

Wedding Dresses and Wanted Criminals: Pinterest.com as an Infrastructure for Repository Building

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Abstract

We present findings from a qualitative study of activity on Pinterest.com, in which we investigated professional and personal uses of the site using interview data and observations of online activity. We find that Pinterest serves as an infrastructure for repository building that supports a wide range of activities including: discovery, collecting, collaborating, and publishing. We discuss these concepts using the language of “boundary objects” from the sociology of science. We suggest that scale is a critical dimension of boundary objects for understanding how people make sense of Pinterest and their diverse goals for using it. Professionals often attempt to use Pinterest to create repositories that scale to groups, organizations and societies and interface with multiple social worlds whereas personal repositories often have highly localized meanings. Our approach builds on quantitative descriptions of Pinterest to understand how the site fits into a growing ecology of social network sites.

Introduction

Collecting things is a common activity. Baseball cards, fossils, paintings, plants, figurines—collections of *objects* can be found in just about any household. Digital things, although less historied, also play important roles in people’s lives. Collections of digital artifacts are becoming increasingly common and increasingly public. Shared iTunes libraries (Volda, 2005), shared bookmarks (Heckner, 2009), and shared digital photographs (Terras, 2011) are a few examples of ways that both institutional and personal collections of digital objects can be publicly shared.

Using data collected in 2012, Pew Internet and American Life found that 46% of adult internet users are creators who upload original photos and videos that they have created, and 41% are curators who assemble collections of others’ photos and videos on sites specifically designed for collecting and sharing (Duggan & Brenner,

2013). The website Pinterest.com has quickly become emblematic of digital collecting. Pinterest functions as a social curating site, in which people create, maintain and share collections of digital objects like images and videos. Pinterest users can both upload original images and curate collections of found media, although the site has an emphasis on found media curation. In January 2012, the site crossed the 10-million user mark, making it the most quickly growing website in the history of the Web at the time of this writing (Constine, 2012). It has attracted attention not only because of its record-breaking growth, but also because of the diversity of uses observed on the site, ranging from common activities like eating, decorating, arts, and fashion (Zarro & Hall, 2012) to less frequently encountered activities like police work (Knell, 2013). Twelve percent of online US adults use Pinterest, and this figure rises to almost one-fifth of online women (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). The media was quick to seize on gendered use as a defining characteristic of the site, which in the United States has attracted a user base that has been estimated between 60 and 80% female (Experian Marketing Services, 2012; Gilbert, 2013).

We are interested in understanding activity on the site by investigating how diverse Pinterest users make sense of their activities and form connections in an interest-based social network. Although there is research about what actions people perform on Pinterest and who performs them, little is known about why they do it, or what role it plays in their lives. In this paper, we use qualitative data to answer the questions “What kinds of activities are people engaged in on Pinterest.com and why?” and “How do Pinterest users understand these goals and activities within the broader ecology of social network sites?” This study complements Hall, and Zarro (2012) as well as Gilbert et al.’s (2013) quantitative explorations of user activities on Pinterest by offering a phenomenological analysis grounded in the accounts of users themselves as well as in their observable actions and the collections they’ve assembled.

Related Literature: Social Network Sites and the Social Psychology of Collecting

Pinterest meets boyd and Ellison's 2007 definition of a social network site (SNS) in that it is a bounded system within which users create a profile, link to others' profiles, and traverse the connections of others. Unlike the prototypical examples of SNS, Facebook and Twitter, Pinterest.com functions as a social curating site, in which people create, maintain and share collections of images they have found online or upload from their personal devices. Social curation combines social media features, such as sharing, liking, commenting and following, with curating functionality like organizing collections and adding new digital artifacts (Hall & Zarro, 2012). Pinterest supports these behaviors along with the associated search and retrieval tools that help users discover interesting resources and people.

Gilbert et al. (2013) undertook a textual analysis of Pinterest and Twitter and found differences in what people post on the sites. They found that *use, look, want* and *need* were the Pinterest verbs of choice, while other popular terms identify topics of high interest for site users: *DIY, recipe, book, photo*, etc. In comparison, the Twitter lexicon was populated with language of immediacy: *now, today, tonight, time*; and action: *watching, see, going*. Gilbert et al. also found that, unlike Pinterest, expressive conventions such as thanks, lol. :-D, and haha pervade the Twittersphere, which suggests higher levels of social interaction.

