SOCIAL MEDIA DESIGN ECONOMY: THE CURATORIAL, INSPIRATIONAL, AND ENTREPRENEURIAL LABOR OF DESIGN PROFESSIONALS

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The rise of digital platforms and connective technologies is reconfiguring the tools, processes, and practices of design in profound and complex ways. This dissertation empirically examines how design professionals adopt communication technologies and the emergent social and cultural creative design practices that are developed around these technologies. This project analyzes the ways in which designers' activities on social media platforms constitute new forms of design labor. This dissertation conceptualizes a social media design economy composed of various modes of digital labor that design professionals engage in as they use digitally networked platforms to promote their creative work, cultivate their personal brands, and publicly evaluate the creative design products of their peers. As a part of this social media design economy, I identify three forms of digital design labor: curatorial labor, inspirational labor, and entrepreneurial labor. As existing creative practices such as curation, inspiration, and portfolio-creation become digitally networked, they follow social media logics, resulting in new forms of labor and amplifying existing forms of design work. All three forms of labor represent ongoing, self-promotional enactments of design production, process, and performance. Thus, the findings of this study contribute to a broader understanding about the future of design work and creative processes amidst an increasingly independent and entrepreneurial employment market. As such, this dissertation suggests implications for advancing theories of creativity online, the role of visuals as part of digital platform ecologies, and emergent area of *socially mediated* design.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Leah Maureen Scolere is a designer by training, holding M.A. and B.S. degrees in Design and Environmental Analysis from Cornell University. She is particularly passionate about pursuing research at the boundaries of design and communication. Before pursuing a Ph.D., Leah worked as a practicing designer and titled associate at Gensler, where she created human-centered workplace environments, provided design strategy, and designed a range of services & brand experiences. Leah’s professional experience inspired her to think critically about the theoretical approaches that may inform the processes, practices, and digital tools of designers. As a scholar-practitioner, Leah’s interdisciplinary focus exists at the intersection of design, communication technologies, and the built environment.

With love to my mentor and friend, Professor Jan Jennings,
who encouraged me to pursue a Ph.D. before I could envision it for myself.

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When I started on this journey, I couldn't imagine the amount of intellectual and personal growth that would be possible. I would like to acknowledge the constellation of people without whom this journey and work would not have been possible.

Throughout my dissertation project, I had the opportunity to work with four of the most caring, supporting, and brilliant people at Cornell. My mentors and committee members Lee Humphreys, Geri Gay, Tarleton Gillespie, and D. Medina Lasansky provided ideas, feedback, and continually challenged me to develop my thinking. Without their intellectual contributions, this project would never have been realized. I've taken inspiration from each of their diverse research approaches. Their balance between openness to ideas and rigor provided the best kind of constraints to foster creativity. I'm particularly appreciative of Geri Gay's model of doing serious work but finding the humor in the process, Tarleton Gillespie's thought-provoking and detailed questions to push the dimensions of a project, and D. Medina Lasansky's inspired creative combination of ideas and research. Additionally, Geri Gay has been a formative model for interdisciplinary work and helping me to bring together design and communication.

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I was fortunate to have my time at Cornell overlap with Brooke Duffy's appointment as assistant professor in communication at Cornell University. To say I am greatly indebted to Brooke Duffy's mentorship both personally and professionally is an understatement. Collaborating with Brooke has helped me to make key intellectual connections in my own work and in the broader field of communication. I'm particularly appreciative of being introduced to 'deadline monster' and how Brooke's own prolific writing has inspired a shift in my writing from a dreaded activity to an everyday practice. This dissertation would not have been possible without having Brooke Duffy's program of research on self-branding, media industries, and labor as a foundation.

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My gratitude to my family for their support during this Ph.D. journey and always is infinite. My family has always been my compass and I gathered my strength from all our interactions. I've absolutely treasured being near my mom and dad. Being with both of my parents has always been a respite for me. I'm so grateful for my mom's unwavering faith in me. I've teasingly referred to my phone calls to my mom as "1-800-positivity" for providing a loving dose of encouragement. My dad's quick wit and sense of humor has sustained me. I'm so appreciative of the model of persistence and resilience that my parents have instilled in me, which I have continually drawn on to realize this project.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The rise of digital platforms and connective technologies is reconfiguring the tools, processes, and practices of design in profound and complex ways. Reviews of how technology is disrupting the design industry persistently focus on processes for design production and fabrication such as 3D printing, building information modeling (BIM), augmented reality, and the Internet of Things (IoT) (e.g. Autodesk n.d.; Budrick, 2016, December 19; McMenamin & Waligore, 2017, April 10; Wired, n.d.). Glaringly absent from these reviews are the quiet, *everyday* ways that digitally networked platforms are disrupting and changing workflows in the design industry. In response, this dissertation analyzes the ways in which designers' activities on social media platforms constitute new forms of *design labor*. Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted with over seventy-six design professionals, this qualitative research project examines communicative practices spanning interior design and graphic design professional communities. These interviews were supplemented with online participation observation, interviews with creative industry professionals, and qualitative platform analysis and communication. In this dissertation, I identify the various modes of digital labor that design professionals engage in as they use social media to promote their creative work, cultivate their self-brands, and publicly evaluate the creative products of their peers.

Design culture scholar, Julier Guy's (2017) recent book *Economies of Design* puts design processes in the context of various economies. While providing a strong foundation for contextualizing economies of varied design processes and practices, the role of digital networks in the everyday creative work processes of contemporary designers is left underexplored. This dissertation expands the scope of "economies of design," to conceptualize a *social media design economy.* As a part of this social media design economy, I identify three forms of *digital* design labor: *curatorial labor, inspirational labor,* and *entrepreneurial labor*. All three forms of labor represent ongoing, self-promotional, future-oriented enactments of design production, process, and performance. As curation, inspiration, and portfolio-building practices become socially mediated, they take on an increased pace, constancy, and subjectivity. Together these forms of labor illustrate how design professionals work among tensions of *profession, labor*, and *platform* all at once.

Design Professions

Contours of the design professions

Building on Perkel's (2011) "practice approach" to studying creative communities, this project seeks to study designers who are actively developing their identities as creative professionals through both the work they create & share and through their relational activities (Baym, 2015a) as a part of social media platforms. As such, design professionals can be understood as "communities of practice" or "communities of practitioners" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.29). These "social worlds" are continually produced and reproduced through the interplay of interaction, activities, membership, and technology (Strauss, 1978). Pointing to the way 'design' is commonly presented as a cohesive, singular entity (i.e. Cross, 2006), Julier (2017) argues, "design is far to variegated in its practices, far too widely deployed and far too diverse in how it is understood and used for us to be able to express a singular definition for it" (p. 2). To this end, the design professions are vast including: web design, user experience and user interface design (UI/UX), industrial design, furniture design, fashion design, interior design, graphic and digital design, urban design, among other areas of design specialization. In terms of educational training, many of these disciplines are often housed together under a school of design.[1] There is often fluency between these disciplines with all design disciplines sharing a studio-practice tradition of education. The blurring of job roles among design professions traces its origin back to a shift to *design consultancy* firms that offered a wide variety of services and the significant growth of the design sector during the 1980s and 1990s, especially in graphic design (fueled by corporate identity growth) and interior design sectors (Julier, 2014). Julier (2014) points to the economic recession of the early 1990s and resulting fragmentation of the design industry as a catalyst for an enlarging of the scope of design services into other sectors such as management, advertising, and brand communication many of which are offered by design firms.

Design Employment. There are a variety of ways in which designers work as a part of the design profession including: 1). design consultancies/firms and creative studios 2). In-house design, and 3). freelance/independent forms of employment. Increasingly common is the "embedded designer" or designer working 'in house' for an industry outside of the design sector (Fleischmann & Daniel, 2014). For example, a designer who works in the *technology sector* for Dropbox, Mailchimp, or Pinterest would be considered an 'in-house' designer.[2] In addition to working in the design sector as full-time employees at design consultancies, design firms or creative studios, designers will often work as creative directors and art directors[3] at *advertising agencies*. Advertising agencies[4] have historically relied on a great deal on freelance design labor, especially from designers with a background in graphic design. To this end, designers also work *freelance* where they are self-employed, working as part of collaborative teams or as contract or sub-contract workers to larger design firms (Julier, 2014). These forms of employment, especially the culture of freelance employment in the graphic design industry[5], make this sample of designers particularly relevant for interrogating the rise of the larger 'gig economy' and labor conditions of an increasingly individualized and entrepreneurial work force[6]

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[1] Some of the most prestigious schools such as Harvard School of Design and Rhode Island School of Design house architecture as just one of the design offerings instead of it being its own school (Leach, 2015).

[2] The technology sector had a particular draw for my sample for a number of reasons—one of which was the fact that the compensation was reported as typically higher than working within the design industry at a creative studio or consultancy. For example, a number of independent designers in my sample had worked as full time 'in-house' designers for Dropbox at some point in their careers. However, for others, the creative prestige of working at a well-known design firm or consultancy was higher.

[3] The title of Art Director is challenging because the term 'art' is confusing and the title at times, limits the possibilities of the role when really the role of art director is to "direct other designers" (Larossa, 2017, April 28). Points to the issue of titles within the creative professions.

[4] There is a fundamental difference between how *design consultancies* and *advertising agencies* make money. Design firms or consultancies "work on a fee basis whereby payment is made by the client, which is agreed prior to or in the early stages of a

Evolution of the Design Professions

From a sociological perspective, codifying a particular set of knowledge for a profession is key to attaining market presence for expertise and social status (Larson, 1977; MacDonald, 1995). Design has increasingly evolved in ways that have strategically positioned its market reach into other disciplines making it interdisciplinary, and continually demonstrating its value as a profession[7]. Design has entered disciplines and discourses in ways that create an openness and accessibility of design. In the 1990s, there was a convergence with advertising as design took on brand design and corporate identity and later expanded from the design of products to the design of services in early 2000s (Stickdorn & Schneider, 2010). Fisher (2015) describes the value creating skills that a designer learns from a professional design education that contribute to innovation—"imagining new paradigms, envisioning better alternatives, and conceiving of that which does not exist" (p.164). These skills and the design process has been sought after because of its link to the creation of new products and services, which ultimately contribute to revenue

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project." In contrast, the revenue for advertising agencies are "from a percentage commission of the media space bought for a specific campaign" (Julier, 2014, p.30)

[5] Freelance work throughout the design professions is uneven with sectors like graphic design relying more heavily on freelancers than for example interior design. This stems from the scope and timeframes of projects.

[6] See 'typology' of freelance labor (Horowitz & Rosati, 2014). discussed in broader trends of employment section.

[7] There are a variety of turns in design that have contributed to the discourse around design that I want to acknowledge but are not directly related to this proposal. Critical Design (Dunne,2005; Dunne & Raby; 2001), Speculative Design (Dunne & Raby, 2013), Adversarial Design (DiSalvo. 2012), Design as Social Activism (Pilloton, 2009; Julier, 2013), Participatory Design

generating activities and consumer culture. As a result, the process of 'design thinking' has been adopted by business management as a key resource to leverage in the pursuit of innovation and creating economic value (Brown, 2009; Martin, 2009).

As design has been moved across disciplinary boundaries or been brought into various discourses, the way design has been taken up has been very fluid—expanding and narrowing. Definitions of design are continually evolving, contested, and highly situated (Julier, 2014). Design can refer to both the process of designing as well as the result of the design process such as the drawing, graphic, product, or building (Julier, 2014). More specifically, design has been described by Walker (1989) as the following:

> "It can refer to a process (the act or practice of designing); or to the result of that process (a design, sketch, plan, or model); or to the products manufactured with the aid of a design (design goods); or to the look or overall pattern of a product ('I like the design of that dress')" (p.23).

In contrast to these narrow, more closed definitions of design, which continue to position design as an activity done by professional designers, other critics such as Papanek (1973) have sought move forward a more expanded and accessible definition of design—where everyone is a designer as a part of their everyday activities. More recently, the term "everyday designer" has gained popularity where the creative problem solving and ideation of people who are not formally trained as designers is conceived as a form of design (Wakkary, 2005; Wakkary & Tanebaum, 2009; Linder, Snodgrass & Kerne, 2014). These attempts to open the definition of design and the practices of designers to everyone can also be viewed as threats to the current boundaries of the profession of design.

Boundary Work & Maintaining Distinctions.

In the face of these attempts to make design and the way designers think accessible to those outside of the design professions, design professionals continually work to assert their value and maintain distinctions around the profession. This ongoing endeavor is primarily directed toward potential client audiences and can be understood as a type of "boundary work" (Gieryn, 1983). In fact, *client's business problems* serve a key differentiator that designers draw on to make distinctions between designers and artists (Potter, 2002). In other words, client problems and demands often drive the designer's project goals since design is "oriented around clients and deliverables" (Forlizzi & Lebbon, 2002, p. 3). Renown graphic design legend Milton Glaser famously proclaimed that "design has nothing to do with art" because even though designers and artists may use similar tools may be used, "design's efficacy is measured by how well it delivers on a client's goal." (Quito, 2016, October, 31). So while bringing a "certain artistry" to the work is still present (Potter, 2002, p.20), personal self-expression is secondary to the pursuit of solving a client's design problem. This emphasis of design as solving a problem for a client is deeply embedded in design culture as means of demarcating the work of designers from the work of other creative professionals (i.e. artists).

While there are many similarities to creative workers in the broader creative industries, there are some important differences about the design professions and the culture of design that have been drawn on as key to distinguishing the knowledge boundaries and expertise of professional designers—boundaries around the work that designers do as well as the value they add as a way of securing market presence around the design professions. Wang and Ilhan (2009) argue that *"the creative act"* should be considered the distinct body of knowledge for the design professions because it is central to all the design professions (p.6). Wang and Ilhan (2009) offer a useful definition of the design (the creative act):

"A creative act is characterized by the imaginative and original generation—with

> aesthetic value as high priority—of utilitarian objects, usually first expressed in figural representations such as sketches, working drawings, physical or computer model but ultimately produced (i.e. fabricated, assembled, constructed) because they have high cultural value. The provenance of the creative act is essentially unpredictable in nature, if by prediction is meant the ability to reproduce the moment of creation, the empirical attributes of what is created, by pre-determined formulations or frameworks" (p.8).

Central to this definition of the 'creative' act for designers is a value commitment to *imagination, originality, and aesthetics.* Additionally, the "unpredictability of the creative process" can be understood as a key part of the specialized knowledge of designers—a process that is "safeguarded" as a type of knowledge that helps to distinguish the design profession and the practices of designers from those outside of the profession (Wang and Ilhan, 2009, p.9). Cross (2011) has referred to process of *how* designers design as *design thinking* or the "cognitive and creative abilities of designers that are common across design domains" that often seem mysterious (p.1). In many cases this safeguarding of the design process and design thinking translates to a concealing or "obfuscating" the design process (Cross, 2011). In other instances, clients are given only staged or highly curated glimpses into the full design process as a way of maintaining this knowledge as unique to the profession.

Along with the core knowledge of the creative act, the role of the professional designer has been described as *value generating*—commercial, cultural, social, political, environmental and symbolic (Julier, 2014, p.46). Overall, the role of designers is seen as *additive*—"adding value" to objects, places, and messages (Julier, 2014, p.40) or "adding a new dimension" or perspective to object, places and messages (Clarke, 2011, p.16). In this definition we can understand "adding a new dimension" as the designer's ability to create a new perception, meaning, or interaction through a design solution. Clarke (2011) goes on to describe the designer's ability to see "as generative not just descriptive" —a designer can see or imagine the potential for a new combinations of forms, type, object. The *value generated* by professional designers then becomes a form of monetization for the design professions.

Design has historically been challenged with a lack of coherence and professional norms. Unlike professions such as law and even architecture, which have norms that are regulated not only by the state, but by longstanding internal professional organizations, design has virtually "no minimal standard attainment of training required" for individuals to call themselves designers (Julier, 2014, p.44). The lack of cohesive professional norms and educational norms has made design vulnerable to *"design entryism"* at the "outer edges of design practice"- both the "conceptual end" of design services and strategy and the production end of design (Julier, 2014, p.44-45). In addition, designers not only work to differentiate themselves from other professions, but are also continually working to differentiate and distinguish themselves from other designers as a part of this professionalization (Julier, 2014). Further complicating distinctions within design professions, architectural design, which has traditionally had more *professional barriers* to entry than other forms of design, has its area of specialization increasingly encroached upon by spatial design firms. Subsequently, theorists such as Leach (2015) have called for a redefinition of the architect and rethinking of the professional boundaries of architecture within the broader industry of space and building design.

Boundary-work or the attribution of key methods and knowledge forms a "social boundary" for intellectual bodies of knowledge or professions (Gieryn, 1983, p. 781) . As, such *boundary work* is an ongoing project for designers across all design disciplines. For these reasons, designers and the design professions offer a rich area of study around how professionals actively defend, negotiate and remake already fluid professional boundaries online.

Digital Turn & Amateur/Professional Boundary Work

The design professions such as graphic design, interior design, industrial design, and architecture have been challenged with the blurring boundaries between professional design fields and a rapidly growing group of amateurs or DIY designers (Julier, 2014). Beegan and Atkinson (2008) argue that professional practices are defined by their distance from the "unschooled practitioner" (p. 305) and that the distinctions between design professional and amateur have *traditionally* been constructed through professional design organizations, design researchers, and corporations who contract the work of freelance designers (Massanari, 2012). However, these distinctions are evolving as the access to digital design tools such as Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator has lowered the barriers to entry to producing design artifacts and has created permeability between perceived amateur and professional practice. These lower barriers to entry have caused tension with the professional design community. Some in the graphic design community such as Ellen Lupton see an opportunity to educate amateurs on design principles so they can incorporate design in their own lives (Lupton, 2006). However, others such as practitioner and design critic, Steven Heller expressed anxiety around the implications for the design professions.

> "By making our work so easy to do, we are devaluing our profession. I like democracy as much as the next person, but because of new technologies, the definition of amateur in fields like graphic design, photography, film, and music among others is being redefined. With everything so democratic, we can lose the elite status that gives us credibility" (Lupton, 2006).

In this era of increasing DIY design and maker culture, there has been a movement to democratize “the design process through amateur practices” (Beegan & Atkinson, 2008, p. 306). This movement is largely about design moving from an activity by professional designers to an activity that is accessible to everyone (Atkinson, 2006).

The perceived threat to the boundaries of the design professions became more pronounced in the era of desktop computing and creative software development (Beegan & Atkinson, 2008). Many of these online practices that blur the boundaries between amateur and professional and blend work and play were established on early web design portals and of the 1990s where the experimental nature and ‘coolness’ of the work and subsequent technical skill involved to create such design work served as the key commodity that advanced a designer’s reputation (Turner-Rahman, 2008). Prior to social media platforms, these design community forums were sites where social networking, reputation-building and sharing of design knowledge was continually negotiated with the desire for professional designer recognition (Turner-Rahman, 2008). One of the more recent studies about evolving design practices online is Massanari’s (2012) study, which examines how crowdsourced design platforms are challenging notions of design expertise. Massanari (2012) points to the crowdsourced DIY graphic design practices on sites such as CrowdSPRING, 99designs, and Threadless that privilege the client and platform over the designer, highlighting tensions around retention of creative intellectual property rights and fair compensation.

Julier (2014) argues that the historically described role of designers, demonstrates some of the ways designers have worked to set apart design from other commercial and cultural practices. Through their practices and design discourse of individuals and professional organizations, the design professions have done work to identify themselves and their practice as *adding value*. In doing so, this “boundary work” (Gieryn, 1983) defines design as those products, spaces, and services that are “shaped by the intervention of design professionals” (Julier, 2014, p.93), while excluding the work done by amateurs from this definition of design. While this represents the ways design has tried to construct boundaries around the profession of design, it also speaks to ways designers are continually re-designing the practice, processes, and roles of the design profession itself (Julier, 2014). Therefore, the design professions and their continual re-design and “reflexive” self-modification (Julier, 2014, p. 74) represent an ever shifting site in which to study the labor of designers and their work practices on new digital media platforms as they further their identity as professional designers.

Labor

Creative vs. Culture Industries

The design professions such as interior design, industrial design, graphic design, and architecture form an understudied creative sector within the larger creative and cultural industries. The term cultural industries and cultural work is a broad term that has been defined as the “symbolic, aesthetic, or creative labour” (Banks, Gill & Taylor, 2013, p.4) and encompasses “identity, values, social belonging with links into sub-cultures” (Smith & McKinlay, 2009, p.4). In this way it is all inclusive with *symbol-making* referring to not only visuals and art but also “interpretative knowledge” that is at the core of media professions such as journalism (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011, p.9). In other words, creativity is just one aspect of what it means to be a cultural worker. The shift in discourse from *cultural industries* to *creative industries* was largely carried forward by policy-makers in the 1990s (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011) focusing on creativity as the key contributor to economic development and a competitive advantage (Gill & Pratt, 2008). Introduced by the UK government Department for Culture, Media, and Sport Creative Mapping Project, the term ‘creative industries’ was defined as “those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill, and talent and which have the potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property" (DCMS, 2001, p.5). Key to the concept of 'creative industries' is the attempt to resolve the emergence of individual creativity, talent, and small-scale project based work with larger mass cultural production within the cultural industries (Deuze & Lewis, 2013; Hartley, 2005). While this shift to creative industries has been disputed (Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Lovink & Rossiter, 2007; Pratt, 2005; 2008) and regarded by some to be merely a "political rebranding" (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hesmondhalgh & Pratt, 2005), it has served to raise the economic value of creative practice (Luckman, 2015). As such, Luckman (2015) defines the 'creative industries' as "those segments of the economy concerned with the generation of intellectual property, the production of aesthetic or symbolic goods or services" (p. 47).

One listing of creative industries, which has had global reach is the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport 2006 listing of fields such as advertising, architecture, the art and antiques market, crafts, design, designer fashion, film, video, photography, software, computer games, and electronic publishing, music and the visual and performing arts, publishing, television, and radio (DCMS, 2006, p.5). The term creativity can be problematic because it can be applied to a wide range of types of work and may not account for nuanced distinctions between scientific or technical creativity and artistic creativity (Smith & McKinlay, 2009; Pratt, 2005). However, it is useful to apply to this project on the design professions because it narrows the discussion from including all cultural work and symbolic goods to emphasizing the "creative act" in producing aesthetic goods and services. However, the term creative industries is still lacking in specificity, especially given the wide variation in practices encompassed by the design sector alone. Julier (2014) has focused in on design as a creative industry, finding that what unites the design sector is its *consistent* “fragmentation and deliberate differentiation amongst its actors” (p.20-21). Where other studies of the creative industries have paid less attention the creative industries’ process as a creative cultural product,” Julier (2014) points to and emphasizes the objects of design production work such as sketches, models, and digital prototypes as a way of unifying or linking the design professions within the larger creative industries.

So while the terms cultural industries and creative industries are often used interchangeably, I use the term “creative industries” to refer to the work of the design sector. This design sector is sometimes referred to as design industry. Some scholars group all workers under cultural production as part of creative labour, including both creative personnel and administrators, executives, and other forms of supporting labor (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). However, this dissertation focuses specifically on design professionals who directly produce design goods and services and engage in the creative act of the design process as a part of their everyday work and career.

Employment Shifts.

With this shift to the ‘creative industries,’ the focus has moved away from the industries to the individual workers and their specific labor practices (Banks, Gill, & Taylor, 2013; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). Creative work involves various kinds of labor ranging from the production of material goods to knowledge work of conceptualizing new ideas, strategies, and services. One aspect of creative work can be understood as a form of what *autonomist Marxist*[8] writers have termed *“immaterial labour,”* “where labour produces immaterial goods such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge or communication" (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p.292) rather than the production and manufacture of material goods. Linked to immaterial labour, is the precarity of the work conditions that creative workers manage. *Precarity* refers to a wide range of flexible and insecure work including everything from illegal work to freelance and temporary forms of work (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011).

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[8] Autonomous Marxism- Instead of understanding wage laborers as only victims of capitalism, autonomous Marxists take the perspective that laborers have agency and can force change through self-organized action outside of traditional structures such as unions. Additionally, Autonomist Marxism focuses on the “autonomy and creativity of labour, and the workers’ power to bring about change” instead of focusing on the power of capital (Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 5).

Changes in advanced capitalist economies brought on by "new communication technologies, globalization, and neoliberal policies have resulted in increasingly insecure labor conditions" (Keuhn & Corrigan, 2013, p. 15-16, see also: Harvey, 1990; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Gill, 2010). In this context of work, the risk and responsibility of work is shifted from the organization to the individual entrepreneur (Gill, 2010; Neff, 2012; Neff et al., 2005). The 1990s saw the rise of "enterprise culture" as a key business notion that emphasized "certain enterprising qualities—such as self-reliance, personal responsibility, boldness, and a willingness to take risks in pursuit of goals" (Du Gay, 1996, p. 56). This context has given rise to a "new ideal worker-subject" who is constantly responsible for *"managing the self in conditions of radical uncertainty"* (Gill, 2010, p. 2, in italics). As such, the 'model' neoliberal worker is called to be entrepreneurial, flexible, self-directed, and always working (Gill, 2010).

Creative Labor.

McRobbie (2002) observed that creative work was increasingly characterized by neoliberal ideals of "entrepreneurialism, individualization, and reliance on corporate sponsorship" (p. 515). As such, creative workers participating in precarious project-based and freelance work were held up as what Gill and Pratt (2008) critiqued as "model entrepreneurs" (p. 1) and the future of work (Florida, 2002) for their embrace of the entrepreneurial ethos. Collectively studies on creative industries point to precarious jobs with long hours and what Gill

& Pratt (2008, see also Pratt 2002) term “bulimic patterns of working” (p.14), low pay and high involvement and passion toward the work (Gill, 2010; Neff et al., 2005; McRobbie, 2002, 2003; Ross, 2003).

In addition to precarity, research on the creative industries has drawn upon another autonomous term “affective labour” to describe the tension around described intense love and passion (McRobbie, 2016) for the work with the sometimes anxiety provoking ways that their creative work is tied to their sense of self (Blair, 2001). The concept of affective labour is related to Hochschild’s (1983) earlier work on emotional labor where workers, such as female flight attendants, were expected to manage their outward emotional appearance for others as a part of their job and sold for a wage. This labor required workers to “induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others’ (Hochschild, 1983, p.7). Designers engage in a similar kind of affective labor as they manage their passion for the design work they do and how closely that is tied to their own identity. The narrative of *passion or love for the work* becomes a way of rationalizing the low pay & insecure working conditions, highlighting how creative workers draw value from the creative work in ways apart from monetary compensation (Arvidsson, Malossi, & Naro, 2010).

Creative work in the culture industries has been largely defined by a *culture of cool* which emphasizes creativity, autonomy, and self-investment as a part of this “entrepreneurial labor” of new media workers and fashion models (Neff, Wissinger & Zukin, 2005). Moreover, Hesmondhalgh & Baker (2011) point to this *creative autonomy*, *high involvement in the work*, and *self-investment*, among other aspects as contributing toward what counts as “good” creative work for these professionals in the television, music, and magazine publishers. Creative professionals struggle to balance the degrees to which they define themselves through their creative work due to the public, yet personal nature of their work (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). The emotional investment that is required of creative professionals due to the personal nature of their work is a kind of emotional and "affective labor" that is necessary in order to maintain a certain appearance, embodying cultural attributes of cool and creative (Neff et al., 2005) in order to build their professional networks (Hochschild, 1983; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). Research on creative labor has predominately focused on the media industries around television, advertising, film, music, magazine publishing, theater, and new media (Blair, 2001; Duffy, 2013; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; McKinlay & Smith; 2009). McRobbie’s work (2002; 2016) has highlighted the creative labor of fashion designers.

Designers share many of the same attributes and tensions around work that are reported by media industry creatives and workers in the creative industries more broadly. Engaging in project-based work, designers work long hours and often have a deep attachment to the work with identity being closely fused to the creative work as a form of self-expression and self-actualization. Like other creative industries whose work is considered glamourous and carries a cultural value of cool (Neff et al., 2005; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008) , the work that designers do is perceived by others as “cool,” fun, and desirable Much like the new media workers or fashion models that Neff et al., (2005) studied, designers are evaluated through their portfolios of design work where they often manage tensions around the work they do to pay the bills and the design work they hope to pursue to receive creative recognition from their peers and feel satisfied about their own creative expression. For many in the design professions especially architecture, there is a longstanding history of conceptualizing work as a creative art form, separate from labor and the production of commodities (Deamer, 2015). Additionally, there is the notion that designers should deliver creativity and should be fulfilled by that same creative aspect of their work (Larson (1993) as cited by Biernacki, 2015). Similar to other creative workers, designers can be understood as "*cultural intermediaries* or tastemakers in that they broker modern ideas in the work they do and the way they consume" (Bourdieu, 1984 as cited in Julier, 2008, p.86). Designers are *creators of cool* in the work they do to create the brand imagery, graphic design, workplace design, and architecture for their clients. As such, they are required to embody these attributes of cool in the way they dress, the spaces they live in, and the products they consume. In this way, designers represent an intensified group of creative workers who participate in "affective labor" (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). Moreover, design professionals embrace the entrepreneurial ethos and individualism highlighting how design work fits with larger work patterns of "flexible, project-based employment, and multi-skilling" (Julier, 2017, p. 52).

Designers and creative professionals more broadly are part of a growing movement of self-employment and project-based work across sectors (Lingo & Tepper, 2013). In fact, labor experts anticipate that independent workers will be the majority by 2030 (Pofeldt, 2012). Recent freelance employment trends that show that 34% of the American workforce is working as *freelancers* (Horowitz and Rosati, 2014). This survey conducted by the Freelancers Union in partnership with Elance-oDesk reveals a typology of freelance employment distinguishing between: 1). *Independent contractors* or 'traditional freelancers,' 2). *'moonlighters,'* who are professionals with a traditional job doing freelance or project work in their spare time or in the evening, 3). *diversified workers* who have multiple sources of income including both freelance and traditional dependent work, 4). *temporary workers* who are individuals with a single employer, client, job, or contract project with temporary status as freelance workers, 5).

freelance business owners who have between one to five employees and consider themselves "both a freelancer and business owner" (Horowitz and Rosati, 2014, p. 5).

While various new types of "creative self-enterprise are symptomatic of labor in the post-Fordist era" (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 1), artists and creative workers have had a long history of managing precarious work conditions, economic uncertainty and holding multiple jobs in order to pursue their creative work (Bain, 2005). Increasingly, artists and creative workers have been seen as "key economic drivers for cities and nations" (Lingo & Tepper, 2013, p. 340) with governments seeking to leverage talent to create places of innovation (DCMS, 2006, 2008; Florida, 2014) that make valuable economic contributions (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010). Artists and creative workers have come to "symbolize contemporary transformations of work" (Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 2) in the ways in which they negotiate entrepreneurialism and creative control and embrace risk (Lingo & Tepper, 2013). For these reasons, media creatives, designers, and artists have been pointed to as exemplifying the future of work through their practices (Banks, Gill, & Taylor, 2013).

"Labor of Social Media Production"[9]

The rise of Web 2.0 ushered in what Jenkins argued in *Convergence Culture* (2006), a "participatory culture" where "fans and consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content (p.290). Terms such as 'prosumption,' 'produsage,' and pro-am became ways to understand the blurring of production /consumption and professional/amateur boundaries within these online environments (Jenkins, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Brabham, 2012). As such, Burgess & Green (2009) argue that digital platforms are "co-creative" spaces that blur lines between forms of creative production along a “continuum” from amateur to professional (p.89, p. 105). Similarly, argue that the distinctions between amateurs and professionals may be better understood on a “spectrum” from amateur to professional (Luckman, 2015) or conceptualized as a “continuum of relationships between individual and organization” (Brabham, 2012, p. 402). Whereas Jenkins (2006) saw this user-generated content as *participatory*, critics, drawing on Marxist theory view participation as a form of “digital labor” (Scholz, 2012) whereby users’ shared content and data is harnessed to generate revenues for companies. Fuchs (2012) argues that because users are uncompensated for this labor that it is form of exploitation. However, the “free labor debate” is more nuanced because as Terranova (2000) argues, “free labor” is “simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited” (p.33). As such, Arvidsson (2008) has identified the notion of “socially recognized self-realization” as primary motivation for voluntary online social production (p.332). While another motivation has been the potential for experience and exposure (Brabham, 2012) and future opportunities (Postigo, 2007; Deuze, 2007; Kucklich, 2005). Existing research has examined various new kinds of digital labor such as Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (Irani & Silberman, 2013; Scholz, 2012), fanfiction efforts in promotion (DeKosnik, 2012), and creative personal expression through online blogging (Dean, 2012). The notion of passion is invoked as a way to rationalize the uncompensated efforts (Arvidsson, Malossi, & Naro, 2010). However, Duffy (2017) argues that often “social media creators derive pleasure from their digitally mediated “passion projects,” but they also believe that they will benefit professionally from such value-generating activities” (p.46).

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[9] Term used by Duffy (2017) to describe the work of social media producers such as bloggers.

