The Third Shift: 
Pinterest, Digital Labour, and “Women’s Work”

Natalia Pietrzykowski

Abstract

With the content collections of Pinterest users frequently centred on activities related to the domestic sphere, Pinterest is constructed as a women’s space in popular media. This investigation probes the processes by which user input is commodified, positing this trend as a continuation of the historical commodification of unwaged “women’s work,” in a digital context. Using a feminist political economic perspective to frame a dialogue on the topic of digital labour, this paper elucidates the power dynamics between (presumed) female Pinterest users and the greater capitalist corporate structure. This is achieved through an analysis of marketing narratives presented to potential retail partners by one of the site’s creators. Through this mode of inquiry, it is determined that in its marketing materials Pinterest constructs the user as both a consumer and producer of enriching experiences, a duality that echoes the coexisting processes of social networking that stimulate pleasure while turning sociality into capital.

Keywords

digital labour, feminist political economy, digital economy, digital identity, social networking

Introduction

From a functional perspective, Pinterest offers an online platform for the creation and display of collections of images. Virtual boards host pins: images that are either uploaded by users, or, more frequently, linked to existing web content (Gantz, 2013, p. 22). Although the social networking site (SNS) is typically constructed in popular media as a women’s space (Chocano, 2012, para. 13), Pinterest is well known for evasiveness in publicizing user demographics (Delo, 2014, para. 8; Gantz, 2013, p. 21). However, it is speculated that women are dominant on the site and account for anywhere between 60% and 90% of users in the United States (Gantz, 2013, p. 21). This assumption may be driven by the fact that Pinterest collections frequently centre on lifestyle endeavours and activities that take place in the domestic sphere. Whether this phenomenon occurs by design, user input, or a mutual shaping, the home represents the historical site of women’s unwaged labour in a capitalist context (Jarrett, 2014, p. 15). In the domestic sphere, gendered immaterial labour supports capital in numerous and indirect ways. With this transposed to a digital setting, the dynamics between Pinterest and its female users present a rich context for a contemporary investigation of how capitalism is reproduced through the commodification of unwaged, digital, women’s work.

In a promotional YouTube video targeted to potential retail partners, Pinterest CEO and co-founder Ben Silbermann speaks to the unique joys that are enabled by the site, declaring “We help people discover
things they love and inspire them to do those things” (Pinterest for Business, 2014). Far beyond aiding in the discovery of cherished things, however, Pinterest commodifies the affective labour of its users, with affective labour comprising those actions that produce and support emotional experiences (such as love and inspiration) (Pinterest for Business, 2014). This can be observed in the business model employed by Pinterest and other SNSs: providing users with a free online service in exchange for the right to track, mine, store, analyze and sell data relating to their online behaviours, interactions, and purchases (Trottier, 2012, p. 109). The content that users produce on these platforms is also captured by SNS owners and harvested for profit. Although this profit scheme is opaque, users still establish communities within the bounds of these privatized social spaces (Andrejevic, 2011a, p. 97). According to a discursive analysis by Gantz (2013), female Pinterest users “are forming cohesive social groups within this particular niche in social media” (pp. 21-22). Terranova (2000) describes the conditions of the digital economy as favouring specific kinds of production and capital accumulation, namely those that contribute to social or cultural knowledge, while generating new modes of labour to extract monetary value from previously unwaged work (p. 38).

By commodifying the sociality of users, Pinterest can be situated in the socioeconomic shifts identified by Terranova. The exchange, however, is complicated by the communities and affective pleasures produced and experienced by users. An analysis of promotional materials created by Pinterest highlights the construction and marketization of both consumptive and productive user subjectivities. The duality found here echoes the coexisting processes whereby Pinterest users experience pleasure in the face of unjust conditions (Andrejevic, 2011b, pp. 282-283). Not only are these relationships representative of the digital economy, they are also gendered, as previously unwaged women’s work is further exploited in a digital milieu.

