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Constructing Identity and community online: strategies of EBay netizens

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CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY ONLINE: STRATEGIES OF
EBAY NETIZENS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Communication
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

By

William C. Tran

May 2002

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ABSTRACT

CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY ONLINE: STRATEGIES OF EBAY NETIZENS.

By William C. Tran

This study examines the online community of eBay. It explores the rhetorical strategies employed by eBay Netizens to craft identity and community in an online web-based environment. Rhetorical analysis was done on personalized identity sites called "about me" pages.

The analysis revealed that several common strategies were used to construct identity. In addition, the study also uncovered specialized identities on this community. It was explained that these specialized identities help fill many of the voids present with the advent of e-commerce. Moreover, these specialized identities help build and shape this online community.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

This study explores how users create a sense of identity and community in an online environment. The study examines the rhetorical strategies users employ in the online world to construct a sense of identity and how they build a sense of community within this new virtual space. This study has many objectives. First, the literature review summarizes research on how identity is constructed in the traditional community and the virtual community. The study defines characteristics that make up a traditional community and a virtual community. The discussion of identity in the traditional community reveals an element lacking in the virtual world: the need for identity. Secondly, the literature review introduces the role of rhetoric in shaping traditional notions of community in both physical and virtual environments. For this purpose, the study differentiates between primary orality and secondary orality. Third, the study discusses how identity and community have been previously analyzed in order to fill

some of the voids in extant research. To that end, this study focuses on the eBay online trading community.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN TRADITIONAL AND VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

Identity has always been an important element in the construction of a community. Throughout time, identity construction has changed and evolved and new means of shaping identity have emerged. Marketplaces have traditionally represented a site of commerce and social life (Grigar, 1996; Donath, 1998). In traditional market places, not only are goods exchanged, ideas and identity are developed as well (Tidwell, 1999; Grigar, 1996; Hagel and Armstrong, 1997). There is a great deal of communication in traditional market places such as shopping malls, flea markets, and even Wal-Mart. Simply put, shopping is a form of community building. However, in many areas in the world of e-commerce, people lose touch of community building and the act of public display. There is a void, a missing link. In an increasingly commerce-oriented world, many buyers/sellers lose touch with the human dimension of business (Kleindl, 2001). Shopping is a public act of display. But, unlike the face-to-face environment where

buyers/sellers can easily identify one another, the persona of the individual remains obscured in virtual space (Bordia, 1997; Kling, 1996). This absence brings about a need for buyers/sellers to alter and adapt their environment to their needs through various strategies. These strategies can best be understood by first exploring the elements and link between the traditional community and the virtual community.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON THE TRADITIONAL COMMUNITY

What exactly is a community? Depending on where you look the definition of community will vary. A formal definition proposes community to be "The quality of appertaining to or being held by all in common" or community is also known as "Common character; quality in common; commonness, agreement, identity" (OED Online, 2001, ¶1&2). According to Alan Tidwell (1999), "community suggests a sense of togetherness and commonalty, and recognition that one is a member of a community, (i.e. members are self aware)" (¶10). The Greek agora is a classic example of community. The agora was a market place in which people gathered to exchange goods and services. Although the marketplace is a forum mainly used for commerce, it also serves as an area in everyday life where individuals gather

to discuss the important topics of the day. The communication within the agora slowly emerges into a community of individuals with similar interests. Today, there is a latent function of the agora in market places.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEW AGORA

The traditional agora has now been resurrected and reshaped into an electronic space. Grigar (1996) notes that "with the advent of computers, yesterday's agora is today's electronic forum, a virtual space created by networked computer technology" (§1). A new type of space in today's agora is the Internet. Traditionally in communities, publishing, radio, and television serve as vehicles for communication. Now, the Internet has become a significant form of communication. Moreover, the Internet -as- agora has spawned new forms of gatherings called virtual communities.

There are many characteristics of a virtual community. Howard Rheingold (2000) defines virtual communities as "people who use computers to communicate, form friendships that sometimes form the basis of communities" (§1). Virtual communities are interactions among Netizens who form relationships through discussions that simulate real life

conversations. Communities have now been redefined where personal relationships can exist in cyberspace. In describing the traditional notion of citizen, Michael F. Hauben (1996) notes that the word "citizen suggests a geographic or national definition of social membership" (¶5). People often confuse the word Netizen for meaning citizen. In order to clarify this distinction, Hauben (1996) discusses two general uses of the term Netizen: The first is a broad usage to refer to anyone who uses the Net, for whatever purpose. The second usage describes people who care about Usenet and the bigger Net and work towards building the cooperative and collective nature that benefits the larger world (¶5). Many of the elements of the agora have remained the same throughout time. The major difference between the agora of the old and the agora of the new is the emergence of a new electronic space. Many new challenges emerge in this new agora; one such challenge is the need for identity.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON A NEED FOR IDENTITY

In traditional communities identity plays a critical role in interaction. The same applies for communities on a virtual plane. Judith Donath (1998) writes:

Identity plays a key role in virtual communities. In communication, which is the primary activity, knowing the identity of those with whom you communicate is essential for understanding and evaluating an interaction. Yet in the disembodied world of the virtual community, identity is also ambiguous. Many of the basic cues about personality and social role we are accustomed to in the physical world are absent. (¶1)

When physical community ceases to exist, individuals think up new ways to shape community in the online world. This thesis argues that eBay.com illustrates this principle. eBay.com is an online auction that seeks to form a sense of community among its members. In fact, eBay boasts over 19 million registered users since it was launched on Labor Day in 1994 (Couzin, 2000). So what are the characteristics of communities that define online communities such as eBay?

As eBay became an established marketplace, buyers and sellers realized that many have unique and specialized interests. Many Netizens felt a need to create a sense of identity with the community. Since this is an electronic community where face-to-face interaction is not yet a reality, Netizens had to improvise. eBay's management

recognized this need and created the "about me" page. The "about me" page allows a Netizen to employ rhetorical strategies to construct a sense of community in an online electronic environment. It gives Netizens a sense of identity because it replicates elements similar to the agora. According to Auctionwatch.com (2000), eBay's About Me page allows sellers to post their own personal page on the site, offering information about themselves and their auctions as well as quick and easy access to their feedback and other auction listings, among other things. In addition, the "about me" page may be of use to Netizens because "buyers like the intimacy and contact that About Me pages provide; they put a face (figuratively, or literally, if you choose to include a photo of yourself) to the anonymous auction site username" (Auctionwatch, 2000, ¶2). Reputation, identity, and character are components of building a "me" in a place. After discussing the emergence of the electronic agora from the traditional agora it is now important to discuss the importance of rhetoric in shaping community and identity on these online electronic environments.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON THE INTRODUCTION TO RHETORIC AND THE SECONDARY ORALITY

Rhetoric is shaped differently in the traditional agora than in the electronic agora. It is important to establish the link between these two areas before moving forward with this chapter. This section introduces three stages of rhetorical construction. Rhetoric is shaped in stages called oralities. Walter Ong (1982) discusses various areas of orality. The first stage is known as primary orality. This is the stage where humans exchange knowledge and information through speaking. The second stage is the written word. This all came about with the emergence of various alphabet systems and moveable type. Finally, the third stage includes a term coined by Ong as "secondary orality." This concept emerges with the advent of the electronic telegraph, computers, motion pictures, video, computers, etc. These notions of orality are not mutually exclusive; rather they depend on each other. For instance, secondary orality cannot exist without the presence of literacy. Ong (1982) is careful to point out that secondary orality doesn't abandon print culture, as indeed the "telephone, radio, television, and other

electronic devices [...] depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print" (p. 11). This section presents and explains in more detail the background of these stages and how rhetoric is shaped within these stages.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON PRIMARY ORALITY

In his book, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (1982), Ong explains that rhetoric is shaped in three stages. Ong characterizes primary orality as "the orality of cultures untouched by literacy" (p. 6). Human communication begins with primary orality, the ability to speak with others. In this culture there is no knowledge of writing or even the possibility of writing.

Communication, knowledge, and identity are known by the spoken word. According to Ong (1982), "To learn what a primary oral culture is and what the nature of our problem is in regarding such a culture, it helps to reflect on the nature of sound itself as sound" (p.31). We come to understand others by the transmission of sounds. Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. Once sound moves out of existence there is no way to stop it. If the movement of sound is stopped, all you have is silence. The

sounded word and the development of mnemonics (strategies for recalling information from memory) are fundamental characteristics for the qualities of orality. Many tribal or hunting and gathering societies are examples of primary orality. Analyzing a public speech is an example of how rhetoric is used in the first stage of primary orality.

The second stage of orality started with the written word. For most of human prehistory there was only orality. With the written word and the introduction of the alphabet, humankind no longer passed down knowledge orally and recalled information mentally. Stories could now be achieved through texts and books. Literacy and the spread of information increased with the introduction of the Guttenberg's printing press in 1452. Provenzo (1986) explains:

The printing press made books a mass commodity, and for precisely that reason, literacy became a mass phenomenon. Standardized typefaces made reading an easier activity, because readers no longer had to deal with the idiosyncrasies of another person's handwriting. The errors so frequently made by scribal copyists were eliminated, and thus thousands of people could have access to the same, presumably

error-free "standard edition" of a text.
(p.16)

Until the late 19th century, identity and community was expressed orally and/or in writing. Analyzing magazine or newspaper comic strips to see how humor changes over time is an example of how rhetoric is examined in the second stage of primary orality. Innovations in media technology set the stage for an exploration of rhetoric in secondary orality.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON SECONDARY ORALITY

Secondary orality emerges with the electronic age. This is an age where devices such as the telephone, radio, television and computer change the ways we interact. However, despite the introduction of these new media the presence of some traits from primary oral cultures endures. Ong (1982) states: "This new orality has striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas" (p. 136). Secondary orality traits come from both literacy and orality. The Internet is a prime example of secondary

orality because it alters the traditional means of communication.

According to Thomas Boutell (1996), the Internet "came into existence in the late 70's as an outgrowth of the ARPANET, a Pentagon-instigated network designed to be able to survive a nuclear war. In practice, the web is a vast collection of interconnected documents, spanning the world" (¶3). The World Wide Web, created by Tim Berners-Lee, is a part of the Internet that links hypertext documents. Browsers (such as Netscape Navigator and Microsoft Internet Explorer) are needed in this process. These browsers are application programs that allow users to view content over the World Wide Web. These browsers decode HTML and make information readable to an audience. HTML is a universal language used to display text, images, sounds, and other multi-media features on websites. Browsers, HTML, and Hypertext are all examples of elements that aid in the shaping of rhetoric in secondary orality.

Hypertext is an important area to address when talking about secondary orality because it breaks away the traditional belief held in primary orality that the dissemination of information must be linear (for instance, books and other print come with chapters and page numbers

guiding the reader in a predetermined path). Jay Bolter (1991) explains, "hypertext is the interactive interconnection of a set of symbolic elements" (p. 27). Hypertext provides flexibility by allowing a person to connect to various links by using a mouse to click a word, icon, picture, or symbol. Another way to look at hypertext is any text that is nonsequential, multi-linear. Through this non-linear process the experience for readers varies because it breaks away from the predetermined path characterized by primary orality. This mainly differs from the second stage of primary orality because in books, journals, magazines, and other printed sources, there are indices and chapters to organize sections of information. There is a linear path in the dissemination of information. On the Internet, this linear path does not necessarily apply. Ted Nelson created the term "hypertext" in the late 1960s to explain this new flexibility in the dissemination of information. Ted Nelson (1990) explains hypertext as "text that branches and allows choices to the reader, best read at an interactive screen. As popularly conceived, this is a series of text chunks connected by links which offer the reader different pathways" (p. 2). Hypertext breaks the traditional rules. In his book Hypertext: the Convergence

of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology (1992), George Landow explains that "hypertext calls into question such elements as: fixed sequence, definite beginning and ending, and a consequent perception of unity and wholeness" (p.102). Hypertext is primarily noted for its feature to link but there is much more beyond linking.

The capability to integrate other forms of information is also a characteristic of hypertext. Landow (1992) explains that hypertext "inevitably includes a far higher percentage of non-verbal information than does print (p. 43). Merging together elements of multimedia like video and sound adds to hypertext's complexity. From this we get the term hypermedia. According to Picher (1991), hypermedia applications "allow users to forge their own nonlinear paths through images, sounds and text" (p. 23). Many new elements are now possible that was absent through primary orality. Writing takes place in a new type of space. Bolter (1991) introduces the term "writing space," by which he means "the physical and visual field defined by a particular technology of writing" (p. 11). Writing in cyberspace changes the traditional rules of place. For instance, public speaking in the first stage of orality may require a person go to an auditorium or speaking forum (the

place). Or, reading a book in the second stage of primary orality may require a person go to a library (the place). The action must be performed in these spaces and the space cannot come to the person. Hypertext on the other hand is quite different because place becomes space. This space creates flexibility and accessibility, an important component in this area of secondary orality. Lance Strate (2000) explains that, "along the same lines, we might say that hypertext makes available a new kind of reading space" (p. 268). People can create communities through this new space because geographical boundaries are eliminated. This thesis rests upon the claim that such phenomena warrants a closer study because limited exploration has been done in this area.

In order to study how rhetoric is utilized in this area, the author analyzed what rhetorical strategies Netizens employed to construct a sense of identity and community on eBay web-based auctions. How do Netizens use hypertext to express a sense of identity and community? Answering this question required an analysis into the use of metaphors because metaphors are common tools used in building identity in primary orality. The author believes

that metaphors also influence identity construction in secondary orality.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON RHETORIC AND THE USE OF METAPHORS

There are many strategies that people use to build a sense of identity and community. One such way is through the use of metaphors. Robert Ivie's (1987) work on *Metaphor and the Rhetorical Invention of Cold War "Idealists"*, proposes that a "metaphor is at the base of rhetorical invention" (p. 166). When writers or speakers bring together a group of metaphors, they create a sense of identity about themselves. Ivie explains that by clustering metaphors that are alike, the speaker's "system of metaphorical concepts" can be identified (p. 167). The use of metaphors helps people within communities or groups make sense of the world. The use of metaphors was widely used in primary orality. In his work, *Water-related figurative language in the rhetoric of Mencius*, Ringo Ma (2000) notes that, "a significant number of figures of speech can be found in the *Meng Tzu*. A notable cluster among these figures of speech was water-related, such as "inundation," "rain," and the general term, "water." They were frequently used in association with power or superpower" (p. 121). In this work, Ma shows how Water-related figurative language

is an important component in the rhetoric of Mencius (a prominent Confucian philosopher of social order and humanism believed to live between 371-289 B.C.). Constructing rhetorical meaning through the use of metaphors is present in primary orality but relatively recent in secondary orality. Employing metaphors to shape identities in the agora has existed for centuries through literature and face-to-face interaction. The emergence of Internet agoras like eBay has only been around for about a decade.

In another work, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration & Practice*, Karan Foss (1989) explains that a metaphor "constructs a particular reality for us according to the terminology we choose for the description of reality" (p. 189). In an online community, Netizens often use many different kinds of metaphors to construct a sense of reality about their identities. These metaphors contain various assumptions and points of view. Foss goes on to argue that a metaphor "prescribe[s] how we are to act" (p. 189). Perhaps much of the way Netizens construct identity on eBay is a way of "acting" in order to fulfill or construct the social norms of the community. As shown by Ivie, Ma, and Foss, metaphors are used in many areas of

primary orality to shape meaning. This thesis builds on this previous research in primary orality by showing how identity-related figurative language and metaphors is an important component in secondary orality through the rhetoric of the Netizens of eBay. Much of Ong's work on orality is interrelated with metaphors. Based on the literature review, it is now appropriate to examine how the author studied identity and community.

STUDYING IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

To analyze how eBay users craft a sense of identity and community in a virtual environment, the author considered the question: What rhetorical strategies do Netizens use to construct a sense of identity on eBay? The author proposes that the "about me" pages is an accurate model of how Netizens construct a sense of identity in this online environment. Many scholars find that the strategies employed by people to craft online personae are limited (Donath, 1998; Greenhill, 2000; McRae, 1996). Also, the tools that Netizens have to create an image for themselves are limited in many online communities. Usenet groups and threaded discussions are a good example. To identify an individual, the only physical cues a person has are textual.

For instance, in a threaded discussion, a person can infer an individual's screen name, their e-mail address, common phrases that a particular member would only use but not much more (Baym, 2000). This thesis responds to these limitations by studying the "about me" page and evaluating the manner in which this tool offers Netizens a method for enhancing identity online. For instance, some examples include explaining the Netizen's buying and selling strategies, their role and identity on and off of the eBay community, or sharing their hobbies and interests. Conveying these personalized details are often absent or blurred in threaded discussion forums. It becomes apparent that "about me" pages and threaded discussions differ. This is just one of the many justifications of why this thesis deserves further examination.

