femininity.⁶⁶ Given the association of the heart with femininity, the linking of the <3 with a group of men who wear pants that are also adopted by women is designed to undermine the associated men’s positions as normatively masculine. For example, Andre defines the <3 as “an emoticon for a really gay heart” and proposes that users and receivers of the associated messages are tainted by such content.⁶⁷ Since the heart has been employed as an intensifier, definitions on Urban Dictionary suggest that it results in the production of insistently and “really” gay individuals. These formulations point to how gay identities and

hearts are correlated in their cultural roles as magnifiers of characteristics and feelings. In these settings, gay sexualities are culturally stereotyped as some combination of being too feminine, too masculine, and inappropriately gendered. Thus, these gender scripts that associate women with hearts are reliant on sexuality scripts. These practices can also be considered, and their problems pinpointed and punctured, by employing Barthes's conception of punctum and other affective queer theory frameworks, which I outline later in this book. Barthes's notion of the pricked and torn subject compromises investments in impenetrable and coherent bodies and the associated conceptions of normative masculinity.

Consumer Love on Etsy

Ecommerce sites that are not actively directed at heterosexual men tend to emphasize femininity. Sites that are focused on women and femininity are more likely to employ hearts to underscore that they love people and that these emotions replace the impersonal and massified aspects of online shopping. Etsy and related online sites associate the heart and love with handmade objects, items crafted or sold by passionate individuals, things that reference personal experiences, and items that are gifted by intimates. In *Buy It Now: Lessons from eBay* and *Producing Women: The Internet, Traditional Femininity, Queerness, and Creativity*, I note how companies, sellers, and buyers work together to associate the online marketing of such goods with personal connections between people.⁶⁸ These companies and individuals indicate that handmade items connect people through the shared touch of objects, are imbued with loving feelings, extend familial forms of love, and are pleasurable to create. For instance, craft producers who identify as mothers often indicate that they are selling products that are similar to the ones that they lovingly made for their children and sharing their related feelings. Christoph Fuchs, Martin Schreier, and Stijn M. J. van Osselaer's research on handmade objects indicates that these "products may often be more attractive, at least in part, because they are perceived as being made with artisanal love and even as symbolically containing love."⁶⁹ They "define love as the producer's warmhearted passion for a product or its production process that, as a result, can be perceived as symbolically embedded in the product." Thus, people understand handmade objects as representing, filled with, and extending circuits of feelings.

Etsy foregrounds these notions of consumer love in its email sign-up for wedding information, which has been available in the same form for many years (figure 3.1).⁷⁰ The sign-up site features a photograph of a white heterosexual couple holding a banner. The banner, which loops under and seems to conceptually support the sign-up form, has pendants that spell out the word “LOVE” and hearts that resemble Etsy’s favorite button. The form promises to provide “picks for brides, grooms and everyone else who loves weddings” and scripts people’s interests as being wedding-oriented. These representations connect Etsy to the processes of heterosexual coupling, loving individuals and goods, and what is presumed to be a more general love of weddings. This focus on weddings, which as I suggest in *Buy It Now* is also employed by eBay, allows ecommerce sites to reform the feminine, queer, and excessive connotations of shopping and associate the site and company with sanctified, heteronormative marriages and familial attachments.⁷¹ Etsy’s scripting of the wedding as a site where white heterosexual and community attachments are produced is counter to its promise to acknowledge and connect everyone through their love of weddings.

Etsy’s digital banner, which is on the initial part of its site, adopts a related narrative about emotional connections when directing individuals

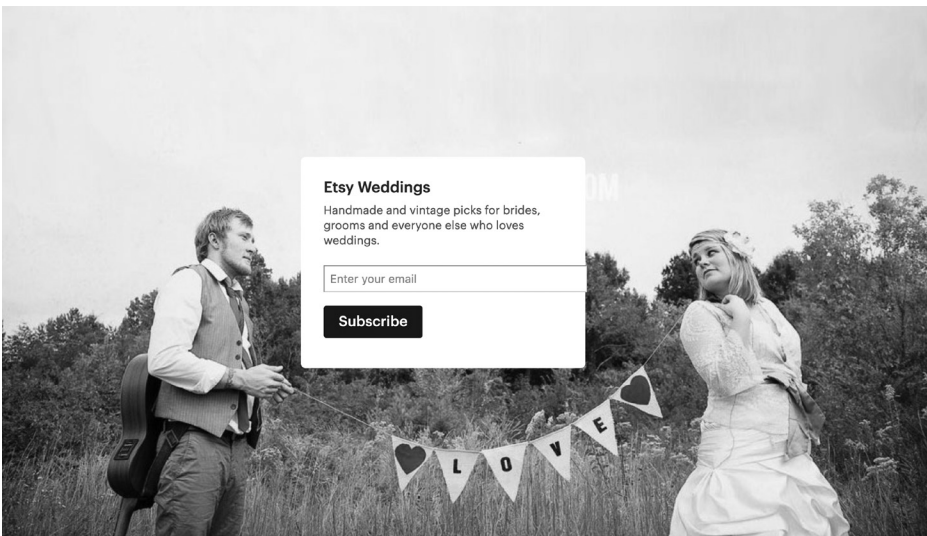


Figure 3.1
Screenshot from “Etsy – Email Sign Up.”

to “Buy directly from someone who put their heart and soul into making something special.”⁷² Etsy employs this account about the heart to indicate that sellers personally put everything into objects and give everything to consumers, including their passion and care. The site uses a form of tactile address by directly engaging buyers and referencing how producers have emotionally touched items. This structure is designed to get individuals to invest in the brand. Buyers are supposed to return the site’s and sellers’ sentiments by purchasing items and supporting Etsy’s construction of an ethics of care. Through Etsy’s text about the heart and soul of special items, the company associates the process of buying massified objects or purchasing through other consumer processes with not caring. Another version of this ardent relationship is constituted when Etsy tells readers to “Support independent creators. There’s no Etsy warehouse – just millions of people selling the things they love.” The site figures a version of Diana Adis Tahhan’s touching at depth in which the company helps “you connect directly with makers” and share deep feelings with sellers and their products.⁷³ Etsy members are assured that they are in direct contact with makers and will receive the things that sellers love. Viewers are also configured as people who care about and make sellers’ economic sustainability viable. Yet, as I suggest in *Producing Women*, online sales of personally produced and handmade items do not always result in viable jobs.⁷⁴