Theories of Labor

Several key theories of labor address how creative workers' internalization of neoliberal ideologies help them normalize and rationalize the investment of time, energy, and capital in the present for potential future payoff (Duffy, 2017): *venture labor* (Neff, 2012), *hope labor* (Keuhn & Corrigan, 2013), and *aspirational labor* (Duffy, 2015a, 2015b, 2017). Neff's (2012) theory of "venture labor" focused on the ways workers in the tech sector normalized *risk as investments*—deferring compensation, learning new skills for future opportunities, and constant promotion and networking. Keuhn & Corrigan (2013) frame "hope labor" as a "meritocratic investment in one's employment prospects" (p.21). As such, "hope labor" is defined as "un- or under compensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure in the hope that future employment opportunities may follow" (p.21). Keuhn & Corrigan (2013) distinguish hope labor from venture labor by *how participants viewed their work*. For example, Keuhn & Corrigan (2013) argued, "hope labor investments of time and effort are not seen as particularly risky or even a risk at all" (p.19). Duffy positions "aspirational labor" as "form of hope labor" which seeks to illuminate gendered aspects of labor (Duffy, 2017, p10). In addition to these theories, Baym's (2015a) introduces a temporally-oriented theory of "relational labor" which is the "ongoing communication with audiences over time to build social relationships that foster paid work" (p. 16). For all of these forms of labor, creative aspirants embrace neoliberal ideals of individualization and internalize risk as they seek to develop and sustain their careers.

Self-Branding as labor practice

Scholars have identified *self-branding practices* as a form of labor on social media platforms. (Hearn, 2008; Hearn, 2010 Gandini, 2016). Since the late 1990s when Tom Peters asserted, "you are a brand," the concept of personal branding as a self-enterprising strategy has become pervasive across industries (Peters, 1997, para 17). Marwick (2010) argues that Web 2.0 technologies, social media in particular, facilitate self-branding as a self-presentation strategy. Moreover, Marwick (2013) asserts that self-branding is "intrinsically linked to the features of social media technologies that make self-promotion on a wide scale possible" (p.166). As such, it is against this neoliberal backdrop that individuals are called to think of the self as a brand (Gandini, 2016; Hearn, 2008; Marwick; 2013) In the context of social media, reputation-building and networking are viewed as key investments for digital workers (Gandini, 2016). Creative workers are socialized to promote themselves and their work through carefully curated self-branding practices (Marwick, 2013). Gandini argues that although digital workers tend to place importance on their "skills and talent," "one's professional success appears to be ultimately related to the capacity to connect self-branding practice to the construction of reputational capital and the management of this asset over the professional network." (p. 131). Further, Gandini (2016) points to branding of the self as an "investment in social relationships with an expected return for the acquisition of a reputation" (p.1). Increasingly users are thinking about the larger social media ecology as they make decisions about where to share content and tend to make "conceptual links between platform and audience" as they purposefully share content (Zhao et al., 2016, p.92). As means of resisting, context collapse on social media, users "compartmentalize" how they share content with differing audiences across the ecology of social media (Wilken, 2015). Van Dijck (2013b) suggests that users deploy distinct personas based on their understanding of various platforms as a self-presentation strategy, often maintaining multiple accounts on the same platform (Duffy & Hund, 2015). Drawing on data from this project, Duffy, Pruchniewska, and Scolere (forthcoming,2017) contend that social media users who are working to sustain creative careers tailor their personae to various platforms—a logic we term “platform-specific self-branding” based on the “imagined affordances” (Nagy & Neff, 2015) of individual platforms across a broad social media ecology. These imaginations are “constructed through the interplay between platform feature, assumptions about audience, and the producer’s own self-concept” (Duffy et al., 2017, p.1).

Digital Platforms

Digital platforms serve as sites for these forms of ongoing labor. Although platforms often position themselves as ‘neutral,’ they have a vested interest in harnessing user data (Gehl, 2011; Gillespie, 2010; van Dijck, 2013a). Drawing on actor-network theory, van Dijck (2013a) argues that as a “*mediator*” a platform “shapes the performances of social acts instead of merely facilitating them” (p. 29). As such, “the construction of platforms and social practices is mutually constitutive” (van Dijck, 2013a, p. 6). Sharing some values with mass media logic but amplifying others, van Dijck and Poell (2013) explicate *“social media logic,”* or the key norms and economies underpinning its configurations including: programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication (p. 2). van Dijck & Poell (2013) identify *connectivity* as a key principle of social media logic in connecting “content to user activities and advertisers” where “ the mutual shaping of users, platforms, advertisers and more generally, online performative environments” is the key driver (p. 8). Within these platforms offline “social activities are translated into algorithmic concepts” (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 13). As such, many of these activities of liking, friending, following, and trending, while different functions, stem from the same underlying social media economy—the *popularity principle* where popularity is self-reinforcing such that popular ideas, content, and people become valuable and thus elevated further within these systems (van Dijck, 2013, p.13). Taking a “sociology of technology” approach, Gillespie (2014) positions the *algorithms* underpinning online economies as a "communication technology" which are positioned as neutral yet completely obscure the mechanisms behind them (p.169). In addition to structuring interactions among a network, algorithms actually produce "calculated publics" (p. 188). The "politics of platforms" (Gillespie, 2010) are evident in the way platforms are designed with a visible metric culture to ensure continued user engagement (Baym, 2013). These social media metrics are marked with issues of algorithmic and affective skew, partiality, deceptive practices, and ambiguity (Baym, 2013, p. 9). In the context of platforms such as Netflix, Hallinan and Striphas (2014) problematize the role algorithms play as "arbiters of culture, much like art, film, and literary critics" (p. 131). Similarly, other scholars have examined algorithms in the context of taste (Morris, 2015), popular culture (Beer & Burrows, 2013), and consensus culture (Hanrahan, 2013).

Creative Communities and Platforms. Scholars have looked specifically at online creative communities and the role of *metric culture* in evaluation of various creative content ranging from photography, video, art, fashion, and design (Suhr, 2015). To this end, Reagle (2015) examines how users manipulate rating systems within a photography community, identifying the negative effect of "revenge rating." Others have examined the role of algorithms in evaluation in music communities (Suhr, 2015), fashion blogger communities (Duffy, 2015), and artist communities such as DeviantArt (Vigdor, 2015). Vigdor's (2015) critique highlights the difference between the legacy of the offline studio critique practice in art schools and the *affirmation only* practices available within social media platforms. Kennedy (2015) problematized the role of crowdsourcing design communities for how they proliferate "spec work"—ultimately reducing the "the value of labor in the design process" (p.124). Moreover, Kennedy (2015) argues that these "spec work competitions could be seen as amateur economies, masquerading as professional" (p. 121). However, besides "spec competitions" (Kennedy, 2015), and crowdsourcing graphic design platforms (Massanari, 2012), design labor and evaluation within online communities has been underexplored. This project seeks to make a contribution at the intersection of design, communication technologies, and labor by exploring the practices of designers via social media platforms.

While platforms like Pinterest, and DeviantArt form a creative-hybrid of professional/amateur communities, and Dribbble represent new distribution systems for creative content online which target professional creative and design communities respectively. These evolving distribution systems for creative content online offer an opportunity to examine how professionals maintain and construct distinctions in new online spaces that more accessible and vulnerable to what Julier (2014; 2017) refers to as “design entryism.” These platforms are viewed as places to promote their creative design work and their professional status. Moreover, these platforms have become increasingly important to freelance and independent designers and provide a site in which to understand notions of self-promotion in the context of increasing freelance employment patterns. By exploring how designers maintain and develop their identities as creative professionals, we can understand how these practices impact the future of the design professions and creative industry more broadly.

Dissertation Outline: Forms of Design Labor: Curatorial, Inspirational, and Entrepreneurial Labor

The following chapters present three forms of labor in the format of three standalone articles. Below, I define each of these theories of labor. In the conclusion, I summarize the findings and implications for each form of labor.

This dissertation examines how designers adopt communication technologies and the emergent social and cultural practices that are formed around these technologies. As existing creative practices such as curation, inspiration, and portfolio-building become digitally networked they follow social media logics, resulting in new forms of labor and amplifying existing forms of work. As such, the connective aspects of social media platforms and the processes of designers constitute a mutual shaping of design work practices. All three forms of labor are continual, self-promotional, future-oriented, and always concerned with performative design value creation. Narratives of affect and passion for the work underpin the designers' motivations, shaping the view of the work as an investment in one's creative career. This is especially salient for the independent and freelance designers in this sample. Similar to the ideology of 'hope labor as a meritocratic investment in one's career" (Keuhn & Corrigan, 2013, p. 21), the labor of designers was driven by a persistent belief that success and failure in the design industry was based on one's creative self-initiative and self-enterprise—lack of success would be framed as not being *creative enough*. Building on a collaboration with Brooke Duffy and Urszula Pruchniewska (forthcoming, 2017) on the "always on laboring subjectivity" of platform-specific branding of social media producers (p.7) and I argue that altogether curatorial, inspirational, and entrepreneurial labor result in a continual laboring—an 'always designing' subjectivity on social media platforms. This research highlights the extent to which emergent media ecologies and designers' practices are reconfiguring design worlds and reorganizing lines between professional /amateur, work/inspiration, and labor/love.

Chapter 2-Curatorial Labor

Drawing on digital curation, convergence culture, and creative professionals, this study examined the curatorial labor practices of interior design professionals (n=20) on Pinterest. This study focused on how *interior designers* engaged in what we term digital "curatorial labor" on Pinterest as a means of actively developing their professional identity online and was central to their value production. *Curatorial labor* is the ongoing aesthetic selection and arrangement of digital images and mediated connections as a form of original design production and identity development. The designer's performance, process, and products on Pinterest mutually constitute a curatorial labor that publicly conveys their original and professional value.

Our study shows that professional designers on Pinterest create value by *curating* not creating content for Pinterest. The *publicness* and *socially mediated* nature of *curatorial labor* calls attention the ways in which designers brought their process-oriented design strategies to their curatorial work online and the way that their pinning practices impacted their offline design processes and communicative practices.

Chapter 3-Inspirational Labor

Moving from a platform-specific approach, this study focused on how *graphic design professionals* (n= 56) engaged in what I term digital "inspirational labor" across digital media ecologies as a means of continually managing the distance between *inspiration* and *imitation* within their own digital creative work and within the community to police the ownership of creative products and their own self-brand. While *curatorial labor* focused on the mechanisms of culling and curating existing online content on public digital pin boards, this study expands beyond the curatorial aspects of inspiration to situate related design practices in the larger context of a *digital inspirational economy*, where one designer's shared design work becomes another designer's design inspiration. *Inspirational labor* is the reciprocal, affective, and constant comparative strategies that designers employ to both protect and promote their original design work through socially mediated platforms. As such, *inspirational labor* is marked by both consuming/producing design inspiration and protecting/promoting original design work using affective strategies to ensure an 'inspiring' brand presence across platforms.

Chapter 4- Entrepreneurial Labor of Portfolio Building

This study focused on how *professional graphic designers* (n=56) engaged in what I term digital "entrepreneurial labor of socially mediated portfolio building" across vast media ecologies as a means of developing their design reputational capital. *Entrepreneurial labor of portfolio building* is a future-oriented, content creation focused, self-promotional production of creativity for both client-facing audience and creative industry-facing audiences. *Entrepreneurial labor* is marked by continual 'designing,' demonstrated through the frequency of new design content created and posted across digital platforms. Building on the notion of entrepreneurial labor (Neff et al., 2005), this study identifies two new dimensions of 'portfolio' as a part of the digital economy: the creative portfolio as *platformed* and *connected.* As such, this study advances our understanding of digitally networked "portfolio careers" in the creative industries.

Methodology

In order to study the digital creative practices of design professionals on social media platforms, I employed an interpretivist and naturalistic framework (Lofland et al., 2006). This framework allows me to gain insight into how the designers understand and interpret their own everyday usage of digitally networked platforms. Additionally, this framework gives me the opportunity to go beyond just their actions on various platforms and examine more broadly their assumptions, understandings, and values related to design work on social media platforms.

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of these creative professionals' motivations, perceptions, and ambitions, I collected data through semi-structured interviews of design professionals and online participant observation. The interviews and participant observation were supplemented with a qualitative analysis of design platform communications and promotional materials as well as an informal visual analysis of interviewees' digital work as a part of the interview process. This helped me to understand how designers work amidst tensions of profession, platform, and labor at the same time. This project situates design work practices in the context of a social media ecology, examining both platform specific practices as well as practices that span the media ecology (i.e. van Dijck, 2013b; Zhao et al., 2016). This dissertation draws on both a "social shaping of technology" (Baym 2015a; Mackenzie & Wajcman, 1985/1999) and the social construction of technology (SCOT) (Bijker, Hughes & Pinch, 1987) perspectives to understand evolving creative labor practices in context of features and affordances (Gibson, 1977) of communication technology platforms.

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CHAPTER 2

PINNING DESIGN: THE CURATORIAL LABOR OF CREATIVE PROFESSIONALS

Abstract. Pinterest is a site primarily used for sharing online content particularly images, as such it is a unique platform through which to explore curatorial practices. Professional designers are a unique community of interest because of their expertise in the offline curation of visual images is central to their professional work. Drawing on digital curation, convergence culture, and creative professionals this study examined the curatorial labor practices of design professionals on Pinterest. Through a series of in-depth qualitative interviews and online observation of design professionals, we identify three aspects of curatorial labor on Pinterest: (1) performance, (2) process, and (3) product. The strategic and creative selection and arrangement of digital images by these designers becomes an on-going authorial act of creative labor. This community demonstrates how the public digital curation of visual images is an important part of the ongoing labor of design professionals. The study concludes with implications for our collective understandings of online curation, creative professional labor, and the role of social media within commercial and organizational contexts.

Keywords: online curation, creative professionals, curatorial labor, Pinterest, design, creative professional labor

Pinterest describes itself as a “visual discovery tool that you can use to find ideas for all your projects and interests” (Pinterest, 2015). With over 72.8 million users (Mangalindan, 2015), Pinterest is a fast growing online image-sharing platform that allows users to collect and display ideas by “pinning” images to thematic boards around projects, hobbies and inspiration. Users can *pin* their own photos or images from websites outside of Pinterest or they can *repin* images from other users’ boards within Pinterest. Unlike other image-sharing or social network sites like Flickr or Facebook, Pinterest users do not tend upload and share their own images, but circulate images found within Pinterest or elsewhere on the web (Moore, 2012; Zarro & Hall, 2012; Hall & Zarro, 2012). Indeed, the most common activity on Pinterest is *repinning* images from other Pinterest users’ boards rather than *pinning* personal images or images from websites outside of Pinterest (Moore, 2012).

The sharing of videos or photos found online with others is a popular activity not just on Pinterest. Pew Research Center’s Internet Project found that 47% of adult Internet users have shared videos or photos that they found online with others (Duggan & Smith, 2014). The sharing of online content through various social media platforms has been referred to as curation (Duggan & Smith, 2014). Because Pinterest is a site that is primarily used for *online content sharing*, as opposed to content creation, it is a unique platform through which to explore curatorial practices.

Pinterest is increasingly used by organizations, brands, and professionals to circulate images of their products and services to potential consumers (Silberman, 2013). While research has begun to explore general Pinterest use (e.g. Gilbert et al, 2013; Linder, Snodgrass & Kerne, 2014), there is little understanding of how professionals think about and use Pinterest.

Nevertheless, there is a growing literature surrounding how creative professionals more broadly adopt and adapt to social media platforms (e.g. Duffy, 2013, 2015; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Perkel, 2011; Marwick, 2013a, 2013b), raising tensions about the blurring boundaries between authenticity and professionalism, privacy and publicity, work and hobby, amateur and professional. It is these tensions that we bring to the understanding the curatorial practices of design professionals on Pinterest.

Designers are a unique creative professional community of interest because their expertise in the offline curation of visual images is central to their professional work. Designers, including interior, graphic, industrial, and architectural, can also be understood as "*cultural intermediaries* or tastemakers in that they broker modern ideas in the work they do and the way they consume" (Bourdieu, 1984 as cited in Julier, 2008, p.86). Studying design professionals on Pinterest can give us insight into online curation because the design process typically involves the offline curation of images to create new design interventions.

Designers often collect *precedent* images, known as existing examples of design, as part of the design process to build their design knowledge, identify patterns and typologies for future design problems, discover inspiration, and look for points of departure for new innovations (Lawson, 2004). These precedent images act as sources of inspiration for designers and are often compiled on design mood boards (Eckert & Stacey, 2000). Beyond mood boards, the work of designers is the rearrangement or recombination of existing elements into new configurations or interventions. "Styles, tropes, inspirations, popular culture, language and symbols are the materials, and it is the measure of a designer's ability to reposition these in the most successful way for the audience that determines the effectiveness of a piece" (Cullinane, 2013, np). Despite a prominence of curation in design culture, there is a still a tendency of designers, design education, and design culture to “overvalue differentiation and originality” (Bierut, 2013, part 2, para. 7) which Cullinane (2013) refers to as the “originality paradox” in design.

Designers have been at the forefront of issues surrounding the sharing and display of creative content online. is a popular professionally oriented site for sharing creative work in the design industry and connecting creatives, at various levels of their careers, and their work to professional networking sites such as LinkedIn. DeviantArt is an alternative artistic online community that brings together artists and designers to share creative projects which remake, remix, and modify digital artifacts. The deviated digital artifact represents the artist’s or designer’s creative intervention. Like Pinterest, DeviantArt and represent new distribution systems for creative content online. Both DeviantArt and Pinterest also blur the boundaries between amateur and professional artist and creative practitioner (Perkel, 2011). Unlike deviantART and, however, Pinterest reaches a broader demographic beyond creative communities.

Therefore this study examines how designers take up such a popular image-sharing and social networking platform. Through a series of in-depth qualitative interviews and online observation, this study seeks to explore the curatorial practices of design professionals on Pinterest to 1) explore curatorial labor for design professionals and 2) to understand how their online Pinterest work influences their offline practice and visa versa. Together these help to expand our theoretical understandings of social media, online curation, and creative professional labor.

Literature Review

Previous research has defined Pinterest as a *“social curation”* website because it combines collecting capabilities with social attributes of liking, following, and commenting

(Gilbert et al., 2013; Hall & Zarro, 2012; Zarro, Hall, & Forte, 2013). However, the terms ‘collecting’ and ‘curating’ are used interchangeably and there is some ambiguity around the definitions. Therefore this study draws on digital curation literature in which to situate Pinterest usage. Additionally we build upon convergence and creative professionals research exploring the tensions between amateur and professionals and labor in the online environment.

Digital Curation

Within museum studies, curation can be defined as the selection and display of artifacts (Belk, 2006). The role of the curator has evolved from a *caretaker of a collection* to the curator as *creative author* based on the degree of visibility and independence from the institution of the museum (O’Neill, 2012). Curation is fundamentally about meaning exchange as a form of public activity (Martinon, 2013; Staniszewski, 1998). In this way curation is a process, not a product of creative intervention. Digital curation and its emphasis on participation has shifted the role of the visitor in curation, who becomes part of the meaning exchange process through their tagging, sorting, and remixing of digital artifacts. For example, Eschenfelder & Caswell (2010) have developed three approaches based on degree of control to images: 1) “*virtual display case*” (highest degree of control), 2) “*cultural property approach,*” and 3) “*cultural remix*” (reuse without restriction). These levels of reuse within cultural institutions range from “*open commons collections to account controlled, negotiated permission, to restricted digitization*” (Eschenfelder and Caswell, 2010, p.17-18). In response to the extremely specialist language that has been used in the descriptions, labels, and metadata associated with digital art objects (Srinivasan, et al., 2009), museums have experimented with social tagging as a way to make art objects more accessible to the broader public (Trant, 2009; Trant & Wyman, 2006) and to encourage involvement and accessibility to the digital art objects (Vliet and Hekman, 2012).

Digital collections of museums have been at the center of the tension about control and access of curation (Smith, 2012; Staniszewski, 1998).

Within *new media studies*, the role of a new media curator has been discussed as the *media platform* itself or system for an *algorithmic* filtering and organizing (Hogan, 2010), *archivist* with an emphasis on preservation (Erickson, 2010), *intermediary* who identifies and culls from the broad amount of existing content to circulate media artifacts with new audiences (Monroy-Hernández et al., 2013), and *mediator* who significantly transforms or recontextualizes the media artifacts so as to open up new meanings around the media content (Gehl, 2009; Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013). Within internet studies, digital curation is about the degree of transformation and manipulation of media content. Here the DJ or mashup practitioner's creative output is a curatorial act of creative selection and arrangement of source material (Sinnreich, 2010). The mashup or remix highlights the role of artist as digital curator. We therefore draw on this work of musical creatives in which to situate our study of visual creative labor.

Convergence: Professionals and Amateurs

Social media platforms such as Pinterest offer an opportunity to examine how professionals and amateurs converge and the ways in which professionals maintain distinctions. This work can be situated in the literature around how professionals have taken up social media. In the context of creative industries, the relationship between professionals and amateurs has become a space of blurring boundaries and contestation (Bruns, 2008).

We can look to the profession of journalism and the ways in which journalists have taken up social media and sought to distinguish themselves from citizen journalists, amateurs, and other laypersons as a way to situate this study on how professional designers negotiate social media. The emergence of "convergence culture" (Jenkins, 2006) and participatory culture of social media serve to “erode the traditional distinction between the producer and consumer of news information” (Hermida, Lewis, and Zamith, 2014, p. 481. Professional journalists have historically derived their role and expertise through control of information, known as *gatekeeping* (Bruns, 2005; Deuze, 2005). Journalistic authority and control over information has been threatened by *user generated content* (Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Singer & Ashman, 2009). In the face of these threats, journalists have had to share their gatekeeping role with users or amateurs who take on a secondary gatekeeping role of re-circulating content, ultimately controlling the visibility of content for a secondary audience (Singer, 2014). Lewis (2012) argues that these “indistinct media boundaries” increase the need for “*professional distinctiveness”* through the displays of exclusivity, authority, and expertise (p.853). Howarth (2015) points to the “curatorial turn” (np) in journalism making distinctions around traditional newsgathering as being about original or new content creation and news curation being about imaginatively and creatively re-mixing existing content in new ways.

Creative Professionals

The creative professions have been challenged with the blurring boundaries between professional design fields and a rapidly growing group of amateurs or DIY designers. Beegan and Atkinson (2008) argue that professional practices are defined by their distance from the “unschooled practitioner” (p. 305) and that the distinctions between design professional and amateur are largely constructed through professional design organization, design researchers, and corporations who contract the work of freelance designers (Massanari, 2012).

Creative labor also raises important tensions within the contemporary media industry (Blair, 2001; Duffy, 2013; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; McKinlay & Smith; 2009). Creative work in the culture industries has been largely defined by a culture of cool which emphasizes creativity, autonomy, and self-investment as a part of this “entrepreneurial labor” (Neff, Wissinger & Zukin, 2005). Moreover, Hesmondhalgh & Baker (2011) point to this creative autonomy, high involvement in the work, and self-investment, among other aspects as contributing toward what counts as “good” creative work for these creative professionals. Creative professionals struggle to balance the degrees to which they define themselves through their creative work due to the public, yet personal nature of their work (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). For example, fashion bloggers’ labor includes carefully cultivating the “brand of self-expression” in order to create a successful online persona (Marwick, 2013b, p.6). Creative labor online is simultaneously about the blending of work and leisure (Duffy & Hund, 2015), the promotion of self and profession (Nathanson, 2014) and self-branding as authentic (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

The emotional investment that is required of creative professionals due to the personal nature of their work is a kind of emotional and "affective labor" that is necessary in order to maintain a certain appearance for others and build their professional networks (Hochschild, 1983; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). In addition to the affective labor, creatives also participate in a kind of “venture labor” where they are asked to invest their own time and resources in their imagined futures (Neff, 2012). Duffy & Hund (2015) argue that the socially mediated processes and curation by these creative professionals such as fashion bloggers is a kind of aspirational labor that “obscures the labor, discipline, and capital necessary” to become successful (p. 1). Biernacki (2015) suggests a tension for architects and designers who are required to “deliver creativity” while simultaneously being fulfilled by the creative aspect of their work (p.40). Further contributing to the tension around labor and compensation in architecture profession is the failure of architects and designers to see their “work as work” by thinking of the creativity of design as isolated from work (Deamer, 2015, p.61). Within the design community, amateur or DIY designers engage in speculative design or work without the guarantee of adequate compensation on crowdsourced design websites, which encourage clients to think about creative work as a commodity while downplaying the value of the design process (Massanari, 2012).

For design professionals who are already established in their careers, sites like Pinterest, may represent an opportunity to reinforce their creative practice, their professional networks, and their own self-brand outside of various firms they may work for, while simultaneously raising questions regarding professional expertise and control of their design aesthetic. Therefore this study seeks to understand the designers' use of Pinterest as a kind of curatorial labor. As offline curatorial professionals, how do designers distinguish themselves as professional tastemakers and manage their "originality paradox" through their curatorial labor on Pinterest? How does their online curatorial labor impact their offline creative work and vice versa? How does curatorial labor help us to better understand the tensions around online curation, creative labor, and social media?

Methodology

In order to study the curation practices of design professionals on Pinterest, we used an interpretivist and naturalistic framework (Lofland et al., 2006). This framework allows us to gain insight into how the designers understand and interpret their own everyday usage of Pinterest. Additionally, this framework gives us the opportunity to go beyond just their actions on Pinterest and examine more broadly their assumptions, understandings, and values related to curation on Pinterest.

Sampling and Recruitment.

The research on Pinterest use has tended to sample using computational methods of the entire public site (e.g. Gilbert, et al 2013, Moore, 2012) or by a convenience sample of "everyday" users (e.g. Hall & Zarro, 2012; Zarro & Hall, 2012), rather than looking at how Pinterest is being used by communities for specific ends and associated practices. Therefore we focused on sampling from a very specific population of design professionals because of their expertise in the offline curation of visual images as a part of the creative design work.

We employed two primary recruitment strategies to sample design professionals from 1) professional design communities and 2) large, well-known design firms in the interior design and architecture industry.

First, we posted recruitment messages on a LinkedIn *'IIDA' group* that has over 36,500 members including prominent design professionals both nationally and internationally. The first author is a designer by training and profession, therefore our second recruitment strategy involved contacting former colleagues who worked at large global architecture and design firms to help connect us with designers in their networks who were using Pinterest. In particular, Jay, who worked as a design strategist, acted as an "informal sponsor" sending our recruitment message to several internal firm and external design listserves, vouching for the project, and helping to explain the research interests to the design firm and community (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 60). From the original group of respondent interviews (n=6), we used a snowball sampling to recruit the remaining participants.

The participants included 16 women and 4 men (n=20), ranging in age from 25 to 50 with a mean age of 33. The sample includes participants from six states in the US, including cities such as New York, San Francisco, Denver, Minneapolis, and Washington D.C. along with a small group of international participants (n= 3) from the UK, South Africa, and Canada. The sample consists of 6 professional designers who own their own firms and 14 from large global design firms, which offer a range of design services including architecture, interior design, and graphics and branding. The majority of the interviewed designers (n= 16) work on commercial architecture and interior design projects, while a small minority work graphics and brand design for the built environment and one designer reported working primarily on residential design projects. The gender divide of this sample is reflective of both the Pinterest site as encoded with gender and consumptive assumptions (Tekobbe, 2013) as well as the predominance of women in the U.S. commercial interior design industry—approximately 69% (Interior Design Staff, 2010).

Data Collection and Analysis

We conducted 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews during the summer of 2013. The interviews ranged from approximately 40 to 90 minutes and were conducted via phone or Skype. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy. This study was granted IRB permission by the authors' institutional review board.

Overall, we structured the questions and the overall interview as "open ended process reflection questions" (Charmaz, 2002, p. 679) that would encourage the participants to reflect on their own usage. As Charmaz (2002) suggests, the first interview guide started with broad, easy to answer, concrete questions and then gradually became more specific to particular aspects of Pinterest in order to "study process" (p. 679). The interviews focused on five areas: general use, pinning/repinning (and never pin), motivations around creating boards and types of boards, profile information, and pinning "etiquette". Participants' public Pinterest boards were accessed with their knowledge for background information as we prepared for and interpreted the interviews, but formal visual analyses of participants' pins and boards were not conducted.

Drawing on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we approached data collection and analysis as an iterative process, moving continuously back and forth between collecting data and analyzing the data using a “constant comparative method” (p.102). The ongoing analysis of the initial interview transcripts allowed us to follow up on emerging themes in subsequent interviews, so as to continue to refine the categories and emerging themes during the data collection process. The original broad affinities about participants’ reported Pinterest use included: where and when they used Pinterest (context), how and why (motivations, intentions), and their perceptions and reflections (norms).

Findings

The interviews revealed that Pinterest was primarily seen as a site to *do* design work and secondarily to *display* design work. As creative professionals, the majority of designers in our study did not pin content that they had created on Pinterest. In fact, only one of the twenty designers had regularly pinned his own work and this was constrained to one board. Two designers mentioned when they first joined Pinterest, they experimented with pinning content they created but then quickly felt that it didn’t fit within the norms on Pinterest and decided against pinning their work in the future. Four designers described pinning their own work was too “self-promotional”. This norm was even made explicit in Pinterest’s “Pin Etiquette” policy that instructed users to “avoid self-promotion” (Eder, 2012). The designers in our study acknowledge the community norms on the site are centered on sharing rather than promoting. Five of the design professionals expressed concerns about the lack of control from sharing their own (or their firm’s) design work, which could circulate widely and end up in various contexts without proper credit or attribution. The aspect of Pinterest that designers most valued, a platform to easily discover and display images and engage in their work, was simultaneously the aspect of the platform that concerned them about posting images of their own design work. To manage this tension, some designers posted images and narratives of their own design work on, which linked designers and firms together. Despite not pinning their offline design work on Pinterest, designers in our study did use Pinterest to engage in various kinds of design work that can be considered online curatorial labor.

The performance, process, & product of curatorial labor

Three aspects of curatorial labor on Pinterest emerged from the interviews with design professionals: (1) performance, (2) process, and (3) product. The *performance* of curatorial labor is the means by which a designer strategically pins and creates boards as a means presenting oneself as a professional designer as opposed to what they perceive to be the average Pinterest user. The *process* of curatorial labor is the means by which designers brought their process-oriented design strategies to their curatorial work online and the way that their pinning practices impacted their offline collaborative processes. The *product* of curatorial labor is the means by which designers experiment with the structure of the boards and pins as an original and artistic endeavor in of itself and become aware that their Pinterest work inspires imagined publics through the sharing of their perceived unique and original points of view. Their particular aesthetic choices and compositions are the products of their creative labor for others to consume.

Performance. Designers in this study took seriously the idea of presenting themselves as creative professionals through their pins and the composition of their boards. The curation of images became a means of identity work and self-presentation (Baudrillard, 1994, 1996; Goffman, 1959). For example, the designers interviewed purposefully pinned design imagery to enact and display their professional identity and expertise.

When asked about their Pinterest profile or what they thought people could tell about them from viewing their boards, participants would first articulate that a viewer of their profile would be able to tell that she was a designer. This was communicated not through their profile information but through their aesthetic quality of pins, the number of pins relating to design, and the delimiting of topics to design. In many interviews, the designers described pinning in ways that demonstrated their design expertise, often in contrast to non-designer Pinterest users.

*Delimiting of topics***.** Participants were careful to pin images that are narrowly characterized within their professional identity. Catherine, a South African based designer, explained her reasoning for carefully delimiting topics for her boards and her pins.

> My main focus is interiors and architecture and that imagery. I might follow people who follow other things just to see it but I don't repin those things because my focus is on the interior and I don't want to complicate my profile with too many boards. (Catherine, Western Cape, South Africa)

Catherine is conscious about her self-representation and maintaining that professional position through the types of images she chooses to pin and the boards she creates. This can be contrasted with Julie's observation of what a non-designer does on Pinterest, as "someone who has a broad range of topics." The delimiting of pin to design-related topic was a strategic means for our participants of performing their professional identity on Pinterest.

In addition to what designers say they intentionally pin, it is also helpful to examine what they intentionally do not pin or say they would never pin. Julie communicated this in relation to what she observes 'non-designers' pinning.

> I pin things that are focused on design and aesthetics. Where I feel like non-designers are just kinda pinning things they find interesting—like recipes, like workout plans, like funny quotes. Non-designers love pinning funny quotes and

> it’s not really about aesthetics. (Julie, Brooklyn, NY)

Twelve designers reported that they intentionally kept their boards and pins focused on design imagery and noted that non-designers tended to pin a broad range of common interests such as recipes, fitness, wedding inspiration, fashion trends, and home décor.

Everyday creative acts, like craft arts, home décor or cooking, were not a primary part of our participants’ performance on Pinterest even though they recognized that non-designers on Pinterest valued them. Similarly they recognized the popularity of inspirational quotes, fitness, recipes, wedding inspiration, and fashion trends on Pinterest, but many reported that they would not pin such topics on public boards. The symbolic value of delimiting their pins and boards reflects a strategy to distinguish themselves and legitimate their different social status from non-designer Pinterest users (Bourdieu, 1984).

This does not suggest that the more “common” pins on Pinterest were not also of interest to our participants. Indeed one participant said that she had a private board regarding pins for her wedding. She, however, would not make the board public because it was not part of her identity performance as design professional. Recognizing the distinctions between high and low art (Becker, 1982), our participants remain committed to their public pinning performance as central to their curatorial labor as creative professionals.