WHY THIS STUDY IS WORTH PURSUING

This study is worth pursuing for a number of reasons. First, humans have a yearning for social belonging (Myers, 1992). When this dimension of their lives is limited or taken away, they seek out alternative means to satisfy this need. The Internet has become a blurred space. In an electronic environment such as eBay, Netizens find a need

to break through the barriers of a virtual non-existing geographic space and establish an identity for themselves in the electric community. This thesis demonstrates how Netizens accomplish that. Secondly, the Internet is a new medium of study. More exploration needs to be done in this area. A greater understanding still needs to be developed on how people interact in this environment. Third, this study may be the first of its kind. Through the author's exploration of several e-commerce sites and online communities, the feature of a personal identity space is absent. eBay appears to be the exception as it integrates the commerce and identity elements. Moreover, it may serve as a launching pad for other scholars to bring about related studies about eBay or other online communities. Finally, this element of online community may be beneficial because it addresses a topic of broad and contemporary interest. Recently many dot-coms have been going out of business. Some of these establishments have been around as long as eBay. They are out of business and eBay is growing faster than ever. Starting with only a handful of people, eBay has grown to have over 19 million registered users. eBay now positions itself as "The World's Online Marketplace" (taking the virtual agora type of positioning)

but it is important to note that they used to be known as "eBay, your Online Trading Community." Perhaps eBay's growth and survival has to do with its strategy of successfully integrating business with community. This thesis provides insight on how eBay manages this feat.

SUMMARY

This chapter has introduced the construction of identity in traditional communities as well as identity construction in virtual communities. The literature explained the elements making up these communities as well as how rhetoric is employed in both areas. Ong's research provided a framework on how rhetoric is shaped in oralities. In addition, an explanation was provided on how rhetoric, orality, and metaphors are linked. Finally, Chapter I examined how identity and community is studied and also provided a justification on why this study is worthy pursuing. It is now appropriate to examine a useful methodology to analyze the rhetorical strategies that Netizens use to construct a sense of identity and community.

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY FOR STUDYING IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

DRAWING THE SAMPLE

From the eBay.com homepage, the first step was to visit the sitemap (<http://pages.ebay.com/sitemap.html>) located at the footer of the homepage. The sitemap links to various links on eBay. The author was only concerned with the links under the category of *Community*. The category *Community* displays various links where a sense of community is shaped in some way (community help, chat rooms, suggestion boxes, etc.). Data were drawn from links under the *eBay User to User Discussion Boards* (<http://pages.ebay.com/community/chat>). Under the discussion board are three links. These links are the *eBay Town Square*, the *Soapbox*, and the *Park*. The data was sampled from the *eBay Town Square* (URL continually changes).

The sample was drawn from this eBay resource because in traditional communities, the *Town Square* is an example of a forum where communities and identities are shaped. The author employed this treaded discussion forum to draw a selection of "about me" pages. Conditions under these electronic environments attempt to resemble elements of

community building and identity aspects of the traditional community. The *Town Square* positions itself as an open forum for Netizens to discuss various topics. For instance, a topic posted may ask, "What do you think about the 2000 election controversy in Florida? Under these sections, Netizens participate by representing various interests. Topics under these forums update frequently (often every 10 minutes). The threaded discussion element is one example of community building. For this study, the author focused solely on analyzing the "about me" pages. Only some members on eBay choose to expand their presence through the "about me" function. Only members with an "about me" section under the *Townsquare* were analyzed. The author collected data from 150 "about me" pages. The sampling and analysis of the "about me" pages took place in April of 2001. Because of the difference in page length, some pages were relatively quick and easy to analyze. Some "about me" pages took less than two minutes to compile and analyze. The longer "about me" pages took from five to fifteen minutes.

Under a topic posting such as "What do you think about the 2000 election controversy in Florida?" there may be about 80 posts. The author scrolled down the page of posts and selected postings with a "me" icon next to the poster's

screen name. Out of 80 posts there may be about 20 members with a "me" icon. The author gathered a convenient sample from people from all different areas (neighborhoods in traditional marketplaces). The author felt that these forums created a greater likelihood that this study can develop insightful conclusions about identity construction in an online environment.

ANALYZING THE "ABOUT ME" PAGES

The author studied how content is shaped on the "about me" pages by analyzing clustered strategies on how Netizens communicate identity. In other words, strategies held in common by groups of Netizens. Examples of rhetorical strategies expressed on these pages range from their business/services, the reinforcement of the Netizen's reputation, the Netizen's guidelines for selling/buying, the Netizen's discussion about their family, and other such categories. One goal of this study is to see what are some of the commonalties that are prevalent throughout the "about me" pages in creating identity.

The author employed a convenient sampling method to analyze clustered-strategies on how Netizens construct identity and community. This was accomplished by utilizing a coding procedure influenced by Robert Ivie's (1987) work

on *Metaphor and the Rhetorical Invention of Cold War*

"Idealists." Much of this work shows how metaphorical cues form the basis of rhetorical invention. Ivie presents a five-step procedure for identifying metaphorical concepts. Ivie's five-step method is quite useful in this research. The procedure allowed the author to break down large pools of information into smaller clusters. These small clusters enabled the author to examine the data in closer detail. The main distinction between Ivie's study and this study is the difference in orality.

In order to analyze the rhetorical strategies that Netizens employ to create a sense of identity and community on eBay, the author employed the following procedure:

- 1) Familiarize with text
- 2) Select a collection of texts for marked vehicles.
- 3) Arrange marked vehicles into subgroups by clustering.
- 4) Create a separate concept files for each cluster of terms.
- 5) Analyze one-by-one for patterns of usage between clusters.

FIVE STEP PROCEDURE

Step One

In the first step, the author familiarized with the "about me" pages context. This is essential in interpreting any particular rhetorical method put forth by the authors of the "about me" pages. In chapter one, the author has done that by exploring relevant scholarship such as eBay literature, the electronic agora, rhetoric, and primary and secondary orality.

Step Two

In the second step, the author gathered a series of "about me" pages in order to analyze the rhetorical strategies employed by a series of Netizens. From this gathering, the author identified marked vehicles. In the context of this study, a marked vehicle is any textual indicator that drives a Netizen's identity. For instance, a Netizen may use textual indicators like: "Trust", "Mom", or "Canadian" to portray identity. The "about me" pages supplied the author with the necessary vehicles put forth by a diverse sample of Netizens. As the author went through analyzing the "about me" pages for rhetorical strategies of identity and community construction, the author became more familiar with the strategies that the

Netizens conveyed. Ivie (1996) notes that, "each reading yields previously overlooked vehicles as the critic becomes more sensitized to figurative terms disguised initially by their seemingly literal usage" (p. 167). Like most of the vehicles of content that Ivie discusses, the rhetorical strategies on the "about me" pages should be ideally a paragraph or less for every occurrence of a strategy. It is under this step that Ivie suggests using a word processing program to mark designated speech or text being analyzed. The point of this is to reduce the original text to an abridged version that comprises only marked rhetorical strategies and their immediate contexts. The author used Microsoft Word for the data compilation and analysis.

Step Three

In the third step, the author arranged marked rhetorical cues gathered from all the "about me" pages into categories and subgroups. The author then clustered rhetorical cues together under a category based on rhetorical cues with similar entailments from the sample of "about me" pages. For instance, an "about me" page may have 12 rhetorical strategies. Suppose one category of constructing identity is "building an honest reputation." Rhetorical cues with key words like: "honest", "trust", "no

negative feedback", or "check out my feedback profile", was organized under the "building an honest reputation" category. This process was repeated under every category constructed and under every "about me" page.

Step Four

In the fourth step, the author created concept files of rhetorical strategies gathered from each cluster of content. This established an organization system that helped the author analyze the data more efficiently. Again, a word processing application assisted in the compiling of data. These concept files displayed the Netizen's various rhetorical strategies within a given cluster, as well as occurrences of rhetorical strategies from other clusters. For instance, let's take the category "building an honest reputation" once more. A concept file under the "building an honest reputation" category may be labeled as "building an honest reputation through direct reinforcement" and another concept file may be created labeled "building an honest reputation through indirect reinforcement." Under "building an honest reputation through direct reinforcement," a buyer/seller may directly reinforce "building an honest reputation" by using clear vehicles targeted to being honest. A list of metaphors and

strategies may include the seller claiming: "I am an honest seller," "My buyers see me as a trustworthy seller," "I make it my duty to build a foundation of integrity and honor in the community." In the concept file "building an honest reputation through indirect reinforcement," a buyer/seller may indirectly reinforce "building an honest reputation" by using suggestive or implied vehicles targeted to being honest. A list of metaphors and strategies may include: "check out my great feedback profile" or "I am an eBay power-seller (a seller completing over 1000 transactions)."

Step Five

In step five, the concept files that the author compiled in step four are analyzed one-by-one for patterns of usage within and between clusters. This process revealed a system of constructing identity and community from a wide cross-section of Netizens. For instance, the author analyzed closely how all of the Netizens "build an honest reputation" through "direct reinforcement" and "indirect positive reinforcement." As the author analyzed all of the data gathered from the 150 "about me" pages, the author searched for rhetorical cues that show up frequently. In step four for instance, an example was given that a Netizen

may have an indirect positive reinforcement method like "Check out my great feedback." It was at this point that the author established points of commonality across all of the "about me" pages. Perhaps using a rhetorical strategy like "check out my great feedback" (or a sentence similar with the key vehicle "feedback") may be a popular indirect reinforcement method used by many Netizens to promote "building an honest reputation." On the other hand, the "feedback" vehicle may be unique to just that one user. This final step was repeated for all of the concept files created. With the completion of this fifth step, the author was in a position to assess the rhetorical strategies guiding various rhetorical inventions that eBay Netizens employ.

SUMMARY

This chapter has provided a justification of why the sampling took place in the Town Square. The conditions in this forum were explained and some indicators of identity were suggested. In addition, this chapter presented Ivie's five-step method as the framework for the study and explained why this process works best in the study's exploration. With these elements in place, it is now

possible to move forward with the next section of the thesis.

CHAPTER III

STRATEGIES FOR CONSTRUCTING SELF

INTRODUCTION

As an outside observer looking into this community, it is apparent that eBay Netizens share many similar characteristics. Here, identity is shaped through generic strategies that represent a wide-cross section of the eBay community. These strategies are the most commonly used vehicles for constructing the self. Netizens here use a combination of both online identity strategies as well as offline identity strategies to convey self.

Online identity is a relatively new form of identity construction. This is one of the more groundbreaking areas in the shaping of identity because there are few rules, guidelines, or roadmaps for Netizens to follow when constructing this online self. This online self normally revolves around how the Netizen makes use of his/her space on the eBay community. On the other hand, Netizens may also choose to employ strategies that relate to offline identity. Offline identity is a form of identity construction without reference to the Netizen's identity on eBay. In simple terms, identity construction in this category centers on the Netizen's "real life" rather than

their "virtual life." Clusters and strategies under this category incorporate content that the common person would comprehend because the strategies share commonalities that exist in traditional communities. The strategies employed here are generic strategies that make up the first part of this research. Part two of this research is discussed in further detail in Chapter IV.

During the data collection process, a few dozen strategies emerged. Here, content was organized and simplified after employing Ivie's method. Following the organization process, the author found that the general strategies for constructing identity fall under twelve frequently used clusters. These clusters are labeled: The Netizen Building Identity Through Geographic Location, The Netizen Building Identity Through Their Profession, The Netizen Building Identity Through Emoticons, The Netizen Building Identity By Addressing Issues Of Importance, The Netizen Building Identity Through Quotes, The Netizen Building Identity Through Name And Demographics, The Netizen Behind The Alias, The Netizen Building Identity Through Hobbies and Interests, The Netizen Building Identity Through Seller Strategies, The Netizen Building Identity Through Buyer Strategies, The Netizen Building

Identity Through Reputation Reinforcement, and The Netizen Building Identity Through Contact Information.

THE NETIZEN BUILDING IDENTITY THROUGH GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION

The space surrounding the "about me" page is utilized in order to construct identity. However, a Netizen's offline location regarding to where he/she lives alters this distinction between space and place. When a Netizen makes public where he/she lives in the physical world, the eBay community comes to know his/her identity through another place beyond the community space. A Netizen's brief or general statement of geographic location can unravel numerous things (please note that all footnotes contain quotations from Netizens sampled in this study).¹ When a Netizen states that he/she lives in British Columbia, the community may presuppose that the Netizen's nationality is Canadian. Likewise, Netizens may be labeled based on these geographic identities domestically. Describing U.S. states, cities, or towns often accomplishes this. By doing so, the community may be able to presume regional culture or

¹ ***Talking about location***

Crabapple Cottage is located in Surrey, British Columbia, Canada. "santanna"

New, Unique, and Antique Mostly Art started as consignment store in Southeast Denver. "mostlyart"

A Little About Me. Hi, my name is Patricia and I live in Katy, TX. "valentinemcgee"

characteristics but little room is open for interpretation beyond these general statements. Then again, when a Netizen goes into further elaboration into geographic location, more indicators are left in the open to better assess his/her identity.

After stating their geographic location, many Netizens go into finer detail about their physical environment.² Netizens here separate themselves from the community when they communicate unique attributes about their area. Physical descriptions and images such as "front porches" and "rocking chairs" to group gatherings such as "hunting," "tractor pulls," and "chili cookouts" are used to describe their locale. Visual imagery is also a widely used strategy. Metaphors such as "the salt air is so

²***Describing their location***

ETC...ETC.... I have recently moved to Kansas *yawn* so inbetween tractor pulls, hunting Bambi and chili cookouts *sarcasm* I kill time on Ebay! Bored and feel like looking at some sites? Check out the links below, they are GREAT! "shedevilss"

I am living in Kingsport, TN although I am from Myrtle Beach, SC. I am homesick for the "Beach", but it is nice here, too. I hope to go home to live out the remainder of my life someday. The smell of the salt air is so intoxicating and I do really miss it. "trulascloset"

Thank you for stopping by! I reside in Southern California in a suburb called Huntington Beach, about 45 minutes south of Los Angeles. I am originally from Oregon, and moved here to study the designing of movie and television sets. A former student of Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising-Los Angeles campus. "vault_disney"

Southerners are reknowned for their hospitality and East Tennessee is no different--front porches and rocking chairs are the norm around here, so sit a spell and we'll visit!! "imagrits"

I live in Australia (which is definitely the best place in the world), but I love international trading, as well as dealing with other Aussies. "saucie_aussie"

intoxicating" help the reader relate by depending on their physical senses. Sarcasm may also be a strategy, to perhaps dispel regional stereotypes about a location. This humorous effort works well in guiding the reader through their space.

Many also take extreme pride in their geographic location. A strategy used to communicate friendliness is hospitality. By taking a whole geographic area (like the southern United States) and linking it to a trait, Netizens also acquire these traits by communicating their geographic location. This creates boundaries as it relates to borders, culture, and sometimes language between their identity and most of the online community. A superiority strategy is one way to heighten identity. Netizens may take an ethnocentric angle by stating that their place is "definitely the best place in the world." Displaying this sense of national pride again establishes boundaries among community members. Alienation may come about as a result of these borders unless the Netizen's identity belongs to a large cross section of the community. However, it is important to note that the evidence is not compelling that Netizens who choose to affiliate their national identity to a group that's outside the mainstream population is subject

to ostracism if national identity is communicated in a reasonable manner without being offensive to others on the community.

THE NETIZEN BUILDING IDENTITY THROUGH THEIR PROFESSION

Few Netizens consider eBay to be their full time profession. Given that some members on the community utilize eBay as a full time job, many make the most of eBay as a part-time venture. Their offline profession is what defines them and not eBay entirely.³ Some Netizens hold only one offline profession; but there are also others who hold down multiple professions. Community members can associate their identities through their knowledge in various areas. "Strombor" explains how the government terminated his

³ *Discussion of Profession*

Welcome to all who are curious Thanks for stopping by to see who I am and what I collect. I teach history at the high school level and farm on the side as my second job. "bruv"

About Me The government decided that middle managers weren't doing anything a few years ago, so they offered me early retirement. Now I teach history part-time at the local community college. My family and I live in the Mojave Desert. A picture will follow when I get organized. "strombor"

Ruth is a public high school teacher of English, Spanish, and Theatre... James is just along for the ride! Actually he is a bureaucrat, as he works for city hall. "gloriawall"

Who Am I am a former member of the U.S. Secret Service, and I am currently a law enforcement agent for the state of South Carolina. My boxing career includes losing a three round split decision to future professional heavyweight champion Michael Moorer. "pugilist66"

As you can tell by me eBay ID, I'm a mom of a great 8 year old and I also work as a commercial photographer. (overlap) Been doing that since 1984. I love my computer and spend way too much time on it. I try to put up some examples of my work when I can. "caseysmom3"

Thanks for stopping by! My name is Debbie, and I'm a software designer in the telecommunications industry. "basset_rescue"

employment when his position was considered obsolete. He now takes on a part-time position at a community college to pass the time. Other community members who share commonalities with "strombor" such as "gloriawall" may be able to relate to "strombor's" situation because her husband works for the government as well. Pouring out these fine points to the community helps the Netizen to build bonds with other members who may perhaps share common characteristics.

Likewise, discussing a Netizen's profession may also be a way to boost or give suggestive implications about his/her accomplishments. "Pugilist66" appears to take extreme pride in fighting a tough match against a heavyweight champion boxer during his boxing career. This may serve as an attention-drawing element to intrigue other members of the community. In addition, by expressing early that he works for the U.S. Secret Service, he may also draw in other community members such as "gloriawall" or "strombor" who works or knows others who work for the government. Identity may also be shown through professional work done off of the community. "Caseysmom3" writes that she continually tries to share some of her professional

work with the community. A Netizen taking this approach communicates identity through accomplishment and work done through his/her offline profession. "Caseysmom3" is able to further build her identity when others on the community have things in common with what she does or interest in what she is doing.