The people and companies marketing handcrafted goods, including Etsy, suggest that handmade items connect people in emotional and tactile networks that are not based on physical contact. For instance, Etsy entices individuals around Father’s Day to send “Dad love from any distance.”⁷⁵ In a related manner, Tahhan argues that “heart (as feeling) really signifies a presence of touching at depth, touch that is not locatable at all.”⁷⁶ These feelings, which include such notions as heartfelt and heartwarming, incorporate a “tug or warmth—a tangible feeling of connection.” Cultural conceptions of heart include emotional associations, exchanges of feelings, and embodied responses. These sensations are then supposed to be felt “inside” the body. People insistently identify online associations, including ecommerce exchanges, as intermeshing heart, love, and touch. So too do conceptual and coded links mesh bodies, avatars, companies, devices, software, sites, and texts together. According to Tahhan, touching at depth “has intimate manifestations (is not only physical or from the ‘body’) and finds meaning through an embodied felt relation and deep sense of

connection.”⁷⁷ Throughout this chapter and book, I elaborate upon Tahhan’s consideration of the ways touch is emotionally experienced by foregrounding the stakeholders who produce and experience such touching at depth despite (or because of) distance. This also allows me to indicate the ways touching at depth can be employed to theorize the representations and sensations associated with digital media.

Etsy’s About page emphasizes the importance of touching and crafting at depth, including the ways these experiences contribute to its site ethos, by representing a series of animated and engaged hands. Two hands hold knitting needles and ply the yarn in unison (figure 3.2). A lighter and darker hand touch palms. A light-skinned hand also swipes a touch-screen and changes the associated image. Such hands support Etsy’s claim that it collaborates with buyers and sellers to “Keep Commerce Human” and individuals connected at a distance.⁷⁸ Philosophers and scientists have historically identified hands, as I suggest in the introduction, as the physiognomic features that distinguish and elevate humans over other animals. Etsy continues this association of hands with humans, while promising

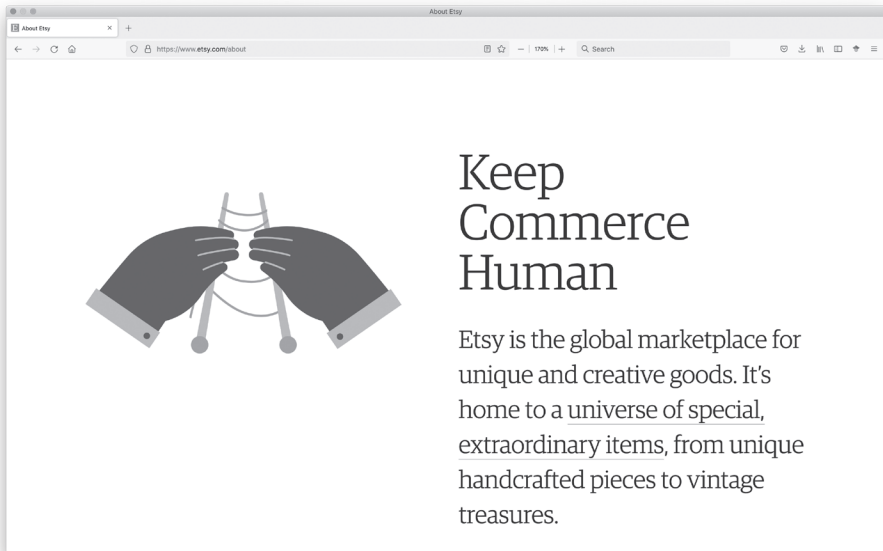


Figure 3.2
Screenshot from “About Etsy.”

participants physical and emotive connections through the interface. Etsy also uses these hands to conceptually connect viewers to “unique hand-crafted pieces” in a setting where the texture and details of the handmade are difficult to determine. Manipulable hand-pointers and other operable and static representations of participants configure expected bodies and engagements. Through Etsy’s representations of hands and contact, the company elides mediation and emphasizes the physical, tactile, and emotional aspects of its site and products.

References to hands and hearts make inaccessible goods into tangible things and sentimental connections. They suggest that buyers, sellers, and the company constitute a loving community where skin and bodies are in contact. Etsy’s images of hands with tools indicate that the site facilitates people’s processes of making things. Etsy identifies the site as a “vibrant community of real people connecting over special goods. The platform empowers sellers to do what they love and helps buyers find what they love.” These narratives about hands, love, and hearts undergird the site and the ways it is supposed to make individuals feel. In a similar manner to other social selling platforms and social networking sites, individuals are encouraged to identify with and contribute to the brand and interface and understand these arrangements as a community.

Lisa Whitmer encouraged such connections in her role as manager of Etsy’s seller education team. She notes, “One way to turn browsers into buyers is to hook them” with a video about “what makes your Etsy shop noteworthy.”⁷⁹ Her mention of “browsers” combines the viewing technologies that allow individuals to access sites with people’s processes of engaging. She also articulates physical interconnections in the form of a “hook.” Sellers are encouraged to share by answering the question, “Why do you love what you do?” In reply to her prompt, sellers respond with related sentiments. For example, Louisa writes, “love that this is now an option on etsy! Inspired to create a video soon!”⁸⁰ This seller employs the term “love” to convey extreme happiness. Pleasure and the movement of loving feelings through varied circuits are also evoked when Adriana notes, “love this!”⁸¹ The video option will allow her “Etsian loves” to see her shop and view her explanation of her process. She also expresses her “love” of “Etsy!” and how she would “love” to “connect” by seeing buyers’ videos. Her continued employment of the term “love,” as well as exclamation marks and related sentiments, in a similar manner to my considerations of other forms

of repetition, are intended to convey her intense feelings and notion that the site provides intimate and exciting connections.

