

Pinning the feminine user: gender scripts in Pinterest's sign-up interface

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Abstract

Popular social media site Pinterest is known for its strong female user base, something often attributed to the links, images, and ideas available on it. We argue that Pinterest's popularity with women can also be attributed to a kind of gendering that occurs during the sign-up process. We see the sign-up process as a 'gender script' that inscribes specific gender performances into Pinterest itself by 'pre-scribing' adherence to a dualistic conception of gender and encouraging users to cooperate rather than to compete with each other, to curate content rather than to create it, and to interact affectively with images rather than with text. These behaviors have connections in the broader public imaginary to traditional performances of femininity, thus the kind of introduction and instruction the new user receives when signing up encourage a perception that Pinterest is for women, a perception that is then materialized in user behaviors. We close by arguing for the sign-up interface as an important site of study in new media scholarship and by discussing the ways in which gender scripts might be resisted.

Keywords

gender, gender script, performance, Pinterest, sign-up interface, social media

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Introduction

When Pinterest co-founders Ben Silbermann, Paul Sciarra, and Evan Sharp set out to craft a new web service, targeting women was far from their minds. Like many social media platforms, Pinterest initially was created without any sense of who the users would be or what they would do with it. ‘Silbermann wanted the product’s purpose to be vague, so that it could be used by everyone for anything. He learned this lesson from Twitter’ (Carlson, 2012a: 35).

During a 2012 interview with *Huffington Post* writer Sara Wilson, Silbermann even addressed the popular myth that he and his co-founders strove to capture a female-only demographic: ‘We didn’t build [Pinterest] specifically with women in mind. I personally believe that finding other people in the world that appreciate your tastes and interests is not a gender-specific thing’ (as quoted in Wilson, 2012: 18). At its inception, Pinterest was conceived of as a visual bookmarking service, useful for displaying collections, such as Silbermann’s butterfly collection (Carlson, 2012b). One can even see the genesis of ‘pinning’ images to a Pinterest board in the act of collecting and displaying butterflies.

But the popularity of Pinterest among women cannot be contested. According to a Pew study, users identifying as female made up 80% of all US Pinterest users in 2014 (Moore, 2014). How did Pinterest get this way? It is tempting to say the preponderance of crafts, recipes, wedding ideas, and other traditionally feminine pastimes draw women to the site, and to an extent such assertions possibly explain the sustained female majority. However, since such content has not always been on Pinterest, these arguments cannot explain the initial surge of female US users, lest they descend into tautology.

To explore Pinterest’s gendering, then, we examine Pinterest’s interfaces to discern how those interfaces are aimed at a feminized subject. We focus on a very particular sort of interface, one that is common to many social media sites and yet takes different forms. This interface is the *sign-up interface*, composed of various screens that welcome the user to the new social media software and provide basic pedagogy in its use. As feminist science and technology studies (STS) scholars have argued, the gendering of technology – along with the subsequent disciplining of bodies into gendered performances – takes place at many key loci: advertisements, displays at market, and in ‘domestication’ processes. Following Van Oost (2003), we submit that the design of the technology itself is a key site of gendering. Again, design is not the only site where technology and gender intersect; we should not run the risk of overstating the power of the engineer (Star, 1991), nor ignore users’ resistance, appropriation, or modification of the designers’ proposed gender/technology relationship (Oudshoorn and Pinch, 2003). However, we argue that studying design certainly provides insights into the designers’ desires to influence and direct interpretations of the technology, including its relationship to gendered roles and performances, and that such designed ‘gender scripts’ (Van Oost, 2003) are a powerful factor in the social construction of gender. In this sense, we seek to reverse engineer (Gehl, 2014) the design of one of Pinterest’s key interfaces to gain a sense of how software engineers gender their imagined users.

The essay is organized as follows. First, we lay out the gender script approach, a method of analysis that synthesizes actor-network theory (ANT) and feminist technology studies. We then conceptualize the object of the essay, what we call the ‘sign-up interface’, the collection of screens, forms, and tutorials that new users of social media

systems confront. We argue for the utility of studying these interfaces to critical social media studies. Next, we turn to three binaries we discern in the Pinterest sign-up interface: cooperation/competition, image/legal text, and curation/creation, arguing that Pinterest privileges particular actions over others. This, we argue, is part of the overall gender script of the site, a script that hails an idealized, feminized user. However, because no script is ever totalizing, we conclude with a discussion of *resistance* to this proposed script.

The gender script approach: the conduct of gendered conduct

Drawing on Van Oost (2003), we approach the Pinterest sign-up interface as an object bearing a 'gender script'. For Van Oost (2003), "'gender script" refers to the representations an artifact's designers have or construct of gender relations and gender identities – representations that they then inscribe into the materiality of the artifact' (p. 195). Although they are inscribed into the technology itself, gender scripts ought to be thought of as sites for negotiation between designer and user. Much like gender itself, which is achieved through specific performances, gender scripts are written into the artifact itself and then may be adopted, challenged, or rejected via individual uses or performances. The gender script thus functions as a locus at the intersections of symbolic and structural constructions of both gender identities and gendered divisions of labor (Van Oost, 2003: 195).

