Buy It Now

White, Michele

Published by Duke University Press

White, Michele.
Buy It Now: Lessons from eBay.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/69292

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2506120
Individuals who are planning to attend eBay Live! conferences express excitement in the conference forum, make plans to socialize with other members at events, strategize about attending classes, arrange elaborate branded outfits, and envision the eBay-ana they can collect. For instance, mattie-lily-rose posts that she is “excited, really excited, no really really really excited” about the convention.¹ surfsilicon1 is “so excited about eBay Live!” that the poster “started to literally dream about it.”² Both raglebagle and unique-find eagerly anticipate eBay Live! because it will allow them to finally meet.³ These individuals share similar stories about eBay and the conferences as ways to articulate eBay identities, connect with other members, engage the company and its employees, and support the brand community. Such collaborative conference practices are important for deeply engaged members and the company. They explain, justify, and extend attachments to the site.

eBay promotes this enthusiasm and community through its conferences. eBay Live! conventions have been held in Anaheim, California (2002); Orlando (2003); New Orleans (2004); San Jose, California (2005); Las Vegas (2006); Boston (2007); and Chicago (2008). Versions have also occurred in Berlin (2003) and Düsseldorf (2006). The eBay Live! conference for 2009 was canceled. In 2010, eBay began making the conferences over into eBay: On Location, holding them in varied U.S. cities throughout the year and promising to reach more interested members.⁴ eBay describes these conferences
as “Live” and “On Location” and indicates that they incorporate physical people and locales and are more than computer mediation. Members also use the conferences to produce material spaces and experiences that bolster eBay’s representations. eBay Live! provides raglebale with the opportunity to “actually hug unique-find and thank her for her precious friendship.” Yet surfsilicon1’s account of dreaming about the conference evokes connections, as well as ruptures, between the immaterial (including dreamscapes) and the physical. The conferences thereby represent and trouble the realness of eBay’s goods, identities, and participants.

Studying eBay Live! and its limits allows me to reflect on the ways members identify and how the asynchronous conference forum, conferences, eBay Live! I attended in 2007, and sale of eBay-branded objects shape larger fan, community, collecting, and cultural identities (figures 3 and 4). Such processes of individual and group identity construction are always in tension and should be considered together. Social identification, as the anthropologist and sociologist Richard Jenkins comments, is not only about “knowing who we are” and “what we think about ourselves” but also “what people think about us” and how they render our identity and position. Internet settings and their physical manifestations (such as eBay Live!) offer powerful opportunities for individuals to identify and companies to engage members, constitute brand communities of like-minded people, and get individuals to do more work for the company and brand.

Events such as eBay Live! and eBay: On Location have a significant value for participants and the associated corporations. However, there has been a dearth of critical literature about conferences. Technology-oriented convention cultures determine what products we see on the market; how technologies are understood; and the relationship between hardware, software, and identity positions. These events play a considerable part in configuring users. Studies of conferences should be further incorporated into research on blogging, computers and peripherals, fan cultures, gaming, social networking, and software, because they have active conference cultures. Since eBay features classes and a trade show, I use the terms “conference” and “convention” somewhat interchangeably. Literature on brand, fan, and Internet communities and collecting helps explain these conventions and the ways the identities and values of individuals, the company, and branded objects become intertwined. Connecting brand community and fan processes and literature allows me to further analyze how these structures function and some of the limits of these research models.
3. eBay Shop, eBay Live! 2007, Boston

Fans and Brand Communities

Brand community members tend to be active fans of particular companies, products, logos, sites, virtual communities, and media texts. Engaged eBay members and brand community participants demonstrate a kind of media and console fandom.8 They are proponents of such eBay texts as the forums, advertisements, logo, listings, and narratives about values and how these features are supported by the interface. eBay fans meet Roger Blackwell and Tina Stephan’s criteria for consumer fans and “invest time, attention, energy, emotion, and money into building and maintaining a relationship to a brand.”9 Their book, which is directed at businesses, indicates the distinctive ways brands encourage and support fan identifications. Brand communities attach fans to branded products, companies, and community members. They articulate objects and ethos individuals can identify with, settings and rituals where participants can connect, and cultures of fannish enthusiasm that embrace engaged people. This suggests how media fans, whether they participate in collaborative engagements or are solely attached to the text, are also brand community members.

The sociologists Denise D. Bielby, C. Lee Harrington, and William T. Bielby distinguish between media viewers, who “engage in a relatively private behavior,” and fans, whose activities include “purchasing or subscribing to fan magazines,” “writing letters to actors, producers, writers, or fan publications,” engaging with other fans in Internet forums, “joining fan clubs,” and attending conventions and other fan events.10 eBay fans are also distinct from people who casually deploy the site and individuals who actively buy and sell but do not participate in such fan practices as identifying with the company, reading eBay newsletters and magazines, engaging with members through forums and other site features, attending convention parties, and wearing or collecting eBay-branded items. These eBay enthusiasts and fans, as my analysis in this chapter demonstrates, tend to repeat the company’s discourse. This encourages a closer analysis of fan practices and of how individuals support the values of corporations. It also points to some limitations in the canonical fan studies literature by, among others, Camille Bacon-Smith, John Fiske, and Henry Jenkins because they identify fans as active producers who are resistant to mainstream media and corporate structures.11

Canonical fan studies texts, according to Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington’s research, associate fandom with “a collective strategy, a communal effort to form interpretive communities that in their
Chapter Two

subcultural cohesion evaded the preferred and intended meanings of the ‘power bloc.”

For instance, Jenkins identifies Internet-based fan communities as being “focused around the collective production, debate, and circulation of meanings, interpretations and fantasies in response to various artifacts of contemporary culture.” Fiske argues that fans oppose and rework dominant culture. These researchers are interested in the productive and creative aspects of fandom. They rightly resist notions that fans are foolish and their engagements valueless. Instead, as Jenkins notes, the intent is to portray fans as “active, critically engaged,” “creative,” and “rogue readers.”

These fan studies researchers emphasize the importance of fandom and may overstate the oppositional aspects of these cultures. I hope to enrich this literature by further highlighting how fans are related to brands. For instance, eBay brand community members also act as fans when they narrate and extend the history of the site, wait for company executives to sign eBay-ana, and indicate that they have crushes on employees.

There is some research that interrogates how fans support the values and products of media producers and corporations, regulate what can be included in fan cultures, and perpetuate media products by completing missing parts of texts. Yngvar Kjus, who studies cross-media events, describes how the “television industry is actually strengthening its grip” on fans and other viewers “to reduce costs and risks while increasing revenues.” In his study of alternate reality gaming, Henrik Örnebring argues that convergence culture facilitates increased opportunities to market texts in ways that support the hierarchies and values of producers rather than dissolving the boundaries between authors and texts. While there are opportunities for interactivity, many texts position audiences as consumers. These researchers acknowledge the importance of fan practices while identifying how engagements with loved objects and representations can be personally pleasurable, resistant to some mainstream cultures and positions, and support corporations and their values. Such active and complicit fan engagements are key to the functioning and productivity of the eBay Live! forum and conventions.

eBay’s Community Discussion Boards

The community discussion boards or forums, which are available from the Community link, are an important part of eBay’s and members’ identity production. Pierre Omidyar started the community board in 1996 to engage members in a collaborative dialogue and disengage himself from requests for
assistance. Jim Griffith was employed as the first customer service representative and to maintain a board presence because his textual drag performances engaged members and helped resolve conflicts. Some individuals would email Griffith and indicate they were so upset about board disputes that they “had cried all night, sometimes all week.” Such intimate connections and attachments to settings, including representations of crying participants, are associated with fandom. They point to the value these texts have for some viewers and the combined pleasures and frustrations that are implicit aspects of these kinds of engagements. eBay members’ passionate and agitated responses suggest the centrality of conflict in computer-mediated settings. Varied disputes occur in eBay forums. They are vital features of this setting and community, pointing to the ways difference operates, but individuals often associate sites like eBay with agreement, support, and shared values and tend to mandate affinity from members.