Heart Buttons and Hearting on Etsy

Individuals may be hooked and connected by buttons that evoke touching and feeling. Heart buttons are increasingly available on ecommerce sites, including sites that are as distinct as eBay, Etsy, Modcloth, and Neiman Marcus. Buttons are different than Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) links, which indicate that individuals can open a web page or resource. Buttons suggest that individuals can modify data or add preprogrammed indications. Buttons reference the actions of hands and fingers on surfaces by suggesting that there is something to touch and push. They thereby configure the expected body of participants and the position of individuals' hands and fingers. Heart buttons may thus be particularly productive for Etsy because they stand in for certain kinds of material work. Yet button pushing has also been figured as mechanical and excessive in its requirements for force and repetition. Rachel Plotnick provides a historical chronicle of people's concerns about material buttons being replaced by images and screens. According to Plotnick, individuals have conveyed apprehensions about buttons being replaced by smooth glass and “force and feedback” barely mattering.⁸² While she relates such screen-conveyed buttons to “flatness and touch without feeling,” I suggest that heart and other buttons and associated options render tactile and emotional sentiments. Given buttons' recurring and expressive functions, they are related to individuals' repetitive use of texts for emotional impact and thereby to a kind of familiar excess.

Varied kinds of buttons, including plant buds, pimples, belly buttons, and genitals, are conceptualized as tender parts. On-screen buttons are also pleasurable and sore points and thereby evoke Barthes's conception of punctum. People are more likely to experience such soreness when they refuse heart buttons' conveyance of wholehearted feelings and the repetitive spotting of the interface with heartfelt sentiments. Punctum and hearts, including Valentine's Day stereotypes, seem to shoot out at viewers and produce holes. Digital buttons call to and provide a point for the fingers of users, or their hand-pointers, and position bodies in relation to devices and screens. This is enacted when individuals put their fingers on touchscreens. Buttons address the “you” who will engage with the system and thus produce a

direct and tactile address. While Ahmed figures the raised arm as a position of feminist resistance, buttons provide specific directions and schematics for hands and fingers. A theory of buttons, which I outline in this chapter, should be incorporated into studies of online interfaces and mobile touchscreen devices because buttons promise interactivity while scripting the actions and bodies of individuals.

Heather Burkman's Etsy blog post provides a context for heart button pushing that connects tender feelings to collecting and buying. She informs readers, "By clicking the heart, the item will be added to your default Favorites list, 'Items I Love,' for fast collecting."⁸³ Burkman and Etsy directly address individuals and deploy the button structure to articulate people's actions and feelings. While individuals may add items to a list for varied reasons, Etsy's terminology and framework render items as coveted goods that generate affectionate feelings. Buttons directly address individuals as people who should select the highlighted options and, in the case of heart buttons, understand their interaction through enthusiastic, happy, heartfelt, and loving sentiments. These online buttons are often surrounded by and conceptually associated with emoticon and emoji hearts and narratives about hearting and loving. Yet notions about the people who use buttons are also proscribed by interface articulations of white hands and other cultural expectations about users.

Sellers, as I have started to suggest, support Etsy's valuation of the heart, hearting, and loving feelings. For instance, dfalv38 conveys excitement when getting her "100th Etsy heart today!!! Yippee!!!"⁸⁴ This seller envisions turning "hearts into sales and lifelong customers" and underscores how hearts contribute to social selling. She also indicates that people "exchange hearts" in forums. The tactical exchange of hearts for profit and the boost of the likelihood that people will notice a seller may invoke the black and cold heart that is often associated with lack of feeling. Yet dfalv38 employs and amplifies the heart icon when using a series of black hearts as a text divider. After this emotive break, dfalv38 writes, "Everyone on Etsy wants to know how to create these little black heart symbols to add to their descriptive copy" and "make neat bullet points." dfalv38 provides instructions on varied ways to produce hearts, including cutting and pasting. She thereby makes her post into a template for readers' practices and repetitions. dfalv38 suggests that using hearts is a creative enterprise that supplants the Etsy interface and functions as emotive bullet points, punctum, and economic stimulus.

EtsyGadget’s Hearts Counter facilitates such practices. It enables sellers to combine the heart button with a plug-in that “shows how many times have you favorited/unfavorited (hearted/unhearted) items and shops during an hour.”⁸⁵ Since “many sellers participate” in “‘Favathons,’ the main principle of which is heart interchange,” the plug-in allows individuals to “prevent missed hearts and so, avoid being expelled from teams.” Hearts are thus a means of exchange that connote favorite things and can result in interpersonal problems when not delivered. People respond to the Hearts Counter with related narratives about love. These textual forms of call-and-response suggest how related ideas are produced. Rose Barbola replies, “Wonderful tool! Loving it!”⁸⁶ Pamela Quinn from Vintagequinn gifts writes, “love the heart counter.”⁸⁷ Their use of the term “love” is meant to convey appreciation of the application and its delivery of information. They indicate how intensities are expected, produced, and circulated as part of heart exchanges.

Sellers also associate Etsy, members, and items with feelings in the commentaries that are part of their stores and listings. Sellers thereby follow the scripts that I have analyzed, and that Etsy established. For instance, Val Hebert identifies as a “multimedia artist who is currently sidetracked by a love affair with fiber.”⁸⁸ She relates her passion for crafting to human interactions and pleasurably excessive relationships with objects. Hebert identifies herself as a “painter at heart” and renders the heart as central. She also “loves bringing her sensibilities together on the canvas of repurposed wool, which she needle felts” to her “heart’s content.” Hebert thus distinguishes her work as consolidating her feelings and fulfilling desires. Her practices and products are also supposed to meet buyers’ yearnings, and it is “100% guaranteed that you will love what you buy!” In writing this, Hebert promises to fulfill Etsy’s indication that individuals will “Find things you’ll love.”⁸⁹ Hebert offers a “thank you from the very bottom” of her “heart for supporting H a n d m a d e.”⁹⁰ Her expressed appreciation advances the site’s constitution of deep feelings and touching at depth.

