Buy It Now

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eBay’s Visible Masculinities

“GAY” AND “GAY INTEREST” LISTINGS

AND THE POLITICS OF DESCRIBING

Most sellers are encouraged by eBay’s traditional representations of engagements, weddings, and other normative roles and provide narratives about gendered behavior and heterosexual relationships. Gay and gay interest sellers present different self-depictions and forms of desire and thereby work to unravel eBay’s gendered organizational logic and configuration of normative sexual citizenship. In doing this, they take eBay up on its promise of diverse identities and desires. Gay and gay interest sellers incorporate gay identities, gay communities, and unconventional masculinities into the eBay site when indicating listings are of interest to gay men, the men depicted in listings are gay, images have queer content, and objects and images offer a record of gay history. They perform a consumer critique of the eBay setting and its values while sometimes garnering better prices than related goods. Gay interest sellers thus achieve the blend of personalization and successful marketing eBay promotes but facilitate it through the forms of explicit representations of sexuality eBay has tried to ban.

eBay asserts its role as a selling platform, but gay and gay interest underwear and swimwear listings are a byproduct of men’s interests in self-display and communicating with other men. Their sexual representations conflict with eBay’s heteronormative focus, and the company often regulates them. In this chapter, I reflect on the political influence gay clothing sellers have when imaging their gym-built bodies, soft flesh, uneven physiques, genital
bulges, and flaccid penises. Sellers who list gay interest items in the “Collectibles > Photographic Images > Antique (Pre-1940)” category extend these narratives about masculinity, gay visibility, identities, and desires into historical and imaginative pasts. Through such strategies, sellers’ gay and gay interest listings interrogate eBay’s conceptions of everyone and undermine its normalizing discourses and traditional ideas about gender, sexuality, and embodiment. They also expand and queer N. Katherine Hayles’s association of Internet settings with flickering signifiers, shifting meanings, and impermanence by emphasizing the seen and unseen aspects of gay men’s identities and visible penis lines.¹

I use critical literature on gay consumerism, masculinity, and sexuality to analyze how gay interest listings work with and against eBay’s system. For instance, writing by Alexandra Chasin and Katherine Sender that articulates the interdependence of identity, consumerism, and citizenship provides methods for considering how the company and sellers deploy sexuality to constitute the site and individuals.² Considerations of masculinity by Susan Bordo, Richard Dyer, Annie Potts, and others help me examine how masculinity is constituted on eBay and the ways these gay self-representations can disturb normative conceptions of binary gender.³ Sellers’ gay and gay interest listings undermine eBay’s normalizing discourses and larger conceptions of identity and embodiment because they represent soft male bodies, identify gay identities and desires in objects, and propose that everyone’s family history can be read queerly. Through political as well as social selling, gay and gay interest sellers confuse stable categories, desires, and subject positions.

Being Gay and eBay

Sellers intervene in eBay’s production of normative identities by deploying the terms “gay” and “gay interest” in listings, encouraging buyers and viewers to find alternative content and making an array of genders and sexualities visible. eBay has regulated these strategies. Firemeg critiques eBay’s general policy because the company “has stepped outside the bounds of being a venue and become its own regulatory and enforcement agency for ecommerce.”⁴ Sellers of gay items regularly wonder about eBay’s removal of listings and complain about eBay’s inequitable policies. Mark, who describes himself as a “victim of the ebay police,” had eBay pull auctions “because they contained the word ‘Jock’s” even though “there were over 500 auctions with the word.” He identifies this selective cancellation as blatant “discrimination.”
Sellers also have auctions removed because images are too “racy.” After receiving an email notifying him that artwork showing a flaccid penis had been removed and the listing canceled by eBay, a buyer replied that he “was certainly glad that Michaelangelo wasn’t still painting, because the entire Sistine Chapel would violate eBay policy.”

romanborn is also “extremely frustrated by the very ambiguous and sometimes seemingly homophobic guidelines.” Sellers can list Playboy magazines on the regular site, even though they contain images of nude women; however, when he runs “a similar gay-themed vintage 70s era magazine” called Gayboy with “a cropped-at-the-waist image of an adult man,” which meets eBay’s Adult Only guidelines, he still risks having all of his “auctions yanked, facing selling restrictions and possible suspension.” eBay’s allowing of the term “boy” in listings for straight magazines but banning of it in listings for gay magazines, romanborn asserts, is contradictory and homophobic. These members are unwilling to accept eBay’s position as the arbiter of how things are arranged, what can be viewed, and the appropriate forms of gender and sexuality that can be conveyed through the site. They continue to list items on eBay, find ways around eBay’s censoring tendencies, and perform consumer critiques in their listings and forum comments.

Buyers engage with gay and gay interest listings when they look in categories, search for the terms “gay” or “gay interest,” and set up favorite searches and receive emailed notification of new listings. Gay listings appear in such varied categories as “Art” (paintings and prints of nearly nude young men), “Photographic Images,” “DVDs & Movies,” “Books,” “Sporting Goods” (mostly socks and briefs), “Men’s Clothing” (typically thongs and briefs), “Home & Garden” (bookends depicting attractive men), “Toys & Hobbies” (Teletubbies’ Tinky Winky and Star Trek’s Captain Jean-Luc Picard), “Coins” (medals with images of men), and “eBay Motors” (chaps and other leather items). For example, in the “Photographic Images” category, sellers list studio as well as vernacular images of men together (specifically, sailors, soldiers, sports teams, and fraternity boys); men with their shirts off, from the back, or “from behind”; nudity, genital bulges, and partially or wholly visible penises; images of men touching, almost touching, or even close together; muscled and good-looking men; and men with effeminate gestures or “dapper” dressing. Similar conceptions of gay identities are produced in other site categories.

The commentary in Internet and print sources shows that many people are aware of gay interest practices and share this conceptualization of ob-
jects, identity, and desires with others. In the eBay forums, marsha91091 advises putting “gay interest’ in the title” of mal-tbo’s listing of a toiletry bag with “40’s pinup muscle men.” A seller of Physical Culture magazine is told how to “find a few more bidders” by adding “gay interest.” lillieborghild advises a seller that “auctions with ‘gay interest’ in the title” are “key to selling that postcard for more bucks!” However, hcquilts challenges the use of the term because the poster owns an image that is similar to the listing. It portrays hcquilts’ “great-grandfather.” The man’s wife and relatives, hcquilts writes, “would be very surprised to find out he was gay.” John Ibson, an academic and collector of vintage photography, describes how, on eBay, “‘Gay’ or ‘Gay Interest’ is often given to any photograph of two or more men doing no more than standing close to each other.” Men’s actions, as depicted in vintage photographs, do not always validate the use of the term “gay.” Nevertheless, gay interest listings of photographs surprise some viewers and direct them to understand family and history differently. Sellers’ practices in listing gay and gay interest underwear and swimwear also disturb eBay’s rules by displaying erotic male bodies and personally engaging with men through the setting without focusing on economic transactions. These listings point to important, unintended, and understudied uses of ecommerce settings for social networking.

Sellers’ gay listings also produce a written history of gay consumption and collecting that was not previously available. This history is facilitated by gay sellers’ descriptions of collecting practices, indications they purchased things from other gay collectors, and addresses to gay buyers. For camp-classics, the term “gay interest” is meant to reach gay collectors, who “are legion,” and to “let them know there might be something that will either catch their eye or tickle their fancy.” gearsaleaol, who sells vintage briefs, is “culling” his “sportswear collection.” He is selling the extra items on eBay so that other men can have a collection. jonmccgarrah knows he does not “have to tell you collectors out there, that Original vintage body builder shots from this period are very, very scarce.” All listings are removed from the system after a period of time, but a history of such gay interests and desires persists as similar listings are added.