Pinning, not repining. The majority of designers in our study (17 out of 20) strongly expressed a preference for pinning (images from websites outside of Pinterest) over repinning (images existing within Pinterest). For example, Mara described pinning as seeming “more like an original process” and Julie’s referred to pinning as “finding things from scratch.” In contrast, Julie described repinning as something “someone else found.” Similarly, Giselle described a repin as “other peoples’ ideas, stories, and inspiration.” Even though the majority of the images, whether pinned or repinned were not original content created by the designers themselves, there were nuanced distinctions for how the designers evaluated originality and value. Blake explained explains why pinning was deemed more original.

> I prefer to do an original pin because it feels more legitimate. It feels original—you are not taking what someone else loves. It feels nice to go out there and search for something and find something really cool that you don't think anyone else has pinned. (Blake, San Francisco, CA)

Much like Mashup artists who evaluated creativity based on the *degree of transformation* and *degree of context change* (Sinnreich, 2010), Blake expressed a kind of creativity as defined not through the creation of original content but through the *action of finding and remixing of content or ideas* from other places and bringing them to a new community. By not limiting himself to the choices *within* Pinterest, Blake believed that what he finds better fits his viewpoint. Although this is a very thin distinction, the designers using Pinterest conveyed a clear distinction between *pinning* as active, more effort, and more creative and *repinning* as passive, requiring less effort, less original, and ultimately evaluated as less valuable.

In some cases, to avoid repinning from another person's board, designers employed strategies for *appearing* to pin instead of repinning. For example, Rachel, a designer in NYC, explained her strategy for avoiding repinning too frequently.

> Rachel: "One thing that I noticed that I did—this is cheating a little bit—If I see a pin on someone's board, I might not necessarily just repin it."
>
> Interviewer: "What's your reasoning? How do you think about that?"
>
> Rachel: "There has been an occasion when I have been insanely overtly repinning from one person and just didn't want that person to think I was totally ripping off

their boards."

As a designer, Rachel knows that even if she finds an image on a board that she likes, she should go outside of Pinterest to find the image to avoid what she knows is less desirable in the design community—repinning from someone else's board. "Cheating" is how Rachel described the "inappropriate" behavior of using Pinterest's search functionality to find good design images through other users' boards but not revealing that process by avoiding repinning, which would tag from whom she found the image. By *pinning* an image, Rachel performed (Goffman, 1967) originality associated with bringing an image into Pinterest and got credit for the discovery of the image as there is no link or trace of connection to another Pinterest user's existing pins and composed boards. Alternately, *repinning* an image is associated with a 'found image', an image that has been discovered already, introduced to Pinterest, and composed as part of an existing board by somebody else. If repinned on Rachel's board, an image will still carry a trace of its origin by saying for example, "added by Rachel *via Julie*" (the Pinterest user who originally pinned the image from a website outside of Pinterest). The performance of process that Rachel describes reflects a kind of contradiction of curatorial labor where the work of finding the same image pinned by another designer belies the affective or relational labor that comes from how the platform signals sharing pins and boards with others on Pinterest.

Process. Professional designers are trained in a very systematic design process of collecting existing examples of design, identifying patterns and typologies, as well as, points of departure, to inform future design innovations (Lawson, 2004). The creative professionals in this study described their pinning practices as means of enacting this offline design labor practice in this online environment. In other words, they brought their process-oriented design strategies to their curatorial labor on Pinterest. Significantly, the designers reported that their online curatorial work on Pinterest impacted their *offline* collaborative processes for creating new design interventions.

Developing Point of View. In addition to the discovery of images and their valuing pinning over repinning, designers in this study build their point of view and potential patterns for future design problems by the transformation of singular pins into patterns and typologies. Historically, designers have collected images offline as a source of design inspiration and often compile these images on design mood boards (Eckert & Stacey, 2000). As an offline design practice, these mood boards are created by compiling images of varying degrees of abstraction on boards that the designer will use for personal inspiration, share with other designers on the team, and to communicate with clients and stakeholders about the design direction (McDonagh & Storer, 2004; Lucero; 2009). This offline design process was transposed online through the composition of the boards on Pinterest. Designers in this study spent a lot of their time on Pinterest dedicated to composing, editing, and managing their boards. However, this attention to composition was technologically problematic. Indeed, Julie expressed frustration with the lack of control over the order of the pins on a board: “You can arrange the order of your boards as they appear on your page but you cannot arrange the pins on the board. So you really have no control of the composition, which I find a little bit challenging.” Julie describes her strategy for overcoming the issues of controlling image order on Pinterest. “I’ll keep everything in one massive board but I will repin it on to a more tailored board.”

Participants, like Julie, used repinning *their own* pins as a means of controlling the composition on Pinterest that did not allow for the custom arrangement of images on boards. By repinning from a previously existing larger board to a new board, participants could control the position of the images, which also serves as a strategy for creative control, enhancing the graphic composition of the new board. In addition to the preoccupation with the graphic composition of each board, several designers were equally concerned with the overall composition of how all the boards looked together on their main page— a kind of meta-composition.

Because the composition of boards was a very important part of the design process for these professionals, they would often make use of secret boards secret for projects they felt were not ready or complete. In addition to valuing and safeguarding their process, eight designers described secret boards as a type of private space for "process work" (Julier, 2002). Blake explained using the secret boards as a place to experiment freely with projects in process.

> I was thinking of making another secret board for self-branding—ideas for how I want to present my portfolio and brand myself but I don't want that process to be open to the public to see me trying to put these images together. So, I use Pinterest because it is a very simple tool but I don't want to necessarily share that with the world—I don't want to share that part of my process. (Blake, San Francisco, CA).

In Blake's description, the secret board is a type of workspace for hiding certain processes before they are more fully developed into final boards. Similarly, Julie described creating secret boards for "testing things out" or doing "something very edgy." The "edgy" work that Julie refers to is a type of work that she worries will not fit into her professional design aesthetic. Both Blake and Julie described secret boards as a type of private space for creative design project experimentation away from the publicness of other Pinterest users. This not only safeguarded their actual design process, which is unique to them as design professionals, but it also helps to preserve their performed identity as design professionals.

Collaboration. Designers in this study also reported that their online pinning practices impacted their offline labor and the way they collaborated on new design interventions. A number of the designers started using Pinterest group boards where multiple team members can contribute and pin images to a shared project board. By using these boards, the designers reported that they were able to follow visually what individual designers on the team were thinking about the design direction based on their pins and have face-to-face conversations as team sooner about the design direction of the project. For these designers, the Pinterest board was as Rachel termed, “a side conversation” that replaced the email conversations of sharing images between team members or the printing of images and the physical pin-up of images in the design studio. Andrea, a graphic designer, expressed a similar sentiment about using Pinterest as a way to gauge and negotiate the design direction with different design roles on the team.

> A lot of times what the interiors group is pinning and what I am pining are two very different things. Even though we are pinning different types of things it would help me and help them to see what we were thinking—to help get on the same page or become more inspired about a different direction that you hadn’t thought about before. (Andrea, Denver, CO).

Team pinning became a “visual dialogue” to gauge how other team members were thinking about the direction of the project.

Because the speed and ease of finding, selecting, and arranging images on Pinterest was significantly easier than offline curative practices, the designers suggested it impacted how they felt about their individual design directions at the early schematic stage of the design process. Rachel discussed the lower effort threshold to pinning images that helped how they negotiated design direction in team meetings.

> I like the fluidity of Pinterest. It is not so precious so you don’t feel bad about not

> moving forward with an image because of the effort threshold. It didn’t cost the designer anything to select and pin that image. In order to do it the old way, you gather your images, you print it, you find physical pins and a board and you probably have to take off other people’s work before you can put your board up in studio. When you have a team meeting, it is ‘I like this, I like this’ but Pinterest is more like ‘I found these things. I’m not shoving it in front of you but if you also like it, that’s great.” I thought this was the dynamic that was helpful to the process. Not so much pushing that you should do that but rather ‘if you like it, here it is’ (Rachel, NYC).

For the designers, who collect design inspiration as a part of their job, the efficiency of pinning digital images on Pinterest served to make them feel less attached to a particular design direction as reflective of their individual design contribution and effort. In the design process, designers are taught that they should not become too attached to one idea at the beginning of a project and value divergence of ideas in order to find the best solution (Cross, 2008; Liu, Chakrabarti & Bligh, 2003), while simultaneously identity investment is central to creative labor and the development of innovative creative ideas (Hemondhalgh & Baker, 2011). In a low profit margin environment, architecture and design firms are often under pressure to streamline and manage the efficiency of the design process (Bernstein, 2015), which often competes with the ideal design process of carving out time for design divergence before converging on the final solution. The designers in this study seemed to find that Pinterest afforded them the opportunity to be less personally attached to or invested in the images they were pinning as part of their own professional identity and self-realization, while improving the efficiency of collecting divergent ideas. While Pinterest was seen as a helpful tool for designers’ collaboration and professional design work offline, three designers mentioned that they felt “guilty” or “ a sense of trepidation and hesitancy” when using Pinterest at the office, where it may be seen as a frivolous social networking platform rather than a tool for creative labor. Additionally, ten designers mentioned that they primarily pinned at times outside of the office such as during the evening or on the weekends. As such, designers in our study indicated that much of the curatorial labor on Pinterest was done in their free time rather than in the office, thus reflecting a common tension in digital labor (Scholtz, 2012; Terranova, 2000).

Product. Initially, some designers described their curatorial labor as selectively pinning images and accumulating images on boards as work that was just part of who they are as designers. It was part of their engaging in their own design aesthetic process as they had been used to doing in their offline mood board practices. As they became more aware of the visibility of their pins and the potential to connect with various publics, they described a more external focus around the creative arrangement and composition of boards as design interventions.

The designers in this study understood the composed Pinterest boards as a resulting original design or creative product, and spent a much of their time on Pinterest preoccupied with creating a beautiful board. Designers reported that even more so than the individual pins, they are concerned with the overall graphic composition of each board—how all the pins work together aesthetically on an individual board. Designers commonly reported strategies for resisting the Pinterest template. For example rather than titling a board “design” or “interior design” they would use color as a theme to organize and name boards. While Pinterest by default uses the first image pinned to a board as the cover image of the board, our participants would actively change the cover images of boards to carefully construct a visual product that conveyed their unique design aesthetic.

Continual Maintenance. The majority of the designers described curating images on Pinterest as ongoing labor. Giselle described her daily routine on Pinterest.

> Oftentimes, I'll revisit boards and I'll scroll down and filter—kinda to get rid of the older pins. I'm constantly updating and I might re-title boards. I'm still filtering through and trying to narrow down because I am a designer perfectionist. I am trying to figure out ways to clean it up or make it a bit more useful to what I'm feeling. It is constantly evolving. (Giselle, Denver, CO)

In the interview, Giselle also discussed how she has had the same the six to nine boards for the entire time that she has been using Pinterest and will continually edit these boards and delete pins that represent a trend. As a design product that represents her design aesthetic to various publics, she continually revisits and updates her boards to demonstrate her unique point of view and to signal her ability to be on the cutting-edge of trend discovery.

Meaning exchange with various publics. In addition to collecting images for their own inspiration, the designers in our study viewed pinning as engaging in a process of meaning exchange with range of potential publics. Beyond the general public, seven of the twenty designers reported that they were actively trying to *inspire* other design professionals, project teams, current and potential clients. Giselle described how she pins and composes boards with the purpose of inspiring other viewers in addition to herself.

> I pin things that bring a moment of pause for someone looking at my boards. I like the idea of pinning something that makes you stop and pause a bit. (Giselle, Denver, CO)

Giselle tries to pin in order to get the attention of other potential publics; her goal is to use the composition of images to have people see a certain point of view or open up meanings around images. Her pins and boards are the product of her design process meant to inspire and engage others as a kind of venture labor (Neff, 2012).

Designers in our study also engaged in a kind of affective labor of contributing to the community on Pinterest (McCoulough, 2015). For some designers, this meant building a network outside of their firm-related professional identity. For example, Julie suggested that she is also able to engage with other designers on Pinterest who share her aesthetic.

> The two pages that consistently get the most followers are my African textiles and my global textile style. That has made me feel good that there is this community and population out there that finds this stuff interesting and appreciates the aesthetic. It’s funny when you find other people with those interests and we all follow each other. There is this community out there and it just takes time to be introduced to that community. There is this big burst when you first join the community and the community grows and acknowledges you and finds you. (Julie, Brooklyn, NYC).

Julie's notion of community further blurs the line of work and leisure in ways that reinforce the affective labor central to Pinterest (McCoulough, 2015). In other social media platforms, having followers is a sign of social status and influence (Marwick & boyd, 2012). Julie’s description illustrates how some designers view the publicness of the creating boards as a way to exchange meanings and build shared ideas around niche interests and how that can extend beyond the online Pinterest community.

Discussion

Curatorial labor can be understood through the designers of this study as the ongoing affective and aesthetic selection and arrangement of digital images and mediated connections. The curatorial labor of the designers reveal evolving beliefs around design and digital objects, which in turn are shaped by the technological affordances of the platform itself. This study finds that the designers had developed their own norms and distinctions around creativity and originality through their digital curation. In valuing pinning over repinning, these designers have placed value in the labor of finding and discovering content outside of Pinterest, thus enhancing its originality in context if not in action, and the creative arrangement and combination of images. Bringing “new” found content from outside of Pinterest can be understood as a greater degree of contextual transformation and effort than the ease of repinning content from existing “found collections” within Pinterest. These designers felt it was their job to be continually “looking” outside of Pinterest in order to bring that original contribution to Pinterest.

The thin distinctions that the designers in this study made around what they consider “original content” stems from the fact that Pinterest makes visible that an image was repinned and where from. This visibility on Pinterest creates an environment where the designers had to manage community norms around originality in their pinning practices by not overtly repinning from other users’ boards or upon finding content on another user’s board. While the repin tagging was likely meant to enhance a sense of social connection amongst pinners, the designers in this study often made a purposeful decision not to repin from a user, but rather *pin* the same image from a website or source outside of Pinterest to perform originality central to their curatorial labor.

Chang et al (2014) suggest that pinning a diverse range of content, rather than specializing, attracts more followers on Pinterest. However, the designers in this study reported intentional specialization and delimiting of topics and pins over diversity of pins a strategy for self-presentation as a designer as a way to signal their professional design status and identity. For the designers in this study, their design aesthetic is both a process and a product that is reflected in their Pinterest work. Simultaneously, their pins and boards reflect their brand not in ways that could be construed as overtly self-promoting but within an “authentic” framework (James, 2015; Hookway & James, 2015; Banet-Weiser, 2012). More specifically, the designers leveraged the pins, the topics of the boards, and the aggregation and composition of the boards as identity performance as curatorial professionals. Additionally, whom the designers are following and followed by conveys professional expertise, signaling their role as influencers and not influenced by non-designers and further demonstrating the venture labor (Neff, 2012) at work for creative professionals Therefore, the designer’s performance, process, and products on Pinterest mutually constitute a curatorial labor that publicly conveys their original and professional value. For designers in our study curatorial labor on Pinterest was key to how they positioned themselves as visual creative professionals.

Unlike material objects, digital objects and their copies are nearly indistinguishable from each other (Belk, 2013; Lehdonvirta, 2012; Gray, 2006) and are easily shared (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013). Studying the labor practices of designers on Pinterest suggests that evaluations of creative value stem from *discovery of image* (effort to search and find image from huge amount of available content), *source of image* (linking to the original source of where the image originated from), *degree of contextual change* (in this case, distance from Pinterest site), and *amount of transformation* or innovative recombination (new combinations of images for new meanings on boards rather than perceived pre-arranged images).

The findings from this study suggest that while digital objects and their copies are seemingly indistinguishable and ubiquitous (Belk, 2013; Lehdonvirta, 2012; Gray, 2006), the Pinterest platform makes digital objects *distinguishable* by making the second copy travel with the note "hey this was pinned from so-and-so's collection." This study highlights that on a site such as Pinterest where digital objects are distinguishable, certain communities of users develop "norms that shape the negotiation of value" (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013, p.90). In the case of the designer community in this study, participants valued and evaluated the digital objects' originality and contribution based a series of internalized norms not around the originality of the object or even the originality image but rather the *originality of choosing the image*.

Curatorial Labor: Curation vs. Content Creation

Friz & Gehl (2015, forthcoming) suggest that Pinterest privileges *curation over creation*, where there is a strict divide between curation as "repining the already existing content within Pinterest" and the creation of something new and uploading it (p. 17). This study of professional designers suggests there is a middle ground of curatorial labor whereby the work of discovering, sourcing, contextually changing, and recombining with other images become the creative act. Curatorial labor is the performance, process, and production of design interventions for our creative professionals in a social media environment like Pinterest. Even though the majority of the design professionals interviewed *did not upload their own creative work*, the designers in this study see themselves in a curatorial role of creative author through their discriminating selection of pins (i.e. images of design by designers outside of Pinterest) and their creative composition of these pins on a board as an original design in of itself. The curatorial labor on Pinterest is a kind of venture labor (Neff, 2012) whereby the work is ongoing and not necessarily compensated.

Meta-composition is a central curatorial labor practice whereby design professionals came to understand what their profiles, pins, and boards together communicate about who they are. Meta-composition was an ongoing process of arranging and re-arranging digital artifacts and affiliations to convey and refine designers' creative labor. Whereas previous social media research has suggests that curation focuses on the selection and filtering of content to share with others (Hogan, 2010; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013), our research highlights the aggregate nature of online curatorial work. Our study suggests it is important to place attention on the shared digital artifact (e.g. image, video, link) not just as a singular object but part of a broader collective whether than be technologically explicit like a Pinterest board or profile page on Twitter. The meta-composition of boards by our participants is not that dissimilar to the tweeting practices of professionals whereby professionals delimit their topics in order to distinguish themselves as experts in their professional field (Marwick & boyd, 2010). The collection of digital objects, whether they be tweets or boards, reflects back upon the identity of the social media user who is aware of this and actively performs accordingly.

Publicness of Curatorial Labor

At the most basic level an exhibition is a primary method of communication and dissemination about works of art and does so through a temporally constrained display that helps communicate a particular point of view to viewers of the exhibit (O’Neill, 2012). However, the distinction here is that the final product of curation (the exhibit) is always public but historically the *process of curating* an exhibit—selecting works of art and arranging them has not typically been public. The digital curation within public institutions like libraries and museums has always been about the public nature of exhibition. However, for designers, who had been using mood boards as a kind of offline curation, exhibits of curation had occurred in mostly private, corporate spaces. This study suggests that the curatorial labor for design professionals on

Pinterest involves moving some of that creative process and product to a public stage. Significantly, the Pinterest platform shifted the offline private or semi-private creative labor of creating mood boards to a public form of creative labor.

On a site such as Pinterest, not only are boards public but the entire process of choosing and composing is public. There is no *behind-the-scenes composing of pins* function on Pinterest. The actual composition of curating is publicized. Followers receive notifications for each pin a user pins to board and Pinterest makes the source of pin/repin known and more importantly highly visible to the Pinterest community. At times, some of the designers in this study negotiated this publicness of curation and creative production by using the private ‘secret boards’ as a place for “storing” pins before they decided which board to pin them to or experimenting with composition of pins without the process being public. Several designers articulated their awareness of the “socially mediated publicness” (Baym & boyd, 2012) to Pinterest and their pinning when they explained how initially they started pinning images without being attuned to publicness of their pins and quickly changed their approach based on feedback from other users that made them aware of this publicness. Baym & boyd (2012) assert, “as people communicate publicly through social media, they become more aware of themselves relative to visible and imagined audiences and more aware of the larger publics to which they belong and which they seek to create” (p. 320). A number of designers in this study described rebuilding their boards after experiencing a heightened awareness of the *visibility of their pinning*. In many cases, the designers reported getting feedback that reminded them that they had an audience beside themselves— imagined audiences and the larger publics to which they belong including design industry professionals, clients, consultants, and friends and the more niche publics they hoped to develop and become a part of through their pinning.

Conclusion

This study makes two important contributions to internet studies. First, by exploring Pinterest use by design professionals, we demonstrate how visual social media platforms are operating within commercial and organizational contexts. Much of the work surrounding the adoption of social media by creative professionals has focused on sites like Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and Tumblr where the text, photos, and videos posted are created as aspirational labor (Duffy, 2015). Our study shows that professional designers on Pinterest create value by curating not creating content for Pinterest. Despite not pinning images of their own design work, our participants used meta-composition as a means of creating larger visual meaning across pins and boards.

A second contribution of this study is the explication of online curatorial labor as the complex interplay between the performance, process, and production of originality. While previous research has demonstrated the performative as well as selective nature of social media curation (e.g. Marwick & boyd, 2012), our study reveals these practices as creative acts of labor. Our study also highlights the processual nature of originality and its centrality to our participants' curation work. Their continued adding, culling, editing, and managing of pins and boards was vital to our participants and their curatorial work as creative author. Research on social media use has revealed the active management of social media profiles as part of a privacy and identity management (Madden, et al, 2013), but our research highlights how similar a social media practice can be a creative, rather than protective act. Instead of interpreting the deleting and editing of online materials associated with one's profile as privacy enhancing, when viewed through the professional or commercial lens, such acts reveal an active management of relevant information. In the case of our designers, managing their Pinterest content was an on-going authorial act of creative labor.

Future research should continue to explore how creative professionals use social media as part of their professional branding, creative process, and interpersonal communication. While this study focused primarily on designers working on commercial architecture, interior design, and graphic design work, additional research is needed on creative professionals in the design industries more broadly. Future research should also continue to explore how value is determined and circulated in online platforms across creative professional industries. Additionally, future research might examine how designers convey the value of their labor on more professionally oriented sites like.

Our study reveals that the performance, process, and product of curatorial labor of our design participants on a site like Pinterest were central to ongoing value production, both for the designers and their followers. We demonstrate how the public digital curation of visual images is an important part of the ongoing *venture labor* (Neff, 2012) of design professionals.

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CHAPTER 3 IS INTENDED AS A STANDALONE JOURNAL ARTICLE

CHAPTER 3

DIGITAL INSPIRATIONAL ECONOMY: SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE DIALECTICS OF DESIGN

In the early stages of the design process, designers draw on examples of existing designs as well as a range of creative visual imagery as *inspiration* for new designs (Eckert & Stacey, 2000; Keller et al., 2006; Herring et al., 2009). Many designers refer to the work of browsing, searching, collecting, and curating visual imagery as a type of design research that *inspires* new work and can serve as a form of “idea generation” for the design process (Herring, Jones & Bailey, 2009, p.5). For over several thousand years in Western literary culture, the term *inspiration* has had evolved through many “permutations” (Clark, 1997, p. 282). Moreover, accounts of *inspiration* have continued to persist throughout creative communities as a part of the process for creating ‘original’ work (Harding, 1940). Designers represent one such community. Historically, designers would collect physical visual imagery or sketch examples as a part of their sketchbooks (Lawson, 2004), or tear out pages from magazines or bookmark pages with post-it notes as references (Keller et al., 2009). Gradually, this practice of collecting design inspiration became digital with designers saving images from design websites and blogs to desktop folders and/or reposting on their own Tumblr blogs. More recently, designers brought their offline practices around collecting precedent imagery or *design inspiration* online to sites such as Pinterest (Scolere & Humphreys, 2016).

Designers' continual search for new approaches and exemplars that are inspiring technically or aesthetically is part of design culture (Herring et al., 2009; Lawson, 2004). Turner-Rahman (2008) points to early web design portals of the late 1990s as online design community spaces where the "central currency" was the sharing of links to "inspirational work" (p. 377). This was both a means of developing one's own work and reputation building. In the time since those early web design portals and the ushering in of design blogs, there has been a rapid rise in blogs, websites, aggregators, and social media platforms, which serve as places for "design inspiration." Design-centric social media platforms such as Bēhance and Dribbble along with popular social media platforms such as Instagram offer designers a place to share and promote their own design work. Increasingly sites pitch themselves to designers as places to "find inspiration" with websites such as Visual News asking designers if they "Need a hit of visual inspiration?" (Visual News, 2017) or social media platforms such as Designspiration, a place to "save your creative inspiration" (Designspiration, 2017) on boards. Popular Chrome extension plugin Muzli is billed as "like crack for designers" and aggregate content from design-centric social media platforms such as Bēhance and Dribbble delivering designers continual streams of "all the design inspiration you need" (Muzli, 2017) in the form of other designers' creative works. As designers use Pinterest to collect and curate visual imagery from platforms and websites outside of the platform (Scolere & Humphreys), creative visual content is continually circulating among digitally networked platforms.

While previous studies have focused on how designers use specific platforms such as Pinterest (Scolere & Humphreys, 2016), and Dribbble (Marlow & Dabbish, 2014), this study zooms out to take a broader look at the continual shaping and reshaping of what I term the *"digital inspirational economy,"* where one designer's creative content becomes another designer's design inspiration. Renown graphic designer and partner at design firm, Sagmeister & Walsh, Jessica Walsh (Walsh, 2016) described how *digital inspiration* brings up new tensions for designers in her weekly industry advice she gives on her "Ask a Question Mondays" through her popularly followed public Instagram account in response to a question about inspiration:

> “I think creativity is all about taking things that already exist and putting them together in interesting and fresh ways and inspiration libraries can help with that. I think the only thing you have to be careful with is not ever taking too much inspiration from someone within your own field, and never from one source. The more inspirations you have, the more varied and obscure, the more fresh your work will feel.”

Here, Walsh's cautionary about digital inspiration draws on best practices but also emphasizes the work of finding the *right kind* of inspiration- sources outside of the design field, multiple sources, variation, and unknown to others in order to create "fresh" work. These best practices for drawing on digital design inspiration represent a form of criteria similar those developed by the music industry as an attempt to “reinforce the eroding border between original and copy” (Sinnreich, 2010, p. 125). Yet, this tension plays out in new ways as part of visual culture of designers and through *socially* mediated platforms. As technology developers have leveraged the common design industry language of inspiration to describe the ways that these platforms and applications could fit within, perpetuate, and ultimately direct this design labor practice to happen among and within these sites, designers engage in continual work to manage their time and effort invested in browsing for inspiration while simultaneously creating new work that is inspiring. In these digital environments where designers are both actively *producing* design work aimed to 'inspire' and *consuming* design inspiration (intentionally and unintentionally), they manage an age-old tension between *inspiration* and *imitation.*

For graphic designers, whose work is largely about the innovative rearrangement or recombination of existing elements into new configurations, this tension between inspiration and imitation is not new and has been critiqued and discussed continually within the profession (Beirut, 2006; Hische, 2011). However, this familiar "original/copy binary" (Sinnereich, 2010) highlights new dimensions of work for designers.   I argue that when this *design process* practice is taken up within the context of the digital platform ecology, the dialectic between inspiration and imitation is amplified and follows social media logics. While there is a an ongoing history of graphic designers and artists more broadly being concerned with people co-opting or repurposing' their work in the early era design portals (Turner-Rahman, 2008) and 'stealing work' in online digital artist communities such as DeviantArt (Perkel, 2011) as a form of infringement, this study turns attention to the designers' increasing concern with *imitation from within design communities* or a what well-known type designer and letterer, Jessica Hische terms a "style rip-off" (Hische, n.d., para 3) within these digital platforms where the reputational stakes and the potential for compensation are increasingly higher.

Drawing on interviews with 56 graphic designers and participant observation within these digital communities, this article analyzes the digital work of designers as they manage the dialectical tension between inspiration and imitation within a design-centric social media ecology. I argue that the energy and time designers invest to continually manage the distance between *inspiration* and *imitation* within their own digital creative work and within the community to police the ownership of creative products and their own self-brand is a form of labor.

Literature Review

Creative Labor

Creative work in the culture industries has been largely defined by a culture of cool which emphasizes creativity, autonomy, and self-investment as a part of this “entrepreneurial labor” of new media workers and fashion models (Neff, Wissinger & Zukin, 2005). Moreover, Hesmondhalgh & Baker (2011) point to creative autonomy, high involvement in the work, and self-investment, among other aspects as contributing toward what counts as “good” creative work for these professionals in the television, music, and magazine publishing media industries. The emotional investment that is required of creative professionals due to the personal nature of their creative work is a kind of emotional labor that is necessary in order to maintain a certain appearance (Hochschild, 2012[1983]) embodying attributes of cool and creative (Neff et al., 2005) in order to build their professional networks (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011).

Designers share many of the same attributes and tensions around work that are reported by media industry creatives and workers in the creative industries more broadly. Collectively studies on creative industries point to precarious jobs with long hours and "bulimic patterns of working," (Gill & Pratt, 2008, p.14 see also Pratt 2002) low pay and high involvement and passion toward the work (Gill, 2010; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Neff et al., 2005; McRobbie, 2002, 2003). Engaging in project-based work, designers work long hours and often have a deep attachment to the work with their identity being fused to the creative work as a form of self-expression. Like other creative industries, the work that designers do is perceived by others as desirable, hip, and glamorous, thus carrying a cultural value of cool (Neff et al., 2005). Much like the new media workers or fashion models that Neff et al., (2005) studied, designers are evaluated through their portfolios of design work where they often manage tensions around the work they do for corporate clients and the more experimental creative work they hope to pursue.

Social Media Ecology

Increasingly users are thinking about the larger social media ecology as they make decisions about where to share content and tend to make "conceptual links between platform and audience" as they purposefully share content (Zhao et al., 2016, p.92). As means of resisting, context collapse on social media, users "compartmentalize" how they share content with differing audiences across the ecology of social media (Wilken, 2015). Van Dijck (2013) suggests that users deploy distinct personas based on their understanding of various platforms as a self-presentation strategy, often maintaining multiple accounts on the same platform (Duffy & Hund, 2015). Duffy et al., (2017) contend that social media users who are working to sustain creative careers tailor their personae to various platforms—a logic we term “platform-specific self-branding” based on the “imagined affordances” (Nagy & Neff, 2015) of individual platforms across a broad social media ecology. These imaginations are “constructed through the interplay between platform feature, assumptions about audience, and the producer’s own self-concept” (Duffy et al., 2017, p.1).

Social Media Self-branding. Marwick (2010) argues that Web 2.0 technologies, social media in particular, perpetuate self-branding practices as a central self-presentation strategy. Moreover, Marwick (2013) asserts that self-branding is “intrinsically linked to the features of social media technologies that make self-promotion on a wide scale possible” (p.166). As such, it is in the context of a post-Fordist capitalist economy that individuals are called to think of the self as a brand (Gandini, 2016; Hearn, 2008; Marwick; 2013). In the context of social media, reputation-building and networking are viewed as key investments for digital workers (Gandini, 2016). Creative workers are socialized to promote themselves and their work through carefully curated self-branding practices (Marwick, 2013). Gandini (2016) argues that although *digital workers* tend to place importance on their “skills and talent,” “one’s professional success appears to be ultimately related to the capacity to connect self-branding practice to the construction of reputational capital and the management of this asset over the professional network.” (p. 131).

The ‘Creative’ in the Creative Labor

Creativity is often seen as the key characteristic of a designer or artist (Littleton & Taylor, 2012). To that end, creatives are believed to possess “special talents, gifts, or abilities” that contribute to what Becker (1982) refers to as the “romantic myth” surrounding creative ability and creativity (p.14). This “imagined individuality” (Conor, Gill & Taylor, 2015, p. 5) of creatives or what McRobbie observed as the “designer as auteur” (McRobbie, 1998/2003, p.9) is persistent despite the fact that *coordinated conventions* by diverse stakeholders and contexts shape “art worlds” (Becker, 1982). Additionally, there is an “aura of mystery” that surrounds creativity (Bain, 2005, p. 30). Often, designers experience the creative process as “unpredictable” and struggle to manage the anxiety over the mechanisms of creativity (Wang & Ilhan, 2009).

Lee (2017) observes that creativity is the “most intangible—form of tacit knowledge”— a sort of “black box that transforms ideas into innovative products.” As such people “fetishize creativity,” which renders it seemingly “beyond critique” (Conor, Gill, & Taylor, 2015, p. 4). There is a tendency for those outside of the creative professions to “romanticize creative practice” which can result in an undervaluing of the labor involved (Bain, 2005, p.30). Further, Lee (2017) conceptualizes “creativity as labour” in the framework of “economic characteristics” of low productivity and “social consequences” of high diversity (p.1). For example, Lee (2017) notes that the work of artists is characterized by “labour irreplaceability,” where the diversity of the work is high or unique to the artist that it can be such that it is not substitutable by another artist’s labor (p.7). In contrast, other creative professions such as design “offer tailored creativity” —work that is “tailored to client’s demands” and thus the labor would be more replaceable (Lee, 2017, p. 7). As such, reliance of graphic design work on client driven problems means that the labor by one individual designer is viewed as *substitutable.* This ‘replaceability’ of the graphic design labor presents an ongoing challenge to designers to define and articulate their economic value in a market that may view their labor as *easily substitutable*.

Graphic Design, Inspiration & Practices

A primary professional design organization for graphic designers, the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) defines graphic design: "Graphic design, also known as communication design, is the art and practice of planning and projecting ideas and experiences with visual and textual content" (Cezar, 2015, para 1). Although spanning a wide range of areas in both print and digital including branding and corporate identity, annual reports, publishing, advertising campaigns, posters, packaging, motion graphics, wayfinding and signage systems for spaces, graphic designers share in common the work of "arranging type, form and image" (Cezar, 2015, para 2). Heller & Vienne (2015) refer to the work of graphic designers and digital designers as "a way of organizing, 'formatizing,' and functionalizing word and image" (p.15). Although "creating a completely original piece of work is unachievable because design is the process of rearranging existing elements into new configurations," designers still strive for originality in the way they reposition their new designs (Culliane, 2013, para 6). However, graphic designers are preoccupied with the continual “pursuit of newness” (Nixon, 2003, 2006) and ensuring novelty and freshness in their work.