Hebert uses a large font to offer consumers “HeARTfelt goods made of reclaimed textiles, embellished with needle felted love, one handmade piece at a time.”⁹¹ She references multiple forms of touching at depth, which are associated with and supposed to be conveyed through the feeling of materials, including the felt fabric. An analysis of such terms is supported by Barbara Johnson’s identification of the importance of addressing ambiguous words.⁹² Felt (fabric) provides an ideal term for evoking emotional feelings

that combine with and are magnified by tactile things. The fabric is physically and emotionally felt because of its texture and because it is pierced with the producer's handwork and interests. Needle felting is the practice of consistently pushing a sharp object into a fabric until the fibers knot and weave together and become felt fabric. Such processes render a constructed version of punctum because the producer pierces material over and over again with a needle in a manner that creates felt and facilitates consumer desires. Hebert's chronicle of this piercing is designed to convince consumers of the labors of love that she incorporates into her products, and for her to indicate that she and her goods pierce buyers' hearts in a further form of punctum. Her description and process also indicate the ways entanglements, including the meshing of fibers, produce new structures and feelings.

Hebert's linking of feelings to enmeshed fibers and felt fabric evokes Didier Anzieu's identification of skin wrappings (and embodiment) as communicative.⁹³ It also conjures Steven Connor's and Tarja Laine's resonating membrane, which I mention in chapter 2.⁹⁴ Their proposals suggest the ways Hebert's multiple meanings and layers of felt are designed to make individuals collaboratively feel. Hebert and many other Etsy sellers use tactility as a means of connecting with other people. For instance, Elvira Para employs the tagline, "Creating useable, touchable art."⁹⁵ Rather than viewing her art at a distance, she wants people to "be able to touch it and use it in their daily lives." Para enjoys when people walk into her "show booth and immediately pick up a coaster, run their hands over a smooth satin tile." She emphasizes the ways textural objects attract individuals and make them want to feel things. In describing these connections, she encourages potential online buyers to imaginatively reach out, connect with her, and buy her ecommerce products. Thus, narratives about materiality are designed to reframe online shopping and make buyers feel as if they are reaching through the interface and touching art and other things. Such texts also shift women from existing as to-be-touched-ness to producing it, especially the rendered to-be-touched-ness of their crafted objects.

Sellers connect crafting to feeling by highlighting the ways the terms "art" and "heart" share a series of letters. Here too, the evocative aspects of words and the larger and thus more impassioned font are employed for their multiple connotations and associated sentiments. For instance, Hebert constitutes "HeARTfelt goods" that intermesh the heart, art, and feelings.⁹⁶ The Heartmaker and associated Heartistics shop produce these

connections by crafting heart-shaped items and identifying the crafter as a “Heartmaker.”⁹⁷ Beverly Thomas Jenkins expresses her “LOVE LOVE LOVE” of “DOING MOSAICS!!”⁹⁸ All of her “mosaics have a heart on them,” which is identified as her “heart” and which she inserts into each item. The mosaics have a heart visually incorporated into the design that stands in for Jenkins’s body, emotional feelings, and ability to touch shoppers at a depth by shipping a version of her heart to buyers. These conveyances of love, care, and appreciation are concluded with a “Thank you...love, Beverly xoxo.” The intensity of these sellers’ feelings and the overall resonance of sites are amplified through multiple uses of the terms “heart” and “love” and intensifying punctuation. Connor’s and Laine’s identification of skin as a resonating or beating membrane also suggests the ways figurations of hearts are designed to connect sellers and buyers.

The Heartmaker advertises the “perfect heart for the hearts you hold” and emotional and material exchanges.⁹⁹ This suggests that the seller, buyers, and people who are gifted these items are connected in a tissue of love and care. The Heartmaker’s craft “fills” the crafter’s “very heart” and moves from that “heart to yours.”¹⁰⁰ The seller’s bodily sensations are supposed to be transformed through the processes of creating things, and these embodied adjustments touch buyers and change them. This experience of being touched at a distance, and without physical contact between bodies, is echoed by and resonates with buyers. For example, *clburon1234* describes wearing the pendant over the individual’s “own heart everyday.”¹⁰¹ This buyer has and feels The Heartmaker’s heart against the buyer’s own heart. These texts indicate how consumers follow the scripts and experience the sentiments of sellers. The narratives also demonstrate how Etsy and its sellers produce sticky affective intensities that keep individuals engaged with the company and producers and link individuals in circuits of feelings.

Facebook Reactions

Etsy claims that its site emotionally connects sellers, buyers, and hand-crafted objects in exchanges of loving feelings. Facebook is also associated with positive feelings. Caitlin Dewey reports on “Facebook’s cultural and algorithmic preferences for everything positive and upbeat.”¹⁰² In a related manner, Lin Qiu, Han Lin, Angela K. Leung, and William Tov’s Facebook research indicates that individuals are more likely to use the platform to

convey positive emotions and well-being.¹⁰³ These good feelings are often conveyed through the love and care reactions, which include hearts. Yet scholarly research specifies that Facebook's interface goes beyond supporting friendships and articulates the terms and conceptions of relationships. According to Corina Sas, Alan Dix, Jennefer Hart, and Ronghui Su, "at their heart, people's most memorable experiences with Facebook are all about positive emotions."¹⁰⁴ These researchers emphasize not only how Facebook is correlated with upbeat feelings but also the ways the researchers identify such recollections as having essence and heart.

Facebook promotes positive feelings through its interface design, narratives about the site and its members, and reports about site changes. For instance, Facebook asserts that it added a series of reactions to the thumbs-up "like" option as a means of expanding upon the site's emotional features. Facebook's expansion of its like button in 2016 included options for "love," "haha," "wow," "sad," and "angry." In a similar manner to other sites, a graphic heart is used to represent love. The product designer Geoff Teehan indicates that the company wanted to "make the Like button more expressive."¹⁰⁵ Fidji Simo, who manages applications, elaborates on the association of the reaction buttons with various sentiments. The company launched reactions because people sought to "express how they felt."¹⁰⁶ Alexandru Voica amplified these feelings as part of his communications position, when he announced that Facebook was launching a new care reaction as a "way for people to share their support with one another during" the coronavirus pandemic.¹⁰⁷ This decision represents Facebook and its members as caring and foregrounds tactility because the icon is a yellow smiley face-like figure that is animated to tenderly hold and hug a heart, and by analogy also embrace the participants.