Without the interventions of gay and gay interest buyers, sellers, and viewers, eBay asserts heterosexuality but does not name it. Men are articulated because of their role in heterosexual couples, but their bodies and masculinity ordinarily are not described. This continues traditional conceptions of binary gender, since men are ordinarily associated with the mind rather than
the body and are imagined as possessing a body rather than being a body. However, gay listings articulate detailed and complicated versions of men’s bodies and desires. Thus, gay listings are one of the sites on eBay where masculinity is overtly articulated. A study of these listings suggests that campy objects; representations of men together; depictions of nude men; items made of leather, rubber, and spandex; and body-revealing clothing are described as “gay” or of “gay interest.” Sellers usually use the term “gay” to address men and “lesbian” to address women, but the term “gay” is also sometimes deployed to address all individuals with same-sex desires. Since there is no exact definition of these terms, and the concept of gay interest incorporates gay identities and desires, I will ordinarily use the term “gay interest” throughout this chapter when referring to members’ practices.

The gay interest search term requires more consideration in a culture where, as Chasin notes, the “way that gay men and lesbians in the United States come to understand themselves as ‘gay,’ and as ‘American,’ has everything to do with understandings of the relationship between citizenship and consumption.” The connections between citizenship and consumption are also important to gay identities in other Western countries. The Community link on eBay offers buyers and sellers a message system that is designed to facilitate citizenship, along with better buying and selling strategies. Gay interest items, and the sellers who describe them, visualize bodies and desires left out of the category system while supporting eBay’s claims that citizenship and community are achieved by buying and selling. Through their listings and narratives, sellers inform eBay viewers that they are looking at gay products, and that clothes, toys, and other items can make the man gay rather than the more ordinary indication that everyday objects and consumerism support heteronormativity. These sellers thereby complicate the forms of sexual citizenship eBay establishes on the site.

Gay interest sellers overturn part of eBay’s heteronormative structure by making gay interest into a kind of category, even though they still work within eBay’s category and representational systems. The sorts of collecting and fashion that are constituted in gay and gay interest listings are important. They provide ways to demarcate individuals from mainstream values and desires, to assert identities, and to allow people to be recognized on the site and possibly in physical spaces. Sellers’ gay interest listings and eBay’s uneasy facilitation connect men and constitute a community through men’s mutual admiration of objects, engagements with sellers’ erotic self-portrayals, and email and other forms of communication. This community is continued.
When Sex Does Not Sell

Gay interest sellers tend to be located in, and such images are ordinarily viewable from, America and Britain, as well as many other parts of Europe. eBay is conceptualized as a global social-selling platform where community practices are connected to economic transactions and produce consumer citizens. However, gay underwear and swimwear sellers’ economic transactions are often a byproduct of their interest in self-display and communicating with other men. Sellers assure readers that viewing and communicating are as satisfactory as buying. jocktime/huckleberry informs potential viewers in a forum, “you don’t have to bid” but should “just check out” his pictures and let him “know what you think.”20 In his listings, somtom2000 offers a “THANK YOU FOR LOOKING OR BIDDING.”21 These sellers constitute a form of community and ironically fulfill eBay’s mandate for collectivity and connections by providing free views. Gay interest sellers thereby achieve a politics that goes beyond acknowledging gay men as consumers, also enabling gay men’s position as visible social subjects who engage with other men.

Mainstream advertisers deploy different visual strategies and have different ideological goals from those of gay interest sellers. However, they also provide images of half-naked men when selling underwear, swimwear, and other products. As Deanna A. Rohlinger points out in her study of male eroticism, “Gay male consumers have suspected for years that images of partially-clothed, muscular men with sexually ambiguous appeal were designed to attract their attention.”22 Mainstream publications feature these images because people believe that “sex sells” when the gender of the individual addressed and the sexuality of the depicted men remain unclear. Some advertisers address gay male consumers directly in mainstream venues, but most avoid such strategies because they fear troubling heterosexual consumers’ erotic position and angering them. For Sender, the argument that sex sells prevents more detailed interrogations of the sorts of sexuality used in advertisements and the cultural limits placed on this marketing model. Some
“manifestations of sex are not commercially viable.”23 Sex is not accepted by heteronormative culture and does not sell products to heterosexual consumers when it is constituted by images of partially clad men who are erotically engaged with other men and when viewers are clearly articulated as gay men.

Mainstream publications, Internet portals, and the eBay company do not accept overtly gay sexual narratives as methods of selling products. Sellers’ images of nearly nude and muscled men, which repeat the conventions used in mainstream advertising and label things “gay,” remind eBay viewers that mainstream media also features and communicates with gay men, and that their consumerist drives have been at least partially activated by erotic images of men. Michael Petit has studied men’s sales of used underwear and how eBay’s banning of these popular listings in 2000 constituted an instance of sex panic, as Gayle Rubin articulates the term.24 Sex panics occur, according to Petit, at “particular moments, characterized by conditions of high social, political, cultural, or economic anxieties.”25 During these periods “sex and what constitutes its ‘legitimate’ parameters are hotly contested and overtly politicized, with those on the sexual margins typically policed and controlled by institutional forces.” For instance, eBay explains its ban on all types of used underwear by citing “hygiene” concerns, even though the sale of other used and vintage clothing is allowed.26 In the wedding-dresses category (see chapter 3), eBay allows listings to remain active even when sellers offer items without cleaning them.

Buyers, sellers, and viewers who look at gay interest listings and read gay-oriented clothing forums are aware of eBay’s policies and the risks in selling these items. In Internet forums, sellers note listings with erotic content and ways to avoid eBay’s censoring tendencies. They also critique the company’s unclear and inequitable policies. Espion warns readers, “Ebay doesn’t permit the sale of used underwear, cleaned or otherwise, and if Ebay finds out, you can be temporarily or permanently banned.”27 speedofang informs members about “very hot pics” and that the “ebay police” will “delete auctions for showing” visible “signs of genitalia arousal.”28 His auctions were canceled when he “showed too much excited bulge.” jockwolf advises new sellers that “you have to be careful—they will pull auctions if they consider the picture to be too racy,” and that some of his auctions were “cancelled, others not, even tho the pose (and level of arousal (NONE))” were “the same in all instances.”29 eBay removed online3’s auctions because he “said stuff like ‘these make your package look awesome.’”30
eBay regulates gay interest underwear and swimwear sellers’ visible manifestations of their sexuality. However, sellers still make listings evident by redeploying their eBay images as avatar icons, personal profile depictions, and auction advertisements in such underwear and swimwear settings as Real Jock, Underwear4Men.com, and Underwear Swimwear Guide (USG). In these settings, eBay sellers sometimes group their eBay representations of bulges and visible penis lines with “before” and “after” images where they are revealing their penises, masturbating, and ejaculating. These images become almost indistinguishable from the appropriated pornography that some members claim as their self-depictions and the advertisements for porn that appear on these sites. By deploying gay interest depictions, sellers begin to introduce a wider array of representational strategies and desires into the mainstream eBay setting. eBay responds by removing listings, canceling accounts, and resisting the marketing of gay men’s sexuality.

The sale of socks and other unwashed clothing persists on eBay, but most underwear items are new, and swimwear sellers advertise new or cleaned clothing to avoid being regulated. While these items may be “customized” with semen and other bodily traces according to buyers’ requests, most sellers do not offer such services in listings. themickster’s item “comes in its vintage unused (Brand New and unopened) package. The jock on the model is not for sale but for display purposes only.”31 Other items are “Cleansed and laundered to eBay standards.”32 Such comments used to be followed by notices that items were still permeated by traces of the seller, but these practices have been largely evacuated. All of the items mscljocko has “listed on eBay are in full compliance with eBay regulations, all items are cleaned per eBay standards except underwears. All underwear items are in their original condition, new and never been tried on, not even for the picture.”33 While it is sometimes unclear what items sellers are modeling in listings, sellers display erotic representations rather than promise unwashed garments.

