Buy It Now

White, Michele

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Many eBay advertisements indicate that the site supports all identities and realizes all desires. However, eBay uses traditional representations, including depictions of heterosexual couples, to sustain the values of the setting and company. For instance, eBay features engagement rings and wedding dresses on the main parts of its site, in press releases, and in advertisements. It connects these items to gender, heterosexuality, and conceptions of shopping for “the one” and suggests they are key elements of eBay and women’s identities and lives. Women repeat these conceptions when using images and narratives about their weddings to sell dresses, mandating perfect bodies and gowns, and describing the wonderful qualities of their husbands. eBay’s connection of its site, company, and values to heterosexual marriages has a social and economic influence on members. Its ethos also exceeds the setting as the company and site are further incorporated into the contemporary cultural and political sphere through such things as Meg Whitman’s engaging in U.S. politics.

eBay’s narratives about engagement rings and wedding dresses do more than distinguish gender and sexuality. eBay links such organizational aspects of its site as the category system, feedback ratings, digital imaging and digitized photography, and color coding to binary gender and heteronormativity. This is even more effective since binary gender and heteronormativity are also organizational, and sometimes institutional and business, logics. Binary
gender maintains and produces social stratification and power by mapping a dyadic system onto people, bodies, companies, groups, and other things. Heteronormativity is the assertion of heterosexual privilege and pervasive ordering of existence through inflexible sexual standards. By using the concept of organizational logic, I interrogate the underlying structures of businesses, which assert gender and heterosexual norms, and the larger ways things are categorized in Internet settings and other spheres. eBay’s gendered and heterosexual organizational logic includes the methods through which the company structures individuals, the ways it organizes things into men’s and women’s categories, the deployment of engagements and marriages in its founding mythos and advertising, and its claims to equally honor everyone. Critiques of such corporate and social structures are imperative. As Joan Acker and other feminist academics note, society often views companies and their rules and procedures as gender-neutral, equally acknowledging everyone, and considerations of gender and sexuality as forced on or tangential to the organization and analysis.

eBay configures buyers, sellers, and viewers as heterosexuals and supports its organizational logic when featuring engagement rings and wedding dresses on the main parts of the site, in press releases, and in advertising. eBay thereby produces members, technologies, and the site. In a related manner, Steve Woolgar demonstrates how technology designs set constraints upon users’ actions. Technologies are imagined to be unbiased tools and to equally serve everyone, and in the case of eBay to enable “Whatever it is,” while providing clear messages about the identity of users. eBay’s and members’ portrayals, as I suggest in the remaining chapters, work with and against each other in configuring the gender, race, and sexuality of participants and constraining their positions and roles. Advertising is an important aspect of this process. It asserts corporate logics; links objects and cultural roles to specific consumer groups; articulates gender, race, and sexuality positions; and coaxes categorized consumers to buy particular goods. Advertising has “consistently reflected prevailing views of appropriate gender relations and heterosexual norms,” argues the media studies scholar Katherine Sender, “both endorsing ‘proper’ femininity and masculinity and yoking these to the heterosexual dyad.” In doing this, advertising and related institutions affirm heterogender—a gender system that couples male with female and thereby asserts heterosexuality.

Engagements and weddings, with their normative, moral, and consumerist mandates, are an obvious structure for eBay to deploy. Ramona Faith Oswald,
who studies lesbian and gay family structures, describes how “society privileges heterosexual marriages, and thus weddings link the personal decision to marry with an institutional heterosexual privilege carrying profound social, legal, financial, and religious benefits.” Critical considerations of heteronormativity and heterogender are important because they show the means through which heterosexual privilege is incorporated into society and the ways these advantages pervasively and insidiously order everyday existence. In this chapter, I address how eBay asserts its organizational logic and configures members by using representations of engagements and weddings. Literature on weddings and sexuality suggests how the company and its members ordinarily work together in instituting stable and traditional women’s roles. eBay’s reliance on members can also undermine its organizational logic. For instance, eBay’s linking of social selling to normative bliss is disturbed by sellers’ depictions of grimy objects and failed relationships. The critical literature on dirt and disorder points to some of the ways eBay’s normative assertions break down. Sellers’ descriptions of weight gains, dirty dresses, broken marriages, and images that do not do objects justice articulate expected conventions and remind members that normative narratives are connected to failed and resistant activities.

Imaging eBay Weddings

eBay’s apocryphal founding story, and the concept that configures the site and company’s notion of community, is that Pierre Omidyar started eBay as a kind of love token so his fiancée, Pam Wesley, could trade Pez dispensers. His design proved to be economically profitable and purportedly successful in facilitating his marriage. eBay continues this founding narrative in its Valentine’s Day gift finder, which associates shopping and the site’s functions with Pez dispensers depicting Kermit the Frog and Miss Piggy that stand in for Omidyar, Wesley, and the desire for Pez trading (figure 1 on p. 14). Through the paired dispensers, which are correlated to “Male” and “Female” gift options, eBay interlinks consumerism, the eBay community, heterosexuality, and Omidyar and Wesley’s romance. Members retell the founding story, connect their participation and romantic relationships to his design, and make the myth more real. By employing such practices, the eBay company and many members collaboratively configure the site as having a heterosexual lineage and being heterosexual.

Whitman supports the relationship between eBay and traditional gender
and sexuality positions by identifying as a wife and mother. For instance, while running for governor of California, Whitman explained her poor voting record to constituents by arguing that she “was focused on raising a family” and on her “husband’s career.” She configures eBay as a community that supports family and prescribed particularities of boyhood when she describes buying and selling “old sporting equipment on eBay, especially when the boys were younger. They would outgrow hockey skates, they would outgrow skis, they’d outgrow sneakers, they’d outgrow everything. You know how boys grow so fast.”