Facebook introduced the reaction buttons in response to concerns that the company had been grappling with since incorporating the like button in 2009. As Robinson Meyer reports, "Facebook has known that not every kind of post deserved a thumbs-up."¹⁰⁸ Mark Zuckerberg, the co-founder of Facebook and Meta Platforms, argues that people want the "ability to express empathy. Not every moment is a good moment."¹⁰⁹ This linking of reactions to bad moments is undermined by Facebook's tendency to render and promote positive feelings, including its mediation of the coronavirus pandemic with the figure that hugs a heart and is designed to send positive feelings and connect with recipients. This notion of care is

part of Facebook’s ongoing structuration and corporate identification. For instance, the company calls part of its research and development practices “Compassion Research Day.” During one such research event, staff considered a “Sympathize” button, which may now be realized as the care button. Meyer argues that reaction buttons are similar to this figuration and offer the opportunity to express sympathy. The envisioned sympathize button and eventual development of reactions are designed to intensify the relationship between members and the brand by providing additional ways for people’s feelings to emerge from the interface. Reactions enable participants to engage in the kinds of brand community practices, which Albert M. Muñoz and Thomas C. O’Guinn describe, and share in the sentiments and ethos of the site.¹¹⁰

Facebook Guidelines provide a similarly upbeat portrayal of reaction buttons while encouraging standardization. They note, “Reactions are an extension of the Like button to give people more ways to express themselves.”¹¹¹ Yet Facebook informs participants that it is important to “use Reactions in the way they were originally intended” as a “quick and easy way to express how you feel.” The company and site attempt to manage reactions as a means of encouraging people to understand the interface as authentic and as facilitating unmediated feelings. This is also the way YouTube scripts viewers, as I indicate in chapter 4. In fostering this framework, Facebook configures participants’ practices even as it tries to hide how the site produces and mandates certain behaviors. Yet Facebook declares its interest in protecting the “integrity of the Facebook brand and product” rather than facilitating the widest array of members’ feelings and expressions.

Facebook’s control of members’ feelings and identities includes banning drag queens, Indigenous people, and trans individuals for ostensibly not following Facebook’s policy on “real names.”¹¹² The #MyNameIs campaign, which is associated with the Electronic Frontier Foundation, asserts that Facebook’s name policy is “culturally biased and technically flawed” and represents corporate indifference.¹¹³ The policy endangers individuals who need to remain anonymous or pseudonymous because of domestic violence, stalking, repressive government, and political activism. People duplicitously use the reporting option as a means of silencing groups and individuals. Facebook has banned or otherwise suppressed individuals who do not meet gender and racial norms, even as it has been a welcoming site for online hate, the spread of violent content, and misinformation.

For instance, Brenton Harrison Tarrant is alleged to have used Facebook to livestream his white supremacist terrorist attack on New Zealand mosques.¹¹⁴ White nationalists also used Facebook to organize the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 and more recent events.¹¹⁵

Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández's Facebook research indicates that people use the angry reaction as a means of producing and amplifying racism and hate. As she notes, far-right groups have "appropriated this affordance to spread anger towards specific targets."¹¹⁶ Matamoros-Fernández argues that such platform affordances "facilitate the mobilisation of anger as a tool of power." Certainly, anger and associated threats of violence continue to be used as methods of silencing women, people of color, queer folk, and other oppressed groups. These feelings are amplified, and pleasure is correlated with inflicting harm, in Stormfront's association of smilies and things that bring smiles to people's faces with spraying individuals with bullets. Stormfront's use of smilies is consonant with its white supremacist message and should encourage an analysis of how smilies and emoticons map onto cruel, duplicitous, and hateful smiles as well as good feelings.

Facebook's banning of people's self-representations and enabling of hate through system affordances indicate the limits of its care. This suggests that its rollout of the care reaction may have more to do with downplaying news coverage about its escalating association with hate groups rather than addressing the coronavirus pandemic, including the disproportionate risk of death and serious illness experienced by people of color. In Andreas Chatzidakis, Jamie Hakim, Jo Littler, Catherine Rottenberg, and Lynne Segal's article about the ways care is referenced, enacted, and withheld during the coronavirus pandemic, the authors argue that corporations are attempting to increase their acceptability by self-representing as "socially responsible" at the same time as they contribute to oppression.¹¹⁷ In the case of Facebook, the company markets and benefits from the crisis in care (and intolerance) by offering reactions, even though the site has not cared enough to moderate white and male supremacist posts, stop the circulation of misinformation, or intervene in the hate that is directed at other members.

Sammi Krug has managed the site's legitimacy and claim to caring in her role as Facebook product manager. She indicates that the site provides updates on "anything that matters most to you" and is the "central place to have conversations with the people you care about."¹¹⁸ Krug portrays

the addition of reactions as a process of “listening to people” and providing “more ways to easily and quickly express how something you see in News Feed makes you feel.” Facebook consistently uses the term “feel,” emphasizes members’ sentiments, and indicates that the interface supports participants’ moods. Krug and others identify reactions as ways of conveying more fine-grained feelings and engaging in more specific, quicker, and more abbreviated expressions. Reactions convey emotive responses to posts and other members and are designed to articulate the relationship between participants and the site. They also reshape members’ practices of engaging with individuals and feelings about the interface. Dewey reports that the reaction options “have made it far more pleasant to respond to certain types of posts – particularly sad or outrage-inducing ones. They’ve also, like virtually all features on Facebook, made it easier for the network to amass data.”¹¹⁹ Dewey connects the ways Facebook enables people to feel good about bad feelings to company profits. In addition, Facebook intensified members’ alienation and concern about such data collection when it admitted to changing the number of positive and negative posts seen by more than half a million individuals as part of a psychological study.¹²⁰