THE NETIZEN BUILDING IDENTITY THROUGH EMOTICONS

As discussed in the literature review, there is an absence of face-to-face interaction in the online environment. In order to supplement for these missing emotions and expressions, ASCII illustrations are used. These illustrations are known as emoticons. Emoticons are built out of punctuations marks and letters to replicate human emotions or expressions. On eBay, expressions for the most part tend to be either positive or neutral in tone.⁴

⁴ *Emoticons*

RICKY'S ATTIC HI WELCOME ONE AND ALL I HOPE YOU ENJOY YOUR STAY FEEL FREE TO BROWSE AROUND ALL SMILES ARE FREE :) FOR ALL ELSE YOU PAY "BILBO32"

Ya know, I've never met a cat I didn't like, ditto for dogs and most other critters - tame or wild. Critters are pure, what you see is what you get. Animals have no pretenses, no excuses, no regrets. Natural. Wonderful. I'm guess I'm getting way too old to dally with whimsy about the simple beauty of animals and the too often destructive intellect of humans but . . . if you wanna to be my bosom buddy you'd better have fur growing on you. :-) (pic of cat) "yumgood"

Hi, my name is Kat. I've been mostly buying on eBay lately, as I don't have as much time as I'd like to tackle selling like I used to, but keep an eye out for future sales. You never know what I might come across and list! :o) "MOMKAT62"

=^..^=MEOW=^..^= Hello and welcome to our page! Our names are Pookie,Tigger,Trapurr and Elliott. Please be sure to check out how cute we are! "TRAPURR"

Then there was always the little matter of keeping the cages high enough to keep the kitties away!

Smiley faces are popular (as in most online communities such as chat rooms, MUDS, newsgroups, etc.) and examples of such include ":)", :-), and :o)." These emoticons are used to express emotions of friendliness, approval, happiness, and so forth. Emoticons are prevalent on the eBay community. However, some Netizens tend to overuse these emoticons. This risks diminishing the value of these expressions. The regularity of these symbols may blur the line between genuine emotions and artificial expression. A large pool of Netizens pioneer emoticon usage to communicate meanings other than emotions. The "=^..^=" emoticon used by "truppur" reflects the Netizen's deep love and interest for animals (especially cats). The two "=" signs appear to represent whiskers, the "^" symbol represent eyes, and the two ".." appears to replicate a nose of a feline. Although the frequency of these emerging emoticons pale in comparison with the emoticons used for displaying emotions, it is evident that some Netizens are drawing up unique ways to authenticate their identity through this strategy.

Emoticons

^.^ ^.^ ^.^
=.= =.= =.= "assenav"

THE NETIZEN BUILDING IDENTITY BY ADDRESSING ISSUES OF IMPORTANCE

In this cluster, Netizens build their identity through addressing issues of importance that shape their identity.⁵ Employing such strategies serves dual purposes as they also provide a PSA (public service announcement) to the rest of the community on what special causes or issues drives them. The length and depth of information that goes into writing about these topics suggests that these causes are important to the Netizen. But, many Netizens may discover that identity is not based through this one area alone. Many Netizens under the "neighborhood watcher" cluster like "turturk" (refer to chapter 4) who dedicates his entire "about me" page to an issue of interest. A community member like "sethelm" takes on a contrary approach by noting that

⁵ *Issues of Importance*

I am a volunteer seller for Centers For Nature Education, Inc.(CNE) at Baltimore Woods in Marcellus, NY. Please help support this very worthwhile cause, *teaching and promoting environmental awareness and appreciation*. 100% of the profit from CNE fundraising auctions on eBay are applied to our Capital Fund for facilities improvement. CNE is a non-profit 501(c)3 Nature Education Center providing public programs to thousands of children and adults throughout the year. Please visit our website at www.takeahike.org, or by following the link below. Thank you for your interest. Specifically marked auctions are CNE Fundraising items donated by our supporters. Please note, as I am a volunteer and sharing my ebay site, personal items are also showing. CNE fundraising items are noted in the auction text. You can also support CNE while shopping at [igive.com](http://www.igive.com). Copy/paste this address <http://www.igive.com/html/refer.cfm?memberID=112758&causeID=6945>. Choose Centers For Nature Education as your charity of choice. "sethelm"

Stop what you are doing right now and go give your furry little one a big hug! Just a reminder to have your little guys spayed and neutered. Even though the world is a better place having them with us, we still need to do our part to control the population and please.....always remember to show your little guys how much you love them! If you haven't a furry friend, please visit your local animal shelter and give one a chance. I promise you they won't let you down! Be sure to check out Elliott's siblings at the end of this page! Just click on the captions to view pictures. "TRAPURR"

I adopted Cameron recently and advise everyone interested in adoption to check into your local Children Services Board and help the children in your own community that need parents and a home. "legoholic"

the "about me" page contains information relating to a cause of interest while making it clear to the community that her space is not limited to this one issue alone. The "about me" page is a means for Netizens to get their message across while simultaneously seeking to build community awareness. Links and addresses are disclosed for community members interested in joining the cause. Others promote the joy of adopting pets from animal shelters. It is shown here that "TRAPPUR" is not only an advocate but that she also contributes to an issue that is dear to her. Her actions and decision to adopt animals is proof for the community that the outcomes outweigh the costs. She communicates this through the success and joy of adoption. Issues of importance communicated by these Netizens such as the environment, education, animal appreciation, and adoption demonstrates that there are a wide variety of issues that Netizens deem important.

THE NETIZEN BUILDING IDENTITY THROUGH QUOTES

A popular strategy to begin an "about me" page or to convey identity exists through the use of quotes. The most popular quotes tend to be religious in nature.⁶ All Netizens

sampled through this cluster fall under a Judeo-Christian background. Netizens communicate that their identity is shaped through their faith. Many Netizens proclaim that the "Lord Jesus Christ took hold of [their] life" and reinforce their deeply held beliefs using Bible quotes. Most Netizens communicate how their faith has influenced their life. However, some Netizens also take on the identity of a "converter" by pushing their beliefs onto the community in hope of having people join their sub-community. Some Netizens accomplish this by asking or providing the community links associated with their faith. The bible is a vehicle that drives these messages. One Netizen uses a passage from John 8:47 asserting, "The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God." The use of this

Religious Quotes

Newness of Life When I was 9 years old, the Lord Jesus Christ took hold of my life, and I have never been the same! He is my joy, my strength, my precious Savior! Luke 1:78-79 "...the DAYSPRING from on high has visited us; to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." "nificent"

Who is like the Lord our God, the one who sits enthroned on high, who stoops down to look on the heavens and earth. ...The heavens are yours and yours also the earth; you founded the world and all that is in it. "K3OF5KS"

I found a great presentation of the gospel. Click here: "HKENNC"

"Worship the Lord Your God and Serve Him Only" Luke 4:4 "He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God." John 8:47 "jaidesmom"

quote may unite as well as separate various communities on eBay. For those who believe in the Netizen's message, a religious community may flourish. For those who do not believe or have doubt in the Netizen's faith, the Netizen once again turns to the Bible to explain that this is because they "do not belong to God." This passage has various implications from establishing invitations to build religious community to asserting individual religious faith. The other area of quotes includes personal mottos or personal beliefs.⁷ Netizens employing this strategy communicate various mottos and how these mottos shape their identity and behavior on the community. "Bratpup1" indicates that a person should buy what they like. The identity behind this Netizen may indicate that they often buy on impulse. This impulse behavior can serve community purpose as sellers on the community may propose possible items for sale to this individual. On the seller or business side, the "you're never too old for a second

⁷ *Mottos*

I Buy What I Like A very intelligent person once told me "buy what you like, you only live once". My motto has become "I buy what I like". Life is short, too short to let something pass you by that may bring a smile to your heart and awaken your soul when you gaze upon it. "bratpup1"

Our tag line, "You're Never Too Old For A Second Childhood" is not just a motto, it's our way of life. "toys-to-treasures"

Visitors often comment that my house is like a museum. My motto is that anything can go on a wall, if grouped nicely! "LINDY2U"

childhood" motto used by "toys-to-treasures" is a tool used to reflect the philosophy behind a seller's business enterprise on eBay. These mottos may represent both personal beliefs online as well as offline.

THE NETIZEN BUILDING IDENTITY THROUGH NAME AND DEMOGRAPHICS

In online communities like newsgroups or MUDS, the disclosure of a person's real life name is the social norm. Screen name or aliases are acceptable at one point but many online communities expect members to disclose their real-life name after the member assimilates with the community. Nancy Baym (2000) writes: "The preference for real names is normative as well as structural. Participants on [online communities] actively discourage anonymity" (p.148). On eBay, this standard is not crucial. The majority of Netizens opt to use their screen name while keeping their real-life name confidential. However, a select few on eBay have no problem disclosing their real-life name.⁸ Disclosure

⁸ *Using own name*

Hi, I am Marcia, better known as legoholic. "legoholic"

Who is Krayz? I'm Joe Rider, owner of Hot Comics St Paul, in Minnesota. And I love eBay!! What a great place to get stuff. And that's what life's all about: getting more stuff! "krazz"

My name is LaDora, but you, my friend, may call me Dorie! "DANDORA"

Hi--We're the Wiersma's!.... Dan, Terri, and our sweet toddler daughter, Sarah Kathryn (born January 29th, 1999!) Sarah will become a big sister sometime this April--can't wait for the new arrival!!! "wiersma98"

varies to some degree. Some Netizens have no preference on how they wish the community to address them. For instance, "legoholic" as well as "krazz" provides two acceptable means for name association. For some, the use of nicknames or shorted versions of their name are acceptable. This customization provides ease of identification, familiarity, and eliminates any one standard for addressing other members. In addition, the usage of a Netizen's real life name also applies to other clusters as well. For instance, the "family person" persona (discussed in Chapter IV) contains examples where the Netizen discloses their name, their spouse's name, as well as their children's names. The use of the offline names, as well as online names, are not mutually exclusive and are applicable to identity construction and community building. The same applies for other demographic information as well. Age is another factor that builds identity. The disclosure of one's age appears sporadically.⁹ Generally, younger Netizens are more

⁹ ***Exact Age***

My name is Mary Lucas. I am 22 years old and love selling on eBay. "maryslittlecorner"

A BIT ABOUT ME Hi everyone! Thank you for taking the time to get to know me. Well, I'll be turning 21 very soon and I'm a Graphic Design major in college. I'm one of the few girls out there that actually has a thing for cars. So now you know the story behind the name. :-)) I also have an addiction to shopping. Some of my favorite brands are BEBE, ARMANI EXCHANGE and ABERCROMBIE. "lude-angel"

Stats Hi: I am a 46 year old from the state of Utah. I am a Pilot. I have only bidded on Ebay and have Yet to start selling. "davidclark764"

likely to disclose their age. For instance, "maryslittlecorner" states that she is 22 years old and loves selling on eBay. Here the Netizen states that one of her roles on eBay involves being a seller. Her age also serves as an indicator in assessing her personality and identity offline. Many Netizens may infer that Mary is a college student or someone just getting started in life. "Marylittlecorner" is vague aside from disclosing her age, but other hand, other Netizens fully disclose their offline identity so the community can come to a general conclusion without guessing. "Lude-angel" states that she is soon turning 21 and is currently attending college as a graphic design major. This refers to her offline self. At the same time, she also makes her online identity known by using the "reason behind the screen name" and the "hobbies and interest cluster" by stating she has an addiction to shopping or explaining the reason behind her screen name. In any case, it is apparent that disclosing one's age is a tool to shape identity. Although the disclosure of one's age appears most frequently amongst young women, every now and again an extreme case emerges. For instance, "davidclark764" states he is 46 years old and goes on to state his online and offline identity. Stating a Netizen's

exact age is rare but it is even rarer to see disclosure in ambiguous terms.

As individuals pull away from the 20-something age range (perhaps more among women), Netizens are more likely to reveal an approximate age.¹⁰ "Mycottageshop" illustrates this by stating that she's "a middle aged woman." This apprehension of disclosure perhaps reflects insecurity on aging or ill sociological perceptions on aging. The approximate age strategy shields Netizens from this kind of conflict.

THE NETIZEN BEHIND THE ALIAS

A Netizen's screen name is his/her first means of identity in the community. Netizens come to know Netizens by their screen name at the outset. Screen names are aliases used to identify online community members. There is often a shroud of mystery behind screen names. This sense of mystery may create a sense of obligation by the Netizen to shed light on the meaning and significance behind their online identity.¹¹ Assumptions flourish in the community.

¹⁰ *Approximate Age*

I'm not a retail 'shop'. I am literally a middle aged woman sitting in front of her computer in her cottage at the edge of the forest. I go into town , now and then , buy things I love and share them with you. It is so much fun, I don't have much time for anything else. But, I will get organized , someday and finish this page "mycottageshop"

"Lude-angel" overcomes these assumptions by clarifying that her screen name has deeper meaning than what appears on the surface. Contrary to the general assumptions that community members presume about her screen name being "naughty" or "kind of lewd," the name in reality is a reflection of her deep interest in cars. "Texasbrit" suggests that his identity is a result of his ethnic lines and nationality. It is evident that many factors contribute to the shaping of a Netizen's identity. The above examples provide clear support that clusters work together to construct identity and a sense of community online. However, the process of identity construction also creates many complications.

Users are not restricted to only one screen name. Many Netizens opt to create multiple identities online. There

¹¹ *Explaining reason for screen name*

SO WHAT'S UP WITH "LUDE-ANGEL"? I know you probably thought that my ID was the naughty kind of "lewd". But nah, it's from my Prelude Si that I absolutely adore and love to modify. I guess it's safe to say I'm one of the few girls out there that actually has a thing for cars. So now you know the story behind the name. :-) "lude-angel"

Hi, welcome to my page. My name is Jane and I'm a transplanted Brit from Nottingham, England living in Texas for just over 21 years - hence my eBay ID. "texasbrit"

Never mind Mommy! Who's Pudding? And why is there a black cat in Puddingsmommy's auction ads? Pudding is my 13 year old female feline who is part Maine Coon cat and part Queen of Everything. I use her name as part of mine, and I include a black cat in my ads in order to give equal attention to Pyewacket, my 16 year old male black shorthair.
"puddingsmommy"

Everybody else seems to be doing About Me pages, so I guess I had better too. First of all, why "strombor"? I mean, so many of you have really neat names. Well, when I first signed on to eBay, I was asked for a name. My mind went blank. I looked at my daughter's miniature poodle for inspiration. As it happens, he is named "Dray Prescott," for the hero of a fantasy/science fiction series. So "strombor" just popped into my head, since that is one of Dray Prescott's titles. How profound! "strombor"

My Ebay name comes from a cartoon character - a bear named "Kissyfur" (which was already taken, hence, the addition of "Ms"). "mskissyfur"

are a range of reasons why people acquire more than one screen name. Safety reasons and business/community reasons are two reasons discovered during the research. Ideas expressed on the Town Square and other community forums on eBay may contain controversial content. These topics of debate may unearth tension and bitter opposition from Netizens. Netizens protect themselves by acquiring additional screen names. Accusations suggest that "vindictive folks"¹² are responsible for ruining auctions, conspiring in personal attacks, and even stalking. By explaining the necessity of generating a second screen name, the Netizen also reminds the community about the dangers of online life.

The "role on eBay" cluster (in Chapter IV) is another popular justification for additional screen names. One screen name may be used for commerce and another screen name may be used for community functions (Town Square and Soapbox). Clarification whether the purpose is for commerce

¹² Safety Reasons

Why the posting ID and why ASSENAV? I have a posting ID for The Soapbox separate from my regular eBay identity because sometimes strong ideas are expressed with the potential for great argument and I would not want these opinions to effect my auctions in any way, as they have with some others. I chose assenav because I feel like, when need be, I can let out the "Evil Me"! (Remember that episode of Star Trek with the Evil Captain Kirk?) I feel that here, unlike in "real" life I can express my thoughts without hesitation, knowing that some may agree and others may not; some might understand my weird sense of humour at times, and others might not, but it's all okay! "assenav"

or community purposes is critical in order to dispel speculation of identity fraud or identity deception. Identity fraud and deception is rampant online (Aycock, 1995; Post, 2000; Chenault, 1998). Many Netizens justify their intent in creating these additional screen names as a means to safeguard against assumptions coming from other community members. Assumptions on part of the community may separate rather than unite the Netizen's identity to the community.

THE NETIZEN BUILDING IDENTITY THROUGH HOBBIES AND INTERESTS

Hobbies and Interests are perhaps the most powerful strategy on eBay in creating identity.¹³ The "hobbies and

¹³ Interests and Hobbies

A little about us We both love the creative side of life. I enjoy a folk art of rolled paper pictures. Ever hear of it? You use magazines, cut the pics into small pieces, roll the pieces into small rolls and use them as your "paint" to create a picture. I've sold some, and won a People's Choice award for one, too! There are about 3000 to 4000 pieces on one picture.

