CRAFTING CREATIVITY AND CRAFTING THE SELF
How female users construct the boundaries of creativity on Pinterest

I. INTRODUCTION

With the gradual expansion and growing economic importance of creative industries, the social value of creativity is also increasing. Creativity has grown to be recognised as a currency of the modern world, both in the economic sense as a source of subsistence and employment, and from the social point of view as a basis of prestige and self-esteem. The advancement of social media has opened the door for new forms of creativity, thereby challenging and remediating the traditionally strict and exclusive understanding of the term.

The essay focuses on Pinterest – a social bookmarking site built around the idea of creativity. Pinterest is a virtual pinboard that allows users to share, in a visual way, inspiring content revolving around everyday activities and interests. In this respect, Pinterest can be described as a marketplace of creativity: “a place to discover ideas for all your projects and interests, hand-picked by people like you.” To that end, the objective of Pinterest is consistent with the realities of ‘creative economy’, which suppose that ideas and knowledge – perceived as the tools and materials of creativity – are the most valuable economic goods these days.

In helping strangers to connect on the basis of shared interests and, at the same time, concentrating on the joint project of collecting media content by the users, Pinterest combines certain salient features of a social networking site and a collaborative project. Linked to that, are two further qualities that differentiate Pinterest from other major social media platforms: emphasis placed on creative content rather than articulated network of relationships, and orientation towards sharing and inspiring rather than self-presentation. Also gender distribution of the users is peculiar to Pinterest: women constitute approximately 80% of user base, thereby reversing a gendered definition of

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3 Florida, The Rise of the Creative Class, 44.
creativity, which has traditionally been considered a masculine domain\textsuperscript{7}. Even though Pinterest has recently established itself as one of the most prominent social media sites, it remains under researched beyond the business and marketing opportunities it offers.

To address this gap, this essay explores Pinterest as a creative community for women. The analysis is guided by the following research question: How do female users construct the boundaries of creativity on Pinterest? The answer will give insight into how female users of Pinterest articulate creativity. Furthermore, the essay will examine Pinterest as a source of empowerment, particularly as it pertains to everyday creativity, and the knowledge and joy it provides.

The essay begins with the introduction of the concept of ‘everyday creativity’ that is crucial for the perception of Pinterest as a creative community. Afterwards, the relationship between creativity and female social roles is discussed. Then, the essay moves on to describing the results of the analysis that answer the following four questions: what is the scope of creativity on Pinterest?; what is the relationship between creativity and consumption?; how is Pinterest used to construct the ideal self?; and how is the community of Pinterest built? The final section discusses the empowering potential of Pinterest.

2. DEFINING EVERYDAY CREATIVITY

Reports on ‘creative industries’ in multiple countries have confirmed that it is one of the vital sectors of developed economies, and that it grows at the pace faster than average\textsuperscript{8}. Hence, the expanded research into creative industries and creativity – mainly in the fields of economics and policy, but also sociology\textsuperscript{9}. Traditionally, creativity has been associated with and attributed to an individual genius. The sociological model of creativity comprised of individuals, knowledge domains, and informed experts\textsuperscript{10}, emphasises that a creative outcome is the result of years of practice within a particular domain. On top of this, it also cites a certain level of appreciation as a precondition for an idea to be considered creative\textsuperscript{11}. Primarily due to the above-mentioned reasons, the privilege of ‘true’ creativity has been, effectively, reserved for men\textsuperscript{12}.