A group of Facebook employees and reporters have emphasized the expressive aspects of the newer reaction options. The link between the like button and feelings is underconsidered and requires more analysis. Distinctions between the like and reaction buttons enact a version of Barthes’s differentiation between general cultural experiences of liking and more embodied experiences of loving. In some of the reporting, the like option is understood as a less emotive response and one associated with standard behavior. This is conveyed by Connie Fredrickson’s “Every time it’s acceptable to use the new Facebook reactions” article about the expansion of the like button, which includes a photograph of a hand with an extended thumb and chipped blue nail polish (figure 3.3).¹²¹ The blue nail polish evokes the blue of the Favicon, or shortcut icon, and the background color of the Facebook interface. The condition of the nail polish suggests that Facebook, and the referenced like button, are worn and in need of upgrading. This proposal that the like button is dated is supported by the subtitle of Fredrickson’s article, which reads, “Like: The ‘vanilla’, safe yet a bit boring, of the Facebook reaction buttons.” The dismissal of “vanilla” and “safe” (sex) likes renders reactions as kinky, a queer erotic, and a kind of

Like



Figure 3.3
Screenshot from “Every time it’s acceptable to use the new Facebook reactions.”

online barebacking. On Urban Dictionary, The Smart 1 similarly identifies a “vanilla like” as a “plain, lame Facebook reaction that normies consistently use.”¹²² By describing the like as a banal norm, The Smart 1 and others suggest that reactions are queer expressions that do not match normative identity positions. Of course, the rendering of hearts as deeply feminine tends to support binary categories.

Dewey elaborates on the emotional limitations of the like option when she argues, “Likers are indifferent” to “your post.”¹²³ They acknowledge having seen it but “couldn’t really be bothered to work up much of an emotional reaction. Likers are cool, distant, dispossessed.” She suggests that many people’s engagements, and presumably features of the interface before the redesign, are unresponsive and outdated. Her formulation also

implies that liking is antithetical to touching at depth. It is notable that Dewey suggests that Facebook’s moving hand does *not* evoke connections. However, virtual touch is amplified, as Brian Adam reports, with the care reaction, which shows “who you want to be close to despite the distance, it is sharing love during the quarantine.”¹²⁴ Dewey also associates responsive processes with people’s employment of the heart when you “‘like,’ but with feeling.” This is unfortunately combined with stereotypes when she describes the love reaction as the “high-pitched ‘omg, love it’ of reaction emoji.” She thus denigrates more expressive instances of conveying feelings by associating such reactions with the excessive, shrill, and feminine. Dewey’s illustrative phrasing renders the love icon as disproportionate *and* uncommunicative. As I suggest earlier in this chapter, “omg” is deemed to convey immature and unclear feelings through speech. Urban Dictionary and other online sites specify that acronyms like omg are correlated with young women and devalued.

Other reporters indicate that there are significant limits to communicating with reactions and the availability of these options curtails other kinds of interaction. Natt Garun asks, “why bother commenting on a comment when you can just click the ‘Heart’ emoji?”¹²⁵ Garun suggests that contemporary subjects, or at least the feminine participants who are correlated with the heart button, have been made into automatons that mechanically respond. He writes, “What is communication even? Words? What are those?” In such instances, the heart is represented as magnifying the simplistic aspects of push buttons, but also imbuing the purportedly flat and affectless aspects of screen buttons, as narrated by Plotnick, with too much feeling.¹²⁶ Frank Bank conveys a similar position when noting that “more expressive communication” can be conveyed through words than through likes.¹²⁷ In a similar manner to Dewey’s disaffected participants who “like” but do not care or engage, Garun and Bank articulate subjects who are prelinguistic and postlinguistic. Such narratives produce gender scripts about excessive and illiterate women participants. The women who use the heart reaction are depicted as thoughtlessly adopting empty signs and reducing already phatic communication to its most limited expressions. Yet N. Katherine Hayles emphasizes the intricate ways people communicate and write into and through online systems.¹²⁸ People’s use of ambiguous concepts, multilayered meaning, atypical punctuation, emoticons, and emoji, as

I indicate throughout this book, indicate individuals' skills with and complexification of online communication.

People's multifaceted use of feminine hearts *and* individuals' contrary desires to contain such identities and expressions result in the persistent belittling of the heart, the sentiments that it evokes, and the participants who are correlated with love reactions and feelings. This may be because, as a group of journalists and other participants note, the heart is persistently employed. For instance, Jylian Russell suggests that 2016 was a "traumatic year" because of the election of Donald Trump as 45th president of the United States, but the "Love button" rather than another reaction "(fittingly) got the most love."¹²⁹ Karissa Bell reports that "'love' is far and away the most popular of all reactions."¹³⁰ These distinctions between dismissals and celebrations of hearting underscore how the heart represents and generates diverse feelings. In the next section, I consider people's expressed refusals of the heart on Twitter. Whether people happily adopt or angrily reject the heart and other site frameworks, impassioned expressions are productive for both sites and brands. People who respond with the love reaction, as Felicity Wild indicates, "can be assumed to be loyal customers and important brand ambassadors."¹³¹ Negative evaluations can cause problems for a brand's community, but such assessments also act as reminders about the company and its products. The love button is valued and dismissed for its conveyance of members' identities, attachments, and amplified feelings. Its popularity and massification are part of its productivity and the reason some individuals suggest that it is too much, including its persistent appearance.

Twitter and the Broken Heart

The emoji-tracker tends to list the heavy black heart, which now appears on many sites in red, as one of the most popular Twitter emoji.¹³² At the bottom of the emoji-tracker page, the centrality of the heart and the associated conveyance of feelings are supported by the indication that "emoji-tracker is brought to you with ♥" through the programming of mroth. The emoji-tracker's extensive grid emphasizes that hearts and other emoji are employed as part of everyday communication. However, a large number of journalists and other Twitter participants expressed extreme dissatisfaction when Twitter changed the star "favorite" button to the heart "like" button in 2015.¹³³ While many people disparaged Twitter's shift from the star to

the heart, the change did more than make the site consonant with other social media platforms. The heart suggests that Twitter is a setting of touching emotions rather than preferences.

