Pinning Design: The Curatorial Labor of Creative Professionals

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Abstract
Pinterest is a site primarily used for sharing online content particularly images; as such, it is a unique platform through which to explore curatorial practices. Professional designers are a unique community of interest because their expertise in the offline curation of visual images is central to their professional work. Drawing on digital curation, convergence culture, and creative professionals, this study examined the curatorial labor practices of design professionals on Pinterest. Through a series of in-depth qualitative interviews and online observation of design professionals, we identify three aspects of curatorial labor on Pinterest: (1) performance, (2) process, and (3) product. The strategic and creative selection and arrangement of digital images by these designers becomes an ongoing authorial act of creative labor. This community demonstrates how the public digital curation of visual images is an important part of the ongoing venture labor of design professionals. The study concludes with implications for our collective understandings of online curation, creative professional labor, and the role of social media within commercial and organizational contexts.

Keywords
online curation, creative professionals, curatorial labor, Pinterest, design, creative professional labor

Pinterest describes itself as a “visual discovery tool that you can use to find ideas for all your projects and interests” (Pinterest, 2015). With over 72.8 million users (Mangalindan, 2015), Pinterest is a fast-growing online image-sharing platform that allows users to collect and display ideas by “pinning” images to thematic boards around projects, hobbies, and inspiration. Users can pin their own photos or images from websites outside of Pinterest or they can repin images from other users’ boards within Pinterest. Unlike other image-sharing or social network sites like Flickr or Facebook, Pinterest users do not tend to upload and share their own images, but circulate images found within Pinterest or elsewhere on the web (Hall & Zarro, 2012; Moore, 2014; Zarro & Hall, 2012). Indeed, the most common activity on Pinterest is repinning images from other Pinterest users’ boards rather than pinning personal images or images from websites outside of Pinterest (Moore, 2014).

The sharing of videos or photos found online with others is a popular activity not just on Pinterest. Pew Research Center’s Internet Project found that 47% of adult Internet users have shared videos or photos that they found online with others (Duggan & Smith, 2014). The sharing of online content through various social media platforms has been referred to as curation (Duggan & Smith, 2014). Because Pinterest is a site that is primarily used for online content sharing, as opposed to content creation, it is a unique platform through which to explore curatorial practices.

Pinterest is increasingly used by organizations, brands, and professionals to circulate images of their products and services to potential consumers (Silberman, 2013). While research has begun to explore general Pinterest use (e.g. Gilbert, Bakhshi, Chang, and Terveen, 2013; Linder, Snodgrass & Kerne, 2014), there is little understanding of how professionals think about and use Pinterest. Nevertheless, there is a growing literature surrounding how creative professionals more broadly adopt and adapt to social media platforms (e.g. Duffy, 2013, 2015a, 2015b; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Marwick, 2013a, 2013b; Perkel, 2011), raising tensions about the blurring boundaries between authenticity and professionalism, privacy and publicity, work and hobby, amateur and professional. It is these tensions that we bring to the understanding of the curatorial practices of design professionals on Pinterest.

Designers are a unique creative professional community of interest because their expertise in the offline curation of visual images is central to their professional work. Designers,
including interior, graphic, industrial, and architectural, can also be understood as "cultural intermediaries or tastemakers in that they broker modern ideas in the work they do and the way they consume" (Bourdieu, 1984 as cited in Julier, 2008, p. 86). Studying design professionals on Pinterest can give us insight into online curation because the design process typically involves the offline curation of images to create new design interventions.

Designers often collect precedent images, known as existing examples of design, as part of the design process to build their design knowledge, identify patterns and typologies for future design problems, discover inspiration, and look for points of departure for new innovations (Lawson, 2004). These precedent images act as sources of inspiration for designers and are often compiled on design mood boards (Eckert & Stacey, 2000). Beyond mood boards, the work of designers is the rearrangement or recombination of existing elements into new configurations or interventions. “Styles, tropes, inspirations, popular culture, language and symbols are the materials, and it is the measure of a designer’s ability to reposition these in the most successful way for the audience that determines the effectiveness of a piece” (Cullinane, 2013, n.p.). Despite a prominence of curation in design culture, there is still a tendency of designers, design education, and design culture to “overvalue differentiation and originality” (Bierut, 2013, part 2, para 7) which Cullinane (2013) refers to as the “originality paradox” in design.

Designers have been at the forefront of issues surrounding the sharing and display of creative content online. Bēhance is a popular professionally oriented site for sharing creative work in the design industry and connecting creatives, at various levels of their careers, and their work to professional networking sites such as LinkedIn. DeviantART is an alternative artistic online community that brings together artists and designers to share creative projects which remake, remix, and modify digital artifacts. The deviated digital artifact represents the artist’s or designer’s creative intervention. Like Pinterest, deviantART and Bēhance represent new distribution systems for creative content online. Both deviantART and Pinterest also blur the boundaries between amateur and professional artist and creative practitioner (Perkel, 2011). Unlike deviantART and Bēhance, however, Pinterest reaches a broader demographic beyond creative communities.

Therefore, this study examines how designers take up such a popular image-sharing and social networking platform. Through a series of in-depth qualitative interviews and online observation, this study seeks to explore the curatorial practices of design professionals on Pinterest to (1) explore curatorial labor for design professionals and (2) to understand how their online Pinterest work influences their offline practice and vice versa. Together these help to expand our theoretical understandings of social media, online curation, and creative professional labor.