In prior studies, we explored the most popular postings on Pinterest and found that the most common sources of material for pins were blogging sites followed by e-commerce sites (Zarro & Hall, 2012; Hall & Zarro, 2012). We observed that people create ad hoc categories (Barsalou, 1983) to group content related to important life events like weddings and purchasing or renovating a home. We found that comments supported a range of posts including opinions and judgments, conversation, and personal histories in the comment field associated with each pin. Our previous analysis of popular collections along with Gilbert et al.'s (2013) analysis describe a lively SNS with characteristics that differ from those that have come before it. But what kind of SNS is it? To explore this question, we turn first to literature on the social psychology of collecting.

Collectors collect for many reasons. Researchers have observed diverse motivations that range from obsession, to investment, to enjoyment, to personal expression (McIntosh, 2004). The literature on collecting provides an interesting backdrop for examining online activities; theorists have largely viewed research on collecting as an opportunity to examine relationships between material objects and culture. Explanations of collecting behaviors are generally bound to the physical nature of collectables and

are often predicated on the exclusivity of possession. Pinterest's pinboards, where pinned objects seldom "belong to" the pinner and which encourage "repinning," offer an interesting alternative context for examining collecting in a mediated public environment. For example, Belk distinguishes between the role of the collector in assembling a collection, and that of the curator who acquires and maintains it (Belk, 2006). In Pinterest, the assembly of a digital collection, and its ongoing upkeep are indistinguishable. Moreover, the same artifact may be used to populate multiple collections.

Gender has also been addressed in scholarship both on collecting as a social activity and on use of SNS. In a study that compared users of SNS with non-users, Hargittai (2007) found that women were more likely to use social network sites but that this correlation did not hold across all sites studied and was most pronounced for MySpace. Recent data suggests Facebook, Twitter and Zynga have more female users than male but that LinkedIn and Google+ are predominantly male (Taylor, 2012).

In the United States, most Pinterest users are female (Experian Marketing Services, 2012; Gilbert, 2013). Collecting behaviors have a history of gendered practice. Shakur notes that "while there is convincing survey evidence that the majority of collectors are women, male collectors and their preferred collectibles usually are given more public prominence" (Shuker, 2010, p 5). Interestingly, the SNS research literature presents an analogous story: although women have been found to dominate several of the largest social network sites, they are also more likely to obscure their activity by using privacy settings to remove it from public view (Lewis, 2008; Caverlee and Webb, 2008). The gendered uptake of Pinterest in the U.S. has been highlighted in the media and was also examined by Gilbert et al., who found that men tended to have more followers but were less likely to have their pins repinned by others (2013); however, explanations for contradictory phenomena like these remain unclear and require further research.

An important theoretical vocabulary for discussing collections and their meanings is that of "boundary objects." Star and Griesemer (1989) introduced the concept as a way of explaining the myriad meanings represented in and mediated by a university zoology museum collection as different actors' visions (collectors, university administrators, animal trappers, funders) converged to make the collection a reality. They identified four types of boundary objects: repositories, ideal types, coincident boundaries and standardized forms. We introduce this concept here as an important one in the lexicon of scholarship on collections and, once we have presented our findings, will examine in detail how Pinterest can be interpreted as an infrastructure for building repositories - "ordered piles" of heterogeneous objects like library collections that are organized in order

to serve the purposes of multiple parties with divergent interests and needs.

This paper aims to enrich current descriptions of activity on Pinterest with explanations of people’s practices. Specifically, we ask:

- What kinds of activities are people engaged in on Pinterest.com and why?
- How do Pinterest users understand these goals and activities within the broader ecology of social network sites?

In the next sections, we explain our methods for investigating these questions, our findings, and discuss how these findings connect to and build on existing literature.