Such gender and sexuality narratives are part of early conceptions of virtual community. Indeed, Howard Rheingold situates virtual community in relationship to his home life, wife, and child.

eBay regularly depicts wedding rings in site advertisements. These citations support eBay’s association of the site with heterosexual engagements, weddings, and marriages. NetLingo dictionary and a variety of newspapers quote eBay’s promotional material about how many “diamond rings” are sold on the site every hour. Jim Griffith notes that a “diamond ring is purchased every two minutes,” even though the site has higher sales numbers. eBay’s “Build Your Bling” competition enables members to vote on the engagement-ring and wedding-ring designs submitted by participants, viewers to buy material versions of the sketches, and the winning designer to get the “dream ring.” Through this contest, eBay gets members to generate, vet, and invest in brand community products. On the main part of the site, eBay furthers its connection to heteronormativity and inquires, “Getting engaged? Let eBay’s Wedding Jewelry page help you.” The related links offer “Testimonials” about how sellers of engagement rings provide reliability, quality, and reasonable prices. In this narrative, buying reinforces a man’s relationship with a woman, so that she “loves the ring and she loves him.” eBay’s pink “banner” advertisements for engagement rings, which address women by using a gender-specific color, also link the site and auctions to future marriages. Women are assured that eBay can resolve their fears that they will “be single forever” by enabling couples to reasonably acquire the accoutrements of heteronormative relationships. All of this positions eBay and its sellers as good community members, supporters of Omidyar’s site ethos, and matchmakers.

The issue of eBay Magazine from June 2000, which is culturally marked as the time of year when marriages occur, includes a section on the “bridal wave.” The reporter Theresa Howard argues that, in addition to “being a marketplace, eBay has spawned marriages, collectors’ clubs and even help
in tracing family genealogies.”

Maggy Wolfe and Brad Aspling—a white heterosexual couple who used the site to get engaged—were featured in company announcements and married in front of thousands of attendees during the eBay Live! conference in 2004. Conference participants could “attend the wedding of two people who met on the community boards. (Now that’s doing it eBay.).” Through this text, eBay asserts, as it indicates in other venues, that individuals should be heterosexual and in a monogamous relationship to perform eBay culture correctly. eBay’s use of the term “it” in these announcements and notion of “doing it eBay” are related to the company’s “Whatever it is, you can get it on eBay” and “Come to think of it, eBay” slogans. However, this text immediately relates sex to sanctified heterosexual unions rather than a variety of sexualities. eBay argues that it makes sense to situate the wedding at the convention, to “do it eBay,” and for the couple to be “be married within the Community that brought them together,” because the “two met on eBay, and Brad sniped Maggy’s engagement ring on eBay.”

According to Aspling, getting married at the conference gave them the “chance to get married in front of” their “friends in the community” where they “met.” In these instances, eBay’s community and ethos are equated to the processes of heterosexual marriages, and members are committed to the site through the brand community activities of reading about and attending the wedding.

eBay uses weddings to personalize and individualize eBay and further its community appeal, even though contemporary weddings are consumerist structures and ordinarily require a significant monetary investment. Weddings are thereby a successful way for eBay to emphasize its community-oriented and non-corporate profile while supporting its underlying economic motivations. However, eBay’s and Aspling’s claims that the site facilitates marriages are disputable. eBay states that Aspling and Wolfe met on eBay, but Wolfe provides a different story, which troubles another one of eBay’s origin myths. According to Wolfe, they “met on match.com and he proposed in an auction.” By highlighting eBay’s apocryphal stories, I hope to demonstrate how the company crafts narratives to sustain its relationship to normative gender and sexuality, configure the site, and support its organizational logic. eBay’s wedding narratives are therefore not inherent or politically neutral aspects of the site and company.

eBay’s advertising campaigns reference diverse desires and perpetuate heterosexuality and normative sexual citizenship. Dress, a television commer-
cial from the “Come to think of it, eBay” campaign that began in 2009, uses a green putting range and red bedroom to articulate separate gendered spheres and shopping experiences. In the commercial, the comic Kevin Hart indicates that his wife should have spent less money on a dress. She provocatively lounges on the bed while hearing his critique, directs him to feed the children, and expels him from the room. By dismissing his partner’s eBay purchase, Hart foils their romantic evening. An approving relationship to eBay is thereby coded as good for “it” and erotic heterosexual relationships. The commercial Camera, from the same campaign, presents a more queer reading and associates eBay with traditional masculinity and heterosexuality. In it, the comics Michael Showalter and Michael Ian Black are in a tattoo parlor. One of them has wisely and inexpensively bought his camera on eBay. The bad shopper spent more, attempts to get a shark tattoo and remain masculine, and is foiled. As the successful eBay shopper advises, the tattoo is of a dolphin rather than a shark, and he is “going to look so good in a half shirt” because “it is just so feminine.” Shopping is thus coded as something that can lead to masculine norms or, if improperly handled, mistaken sexualities and queerness.

Some of eBay’s “Whatever it is, you can get it on eBay” television spots, from a campaign that started in 2005, also frame the site’s promises of bountiful objects and collections with heterosexual unions. This is necessary if eBay wants to maintain its relationship to heteronormativity. The art historian Michael Camille indicates that the boundlessness of collectors’ desires, their interest in possessing an ever increasing web of desirable things, “strain the limits of the heterosexual matrix” and “problematize the logic of oppositions structuring it.” The eBay television advertisements manage this boundlessness by connecting everyone and “it” to engagement rings and heterosexual unions. In one of the spots, a woman is wearing a diamond engagement ring that spells out the word “it.” She mistakenly drops her ring down the drain as her male partner watches (figure 2 on p. 15). The viewer hears the ring hitting varied parts of the drainpipe and sees the apartments that the ring falls through; each is populated by people who own “it”-shaped items. Their shared engagement with “it,” and thereby the site, means they live together in an eBay community. In the final sequence, the heterosexual couple is eating an “it”-shaped fish. When the woman puts a bite of fish into her mouth and pulls out the ring, her male partner is delighted. The ring and their looks of wonder connect the couple into a kind of second engagement proposal. In
this advertisement, the many desires and community arrangements articulated as being available through eBay are prefaced by and returned to a normative and sanctified heterosexual union.

In another ad, a cloud of pink smoke forming the word “it” and a sultry musical track lure a man from the refrigerator to the bedroom. The narrative frames the man’s masculinity in relationship to a shopping platform that is sometimes coded as feminine and to a sequence where the man is lured by a diaphanous pink cloud, or “Whatever it is,” but ends up getting “it on.” He follows the cloud into the bedroom, where his female partner is clad in a white slip, spraying herself from a perfume flacon shaped like the word “it” and getting ready for a seduction scene. At the end of the commercial, the tagline reads, “Give in to temptation.” However, temptation has already been framed in very limited terms. In these spots, the profusion of objects, community arrangements, and desires, which give the individual a variety of collecting choices, are bracketed by normative gender and heterosexual roles and monogamous relationships.