**Theoretical Framework**

While the phrase “women’s work” is employed throughout this paper, it is not without attention to problems inherent with utilizing the term “women” as though it describes a monolithic category. Firstly, it implies a binarism that ignores the reality that the self-identification of gender may occur along a broad continuum. Secondly, the intersecting influences of varying social locations, coupled with the privileges and oppressions between and among those who self-identify as women, inform a multiplicity of experiences. Lastly, although immaterial labour can be connected to women’s work in the home, these practices exist elsewhere and are not “essentially feminine” (Jarrett, 2014, p. 16). Despite these challenges, a feminist political economic perspective may be applied to unpack this context, and to shed light on the relations between capital, labour, and gender in this particular feminized context. This is executed with the understanding that the conditions of this digital labour environment are not universal and are, instead, contingent upon multiple intersections of experience.

This investigation draws on scholarship that follows the Italian autonomist theory of the social factory, a concept that describes the increasingly unstable boundaries between work and leisure in post-Fordist societies (Terranova, 2000, pp. 45-46). Scholars have used this theory to locate the shifting spatial and temporal conditions of productive labour (that which generates products and other surplus values), and the ways in which capital is generated through immaterial labour (inclusive of affective labour) (Jarrett, 2014, p. 16; Terranova, 2000, p. 33). Fuchs (2014) highlights the significance of the social factory as a model that “allow[s] one to go beyond a wage-centric concept of value, labour and exploitation” to examine new sites of class struggle (p. 111). Thus, the material and historical lenses of the social factory theory afford a study of broader cultural and economic trends through an investigation of the relationship between Pinterest and its users.

This paper draws on both culturalist and economic perspectives, heeding the notion that “social relations are always already gendered and economic, as well as intrinsic to one another” (Riordan, 2001, p. 5). Jarrett (2014) highlights that, while critiques of knowledge work in contemporary capitalism elucidate the feminization of work processes and roles, such as the demands for increased flexibility, adaptability, and precarity, there is little attention paid to the role of women’s affective labour in these conditions (p. 15). She writes, “it often seems as if immaterial labor was only ‘invented’ when it moved out of the kitchen and onto the Internet” (Jarrett, 2014, p. 15). As, in some capacities, much of the labour on Pinterest may well be performed both in the home and on the Internet, this
investigation aims to connect political economy and cultural studies research strands to study ownership and production in conjunction with consumption and meaning creation.

**Pinterest in Context**

Before exploring narratives of the Pinterest user, it is important to situate the context of use by exploring the site’s origins, ownership, and business stature. Pinterest was launched in 2010 by Evan Sharp, Ben Silbermann, and Paul Sciarra, counting 10.4 million users by the following year (Gantz, 2013, p. 21). During this time frame, the company developed partnerships with Facebook and Twitter that sync the search and post functions across the platforms when users access Pinterest through linked accounts (Gantz, 2013, p. 21). It was reported in 2013 that Pinterest use has grown to 70 million accounts worldwide, with 500,000 of those reported as business accounts (Roose, 2013, para. 8-13). Financial news reports estimate Pinterest to be currently valued at $5 billion, and funds for this valuation have been generated primarily through the investments of American-owned venture capital groups (Gerber, 2014, para. 5; MacMillan, 2014, para. 2-4; Rhondan, 2014, para. 1-2). Among SNSs, Pinterest is the fourth most valuable in the world behind Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook, and it is the only one of the aforementioned companies that is not yet publicly traded (Gerber, 2014, para. 5).