In contrast to the sharing of remixed content of other creative content producers (Jenkins etc), the design work that graphic designers are sharing on social media platforms can be considered original design work that is created for clients or represents personal projects, also referred to as self-initiated work. Indeed, the term 'originality' is fraught in the creative industries and can become particularly nuanced for the graphic design profession which has long debated the issues of *imitation or derivativeness* (Beirut, 2006; Hische, 2011), which is fundamentally about the originality of new work. Moreover, graphic designers continuously negotiate issues of copyright infringement as they freely promote their work via these social media platforms. They are constantly policing brand, corporations, and other individuals who steal their work and use it without their permission. The rise of remix culture (Lessig, 2008; Manovich, 2005) and "configurable culture" (Sinnreich, 2010), has resulted an amplified attention to issues of copyright and originality. Most notably, Sinnreich (2010) analyzed these changes in the context of longstanding "binary distinctions" of a "modern discursive framework"— one of which is the primacy of the 'original' over a copy. Sinnreich (2010) draws out the distinctions between two concepts: 1). "Logic of *originality"* —"a copy is a work of art that attempts to replicate either the style or the exact form of another work" and 2). "Logic of *uniqueness*"— where the "term copy suggests either a forgery or a mechanical reproduction" (p. 51). The music practitioners that Sinnreich (2010) interviewed thought of this original/copy binary in a range of ways including: "configurability and style," "relationship to source materials," and "recognizability vs. obscurity of source material" (p.125-129). The graphic design industry draws on similar understanding around the *original/copy binary*.

From a legal standpoint, the design of new content (eg. logos, brand identity, advertising design, book cover, editorial illustration etc) is treated differently than for example the layout design of print or webpages, which is referred to as a "compilation" under copyright (Kattwinkel & Perkins, 2016). While the arrangement of type, image, and form results in original work and content and qualifies under copyright as "original works of authorship" (Kattwinkel & Perkins, 2016), a graphic designer's style exists in a grey area in which it is difficult for designers to have any protection for style imitation under copyright law (Graphic Artists Guild, 2013). There was hope among the visual arts and design community that the concept of "trade dress" under trademark law, which "protects an established look" might be a new avenue of redress for "claims of imitation" (Graphic Artists Guild, 2013, p. 41). However, in my interview with a visual artist and attorney, Amy[11] who specializes in copyright, trademark, and visual arts law, she observed how the approach of "trade dress" has had limited success in the courts thus far (Amy, personal communication, 2017, May). It is in this legal context that the graphic designers whom I interviewed brought up their growing concerns around "style imitations" occurring as part of digitally networked platforms.

Inspiration

Inspiration discourse. If *creativity* has been fetishized and is "beyond critique" (Conor, Gill, & Taylor, 2015, p. 4), then the term *inspiration*, as a part of the creative process, has held an even more contentious status with the "*discourse of inspiration*" embodying what Clark (1997) refers to as "a tight knot of different, even contradictory, claims about subjectivity, value, and productivity" (p. 3). In the context of literary tradition, Clark (1997) traced the evolving historical conceptions of inspiration over several millennia from "an archaic notion of inspiration as a dictation from another" to notions of a "privileged inner source of authority, insight, or transcendence" (p. 282). One constant of this theory of inspiration was "close relation between conceptions of inspiration and varying techniques of composition, the forms of imaginary subjectivity that are made possible by different technologies of communication and potential audiences" (Clark, 1997, p. 283). Clark (1997) points to Harding's (1940) "Anatomy of Inspiration" as an exemplar of such Romantic and post-Romantic assumptions of inspiration where "moments of inspiration" result in work that is original or "work of value"; a

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[11] Pseudonym used for this dissertation

"performative that ensures its own value" (p. 6-7). This is the notion that *being inspired* makes the resulting work of value or "inspired." Discourses of inspiration such as Harding's (1940) "Anatomy of Inspiration" emphasize seemingly contradictory ideas about labor. For example, Harding (1940) argues that inspiration as part of the creative process is "an automatism" (p.91) and can't be produced through effort, yet "preparation" in the form of developing one's "diversity of knowledge" ensures that one will be ready to connect ideas when the "moment of inspiration" strikes (p.xi). While Clark (1997) worries that the risk of studying inspiration is to take writers "claims to inspiration seriously," (p.9), the persistence of such claims within creative communities points to the degree to which *inspiration* is entangled in the *labor practices* of creatives.

Design Process & Inspiration. Designers represent one such community where the notion of inspiration persists. Legendary graphic designer Milton Glaser suggests that what separates design from art is the aspect of design as problem solving (Quito, 2016 October 31). Drawing on the rhetoric of problem solving as an identifier for the work practices of designers, collecting examples of existing design work allows designers to understand what has already been designed and how they might innovate on those existing ideas to create value around new products, services, and visual content. Collecting examples as a part of the creative process happens in the early stages of design to help develop a "visual framework" for defining the problem, to survey the existing solutions available as part of the market as a means for generating new ideas, and to validate a design direction (Herring et al., 2009, p. 89).

Collecting Visual Imagery. The work of designers is the rearrangement or recombination of existing elements into new configurations. Professional designers are trained in a very systematic design process of collecting existing examples of design, identifying patterns and typologies, as well as, points of departure, to inform future design solutions and innovations (Lawson, 2004). The collecting of examples as part of the design process is ingrained in design culture and education where designers are encouraged to build up their knowledge of design “precedent” or examples in order to inform how they develop new ideas (Lawson, 2004). Predating photography and digital images, young designers were expected to travel as a means of gathering and recording design precedent as a part of their sketchbooks (Lawson, 2004). However, unlike the use of precedence in law practice, which is about illustrating similarity, in design practice examples are used as *references* to develop a point of departure from existing designs (Goldschmidt, 1998). Often understood as a form of design research for a project, references “represent known instances of design that can serve as arguments in design reasoning” (Goldschmidt, 1998, p.266). Designers commonly referred to these existing design exemplars as well as a range of creative visual imagery as *inspiration* for new designs (Eckert & Stacey, 2000; Keller et al., 2006; Herring et al., 2009). Turner-Rahman (2008) points to early web design portals of the late 1990s as online design community spaces where the "central currency" was the sharing of links to "inspirational work" (p. 377). In a recent study examining designers’ use of Pinterest for creative work (Scolere & Humphreys, 2016), designers frequently used the term “inspiration” to describe the consuming and collecting of design work as part of the process of inspiration as well as their hope to inspire imagined audiences through their arrangement of pinned images. This contemporary digital context of social media and reference to inspiration provided the impetus to take seriously the pervasive use of the term and claims of inspiration of designers as a part of their creative *work*.

Method

Sampling & Recruitment

Acquired by Adobe in 2012, Bēhance is the leading professionally-oriented global portfolio sharing social media platform. With over 6 million members at the end of 2015, is one of the vastest online creative communities including strong presence of graphic and digital designers who maintain profiles and actively post work on Bēhance (Bēhance, 2015). For these reasons, I chose Bēhance as the sampling frame to recruit graphic designers who were actively developing their identities as creative professionals through digitally networked platforms.

This project draws upon in-depth interviews with 56 graphic design professionals, several Bēhance employees as well an interview with a prominent AIGA member and creative copyright attorney. As a member of the Bēhance platform and designer by training, I spent time getting a sense of graphic design network on Bēhance—frequently browsing work, looking at well-known agency profiles in addition to individual designers' profiles, examining the professional titles and descriptions of members. In addition, I became familiar with the American Institute of Graphic Arts sub-site of Bēhance, which featured the work of Bēhance members who had an AIGA membership. This work along with informational interviews with several design industry colleagues provided the backdrop to my formal recruitment of participants.

I employed several recruitment strategies to sample graphic design professionals who were Bēhance registered users. First, I posted recruitment messages on LinkedIn design-oriented professional groups including the *'AIGA' group and 'SEGD' group,* which represent key professional organizations for graphic designers. As a designer by training and profession, I appealed to my personal online networks for contacts. Additionally, I recruited directly from the platform, reaching out initially to graphic designers within the AIGA sub-site of Bēhance. My profile within Bēhance clearly listed my dual role of designer and researcher and I posted a recruitment link on my profile where a designer could fill in their information to be contacted for an interview. From these initial contacts, I employed a snowball sampling to recruit additional participants. Several participants promoted the study through their Twitter networks.

The participants included women (n=20) and men (n=36), ranging in age from 22 to 42 with a mean age of 30 (See Appendix). The sample includes participants working in large cities throughout the U.S. The gender divide of this sample is reflective of both the platform and the industry of graphic design. Although, the gender make up of Bēhance is not readily accessible, an interview with an Adobe/Behance employee confirmed that there are more male than female members (personal communication, 2016, December, 21). Additionally, the web traffic results for people visiting Bēhance are predominately male (Alexa b, 2017, July). This gender disparity is even more pronounced for people visiting the Dribbble platform based on the web traffic results of Alexa (Alexa c, 2017, July). When asked about other designers that I should interview as a part of this study, it was typical for both my male and female participants to *overwhelmingly* recommend or refer other male designers for me to talk to as a part of this study. In later waves of recruiting, I started asking specifically for recommendations of women designers.

While the majority of the sample of designers are freelance or independent designers, as is common in graphic design nearly all of the participants have moved fluidly between the roles of more *permanent employment* (as in-house designer, agency designer, creative studio) and project-*based employment* (freelance/independent). As such, the majority of my sample was composed of (n=41) designers who were employed as independent/freelance workers with the majority of those qualifying as *freelance business owners*. The remaining (n=15) designers were full time employees in agency, creative studio, or 'in-house' roles. Of these full time employees (n=2) were founders of studios with more than five employees and (n=8) were 'moonlighters' or part time freelancers in their spare time in addition to their traditional employment. Moreover, a number of my participants who were permanently employed by organizations or agencies engaged in part-time freelance work on the side. This sample of graphic designers fits within rising freelance employment trends that show that 34% of the American workforce is working as freelancers (Horowitz and Rosati, 2014). This survey conducted by the Freelancers Union in partnership with Elance-oDesk reveals a typology of freelance employment distinguishing between: 1). *Independent contractors* or ‘traditional freelancers,’ 2). *‘moonlighters,’* who are professionals with a traditional job doing freelance or project work in their spare time or in the evening, 3). *diversified workers* who have multiple sources of income including both freelance and traditional dependent work, 4). *temporary workers* who are individuals with a single employer, client, job, or contract project with temporary status as freelance workers, 5). *freelance business owners* who have between one to five employees and consider themselves “both a freelancer and business owner” (Horowitz and Rosati, 2014, p. 5). As such, many of my participants referred to themselves as independent graphic designers and fit the category of “freelance business owners” who had one to five employees and identified as *both a business owner and freelancer*. As such, these designers identified strongly with the culture of self-enterprise.

Data Collection & Analysis

I conducted 56 semi-structured in-depth interviews beginning in the summer of 2015 and continuing through summer of 2017. The interviews ranged from approximately 30 to 90 minutes and were conducted via phone or Skype. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy. This study was granted IRB permission by the author’s institutional review board. Overall, we structured the questions and the overall interview as “open ended process reflection questions” (Charmaz, 2002, p. 679) that would encourage the participants to reflect on their own usage. The interviews focused on a range of areas including

Bēhance platform use and motivations, work involved with promoting and sharing work through platforms, background and career aspirations, the design process, types of project work. I would ask participants to pull up their Bēhance profile and talk me through a specific project post.
As I started sampling, my interviewees were happy to discuss Bēhance but were very eager to tell me about their use of the smaller design-centric social media platform, Dribbble and popular social media platform, Instagram. Signaling larger trends in how users think about their decision to share content in the context of a broader social media ecology (Zhao et al., 2015; Wilken, 2015; van Dijck, 2013), the designers I interviewed were framing their use of Bēhance in comparison to the other platforms they were using across a sprawling social media ecology. Thus, I followed the lead of my interviewees and adapted my subsequent interview guides to allow for more discussion about the media ecology of platforms they were using as a part of their work practices. This lead my study in the direction of taking a social media ecology perspective for digital labor practices of design professionals. As a part of the interview process, participants' public social media profiles were accessed with their knowledge for background information as we prepared for and interpreted the interviews, but formal visual analyses of participants' pins and boards were not conducted. Drawing on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I approached data collection and analysis as an iterative process, moving continuously back and forth between collecting data and analyzing the data using a "constant comparative method" (p.102). The ongoing analysis of the initial interview transcripts allowed me to follow up on emerging themes in subsequent interviews and to follow up with interviewees, so as to continue to refine the categories and emerging themes during the data collection process. All of the names of the participants interviewed for this article are pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Brief Sketch of Design-Centric Platforms

Bēhance and Dribbble are the leading platforms for creative design professionals. Dribbble is the second most visited site for digital design, ranked just behind leading creative community platform, Bēhance (Alexa, 2017, July).

Bēhance

Founded in 2006, Bēhance is the leading professionally oriented global portfolio sharing social media platform. With over 6 million members at the end of 2015, Bēhance is one of the most vast online creative communities including product designers, user interface/user experience designers, architects, interior designers, illustrators, photographers, graphic designers and many more (Bēhance, 2015 Year in Review). Among these communities is a strong digital and graphic design presence. The site describes itself as “the leading online platform to showcase & discover creative work” where the creative world updates their work in one place to broadcast it widely and efficiently (Bēhance, 2017) (Figure 3.1). Founder, Scott Belsky sought to target the "creative professional community" and in the tradition of the portfolio, the defining content upload is "a 'project' - not an image" (Belsky, 2013, June 4). Acquired by Adobe in 2012, Bēhance is now directly integrated with Adobe Creative Cloud production software such that designers can upload their work directly from Adobe applications such as Photoshop to their Bēhance profiles. Since the acquisition, Adobe has introduced “Adobe Portfolio” which is a hosting portfolio website platform that is free to designers who have paid for a Creative Cloud software subscription. Adobe Portfolio provides Bēhance members with a way to distribute the same project updates to both their Adobe hosted personal and customized “portfolio website,” and their Bēhance profiles. The Bēhance acquisition by Adobe ensures that in addition to owning the sole production software for creative (Creative Cloud), Adobe now owns a distribution platform for creative content and connections to creatives. Notably, in Adobe's released memo detailing "Acquisition Frequently Asked Questions" about the Bēhance acquisition, Adobe detailed the value of Bēhance to Adobe noting "The addition of the Bēhance community to Adobe's Creative Cloud offering positions Adobe as the only company with the opportunity to integrate he entire *creative process"* (Adobe, 2012, December 20). Further, as part of the value Bēhance adds, Adobe draws on the "inspiration" aspect of the creative process, noting the reciprocal aspects of inspiration: 1). "*Get inspired* by searching and browsing the galleries on the Bēhance website or in their mobile app," and 2). "let your work *inspire* other creatives" (Adobe, 2012, December 20).

Couched in language of 'creative meritocracy,'— Bēhance is accessible to anyone who wants to create an account. In addition to individual designer profiles and agency profiles, Bēhance partners with professional graphic design organizations such as the American Institute for Graphic Art (AIGA) and design schools who pay to create portfolio galleries. Companies pay to post jobs and have access to creatives. However, some creative directors just create a profile and search Bēhance without necessarily posting jobs and paying for access formally. Although, Bēhance came out with a mobile application option, it is most widely used and experienced by the creative community as a 'desktop' interface because of the types of creative intensive work that is being uploaded by registered members.

Individuals create profiles and post projects, also called case studies, which are composed of multiple images—usually three or more images. Bēhance includes basic social feature capabilities such as following, commenting, and 'liking' work, which is termed *'appreciating'* within the Bēhance community. Bēhance is open to browsing by non-members but with limited filter search capacity. Search functions allow work and profiles to be filtered by 'design profession' (aka graphic design, interior design, photography), geographic location, and tags (Figure 3.1). Registered members' work can be featured with in the main Bēhance gallery or within topical sub-galleries such as illustration, web design, branding etc (Figure 3.2). Projects are 'hand-selected' to be featured in the galleries by two Adobe/Bēhance employees who work in the role of Bēhance curators.[12] A project can have multiple owners in order to attribute work to a team of designers.

Dribbble

Founded in 2009 by designers *Dan Cederholm* and *Rich Thornett,* Dribbble as a "side-project," Dribbble is much more design-centric platform than focusing on digital, graphic, and user interface designers. Recently acquired by Tiny, Dribbble describes itself as "Show and tell for designers," and bills itself as a place where "web designers, graphic designers, illustrators, icon artists, typographers, logo designers, and other creative types share small screenshots (shots) that show their work, process, and current projects" (Dribbble, 2017) (Figure 3.3). Unlike Bēhance, to be a full member on Dribbble, a person must be "drafted" as a player through an invite process by an existing design member or platform administrator. As such, Dribbble is structured around a tiered access model and uses the metaphor of basketball for the organization of the platform. A full member ('player') has the ability to post work (shots), follower other designers, view and comment on work by other designers. Non-members ('scouts') can follow players and view work, but are unable to comment or post their own work. Companies pay to post jobs on a job board and members can pay a monthly fee to have a 'Pro Account' with a 'hire me button.' In contrast, to the Bēhance post as a multi-image project, the Dribbble post is defined as a ‘shot’—a 300 x400 pixel post. Designers are limited to no more than 24 shots in a month, a policy enacted to prevent ‘over-promotion’ and control the potential for spamming. Dribbble has more integrated social networking features than Bēhance including profiles that are connected to Twitter handles, ability to follow and display follower counts, liking capabilities, commenting. More recently, Dribbble adopted a ‘direct mention’ feature (@user) similar to Instagram, allowing for more directed social interaction among members.

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[12] I've interviewed Bēhance curators as a part of this larger project to understand how they work and the process of curation and featuring within the community. The interviews with the individual designers and registered Bēhance members indicated that there was a lack of clarity around how one came to be featured.

Findings

With the rise in design centric social media platforms, design blogs, and design inspiration aggregators, the term “inspiration” has become standard terminology for the creative work by designers that is served up across a digital ecology. While the term inspiration has long been embedded in creative culture (Clark, 1997; Eckert & Stacey, 2000; Harding, 1940), the digital turn has increased the popularity of the term as observed by Joel, a freelance graphic designer in Virginia:

> “You see the word inspiration pop up on so many art blogs and design blogs and design websites now, and of course you have a website that's literally called Designspiration. I mean that's a great website, but it's a testament to how much the word inspiration has become part of the designer language these days.”

Designers in this study reported using a variety of blogs, websites, and social media platforms to search for design inspiration. Many of the designers who participated in this study described how many of the same sites that they had profiles on and were promoting their design work within, also served as sites for design inspiration. The most commonly reported sites used for digital inspiration were also the key platforms used for self-promotion of creative work Bēhance, Dribbble, and Instagram. Other social media platforms such as Designspiration and Pinterest were more frequently used for organizing and curating inspiration rather than the sharing of one’s own work.[13] Hannah pointed to the reciprocal nature of the sharing and consuming of creative work as a form of currency within a digital inspirational economy:

> "Social media platforms and those geared towards designers make that possible for you to not only share your work as inspiration but for you to gain inspiration from other creatives."

Designers frequently talked about the ways they used platforms for inspiration in comparison to other platforms and often grouped platforms together regarding how they used them as a part of the design process and for particular types of design inspiration. For instance, California based creative director, Laura explained the variety of resources she draws on for digital inspiration.

> “I use this Chrome extension called... I think it's called Muzli? And every time you open a new tab it has like eight different things that are popular on the Internet right now, or just design inspiration. And that'll be anything from somebody's new website that they designed to a Bēhance thing or Dribbble thing or whatever. And then I use Pinterest and Designspiration for design related thinking. I also really like siteInspire. I use that one a lot cause I'm a terrible web designer and it's probably like the latest web design stuff on there.”

For Laura who is a graphic designer and doesn’t specialize in web design, inspiration can serve as means for getting up to speed on the latest designs. As more and more channels are created for displaying content, designers are ever increasingly required to master a wide variety of skills including designing for a variety of interfaces, websites, social, print to meet the need of their clients.

In particular, many designers viewed Pinterest as a "tool" for collecting and organizing inspiration. For Ross, even though he would sometimes search for inspiration on Pinterest, he explained *"a lot of the time I'm using it for a tool to categorize certain inspiration for projects."* Similarly, Jayla pointed out how she will use Pinterest for *"mood boarding"* to "study a theme" and use that to *"collaborate with clients."* Other designers like Conor used Pinterest as a *"source*

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[13] Evolving social norms about platform “self-promotion” policies as well as technical affordances of the platform.

of inspiration" for consuming content where it was about as Hannah put it *"getting on Pinterest and devouring imagery*." Independent designer Mitch uses both *"Pinterest and Bēhance to find stylistic references"* once he has developed a concept to help communicate the look and feel of a print treatment such as a *"white on white emboss."* Other independent designers like Andrea made distinctions between the purposes of individual platforms: *"Bēhance is the place I go to publish my work. Pinterest is where I go to get references."* The distinctions Andrea makes are related to different kinds of labor: self-promotion versus the work of the design process: Bēhance for promoting original design work and Pinterest is for collecting images as a form of design research. However, these distinctions varied among the designers I spoke with based on how they constructed or "imagined" the affordances of each platform (Nagy & Neff, 2015).

Inspirational Labor

I highlight the 'work of inspiration' for designers, as 'inspiration' becomes part of a digital inspirational economy where the currency of one designer's creative content becomes another designer's design inspiration. The continual time and effort invested in browsing for inspiration while simultaneously creating new work by these designers can be conceptualized as a form of labor—*inspirational labor*. Popular platform, applications, and websites frame *inspiration* as something fun, easy to get, and digital. I argue that this framing obscures the work involved with inspiration—as a process and a product. Within the context of the social media ecology, the dialectic between inspiration and imitation is amplified and is shaped by social media logics. I have identified several key tensions that designers negotiate as a part of the work of inspiration within digital networks.

1. Being inspired vs. Getting Inspired
2. Abundance vs. Filtering
3. Visibility of Self-brand vs. "Style Rip Off"
4. 'Overinspired' (Imitation) vs. 'Inspired By'

5. Connection vs. Callout

These tensions illustrate the digital work designers do to ensure that their inspiration doesn't become imitation through the following practices: 1). Developing strategies for managing digital inspiration—collect, filter, curate, avoid, monitor. 2). Strategically policing the boundaries of ownership of work, styles, approaches through practices of giving credit, call-outs 3). Managing the reciprocal nature of the digital inspirational economy of being inspiring and being inspired carefully sanctioned boundaries of social media platforms where brand/reputation is dominant. Further, these dialectics help to illuminate the contours of evolving work practices and the ways in which designers are continually challenged to assert to their economic value in the broader creative economy.

Being Inspired vs. Getting Inspired

Designers largely conceptualized 'being inspired' in terms of Romantic and post-Romantic notions of a "sudden illumination," which was mysterious and unpredictable (Clark, 1997; Harding, 1940; Wallas; 1926). In contrast to the passivity of "being inspired," designers discussed 'getting inspired' in decidedly *work-oriented terms*—an active consumption and collection of design examples.

Being Inspired

One of the challenges of being a designer is managing the anxiety around the seemingly *unpredictable* nature of creativity (Wang and Ilhan, 2009). For Seth, inspiration is "*hard to predict when it comes and how it's gonna come.*" Based on his experience he felt that if inspiration "*doesn't come in the first five minutes, it's gonna be difficult. Then, it's gonna be this grueling multi-week project of explorations, feeling down on yourself and wondering if you're going down the wrong way.*" This unpredictability along with the understanding by designers like Mathew that inspiration is also a "mental state," motivates designers to continually work to invest in their perceived sources of inspiration or ‘getting inspired.’ In other words, designers often describe the tension of the requirement to *be inspired* to do creative work with the effort necessary to manage the uncertainty of maintaining their creativity, understanding the source of their creativity or overcoming what they refer to as ‘creative blocks.’ Drawing on traditional notions of inspiration as mysterious, magic-like and passively received (Harding, 1940), designers talked about the idea of *being inspired* in subjective terms. Laura described how *"it's that unquantifiable thing that is really hard to put into words and to describe but you can just tell when somebody's work has that excitement behind it."* Conor proclaimed, "*If I didn’t feel inspired I definitely wouldn’t do what I do. I wouldn’t be producing any work that I’m proud of.”* However, this link of "being inspired" to the ability to produce "good work," was a source of frustration for Sebastian who struggled with the unpredictability of the design process:

> "I think (being inspired) is somewhat overrated… I mean I think it’s a job so inspiration is important but you can’t… I don’t know… at least not for me… I don’t think a lot of people… I know I’m not living in a constant state of inspiration. More often than not, I’m like searching and I have no idea what to do."

For many designers, this continual browsing visual content is viewed as a type of work that is central to being a designer- a means to ‘being inspired’ to do the creative work they do as designers in order to earn a living through their creative abilities.

Getting Inspired

While ‘being inspired’ is an experienced ‘mental state’ designers chase to feel like they can successfully create novel design work, designers framed “getting inspired” in distinctly work-oriented terms. ‘Getting inspired’ is the work of consuming and collecting visual inspirational images to help them prepare to do their design work. Common with creative endeavors more broadly, there is sense that you need to “prepare” to be able to *be inspired*

(Harding, 1940). For many designers, this work of *consuming inspiration* was viewed as an investment in being inspired to do creative work in the future. Steward explained that inspiration was "*viewing a whole bunch of stuff, and almost overloading your mind with colors and shapes and typography, illustration, and it's immersing yourself into what you see."* Continuing, Steward lauded the ease of digital platforms as a source of inspiration for his process: *"It can literally come from anywhere, but social media can be a great place because everything is readily available to you and there's so much of it, and it makes it really easy."* Similarly, Kenneth noted, "*As opposed to 10 years ago, the internet has made it so fast to get results, and to get swipe*[14] *and reference material"*. Echoing Kenneth's observations, Hannah pointed to the efficiency of digital platforms as key to being evaluated as a "better designer" in terms of market value and employability.

> "As designers we're always talking about how to become more efficient workers. The faster you are at what you do, the better designer you're considered because you can complete tasks faster, you can make more money, you're more employable. And so all these digital platforms fall into that thinking- that the easier you can access something as inspiration or as a reference to do better work, the more efficient you will be."

Hannah's sentiment aligns with the positioning of the Bēhance platform as a solution to the "inefficiency" of the "creative world" and was premised on the idea of efficiency as a way to give creatives time to do great work: *"We believe that great work should spread efficiently across the globe [..]*" (Bēhance, 2017). The efficiency and access to visual content packaged as design inspiration offers designers an opportunity to increase productivity. This is increasingly important for freelance and independent designers in an industry where creativity is typically understood as "low productivity" (Lee, 2017, p.1). Similar to the value proposition of these websites and platforms, many designers subscribed to the mentality that experienced designer Stephen referred to as *"the more you take it in [of digital inspiration], the more it'll come out of you."* Many designers described the importance of continually browsing these platforms and consuming creative content as part of the process of getting inspired and collecting *inspiration*.

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[14] "Swipe" and having a 'swipe file' or 'folder of swipe' is terminology long used in graphic design to describe the process of collecting ideas for future reference in order to jump-start the creative process. Refers to the longstanding creative practice of recombination of existing ideas in new ways or as Austin Kleon states "steal like an artist"

For many designers browsing for inspiration was an "everyday" part of their work. Leila, for instance, described her frequency of browsing *"for inspiration everyday or every other day and with more intensity if working on a project."* Echoing Leila's approach, Joel explained his routine: *"Normally everyday I open the computer and the first website I visit is probably Dribbble as far as browsing other people's work."* Steward considers his work finding inspiration as a form of *"researching"* and a *"continual process"* that he commonly does *"throughout the whole day, and everyday"* In terms of *"time looking for inspiration,"* Mark emphasized, *"Yeah, I don't think it ever really stops."*

Modes of Inspiration. Designers often described “different modes of inspiration,” which aligned with (Herring et al., 2009) findings about "active" vs. more "passive" modes of searching for inspiration online. Ross described a *"very focused"* and *"goal-driven"* inspiration mode for when he is working on client work and was *"seeking something specific."* He contrasted that with a more *"serendipitous"* mode of browsing as a *"creative outlet."* However, rather than just being simply a "passive act," many of the designers I spoke with assigned a great deal of importance to the continual non-project specific browsing as a form of investment in their creative ability. For instance, Andrea viewed this continuous browsing as being "*for the investment of your creative view which happens naturally as you are browsing,"* emphasizing that it is *"something you do everyday— like breathing."* For instance, Conor tried to *"look at new stuff every day"* as a means preparing for *future* creative project work:

> ″I feel like it's something that needs to be fed constantly, just so you're always ready, like *your inspiration tank* needs to be full, and if you're treating everyday like you'll be full then when you need to like bust a job out—you'll be ready"

Conor's use of the term "inspiration tank" is a direct reference to continual investment for future work. Much like other forms of labor that rely on temporally delayed payoff (Keuhn & Corrigan, 2013; Duffy, 2017; Neff, 2012), the work of inspiration is about investing time in collecting references *in the present* so that the designer will be inspired to create new work in the future. In this way, the bid to use digital platforms to 'find inspiration' or to 'get inspired' is about making the intangible and unpredictable aspects of creativity tangible and productive. Digital platforms offer designers *efficient* places to 'find inspiration.' As such, the value proposition that these digital sources make is one of continual investment—inspiration is something you need to find, collect, pin and the more work you put in, the more creative you will be. This notion was especially heightened for freelance and independent designers who relied on their creativity to earn a living. "Time spent looking for inspiration" became a way to buffer against the precarity of their employment. While these interviews show a relative consensus and shared meaning of the term inspiration among designers, a few designers mentioned that in client contracts they often referred to this work of inspiration as 'design research.' However, this doesn't always capture the ongoing inspiration work designers are participating.

Abundance vs. Filtering

Designers managed their exposure to the unprecedented abundance of digital design inspiration with the *work of filtering* how they consumed inspirational images to avoid contributing to the 'homogenization' of design work.

Abundance

For designers, who are using these platforms to both share their own design work and consume creative content as a part of their design process, this equates to a dizzying amount of visual design content that is accessible. As one designer put it, even just the platform Bēhance alone is the equivalent of *"drinking from a fire hose"* for design inspiration. As designers continue to use these digital platforms as a part of their design process there is a pervasive feeling that amount of digital design inspiration available to designers is *overwhelmingly abundant*. Independent Brooklyn based lettering design Ray expressed how overwhelming this intake of visual content felt. He explained,

> "When you start to consume all these images all day, everyday design and projects. Everything just looks so similar. You start getting a creative block type thing. It is like a saturation of information. It made me feel—it is saturating me and feels overwhelming."

Yet, designers felt compelled to continuously consume design content because it often motivated them to aspire to push their own creativity to new levels. Cole described this motivation as the *"feeling I get when I look at someone's work and feel like starting over, starting from scratch."* However, in the context of this abundance of digital inspiration, the volume of visual content combined with the pressure designers feel to produce new and fresh ideas can lead to what Jordan described as a feeling of "paralysis."

> "I think people need to be careful for a few reasons. You could see a lot of stuff on Instagram and you're like "Oh everything is done," and then paralysis sets in and you don't make anything. I've seen that happen quite a bit. I think that's when it becomes a hindrance versus inspiration becomes, again paralysis sets in. You're like, "Everything's been done. Fuck it, I'm not going to make anything"

Jordan’s experience of social comparison was pervasive throughout the sample of designers with designers like Joel describing a culture where *"you are never satisfied with your work."* To set limits on their consumption of other designers' work, many designers employed filtering strategies.

Filtering

Brooklyn based freelance designer and Illustrator, Max described how the shift from accessing design books, Tumblr, or design blogs for inspiration to the platform culture of incessantly producing and sharing visual content has necessitated filtering out:

> "Now, we are so inundated with visual stuff. People think this is a great thing. It's almost like you have to tune it out. I think there's so much more stuff to look at. To me, it almost becomes overwhelming and you just kind of have to disconnect them altogether. There's just too much out there. Part of my job is maybe to filter through or, I don't know, somehow disengage."

Without constant filtering and "consumptive curation" (Davis, 2017), this volume of content that designers engage with as a part of these platforms became stifling to the design process. Nearly all of my participants voiced the concern about the abundance of visual content influencing their work—leading to what they termed a "homogenization" or similar look of design work among these digital networks. Thus, filtering became a way to avoid 'homogenization.' For example, Jessica decided to curtail her time spent "looking and exploring these sites" because of the "homogenization of work and the styles." In the context of the original/copy binary (Sinnreich, 2010), "homogenization" stems from a number of designers *drawing on the same sources* for creative work.

Many designers developed strategies for negotiating this tension between the compulsion to participate for their social and economic benefit and the constant barrage of visual content that some like Jessica viewed as "dangerous" to their creativity and ability to produce new ideas because it might lead them down the path toward imitation. For instance, Jessica elaborated on her new strategy to try to avoid using digital platforms for finding inspiration:

> “I don’t look at it. I just feed it. I feed it like a pet. I put the projects up and like my friends' stuff and leave. I intentionally step away and look for my inspiration elsewhere.”