Literature Review

Previous research has defined Pinterest as a “social curation” website because it combines collecting capabilities with social attributes of liking, following, and commenting (Gilbert et al., 2013; Hall & Zarro, 2012; Zarro, Hall, & Forte, 2013). However, the terms “collecting” and “curating” are used interchangeably and there is some ambiguity around the definitions. Therefore, this study draws on digital curation literature in which to situate Pinterest usage. Additionally, we build upon convergence and creative professionals research exploring the tensions between amateur and professionals and labor in the online environment.

Digital Curation

Within museum studies, curation can be defined as the selection and display of artifacts (Belk, 2006). The role of the curator has evolved from a caretaker of a collection to the curator as creative author based on the degree of visibility and independence from the institution of the museum (O’Neill, 2012). Curation is fundamentally about meaning exchange as a form of public activity (Martinon, 2013; Staniszewski, 1998). In this way, curation is a process, not a product of creative intervention. Digital curation and its emphasis on participation have shifted the role of the visitor in curation, who becomes part of the meaning exchange process through their tagging, sorting, and remixing of digital artifacts. For example, Eschenfelder and Caswell (2010) have developed three approaches to digital collections based on the degree of image control: (1) “virtual display case” (highest degree of control), (2) “cultural property approach,” and (3) “cultural remix” (reuse without restriction) (pp.2–3). These levels of reuse within cultural institutions range from “open commons collections to account controlled, negotiated permission, to restricted digitization” (Eschenfelder & Caswell, 2010, pp.17–18). In response to the extremely specialist language that has been used in the descriptions, labels, and metadata associated with digital art objects (Srinivasan, Boast, Be cvar, & Furner, 2009), museums have experimented with social tagging as a way to make art objects more accessible to the broader public (Trant, 2009; Trant & Wyman, 2006) and to encourage involvement and accessibility to digital art objects (Vliet & Hekman, 2012). Digital collections of museums have been at the center of the tension about control and access of curation (Smith, 2012).

Within new media studies, the role of a new media curator has been discussed as the media platform itself or system for an algorithmic filtering and organizing (Hogan, 2010), archivist with an emphasis on preservation (Erickson, 2010), intermediary who identifies and culs from the broad amount of existing content to circulate media artifacts with new audiences (Monroy-Hernández, boyd, Kiciman, De Choudhury, & Counts, 2013), and mediator who significantly transforms or recontextualizes the media artifacts so as to open up new
meanings around the media content (Gehl, 2009; Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013). Within Internet studies, digital curation is about the degree of transformation and manipulation of media content. Here, the DJ or mashup practitioner’s creative output is a curatorial act of creative selection and arrangement of source material (Sinnreich, 2010). The mashup or remix highlights the role of artist as digital curator. We therefore draw on this work of musical creatives in which to situate our study of visual creative labor.

**Convergence: Professionals and Amateurs**

Social media platforms such as Pinterest offer an opportunity to examine how professionals and amateurs converge and the ways in which professionals maintain distinctions. This work can be situated in the literature around how professionals have taken up social media. In the context of creative industries, the relationship between professionals and amateurs has become a space of blurring boundaries and contestation (Bruns, 2008).

We can look to the profession of journalism and the ways in which journalists have taken up social media and sought to distinguish themselves from citizen journalists, amateurs, and other laypersons as a way to situate this study on how professional designers negotiate social media. The emergence of convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006) and participatory culture of social media serve to “erode the traditional distinction between the producer and consumer of news information” (Hermida, Lewis, & Zamith, 2014, p. 481). Professional journalists have historically derived their role and expertise through control of information, known as gatekeeping (Bruns, 2005; Deuze, 2005). Journalistic authority and control over information have been threatened by user-generated content (Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Singer & Ashman, 2009). In the face of these threats, journalists have had to share their gatekeeping role with users or amateurs who take on a secondary gatekeeping role of re-circulating content, ultimately controlling the visibility of content for a secondary audience (Singer, 2014). Lewis (2012) argues that these “indistinct media boundaries” increase the need for “professional distinctiveness” through the displays of exclusivity, authority, and expertise (p. 853). Howarth (2015) points to the “curatorial turn” (n.p.) in journalism making distinctions around traditional newsgathering as being about original or new content creation and news curation being about imaginatively and creatively remixing existing content in new ways.

**Creative Professionals**

The creative professions have been challenged with the blurring boundaries between professional design fields and a rapidly growing group of amateurs or DIY (do it yourself) designers. Beegan and Atkinson (2008) argue that professional practices are defined by their distance from the “unschooled practitioner” (p. 305) and that the distinctions between design professional and amateur are largely constructed through professional design organization, design researchers, and corporations who contract the work of freelance designers (Massanari, 2012).

Creative labor also raises important tensions within the contemporary media industry (Blair, 2001; Duffy, 2013; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; McKinlay & Smith; 2009). Creative work in the culture industries has been largely defined by a culture of cool which emphasizes creativity, autonomy, and self-investment as a part of this entrepreneurial labor (Neff, Wissinger, & Zukin, 2005). Moreover, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) point to this creative autonomy, high involvement in the work, and self-investment, among other aspects, as contributing toward what counts as “good” creative work for these creative professionals, (pp. 46–47). Creative professionals struggle to balance the degrees to which they define themselves through their creative work due to the public, yet personal nature of their work (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). For example, fashion bloggers’ labor includes carefully cultivating the “brand of self-expression” in order to create a successful online persona (Marwick, 2013b, p. 6). Creative labor online is simultaneously about the blending of work and leisure (Duffy & Hund, 2015), the promotion of self and profession (Nathanson, 2014), and self-branding as authentic (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