Methods

Our research questions require methods that can give us insight into why people use Pinterest and how they make sense of the site. Our approach to this study is phenomenological; in other words, we aim to define and explain phenomena on Pinterest using the perceptions of the people who are directly involved in creating these phenomena (Schutz, 1967). Appropriate methods for collecting such data include interviewing and participant observation (Seidman, 2006), which yield rich and detailed data in the form of transcripts and field notes. Analysis of these data generally includes inductively generating explanations of a phenomenon by iteratively examining interview and observational data to identify recurrent themes and to explain the relationships among emergent concepts (Glaser, 1967).

Our analysis is not intended to present a generalizable description of activity on Pinterest; rather, we want to develop insights about the ways Pinterest fits into people’s lives, what it means to them. From this analysis, further questions and more targeted quantitative studies can arise. We explain our data collection and analysis methods in detail in the following sections.

Participants and Recruiting

Strategic sampling is a critical feature of phenomenological work; interview studies tend to be small and the careful selection of participants frames what can be learned from a study. To sample a range of activities and enable comparisons within our dataset, we searched and browsed the website to identify Pinterest accounts that were used for professional purposes and accounts that appeared to be personal. Personal uses were identified as hobbies, leisure activities or life-events like planning a wedding or renovating a home. Professional uses were identified as promoting a business or representing a professional organization. These two groups were chosen as personal users used the site for their own needs, while professional users are trying to reach others with their activities.

Once we identified accounts of interest, we used publicly available contact information to send a message to account owners inviting them to take part in a 30-60 minute interview with questions about their use of Pinterest and social media practices in general. Of 32 potential recruits, we received 12 responses and interviewed nine participants. We piloted our interview protocol prior to data collection with two test participants whose data was not used in the final analysis.

We interviewed eight female and one male participant. This echoes the gender ratio described in public reports of the Pinterest user base in the United States, reported at 60 to 80% female (Experian Marketing Services, 2012; Gilbert, 2013), although we do not claim this is representative of Pinterest as a whole. Participants reported ages from mid late 20s to late 30s, each had over ten years experience of using the Web, and each was a regular user of other social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr.

Table 1: Participant Data

| | |
|--------------------|----|
| Female | 8 |
| Male | 1 |
| Professional | 5* |
| Personal | 5* |
| Also uses Facebook | 9 |
| Also uses Twitter | 6 |

* One of our nine participants shared experiences using Pinterest for both her personal account and professional account.

In addition to interviewing users we observed public activity on Pinterest, including popular pins, pinboards, and the top-level categories. We also examined the Pinterest site operator’s mission statement, user guidelines, and the content that was generated by participants. Inspecting user-contributed pins and pinboards enriched our understanding of activities taking place on the site, while inspecting the stated desires of the site operators provided insight into their goals and the types of activities they seek to support.

The interviews were transcribed and then coded using Atlas.Ti software to generate a thematic analysis (Braun, 2006). Two researchers collaborated closely in iterative coding exercises that were used to identify patterns in participant data and a third was brought in to discuss emergent concepts. These concepts were grouped into affinity clusters and iteratively refined to develop four primary categories of activity, which are used to organize our findings.

All data collection and analysis was approved by the Drexel Institutional Review Board; participant names have been changed.

Findings

Participants' Early Pinterest Experiences

We begin with a broad description of participants' experience with the site. Pinterest adoption most commonly occurred one year to six months prior to our interviews. Often our interviewees described hearing about the site through a friend or acquaintance in visual arts-related fields. Participants reported "trying out" the site for a period before committing to adding materials in a structured fashion. After an initial trial period, participants described using the site as a tool to support personal information management (PIM; Jones 2007) or professional communication. Personal users reported pinning resources for major life events like weddings and birthdays along with everyday interests such as cooking or crafting. Professional users created pinboards and added pins for collaboration, communication and marketing purposes. One participant referred to this as showing a "lighter side" of her employer. Through these PIM and "lighter" activities the two worlds of personal and professional users build a common ground on the site.

Categorizing Activities on Pinterest

Our analysis of interview data led to the identification of four categories of activities that spanned professional and personal use of Pinterest: collecting, discovering, collaborating, and publishing. In the next sections we examine the data that constitute these activity categories as well as two important crosscutting dimensions: ownership, and interaction and identity (See Figure 1).