Recently, scholarly literature has acknowledged creativity as pervasive and permeating various domains of everyday life. Particular to the exploration of Pinterest, the concept of ‘everyday creativity’ developed by Gauntlett serves best:

Everyday creativity refers to a process which brings together at least one active human mind, and the material or digital world, in the activity of making something which is novel in that context, and is a process which evokes a feeling of joy\textsuperscript{13}.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 6.
Firstly, this idea takes into account not only the material world, but also the Internet as a space for creativity. Secondly, everyday creativity is an innate quality of every human being, and as such, encompasses a variety of activities, e.g. writing, self-presentation and insightful speech, which may be considered mundane\textsuperscript{14}. The ‘everydayness’ of creativity also shifts the importance from a final product’s uniqueness to the act of doing. In effect, for the examination of Pinterest as a creative community of women, it is crucial that the concept of everyday creativity deposes the distinction between the superior, creative and masculinised fine arts, and the inferior, ectypal and feminised crafts. Thirdly, everyday creativity is highly contextualised\textsuperscript{15}; the criterion of novelty in and relevance to the context establishes the activity of pinning onto the virtual pinboard as a creative process of providing content rather than a secondary step in relation to actual making. Fourthly, everyday creativity has the potential to become ‘social glue’ that binds people and sustains community. With regard to making and sharing online – which is the essence of Pinterest – Gauntlett writes that it “can be seen as a disorganised (or, rather, lightly-self organised) cloud of creative links that can bind people together”\textsuperscript{16}. The present essay adopts such an understanding of creativity.

3. Creativity and female social roles

As mentioned in the previous section, by and large, women have been considered incapable of performing creative activities. This view can be traced back to the social roles imposed on women, and, to a lesser extent, their own inherent limitations\textsuperscript{17}. Indeed, women are expected to be, first and foremost, family nurturers and caretakers. The obligations of a mother and wife that a woman is conventionally expected to fulfil, demand empathy and multitasking – capacities which are fundamentally at odds with the relentless attention toward own work and unorthodox way of thinking typical of highly creative individuals\textsuperscript{18}. As a result of this tension, women usually have to settle for performing ‘inferior’, due to the practicality of such tasks, crafts such as ceramics or furnishings.

Female creative activities, often embedded in everyday life rather than removed from it, have been generally dismissed as, in fact, uncreative\textsuperscript{19}. Rarely has housework been recognised as a method of practising a woman’s creativity and skills\textsuperscript{20}. Nor have a female body and self been frequently acknowledged as objects of creativity, even though oftentimes in the past they were the only materials available for women for creative efforts\textsuperscript{21}. The diversification theory of female creativity presented by Reis takes into account creative opportunities contained in these various channels:

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{15} See also: J. Burgess, “Vernacular Creativity and New Media”, PhD diss., Queensland University of Technology, 2007, 32.
\textsuperscript{16} Gauntlett, Making is Connecting, 224.
\textsuperscript{17} Reis, “Toward a Theory of Creativity in Diverse Creative Women” (307-308).
[...] Women’s creativity is diverted to multiple areas in their lives, including relationships, work related to family and home, personal interests, aesthetic sensitivities, and appearances. This diverse creativity emerges in their work but also in other areas, occurring daily, including their relationships with family and friends and the ways they decorate their homes, prepare meals, plan complicated schedules for their families, balance time between work and personal life, and stretch the family budget.22

This theory is evidently linked to and congruent with the concept of everyday creativity in that both neutralise the gendered definition of creativity. As regards Pinterest, it revolves around diverse, everyday activities performed by females, which may well constitute outlets for creativity alternative to composing of music, writing novels or doing science.23

4. Method

Netnography, ethnography of online communities, was selected to best serve the exploration of Pinterest as a creative community for women. The DIY & Crafts category was chosen as a research site due to the versatility of the creativity-related content it comprised as well as its popularity among the users, topped only by a less comprehensive category of Food & Drink. Participant observation was employed as a method of data collection, and included the following activities: observing the content on a regular basis and in real time over the period of 10 weeks, following certain users and liking their pins, as well as occasionally pinning own research-related items.

Data was collected from 23 screenshots of the main board of the DIY & Crafts category. Each of the screenshots contained approximately ten pins, newest at the time of retrieving, totalling approximately 250 pins altogether. The boards onto which these pins were posted and the profiles of their authors also underwent the examination. In sum, approximately 250 users’ profiles were retrieved, from which user-provided personal information was extracted to confirm gender and explore demographics of users, especially with regard to family and employment status. The body of data contained also the most popular pin and most popular board of the DIY & Crafts category at the time.