The emotional investment that is required of creative professionals due to the personal nature of their work is a kind of emotional labor or affective labour that is necessary in order to maintain a certain appearance for others and build their professional networks (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Hochschild, 1983). In addition to the affective labor, creatives also participate in a kind of venture labor where they are asked to invest their own time and resources in their imagined futures (Neff, 2012). Duffy and Hund (2015) argue that the socially mediated processes and curation by these creative professionals such as fashion bloggers are a kind of aspirational labour that “obscures the labor, discipline, and capital necessary” to become successful (p. 1). Biernacki (2015) suggests a tension for architects and designers who are required to “deliver creativity” while simultaneously being fulfilled by the creative aspect of their work (p. 40). Further contributing to the tension around labor and compensation in architecture profession is the failure of architects and designers to see their “work as work” by thinking of the creativity of design as isolated from work (Deamer, 2015, p. 61). Within the design community, amateur or DIY designers engage in speculative design or work without the guarantee of adequate compensation on crowdsourced design websites, which encourage clients to think about creative work as a commodity while downplaying the value of the design process (Massanari, 2012).

For design professionals who are already established in their careers, sites like Pinterest may represent an opportunity to reinforce their creative practice, their professional
networks, and their own self-brand outside of various firms they may work for while simultaneously raising questions regarding professional expertise and control of their design aesthetic. Therefore, this study seeks to understand the designers’ use of Pinterest as a kind of curatorial labor. As offline curatorial professionals, how do designers distinguish themselves as professional tastemakers and manage their “originality paradox” through their curatorial labor on Pinterest? How does their online curatorial labor impact their offline creative work and vice versa? How does curatorial labor help us to better understand the tensions around online curation, creative labor, and social media?

**Methodology**

In order to study the curation practices of design professionals on Pinterest, we used an interpretivist and naturalistic framework (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). This framework allows us to gain insight into how the designers understand and interpret their own everyday usage of Pinterest. Additionally, this framework gives us the opportunity to go beyond just their actions on Pinterest and examine more broadly their assumptions, understandings, and values related to curation on Pinterest.

**Sampling and Recruitment**

The research on Pinterest use has tended to sample using computational methods of the entire public site (e.g. Gilbert et al., 2013, Moore, 2014) or by a convenience sample of “everyday” users (e.g. Hall & Zarro, 2012; Zarro & Hall, 2012), rather than looking at how Pinterest is being used by communities for specific ends and associated practices. Therefore, we focused on sampling from a very specific population of design professionals because of their expertise in the offline curation of visual images as a part of the creative design work.

We employed two primary recruitment strategies to sample design professionals from (1) professional design communities and (2) large, well-known design firms in the interior design and architecture industry.

First, we posted recruitment messages on a LinkedIn “IIDA” group that has over 36,500 members including prominent design professionals both nationally and internationally. The first author is a designer by training and profession; therefore, our second recruitment strategy involved contacting former colleagues who worked at large global architecture and design firms to help connect us with designers in their networks who were using Pinterest. In particular, Jay, who worked as a design strategist, acted as an “informal sponsor” sending our recruitment message to several internal firm and external design listservs, vouching for the project, and helping to explain the research interests to the design firm and community (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 60). From the original group of respondent interviews (n=6), we used a snowball sampling to recruit the remaining participants.

The participants included 16 women and 4 men (n=20), ranging in age from 25 to 50 years with a mean age of 33 years. The sample includes participants from six states in the United States, including cities such as New York, San Francisco, Denver, Minneapolis, and Washington DC along with a small group of international participants (n=3) from the United Kingdom, South Africa, and Canada. The sample consists of 6 professional designers who own their own firms and 14 from large global design firms, which offer a range of design services including architecture, interior design, and graphics and branding. The majority of the interviewed designers (n=16) work on commercial architecture and interior design projects, while a small minority work on graphics and brand design for the built environment and one designer reported working primarily on residential design projects. The gender divide of this sample is reflective of both the Pinterest site as encoded with gender and consumptive assumptions (Tekobbe, 2013) as well as the predominance of women in the US commercial interior design industry—approximately 69% (Interior Design Staff, 2010).

**Data Collection and Analysis**

We conducted 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews during the summer of 2013. The interviews ranged from approximately 40 to 90 min and were conducted via phone or Skype. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy. This study was granted institutional review board (IRB) permission by the authors’ IRB.

Overall, we structured the questions and the overall interview as “open ended process reflection questions” (Charmaz, 2002, p. 679) that would encourage the participants to reflect on their own usage. As Charmaz (2002) suggests, the first interview guide started with broad, easy to answer, concrete questions and then gradually became more specific to particular aspects of Pinterest in order to “study process” (p. 679). The interviews focused on five areas: general use, pinning/repinning (and never pin), motivations around creating boards and types of boards, profile information, and pinning “etiquette.” Participants’ public Pinterest boards were accessed with their knowledge for background information as we prepared for and interpreted the interviews, but formal visual analyses of participants’ pins and boards were not conducted.

Drawing on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we approached data collection and analysis as an iterative process, moving continuously back and forth between collecting data and analyzing the data using a “constant comparative method” (p. 102). The ongoing analysis of the initial interview transcripts allowed us to follow up on emerging themes in subsequent interviews so as to continue to refine the categories and emerging themes during the data collection process. The original broad affinities about participants’
reported Pinterest use included where and when they used Pinterest (context), how and why (motivations, intentions), and their perceptions and reflections (norms).