The concept of 'script' links 'gender script' to ANT, especially as articulated by Akrich (1992) who first suggested technical artifacts bear scripts. Akrich considers technological artifacts as being 'pre-inscribed' or carrying 'pre-prescriptions' placed there by their designers. 'Designers thus define actors with specific tastes, competences, motives, aspirations, political prejudices, and the rest, and they assume that morality, technology, science, and economy will evolve in particular ways' (Akrich, 1992: 208). A vision of the user's relationship to and interactions with the object and its consequent actors is inscribed such into the object itself (Akrich, 1992: 208). Presenting a technological artifact as something that bears a 'script' – metaphorical 'stage directions' for the performance of using the technology – draws attention to artifacts as *actants*, things that can make a difference in a situation (and thus things we might describe as having agency).

However, as Akrich makes clear (and Van Oost acknowledges), such 'pre-prescriptions' can be 'de-inscribed' or 'de-scribed' when the technical artifacts move out of the world of abstract conceptualizations (such as use-cases, prototypes, or design labs) and are inserted into concrete situations. De-description exists in a space of play between the designer's imagined user and the actual user, and thus requires 'mechanisms of adjustment' which may 'work by exclusion, whether or not this exclusion is deliberate' (Akrich, 1992: 208). In other words, if the designer excludes actors from his or her theory of use, that excluded actor might dissociate the system when it meets users. Akrich gives the example of photoelectric houselights provided to villagers in Africa; these systems failed because the villages did not have an infrastructure of replacement bulbs or batteries. The designers' exclusion of these actants caused the system to crumble.

The gender script approach, then, focuses our attention on the specific ways gender is inscribed and de-scribed in technological systems, especially those ‘pinked’ for women or made ‘manly’ for men. Despite the fluidity of gender, and indeed the fluidity of technological design, products often get gendered in the binary masculine/feminine. As Van Oost (2003) notes, products are often designed for specific gender demographics using extant stereotypes of gender identity such that the final products reflect prevailing notions of masculinity or femininity already in circulation (p. 195).

So here we have the politics and intentions of designers as they meet, constrain, negotiate with, or associate with external actors. Designers construct an ideal user, and that user conforms to an array of gender images or stereotypes. This is an attempt to pre-emptively shape user activities. Thus, we note that the gender script approach also dovetails well with Foucault’s (2003) understanding of power. For Foucault, power is productive and active, ‘a way of acting upon one or more acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. A set of actions upon other actions’ (Foucault, 2003: 138). We see design in this way: as an action upon other actions. For Foucault, power is always relational: it appears in power relations between subjects, one who acts and one who acts next in relation. Such power is not about radical constraint: complete domination of a subject is not a power relation. A useful metaphor is that of a conductor: one who conducts others, one who helps shape the *conduct* of others, one who helps others *conduct themselves*. Thus, power is very much about freedom – the freedom to conduct oneself within the bounds of proper conduct, the freedom to act after action. In the sense we’re pursuing here, this is the freedom to act within the parameters of a technical design.

This confluence of ANT and Foucault’s theory of power opens up a space for us to consider technical artifacts, such as a software interface, as an ‘action before action’, a link in a chain of action (Latour, 1986), something that acts in the world and shapes subsequent action (in this case, one’s conception of oneself as gendered as well as one’s performance of that gender). This is a power relation between an interface and a gendered subject. The subject is free to act, but the gender-scripted interface is a preceding action that can shape (if not rigidly determine) the subsequent actions of the subject.

Moreover, we can also draw on Foucauldian theories of *resistance* to such scripts, as well, which links Foucault tightly to those who have used ANT to find resistance to technological determinism (Akrich, 1992: 208). We will return to this point about resistance – the de-description of pre-scripture – in the conclusion.

The sign-up interface as a site of study

Beyond these theoretical bases, why a social media sign-up interface as a site of study? We argue that sign-up interfaces contrast with the sheer heterogeneity of uses of social media. In other words, to study ‘social media’ is a nearly impossible task because of the multiple ways people use it and the multiple forms it can take after users customize it. For example, one person might use Twitter to promote herself as a ‘personal brand’; another might use it to follow a specific topic; another might use it to socialize with friends; another might use it as a place to display pictures; and another person stands in for a transnational corporation and Tweets as the company mascot. It is difficult – if not impossible – to account for such variety of use in any study of social media sites. Witness

the sheer range of scholars who have studied social media from a variety of perspectives: computer-mediated communication, software studies, human–computer interaction, critical theory, marketing, and design, just to name a few.

However, one common moment shared by most if not all users of a social media site is the sign-up process. No matter the user – from celebrity to the stay-at-home mom – all users go through the sign-up process. This is a key moment of orientation and training in the conventions of the social media system, a moment where user confronts designer *qua* a set of interfaces. Thus, the sign-up interface is a clear expression of how the *designers* of the social media site ‘configure’ the user (Woolgar, 1991). As open-ended as social media sites are, their uses are still structured through a mix of menus, options, input fields, and rules. The sign-up interface is a moment in which the site engineers inscribe their imagination of who the user is through these design conventions and structures. For example, the designers’ presentation of possible interest categories such as, say, ‘News’, ‘Technology’, and ‘Fashion’ (instead of, say, ‘Ornithology’, ‘Ancient Aliens’, and ‘Socialism’) – along with a requirement to ‘Pick 3 Things You’re Interested In’ – tell us much about who they think their user base is and how they want their user to understand the site.

