Buy It Now

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eBay uses narratives about community to transform its visual and textual representations into people and spaces, connect members, provide reasons for participants to invest and work for the site, and turn the company into a neighbor and friend. eBay labels parts of the site with the term “community” and makes it a key structural and emotive feature. For instance, notions of community are conveyed through eBay’s “Group Gifts” feature. With this option, people make partial payments and “Give bigger, give better, give it together.” The Group Gifts site depicts members in eBay’s color scheme collaboratively supporting a large gift box and underscores the power of eBay groups, caring, and that this is a site-based community practice. These characteristics are emphasized in eBay’s newsletter when an employee, Nino, describes lldivasboutique*com giving minmaxshow an extra item along with a listing, getting a gift in response, and the two women becoming friends and business partners. Two other female members featured in the newsletter, raglebagle and unique-find, form a vital connection that incorporates social selling, “a special friendship,” and “countless emails every day” until raglebagle “cannot imagine living life without unique-find.” While there is an image of “raglebagle with husband” and assertion of heteronormativity, the article also describes people “meeting their future spouse on eBay,” the women knowing “exactly what to say to each other on good days and bad,” and plans for “the two friends” to “finally meet in person – after three years
of waiting” at eBay Live! The newsletter thus evokes intense eBay-facilitated female friendships, or even queer romances.

eBay references passionate attachments and uses accounts of community to constitute members as normative citizens—individuals who freely give to each other, take an active part in society, do good work, and perform traditional roles. The concept of the eBay citizen and the company’s relationship to citizenship, sexuality, and governmentality should be examined in depth. eBay’s linking of these social structures includes eBay-facilitated weddings and Meg Whitman’s campaign to become governor of California. By rendering community, relationships, and citizenship, eBay makes the setting matter, addresses everyone, coaxes individuals to invest and work for free, and institutes a series of norms that are productive for the company’s profile and profitmaking capabilities. Members’ engagements, whether they are fans of the site, outcome-oriented shoppers, or critics of the company and its interface—are always filtered through eBay’s community discourse and establishment of norms. Members are envisioned, and sometimes act, as co-producers of the technology and community, especially when their own positions match that of eBay. Therefore, a full understanding of eBay is not possible without considering how the company and members deploy the term “community” and related features.

In this chapter, I consider eBay’s rendering of community, consumer citizenship, and sexual citizenship; the importance of consumer and organizational critique; and how members support and resist these configurations. According to Margaret Scammell, “Consumer critique is fundamental to citizenship in the age of globalization. It brings into the daylight the dangerously hidden issue of the political power of corporations.” Such critiques are vital because organizations such as eBay and their values get attached to contemporary behavior, discourses, and politics. The journalist John C. Abell connects Whitman’s gubernatorial candidacy to eBay’s auction processes by titling an article “‘Buy It Now’ FAIL: Former eBay CEO Whitman Is the Biggest Loser.” leapord420 continued the company’s investment in heteronormative unions when commenting on a wedding at the convention and asking, “Does anyone know what I have to do to get married at Ebay live?” The literature on sexual citizenship, brand communities, and configuring the user provides powerful methods for examining the ways organizations such as eBay produce and engage members. eBay’s production of community and norms informs my studies of members throughout this book. My analysis
also offers methods for reconsidering the critical literature about community and discourses about virtual communities, which were common in early Internet studies research and continue in slightly reorganized versions. A reassessment of this literature is vital because popular culture often accepts that communities are essential and inherently good. However, the eBay company’s community, when it works, transforms individuals into privileged insiders, enforcers of norms, unpaid workers for the company, and promoters of the brand. eBay’s managing of members and profiting from community, which can be conceived as the company’s community, is sometimes different from and a threat to members’ community structures and reasons for engaging.

Producing eBay Community

eBay uses the term “community” to articulate connections among members, participants and employees, people and consumption, users and the site, and constituents and the brand. The term informed initial conceptions of the site and continues to be an important structuring feature. Early versions of the setting, when Pierre Omidyar was still calling it AuctionWeb, encouraged individuals to “join our community.” The setting was “dedicated to bringing together buyers and sellers in an honest and open marketplace.” Omidyar added the “AuctionWeb Bulletin Board” asynchronous message system in 1996, which allowed people “to communicate with the rest of the AuctionWeb community.” eBay thus produces community by informing people that they are part of it, suggesting that individuals have a responsibility to their community, providing asynchronous text-based boards where participants can communicate, establishing stable identities and consumer records so members have a recognizable position within the setting, and giving buyers and sellers the opportunity to evaluate transactions and establish trust among members.

The menus of ebay.com and many of eBay’s country-specific sites contain a “Community” link. The menu usually remains constant and suggests that people are a part of the eBay community as they view different parts of the site. eBay also commits to individuals and personalized features by including a “My eBay” link before the Community link. Yet the My eBay link provides individuals with ways to track items, bids, and purchases rather than an array of methods for structuring the site around personal interests. Jon Lillie explains that eBay “was one of the first to successfully apply the principles and technologies of online community toward the dominant regime of commerce
and consumption.”9 These practices and features establish community as an organizational aspect of the site. Individuals are thereby made into a collective and citizenry with shared values and obligations to the site and company. At the same time, the tendency to associate community with people and sentiments minimizes the technological and organizational aspects of the site, encourages participants to feel comfortable, and assuages concerns about engaging in transactions with unknown individuals. A related series of community narratives are a part of other Internet settings, including Dell computers, craigslist, Second Life, Weight Watchers, and YouTube.

Omidyar and Whitman use the phrase “Dear eBay Community” and further the idea that the site facilitates intimate connections between members, executives, and the setting.10 Members’ engagements are characterized as “social selling” and “social commerce”—“a powerful combination of commerce, communication and community that enhances traditional buying and selling.”11 The concept of social selling, which is conveyed through accounts about sellers such as raglebagle and unique-find, emphasizes friendly connections between people rather than profit, market forces, and isolated viewing.12 It remakes the work members perform while selling products into a communal dialogue and commitment to the site and participants. Social-selling principles include providing personal descriptions that bond people, emailing prospective buyers with special notes about items, identifying as stay-at-home mothers and encouraging buyers to support this role, marketing listings by communicating in the bulletin boards, and passing out items at eBay Live! imprinted with the sellers’ IDs. eBay’s notion of social selling is connected to its production of brand community and attempts to link people to the company and get them to work for the site because of shared forms of identity and collecting. Members, as I show in more detail in chapter 2, assist eBay in producing this community engagement. They do such things as reshape eBay’s text-based board engagements into tea parties, plan events at conferences, and offer assistance to other members.

eBay encourages members to help each other. The options and social contracts in other early Internet settings, such as Usenet, influenced this model of community work.13 Omidyar included forums and provided members’ contact email addresses because he was unable to maintain the site alone. For a period of time, many individuals used email addresses as eBay IDs, and their availability and willingness to engage were thereby a part of their system identities. Community is thus articulated so Omidyar and other employees can detach, disinvest, and transfer a lot of the work to unpaid members. This
results in community having different personal and economic meanings or even being an altogether different structure and discourse, for different constituencies. All of this suggests that co-production and brand community opportunities include decreased rather than amplified commitments from corporations. This is certainly the case with brand communities for the Apple Newton personal digital assistant and Radio Shack TRS-80 computer, because the initiating companies stopped supporting the products. However, it is also likely to be the case with commodities that are available on the market and garnering increased value from brand community members.