**Findings**

The interviews revealed that Pinterest was primarily seen as a site to do design work and secondarily to display design work. As creative professionals, the majority of designers in our study did not pin content that they had created on Pinterest. In fact, only one of the 20 designers had regularly pinned his own work, and this was constrained to one board. Two designers mentioned when they first joined Pinterest, they experimented with pinning content they created but then quickly felt that it did not fit within the norms on Pinterest and decided against pinning their work in the future. Four designers described pinning their own work was too “self-promotional.” This norm was even made explicit in Pinterest’s “Pin Etiquette” policy that instructed users to “avoid self-promotion” (Eder, 2012). The designers in our study acknowledge the community norms on the site are centered on sharing rather than promoting. Five of the design professionals expressed concerns about the lack of control from sharing their own (or their firm’s) design work, which could circulate widely and end up in various contexts without proper credit or attribution. The aspect of Pinterest that designers most valued, a platform to easily discover and display images and engage in their work, was simultaneously the aspect of the platform that concerned them about posting images of their own design work. To manage this tension, some designers posted images and narratives of their own design work on Bēhance, which linked designers and firms together. Despite not pinning their offline design work on Pinterest, designers in our study did use Pinterest to engage in various kinds of design work that can be considered online curatorial labor.

**The performance, process, and product of curatorial labor**

Three aspects of curatorial labor on Pinterest emerged from the interviews with design professionals: (1) performance, (2) process, and (3) product. The performance of curatorial labor is the means by which a designer strategically pins and creates boards as a means presenting oneself as a professional designer as opposed to what they perceive to be the average Pinterest user. The process of curatorial labor is the means by which designers brought their process-oriented design strategies to their curatorial work online and the way their pinning practices impacted their offline collaborative processes. The product of curatorial labor is the means by which designers experiment with the structure of the boards and pins as an original and artistic endeavor in of itself and become aware that their Pinterest work inspires imagined publics through the sharing of their perceived unique and original points of view. Their particular aesthetic choices and compositions are the products of their creative labor for others to consume.

**Performance.** Designers in this study took seriously the idea of presenting themselves as creative professionals through their pins and the composition of their boards. The curation of images became a means of identity work and self-presentation (Baudrillard, 1994, 1996; Goffman, 1959). For example, the designers interviewed purposefully pinned design imagery to enact and display their professional identity and expertise.

When asked about their Pinterest profile or what they thought people could tell about them from viewing their boards, participants would first articulate that a viewer of their profile would be able to tell that she was a designer. This was communicated not through their profile information but through their aesthetic quality of pins, the number of pins relating to design, and the delimiting of topics to design. In many interviews, the designers described pinning in ways that demonstrated their design expertise, often in contrast to non-designer Pinterest users.

**Delimiting of topics.** Participants were careful to pin images that are narrowly characterized within their professional identity. Catherine, a South African–based designer, explained her reasoning for carefully delimiting topics for her boards and her pins:

> My main focus is interiors and architecture and that imagery. I might follow people who follow other things just to see it but I don’t repin those things because my focus is on the interior and I don’t want to complicate my profile with too many boards.  
> (Catherine, Western Cape, South Africa)

Catherine is conscious about her self-representation and maintaining that professional position through the types of images she chooses to pin and the boards she creates. This can be contrasted with Julie’s observation of what a non-designer does on Pinterest, as “someone who has a broad range of topics.” The delimiting of pin to design-related topic was a strategic means for our participants of performing their professional identity on Pinterest.

In addition to what designers say they intentionally pin, it is also helpful to examine what they intentionally do not pin or say they would never pin. Julie communicated this in relation to what she observes “non-designers” pinning:

> I pin things that are focused on design and aesthetics. Where I feel like non-designers are just kinda pinning things they find interesting—like recipes, like workout plans, like funny quotes. Non-designers love pinning funny quotes and it’s not really about aesthetics. (Julie, Brooklyn, NYC)

A total of 12 designers reported that they intentionally kept their boards and pins focused on design imagery and
noted that non-designers tended to pin a broad range of common interests such as recipes, fitness, wedding inspiration, fashion trends, and home décor.

Everyday creative acts, like craft arts, home décor, or cooking, were not a primary part of our participants’ performance on Pinterest although they recognized that non-designers on Pinterest valued them. Similarly, they recognized the popularity of inspirational quotes, fitness, recipes, wedding inspiration, and fashion trends on Pinterest, but many reported that they would not pin such topics on public boards. The symbolic value of delimiting their pins and boards reflects a strategy to distinguish themselves and legitimate their different social status from non-designer Pinterest users (Bourdieu, 1984).

This does not suggest that the more “common” pins on Pinterest were not also of interest to our participants. Indeed, one participant said that she had a private board regarding pins for her wedding. She, however, would not make the board public because it was not part of her identity performance as design professional. Recognizing the distinctions between high and low art (Becker, 1982), our participants remain committed to their public pinning performance as central to their curatorial labor as creative professionals.