Twitter explained this interface change by tweeting, “You can say a lot with a heart. Introducing a new way to show how you feel on Twitter.”¹³⁴ A Graphics Interchange Format (GIF) animation accompanies the tweet and depicts a throbbing red heart that equals “yes!!” “congrats,” “LOL,” “adorbs,” “stay strong,” “hugs,” “wow,” “aww,” and “high five.” Twitter thus asserts that the heart conveys diverse notions. Viewers are encouraged to “show how you feel without missing a beat” and understand that the heart option is intuitive and spontaneous, enables varied kinds of ideas and sentiments, and is easily integrated into online communication. The post configures what the heart means. It also indicates how the heart works as part of Twitter’s interface and how members can use it. Through these frameworks, Twitter conveys popular narratives about the simplicity of buttons while distinguishing between the star and heart. Although Twitter’s description of the heart button is similar to Facebook’s narratives about its reactions, individuals’ responses to it have been more negative.

Twitter’s blogged announcement about the interface change notes that the company wanted to “make Twitter easier and more rewarding to use” and that at “times the star could be confusing, especially to newcomers.”¹³⁵ Its text establishes participants as uninformed, which is the opposite of what critics of the change want. Twitter asserts that while not “everything can be your favorite” and marked by a star, the “heart, in contrast, is a universal symbol that resonates across languages, cultures, and time zones.” In a similar manner, Facebook argues that the “value of reactions is that they express universal feelings that unite us all.”¹³⁶ Twitter argues that the heart is more suitable for a range of emotions and forms of communication. However, before the change to the heart, the reporter Charlie Warzel described how members changed the star into “one of the most complex and cryptic forms of online communication,” including such expressions as the “hate” and “flirt fav.”¹³⁷ He highlights the emotive and potentially flexible experiences of the star button. Warzel asserts, “You fav because a tweet made you feel something *or* (much more interestingly) you fav because you want to make the *tweeter* feel something.” He indicates that favoriting involves multiple people and systems in circuits of feeling and exchange. These reviews also suggest that favoriting can be employed, understood, and emotionally experienced in multiple ways.

Some people greeted Twitter's announcement about the heart with consternation. Such responses should have been, but were not, recognized as conveying participants' emotional sentiments. Thomas Ricker configures people's practices when reporting, "To star something is to measure its quality. To heart something is to emote it."¹³⁸ People's comprehension and valuation of these systems are supposed to be associated with "lessons learned long ago in grade school: gold stars were reserved for a 100 percent on a math test or when Mario defeated Macho Grubba, hearts were doled out like Valentines by a horny Periscope user." People's acquisition of knowledge and support of educational norms are persistent themes in literature about favoriting. Ricker uses such conventions to represent stars as appropriate, while deeming hearts as excessive, disingenuous, and related to distasteful and potentially uninvited expression. He thereby correlates buttons with gender and emotive scripts and suggests that hearts are tainting. PiotrNowinski provides a related response to Twitter's announcement by tweeting a drawing of Grumpy Cat holding an umbrella to ward off a rain of hearts.¹³⁹ PiotrNowinski suggests that the heart button is an uninvited barrage that is best kept away from bodies and identities. These participants indicate that their identity constructions and relationship with the site depend on Twitter conveying normative, and male, gender and sexual orientations.

Journalists characterize the star as more normal and reasonable than the heart through surveys and other methods. For instance, Mashable offered a poll on the "superior way to tell someone 'hey, cool tweet,'" and 82 percent indicated that the star was the best method.¹⁴⁰ NPR posted a survey about Twitter's change from the star to the heart, and 79 percent of respondents voted to "Bring back stars."¹⁴¹ This need to numerically rank icons as methods of dismissing the heart is notable and may indicate the ways the feminine and masculine are persistently hierarchized, with the feminine deemed of a lower order and less valuable. While Twitter portrayed the heart as more nuanced and malleable, its participants dismissed its utility. For instance, jamesoreilly tweeted that the "heart is inadequate symbol. Don't want to 'heart' story about ISIS, rape, Dachau. All wrong."¹⁴² Reporters and other participants represent the star as right and the heart as wrong and insufficient. Yet employing any star symbol as a positive method of responding to reporting on Dachau, when Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied areas used the Star of David to mark Jews for tyrannical mistreatment and genocidal murder, is disturbing.

Reporters portray the star as more capacious and less subjective than the heart. Abhimanyu Ghoshal argues, “Unlike the heart, the star seems more neutral and open to interpretation.”¹⁴³ According to Mongoosebumpkin, the “dignified, neutral gold star” is “replaced with a giggly, twee little heart.”¹⁴⁴ Mongoosebumpkin amplifies the association of the star with neutrality by suggesting that the feminine heart is little and diminishing, and thereby threatens masculine dignity. While arguing for the interpretive flexibility of the star, such tweets refuse to interpret their own normative frameworks. Instead, they employ the kinds of emotional framework that Sarah Sobieraj and Jeffrey M. Berry outline as a method of distancing themselves from the heart and the associated references to femininity.¹⁴⁵ When BrownoftheGlobe tweets, “The heart connotes sentiment, the star judgment,” the statement also relates the heart to unreasonable and feminine emotions.¹⁴⁶ Of course, such commentary demonstrates that the star and people’s feelings about it are not neutral. These frameworks perpetuate gendered binary distinctions and scripts and Cartesian dualism, where society associates men with valued aspects of the mind and rationality and women with the devalued body and sentiments.

Commentaries about the Twitter heart, in a similar manner to the narratives about hearts that I discuss earlier in this chapter, reveal age biases. This occurs when CherokeeLair asserts that “hearts are cloying” and the poster is “not 13 FFS” [for fuck’s sake].¹⁴⁷ CherokeeLair, like Mongoosebumpkin, relates the heart to youthful silliness and suggests that it demeans members. Yet CherokeeLair employs a curse that is often associated with passionate and youthful language. katecrawford supports the correlation of the heart with the cloying feminine and unpleasant residues when noting, “It’s like Hello Kitty threw up in here.”¹⁴⁸ “Not to be hyperbolic,” writes Mario Aguilar, “but this ‘heart’ makes regular users” want to “vomit on our *keyboards*.”¹⁴⁹ These individuals fail to analyze what the heart represents and how it works on their bodies. Instead, they reference forms of bodily disgust that are often generated when more feminine things, such as the gendered-as-female Hello Kitty and her feminine and largely women fans, are brought into correlation with purportedly advanced digital technologies.