In 2013, Pinterest began selling ad space in the form of promoted pins that appear in user searches (Delo, 2014, para. 14; MacMillan, 2014, para. 7). This strategy is aligned with overall trends that have occurred in the social networking industry; in 2009 van Dijck (2009) suggested that ”sites are transforming from commons-like structures towards commercially driven platforms” (p. 51). While Pinterest has never truly resembled a commons-like structure, with data ownership and control resting with the site’s owners from its inception, SNSs are increasingly concentrating their efforts to turning revenue from the networks built upon their digital infrastructures. With some financial reporters highlighting the e-commerce clout of the Pinterest customer (Roose, 2014, para. 12), it can be inferred that user data is extremely valuable for capital accumulation. This is further supported by the report that promoted pins have recently been sold to compa-

**The Processes of Digital Labour**

The terms of use agreement, to which users must consent before accessing a social networking platform, is a fundamental strategy used by SNS owners to establish exclusive rights to the content and data created by users. Scholars agree that these agreements are overcomplicated and unjust, setting the stage for imbalanced power dynamics between SNS users and SNS owners (Andrejevic, 2011a, p. 87; Fuchs, 2014, p. 245). When it comes to altering this initial agreement, Pinterest provides a link through which users may opt out of Google Analytics in the Help Center section of the website; however, this represents only one external party that has potential access to user data. The Pinterest Help Center broadly states, “We also allow certain providers to collect information” (emphasis added), and adds that third-party analytics “help us analyze and improve our services” (Pinterest, 2014). This highlights the purported service-orientation of data collection while obscuring the processes through which user input is commodified. Another strategy that contributes to the black box experience of social networking is the use of algorithms, which enable “manoeuvring individuals and communities” within the SNS terrain (van Dijck, 2009, p. 45). A major goal of such manipulations is to support predictive analytics practices, wherein data owners seek correlations in aggregates of data with the goal of anticipating/directing purchase behaviour (Andrejevic, 2011b, p. 281). In accessing available user information from the device being connected to the site, Pinterest interprets data markers of the user’s identity (Delo, 2014, para. 13). Promoted pins and autofill search suggestions are then tailored to the user, thus partly directing their user experience.

The social factory concept makes the novelty of digital labour evident by representing the commodification of activities that were previously thought to be outside of the wage labour system (Terranova, 2000, p. 33). According to Andrejevic (2011a), the social factory “puts our pleasures, our communications, our sociability to work...in order to extract value from them” (p. 90). A Marxist conceptualization of labour posits a dialectical relationship between human labour-power (a capacity
for work), the instruments and objects of work, and the products or use values that are created when these resources interact (Fuchs, 2014, p. 251). While the communicatory use values of these outcomes are in some capacity accessible to users—for example pleasure, esteem and validation (Jarrett, 2014, p. 19), they are also transformed into commodities through the sale of subsequently created behavioural and content data to advertisers.

Building on the work of Dallas Smythe, who conceptualized the notion of the audience commodity, Fuchs (2014) locates the processes of digital labour production in a new model of capital accumulation where— in the internet prosumer commodity (prosumer is a portmanteau of the terms producer and consumer) becomes sought by SNSs and advertisers alike (p. 246). Therefore, while users may retain some modicum control over their own productive activities, SNSs own and exchange the data and content that comprises their digital subjectivities. Through the overly complex user agreement, the user relinquishes their claim of authority to the products that are generated through SNS participation, and hereafter becomes alienated from one of the principal instruments of digital labour: the platform itself. Turrow (2005) writes, “The idea that customers would make a cost-benefit calculation in giving up useful information about themselves fits the needs of advertisers and media perfectly” (p. 115). This cost-benefit analysis is convoluted, however, by the purposeful obscurity under which SNSs operate. Furthermore, the products of digital labour (the useful information, as described by Turrow) become inaccessible and unrecognizable when aggregated and transformed into a personalized advertising commodity. Thus, the user becomes alienated not only from the instrument of labour, but also from the data/commodity version of themselves that is a product of their digital work. Through dataveillance techniques, whereby the social input of users becomes a source in the production of targeted advertising, Pinterest users are alienated not only from their own digital labour; but also from their labour power and digital self.