**Pinning, not repinning.** The majority of designers in our study (17 out of 20) strongly expressed a preference for pinning (images from websites outside of Pinterest) over repinning (images existing within Pinterest). For example, Mara described pinning as seeming “more like an original process” and Julie referred to pinning as “finding things from scratch.” In contrast, Julie described repinning as something “someone else found.” Similarly, Giselle described a repin as “other peoples’ ideas, stories, and inspiration.” Although the majority of the images, whether pinned or repinned, were not original content created by the designers themselves, there were nuanced distinctions for how the designers evaluated originality and value. Blake explained why pinning was deemed more original:

I prefer to do an original pin because it feels more legitimate. It feels original—you are not taking what someone else loves. It feels nice to go out there and search for something and find something really cool that you don’t think anyone else has pinned. (Blake, San Francisco, CA)

Much like Mashup artists who evaluated creativity based on the *degree of transformation* and *degree of context change* (Sinnreich, 2010), Blake expressed a kind of creativity as defined not through the creation of original content but through the *action of finding and remixing of content or ideas* from other places and bringing them to a new community. By not limiting himself to the choices within Pinterest, Blake believed that what he finds better fits his viewpoint. Although this is a very thin distinction, the designers using Pinterest conveyed a clear distinction between *pinning* as active, more effort, and more creative and *repinning* as passive, requiring less effort, less original, and ultimately evaluated as less valuable.

In some cases, to avoid repinning from another person’s board, designers employed strategies for *appearing* to pin instead of repinning. For example, Rachel, a designer in NYC, explained her strategy for avoiding repinning too frequently:

Rachel: One thing that I noticed that I did—is this cheating a little bit—if I see a pin on someone’s board, I might not necessarily just repin it.

Interviewer: What’s your reasoning? How do you think about that?

Rachel: There has been an occasion when I have been insanely overtly repinning from one person and just didn’t want that person to think I was totally ripping off their boards.

As a designer, Rachel knows that even if she finds an image on a board that she likes, she should go outside of Pinterest to find the image to avoid what she knows is less desirable in the design community—repinning from someone else’s board. “Cheating” is how Rachel described the “inappropriate” behavior of using Pinterest’s search functionality to find good design images through other users’ boards but not revealing that process by avoiding repinning, which would tag from whom she found the image. By *pinning* an image, Rachel performed (Goffman, 1959) originality associated with bringing an image into Pinterest and getting credit for the discovery of the image as there is no link or trace of connection to another Pinterest user’s existing pins and composed boards. Alternately, *repinning* an image is associated with a “found image,” an image that has been discovered already, introduced to Pinterest, and composed as part of an existing board by somebody else. If repinned on Rachel’s board, an image will still carry a trace of its origin by saying, for example, “added by Rachel via Julie” (the Pinterest user who originally pinned the image from a website outside of Pinterest). The performance of process that Rachel describes reflects a kind of contradiction of curatorial labor where the work of finding the same image pinned by another designer belies the affective or relational labor that comes from how the platform signals sharing pins and boards with others on Pinterest.

**Process.** Professional designers are trained in a very systematic design process of collecting existing examples of design, identifying patterns and typologies, as well as, points of departure, to inform future design innovations (Lawson, 2004). The creative professionals in this study described their pinning practices as means of enacting this offline design labor practice in this online environment. In other words, they brought their process-oriented design strategies
to their curatorial labor on Pinterest. Significantly, the designers reported that their online curatorial work on Pinterest impacted their offline collaborative processes for creating new design interventions.

**Developing Point of View.** In addition to the discovery of images and their valuing pinning over repinning, designers in this study build their point of view and potential patterns for future design problems by the transformation of singular pins into patterns and typologies. Historically, designers have collected images offline as a source of design inspiration and often compile these images on design mood boards (Eckert & Stacey, 2000). As an offline design practice, these mood boards are created by compiling images of varying degrees of abstraction on boards that the designer will use for personal inspiration, share with other designers on the team, and to communicate with clients and stakeholders about the design direction (Lucero; 2009; McDonagh & Storer, 2004). This offline design process was transposed online through the composition of the boards on Pinterest. Designers in this study spent a lot of their time on Pinterest dedicated to composing, editing, and managing their boards. However, this attention to composition was technologically problematic. Indeed, Julie expressed frustration with the lack of control over the order of the pins on a board: “You can arrange the order of your boards as they appear on your page but you cannot arrange the pins on the board. So you really have no control of the composition, which I find a little bit challenging.” Julie describes her strategy for overcoming the issues of controlling image order on Pinterest: “I’ll keep everything in one massive board but I will repin it on to a more tailored board.”

Participants, like Julie, used repinning their own pins as a means of controlling the composition on Pinterest that did not allow for the custom arrangement of images on boards. By repinning from a previously existing larger board to a new board, participants could control the position of the images, which also serves as a strategy for creative control, enhancing the graphic composition of the new board. In addition to the preoccupation with the graphic composition of each board, several designers were equally concerned with the overall composition of how all the boards looked together on their main page—a kind of meta-composition.

Because the composition of boards was a very important part of the design process for these professionals, they would often make use of secret boards for projects they felt were not ready or complete. In addition to valuing and safeguarding their process, eight designers described secret boards as a type of private space for “process work” (Lawson, 2004). Blake explained using the secret boards as a place to experiment freely with projects in process:

*I was thinking of making another secret board for self-branding—ideas for how I want to present my portfolio and brand myself but I don’t want that process to be open to the public to see me trying to put these images together. So, I use Pinterest because it is a very simple tool but I don’t want to necessarily share that with the world—I don’t want to share that part of my process. (Blake, San Francisco, CA)*

In Blake’s description, the secret board is a type of workspace for hiding certain processes before they are more fully developed into final boards. Similarly, Julie described creating secret boards for “testing things out” or doing “something very edgy.” The “edgy” work that Julie refers to is a type of work that she worries will not fit into her professional design aesthetic. Both Blake and Julie described secret boards as a type of private space for creative design project experimentation away from the publicness of other Pinterest users. This not only safeguarded their actual design process, which is unique to them as design professionals, but it also helps to preserve their performed identity as design professionals.