Extremely time consuming!! My current picture is of Nantucket's oldest light house. It's a 9" by 11" and I'm rolling on a darnin needle. Yes, a needle!! Smaller picture, but still 3000 - 4000 rolls. "sirock"

I live close to downtown, you can find me and my buds skate boarding all over town. I have a vespa (moped). that I just love to ride. It gets 100 miles per gallon. You ought to see me on it orange and green hair flowing. I am into heavy metal, comic books and older women. I am on the football team, I am the quarterback. In our off time we (the team)hustle older chicks (30 and above). they appreciate it more than the young stuck up ones. Usually, a bottle of wine (ripple or thunderbird) does the trick. I guess Mrs Grazianna will be more the merlot or dom pergnion type. Oh well, there goes my allowance. I am saving my lunch money to get one of those super savers to get over ther to Va. That Dolly girl is hot but Adolph, the blocking back wants her. And whatever Adolph wants he usually gets. Besides he is more into whips and chains than I am. "azz"

Ya know, I've never met a cat I didn't like, ditto for dogs and most other critters - tame or wild. Critters are pure, what you see is what you get. Animals have no pretenses, no excuses, no regrets. Natural. Wonderful. I'm guess I'm getting way too old to dally with whimsy about the simple beauty of animals and the too often destructive intellect of humans but . . . if you wanna to be my bosom buddy you'd better have fur growing on you. :-) (pic of cat) "yumgood"

Music is my religion and the source of my spiritual comfort and inspiration. And it keeps me rockin... Some of my favorites: Bjork, Led Zeppelin, Kate Bush, The Cure, Frank Zappa, Crowded House, Tom Waits, Geoffrey Oryema, They Might Be Giants, NIN, Massive Attack, Talking Heads, Radiohead, Laurie Anderson, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Squirrel Nut-Zippers (overlap) I hold an oh-so-useful degree from the University of North Alabama in Acting and Directing, hence the interest in vintage clothing for costumes. "kulmandu"

interests" cluster include identities that are usually created offline rather than online. Netizens here intensify their identity more through the community building aspect of eBay rather than the commerce side. Netizens here seldom suggest that their interests and hobbies are for commerce purposes. Rather, these Netizens strengthen their identity through these hobbies and interests. This invokes a sense of community building for Netizens who have areas in common with the Netizens. On the other hand, it also presents an opportunity for those who are interested in finding out more about the Netizen's interest or personality. The "collections" cluster reflects more of the online side of identity construction.

The "collections" cluster creates a junction where offline identity meets online identity.¹⁴ A Netizen

¹⁴ ***Collections***

For years I have wanted Fun with Dick and Jane books., Well now I have them.THANKS E-BAY! My daughter and granddaughter have found humming bird wind chimes,and suncatchers etc.etc.etc.I am fascinated with the little birds.I have feeders and in the summer I set and watch them..I live in PA. near the Amish community so I have collected quite a few pictures and figurines,of Amish, I guess you would say I am a collector.I think it is time to stop .Also lots of good bargains on Bellville sale days(every wednesday) weather permitting. Years ago this was a farmers market.Today it is a combination farmers market and flea market. "EDDESSA"

I collect angels, stuffed teddybears and rabbits, colbolt blue glass, rocks, CD's, Chicken Soup Books, rosaries and neat clip on earrings to name a few "KAITIPOO"

I love to collect Beanie Babies, Angel figurines, American Prescut glassware, and anything to do with POODLES. I love children. I guess that's why I have surrounded myself with them for the past seven years! "pchenley"

Now, for my passion. I have a Star Trek collection. It was beginning to take over our guest room, so I've decided to thin it out a bit. I watched the original show as a small child, and I still love it. "timezorro"

communicates his/her identity through a statement about collecting. Areas of collections include Star Trek items, books, beanie babies, and other items. Netizens take on the identity of a collector by making use of words such as "I collect" or "my passion." Some Netizens state that they have been collecting for a number of years before eBay came about. This "collector" identity tends to reflect the existence of an offline identity before the online community was established. Through their offline identities they are able broaden the scope of their collections even further thanks to eBay. They are now able to build on their collection through their online role as a "buyer or seller." Identity construction shaped through these collections is not limited only to commerce as the community building aspects (Town Hall, Soap Box, Chat rooms, etc.) allow the Netizen to further shape their identity through Netizens with shared interests.

THE NETIZEN BUILDING IDENTITY THROUGH SELLER STRATEGIES

Many Netizens appear to be selling items found around the house for which they have little use. One gets the

Collections

I personally collect alphabet blocks, buttons and small old embroidery pieces. I also love old linens and books. My husband recently decided that he only wants to wear French cuff shirts. As a result he has started to collect cuff links. We have spent many evenings "surfing" EBAY for going, going, gone cuff links. "dustystars"

impression that much of the selling on eBay resembles a garage sale as found in a traditional community.¹⁵ Many Netizens communicate that they sell because there are things that they don't need or want anymore. So, by the sale of these items, the Netizen not only earns extra income but also cycles items into the community that others could use. This is the most common approach in shaping a seller's identity. This identity of being a "trader" is expanded further when Netizens delve into the discussion of their hobbies or where they obtain these items¹⁶. Strategic

¹⁵ *What Netizen sells*

I sell stuff that I can't use anymore. Some of it I've never used at all. Look for my auctions and you'll probably find a good deal. My house is over run with baby stuff, computer parts, and punk gear. I always seem to buy things I never get a chance to use (especially when it comes to baby things). *sigh* "soap-artist"

Most of the items I sell on eBay are ones that I find on my collecting adventures or things that I don't need, don't want, or have decided I can live without. I also list items for friends and. If I ever decide to sell my personal treasured collections of things, I can probably retire to an island - yeah, right! Dream on, Lindy! "lindy2u"
Who We Are I am not a trader. These magazine, books and other gift items sales are going to help with the cost of a very expensive operation my Paint show gelding, HPH Pawnee Bull, has to have. "paintpower"

I love anything old and have TOO MANY different collections--hopefully you will benefit from my varied interests as I clean out my house and put many of the things up for auction!! Of course, you will have to hang around a while, as I have literally hundreds of items to get rid of!! "imagrits"

¹⁶

Where Netizen Obtains items

I search out items mainly at estate sales and I do not apologize for the opening bids, which I do try to keep as low as possible. Sometimes I will start an item off lower than my cost and just hope it will get more than one bid. I know the fun of the hunt! That is what I do when I go to these sales. Sometimes I can find a boutique going out of business and then I do some dickering for you to get the lowest price I can. "trulascloset, 650"

words such as "search," "hunt," or "looking" involves additional identities for Netizens. The author believes that the places where eBayers obtain these items may also suggest to the community that they are "bargain hunters" or "scavengers." Elements of pleasure are indicated through the use of "fun" or "great time." Many Netizens use this pleasure element to link up with their strategic selling purposes. Through this process, Netizens talk in terms of the community and not themselves. It is their hope that the community "will benefit from [the seller's] varied interests." Eliminating indicators of personal interest helps in the seller's quest for belonging. However, some Netizens choose to break away from the identity of a "trader." A Netizen's intent may be to accomplish things that appear important to his/her identity such as a "very expensive operation." Selling now becomes a necessity to a single member that breaks his/her identity away from the mainstream trading population. Using a strategy like this, an individual Netizen may be able to generate sympathy and community support.

Where Netizen Obtains items

Thanks for coming to my page. I have a great time looking for and finding neat collectibles at garage sales, thrift shops and antique stores. My family sometimes wonders about my "obsession". I think they are just jealous because I have so much fun! "dustystars"

Using eBay to generate money is a role that represents many eBay Netizens¹⁷. For most people, eBay is a forum to generate additional income. Netizens often state that they are not in this to get rich but just to accomplish some personal goal. For some, eBay is more practical than searching out a part-time means of employment. The convenience factor and simplicity of the system creates a fast-growing group. To fit into this community, Netizens assume general roles based on their participation on the community. Drawing from the previous discussion of commerce, many Netizens imply that generating income drives their identity on eBay. Whether their involvement is limited or involved is irrelevant. Netizens who explain how they use eBay for their own uses in the area of commerce automatically classify themselves into the category of seller.

¹⁷ ***Money Makers***

Auctions 2000 is a small business that I started to help generate a little extra income. All merchandise sold under the Auctions 2000 name is new and is guaranteed. "auctions-2000"

I work full time and I e-bay on the side to earn a little mad money for my e-bay purchases. "jennyt557"

Read Some Stuff About Me! I'm kinda new to all of this and thought I'd share some of my thoughts with you, the curious and bored people of the world. I've been eBaying for a while as a buyer but I've just listed my first auctions today (9-6-00) and actually already have a bid! Ain't technology grand? I'm hoping it's the start of a long run on eBay. What could be more perfect than taking three things I'm crazy about...photography, computers, and shopping...and turning it in to a little extra income? I'm not here to get rich, just make a few extra bucks and clean out my closets. The last thing I want to do is out and get another part-time job that I hate and have the headache (and cost!) of having to deal with childcare. "retro rave"

THE NETIZEN BUILDING IDENTITY THROUGH BUYER STRATEGIES

On the other hand, buying is the other function in commerce on eBay. The role of "buyer," makes up the other half of the community.¹⁸ Key words such as "shopping," "purchases," and "acquire" are used to push this buyer identity. The buying behavior of these Netizens varies from bargain hunting to addiction. Some Netizens communicate that eBay is a great place to buy miscellaneous items at a discount. Displeasure is expressed through words such as "hate" or "cursed" when communicating purpose behind selling. Through this dark choice of words, Netizens also express problems with addiction. The expression of being a "shopping addict" is not unique to one Netizen. Multiple Netizens communicate in one way or another their addiction for shopping. However, "addiction" used in most cases reflects more of a personal passion that the buyer holds rather than any real psychological problem or "addiction" in its true sense. Implications of addiction are also

¹⁸ **Buyers**

Buying and Selling I usually buy levi's for myself and my husband (aka Domestic Partner) as well as any other odds and ends we need which I can find here. I hate paying retail for clothes! "redjinx1"

I enjoy shopping on eBay for high-end cosmetics and designer goods. I'm cursed with champagne tastes and a beer budget. "xpenSive1"

Since then, I have both sold and acquired many items through Ebay....Although I have sold items through Ebay, my husband keeps reminding me that my purchases have now outweighed my sales at this point! Oh well... "bratpup1"

suggested when members in the buyer's life (such as a spouse) must remind that buyer of a potential problem. In any event, addiction used here unites other Netizens who can relate to the buyer's point of view.

THE NETIZEN BUILDING IDENTITY THROUGH REPUTATION

REINFORCEMENT

Reinforcement is the most widely used methods of building reputation on eBay. This aspect is one of the features that position eBay apart from other online communities. The most popular methods for strengthening one's reputation are through direct or indirect reinforcement. The most popular method by far is by direct reinforcement where members state their positive reputation by expressing concrete facts and/or examples.¹⁹ Many Netizens express this expectation of the community through honesty and fair/business practices.

¹⁹ Direct Reinforcement

Refund Policy I will package your items with the utmost care! I use bubble wrap and peanuts for all of my fragile items. My feedback is a testimony to how well I package items. "HKENNC"

I am a very honest seller and buyer. My feedback profile is evidence of that. I do expect the same honesty from others that I have transactions with. If you are new to eBay and reading this, here's a little advice; ALWAYS check feedback before bidding. It could save you a lot of disappointment and money later! Most of the sellers on eBay are very honest and great people, but once in a while you may run across one that is just the opposite. Don't make any decisions to bid in the heat of the moment. Always bid smart. HAVE FUN AND HAPPY BIDDING! "pchenley"

THE PROOF IS IN THE PUDDIN'Take a look at my feedback section. The best way to get to know a seller is to read what others are saying about them. "alwaysapenny- neverareserve"

Every item you will see on my auctions is in hand and ready to be shipped and "fast" is the operative word around here - check my feedback!! "texasbrit"

Honesty is an expectation on the community. This is a shared value held by the community and it reflects the community norms of the eBay community. For those unacquainted regarding these community norms and values, many Netizens also take on a role of a "teacher/guide" (discussed in chapter 4) to inform the community proper conduct. These "teachers" or "guides" caution others not to "make any decisions to bid in the heat of the moment" and to "always bid smart." It is apparent that many community members believe that ignorance does not excuse poor judgment. Nonetheless, Netizens take measures to safeguard against misunderstandings. The general feeling about holding a positive identity is that honesty is dependent on the attitudes that other community members hold about the Netizen. Netizens believe that "feedback is testimony." Netizens may intensify their identity by drawing in community members to back them up because the best way to get to know a seller is to read what others are saying about them through direct reinforcement.

A less popular method is through indirect reinforcement where the Netizen hints that a positive reputation is essential but the Netizen never directly

proclaim his/her noteworthy reputation through clear statements.²⁰ Again, little has changed when striving to become part of this community. A strong example of how important feedback and reputation are intertwined lies in this statement: "Neferatiti" states that "[she is] both a buyer and seller with feedback well over 160. All positive except for 1 neg! (sniff)." Judging from this quote, it is clear that the community has little tolerance for negative feedback. This Netizen expresses a dramatic or exaggerated sense of sorrow and disappointment. It appears that one negative feedback draws far greater attention than 160 positive feedbacks. These Netizens aspire to be accepted into the community. "Consideration" is a powerful factor in accomplishing this. Netizens take time to thank the community for "considering doing business" with them. In this case, a Netizen's reputation is contingent on his/her acceptance into the community.

There are also many Netizens who strive to distance themselves from less desirable members on the community.

²⁰ ***Indirect Reinforcement***

I am both a buyer and a seller with feedback well over 160. All positive except for 1 neg! (sniff) "neferatiti"

I think it's important to start by thanking you for taking the time to learn more about me... the person you're considering doing business with. We all work very hard for our money and we should work just as hard ensuring that we're making good choices when spending it. While there are few guarantees in life, the more information we have when making these decisions, the more likely we'll make informed, safer choices. "pawspd"

Many members feel that "most sellers on eBay are very honest and great people, but once in a while you may run across one that is just the opposite." The seller suggests here that they belong to the better half of the community or else they would not be making such an assertion. Their identity is associated with the honest portion of the community and they aspire at all costs to distance themselves from other community members through this indirect method. On the community, "there are few guarantees in life, [but] the more information [community members] have when making these decisions, the more likely [community members can] make informed, safer choices." "Pawspd" suggests that the community members assume the responsibility to judge credibility rather than relying on mere statements attesting to a Netizen's claim. It is vital not to take the Netizen's word for everything. Understanding the community, values, and norms leads to acceptance. The word "safer" implies that danger lurks on the community. The Netizen seeks to distance his/her identity away from this less sought-after group. No reference is ever made back to the Netizen with exception to the first sentence giving the community a sense that the

Netizen does not boast about his or her own reputation, but seeks the greater good of the community.

THE NETIZEN BUILDING IDENTITY THROUGH CONTACT INFORMATION

Many Netizens make their address public or invite the community to contact them through various forms of communication. Traditional means of contact such as mailing address and phone numbers have diminished in popularity. Established businesses that expand into the online environment are the only groups that disclose such information.²¹ The bulk of Netizens choose, instead, to keep this information secret. This may be due in part to malicious attacks, stalking, or a potential invasion of privacy to safeguard against these possible threats. Many eBayers employ electronic means.²² Using email is the most

²¹ *Invites to mail/call*

MY ADDRESS: Jane Edwards Texasbrit Enterprises 9711 Plum Ridge Drive Houston, TX 77064. "texasbrit"

Inquiries Alchemy Arts has expanded during March 2000, and is now located at 1203 W. Bryn Mawr, Chicago, IL. 60660
If you need to contact us about a completed auction; you can call us from USA or Canada FREE or toll free at 1-800 348 6766 from Noon to 6 PM CST daily. "alchemy-arts"

²² *Invites to e-mail*

How To Contact Me As always, I invite your questions, comments and suggestions. I can be contacted at:
rscannady@home.com or rscannady@hotmail.com / "pawspd, 33"

We try and do our best to make sure our customer's are happy. If you are looking at our items, please always feel free to ask us anything or just drop us an email. We would love to hear from you! Thanks to all of our great customers. And, also thanks to all the great seller's who brought us quality items at great prices. "spencersstuff"

I'm a laid-back kinda girl and hella-easy to get along with. If you have any questions about anything, please send me an e-mail. I love meeting new people and I love the ones that are just as nice to me as I am to them. Thanks everyone, AND thank you again for stopping by. Take care! :-)

Oh, yea...if you like, you can e-mail me at heidrich@townsq.com anytime!
"gopher_girl"

widely way for eBayers to communicate. Netizens disclose this information freely. They often invite the community to email concerns or any questions or comments that they have. Aside from email contact, some Netizens also provide their ICQ address as well. ICQ refers to a program that "takes the complicated work of finding friends, colleagues and people with similar interests across the globe [by communicating through several channels such as] email, chat, SMS, phone or pager" (ICQ, 2002, ¶1). It is not unconceivable that streaming audio and video may become a new course for contact in the near future.