The Rhetoric of Social Media: Dual Subjectivities

In a promotional YouTube video, Silbermann constructs the Pinterest user as a producer of meaning and a consumer of enriching experiences. In his appeal to potential partners, he states:

That idea that a single object can be passed from interest to interest, not by SEO targeting or by keywords, but by people just organizing things they’re passionate about, is at the heart of what makes Pinterest special. And makes our partners such an important part of the experience that we’re trying to deliver for users. (Pinterest for Business, 2014)

Silbermann touts technology as enabling transformative events, and propagates the narrative that a unique pleasure occurs through Pinterest-facilitated discovery. He highlights self-actualization as achieved by a union of digital and embodied selves, which are, purportedly, otherwise disjointed. Through an evocative description of the user experience rather than the mechanics of targeted ads, Silbermann’s appeals fall in line with Trottier’s (2012) assertion that social media surveillance data is poised as more authentic in the advertising realm (p. 126).

As constructed by Silbermann, the Pinterest user’s subjectivity yields both production and consumption, though he extrapolates these functions to broader, noneconomic terms. He does not discuss revenue or purchases directly, but instead frames economic value for partners in terms of encouraging pinners to “take action” on an item and “make good” on inspiration, all while generating useful “insights” (Pinterest for Business, 2014). However, as asserted by Riordan (2001), production and consumption are “integral parts of capitalist accumulation” (p. 8). As such, although Silbermann’s narrative describes a tethering of companies to deliver meaningful experiences for users, the essence of capital remains. The discourse of participation, creation and collaboration through social networking obscures not only the asymmetric power relations between Pinterest and its users, but also that it is a profit-seeking company that uses exploitative digital labour practices. Pinterest users lack control over the processes through which their consumptive/productive subjectivities are repackaged and sold as targeted ads. No matter how significant their experiences are with the site, users have little recourse to the market-driven surveillance that guides them. Women are disproportionately affected by these dynamics on Pinterest because of their prominence among the user base.
Affective Labour and the Reproduction of Capitalist Values as “Women’s Work”

By discussing the movement “from interest to interest,” Silbermann positions the user’s identity as genderless and affinity-based (Pinterest for Business, 2014). Despite this narrative, the discourses that surround Pinterest in popular media frequently employ a gendered lens. Chocano (2012) captures this in a piece about her own experience with the site for the New York Times, stating “it’s often talked about in that particular dismissive way reserved for things that have the temerity to seem both frivolous and feminine” (para. 13). While Silbermann avoids addressing these public perceptions, his declared quest to connect users one to one through their interests suggests the employment of the real woman construct, which enlists users as brand ambassadors. In her examination of femininity in historical and contemporary advertising texts, Duffy (2013) writes that the movement in cultural studies towards valuing interactivity and consumer engagement has been shaped by the advent of blogs and SNs (pp. 227-228). On the topic of blogging sites directed at women, Duffy (2013) states, “despite (or perhaps because of) the corporate nature of these sites, they often emphasize their cultures of authenticity and participation” (p. 224). Silbermann, too, evokes authenticity when speaking of Pinterest as a tool for self-improvement, one that can remedy the divide between embodied and virtual selves. This empowerment narrative obscures that those interests are most frequently consumer goods, and that the relations between users serve to bolster their Internet prosumer commodity profiles, which are owned and traded by the SNS owners.

The neoliberal narrative of self-branding can be observed when investigating Pinterest’s domestic focus, which is heavily influenced by lifestyle blog aesthetics. Only certain types of femininity are expressed, and in very specific ways. These depictions are often highly professionalized, frequently centering on the marketization of the self. Taking this into account, Gregg’s (2008) notion of a “workstyle,” as both “a style of work and a stylisation of work,” can add further dimension to this analysis (p. 290). Whereas work life in the digital economy is now flexible and precarious, home life must comply with a new set of standards as exposure to wider audiences is sought. Much like Fuchs’ assertion that digital labour is representative of a new era of capital accumulation, Duffy (2013) locates a “new phase in cultural production” with an increase in user generated content (p. 233). Both of these transformations support the premise of the social factory, wherein capital exerts a more direct influence on all areas of life, blurring the boundaries between leisure and work.