Individuals articulate their identity and are identified as members of the community by being board participants. In the Internet forum that Anne-Laure Fayard and Gerardine DeSanctis study, identity “occurs as speakers define themselves in relation to the group. Identity can be found in surface language features that convey intimacy with others, such as reference to ‘we,’ ‘us,’ or ‘our group’ and in references to a common, larger community.” In a related manner, brand community researchers identify consciousness of a kind and brand stories as important aspects of community formation. For Steven P. Westly, who collected toy soldiers as an eBay employee, eBay’s and members’ identifications of shared interests are connected to collecting. eBay sells collecting as well as goods, so consciousness of a kind is related to eBay’s commercial intents. Westly believes that collectors “have a passion about something that makes them feel a little left out. And at eBay, they are immediately connected to someone else. eBay represents a community of people who deeply understand one another.” eBay is also a community of people who know about collecting and whose identities are partially organized through particular kinds of consumption. For instance, the opening part of the site often features antiques and curios and offers links to “Collectibles” categories. The apocryphal reason Omidyar developed the site was so that Pam Wesley, his fiancée, could collect Pez dispensers. Thus, eBay emphasizes collecting, provides individuals with a setting in which they can connect with other collectors, and supports individuals’ identities as collectors.

eBay offers varied features that facilitate consciousness of a kind, including participants’ recognition of other collectors and social selling, in which
individuals market goods by communicating about personal interests. Members provide detailed personal information in listings, eBay-facilitated blogs, “About Me” and “My World” sites, and forums. Boards make readers and posters into buyers and sellers by including links to feedback reviews, About Me sites, stores, and listings. Interestingly, some participants choose to use posting IDs rather than selling IDs in forums because their outspoken comments make them unpopular and cause people to bid on items they have no intention of paying for. The community’s disruption of some listings, even if these behaviors are not corporately sanctioned, articulates acceptable forms of engaging, the identities that are most welcome, and the individuals who are invited to take part or discouraged from participating. In such instances, brand communities employ and reject difference as a way to articulate and extend consciousness of a kind.

Board postings also tend to render connections between individuals and make the setting matter, both affectively and physically, by transforming textual features into shared spaces. For instance, an individual may post the word “pop” and people reply with “pop, pop, pop” to turn the site into a popcorn party. People post detailed images of tea and cookies to convey their hospitality and bond with other readers. These renderings of the site as a community and detailed setting are supported only when others engage. As Nancy Baym’s Internet studies research indicates, computer networks become meaningful when “they are invoked by participants in ongoing interaction.” Omidyar called community into being, but the company needs members to support his narratives with their practices, investments, and identification of consciousness of a kind. eBay encourages members to work. Yet it is buyers and sellers who decide to produce much of eBay’s content, perform as fans of the setting, and activate the site.

The eBay Live! Community Conference Board

Members’ fan and brand practices galvanize and sustain the conferences and conference board. This forum is focused on eBay’s yearly convention, includes all of the messages about the conference that were posted since the event was first announced in 2002, and is still available in a read-only format. This allows eBay to feature brand enthusiasts while preventing critical debate about the shift to eBay: On Location. Individuals are directed to use the forum to make “arrangements to meet your friends, talk about travel and ac-
commodations,” “discuss what you would like to see during the event,” “find out about the Pink Lounge” (a meeting area run by “pinks,” or employees whose posts are demarcated with a pink stripe), and learn about “other activities that are planned.” They are also advised that before “posting, please read and familiarize yourself with the eBay Board Usage Policies,” and people unfamiliar with the discussion forums can select a “tutorial.” Such notices and instructional texts accompany many Internet sites. They provide individuals with provisos and warnings, indicate the kinds of engagements that are expected, offer further lessons, and configure people. Through the board and conferences, eBay works with members to extend the company’s notion of community.

Most posts to the eBay Live! forum are concerned with problems registering for the conference, inquiries about the usefulness of going, attempts to convince uninitiated readers to attend, plans to meet people, indications of members’ physical locations, and enthusiastic posts about the conference. eBay promises to connect all people in a global market. This idea is related to popular and academic narratives about the Internet, such as R. B. Driskell and L. Lyon’s virtual community research and description of how “cyberspace has been liberated from the confines and constraints of place.” However, members’ eBay Live! forum threads convey their interest in engaging with people from the same cohort and geographic place. For instance, board threads inquire, “Anyone from Oklahoma going to ebay live?”; “Any Canadians Going?”, “Owner or interested in an Ebay consignment biz? let’s meet at Ebay Live!!!!”; and “Any Asian wanna hang out together?” These brand community members, and many other people who use Internet settings, produce traditional geographic and identity positions as part of their fan and brand allegiances. Their interests are addressed in the shift from the nationally, or even internationally, coded eBay Live! conferences to the more regional focus of On Location.

The company presents the conference as its way to thank engaged members. However, the event also enables eBay to get members to work. According to scooch, a pink who posts official messages to the site, eBay believes “everyone has something to contribute. eBay Live gives us an opportunity to meet and thank you.” Yet scooch frames the conference experience and prefaces the possibility of being thanked with the common eBay directive that members should “contribute” and work. A cohort of members contributes by expressing enthusiasm for the site and conference, helping other individuals
to join and engage, and promoting the convention and company by selling branded items. In this manner, members respond to eBay’s mandates for immaterial labor and replicate eBay’s configuration of consumer identities.

On the eBay Live! board, members offer brand stories and reiterate eBay’s ideas about community and values. This is not surprising since learning and sharing brand stories, as Albert M. Muñiz Jr. and Thomas C. O’Guinn indicate, also assists members in “learning communal values.”30 A key eBay brand story, as structured by Omidyar and perpetuated by forum participants, is that the site provides access to good people and a community. Artful seller supports this notion and describes eBay as “a wonderful gift” that “has given so much to so many.”31 eBay creates “this amazing, growing mass of goodwill around the world.” For danse, eBay Live! is “a wonderful small community of people from all over the world. It didn’t take long” for her “to get to know many of them by name and feel . . . part of a greater good.”32 Relating the conference to Omidyar’s values, misswiggleemporium writes, “Everyone was super nice proving Pierre’s thought that ‘People are basically good.’”33 These members provide reasons for being attached, encourage others to work selflessly for the company and community good, and do good work for eBay by perpetuating brand stories.

Individuals also redeploy brand stories as a means of telling more personal accounts and increasing their visibility. In some of these cases, sellers support and extend brand stories for personal profit. Beachbadge, who often signs her posts “Anita / beachbadge,” has an eBay site “guide” that transforms her individual behavior into a brand story and part of eBay’s history.34 According to beachbadge’s guide, board members loved her virtual rum balls (a version of the tea and cookie ritual that is common on the forums). She was “able to share the real ones with everyone” at the conference, people searched for her in order to try the rum balls, and her “husband was even using the rumballs to barter” for collectible convention pins.35 Beachbadge uses her identity, practices, and brand story to stand in for eBay’s processes and its interlocking of representations and material objects. She emphasizes the shifts from textual to material rum balls and from the forum to the corporeal relationships of the conferences.

This is a brand story because the “rumballs made eBay history” when Meg Whitman mentioned them while giving beachbadge a community award. Beachbadge’s claims to exemplariness operate along with traditional identity positions. Her self-presentation is similar to the managing of Whitman’s corporate position with portrayals of the executive as a wife and mother. beach-
badge emphasizes her femaleness, femininity, and heteronormativity by including her real name in posts, connecting her eBay identity to cooking and hospitality, and indicating that cooking facilitates her husband's collecting desires. Members are not required to link eBay IDs to binary gender positions but many forum participants create identities that are gendered and perform stereotyped roles. This tendency is encouraged by eBay's directive to provide personal information, cultural expectations that physical and virtual identities are connected to gender positions, and the requirement on such sites as MSN/Hotmail, MySpace, and Yahoo! that individuals provide gender identifications in order to get accounts. Since telling brand stories, including beach-badge's narratives about rum balls, assists members in learning communal values, these practices contribute to eBay's binary gender and heterosexual organizational logic.

