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## **PINNING ORIGINALITY: CURATION PRACTICES 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. Creative professionals or designers are a unique community of interest because of their expertise in the offline curation of visual images as a part of their profession. Drawing on museum and material studies, this study examined the social practices of design professionals on Pinterest to explore the curatorial practices and to expand our theoretical understandings of online curation and the role of curator. Through a series of in-depth qualitative interviews and online observation, we identified *originality* as a central value of creative professionals' curatorial practice online. Three aspects of curation practices on Pinterest emerged from the interviews with design professionals: (1) originality as performance, (2) originality as process, and (3) originality as product. The strategic and creative selection and arrangement of digital images becomes a mode of artistic production that results in a series of ongoing exhibits in the form of Pinterest boards. This community demonstrates how online curation becomes an important mode for the demonstration of professional expertise and the production of value. The study concludes with implications for our collective understandings of online curation and the role of social media within commercial contexts.

### **Keywords**

online curation, creative professionals, Pinterest, design, originality

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## **Pinning originality: Curation practices of creative professionals**

Pinterest describes itself as a “place to discover ideas for all your projects and interests, hand-picked by people like you” (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 upload and share their own images, but circulate images found within Pinterest or elsewhere on the web (Moore, 2012).

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, 2013). The sharing of online content through various social media platforms has been referred to as curation (Duggan & Smith, 2013). 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.

The majority of images or pins on Pinterest are not uploaded, original content from Pinterest users themselves, but come from elsewhere on the web, most often blogs and ecommerce sites (Zarro & Hall, 2012; Hall & Zarro, 2012). 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, 2012). Thus questions arise regarding how the circulation and collection of visual images on Pinterest relate to online 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 et al, 2013; Linder, Snodgrass & Kerne, 2014), there is little understanding of how professionals think about and use Pinterest.

Creative professionals or designers are a unique professional community of interest because of their expertise in the offline curation of visual images as a part of their profession. Designers 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 often involves the offline collection and curation of images to create new design interventions.

Therefore this study examines a community of creative professionals who have taken their professional offline curatorial practices to Pinterest. Through a series of in-depth qualitative interviews and online observation, this study seeks to explore the social

practices of design professionals on Pinterest to 1) explore the curatorial practices of creative professionals online and 2) expand our theoretical understandings of curation and the role of curator.

## 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 the material culture literature about collecting, the culture of collecting, as well as, the evolution of curatorial practice from an art history perspective as it relates to offline exhibition collections to theoretically distinguish the concept of collecting from curating and that of the collector and curator.

### Collecting and curating

Belk (2006) defines collecting as “the process of actively, selectively, and passionately acquiring and possessing things removed from ordinary use and perceived as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences” (p.535). Further, collecting involves removing an object from its original everyday use and economic exchange value. The value of the material object is defined by its singularity (i.e. uniqueness or rarity of an object) and its contribution to the larger collection.

Unlike material goods, digital artifacts are *non-rivalrous* and *non-excludable* meaning that one person’s use or collection of a digital artifact does not limit another person’s access to that same object (Lehdonvirta, 2012). Further, a digital artifact can be easily shared and accessed by others in a number of contexts simultaneously without “it leaving one’s possession” (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013, p.91). Lehdonvirta (2012) argues that “every copy of a digital good is indistinguishable from the original” (p.20). Thus this raises importance issues regarding the singularity or originality of digital artifacts within collections.

Implicit in Belk’s (2006) definition of collecting is that it is relatively private process. However, there is a certain blurring of public and private that occurs around digital collections where digital collectors and their collections “perform publicly *and* privately” (Gray, 2006, p.11). All collections on Pinterest are by default public. Though users are allowed up to three private boards, the number of public boards is unlimited. The pinning of images is further publicized by alerting followers when someone pins an image and when an image is repinned the previous pinner is notified as well. Digital collecting on a site like Pinterest is primarily a public and visible process of collecting from selecting images to composing boards.

### Collectors and curators

Belk (2006) makes a key distinction between the collector and the curator by identifying the collector as the person who *assembles* a collection, while the curator *acquires* a

completed collection and is in charge of the continual upkeep of this already intact collection. Within the framework of material culture (Belk, 2006), the assemblage of a collection is the important creative act, whereas the creative act within curation is about the choice of which collection to acquire.