Moreover, Jessica’s comment about “like my friends’ stuff and leave” is a direct reference to her social media activity of ‘liking’ or what scholars have referred to as “compulsory sociality” of required networking as part of building one’s career in the creative industries (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Gregg, 2008; Neff et al., 2005).

Many designers such as Brooklyn based independent designer, Lindsay shared concerns about how actively engaging with social media might begin to impact their creativity and ability to produce work that they felt was innovative and even more worrisome— resemble too closely the work being showcased on these platforms. Lindsay offered this concern,

> “Social media makes it really... You can follow the best of graphic design accounts, there's a best of illustration accounts. But a lot of it really just shares the same sorts of things, but it feels a little over-saturated. And that worries me too is that, if I'm looking at these things all the time, is my work going to be heavily influenced by these sort of force-fed projects?”

This idea of being ‘overly influenced’ by consuming digital inspiration from the same sources was pervasive among designers. This concern was tied to compulsion to *both participate* and *curate* one’s consumption of digital inspiration. Sebastian, a part-time freelance graphic designer, described the how he felt compelled to participate for his own reputational benefit:

> "If you want to be present on Instagram you do have to engage and interact and comment on other people’s work so you can’t help but see what everybody’s doing and it’s kind of struggle trying to fight the homogenization I guess of design on there because everything is starting to look the same with everyone doing the same stuff and the same stuff is kind of getting a lot of attention so it’s tempting to do that so I guess that’s the other end of looking for inspiration on social media."

For designers trying to sustain a design career, there is an ever-growing mandate to maintain their profiles, share their creative work, and build their following across a wide ranging social media ecology. Part of this work means that they are constantly exposed to and interacting with the design work of other creatives. Massanari (2012) argues that the stakes for participation on social media are different for professional groups such as graphic designers. While everyday users can decide not to participate, creative workers who are trying to promote their portfolios and build their reputations can't opt out (Suhr, 2015). Moreover, Sebastian's reference to 'the same stuff is getting a lot of attention, so it's tempting to do that," points to what designers saw as the 'other side' of consuming digital inspiration—imitation. Imitation that was in part, motivated by the attention-garnering environment of social media.

Visibility of Self-brand vs. 'Style rip-off'

Designers are encouraged to develop a unique style or point of view to their creative work. This becomes part of their economic value—being able to differentiate their creative approach from others. In competitive environments, designers and illustrators are advised to "develop a strong, recognizable style" (Taylor, 2012, p 1). This is especially true for freelance designers who are hired based on being known for a 'thing' or a particular style. In the context of self-branding on social media, it becomes particularly important that freelance designers curate a specialized and coherent visual style so they can be easily identified and tapped for that particular kind of work. Much like other creative workers who were constantly developing diverse skills as a form of future job security and 'keeping up' (Gill, 2010; Neff et al., 2005; Neff, 2012), the majority of the designers I interviewed were constantly learning new techniques to make them more nimble for future opportunities. While many of the freelance designers I interviewed were generalists and had a wide background of design skills, on social media they made calculated decisions about their self-presentation in order to put forth a more 'specialist' point of view. This meant only sharing and promoting work for a particular style and veiling the rest of the portfolio of work that didn’t fit in with this criteria. Designers took up this broader mandate of self-branding on social media to present a ‘consistent’ narrative seriously (van Dijck, 2013b). As such, designers viewed this ‘specialist’ self-presentation approach as resulting in a stronger brand presence and higher likelihood of being hired for freelance work.

Independent D.C. designer Mark described how having a *distinct and recognizable style* was amplified in the context of career oriented social media platforms such as Bēhance and Dribbble:

> "When you go (to a designer's website), it's just someone's portfolio so you're only looking at their work within the context of their own work. But when you look at it on the portfolio site like Bēhance or Dribbble, or something like that, you're looking at one specific person's work within the context of a sea of other work. And I think it becomes a little easier... It's like you become familiar by way of differentiation."

While the feeds of many of the social media platforms allow for comparison of content, platforms like Bēhance and Dribbble have activity feeds and featured galleries or popular feeds which are organized in infinite scrolling style where thumbnail images of projects (Bēhance) or a "shots" (Dribbble) appear side by side in a grid. In data presentation, Edward Tufte (1990) advocates for a technique known as "small multiples" that is premised on the idea that by holding constant the design of presentation, there is an emphasis on "changes in the data" that allows viewers to "make comparisons at a glance- uninterrupted visual reasoning" (p.67). Similarly, the consistency of the grid within these feeds and galleries, allows for designers *and potential clients* to easily make comparisons between designers' works in a way and scale that has been unprecedented. The affordance of visibility and searchability of social media in how content is aggregated within these social media platforms has created an environment in which a distinct visual style is a requirement for being *visible*. As such, the affordances of social media platforms, the call for prolific self-branding, and the culture of design hiring practices has compelled designers to publicly perform a unique brand style on social media. Moreover, these easy comparisons between designers afforded by social media platforms have also enabled designers to quickly spot *style similarities or imitation* between designers.

"Style Rip-offs"

While designers were prodded to make their "design work" highly visible in the form of a consistent self-brand via platforms career oriented creative platforms, this also opened them up increased *vulnerability* to imitation or to what renown letterer and type designer Jessica Hische referred to as a "style-rip-offs" (Hische, n.d., para 3). Similar to the distinctions made by the designers in my sample, Hische makes a distinction between a *"true rip-off"* where someone reuses an image without permission or copies an image exactly and a *"style rip-off"* where someone imitates the style of your work (Hische, n.d., para 5). This thin distinction is taken up by designers in part because *style imitations* exist in a grey legal area that don't have protection under copyright law like a 'true rip-off 'would. This is in part because they stem from two different types of logics. For these designers "true rip-off" is seen as a form of stealing and fits under what Sinnreich (2010) refers to as the *logic of uniqueness* where a "copy is a mechanical reproduction" (p.51). In other words, the 'true rip-off' clearly qualifies and is afforded protection under copyright infringement.[15] As such, designers like Mathew were often unsure about how to classify the practice and referred to a style imitation as 'a very hard thing to balance.' He explained,

> "How do you have a conversation with someone that's a world away from you saying, "You know what, it's somewhat unprofessional to somewhat copy the style of my work and then say you were inspired. I don't know if that's a copy?"

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[15] This doesn't diminish the seriousness of the constant threat that designers and artists are under by theft or repurposing of their work and their ability to take action against those who have infringed upon their creative work. The contemporary case of Modern Dog was on the minds of many of the designers I spoke with.

Mathew’s observations also point to the ways in which designers struggled to determine the line between *inspiration and imitation*, when the resulting work wasn’t an exact copy or reuse of the original work. Freelance designer, Simon observed how seeing a designer garner attention and visibility for a particular style in the form of followers on social media could serve as a powerful motivator to imitate another designer’s visual style:

> “There are a lot of designers that are seeing, "Okay, this person has 150,000 followers and he's doing this type of work. I can do that type of work." And then they try to do the exact same thing and then they post it. And it's like this cyclical process of people copying the same style but in different..(ways).”

In an interview with *Fast Company*, designer and critic Michael Beirut noted that trying on a style or approach was low stakes because within graphic design, "the turnaround is so much quicker, you can experiment with something, try it out, discard it if it doesn't work" (Budds, 2015, October 9). The scope and short time frames of graphic design work affords designers the ability to easily try out styles and relatively 'instantaneously' share that work across the social media ecology. As such, imitation of style online was shaped by both the *aggregated visibility* of work (means), the *metric cultur*e of social media (motivation), and the *medium* of digital graphic design work (opportunity).

‘Over-inspired’ (Imitation) vs. ‘Inspired by’

Designers navigated the tension between imitation or what they termed being *‘over inspired’* with the notion of *‘inspired by’* as a way of giving credit for the source(s) of their inspiration. As a part of this digital inspirational economy where one designer's creative content becomes another designer's design inspiration, designers were concerned being ‘over inspired’ or influenced by the content they were consuming because of the compulsion they felt to both participate in these platforms for their reputational benefit and to consume design inspiration. Designers invested time an energy to manage the distance between the digital *inspiration they* *consumed* and they design work they produced in order *to avoid imitation.* As such, the design community developed platform specific norms around the explicit articulation of references or sources of inspiration— by using the term 'inspired by' to give shout outs to other designers and as a means for initiating new work. At times, mentions on social media became a currency that facilitated situations in which designers could more easily extract value from the work of other designers. As such, 'inspired by' was increasingly viewed as a superficial form of attribution.

'Over inspired'

Many of the designers described *imitation* in terms in a largely sympathetic manner that downplayed aspects of infringement including: "being over inspired," "way too inspired," "taking too much inspiration," and "reference it [someone's work] too much." For instance, Texas based part -time freelance designer, Luis asserted that *"you don't want to* ***overdo*** *your inspiration."* because that would be seen as imitation. Indeed, the notion of imitation was viewed through the logics of originality— derivativeness or a lack of creativity rather than an issue of infringement. This was also largely in part due to the grey area of where 'imitation' falls legally under copyright law and the longstanding practice of designers learning how to design through the imitation of other designers— known as a form of design practice (Hische, 2011). Walking the line between inspiration and imitation was continual work for these designers—labor that was amplified in part by the social media logics of these digital platforms.

Some designers framed imitation in terms of the issue of abundance—or too much exposure to visual design inspiration. Freelance designer, Simon explained how he felt the practices of scrolling through social media could easily lead to copying:

> "Yeah 'cause some people could get too sucked into the idea of like, "Okay, I'm gonna scroll through Instagram," and they'll see something and then they'll be like, "Okay, I'm

> gonna create something like that." And then they'll look at that or **reference it too much**. And then that's where the copying starts."

Simon's use of the term "reference it too much," can be understood as the distance or relationship to the sources of inspiration. Stephen pointed to the vast quantity of visual content that designers are "*consuming so much all the time"* and resulting in *"a lot of stuff out there that looks really similar."* Stephen took a stronger tone—referring to this practice more explicitly as 'plagiarism': "*I think what I've observed happening over time as social media has gotten huger, especially within the realm of creative is that plagiarism is becoming a huge issue."* This range of terminology around imitation suggests that this is an evolving tension within the design community—a tension that has been amplified through the availability of digital inspiration via social media. Many designers are cognizant of younger designers or design students "practicing" a style and then posting it on social media and understand that the publicness of these platforms creates an environment where imitation is prevalent (Hische, 2011). Many designers tend to overlook these situations because most designers will admit to having copied styles as a way of practicing and learning design—the difference now is the publicness of the practice on social media platforms. However, the seemingly sympathetic approach to 'style rip-offs' shouldn't belie the concern designers felt about the real implications of these style imitations on their economic capital.

Stakes. Designers expressed worry that "being over inspired" could lead to a development of an *identifiable style* based on someone else's work— which then could lead to recognition and potential future compensation. Freelance designer and illustrator, Keith explained how once someone gets hired to produce a certain style, it can be self-reinforcing where designers continue to create work in that particular style.

> “Inspiration can go to your head wicked quickly without you even realizing it. People aren’t maliciously stealing from you. They are just **way too inspired** and then next thing you know; they aren’t really developing their own style. Especially, if they start mimicking that style and get paid or hired for it. And they think that is their style and it just takes off from there. It can be poisonous.”

What is at stake here is the reach and speed of which, these digital platforms make possible the circulation of design content and community recognition for particular design content. Sebastian recounted how after launching a new series on Instagram he immediately *"started seeing other people doing it."* He described his mixed emotions about the event: " *It was flattering that people were inspired, but some of the early adapters were pretty... had a pretty big following. There's this one guy in particular who has quite a large following, and he just decided to do his own series of mosaics, basically, the same exact thing."* This became compounded by the fact that very soon after, the design community was already incorrectly attributing the project to *both* Sebastian and the designer who had been "inspired by Sebastian," perpetuating the incorrect "inspired by" project even further within these platforms. He explained,

> “And so that felt kinda weird. And since he had started fairly early on, I had only posted two of them before he started, so people converged us in their mind. Some people said, as they were doing their own, they started saying, "Well, I was inspired by Sebastian and Zed's project."

Sebastian expressed his anxiety about how he reached out to Zed privately to hold back and doing more of the same work until he had a chance to get his series more established to no avail.

> "I tried to explain to him that with his following, it's really... People will start associating the project to him, and if he could just hold off for a couple weeks while I had time to churn a couple more out. But he decided to not do that anyway, and just sort of went ahead."

This scenario points to the problematic situation where a designer, regardless of experience level, has a larger follower count and decides to ‘rip-off’ a style or approach of a designer with a smaller follower count. A follower count within these systems has become such a marker for “success,” that it wields power and can serve to disrupt the traditional power differential of more experienced designers getting the best opportunities. Those with more followers are more likely to get hired, so metrics often trump ‘experience.’ Ultimately, a designer with a larger follower count who “*rips off*” work may prevent a designer with a lower follower count from being able to successfully extract value from their work and novel contribution.

‘Inspired by’

While common in creative fields to talk about your inspirations, in these digital platforms the term "inspired by" has become common technique to give credit or to link to someone else's work. In this way, the sheer abundance of digital media ‘inspiration’ has resulted in the explicit articulation of references or sources of inspiration—the term ‘inspired by’

When navigating how someone could have handled giving credit better, Keith advised, *“You can say‘ hey it might be cooler if you said you were inspired by this person."* Other designers like freelance lettering artist and art director, Dina emphasized the *way* in which another designer *"gave credit"* publicly mattered:

> “So sometimes, people were calling it out going, 'Yo, this looks very much like Dina's stuff' And in which case he would say, 'Yeah, I definitely took inspiration from her work. I really love what she does.' And so, I think in part, him acknowledging publicly that, [..] 'Yes, you were here first, and, yes I've found some version of this I wanna carry forward into my own work but I don't want to harm you in terms of work output.' That was really beautiful"

Dina's point about ‘referencing as credit’ invokes a distinction Monroy-Hernandez et al., (2011) make between *attribution* and *credit* where credit is "an explicit acknowledgement, an expression of gratitude, and an expression of deference, in a way that a simple attribution cannot" (p.3422). Rather than simply attributing a design with a name, credit goes beyond attribution —becomes more meaningful and does more work publicly on these platforms.

However, the term "inspired by" as a mechanism for giving credit within the social media environment has become increasingly fraught with tension. Within the design community, there is a growing distaste for the term *inspiration* because of the feeling that it has come to mean what Joel referred to as "loosely copied." This frustration is echoed by Mark, “*I think 90% of people who use the word inspiration, that's the same thing as saying, "something I can loosely copy.*" Mark continued to explain his interpretation of "inspired by:"

> “I think a lot of people, I think that's what they unintentionally mean. I feel like I've just read interviews and somebody's like, "Oh, I was inspired by this." And then you go and look at that thing and it's a carbon copy. And I don't think that's talked about enough. It's so easy to get away with taking somebody's work these days.”

At times, the use of the term "inspired by" creates an *unwanted connection* between two designers and their creative works. One Michigan based independent graphic designer, Mathew recounted his experience:

> "This gentleman, he copied my work. Not literally but he copied the style of my work and said, "Oh, I was inspired by Mathew. So it's funny, I'm like, "Okay, well, at least he put some credit to me," But his illustrations in my opinion were crap. I'm like, I don't want my name associated with that kind of [design work]..."

Since these platforms are public facing, an "inspired by" mention serves to link designers and their work in ways that the person being linked to has very little control over and in ways that seem to sanction the similar work. Mathew’s comments also point to the way designers have made a distinction between ‘copied work’ (exact re-use of image) vs. ‘copied the style’ of work. This thin distinction points to ways in which designers have bracketed off ‘copying style’ from other forms of copyright infringement.

Similarly, Sebastian pointed to the way in which the person who copied the style of his work made his connection to Sebastian *appear closer* than it was by referring to Sebastian as "my friend" in his Instagram post. He explained,

> “I don't know him personally, even though he *referred to me as his friend* when he says he was inspired by my project, but I've never met him, or really spoken to him.”

Sebastian's dismay about being 'referred to as his friend,' speaks to what van Dijck (2013) refers to a "conflation between human connectedness and automated connectivity" that occurs on social media where the offline meaning of 'friend' as someone you know well is transformed to mean "strong and weak ties" (p. 13). In this way, ‘inspired by’ as a term used on social media to reference another designer’s work as an influence for one’s own work takes becomes less about credit or “expression of gratitude or deference” and is perceived as a *superficial form of attribution*.

Of growing concern is the way that ‘inspired by’ on social media platforms is viewed as a *mention* that has social and economic currency attached to it. This is especially true when the designer who is ‘inspired by’ another designer has a higher follower count on social media. Dina felt that some designers emboldened by their follower counts and clout viewed the mention of ‘inspired by’ as an equally beneficial trade for taking an idea and running with it). She quipped,

> “So, it's strange. Like, the social component is just a whole different monster in terms of, 'Well, I took inspiration from you, so let me throw you a bone of, throwing your name on it, and maybe you'll get a hundred followers. You're welcome.' That sort of thing, and people seeing that as currency for an idea."

The social media metrics of follower counts becomes a power differential that serves to further complicate the practices of credit and attribution. This points to the power of follower counts within these systems. Those that carry larger followers wield more power and prestige or have more currency to leverage. Comments on social media are a form of “currency” (Duffy, 2015a). As such, a ‘mention’ on social media acts as currency—currency through which the value of inspiration can be extracted. These "inspired by" attributions fundamentally allow the person to get value from another designer's labor in multiple ways— both the design work and their promotional self-branding work.

Connection vs. Callout

Designers negotiated a delicate balance between ensuring that their own work was fresh and not overly derivative and policing the boundaries of their own unique style from would be imitators. Within these design communities, designers repeatedly reported how they became aware of someone copying their style from *peer designers*. Since there weren't legal courses of action for style imitations, the community relied on self-policing of style infringements to try to curb style imitations. Independent designer, Mark extoled the monitoring and policing that goes on within these online communities:

> "But anytime one of those things has happened, the person who tipped me off to it was somebody from Dribbble or Twitter or another social media platform. I think there's definitely a sense of people having one another's back for sure."

However, these designers were *always concerned with reputation* as they navigated promoting and protecting work. The design industry is a small community where everyone knows everyone. To this end, scholars like Duffy (2015a) have pointed out the primacy of *reciprocity* in these online communities. Further Gandini (2015) argues, "collaborative for freelancers outperforms competitive since reputation is their most valuable asset, and jobs come from recommendations, referrals, and word of mouth" (p. 133). For this reason, many designers whose work had been imitated chose to privately reach out the person infringing on their work. For example, Keith expressed how 'calling 'someone out about being "too inspired" would ultimately reflect poorly on his reputation. He explained,

> "Very often people will send work to me they say, " did you do this" Nope. This person was really *heavily inspired*. If it is clearly someone who really likes my work a lot and

> they just so happen to be a *little too inspired*- I will message them privately. I try not to make a stink of it because it can be rude because they might not understand that perspective yet or it just looks petty. *My goal is to make it look like I don't care about those things because I'm too busy focusing on my work and my future rather than looking back at who might be inspired by me but I will message people."*

Similar to Keith, many designers carefully managed their interactions to downplay how much it *seems like they care* about their work being copied in order to avoid 'looking petty.' This emotional management served as a longer-term reputation building strategy for developing connections within the community. Especially for freelancers, this strategy was a form a risk management in the face of precarious employment conditions—an investment for future potential opportunities within close knit design communities.

This concern over 'appearing petty,' is socially easier when a 3rd party does the work to publicly call attention to the person who "copied" someone's work. Mark expressed how common the practice of screenshotting work and posting it publicly on Twitter as a means to alert not only the designer but also the person who did the copying.

> "Of course, Twitter, I think, is just built to call people out for their foul deeds. But, yeah, I can think of a lot of instances where I'm going through Twitter and somebody's posted a screenshot of like, "Hey, look. Person B copied our friend's work." That happens a lot. Public shaming is good and bad to an extent, but the fact that there are people there who are willing to comment about that publicly and put out in the space, "Hey, this person did something bad. I'm this familiar with this person's work that I can identify that this other thing was a rip-off."

Based on platform affordances, designers made strategic decisions to deploy content in platform-specific ways within a larger media ecosystem to accomplish their goals. Here, Twitter was used a means to publicly elevate an incident that occurred within the more insular design-centric platforms such as Dribbble. "Call-out culture" is certainly endemic to the Internet and has been used as tool to call out inappropriate behavior (Ahmad, 2015; Nakamura, 2015). These designers use *call-outs* to police the boundaries of ownership of particular styles- an area that isn't afforded protection under copyright law. However, while other design colleagues might ‘call out’ the infringement publicly, the designer whose idea was being used would publicly maintain the approach of ‘taking the higher road.’ In one such instance that I observed, the designer publicly de-escalated the call-out situation by reassuring the community through a comment that the two designers had talked. On Instagram this took on the following form,

> @hey [concerned designer who did the calling out (3rd party),] appreciate the thought but Zed and I talked in private and we're cool.

The use of ‘we’re cool’ is a form of what Gandini (2015) refers to as ‘performative practices of sociality” that acts as an investment in social relationships for the sake of reputation (p.134). Designers’ continual management their consistent self-brand and "inspiring" presence while protecting the territory of their design is a defining aspect of the work of inspiration.

Social Norms around Inspiration & Value

Being inspired in the right ways. To counter these concerns about having their creative work overly influenced by all the design inspiration that they are continually consuming, designers are continually shaping and reshaping the norms around practices for consuming design inspiration in order to distance themselves from imitation. These norms were often described in terms of the obscurity of the inspiration sources and relationship distance between the inspiration source and new work—topically and temporally.

Look outside the discipline of design. Some designers described how they felt that inspiration should come from outside of the field or discipline. Particular platforms like Bēhance which featured full case studies of graphic branding design projects, were described as places where searching for inspiration might lead to imitation. Mitch explained, "*Personally, I find it really weird to go through graphic design projects on Bēhance to get inspiration to do graphic* *design projects."* Similarly, Mathew, avoided Bēhance for inspiration because he didn't want to *"muddle"* his brain *"looking at project work."* Instead he opted for platforms like "Designspiration" where he could find a particular type of inspiration: *"I just wanna see a lot of visual play when I type in the color, if I look for red, I wanna see everything."* Many designers described the most valuable inspiration as content that wasn't about final solutions but rather about abstract ideas about patterns, textures, and "visual play." As Luis mentioned, *"I'm not ever going to look for exactly what I want to do—'Cause I think that could get you into a dangerous place."* Mitch echoed this concern: *"If you look at logos to create a logo, then you will create logos like everyone else has created. It keeps things interesting to look in different places."* In order to great novel work, senior graphic designer Stephen described evolving to a more purposeful approach to avoid creating similar content:

> "So what I try to do personally now and with my team... I guess I'll say personally, I follow a lot of stuff that is outside of my realm of expertise and is inspiring me in different ways so I can make new connections and new ideas for visuals and it's just more exciting that way, too. There's a lot of really interesting artists and photographers and illustrators out there that can all inspire you and influence the work you do as a graphic designer or a branding professional."

This concept for developing new ideas aligns with the notion that inspiration to create new connections comes from exposure to diverse information (Harding, 1940). Many designers described looking to fashion, photography, and art as places outside of the field. However, this is further complicated by the various smaller subfields and overlapping areas of specialization within this community. For example, there are lettering specialists, designers who specialize in illustrations, type designers who work on branding projects, and designers who work on advertising campaigns involving art direction and photography. This norm around looking outside of the field, really came down to looking at things unrelated to what you are creating.

Draw on multiple sources instead of a singular source. Since part of the design process is about the recombination of ideas or "taking ideas that already exist and then repurposing them," Simon a freelance designer emphasized how *"you can't take too much from one thing, you have to take little pieces from everything"* to avoid creating something that was too similar to previous work. Keith maintained, *"It's a matter of how many different tiny inspirations you are taking rather than just grabbing one big inspiration."*

Timing: Continuous browsing. Some designers developed strategies for how they timed their browsing for inspiration to help ensure they wouldn't be too directly influenced for a particular project. Luis's described his strategy: *"I kind of like to constantly be looking over a lot of things and then when it comes time to do the project, hopefully I will have been sitting and thinking about something in the past that I can kind of cue up and it will inspire something"*

Look to experiences offline. In response to the overload of all visual design inspiration online, several designers described the best way to avoid the influence of online content was to draw on offline experiences. Designers like Noah are continuously refining their strategies for inspiration in response to digital context and in particular pushing back against the popular notion of needing digital design inspiration to do creative work.

> I feel like the definition of it has changed for me over the past couple of years or so. When I started I kind of looked at inspiration as something that I needed to kind of track down. I was always scouring the web for things that were going to immediately inspire me on a project I was working on. I think for me at least the more healthy way to look at it is to see inspiration as more of a result than something I can initiate myself. It's almost like… I try now to kind of put myself in places where I can by kind of osmosis almost, soak these things so whether it's going to a show, or being outside, or just being with friends that I find inspiring. So then, I'm almost loading my mind with these moments that I can pull from in my own translation when I'm working"

Constant monitoring of existing design work. Constant access to design inspiration resources via these digital platforms, made many designers feel that it was their responsibility to know what had been created before in order to create something new.

This tension came up time and time again as they made thin distinctions around how they used these platforms to consume creative content as a part of their design process in particular ways that ensured that they didn't draw too much inspiration from others' work. Mark explained, “I try to be very cognizant of not using the sites for "inspiration." However, Mark followed this up by explaining how he does scour platforms such as Dribbble to monitor what other designers have created:

> “Actually, one thing I'll mention that actually is really good is it's a good archive of things that have already been done before. So, it makes it a lot easier to... If I have an idea for an illustration, and I think that there is a chance somebody else has explored something in a similar way, I'll do a pretty exhaustive search and make sure that it hasn't been done.”

Moreover, Will monitored his feeds to avoid creating work that was too similar: "*When I work on projects I try to look at what other people are doing, to make sure I don’t do any of them."* These efforts by both of these designers points to the tension between inspiration and imitation—where continual monitoring and scouring of these social media platforms is simultaneously a means of differentiating your product and ensuring you aren't creating work that is too similar to existing work. As such, part of the work of inspiration is trying to control their process by setting boundaries on the ways that they use these social media platforms when part of their job is to be have an expansive knowledge of what is being created where it feels as though, through these digital platforms they have what freelance business owner, Jessica described as *"access to the whole world."*

Discussion and Conclusion

While discourses of inspiration have centered on issues of “subjectivity, value, and productivity” (Clark, 1997, p.3) and emphasized the automatic nature and preparation needed for inspiration (Harding, 1940), this article examines the *work of inspiration*. As an increasing number of platforms, websites, and applications pop-up and position their services as places to "get a hit of inspiration," they frame design inspiration as fun, easy to get, and decidedly *not work*. I argue that these digital activities of designers can be framed as 'inspirational labor,' which I define as reciprocal, future-oriented, and ongoing form of creative production.

The findings illustrate the *amplified* time, energy, and effort that designers are investing in digital inspiration as a part of their creative processes. Just as historical notions of inspiration were shaped by the context of communication technologies (Clark, 1997), this study finds that contemporary conceptualizations of inspiration are being shaped by digitally networked platforms and their audiences. In the era of digital platforms, the largely invisible and private work of inspiration has become a *public* and *socialized* creative work practice. Moreover, the digital inspirational economy compels designers to make the work of inspiration *visible*. As such, the logics of social media platforms have made the work of inspiration never ending.

In this article, I've mapped out the key tensions of *inspirational labor* experienced by designers using these design-centric social media platforms including: 1). Being inspired vs. Getting inspired, 2). Abundance vs. Filtering, 3). Visible Self-Brand vs. "Style Rip-offs" 4). "Over inspired" vs. "Inspired By," and 5). Connection vs. Call-out. These tensions illuminate the ways inspirational labor both draws on traditional Romantic and post-Romantic notions of inspiration and challenges these same notions of subjectivity, value, and productivity.

Designers largely conceptualized 'being inspired' in terms of Romantic and post-Romantic notions of a "sudden illumination," which was mysterious and unpredictable (Clark, 1997; Harding, 1940; Wallas; 1926). In contrast to the passivity of "being inspired," designers discussed 'getting inspired' in decidedly *work-oriented terms*—an active consumption and collection of design examples. Embedded in design psyche is the need to 'be inspired' to do ‘good’ creative work. Many designers vehemently clung to the notion that ‘good work’ was the result of 'being inspired.' Clark (1997) referred to this assumption about inspiration and value as “a performative that ensures its own value” (p. 6). As such, getting, finding, discovering inspiration was actively pursued to shore up the likelihood of ‘being inspired.’ To that end, digital platforms offered designers *efficient* places to ‘find inspiration.’ In this way, the bid to use digital platforms to ‘find inspiration’ or to ‘get inspired’ is about making the intangible and unpredictable aspects of creativity tangible and productive. The value proposition that these digital sources make is one of *continual investment*—'inspiration is something you need to find, collect, pin and the more work you put in, the more creative you will be.' Thus, designers perform ‘getting inspired’ through visible collecting and consuming digital content.

Designers managed their exposure to the unprecedented abundance of digital design inspiration with the *work of filtering* how they consumed inspirational images to avoid contributing to the ‘homogenization’ of design work. Designers saw homogenization as a result of everyone drawing on the same sources of inspiration from digital galleries, popular boards, and featured work on digital platforms. As a part of this digital inspirational economy where one designer's creative content becomes another designer's design inspiration, designers were concerned being ‘over inspired’ or influenced by the content they were consuming because of the compulsion they felt to both participate in these platforms for their reputational benefit and to consume design inspiration.

Designers invested time an energy to manage the distance between the digital *inspiration they consumed* and they design work they produced in order *to avoid imitation.* As such, the design community developed norms around the explicit articulation of references or sources of inspiration— by using the term ‘inspired by’ to give shout outs to other designers. Thus, mentions on social media became a currency that facilitated situations in which designers could more easily extract value from the labor of other designers. Moreover, the "inspired by" attributions fundamentally allowed the person to get value from another designer's labor in multiple ways on social media— both the design work and their promotional self-branding work. Lastly, designers prioritized connections over direct callouts for style rip-offs in order to develop their reputational capital. In this design community, which relied on referrals for work, 'being positive,' collaborative, and generous were viewed as more beneficial long-term strategies for career success. As a result, a defining aspect of inspirational labor was the continual emotional management of self-presentation to uphold an ‘inspiring’ presence while protecting the territory of their design is a defining aspect of the work of inspiration.

Norms of Inspiration. The interviews suggested that to combat the sheer abundance of digital content and the worry about homogenization of drawing from the same digital sources, designers are actively shaping norms around ‘being inspired in the right ways.’ These norms were often described in terms of the obscurity of the inspiration sources and relationship distance between the inspiration source and new work—topically and temporally. Similar to music industry (Sinnreich, 2010) but taking on distinct *visual characteristics,* designers deployed several strategies for drawing on digital sources including: 1). Seeking out work outside of the design discipline (art, photography, etc), 2). Drawing on multiple sources of inspiration rather than a singular source, 3). Continuous browsing (rather than searching specifically during a project), 4). Constant monitoring of design platforms to ensure you are not accidentally imitating, and 5). Look to experiences offline rather than online sources. These practices were informed by the context of social media platforms and designers trying to find unique sources from which to draw inspiration to ensure novelty in their own creative work. The thin distinction between a ‘real rip-off’ and a ‘style rip-off’ by the design community signals how the everyday risk of imitation has been internalized and normalized despite or perhaps because of the real economic impacts to one’s creative career that are a part of making one’s design work public and visible.

Altogether the work of inspiration took a highly visible nature as mediated through social media platforms. As such, inspirational labor is marked by continual monitoring, comparison, consumption of digital images, and production of creative work *made to inspire*. As such, the technical platform features resulted in the display of organized and aggregated design work in such a way that afforded an unprecedented visibility and comparability of design work. The consistency of the grid display within these platform feeds and galleries allowed for designers *and potential clients* to easily make comparisons between designers' works. This has resulted in additional work on the part of designers. First, this *comparability* makes it easier for designers to see similarities in work, make judgments about the degree of similarity, and then callout designers for being ‘too stylistically similar’ in a way that would have never been possible before. While this can be read as a positive in that it allows for self-policing, it also feeds a hyperawareness to similarities between styles. Through my conversations with designers, noticing similarities between styles was a highly subjective evaluation yet seemed to coalesce around common understandings of what was considered imitation. With reputation stakes being very high, a public social media callout could mean a big hit on a designer’s career and future employment.

Second, this same comparability afforded by social media compels designers, especially freelancers to put forth a unique and recognizable self-brand through the aggregation of design work posted. In the context in which individuals are compelled to participate in self-branding on social media (Duffy; 2017; Gershon, 2017; Hearn: 2008; Marwick, 2013), designers' digital work is a form of brand content distributed across media ecologies As such, I argue that in *aggregate* this brand content being produced by designers represents an established look meant for the purposes of distinguishing one's product from another designer's work. Yet, this same push to develop and promote a visible brand style of work, left designers open to few options for legal recourse from would be imitators because there isn't a copyright for aggregate works and trade dress hasn't been a widely effective claim (Amy[16], personal communication, May 23, 2017). This finding suggests that for creatives who are increasingly compelled to hype their original design work and ideas via social media networks, there are real risks to being able to hold on to their unique economic value in the face of imitators and platforms which help shape the 'look' of the design work that becomes popular.