A. Collecting

Assembling and curating collections on pinboards is a primary activity. The action of pinning an item to a pinboard is the basic building block of Pinterest. This action is how site content is created and collections are constructed. Our data suggest that users invest substantial time and effort in carefully selecting pins, reorganizing or editing pins (such as changing a title or ensuring a source URL is correct), and in some cases deleting them. Our interviewees' accounts suggested that pinning is analogous to behaviors like bookmarking in a browser, clipping magazines, or saving lists of items in a non-social digital repository, such as email drafts (never sent). The site was described by one participant as "visual bookmarking, but

sorted by categories and similar to a real pinboard or bulletin board" (Sara).

Some participants explicitly used the word curation to describe some of their collecting behaviors and all described behaviors that we would classify as curating, "really you're a curator, not an aggregator. Thinking of how a museum works, you're finding the best things that you would want to showcase, not necessarily everything" (Kendra). Curating activity was not always perceived as public or shared despite participants' clear understanding and use of public aspects of the site like discovering, "I actually kind of forget that it's all really, really public... because I just think of it as a better way for me to organize these links or bookmarks and images." (Sara). Participants reported collecting for ongoing information needs, like diet and exercise, and one-time events like weddings and parties.

B. Discovering

Pinterest's growing collections are used as an information resource and our participants described discovering new images through on-site keyword searches and directed or undirected browsing. Some of these discovery activities are targeted; for example, one participant described exploring the site looking for design patterns specific to a kitchen renovation project. Another said Pinterest replaced Google image searching and commented on the helpfulness of categorization to assist with finding desired images: "It's a time saver because you don't have to go to a specific website, it just kind of finds it for you and then compiles it together. And then grouping each one into their own categories to make it easier to find" (Jane). Participants also described finding new items to collect and repin in a serendipitous manner by browsing the activities of their connections and the top-level categories maintained by site operators.

Some participants described sessions of extreme engagement with discovery activities, "I get sucked in... and then two hours later have no idea of how I got to where I am" (Katie). The user-interface, featuring endless scrolling, was cited as one reason for the site's stickiness.

C. Collaborating

Collecting activities are not always done alone. Often, interviewees described using Pinterest to support communication and collaboration with both Pinterest users and non-users, who access the site in "read only" mode. Each pin has a unique, public, URL. Participants described sharing pins using within-site tools, but also in parallel "dark" channels like email and SMS text messaging that is more difficult to detect in quantitative analyses of trace data. In more than one case, our participants described how they "just copy and email links, or text each other" (Jane). In most cases, collaboration did not happen *on* the site, instead the tool was used to facilitate off-site communication

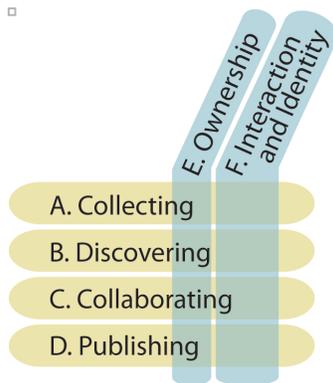


Figure 1: Organization of Findings

or collaborative activities. One participant reported that she created and maintains a board for a sibling perceived as not having the time to actively maintain a Pinterest account, “so I named the board for [her]. It’s just ideas for birthday parties, ideas for the kids or how to organize artwork from the kids.” (Jane). The sister views the pinboard in “read only” mode using a public URL, without the ability to comment, like, or otherwise directly interact with the pin. Sharing with family members and close friends was a frequent occurrence, and sometimes led to real world collaborative activities like family outings or home renovation projects.

“I see something cool and I think my mother would like something, I’ll email the pin to her” (Liz).

“I go and find pictures and put them all on a board and then send that board to my husband” (Michelle).

Family communication surfaced repeatedly in accounts we heard about personal uses of Pinterest. In our first example above, a grandmother made a sweater for a grandson using a pattern Liz (the mother) had shared on Pinterest.

Professional Pinterest users were also likely to use Pinterest to support collaboration and communication. Becky, who works in the wedding industry, uses Pinterest to coordinate the development of an online magazine: “One of our designers had invites available and we were collaborating on boards for one of the photo shoots for our online magazine. So it was really easy for us to be able to have multiple people contribute to a board... [Privacy] wasn’t an issue then, but the idea of being able to link to things, visually we could all look at the same thing...”