Virtual Communities

eBay’s community, as Adam Cohen argues, is one of the company’s “greatest assets.” The records individuals provide to consumer communities, which includes demographic data, shopping habits, detailed reviews of products, critiques of the company, and indications of how site design facilitates connections, are highly valuable. This information allows companies to understand consumers better, meet their needs, sell individuals more products, and encourage customer loyalty. Jay Marathe, who works with startups and corporate ventures, identifies Internet-facilitated communities as “central to a sustainable business model,” because they bring people to the site, keep them engaged, provide assurances that companies meet individuals’ needs, lower the costs of customer support, and pinpoint successful strategies. The detailed information members provide allows companies to mirror people’s interests and constitute stronger brand community ties.

People sometimes use the term “community” to resist the idea, which persisted through the 1990s and still occasionally appears today, that only poorly socialized individuals choose to communicate without physical co-presence and use the Internet to shop. When people portray Internet settings as communities, they emphasize the complex and important activities that occur in these settings and make them seem more spatial and real. For instance, “The Power of All of Us” campaign portrays eBay as a physical location, community, and “a place where people love the things you love.” Part of this advertising site depicts a rural landscape where an eBay “neighborhood,” and brand community with shared attributes, is being constructed from very similar houses. eBay also situates people in community spaces by naming the discussion boards “The Front Porch,” “The Homestead,” “The Park,” and
“The eBay Town Square.” Members support this spatialization and materialization of the setting when they perform popcorn parties and group teas in the forums.

eBay’s rendering of community, which is envisioned as collaborative and intermeshed because of common desires and values, is related to larger social drives to resuscitate preindustrial communities. Robert Putnam argues that a variety of technological and social factors have destroyed community. With eBay, old-time community is supposed to be remade from porches, unlocked doors, and communitywide celebrations, features that are simultaneously virtual and material. eBay’s rendering of small-town values and trust are related to its marketing of sentimental goods. eBay’s “The Power of All of Us” campaign asks, “What if nothing was ever forgotten? What if nothing was ever lost?” The campaign promises that a community incorporating the power of all of us, including the labor of participants, can replace these purportedly lost emotive states. eBay remakes people’s economically motivated sale of goods and casting off of mementos, which could mark items as valueless, into the community’s maintenance of history. Everything thus has value, and sellers are doing good work by looking for the right owners. For example, eBay’s Toy Boat advertisement depicts a ship’s crew finding a boy’s plaything and using the eBay interface to return it to the adult who is still longing for it. In a similar manner, sellers of antiquarian photographs try to remake people’s family albums by matching individuals with the photographs they have lost or through “instant ancestor” replacements. All of this suggests that everything is loved, saved, remembered, and saleable within the community.

eBay also represents harmony and concord as attributes of the site and community. For the theorist Alphonso Lingis, community mandates that “each one, in facing the other, faces an imperative that he formulate all his encounters and insights in universal terms, in forms that could be the information belonging to everyone.” Images of eBay’s community of cookie-cutter homes, figured in “The Power of All of Us” campaign, and its string of hand-holding paper-doll-like members insistently evoke a community in which all members are the same. This is in line with community investments, including the community’s alignment with “unity, commonality, and agreement,” that the social philosopher and political theorist Linnell Secomb describes. Community is associated with consciousness of a kind, but disagreements and discrepancies are also inherent and important aspects of communities.
A number of theorists have come to question the philosophy of community with its bias toward sameness and tendency to distinguish between self and other, or even to expulse the other.\textsuperscript{26} Many texts about Internet communities describe the utopian possibilities of collectivity and caring that happen in these settings. At the same time, theoretical writings declare that community, as we know it, has or should end. Such theorists as Benedict Anderson and Jean-Luc Nancy chronicle the regional conflicts that are spurred by conceptions of community and how purportedly supportive groups ostracize individuals who are identified as not belonging because of ethnic, racial, religious, or other identities.\textsuperscript{27} Brand communities are also usually described as supportive structures that enable individuals to identify and engage, but participants articulate norms and position themselves as opposed to other products and cohorts.\textsuperscript{28} For instance, consumer research by Thomas Hickman and James Ward describes how members have a “tendency to seek information that positively discriminates” their “own brand community from others” and “either seek or accept negative information” about other groups.\textsuperscript{29} In a related manner, eBay’s discourse about community gets members to do such patrolling and ostracizing work as questioning the legitimacy of listings and directing participants to value eBay that would otherwise be associated with the company. Community seems to be an Internet structure that gets people to do the corporate and state work of rejection and hate.

These issues are not addressed in most of the literature about virtual communities. For Howard Rheingold, an early and often referenced writer on the subject, virtual communities are usually positive “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.”\textsuperscript{30} For him, the well (Whole Earth ’Lectronic Link) became a community because of social contracts and collaborative negotiations: “Norms were established, challenged, changed, reestablished, rechallenged, in a kind of speeded-up social evolution.”\textsuperscript{31} In a similar manner, Michael and Ronda Hauben wrote an early book about “Netizens” and describe “people who care about Usenet and the bigger Net and work towards building the cooperative.”\textsuperscript{32} Omidyar’s and other setting designers’ narratives about care and cooperative work are often influenced by these early conceptions of virtual communities.

There are also analyses of how virtual communities can enhance businesses. According to John Hagel and Arthur Armstrong, who promote
ecommerce communities within the business sector, the “rise of virtual communities in on-line networks has set in motion an unprecedented shift in power from vendors of goods and services to the customers who buy them.”33 We are therefore, writes Tom Murphy, a technology journalist, “witnessing the greatest transition of power in history, one that will take power away from the mightiest corporations and social institutions and give it to . . . consumers.”34 However, these authors focus on how businesses can profit rather than on how individuals can gain power and change corporations and governments. There is also research in new media studies on the ways Internet social networking sites and virtual communities offer modes of resistance through digitally facilitated protests, email updates about corporate behavior, culture jamming (subverting mainstream institutions and corporations), and the redeployment of corporate logos.35 Given that the commercial and academic cohorts find empowering aspects of Internet settings, but the business writers tend to identify corporate advantages in providing consumers with a form of authority, the relationship between virtual communities, brand communities, and agency needs further investigation.