In her exploration of the role of immaterial labour in capitalist production, Jarrett (2014) writes, “women’s work has always had a pivotal but complex relationship with capital” (p. 15). Apart from affective labour, “women’s work” is also comprised of social reproductive labour, which can be understood as the activities and behaviours that reproduce social and cultural norms. In the home, this occurs by modeling and enforcing accepted values (Jarrett, 2014, p. 22). While there is no direct economic value to reproductive labour in terms of commodity production, it can be linked to the normalization of capitalist values and a continued societal acceptance of neoliberal capitalist ideologies (Jarrett, 2014, p. 21). Social reproduction occurs through pre-determined rituals (Jarrett, 2014, p. 23), and on Pinterest these rituals are re-pinning the images of another Pinterest user, and liking or commenting on pins. With approximately 80% of the content on Pinterest being re-pinned from other users (Gantz, 2013, p. 22), Pinterest shows a high rate of social cohesion through social reproduction. According to Jarrett (2014), there is a disciplining socialization in these actions, asserting, “these affective intensities...encourage the future generation of such sensations within commercial contexts” (Jarrett, 2014, p. 23). While the affective experiences and gratifications described by Silbermann may indeed benefit users, they occur within this system of social reproduction. Although the social networking behaviours of women may be viewed as frivolous and feminine, these disciplined modes of sociality reproduce social order and propagate contemporary capitalism.

The economic, social, and gendered relations between Pinterest and its female users are complex due to intersecting patriarchal and capitalist influences. While female Pinterest users build social groups through shared affinities for things, the experiences of Pinterest users cannot be extricated from the sociopolitical systems in which these activities take place. Although affective and reproductive labours are not limited to women, these areas of work/life are often gendered in Westernized societies. As such, their “indirect input into regimes of accumulation” is often overlooked (Jarrett, 2014, p. 15). Through digital labour processes, Pinterest commodifies labour that has been previously unwaged on two
fronts: in the sense that it stems from social life, and in the sense that it often originates from the home, the historical domain of women’s work. While the affective labour of users may be unalienable, which supports the creation of user communities, all other aspects of digital "women's work" on Pinterest are exploited through dataveillance monitoring techniques and monetization of the product that users produce. This dynamic, coupled with the disciplining social behaviours of Pinterest users themselves, ultimately facilitates the expansion of capital through social reproduction.

Conclusion: Discourses of Resistance

The rhetoric of social networking frequently draws on Marxist ideas, despite, ironically, the exploitation of users’ digital labour. Specifically, Andrejevic (2011a) highlights “promises to overcome alienation, revitalize community, and empower citizen-consumers” as “recurring themes” (p. 92). Faced with the assigned dual role of consumer and producer in this context where sociality is disfigured, there are currently few options for individual resistance other than opting out of such services. The commons of social networking is illusory, a marketing construct that has facilitated the rapid accumulation of capital among companies that provide connectivity services to access user data.

As Pinterest profits from women’s digital work, resistance to the structures of inequality that it perpetuates have deeper sociopolitical implications. The discourses explored in this paper are intrinsically tied to a movement towards the social valuation of labour performed in the domestic sphere. This can be achieved in part by interrogating the role of women’s work and the experiences of people who identify as female or non-binary as a way of historicizing immaterial labour practices in relation to capitalism (Jarrett, 2014, p. 26). In feminist scholarship, SNSs can be problematized to investigate the social and economic roles that they play both on individual and structural levels, with particular attention to the ways that these terrains are navigated by marginalized groups (Riordan, 2001, p. 4). These lines of questioning may situate the contemporary moment and provide points of solidarity for groups to organize collective action. Most drastically, Weeks (2007) proposes an epistemological shift that focuses on the relationship between life and work, rather than focusing on politics of identity (p. 246). Such an expansion beyond the household to include all matters of social life may help to trouble the relations of unproductive and productive labour in conditions where work and life are increasingly conflated. It may be possible to organize resistance that is centered on emphasizing the social value of the affective and reproductive work that is performed in these areas of life, thus rejecting the alienating consumer subjectivities that serve to extract monetary value from sociality.

References