**Participants and Identity**

Popular and academic literature often indicates that Internet sites and technologies empower everyone while popular representations, including some of the aforementioned texts, associate advanced computer processes with white heterosexual men. For instance, eBay configured the gender of attendees at its 2007 conference for software developers, which happened before eBay Live!, with signage that almost always depicted men. In doing this, eBay establishes third-party software development, and knowledge of advanced technologies, as a male terrain. Racial and other identity positions are not infallibly determined. Nevertheless, whether through years of encouragement and acknowledgment or for other reasons, most third-party developers in attendance at eBay developer conferences appear to be young, male, and white. eBay Live! employees range from young and newly hired individuals to established executives, but they are, with some variance, usually white men. Buyers and sellers are also likely to be white, although there is a broader range of racial identifications in this group. Thus, eBay references everyone while remaining a fairly homogeneous culture.

eBay associates men with site design and programming. Women are more apt to be identified as sellers in advertisements, listings, and About Me sites. For instance, the banners for the 2003 eBay Live! convention depicted an engaged female member hugging a feedback star. This is not surprising since women are still associated with such activities as shopping, sales work, and running yard sales. Women are the most visible group at eBay Live! confer-
ences. Middle-aged and retired heterosexual couples, networks of friends, and extended family groups also have a significant presence at eBay Live! conferences and sell on the site. Individuals with other identifications and sales strategies, such as the gay men who sell underwear and swimwear, are not visible within the convention culture. This may be because eBay and members tend to configure attendees as heteronormative and encourage heterosexual couples to go to the convention as a nuclear-family vacation. Kathryn states that “the idea is to have a city suitable for a family vacation, so dad can take the kids to entertainment while mom attends the convention.”37 The company chooses tourist destinations and describes the conference as fun, a community, a family, and a reunion.

Some members use eBay as a way to change careers, make extra money, retire, or leave jobs that are difficult to maintain because of health or family issues, while still operating within a kind of traditional role.38 For instance, tradrmom “got onto Ebay (in addition to not having to wear pantyhose)” because it is “flexible,” it “provides time for family and other responsibilities,” and going back to “the regular office,” “the clothes,” “and/or the politics would kill” her.39 Tradertif started her own business so that she would “never have to wear ‘business attire’ ever again!!”40 These women have their own businesses, although many of them present as professionalized without being professionals and businesslike without being businesspeople. They are “motivated and inspired” by Whitman heading such a large corporation.41 They reject aspects of corporate femininity, such as pantyhose, in favor of a hybrid identity that combines conventional women’s roles and self-directed work and careers. In doing this, they reference Whitman’s own self-portrayals as traditional and family-oriented.

Attendees range from pre-teens to individuals who are more than eighty. Many board participants identify as older than forty, but varied concerns about being “old” are conveyed in threads. Axzar3000 assures a member that “at 35 you will be the life of the party”: “Most people at eBay Live are like 300 years old!”42 The participant www-internetishop-com worries about not having “fun because” of being “really young compared to the general” attendees, and people older than forty are boring and staid.43 Members highlight their concerns about aging and desire to be with individuals in their age range when they ask, “Any older folks who don’t party going?”; Any party people going who are younger than 30?”; and “ebay live- What’s your age?”44 These posts reproduce traditional divisions and feelings of unworthiness rather
than providing the supportive setting eBay promises. Such ageism, according to Todd D. Nelson, “is one of the most socially-condoned and institutionalized forms of prejudice” in the United States.\textsuperscript{45}

eBay posters represent their social value by indicating that they look and act younger than their numerical age. For instance, acmeusa self-identifies as “a single 43 year old that is very young at heart and is accused of looking and living like someone much younger.”\textsuperscript{46} According to the ageism research of Victor Minichiello, Jan Browne, and Hal Kendig, individuals detach themselves from “the ‘old’ group” by doing such things as indicating they have “a positive attitude, not looking old,” and “not acting old.”\textsuperscript{47} craftypetstuff critiques such attempts to belong, which require individuals to detach from and dismiss people, by identifying as “young at heart, but wrinkled and much older in other places.”\textsuperscript{48} She has “just ordered a t/shirt that says not getting older—becoming more valuable”; performatively worries that the “mind isn’t what it used to be either....now what were we talking about??”; considers “tips on how to blend in”; and realizes she does not “have enough time to do a total makeover” and is just going to be herself. She proposes a way to accept different identities and forms of embodiment, but posts to the conference board collaboratively establish age, gender, and sexuality norms. These stories about age incorporate prejudice—and, occasionally, resistant identifications—into the company and site.

**Queer Performances and Values**

Forum participants who are asked about their age discuss weddings and long-term marriages and thereby relate eBay to normative sexuality. For example, susiecraft identifies as “59 and dh” (dear husband) “is 61.”\textsuperscript{49} deco2mod4u is “47F, 3rd Ebay live,” and her husband is attending because it is their thirty-first wedding anniversary.\textsuperscript{50} theimpus is a “25 year old female, First time” at “Ebay Live, Just got Married in Vegas 3 Months ago.”\textsuperscript{51} These narratives encourage members to mirror traditional identifications and are widely embraced within the setting. This is because “what tends to be valorized as ‘normative’” in society, according to the feminist and sexuality studies researcher Stevi Jackson, “is a very particular form founded on traditional gender arrangements and lifelong monogamy.”\textsuperscript{52} These forms of heterogender—a gender system that asserts heterosexuality because of its coupling of male with female—and monogamy are incorporated into eBay’s brand commu-
nity identifications, stories, and organizational logics. Members’ interlocking of heterosexuality and age also point to the cultural functions of heteroage, where individuals equate “growing up” to heteronormativity.

eBay and many of its members configure the site with traditional narratives about age, gender, race, and sexuality. Other people work against this production of normativity. For instance, fiberwireguy performs his gay identity and asserts a queer series of meanings for eBay and for members’ brand identifications in the forum. In response to a question about the appropriate attire for the conference, fiberwireguy insists that “there is a strict dress code. For women you must wear a hoop skirt and bustle and carry a parasol with you at all times. No colors will be allowed that are not in the eBay logo.”

When queen-ebabe responds that she is planning to wear “overalls” and a “cowboy hat and be done with it,” fiberwireguy uses the opportunity to queer her. He advises, “That’s mighty butch.” unique_finds93 supports fiberwireguy’s performances and flirts with him by inquiring, “Can I wear a hoop skirt? I have one with the gay rainbow colors, so if I just take out two of the colors, I will be good to go.”

He also finds gay content in eBay’s portrayals. When fiberwireguy asks unique_finds93 to go to the eBay Live! gala as his date, he argues that “you can’t say ‘gala’ without saying ‘gay.’” fiberwireguy’s reading of the gala as a gay event and the indication that it supports his proposed rendezvous is not something most members would accept. Yet it does evoke the company’s own references to multiform desires. The self-declared positions of fiberwireguy and unique_finds93 as an “institution on this board” kept the gay identities and queer aspects of eBay highlighted in the forum for a period of time.