Moreover, the influence of designers and engineers is extremely strong during the sign-up interface, and other factors (such as other users) are weaker. Specifically, during this early process, other social media users are nearly non-existent; their synoptic gaze (Albrechtslund, 2008) does not come into play as a means to constrain the users’ activities and performances. The sign-up interface is a meeting of user and designer, a moment when the designer/user relationship is at its purest.

Thus, the sign-up interface’s combination of questions, forms, texts, images, videos, rules (both Terms of Service agreements and Javascript form validation rules), links – in other words, constraints and affordances – are associated together by the site designers to create uses and thus users of the system. Following Anni Dugdale (1999), rather than treat such elements as background, we argue they are vital sites of study in that they produce ‘subjects of a particular kind’, formed in the ‘material arrangements, even before any verbal performances have occurred’ (p. 118). In other words, before a user can perform within social media, before he or she can freely ‘write community into being’ (boyd, 2006) along with all the tensions and negotiations that entails, a user must perform the sign-up process. The user experiences a ‘body-object articulation’ (Foucault, 1979: 152), a moment in which he or she is trained in how the mouse or finger moves across the screen to achieve the ‘right’ uses of the system, where he or she learns what various alert boxes, numbers, and menus ‘do’, and where he or she learns how to create a proper user name and input a valid email address. Through this process, the user is translated from her previous role as a ‘non-member’ of the site into a new role as ‘member’, with all the rights and restrictions that come with that status. And, if something goes wrong during this process – the user does not check all the required boxes, or fails to create an adequate password, for example – the user does not gain access to the system.

But of course, the sign-up interface is only a gateway into the site; we cannot overstate its influence on end users. As noted above, social media use is wildly heterogeneous. The interface might prescribe particular uses and meanings to an abstract, configured user, but when the system is articulated into concrete end-user’s lives, such pre-scriptions

might be muted, denied, or outright resisted as the user de-scribes the system. As is quite often true of software systems, the users might appropriate and radically alter the system for their own ends. Then again, of course, the designers might be quite successful in shaping the actions of their target audiences and devices. The power of the designer's scripts, including gender scripts, comes under trial at use, and the script could turn out to be quite powerful or simply discardable.

This brings us to our main object of this essay: the Pinterest sign-up interface and the ways in which its gender script maps – or does not – onto existing networks of gender identities, divisions of labor, and social structures. In the sections that follow, we explore Pinterest's sign-up tutorial and its specific presentation of Terms of Service and Privacy Policies to the new user.¹ We see in these moments a gender script predicated on several binaries that invite the ideal user to be a certain (gendered) way and not others: cooperation/competition, curation/creation, and image/legal text.

Analysis of Pinterest's sign-up interface

Cooperation and support over competition in the Pinterest tutorial

One of the characteristics of the implied user created by the Pinterest sign-up process, especially the tutorial, is cooperativeness. Through the tutorial and other socialization pages, cooperative users are positioned as more desirable over competitive users. Specifically, Pinterest encourages a cooperative user through the polite yet informal language used to guide the new user through the tour. After filling out the sign-up form (discussed further below), users are greeted by first name: 'Welcome to Pinterest, Jane! Let's get you started with a quick tour ...' (see Figure 1).

The use of the exclamation mark adds a tone of excitement and informality. Immediately, the focus is placed on the user as an isolated individual welcomed into a collective: 'Let's [first-person plural, the established collective] get you [second-person singular, the new user] started'.

This focus on individual users is present throughout the sign-up process, from the splash pages that describe how 'she used Pinterest to roll her first pasta' and how 'he used Pinterest to find his stride' to the tutorial screens that encourage the new user to find 'what inspires you'. These screens emphasize an individualized, customized experience of Pinterest that is bent toward users' own unique interests.

This focus on singularity, then, is not a glorification of the rugged individual we typically see in American culture, but the constitution of an isolated individual focused exclusively on his or her own passions without much group feedback. In fact, the most common interaction two users will have with one another is not commenting or following but simply repinning, or adding another user's pin to one's own collection (Hall and Zarro, 2012). A user is 'conscious' only within her or his digital web, the solipsism of which helps to mitigate competitive urges that tend to be more strongly present on other social media.