**Collaboration.** Designers in this study also reported that their online pinning practices impacted their offline labor and the way they collaborated on new design interventions. A number of the designers started using Pinterest group boards where multiple team members can contribute and pin images to a shared project board. By using these boards, the designers reported that they were able to follow visually what individual designers on the team were thinking about the design direction based on their pins and have face-to-face conversations as team sooner about the design direction of the project. For these designers, the Pinterest board was, as Rachel termed, “a side conversation” that replaced the email conversations of sharing images between team members or the printing of images and the physical pin-up of images in the design studio. Andrea, a graphic designer, expressed a similar sentiment about using Pinterest as a way to gauge and negotiate the design direction with different design roles on the team:

*A lot of times what the interiors group is pinning and what I am pinning are two very different things. Even though we are pinning different types of things it would help me and help them to see what we were thinking—to help get on the same page or become more inspired about a different direction that you hadn’t thought about before. (Andrea, Denver, CO)*

Team pinning became a “visual dialogue” to gauge how other team members were thinking about the direction of the project.

Because the speed and ease of finding, selecting, and arranging images on Pinterest was significantly easier than offline curative practices, the designers suggested it impacted how they felt about their individual design directions at the early schematic stage of the design process. Rachel discussed the lower effort threshold to pinning images that helped how they negotiated design direction in team meetings:
I like the fluidity of Pinterest. It is not so precious so you don’t feel bad about not moving forward with an image because of the effort threshold. It didn’t cost the designer anything to select and pin that image. In order to do it the old way, you gather your images, you print it, you find physical pins and a board and you probably have to take off other people’s work before you can put your board up in studio. When you have a team meeting, it is “I like this, I like this” but Pinterest is more like “I found these things. I’m not shoving it in front of you but if you also like it, that’s great.” I thought this was the dynamic that was helpful to the process. Not so much pushing that you should do that but rather “if you like it, here it is.” (Rachel, NYC)

For the designers, who collect design inspiration as a part of their job, the efficiency of pinning digital images on Pinterest served to make them feel less attached to a particular design direction as reflective of their individual design contribution and effort. In the design process, designers are taught that they should not become too attached to one idea at the beginning of a project and value divergence of ideas in order to find the best solution (Cross, 2008; Liu, Chakrabarti & Bligh, 2003), while simultaneously identity investment is central to creative labor and the development of innovative creative ideas (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). In a low profit margin environment, architecture and design firms are often under pressure to streamline and manage the efficiency of the design process (Bernstein, 2015), which often competes with the ideal design process of carving out time for design divergence before converging on the final solution. The designers in this study seemed to find that Pinterest afforded them the opportunity to be less personally attached to or invested in the images they were pinning as part of their own professional identity and self-realization while improving the efficiency of collecting divergent ideas. While Pinterest was seen as a helpful tool for designers’ collaboration and professional design work offline, three designers mentioned that they felt “guilty” or “a sense of trepidation and hesitancy” when using Pinterest at the office, where it may be seen as a frivolous social networking platform rather than a tool for creative labor. Additionally, 10 designers mentioned that they primarily pinned at times outside of the office such as during the evening or on the weekends. As such, designers in our study indicated that much of the curatorial labor on Pinterest was done in their free time rather than in the office, thus reflecting a common tension in digital labor (Scholz, 2012; Terranova, 2000).

Product. Initially, some designers described their curatorial labor as selectively pinning images and accumulating images on boards as work that was just part of who they are as designers. It was part of their engaging in their own design aesthetic process as they had been used to doing in their offline mood board practices. As they became more aware of the visibility of their pins and the potential to connect with various publics, they described a more external focus around the creative arrangement and composition of boards as design interventions.

The designers in this study understood the composed Pinterest boards as a resulting original design or creative product, and spent a much of their time on Pinterest preoccupied with creating a beautiful board. Designers reported that even more so than the individual pins, they are concerned with the overall graphic composition of each board—how all the pins work together aesthetically on an individual board. Designers commonly reported strategies for resisting the Pinterest template. For example, rather than titling a board “design” or “interior design”, they would use color as a theme to organize and name boards. While Pinterest by default uses the first image pinned to a board as the cover image of the board, our participants would actively change the cover images of boards to carefully construct a visual product that conveyed their unique design aesthetic.

Continual maintenance. The majority of the designers described curating images on Pinterest as ongoing labor. Giselle described her daily routine on Pinterest:

Oftentimes, I’ll revisit boards and I’ll scroll down and filter—kinda to get rid of the older pins. I’m constantly updating and I might re-title boards. I’m still filtering through and trying to narrow down because I am a designer perfectionist. I am trying to figure out ways to clean it up or make it a bit more useful to what I’m feeling. It is constantly evolving. (Giselle, Denver, CO)

In the interview, Giselle also discussed how she has had the same six to nine boards for the entire time that she has been using Pinterest and will continually edit these boards and delete pins that represent a trend. As a design product that represents her design aesthetic to various publics, she continually revisits and updates her boards to demonstrate her unique point of view and to signal her ability to be on the cutting-edge of trend discovery.