Collaborating with clients is supported on the site. A travel-related organization collects images from previous travellers and posts their images to a pinboard, “When participants come home from the trips we asked them to share their photos with us.” (Jess). This public pinning of images allows participants on a trip to share photos with their fellow travellers.

Participants used the infrastructure that Pinterest provides in different ways. We have noted the frequent use of email, SMS and other direct messaging channels to supplement communication channels on the site. Some participants reported creating ‘group boards’, where multiple users share the credentials to add and curate materials. Since the time of our data collection, Pinterest has added hidden boards that can better support collaboration within the site.

D. Publishing

We refer to the desire to distribute media widely and publicly as publishing. Both personal and professional users viewed Pinterest as a platform where they could reach an audience. Some personal users explained that they wanted to be viewed by their contacts as having authority, good taste, or style. This sentiment was not universal among our

participants, but among those who expressed this idea, it was an important driver of use. Repinning was an important indicator of approval; if others repinned an image, it was described by Pinterest users as a gratifying experience, and a lack of repins could be a disappointing experience.

Professionals are on Pinterest to promote their organization or products and generally seek to reach a wide audience or different audience than they do in other channels. Because they seek to reach a wide audience, they are careful to respect norms for posting, and view not adhering to the prevailing standards as “sort of cheesy and slimy and I don’t want to appear that way” (Sean). A typical violation of Pinterest norms that results in people unfollowing a collection is “overpinning” where the sheer number of another user’s pins overwhelms followers’ feed of new pins. While it is not apparent of if this overpinning is an intentional “look at me” activity, it is the most commonly mentioned breach of informal community guidelines mentioned by our individual participants, “It definitely gets annoying when people overpin... it just floods the boards” (Kate). Before following a new person, some participants have even adopted the strategy of investigating past practices, “am I going to get overwhelmed with their pins?” (Sara). Thus, it seems that professionals are well served to take standards and norms, as perceived by individual users, into account.

Professionals may consult with others if they question the suitability of material “I check in with the developer that led me to this site and ask her what she thinks” (Sean). One professional participant reported Pinterest fills a niche, that it is a place where they can reach potential female connections in the predominately male technology field. Organizations use Pinterest as a place to post images that may not fit within the self-imposed boundaries they have on Facebook or Twitter. Generally Pinterest is used to show a more “human” side to the organization.

E. Ownership

Ownership in the context of social media is a complex issue. We refer here to ownership as experienced by Pinterest users. Despite a relaxed attitude towards copyright of individual images (“I don’t even think about it”), pinners described feeling strong personal connections to their collections. “There have been a couple of women that have repinned like 90% of pins from my wedding and then I’m like -Oh, okay? I guess that’s like a compliment but then I’m also like, I want my wedding to be unique but I guess it’s also like, I’m taking these images from all over the web so it’s not like I’m coming up with any original content. So...it made me feel a little protective of my boards” (Sara). Another participant noted that she feels some Pinterest users are not “creative” enough in their pinning, that

many are merely being derivative. She views the pinboard for her future wedding as a creative remix project.

Although copyright was not perceived as an important consideration when repinning, attribution played a role. Participants appreciated accurate linking to pin sources and tried to be courteous in their own practices: “In the beginning I wasn’t as thoughtful as I could be, and I do try and go back and edit links and stuff like that...I do always try and make sure, you know, that links work, that’ll they’ll take a person back to the original source.” (Kendra). The automated link to the source URL is considered by most to be adequate acknowledgment of copyright.

F. Interaction and Identity

One participant described Pinterest as a “community of people who don’t know each other” (Kendra). Our data suggest that Pinterest complements other popular SNS like Facebook and Twitter rather than replace them. Participants explained that the casual interactions that take place on Pinterest require less personal commitment than a Facebook friend request or even following another person on Twitter. The follow model of Pinterest (Zarro & Hall, 2012) allows users to follow pinboards (i.e., they follow the collection of pins, not the person creating those pins). Our participants commonly mentioned preferring to follow only specific boards, not the entirety of another member’s activity. As a result, the construction of a public persona on Pinterest was not always of great concern to participants, particularly those who use the site for personal purposes. Many suggested this was a positive experience, for example, “you can like stuff of random people and you don’t have to make a further connection” (Katie)

Participants who used Pinterest for professional reasons often described a more careful approach to managing identity on the site. They reported that Pinterest norms allow organizations to show a side of their organizational identity that might not be possible on other sites. Described one professional user: “the business building side of it is mostly just showing off a little bit more of what I’m in to” (Becky). It was important to one participant that followers see the people who run her organization, not just a brand, “Like, I’m one of you guys, I’m an individual as well. I like cool stuff” (Michelle).