**Omidyar’s People Are Basically Good Ethos, Free Work, and the Value of Fun**

eBay’s community discourse gets members to work for free. Work is often identified as an expected aspect of community. Lingis has noted that “rationalists perceive the reality of being members of a community in the reality of works undertaken and realized; we perceive the community itself as a work.”36 Community is produced, its features are determined by the work of controlling members of the group, and the benefits of community are ordinarily provided to this cohort. Community is a successful model for Omidyar to deploy because it requires people “to participate in the market,” “political structure,” and “laws.”37 Nevertheless, working should be distinguished from having a significant amount of control. eBay members do not have a great deal of power over site design, security issues, or fee structures. The marketing scholars Bernard Cova and Stefano Pace believe that brand communities allow consumers to have more control over their relationships with “beloved” brands, but the inability of eBay members to change things points to some problems with brand community research models and eBay’s promises.38

Omidyar and eBay deploy brand community in similar ways to what the marketing researchers Scott Cook, C. K. Prahalad, and Venkat Ramaswamy
envision. They get enthusiasts to work for free on improving the value of corporations and products. eBay encourages members to coach new participants, provide information about HTML, and patrol listings for scams and infractions of the rules. For instance, Omidyar’s SafeHarbor 2.0 security message of 1999 reminds members that “community participation is the foundation upon which eBay was built. It is our history of participation that helped eBay grow with unparalleled success.” Omidyar establishes work as vital to the eBay community’s development and traditions. However, he does not acknowledge the many buyers and sellers whose revenues have decreased and have been forced to give up eBay businesses as the company has continued to raise fees and sellers have lowered prices to beat the competition. In 2004, janica-online pointed to the “thousands of people on eBay that have been doing this full time for a number of years and are now basically unemployed due to the changes eBay has made.” eBay instituted another series of rate hikes, and members were “evenly split,” according to the reporter Gary Rivlin, “over whether” to use “‘FeeBay’ or ‘GreedBay’” as “the most apt epithet” for the company. More recently, as I show later in this chapter, sellers have escalated their use of community narratives to critique eBay.

Omidyar and eBay encourage buyers, sellers, and viewers to help with site security, to engage deeply, and to become more affiliated brand community members. There are many instances of members following these directives. Board regulars work together to find people who use the site for scams and, as the eBay seller Steven Phillips notes, make “their lives miserable.” Ina Steiner, a reporter for AuctionBytes, describes the rise of eBay vigilantism, which is encouraged by the company, and the large amount of time people spend on these projects. For instance, Karen Christian, who set up a site to publish information about a fraudulent seller, worked “about 5–6 hours a day keeping the Web site up to date, contacting law-enforcement officials, and talking to reporters.” Other sellers spend hours every day reviewing competitors’ listings and informing eBay about terms of service violations. Evading fees and regulations allows sellers to lower their prices and thereby ruin the businesses of those who follow the rules. Deeply engaged members also regulate other settings because of their commitment to brand communities and interest in garnering a kind of validation from the interface. For instance, rather than offering assistance, self-appointed advisers to craigslist admonish and discourage sexually active women and sex workers when they seek help with their flagged and removed ads.

eBay and other Internet companies are able to keep their salaried work-
forces small by directing members to function as unpaid customer-support representatives, advocates, and marketers of the brand. An important element of eBay’s business model, according to Lillie, is to “train” individuals to “do much of the company’s work.” Yet these behaviors are widely understood as brand community participation rather than labor. Some immaterial labor researchers, as Lillie also suggests, consider how these underacknowledged and undercompensated forms of work render and support Internet settings and other spheres. For the activists and theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, immaterial labor “produces immaterial products, such as information, knowledges, ideas, images, relationships, and affects.” These things are often byproducts of daily life and cultural participation and therefore are undervalued. This devaluation is likely to be intensified when the products and emotional performances are collaborative, including shared work done by brand community members and corporations, rather than individually created.

Brand community researchers classify co-production opportunities as empowering, but the activist and academic Maurizio Lazzarato identifies the precarious and hyperexploitative features of this labor. Networks and new communication technologies enable employers to use temporary and mobile laborers rather than committing to long-term employment and material infrastructures. This suggests that Internet technologies and their social structures diminish the stability of work while signaling users, expecting responses, and keeping conceptions of individuals enmeshed with the infrastructure even when people are not logged on. People are increasingly tied to digital systems that intensify their precarity—an existence with limited material and emotional predictability and security. The Internet complicates such careers as journalism with blogging and is unpredictable and insecure because of software failures and data leaks. Unfortunately, as the philosopher George Caffentzis argues, the term “immaterial,” with its allusions to intangibility and evanescence, can dismiss the personal costs of labor as well as critique these structures. This vocabulary mirrors the ways Internet settings are coded as immaterial, or less substantive, with terms such as “virtual.” The phrase “immaterial labor” is also out of sync with the feminist struggle to make “housework, ‘reproductive’ work and the body . . . central to the analysis of capitalism.” The concept of immaterial labor thus provides useful ways to interrogate eBay’s affective forms of social selling and community and, if not managed, can elide the work mandates and gender and sexuality distinctions that the company and members deploy.
A cohort of Internet studies scholars also considers the functions of free labor. For instance, Tiziana Terranova describes how in 1996, “at the peak of the volunteer moment, over thirty thousand ‘community leaders’ were helping AOL to generate at least $7 million a month.” At about this time, Omidyar was adding features to eBay that would get members to do site labor. This free labor is “a trait of the cultural economy at large, and an important, and yet undervalued force in advanced capitalist societies.” According to the game studies researcher Julian Kücklich, modders employ game companies’ authoring tools to produce new or modified products and offer them for free. This generates profits for the companies that make digital games because the people playing mods must buy the original game, but it provides few economic rewards to the modders. In researching the same population, Hector Postigo argues that game companies can sell modders’ work as a new product or addition and “harness a skilled labour force for little or no initial cost,” and that this “represents an emerging form of labour exploitation on the Internet.” Whether they are employees of game companies or participants in eBay, individuals are coaxed into excessive hours of engaging with new media because their work is supposed to be social communication and play. This is related to Hardt and Negri’s identification of how immaterial labor practices tend “to blur the distinction between work time and nonwork time, extending the working day indefinitely to fill all of life.” Internet representations and calls for users to respond also weave through daily activities and constitute seemingly alive data images that support the presence and functions of individuals, brands, and systems.