SUMMARY

This chapter outlined widely used methods for Netizens to construct identity online. These cues help create a sense of self. Strategies relating to online self (screen names and online interests) and strategies relating to offline self, (conveying professions and place of residence) help eBay Netizens fill that void in identity. In addition, these strategies may also make the Netizen feel established in the community. The majority of Netizens

Invites to e-mail

For questions, or just to contact me, I can be reached by e-mail at: auctions@drexelantiques.com Sometimes e-mail bounces, and at times e-mail and servers can go down. If my regular e-mail doesn't work, I can be reached at this alternative e-mail address (It may take a few days for me to respond, as I don't check this address ever day): drexelantiques@hotmail.com ICQ Number: 94992785 "drexelantiques"

shape their image in the strategies discussed in this chapter. However, as the next chapter examines, in conjunction with these strategies, some Netizens take on a more specialized role.

CHAPTER IV

PERSONA

INTRODUCTION

To this point, the author has described how online personae are specialized identities developed by Netizens to better serve the community. These personae help explain how prospers. This chapter proposes that some of these personae depend upon the presence of two factors: 1) the continual involvement of the community and 2) the continual interaction and feedback from the community. This chapter further argues that two major groups of personae exist. The first is the "shopkeeper" or "businessperson." This group is mainly motivated or concerned with their own interests. The second group also participates in many of the "shopkeeper" functions but plays a larger role in the development of the community. The author has labeled this group the "neighborhood activist/booster." Examples of personae existing under this group include: The Guide/Teacher, the Town Square and Soap Box Netizen, the Neighborhood Watcher, the Politician, and the Family Person.

THE SHOPKEEPER

eBay's prime function is to provide a gathering space for commerce and trading. It is no surprise then that the "shopkeeper" persona is the most dominant identity on eBay. Under this persona, Netizens generally employ strategies that build upon this identity of a "shopkeeper." The "shopkeeper" uses strategies that fall under four frequently used clusters. These clusters include: the shopkeeper's discussion of business, the shopkeeper's honesty/fair business practices, the shopkeeper's accommodation of customers, and the shopkeeper's business rules and guidelines.

THE SHOPKEEPER'S DISCUSSION OF BUSINESS

Some Netizens have turned a simple garage sale type space into a full-blown business.²³ Through this business, the Netizen takes on the role of a "shopkeeper." In many

²³ *Discussion of Business*

Home-based Business Since 1990 Welcome to the virtual embroidery shop. Being a horse-lover, most of my products will be equine related. We are just getting started, many more horse designs to come. Right now draft horses are our favorites. The beauty of this job is that you can sew any kind of horse you are in the mood to sew at the moment. Coming soon, a Russian Orlov Trotter, just found that design and can't wait! Also coming soon, Breyer Horses. "bellestart2"

Greetings Alchemy Arts is a Occult/Metaphysical book and supply store located in Chicago. We stock over 220 herbs, 200 tarot sets & decks, candles in all colors & shapes (figure, mummy, gender, etc.), altar tools and jewelry. We carry over 100 different single-note oils, and we do 600 plus blended oils. Alchemy Arts specializes in rare, out-of-print books and modern leather-bound limited editions. "Alchemy-Arts"

Hadrian Woods centers on the elements & holds them sacred. Most offerings have an element in theme...be it earth, air, fire & water. Although these gifts from the woods are presented in the realm of modern technology, we believe in the simple art of tending a garden and the written word. We appreciate the artist and rejoice in the gifted hand. "hadrianwoods"

cases, they are known generically as a shopkeeper or they may be more clearly identified through their business name. For the most part, these businesses are small, often defined as "home-based." Regardless of the size and sophistication of these enterprises, though, the Netizen tends to make his/her presence known through an online business name or his/her role as a salesperson. The repeated use of the word "we" rather than "my" draws attention away from individual identity. Through this business identity, Netizens also communicate various strategies relating to trust.

THE SHOPKEEPER'S HONESTY/FAIR BUSINESS PRACTICES

The "shopkeeper" finds a compelling need to earn the community's trust because of the danger or perceived danger online. He/she does so through the aid of the following strategies.

Satisfaction Guarantees

To display honesty and fair business practices, many Netizens offer a money back or satisfaction guarantee.²⁴

²⁴ *Satisfaction guarantees*

My Guarantee: I am comitted to 100% satisfaction. If the item(s) are not accurately represented in my descriptions, I will send a full refund once the items are returned. I must be notified within 10 days of postmark via e-mail to invoke the guarantee. "auctions-2000"

EASY, HASSLE-FREE RETURNS GUARANTEE "Buy With Confidence, Return Without Worry" If you are not entirely happy with your purchase, simply return it and we will gladly exchange it or process a refund within 24 hours of receiving

These strategies intend to put buyers and sellers at ease. Netizens strive to build an identity of trustworthiness by putting the members of the community first. Key words such as "Guarantee", "100% satisfaction", "full refund", "easy", "hassle-free returns", "buy with confidence", and "return without worry", provide examples used to create this impression of trust. Acceptance into the community requires the contentment of the community. This acceptance is typically associated with the commerce aspect of eBay. A popular strategy among Netizens is to put their reputations on the line. If something is not to the liking of the community, solutions are suggested in order to remedy these ill effects and increase their chances in regaining the community's trust. These remedies lead the way to trust and trust lead the way to acceptance within the community.

Satisfaction guarantees

your item. Return Guidelines Please return product in it original packaging along with your packing slip within 30 days. Free return shipping refund is limited to the amount you paid us for shipping it to you. "fortsumpter"

Our guarantee All merchandise is guaranteed as stated or full refund. If you have a complaint then please contact us within 3 days of receipt so that the problem can be promptly addressed and resolved. We leave feedback and encourage you to do the same. "wardnjune"

My Guarantee: I guarantee that the merchandise I sell is just as described, and free from any defects unless stated otherwise in the auction text. If you feel that the items are not as described or have a defect, please e-mail me within 10 days from the date of shipping (immediately) and I will send you a refund (less shipping charges) or replace the merchandise upon receipt of the items back to me. "jennyt557"

I don't want to jinx my packages, so would like to mention here instead...I stand behind everything I sell. If something bad happens to your package, PLEASE-let me know as soon as possible. We can either replace or refund, depending on the item. The Post Office wants the original wrapping/packing to collect their insurance. Thank you "mostlyart"

Promises and pledge strategies are another method in enhancing trust.²⁵ A person's promise carries a lot of weight. The strategies used in this cluster resemble many of the strategies in the "money back guarantee" cluster. In fact, many times these two strategies work together in intensifying the effect of honesty. The defining difference in this cluster is the utilization of a "pledge" or "promise." This is often followed by an agenda on what the Netizen hopes to accomplish through these declarative statements. Like the "money back guarantee" cluster,

²⁵ *Promises and Pledges*

Littlestreet Merchants is an affiliation of local (midwest area) merchants who scour the country-side to bring you the very best, most unique items available. From antiques and collectibles (our first love!) to custom gift-baskets, housewares and electronics; we pledge quality, service and value with every auction. Please keep an eye out for our current auctions; we have new items each week! "littlestreet"

SELLERS - MY PROMISE to YOU Prompt, courteous communication and payment. Positive feedback posted upon successful completion of our transaction. Professional transaction from start to finish !!!!
...BUYERS - MY PROMISE to YOU Products will be fairly represented. All questions answered. Honest, prompt communication. Easy payment methods via PAYPAL or BILLPOINT. Positive feedback posted upon receipt of payment. Timely shipping. Professional transaction from start to finish !!!!! Your satisfaction is Guaranteed. If you are unhappy for ANY reason with your product, simply return it for a prompt refund. I'll even refund the return shipping charge if returned using the same manner in which the product was shipped to you. You can't go wrong. Buy with absolute confidence. "pawspd, 33"

Well, a little while ago I decided that I could make a few dollars and help a few people by selling parts, and offering some of my poor advice to folks online. It seems to be working, and I am having fun! So heres my pledge to you good folks! *I will sell nothing but good products. I will gaurantee everything I sell, and pay shipping BOTH ways if you are unhappy with anything. NO ONE will EVER lose a dime dealing with me! I buy items in bulk, and repackage them to save you money, because if I can't save you money, I don't deserve your business! I'M *EB, just an old, retired engine builder. BTW: I put a fixed shipping charge in my auctions. I try real hard to get close, but it seems they have a different price every time I go to the Post Office. Please take that fee into consideration with your bid. See you on the "net"!...*EB ... We have been playing with some of the imports, and the truth is, they are a KICK in the pants! The idea of getting some FUN power out of a tiny little import engine just YANKS this old Man's chain! Keep your eyes open, and see what I come up with next!! But I will still have the nice EPN™ Hotrod parts for you whenever you want them. *And if you would like to post a bid, please do so with faith. I will never let you down, you have my word on that!...*Engnbldr "engnbldr"

Netizens speak in terms of the community by promising things like "NO ONE will EVER lose a dime" dealing with them. Netizens may also emphasize that to become part of the community they must earn trust. If they are unable to earn trust or deal in the best interest of their community then they "don't deserve [the community's] business."
If I won't buy it myself, I'll never sell it to you

Many Netizens reassure the community that they will never buy anything that they would not purchase themselves.²⁶ eBay has often been the center of jokes by many as a venue to buy junk or inferior products that nobody wants (Gilllin, 2000). Perhaps, many Netizens use this strategy in order to dispel these myths. Through this practice, the Netizen establishes that all Netizens have elements of commonality. Common needs, wants, and desires

²⁶ *If I won't buy it myself, I'll never sell it to you*

I have had many mall spaces in the years I have been selling, but have found the most satisfaction with doing business on Ebay. We do not have alot of items for sale at any given time, but what we do sell is always something we would buy for ourselves. We enjoy Ebay as a part time venture. "minuet"

Our customers have discovered how easy it is to shop any time of day or night for top quality, reasonably priced items, without leaving the house. What could possibly be better than getting exactly what you want, delivered right to your door, and having more time to spend doing things you really like? ...I am very particular about what we sell; if I wouldn't buy it for our family, I don't list it. I always provide measurements, detailed photos and accurate descriptions so you can be sure your purchase will meet your needs. "scipio wood"

are held in common among many individuals. By addressing these commonalities, boundaries are reduced among traditional buyers and sellers because transactions are imagined as accomplished between Netizens. Strategies using key words like "ourselves" and "family" are employed to bring about a sense of closeness. Most people usually think about only themselves and their family first. Based on this premise, the community is considered as valuable as the Netizen's family. The key word of "family" and "self" is often associated with community. It may be no coincidence that the Netizen knowingly employs this strategy to better fit into the larger eBay community.

Do unto others as you would have done unto you

These strategies draw from biblical language implying that Netizens try to treat other community members as they themselves would like to be treated.²⁷ Community is

If I won't buy it myself, I'll never sell it to you

We firmly believe in quality-and will not sell anything that we would not use ourselves. "sirock"

As to what I sell..... I try to find great items through many sources, I also have many friends who have asked me to place their items for them as well. I would not post an item that I personally would not want to own. I will not post items that I myself would not want to receive either. "cachelin"

²⁷ Do unto others as you would have done unto you

I will be as honest for you as it is possible to be and I hope for the same from wonderful bidders. They have never disappointed me. "trulascloset"

successful when others treat each other with the same or similar treatment. Many Netizens choose to portray an honest identity through an exchange theory type of approach. In other words, if a Netizen's courteous treatment toward the community outweighs the contribution of other community members back to the Netizen, than a number of relationships will decrease. Failure to adhere or conform to certain sets of rules or expectations may result in the exile of certain members out of the Netizen's immediate or sub-community. Although this is an extreme case, the majority of these Netizens demonstrate confidence in the community, often by invoking previous experiences. By stating, "they have never disappointed me" the Netizen appears to throw down a challenge to the rest of the

Do unto others as you would have done unto you

I am here as a buyer more than a seller. I believe in treating others as I would like to be treated myself. That means quick payments and serious bidding ONLY. A winning bid by me means a solid confirmation that you will receive payment ASAP. As I begin to sell, I trust you will be as prompt and sincere as I am. "thebigdogdude"

I try always to treat others as I would like to be treated. I do hope that you will check out my auctions (if I happen to have any going right now!) and possibly find something that you "can't live without"!! "gopher_girl"

I believe in excellent customer service, I treat people the way I would like to be treated. I think that if you keep your customers happy, maybe they will be repeat customers. I fully believe that honesty and integrity are a must, with no exceptions. I never want to have a customer who is sorry or disappointed, its not good business, nor is it fair. "cachelin"

My life's philosophy is to treat others as I would want to be treated. I try hard to be conscientious, honest, and self-examining so that I may continue to grow, learn and better myself. I look at people as individuals; unique, complicated and deserving respect, unless the proof is in the pudding. LOL I admire honesty, integrity and helpfulness. I earnestly strive to live by this principle; *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you* . "JEENY98"

I give very honest descriptions of any model I sell, almost to the point of making the model sound worse then it really is. I would rather a buyer be pleasantly surprised then disappointed. I hate buying a model from someone only to find obvious flaws that were not mentioned. "breyer65"

community that history teaches her that for the most part, the community is good expecting that these trends will continue. Strategies related to faith in the community such as "never disappointed me," "hope," or "trust" are widely used.

Moreover, possessing an identity that encompasses moral and ethical conduct is imperative to fitting in with many communities. Personal and community values are expressed to the community. A Netizen may do this as an attempt to move forward community standards that should be adopted by all people existing in the community. A consensus is formed among many Netizens that ideal characteristics include integrity, honesty, helpfulness, and respect. Netizens suggest that these basic principles serve as a safeguard against violations and questionable behavior on the community. Netizens further indicate that failure to adopt or conform to these standards may yield unfavorable outcomes resulting in a breakdown of relationships within the community. This is because a customer who is disappointed does not reflect well upon the seller. Netizens communicate that these community standards are important in making this system work, and most Netizens are willing to give the community the benefit of the doubt

when it comes to their reputation unless their feedback shows otherwise. Once again, it is clearly shown how fundamental a Netizen's reputation is on the community and how a bad reputation may damage a Netizen's social standing on the community.

The fair and courteous businessperson

Fair and just businesses practices are essential in building trust in e-commerce. Many Netizens tend to build trust in this area by discussing fair shipping practices and speedy transactions. Through shipping, displaying indicators of friendliness contribute to the shaping of identity.²⁸ To an open line of communication, Netizens

²⁸ ***Through shipping***

Customer service is my top priority so you get prompt and friendly post-sale service, including same- or next-day shipping. Shipping rates are always stated in the auction, so there is no guesswork. I charge as close to possible actual shipping rates. I don't believe in charging handling fees. Woodworking Success Although we are a true "Mom and Pop" business we are thoroughly schooled in all technical aspects of lumber production and woodworking. Our goal is your woodworking success. YOU can count on our lumber to be properly processed and treated with the utmost care. "scipiowood"

You won't find any high shipping prices here--we charge what the postage is and any cost for insurance. That's it. Some of our items can be quite heavy--the heaviest so far is our wine stand that's 22 pounds. That may cost more to post, but not because we've added to it! "sirock"

my husbands birthday in March I 1999 purchased a computer (for me!) This is a good thing! If I could just learn how to keep from (performing illegle operations!,freezing up and crashing,I think I may be able to learn how to sell on e-bay!That is what I want to do when I retire! Just go to the attic and clear out all of my good-old-stuff! THAT WILL KEEP ME BUSY! Well it is Dec. 20 2000,on Jan.5 I will be officialy retired from my every day work schedule, and I have learned how to use the Computer--I have also learned how to put pictures on e-bay--I have tried to be as fair with shipping cost (this can be a problem) I do not list the shipping charges, because I would no doubt over charge. So I have a pair of baby scales, I weigh my packages and get the information out, I hope more people take advantage of the on-line calculators. I am having a very good time. I love getting all the wonderful letters from people after the package arrives. Even if I make a mistake, I learn from them. Believe me at 62 I am still making mistakes and I am still learning. "EDDESSA"

Postage You will basically only have to pay the actual posting cost (i.e. the cost of the stamps). Give or take a few pence. I have no interest in making money out of P&P. Some of the P&P charges i've seen on eBay are outrageous! I'll make sure the item is well packed "grittyhubcap"

Shipping charges are always stated in the description, no handling charges, no surprises. I take pleasure in leaving all my buyers Feedback! (4GYPSIES)

strive to build an identity of friendliness. In contrast, the practice of applying a handling charge on eBay is controversial. Indeed, select populations of the community are outspoken about hiked shipping rates and miscellaneous hidden charges. Many Netizens realize the potential conflict that may arise when price gouging is practiced. Engaging in this practice diminishes a Netizen's sense of friendliness within the community. Due to this controversy, these Netizens are determined to break down this potential barrier to community building.