The Power of All of Us site, which is associated with eBay’s 2004 campaign, also emphasizes community and heteronormative positions. The site begins with an outlined image of the community and then provides the viewer with a “Welcome to the eBay Community. The Power of All of Us.” This is another stand in for everyone. According to an article in the Chatter newsletter, eBay “is about millions of human connections,” but the company uses a “special effects technique called ‘green screen’ to create thousands of sellers” in the advertisement. eBay thus figures community where there literally is none. The Power of All of Us site also configures the gender, race, and sexuality of members. It represents the “future of eBay” as a light-skinned mother, father, and two children who are about to travel toward a “community” of architecturally similar houses and desires. While the site’s generic outlines of people begin as a stand in for everyone, they are subsequently filled in with gendered and raced individuals. Members are thereby encouraged to occupy specific roles.

eBay’s Clocks and Maze television spots, from the “Power of All of Us” campaign, also render buyers and sellers moving from fields of everyone to heterosexual unions. The Clocks advertisement begins and ends with a man standing in front of his collection. As the commercial unfolds, the prospective buyer is presented with everyone as his home, street, neighborhood, and landscape are filled with potential sellers and clocks. Selecting an item from the eBay community allows the buyer to meet a woman, briefly join hands with her, and obtain the object from her hands. In Maze, a woman’s con-
fused search through an incomprehensible labyrinth of everything is resolved when she finds “the one thing” she wants “from the one person who has it” and is united with a man across a bundled rug. eBay uses these advertisements to relate individual and community engagements with objects to heteronormative romances between people, make a connection between the “thousands of people who love what you love” and “the one” partner who is right for an individual, and indicate that eBay can enable the individual to “find them.” The arrangement between buyers and sellers is even referred to as “trading partners.” The company uses these texts to support its narratives about eBay being a community of everyone, constitute the normal citizen as heterosexual, and institute heterosexuality as a necessary condition for full eBay citizenship.

**Gender and Sexuality Conventions in Other Settings**

eBay’s allusions to everyone and production of normative positions encourage evaluations of the ways other Internet sites generate conventions. For instance, early writings about the Internet tend to claim that everyone can connect equitably because of Internet-facilitated anonymity. According to Virginia Shea’s often quoted “Netiquette” guidelines, individuals are not judged according to their age, body size, class, and race in Internet settings. The Jargon File attributes hackers’ gender and racial tolerance to their engagement with text-based communication. More recent work identifies Internet-based production opportunities as democratizing and providing young adults, women, and people of color with the same chances as those who have traditionally been able to express their opinions. Such indications incorrectly make it seem as if power discrepancies are the fault of individual engagements rather than cultural and structural inequities. Scholarship on GLBTQ consumerism, sexual citizenship, and configuring users provides methods for analyzing such promises and representations. For instance, Sender demonstrates that advertising—and I would argue that most websites function as a form of self-advertising—support and continue normative conceptions of gender and heterosexual relationships.

Adesso, which sells input devices, uses three digital images to advertise its products, represent the company, and configure individuals (figure 5). In the middle image, a young white woman and man are dressed in a wedding gown and tuxedo, surrounded by family, engaged in normative forms of connectivity, and getting married. Since the depicted wedding is a union
between a man and woman and facilitator of familial connectivity, it evokes and stands in for technological connectivity. The image therefore associates heterosexual relationships with technologies. As Sender’s analysis and my critique of eBay indicate, company advertisements tend to support normative roles and link people’s binary gender position to their presumed place in a heterosexual couple. On either side of the Adesso wedding image, parents are teaching their children how to use computers as the representation instructs consumers in heterosexuality. Adesso establishes technology as part of the normative family, or even constituting it, and literalizes the notion of a “family” of products. Adesso provides a genesis legend for technologies and gender and heterosexual lessons for consumers. This is similar to eBay’s founding mythos.

Many other companies also code individuals who use technologies as family-oriented and occupying traditional roles. For instance, Logitech advertises its WiLife Video Security system, which allows individuals to “Make
sure ‘all is well,’” with an image of a man in an office monitoring a computer screen. Via the monitor, he watches his home and, most important, as emphasized by their size and position on the monitor, his wife and child. The image establishes a difference between men who skillfully use technologies and women and young children who are protected and watched through technologies. By featuring this image and conveying the idea that the technology allows individuals to make sure “all is well,” Logitech references everyone and everything but articulates the heterosexual family as “all” and everything. Such claims to address everyone are related to eBay’s assertion, “Whatever it is, you can get it on eBay,” references to profusion and varied sexualities, underlying coding of “it” as heterosexuality, and indication that everyone gets/is trained in heterosexuality on the site. In the afterword about craigslist, I continue to consider how the concept of everyone is associated with sexual freedom and the ways it is used to justify rules and regulate members.

eBay and other companies use color coding to configure viewers—directing them to appropriate parts of sites and instructing them. Colors help to articulate the purportedly different behaviors of individuals and organize them into pairs. For instance, the Geni site deploys color coding to establish heterogender. Geni offers a variety of web-based tools to produce family trees; claims to be a place “for your family to build your family tree, preserve history and share your lives”; and advertises with the tagline “everyone’s related.” Despite Geni’s assertion of universal delivery and applicability, the login depiction prevents some individuals from being related and constituting family. The login provides an image of a blue rectangle, which is labeled “Your Father,” joined to a pink rectangle, which is labeled “Your Mother.” Viewers are provided with a registration box that derives from this union and are told, “You – Start Here.” They are also required to choose “male” or “female” for their identity position. By telling individuals that they “Start” from heterosexual arrangements, the site informs viewers that they begin with and are produced from heterosexuality. The log-in diagram and other site mechanisms thereby assert an organizational logic that includes binary gender and heterosexuality. Geni associates relationships with reproduction.