People are directed to “spend” time coding and beta testing open source browsers and operating systems, tagging articles and images, writing encyclopedia entries and reviews, leaving feedback, and creating other content without economic remuneration. For example, academic proposals for new settings often include plans to design structures and then have scholars generate all the content. eBay sellers also design the listings, and therefore most of the content, on the site. These plans for user-generated content rarely address the costs of participants’ labor and how it will continue as the number of sites increases and existent settings require more content and editing. In the case of academe, all of this is drastically reorganizing commitments and work demands. However, there is no accompanying rethinking of such academic labor issues as the amount of time people are expected to spend with students, teaching, and providing service for their institutions and only a slight reformulation of the forms of research that are believed to indicate academic
success. eBay has also not addressed the increased content and programming requirements that accompany site changes. Such projects have radically skewed when many people are working as well as the relationship between corporations, organizations, and individuals. Nevertheless, individuals may be unaware of their time expenditures. The design features of the computer and the Internet, including the scrolling of instant messaging sessions and documents, encourage people to “space out,” deeply engage, and ignore the time unfolding.

Some individuals enjoy the design of mobile computing devices, which are often manufactured with rounded and smooth edges that encourage tactile engagements, and delight in the features of operating systems and software. Modders, community leaders, and eBay members also take pleasure in performing some kinds of immaterial labor. However, this should not prevent critical considerations of the ways companies can provide participants with control, economic rewards, and physical and psychic comforts. When the eBay site and its membership structure function properly, individuals do not interrogate how the company encourages free work; the work requirements individuals have to fulfill to be recognized members of the community; and the many ways buyers, sellers, and viewers support the site. This may not be surprising since, according to Terranova, certain forms of labor, which include advice, “chat, real-life stories, mailing lists, amateur newsletters,” and fan activities, are not ordinarily recognized as work. They are often feminized and devalued, like the association of women with housework and child care. By incorporating humor and play into work, companies elide the personal costs of long-term and demanding Internet engagements.

eBay jokes about its poor compensation for immaterial labor in the “About Me” site it produced for one of its imaginary characters. elf, or elfie, is a mascot and invented figure that “posts” in the boards and other parts of the site. Readers of the boards engage with elfie, provide images and props for his activities, and make his board presence and placement within the eBay setting real. In his About Me site, elfie complains that he works for the company, but “it isn’t as though they pay me or anything or that I can actually buy anything. Okay, they gave me a cave under the Gazebo in the Park” (one of eBay’s boards). He goes on to provide a “Big whoop” about these accommodations and argue that the company does not “think elves need money.” In a similar manner to Terranova, elfie indicates how participants’ activities are valuable aspects of eBay’s cultural economy but result in few economic rewards for laborers. The inequity of not paying elfie—and, by implication, members who
support the setting—is diffused because elfie is portrayed as a nuisance who plays pranks and steals socks and other insignificant items. Through this narrative, eBay suggests that members need to pay for their errant leisure and validates its immaterial labor practices. People support the site to engage with elfie’s performances, and through his antics they have contact with employees. This echoes eBay’s emphasis on the social aspects of social selling rather than economic rewards. Within eBay’s social economy, individuals can elevate their status by working for free and getting employees to recognize and favor them. Individuals who do not engage risk being ignored and having no network in times of crisis. This makes immaterial labor a tactical practice for people who rely on the site.

eBay directs members to work while conveying the idea that the site and its community features are fun and therefore a form of leisure. During the eBay Developers Conference and eBay Live! in 2007, executives expressed interest in recapturing the fun and amusing aspects of eBay as a method of attracting new people and keeping current members attached to the site. The “New to eBay Board” invites readers: “Come on in and join the fun.” eBay engages collectors, who are more likely to want experiential shopping experiences, by conveying how fun it is to buy, sell, and help other members. According to the consumer researchers Peter H. Bloch and Grady D. Bruce, collectors tend to demonstrate “product enthusiasm” and “enduring involvement.” Fervor and commitment are also key aspects of brand community formation. It is likely that individuals will buy more items and purchase things with greater frequency when eBay renders fun and playful activities. The site’s narratives and promises of pleasure, if they bring individuals to purchase more goods, may also turn members into collectors. All of this suggests how fun can be used as a controlling sentiment. This is certainly the case with the ways fun is deployed in work environments to generate greater commitment to the company, a better organizational culture, and increased work output. Fun can also turn into displeasure and resistance. This is highlighted by eBay members’ negative responses to site changes and gamers’ descriptions of how gaming is “more like work than fun” and goes “from enjoyable to just work.” In these cases, some of the absorbing aspects of Internet engagements, collecting, and brand community identifications are unpleasant but still continue, with people unwilling to give up their established identities and commitments.
Community Values and Norms

eBay is similar to Apple, Coca-Cola, Saab, and other brand communities and offers such traditional community features as “we-ness,” “rituals and traditions,” and the establishment of morals and a “sense of obligation to the community and its members.” For example, active eBay Live! attendees identify as a cohort, wear branded items on their way to the conference so other people can identify them, and assist participants with planning their attendance and collecting conference collectibles. As Cohen notes, Omidyar wanted eBay to “operate according to the moral values he subscribed to in his own life: that people are basically good, and given the chance to do right, they generally will.”

Readers of eBay’s “Community Values” statement are informed that

eBay is a community that encourages open and honest communication among all its members. Our community is guided by five fundamental values: We believe people are basically good. We believe everyone has something to contribute. We believe that an honest, open environment can bring out the best in people. We recognize and respect everyone as a unique individual. We encourage you to treat others the way you want to be treated.

A cohort of eBay members uses the values statement in listings, About Me sites, and forum posts. Members thereby constitute their moral character, attract customers, identify with the brand, and provide support for eBay’s standards of conduct.

A line drawing that accompanies the Community Values statement represents people as outlines and suggests that anyone can fit into the community. However, eBay also marks these people as heterosexual couples by grouping them into pairs and using gendered gestures, gender-specific clothing items, and height differences. For instance, a man steers a woman in a skirt by pressing his hand into her back. Another man, with a significant genital bulge, points and directs a woman who wears heels and has a scarf tied around her neck. In each of these gendered images, the man directs the conversation and is in power. The woman acknowledges his purported authority by leaning in or bending her head. With this portrayal, eBay continues to use narratives about acceptance as a lure and as a way to get people to engage in the gender-specific behaviors and normative sexualities that, as I argue in the introduction and chapter 3, articulate its organizational logic.
eBay’s production of values is related to the larger corporate trend for brands to assert emotional and social ethos. For example, the Body Shop emphasizes fair trade and ecological responsibility in its sourcing of items, and MAC Cosmetics donates to AIDS causes. In an advertisement for a tartan-themed VIVA GLAM Christmas product, where all proceeds are donated, MAC asks the potential buyer to “Keep the VIVA GLAM clan alive & thriving”; “Keep the MAC AIDS Fund flowing!”; “Keep the coffers confident”; and “’Tis Noble to Give!”