Most sellers have changed the ways they describe items and the material conditions of the objects they sell, but the practices of gay interest sellers and of eBay are still not aligned. The company’s warnings and tendency to delete auctions continue to make sellers aware that they risk being regulated when they list items with overt sexual narratives and include images of mostly nude male bodies. eBay cautions used underwear sellers that they may experience the following actions: “Listing cancellation,” “Limits on account privileges,” “Account suspension,” “Forfeit of eBay fees on cancelled listings,” and “Loss of PowerSeller status.”34 Listings “that contain inappropriate descriptions will
be ended.” However, eBay does not explain what makes something inappropriate. The numerous viewers of men’s underwear and swimwear listings, as indicated by site counters, and the high prices paid for some of the items depicted on sexy men’s bodies support the idea that sex attracts eBay viewers and helps sell items. However, the company is not sold on such listings and tends to remove the more explicit listings, even though they encourage personalized selling strategies that engage potential buyers.

eBay continues to change the wording of its documents, but the policies remain. eBay does not allow any “listing that contains images of frontal nudity or of any form of sexual activity, with limited exceptions” on the main site.35 These exceptions include “part of an artwork that is considered fine art, such as certain paintings” but excludes “Amateur photos.” eBay allows “Frontal nudity” in “Art categories when the item is considered fine art,” but does not define the category or the parameters of disallowed “explicit sexual content.”36 At eBay Live! conferences and in the forums, employees try to explain such regulation of art and erotica by describing the complaints they receive, including those from parents who are concerned that their children will see drawings of nudes on the site. Of course, similar concerns have been directed at museums and advertisements. It is also the case that eBay can be viewed as an adult portal because individuals are required to be older than eighteen to use it. However, the company is interested in attracting young consumers. It constructs the site as G-rated and is trying to find ways to facilitate shopping for young people who cannot enter into legal contracts in the United States and therefore cannot commit to buying.

Sellers who are confronted by eBay’s warnings and regulations are forced to edit their expressions and self-representations or risk being banned. Sellers offer to email images they believe are not allowed or to post them to other sites. gearsale offers images of swimwear “that won’t make it past the ebay censors” on a personal site.37 Tropis says he wants to apologize to forum readers for “‘toning down’ the photos.”38 eBay canceled one of his listings, but he has “unedited copies of the photos” on another site. Sellers censor their images even when the items are paintings and other artistic works, which eBay’s policies allow but the company still sometimes removes. Viewers of dontbesilly’s listings for paintings can email “for a larger easier to see uncensored view.”39 One painting shows a reclining male nude with his legs in the air, as if he is asking to be penetrated by the viewer, and an ecstatic look on his face. A sign covering the figure’s painted genitalia and buttocks coaxes buyers and viewers to email dontbesilly and to thus situate their body in relationship
to the full view, uncover what is not publicly available, and achieve an erotic engagement with the image and seller. John-bishop’s “actual drawing is a full nude (below the waist).” According to him, “ebay does not allow an erect penis.” To “see the entire artwork,” viewers are directed to visit his site. John-bishop and other sellers promise but do not fully deliver erotic content. The images are cropped, and red dots and other obfuscating devices are used to meet eBay’s standards.

All of this results in expelling gay sexuality, which, according to Sender, “makes the gay market distinct” and compels individuals to employ other means to distinguish the gay niche. On eBay, performances of regulation and censorship are sometimes used to activate eroticism and articulate the gay niche. For instance, galaxy_shop depicts a well-muscled nude man with a black bar over his groin that advertises the seller’s ID. John-bishop’s viewers can visit his site to see the full view, but the head of the figure’s penis is visible just above the blocked portion of the image in the eBay listing. These sellers deploy an eroticism that flickers between the seen and the unseen, an experience that is also rendered by the technological processes of downloading images and the refresh rate of cathode-ray-tube monitors. Sellers use the proscriptions against more explicit images of men to make their images, listed objects, and bodies more difficult to obtain, and thus—at least, for some buyers and viewers—more desirable.

**Constituting the Gay Male Body**

Many gay interest underwear and swimwear sellers depict young and toned bodies and focus on muscled chests, nipples, pubic hair, and outlines of genitals. For instance, mscljocko models “JM Contoured Pouch Squarecut 32 gay int. spandex nylon” underwear with his legs spread widely and his groin pushed forward. Mscljocko’s fisted right hand presses down on his groin, emphasizing the size of his genitals and invoking masturbation. In other underwear listings, he flexes his well-muscled body and tilts his hips out to best display a visible penis line. To some extent, these images work in the same ways that Graham Ward’s film research indicates muscular bodies signify, functioning “as one great hard-on.” Mscljocko’s possessing stance and taut body visually evoke an erection and are intended to turn on viewers. Yet his tilted head and ecstatic expression also convey postcoital pleasure and the beginning of flaccidity. These images thereby interlink genital erections and penises listing, falling, and failing. Because of these connections, the masculinities rep-
presented do not meet the standard Bordo describes in which the male body is expected to be “rock hard” and “without looseness or flaccidity.”

Sellers also challenge traditional conceptions of masculinity when they offer their bodies as well as items to viewers. usflaboy’s “New N2N Swimsuit Size Small. Gay games Limited Edition” listing, which was viewed an astounding 1,008 times, emphasizes the seller’s muscled shoulders, lean torso, genital bulge, and pubic hair (figure 7). usflaboy makes himself available by directing individuals to email “if you have any questions” just above his sinuous torso and visually accessible genitals. gerardo5800 offers even more access to his body: “MY WHOLE PACKAGE IS FOR YOU!!!!. LOOK AT ME” and “MY LITTLE THONG... GET THEM ALL NOW!!!!!!!!! VERY GAY.” gerardo5800 is selling packages of underwear, offering visual representations of his genitals, and promising more. Individuals are encouraged to imagine that sellers’ bodies are available. In an Internet forum, Newbie2it asks, “Does the package inside the ‘wrapper’ come with the purchase? Cause I will buy them all.”
haywardmike advises that the “Current bid on that suit was $94.00. The bidder must think the model comes with it.” Gay interest sellers instruct viewers to look at them; they deploy camera viewpoints that move the viewer’s gaze from torso toward groin, and they transform images into visceral versions of male bodies.

Sellers create a market for eBay auction images by offering more revealing depictions. One seller identifies as “a bit of an exhibitionist.” jockdude90036 lists a “Gray Camo Camouflage Swim Bikini Thong new nwot Gay Int,” that has a “rear floss strap.” However, the “back side picture” is available only “on request for bidders.” These listings allow sellers to offer clothing items for sale, display themselves, and engage with other gay men. Buyers can shop for underwear and swim trunks, look for erotic content, and save favorite images. Sammy writes that he “will start a photo file” on a new seller. Stl_Muscle collects images from eBay auctions and describes a picture that he has “been unable to find . . . since upgrading to a new PC.” two-talented-leos offers a collection of digital self-portraits where some “are from previous auctions photos, some are from private shootings” and most “of them are topless, half naked, and or pants down depending on the product.” In a similar manner, mscljocko lists “Over 140 pictures of my previous auction pictures” that include “pictures that were used in mature audiences category.” These photos, which were once employed to sell underwear but are now more overtly described as images that make sellers visually accessible, indicate the difficulty in differentiating between the images and objects that are for sale. In part, listings are a form of picture exchange that allows individuals to virtually look at sellers.

Buying delivers a material object that has touched the body of the seller in some way and personal contact and email exchanges with that individual. poloboyzz is “the same one behind the auctions” and “in all the pictures.” He guarantees that viewing and buying will lead to personal contact and an engagement with his body. rshadz wants the suit of a seller “just to know that butt was in it.” If eBay’s message boards and other site features produce one kind of arrangement between individuals and traditional forms of identity, then listings for men’s undergarments and other erotic clothing produce another community, form of social selling, and way of engaging. In such cases, the normative functions of eBay’s auctions and its focus on economic exchanges are replaced by site-facilitated engagements between men. As part of this structure, viewers’ enthusiastic comments in forums situate them as fans of specific sellers. Speedoman NYC recommends “a very hot guy . . . on
ebay selling suits” and tells readers to “Check him out.” Readers respond with the names of other attractive sellers. These gay interest practices produce a brand community that is constituted by the term “gay” rather than “eBay” and includes consciousness of a kind, rituals and traditions, and an ethos. The gay interest brand community is part of the eBay setting, has connections to forums and other Internet sites, uses eBay’s systems, and disorders the normative gender and sexuality aspects of its organizational logic. The eBay gay brand community even has a form of eBay-ana, because sellers list mouse pads and T-shirts branded with the word “eGay.” In these cases, the term is positively configured.