Both fiberwireguy and unique_finds93 playfully destabilize the categories within which other members operate. For example, one-gr8-deal expresses confusion and asks, Are “fiber and unique two guys, one girl and one guy, or two girls?” He associates their eBay engagement with the unidentifiable and “Whatever it is.” In response, fiberwireguy, whose name provides a gender reference, says he “can’t speak” for unique_finds93, but he is “all man.” unique_finds93 “*looks down there*” and asserts, “Man here too!!!!” Nevertheless, stable and knowable gender is problematized because, as fiberwireguy suggests, “Some of us didn’t need to check.” One may be, according to Baym, “anyone he or she wants to be online, but if one wants to be admired or even liked, then he or she would be wise to attend to the very real social constraints that groups develop.” Even Baym does not offer a model that goes beyond the dyadic gender distinctions of “he” and “she.” Those who support
the “communal values” of sites such as eBay “are likely to be praised, quoted, and otherwise supported, while those who try to present other identities are likely to be disregarded.”

In a manner similar to other individuals who interrogate the codes of Internet settings, fiberwireguy and unique_finds93 are opposed and ignored. For example, extraordinary-ellie says she wants fiberwireguy and unique_finds93, or you “two boys,” to “give it a rest”: It is “tiresome to open just about any thread on this board and find your hijinks.” She evokes heteroage by stating that they are not properly normed and engaged in age-appropriate work. Whether because of such negative assessments or for other reasons, unique_finds93 stopped participating in the forum, and fiberwireguy adopted a much more conventional way to engage. Then curiously-strong-ellie-mint (extraordinary-ellie’s posting ID) noted that “Fiberwireguy annoyed the heck out of” her “a few months before the convention when he was such a goofball with another poster and kept veering off topic.” But now, she is “fond of him.” Of course, fiberwireguy was supporting communal values at this juncture. He could be tamed and made into a kind of quirky but adorable pet without his inclusion of overtly gay content. When fiberwireguy reproduces the processes and codes of the forum, he is allowed to become a full sexual citizen.

Group Identification and Community in the eBay Live! Board

eBay tries to use pinks and other employees to sustain the site’s identities, values, sexual citizens, and organizational logic. Pinks act as handlers and cheerleaders for individuals who are positively identified with the company and its positions. Active members respond to them. For instance, women reply by creating threads about male pinks. They also compromise expectations about female members’ “proper” femininity by marveling at the physical attributes of male pinks and imagining having relationships with favorite employees. When individuals manipulate images of male pinks in the forum, *queen*cheese* wonders, “Did someone say it was hot in here??” She also jokes, “That’s a mighty big gun you got there” as a way to comment on a male pink’s genitals. been_there*done_that humorously plans her wedding with a pink. These posters connect brand enthusiasm to the historical processes of fan cultures and accounts of female fans desiring and swooning over male stars. At the same time, they assert some control over the company, men, and male employees by converting male pinks into erotic objects. Male pinks are
already associated with some level of gender confusion and disempowerment because the color pink is culturally linked with femininity. Yet even women’s playful desires for male employees and assertion of sexual power are managed when pinks tell them to “stay within the realm of good taste.”69 In these cases, eBay maintains a precarious balance between values and enthusiasm.

Pinks have a special status in the forum, and members can increase their status by communicating with them. It is therefore not surprising that individuals often respond to pinks with mannerly agreement and even fannish enthusiasm. For instance, a number of members positively repeat scooch’s language when he inquires, “Is everyone getting excited” about the conference?70 **christymj** replies, “excited yet???? how about still!!! Can’t wait.”71 suebeany says she “can’t wait!”; she is “Counting the days!” and is “looking forward to meeting all you nice folks and absorbing info and tips like a sponge.”72 abovethemall is “so ready!!!” and “looking forward to meeting” everyone.73 This repetitive language extends the insider references that Fayard and DeSanctis find in Internet forums.74 eBay board participants employ similar expressions and writing styles, render agreement about the event, and produce a group identity.

This group identity is often associated with family. For instance, bobals_wife, whose id attaches her to the better-known bobal and highlights her position as married and family-identified, writes about the conference that she “went to a family reunion” that “was the most fantastic and rewarding time of” her “life. Over five thousand relatives showed up.”75 valentinemcgee “was so happy to be spending” her birthday with “ebay family” at the conference.76 A “very sweet lady” recognized funfindsfromsuz because of her eBay-specific clothing and invited her to ride to an eBay Live! event from the hotel.77 They “laughed about how anyone else would think” she “was crazy for taking a ride with a carload of strangers, but that as ebayers,” they “were all family!” In these narratives, members’ engagements and feelings of security exceed the kinds of trust produced by the feedback system. Their attachments are related to corporations’ references to family. For example, when eBay acquired a new shopping search engine, it shared the “Great news” that “Milo has joined the eBay family!”78 These structures, according to the organizational research of Catherine Casey, render caring employers and familial colleagues. Companies’ promises of greater “involvement, commitment, and ‘empowerment’” attract employees and consumers while including a built-in disciplinary mechanism that enforces businesses’ internal rules and values.79 Critiques of such cultures are also difficult because they challenge members’
caring families and the values that appear to be in the best of interest of this kinship structure.

eBay’s conference materials continue these narratives about intimacy and connections by depicting members holding hands and promising participants that they will bond. In a related manner, community members tell brand stories about being connected to people who understand one another. cuties4u appreciates how attendees accept and understand eccentric selling and brand community practices: “If you pull your wallet out of your purse and packing peanuts fall out ... NO ONE thinks a thing about it”; “If you use words such as eek, erk or snort ... EVERYONE gets it”; and “If you have to fix a broken purse strap to get you thru the day and use priority tape ... EVERYONE understands.”80 For ion_treasures, the conference population includes “1000s of people whose eyes don’t glaze over when you start talking about eBay.”81 Fan conventions also provide assurances “that there are others out there just like oneself,” according to the American studies scholar Joe Sartelle.82 cuties4u and ion_treasures emphasize the otherness of active members and the ways their differences are embraced in eBay’s conference cultures. However, a group of participants on the eBay Live! board, as I suggest later in the chapter, also make it clear that some posters and attendees do not belong. Their methods of creating a common culture should be cause for concern, even though the outcomes are not as extreme as those addressed by Benedict Anderson’s and Jean-Luc Nancy’s community research.83 Participants use their shared differences to articulate norms that should be followed by others.

Attendees are encouraged to identify with the group by creating visually recognizable brand community identities. “Dawn’s Top Ten Tips for eBay Live” pushes members to “‘show your eBay spirit.’ Dress in a creative way using the eBay colors.”84 Upon registering at the conference, everyone receives branded bags to carry their logo-covered programs and is made over into fans, a brand community, and an advertisement for the site. Media fans also identify with T-shirts that are legible only to insiders, jewelry that replicates symbols and items from television shows or films, media-specific language, and elaborate replications of clothing and settings from texts. In the case of eBay, members who display company logos and colors are rewarded by receiving gift certificates from pinks, being depicted in issues of eBay’s Chatter (e.g., the wearer of eBay-branded socks and sneakers in figure 4), and getting represented in slide shows of attendees that appear before sessions.85 For some members, eBay’s recognition, transformation of them into model
members, and facilitation of their fame within the community lead to personal pride, acknowledgment from peers, and increases in sales.

A number of members convey their membership even before they arrive at the conference. For example, sanda-girls_closet purchased stickers that declared her love of eBay and her husband “bought some kind of ‘spirit foam’ to ‘paint’ the car” in eBay colors. She wants members who see them driving to the conference to “honk or wave,” acknowledge their presence and spirit, and connect. frednmag encourages members “to wear something that reflects ebay” while flying so people can recognize each other and “sit together and get pumped up.” Sports fans also decorate cars with flags and stickers so their enthusiasm is extended out from the game and engages a larger public sphere. Academic and business conferences tend to hand out bags with the event name and logo; they presume people will need something to carry conference materials and thereby get attendees to show spirit and allegiance on the way home. By creating and wearing branded items, eBay and other fan and brand community members render a marketplace and sphere of sociality that exceed the site and conferences, extend the brand and products, and support their investments. Such brand community objects and stories suggest that members’ alliances and brand community structures are global and constant. Nevertheless, even a resistant or disgruntled patron who carries a bag with a company’s name on it performs some version of this role and labor.