Additionally among collectors, social hierarchies exist. Traditionally there has been a distinction between the “collector as connoisseur”—the collector that follows his aesthetic sense and collects based on the uniqueness or rarity of an object and the “straightforward collector”—the collector who needs to complete a series (Belk, 2006). The symbolic value of one’s collection thus reflects back on the collector’s identity and social status (Bourdieu, 1984), whereby the connoisseur is often considered of higher social status than the serial collector who is merely completing a predetermined series.

Within museum studies, 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). However, the roles of the curator of *new media* are distinguished not through degree of visibility of the curator alone, but rather the degree of transformation and manipulation of content and creative agency of the curator (Sinnreich, 2010). Within internet studies, role of a 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 culls from the broad amount of existing content to circulate media artifacts with new audiences (Monroy-Hernández et al., 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).

While social media like Pinterest offer individuals the ability to curate, how do design professionals distinguish themselves as professional tastemakers? What are their online curatorial practices and how do they help us to better understand the tensions around curation, identity, and social media?

## **Methodology**

In order to study the curation practices of design professionals on Pinterest, we used an interpretivist and naturalistic framework (Lofland et al., 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.**

**Sample.** The research on Pinterest use has tended to sample using computational methods of the entire public site (e.g. Gilbert, et al 2013, Moore, 2012) 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 process.

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). As cultural intermediaries, designers mediate a position between culture and the economy and through their professional work shape consumptive practices (Julier, 2008). For these reasons, design professionals can be positioned as a unique community of Pinterest users whose practices can give us explicit insight into collection and curation practices.

**Recruitment.** 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 a former colleague, Nathan<sup>1</sup>, who worked as a design strategist for a large global architecture and design firm. Nathan acted as an "informal sponsor" sending our recruitment message to several internal firm and external design listserves, vouching for the project, and helping to explain the research interests to the design firm and community (Hammersley and 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, ranging in age from 25 to 50 with a mean age of 33. The sample includes participants from six states in the US, including cities such as New York, San Francisco, Denver, Minneapolis, and Washington D.C. along with a small group of international participants (n= 3) from the UK, 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. 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 U.S. 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 minutes and were conducted via phone or Skype. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy. This study was granted IRB permission by the authors' institutional review board.

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 pinning practices of creative professionals highlight *originality* as a central value of curatorial practice online. This was expressed most clearly in how designers discussed their pinning practices. When asked about pinning and repinning, the majority of designers 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’s 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.” Even though none of the images, whether pinned or repinned were original content created by the designers themselves, there were nuanced distinctions for how the designers evaluated originality.

Further, the designers expressed very positive feelings toward pinning over repinning. Blake explains how he feels toward pinning and explains 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. It feels like it (original pin) probably reflects my point of view a bit more clearly. You can see things on your feed and maybe they are appealing somewhat or in most of the ways that you want so you repin that. But when you are looking for something online, you stumble across something really strange and bizarre and really

interesting and you are drawn to it. I feel like it is a bit more special.  
(Blake, San Francisco, CA)

Blake expressed a kind of originality as defined not through the creation of original content but through the *action of finding and discovering images or ideas* from other places and bringing them to Pinterest. By not limiting himself to the choices *within* Pinterest, Blake believed that what he finds will fit better with his viewpoint, with his criteria for choosing and selecting. 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—this is 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 as a way 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 got credit for the discovery of the image and the perceived originality associated with bringing an image into Pinterest; 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). When distinctions about being a designer and originality are not made through the *creation* of content, designers evaluate originality and creative contribution through the *discovery* of content, but significantly this suggests that the discovery of originality needs to be further unpacked to understand how designers distinguish themselves as professional tastemakers.

### **Originality as performance, process & product**

Three aspects of curation practices on Pinterest emerged from the interviews with design professionals: (1) originality as performance, (2) originality as process, and (3) originality as product. *Originality as performance* is the means by which a designer

strategically pins and creates boards as a means presenting oneself as a designer as opposed to what they perceive to be the average Pinterest user. The designers actively constructed their performance of originality as a central value to their curation. *Originality as process* is the means by which designers are experimenting with the structure of the boards and pins as an original and artistic endeavor in of itself. The management of pins and boards were perceived as a dialogical process of curation. *Originality as product* is the means by which designers 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 their creative output for others to consume.