The eGay mouse pad offers to “let others know the ‘real you.’” In a related strategy, sellers’ gay underwear and swimwear auctions pose a culture in which buyers, sellers, and viewers are seen. hrdmslguy notifies swimsuit buyers that they will be seen: There is “no lining in it so beware!” (figure 8).

Another listed item is “really fun. Nice and respectable and sporty” but “get

them wet and they become completely sheer.”64 Mark uses “terms like ‘very revealing when wet, clings like a second skin, and not for the shy’” that sound “like a warning.”65 Yet some individuals recognize them as meaning, “Hey guys, this will show your package.” Such items also promise gay visibility. Their descriptions evoke the ways the seen and the unseen body are deployed by gay interest sellers and regulated by eBay. Sellers highlight their visibility, the erotic potential of listings, and eBay’s regulatory behavior. hrdmslguy would “show you the pics” he “took but people get offended and” he would “be suspended.”66 The buyer, however, will receive “the pics that ebay cancelled” and is thereby awarded an erotic and illicit view. Such arrangements emphasize the erotic promise of listed items, images, and sellers’ bodies and withhold some details.

Sellers’ descriptions of seen and unseen bodies and penises evoke the staccato and brief, and thus more tantalizing, unveilings that occur in such forms as striptease and personal webcams. By indicating that images and listings are impermanent, sellers connect views of visible penis lines, erotic artwork, and even general listings to a kind of ontology of new technologies, including the unstableness of operating systems and software, the changeability of computer texts, and the disappearance of Internet sites. Since these technologies and their shifts render “flickering signifiers,” as Hayles calls them, and make meaning “less stable,” they also make the ability to read gender and sexuality less secure.67 This may be one of the reasons eBay provides all of its regulating and stabilizing rules and texts. Of course, the always present threat that eBay will remove gay interest listings increases the erotic appeal of those listings while making them increasingly unstable. For Roland Barthes, it is the “intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater) between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove, and the sleeve); it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance.”68 The gay interest “appearance-as-disappearance” evokes even more sexual frisson and pathos with some men’s desires to be out because of eBay’s repressive policies, the closeted aspects of a number of gay interest practices, and the catastrophic disappearance of gay communities and individuals due to AIDS. Sellers create a structure in which being seen is desirable and risky. They risk having their gay listings, accounts, and income opportunities canceled by eBay. Most sellers do not provide headshots or full-figure images, but they can still be identified by the detailed self-portraits in listings and personal information individuals automatically receive when they “win” auctions.
Gay interest underwear sellers constitute a community in which men can
be seen. However, men traditionally have been depicted as acting rather than
appearing and, as Bordo suggests, it is rare to see them engaging in bodily
explorations, self-presenting as visual objects, or gazing at their image in mir-
rors.69 Heterosexual men are usually believed to be uninterested in how they
look and to ignore their position as corporeal and embodied. The gay and gay
interest listings on eBay, like many other representations of gay men’s sexu-
ality, pose men as the object of the gaze. This position is different from the
one occupied by heterosexual women and the men who look at them. All gay
men, at least theoretically, are posited as the object of the gaze. Sellers em-
ploy mirrors, which have long been used to represent femininity and vanity,
and handheld cameras to capture their likenesses and appear framed within
these self-reflective and material structures. Their listings act as a composite
mirror that allows sellers to see themselves figured in the “public sphere” of
the eBay market of objects and the gay cruising “meat market” bazaar. Sellers
challenge straight men’s sexuality when they propose that eBay is a gay cruis-
ing market as well as a bazaar of goods. According to Philip Culbertson, who
researches the male body, “It is the imagined effeminacy of homosexual men
that makes them objects of heterosexual derision.”70 However, it is “their
imagined masculinity (that is, the consciousness of them as active, evaluat-
ing sexual subjects, with a defining and ‘penetrating’ sexual gaze) that makes
them the objects of heterosexual fear.” Gay listings for underwear, swimwear,
and photography pose all male viewers as willing objects of the gaze and
active viewers and establish a different formation of everyone from that of
eBay.

Shopping on eBay means deploying a consumerist gaze and imagining
touching things. poloboyzz describes the erotic delight buyers will have when
his clothing items rub against their skin, and ozbestprice advertises under-
wear that has “soft material” and assures buyers, “You will be attractive!”71
Within this structure, gay men offer their bodies as one fleshy good in an
already complicated market of virtual tactility and sensuality. Straight men
are addressed as individuals who desire male bodies and the clothing that
will make them more appealing to other men. They are reconfigured as queer
individuals who are cruising for consumerist pleasures and as men who are
shopping for men. Using the men’s clothing category means gazing at images
of men who are displaying themselves and, because of gay interest listings,
self-identifying as gay. Yet, as Culbertson argues, to “gaze at another man re-
positions a straight man as a gay man, thereby shattering his fragile mascu-
Men’s normative masculinity is challenged, and straight men are repositioned as gay men by sellers’ gay addresses, the tactile engagements that listings promise to deliver, and men’s consumer positions, which feminize them.

Masculinities and Femininities

Gay and gay interest sellers have a stake in maintaining empowered forms of masculinity. Their listings include images of the sellers standing rather than languidly reclining. Painters, photographers, and other image producers have depicted women reclining to render them passive and available to the male gaze. Male sellers may stand because it provides for easier display of the genitals. However, standing with legs spread slightly apart and penises jutting forward also imbues them with a more commanding position. Sellers depict themselves in static poses but are also active individuals who orchestrate listings and engage potential buyers. According to Dyer’s research on the pin-up, “The male image still promises activity by the way the body is posed,” even when it is not depicted as moving or working. The Internet studies researchers Marjorie Kibby and Brigid Costello write that flexed muscles “connote immanent activity.” In underwear and swimwear listings, sellers raise their arms to best display limbs and torsos and flex muscles to remind viewers of their past and future actions. Dyer proposes that such figures are “standing taut and ready for action.” poloboyzz conveys this readiness for movement and sexual engagement while advertising a shirt that will allow the wearer to “rock the club when you get off!” He uses a narrative about after-work partying to equate clothing to erections and ejaculating. Sellers continue these representations of hardness and readiness in their portrayals of semi-erect penises, inclination for exercising, and availability for sexual activity.

Gay clothing listings render erotic bodies that are posed and described for the visual pleasure of viewers. Buyers are encouraged to imagine they will be as erotic and desirable as sellers when they wear the items. The absence of faces in many of the listings make sellers into bodies rather than minds and allow the depictions to stand in for multiple individuals. Images of men modeling underwear, swimwear, and other body-revealing clothing constitute possible selves for buyers and viewers, who are addressed as future owners and the people who wear items. For instance, sexysadiespandex offers a “Men’s Hot Pink Leopard Spandex Wrestling Shirt gay sexy” that will enable the buyer to “look your best whether skiing, weightlifting, dancing, wrestling,
clubbing, or simply because you look good in spandex!”78 “Show ’em all your muscles!” sexesadiespandex encourages buyers. In a similar manner, polobyzz presents his toned chest and emphasizes that his items will flatter the “shape of that rocking body you’ve got!”79 Sellers’ descriptions and images conflate the bodies of buyers and sellers. Through these processes, gay interest sellers also convey social mandates about the importance of being physically attractive and the kind of body gay men are supposed to maintain—hard and muscled.