Through the advertisement, MAC constitutes a clan of community members that will enliven the brand and do good deeds by supporting the cause. It and other companies attract and configure customers by highlighting such values. Members are also at an advantage because their consumerism, which could otherwise be understood as passive and self-involved, is melded with active and righteous citizenship. In a related manner, eBay members are constituted as socially conscious on its WorldofGood.com site, “where every purchase makes a positive impact.”

eBay represents its consumer system as a community- and citizenry-based model, in which all members produce aspects of the system. Nevertheless, belonging to a community implies that others do not. Most academic and popular texts about virtual and brand communities do not consider what happens when the ostensibly inclusive community rejects some people, cultures, and ideologies. The sociologist Kenneth E. Pigg suggests that the best way for corporations to facilitate community is by providing members with means of collaboratively thinking about values and standards. However, there is no established mechanism for the ideals of eBay buyers, sellers, and viewers; the principles members articulate in boards; or the standards sellers express in their listings to be acknowledged by eBay or integrated into the company’s values statement. Forum writers have wondered about their community engagements since critiques receive no response from the company. Craigslist members who identify problems also note that the company does not respond. In these cases, the company is not good to members, disallows their attempts at co-production, and fails to meet its own promises about accepting everyone.

eBay members who want to be approved of and remain acceptable citizens must strive for system validation because some individuals are removed from the system, evaluated negatively by other members, and commodified against their will. These forms of normativity filter through society, according to the political philosopher Onora O’Neill. “Good” is a normative word that refers to behavior and success—in the case of eBay, coding selected members as
ethical, encouraging other people to follow these examples, and guaranteeing that eBay fulfills commercial and economic functions. eBay uses “good” and its heteronormative representations to produce the acceptable sexual citizen. This citizen is coded as doing and being good and becomes even more productive for the company when helping other members and performing sitespecific labor.

**Socially Conscious Consumerism and Critique**

eBay’s narratives about doing good are important to its position as a resale platform because other forms of reselling and exchanging are socially conscious. According to Gretchen M. Herrmann, a researcher, garage sales provide a sense of community, and gift giving is as common as “simple recommodification” in these situations. Garage sales provide a place for people to congregate, allow friends and groups to buy and sell together, create ties between buyers and sellers through the exchange of items, enable people to connect by sharing personal histories, let individuals do good work by selling items at a low cost or giving them away, and promote neighborhood solidarity. Omidyar and some other eBay executives envision eBay as a worldwide garage sale. However, the “outright acts of giving” at garage sales, which accompany or even displace the sale of objects, evoke the Freecycle movement and its location-based listservs rather than eBay.

Popular and academic writers associate Freecycle with certain individuals’ desires to decrease their possessions and the work required to support consumption. Freecycle’s motto is “changing the world one gift at a time,” which figures participants as consumer citizens who do political work by giving (rather than getting rid of unwanted items). It has 5,007 local groups, which are ordinarily organized through listservs, and 8,869,534 global members. Freecycle identifies as “a grassroots and entirely nonprofit movement of people who are giving (& getting) stuff for free in their own towns. It’s all about reuse and keeping good stuff out of landfills.” Volunteers, who are also envisioned by Freecycle as “good people,” moderate local groups. Freecycle describes its listservs as a political movement and community, but most product exchanges happen between individuals. Like other forms of consumer citizenship and political consumerism, Freecycle enables a degree of environmental and social assistance. Nevertheless, it also threatens to make it appear as if people are facilitating significant social change when they are moving consumer goods from one place to another.
eBay’s facilitation of recycling is less proactive and ambitious than Freecycle and, as I suggest later in this section, eBay often regulates the kinds of recycling it claims to enable. eBay’s Green Team site, introduced in 2009, provides information about how the company has installed solar panels on its new headquarters and invested in varied methods to reduce its carbon emissions.80 Many of eBay’s green initiatives have economic underpinnings. eBay encourages people to employ its local classified site, which is “Inspiring the world to buy, sell and think green every day.”81 During an address at the Developers Conference that was remediated in video form, the early eBay investor Bob Kagle described Omidyar as green because of his vision of reselling.82 Some eBay members also assert that reselling goods is inherently green. For msklusa, “BUYING VINTAGE JEWELRY IS A GREAT WAY TO BE GREEN AND HELP OUT LOCALLY AND GLOBALLY.”83 However, such indications do not explain who is helped or the manner of socially conscious consumerism that occurs. Shipping requires a great deal of material that often is new and not biodegradable and fuel to transport goods. eBay tries to resolve these problems with its “simple green shipping” program in which 100,000 reusable boxes were given to sellers.84 Of course, the project requires receiving buyers to be, or become, sellers for the boxes to be reused and the project to continue. It also deploys buyers and sellers as brand community workers by offering “plenty of space on the boxes . . . to write a personal message to the next person in the chain” and “a virtual community where buyers and sellers can connect” and track boxes. Through such tactics, eBay, Freecycle, and some other social networking settings intertwine notions of socially conscious individuals and consumerism, produce versions of the consumer citizen, and further narratives about community belonging.

eBay’s community values are linked to and influence the perceived exchange value of objects. eBay buyers are assured of an equitable trading platform and that they will receive the listed item because sellers are “basically good.” The corollary to this is that the values represented by objects and listings support or undermine eBay’s community ethos. For David A. Crocker and Toby Linden, who consider the ethical impact of consumption, personal and collective purchasing decisions are connected to values.85 One reason people become involved with a product, according to Bloch and Bruce, is “the congruence of product usage and meaning with the individual’s values, self, and reference group-imposed role expectations.”86 Brands and objects, including paintings of morality tales, soap wrappers testifying to purity, advertisements portraying gender norms, and signs directing individuals to line
up or be quiet, are designed to direct people’s behavior and configure them. The connection between consumerism and eBay’s principles is particularly strong when it is eBay collectibles, materials that document the company’s values and histories, that are being bought and sold. Individuals are conceptually buying and selling eBay in the form of shirts once owned by employees, items signed by Omidyar and Whitman, and representations of eBay community. Through these goods, members declare their alliance to the brand community and work as advertisements for the company.