**Originality as performance.** Designers in this study took seriously the idea of presenting themselves through their pins and the composition of their boards. The collection and curation of objects became a means of identity work and self-presentation (Baudrillard, 1994, 1996; Goffman, 1959). For example many of 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 specificity of pins, the number of pins relating to design, and the delimiting of topics to design. In many cases, the designers would describe 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, explains 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 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 communicates 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, NY)

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 part of our participants' performance on Pinterest even though they recognized that non-designers on Pinterest valued them. Similarly they recognized the popularity of fitness, wedding inspiration and fashion on Pinterest, but reported that they would not pin such topics. 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 creative professionals.

**Originality as 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 practice in this online environment. In other words, they brought their process-oriented design strategies to their curatorial practices on Pinterest.

In addition to the discovery of images and their valuing pinning over repinning, designers build their point of view and potential patterns for future design problems by the transformation of singular images into patterns and typologies. 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, many 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 secret for projects they felt were not ready or complete. In addition to valuing and safeguarding their process, many designers described secret boards as a type of private space for “process work” (Julier, 2002). Blake explains 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 describes 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 performed design aesthetic. Both Blake and Julie describe 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.

**Originality as product.** Initially, some designers described collecting practices of selectively pinning images and accumulating images on boards with a more internal focus. It was part of their engaging in their own design aesthetic process. 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. Unlike a *collection* in which all elements are equal and the composition doesn't necessarily matter because it is about the totality of the series (Baudrillard, 1994), the composition or how pins are arranged on a board is integral to a *curated exhibit*. As such, designers in our study understood their Pinterest profiles, including their pins and boards, as a creative product in and of itself.

Designers in this study understood the composed Pinterest boards as a resulting original design or creative product, spending a majority 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.** Many of the designers described curating images on Pinterest as an ongoing act. Giselle describes her daily routine on Pinterest.

Often, 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 the 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, many of the designers reported that they were actively trying to *inspire others* with their pins—viewing pinning as engaging in a process of meaning exchange with range of potential publics including: professional design communities, project teams, current and potential clients, as well as, non-designer Pinterest users. Giselle describes 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.

Julie suggests 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).

Like on other social media platforms, having followers is a sign of social status and influence (Marwick & boyd, 2012). 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**

Curation as understood through the designers of this study can be described as a type of creative authorship where creative selection and arrangement of digital images becomes a mode of artistic production that results in a series of ongoing exhibits in the form of Pinterest boards. The pinning practices of the designers reveal 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 have developed their own norms and distinctions around creativity and originality through curating. In valuing pinning over repinning, these designers have placed value in the act 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 important to be "looking" outside of Pinterest in order to bring that original contribution to Pinterest.

The thin distinctions that the designers are making around what they consider "original content" stems 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 amongst 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.

Chang et al (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 use. Simultaneously, their pins and boards reflect their brand. More specifically, the designers leveraged the pins, the topics of the boards, and the aggregation and composition of the boards as identity performance. Additionally, whom the designers are following and followed by conveys

professional expertise, signaling their role as influencers and not influenced by non-designers. Therefore, the designer's performance, process, and product on Pinterest are mutually constituted in ways to convey their original and professional value.

Unlike material objects, digital objects and their copies are nearly indistinguishable from each other (Belk, 2013; Lehdonvirta, 2012; Gray, 2006) and are easily shared (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013). Studying the practices of designers around digital objects suggests that evaluations of originality 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; Lehdonvirta, 2012; Gray, 2006), 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 site such as Pinterest where digital objects are distinguishable, certain communities of users develop "norms that shape the negotiation of value" (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013, p.90). In the case of the designer community in this study, designers valued and evaluated the digital objects' originality and contribution based a series of internalized norms not around the originality of the object or even the originality image but rather the *originality of choosing the image*.

**Collecting & curating.** One significant contribution of this study of designers' practices on Pinterest is to expand our understanding of curation in new media studies beyond the curatorial role of selecting, organizing, and sharing digital content. Previous Pinterest studies have tended to use the terms collecting and curating together without making clear distinctions and combining more traditional understanding of curator as someone who selects and organizes with the added role of collecting (e.g. Zarro & Hall 2012).