Sellers market themselves and listings with body-oriented IDs such as progressive-fitness, hrdmslguy, brazenmuscle, and feistymuscle. Such representations are part of the imposition of “hypermasculine and rather rigid appearance standards” that are described in the research of Steven M. Kates and that are emphasized in some gay cultures.80 Hypermasculinity, according to Mitchell J. Wood’s study of the gay male gaze, “dominates gay mass media and gay public life.”81 Consumer culture is “less and less forgiving,” writes Rohlinger, “of those who are not sufficiently young, thin, and attractive.”82 Numerous researchers contend that there are many forms of gay masculinity and corporeal desires, but muscularity is still overtly promoted, and this contributes to many gay men’s feelings of dissatisfaction with their bodies.83 The pressures of these social and media messages, and men’s affective responses, encourage considerations of alternative proposals for masculinity.

The amateur photographic practices of eBay sellers, which highlight rather than downplay sagging flesh, rounded stomachs, scars, and uneven gym-built bodies, offer a more complicated image of gay bodies and desires. Sellers also tenderly image slender, unexercised, and fleshy bodies and age spots and wrinkles. For instance, feistymuscle’s extremely muscled thighs and broad shoulders operate in a different way from his unexercised and slightly pot-bellied stomach.84 His long scar, which cuts diagonally from sternum to hip, and tilted pose do not fulfill cultural mandates for bodily symmetry and perfection. The sellers who revel in their fleshy chests and limbs, emphasize their curved bellies and thighs, and highlight how their bodies fold over clothing are more aligned with chubs and chasers, who have or admire men with larger bodies.

Sellers present differently configured bodies by wearing clothing that is too tight for them.85 kirkieskorner’s “sexy-fitting, trim jean” that is “great for
a slim build,” and has been “washed enough times so that it fits very well,” distorts the size and shape of his body.86 In the images, the last two buttons remain undone, and the jeans gape to reveal a large “V” of flesh. With these images, kirkieskorner demonstrates that he has a large body, which is appreciated within conventional gay culture, rather than a “slim build.” His tight clothing also functions as a form of erotic bondage. It contains his body and emphasizes the shape and bulk of his penis and testicles. In another image, he wears a pair of jean shorts that are so tight that the fly has to remain undone and the shorts do not fit over his hips (figure 9).87 His underwear-covered penis and testicles protrude from his clothing and are supported by the fly of the shorts. kirkieskorner’s images display his genitals, but they also emphasize the slight softness of his torso and the sag of flesh around his waist and belly.

kirkieskorner’s body does not meet cultural ideals, but he still suggests that buyers will find an item appealing if “you are one of those guys like me
that like to show your body.” His comments and viewers’ responses demonstrate how some gay eBay self-presentations operate beyond narrow norms. These listings encourage individuals to desire men with more varied body shapes. One viewer notices kirkieskorner’s pleasurable self-display and asks, “Does the model come with/in the thong?” because the “model sizzles!” kirkieskorner thanks the viewer for “the compliment,” indicates he is “no small boy”—an embodied position that is emphasized by the too-tight clothing he chooses to model, that shipping himself (the model) would be too expensive, and that the seller should contact him and obtain more personalized items. By encouraging the viewer to “let me know what other items you would like to see me put on auction,” kirkieskorner also becomes available. Such listings, kirkieskorner’s references to body size and genital bulge, and viewers’ reactions are a form of cruising. These instances of gay interest cruising challenge eBay’s attempts to configure the site as heterosexual.

Gay interest practices function as a kind of consumer resistance and critique. Sellers’ gay underwear and swimwear listings perform a version of what the masculinity scholar R. W. Connell envisions for homosexuality. They rely on and disrupt the “existing gender order in ways that illuminate long-term possibilities of change in the structure of gender relations.” These listings contest straight men’s claims that they are minds that have bodies, rather than being bodies, and that they do not look at other men. Sellers’ practices and listings also disturb gay men’s appropriation of and engagement with empowered masculinity. For instance, kirkieskorner’s otherwise masculine performance of a large hard body is problematized by the extreme tightness of his clothing, which emphasizes his looser flesh and difficulty fitting into things.

Mark Simpson critiques the aesthetics of gay culture and ironically notes that gay men have “the best underwear shops”; heterosexual men suffer because they cannot “carry off wearing a silver thong”; and Stonewall enabled gay men to stop repressing “their desires or their undergarments.” In his book, Simpson calls for a critical consideration of the values, politics, and stereotypes that accompany gay lifestyles. Proposing a similar political inquiry into the marketing strategies that constitute gay identity, Toby Manning studies how gay individuals who do not embody certain codes are at a severe disadvantage. Sellers of gay interest underwear and swimwear constitute rigid versions of gay masculinity and offer other positions. They perform masculinities and femininities. While Simpson interrogates gay men’s tendency to focus on their genital performances, galaxy_shop sells a “Translucent BIKINI”
that does not provide any evidence of the model’s genitals, even though he is depicted in a spread-legged pose.\textsuperscript{94} thana\textsuperscript{0} elides rather than performs male genitals (figure 10).\textsuperscript{95} He uses a graphics program to technologically remove the penis from images and thereby meet eBay’s rules about visible genitals. By employing a “fuzz” technique to delete the penis, using pink fabric, sheathing the testes in shimmering material, and portraying hairless and creamy smooth thighs, thana\textsuperscript{0} offers a different proposal for gender and gay desire.\textsuperscript{96} He feminizes the male body and evokes transgendered positions.

fellowes\textsuperscript{1964} also displays a less conventional body and gender position. His swimwear and underwear listings, like kirkieskorner’s, feature clothing that is too small for him. fellowes\textsuperscript{1964}’s upper body curves over his tight trunks, and his stomach protrudes (figure 11).\textsuperscript{97} By displaying his body in multiple listings and in varied positions, he makes it clear that all of this is purposeful. He even highlights the difference between his soft flesh and more conventional gym-built bodies by including mass-marketed advertisements of highly muscled men in some listings.\textsuperscript{98} In a number of listings, fellowes\textsuperscript{1964}
crosses his legs and compresses his thighs. fellowes1964’s pose and the creases in the suit, which radiate from his crotch, direct viewers to gaze at his groin. The performances of galaxy_shop, thana0, and fellowes1964 depart from the mastering stances in other gay underwear and swimwear listings. Instead, fellowes1964’s crossed-leg gesture and tight suit compress his genitals, render his penis small and flaccid, and evoke the penis-tucking techniques that accompany certain forms of forced womanhood and cross-dressing. His choices are also connected to men’s pleasurable selection of constricting swimsuits, in which “the package up front” is “squished into oblivion.”

The listings by thana0, fellowes1964, and some other sellers reform the investments in large and erect penises that accompany normative forms of straight and gay cultures. Masculinity, as Potts argues, is historically understood as not feminine and as “exteriorized, strong, hard, competitive, controlled, enduring, authoritative, and active.” In contrast, the flaccid penis is troubling to binary gender schemes because it is “less active,” “has no

stamina,” and is thus too feminine. The gay interest practices I consider in this section, with their presentations of compressed and elided penises, trouble hegemonic masculinity and dyadic gender. They remind individuals that the limp and even the erect penis cannot sustain the hardness and power that have been associated with masculinity.102

Reforming eBay’s Logic through Brand Communities and Cultural Genitals

Buyers and viewers chronicle their erotic fascination with gay interest underwear and swimwear listings. bj’s friends tease him about the “eBay underwearboy pics” saved on his “hard drive (all the while hogging the chair at the computer - laughing at some, drooling at others).”103 avi describes the “ebay spandex bulge moment” and enjoys “searching and sharing the spoils” from eBay on his blog.104 The ebulges site says it has images collected from gay interest listings that “Ya just gotta love.”105 luckybiker07 has collected “thousands of bulges pics” from eBay listings and other sources and wants to “share” his “bulge passion” on his blog.106 Like eBay Live! attendees, these individuals constitute a brand community and work for members by saving and posting desirable images. They are also eBay collectors. Their practices are related to the larger forms of erotica collecting facilitated by the computer and the Internet.107

Buyers’ feedback comments highlight the desirability of depicted items and the fan and brand communities that are formed around sellers. fontal430’s feedback for hrdmslguy indicates “you soooo sexxy” while turnage2007 reviews his underwear purchase and rhapsodizes “luv ur stuff Hot pics too.”108 mscljocko is “the hottest thing on ebay. Excellent ebayer.”109 These buyers engage with the gay interest brand community when posting advice such as “hot seller. check him out” and “This is the best and hottest seller on eBay! you will enjoy!!! aaaaa+.”110 In their feedback comments, buyers admire and evaluate sellers’ embodied attributes along with their underwear and swimwear products. Through this behavior, the feedback forum, which is a key part of eBay’s community and trust-building system—and is sometimes quoted in listings and About Me sites—highlights the ways men gaze at other men. Members’ consumer comments thereby reframe eBay’s system, gendered organizational logic, and constitution of normative sexual citizenship.