Each of the above-mentioned data components was instantly described and reflected upon in the field notes. The field notes were inspected through thematic analysis. The analysis focused not so much on the visuals – since they usually derived from other Internet resources – as on the content originally created by the Pinterest users, that is captions, comments, general composition of boards, etc.

5. The Pervasive Creativity

Since the DIY & Crafts category was identified as being the closest in scope to everyday creativity, its contents mark the extent of creativity on Pinterest. The DIY & Crafts category is a catch-all section, encompassing content that ranges from sewing tutorials to

22 Reis, “Toward a Theory of Creativity in Diverse Creative Women” (312).
25 Moore, “Pinners be Pinnin’: How to Justify Pinterest’s $3.8B Valuation”.
photography tips and from cooking recipes to hairdo ideas, for example. Such diversity 
resonates with the broad definition of crafts proposed by Miller: “[craft] encompasses 
both industrial labour and things that can be made at home, as a form of relaxation from 
a day spent at work: embroidered jewellery, quilting and knitting in the living room, 
messy stuff in the shed”26.

The analysis has showed that the content of the DIY & Crafts category falls along 
two continua: (1) practical use – decorative value, and (2) professional life inspirations 
– leisure projects. The use of continua rather than binary oppositions allows for a de-
picted item to be functional and aesthetically impressive at the same time. For example, 
a hand-quilted table cloth sits somewhere around the middle of the first continuum: not 
only does it decorate, but also protects the tabletop. However, the pins more clearly 
situated toward the opposite ends of the practical use – decorative value continuum are 
also present in the DIY & Crafts category. Some pins visibly emphasise the functionality 
of the end-product, e.g. link to the tutorial on transforming an empty wipes container 
into a plastic bag feeder, whereas some content advises on beautification of objects, e.g. 
reusing a wine bottle as a nice decorative vase.

The professional life inspirations – leisure projects continuum is more problematic 
in that the distinction between the two can be contested. Oftentimes, any housework 
performed by women is identified as professional work27. Nevertheless, it is possible 
to distinguish job-related content in the case of teachers, who appear to constitute a 
relatively large proportion of Pinterest users. Interestingly, teaching is often socially 
perceived as an appropriate career path for creative women as it allows them to “put 
their family first”28. One of the job-related pins comes from a kindergarten arts teacher 
and suggests an exercise of drawing a snowman as a way to develop children’s dimen-
sional awareness. With regard to the leisure projects end of the continuum, the apparent 
enthusiasm of a user toward pinned content – e.g., manifested in using certain emoticons 
– can indicate its role as a hobby or otherwise pleasurable activity. Such an assumption 
might be true for both hobbies (e.g., a sewing tutorial on transforming a T-shirt into a 
scarf) and household chores (e.g., “For the gross carpet here... in case I haven’t pinned 
before???? Magic Carpet Cleaner ;-) Baking soda, vinegar, dishwashing liquid & warm 
water!!”).

6. CREATIVITY AND CONSUMPTION

Furthermore, the construction of the boundaries of creativity by Pinterest users can be 
described through relating creativity to consumption. By and large, creativity involves 
being active, while consumption is associated with passivity, mindlessness and idleness. 
On top of this, the objects of creativity and consumption differ significantly: the former 
creates the “homey, authentic, small-scale, handmade and preindustrial”29, and the latter 
eats up the mass produced and glossy. In a sense, outcomes of creativity stand out 
against the pervasive ecosystem of commodities.

Pinterest users ascribe special value and a unique kind of prestige to the products of

28 Reis, “Toward a Theory of Creativity in Diverse Creative Women” (310).
individual creativity. Due to their perceived authenticity and honesty, handmade items are considered desirable as gifts. This includes homemade candies and drinks that are highly appreciated as presents. One Pinterest user shares her experience of handing a gift of handmade sweets to her neighbours: “Christmas peppermint popcorn. ‘This stuff is like crack. I gave it as neighbour gifts and a few people even asked for more!’”. The reason behind the popularity of handmade presents on Pinterest might be contained in their attributes as craftwork: in that they are personal and unique, as well as made with care30.