Flickr claims to enable “new ways of organizing photos and video,” because once people “switch to digital, it is all too easy to get overwhelmed.” In indicating this, Flickr distinguishes itself from the sorts of photographic and organizational logics, fixed in albums, scrapbooks, wallets, and photo
frames, that produce developmental histories where children are transformed into heterosexual couples, get married, and have families of their own. From its “inception in daguerreotypy,” according to Shawn Michelle Smith, a photography historian and theorist, “the photographic image has been conceptualized as a means of preserving family history and of documenting family genealogy.” Flickr indicates its difference from traditional photography but uses the tagline “flickr loves you,” links members to the site, and equates this engagement to a relationship or romance. Flickr, in a manner similar to eBay, relates personal connections between the company and members to normative gender and sexuality roles. Its “favicon,” the specially designed icon that appears in the browser’s URL bar and stands in for the site, further ties photo organizing to heterosexual pairing. It features a blue dot and a pink dot, or a man and a woman, paired together. This reference to heterosexuality also appears in Flickr’s blue and pink logo and other texts. In a related way, Phanfare, a photo and “video sharing network for families,” connects its setting and photography to heteronormativity. It states, “From wedding bells to the arrival of a new baby, phanfare has the perfect album style to showcase all of your treasured photos and videos.” Photographs and photography may be digitally reconfigured. However, these sites still connect photo-like objects and digital processes to families and weddings and thereby assert their role in producing traditional gender and sexuality positions. These unreliable addresses to everyone encourage further critical analysis of the politics of these texts.

Selling Values and Norms

Technology companies use narratives about everyone to stand in for heterosexual relationships and conventional forms of identity and desire. We generally agree that there has been a change in values and norms relating to women’s roles since the second wave of the women’s movement. Nevertheless, Sherril Horowitz Schuster argues, the increase in bridal magazines (and now websites), consumer shows, and wedding-themed films and advertising indicate “that the traditional bridal ritual and its myths are still salient,” and we are collaboratively producing the most traditional roles. eBay’s popular narratives and Adesso’s images can be added to Schuster’s list and her research concerns. They perpetuate traditional roles while claiming to deliver new interfaces and technologies.
eBay chose the wedding as one of its key structuring devices because weddings, as Dawn H. Currie’s research on the subject indicates, are “a good example of the increasing commodification of ritual elements of social life in western culture” and “big business.” The consumer researchers Cele Otnes and Tina M. Lowrey describe weddings as “significant consumption rituals within American culture.” Weddings manage to “‘marry’ the tenets of consumer culture and romantic love.” Weddings are also moments where family and community are constituted as consumers. These families, and the forms of buying they facilitate, are ordinarily envisioned as good and supporting traditional values. This is important to eBay’s design, because, as Cohen indicates, Omidyar wanted the site to function in the same manner as his personal values, including his belief in goodness. Through such organizational logics, Omidyar’s discourse about community is related to his articulation of the setting’s values, establishment of normative beliefs, and the model of trust that is needed for people to participate in economic transactions without physically engaging items or sellers.

Computer designers and marketers, as demonstrated by my analysis of the Adesso and Logitech campaigns, connect the organizational logic of the heterosexual imaginary and its wedding myths to the structures of Internet settings. The heterosexual imaginary, as Chrys Ingraham’s feminist and sexuality studies research indicates, is “that way of thinking which conceals the operation of heterosexuality in structuring gender and closes off any critical analysis of heterosexuality as an organizing institution.” eBay’s heterosexual imaginary, its purported representation of reality and everyone, relies on romantic conceptions of heterosexuality to render the illusion of well-being and mask the specific conditions of the site and its members. The heterosexual imaginary and romance are therefore important to eBay, especially as members become disenfranchised with the site and its rules. eBay justifies consumerism by equating it with heteronormative love and heterosexually infused caring behaviors, including Omidyar’s supposed design of the site as a love token. At the same time, as the sociologist Amy L. Best argues, “romance carries tremendous ideological force; it naturalizes and normalizes” heterosexuality and gender and “shapes and organizes modern constructions of self.” Normative romance is a key aspect of eBay’s advertising structures, as well as a larger thematic in Internet settings, and has a significant impact on eBay’s organizational logic, the meaning of the site, and the ways members understand themselves and their position in the setting.
Chapter Three

The Wedding Dresses Category

eBay’s wedding category and “Wedding Dresses” subcategory, which is listed under “Clothing, Shoes & Accessories > Wedding Apparel & Accessories,” repeat the site’s normative narratives. The category claims to have “everything a bride needs from wedding dresses, veils, tiaras and garters to flower girl dresses and ring bearer pillows. You can even outfit your whole bridal party with our tuxedos, bridesmaid dresses and ring bearer outfits.” Through this text, eBay codes wedding shopping, including outfits for men and children, as the bride’s job, constituting the “bridal party,” and as fulfilling feminine desires. At the same time, the category offers the opportunity to conceptually connect members’ weddings to Omidyar’s marriage. Wolfe’s and Aspling’s searches of the site to shop for wedding items and their eBay Live! wedding further the idea that the setting facilitates marriages and intimate connections to eBay.

In the rest of this chapter, I study the ways individuals list wedding gowns rather than the methods used by Chinese gown producers and U.S. bridal shops, which are significant vendors in this category. This allows me to analyze how people sell items that are culturally coded as deeply intimate and conceptually related to the eBay site. Sellers often use the wedding dresses category to present virtual photographic albums of their wedding ceremonies and families. In these instances, the listings have a personal function. Sellers also personalize items to further social selling and promise potential buyers a connection to community and romantic history. These listings provide traditional social scripts about what weddings look like and how women are supposed to perform and thereby normalize future shoppers and brides. For example, sellers indicate that dresses can be part of a “dream wedding,” are “ready for your Special Day,” “will make you feel like a princess,” and are examples “of bridal romance and femininity!” Sellers’ commentary about fantasy weddings and feeling like a princess continue the representations in wedding-dress advertisements, children’s toys, and popular films about weddings.

Sellers also convey traditional conceptions of weddings and gendered roles through digital images. Bridal photographs, as Schuster states, have an impact on women by instructing them in how to enact the portrayed role. In doing this, they configure the user. For instance, carolineprezzano helps women envision the bridal role, and the sorts of femininity women are supposed to embody, by presenting an image of her thin form articulated and
shaped by a fitted wedding gown and contrasting sash. She holds a bouquet of white flowers and stands fixedly with the train arranged behind her. In such depictions, women emphasize their femaleness and purported connection to nature with sprays of flowers and position in green park settings. An image of carolineprezzano’s partner helping her enter the limousine further highlights her limited mobility and need for assistance. Of course, it is the gown rather than any aspect of her psyche or physiognomy that produces this confinement. A similar feminine role is conveyed in emelias2242’s dressing-room scene. She demurely and submissively looks down, with her dress, sash, and pose emphasizing her delicateness. Women and listings work to replicate these positions. For instance, carolineprezzano “would love nothing more than for someone else to experience their special day in this memorable gown” and to thereby enact the portrayed role.