Netizens generally claim that they do not "gouge on shipping" or manipulate shipping practices for their own interests. The majority of these Netizens "have no interest in making money out of P&P" (or packaging and postage). This implies that others on the community are interested in making this extra buck on their auction. eBay neither

Through shipping

As far as terms of sale, we NEVER charge a handling fee and NEVER gouge on shipping! We try not to use reserves, but please keep in mind that we buy specifically for eBay and sometimes have to use a reserve to protect our investment. We are always happy to reveal reserve.....just e-mail us! We like to think of ourselves as friendly and reasonable, and we will do all we can to help if there is a problem.....just keep the communication open is all we ask! We don't usually hold personal checks as we find most folks here on eBay are honest people, and we usually ship as soon as payment is received. We will leave negative feedback when appropriate, but we HATE to do it! (bartmorehouse)

I never charge a fee. Sometimes I may be off a little on the shipping, but that is rare or usually it is in the international shipping. If I overcharge i will make a refund in a separate cover, if you see I have overcharged and not sent you a refund, please remind me. If I quote you too little, that is my fault and I will not come back to you and say you owe me more shipping. (trulascloset, 650)

If I'm trying to buy something from you, you can rest assured knowing I always send payment as soon as I get all the right info. I HATE deadbeat bidders & deadbeat sellers! I check my email about 10-20 times a day and I reply when I get emails immediatly. Geeeee....That sounds kind of dorky (soap-artist)

endorses or prohibits these practices on the community. These Netizens create their own standards by seeking to reflect the shared feelings of the community. By discouraging price gouging, these Netizens break away from the part of the community that chooses to engage in these practices.

Netizens also communicate that they try their best to be accurate and fair in their business practices. Most Netizens "try to be the best seller." But many Netizens also realize that "even if [they] make a mistake, [they] learn from them." Using strategies surrounding fault is a powerful strategy in communicating these good intentions. The majority of "about me" page Netizens use these reputation reinforcement strategies. Admitting mistakes, but at the same time realizing and learning from these shortcomings, appears to be much more powerful than many other strategies.

The other aspect of this cluster is when Netizens exhibit signs of fairness and courtesy by promising the community with a prompt and hassle free transaction.²⁹ One

²⁹ ***Prompt transaction***

If I win your auction you can be assured payment will be there asap. I work nights, so if I get back to you in the middle of the night (by email) don't be surprised. If you are buying from me, you can be assured a friendly transaction, and prompt

may assume that the majority of Netizens are friendly; nonetheless, many Netizens feel that there is a compelling need to reinforce their level of friendliness. This is not apparent when discussing transaction methods. Prompt communication via email as well as prompt shipment appears to be standard among these Netizens. It is unclear if the Netizens are suggesting that others on the community are often poor or satisfactory in these transaction practices. But clearly, it seems as if these Netizens are isolating themselves to some degree on how their transaction practices are superior.

THE SHOPKEEPER'S ACCOMMODATION OF CUSTOMERS

Netizens often build ties with the community by speaking in terms of what the community desires.³⁰

Prompt transaction

delivery of your item.I promise not to accidently ship you one of my kids! Well anyway,hope you have a great day and hope to see ya around sometime! Come by the [] and play for awhile! "draysmommy"

Doing business with me I always provide quick email responses and fast shipping. And ALWAYS friendly courteous service. "corbayfrombuffalocity"

I make it a point to pay quickly I love paypal because it enables me to get my payment quicker to you. I've had nothing but a great buying experience here on ebay. A big thank you to all of my sellers. "MAMAWREN"

As a bidder, I hope you'll enjoy dealing with me. I make a point of paying promptly no matter what your terms are. I appreciate the opportunity to pay by PayPal or Billpoint (sorry, that's not an advertisement.....I just find getting money orders a royal pain in the a\$\$!) "xpen\$ive!"

³⁰ ***Putting Customers First***

It was by working for my father in his coin business that I learned how to treat my customers & that they always come first. I have carried that on into my own business & put customer satisfaction at the top of my list! "minuet"

Refraining from speaking about the needs of the seller eliminates the risk of appearing selfish. Netizens strive to appear trouble and hassle free. These Netizens convey that those who deal with them are important by stating that the customer "always come first" or the customer is their "number one goal to please." All of these promises require the need for reliable and sensible communication.

The contact information cluster mentioned earlier once again appears here as a tool to aid eBay commerce.³¹ Netizens link this cluster up with the "accommodation cluster" as a means to an ends approach. The accommodation here is more often than not related to commerce related activities rather than the community function activities. To further accommodate and generate accessibility and ties to customers, Netizens accommodate the community through

Putting Customers First

We are always happy to hear request of items folks would like to see listed. If you have a special request, please let us know. You, our customer, is our number one goal to please. Have a great day. "spencersstuff"

I am more then happy to combine shipping! I will do my best to make all the transactions easy and painless. I will also ship in other ways within reason if that is what you the bidder wants. "crewof9"

³¹ Asking the community to email

If you are interested in any of my items, but have special requests, please email me. I try to be accommodating. "iwebalot"

If you are interested in viewing my work or want a list of my custom rates, please email me. I am currently accepting custom orders. "breyer65"

If you live outside of the States and want to bid on one of my items, email me and we can try to set things up. I also accept Billpoint upon request. "dlite95"

things such as "custom orders," "special requests," or even international shipping. This indicates the Netizen's concern for others beyond the profit motive.

THE SHOPKEEPER'S BUSINESS RULES AND GUIDELINES

Finishing a Transaction and Leaving Feedback

Rules are essential for the growth and maintenance of any community. eBay Netizens borrow these rules from the existing eBay standards, individualizing or customizing them for their own uses.³² Feedback and shipping policies are mentioned most often among Netizens. In the feedback cluster, some Netizens make use of the "reciprocal approach" by stating that feedback will only be given when feelings between buyer and seller are mutual. Both parties should walk away with a "win win" experience and "begging" for feedback by either party diminishes the value of the feedback system. Other Netizens will agree to post feedback immediately upon the close of the transaction. It is unclear if this promise is absolute. For instance, if a

³² ***Finishing a Transaction/Leaving Feedback***

We don't beg for feedback ... a "smooth" deal is all we wish for, but **Transactional Feedback**, by you, for adderbolt, will quickly get you the same This all makes for an easy and fair transaction. Ebay Should Be a Pleasant and " Win Win " Experience ...Thank You ... Jack "adderbolt"

I will post glowingly positive feedback as soon as you email me to tell me the package has arrived. "peekaboo"

I always will let you know I received my purchase and will leave feedback about the transaction. If I can't leave positive feedback right from the get go. I'll contact you and try to work things out. "xpenSiveI"

buyer is unhappy with a transaction and should leave the seller negative feedback first, it is unclear if the seller would leave negative or neutral feedback in retaliation. Because of possible conflicts such as this, other Netizens communicate that if problems should arise, they are willing to take on the obligation to work out conflicts with the other party to come to a mutual resolution. Through this cluster, it is probable that feedback is often contingent on negotiation and conflict management. This creates the necessity for Netizens to draft their own guidelines to handle such conflicts.

Shipping Policies

A preponderance of "about me" pages centers around shipping policies.³³ This may be explained by the plethora

³³ *Shipping Policies*

As for shipping I normally ship priority which starts at 3.50 for under 1 lb. As the weight goes up so does the price. I am more then happy to combine shipping! ...I have found that Parcel Post is only a nickel cheaper in most cases thou. When shipping books I ship Bookrate unless asked to ship another way. I ship books in bubble envelopes unless it is a larger lot

and then I ship in boxes. I do charge a 50 cents handling charge as I do use bubble wrap and tissue paper liberally. I accept, Money orders, Personal Checks and Paypal. Bid and Have Fun!! "crewof9"

Payment Information. I accept Checks Money Orders or Certified checks. Money orders and Certified checks will guarantee A.S.A.P. Shipping. I accept payments from anyone with a credit card at PayPal -always FREE! Sign up Right now, and get \$5.00 Free, just click on the icon below. "bigbossman1"

Customer Service and Returns Policy Domestic orders are shipped approximately 3 to 5 days following the placement of your order. UPS Ground Servicetakes another one to six days, depending on your location within the United States. You should receive your order within 1 to 2 weeks. Washington residents, please add 8.8% sales tax when you checkout. **Traceable Shipments.** Once your package has been shipped, we know where it is every step of the way. USPS, our carrier of choice, provide an informative web-based, real-time shipment tracking mechanism. "fortsumpter"

My Selling Philosophy Policies I try to make my items easy to acquire by starting the auctions at reasonable prices and fairly easy terms to follow. I do get a little irritated at having to try to collect money that is owed to me, so please be considerate and get your payments out in a timely manner. Also, since I'm helping to raise a toddler grandchild, I can't always get to the post office as often as I like, so that's why I say 1-3 days for credit card money order payments. I also

of methods in completing a transaction. eBay doesn't support any one method of finalizing a transaction (payment method, insurance method, shipping method, packaging method, or handling charges); Netizens take it on themselves to accomplish this function. Therefore, many Netizens borrow strategies from the "accommodating customers" cluster by trying to make the transaction for Netizens "as pleasant as possible." Netizens do this by expressing to the community that they are out to help save buyers money by combining shipping costs. Or, Netizens may add further speed and convenience to buyers through PayPal (an online funds transfer service).

SUMMARY

The "shopkeeper" persona discussed in the first part of this chapter explained that these Netizens are motivated through the commerce aspects of the community. Through the "shopkeeper" persona, these Netizens employ strategies that generally reflect this role. Some of these strategies include orientating the community about their business, their business practices, their relationship with

Shipping Policies

don't like to do returns for items that I give adequate/extensive descriptions on and particularly not several weeks after the person has received the item. Other than that, I try to put myself in my bidders' shoes to make the transactions as pleasant as possible. "imagrits"

customers, and any thing else commerce related. Their primary duty on eBay appears to be tending to their own business needs. In fact, it appears that the largest percentage of Netizens on eBay fall into this category. As the next section argues, a growing number of Netizens are assuming other roles on the community besides focusing solely on business activities.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD ACTIVIST/BOOSTER

The "neighborhood activist/booster" persona is an extended version of the "shopkeeper" persona. Not only are these community members "shopkeepers", they are also individuals involved in other various aspects of the community. These Netizens play an active role in the enrichment and growth of the community rather than focusing identity on the "shopkeeper" persona. Five personae are introduced: The Guide/Teacher, the Town Square and Soap Box Netizen, the Neighborhood Watcher, the Politician, and the Family Person. All of these personae are unique. The forthcoming pages explain the functions of these roles on eBay.

THE GUIDE/TEACHER

Although there is a thriving band of sellers on the community, many Netizens aspire to become sellers but don't have the technical acumen to join this group. With this apparent conflict in the community, some Netizens emerge by taking on an identity or role of a "teacher" or "guide."³⁴ These "guides" play a critical role in the community by training and establishing members who aspire to join the selling class.

Netizens may find a sense of purpose and self-fulfillment in taking on this role. For some, taking on this role helps build a sense of community with other Netizens. This is conveyed through the expression of their

³⁴ The Guide/Teacher

Need Help Putting Pictures On eBay ? We visit the boards, chat, and look for people in need of help. Fifteen years ago, I came down with MS (multiple sclerosis). I felt really useless until I found eBay. Now I feel productive again, being able to help others, and it gives me great pleasure to be able to do so...I help users every day to get their pictures into their ads. I do this as a FREE service, I just like to help people. "BOBAL"

If you are interested; I am available for web page design for auctions and me pages, personal and business pages, along with photo help (cropping/sizing, enhancement, placement, and storage). Email me for info: Jeannie98email@aol.com "jeeny98"

Having problems on Ebay? Want some help and advice from other users? Very helpful and knowledgeable users can be found at all hours on the Ebay User to User Question & Answer Board. To visit, click on the link below: [User to User Q & A Board "drexelantiques"](#)

Prospective Customers - Useful Info. Below are the links you can use for postage quotes, and for currency conversion as quotes will be in Australian dollars. I hope you find them useful. Australia Post is our only carrier here, and I will charge exactly the amounts shown on the website, plus the cost of the box/envelope. I accept Western Union money orders, and local cashier's/bank cheques, both with \$5US extra to cover banking fees, or cash in Australian or US dollars, or paypal with no extra charges. For buyers who aren't in either Australia or the US, we can negotiate payment terms prior to auction close to find those which are most convenient. I try and answer all emails within 24 hours, and I always leave feedback for positive transactions. This applies to people I am buying from as well. If you're a fellow "Australayan", you can pay using any standard local method and choose any form of shipping (at your cost). "saucie_aussie"

desire to help others by using emotional words such as "pleasure," "enjoy," or "like." Netizens may get the sense that the Netizen is genuine in looking out for the greater good of the community without disclosing any hidden motive. Excitement and enthusiasm become diminished in some clusters as some Netizens choose to shape content in a neutral tone. Clearly, expression in this neutral tone does not appear to be as powerful in creating a sense of openness or perhaps even friendliness compared to the previous example. The elimination of the word "FREE" or "no charge" raises questions if a Netizen is out for personal gain (in the form of monetary gain) or if their intent is purely to help others become established on the community. A Netizen often provides an email address for further details. A conclusion on intent cannot be determined until the Netizen offers additional details. Both these examples reflect strategies that are active, inviting personalized interaction.

Passive helping strategies are more widely used on eBay. Here, Netizens do not directly indicate that they will help another in distress. Rather, they provide tools to allow others help themselves. Burden is eliminated from the Netizen and placed on the community. These Netizens

provide the community pathways that may solve their immediate problem. These include Q&A boards or useful links. Taking on this passive identity is less effective than the active identity because the active approach promotes interaction from Netizen to Netizen. It is safe to assume that more Netizens would gain more through the help of a tutor rather than through an instruction manual.

THE TOWN SQUARE AND SOAP BOX NETIZENS

One might argue that the greatest indication of community building resides in the Town Square and Soap Box areas of eBay. When using Ivie's method to organize these clusters, it became evident that these Netizens represent a subset of the "neighborhood activist/booster" persona. The frequent interaction, discussion, and relationship building that flourish in this forum helps shape this notion of identity and community. The Town Square and Soap Box residents discuss strategies under three frequently used clusters. The most popular strategy falls under the Roles, Participation, and Experience cluster. Two other strategies that appear less frequently are the strategies of Building an Identity thorough Thanking Members and Building Identity through Membership History on eBay.

Roles, Participation, and Experience

Netizens who are tired of touring the marketplace may decide to grace this forum with their identity. In this forum, identity is shaped not only through commerce but also through a social aspect.³⁵ Expressions of delight are communicated when the Netizens express that this is their "favorite hang out" or pleasure elements such as "enjoy," "fun," or "love." Roles of active as well as passive participation are present on this forum. Many Netizens communicate that they are quite outspoken and expressive in these spaces. However, the majority of Netizens also "lurk" (This refers to eavesdropping or participating by reading

³⁵ *Roles, Participation, and Experience*

I can be found in the Town Square and the Soapbox. Sometimes I am in the balcony while at other times I am in the middle of the fray and you can't shut me up. Come join us, we always welcome new friends "ROADIES"

Stats Hi; I am a 46 year old from the state of Utah. I am a Pilot. I have only bidded on Ebay and have Yet to start selling. ...Favorite Hang Out I like to hang out in the "Town Square" here at Ebay. I am NOT well loved because I tend to rub people the wrong way. I don't mince words when I disagree with someone. If we agree I will back you up until the wheels fall off. "davidclark764"

I love hangin out in the soapbox and chattin with my {} buds. "draysmommy"

I've also been enjoying the Soapbox for the last few months. I toss in my 2 cents worth every now and then, but it's just as much fun to "lurk". You never know what you're going to "hear". Expect the unexpected everytime. "abbeyroad67"

Hi there. My posting name is Bliss, when I am posting to the help boards of the eBay site. Although I try to venture to several site boards, my more favorable area of the site, would have to be the Soapbox Board. This board is for eBay members to share their views and suggestions in order to help build a better eBay. The topics vary, and whether you choose to participate or lurk about, the wealth of information you will find, is grande. I can be found quite easily, as I do spend a lot of time in and amongst the threads and topics located there. Katy makes her presence known from time to time, and is [without a doubt] my more favorable 'pink'. :) And when I am feeling extra 'giddy', I like to venture on over to the Town Square and watch Gianni flying among the rafters (among other things) trying to maintain peace in the land with the Town Square Community. Thanks for taking a peek at my temporary 'me' page. Regards, Bliss "bliss1502"

rather providing input) in these forums. The practice of "lurking" is the most popular method of participation because many Netizens remain apprehensive about providing input that may not meet with the approval from some community members. "Lurking" provides a safety net for those who want to participate but are not willing to endure possible ridicule.

Many do choose to make their presence known despite possible scorn or opposition from other community members. These are speakers (authors) rather than listeners (readers). Although some members venture about this alone, the bulk of the speakers form affiliations with community members before expressing their viewpoints. Netizens communicate these community affiliations by stating the name of community members (ex. Gianni or Katy) or in more general terms by referring to members in this affiliation as "friends" or "buds." Some speakers communicate that they are not "well liked" by many on the community because they hold opposing viewpoints. A Netizen like this offers no apologies and holds firm on his/her convictions without shaping words that would be more socially acceptable.

Members with opposing viewpoints are adversaries and members with similar viewpoints may be viewed as allies. In some cases, Netizens fall somewhere in between the two extremes. They do so by taking on the role of a mediator ("Gianni"). This is accomplished by "trying to maintain peace [in the community]" between the two opposing groups. Taking on such an identity is risky, though not all topics expressed here are controversial.

Many topics are meant for simple chatting or to gain information. Community is most often formed through this area rather than the debate section because of the strong feelings that this type of rhetoric tends to stir up. Current members are quite open to having new members join this community. The invitation strategy is a way to expand the community. Netizens may be direct in welcoming new members by asking others to join them because they "always welcome new friends." Or, a Netizen may be indirect by combining a variety of strategies (such as the pleasure strategy mentioned earlier) on what makes his/her community so great.