Our participants all maintained accounts on other social network sites and did not try to replicate existing networks, ties, or identities they have established in the past. Participants reported that they use Pinterest to support their interests and tasks, the site is about what they enjoy, not who they are: “It’s about your interests, it’s not necessarily about *who*” (Kendra, emphasis added). Nor do participants always feel the need for a greater connection, “I don’t need to follow all of you or see what you’re doing on Twitter and Facebook.” (Kendra).

Discussion: What Do Collections Mean to Whom?

In our findings, we presented four categories of activities on Pinterest: collecting, discovering, collaborating, and publishing as well as two important aspects of these activities: ownership and interaction/identity. All of these activities intersect with aspects of literature on collecting and collections. As we refined these emergent concepts, we began to make connections to the literature on boundary objects (Star and Griesemer, 1989).

Theorizing Pinterest

Boundary object is one of those terms that have been adopted so broadly—and at times loosely—that using it in an analysis introduces perhaps as much theoretical liability as it provides theoretical traction. We take pains in this section to clearly explain our interpretation of Star’s writings on boundary objects and how the concept can be used to understand the patterns that emerged from our data.

Boundary objects are entities that mediate the boundaries between groups; they can be processes, things, or concepts that are shared but used by different groups for different purposes or imbued with different meanings and are negotiated over time. Star and Griesemer identified four types of boundaries objects in their original work (1989): repositories, ideal types, coincident boundaries, and standardized forms. In this paper we focus on repositories, “ordered ‘piles’ of objects, which are indexed in a standardized fashion.” Examples of repositories are museum or library collections or, we argue, Pinterest pinboards. Within a repository are modules that have been assembled and ordered via the collecting/curating practices of actors in a system, and the removal of which does not collapse the overall structure of the repository. For example, the structure of a library survives the removal of individual books. Pinterest.com provides tools for building such collections, including standardized vocabularies for organizing content. At a global level, the site provides some categorization of content across local collections; however, people can and do develop unique vocabularies and norms. For this reason, we view Pinterest not as *a* repository of images; rather, as an infrastructure for repository building.

Star (2010) observed that *interpretive flexibility* has been a favored characteristic of boundary objects as researchers and scholars appropriated the term in the past 20 years. Interpretive flexibility suggests that an object can have different meanings in different social worlds. But what is the relevance of interpretive flexibility in an environment like Pinterest where artifacts can be repinned and reappropriated endlessly? We view the value of interpretive flexibility as enabling groups to interface through/around an object they have in common and use it successfully even as they

negotiate its use, form and meaning. Is interpretive flexibility a critical issue in an environment where someone can use images to create a new collection and vocabulary around them without further contact with the “original” collector? Do social worlds intersect when no further negotiation is necessary? At times our data suggested that building repositories that resonate broadly is important and at other times people had no interest in what other people or groups might think of their collections. We suggest that *scale* can explain some of the divergence in our participants’ accounts of their Pinterest activity.

Scale refers to the “reach” of an object. For example, a boundary object may be a local and clearly articulated scheme for organizing instruments in a lab that is influenced by the practices of the groups that share the space or a widely adopted “boundary infrastructure” (Bowker and Star, 1999) into which societal norms become embedded and disappear from view. Star has suggested that boundary objects are most useful at the organizational level (2010); however, we suggest that the concept can also be useful for understanding how smaller groups might co-construct repositories that interface among multiple stakeholders.

On Pinterest, “small scale repositories” include those that represent the understanding and work of a few people (though they may be huge collections); whereas “large scale repositories” structure understanding among large numbers of people (though the collections themselves may be quite limited). In our findings, we described how some professional participants used Pinterest to create repositories that scale to groups, organizations and societies. By engineering their content to have the widest possible reach, they sought to generate business and cultivate an identity for their organizations, in doing so they found it necessary to interface with multiple social worlds and create collections that have meaning for many.