Despite some preference for the handicraft, content published in the DIY & Crafts category is a mixture of handmade items and purchasable goods. In fact, the border between the objects of creativity and consumption on Pinterest appears flexible and constructed by the female users on a case by case basis. For example, a photo of a tank top posted on a board entitled ‘Do It Yourself’ is accompanied by the following caption: “now where to buy it?”. Often, a ready-made object of consumption constitutes a point of departure for creative activities, as is the case with a post picturing a photo frame made of clear glass block, with the caption revealing where the block can be bought. The photo frame, however, has been creatively worked on through the gluing of stones, adding some lettering and a bow on the top. Reusing previously used items for a new function; repurposing used items into another format or product, usually without any modifications; and creative upcycling involving major alternations of used items, are other popular ways of utilising a purchased object as a basis for creative process. For instance, one pin suggests reusing an old chest of drawers: “Paint and reuse an old dresser in a new way. Store your handbags: shelve your clutches & hang the rest”.

The motivation to engage in creative activities rather than immerse oneself completely in the consumption of purchasable objects is often financial. Content of the DIY & Crafts category frequently advises users how to reduce household expenses by working with one’s hands: making baskets from cardboard boxes and twine, creating affordable coasters, etc. Involvement in the process of budgeting is at odds with the liberal view of a woman as an irrational and compulsive consumer31. Moreover, the actual creative making of goods undermines the stereotype of the main consumer in a family being female: ever spending, but rarely producing32. Hence, it can be argued that through creative activities and, by extension, using Pinterest, women develop their competencies in the area of housekeeping.

7. CRAFTING THE SELF

Pinterest serves not only as a tool to stir and stimulate the creativity of its users, but might also help them to construct ideal selves and connect to them – whether consciously or not. This is illustrated by the multitude of pins presenting weight loss programmes posted in the DIY & Crafts category that instruct how to, e.g., “tighten that bikini string a little tighter and still enjoy your favourite foods!” Postings similar content to the DIY & Crafts category reveals the, perhaps latent, view of certain Pinterest users that a female body is an object which can assume a desired shape through a creative process. This

30 Ch. Frayling, “‘We Must All Turn to the Crafts’”, in Power of Making, 28-33 (33).
32 Oakley, Housewife, 3.
interest in and readiness to mould their bodies can be attributed to the pressures and expectations toward the feminine body that exist within society. Physical attractiveness is not the only socially imposed expectation that Pinterest users might be trying to live up to. For example, for the ideal of a ‘superwoman’ created by advertising and women’s magazines, maintaining a body in perfect shape is but one component; the other two are professional career and successful family life. The two can be observed in teachers’ use of Pinterest to aid their professional careers, and in the multitude of content related to the family and household as the last domain of creative activities performed by female Pinterest users, respectively.

A significant portion of content posted in the DIY & Crafts category is related to parenting. Some of the pins cover the ‘creative’ aspect of rearing of children, e.g., games and artistic activities, while some are more concerned with the ‘pragmatic’ side of the process, e.g., food recommendations and sensory activities. Also, content offering a somewhat basic ‘baby manual’ is popular in the DIY & Crafts category (e.g., “Baby Massage Tips to Relieve Discomfort from Colds and Teething”). Hence, Pinterest as a parenting resource may provide women with tools to become better mothers, and – in effect – come closer to the ideal of a ‘superwoman’ that is imposed by the media and might be socially desirable.