Building an Identity through Thanking Members

Thanking the community is the result of contributions or influences that the community has had on the Netizen in

some way.³⁶ This strategy of thanking links the identity of the buyer with the larger community. Bonds are established as members on the community band together in order to accomplish some purpose. These community efforts may take form of a support group for someone fighting to quit smoking. Or, support may also revolve around commerce in the form of a fundraiser. The "thanking strategy" is supported with the "emoticon strategy." Through this strategy, the Netizen is able to display a greater degree of depth and emotion in his/her message. Reference is also made to discussion groups, the general community, or specific names of people. It is interesting that gratitude may reach beyond the immediate community and may include outsiders who do not directly belong to the eBay community. In any case, whether a member resides on the community or outside the community, Netizens view these members in a

³⁶ ***Thanking Members***

A special thanks to my friends in the Ebay Beanie Chat Room for the support you have given me in my quest to become a non-smoker and for being great friends. **You played a huge part in my ability to be successful. Hugs to all of you :-)** ...and a special thanks to Paula, at www.SolaceLambs.com for the beautiful graphics. "savannah35"

Thanks everyone for buying my merchandise and helping out. **However, I have had so much fun on Ebay that I do plan to continue until I run out of things to sell!** Thanks to everyone who bought my items on eBay, **I have raised enough money for my gelding to have his surgery!** However, since my storage shed (and my kitchen!) is still full of magazines and catalogs, **I will be continuing until I have cleared out the excess!** "paintpower"

Thanks for looking at my page! First of all I want to thank all the great people I have met on this fun journey through Ebayland. **I had no clue there was this many nice people in the world...Okay here goes!** "juliannecollectibles"

positive light through expressions such as "great friends (or people)" or "hugs to all of you."

Building Identity through Membership History on eBay

A Netizen's identity may also be shaped through his/her experience on the community. Netizens communicate this through the duration of membership or through experiences on the community. The duration strategy is straightforward though broad.³⁷ Netizens may state the exact date they became a member of the community. It is unclear if a Netizen who has been a member of the community for a considerable amount of time becomes "established." For instance, a Netizen could create an account at any given time but may stay idle or inactive in community functions of engagements. This strategy may be misleading in determining if the Netizen has an established a strong identity or presence.

³⁷ ***Duration of Time on eBay***

Member since Friday, May 07, 1999 "dannkim18"

eBay member since November 22, 1997 "terkl"

We have been with eBay since April, 1998 "bobal"

englandboy's Posting ID Has Been a Member of eBay Since Sunday, Aug 13, 2000 Current Date and Time Is: Apr-30-01 23:26:48 PDT "england boy"

Elaboration is one way to overcome the duration question.³⁸ Netizens guide visitors through a brief summary of what drew them into the community and/or why they still continue to participate on the community. Orientation with eBay through existing members is what the author has as labeled the "referral strategy." Through this "referral strategy" the community grows through the active involvement of members promoting eBay. Netizens indicate that the messengers who have brought them into eBay range from their friends to their spouses. Once introduced, the Netizens communicate indications of commitment and establishment on the community. The duration strategy mentioned above is weaved into their description. This builds strength to their membership and words communicated such as "still checking it out (eBay)," "I love it (eBay), or "addicted," indicates his/her commitment to build

³⁸ ***Experience History on eBay***

I HEARD ABOUT EBAY THROUGH A FRIEND AND HOW YOU COULD BUY ANYTHING HERE. I CHECKED IT OUT AND NOW FIVE MONTHS AND 216 FEEDBACKS LATER I'M STILL CHECKING IT OUT. "SOFAR8"

It all began... in September 1999 with the Beanie Craze. I was trying to find a Schweetheart Beanie Buddy for my son. Someone told me about ebay, and the rest is history. I've been a seller for almost a year and I love it. "abbeyroad67"

I myself am relatively new to eBay, but have been aware of it for a longtime. My husband is a very active bidder seller (you may have dealt with him before he goes by cokesr.tech). I guess you can say he got me addicted. It's Cool and Intriguing Since surfing eBay I've come to enjoy the services and the availability of items I would search for manually, running store to store. This aides you in meeting and working with people just like myself. "sammyjud"

I have been selling on eBay since June, 1999 and have enjoyed all the fringe benefits of meeting dozens of wonderful people, learning TONS about the things I love AND getting to BUY BUY BUY!! "violet9"

membership on the community. The "referral strategy" is usually a way to break the ice and tends to be a lead to other areas that shape the Netizen's broader identity. Using the referral strategy may work in generating a sense of rapport and association with unknown members of the community as well. From here, a variety of strategies are combined such as discussing things from clusters/sub-clusters such as the: "reputation reinforcement", "collections", "role on community."

THE NEIGHBORHOOD WATCHER

In most societies, conflict emerges as a community grows. For the most part, most community members are decent and law abiding. However, some disrupt the community's harmony and tranquility. The "neighborhood watcher" responds to this problem by offering his/her services or by promoting community involvement.³⁹ There are two ways to

³⁹ ***Neighborhood Watcher***

Thanks for stopping by... Feel free to LINK my "FRAUD" website wherever you wish. It's important to get the word out that the system DOES work when you know how to use it. If you need additional HELP with a case, EMAIL ME and I'll be glad to help you personally, or post your story on my PRIVATE off-eBay message board, so that experienced users can take a look. "basestealer"

Remember the tv show "The Equalizer" who helped good people deal with bad situations. I have dedicated this eBay "me" page to providing that kind of help! If you have been cheated this place can help. If you need help or information for any internet crime please check WWW.CYBERCRIME.GOV, follow their links for additional materials. If you indicate that you are a victim of internet crime it will take you to a page where you can select How to Report Internet-Related Crime That will take you to links and phone numbers to report any internet crime including: harassment, bomb threats, Child Porn, Copyright piracy, and Fraud Or just go directly to <http://www.usdoj.gov/criminal/cybercrime/reporting.htm> If you have been the victim of a non-internet crime please contact your local police Cyber-crime is crime just like original recipe crime Your local police may very well be able to help with that too. (long break of added safety guidelines. THE SMALL PRINT This is a general list of advice, links,

accomplish this objective. The first strategy evolves from the "teacher/guide" cluster where a Netizen supplies links for the community to use. The "neighborhood watcher" identity is in essence the same identity as the "teacher/guide" but these members tend to go a little further in terms of details and resources. Links may be adequate to solve a community member's problem. If that link is not sufficient in resolving that member's predicament, the "neighborhood watcher" offers to take on the case by making use of the "contact information" cluster mainly through the use of email. Community here is established directly between Netizen to Netizen. Options are also available that involve a larger scope of individuals by implementing a Netizen's personalized eBay message board for safety. In either case, community and

Neighborhood Watcher

phone number and other resources for victims of e-crime. It is designed to help those who, subsequent to having won a bid on eBay, have encountered dishonest individuals. **There are other situations where it may be useful and it is available to any and all who may benefit.** Feel free to copy, share or plagiarize, information of my creation. It is here to be shared. (McGruff & Take a bite out of Crime are protected - **please check their rules**) If you find any inaccuracies, omission or out of date info - let me know at KurtWWenzel@aol.com I will try to fix it and I promise to try real hard not to break this page in the process. Do not even think of asking him if he likes horses and then leaving a horse's head on the crooks bed while he is sleeping. That would be wrong. That would be VERY VERY wrong. But I had to put this here just so you would know that you were not the first person who was angry enough to think about it I thought no one would read this tiny printing at the end of my page. Meanwhile, take care of yourself. "turk"

safety are promoted in two ways: either individual-individual or individual-group. Like the clusters beforehand, the "neighborhood watcher" has faith in the current eBay rules.

The "safety and community issues" aspect of a Netizen's "about me" page tends to be limited. However, an eBay member such as "!turk" dedicates his entire space on eBay to safety/community issues. Many of the members of the community assume multiple identities (buyer, seller, teacher, Town Square member, etc.). In this extreme case, "!turk" provides a one-sided identity about a topic about which he is passionate. Through this single passion, community members come to know him as the specialist in this area. "!turk" is not simply alarmed about safety issues on eBay but rather looks at safety through a wider scope by providing links and hints for crimes committed on and off of eBay. A Netizen like this takes pride in his work. Information created by this individual is donated to others in the form of community property. Permission is given to reproduce any information for the greater good of the community. The "neighborhood watcher" suggests that safety is a community effort and if any omission or missing

information is found in their space, the community should speak up. Restrictions are also expressed on what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior. This is accomplished on this page with other strategies such as humor in order to aid the reader through the space. In conjunction with other strategies, the Netizen invites others to take on the identity and join the effort as a "neighborhood watcher."

THE POLITICIAN

"Neighborhood watchers" may also mold their identity through the role of an "advocate" or a "politician."⁴⁰ eBay closely resembles a democratic society where Netizens voice their opinions freely. However, most members on eBay are too occupied with their own schedules and obligations to

⁴⁰ **Politician**

I have been gathering ideas on how to improve ebay from ebayers just like you. In visiting Other sites I have seen some of the bells and whistles in place that people on ebay would benefit from. If you agree with any of these suggestions then just cut and paste and send it in to suggest @ ebay.com. send a copy to me and I'll expand the list!

- 1) Eliminate the listing fee- just a low flat rate final value fee
- 2) NO hoop jumping for for final value credit- just a simple request with ability for bidder to document payment for correction in an easy format
- 3) The ability to ADJUST FEEDBACK if you feel as though wording is too strong or you were too hasty.
- 4) Extended auction format (5 minute extensions) as an option (not mandatory)
- 5) Active screening for auctions that are against ebay rules, or illegal.
- 6) Put state or country next to bidders name. This would assist sellers in ad compliance and shipping cost estimates.
- 7) Ability to view all neg fdbk and all neutral fdbk in separate lists from the person's feedback page by just clicking on a button.
- 8) Reverse Negative feedback left by sellers who with proof ADD fees for using paypal or billpoint. Give the buyers the right to reject such sellers without punishment. "darla"

express their complaints, suggestions, and comments. As a result, a representative government may become necessary to execute the needs and wants of the community. There is no formal election or appointment from the community. A Netizen who takes on such a role does so for personal reasons. A dependency conflict is present. In other words, without community involvement, the identity of a politician or advocate ceases to exist. Their role is dependent on the community and the community.

THE FAMILY PERSON

The family person persona serves primarily as a social function in the community. Netizens here open up their homes and their lives to the community and everyone else who is interested. For this persona, there is little apprehension when discussing their private and home life. By practicing Ivie's method, it was discovered that the family person uses strategies that fall under three clusters: The Discussion of Children, The Discussion of Spouse, and The Discussion of Pets.

The Discussion of Children

People often live their lives through an invocation of their family. Netizens may communicate their identity as

parents by discussing topics that relate to their children.⁴¹ As discussed earlier, screen names and aliases are popular on the eBay community. Many Netizens prefer to hide behind the security of anonymity. When it comes to children, though, Netizens are often vocal, perhaps because their children are not in direct contact with the community. This limited exposure appears to eliminate any need to promote secrecy.

These parents are supportive of their children. They communicate this by supporting their children's various childhood fantasies, interests, or hobbies. Netizens may also present a boastful attitude that others are envious of their children. Because children are often a representation of their parents, these parents build off of their children to affirm their identity.

Some Netizens describe the age of their children through direct and indirect methods. Many elect to give

⁴¹ *The Discussion of Children*

Here I am! This is a photo of me and my son Josh, who wants to be a knight in shining armor when he grows up! I WILL support him, even if it means he will be the only sword wielding, horse riding, savoir of maids and matrons in the whole world. I can see it now, I will be the only mom on the block with a 33 year old son who wants to be called Sir Joshua. LOL "dandora"

Sabre is my leetle cheerleader I am putting through Junior High I just love to drop her off at the junior high and see the envy of all her friends. She just looks so cute with the blond hair and the rosy cheeks. "jaunfangio"

A bit about my other life I am a mom to 3 kids and I work in healthcare for a living. "draysmommy"

My Home Life I am the single mom of three boys. Tommy, who is 20, Timothy, who is 15, and Cameron, who is 4. I adopted Cameron recently and advise everyone interested in adoption to check into your local Children Services Board and help the children in your own community that need parents and a home. "legoholic"

hints on the age range of their children. Drawing from her statement of "when he grows up," "dandora" suggests that she is probably raising a young child although the mention of actual age never arises. Similarly, the "junior high" indicator in "jaunfangio" description of her child indicates implies that her daughter is a teenager. The community can only assume rather than come to concrete conclusions through these indirect methods. There is no confusion when Netizens publicize the exact age of their children. Many view parenting as a whole other function outside of the community. They view parenthood as a glimpse of their "other life." In addition to the strategy mentioned above, Netizens also integrate several strategies when describing their children. The "discussion of one's profession" as well as the "topics of importance" partially explains this. Identity is conveyed further through other indicators and statements such as "single mom." This statement is a powerful indicator that may unite or distance a member from the community.

The Discussion of Spouse

Some build their identity on eBay through the mentioning of their spouses.⁴² For the most part, these Netizens are content with their marriages. A Netizen stating that that his/her marriage has lasted for "~~almost~~ **over** 30 years," signifies that time is a test for their commitment. This strategy is further intensified through the strikeouts method of "almost" and the bolding of "over," building an impression that the Netizen anticipates counting down the seconds to 30 through "almost" and looking forward to many years after 30 through the use of the word "over." It is also evident that a Netizen's spouse has a lot of influence over the shaping of the identity of the Netizen. When "K_M_W_R_F_A" writes, "I'm so glad I never got me no learnin! My common law husband Jerry Lee say he don't cotton to wimmen who get scoolin pass da 4th grade. And dem wimmens wit fancy degrees n all -da worse..dey are jus so uppity!" She communicates that her spouse supports her lack of education and she's quite content with holding

⁴² *The Discussion of Spouse*

A little bit about Hoo (aka Steve)... My wife, Kathy, and I have been married for ~~almost~~ over 30 years, and live in Savage, MN. "pahoo"

My husband Don retired from the U'S Navy in 1999, and together, we run a Bible camp in the mountains north of Los Angeles. We lovingly refer to our home as THE DAYSPRING INN, as we like to create a haven for our family and friends who come from afar to visit us in our mountain hideaway! "nificent"

this limited education level. Using this superiority strategy to build up her identity may offend some members of the community. Or, others may just find this as an attempt to be humorous with little offense. The poor grammar may reflect her lack of education. But then again, it is more likely to be satirical. Additional clusters are also present such as the "hobbies and interests" or "discussion of one's profession" cluster.

The Discussion of Pets

The discussion of a Netizen's pet outnumbers the discussion of a Netizen's children, spouse, or family members nearly 3 to 1.⁴³ Animals are not viewed simply as

The Discussion of Spouse

I'm so glad I never got me no learnin! My common law husband Jerry Lee say he don't cotton to wimmen who get scoolin pass da 4th grade. And dem wimmens wit fancy degrees n all -da worse...dey are jus so uppity! "k_m_w_r_f_a"

⁴³ *The Discussion of Pets*

Here are two of our three furbabies to welcome you! Duncan the rott mix and TJ the pom are best friends. It's so funny to watch them play together, it's like having a house full of clowns! "valentinemgee"

We have three wonderful but naughty cats! For a very long time we also used to have pet rats! Wonderful, friendly and intelligent little creatures were they! Unfortunately they require a lot of maintenance, and the worst part is that they only live for a few years. It's hard to say good-bye to the little guys so soon! Then there was always the little matter of keeping the cages high enough to keep the kitties away!

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^
= * = = * = = * =

"assenav"

Ebay is not a new passion- just one I try to be responsible about. (overlap) After all- I have to pay for food and lodging for my true love Sebastian. Yes- He's a cat. But he's more than just a cat. He's been online since October 2000. He and I are members of SICC (Siamese Internet Cat Club- total siamese world domination) and Siamese Rescue. Sebastian's just

earned his first PurrScouts (visit Purrscouts.org) Badge for first aid. At any rate- That's enough for now. Caio Beckah and Sebastian "eclectic"

pets. Rather, their role is elevated to a role of family members. Strong emotion is communicated when the discussion of pets arises. The depth of this love is communicated as Netizens communicate that their pets are their "true love" and "wonderful." Although many of these animals require a "lot of maintenance," these Netizens are "happy" to include these animals as part of their families. It is awkward for many to comprehend how an animal can be considered a part of one's family. Netizens tend to address this by using a strategy that may be termed the "personification." Characteristics are bestowed upon their pets that are often associated or similar to humans. These Netizens communicate that their pets are "friendly" and "intelligent." These characteristics are held in common by both humans and animals making animals "more than just a [pet]." A humanistic identity such as the word "clown" is used here to build human feeling to the humor and playfulness exerted

The Discussion of Pets

This is baby Elliott. He was found in a warehouse wall in Seattle, Wa. The warehouse was located on Elliott Bay; thus the name Elliott! He was only 2-3 weeks when found and weighed 1 lb. I am happy to say he has grown up wonderfully and now weighs 19 lbs. He is still my baby..... "TRAPURR"

Update on Bull: Bull had his surgery on Tuesday, January 18. He had a very rough time and a 2 day stay at the vet clinic turned into a week's stay! Then, the BIG SNOW hit the day he was supposed to come home and he is STILL stuck at the vet clinic! Hopefully I can get him home before the next big storm this weekend, if I can get out of my driveway and the roads are safe to pull a trailer! Update in 2001 - Bull is doing much much better. Thanks to everyone who bought my items on Ebay an almost 4 pound bladder stone was removed. He has to have frequent checkups, but feeling much better. "paintpower"

by these pets. Additionally, the word "baby" is often used to refer to an infant and usually holds humanistic connotations of a being requiring constant attention, love, and care. Animals are brought close to the same platform of human beings as Netizens consider them to be equals in some regard. This is evidenced further through "paintpower's" frequent updates to the community of her pet's health condition. While reading these pieces, the updates appear to be referring to a close family member and many Netizens would likely assume that these updates are referring to a person until the word "vet" is included in the paragraph. Interaction regarding the animal's condition is newsworthy to the community. The Netizen builds his/her identity through the use of a pet. It is interesting that Netizens are much more likely to comment on their pets rather than another family member.