So while there was this compulsion felt by designers to make inspiration 'visible,' there was also resistance by designers against inspiration being *too visible.* Being visible meant that sources of inspiration and original design work could be easily repurposed and imitated. At times designers struggled with the publicness of inspiration and what it meant for their ability to ensure novelty in their own creative work. On one hand, '*revealing' visual sources* of inspiration on public digital pin boards was a means of promoting one's self-brand. On the other hand, *concealing visual sources* on private boards was a way to prevent others from drawing on the same sources—a tactic deployed in the face of homogenization. Designers continually negotiated this tension between *protection* and *promotion* of design work.

The dialectical nature of the digital inspirational economy is that as the work of inspiration becomes never-ending, the popular invocation of the term 'inspiration' also serves to

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[16] Pseudonym used

downplay the work involved in the creative design process. In contrast to terms like ‘references,’ ‘precedent,’ or ‘design research’ which are arguably more work-oriented, the call to rely on digital platforms and apps for ‘finding inspiration’ reduces the design process to ‘it is as easy as finding images’ to use for new designs. While there is a shared understanding of the meaning of the term inspiration within the creative and design communities, it becomes a bit more problematic outside of the creative communities, obscuring the work involved to would-be clients. Some designers viewed the rhetoric of digital sources representing a one stop shop for ‘creative ideas’ as effectively downplaying the designer’s role and value in the creative process. As such, some designers pushed back on the popular notion of needing digital sources of inspiration for their design work and instead emphasized their own abilities to draw inspiration from offline sources such as experiences—experiences such as travel, going to museums, and foodie experiences that carried signaled cultural capital and inspiration as coming from ‘within.’ Inspiration discourse has long drawn on the notion of “internal source” for creativity (Clark, 1997). These graphic designers draw on a similar notion of *inspiration as internal* for the purposes of value creation. Emphasizing the source of inspiration as ‘internal’ served as a means for increasing designers’ unique economic value in the creative industry—creative talent that is unique to them. This was especially important for graphic designers whose “tailored creativity,” (Lee, 2017, p.7) could be viewed as *easily substitutable*. This ‘replace ability’ of the graphic design labor presents an ongoing challenge to designers to define and articulate their economic value in a market that views their labor as *easily substitutable*.

Being visible also meant that inspiration could be increasingly quantified. Legendary graphic designer, Milton Glaser asserted, inspiration is “something that’s not easily quantifiable” (Pashkow, 2005, p. 228). However, when inspiration is taken up within these platform systems, it becomes a *commodity*, becomes quantified and tangible. It can be pinned, saved, shared, concealed, and revealed. As such, social media metrics also suggest *who is inspiring* and *which types of content are inspiring.* The implications of this *metric culture* on designers' work will be further explored in the subsequent chapter on 'Entrepreneurial Labor of Portfolio Building.'

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CHAPTER 4 IS INTENDED AS A STANDALONE JOURNAL ARTICLE

CHAPTER FOUR

Entrepreneurial Labor of Socially-Mediated Portfolio-Building

The design industry, a part of the broader creative industries, places emphasis on the neoliberal ethos of "flexible working conditions, project-based employment structuring, multi-skilling, entrepreneurship, and individualism" (Julier, 2017, p. 52). As such, the design industry is characterized by broader economic and organizational post-Fordist trends in labor such as work precarity and contract-based work (Gill and Pratt, 2008). These employment conditions and neoliberal ideas of individuality and self-governance provide the backdrop to narratives of creative self-enterprise. Neff et al., (2005) point to the *entrepreneurial aspects* of creative labor as workers manage the risk of flexible working conditions with the 'coolness' of their jobs, while building their portfolios. Designers, like other creative workers subscribe to ideals of creative autonomy, self-investment, involvement and passion for the work (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). Building on the concept of *entrepreneurial labor* of new media workers and fashion models identified by Neff, Wissinger & Zukin (2005), this study examines the *digitally networked* entrepreneurial labor of professional graphic designers who are using social media platforms to build and promote their design portfolios.

For the graphic design profession, which "relies heavily on freelancers" (Heller & Fernandes, 1999, p. 196), portfolio building is vital to sustaining a career. In particular, graphic designers get hired as freelancers across a wide range of media industries including book publishing, editorial, advertising, and film. Moreover, graphic designers frequently move between contexts of employment including— freelance/independent work, advertising agencies, design consultancies, small creative studios, and companies outside of the design sector

(Castillo, 2015). As they move among various contexts, graphic designers are always open to participating in freelance work as a way to build their design portfolios. Along with creatives' "embrace of entrepreneurial and individualistic ways of working" (Nixon, 2006, p. 104), the idealized autonomy of freelance lifestyle is part of graphic design culture. Directives for all creatives to "work like a freelancer" (Christmann, 2012) serve to further idealize the continual networking efforts and self-promotional practices of temporary workers as the *futur*e of what it means to be successful creative workers in the “new economy.”

Similar to other knowledge workers, designers' careers are portfolio driven where the sentiment "you are only as good as your last job" (Blair, 2001) rings true. As is true for many creative aspirants, portfolios serve as a form of design industry credentialing, which "conflate job skills and clients' prestige" (Neff et al., 2005, p. 311). Design labor, already “intensely performative” in the way designers perform what it “means to ‘be creative’ or designerly” becomes increasingly amplified in context of self-branding on social media (Julier, 2017, p.15). The *design portfolio*, which has always been about self-promotion tailored to a specific audience becomes more malleable and harder to pin down as it becomes digital and moves across various social media platforms. As the digital design portfolio becomes subsumed in social media platforms it becomes entangled in the inevitable “*context collapse”* (Marwick & boyd, 2010) on social media platforms which bring together peer-designers who may serve as collaborators, art directors and creative directors who often hire freelance and independent graphic designers for various media sector work, companies, ad agencies, and design consultancies scouting for talent, and clients and brands across a diverse range of industries who seek to hire designers directly. To manage this “context collapse” (Marwick and boyd, 2010), designers like other creative workers “continuously negotiate their self-presentation activities” through “platform specific self-branding” across a broad social media ecology (Duffy, Pruchniewska & Scolere, 2017, p.1).

Gandini (2016) argues that "the management of the content posted and the networking activity are perceived as two equally fundamental aspects in the marketability of a digital worker for the acquisition of a reputational capital" (p. 130). For graphic designers, the *content posted* makes up a fluid portfolio of design work, which acts as the centerpiece for their professional self-branding practices in pursuit of what Gandini (2016) terms "reputational capital” (p.136). With the burgeoning rise of the visual on social media (Highfield and Leaver, 2016), the market for high quality visual ‘content’ is in high demand by individual producers as well as corporate brands. In this context where everyone is called to be “content creators,” professional graphic designers are both experimenting with new brand sponsored opportunities and clinging on to professional expertise and identity to distinguish themselves from a range of perceived amateur groups such as bloggers and influencers engaging in similar self-promotional practices.

Graphic designers offer an opportunity to highlight the contours of self-branding practices as traced through the visual content of a creative portfolio and the *entrepreneurial labor of portfolio-building* within the context of social media logic. Using the design portfolio as an analytical lens, I detail the entrepreneurial labor practices of graphic designers in the context of social media platforms.

Literature

Creative Work and Portfolio Careers in the New Economy

Changes in advanced capitalist economies brought on by “new communication technologies, globalization, and neoliberal policies have resulted in increasingly insecure labor conditions” (Keuhn & Corrigan, 2013, p. 15-16, see also: Harvey, 1990; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Gill, 2010). In this context of work, the risk and responsibility is shifted from the organization to the individual (Gill, 2010; Neff, 2012; Neff et al., 2005). The 1990s saw the rise of "enterprise culture" as a key business notion that emphasized "certain enterprising qualities—such as self-reliance, personal responsibility, boldness, and a willingness to take risks in pursuit of goals" (Du Gay, 1996, p. 56). McRobbie (2002) observed that creative work was increasingly characterized by neoliberal ideals of "entrepreneurialism, individualization, and reliance on corporate sponsorship" (p. 515). As such, creative workers participating in precarious project-based and freelance work were held up as what Gill and Pratt (2008) critiqued as "model entrepreneurs" (p. 1) and the future of work (Florida, 2002) for their embrace of the entrepreneurial ethos. Collectively studies on creative industries point to precarious jobs with long hours and what Gill & Pratt (2008, see also Pratt 2002) term "bulimic patterns of working," (p.14) low pay and high involvement and passion toward the work (Gill, 2010; Neff et al., 2005; McRobbie, 2002, 2003; Ross, 2003). Similarly, design professionals embrace the entrepreneurial ethos and individualism highlighting how design work fits with larger work patterns of *flexible, project-based employment,* and *multi-skilling* (Julier, 2017, p. 52).

The pervasive notion of *passion for the work* becomes a way of accepting the low pay & insecure working conditions, illustrating how creative workers draw value from the creative work apart from monetary compensation (Arvidsson, Malossi, & Naro, 2010). Moreover, Duffy (2017) argues that "individualist appeals to passion and entrepreneurialism temporally reroute employment concerns" (p.226-227). For example, "affective appeals like Do What You Love shift workers' focus from the present to the future" (Duffy, 2017, p. 227). Neff et al., (2005) point to the *entrepreneurial aspects* of the work that creative workers engage in as the risk of project-based work is internalized and glamorized. Several key theories *venture labor* (Neff, 2012), *hope labor* (Keuhn & Corrigan, 2013), and *aspirational labor* (Duffy, 2015, 2017) address how creative workers' internalization of neoliberal ideologies help them normalize and rationalize the investment of time, energy, and capital in the present for potential future payoff (Duffy, 2017). Neff's (2012) theory of "venture labor" focused on the ways workers in the tech sector normalized risk as investments—deferring compensation, learning new skills for future opportunities, and constant promotion and networking. Keuhn & Corrigan (2013) frame "hope labor" as a "meritocratic investment in one's employment prospects" (p.21). As such, "hope labor" is defined as "un- or under compensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure in the hope that future employment opportunities may follow" (p.21). Similarly, Duffy positions "aspirational labor" as "form of hope labor" which seeks to illuminate gendered aspects of labor (Duffy, 2017, p.10). All of these can be understood as forms of *entrepreneurial labor*—where creative aspirants embrace the neoliberal ideals of individualization and internalize risk as they sustain their careers. Like other creative workers, self-enterprise has become a much-vaunted ideal for designers. Designers engage in entrepreneurial labor as they build their portfolios to sustain their creative careers.

Self-brand & social media

Since the late 1990s when Tom Peters asserted, "you are a brand," the concept of personal branding as a self-enterprising strategy has become pervasive across industries (Peters, 1997, para 17). Marwick (2010) argues that social media technology facilitates self-branding as a self-presentation strategy. Moreover, Marwick (2013) asserts that self-branding is "intrinsically linked to the features of social media technologies that make self-promotion on a wide scale possible" (p.166). As such, it is in this neoliberal context that individuals are called to understand themselves as brands (Gandini, 2016; Hearn, 2008; Marwick; 2013) In the context of social media, reputation-building and networking are viewed as key investments for digital workers (Gandini, 2016). Creative workers are socialized to promote themselves and their work through carefully curated self-branding practices (Marwick, 2013). Gandini argues that although digital workers tend to place importance on their “skills and talent,” “one’s professional success appears to be ultimately related to the capacity to connect self-branding practice to the construction of reputational capital and the management of this asset over the professional network.” (p. 131). Further, Gandini (2016) points to branding of the self as an “investment in social relationships with an expected return for the acquisition of a reputation” (p.1). How then is this practice of self-branding enacted?

The design of a self-branded persona of qualities is presented through both “content and networking” (Gandini, 2016), is increasingly deployed in *platform-specific* ways across a sprawling social media ecology (Duffy et al., 2017), and is demonstrated through coherent “visual and typographic strategies” (Gershon, 2017, p. 34). Marwick (2010) argued that while self-branding is about the “visual as much as the textual,” —“self-branding discourse deemphasizes the photograph in favor of the blog post or tweet” (p.344). However, in the time since Marwick (2010; 2013) examined the self-branding practices of the Silicon Valley tech community, the rise of platforms such as Instagram has emphasized the visual as a key component of a self-branding strategy. While visual content is a key component of self-branding (Marwick, 2010; Duffy & Hund, 2015), the role of the visual aspect of self-branding on social media has been underexplored. Graphic designers who create design visual work as part of their professional careers offer an opportunity to examine the tensions that arise as their design portfolio of work becomes a centerpiece of their *socially mediated self-branding strategy.*

Contextualizing Graphic Design Culture

The graphic design profession has historically relied heavily on freelance work as graphic designers work in a variety of contexts across a wide range of creative industries (Heller & Fernades, 1999). As such, graphic designers represent creative workers who balance the precarity of work as they seek out projects that will enable them to ‘do what they love’ and boost their design portfolios. Indeed, hiring practices in design “grant primacy to aesthetic considerations” through a designer’s portfolio of work (Soar, 2002, p.57). This perpetuates a preoccupation with continual portfolio-building as part of a graphic designer’s career.

A primary professional design organization for graphic designers, the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) defines graphic design: "Graphic design, also known as communication design, is the art and practice of planning and projecting ideas and experiences with visual and textual content" (AIGA, Cezar, 2015, para 1). Although spanning a wide range of areas in both print and digital including branding and corporate identity, annual reports, publishing, advertising campaigns, posters, packaging, motion graphics, wayfinding and signage systems for spaces, graphic designers share in common the work of "arranging type, form and image" (AIGA, Cezar, 2015, para 2). Heller & Vienne (2015) refer to this work of graphic designers and digital designers as "a way of organizing, 'formatizing,' and functionalizing word and image" (p.15). As advances in technology have guided the direction of where graphic messages are viewed and how they are produced, the profession of graphic design has been challenged with continually defining and redefining ‘what is graphic design’ and ‘who is a graphic designer.’ This has happened most notably with the rise of desktop publishing and lowered barriers to creative production (Turner-Rahman, 2008), with the rise of DIY design movement and crowdsourcing logo design sites (Massanari, 2012). To this end, graphic design has engaged in continual boundary work, even what Soar (2002) refers to as “protectionism” to demarcate the territory of the profession amid threats that seem to encroach on the work of graphic designers (p.35).

In contrast to the sharing of remixed content of other creative content producers (Lessig, 2008; Manovich, 2005), the design work that graphic designers are sharing on social media platforms can be considered original design work that is created for clients or represents personal projects, also referred to as self-initiated work. To do this work, designers are required to “cultivate an acute attunement to everything that is new in the world” (Soar, 2007, para 22) as they create new work. Although "creating a completely original piece of work is unachievable because design is the process of rearranging existing elements into new configurations," designers still strive for originality in the way they reposition their new designs (Culliane, 2013, para 6). Within this context, there is continual “pursuit of newness” that is part of graphic design and advertising cultures (Nixon, 2003, 2006).

Context of graphic design work: Soar (2002) refers to advertising and graphic design as key contributors to ‘commercial cultural production’—“the driving force of image-based culture” (p.14). Indeed, “commercial culture” serves as the context for the graphic design profession with it being “oriented around clients and deliverables” (Forlizzi & Lebbon, 2002, p. 3; see also Nixon, 2003). Graphic designers often use this commercial context as a way to distinguish themselves from artists. Renown graphic design legend Milton Glaser famously proclaimed that “design has nothing to do with art” because even though designers and artists may use similar tools may be used, “design’s efficacy is measured by how well it delivers on a client’s goal.” (Quito, 2016, October 31, para 6). This statement deprioritizes the role of personal self-expression in pursuit of solving a client’s problem. This emphasis of design as solving a problem for a client is deeply embedded in design culture as means of demarcating the work of designers from the work of artists. This tension has come under renewed scrutiny by the design community via social media platforms like Dribbble where creating work *for the platform* is viewed as superficial and pejoratively referred to as the “Dribbblisation of design” as opposed to sharing work that has been created to solve a ‘real problem’ (Intercom, 2014, August 19). Here ‘real problem’ can be read as client driven ‘business problem. In this way, designers frequently manage their own goals of self-expression with the client’s goals in the way they pursue new work. Similar to the cultural producers Neff et al., (2005) highlight, graphic designers manage the tension between the work that they create for clients and work that they design to “elicit recognition from peers” (p. 323). The design portfolio or the coherent presentation of one’s design work becomes a place where this tension plays out as designers seek out new design work to sustain their careers.

The Design Portfolio as Analytical Framework

Since the late 1990s Tom Peters encouraged *Fast Company* readers to think of their careers as “a portfolio of projects” that serve as core part of one’s brand, “A career is a portfolio of projects that teaches you new skills, gain you new expertise, develop new capabilities, grow your colleague set, and constantly reinvent you as a brand” (Peters, 1997, August 31, para 53). Today as more and more workers are encouraged to focus on their portfolios, graphic designers’ preoccupation with portfolio-building and presenting a portfolio as a means of self-enterprise in the design industry presages contemporary trends in entrepreneurial portfolio-building. The *design portfolio* has a long legacy of being a key self-promotional device for designers personal branding.

Historically, physical design portfolios were labored on by prospective designers taking on a variety of creative forms in designed portfolio books, boxes, folios, and other meticulously designed print materials to demonstrate a unique point of view. This approach was more amplified for graphic designers in particular who were often required to showcase not only their ability to come up with innovative ideas but also their technical and design abilities in layout, composition, and typography etc. The portfolio has long since been a project on to itself and something that designers notoriously agonize over because it has been seen as the ultimate self - promotional tool that designers have in their arsenal to get a job or to drum up new work. In the popular portfolio guide *Flaunt*, designer Steve Liska asserted, "Basically, look at a portfolio as you would a design project—it is one, after all—and design the hell out of it. (Gomez-Palacio, and Vit, 2010, p.37). In the portfolio guide Flaunt, a number of experienced designers gave advice about portfolio presentation such as "make sure your craft is clean and tight," "excellent typography," "let the work speak for itself," and "do good ideas and execute them well." (Gomez-Palacio, and Vit, 2010, p.36-37).

In the past, designer hopefuls would frequently mail or drop off "teaser" portfolios also called short portfolios in the hopes of landing an interview at creative studios or design agencies. Then, after securing an interview designers would bring in the full portfolio to walk through as part of the interview. The portfolio is designed with a particular "target" or audience in mind and there is competing demand to appear multi-skilled but also tailor the projects to reflect the work that the designer wants to do (generalist vs specialist positioning). In the beginning of one’s career or if working for a studio or an agency, a designer’s audience for the portfolio is almost always other designers who use the portfolio as the central means for evaluation of a prospective hire’s creative abilities. As a graphic designer shifts to independent work or if starting a small creative studio, the audience for the portfolio becomes directed toward clients—selling their creative abilities to clients where the focus is about putting forth one’s design identity. As Julier (2017) notes, “designers act out ‘being creative’ as a necessary selling point for their clients” (p. 58). Often this presentation to clients is about educating the client on *their value*—value for design services and value of unique creative abilities. In this way, the *client-facing portfolio* has different objectives than the *design industry-facing portfolio*.

Although the print portfolio didn't completely disappear, there was a gradual shift to the web portfolio and the PDF portfolio that could be easily emailed, uploaded, and circulated. Currently, when designers refer to their ‘portfolio,’ they are most often referring to their *personal website* as the central location for their displaying their body of work. In contrast to the physical portfolio that was brought to an interview, the *web portfolio* became a much more public and accessible extension of the portfolio in which designers had to consider a multiple audiences—*both* potential client audiences and designer community audiences, among others. In this era of the digital portfolio, founder of online portfolio platform Bēhance, Scott Belsky saw the ecology of individual web portfolios and resumes in the creative industry as disconnected and "inefficient." In a 2013 interview with *The Great Discontent*, Belsky described how he was motivated to start Bēhance by his concern that "the creative world has no transparency,” He explained:

> "We can show our portfolios, but in a sense, they are a lie because the work isn’t done solely by us. Other people were involved. The attribution in creative work has never gotten the spotlight it deserves. The Internet complicates attribution because work circulates and becomes disconnected from those who created it. However, if you foster attribution, there is so much opportunity. Organizing portfolios by who did what helps

> people showcase work and helps others discover it much easier." (Essmaker & Essmaker, 2013, para 6).

Founded in 2006, Bēhance was launched as an "online platform to showcase and discover great work" with the mission: "The creative world updates their work in one place to broadcast it widely and efficiently. Companies explore the work and access talent on a global scale" (Bēhance, 2017). By connecting creative portfolios together in "one place," where projects could be uploaded as case studies, creatives could follow other creatives and like or in Bēhance terms "appreciate" others work, the portfolio became "social," connected, and public to a degree not previously experienced. Deviant Art was a forerunner to Bēhance and also incorporated social features where a person's art could be "watched," and watchers were like followers (Perkel, 2011). However, in contrast to Deviant Art, Bēhance sought to target the "creative professional community" and in the tradition of the portfolio the defining content upload is "a 'project' - not an image" (Belsky, 2011, June 4). With over 6 million members at the end of 2015 (excluding users who just browse profiles and creative work), Bēhance is one of the vastest online creative communities including product designers, user interface/user experience designers, architects, interior designers, illustrators, photographers, graphic designers and many more (Bēhance, 2015 Year in Review). However, there is a strong presence of graphic and digital designers who maintain profiles and actively post work on Bēhance.

Since Bēhance was the largest professional creative community with a strong graphic and digital design presence, I used Bēhance as my sampling frame to recruit participants. As I started sampling, my interviewees were happy to discuss Bēhance but were very eager to tell me about their use of the smaller design centric social media platform, Dribbble and Instagram. Signaling larger trends in how users think about their decision to share content in the context of a broader social media ecology (Zhao et al., 2015; Wilken, 2015, van Dijck, 2013b), the designers I interviewed were framing their use of Bēhance in comparison to the other platforms they were using across a sprawling social media ecology. This led me to adapt my interviews to follow where my interviewees were leading me in terms of their current social media practices for sharing and promoting their creative content. This afforded me the opportunity to understand their digital labor in the context of how they conceptualized the ecology of platforms and more importantly to understand broader practices of work that were not specific to just one platform.

Similar to other creative professionals across a range of media industries, designers have what Neff et al., (2005) term "portfolio-based careers" made up of multiple creative projects. To this end, demonstrating a "portfolio of skills" has been identified as an important aspect of employment in the creative and cultural industry (McRobbie, 2002; 2015; Neff et al., 2005) and a means risk management by workers (Neff, 2012). Originally celebrated, the notion of the "portfolio career" or a "boundaryless career" (Arthur and Rosseau, 1996) was synonymous with freedom from the typical bounds of more organized employment (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). However, critical scholars have pointed to the self-exploitation central to flexible forms of creative work (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). Often the narrative of portfolio-building is taken up by creative workers to rationalize under compensated forms of labor (Neff, 2012; Keuhn & Corrigan, 2013; Duffy, 2017). In the context of *social media marketing*, Duffy (2017) points to the ways "brand representatives may also reach out to bloggers, vloggers, and Instagrammers directly, hoping to lure them with vaunted promises of "exposure" or "portfolio-building" (p.182).

The research of creative and cultural industries labor in the context of post-Fordist economy provides a strong foundation for examining the nature of the portfolio as a key aspect of self-branding work practices of creative professionals. While the portfolio-building narrative has been established as key to getting work in the creative industries, the mechanisms around the form the portfolio takes on and how it becomes a digital product within the social media ecology has been underexplored. This case of graphic designers seeks to examine the way the evolving nature of portfolio-building as a key self-promotional practice in the social media ecology. In this social media context, the 2010 assertion by designer Adrian Shaughnessy that, "your portfolio requires endless work, and few things are more important than it."(Gomez-Palacio, and Vit, 2010, p.8) takes on a new pace, constancy, and subjectivity for designers. Moreover, with the rise of design centric social media platforms such as Dribbble and the increasing view of popular social media platforms such as Instagram by designers as an extension of their portfolios and in some cases supplanting the importance of the traditional web portfolio, the task of creating and maintaining a portfolio has increased dramatically. This sample of graphic design professionals highlights the ways in which these digital platforms have made it such that portfolio building is a much more visible, "always on" activity for designers—thus requiring more labor.

Method

Sampling & Recruitment

Acquired by Adobe in 2012, Bēhance is the leading professionally-oriented global portfolio sharing social media platform. With over 6 million members at the end of 2015, is one of the vastest online creative communities including strong presence of graphic and digital designers who maintain profiles and actively post work on Bēhance. For these reasons, I chose Bēhance as the sampling frame to recruit graphic designers who were actively developing their identities as creative professionals through digitally networked platforms.

This project draws upon in-depth interviews with fifty-six graphic design professionals as well an interview with a prominent AIGA member and creative copyright attorney. As a member of the Bēhance platform and designer by training, I spent time getting a sense of graphic design network on Bēhance—frequently browsing work, looking at well-known agency profiles in addition to individual designers' profiles, examining the professional titles and descriptions of members. In addition, I became familiar with the American Institute of Graphic Arts sub-site of Bēhance, which featured the work of Bēhance members who had an AIGA membership. This work along with informational interviews with several design industry colleagues provided the backdrop to my formal recruitment of participants.

I employed several recruitment strategies to sample graphic design professionals who were Bēhance registered users. First, I posted recruitment messages on LinkedIn design-oriented professional groups including the *'AIGA' group and 'SEGD' group,* which represent key professional organizations for graphic designers. As a designer by training and profession, I appealed to my personal online networks for contacts. Additionally, I recruited directly from the platform, reaching out initially to graphic designers within the AIGA sub-site of Bēhance. My profile within Bēhance clearly listed my dual role of designer and researcher and I posted a recruitment link on my profile where a designer could fill in their information to be contacted for an interview. From these initial contacts, I employed a snowball sampling to recruit additional participants. Several participants promoted the study through their Twitter networks.

The participants included women (n=20) and men (n=36), ranging in age from 22 to 42 with a mean age of 30. The sample includes participants working in large cities throughout the U.S. The gender divide of this sample is reflective of both the platform and the industry of graphic design. Although, the gender make up of Bēhance is not readily accessible, an interview with an Adobe/Behance employee confirmed that there are more male than female members (personal communication, 2016, December, 21). Additionally, the web traffic results for people visiting Bēhance are predominately male (Alexa b, 2017, July). This gender disparity is even more pronounced for people visiting the Dribbble platform based on the web traffic results of Alexa (Alexa c, 2017, July).When asked about other designers that I should interview as a part of this study, it was typical for both my male and female participants to *overwhelmingly* recommend or refer other male designers for me to talk to as a part of this study. In later waves of recruiting, I started asking specifically for recommendations of women designers.

While the majority of the sample of designers are freelance or independent designers, as is common in graphic design nearly all of the participants have moved fluidly between the roles of more *permanent employment* (as in-house designer, agency designer, creative studio) and project-*based employment* (freelance/independent). As such, the majority of my sample was composed of (n=41) designers who were employed as independent/freelance workers with the majority of those qualifying as *freelance business owners*. The remaining (n=15) designers were full time employees in agency, creative studio, or 'in-house' roles. Of these full time employees (n=2) were founders of studios with more than five employees and (n=8) were 'moonlighters' or part time freelancers in their spare time in addition to their traditional employment. Moreover, a number of my participants who were permanently employed by organizations or agencies engaged in part-time freelance work on the side.

Data Collection & Analysis

I conducted fifty-five semi-structured in-depth interviews beginning in the summer of 2015 and continuing through summer of 2017. The interviews ranged from approximately 30 to 90 minutes and were conducted via phone or Skype. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy. This study was granted IRB permission by the author's institutional review board. Overall, we structured the questions and the overall interview as "open ended process reflection questions" (Charmaz, 2002, p. 679) that would encourage the participants to reflect on their own usage. The interviews focused on a range of areas including Bēhance platform use and motivations, work involved with promoting and sharing work through platforms, background and career aspirations, the design process, types of project work. I would ask participants to pull up their Bēhance profile and talk me through a specific project post.

As I started sampling, my interviewees were happy to discuss Bēhance but were very eager to tell me about their use of the smaller design-centric social media platform, Dribbble and popular social media platform, Instagram. Signaling larger trends in how users think about their decision to share content in the context of a broader social media ecology (Zhao et al., 2015; Wilken, 2015; van Dijck, 2013b), the designers I interviewed were framing their use of Bēhance in comparison to the other platforms they were using across a sprawling social media ecology. Thus, I followed the lead of my interviewees and adapted my subsequent interview guides to allow for more discussion about the media ecology of platforms they were using as a part of their work practices. This lead my study in the direction of taking a social media ecology perspective for digital labor practices of design professionals. As a part of the interview process, participants' public social media profiles were accessed with their knowledge for background information as we prepared for and interpreted the interviews, but formal visual analyses of participants' pins and boards were not conducted. Drawing on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I approached data collection and analysis as an iterative process, moving continuously back and forth between collecting data and analyzing the data using a "constant comparative method" (p.102). The ongoing analysis of the initial interview transcripts allowed me to follow up on emerging themes in subsequent interviews and to follow up with interviewees, so as to continue to refine the categories and emerging themes during the data collection process. All of the names of the participants in this article are pseudonyms to protect their identity.

FINDINGS

Designing Audiences: Chasing and Commoditizing

The *imagined* nature of audiences has been explored by communication scholars as a socially and institutionally shaped construct by a variety of co-creators including advertisers and individual content producers (Ettema & Whitney, 1994; Peterson, 1994). Imagined audiences as a "mental conceptualization of the people with whom we are communicating" (Litt, 2012 p.331) has been explored in the context of communities and various media producers (Anderson, 2006; Ong; 1975) has become increasingly key to how social media users communicate with various networked publics (boyd, 2008; boyd 2010; Marwick & boyd, 2010; Litt & Hargittai, 2016). Referring to *collapsed contexts* of social media, boyd (2008) argues, "the lack of spatial, social, and temporal boundaries makes it difficult to maintain distinct social contexts" (p. 34). In response to the challenge of collapsed contexts, users thought about "general abstract" audiences or "more targeted audiences" as they posted content (Litt & Hargittai, 2016, p. 9). Litt (2012) describes how features of the platforms and various "audience feedback mechanisms" such as commenting act as cues "given off" (Goffman, 1959) by the actual audience which in turn "may influence the imagined audience" (Litt, 2012, p. 336, See also Marwick & boyd, 2010).

Increasingly users are thinking about the larger social media ecology (van Dijck, 2013b) as they make decisions about where to share content and tend to make "conceptual links between platform and audience" as they purposefully share content (Zhao et al., 2016, p.92). As means of resisting, context collapse on social media, users "compartmentalize" how they share content with differing audiences across the ecology of social media (Wilken, 2015). Van Dijck (2013b) suggests that users deploy distinct personas based on their understanding of various platforms as a self-presentation strategy, often maintaining multiple accounts on the same platform (Duffy & Hund, 2015). Duffy et al., (2017) contend that social media users who are working to sustain creative careers tailor their personae to various platforms—a logic we term “platform-specific self-branding” based on the “imagined affordances” (Nagy & Neff, 2015) of individual platforms across a broad social media ecology. These imaginations are “constructed through the interplay between platform feature, assumptions about audience, and the producer’s own self-concept” (Duffy et al., 2017, p.1)

Chasing Audiences

The creative portfolio, which has always been about self-promotion tailored to a specific audience becomes more malleable and harder to pin down as it becomes digital and moves across various social media platforms. As the digital portfolio becomes subsumed in social media platforms it becomes entangled in the inevitable *context collapse* (Marwick & boyd, 2010) of social media platforms, which bring together a multitude of audiences. In addition to personal networks of family and friends outside of the creative industry, designers describe diverse audiences including: 1). fans or aspiring creatives who are inspired by their work, 2). peer-designers, vendors, and specialists who may serve as collaborators, 3. art directors and creative directors who often hire freelance and independent graphic designers for various media sector work, 4). companies, ad agencies, & design consultancies scouting for talent, and 5). potential clients made up of small business owners and brands across a diverse range of industries who want to hire or partner with designers directly.

For many designers, their understandings of who participated in particular platforms guided their conception of imagined audiences and subsequent promotion of creative content.

Independent designer Ray offered the following account of his perception of individual platforms based on reach of professional ties.

> “Instagram is great for any visual artist, designers, illustrator, animator. I think it is one the best ones because you can get a much larger audience not just art directors and clients. It’s very good for reaching out to larger audiences. Bēhance is more sharing your work with fellow creatives but also trying to get attention from clients. Dribbble is just designers. It was a bit difficult to get work [on there].”

In his distinctions, Instagram offered the most reach beyond the creative community while Dribbble offered the least reach, focusing only on the design community. Bēhance was perceived in the middle of the two offering a hybrid of both peer designers and potential clients. Although, Dribbble had clients and art directors frequenting the platform, most designers tended to conceptualize their audience on Dribbble as what Mark referred to as “a community of my peers.” Similarly, Jonathan felt Dribbble was “like Instagram except it’s only designers who see it.” In addition to perceived reach of the platform outside of the creative community, designers often distinguished between platforms as personal or professional. Texas based designer and part-time freelancer, Luis described differing self-presentation strategies based on his perception of the mode of the platform with Facebook being more ‘personal’ and Instagram being more ‘professional’ in terms of audience.