Sellers accompany representations of traditional weddings with accounts of guests complimenting brides and dresses. carolineprezzano has “not stopped hearing about how stunning this dress was.” Such narratives act as reminders of the commentary and evaluations that brides experience. According to the research of Jeffery Sobal, Caron Bove, and Barbara Rauschenbach, “The role of the bride especially involves observations and scrutiny in the central spotlight of the wedding.” Personal and family remembrances of weddings, which are aided by photographic “documentation” of women’s bodies, include recollections of the brides’ weight. Professional photographers have also “developed strategies to manage their subjects’ presentations of their weight, with camera angles, lighting, and posing used to create stylized pictures that portray the weights of people at weddings in socially desirable ways.” For instance, carolineprezzano’s three-quarter pose and the contrasting background emphasize her slenderness. Charles Lewis’s research on wedding photography points to how such images “are nearly always constructing the conventional: it is more or less the same fairy tale for each couple.” Sellers reinstitute conventional gender and sexuality scripts when reusing wedding advertisements and photographs in listings.

Sellers also produce normative conceptions of bodies by advertising dresses with a “flair” that “will hide any hip area that you might think is ‘fat’” and “GOOD AT HIDING MIDSECTION FLAWS. VERY SEXY DRESS!” cowboyssting “was so frustrated with” her “size, and evil dress designers,” but she “put this dress on and started crying” because she was “beautiful.” Nevertheless, encouragements to be beautiful include provisos to hide, constrain, or manage “fat.” Sellers’ texts are reminders, as indicated by Sobal,
Bove, and Rauschenbach, that many “women would like to lose weight to meet cultural expectations about slimness at their wedding.” While these researchers also assert that the process of losing weight before weddings is not discussed, eBay sellers unfortunately connect weddings and dieting. For instance, twopickerz wrote that her “most beautiful dress” would “not fit” and if she “hadn’t already had the invitations printed” she “would’ve postponed” the “wedding and dieted until this fit!!” Other women get “too fat to wear” their gown. The size of wedding gowns and the body of brides are an issue in wedding-dress selection because of narratives about the perfect day and because, as the fat studies researcher Rachel Colls indicates, “Obesity and bodily bignesses are associated with particular versions of morality.”

The people involved in weddings try to articulate a set of values that are different from the cultural coding of obesity because it is associated with a lack of control, messiness, dirtiness, and unreliability. Such attributes endanger the reputation of sellers and eBay.

The wedding-dress industry is fixated on the bodies and weight of future brides and their ability to maintain and manage their weight through the wedding-planning process. Weight shifts mark what is purported to be women’s lack of control as well as the imperfectness of the planning period. According to Laura Sloan Patterson, who researches brides and body image, “The actual wedding-dress shopping day (or weekend, or month) causes bouts of depression, followed by unreasonable attempts to shrink oneself into a tiny size.” The many dresses that are being offered on eBay because they no longer fit are a record of women’s weight gains, dieting, and imperfect relationship with bridal workers and shops. Marisa Corrado’s study points to how women’s weight gains are “a constant problem for bridal workers.”

Women “order dresses months in advance” and “seem to gain significant amounts of weight between the time of their first measurements and when the dresses arrive.” Corrado also states, “Changing shape is such a widespread problem that most bridal shops make clients sign a contract” that the “shop is not responsible for a new dress.” The purported irresponsibility of sellers and brides, who are not able to control bodies, threaten to problematize their roles.

Weight gains—or, in some cases, losses—are not the only unruly behavior women exhibit while planning weddings and listing their dresses on eBay. Women also write about their passionate, and fan-like, desire to obtain the perfect dress. princesao52607 “was obsessed with this dress and wanted it no matter how much it was.” autumn_gunnels was listing an “ABSOLUTELY
gorgeous wedding dress!!” that she “fell in love with” and was “so upset” to “only wear it once” because she “worked so hard to buy it.” Some women get rid of a dress in favor of another gown because they “decided to go with a renaissance faire theme and this gown is much too formal” or changed their “mind on the dress” and are “stuck with this one.” Women get caught up in dress buying, or collecting, and invest both economically and emotionally in their gowns. Women’s purportedly obsessive wedding-dress desires and collecting are economically productive for sites like eBay, but they also connect negative cultural conceptions of fans to the positively coded and value-producing aspects of brand cultures.

eBay does not always support these emotional investments in dresses. Its site title offers “Wedding Dresses, cheap wedding dresses and discount wedding dresses items on eBay.com. Find it on eBay.” This title assures women that items are a bargain. However, it thereby challenges sellers’ promises that the site will facilitate sumptuous fantasies. eBay’s conveyance of cheapness and mass-produced abundance, which is evoked by the reuse of the word “wedding dresses” in the title, is mirrored by the large number of visually similar dresses on the site. Individuals and bridal shops often sell new, sample, and gently worn wedding dresses for less than 50 U.S. dollars, which does not economically communicate their personal value or the special aspects of the event. Of course, dresses are also available in much higher price ranges. The repetitive aspects of the text and images, low prices, and frequent failed auctions do not correlate with women’s desires for authenticity and uniqueness. In this category, “it” literally means normativity and wedding apparel and represents much more complicated unions and arrangements between people. The title and overwhelming number of dresses available in the category represent the problems in moving from the many to “it.”

Searches to find “the one”—both a husband and wedding dress—do not always work so smoothly. The “Power of All of Us” campaign addresses the problem of moving from the many to “it,” or the one item, in Clocks, but the man ends up back with his abundant collection. His past and future selections only lead to more searching. In collecting, each item must be unique, part of a group, and that which constitutes the idea of whole. Traditional brides need to find and then wear one dress at the ceremony, but a number of sellers articulate wedding-dress shopping as a form of collecting. For instance, corrieandmike “couldn’t decide on only one dress.” maileib “went a little crazy shopping” and “ended up buying three.” julieann4him described herself as “a multiple dress bride (10!) who had to make some very
difficult choices!” She was “willing to take the chance and resell if they didn’t work out” because she was looking for her “dream dress” and could not “pass up these amazing deals!” In these cases, eBay increases the “intensely involving forms of consumption” that Belk associates with collecting. Bridal magazines and other sources advise women to consult multiple sources for the best price and make personal choices. This results in extensive shopping and collecting. Collections, as Susan Stewart describes the process, are usually acquired sequentially and amassed, but the processes and experiences of eBay wedding-dress shoppers—and, indeed, all shoppers for such garments—do not mesh well with neverending dress collecting and items. The process of buying multiple wedding dresses suggests numerous rather than individual weddings and challenges the conception of “the one.”