Sellers’ gay interest self-presentation are part of eBay’s erotic culture. De-
spite eBay’s emphasis on heterosexual couples and families, it has a reputation for being a site where free porn can be accessed. According to Adam Cohen, the listings in the Adult Only category are “filled with photographs of topless women and scantily clad men that were not only being used to sell pornography—they were arguably pornography themselves.” Scammers post images of nude women on eBay Motors, then use site redirects and other tactics to get viewers to provide their IDs, passwords, and other personal information without paying too much attention. As I have previously indicated, erotic content from eBay is also posted on other sites. Bloggers such as bj and avi repost gay underwear and swimwear listings with erotic content in their blogs. The producers of ebulges claim that if “there’s a bulge at Ebay, you’ll probably find it” on their site “sooner or later.”

ebulges, which is also called the Visible Penis Line or VPL, presents numerous grids of men’s visible penis lines. The site advises viewers, “Ebay seems to be very watchful for these bulges, so if you see one, send it to VPL!” In this way, ebulges manages the seen and unseen ontology of Internet settings, becomes an archive of gay eBay representations, and encourages viewers to work at finding erotic images of men. Its ordered grids demonstrate how another organizational logic and form of immaterial labor is functioning on eBay. ebulges’ process of discovering and posting erotic eBay images is related to sellers finding depictions of men with visible bulges in Internet sites and printed sources and selling them on eBay. Although ebulges offers a convenient archive of erotic material, some collectors, such as avi, “enjoy spotting the ebay bulge” in its “natural habitat, the cold cruel world of sex motivated commerce.” According to avi, the eBay experience includes discovering listings, personally making the unseen gay aspects of the setting visible, acknowledging the commercial motivations at work, and engaging with sellers. ebulges viewers cannot fully connect with sellers because the site does not provide listing numbers, sellers’ IDs, or contact information.

ebulges, in a similar way to avi’s blog, mentions the economic aspects of selling gay interest underwear and swimwear: With “the singlet laid on the floor, like some wrinkled rag. Who would buy that? but, put a man in that singlet, with a nice ebulge” and these items sell for “2 to 5 times more.” ebulges also entitles listings “Making More Money With the Male Member.” It proposes that good marketing strategies garner higher prices; individuals are buying bulges rather than singlets; and images of gay sex sell. Some gay interest fans suggest similar things in Internet forums. Nevertheless, these propositions diverge from Sender’s analysis. Closed auction prices for gay
interest underwear and swimwear do not ordinarily support ebulges’ claims. For instance, kirkieskorner’s “Micro-Bikini” listing, which included a side and rear view of him in the revealing item, generated 903 views but only sold for 7 U.S. dollars. Gay interest underwear and swimwear have a value that is not represented in economic profits.

eBay viewers are invested in bulges and visible penis lines but wonder whether some of the images are falsified. As NYC swimmer asks, “Do you think that’s really all him in there?” avi indicates that a depiction is impossible by inquiring, How “is his bulge showing so clearly through both yellow underwear and black shorts?” avi also challenges a representation of a man in patterned shorts. He advises the seller that the “next time you stuff your hideous geometry crotch, try something more realistically penis-and-balls-shaped (like a penis and balls) versus a run over teddy bear or 27 hefty bags or whatever the hell is in there.” Thus, avi highlights how representations of penises can be confusing. For example, hrdmslguy’s bulge is misshapen, undifferentiated from his stomach, and too large. In one image, hrdmslguy pulls the top of a singlet down so the garment hangs low on his hips, reveals his pubic hair, forms a long vertical panel in front of his crotch, and acts as a stand-in for his penis. As all of this indicates, images cannot be relied on to convey real genitals or material proof. These viewers of visible penis line perform a critique that is similar to intellectual interrogations of the relationship between photography, digital imaging, and specific moments and material objects. Gay interest representations, like the technologies through which they are conveyed, flicker and are unstable.

In addition to simulating genital size in underwear and swimwear listings on eBay, men trouble genital bulk in other situations. The gay interest sellers of support underwear indicate that masculinity needs physical as well as ideological bolstering. hrdmslguy offers “the Nhance feature that pushes you out much like a wonderbra does for women” but “in men it gives you more power in the crotch department.” In a similar manner, usflaboy lists underwear with a “built in sling to support your asset. It makes the package look bigger.” Sellers chronicle men's production of genital size and the ways these renderings of enhanced masculinity fail. For undermaster87, “No matter how much ‘lifting and enhancing’ the Wonderjock from AussieBum may provide, there is no way that any man, gay or straight, should ever wear these grotesque undies” because they present men’s genitals in an unflattering way. These sellers establish an authentic genital state and show how such positions are mediated by social expectations and underwear technologies.
For men, large penises are “inherent to the macho thing.” However, gay interest underwear and swimwear listings challenge men’s claims about having large penises and being masculine. Advertisements for pouch technologies that lift and enhance bolster the masculinity of buyers, promise to leave men “feeling amazing,” and suggest that men’s attributes and masculinity are inadequate without re-engineering. These representations produce cultural genitals, or gender features that are accepted as sex traits, even though such markers as clothing, hair length, posture, and fabric-covered bumps and bulges convey them. Individuals usually believe they see and know the truth about people’s material bodies and sex, despite evidence that their knowledge is based on cultural genitals rather than physical examination. Descriptions of constructed bulges and gender markers, which I study in more depth in the next chapter, emphasize how genitals and binary sex are unreliable ways to understand bodies.

Gay interest listings sometimes depict ready penises, but they pose an erotic engagement that is not heterosexually based and that does not correlate men’s erections to their penetration of women. Figuring a genital eroticism that is unrelated to penis/vagina penetration challenges heteronormative settings. The “normal erection,” as demonstrated by Leonore Tiefer’s sexuality research, “is implicitly defined as ‘hard enough for penetration’” of the vagina and lasting ‘until ejaculation.’” Since there is no always erect state, the functions of corporeal bodies threaten cultural conceptions of masculinity. The postcoital penis, according to Potts, always shrinks and softens, and the man is disempowered along with “the deflation” of “his (penis-)body.” Some gay underwear and swimwear sellers do not even pose a hard penis and body. Representations of erect penises, which indicate that men are always sexually ready and potent, are removed by eBay and thus deflated. However, sellers who present less detailed images of their genitals, while still including faint and partially flaccid genital references, further threaten the relationship between men, masculinity, penises, and the empowered phallus.

Gay Interest Vintage Photography

All gay and gay interest sellers present a position that is different from eBay’s standard address. Sellers of gay interest photographs remake and rewrite the past that images are believed to convey, including period-specific masculinities and representations of genitals. Sellers in the “Photographic Images > An-
tique (Pre-1940)” category use the terms “gay” and “gay interest” to designate a commodity they believe gay individuals will want and thereby acknowledge the diverse sexualities of collectors; suggest that gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer individuals and relationships have been photographically portrayed; describe non-normative masculinities; and queer the past by describing same-sex duos and groups as gay. For example, the listings from pelicanca's “late gay uncle’s photo albums” offer a history of gay documenting and recount stories the uncle told the seller. These “gay photographs” allow sellers such as endymian to highlight a “record of gay culture” that remains “a historic part and contemporary component of gay culture.” Through such practices, these sellers encourage members to read eBay for gay content. Their political engagements extend beyond the site when they identify family albums and photography collections as having gay content and depicting gay people.