As the new user signs up, she or he is isolated from the rest of the site. Other users are not mentioned during the tutorial, nor are new users shown how to see who's following them or how many followers they have. New users cannot see who else is on Pinterest or what they have pinned until after finishing the sign-up process and tutorial. Instead, the

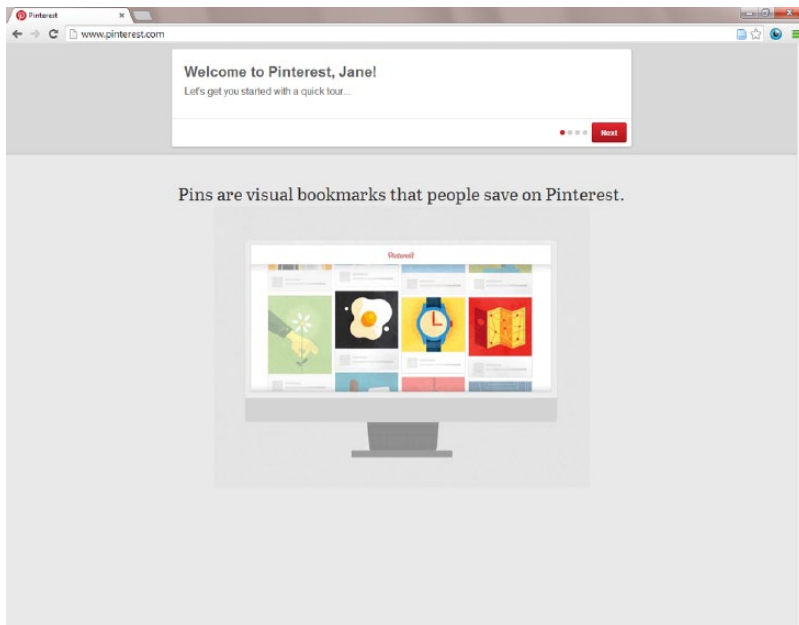


Figure 1. The beginning of the tutorial; image captured 21 February 2014.

focus is placed squarely on the neophyte's own particular interests and passions. When new users are asked to select their first pins and first boards, there is no indication of what is popular or even what new users typically select. There is only a list of broad possibilities. Current users can invite friends to join Pinterest (and indeed this was the only way to join Pinterest for the first years of its existence), but that person's interests and boards are not mentioned at all during the tutorial, nor is there any description of how to find that friend among the vast number of Pinterest users once the tutorial is over. Contrast this with, say, Facebook where users can see not only what interests their friends have liked but also how many likes a particular business, product, or hobby has received. On Pinterest, these typical avenues for competition (gathering followers, starting trends, consuming popular products, developing cliques) are downplayed or outright ignored during the tutorial. In this way, the site shapes expectations as much as by what it hides as by what it demonstrates. Although there are many possible ways a user can utilize Pinterest and behave while on the site, the path of least resistance, the one that is scripted into the tutorial, is one that isolates users into singular minds invested in their own personal interests.

Thus, individualism on Pinterest is operationalized toward cooperation and not competition, as is frequently done in American culture (e.g. Lears, 1981; MacPherson, 1962; Perelman, 2005). The architecture of the sign-up interface and tutorial place the new user out of competition with the rest of site by focusing on singular interests. Pinterest is about your interests and your inspiration, making you unique (Chun, 2011: 13). Since all of the users are equally unique, there isn't a clear way to make comparisons among users.

Although the emphasis is on individual interests and performance, the devaluing of competition is evidenced in the way gathering followers is de-emphasized, while collecting pins is made paramount. This move puts Pinterest in contrast with other social media giants like Facebook and Twitter, which place a premium on the number of friends or followers a user gathers. On Pinterest, your human connections matter less than your virtual connections – the pins you make linking various images, webpages, and ideas together.

Through pinning and creating boards, Pinterest users themselves become the conduits for making cyber-connections among other, already-established content; the human becomes the medium. Indeed, the sign-up tutorial functions as a training ground, laying out steps that position the new user herself as a human medium, acting as the conduit through which ideas, images, and people are connected. In this view, the pins and links are the content, while the users themselves are the media through which the content is communicated, spreading from user to user via pinning and re-pinning.

This is redolent of past feminized conduits, so-called pink-collar jobs such as telephone switchboard operators (connecting callers), midwives (connecting newborn and world), secretaries (connecting their [male] boss with customers, clients, employees), and nurses (connecting doctors and patients) (Hartmann and Reskin, 1986; Webster, 2014). To this list, John Peters would add psychic mediums, an almost-exclusively female profession that seeks to connect the supernatural and natural worlds (Peters, 2000). These jobs were traditionally dominated by women and seen as feminine occupations sanctioned for out-of-home work for the young single woman (see Mangun, 2011). In other words, we have some historical patterns of using women as connectors. Indeed, we could argue that the vagina is one of the most ancient and basic of all conduits, a conduit essential to the reproduction of species.

A human medium role requires immense collaboration, even to such an extent that users might not be fully aware of it or their role in it. Even so, the primacy of cooperation is plainly present throughout the tutorial, from the disarmingly friendly and polite language to the collaborative, image-dominated pattern of view, click, view, click by which tutorial and user move together through the sign-up process. Throughout the tutorial, the user enters into a kind of collaboration with Pinterest, building his or her boards and making his or her first pins at the tutorial's behest.