The wedding dress and rings are usually the most precious material parts of the marriage ritual. As Susanne Friese argues in her wedding dress research, many women’s wardrobes include “one piece of clothing that, having been worn once, is seldom worn again but is often highly treasured and especially cared for. This piece of clothing is her wedding dress.” Nevertheless, eBay becomes a mechanism in which these treasured dresses regularly circulate. For example, 25chanelgirl’s “dress is amazingly stunning.” She “got it for a steal,” “was kinda skeptical about buying a wedding dress on ebay but this dress was perfect,” and now wants “to pass it on to another bride who will love it!!!!” eBay’s advertisement about the lost wedding ring, in which the object travels through a system of pipes, represents the flow of goods on eBay. This circulation, particularly in the case of wedding dresses, indicates a cultural shift away from investments in family heirlooms. These relinquished items are a part of Daniel Nissanoff’s “new auction culture” that, according to him, will “revolutionize the way we buy, sell, and get the things we really want.” In his book on secondary market economies, he advises people to adopt the resale model and assess value in other ways. Wedding-dress sellers evaluate value in a different manner. Dresses are no longer kept because they represent meaningful memories or because they are being saved for children, who are envisioned as mirroring their mothers’ commitment. Instead, the “heirloom” may be transformed into what the reporter Paysha Stockton Rhone describes as “just another piece of post-wedding detritus” when wedding dresses are sold on eBay.

For the site to function economically, eBay must support listings of personal items. However, eBay must resist the negative coding that accompanies the unsentimental sale of goods for the company’s brand community nar-
ratives and values to stand. eBay therefore represents cultural nostalgia and asserts that lost or sold-off items can always be regained. In the Toy Boat advertisement, a man uses the eBay interface to recover the plaything he lost as a child. The company’s commercial about the engagement ring also assures individuals that everything is retrievable. eBay’s corporate display cases in San Jose, California, include the timepiece that the man selected from the female seller in the Clocks advertisement. The retention and display of such items conveys the idea that the eBay community maintains and preserves the past. Individuals sell off wedding dresses and other items, but the site’s narratives and community features assure individuals that these objects are kept within the eBay community, preserved, and loved.

White Weddings and the Problem of Dirt and Disorder

eBay’s wedding-dresses category includes a seemingly neverending series of white gowns, which are usually portrayed on white women. By the turn of the nineteenth century, as Ingraham notes, “White had not only become the standard but had also become laden with symbolism—it stood for purity, virginity, innocence, and promise, as well as power and privilege,” and for the conception that women had one partner.85 Wedding-dress photographers tend to perpetuate these traditional conceptions of families, reproduction, and rituals. However, their images also reveal some problems with attempts to configure members and brides. One of jackool78’s images shows her in a white wedding gown with a full skirt and train.86 Two young girls in full-skirted white outfits smile happily, hold the back of her train, and mirror her garb. The arrangement of the figures, with the girls connected to the bride by a swath of white, evokes the transference of normative gender and sexuality positions from one generation to the next. Nevertheless, these images also reveal the messy and imperfect sets where these actions occur. jackool78’s position in a parking lot, with a series of vans in the background and her train dragging along the filthy ground, challenges the “perfect wedding dress” and event she describes.

Sellers risk negatively coding their practices, auctions, and weddings when they associate wedding dresses with dirt and consumer clutter. For example, sport222’s “dress was not professionally cleaned” after her wedding.87 Her long list of dirt and damage includes “three pink lines of discoloration along bust,” “two small spots on side of bodice,” “under the chiffon layer is a dirt spot,” “along bottom hem on back is a brown spot,” “a few tiny specks on bottom
back,” “back bottom hem is dirty,” “the inside of the straps” have “some dirty spots,” and there “are two rips along the hem.” The slip on pinkpinksiesmom’s wedding gown “could use cleaning” but she advises prospective buyers not to bother and to get married in a soiled dress because “it will be dirty as soon as you walk outside.”88 These sellers promise to make buyers into prominent and beautiful brides, but they also present imperfect events in which staying clean is an impossible fantasy. This is a problem, since, as the wedding photographer Lori Adalsteinsson notes, the mandate for the bride is “Don’t step on the dress; don’t get dirt on the dress.”89

Wedding dresses that are filthy and shown in cluttered surroundings are notable. This is especially the case because eBay uses heterosexual marriages and relationships to stand in for the site’s values and organizational logic. Critical theorists argue that dirt and disorder challenge approved identities and stable categories. For instance the feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz describes how dirt “signals a site of possible danger to social and individual systems, a site of vulnerability.”90 This is because the pure, as the theorist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva notes, is associated with “that which conforms to an established taxonomy; the impure, that which unsettles it, establishes intermixture and disorder.”91 In a similar manner, the anthropologist Mary Douglas identifies dirt as “a kind of compendium category for all events which blur, smudge, contradict, or otherwise confuse accepted classifications. The underlying feeling is that a system of values which is habitually expressed in a given arrangement of things has been violated.”92 Thus, sellers’ representations of dirty wedding dresses and other sorts of mess diverge from cultural expectations and threaten to unsettle eBay’s systems.

Disorder and boundary disruptions challenge normative standards and organizational structures, but many dresses appear crushed, ungainly, and incongruously situated within obsessive collecting cultures. The dresses literally and figuratively do not fit into sellers’ homes. For instance, aquarius12960 poses in a small space between the coffee table, door, and fireplace.93 The wedding dress is difficult to distinguish and is presented as unimportant, because a large-screen television, fireplace, and drape are all depicted behind it. racefanou812 presents her dress in a cramped family room. The uniqueness of this “perfect” dress is hard to accept.94 It is depicted along with other accumulation, becoming just another item the seller wants to expulse, and is surrounded by a large-screen television, sports paraphernalia, cosmetics, cat carrier, and gerbil cage. roslynn portrays the wedding dress in front of a television cabinet. Christmas cards hang from the cabinet; Christmas toys are
perched above the cabinet and on additional shelves; and such figures as a Santa Claus, a snowman, and a Christmas bear stand on the floor in front of a heavily bedecked tree (figure 6). Such images of clutter and out-of-control collecting challenge eBay’s assertion of structure and categories. They also threaten to defile the whiteness and uniqueness of the dress and bride. Clutter is “symbolic dirt or feces,” according to Russell W. Belk, Joon Yong Seo, and Eric Li, who conduct research on home chaos: it “provokes disgust and precipitates guilt, shame, and embarrassment.” The related cultural condemnation and personal humiliation are more likely to affect women on eBay. Cleaning and organizing are perceived as women’s work and used to judge their skills, morals, and identities.