Sellers of gay interest vintage photography, like underwear and swimwear sellers, address consumers as gay men and express interest in well-endowed men. jonmccgarrah entitles a listing “Vintage Nude Male Bodybuilder hand-tinted photo Gay Int: Sexy man holding long rod, bulge, Muscle men, Beefcake?” This “almost-naked young man,” is “Outstanding in his Field. (GetIt?).” In a similar manner, ziel400 lists an image of men holding sports equipment as “13 beefcake men present their sticks gay int.” Sellers use these framing terms and commentary to encourage viewers to look at images differently and to read aspects of images to support their desires. For instance, jonmccgarrah uses the word “rod” as a way to highlight the bodybuilder’s penis. These objects enable gay interest sellers to make erotic jokes and find or create gay content. Sellers of gay interest vintage photography offer images of active bodies and describe them as visually accessible, feminine, and alluring. They thereby transform the vigorous male body into “beefcake” and an appealing object.

Sellers mention and elide genital bulges in their gay interest readings of photographs. elephants_collector offers an image of a “man with his p...s being visible through the undies.” The seller highlights genitals without fully naming them and makes the term invisible to buyers and the regulating forces that use eBay’s search options. In doing this, elephants_collector evokes the ways the seen and unseen body functions on eBay, including how
swimwear becomes sheer. In an image of men in bathing suits, 123elroubi finds unrequited gay desire and an erect but not discernible penis. According to the seller, a man “is covering up something” because he was “looking at nice buns” and now has an erection.\textsuperscript{137} Many of the penis lines in gay interest photography listings are visible. However, some sellers deploy alternative reading methods and shift between the seen and unseen. campclassics offers a photographic detail to make the genital bulge apparent.\textsuperscript{138} toomanyretro expends more effort when he finds “a great-looking tall, dark and lean man” in the image.\textsuperscript{139} It is not until the viewer has put the image “Under magnification” that “it looks like there’s a pack in his pocket.” The “eyes move toward the center” of another image because the groin is positioned there.\textsuperscript{140} toomanyretro posits that it is “the photographer’s favorite spot.” Through these readings, sellers articulate erotic engagements and histories of gay visibility. They pose the penis as a site of desire and a place of heterosexual crisis. Such assertions as crotch grabs and spread-legged seated positions are cultural features, even an operation, of straight men’s dominance. However, these listings associate seen and unseen but emphasized bulges and visible penis lines with gay identities and desires.

Gay interest photography sellers also provide narratives about men finding love and being caught. pelicancan describes men realizing they are gay, finding male partners, hiding relationships, and being discovered having sex with other men. The men portrayed in one of his listings “discovered a secret about each other that allowed them to experience the most complete, sensual love imaginable between two gay men.”\textsuperscript{141} He also tells about sailors who “escaped discovery time and time again as their demands for one another grew increasingly” careless.\textsuperscript{142} A gym teacher kisses a student and is found by peers, who “were shocked to see the two men in such a passionate state” but knew what was occurring because a view of their trousers “made it obvious.”\textsuperscript{143} These historical figures discover gay desires and relationships. In a similar manner, vintage photography viewers find gay content in images because of rods, sticks, and bulges. Nevertheless, the relationship between the image and narrative is conflicted. Although pelicancan and some other sellers provide detailed accounts of gay histories, their images do not usually represent the described encounters. The full narrative and context can be seen only through sellers’ descriptions. These listings are grouped with representations that are, as noted by sellers, of erotic gay interest. For instance, pelicancan presents images of “two handsome, young men sitting closely together under a tree”
and “pressing their knees together” and “smooth, tanned bodies clad in tight swim trunks.” The varied political and marketing strategies of pelican and other sellers prevent the formation of a seamless history or homogeneous photographic viewing practice. Sellers’ accounts of earlier times and relationships become intermeshed with contemporary queer readings of vintage photography, erotic viewing of underwear and tight swim trunks, and items that are labeled “gay.”

Photography sellers echo clothing sellers’ narratives about the visibility and invisibility of gay identities and bodies. They disable expectations that photography conveys a fully viewable and material world. In their accounts, photographs must be read, and textual histories and viewing cues may be needed. endymian identifies his practices as a “str8 forward reading of photographic material” by “your egay photo” specialist. According to his comments, photography is presumed to be a direct record of particular times and objects, but readings of it are informed by sexuality positions, require a specialist, and are difficult to understand. Through descriptions of informational breakdown and indications that there is something beyond what was in front of the camera, gay interest vintage photography sellers code photographs in similar ways to the use of the phrase “pictures do not do it justice.” They highlight photographic failures, and the norms that usually accompany these forms, so a version of gay can be elucidated from varied hints and sources. In doing this, they perform a kind of consumer critique of straight culture and eBay.

Sellers indicate that images do not do objects justice to direct viewers to engage by buying things. However, gay and gay interest listings are most fully elucidated on the eBay site. This makes what buyers are viewing and purchasing and the characteristics of eBay-facilitated gay and gay interest collections unclear. For instance, gay interest underwear and swimwear, much of which is no more revealing or typecast as gay than other items in the category, does not carry any larger cultural meaning when it is worn. These listings have a presence on the site and create inventive communities, connections, and traces of sellers for the people who wear such items. Sellers assert gay viewing positions and men who admire men’s bodies. Female sellers, and women who view these listings, are incorporated into these performances and desires, take up drag positions, and operate in settings where men, rather than women, are looked at. These subject positions are antithetical to eBay’s gendered and heterosexual organizational logic and founding narratives.
Conclusion: The Politics of Gay Interest

Sellers’ gay and gay interest listings trouble straight men’s sexuality and power. It is therefore not surprising that many eBay members are anti-fans and reject the accompanying viewing positions, devalue such images, dismiss the people represented, and resist the ways these materials are described. queen-of-parts promises “not to say ‘gay interest’” when listing a photograph. raretomes is opposed to describing postcards as “gay interest” because it “is pure conjecture.” Gay interest sellers are sometimes inundated by homophobic comments, such as atukolm, who uses the gay interest and lesbian interest search terms in listings but warns “THOSE OF YOU WHO HAVE SENT VILE EMAILS . . . DO NOT EMAIL ME AGAIN, there are ebay rules against harassment.” The “mountain of homophobic emails” camp-classics receives indicates “that some people just don’t get” gay interest selling practices.” gargantua adds a disclaimer to his listings because of the numerous homophobic emails he receives from irate viewers. He attempts to protect himself and the ways the term “gay interest” reflects on his sexuality by advising that “gay is a Search Word” and is “Not a label or social commentary about the viewer or the subject of the photo.” speakswithmusic is purportedly “not thinking of anything sexual, . . . not referring to the people in the images, but the culture that some of the eBay shoppers identify themselves with.” Sellers like speakswithmusic are ambivalent about considering and making fully visible considerations of gay sexualities. They also understandably want to avoid being textually gay-bashed.