Hearts are deemed to be risky gender scripts and to cause people, particularly men, problems by misrepresenting masculine feelings. For example, naziology chronicles how he tweeted his “EX by clicking ♥. And she thinks” that naziology wants “her back.”¹⁵⁰ He concludes, “Oh wait!

#Misunderstanding #TwitterHeart.” A similar position is established when ackraemer chastises Twitter because the heart is “really awkward” and makes it seem as if the individual is “sending love to random strangers.”¹⁵¹ Such texts convey men’s unwillingness to be correlated with feelings. The associated participants worry about men’s normative masculinity being damaged and in crisis because of technological and cultural changes. They represent the heart as a form of misinformation, including the ways they feel that men are improperly framed, and correlate the heart with the ways social media is employed to proliferate propaganda. Of course, Twitter has also been used as a means of undermining mainstream media reporting as “fake news” and harassing women and people of color. The hashtag sign that naziology employs to dismiss the heart is also more generally used in hashtag hijacking and misinformation campaigns. In suggesting that the heart improperly conveys individuals’ interests in romantic relationships, these people insist on defining the heart as a form of intensity that can only connote impassioned feelings. Yet people’s negative responses to Twitter’s shift from the star to the heart repudiate social media sentiments, even as they enact feelings in tweets and news reports.

Individuals distinguish between average Twitter participants and professional “super users,” who they deem to be more important. According to emilybell, the change to the heart button “is a complete misunderstanding by @Twitter of how its super user group of sceptical journalists think of ‘favourites.’”¹⁵² And dkiesow adjusts this argument when noting that “it is not a misunderstanding but rather a repudiation of the current user base as the desired future user base.”¹⁵³ Various reporters’ comments suggest that journalistic practices are better than, and should be put before, other members’ interests. They protest when the company shifts its gender script and associated address and tries to engage a broader array of people. This larger participant base would also presumably be the audience for journalists. Such forms of resistance to the Twitter heart, like people’s refusal to consider an iPhone that accommodates fingernails, illustrate how participants patrol changes to technology scripts and protect gender conventions. Yet in critiquing and refusing the heart, journalists and other members risk making the heart into the device that they identify as endangering. I address such behaviors as a means of foregrounding and encouraging further critical interventions into the ways sites assert the identities of members and how such frameworks are taken up and refuted by individuals.

Conclusion: The Hearted Brand

Journalists understand Twitter and its features as their setting and respond to “their brand” being changed. For instance, the journalist Mathew Ingram references brand community attachments when indicating, “It’s true that becoming incensed over such a trivial detail seems out of proportion in a lot of ways, but then that’s exactly the kind of response that companies often see from users who are devoted to their product or service.”¹⁵⁴ He concludes that “users care very deeply about the service and how they use it.” As I have suggested in such previous texts as *Buy It Now*, brand community engagement can be profitable for companies. However, there are also risks when members’ perceptions of their company do not align with management decisions. Brand community members’ confrontations with products and brands include boycotts, buycotts (where individuals protest corporate practices by buying other companies’ products), and emboldened critiques. In these cases, companies can experience economic and ethical challenges. The associated feelings are circulated through and by groups of people and networks when such practices are shared and reported upon. As the commentary on the Twitter heart suggests, comments contribute to the meaning of the heart and amplify the disliked connotations. Responses to the heart in other settings also employ emotive feelings as methods of rendering the site, members, and products.

Companies employ heart icons and buttons to connect individuals emotionally to their interfaces and companies. For individuals who engage in such interfaces and brands, hearts offer a ready means of expression and a sign that they are loved in response. The varied depictions of hearts that are incorporated into messages and sites configure individuals’ relationships. They also allow individuals to convey their feelings for other members and experiences with products, companies, and sites. While hearts and other icons are designed to represent personalization, they are part of the generalized and duplicable aspects of sites. They are expressions that cannot be turned off or removed. Hearts are thus points of pleasure and pain that speckle every screen. They pierce people in ephemeral, unexpected, and programmed ways.

People’s insistence on understanding Twitter’s heart as distinct from the star button, while they are similarly employed in grade-school classes and communication, is part of the limiting gender scripts that regulate people’s

behaviors and visions of the self and future. Individuals who want to maintain their claims to being normative men identify the heart as endangering. Of course, the heart is an organ embedded in all individuals' bodies, as well as an emotion that is correlated with familial bonds, youthful passion, and adult relationships. When such dismissive associations are curtailed, hearts can be celebrations and exaggerations of feminine positions. They also offer women, girls, and people who identify with femininity expressive ways of seeing their interests coded into interfaces. Individuals' resistance to the heart relies on negative connotations of women, girls, and gay individuals *and* offers such cohorts opportunities for visibility and playfulness.

My considerations of hearts provide opportunities to rethink the identification of screens and buttons as flat and affectless. The online practices and critical theories that I outline in this chapter also offer ways of considering how social networks' employment of hearting and loving are supported or refused by members. Since hearts are key elements of Internet communication and demarcate the frameworks of sites and feelings, the scholarly underexamination of the functions of hearts suggests researchers' lack of interest in some of the ways gender and sexuality are structured online. There is a need for more fine-grained examinations of the varied meanings of hearts and love, which include generalized conveyances of interest, support for people and things, playful engagements, physical and emotional connections, expressions of femininity and queerness, and passionate feelings. Hearts support conceptions of authentic digital feelings and communication, as I indicate in chapter 4. As these practices demonstrate, the heart is a complex representation that underscores the entanglements of sites and feelings.

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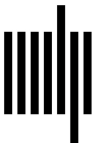
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