Dresses are visually tainted in other ways. Reflections from objects and physical stains make the dresses look gray, yellowed, or grubby. This undermines their ritual status because, as Nicky Gregson, Kate Brooks, and Louise Crewe’s study of used goods shows, certain kinds of secondhand clothing,
particularly underwear, stained items, objects with an overpowering odor, and things from the estates of deceased people, threaten to pollute and contaminate physical spaces and the individuals who engage with them. eBay is motivated to control such notions of pollution and requires individuals to clean used items before selling them. The sellers of unwashed gay underwear that I mention in chapter 4 have been largely removed from the site. However, wedding-dress sellers ignore eBay’s rules and disrupt the association of the site and members with goodness. Some dresses only have “some dirt on the hem from the floors” but there are also records of women’s performances that include more overt forms of failed femininity. For instance, pipoca13’s dress “NEEDS TO BE DRY-CLEANED!!!!!!!!!!” The dress listed by nuttytoys “needs a cleaning” because it “has stains from walking on train and on base also has wedding cake stains on front.” Sellers’ accounts of stains and rips show that they did not walk gracefully, eat carefully, and engage in the mannerly behaviors that are expected of brides, and of women more broadly. At such moments, sellers’ and photographers’ visions of perfect weddings and delicate femininity are replaced by something messier. These representations of dirt and mess thus work against eBay’s organizing principles and normative configuration of members and offer some critical possibilities.

The Wedding Dress Guy, eBay, and the Organization of Heterosexuality

eBay also troubles its deployment of normative engagements and weddings when referencing the “Wedding Dress Guy,” Larry Star, who depicts himself in a listing wearing what is purported to be his ex-wife’s wedding dress. eBay’s collectible trading cards include a representation of Star that highlights his sister’s involvement in the listing, her indication that “some lucky girl would be glad to have” the wedding dress, and her proposal that “he could make at least enough money for a couple of mariners tickets and some beer.” These cards, which also memorialize a seller’s attempts to sell one of his kidneys and a child’s efforts to get rid of his grandfather’s ghost, are designed to represent the quirky aspects of eBay and its social history. At the same time, they strain eBay’s moral and organizational limits when not managed. eBay responds to the destabilizing aspects of the wedding-dress narrative, and tries to reaffirm traditional gender positions, by associating Star’s sister with the sale of the dress and the male seller with sports and beer. Nevertheless, eBay’s production of the site through such narratives is threatened because parts of Star’s
story, including the statement that his sister helped with the listing and that he has no children with his former spouse, are untrue.\textsuperscript{104}

Other male sellers have portrayed themselves in wedding dresses. ajp1999 says he is wearing his ex-wife’s dress because “\textit{after a 28 year marriage, this was one of the only items the jerk didn’t steal on her way out.”}\textsuperscript{105} He adds, “\textit{it’s a size 6 or 8 by the way, which of course she couldn’t possibly fit in anymore.”} In his wedding-dress listing, andersonorganization references Star and asserts his normative masculinity. He re-performs large parts of Star’s story, offers a “thanks to Larry for help with this auction,” labels Star a “hero,” and makes fun of his own “‘alternative lifestyle’ ex.”\textsuperscript{106} He provides an account of his wife’s lesbian relationship and his own cluelessness about the gown, even as he wears it. andersonorganization identifies a world in which he must model the gown and risk the condemnation of his “bar buddies and co-workers” to transform his bad relationship into sports tickets and beer and reassert dyadic gender and sexuality distinctions. The misogyny of Star, andersonorganization, and other male wedding-dress sellers, which takes the form of making fun of the size, hairstyle, or greed of partners, is repeated when readers indicate that andersonorganization’s “wife is an ass” and they hope she “puts on about 60 pounds and loses all her hair.” Through such comments, these stories are further related to eBay’s regulation of sexuality and women’s own frustrated accounts of body size.

eBay’s wedding-dress trading card does not mention that Star continues to wear the gown at varied events. Julia Wilkinson reports on Star’s eBay Live! appearance in 2004 and that the dress looked “even lovelier on him in person.”\textsuperscript{107} Star and andersonorganization parodically confess that their wedding dresses made them “feel very pretty.”\textsuperscript{108} These moments provide some gender confusion at the same time that they distance men from femininity. After all, Star and andersonorganization direct their comments about the dress to the “ladies,” promise they have not tainted the gown and are not really in drag because they are “wearing clothes on underneath it,” and advise that if it can make “a guy” feel “attractive, it can make” a woman “feel attractive.” To “maintain the heterosexual meaning within weddings,” as Oswald advises, “participants need to appear heterosexual” and to look “conventionally male and female.”\textsuperscript{109} Drag listings and the relationship between Star and andersonorganization could trouble traditional gender conventions. However, these male sellers reestablish heterosexuality by incorporating men’s clothing, beards, assertions of men’s rituals, and overt sexism into listings.
Sellers also deploy stereotypes and dismiss ex-wives when listing other items. For instance, gt2plus2 lists a doll that looks like his “ugly,” promiscuous, and lying “x-wife after a party!” when she is “flat on her back.” He challenges her femininity and sexuality, particularly the cultural association of good women with cleanliness and purity, when alerting the prospective buyer that “this doll has stains on her dress. (no puns please) my x-wife heard them all.” gt2plus2 justifies the sale by making it into a way of expunging his ex-wife even though the item did not belong to her. solticeman25 also condemns his ex-wife and uses her purportedly bad behavior to explain why he must sell his “entire collection” of sports cards. He has “to pay this Black Widow alimony,” even though he “Wasn’t even married 8 months” and she “cheats.” teaganz_daddy lists a “lot of 14 handbags left behind” by his ex-wife and claims to have been “a self-made millionaire” before he met her and “found out about her fetish with handbags.” In such accounts, women’s “bad” behaviors are used to explain the sale of valuable and thereby good objects.