Other values are also represented on the eBay site. In chapter 4, I study how gay interest listings of underwear and swimwear constitute a form of gay community and desire that is not acceptable to the company. In a different manner, sellers’ narratives about deception and marketing of tools for committing crimes undermine eBay’s ethos and belief in good people. For example, tankdriver7753 scorns eBay’s “stupid firearms, weapons and knives policy,” which prohibits the sale of firearms and many firearm-related items. tankdriver7753 admits to violating the rules that “keep throwing off listings for cloth backpack sets” because of the regulating algorithms that are designed to find illegal items. tamoto1 challenges eBay’s values by describing how the company prevents the sale of previously worn and clean cloth diapers and diaper covers and ecologically oriented mothering. Such conflicts and consumer critiques are more likely to occur because brand community structures are designed to get individuals to connect, believe the brand belongs to enthusiastic consumers, and identify the company as a reflection of their lives and values.

The different ways the eBay company and brand community members use the concepts of community and goodness, while perpetuating ideas about normative sexual citizenship, are exemplified in the conflict over reselling diapers and diaper covers. In her reaction to eBay’s banning of listings for recycled diapers and diaper covers, tamoto1 expresses brand alienation rather than attachment. She argues that eBay prevents women’s choice because it “is owned by a vicious huggies loving megalomaniac who decided that mothers across the world cannot make their own decision when it comes to buying gently used Aristocrats” (a form of diaper cover). The company pulled her “offer off of Egay. So now this young, sensitive, doe eyed mother” is “attempting to thwart Egay by doing some snazzy evasive” maneuvers. In this commentary, tamoto1 portrays herself as a delicate mother who is fighting a large and unjust corporation. She equates goodness with straight sexuality and sexual citizenship, a tactic eBay also deploys, by calling eBay “eGay” because
of its policy about recycled cloth diapers and related clothing. Thus, tamotol performs a consumer critique while unfortunately establishing cultural norms and associating gay identities with stupidity.

A cohort of diaper sellers has used the PetitionOnline site to encourage eBay to adopt better community values: “Help save the planet” and “do your part to help us help the environment by using reusable diapers!”91 Louise Pendry employs PetitionOnline and identifies this group of eBay sellers as “parents trying to do our best for our babies” by recycling diapers, which “is a wonderful, green act.”92 Pendry identifies as “we” and constitutes parents rather than eBay as the community. eBay’s ban, tamotol also suggests, is about community and “the integrity of the whole human race” because such decisions embody values. Sellers of recycled diapers and diaper covers portray themselves as the good mothers and eBay as the bad mother rather than as the benevolent nurturer of community. These sellers, in processes that are related to oppressed cohorts striving for citizenship, convey the moral and social features that demonstrate they are good and worthy of inclusion.93 They go even further and position their behavior above that of the company and challenge eBay’s claims that it is good, green, and pro-recycling. Diaper sellers’ critiques are one outcome of the melding of consumerism with citizenship. Such consumers are demanding further social responsibility and ethical behavior from corporations.94

Sellers of recycled cloth diapers believe that the children who would benefit from ecological consuming are victimized by adult sexualities, members who sell used underwear, adults who buy used diapers for erotic purposes, and eBay. It “seems silly to group cloth diapees” with used “adult skivvies,” writes tamotol, but that is “the world we live in.” For tamotol, it is a world in which mothers’ livelihood and claims to normative sexuality are at risk. She challenges eBay’s standards and sexuality, which she suggests are inextricably intertwined. Unfortunately, tamotol’s association of unconventional sexualities with disaffection is apt on eBay since the company cancels some listings for adult items and overt representations of queer sexualities. Nevertheless, GLBTQ listings, including “gay interest” vintage photographs of men romantically engaged with other men and images of sellers’ visible penis lines in underwear and swimwear, can allow men to engage erotically through the site, generate higher sale prices in some cases, and challenge the conflation of the site with heteronormative culture. Gay connections, attachments, and the forms of sexual citizenship that move beyond proscribed norms are en-
encouraged by Lingis’s community, which is formed “when sexual excitement spreads among us.”

Mothers who sell diapers, eBay, Freecycle, and other Internet sites and participants render narratives about goodness but sometimes have radically different visions of what is good. The ways diaper sellers and eBay use cultural conceptions of community to articulate good people and condemn the sexualities of other groups encourages a further assessment of the value of community discourses and the violence such beliefs support. For the women’s studies scholar Donna Jowett, what “could be good about community, good in a way that is not just about me getting what I want out of one, requires that we not even assume community, never mind its goodness.” eBay’s and tamotol’s consumer interventions and critiques could facilitate Jowett’s proposal by considering how organizational and individual decisions affect other people rather than imagining a generic goodness and community that holds the same beliefs. While eBay now allows the sale of diapers and diaper covers, it does not mention the petitioners in its new policy statement and avoids acknowledging different opinions and the work of resistant members. In fact, eBay’s change was so under-advertised that auntava posted the announcement to the forums, and other sellers of diapers and diaper covers expressed surprise about the new policy. eBay’s challenge, if it wants to render normative positions, and its critical failing are producing a cohesive notion of goodness and community.

**The Feedback Forum**

eBay uses the feedback forum to constitute a good and trustworthy community. Omidyar started the feedback forum in 1996 so members could communicate about transactions instead of depending on him to mediate them. Readers of eBay forums are informed, “Feedback is an essential part of what makes eBay a successful community” and are encouraged to write about transactions. The system adds informational value to the site, creates trust, keeps people engaged, and furthers brand community identification because IDs are linked to feedback reviews and active members tend to identify with their feedback. Amazon, Froogle, Hotels.com, OpenTable, and countless other sites have feedback systems and prompt consumers to contribute. For Chrysanthos Dellarocas, who researches information technologies, these Internet feedback systems have changed individuals’ “behavior in subtle but
important ways” because people used to base their consumer “decisions on advertisements or professional advice” but are now increasingly relying on the opinions that are available through such systems.101 Consumers develop a certain level of prominence and authority through feedback systems, but they have also taken over much of the responsibility for researching products and manufacturers, providing advice and assistance, and making decisions. The relationship between this consumer labor, which is often a form of review, and more detailed consumer critiques of settings and policies could use further research and theorizing.

Omidyar’s 1996 letter about implementing the feedback forum, which is supposed to reflect eBay’s “founding values,” is included on the site.102 In it, Omidyar reiterates that eBay is “an open market that encourages honest dealings” and that “Most people are honest.” Of course, noting that most people are honest is a different claim, and allows for a more variable member base, than his indications that people are basically good. Omidyar also admits that “some people are dishonest. Or deceptive.” But they “can’t hide. We’ll drive them away. Protect others from them. This grand hope depends on your active participation.” Omidyar and the company thereby indicate that the feedback system will make people behave and encourage them to work for the community. They admit that basing eBay’s functioning on good people has some problems. This conceptual flaw is evoked in the many ways feedback is manipulated and the posts on varied sites that describe bad eBay members.