Meaning exchange with various publics. In addition to collecting images for their own inspiration, the designers in our study viewed pinning as engaging in a process of meaning exchange with range of potential publics. Beyond the general public, 7 of the 20 designers reported that they were actively trying to inspire other design professionals, project teams, current and potential clients. Giselle described how she pins and composes boards with the purpose of inspiring other viewers in addition to herself:

I pin things that bring a moment of pause for someone looking at my boards. I like the idea of pinning something that makes you stop and pause a bit. (Giselle, Denver, CO)

Giselle tries to pin in order to get the attention of other potential publics; her goal is to use the composition of images to have people see a certain point of view or open up meanings around images. Her pins and boards are the product of her design process meant to inspire and engage others as a kind of venture labor (Neff, 2012).
Designers in our study also engaged in a kind of affective labor of contributing to the community on Pinterest (McCollough, 2015). For some designers, this meant building a network outside of their firm-related professional identity. For example, Julie suggested that she is also able to engage with other designers on Pinterest who share her aesthetic:

The two pages that consistently get the most followers are my African textiles and my global textile style. That has made me feel good that there is this community and population out there that finds this stuff interesting and appreciates the aesthetic. It’s funny when you find other people with those interests and we all follow each other. There is this community out there and it just takes time to be introduced to that community. There is this big burst when you first join the community and the community grows and acknowledges you and finds you. (Julie, Brooklyn, NYC)

Julie’s notion of community further blurs the line of work and leisure in ways that reinforce the affective labor central to Pinterest (McCollough, 2015). In other social media platforms, having followers is a sign of social status and influence (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Julie’s description illustrates how some designers view the publicness of the creating boards as a way to exchange meanings and build shared ideas around niche interests and how that can extend beyond the online Pinterest community.

Discussion

Curatorial labor can be understood through the designers of this study as the ongoing affective and aesthetic selection and arrangement of digital images and mediated connections. The curatorial labor of the designers reveals evolving beliefs around design and digital objects, which in turn are shaped by the technological affordances of the platform itself. This study finds that the designers had developed their own norms and distinctions around creativity and originality through their digital curation. In valuing pinning over repinning, these designers have placed value in the labor of finding and discovering content outside of Pinterest, thus enhancing its originality in context if not in action, and the creative arrangement and combination of images. Bringing “new” found content from outside of Pinterest can be understood as a greater degree of contextual transformation and effort than the ease of repinning content from existing “found collections” within Pinterest. These designers felt it was their job to be continually “looking” outside of Pinterest in order to bring that original contribution to Pinterest.

The thin distinctions that the designers in this study made around what they consider “original content” stem from the fact that Pinterest makes visible that an image was repinned and where from. This visibility on Pinterest creates an environment where the designers had to manage community norms around originality in their pinning practices by not overtly repinning from other users’ boards or upon finding content on another user’s board. While the repin tagging was likely meant to enhance a sense of social connection among pinners, the designers in this study often made a purposeful decision not to repin from a user, but rather pin the same image from a website or source outside of Pinterest to perform originality central to their curatorial labor.

Chang, Kumar, Gilbert, and Terveen (2014) suggest that pinning a diverse range of content, rather than specializing, attracts more followers on Pinterest. However, the designers in this study reported intentional specialization and delimiting of topics and pins over diversity of pins a strategy for self-presentation as a designer as a way to signal their professional design status and identity. For the designers in this study, their design aesthetic is both a process and a product that is reflected in their Pinterest work. Simultaneously, their pins and boards reflect their brand not in ways that could be construed as overtly self-promoting but within an “authentic” framework (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Hookway & James, 2015; James, 2015). More specifically, the designers leveraged the pins, the topics of the boards, and the aggregation and composition of the boards as identity performance as curatorial professionals. Additionally, whom the designers are following and followed by conveys professional expertise, signaling their role as influencers and not influenced by non-designers and further demonstrating the venture labor (Neff, 2012) at work for creative professionals. Therefore, the designer’s performance, process, and products on Pinterest mutually constitute a curatorial labor that publicly conveys their original and professional value. For designers in our study, curatorial labor on Pinterest was key to how they positioned themselves as visual creative professionals.

Unlike material objects, digital objects and their copies are nearly indistinguishable from each other (Belk, 2013; Gray, 2006; Lehdonvirta, 2012) and are easily shared (Jenkins et al., 2013). Studying the labor practices of designers on Pinterest suggests that evaluations of creative value stem from discovery of image (effort to search and find image from huge amount of available content), source of image (linking to the original source of where the image originated from), degree of contextual change (in this case, distance from Pinterest site), and amount of transformation or innovative recombination (new combinations of images for new meanings on boards rather than perceived pre-arranged images).

The findings from this study suggest that while digital objects and their copies are seemingly indistinguishable and ubiquitous (Belk, 2013; Gray, 2006; Lehdonvirta, 2012), the Pinterest platform makes digital objects distinguishable by making the second copy travel with the note “hey this was pinned from so-and-so’s collection.” This study highlights that on a site such as Pinterest where digital objects are distinguishable, certain communities of users develop “norms that shape the negotiation of value” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 90). In the case of the designer
community in this study, participants valued and evaluated the digital objects’ originality and contribution based on a series of internalized norms not around the originality of the object or even the originality of the image but rather the originality of choosing the image.