In a consideration of “eBay’s history” and “most memorable” listings, which was sponsored by eBay employees and probably resulted in the company’s production of the trading cards, junquegirl urges, “Don’t forget that guy who was selling his x-wife’s beanies so he could go shopping at Home Depot.” There was “a campaign later where you could PayPal him to buy him a beer.” A number of the “historical” listings include narratives about heterosexual unions gone bad and reinscriptions of gender norms, such as the seller of Beanie Babies who rids his home of feminine objects, turns feminine collectibles into shopping at Home Depot, and gets rewarded with beer. These narratives are related to the larger eBay ritual of selling the goods of cheating and errant spouses. For instance, Hayley Shaw listed the British disc jockey Tim Shaw’s Lotus for fifty pence after he flirted with a model on his radio show and hinted that he was going to leave his wife. 395edmondson offered a pile of her husband’s clothing upon discovering he was cheating. According to her, some of the “items might be slightly damp due to them having been chucked out of the bedroom window.” She had “since bagged them up and put them in the garage but they may smell a bit damp and mouldy.” 395edmondson “sure as hell” was “not washing and ironing his clothes just in case he has to collect them.” Because of this, she might “have to remove the listing,” but she was sure potential buyers would “understand.” Sellers’ appeals for understanding are designed to connect buyers and sellers in a supportive
community. At the same time, they increase the functionality of social selling and the likelihood sellers will garner better prices.

In listings for women’s wedding dresses, items also remain after relationships end and represent the limits of commitment and normativity. estoyblanca is “selling the dress because” she “decided not to marry the Jerk!!!!” kealalaina77 explains, “Due to a RUNAWAY GROOM my wonderful friend got rid of her loser ex-fiance!!! We are trying to get some of her money back on this dress! Thank Goodness for small wonders!” jennyfur1028 “was supposed to wear this for a wedding, however the wedding was cancelled, and now” she is “trying to get rid of the memories” and asks prospective buyers to “Help me out! Please!” In these cases, wedding-dress sellers render buying and selling as part of a community project and a kind of women’s empowerment. Sellers configure a feminist community to achieve their economic goals. Nevertheless, the traditional position of the bride and wedding are never completely cast aside in these listings. For instance, 10255blue switches between condemning her former fiancé, advertising the positive attributes of the dress, and reprieving men. In a sort of stream of consciousness, she advises, “Dumped the bastard,” “hope you have better Luck,” she has “a good one now” because “real men are still out” there “looking for real Women,” and the dress has a “Lace top with White liner very nice!!” In these listings, women indicate troubled marriages and their continued investments in heterosexual couplings and marriages.

Women also attempt to purge the past and cannot resist the opportunity to “trash” their former partners in the “divorce” garage sales that Gretchen M. Herrmann discusses. The wedding dresses sold on eBay, including the stories that get connected to them, reflect not only the tastes but also the values of female sellers. Women’s narratives about soiled dresses, unruly bodies, unmanageable sexualities, and broken promises do not support eBay’s values, production of normative identities (although many sellers certainly work hard to produce normalizing texts), and the idea that people are basically good. Some members perform consumer critiques on varied sites by describing bad eBay participants. Unfortunately, in the case of wedding-dress narratives, the term “bad” is often used to disempower women and resist feminist projects. For instance, the men in wedding dresses dismiss “bad” women who have gained weight, stolen their goods, or chosen a lesbian lifestyle.
Conclusion: Images Do Not Do the Wedding Dress Justice

Fiancés and images of gowns threaten to fail wedding-dress buyers. Many wedding-dress sellers, like the sellers I describe in the introduction, specify that their “pictures do not do it justice.” The phrase evokes and threatens to further taint the dress, the role of the justice of the peace, and the process of getting married. On Internet wedding forums, a lot of women express uneasiness about buying dresses through the eBay interface. They worry that they will purchase a wedding dress from an unreliable seller; that the dress will not arrive in time for the wedding; that it will be poorly constructed; and that it will not fit. These concerns are related to cultural beliefs that wedding dresses should be unique and perfect rather than noticeably mass-produced or flawed. Digital images mirror and magnify these troubling aspects of wedding dresses because they are copies, can be exactly duplicated, are cheaply produced, and break down into pixels when enlarged and delivered at low resolutions.

The aspects of digital imaging and category descriptions begin to destabilize the uniqueness, perfection, and quality of wedding dresses. However, sellers try to avoid this by distinguishing between pictures and objects. Readers of these listings, like prospective buyers of many other objects, are informed that the only way to experience dresses is to buy, see, and wear them. zbestreasure’s “pictures do not do this gown justice - when you see it - you will agree!!!” Visual inspection is stymied in images because “the wedding was indoors and the lighting was dim.” hot12b*’s pictures are also “not a true representation of this dress! It is very white and very beautiful,” but this is difficult to convey visually. She “uploaded an actual pic” from the wedding that “only shows the top of the dress,” so viewers will “get the idea!” Yet it is not fully clear what individuals are looking at or engaging in when sellers provide partial images and accounts. The images render a different position from that of looking at or wearing items. They also suggest that the wedding day is under threat of a failure in justice, photographic and otherwise, because many women use professional wedding pictures to convey the listed items and buyers are looking for dresses that can be portrayed.

Sellers’ narratives about images that do not do items justice underscore some of the failures of the interface and of how eBay treats members. eBay’s apocryphal stories about Omidyar’s production of the site, Wolfe and Aspling’s marriage, and Star’s wedding dress do not honor the company’s moral code. To represent people who are good, eBay willingly provides bad
information. The disenfranchised eBay members I consider in chapter 1 respond to ethical breeches and redeploy site slogans and community promises as critical methods. Sellers’ descriptions of imaging failures also offer critical possibilities and highlight instances where the different aspects of the site do not correlate. These wedding-dress sellers do not actively critique eBay’s values. However, gay interest and lesbian interest sellers, whose practices I consider in the next two chapters, challenge eBay by writing gay and lesbian interests and attachments into the interface, finding ways to erotically “get it on” the site, interrogating eBay’s inequitable listing policies, and reworking the company’s organizational logic. They also present radically different readings of weddings and images.