> “Facebook is really, that's where I have lots of pictures of my dog and pictures of our Christmas time and my family and stuff like that. Whereas Instagram, which I do share on a professional level, it almost has to be a little more curated. So I have a lot of interesting architectural photos that I see around town, or things that just look visually interesting and appealing to me. And then Twitter I think is just kind of a hodgepodge of both. I get to make jokes with all my friends, but at the same time I can use it in a professional setting.”

Other designers like Keith spent time monitoring to figure out *“who is actually looking at my work”* Originally, he imagined his audience on Instagram as *“fans and by fans I mean people who aspire to be doing something similar to what I am doing or take inspiration from me and* *plug that into their work"* but then realized that *"art directors and people who will hire me for a project"* were also part of his audience on Instagram. Inquiries for work played a large role in how designers conceptualized and made assumptions about audiences of the design-centric platforms Bēhance and Dribbble and where they invested time and effort and how they purposefully built audiences.

When discussing the how they made decisions about the platforms that they were a part of, many of the designers described how they were constantly monitoring the social media ecology to figure where the majority of the creative industry was located at a given time. To this point, Noah shared, *"As a freelance artist, I'm constantly looking for where the people are at."* This was especially true when it came to design-centric social media platforms such as Bēhance and Dribbble. Noah remained on Bēhance because of the broader creative industry audience that he perceived to be located there:

> "I am on Bēhance because in the creative industry whether or not many of my friends are active on it, there is a large portion of the creative industry who is very active on it, so I try to stay as up to date as I can on it, for that reason, because there are a lot of people there and I just want to make sure that I am kind of a part of that buzz of what's going on there."

On career-centric platforms like Bēhance, being *"part of that buzz"* can be understood as a form of vetting in which credibility is imparted. The fluidity of the social media ecology, as new platforms are introduced and new norms around use and audience are developed increased the feeling by designers that they should actively maintain a presence on a variety of sites both design-centric as well as more popular sites such as Twitter and Instagram. Simon relayed his perception of the fluidity of the social media ecology in relation to audiences:

> "It's interesting because it's always changing so I'm trying to constantly adapt to that and that's why I have multiple social media sites so I can put my work in more places, that way I would hopefully get seen by more people."

Similarly, Jonathan reflected, *"there are always different platforms evolving, you have to be adaptable."* These platform-specific efforts ultimately lead to more creative labor as designers adapt their self-branding efforts to each platform (Duffy, Pruchniewska, & Scolere, 2017).

"Refer Me or Hire Me." For graphic designers, the creative industry is multi-layered with opportunities for referrals for new work coming from a variety of sources. Even in our discussions about other designers whom I should talk to as a part of this project, Kenneth promptly responded via email with several names noting that in this industry, *"referrals are definitely key;)"* Creative platform, Bēhance positioned itself as appealing to two audiences: 1) creatives creating work and sharing it and 2). companies looking to hire creatives. Bēhance (2017) described this two-sided imperative on their platform: "The creative world updates their work in one place to broadcast it widely and efficiently. Companies explore the work and access talent on a global scale." To this point, Hannah, an independent graphic designer relayed how she is trying to "*reach two different parties"* when she posts work on Bēhance.

> "I'm trying to reach other designers because, I feel like it's really important to build relationships with other designers out there. And also the ability to build working partnerships, through Bēhance. I would love it if a designer contacted me and said, ' I really like your style and your portfolio's solid, would you wanna collaborate on a project"

In addition to other designers and potential collaborations, Hannah described Bēhance as a *"business tool"* where *"a lot of people who aren't designers scout Bēhance to find designers to do projects for them."* The "people" Hannah refers to are the second audience of companies and potential clients that she imagines when she posts her work on Bēhance.

> " I'm also just hoping to reach potential people visiting Bēhance that aren't designers that are just looking through portfolios and are looking for a designer. They're looking for someone who's really good at identity design, or someone who has solid interaction design. Someone who would come to me and say, "I would like that you do this, and I see that in your portfolio you got the perfect project that calls for that. Would you be interested?"

As an up and coming freelancer, Jesse, was motivated to be part of Bēhance because he assumed it was a place where there were people who *"would A. Refer me or B. Hire me for a job."* Indeed, being referred or getting hired were primary motivators for designers to continually seek out new audiences. To that end, many of the designers highlighted how they were continually thinking of their peers as potential source of new work and collaborations. In contrast to the broad creative community of Bēhance, Keith described Dribbble as a *"more focused of a community"* that are *"very much peers"* where he perceives potential creative work opportunities for his freelance career:

> “Even my peers will hire me which is maybe a little bit different and interesting in that you know an animator may have a freelance project and needs someone to help him with design and might email me and say ‘Hey I have this project, and I can’t handle it completely, do you want to help me with it?” Or these users will be Art Directors at their agency that they work at or their company and a task that is given to them will be a little bit out of their wheelhouse so they come to me for that specific thing.”

Within the graphic design industry, many freelance and independent designers see art directors within agencies or other companies as key players in connecting them with opportunities.

Litt (2012) points to the way in which platform environment plays into “limiting and exposing cues” about the composition of one’s audience and leading to a change in the overall social context of the platform (p. 335). As Dribbble’s policies evolved, allowing agencies and other potential clients to have profiles, designers were increasingly encouraged to imagine these users as their audience. Keith described how platforms like Dribbble have *"art directors who have accounts. They don't share anything but they follow and they watch."* Kelsey also described the importance of visibility on social media in terms of *"how art directors see you."* The perception that creative directors and art directors were present on a particular platform served as a signal for a location of the creative industry and potential opportunities for work. One of Ray's *"main motivations*" to continue participating on Bēhance was due to his perception that ”*art directors and brands"* were *"always looking for talent"* on Bēhance. He professed, *"I know they are always looking for talent… That is how you get cool projects."*

In addition to platform policies, a range of other platform features in the form of "audience feedback mechanisms" help users to get a better sense of their audiences (Litt, 2012, p. 337). One such *audience feedback mechanism* is the list of followers. After noticing the presence of *"a lot more creative directors and other illustrators"* following his account, Max decided to start *"transitioning more into showing [his] work"* on Instagram. He noted, *"I'm reacting to who's looking at my Instagram more than anything else."* In many cases, the ever-changing display of followers served to help shape designers' conceptions of audience.

Inquiries for work. Audiences that could lead to work had the strongest pull for many freelance designers. Kieran, a freelance letterer and designer, reflected on how he moved from platform to platform chasing audiences that would hire him, *"I subconsciously followed wherever I get responses and get inquiries for work."* Similarly, Kelsey described how *"messages from potential clients"* on Dribbble made her realize *"Oh wow, people actually are still looking at this platform"* The "responses" designers received in the form of comments or messages were another form of audience feedback about where inquiries were coming from and who made up the audience.

Screenshots of Instagram feeds from potential clients signaled who was looking at their work on Instagram. For example, Jordan started to imagine his audience differently as he received requests for design work based on *"screenshots"* of his Instagram feed by interested clients. He explained, *"I get requests to do projects and those requests will be screenshots of my Instagram page."* For many designers, inquiries and screenshots of work served as compelling *indicators* for where the audiences that could hire them were moving to. Feedback referencing specific platforms drove how designers imagined their audiences and their perception of where 'everyone' who could contribute to sustaining their careers was currently located. However, in the absence of internal platform inquires such as Dribbble’s hire me button or Bēhance’s internal messaging, designers would make assumptions about which platforms they thought they were getting in inquiries and audiences from based on where they were putting in the most effort.

In addition to cues from the platform, individual factors such as the context of use play a large role in imaginations of audience (Litt, 2012). Hartley (2000) suggested, “the audience is a construction motivated by the paradigm in which it is imagined”(p.11). Since the designers I spoke with were participating on social media platforms in order to sustain their careers, they were highly motivated to envision their audiences as people who could hire them for their design skills. For example, Thomas excitedly described how the link of platform to future work motivated him to further invest in the platform.

> "There became a time when that switched for me where you started seeing recruiter emails, and you started getting emails from people like, "Hey, saw your work on Dribbble."I love it." Then you're starting to realize, "Okay, this platform is no longer just to get the other designers to tell me, 'Hey, I love your design.'" Now this is leading to my finances. This is actually leading to making an impact on what jobs I get, the kind of clients I get. Now this is my version, this is how I make my money, this is my advertising essentially. When you start to connect that, then it becomes more focused on, "Okay, now there's actually a tangible impact on my life."

Although, the platforms designers were participating in were made up of diverse audiences, designers were motivated to think of their audience as potential clients when they posted their design work. ″ For example, although, Beth described a diverse group of clients she would primarily target when she posted on Instagram: *"I more often- I'm thinking of the potential clients when I'm posting."*

In the fluid social media ecology of new platforms and new introductions of features based on previous platforms, there was a strong pattern of designers shifting their efforts to platforms based on their perceived buzz in the industry- trying to always be in the newest, hottest place. The majority of designers in this study echoed a similar pattern of moving from Bēhance to Dribbble, and more recently to Instagram in terms of where they were currently putting their effort and trying to figure out creating content for that constructed audience.

Broader Audiences. For a number of designers, Instagram in contrast to the creative-career specific platforms of Bēhance and Dribbble, was an opportunity to chase an audience *beyond the design community.* Sebastian thought of the reaching *"non-designers"* on Instagram as a *"more exciting"* opportunity than *"having other designers looking at my stuff."* Many broadly conceptualized Instagram as a broader public outside of the creative industry. Dina, for example contrasted Bēhance as *"clearly artists for artists, like artists doing work for artists" versus Instagram which is artists for the general public."* However, this broader public of course had some overlap with the design-centric platforms in the sense of art directors, peer-designers but more importantly companies and brands who look to hire designers.

The other section of the imagined audience was composed of what independent designer, Keith referred to as "fans," Beth, a freelance lettering artist and designer described her Instagram following as composed of both *"designers-people newer to the industry, trying to start out and then people who are like more established and have name recognitions"* and *"potential clients"*- *"people who work at brands and ad agencies"* For some graphic designers like Lillie, who hoped to work with brands in particular, Instagram was described as a "quicker" way to "engage with an audience" in the hope of getting work. She recalled,

> "I think Instagram was just quicker, and it was easier to engage with an audience. People can comment. You can have a conversation with them on there... And I think it's easier to find people mainly. A lot of people are on social media, but a lot of clients maybe aren't necessarily on Bēhance all the time. So I think it's easier to find a wider audience [on Instagram]."

The potential of a "wider" audience on Instagram was especially exciting to a majority of designers. For Jordan, the perceived "broadness" of audience on Instagram resulted in a diverse place to be hired by people who aren't doing the same kind of work. He explained,

> "I think designers just as much as any creative person, musicians, designers, architects, whatever it is that you make, you quickly realize that Instagram is a place that you can reach other people that will hire you and aren't just like you. Instagram allows you to touch people I think that aren't makers but want to work with people that make stuff."

Similarly, Kenneth saw Instagram as a place to form connections with other resources who could help make the execution of his work stronger. He recounted,

> "I've actually worked with a vendor I found on Instagram, and worked with them because I thought their look was really exceptional. So Instagram has other avenues to print specialists, vendors, resources for a designer, where you can collaborate and you can augment your abilities based on their specialties."

Similar to the cooperation and coordination required to sustain *art worlds*, (Becker, 1982), these *design worlds* are similarly dependent on a multitude of collaborators as part of executing the final design. Depending on the industry and the type of work a graphic designer is creating, their participation in platform has to do with judgments about whether the community has participants that are likely to hire them for the type of creative work they are interested in doing to continue to build their portfolios and earn revenue. Constructions of *imagined audiences* (Litt, 2012; Litt & Hargittai, 2016) based on engagement and inquiries on these platforms are largely guiding these decisions for this sample of designers. As a result, these perceptions of audiences on platforms were varied.

Commoditizing Audiences

In the pursuit of broader audiences on Instagram, self-enterprising designers are increasingly negotiating the line between *self-promotion* of their design work completed for clients (in the lineage of a design portfolio) and *emerging influencer opportunities* to monetize their audiences on behalf of brands. Sebastian, a part time freelancer and designer at a boutique creative studio offered this distinction:

> "You can tell when someone's posting a job they did for a client because they wanna show it off, and when someone's posting a job because that's the final goal of the job— to post it, and to be an ad for your following."

The designers I spoke with were highly attuned to this distinction as a *break* in the authenticity of the more typical self-promotional efforts of portfolio work being carefully curated by designers. A sort of break that as one designer quipped, *“his followers could sniff out.”* While amateur communities of bloggers, particularly fashion bloggers were some of the first groups targeted by marketers to be social media influencers (Serazio & Duffy, 2017), this later wave infiltration of marketers into the professional design community represents the persistence and expansiveness of influencer programs.

With the rise of the so-called 'Instagram portfolio' (Greenfield, 2014, April, 11), the public and social context makes it value-generating in ways that extend beyond traditional self-promotion of “show and tell” of design work. In the eyes of many brands, these designers are viewed as co-creators (Burgess & Greene, 2009) who can plug into the what Serazio & Duffy (pre-print 2017) refer to as "holy trinity of social marketing: *earned media* (i.e., promotion-driven publicity); *owned media* (i.e., content channels directly controlled by marketers); and *paid media* (i.e., the traditional purchase of ad time and space)" (p.7) in roles that largely under-compensate them for their professional design expertise. It is in this context that some designers’ imaginations of audience have become more homogenous and have taken an explicit advertising turn—with designers seeking out *“more eyeballs”* for their design content and seeing Instagram as *“very broad net to cast, a lot of eyeballs.”* For example, *“Rather than an audience for audience’s sake,”* ambitious freelance designer, Jonathan has been purposeful in *“building an* *audience that is directed toward building a sustainable business.”* In the marketing sense of audience-making, Jonathan is concerned with constructing an audience that can be monetized to sustain his independent business.

Many designers described the importance of building their following to gain the attention of brands and potential art directors working in-house at various brands. For example, as independent designer, Lillie grew her Instagram following to nearly 100k, she noticed *"more recognizable brands reaching out, bigger brands."* However, once designers gain the attention of brands, it becomes a tricky navigation of defining the terms of their compensation and the degree of creative work they will be doing. Lillie recalled, "A lot of times in the beginning, they're like *"Oh, no. We can give you free stuff, but we don't have this budget."* Lillie’s initial experience fits within what Serazio & Duffy (2017) refer to as *earned media* where social media influencers participate in unpaid “promotion driven publicity” (p.7).

Portfolio-Building Narrative. Designers are currently navigating a blurred space of compensation for design work and are participating in a wide range of models, which to varying degrees commoditize their followers as audiences for various brands.

However, this is further complicated by the fact that designers are motivated to freely post their client work or personal design work on their social media accounts as a form of portfolio-building in the hopes of getting new work. A freelance designer, Kieran described how he typically loves *"posting either personal work or client work"* on Instagram. If he were to create client design work for Target's social media channel, then he would likely show that off on his own Instagram in the frame of sharing client work: *"I think if it were to be a brand partnership, I would do it if it was like, "Target wants you to make things for their social media," and I would post that just cause that's client work for me."* Freelance lettering artist and designer, Beth described how she was hired to design a lettering and stop motion video as a part of a social media campaign for a large brand which would appear on the owned Instagram channel of the company. Even though it wasn't in her contract to post on her own Instagram, she felt that the company probably came to her because of the likelihood that she would post it as a part of her habitual self-promotional practices. She recalled,

> “I think that having a descent Instagram following is one reason that people might come to me even if they're using the final designed video elsewhere. Because they know that I'll probably post about it and tag them in it, you know? It's one of the reasons they might choose me over someone else, I guess."

While some designers are negotiating compensation for *both* the *design work* and the *influence work*, in other cases companies seek out designers with large followings as an opportunity to pay for design work but bank on additional uncompensated promotional work by the designer on their Instagram feeds. Even though Beth adamantly proclaimed her view about sponsored posts, *"If you want me to post something, you should pay me,"* she viewed the practice of sharing her work largely in the narrative of portfolio building where she was getting the value of sharing her client work and tagging them in the post: *Unless I'm not happy with the result, I'll usually post it anyway because that keeps me relevant and keeps me getting clients.* Since it is seen as portfolio building for the designer and free work for advertisers, it becomes viewed as "payoff" for both equally, perpetuating the pervasive industry practice of earned media as uncompensated for influencers. Even more nuanced is the way some designers will use the lingo of “hey take a look at my work” in the portfolio sense to deploy an advertisement on Instagram to their following. In this instance, the designer uses the “portfolio” lingo to make an advertisement feel more organic to his following—and more importantly fit in with portfolio logics of “show and tell.” As such, the line between sharing client work and creating a sponsored ad is increasingly blurred.

Designer *Influencer*. As designers chase audiences and opportunities for potential paid design work from brands, they struggle to explain and define their value as designers and expert content creators who also meet the social media metric criteria for influencer programs (follower counts). The contours of their participation in social media marketing are varied and blur the lines for designers in terms of where their value-generating potential is located between the roles of *designer* and *influencer*. For example, Dina pointed to these proposals for work as two distinct ways of being viewed and valued- one based on *"popularity"* (influencer) and another based on a professional *"service."* (designer). She explained,

> "The influencer-based way of thinking tends to deal in, 'Well, you did something to be popular, and we wanna capitalize off of your popularity,' versus, 'You are doing something inherently correct [chuckle] and we want to capitalize off of the service,' which is typically a more symbiotic relationship."

The *influencer bid*, tied to popularity or what Marwick (2013) refers to as “achieved status,” (p. 76) fails to recognize the 'design professional status.' Dina sees being hired as an influencer as problematic because it typically means being underpaid and creatively undervalued. She explained what it meant to be hired as an 'influencer,' " *It's never with the idea of money. It's never with the understanding that what I'm offering is valuable. It's that, "I want people to see my product through your lens."* In contrast, being hired for a design service to create a social media campaign is *"long game focused"* and more beneficial to sustaining Dina's creative career and value as a design professional.

> "They typically see me as a conceptual person, so it's a creative direction role, or an art direction role, or something. I'm working in tandem with higher-ups. Sometimes VPs of marketing, sometimes design directors. That's a much better gig because you're helping guide the whole thing from beginning to end."

Dina is directly invoking the ideal of *creative autonomy* (Banet-Weiser & Sturken, 2010; Banks, 2010; Hesmondhalgh & Banks, 2011) and the potential of key referrals for new design work opportunities. For a creative professional community, the design role, who you work with, and the degree of creative autonomy were all prestige markers that served to demarcate the work of designers as distinct from the work of other content creators—in an environment where the end products might be indistinguishable. This demarcation by designers can be understood as a form of “boundary work” (Gieryn, 1983).

Indeed, several designers expressed their uncertainty around the roles they were being hired for and which aspects of their personal brand made them most compelling to brands—their metrics *or* their creative abilities. Freelance designer and illustrator, Max, for instance, was contacted by an advertising agency and hired as an *"influencer or something"* to create illustrations for a large coffee brand's Instagram channel. He perceived that it was *"a little bit less Instagram follower-heavy, it was more like "Oh, we really like the things you post here, can you do this?"* He felt this stood out when compared to the other promotional posts that he was creating which *"might have been more dependent on followers."* These 'promotional posts' usually entailed him being paid to post illustrations on his Instagram account that plug into larger social media activation campaigns for large coffee, airline, fast food, and art supplies brands.

Even more so is the intertwined nature of what Sebastian refers to as *"a growing amount of people who are into the idea of being graphic designer influencers."* The *designer influencer* is a designer who has a large enough following who is being sought after for both their design services as well as audience reach. For example, Jordan highlighted how he just recently started getting proposals for creative work based on *both* his design ability and his audience reach: "*I get proposals like, "If you're okay, would you do a project and post it on your Instagram as an influencer, so we're paying you for the art but we're also paying you for your reach?"* This *designer influencer* model is new for designers like Jordan and brings up tensions around the nature of creating and sharing design work:

> "I'm doing a project now where yeah I'm doing some lettering, like some design work for that but they're also paying me as an influencer because they want me to post it on there [his Instagram account]. There's stipulations within my contract that dictate when I can post about them, how often I'm comfortable doing it, and what kind of posts I'm comfortable doing. It's opening up these really interesting, weird ... business and contractual things that I never thought I would be asked to do."

In this case, Jordan is being compensated for both the design work *and for access to his particular audience* and this represents a new line of what it means to do design work—and a new way of being identified that seemed to have reputational resonance with this community. With it came a sense of opportunity with more status achieving activities that had more to do with promoting one's self and one's work such as what Sebastian explained as "touring and doing more speaking events."

However, designers like Jordan didn't take these considerations of designer-influencer lightly. Viewing his Instagram feed as an extension of his portfolio, Jordan described how he set limits on the parameters of his posting for a particular client. He noted,

> "I was very strict with this particular client, meaning like I'm only going to do for them one post a month, and it's going to be a post of my choosing meaning I'm not going to be dictated what that is." Jordan felt that most clients who "want you to use your reach are more than happy to do that because […] "that's the audience that" they're "looking to capture."

The 'limits' that Jordan stipulates represent his attempts to participate in influencer activities while still maintaining his sense of design autonomy. However, it also represents an attempt to shore up the line of who is getting the most value or payoff from these brand partnerships. In addition to setting limits on the frequency of posting, other designers like Jonathan actively negotiated having *the client promote the work under his name* in their social media channels as an integral part of the project. Jonathan described how the agent he worked for a project with a big banking institution, *"pitched the idea of them sponsoring an Instagram post"* for him. He explained,

> "So they actually paid me much better than a normal kind of influencer thing would've been, it was a very reasonable rate. And then they also promoted that post as well, so then people saw my work, but under my name as well not just their brand's name."

The compensation for what Jonathan terms the "normal kind of influencer thing," is juxtaposed with the higher compensation for his design services. This represents another line where designers are actively negotiating their worth as creative professionals distinct from influencers. As a part of this value building, Jonathan is pushing back to against the predominantly one-directional model of sponsored posts with the brand reaping the majority of the benefit. However, these models where the designer was recognized by the brand were less prevalent than the more typical sponsored post approaches. Designers like Lillie, were more firmly entrenched in designing sponsored posts, creating as many as *"three to four sponsored posts per month"* for her Instagram account. In the case of a sponsored post for a major north American brewing company, Lillie explained how they came to with an already established *"overall concept"* that then she could *"run with"* in order to create the digital image for the post. This meant that Lillie was *not* involved in the overall creative direction of the larger campaign—and instead was plugging into it on the production end—which usually means less creative autonomy. However, for one multi-national fast food company, Lillie landed the “harder to come by” and more lucrative *"year-long contract,"* where she creates posts *"every time they have a new product activation."* These sponsored post contracts typically come with *"a whole chunk of required copy"* and stipulate the number of posts, hashtags, and tagging the brand. She recalled, *"It'll say in the contract, "three or two photos, ... to be posted, between these dates." And then you have to leave them up."*

In contrast to the *designer influencer,* which for the moment still holds allure, intrigue—and potential reputational opportunity for this graphic design community, at the opposite end of the spectrum lies what I term the *influencer-designer*—whose activities align more strongly with influencer model of being paid to promote various goods among their social media followings. Although the person might tout design credentials, be visibly connected to the design community via social networks, and reference past work experience among notable design agencies, the *influencer-designer* is viewed as participating in more "obviously promotional" activities and sponsored posts which appear to a lesser degree to have any visual creative content produced (sketches, art direction, graphic work). Overall, the *influencer-designer* is identified by other designers through their perceived lack of discriminatory decisions about the fit of products promoted with one's design personal brand.

(Not) Selling Out. Hesmondhalgh (1999) describes *selling out* as independent creatives *abandoning* "previously held political and aesthetic commitments for financial gain" (p. 36). In the context of social media producers, "the tension between *being real* and *selling out* remains a persistent theme in commercial culture" (Duffy, 2017, p. 137). Although all graphic designers are working in an intensely "commercial context," (Soar, 2002; Nixon, 2003, 2006) the idea of *selling out* was still a pervasive notion that designers grappled with in relation to participating in paid social media influencer programs. For example, even though Dina had created a few sponsored posts in the past, she offered this account of how sponsored posts were perceived by the design community:

> "There's also this underlying understanding within the community that when you're doing sponsored posts, you're kind of a sellout, or you're in it for the likes, so to speak. And so, it's this, "If you're gonna hashtag it SP, you probably just shouldn't do it." It needs to make sense, it needs to feel real. In most cases, most of us doing this kind of work- [we] make ads for a living, we don't wanna look at more ads"

Dina’s account directly references the tension between “*being real* and *selling out*” (Duffy, 2017) as it plays out with the creation of sponsored posts. Moreover, this also points to how in the pursuit of larger audiences or ‘eyeballs’ on Instagram, some designers imagined their audiences in ways that ignored the graphic designer sub-audiences who were still a part of their larger audience— a group who resisted being an audience for advertisers. These imaginations of a broad audience outside of the design community made it easier for designers to commoditize their audiences on Instagram.

Designers talked in nuanced terms about the types of activities that they felt still maintained core ideals for being a creative professional, while participating in influencer activities. Overall, designers prioritized the call to maintain a consistent self-brand in the content they created for brands. Color consistency of images was a strategy Lillie used to deploy a consistent visual brand experience on her Instagram feed. If the *"scale"* of the product doesn’t fit with the rest of her feed or if there is *"too much of their [the company's] own branding or their packaging"* then Lillie would turn down a sponsored ad proposal. She noted, *"There are some I have to say no to, if it's just too far-fetched. You know, it would just look too out of place."* Performing what it means to be ‘designerly’ for their audience, as demonstrated through a consistent visual portfolio feed took priority over selling other brands, for most designers I spoke with.

In contrast to sponsored posts that were *"very intrusive"* or *"obviously a promotion,"* designers like Max felt fine with creating sponsored posts if they fit within his "own personal brand," He continued, *"If it fits within something that you normally do on your Instagram, it's not too farfetched."* Max used a marker company as an example:

> "[If] a marker company that I buy their markers from just wants me to post a sketch book page and say I use this pen, which I use, which isn't weird- that's fine. That makes perfect sense, and you get a nominal fee from that."

Similar to bloggers, designers invoke what Duffy (2017) terms the “passion-payout solution” of only promoting products that they already use and love as a way to “buffer against critiques of crass commercialism” (p.175). Part of maintaining a self-brand as a designer was about promoting products and tools that were part of what it meant to practice design. To this end, Kieran thought *"trade specific"* posts were preferred over *"lifestyle"* posts. He emphasized, *"If it's a thing that feels natural to what I already do... If it was like a Cintiq tablet just because I use that in sketching or a type of pencil, I think that makes sense."* Avoiding “lifestyle” posts was a technique designers used to partition their status as design professionals from a more broad, largely amateur group participating in a similar kind of social media marketing. These techniques were coupled with a palatable disdain for being identified as an influencer. Sebastian exclaimed, “influencer, I hate the term." Jonathan was persistent in his efforts to be hired for his creative abilities and be identified as an *"illustrator"* and *"not like a blogger type.*" He explained, "*I always try to pitch it in a way that's not just me being an influencer,* ***it's actually producing some work."*** Being paid to promote products without any creative work required was read as ‘*not* design work’ compared to promotional work in which there was an opportunity to sketch, art direct, make.

Lillie described the work of creating sponsored posts as walking "*a fine line,"* where *"at first it was hard because it kid of feels like you are selling out a little bit."* However, Lillie tried to focus on the work as *"an art piece, not necessarily just an ad."* She elaborated,

> "I definitely see it as more of creating, as long as the work you produce is still artistic. Not just kind of like, "Here's a shot of a beer," you know, kind of thing. Which some people can get away with, and it's not necessarily a bad thing, but it's not what I want to be doing. I want it to be **more design-oriented**."

For many designers, it was important that the work required for the sponsored post *require creative skil*l and design. If it was promotional work on behalf of brands that required no creative output, then that was viewed as purely marketing, not design. In these sponsored posts, designers felt that the design ability and the quality of creative work should lead. When discussing promotional posts, Kieran emphasized, *"I think maybe what it comes down to, is the work good?"* This boundary work was motivated in a large part by portfolio-building concerns—you will be hired to do the work reflected in your portfolio. These designers negotiated the delicate balance of sussing out opportunities that would support their livelihood *and* foster opportunities for design work in the future. Too many promotional posts unrelated to the design industry, design practices, or what it means to do design work could exclude you from being sought after for more cutting edge graphic design opportunities. In the order to minimize this risk but still participate, designers employed strategies to be identified as *designer-influencer* rather than *influencer-designer*—where one's professional design identity takes center-stage.

Klein, Meiers & Power (2017) argue that in the creative industries like the music industry, selling out has become extremely nuanced such that there is "no single act" that demonstrates one has lost "cultural autonomy" as a creative producer (p.234). However, while the notion of "selling out" has evolved, the idea of creative integrity still persists leading to "countless considerations, decisions, and justifications" to maintain integrity as a music-maker (Klein et al., 2017, p.234). In a similarly hyped promotional context of self-branding and reputation building on social media, graphic designers are continuously making decisions about how the work they create and publicly display on social media signals their design autonomy. At this snapshot in time, nuances of selling out for the graphic design community have centered on participation in paid influencer activities and what type of work is central to design-making.

Designing ‘Original’ Work: Social Media Logics, Client Work, & Self-Initiated Work

Similar to portfolios of new media workers which included samples of websites developed for clients Neff et al., (2005), the designer’s portfolio includes samples of the designer’s client work as well as personal work also called self-initiated projects. In this way, the professional portfolio strives to “strike a balance between personal expression and the needs of the creative industry” (Taylor, 2012, ebook source). This balance is often about pursuing various types of projects that “carry creative cachet and lower-profile jobs that pay the bills” (Neff et al., 2005, p.323). Indeed, the designers I interviewed described this constant tension in not only the design work they pursued but also in the strategic decisions they made about which design projects to include in their public portfolios. Often work that that “paid the bills” was omitted from the portfolio of work because it was not the type of work the designer sought to get in the future. As such, the content displayed via these social media platforms is not simply the work completed but rather represents highly curated representations of design work and design abilities— continual portfolio-building efforts in pursuit of future work opportunities. As is true for many creative aspirants, portfolios serve as a form of industry credentialing, which "conflate job skills and clients' prestige" (Neff et al., 2005, p. 311). To that end long lists of clients were prominently displayed on designers’ personal websites along with examples of project work, and creative industry awards received.

Portfolio-building was a huge factor for how designers decided which opportunities to pursue. After a full year as an independent designer, Seth felt that his portfolio was "*in a strong state of having representation in all the industries"* that he would like to have a presence in. He felt this diversity in his portfolio would give him *"enough ammo to start hunting, very confidently"* if things started to *"dry up."* He elaborated on the re-branding he had completed for key projects: *"For instance, [I have] two restaurants, two full restaurants- rebranding shows a lot of responsibility. Also doing a film festival, that's another one, and a clothing line […] I can go on confidently, move forward from there and seek the work that I wanna do."* Seth, like many designers was constantly evaluating his portfolio to make sure he had projects that reflected the work that he hoped to pursue in the future as design evaluation and the potential for new creative work is always based on the *demonstrated work* in your portfolio.

In the context of social media platforms, the display of portfolio and portfolio building efforts follow the logics of social media. As such, the design work was both influenced by platform affordances and helped to shape the norms around presentation of work on these platforms. Rather than just *documenting* work designed for clients, the practices of these graphic designers illustrate the labor of *adding* new work to client projects to demonstrate additional skills, *experimenting* with new techniques for displaying work via these platforms, and designing original graphic work *for social media* all in the effort of launching and sustaining their design careers. The following detail the digital labor of portfolio-building through a content centric lens including: 1). the social media logic of portfolio-building, 2). the aestheticization of process as a social media design product, and 3). the self-initiated projects designed for social media.

Social Media as Portfolio

While Bēhance was initiated as an online portfolio platform, it still recognized the reliance of the design industry on personal website portfolios and encouraged users to sign up for its Prosite (now Adobe portfolio) which allowed users to create a personally branded website from various customizable templates and afforded users the ease of feeding the personal website with content from their Bēhance profile. This made it more efficient to update work in one place and display in both their Bēhance profile and Adobe Portfolio. More recently, Dribbble came out with a similar portfolio option called "playbook" which catered to designers' need to have to have their own self-brand take center stage rather than the brand of the social media platform: *"Playbook is a simple, customizable portfolio, powered by your Dribbble profile. We strip away the Dribbble brand, leaving you with a streamlined website that’s instantly available."* *(*Dribbble, 2017a). Even though the designers I spoke with still maintained personal websites as their portfolios, they were starting to view social media as an increasingly vital part of their portfolio. At times this was difficult for designers to acknowledge because of all the time and effort invested in creating their personal website portfolios. Independent D.C. designer, Mark talked through his evolving thoughts about what he considered his portfolio:

> Mark: “I would say, my actual portfolio site, to me is probably the most important... Well, I don't know. I think only because it took me many, many hours to get it set up the way that I want. Looking at it now in retrospect, it's probably the least important of all three.”
>
> Interviewer: “Interesting. Why would you say that it's now the least important to you?”
>
> Mark: “Say, you want to go and you want to just, in a general sense, find/look at design illustration work, it makes so much more sense to go to a place like Dribbble or Bēhance or Instagram where you can see all this different stuff, than try and hunt down individual designers. I'm sure there are art directors that I work with on a regular basis and they will probably check out my site occasionally to see what is new. I'll bet just in terms of pure visibility and how many people are coming across my work through what platforms, my actual website is getting smaller and smaller by the day.”