Feedback originally enabled eBay buyers, sellers, and viewers to leave comments and “positive,” “neutral,” or “negative” evaluations for any reason. In 2001, eBay restricted feedback to individuals who were in transactions because evaluations were sometimes manipulated.103 In 2007, eBay added options for buyers to evaluate transactions with Detailed Seller Ratings (DSRs). This system provides buyers with more nuanced ratings but makes it even less equitable and collaborative. Sellers cannot see the DSR stars that individual buyers assign to them and cannot reply. In 2008, eBay adjusted the system so sellers cannot leave neutral or negative feedback for buyers. This change further destabilizes the promise of open communication, lowers final sale prices for sellers whose scores decrease, and puts businesses at risk because eBay removes sellers with low scores from the system. eBay’s new feedback model implies that buyers are basically good and sellers are bad and need to be regulated. Numerous sellers, as I suggest in more detail at the end of this chapter, have greeted these changes with anger. eBay’s redesign of the system, which
purportedly facilitates consumer critiques because buyers no longer need to fear retaliatory negatives, has encouraged members’ resistance to the setting and company.

eBay still uses the feedback system to make the setting appear safe and encourage individuals to employ it for transactions. For instance, the member’s “star” often appears next to the ID, represents the amount of feedback received, and is intended to function as “your symbol of trust and experience in the eBay Community.” Trust, according to Lingis, “binds one ever more deeply to another; it is an energy that becomes ever stronger and more intoxicated.” With eBay, this binding and intoxication includes brand community identification and allows the company to retain members. Intoxication may also prevent members from evaluating trust and the feedback system’s consequences. Individuals are invested because the system testifies to their dependability and facilitates sales, and they become their feedback. In his instructional book about using eBay, Michael Lewis describes feedback as “a spotlight on how you do business, and the first impression you are giving to the eBay community, following you around wherever you go on the site. You are your feedback.” During eBay Live! keynote addresses, executives get attendees to rise, go through the feedback increments, and have people who have not reached benchmark feedback numbers sit down until only individuals with a large amount of feedback are standing. Through this ritual, eBay emphasizes the large-scale selling that the site facilitates, vast amount of feedback behind the company’s trust mechanism, and relationship between people and feedback.

Some sellers identify the value of feedback and use feedback numbers to indicate their reliability. Such reputation building, according to the business scholars Jennifer Brown and John Morgan, affects “prices and the probability of a sale.” baseballeve123 emphasizes his reputation, writing that his “FEEDBACK STAND AT 100% BECAUSE” he is “AN HONEST SELLER SELLING QUALITY CARDS.” Other sellers claim, “You can trust us based on our Feedback Rating.” Sellers market feedback numbers, but their comments can be misleading. For example, itrimming advertises as the “Globally ranked #2 eBay Seller with over 520,000 feedback!” but has a 98.3 percent feedback score because 9,837 members left negative reviews. jayandmarie proclaim they are “eBay’s highest rated dealer with a big red ‘Shooting Star’ and over 250,000 unique satisfied customers.” They have a “celebrity status” in the eBay community, and the company has honored them, but 3,979 members had already given them negative reviews by 2007. eBay uses feedback
to constitute a reliable community and includes members that trouble its notion of trust.

Feedback auctions, where individuals pay for positive reviews, are common, and sellers are willing to lose money on listing fees to increase their feedback scores, enhance their ability to sell high-priced items, and strengthen their ability to engage in auction fraud. The technologist Alan Williamson describes individuals selling items for pennies and promising that positive feedback is always provided. There are also listings for manuals that will enable members to “Get 100 Feedback in one Week!” Participants in forums such as “Ebay Sucks” perform a consumer critique and sell eBay accounts with positive feedback. zarkid lists an auction to “Obtain Feedback for 99 cents” because the seller is “taking a trip to Europe during Thanksgiving” and needs “money to hand out 100 soccer jerseys to the poor children. All this money will be going to a great cause. Plus it is a great way to get feedback.” This auction violates eBay’s policies and positions zarkid as bad. However, the seller is trying to constitute the kinds of good community behavior eBay encourages. Oddly enough, feedback sales and sellers’ attempts to avoid negative reviews, and consumer critiques, attest to people’s investment in the system. These people identify the value of feedback as they problematize its functions. Widespread knowledge of the feedback market should destroy the system’s value and community, but this has not occurred. This is because feedback is inextricably intertwined with active members’ identities and community investments, and they are unwilling to give up these positions and structures.

**Conclusion: Critiquing Community**

Some previously engaged brand community members now organize protests against eBay. Such behavior is related to the two phases of consumer and brand community development that Bernard Cova and Daniele Dalli research. For a period of time, consumers enjoy their articulated role as co-producers and are happy to be recognized by the company and other participants. At a certain point, usually after trust has been eroded through policy changes or other incidents, consumers feel unacknowledged, that the connection between company and participants is inequitable, and their labor is exploited. Participants’ anger and alienation can lead to consumer critiques, boycotts, and buycotts. For instance, sellers attempted to get eBay to lower
fees by listing items on other Internet auction sites during the “million auction march.” At eBay Live! 2008, many members booed during the keynote address and highlighted their disaffection in other ways.

People also comment critically about eBay in blogs and forums. For example, Ed “Doc” Koon operates a site that interrogates eBay’s policies. He conveys the two phases of consumer and brand community engagement with companies. It used to be rare, according to Koon, “to get ripped by a bad seller and eBay booted the bad element out right away” but now “it’s all about collecting those $$$ And hiding behind the disclaimer ‘we are only a venue’ eBay is NOT Liable for any transaction.” Koon also started a petition to let eBay investors know members are “tired” of how the company “is currently being managed” because eBay has become “infested with dead beat bidders, scammers, con artists, fences selling stolen property, internal pharming links, porn used in listing thumb nails, etc. Buying and selling on eBay is no longer safe.” Petition signers believe that eBay should be “directly accountable for the fraud they allow”; that “ebay has gone downhill concerning security to the point that one can no longer trust trades due to hijacked accounts, scams and lax ebay security”; and that members “need a better and safer marketplace.” In writing these posts, members assert their alienation and argue against positive accounts of eBay’s community.