SUMMARY

As shown in this chapter, there are many strategies that make up personae. Most Netizens on eBay fall into this category in some way or another. The "shopkeeper's" primary purpose is to sell. Their entire identity is predominantly commerce driven and tending to their own needs. However, a

new type of "shopkeeper" is emerging that caters to the needs of other members on the community besides their own. The "neighborhood activist/booster" personae are members that help make the community work on eBay. Members who fall under this class seem to reflect the fundamental nature of community. This is largely because these Netizens are able to integrate factors into their identity other than commerce related activities. It appears evident that eBay shows a conspicuous resemblance to a traditional community. The groupings of cyber identities like the teacher, guide, cop, politician, shopkeeper, and family person among others, seem to operate much like a village. eBay perhaps thrives and survives partially due to the collaborative efforts of these individuals.

CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

DISCUSSION

This research provided considerable evidence that Netizens employ a wide collection of strategies to help shape their identity. The author has discovered that the majority of Netizens built their identity through general strategies such as statements of their geographic location, their offline profession, their name and demographics, and their personal interests, and many others. The generic clusters displayed in chapter three employed strategies reflective of a wide cross-section of Netizens. It was determined here that Netizens assemble many of these strategies through their own customization. Individual modification enabled them to make sense of their world as well as build a feeling of presence within their community. These strategies are basically generic or common techniques.

Although these general strategies are worthy of note, the author finds that the concept of persona even more fascinating because it has far deeper implications. Chapter four takes this study one step further by establishing this notion. With the introduction of persona, many elements

from the generic cluster in chapter three help reinforce these personae. These generic strategies serve as the foundation in crafting these more complex identities noted in chapter four. Through these generic strategies, Netizens may pick and choose how they are to further develop these more specialized roles. In the physical world, communities are successful through roles and the active participation of individuals who choose to assume these roles. Through this research, the blurriness existing between online and offline identity construction and persona becomes reduced through a mirroring effect. That is, elements of identity construction in the online realm mirror that of the offline realm. This thesis argues that one rationale for eBay's profound success is the presence of these personae in the community.

This study has established that there are various strategies that Netizens use to describe the self. With these identity structures in place, a continual struggle emerges between the commerce and community aspects of eBay. Or course, eBay is primarily a business environment. Buyers and sellers primarily come to eBay not to or find "place" in community, but rather to buy or sell. Assimilation, community building, and association tend to occur only

after a buyer or seller becomes established within the community. Although many Netizens strive to construct some sort of identity in this environment, few have helped in the development and progression of the community building aspects. This is demonstrated in the persona section where the majority of Netizens shape their identity around the "shopkeeper" persona. The "neighborhood activist/booster" persona appears to be deficient as only a small number of Netizens opt to acquire this specialized position.

This is where the conflict and ambiguity in this community arises. Netizens need to balance the commerce and community aspects of eBay. Currently, it appears that the business portion of eBay dominates. However, one can hope that the community building aspects will widen as eBay grows. These two aspects of commerce and community appear to be intertwined. Although eBay has managed to grow close to over nineteen million registered users since its beginnings in 1994, one can conclude that eBay is just passing its infancy stage. This is especially true in the community building aspects. The agora in the traditional community emerged as a marketplace first. As the marketplace developed in size so did the elements of community. Even though commerce currently dominates most

areas on eBay, this does not preclude the future development of community. Community and commerce are competing forces that will eventually attain equilibrium similar to that of the agoras in the traditional community. Additional research into eBay in the future will reveal how far (if at all) eBay has progressed. The next question is what does this all mean and where does research continue from here.

Clearly, there are similarities between online identity and offline identity. Many speculate that with the advent of computer mediated communications, that there may be a sense of dehumanization (Westera, 2000). During this research, this did not appear to be the case. Clearly, there are cohesive bonds developing between Netizens. These Netizens have shaped a microcosm of the real world with ample room for flexibility in regards to identity construction. This customization of identity brings about an interesting possibility. Perhaps, Netizens who turn to online community do so to fill possible voids that they are lacking in the real world. This virtual world helps them find a sense of belonging and eliminate a possible sense of alienation in modern life. Here the idea of persona comes into play as being a means to combat these barriers. It is

conceivable that this network of personae will expand as eBay grows. Many people may soon choose to migrate into this virtual world where their needs are satisfied through online participation, identity construction, and persona. With that said, there are several limitations to this study which demand explication.

LIMITATIONS

One of the most boggling questions that comes to mind is "why do Netizens choose to assume these roles or personae?" This thesis provides an adequate explanation at best. The next reasonable step is to do follow up questionnaires in order to assess the validity of the claims. Follow up research can address such questions that this research has only moderately answered. These questions include: "What is the Netizen's purpose for creating an "about me" page." Or, "why do Netizens feel a need to construct this concept of persona?" And also, "do Netizens feel that they belong to an electronic global village?" The author proposes that a questionnaire employing both quantitative and qualitative research methods may best work in addressing many of these questions. A noteworthy investigation to follow may also incorporate an analysis of threaded discussion in forums such as the eBay Town Square,

eBay Soap Box, or eBay Café. The vital aspect that is missing from this study is the analysis of conversations and ongoing interaction between Netizens. This thesis has provided a single portion of the jigsaw puzzle. Additional study will aid in bringing all of the pieces together thus giving us a clearer perspective of the eBay phenomenon.

The research surrounding identity construction and persona does not end here. Identity construction is an evolutionary process dependent on factors such as environmental, social, and cultural conditions. For instance, it was discovered during the data collection process that out of 150 "about me" pages, there was only one example of patriotism.⁴⁴ Interestingly enough, this

⁴⁴ The Patriot

We Now Interrupt The Broadcast To Bring You This Special Program.... I AM CANADIAN! Don't get me wrong, we love our cousins to the south of the 49th parallel, even though we are often the butt of your jokes. We take it in stride - that's our nature - but we do like to poke a little fun at your expense in return, especially after watching things like 'Jay Walking' on The Tonight Show!

So, indulge me for a moment, won't you, while I partake in some long overdue Canadian Patriotism, eh?

In the year 2000 National Pride began an upswing, thanks in part to 'The Rant' (perhaps not the wisest reason), an ad for Molson Canadian which echoed the sentiments of many Canadians, particularly those in closer proximity to the U.S. border...

Just To Name A Few!! The Canadian Conspiracy Continues.....

**Just a Few of Our Great Canadian
Inventions & Discoveries:**

**The Telephone The Snowmobile Pabulum Insulin Bovril Basketball Le Page's Glue The First Lightbulb The Canadarm on the Shuttle
Centralized Pizza Delivery No.'s Automated Banking Machines Universal Standard Time The Pacemaker Trivial Pursuit**

CHECK OUT MORE HERE! Those Weird Canadian Words & Spellings!

For you I shall attempt to CATALOGUE a few of the quirks of Canadian DIALOGUE....

We pronounce the letter z ZED. We call Eskimos INUIT because they prefer it. A check is a mark, while a CHEQUE is a form of payment. When we use the Metric System we measure with the METRE and LITRE and big, heavy mass is a TONNE. We like to go to the THEATRE. Our films are often quite dark and yet we are known for our export of HUMOUR. We pronounce lieutenant

Netizen was Canadian and not American (subtle signs of patriotism were also shown by an Australian "Saucie_Aussie"). This Netizen devotes nearly three quarters of her "about me" page regarding how great it is to be Canadian and the lack of recognition that Canadians endure. This attitude is not shared with American Netizens. The bulk of "about me" page Netizens reside in the United States. This begs the question of why Americans seldom display any signs of patriotism. One might hypothesize that if data collection were done any time after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on America, there would be a vast outpouring of patriotism and national pride. External forces and media lag have a lot to do with

The Patriot

LEFTENANT. We HONOUR our veterans on REMEMBRANCE DAY.

We drive on HIGHWAYS and ships sail into our HARBOURS. In the winter we wear TOQUES on our heads. When we build stuff we use square-headed ROBERTSON screws. LOONIES and TOONIES are our 1 & 2 dollar coins respectively, and the

latter has a different COLOUR in its CENTRE. We have a second currency known as CANADIAN TIRE MONEY. When someone can't get any LABOUR they go on the POGIEY. We have POSTAL CODES employing letters and numbers. NIAGARA FALLS is better in Canada. We have two official languages - ENGLISH and FRENCH - although most of us are only proficient in one or the other, except when it comes to food labels. Our country is made up of PROVINCES (10) and TERRITORIES (3) and we are governed by PREMIERES and a PRIME MINISTER in the PARLIAMENT. Jean Chretien, pronounced roughly [JZ]ON KRET-CHEN, is our current Prime Minister who resides in OTTAWA, our capitol. MULRONEY (as in Former P.M.) can be used interchangeably with the word bastard.

The name varies in each province, but here in Ontario we buy our liquor at the L.C.B.O. stores (The Liquor Control Board of Ontario) and buy our beer at THE BEER STORE (formerly Brewer's Retail). RUMOUR has it that "We like our COFFEE, CRISP", chocolate bars that is, along with its silly slogan that we saw on tv while sitting on our CHESTERFIELDS. Maple is one of our FAVOURITE FLAVOURS straight from nature. BUTTER TARTS and NANAIMO BARS are homespun sweets. The best way to eat French Fries is with SALT & VINEGAR or as POUTINE from Quebec with its gravy and cheese curd topping. We eat more KRAFT DINNER macaroni & cheese per capita than anywhere else in the world, and we wash it down with refreshing POP. You can wipe your mouth afterwards with a SERVIETTE and then BOB'S YOUR UNCLE! And finally, even if ALL of his policies weren't great, former Prime Minister TRUDEAU really was the coolest world leader ever!! *Thank you! And Now Back To Our Regularly Scheduled Programming... "assenav"*

the shaping of opinion and identity online. The author holds that these identities are not limited to the examples provided in the research. Rather, it is likely that "patriot" personae are now present within the eBay community.

Similar to the Patriotism cluster, a cluster that is used less frequently is the "self defamation" cluster.⁴⁵ Most Netizens on eBay portray a noticeably inflated ego. Everyone strives to gain the attention of the community through their accomplishments or what makes them unique to the community. Whichever direction eBay Netizens take, the majority of Netizens usually paint their identity in a positive light. Nonetheless, there is a select population of the community that pursues a path that is dissimilar to the conventional population. These Netizens do so by

⁴⁵ *Self Defamation*

The scientific misfortune named Tobaccobreath **WHO AM I? Raised as a fatherless child. My mom is a toothless hillbilly and part time circus freak. My dad spreads it around so thin, you'd think he was Velveeta. (The cheese, not my cousin) We didn't have the money for alot of the "fluff" in life, like education, dental work, toothbrushes, toilet paper...well, you get the idea. Not much left of Mommas welfare after the beer & butts were bought. "tobaccobreath"**

Who am I?

LOL! Most of you KNOW who I am, whether you LIKE me or NOT! For those of you who DON'T--I am a NOBODY "homeless" man who prefers to live in a DUMPSTER than be productive in society... I eat SPAM and half-eaten McDonald's hamburgers whenever I get the chance. I "panhandle" for "whiskey-cash" in front of the local "Macy's" department store. When I'm not "out and about" partaking in my daily acitivities, I'm usually sleeping under the local bus stop in downtown SCOTTSDALE! I list my eBay items from the local public library, and shave in public drinking fountains. I don't shower much... My goal in life is to save enough money to buy my very own trailor in MESA. If that doesn't work out, I'll settle for a TENT situated on the national forrest service. My baseball career ended when I discovered vodka... It became impossible to hit those pesky little balls! Luckily, I don't drive anymore...not since the "electric pole" incident. If you want to know more...just check my POLICE RECORD. or contact the local chapter of my "save base" fan club! I have a dangerous fascination with umbrellas, but I currently have it under control with sedatives. (basestealer)

discussing the misfortunes that has happened throughout their lives.

Netizens may incorporate the "screen name" cluster in order to build on their identity. "Tobacoobreath" for instance discusses the significance and reason behind her screen name. In doing so, she discloses personal details about herself that are grim. An assortment of visual imagery is used to describe these misfortunes. For instance, her mom is a "toothless hillbilly and "part time circus freak." Metaphors are also added to the argument. For instance, the line "my dad spreads it around so thin, you'd think he was Velveeta" heightens this sense of poverty. It's important to note that while reading these mortification clusters, many indicators suggest that the Netizen's intent may be satirical in nature. First of all, the English and grammar skills appear to be polished. This may lead the reader to believe that the content here is not to be taken literally. Rather, this cluster may accomplish two things. First, although the content is shaped in a negative light, it accomplishes its purpose by grabbing the attention of the community and drawing the community to explore the Netizen's identity. Because most of the "about me" pages follow a common and often linear format, these

"about me" pages take on a non-traditional means of communication. Netizens may be more likely to glance at these pages rather than filtering them out. The satire tactic may be an effective strategy because it breaks away from the monotony of reading a strand of similar "about me" pages. If the Netizen's intent is to receive acknowledgement and create a presence that they exist, then perhaps this intent was accomplished. Secondly, satire may serve a noble purpose by accomplishing greater good. This "self defamation" cluster works well with the cluster "addressing issues of importance." By introducing identity with the "self defamation" cluster as the foundation, the Netizen is able to address issues of homelessness, poverty, or any combination of these dismal subjects. Strategies such as these may draw members in while at the same time encourage deep thought and reflection. Future surveys or questionnaires may address why these Netizens choose to take such a depressing approach.

The contributions in this thesis in studying identity, community, and persona are limited to just the eBay community. However, many of these "about me" pages may only represent ideas related to Euro-American values. It is also important to mention that this study is limited only to the

eBay.com website based in the United States. Although some users from other countries use the American eBay site, the majority of the members are American. eBay also has websites located in Germany, France, England, Japan, and Australia. This study cannot generalize the findings on the main eBay.com site to these other communities because of different cultural considerations. Perhaps a possible venue to pursue in the future is to test this study and see if there are any correlations on identity and community construction on various eBay global sites.

It is strongly recommended that additional research be done in other online communities as well. This will provide an understanding of the commonalities and differences of other online communities as they relate to eBay. For the time being, no other community replicates what eBay is able to accomplish. Additional research will confirm or refute these assertions that eBay is a unique community unlike any other online forum.

CONCLUSION

Through this examination, the thesis presented a glimpse on the features of identity construction in an online environment. This thesis guided the reader through an exploration regarding the association between

identity/community construction and commerce. The journey through the traditional community/agora provided an illustration on how these two forces are related. The strategies utilized in the traditional community to convey identity was linked to a concept termed orality. Walter Ong explained how rhetoric, a key force in driving identity and community, was associated in two oralities. The first orality related to traditional agoras and communities. The second stage of orality presented an explanation on why this thesis is significant and worthy of study.

Identity construction in secondary orality in terms of the Internet is presently transitioning past the infancy stage. Relatively little research has been conducted in this area in contrast to primary orality. The lack of scholarly research provided one of many justifications on why the study of identity and community construction on eBay web-based auctions was warranted.

Along with Walter Ong's contribution, the thesis was also informed by Robert Ivie theoretical background on metaphors. With Ong's notion of orality and Ivie's view of metaphors, the thesis had a comprehensive scheme on which direction to pursue the research. In addition, Ivie's five-step methodology on analyzing rhetorical content

established the foundation for this study. Without this methodology in place, the study could not move forward.

The author discovered two noteworthy outcomes from the research. First, Netizens employ a wide range of generic strategies to create a sense of self in this online environment. Secondly, Netizens are beginning to fashion their identity into specialized roles. The author labeled these specialized identities as personae. This concept of personae is significant to the study based on two reasons. First, persona demonstrates that many of the roles that exist on the online environment mirror that of the traditional community and agoras. The blurriness that once existed is diminished to a considerable degree because Netizens are customizing their environments. Secondly, it revealed that there is a continual struggle between the practice and tradition of commerce and community. Commerce appears to be influencing and controlling most functions on eBay. The thesis concludes that the element of community is still in its developmental stage and a struggle to find balance between these two elements persists.

The discoveries provided in this study enable future researchers to pursue additional research in a broad variety of channels. The findings in this thesis in terms

of identity construction, persona, and the continuing struggle between community and commerce presents plenty of room for exploration. The thesis has provided one chapter in this area of study. The book has yet to be written.

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