This training sets the stage for later collaborative behaviors expected of the new user when interacting with other users on the website at large, an expectation codified in the 'Pinterest Etiquette' section. This section explains the five basic rules of Pinterest. The first rule, 'Be respectful', implores users to 'please be kind' to each other, while the fifth and last rule, 'Let us know', describes Pinterest as 'a growing, changing community'. Together, these two rules help to articulate Pinterest as a community-building, collaborative social medium. Additionally, rule 2, 'Be yourself', explicitly addresses the competitive impulses found on such social media as Facebook and Twitter: 'We think authenticity – expressing who you really are and what you really like – is more important than getting lots of followers'. This rule implies that competition among users is not valued on Pinterest, which further opens space for a cooperative environment. This valuing of gentle cooperation over aggressive competition is cemented through rules 3 and 4, which ask users to avoid the kind of vitriolic or crude discourse that is often found online. Rule

three, 'Give credit', suggests users should leave 'polite comments if [they] see anything that isn't correctly credited' while rule four, 'Stay alert', directly asks users to report pornography or 'hateful stuff' to Pinterest administrators.

Together, these five rules and the sign-up tutorial define a specific community norm of politeness, respect, encouragement, kindness, and avoidance of competition for followers, pornography, and hate. While these values are vital for productive cooperation, they also have connotations in the larger American – if not Western – culture as being feminine (Van Zoonen, 1994). Indeed, even the renouncing of competition is often interpreted as renouncing a certain kind of masculinity and embracing femininity (Cameron, 2005). Cooperation is an important characteristic of the designers' ideal user, and the broader connotations of cooperation – and the absence or even avoidance of competition – are connected with a hegemonic femininity and the not-masculine. By association, Pinterest's push for cooperation helps to align it as a feminine platform.

Curation over creation: finding and displaying 'What You Love'

Pinterest's sign-up process implies an ideal user through the way it emphasizes certain elements of the platform and ignores others. For example, there are three main actions the new user is forced to undertake in order to move through the tutorial: creating his or /her first pin, creating boards to organize the pins, and selecting five interests so that Pinterest can suggest boards and users to follow. As actions the new user must perform, these three elements of the tutorial encourage a kind of 'muscle memory' such that, having been performed once, the actions are easily repeated. A certain kind of primacy, then, is afforded to the actions the user must perform to complete the tutorial, a primacy that sets up such actions to be privileged in future uses of Pinterest, if only because they are actions with which the user is now familiar.

Additionally, there are several actions one can undertake within Pinterest, but which are not addressed during the tutorial. For instance, the 'Add content' button, which allows users to upload their own original content into the website, is never mentioned or highlighted during the tutorial. Likewise, how to download and install the Pinterest browser extension – which allows users to create pins out of any website – is not part of the tutorial. At one point, the tutorial mentions that pins link back to other websites, but it does not direct new users to click through their new pins to see the original website, which would involve leaving Pinterest. In fact, tracing a pin to its original website is not simply discouraged during the tutorial; it is disallowed. Attempting to click through will yield the following message: 'Don't go yet! This link won't take you anywhere until you're all done with the tour'. Appearing below this message is a single button labeled 'Back to the Tour' (see Figure 2).

The user has no choice but to click the button and continue the tutorial. These disallowed and obscured actions direct the new user back into the fold of Pinterest, ever circling solely within the confines of the platform itself.

The elements of Pinterest that are emphasized by the tutorial and enacted by the user along with those which are ignored or disallowed together imply a specific kind of user, one who is more inclined to work with content already contained within the platform than to bring in new content – in other words, a user who is more comfortable with

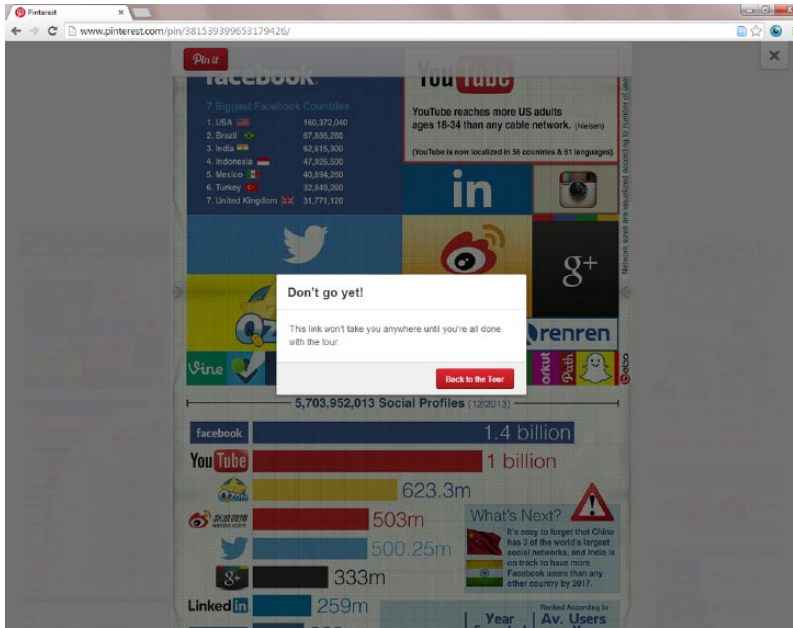


Figure 2. New users are directed back into the tutorial; image captured 23 July 2014.

curating webpages and images than with *creating* them (e.g., Hogan, 2010; Gehl, 2009). It is true that the privileging of such curation has the added effect of encouraging users to stay within Pinterest – and perhaps discouraging users from leaving the platform was the original intent – but it also functions to push new users toward curation and away from creation. In particular, it is a kind of curation that involves recycling and reorganizing – repinning – the already-existing content within Pinterest instead of creating something new and uploading it.