Community Work

Attendees specify that they are good community members and situate themselves at conferences by posting images to the board, describing events, and gathering souvenirs for individuals who cannot participate. eBay encourages attendees to post images in the forum and suggests that photographs situate viewers at the event. For instance, katy, who is a pink, announces that the “party has started,” coaxes readers to “gather here to see all of those great images the nice folks can post for us from eBay Live so we can join in the fun with them,” and thanks participants for “helping us ‘be’ there with you!” In a similar manner, rizal, another pink, asks individuals to share photographs and give “the entire Community the chance to see and experience eBay Live! 2005, as it happens.” Events as diverse as the Association of Internet Researchers Conference (AoIR) and regional furry conventions, where individuals wear carefully crafted outfits made out of fake fur, include forums
where members ask for and post images and sites with numerous images of the event.

In response to requests for images in the eBay Live! forum, beadhappys presents a visual tour of the conference that moves the viewer into the space. It shows the banners that are “all over the streets around the convention center,” “the front of the convention center,” and “inside the Village” an “incredible sand castle.” Viewers reply with requests for particular views, look for images that portray them, express regrets about not attending, and thank posters for depictions. wigglzzzz offers a “Thank you TIEDYEJOHN!!!!” for taking pictures and bringing eBay Live as it was happening to individuals who could not attend. beachbadge describes “all those back at home who eagerly awaited news of Ebay Live!” Images make viewers feel as if they are “there with you!” In these cases, images exceed the function of listing depictions, which I describe in the introduction, by adequately conveying sites and providing materializing views. While objects must be distinguished from representations to further Internet selling, participants and the company code conference images as versions of the physical experience and thus incorporate more people into the brand community and experience.

Individuals documenting the conference work at eBay’s and members’ requests. They have to take images, locate or deploy image-hosting sites, resize pictures, find Internet access, and upload images during the convention. Other members also labor for the company. Adam Cohen describes members sharing information about births, marriages, and deaths and getting favorite participants computers so they can post from home. The popular message-board poster bobal found it financially and physically difficult to travel to the conference but was brought to the event through the active work of other members until he died. They appreciated the specialized knowledge that he shared with members on the eBay boards. According to Jeff, an eBay employee, bobal had “a cult following, and his unparalleled eBay enthusiasm at past eBay Live! events have made him a star.” Members believed “eBay Live! wasn’t eBay Live! without bobal,” and raising enough funds for his attendance was a “thank you for the years of help he’d given in the past.” While economic, health, and family issues are identified as factors that prevent individuals from attending conferences, attendees ordinarily do not work to fund their presence. Yet funding bobal’s trips and guaranteeing his presence was deemed important, as bobal and his wife, daughter, and granddaughter, with their hand-crafted vests and matching hats in eBay’s color scheme, acted as
visual examples of fan and brand enthusiasm and loyalty. By bringing bobal and his family to the conferences, participants produced an event populated by model members and bolstered eBay’s claims that people are basically good. They supported eBay’s rendering of heteronormative families and sexual citizens.

Forum participants who are unable to attend post to the board, sip virtual margaritas, and try to find someone to collect pins and additional eBay-ana for them. When the eBay employee Jackie ran a trivia contest about eBay Live! for people who could not attend, it made winners “feel closer to the action,” and some of them decided to attend the following year. The temporary cancellation of eBay’s conventions pointed to problems with this structure, focused attention on members’ longing for these events, and has now been replaced with video of eBay: On Location that promises to make you “feel like you were there.” This experience of being present at rituals, which is sometimes delivered by representations, is important. sandagirls_closet was “practically crying” about not being able to attend the conference in Boston. For her, there were “No pins and cards,” “No pictures with Bobal and Griff,” and “No Gala with Kool and the Gang.” She associates the conference experience with the ability to physically collect materials, attend the gala, and demonstrate her attendance through depictions. Popular posters such as beachbadge work to assuage feelings of detachment by providing collectibles to individuals who cannot attend. beachbadge does not need anything in return and instead hopes people will “Pay It Forward” and “help another person complete their set.” These members work to increase their personal position, the attendance at future conferences, the collecting of branded convention items, the materialization of events, and the notion of eBay community.

Most of the labor performed by forum members is done without monetary compensation, but eBay occasionally offers incentives like “Skippy bucks,” coupons that can be used to pay for listings. eBay uses such tactics to make it seem as if payment may occur at any time and encourages participants to freely provide listing advice, moderate problems, and create positive representations of the eBay community. In a forum thread, bamaj1 argues that eBay should reinstitute Skippy bucks because they are “a darn fine incentive to keep eBay heppers heppin’.” However, other members believe the desire for small forms of payments is selfish and a betrayal of eBay’s values. They extend mandates for uncompensated immaterial labor. For example, bobal chided bamaj1: “do you really need to get paid to help your fellow user?”

70  CHAPTER TWO
Helping others made bobal “feel good.” cherbear likes “to help people” and does not “expect skippy bucks.” Both bobal and cherbear reference the positive emotional experiences that are associated with immaterial labor. These members also elevate their status by indicating they are willing to help without reward. In doing this, they justify eBay’s methods of getting members to labor without economic compensation. Nevertheless, it is not clear how such helpers are supposed to make a living, although favored sellers can garner more sales because of their free work.

bamaj1 did not appreciate being interrogated about his Skippy bucks proposal and worked to identify with the values of the unreservedly laboring members. The “lack of tangible reward in the form of skippies” would not stop bamaj1 from helping but might “entice others with knowledge in” esoteric “areas to come forward and share their knowledge.” Individuals in brand communities are expected to be responsible, support the product, and solve problems. eBay brand enthusiasts are likelier than other members to enforce the brand’s values and are more resistant to critiques and complaints about “their” company and community. René Algesheimer, Utpal M. Dholakia, and Andreas Herrmann have stated that “identification with the brand community leads to positive consequences, such as greater community engagement, and negative consequences, such as normative community pressure.” Engaged members tend to internalize brand norms, perform as good sexual citizens, and understand their actions as stemming from an overlap between their values and that of the brand.

**eBay Live! and the Conference Culture**

eBay Live!, like other trade shows, is designed to enhance the company’s brand and corporate image. The eBay Live! conference in 2006, the company’s largest, sold out, with nearly 15,000 registered individuals. Nevertheless, eBay elides its marketing intentions, the size of the venues, and the number of attendees when it calls eBay Live! “part family reunion, part classroom, part trade show, and all fun!” eBay Live! thereby supports and extends the coding of the site as pleasurable, recreational, and communal rather than as an impersonal market. Yet many of eBay Live!’s offerings reflect the features of other conferences. eBay conferences include such activities as classes, category roundtables, book signings, “town hall” meetings, keynotes, networking meals, and galas. There is also a bookstore, an eBay Shop for collectibles, an expo hall, and an “eBay Community Lounge” where pinks social-
ize with members and pins and other collectibles are traded. These features are designed to articulate the brand and connect attendees to other members, the site, and the company.

eBay’s conference practices emphasize the presence and reach of the company and site. eBay recodes cities and meeting places as eBay-identified by branding interior convention spaces, areas around convention centers, and convention cities with the site logo and other identifiers. The company also makes employees, buyers, sellers, and press into advertisements by distributing branded lanyards, T-shirts, conference bags, and temporary tattoos. Wearing logos conveys enthusiasm and attachment to the company and, according to the English scholar Herbert Smith, turns the individual into a “walking billboard.” All of the 655 employees working at the conference in 2007, from new hires to Whitman, were identifiable by their blue polo shirts with the eBay logo and khaki pants. In previous years, eBay had also used shirts with the logo to identify employees, emphasize their presence, and make them available to attendees. Companies such as Hammertap, which provide services to eBay sellers, further distinguish their workers and articulate binary gender distinctions by having different branded shirts for women and men.