In addition to obtaining professional success, maintaining a perfect body and mastering the art of child rearing, a ‘superwoman’ needs to manage the household as a wife. The content of Pinterest includes multiple ideas of creative housekeeping, from organising to decorating and from essential household tips to helpful utensils. Fundamentally, the house management suggestions and solutions resemble the ‘folk wisdom’ that a woman usually acquires throughout her life from important female figures (e.g., her mother and grandmother), as well as from how-to articles in print magazines. The recipes for homemade, natural ‘medicine’ illustrate this case well, e.g., “Home Remedy for sore throat, hacking cough, tight congestion. Using this in the winter instead of all those mucus relief drugs and decongestants”. Equipped with such knowledge, a Pinterest user might be able to sail through her housekeeping duties in a truly ‘superwoman-like’ manner.

Therefore, the content of Pinterest has the potential to serve as a resource for women to come closer to becoming a ‘superwoman’. It allows them to connect to the perfect, as in socially desirable, self: a physically attractive, successful professional, a mother who has aced parenting, and a wife flawlessly performing household duties. In this sense, Pinterest resembles traditional women’s magazines, which “show women ‘how to dress, eat, housekeep, have their babies and even make love’ all at the same time” and thereby “enable the harassed mother, the overburdened housewife, to make contact with her ideal self: that self which aspires to be a good wife, a good mother, and an efficient homemaker”.

8. CREATIVITY AS A BINDER

The significance of creativity on Pinterest could potentially go beyond its meaning for individual users. As mentioned earlier, everyday creativity might serve to establish a

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35 Oakley, Housewife, 9.
sense of community by bringing people together around a shared ideal, and to sustain it through the continuous involvement in joint activities. Indeed, the ongoing collective activity of sharing of creative and useful content through the DIY & Crafts category could well constitute a point of departure for building up a community of Pinterest.

The built-in infrastructure for establishing and sustaining two-way relationships between Pinterest users includes commenting, liking and ‘repinning’. Also, more than four years after the initial launching of the platform, the private messaging feature has been introduced to facilitate conversations about pins. Yet, interactions and interpersonal relationships, the traditional foundation of any community, are considerably scarce on Pinterest. For example, most of the pins do not receive a single comment, despite being ‘repinned’ several times. Essentially, ‘repinning’ is a main activity of Pinterest users: it consumes more than 80% of the time spent on Pinterest, compared to mere 0.6% of time dedicated to commenting. These observations lead to the conclusion that the main relationships on Pinterest are created between user and content, not between different users.

Due to the paucity of interactions and reciprocal relationships between users, it is thought that there is no inherent Pinterest community. Rather, Pinterest users should be viewed as a collection of individuals who connect with a shared ideal of creativity. This particular relationship serves two major purposes. On one hand, by sharing creative content, a Pinterest user comes closer to the projection of herself as a creative person. On the other hand, she strives to establish herself as a member of the community of creative people. Pinterest is not such a community though; rather, it is a tool used to achieve shared goals by individual users.

9. Discussion: gendered creativity on Pinterest

All in all, the present essay argues that Pinterest is an outlet for women to unleash their everyday creativity. The main focus of the investigation was on how female users construct the boundaries of creativity on Pinterest. The goal was to discover the reason behind the particular appeal of Pinterest to women and its significance to them.

The analysis has uncovered that the content posted by the Pinterest users to the DIY & Crafts category reflects, to a large degree, the socially desirable female archetype. Hence, it might allow women to construct and connect with their ideal selves. In this respect, Pinterest resembles women’s print magazines: both help a woman to project her ideal self while at the same time offer some guidelines as to how to achieve it. The ‘glossy magazine-like’ structure is mirrored in that most of the content posted in the DIY & Crafts category revolves around broadly-understood housekeeping and upbringing, beauty and fashion tips, as well as weight-loss programmes. Also other media forms,

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38 The main relationship on Pinterest is of a one-way following.
39 Repinning – sharing an item found on another user’s pinboard on own board.
42 van Zoonen, “Feminist Perspectives on the Media”.
including cinema and breakfast TV, present femininity as a performance and a project that is individually constructed\(^43\). However, what makes Pinterest a creative outlet is the user-controlled content. In other words, women not only consume, but also compose and determine the content of Pinterest. Hence, the mode of communication also differs: while print magazines, films and breakfast TV target mass audiences with a message from a single sender, Pinterest offers the possibility of ‘mass self-communication\(^44\) from many to many. This potential notwithstanding, in both cases, dialogue among the participants is largely absent.