The privileging of curation is further achieved through Pinterest's emphasis on finding and cultivating one's affective response to the content presented. Although it is true that Pinterest permits users to follow one another and comment upon pins and boards, one's followers seem not to be the primary audience. Rather, it is a curation of the self (e.g. Donald and Zheng, 2009: 507), produced through the assemblage of images and ideas to which the individual already has positively responded. Like other social media platforms that include a profile, Pinterest allows a construction of the self via the products one consumes and the hobbies one enjoys. Unlike other social media platforms, Pinterest focuses solely on these tangibles of identity, making them the primary content of the website. One's interest in cooking or motorcycle repair or collecting vinyl records becomes the central focus. Pinterest differs from other social media, then, in that communication about events, people, and business is less important than communication of the self via one's interests.

This essence of Pinterest is reflected throughout the website, from the moment a new user clicks on Pinterest.com through completion of the tutorial and beyond. Frequently,

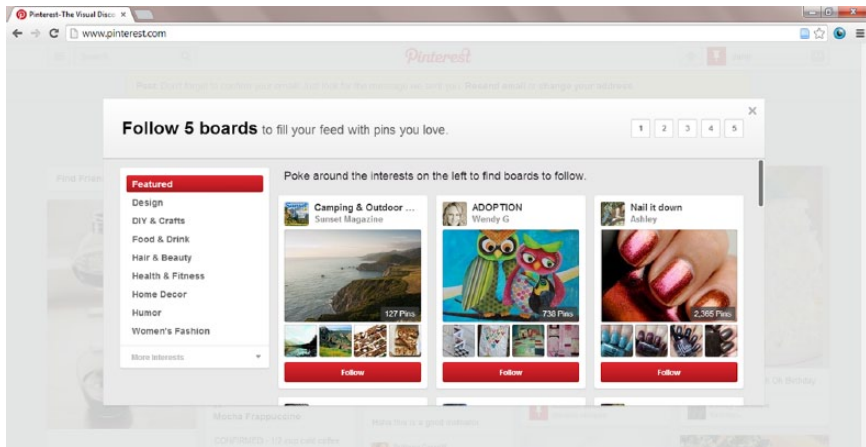


Figure 3. Positive affective responses are the focus of pins and boards; image captured 21 February 2014.

the neophyte user is encouraged to focus on her or his affective response to the images and webpages, particularly those stimuli that create a positive response. In this respect, the word 'love' is used almost excessively throughout Pinterest, in the tutorial and beyond: 'Follow 5 boards to fill your feed with pins you love', the user is instructed (see Figure 3).

While logging off Pinterest, the screen reminds the user 'Save all the stuff you love (recipes! articles! travel ideas!) right here on Pinterest'. This focus on love as the primary affective response curated on Pinterest is even codified in Etiquette Rule #2: 'We think authenticity – expressing who you really are and what you really like – is more important than getting lots of followers'. What one likes – or authentically responds to – thus integrally comprises who one is. Therefore, one's affective responses to stimuli are authentic and constitutive of the self.

Finally, Pinterest's very layout and design, which is almost-exclusively oriented toward the visual and the visible, further assists in privileging curating over creating content. In order to be a pin, content must come in the form of an image or be able to be represented by images, and the layout of the boards – in which pins are assembled in three columns of tiled images – emphasizes that pins are not just collected but are put on display; thus text and language are precluded. This is not to say text is completely absent from the pins. There are thousands of pins which are simply quotes or aphorisms. But even these are highly stylized and graphically designed, with the font, color, shape, and layout of the words serving to turn text into an image, ready to be curated and re-pinned.

Pinterest's sign-up process displays a clear preference for users who curate over users who create. This is not to say it is impossible to create with Pinterest, but such activities occur outside of the platform and require determination to create original content on the part of the user. This is not cultivated by the grooming process of Pinterest's sign-up and tutorial. Through this privileging of curation over creation, echoing broader Western traditional connotations of creation as masculine (e.g. Battersby, 1989), Pinterest thus

privileges a 'feminine' performance among its users. When on Pinterest, users are invited not to create but to work with already-existing images and webpages, weighing their own personal emotional responses to each.

Image over text: Affect over legal rationality in the terms of service and privacy policy

The Pinterest tutorial offers a very image-laden, step-by-step introduction to Pinterest. Indeed, as we have described above, Pinterest is driven by images: they are the central objects of pinning, and throughout every step of the sign-up process, images dominate. What does this say about Pinterest's proposed gender script? We can highlight the affective angle of Pinterest by contrasting it with two screens that are peripheral – and yet of utmost importance – to the sign-up process. In addition to cooperation over competition and curation over creation, another binary appears if we click on 'Terms of Service' or 'Privacy Policy' on the 'sign up with email' screen: image over text. Importantly, we see this appearing specifically as image over *legal* text.