Gay interest sellers try to protect their practices and positions, but some viewers send scathing emails because gay interest listings provide social commentary. These viewers convey the ongoing cultural unease with the possibility of gay pasts and presents and how these histories affect cultural and sexual identities. It can be difficult, as Sender argues, to use explicit gay identities and sexualities as typical selling strategies. Fear of alienating mainstream shoppers causes some sellers to perpetuate the advertising strategies described by Danae Clark in her GLBTQ consumer research. They produce “gay window ads” where content is coded so that it is only recognizable to gay consumers. For instance, sellers use the terms “gay” and “lesbian” in listings but make the text the same color as the background. These listings appear in “gay” searches, but the term is not readily visible to viewers. Only scrolling over the words while “cutting and pasting” or searching for the term while viewing listings, which are unlikely practices, reveal the invisible texts. When
sellers employ these tactics, even the terms “gay” and “lesbian” are closeted. Gay and lesbian interest buyers may become more knowing consumers who see parts of listings that remain unseen by other viewers, but their reading skills, buying power, and interests are hidden from other groups of buyers and sellers. These marketing behaviors curtail the political possibilities of gay and lesbian interest listings that are otherwise facilitated by sellers’ descriptions of gay and lesbian communities and positioning of buyers and viewers.

Some eBay sellers weave current politics into the sale of erotic images and objects. danthemusicman lists “Original Issue Promotional Stickers from 1993 The March On Washington, for Lesbian, Gay & Bi Rights.” When endymian offers a nineteenth-century image of a man in drag, he writes that he wants “to say to george bush” that “if your amendment goes through you and dick cheney will never be a legal couple.” He calls his eBay store, where other items are available for purchase, “the stonewall endymian gay photo shop” in order “to honor the men whose defiance of new york city police brutality against gay men in 1969 triggered the modern gay liberation movement.” He views the “sale of gay merchandise on ebay as a celebration of gay identity and one tied inexorably to the gay liberation movement.” Sellers also support gay histories by describing the sexuality of relatives. For example, uncelcrickey offers “diaries” and “special memorabilia” from his “Great Uncle Crickey”—a veteran of the Second World War and “an openly gay man in the Navy.” The eBay ID uncelcrickey allows him to become a version of his gay relative. Through such practices, sellers embrace a variety of sexualities.

Listings accomplish positive political work and articulate essentialist notions of gay identities and desires. A studio photograph of a Tarzan character “is gayer than gay,” and a man in another photograph “is gay indeed! He wears a lighter suit but sports polka dot socks!” Clothing sellers also associate tight and revealing underwear and swimwear with gay identities. Some amount of essentialism may be unavoidable, since, as John Elsner and Roger Cardinal outline in their visual culture research, “Collecting is classification lived.” Objects become understandable because of the ways they are described and related to other things. Collecting, which includes the desire to acquire and group items, requires articulating a set of essential attributes. Therefore, sellers also render essentialist ideas about sexuality and desire when queering images, undoing the insistent focus on heterosexual identities and desires, and associating being a sailor or dressing in a dapper manner with being gay.

The limiting outcome that queering can have on an array of possible gay
identities can at least be partially resolved by employing such tactics as irony and parody when finding gay elements in images. gargantua uses varied images and texts to self-represent as the “500 pound go-rilla.” He establishes a difference between himself and viewers by referring to their opposable thumbs, indicating that images will “blow your human mind,” creating fanciful tales, and reusing familiar phrases to connect aspects of listings to contemporary gay culture. In depicting an image of shirtless young male rabbit hunters in the 1920s, gargantua evokes some of the stereotyped aspects of gay club cultures by writing, “Kill the wabbit! Kill the wabbit! And you might as well have a few poppers & take your shirts off while you do.” He also offers an image of women performing as a heterosexual couple, in which one of them is wearing a suit. gargantua humorously notes, “God help the Mister that comes between Him and her sister.” In this text, gargantua uses the pronouns “him” and “her” to describe the person in drag, emphasize the portrayed individuals’ unstable gender positions, and highlight the difficulties in reading images for gender and sex attributes. gargantua playfully combines narratives about clubs and gender conventions to encourage viewers to read culture differently. He also uses wordplay, cartoon “self-portraits” of a purple gorilla, and other distinctive visual aspects to emphasize how sellers construct themselves.

Gay and gay interest sellers do not remain conventional bodies or gendered individuals. Some photography sellers complicate their gender positions by using vintage photographic images of individuals to stand in for their businesses and identities. These images rarely correlate to the identities articulated in posted comments and to the full names and email addresses that are provided when buyers “win” auctions. Other sellers tell more fantastic stories about their bodies. For instance, gargantua renders a large male body and genital bulk when self-representing as a naked gorilla. In one listing he notes, “Garg is a bit of a porker.” gargantua self-represents in spread-legged gorilla poses, but his genitals never show and his masculinity is thereby challenged. He further complicates his embodied configuration by using “his” gorilla head to hide representations of nude women’s breasts and other things eBay might censor. Through these gestures, he renders his practice childish, since he graphically presents on top of women’s erotic bodies and gets morphed into and attached to female bodies.

eBay’s search engine also destabilizes fixed identity positions and the cultural boundaries between gay and straight. Sellers sometimes use the term “gay” in listings that address heterosexuals as well as gay people. For instance,
magnumxl_wholesale offers “100% Legal Synthetic Man Sex Pheromones For Gay Men.” His experience with the product “exceeded” expectations; his “wife could not keep her hands off” him, and “a younger female co-worker” suddenly struck up a “flirtatious conversation.” magnumxl_wholesale’s description may be an attempt to self-present as heterosexual, and thus remain unmarked by gay products, but his use of the term “wife” is queered by his listings. The meaning of gay is also complicated because searching for the term generates objects from the “Gay 1890s,” people whose first or last name is “Gay,” and companies and products that incorporate the word. For example, sx28 offers a “Pair 6L6 GAY Vacuum tubes.” Listings for Mattel’s Gay Parisienne Barbie may refer to the company’s title for the doll, highlight its queerness, or queer doll collectors. Books and other items with the term “gay” in their titles are also listed seriously and read queerly.

Sellers construct the buyer, collector, and viewer when articulating what gay looks like, the kinds of images and objects that are of “interest” to the gay community, and what may be in the community’s best interest. Collections are formed and dispersed on eBay as items from estates and from sellers are offered for sale. For Michael Camille, collecting is a “process” by which objects “are being constantly produced, reconfigured, and redefined.” This form of reworking and circulating is different from what eBay’s advertisements propose. For instance, eBay associates collecting with normative histories and stable heterosexuality by depicting the reappearance of the engagement ring in the female owner’s home. Gay interest readings deform the ways items are normatively conceived at the same time that aspects of gay interest maintain some coherence.

Sellers’ gay interest listings and narratives have consequences that exceed the site because, as Elsner and Cardinal argue, collecting is a key part of how people “accommodate,” “appropriate,” and “extend the taxonomies and systems of knowledge that they have inherited.” Gay interest collections help complicate and queer dominant conceptions of society and highlight the value of gay, lesbian, and queer histories because the “categories into which” people and things “are assigned confirm the precious knowledge of culture handed down through the generations.” Camille explains how the multiform desires circulating in gay and lesbian interest collecting and the boundlessness of collectors’ desires trouble the dyadic logic and heterosexual imaginary of contemporary culture. Sellers of gay listings enact a consumer critique and try to generate a different form of culture and knowledge from the one that eBay management produces. Even as eBay works to assert heteronorma-
tivity, these listings articulate the economic and political value of gay interests and sexualities.

Gay interest renderings of masculinity, including flaccid penises and feminine masculinities, cannot fully support men’s cultural power and claims about being dominant. Female sellers of gay and gay interest vintage photography, who are occasionally gendered on the site, produce gay listings and desires rather than being rendered as objects of the gaze. The employment of the terms “lesbian” and “lesbian interest,” as I analyze it in the next chapter, also destabilizes an empowered male gaze and subject position. Sellers use it to describe a variety of representations and subject positions rather than only articulating erotic images of women engaging with each other, which straight men might enjoy. In gay interest underwear, swimwear, and vintage photography listings, the processes of being looked at and objectified are reserved for men. This breakdown of normative masculinity offers theoretical possibilities for rethinking gender, race, sexuality, and other identity positions in Internet settings and other spheres. Sellers of gay interest underwear and swimwear further trouble the functions and organizational logic of the site because they use listings, and the possibilities of communicating through eBay, to connect figuratively and literally to gay men and “get it on” via the site.