**Curatorial Labor: Curation Versus Content Creation**

Friz and Gehl (2016) suggest that Pinterest privileges “curation over creation,” (p. 9) where there is a strict divide between curation as “repinning the already existing content within Pinterest” and the creation of something new and uploading it (p. 10). This study of professional designers suggests there is a middle ground of curatorial labor whereby the work of discovering, sourcing, contextually changing, and recombining with other images become the creative act. Curatorial labor is the performance, process, and production of design interventions for our creative professionals in a social media environment like Pinterest. Although the majority of the design professionals interviewed did not upload their own creative work, the designers in this study see themselves in a curatorial role of creative author through their discriminating selection of pins (i.e. images of design by designers outside of Pinterest) and their creative composition of these pins on a board as an original design in of itself. The curatorial labor on Pinterest is a kind of venture labor (Neff, 2012) whereby the work is ongoing and not necessarily compensated.

Meta-composition is a central curatorial labor practice whereby design professionals came to understand what their profiles, pins, and boards together communicate about who they are. Meta-composition was an ongoing process of arranging and re-arranging digital artifacts and affiliations to convey and refine designers’ creative labor. Whereas previous social media research has suggested that curation focuses on the selection and filtering of content to share with others (Hogan, 2010; Jenkins et al., 2013), our research highlights the aggregate nature of online curatorial work. Our study suggests it is important to place attention on the shared digital artifact (e.g. image, video, link) not just as a singular object but part of a broader collective whether that be technologically explicit like a Pinterest board or profile page on Twitter. The meta-composition of boards by our participants is not that dissimilar to the tweeting practices of professionals whereby professionals delimit their topics in order to distinguish themselves as experts in their professional field (Marwick & boyd, 2011). The collection of digital objects, whether they be tweets or boards, reflects back upon the identity of the social media user who is aware of this and actively performs accordingly.

**Publicness of Curatorial Labor**

At the most basic level, an exhibition is a primary method of communication and dissemination about works of art and does so through a temporally constrained display that helps communicate a particular point of view to viewers of the exhibit (O’Neill, 2012). However, the distinction here is that the final product of curating (the exhibit) is always public, but historically the process of curating an exhibit—selecting works of art and arranging them—has not typically been public. The digital curation within public institutions like libraries and museums has always been about the public nature of exhibition. However, for designers, who had been using mood boards as a kind of offline curation, exhibits of curation had occurred in mostly private, corporate spaces. This study suggests that the curatorial labor for design professionals on Pinterest involves moving some of that creative process and product to a public stage. Significantly, the Pinterest platform shifted the offline private or semi-private creative labor of creating mood boards to a public form of creative labor.

On a site such as Pinterest, not only are boards public, but the entire process of choosing and composing is public. There is no behind-the-scenes composing of pins function on Pinterest. The actual composition of curating is publicized. Followers receive notifications for each pin a user pins to a board, and Pinterest makes the source of pin/repin known and more importantly highly visible to the Pinterest community. At times, some of the designers in this study negotiated this publicness of curation and creative production by using the private “secret boards” as a place for “storing” pins before they decided which board to pin them to or experimenting with composition of pins without the process being public. Several designers articulated their awareness of the “socially mediated publicness” (Baym & boyd, 2012) to Pinterest and their pinning when they explained how initially they started pinning images without being attuned to publicness of their pins and quickly changed their approach based on feedback from other users that made them aware of this publicness. Baym & boyd (2012) assert, “as people communicate publically through social media, they become more aware of themselves relative to visible and imagined audiences and more aware of the larger publics to which they belong and which they seek to create” (p. 320). A number of designers in this study described rebuilding their boards after experiencing a heightened awareness of the visibility of their pinning. In many cases, the designers reported getting feedback that reminded them that they had an audience beside themselves—imagined audiences and the larger publics to which they belong including design industry professionals, clients, consultants, and friends and the more niche publics they hoped to develop and become a part of through their pinning.

**Conclusion**

This study makes two important contributions to Internet studies. First, by exploring Pinterest use by design professionals, we demonstrate how visual social media platforms
are operating within commercial and organizational contexts. Much of the work surrounding the adoption of social media by creative professionals has focused on sites like Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Tumblr where the text, photos, and videos posted are created as aspirational labor (Duffy, 2015a). Our study shows that professional designers on Pinterest create value by curating not creating content for Pinterest. Despite not pinning images of their own design work, our participants used meta-composition as a means of creating larger visual meaning across pins and boards.

A second contribution of this study is the explication of online curatorial labor as the complex interplay between the performance, process, and production of originality. While previous research has demonstrated the performative as well as selective nature of social media curation (e.g. Marwick & boyd, 2011), our study reveals these practices as creative acts of labor. Our study also highlights the processual nature of originality and its centrality to our participants’ curation work. Their continued adding, culling, editing, and managing of pins and boards were vital to our participants and their curatorial work as creative author. Research on social media use has revealed the active management of social media profiles as part of a privacy and identity management (Madden et al., 2013), but our research highlights how a similar social media practice can be a creative, rather than protective act. Instead of interpreting the deleting and editing of online materials associated with one’s profile as privacy enhancing, when viewed through the professional or commercial lens, such acts reveal an active management of relevant information. In the case of our designers, managing their Pinterest content was an ongoing authorial act of creative labor.

Future research should continue to explore how creative professionals use social media as part of their professional branding, creative process, and interpersonal communication. While this study focused primarily on designers working on commercial architecture, interior design, and graphic design work, additional research is needed on creative professionals in the design industries more broadly. Future research should also continue to explore how value is determined and circulated in online platforms across creative professional industries. Additionally, future research might examine how designers convey the value of their labor on more professionally oriented sites like Behance.

Our study reveals that the performance, process, and product of curatorial labor of our design participants on a site like Pinterest were central to ongoing value production, both for the designers and their followers. We demonstrate how the public digital curation of visual images is an important part of the ongoing venture labor of design professionals.

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