Whereas Pinterest.com, the sign-up pages, and the tutorial are comprised of styled, JavaScript- and image-laden pages, the 'Terms of Service' and 'Privacy Policy' pages that are made available to the new user during the sign-up process are notable for their starkness and textuality. Indeed, their full URLs are telling: <http://about.pinterest.com/terms/plain.html> and <http://about.pinterest.com/privacy/plain.html>.² 'Plain' HTML is just that: almost no Cascading Style Sheet (CSS) styling is applied to it. The black, roughly 11-point sans-serif text reaches all the way across the screen. Links are blue and underlined – a faux pas in modern Web design. Headings are bolded but only slightly larger than the rest of the text.

What to make of the contrast between Pinterest.com, the sign-up pages and tutorial, and the plain Terms of Service? Here, we argue that the script the designer is proposing to the (ideal) user is: revel in images. Deal with text only quickly: here's a form to fill in. Don't dwell on it. If the user clicks to see either the Terms of Service or Privacy Policy, he or she is met with a wall of unstyled text, a contrast with walls of engaging images. The text of the Terms of Service and Privacy Policy is (as such texts often are) filled with legal language, warnings, and technical details. Indeed, the Privacy Policy's introduction notes 'some of the concepts below are a little technical'. To be fair, the designers state 'we've tried our best to explain things in a simple and clear way'. However, the very *presentation* of these terms, and their articulation with technicity, grates against the smooth, styled, pedagogical, cooperative, and visual appeal of the rest of the Pinterest sign-up process, not to mention the site itself.

We want to emphasize the Privacy Policy's remark that there are 'technical' concepts included in that policy. Feminist technology scholar Cynthia Cockburn has done much work to trace how certain forms of knowledge are constructed as technical while others are not (Cockburn, 1985; Cockburn and Ormrod, 1993). Moreover, she's done much work to show how technical knowledges are masculinized and putatively non-technical ones are feminized. For example, she notes that even a clearly highly technical field such as weaving with a loom was made to be non-technical and feminized, while the use of factory machines was made to be masculine (Cockburn, 1985). Similarly, Arwen Mohun traced the

history of laundry machines and found a curious movement: when laundry was a home activity, it was a feminized, non-technical task. When large, factory-like laundry systems were developed and marketed around the turn of the 20th century in America and Britain, laundry became a highly technical and masculinized field (Mohun, 2003). However, when home laundry machines were marketed, laundry returns to the home and becomes, once again, a non-technical, feminized task. Again and again, feminist scholarship on technology finds that whether a task is ‘technical’ or not hinges far less on its essential qualities and more on whether it is associated with particular forms of masculinity. For Pinterest to make a claim that its privacy policy is a ‘technical’ domain (and is thus something to warn users about) carries with it this heritage of technical = male and non-technical = female.

Thus, we argue that the ideal user configured by Pinterest’s sign-up gender script is a feminized subject not interested in the technical details of surveillance, data collection, and data analysis – practices that Pinterest, as a for-profit social media system, is engaged in. This is more apparent if we consider the fact that these ‘plain’, text-driven pages are not the only versions of the Terms of Service or Privacy Policy. Both appear in different forms at URLs <http://about.pinterest.com/terms/> and <http://about.pinterest.com/privacy/>, respectively, and these versions are styled in a manner consistent with the rest of the site: centered, gray and white, different fonts, styled links, with pull quotes. The associated CSS files are also different (plain.css in the case of the plain policy pages; multiple stylesheets for the styled ones). These are certainly not as image-laden as, say, the tutorial, but they are far more attractive on the screen.

Why didn’t the designers of the sign-up interface link to these more styled pages? Again, we argue that the script proposed by the designers of the Pinterest sign-up process is one of image over text, affect over legal-rationality. It is telling that they link to ‘plain’ versions of these policies precisely at the moment when a user might pause to think about details such as data collection, surveillance, profiling, and privacy, as well as the user’s potential legal recourse against Pinterest if Pinterest abuses the user’s personal data. A wall of text offers a different way into thinking about Pinterest than styled text, and certainly less so than pages that are highly image-centric. Articulated with the other gender scripts apparent in Pinterest, the design intention here is to highlight affective interaction with images over technicalized legal language, or, in other words, to highlight and privilege traditionally feminized affective and emotional practices in the minds and practices of users over masculinized legal and rational ones.

Conclusion: Pinteresistance

With the sign-up interface encouraging a feminine performance from its users, the leap is easily made to uploading and sharing – in a sense, reconnecting with – information relating to traditionally feminine spheres. Perhaps the preponderance of feminine content on Pinterest is a result of the site’s particular architecture. Of course, more study is needed of the rhetorical force of Pinterest outside of the user interfaces to further establish the connection between site architecture and site content, but this essay shows how a specific kind of gendering can begin in social media sign-up interfaces.

Moreover, the gender scripts embedded in Pinterest’s sign-up process can be resisted, and considering such resistance can shed light on the technology–gender relationship. Akrich and Latour (1992) argue that no script is all-powerful, no design all-encompassing;

instead, scripts are negotiated each time the technology is used – or not used. Within this negotiated space exists what Akrich and Latour call ‘de-inscription’, the process by which users resist a given technology’s script (p. 261). Gender scripts likewise can be de-inscribed, as gender performances are negotiated with and in relation to technological artifacts. Even though Pinterest has inscribed into the sign-up interface, a dualistic conception of gender and provided clear incentives for certain performances of gender, resistance is not only possible, but perhaps to be found within the script itself. We might think of resisting scripts in terms of Derrida’s (1978) concept of ‘play’ or ‘the disruption of presence’ (p. 292) by which the signification inherent in language – and thus present as well in such binaries as male-female, creation-curation, reason-affect, competition-collaboration – can become altered, disturbed, even upset. The displacement of such dichotomies is thus a political act which makes change possible.