The culture of similitude and brand affiliation that these items render seems antithetical to the unique individuals eBay portrays and the ethos of computer programmers and designers. Technologists, particularly individuals engaged in startups and technology innovation companies, distinguish between their work life and the structures and wardrobes mandated by corporations. The Jargon File, which illuminates “many aspects of hackish tradition,” describes corporate cultures that require “Ugly and uncomfortable ‘business clothing’ often worn by non-hackers.” The text claims that “it is not uncommon for hackers to quit a job rather than conform to a dress code,” but eBay employees and many of the third-party developers wear identical branded clothing at conferences. Other hackers and computer workers also eagerly don T-shirts and denim shirts given out by technology companies. At the conference, everyone is reconceptualized as a team of workers who display the same logo and participate in the culture of fan and brand enthusiasm. Emphasizing the presence of employees is important, because board posters often indicate eBay staff is unavailable.

Many members are eager to wear branded items and advertise eBay and its third-party vendors. eBay “understands that many of their users are collectors by nature,” writes Micah Alpern, a former eBay employee, “so they
provided a number of things for attendees to collect.”115 The company gets people to collect eBay and embrace the company by providing branded promotional items. This increases the value of the brand and people’s attachment to the company and its objects. Other companies also offer free items at the conferences to connect their products and services to eBay, memorialize the event and significance of their brand, and link their businesses to collecting cultures and valuable collectibles. Attendees are presented with such things as branded enamel pins, Frisbees, magnets, packing tape, pens, stress balls, trading cards, and shopping bags in the exposition hall. These related objects help create a collecting culture in which eBay and eBay-generated items are central. Many attendees respond to these materials and decorate lanyards and clothing with dozens of branded, blinking, and enamel eBay pins and other collectibles. eBay’s conference culture is similar to Star Trek conventions, where, according to Sartelle, “opportunities for identity-oriented consumption; attending the event and buying Trek products are ways of confirming one’s membership in the larger ‘community’ of fans.”116 Product manufacturers also extend “brands into lines of collectible merchandise,” which, as the research of John Philip Jones and Jan S. Slater suggests, heightens brand loyalty, “extends exposure to the brand message,” and articulates the identity of consumers in relationship to the brand.117 These individuals function as collecting consumers and connect brand communities to collecting cultures.

eBay’s self-promotion and loyalty production through branded pins and other collectibles are part of larger corporate trends, including the Walt Disney Company’s sponsorship of pin trading at its theme parks.118 Disney has always offered collectible pins, but since 1999 it has created trading areas, rules for how visitors may trade pins with workers, seminars, and pin-trading conventions.119 Disney’s sponsorship of these activities makes attendees into collectors and fans, further connects people to the company and brand, and brings individuals to the parks more often. My own institution and its members use collecting to declare their organizational affinity, constitute a value for souvenirs, and validate the places and ideologies represented by these items. Tulane University dispenses free Mardi Gras beads, collectible enamel pins, and other items with its logo during academic rituals. Branded items thereby become a visible part of the institutional body and enable faculty to designate their current affiliation rather than just wearing robes that declare their graduate institutions. Newcomb, the women’s coordinate college that was associated with Tulane, was disbanded after Hurricane Katrina and the flooding of New Orleans. However, it remains visible, and individuals’ attach-
ment to it is declared by the enamel pins, sashes, and embroidered patches with the Newcomb colors and logo that are displayed during graduation ceremonies. These items are designed for specialized markets, make some individuals into fans, and articulate brand communities and resisters.

These events, like eBay’s conferences, assert the centrality and value of collecting. eBay’s first conference guide describes “one-of-a-kind” trading cards that are “exclusively designed for eBay Live attendees to collect” and encourages individuals to “collect the entire set.” At the 2003 conference, some pins and cards were less available because, as Alpern explains, a market is only interesting if “there is scarcity, so some pins were harder to come by.” In a similar manner, the 2007 conference guide advises that “pins are some of the hottest collectibles at eBay Live! because you can only get them at certain times during the event.” eBay uses terms like “one-of-a-kind” and “exclusively designed” to render items as collectible, valuable, and significant rather than allowing collectors’ tastes and market forces determine their long-term appeal. This creates a culture in which enthusiasts strive for items, worry about not being able to find things, and declare passion for the brand. 

ah6tyfour finds it “kind of scary to think that the pins are only” available “for a little while.” toys2keep likes to play games at the conference and win “the elusive special category pins and Limited Edition Hot Wheels car.” Collectors of such mass-produced goods, according to Russell W. Belk’s consumer research, “value rarity in collected objects because it provides both more challenge and a greater feeling of accomplishment and a higher status.” The discourse about rarity encourages collectors to find value in objects and the brand and obtain things as soon as possible. Yet, as David Burton indicates in his analysis of souvenirs, these conceptions can be duplicitous when used to sell large production runs of collectible plates and related items. eBay and other Internet-based collecting sites deploy conceptions of uniqueness and rarity even as they make it easier to obtain objects.

eBay codes its giveaways as limited editions to motivate collecting. However, eBay and employees are also aware that too much scarcity can frustrate members. In 2007, employees regularly carried gigantic bags of pins onto the convention floor, “96,500 pins were handed out,” and numerous pins decorated most attendees’ lanyards. Each collectible pin was supposed to be distributed only during a short, predetermined period, but employees offered all of the collectible pins, coins, and cards to attendees during the last day of the event. Some employees helped attendees complete their sets, but others eagerly and indiscriminately distributed large numbers of branded items to
members. Providing attendees with numerous versions of the same item encourages members to sell collectibles on the eBay site or share them and their enthusiasm and testament to eBay loyalty with friends. People “didn’t grab and hoard as much as possible for their own collecting and souvenirs,” argues stmmcmmanus; “they did that so they could come back home and sell it.” Attendees sell extra items to make a profit and because culture mandates that collections, and individual objects within each compilation, should be unique. As the collecting research of Brenda Danet and Tamar Katriel suggests, for an “assemblage of objects to be considered a collection, each item must be different from all others in some way discernible to the collector.” Since eBay items are often given away in gray plastic wrappings that prevent individuals from seeing what they are acquiring, the only way to sustain one-of-a-kind collections is by getting rid of redundant items.

In 2007, attendees could get pins and other giveaways from eBay employees when Kool & the Gang’s song “Celebration” played in the exhibition area and throughout the conference facility. eBay’s themes of gathering and community are evoked by the band’s invitation to join the party and share good times. A frenzy of activity, perhaps encouraged by Kool & the Gang’s encouragement to “celebrate,” occurred on the exhibition floor during pin giveaways. According to the reporter Julia Wilkinson, whenever “Celebration” played, the crowd started “moving like lemmings towards eBay booths and employees blessed with bags of the sacred pins.” She identifies collecting as part of an uncritical and ecstatic process of transcendence with the brand and eBay. Her narrative also perpetuates the association of collecting with addictive and obsessive behavior.