The new media discussions around the music industry with the introduction of mash-ups and DJs have used the term *curate* to move beyond mediator to emphasize the creative endeavor of curating—"creative selection and arrangement" of existing material to create a new artistic expression (Sinnreich, 2010, p.110). The creative component of mashups as curation applies more broadly to social media curation. Curators as *creative authors* create new forms and experiences through the creative selection and arrangement of art, often art from non-traditional artists or sources (O'Neill, 2012). Similar to our participants, originality and value is evaluated by the degree of change in context and transformation of the source material as a part of the curatorial work being done by DJs (Sinnreich, 2010, p. 101). The performance, process, and production of originality are the creative acts that make meaningful online curation for our creative professionals. 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.

This study drew on museum studies literature on collecting and curating in order to situate the work of design professionals on Pinterest. We observed a set of creative practices including the identification and selection of artifacts, the grouping of artifacts, as well as, an active management, that is, the adding, editing, and deleting of individual artifacts and sometimes whole groupings, of the exhibits. The meta-composition is a central curatorial practice whereby design professionals come to understand what their profiles, pins and boards together communicate about who they are. Meta-composition is something relevant to various social media platforms. Whereas previous social media research has suggests that curation focuses on the selection and filtering of content to share with others (Hogan, 2010; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013), our research highlights the collective nature of online curatorial practices. 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 than 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, 2010). 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.

Distinguishing collecting from curating on Pinterest is difficult because Pinterest practices combine private collecting and public curating due to the publicness of collecting. Nevertheless the historical distinction can still be felt where we saw our participants try to regain notions of private collection and public curation by using secrets boards on which to do process work. Additionally the value of one's digital objects in collections was still in part determined by its rarity –rarity online is not absolute, but contextually defined and performed. Our participants worked hard to perform originality in terms of their identity on Pinterest, the process they go through to manage their Pinterest profile, and the creative product they create as evidenced by their pins and boards. The value of one's digital contribution on the social media platform was determined by the originality of one's postings, both individual posts (pins), boards, and collective boards. But originality is contextual, whereby we can understand something being valued not on its absolutely rarity but its unusual status within a particular context. On Twitter we also see this focus on new and original contributions being of valued (Marwick & boyd, 2010). One of the important Twitter metrics is how many times an original message is retweeted, not how many times a user retweets. Original content is valued content in social media contexts.

**Publicness of Curating.** Exhibitions are the end product of curation (O'Neill, 2012). This suggests that exhibitions are displays for public engagement and curation as an act is inherently public. 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 curation (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.

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 happens in public. Followers receive notifications for each pin a user pins to board. Further, Pinterest makes the source of pin/repin known and more importantly highly visible to the Pinterest community. At times, 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 social media platforms are operating within commercial and organizational contexts. Much of the research on social media focuses on interpersonal use (e.g. boyd, 2014; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007; Walther, et al., 2008), but the growing adoption by companies, organizations, and brands warrants a closer examination of these communities of users.

A second contribution of this study is the explication of online curation as the complex interplay between the performance, process, and production of originality. The theoretical distinctions between collecting and curating are blurred on a social media platform like Pinterest, where we see both practices enacted on the site. Recognizing this, we try to further explicate the symbolic value of these practices. While previous research has demonstrated the performative as well as selective nature of social media curation (e.g. Marwick & boyd, 2012), our study reveals these practices as creative acts. Our study also highlights the processual nature of originality and its centrality to our participants' curation practices. Their continued adding, culling, editing, and managing of pins and boards was vital to our participants and their sense of a curatorial role 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 similar a 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 a creative, authorial act.

Future research should continue to explore how creative professionals use social media as part of their professional branding, creative process, and interpersonal communication. Future research might examine what happens when social tools are employed in professional or organizational contexts and how people must manage professional expectations with the normative authenticity expectations (Hookway & James, 2015; James, 2015). Future research should also continue to explore how value is determined and circulated in online platforms. Our study suggests that the performance, process, and product of originality was a central value to what our participants shared online.

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<sup>i</sup> All of the names of the participants in the article are pseudonyms to protect their identity.