In contrast to professionals, the collections of our interviewees who used Pinterest for personal reasons tended to have highly localized meanings, shared by just a few individuals like family members and friends. These users use their boards to collect and organize materials for themselves and those close to them. Often, these collections are related to important events like weddings or purchasing a home. If passing strangers took an interest in personal pins that was often viewed as positive, but was not the primary motivation for personal activity on the site. It should be noted that some bloggers (such as fashion bloggers and “tastemakers”) and others on the site represent a grey-area between professional and individual; while not professionals, these individuals do use the site more as means of attracting attention than participants in this work.

Boundary objects inhabit spaces between social worlds. Star and Griesemer (1989) examined the intersections of social worlds represented by a museum collection. In our interview data we identified life events as an opportunity

for repository building that brought together disparate social worlds. Collections on Pinterest often represent important events in people’s lives like purchasing a home or getting married. These same events provide opportunities for professionals to interact with customers as people pin products or engage professionals to assist with the design of an event or space. Because design-related professions have a strong visual orientation, we found several examples of businesses that used Pinterest to interact with customers and show off their work. Life events provide a context for building repositories that merge both professionals’ desire to engage an audience and sell their services and products with personal users’ desire to design the perfect event or space.

Others, and Evolving Interests

It is worth noting that the infrastructure Pinterest provides for building repositories is not simply a neutral toolkit (we would argue that no infrastructure is or could be); as an organization, Pinterest promotes beauty as a defining principle for activity on the site and our interviewees shared this orientation:

Pinterest lets you organize and share all the beautiful things you find on the web. (Pinterest, n.d.)

Pinterest is evolving as people construct collections. Our interviews and observations of activity on the site suggest there exists an implicit agreement about what is and what is not appropriate for pinning. Use of Pinterest provided tools like a “Pin It” sharing button on design blogs and e-commerce product pages promote pinning of images from these sites. Yet, this agreement may be unraveling, or at least undergoing substantial changes. There is a growing presence of people on the site who build repositories for purposes other than showcasing beautiful and visually interesting imagery. For example, the Philadelphia Police department posts mug shots and surveillance video of suspected criminals and crimes to support police work. Like-



Figure 2: Images from Pinterest collections by a Police department and an image uploaded to a wedding pinboard.

wise, the Pottstown (PA) Mercury newspaper, has pinboards that include topics such as “For Brides”, “2012 Prom Photos”, and “WANTED BY POLICE.” From the perspective of Pinterest users who adhere to the primary culture of beauty, visual engagement and overall *goodness* a mugshot is an “other” (Star, 2010)—a miscellaneous item that resists incorporation into the standardized vocabulary of recipes, fashion and art that dominate the site. It remains to be seen whether these jarring juxtapositions and “others” will be incorporated in Pinterest collections via repinning and will attract a sustained following.

Conclusion

Pinterest users are collectors, interested in others on the site insofar as others collections are interesting and useful. Participants in our study see benefits in being able to view and display pins without the need to form personal relationships. At the time our interviews were conducted (Fall 2012) there was no way to personally communicate on Pinterest, except through public comments.

Collectors on Pinterest act in the privacy afforded by a noisy, public environment in the same way residents of a large city like New York or London are seen but seldom known. While others may observe their fashion sense or public activities, there is a level of anonymity in being part of a large crowd. Our participants described Pinterest in a similar way. While users feel it is nice that others appreciate their sense of style or activities, personal connections are lacking. “I have no real connection to these people... it’s that whole interaction without real interaction” (Kate).

As we conducted our analysis, we concluded that the addition of private boards would facilitate the kinds of negotiation and collaboration that we saw around collections on Pinterest. Since our interviews, private boards have been added to Pinterest, with a limit on the number of private boards available to each user. Collecting is an important part of peoples’ lives; viewed through the theoretical lens of boundary objects, the Pinterest infrastructure for repository building supports users’ discovering and collecting activities. Future work may explore the emergence “other” pins, and how users accustomed to encountering photos of wedding dresses perceive them.

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