Attendees’ values have also been questioned. People at the conferences gather and even steal unconventional items. In Las Vegas, the “11” sign, which was featured in television campaigns, was taken from an eBay display. Employees advertised without success on the eBay Live! board in order to try and recover it. Attendees have been pickpocketed; bags of collectible pins have been stolen from employees; and people have tricked other members out of more collectible items. According to the eBay pink johnjohn, the “eBay Live team has watched centerpieces disappear from every eBay Live Gala” and therefore “designed the centerpieces to be taken.” However, the team was surprised that “several of the 8 foot towers decorating the buffet tables also disappeared (even though they were weighted down with sandbags) and one of the chocolate fountains.” chix_nuggets was amused “that someone climbed onto the chocolate fountain tables to steal the huge balls on top of
the displays." For giraffer, taking such things as personal mementos is more justified than acquiring things for resale. She hates “when they put them up on auction! If you take a memory, then keep it as a memory!” People are respected within collecting subcultures when their accumulation is not economically motivated. Nevertheless, these tales render crafty and avaricious eBay collectors who are happy to beat out other individuals and steal from their purported family and community.

eBay encourages a culture of enthusiastic collecting, but some attendees interrogate such behavior and identify it as unproductive. coniemiller hopes “people won’t be so crazy for pins” at future conferences. To critique members’ attachments to the company and its products, phreaky2 initiated a thread titled “Pins, Cards, Get a Life People.” In doing so, phreaky2 also referenced the performance on Saturday Night Live in which William Shatner advised Star Trek fans to “get a life.” Shatner’s comment has become an often referenced joke within fan communities. Nevertheless, eBay members diffuse these critiques and differences by providing conversion narratives about becoming fans and embracing the brand. For instance, skip555 initially dismissed people who were “groveling and begging for cards and pins” and then started to collect enthusiastically. The eBay Live! thread that began with phreaky2 asserting people should keep collecting in perspective ended with people trading cards. These shifts emphasize the important functions of convention items. eBay-ana stands in for the company and its processes, further attaches members to the brand, marks the identities of fans and brand community members, offers reasons for members to communicate and engage in trading, provides ways for attendees to make money, and creates a market on the eBay site.

Buying and Selling eBay Live!, Community, and Presence in the eBay-ana Category

eBay extends consumer identities and fan and brand communities by linking the eBay Live! board, conferences, and eBay-ana category. This system is interactive and responsive because items from the convention are listed while the conference is still occurring. There is an eBay-ana category under “Collectibles > Advertising” on the ebay.com site. There are also eBay-ana categories on the German and United Kingdom sites. eBay did not offer the eBay-ana category in the United States until 2005, even though sellers have been listing convention materials since 2002. Before the advent of the category, Barbara
Shaughnessy advised readers to “simply search eBay with the key words, eBay Live, and you’ll get a sense of the collecting and trading frenzy associated with these items.” Expressions of excitement about eBay: On Location suggest these processes will continue. People who engage with eBay items by acquiring them at conferences or buying, selling, and producing them are connected to the site and to collectors of the brand. eBay increases the absorbing kinds of consumption that occur with collecting and are facilitated by the setting because eBay-ana objects represent aspects of eBay and thus stand in for fandom and collecting.

eBay facilitates the eBay-ana market by offering large amounts of swag at conferences. Employees then counsel individuals to find materials on the site. The company also provides employees with many eBay-specific products and sanctions selling them. While a personal gift from Whitman or another executive is expected to have a personal value and be displayed in the employee’s office or cubicle, the overproduction and distribution of products make it difficult to retain everything. In addition, individuals sell eBay-ana after leaving the company because they no longer need to display company spirit in the form of branded items. For instance, denverain offers a “huge assortment of eBay collectibles” amassed while working for eBay and argues that “it’s time to get rid of all the stuff collecting dust.” After working at eBay for five and a half years, arubadubis “collected a lot of wonderful and rare eBay memorabilia” and wants “it out of” the “house.” These former employees no longer have to be eBay-identified and discard objects and the accompanying brand community associations. Such processes offer members of the eBay brand community opportunities to get closer conceptually to their beloved brand and company, but they offer this tie while suggesting the limits of employees’ investments and the ways they opt out of the system when they are not being paid to identify. In these cases, identification and detachment are interlocked.

Most eBay-ana buyers and sellers indicate the value of collections and importance of completing the set. For example, dottie, who bid on the “only eBay Live pinback” she “didn’t collect during the convention,” “Won it for $42.00 and some change,” and completed her collection. Attendees work as intermediaries for eBay collectors who are invested in extending their collection but cannot obtain all the material or go to the conferences. The seller III080551g4rwb, who already had a “set,” coaxed prospective buyers that “now it’s time to get yours.” aleegold advertised an auction for a “lanyard plus all the pins” that the seller is “here collecting for you.” Sellers emphasize
owning collections, but the buyer’s work in constituting it is depicted as less important. This is distinctly different from the majority of collecting cultures in which individuals respect collectors who work to find, organize, and maintain items and groups. According to Susan Stewart, “It is not acceptable to simply purchase a collection in toto, the collection must be acquired in a serial manner.” The cultural move away from appreciating the work in forming a collection is partially due to the changes facilitated by sites like eBay.

Buying and owning items, rather than being located in a particular place, are associated with eBay collectors’ experiences. Sellers promise that listings and collections situate buyers at the conference. gailcat1 offered “a deluxe package of collectibles from the convention” for individuals who “weren’t able to attend Ebay Live 2007.” Like the tourist souvenirs Danielle M. Lasusa studies, eBay-ana collectibles “are thought of as an extension of that experience or location, and play the important role of serving as empirical evidence that one has actually visited.” For instance, possessions recycled, who “spent 3 days of touring booths and speaking and enjoying the experience,” says that buyers “can feel” like they “were there” by buying the items. eBay assists in these narratives about “being there” by depicting sites and historical events from Boston on its pins and cards for the 2007 eBay Live! conference. eBay-ana items thus function as mementos of experiences that buyers have not inherently had and as souvenirs they have not directly collected. These selling practices extend the aspects of virtual settings where visceral experiences and notions of being in specific spaces have flexible relationships with situated materialities. This is related to “on-demand” sculptural castings of people’s game avatars, which can be ordered on a variety of Internet sites and provide a concretized record of individuals’ virtual identities.

 Buyers are also offered a form of access to eBay employees through collecting. Sellers indicate that signatures, clothing, and images deliver traces of employees’ embodiment. This is similar to the ways fans collect materials and even bodily matter from favorite media and music stars. For instance, a cohort of eBay sellers presented a residue of Britney Spears in the form of gum that she purportedly chewed and spit out. In a related manner, Griffith offered a version of himself constituted from artifacts when he listed “Griff’s Cool Mylar Blazer From eBay Live 2007.” The “high winning bidder not only gets the blazer,” he wrote, but “they will also receive . . . a signed full color photo” of him “in the jacket taken during the keynote.” This glittering
jacket stands in for Griffith but also represents his sexuality in more acceptable ways. It associates his sexual citizenship with fashion, consumerism, and his labor for the company rather than with male partners and sex acts. He has not “autographed the jacket but the high bidder can request a signature to be placed in a location of their choice (on the blazer silly . . . lapel or inside the collar for example).” With this comment, Griffith acknowledges people’s visual and tactile interests in his body and slightly averts the gaze. Women engage with Griffith as if he is sexually available and work to situate him in a form of closet. For instance, a female fan asked him to marry her at a 2007 keynote address. Griffith is not the only employee who has eBay fans. Cards signed by Whitman and Omidyar that were listed on “the same day” as the 2003 keynote sold “for a ‘Buy It Now’ price of $124.95.” Jenuinelyjill offered “an Officially Autographed Meg Whitman Collector Card” that she “stood in line waiting for Meg to sign,” suggesting that her personal engagement and Whitman’s mark increased the value of the card. Another seller, toys2keep, described the frenzy generated by Omidyar’s presence at the conference and the importance of celebrity executives. In “the confusion,” Omidyar “started signing Meg’s card instead of his own” and toys2keep “inadvertently ended up with the ever-so-rare ‘Pierre Sig on Meg Card’ . . . any takers? lol.” Members joke about their belief that signed eBay-ana items are unique, rare, and valuable. At the same time, they testify to their investments in these objects and conviction that autographed items further connect them to the executives and brand.

eBay-ana is envisioned as enriching owners’ lives by invoking or even replicating conference experiences and as something that can fund eBay attendance. For instance, postalrainey3 asks potential buyers to “help me pay for my trip to eBay Live! Boston.” Ion_treasures advises that “you can probably resell some/all of your pins/trading cards after the show and make back more than the registration cost.” The “freebies will be worth more packaged away and brought out in 10 years,” biggbill believes. These sellers identify collecting as an investment, a tactical process, and a way of connecting to eBay. Nevertheless, wmack2 identifies the pins as valueless and pin collecting as a base activity by asking, “what the hell are you supposed to do with them??? wear them??? how valuable do you honestly think they will be???” These critiques and anti-fan positions have some validity. Autographed cards used to sell for more than 100
U.S. dollars, but a trading card signed by Omidyar sold for only $3.99 in 2007.\(^{168}\) This shift in the market reflects negatively on eBay and the brand community. It points to waning enthusiasm for the site and its community.