The name of another blog—“FireMeg.com: the anti-eBay management website!”—also functions as a form of consumer critique, although it asks for the removal of a retired executive. In it, Firemeg questions the ways brand community members are supposed to give to the community. He directs readers to the user agreement that makes “eBay look a lot more like Big Brother, if not a full blown communist regime where your thoughts belong to the ‘community’ and where those with bad thoughts may be disappeared.” eBay includes a proviso in which members give the company “a non-exclusive, worldwide, perpetual, irrevocable, royalty-free, sublicensable (through multiple tiers) right to exercise any and all copyright, trademark, publicity, and database rights (but no other rights) you have in the content.” The eBay member nonnie*mouse*posting*id expresses concern about this policy, which “basically means that Ebay is giving itself license to steal from all its users.” Firemeg is also concerned about the mandate for members to “report problems, offensive content, and policy violations” to the company, which seems to be a “call to arms for the collective community gestapo to quash anything from listing violations to dissent among users . . .
with no financial incentives for users.” In addition, Firemeg uses “the fact that eBay reports only 80 million of its 300 million users were active over the past year” to deduce that “something is making masses of online shoppers upset.”\textsuperscript{129} This critique is similar to Secomb’s description of how communities, in striving for unity and coherence, ignore different opinions and regulate members.\textsuperscript{130}

Numerous eBay members perform consumer critiques and articulate a community that is resistant to eBay’s policies. They are motivated by changes to the feedback forum, increases in fees, insistence that sellers accept PayPal, holding of money on some transactions, temporary freezing of accounts, and removal of sellers with low feedback. In some of these cases, the thwarting of consumer reviews has led to consumer critique of the system and its policies. The term “consumer critique” may seem to apply best to buyers, but many sellers purchase items on the site and services from eBay. Sellers’ expressions of political consumerism through timed boycotts, the closing of eBay stores, the canceling of accounts, the choosing of different auction interfaces, the posting of critical comments, and communicating with corporate employees have been widely reported in the popular press. Detailed critiques of the company’s unfair decisions and disruption of community accompany Internet news reports and other eBay commentary. Rick Aristotle Munarriz has been covering “eBay since the 1990s” and now finds it “rare to put out an article and not have a faction of disgruntled sellers—or ex-Power Sellers—chime in with complaints.”\textsuperscript{131} For the reporter Alexander Wolfe, members’ anger is foregrounded by how articles about eBay receive comments long after the news is posted.\textsuperscript{132} This is very unusual, since comments usually stop after a few days. These reporters indicate how eBay produces active and critical consumers. Members engage, but not in the ways encouraged by the site and the company.

eBay removes listings and posts that criticize the site.\textsuperscript{133} When Chris Johnston supported a boycott in his listings, he was informed that “sellers aren’t permitted to state their personal opinions and views in their listings” and that the behavior might result in the suspension of his account.\textsuperscript{134} Yet disagreements, as Secomb explains, are important aspects of community. They may disrupt the “formation of totalizing identity, or commonality,” but there are few ways to include such diversity in the eBay setting and establish viable dialogues.\textsuperscript{135} eBay sellers and other business owners, according to the reporter Karen E. Klein, are some of “the hardest-working, most creative members of
However, they “too often lack a voice in both corporate and government policy.” This powerlessness is antithetical to eBay’s claims that everyone has something to contribute. It also threatens to foil eBay’s community structures and management of public perceptions. Since eBay makes a profit from getting individuals to work for the site and the company, it is worth considering how members and the company could benefit from allowing participants greater influence.

eBay has convinced many members that they produce the site and its community. Whitman used to greet cheering members at eBay events with, “This is about you.” This duplicitous promise has increased participants’ anger. For instance, Brian D. asserts, “we made ebay what it is.” Justice For All, whose forum ID poses an alienated and demanding citizenry, describes how members “gave their all into a business opportunity only to be sent through a slaughter house as a reward for their years of hard work and investment.” Another poster uses “One of many” as an ID, has “been selling on Ebay for over 9 years,” and is one of the community members and “pioneers” who “helped build them up between buying and selling on Ebay.”

One of many is now alienated and looking for another auction site. eBay and other brand communities promise participants agency and co-production opportunities and can therefore encounter increased forms of resistance, critique, and alienation when these assurances are not fulfilled.

Some brand community members use eBay’s rituals and values as a way to critique the company and the site. The company treats members “like criminals,” notes chatanooga, despite its assertion “that people are basically good.” For KD, when eBay “betrays the trust the trusting freely gave, then a moral and ethical crime has been committed and a break in a precious bond is broken forever.” By writing, “You cant find ‘it on ebay’ anymore,” lessthenavrgjoe inverts eBay’s slogan. Members rework eBay’s themes as a means of highlighting their estrangement and problems with the company’s brand formation. Their critiques are more potent because contemporary society also associates eBay with its community. Such critiques by brand community members can therefore endanger companies. For instance, the Coca-Cola brand community vociferously resisted the modification of “its” drink and brand when the company replaced the original beverage with what is now New Coke. This decision alienated fans and thus threatened the stability of the brand and economic position of the company. eBay faces similar hurdles in having noticeably alienated the community it claims as its family and sup-
porters. In accounts about Whitman’s run for governor, reporters have highlighted members’ angry comments in news stories, forums, blogs, and dedicated Internet settings. The visibility of this conflict gives members increased opportunities to critique the company and foil the political and social aspirations of eBay executives.

Alienated eBay members interrogate their relationship with the corporation and identify the limits of the eBay community. However, many of them are still drawn to the concept of brand and consumer communities. Even after becoming aware of the discrepant relationship between corporations and brand community members, they seek more satisfying brand communities and better companies. For instance, Karen believes that everyone who uses the OnlineAuction site (ola.com) is “part of a community. There are real people who answer your questions and solve any problems; not canned responses like at eBay. We all encourage each other in every single way we can and help each other out where we can.”

cabanalolita closed her eBay store and “moved” to the Bonanzle selling site; she loves “the friendly community and the Bonanzle guys are great!” This interface is different, according to cabanalolita, because it offers the opportunity to “Chat live with Bonanzle neighbors. eBay never had that option!” In a similar manner, Bonanzle self-identifies as an interface where people can buy and “sell unique items with the friendliest community online” and figures site usage as a collaborative project. These brand community members, in comparable ways to the arrangements Hickman and Ward describe, choose to declare their allegiance to new brands and position themselves as opposed to eBay. Rather than investing in another brand community, which is likely to economically fail or alienate members, individuals might highlight the troubling aspects of community and problematize the use of the term in Internet settings.

In the next chapter, I continue to study how members engage with eBay’s community and ethos. Such structures are profitable for companies such as eBay because they get consumers to work for the company and invest in its products. Members initiate individuals into the culture, regulate those who do not conform, and try to meet the mandates for selflessness by providing assistance. My analysis of eBay’s asynchronous conference forum, eBay Live! conferences, and collecting and sale of eBay-ana demonstrates how companies use Internet technologies to produce brand enthusiasts and company supporters. I also point to the advantages for members, which include acknowledgments of their interests, increased sales opportunities, and support
from the company and other invested participants. Settings such as eBay should be carefully considered and critical strategies proposed because they tend to produce members who enthusiastically support site codes and normalized and regulated bodies. Yet fan and brand attachments can also put companies at risk.