The examination has also revealed a highly gendered nature of creativity articulated on Pinterest that can be either empowering or subjugating for women. Pinterest, similar to other information and communication technologies, has the potential to empower women through eliciting joyful feelings linked to everyday creativity as well as facilitating information exchange, thereby allowing them to develop as creative and innovative persons\(^45\). Content of the DIY & Crafts category of Pinterest helps women to more easily explore the creative domains directed toward home maintenance that are traditionally considered masculine, like DIY and home repairs. Nevertheless, the majority of the content of the DIY & Crafts category on Pinterest concerns stereotypically feminine activities and interests, such as parenting, crafts and dieting. As a result, both the socially desirable ideal of a woman and the image of a ‘superwoman’ generated by commercial culture\(^46\) are reinforced and further imposed on users\(^47\).

On the other hand, facilitating the pursuit of professional career, family happiness and physical beauty all at once, renders the Pinterest content fit with the post feminist goal of making life easier to manage. Indeed, Pinterest can be seen as a tool in navigating toward ‘having it all’\(^48\), a roadmap to an endless and solitary project of making the female self\(^49\). While enjoying the relative gender equality achieved by the feminist movements, the female users of Pinterest are themselves happy to turn to the neo-conservative roles and values\(^50\). Therefore, the role of gendered creativity on Pinterest is somewhat ambiguous: on one hand, it actually enhances the knowledge and skills of women, but, on the other hand, it does so mainly within the scope of traditional feminine roles.

Nevertheless, it is the focus placed on everyday activities as potential outlets for creativity that constitutes, arguably, the most salient feature of Pinterest mentioned in the present essay. The activities directed toward nurturing family, and the making of home as well as one’s own life – traditionally considered as female – have been largely patronised and undervalued in comparison to professional career or conventionally conceived creative activities. Through concentrating on creative efforts that women undertake in their day-to-day lives, Pinterest enjoys the potential to draw attention to the mundane housework performed by females and to lend it the value it deserves. Actually, ...
nurturing children and home-making can be perceived as women’s ultimate creativity. Thus, creativity should not be looked at through universalising male lens, which ignores that creativity can manifest itself differently in females than males.

SUMMARY

This essay looks at Pinterest as a creative community for women. Pinterest, a virtual pinboard that allows users to share, in a visual way, inspiring things they have found on the Internet, has established itself as one of the most prominent social media sites to date. Vastly explored for the business and marketing opportunities it offers, Pinterest remains under researched as a social media platform, especially as it appeals to women, who constitute 80% of its user base. To address this gap, this essay investigates how female users construct the boundaries of creativity on Pinterest. In so doing, the essay uses, as a starting point, the notion of everyday creativity pertaining to the production of media content, which is novel in a given context. The overarching category of DIY & Crafts was chosen as a site for netnographic research with participant observation as a method of data collection and thematic analysis as a method of data analysis.

The article presents four major findings: (1) Pinterest widens the traditional understanding of creativity and crafts by embracing diverse and unconventional content; (2) creativity on Pinterest is intertwined with, and often anchored in, consumption; (3) on Pinterest, creativity and crafts refer not only to making external objects, but also to individual development of users as women; (4) creativity brings ‘pinners’ together in an effort to pool knowledge and is the ideal that each user seems to connect to, yet it does not suffice to build a community. The essay also identifies similarities between Pinterest and earlier forms of media – print women’s magazines and how-to articles. Finally, the ambiguity of Pinterest is discussed in relation to its potential for empowerment, in particular as a source of pleasant feelings and a resource on creativity and everyday activities.

Gubar, “‘The Blank Page’ and the Issues of Female Creativity” (260).