**Disgruntled Fan, Anti-fan, and Anti-brand Community Critiques**

There are disgruntled fan, anti-fan, and anti-brand community engagements with eBay. In Candice R. Hollenbeck and George M. Zinkhan’s consumer activism research, they identify anti-brand communities that “typically focus on one dominant brand or corporation,” “are nongeographically bound communities based on a structured set of social relationships,” and voice “opposition to corporate domination.”\(^{169}\) For the fan studies scholar Jonathan Gray, “fans’ apparent opposites,” or anti-fans, are “those who refuse to let their family watch a show, who campaign against a text, or who spend considerable time discussing why a given text makes them angry to the core.”\(^{170}\) Derek Johnson develops this model and distinguishes between “anti-fans who hate a program (without necessarily viewing it)” and “disgruntled fan factions who hate episodes, eras, or producers because they perceive a violation of the larger text they still love.”\(^{171}\) There is a dearth of research on these critical positions but such notions help elaborate individuals’ resistances to eBay and the functions of criticism.

Negative assessments are visible aspects of eBay listings, About Me sites, feedback reviews, and forum posts. Ina Steiner critiques eBay because she expects a noncommercial setting and more authentic community. Her disgruntled fan critiques, like the interrogations in news forums, are based on perceived conflicts between eBay’s ethos and practices. The convention, she suggests, “was all about hype” (including the deployment of “the word ‘community’”), “was a made-for-tv event,” and the “words ‘Mary Kay’ and ‘Amway’” were used “more than a few times to describe the spirit of the event.”\(^{172}\) Howtooster also resists eBay’s culture of community and enthusiasm and positions himself somewhere between a disgruntled fan and an anti-fan. He plans to “be the guy” at the conference “wearing a t-shirt, one side will say ‘i hate ebay’ and the other will say ‘i was scammed by ebay.’”\(^{173}\) Thus, howtooster proposes anti-fan and anti-brand items that provide a counterpoint to positively branded people.

Disgruntled fans, anti-fans, and anti-brand community members are part of eBay rather than articulating separate spheres, but forum members ordinarily dismiss their critical commentary. Although fiberwireguy began his
own participation on the board as an opponent of eBay’s normalizing tendencies, he notes that howtooster’s “T-shirt will catch everyone’s eye. Especially” if standing “at the buffet next to the sour grapes.” Creations1106 feels that howtooster has “a sorry attitude,” is “looking for someone to blame,” should “stay away and leave the room for the business minded folks,” and instead “try www.Ifeelsorryformyself.com.” In these instances, members work to protect the company’s brand and reputation by trying to erase critical participants from the setting. Even after individuals in other settings were widely critiquing the company, many members in the eBay Live! forum mandated positive comments.

Members protect their enthusiastic positions and reasons for being attached by blaming consumer critics rather than the company. They become evaluators of the critics, or anti-anti-fans. There are cycles and levels of critique and resistance rather than a clear dyadic structure. For instance, creations1106 interrogates howtooster’s critique by examining one of the seller’s listings. Creations1106 determines that his “problem” is that the listing is “a non creative auction with no thought or concern behind it.” Dennis2kang notes that howtooster’s “44 negatives” explain his comments. Of course, some of the popular, enthusiastic, and award-winning members, as I suggested in chapter 1, have more negative reviews than howtooster and therefore have their own anti-fans. When WJkski lists reasons for not attending the conference, other posters wonder, if “Ebay makes you so upset, why do you still use it?” Chainmaillady gleefully replies that those who do not attend because of problems provide “more room for the rest of us!” Such posters do not admit that eBay controls a great deal of the Internet auction trade, and sellers are not always economically able to abandon their positive feedback and other labor. They imagine fans and brand community members to be expendable. However, howtooster rightly critiques such behavior by commenting that the “optimists don’t allow room to hear anything negative without getting upset. What happened to their good attitude?” Active eBay members, like the brand community members considered by Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann, believe that “belonging” requires “compliance and an obligation to think and act in certain ways.” These forms of ostracizing and controlling participants provide consumer critics with sites from which to interrogate eBay and its ethos. eBay’s and its members’ assertions about goodness structure the site and are flaws in the system that disgruntled fans, anti-fans, and anti-brand community members exploit.
Conclusion: Seasonal Products, Brands, and Fans

eBay Live! has produced seasonal fans and unintentionally highlighted ambivalent and resistant engagements. Most comments to the forum appear around the time of the conference. The trade in eBay-ana during and after the conference is also brisk, but fewer items are listed or sold a few months after the convention. eBay-ana, which invokes the conference for people who cannot attend and articulates members as fans, is a seasonal product. Members become less eBay-identified and adopt other attachments and passions when the conference is not occurring. This may make the more frequent eBay: On Location conferences productive. Yet eBay has not dedicated a forum to eBay: On Location or related events. The shifting forms of fan engagement that happen with eBay also occur in media fandoms, according to the research of Matt Hills, because individuals change the texts to which they are attached. Cyclical fandoms, disgruntled fans, anti-fandoms, and anti-brand communities are related to the ways members disidentify. While eBay wants to keep members endlessly attached and investing more—whether by purchasing goods, listing items, or working on the boards—the company now appears to recognize that eBay Live! is not fully adequate to this task.

Some commentators propose that the shift from eBay Live! to eBay: On Location will lessen critiques of the company and the site. However, funboy1227 humorously relates the change to the possibilities and problems of political consumerism. According to him, “Ebay Live was cancelled because there was concern that the local farmers would be unable to supply enough tomatoes to be thrown at Ebay Manglement. Chilean & Peruvian Farmers are protesting this decision, as they feel that they would have been able to profit by” supplying “Ebayers with the needed tomatoes.” In funboy1227’s critical account, the company foils possible markets. eBay members raise similar concerns about the ways the company prevents an array of sellers and selling strategies. eBay’s refusal to engage such critiques and change its policies reveals its corporate rather than community structure. There is no established method through which to address these conflicts or allow members to participate in site decisions.

The more communicative members of consumer communities become, according to Robert V. Kozinets’s marketing research, “the more activist their activity.” eBay fans are highly communicative. Many of them participate in forums and produce narratives, identities, and objects that have significant value and meanings within eBay fan and brand communities. Some eBay
members perform consumer critiques, but participants tend to replicate the corporate brand and its meanings. eBay fandoms thus work through connections and consensus with the company and its values. As Marc Andrejevic argues in his study of fan sites, “All audiences are active, although perhaps not in the progressive sense the term has come to imply.” Internet settings facilitate “strategies for promoting, harnessing, and exploiting the productivity” of fans. eBay, craigslist, and other Internet settings have methods to tap into and control members’ attachments. eBay manages members through its discourse about community, work, and goodness and such structures as the conferences and forums. craigslist uses similar narratives about belonging. In the next chapter, I provide a detailed account of how eBay addresses everyone and configures members as heteronormative individuals. Sellers of wedding dresses repeat and extend eBay’s mainstream narratives about weddings and heterosexual relationships. Through these practices, members connect and align themselves with eBay’s brand stories and principles. The flaws in these practices also point to possible methods of resistance.