Oudshoorn and Pinch (2008) remind us, though, that not all users will have the same position in relation to a specific technology. For some, the room for maneuver will be great; for others, it will be slight (p. 546). We might ask, then, what ‘play’ is available in Pinterest’s gender scripts, and to what degree might users exploit such play to de-inscribe – and thus resist – those scripts? For one, our analysis does not preclude performances of counterhegemonic femininity; in fact, hegemonic femininity might be taken up in resistive ways. This is precisely what Derrida’s concept of play points us to: the fact that the means of resistance are contained within the structure of oppression itself. Therefore, we might interpret the use of Pinterest as a spring-board for creating, crafting, or cooking offline as contradicting the preference for passive curation. Users who then return to Pinterest to curate their own personal creations can be seen as resisting the gendered dualism by blurring its neat divisions. Returning to Cockburn’s (1985) and Mohun’s (2003) research on the putative ‘non-technicality’ of domestic work, Pinterest could serve as a means to re-present and re-inscribe the technologies of the home and home-making as highly technical, vigorous accomplishments. Pinning up the result of much hard work and achievement – say, pinning images of one’s own process of expertly-baking desserts or custom-sewing a dress – could make public the traditionally private sphere of domestic production and reveal it for the technical accomplishment that it is.

In addition to this form of resistance, we submit that scholarship on Pinterest can also resist the oversimplification implied with the commonsensical phrase ‘Pinterest is for women’. Our analysis has served to problematize Pinterest. We have shown how the sign-up process, the tutorial, and associated pages function together to encourage particular user behaviors, especially those that seem to align with hegemonic performances of femininity. In particular, Pinterest’s sign-up process helps to construct a system where passivity is favored over activity, curation over creation, image over text, collaboration over competition.

We can interpret these practices as disconcerting, because Pinterest hides so many things from the end-user: the ability to create, an implied articulation of hegemonic masculinity and competition, and the use of surveillance by Pinterest to create profiles of users that can be profitably sold to marketers. For decades, marketing has targeted women because they are (in the American political and sexual economy) the ones who call the household spending shots, and now Pinterest has a corner on this very desired market.

The fact that Pinterest is ‘known’ to be the website for women could mean users simply follow the lead established in the sign-up process. It could be argued, further, that the gendering of Pinterest reifies a kind of crisis in hegemonic femininity in which the

knowledge of making a home and raising a family has, through decades of shifting gender roles and outsourcing knowledge to consumable experts and external digital repositories, become lost or at least foreign to young professional women. Pinterest becomes a surrogate for generational knowledge that used to be passed on via inculcation into a specific, narrow gender role. No longer do mothers train daughters in the ways of sewing, cooking, cleaning, and childrearing, but this knowledge is now available, custom-made, through Pinterest. The kind of femininity cultivated on Pinterest is then, conveniently, made available for purchase from handy sponsors.

However, we can also reinterpret the dominant practices in Pinterest as *productive*, as well. If we are right in saying that Pinterest values collaboration, curation, and affect, these are not bad things. They are useful and can be quite valuable to end users, and the millions of Pinterest users likely enjoy engaging in these practices. Many of these behaviors are encouraged in the name of forming a supportive community online, which is a laudable goal when many other sites are criticized for being hyper-competitive, prurient, sexist, and full of insults and ad hominem attacks. In a way, by valuing what is traditionally considered feminine gender performances and practices, Pinterest might come closer to fulfilling the promise of the Internet's utopian beginnings as a public sphere of reasonable discussion than any other social media site has thus far.

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Notes

1. We conducted this study between April 2014 and June 2014, going through the sign-up process multiple times, using different options (such as different genders, names, and interests). During our study, whether the sign-up was for a 'male' or 'female', the screens described here stayed the same. However, in the time since then, some of the screens have changed. In Appendix 1, we have included a reference list of Archive.org snapshots of the various screens we analyze. In addition, we maintain our own archive of Pinterest screens; readers may contact us to see them.
2. Note that these links now resolve to 'styled' pages. For the Terms and Privacy Policies as they appeared during the course of this study, see Appendix 1.

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Appendix I

Sign-up interface URLs

The 'Plain' Terms and Privacy Policies

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140421224201/http://about.pinterest.com/terms/plain.html>

<https://web.archive.org/web/20131108010910/http://about.pinterest.com/privacy/plain.html>

The 'Styled' Terms and Privacy Policies

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140421212425/http://about.pinterest.com/terms/>

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140414210925/http://about.pinterest.com/privacy/>

Pinterest Basics and Etiquette

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140421212041/http://about.pinterest.com/basics/>

Pinterest 'Splash' Pages

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140415000834/https://www.pinterest.com/>

The Pinterest Extension for Chrome

<https://chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/pin-it-button/gpdjoidkbbmdfjfahjcgigfpmkopogic?hl=en>