Like Mathew, many designers saw their social media platforms in a new important light in response to the shift in industry practices for seeking out talent by art directors, agencies, and clients via these platforms. Max, an independent designer/illustrator mused, *"it probably comes down to it that nobody's looking at your online port[folio]...your actual website.”* Both Mark and Max’s observations come in the context of a growing wave of industry professionals’ proclamations to designers that “You don’t need a portfolio anymore. You have an Instagram feed.” (Greenfield, 2014, April 11). As designers turn more to social media platforms as their key vehicle for self-promotion and portfolio presentation, the platformed nature of the design portfolio follows new social media logics.

Social Media Logics

Multi-Dimensional, Platformed Portfolio. While designers have always been encouraged to “show your personality” through the *work* in their portfolios, the socialized portfolio spread across multiple platforms compels designers *share more dimensions* of what it means to *be* a designer. In addition to the typical content of client work and self-initiated work, designers are prodded to share personal moments, sources of inspiration, and a point of view to demonstrate their personal brands through their digital portfolio. Designers manage this expanded, multi-platformed portfolio by sharing their content in platform-specific ways making what Zhao et al., (2016) refer to as “conceptual links between platform and audience” (p.92). Many independent and freelance designers moved between roles of *being hired* and *hiring* as their project load varied. As such, they often reflected on how they saw certain platforms as useful for making determinations about different aspects of designers outside of the design work they were presenting on platforms like Bēhance and Dribbble. For example, Trent reflected how Instagram— showed more than just work but whether design was “more than just a job.” Kacie saw Pinterest as a place as a way to evaluate what a designer was ‘inspired by.’ Collectively, this points to how designers saw all of these platforms as being about *work* and requiring a large amount of uncompensated work to manage their platform specific portfolios across a myriad of social media platforms.

Connected portfolio. van Dijck & Poell (2013) identify *connectivity* as a key principle of social media logic in connecting “content to user activities and advertisers” where “ the mutual shaping of users, platforms, advertisers and more generally, online performative environments” is the key driver (p. 8). This *connectivity* influenced the way designers made decisions about their portfolios and process of distributing their design work. Unlike the more static website portfolio, independent designer Jordan pointed to the way followers on social media platforms impacted how he thought about his portfolio as a part of these systems. He noted how followers complicated the notion of portfolio and sharing his work through these systems as opposed to his personal website portfolio:

> "[The] idea of followers you don't have on your [personal website] portfolio. Your [personal website] portfolio exists in this place that is for you in a way, and you send that link out to other people when you want them to see you, but they're not following that page. It just exists alone. Bēhance and more specifically Instagram has the *follower attached to it*, which means whatever I upload you're going to be confronted with whether you like it or not, you're going to see something and then you have the decision to continue to follow that or not and opt out, which your portfolio doesn't have at the moment. In a way, it's almost I have to be more thoughtful about what I post on my Instagram because that's becoming in some ways my portfolio."

Jordan's observations point to the ways in which platform programmability of social media makes impacts how he thinks about the process of updating his portfolio. While updates to a web portfolio aren't immediately visible to a perceived live audience, an update of project work on Bēhance means immediate notifications to followers. The platform programmability combined with "audience feedback mechanisms" (Litt, 2012, p.327) of social media such as likes, comments, and the change in follower counts serve to make the designer much more aware of a continual audience. As van Dijck (2013a) asserts, follower counts subscribe to the *popularity principle*: "The more contacts you have and make, the more valuable you become, because more people think you are popular and hence want to connect with you" (p.13). Following this logic, the connected portfolio of design work is judged in the context of follower counts.

As designers think about platforms like Instagram as a portfolio, it means that the pressure and anxiety they feel to present strong work in their portfolios is extended to all of these platforms as they come to represent and reflect the creative work of the designer. Each individual post comes to represent the portfolio and now portfolio evaluation happens across all of these mediated spaces. While everyday users carefully manage the content they post based on audience and platform affordances (Zhao et al., 2016), this management is heightened for professionals using social media to sustain their careers. For design professionals who view these platforms as part of their presentation of portfolio each post is experienced as portfolio evaluation through social media metrics of likes and followers. The "social media logic" (van Dijck & Poell, 2013) of the connected portfolio attaches followers and likes as a metric of evaluation for designers. After a designer experiences what Sebastian referred to as an *"incredible jump*" in followers after posting a particular type of new work, it can cause *"performance anxiety"* around maintaining the same type of work to keep followers on Instagram. Sebastian expressed his worry: *"Now, I'm also scared about posting other content, 'cause I'm afraid all these people have followed me for that type of content, and if I post something else, then they'll leave, which is a ridiculous fear, but it's definitely one that's there."* On platforms like Instagram, designers perceive a stronger sense of immediacy to the evaluation of their work than previously experienced on a personal website portfolio through follower counts and likes. Kalsnes, Larsson, & Enli (2017) conceptualize the social media logic of connectivity as three types of "connective affordances"—acknowledging (likes), redistributing (shares), and interacting (mentions, comments) (p.4). These "connective affordances" (Kalsnes et al., 2017) serve to make a once static and controlled portfolio presentation—interactive and tied to tangible metrics where the portfolio and the creative work becomes *quantifiable* by the number of likes, shares, and comments attached to it.

Continuous. In addition to follower engagement and social media metrics, Mark noted the fundamental change in how portfolios were organized through social media platforms as "feed based" instead of being "index based" like websites. He explained,

> "The idea of an index like you have sort of, an archive that is maybe a set number of pieces. Here's 20 pieces you can scroll through. Whereas feed based, which starts way back with Tumblr maybe, probably before all of these [social media platforms]. This idea of just a constantly updated refreshing feed of new work and I think that is best on display on Instagram for sure, which I think is rapidly maybe becoming the third leg of the portfolio triad."

The *"constantly updated refreshing feed of new work,"* to which Mark refers is a feature of social media that changes the temporal nature of the portfolio from a creative product that is updated every couple of months to something that must be continually updated in order for designers to stay relevant. The portfolio is no longer an archive of client work completed but instead takes on the form of a feed that needs to be continually updated and tailored uniquely across a vast social media ecology. Instead of the more traditional portfolio labor of documenting and displaying completed work, the 'feed' nature of the portfolio was experienced by designers as a *constant demand for new design content*. In other words, the project of designing a portfolio moved from a labor of short intense bursts (episodic) to the labor of continual portfolio design, where feedback is continually coming in.

Platform Norms. As the design portfolio becomes spread across multiple platforms, designers' decisions about where to share their work become informed by "imagined affordances" (Nagy & Neff, 2015) of individual platforms across a social media ecology. Elsewhere, we argue that these "imaginations get constructed through the interplay of platform features, assumptions about the audience, and the producer's own self-concept" (Duffy et al., 2017, p.2). Here, I discuss the how the interplay of each platform's material & design features and social norms impacted designers' considerations of portfolio presentation.

The format, display, and size parameters of content varied considerably on each platform, which meant that designers were constantly thinking about considerations of display on each platform as they developed their work. For independent designer, Will the image size features indicated possibilities for the way his work will be viewed on three of the platforms he prioritized for his graphic design work. He shared,

> “When I work on a project I have to think of three perspectives at the same time/ So when I construct the image, [I think]: would it work in a square format on Instagram? Would it work vertically on Bēhance, cause it’s a bigger screen, and also would it work horizontally on my personal website?”

When comparing Bēhance’s vertical format and Instagram’s square format, Will is also alluding to the differences in how content will be viewed—noting distinctions between mobile applications like Instagram and desktop viewing on Bēhance. In addition to size, the distinction between the ‘unit of post’ expected on each platform varied—the singular image versus the project. For example, Bēhance was designed with the "project" composed of multiple images as the unit of content to be posted—you post one project at a time (Belsky, 2011). In contrast to Bēhance, platforms like Dribbble and Instagram are defined by singular image as the post. Some designers developed efficiencies to allow their work to cross platforms more easily. Independent designer, Miles described how he observed designers creating a vertical template in a graphic program where they could layout and arrange multiple images. He explained,

> “I know several of my peers what they do whenever they come up with something on Bēhance is that they end up creating one long image.—a long image with a lot of the elements in it. So that when they upload it to Bēhance, it fits that website perfectly. They can pin it. They can put it on their website seamlessly because they don't wanna have to make a custom page for their website and then a custom page for Bēhance, and Pinterest.”

This strategy by designers also afforded designers more control of the way their images were presented and control in their projects (if pinned) circulated as one image rather than separate images. As result, the format of the digital portfolio has been influenced in part by these format parameters of how portfolio is presented.

Temporal Implications. Designers made conceptual links between these content parameters and expectations of posting frequency on these platforms, which at times were at odds with the client driven design project timeframes. Platforms like Bēhance which, encouraged the ‘project’ upload of multiple images aligned much better with the timeframe of design projects. Designers often discussed how they posted new projects on Bēhance much less frequently and waited until a project was completed and they had client permission to upload those projects. This norm of the full "project" upload was designed into the platform from the beginning and this norm was carefully cultivated by the platform curators through the work that was featured on Bēhance. In my interviews with the head curator and assistant curator for Bēhance, they emphasized that in addition to high quality images, a major criterion for being featured by the platform was a complete project consisting of multiple images. In contrast to Bēhance, platforms like Dribbble and Instagram are defined by the primary unit of an image rather than a project. In the concept of ”Twitter for designers," Dribbble (2017b) described its posts as "shots" or ”small screenshots of 400 x 300 pixels." Independent designer, Noah saw Dribbble as a platform that he could *"constantly be posting to"* because "*there wasn't the expectation that it has to be finished"* and he could post *"just a piece of the process or just a little crop"* of something that he was working. Similar to many other freelance designers, Noah recounted how this made it easier to share design work more frequently:

> "I’ve always got multiple projects in the works, and so if I can just post a little corner of something, I don’t have to wait until that project is done and until the client signs off or gives me permission to post the project, and so there are a lot of things you have to wait on if you’re wanting to share a final project."

However, all of the Dribbble users I spoke with mentioned the change in the platform norm of posting "in process" or unfinished work to more finalized work. Mark described how the platform tagline changed from "Show us what you're working on" to "show and tell for designers," and overtime he had noticed shift from designers posting *"work in progress"* to it becoming "*more of a secondary portfolio outlet than anything resembling 'work in progress.'"* Likewise, Laura described a similar evolution on Dribbble, *"Really quickly, the platform changed from the, "Share what you're working on," to, "Share this beautifully polished thing that you're proud to show," because I think that's just how designers are."* This shift meant that even though designers only had to post one "shot" at a time, the work needed to look more finished.

Nevertheless, the "shot" format on Dribbble and the predominantly singular image post on Instagram gave designers greater flexibility in terms of content creation (instead of full project), but at the same time there was a perceived expectation of a higher frequency of posts on these platforms. This expectation of frequency of posts was experienced as particularly amplified on Instagram. Keith noted that on Instagram,*"There's a sense of immediacy. You have to be posting, and you have to be prolific all the time, and that in itself can be pretty stressful."* The perceived temporal qualities of the platform influenced how designers thought about sharing new work. Independent Bay Area lettering artist and designer, Jonathan described how the recent change in the algorithm amplified the pressure to post *"everyday"* in a way that" penalizes *people who post less often."* He explained the implications,

> "Yeah, it does require just a really high output [..] You're no longer able to spend time on anything. You just have to keep churning out things, and so a certain type of work can do well, like really simple illustrative work can do well. Especially for the lettering community, it's done a disservice there because then it penalizes people that take the time to do it well, and unfortunately elevates people who are pretty sloppy with their work because it's so quick."

Because designers saw frequency of posting as linked to potential to get followers and increase their visibility, many designers struggled with the pressure to continuously be creating high quality design work to post. A number of graphic designers pointed to how the design of some types of content is better suited for the time frame of Instagram than others. Kenneth, an independent graphic designer specializing in branding and advertising campaigns emphasized how lettering artists *"can get followers faster"* and have the *"appearance of just being prolific"* because *"because lettering projects are things that you can get done in a week, in a day."* In comparison, Kenneth emphatically described how his *"branding projects take months."* He continued,

> "Primarily, my work, and what floats my ship, is branding and advertising, and those campaigns take a long time to develop. To do a good, a typical comprehensive brand identity system, to do the strategic work behind it where you're gonna do naming, all of those things, you go through a month, you don't even have anything to show for it. And so, it's like, "Well, great. What am I gonna post?"

For graphic designers like Kenneth whose work doesn't easily align with the perceived temporal structure of Instagram, it becomes an issue of figuring out what content to post that ensures that he still remains relevant.

In the context of the social media portfolio, designers struggle to manage where to post their design work because some design work just fits better with the aesthetics, cultural norms, or temporal structure than other types of content. In the context of social media metrics, there is a sense for the type of design work that “performs well” on each platform based on aesthetics considerations as well as type of work (i.e. vector based graphics versus corporate identity content). Terms like “Dribbble bait,” or “Bēhance-look” were terms used within the industry. Just as the creative work distributed in Becker’s (1982) *art worlds* was shaped by participant developed conventions, so too is the design work circulating within social media platforms shaped by the conventions of its participants. However, the socially mediated environments of platforms are built around actions determined by both human and non-human actors (Latour, 1992). As such, the conventions of platforms are shaped by the interplay between the technical platform features, the platform curators who make decisions about what content to feature, the community managers who reinforce platform policies, and the self-policing of content and boundary pushing by designers. These interactions intersect with the user's perception of audience feedback, coalescing around an evolving but distinct aesthetic look and feel for content posted on each platform. Nagy & Neff (2015) point to the constructed nature of the interactions between users and technology where "imagined affordances" exist between "users' perceptions, attitudes, and expectations; between the materiality and functionality of technologies; and between the intentions and perceptions of designers" (p.1). All of these considerations of "imagined affordances" come into play as designers make decisions about where to display their design work in platform-specific ways. For example, Lev Manovich (2016) refers to how users on Instagram have collectively developed an Instagram aesthetic or style. In part, this aesthetic is driven by the mantra that developing a "theme" through consistency of subject and color for content on Instagram is the key to attracting followers (Manovich, 2016, p.13). Key to what Manovich (2016) refers to as "Instagramism" is establishing a "temporal pattern" for your feed where there is an overall structure to how content appears next to each other in the feed (p.15). As such the *sequencing* of content becomes more important than the individual posts. Indeed, some of the designers I spoke with were trying to fit their design work into a coherent visual theme on their feeds. For example, several designers used apps to sequence their work or adhere to a color theme for posting content. However, too much preoccupation with the feed as demonstrated by sequencing of posts and color coordination of the feed could be perceived as being more of a "blogger type" (see discussion on boundary work in audiences) rather than a designer.

Overall, designers found ways to highlight aspects of the design process, experimented with new methods of presenting work, or developed personal project work that could be packaged in platform specific ways. The privileging of temporal sequencing of content on platforms like Instagram, provides a new constraint for how designers present their creative work. This has opened up a whole new area of designing and design work—where designers are creating work that is made specifically to exist on platforms like Dribbble and Instagram.

Process Work

As a part of the "creative act," (Wang & Ilhan, 2009) the *design process* is a key part of value creation for the design professions. Not surprisingly, revealing process work was a popular type of content that designers in my sample were posting across social media platforms as a part of reputation building. This took several forms including *process as product, process as design effort, process as effortless, process as reciprocity*, and *process as personal*.

Process *as Product*. Giving followers a glimpse into their creative process was viewed as a value-generating strategy for designers to use across platforms. While Keith viewed sharing design process on social media as good for multiple audiences such as "fans" and "art directors," he directed his process toward art directors because they were "the people who could hire" him for design projects. As designers discussed why they were motivated to demonstrate their process work on social media, they were predominately imagining the potential client or person who would hire them as the primary target audience for viewing their creative process (see detailed discussion of audience in 'designing audiences' section). While sharing process work has always been important part of showing how designers think, the process work that designers are sharing on social media takes on a highly aestheticized look—where *process is packaged as final design product*. Kieran felt that the way process was presented on Instagram "fetishizes the process" to a degree that conceals the messiness of the process. He quipped, " *All they see on Instagram are these beautiful photos of pencil sketches with eucalyptus leaves and a candle and* *everything perfectly laid out.”* Similarly, Keith described this notion of how graphic designers and illustrators *“want to pretend that they nailed everything the first try, no revisions, everything was smooth, and they are perfect at what they do.”* The display of creative process on social media becomes a new addition to the design portfolio—one that is about the designer both revealing certain efforts and concealing other parts of design labor as an entrepreneurial effort for attracting clients.

Process *as Design Effort*. Independent graphic designer, Josh emphasized how important “showing process” and “creating value around process” was for designers to combat the perception by clients that *“Oh, I could have done that.”* This is has become especially important for designers to hold on to what is unique about the work they do in the context of a more ubiquitous embrace of design and the increasing savvy of amateur communities of social media content creators, creating digital graphic work. The accessibility of creative production software tools like Photoshop and Illustrator as part of Adobe’s creative cloud suite and the ease with which design solutions look final and polished, has led many of the designers to help potential clients see beyond the final digital image that are shared on social media platforms and continually circulate among platforms. Sharing “process” was deployed as a way to educate would be clients on the value of their design services in a crowded marketplace where there was concern that to the “untrained eye” of the client, the availability and immediacy of polished work posted across platforms was indistinguishable. Some ‘big names’ in graphic design have been self-taught (i.e. Adrian Shaughnessy). As such, the designers in my sample viewed the distinction among designers less in binary terms of amateur and professional and more through the lens of *degree of experience*—experience to be able to not just perform creativity through ‘one-hit wonders’ on social media but be adept at thinking through how a design solution could successfully be applied to a variety of contexts.

Independent graphic designer specializing in ‘creative lettering,’ Ray deliberately shared “details” and *“some of the process shots of the material and how it’s done to make sure people don’t get confused and think that they are [digital] renderings”* His *“aesthetic of creating work by hand and then photographing it”* was a way that he could *“stand out from the crowd”* and show how his approach of creative lettering could ultimately *“be applied to advertising and design”* client work. Making sure “people don’t get confused,” refers to clients who might see a digital image and assume it was created solely by digital software, believing the time and hand-technique used to stand out from many other graphic designers doing lettering work. Similarly, independent designer Noah shared “as much process” as possible on Bēhance to “explain” how he starts working on paper first and then moves to the computer:

> “I think a lot of times, which a client starts working with me they just assume that I’m working on my computer, and so kind of both for me and for them I like to explain that you know I’m doing it on paper first, cause you know that could affect the way we work or the way revisions need to happen, but then also to them, hopefully it translates in some small way to some added value that it’s still being done by hand so there is a little bit more of a human connection, you know, made with the work and the end product”

Displaying hand skills was important for designers in distinguishing individual creative talent in the face of digital software, demonstrating the unique and individual creative abilities of the designer as means of differentiating. Additionally, Noah’s nod to “way we work or the way revisions need to happen,” is about communicating to the client the time involved in the process and the value investment in that time. This was especially true for logo design and corporate identity work with the rise of sites such as 99 designs, which have been termed “logo farms” (Amy[17] personal communication, 2017, May 23). Massanari (2012) points to the problematic ways these crowdsourcing design platforms are encouraging “clients to view design work as merely a commodity and not a very valuable one at that" (para, 51). It is in this context that designers like Keith felt it was important for "people" understand why he is *"billing at $100 plus an hour"* for logo design in particular:

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[17] Pseudonym used

> "*My gosh*, they need to understand how much time goes into creating that mark, that brand. There are 10s if not hundreds of hours of drawing and scribbling it out, throwing it out, frustration, sweat and try again, deadlines. What you are getting is every single thing that was put behind that work and it is all very necessary to get to best final product. I think for those small business owners it is really hard for them to understand that unless they see 'hey that guy sketches a lot before'"

The of side-by-side comparisons of design work on social media platforms intensify an already competitive marketplace for graphic design, where designers perform process as a means of justifying their billing rates to clients. So, while communicating process has always been important to designers, the environment of social media platforms, wider audience, access to creative software, and rise of crowdsourcing have created a context where designers put more time and effort into documenting the process as a key digital product in of itself in pursuit of new opportunities. Demonstrating unique creative skills through the design process was a strategy for designers to manage risk in a precarious freelance economy.

Process *as "Off the Cuff and Effortless"* Increasingly, sharing the process has become a central part of designer's promotional activities on social media platforms. Josh described how process as a product is viewed by designers as a key value generating part of their self-branding promotional strategy on social media, *"I think process has become just a part of marketing, which is okay with me though because I think that process is one of the more valuable parts of it [marketing]."* In the context of social media platforms, sharing process was a way to "bring in a lot of results" in the sense of getting likes and potential clients. Kenneth, a brand and identity designer described how he is "very calculating" in how he posts because he has seen how process, the right kind of process will translate into likes:

> “If you use it [Instagram] to show process, you get a lot of likes. If you can hand-draw stuff, you get a lot of likes, especially if you're good at it. So people who are very, very hands-on and they show you, give you a glimpse behind their works, do very well on Instagram,”

Across the landscape of social media, designers had a keen sense about the type of content that performed well on each platform. On Instagram sharing process took on a particular aesthetic and form that aligned with the immediacy or ‘of the moment’ perceived nature of the platform and the imagined audiences of the platform. In this context, time-lapse video became a common strategy for presenting process that played to the uptick in video or motion as a compelling strategy on social media for garnering attention as well as the perception that the designer was letting the audience in on the behind-the-scenes secrets of the design process, revealing more about the creator as tied to the design.

Asserting his insider status, Kenneth reflected on the reality of the process versus the perception of the process by non-designers, namely clients.

> “Now, it might seem like it's off the cuff, like they just sat there and drew it, but they probably did that a few times. But you don't know that. It could have been that they practiced that for like 10 hours and then drew it. But it's the immediacy. You say, "Oh, wow. It's amazing. It's phenomenal." And it's how it's perceived. It's off the cuff. It's effortless. And so, there's something about seeing the process, in doing that, that brings a lot of results to it.”

Many designers revealed process in ways that made it appear “effortless” and more immediate as a way of garnering awe and inspiration around the design process—creating more perceived distance between the unique skills and abilities of the design and the follower—resulting in more engagement on social media and value around the creative process. Designers manage the competing demands of performing high productivity (efficiency) with high creative output (time intensive) on social media. Designers both reveal time and effort that goes into design to show the value of the work (it is more difficult than it seems) and conceal inefficiencies to make their creative effort *appear* effortless to secure their value and status as a creative professional. Thus, posting process was a way of deploying the narrative of the authentic.

Process *as Reciprocity*. Duffy (2015b) points to the importance of reciprocity in online communities as an investment. For designers promoting their work through social media, sharing one's design process was viewed as a form of reciprocity and reputation building within the freelance and independent design community. Jesse, an up and coming freelance designer tried to share process as a way to "increase your value" within the design community:

> "Say you had two people that were in the same industry and they had very similar work as far as the level of how great it is and you have one that's just posts the work and one the posts the work, as well as taking the time to give back to the community in the sense of explaining process, showing behind the scenes. I think that person is gonna be elevated to the top more, simply 'cause he's giving back to the community"

For designers sharing their creative process is a form of what Gandini (2016) refers to as "performative practices of sociality" that serve as reputation building (p.134). This fits into a broader mode of building social capital which Wittel (2001) termed "network sociality" (p.51). However, this was often a difficult tension to manage as sharing process has traditionally been "safeguarded" as key to unique value production (Wang & Ilhan, 2009, p.9). On one hand Dina experienced a "huge push" to show her creative process follower comments:

> "I was getting it in feedback in comments, because people were saying, "How did you do this? What is this? Are you using stencils?" It was very obvious and direct, and so, the correlation was, "I should show people how this works." And I think people were expecting, in doing the process, that they would get a glimpse of the magic of how my work is made"

However, "giving a glimpse of the magic" or her design process meant that other designers could then replicate her process and infringe on what Dina thought was a key parts of her personal brand.

> "I have a love-hate relationship with this [sharing her process]. I always think of it as open palm, where I'm constantly wanting to clench on it and be like, "But it's mine, I

> shouldn't have to give any more, I shouldn't to explain any further, I shouldn't have to share, no one else has to do this." But then I'm like, "But, for this to work you have to keep it open, and people will take from it, and some people will give back to you in the taking, and others will just take and run away." And you have to be focused on the people who will take and give back. Some days, that's much easier to do. When it comes to losing bids on jobs, that's a lot harder."

Designers like Dina experienced the tension of *performing sociality* in the form of sharing design process but then running the risk of sharing too much the could result in their ability to sustain a living in a competitive creative economy. Giving back in the form of sharing your process was viewed as collaborative. This is especially important in freelance and independent communities where "collaborative for freelancers outperforms competitive since reputation is their most valuable asset, and jobs come from recommendations, referrals, and word of mouth" (Gandini, 2016, p. 133).

Process *as Personal.* Increasingly designers are expected to share more and more of their work and their process as a part of these social media platforms. In contrast to platforms like Bēhance and Dribbble, Instagram offered designers an opportunity to share process as way to be more personal, more relatable as a designer—to stand out among other designers. Often this included sharing the process of designing within the context of a studio. Jesse described sharing process as a way for people to "*see a bit more of me, not just an illustration."* Aside from process, designers often saw self-initiated personal projects as way to reveal more of the personal along with sharing photos of their life as designer as a means of standing out.

Self-Initiated Work (*self-initiated*, *personal*, *passionate*)

In contrast to creating design work for paying clients, there is an emphasis in the design and creative industry more broadly on self-initiated work or personal projects that designers engage in as a creative outlet in the *hope* of getting paid to do that type of work in the future. In addition to the term self-initiated work and personal projects, this type of work is often referred to as side projects or passion projects. Well-known letterer, illustrator, and type designer, Jessica Hische has become known for many of her personal projects and often talks about the role of personal or passion projects for freelance designers. In one recent talk entitled Passion Projects, Hische explained: "Passion projects come about because there is something you want to be doing, but no one is paying you to do it […] Show them that you want to do it, before people will pay you to do it" (GitHub, 2013, July 17). Indeed, many designers were motivated to spend time on self-initiated projects to build their portfolios and demonstrate the type of design work that they would like to be doing. On her blog, Jessica Hische also gave advice about the benefit of personal projects:

> "Make work. One of the best things you can do for your career is to be productive. If you're not getting client work, do self-authored personal work. Most young people that are doing anything in the industry right now got there because of a personal project that *propelled them into the public conscious*. Not only will people probably feel more of a connection to this kind of work (because you poured your heart and soul into it) but it also shows future art directors that you CARE" (Hische, n.d.,para 15).

Being "*propelled into the public conscious*," has become a hope for many design. Jessica's advice touches on affective sentiments—in contrast to "work that pays the bills," these self-authored projects will be more meaningful and more authentic to people, especially in the digital environment. Design entrepreneur, Tina Roth Eisenberg gave this advice to would be designers and entrepreneurs in a 2012 issue of the *Great Discontent*:

> "Believe in side projects. Tattly was a side project; swissmiss was a side project; CreativeMornings was a side project; TeuxDeux was a side project. These are all things that turned into revenue streams for me and made it possible to not have clients. I would never hire anyone who doesn't have side projects. To me, that shows that someone has ideas, self-initiative, and can make things happen." (Essmaker & Essamaker, 2012, March 6, para 36).

Central to Eisenberg's advice is that a designer's employability is linked to their entrepreneurial efforts—demonstrated through the self-initiative of side projects. The message again and again to aspiring designers is that side projects are the key to gaining attention, success, and creative satisfaction. Moreover, both Hische and Eisenberg emphasize this idea of *continuous making*—being productive even if you are not being paid for that work because it will pay off in other ways. These notions echo the much-vaunted entrepreneurial ethos of neoliberal work economy that stresses that one's failure is a result of not taking enough initiative. These *self-initiated projects* were often creative work that designers made specifically for platforms like Instagram which were motivated by several aspects of creative work— 1). a *creative outlet* that demonstrated one's personal involvement (passion for the work), 2). a form of *design skill-building* that could make them more valuable in the future (risk management), and 3). future design work opportunities (portfolio-building). Like many other digital producers across a range of industries, these self-initiated projects can be understood as a form of what Kuehn & Corrigan (2013) term "hope labor" defined as the "un- or under compensated work carried out in the present, often for the experience or exposure, in the hope that future employment opportunities may follow" (p. 21).

Designers took seriously the call to work on side projects with the hopes of steering their portfolio in a direction related to the type of work they were passionate about doing in the future, but currently weren't being paid to do. Freelancer, Simon emphasized how self-initiated projects served the dual purpose of a form of creative expression and potential imagined opportunities: *"Self-initiated projects are unbelievably necessary for every designer, because you're not only bringing about new opportunities, but you're also exploring new things that you've never done or just expressing yourself, really."* However, like many other designers he described his purposeful efforts to create new work that would help him shift his design focus toward packaging work:

> "Personal projects have opened up the doors for, obviously, a number of projects for me, because if I never did those projects I wouldn't have worked on those future projects. I did that corn liquor project and the whiskey project to get me a job, 'cause if I didn't have those in my portfolio, I probably wouldn't have gotten a job because I have no packaging design work in my portfolio whatsoever, so I wanted to obviously show them what I was capable of, and show them that I could do the job that I was getting hired to do."

For freelance and independent designers, self-initiated projects were became a way to deal with the uncertainty and precarity of their work. Designers very much took up the meritocratic narrative of self-initiated projects as way to control their career direction. If they didn't have success, it was because they weren't putting in enough work to make opportunities happen.

For designers like Simon, the labor is framed in terms of the primary motivation of self-realization as a creator and the secondary motivation of future job opportunities. It was common for many of the designers that I spoke with discuss the work of self-initiated projects as "creatively satisfying" and separate from paid client work. For example, Trent viewed "side projects" as a chance to "practice" his skills and "make something for the sake of making." For Trent's series, he "*had this idea to do this thing [branded name], where every week no matter how busy it gets, just devote one hour a week into making something for yourself."* Originally starting out as *"very much a personal kind of thing,"* Trent recalled how he realized that he had an audience for his project:

> "Then the fact that I started sharing it, and then people started kind of looking for them and wanting to see them and look forward to seeing them, is cool, that's great, that's fantastic. It's almost like a modern day comic strip or something. You know what I mean?"

As a part of Instagram, Trent's personal project became a series where "people wanted to see them together in some way so I built a [web] site" and he posted them on Twitter and Instagram with a custom hashtag. Trent's personal project became something he could be recognized for and contributed to his reputation building and a form of what Spigel (2005) terms "conspicuous production" (p.414). Similarly, for designers this *conspicuous designing* signals passion for the work—that it is more than just a job. To this end, even if the efforts don't turn into new work opportunities, they are still viewed by these designers as worth the effort because of the creative satisfaction or the investment in skills development.

" A Gold Rush." In the digital environment, the display of personal projects serves as an important part of reputation building through visibility. Virginia based freelance designer, Joel experienced his "first foray into receiving some sort of recognition as an illustrator" when his "personal project" on Bēhance was initially shared by a local blog with national reach. He explained,

> "So they posted it up on their blog, and it received a ton of views after that. And then people started contacting me to get prints made of these illustrations. And then I got the prints made, and then there was even more exposure from the sharing of the prints online. And then people would also share the Bēhance link as well, and also include the Bēhance link in other blogs, and also Facebook. So then it just kept on going from there."

For aspiring freelance designers like Joel, the experienced spotlight and domino effect of social media attention was unexpected but served to solidify his perception of the link between personal projects presented on social media and an increase in reputational capital. He explained, *"After that [experience], I learned it's [social media] definitely very valuable. Literally my reputation as a designer and how people know me as an illustrator and designer, has literally just been all social media."*

Stories like Joel's recent personal project success on social media serve to valorize designers' sense of self-investment in personal projects and social media as the magic bullet to gaining visibility in the design industry. One designer explained explained how a "passion project” can also be a strategy for "attaining an online following" and generating value as a designer:

> "Attaining an online following through passion projects is key to expanding your personal portfolio and increases your likelihood of attaining new work. Success in this industry often comes to those who make and share their personal creative growth. It is important to note that this growth is also meant to increase my value to current and future employers without the goal or becoming a full time freelance designer." (from post-interview survey).

The “passion projects” that Luis describes are increasingly being seen by designers as a key part of the self-branding social media equation for gaining visibility in the attention economy and the mandate to be continually self-enterprising even if your goal isn't to go full-time as a freelancer.

In-house designer at a tech company, Thomas described the seeming *"gold rush"* mentality around side projects and making things *"because they think it's going to make them money, or this is going to make people impressed, and then I'm going to get a new job, I'm going to be a creative director somewhere if they see my thing."* Thomas referred to how other designers look to the precedent or *"model set by watching it happen to other people"* such as renown designer Jessica Walsh's widely lauded personal project called "40 days of dating" that captured international attention. He described,

> "So many people have seen these, "Oh, look, they did 40 days of dating," or whatever it's called. Now they're doing this thing and people are like, "What if you did something like that?"

Indeed, her digital project resulted in international recognition with "over 10 million readers, spots on The Today Show and The View, a book release and film rights bought by Warner Bros.” (Walsh, n.d.). Personal projects like Jessica Walsh's online experiment have served as a model for aspiring designers seeking to expand visibility beyond the design community. This mentality increasingly encourages designers to be continually partaking in ‘free pitches’ through the work they create and share freely via their social media networks.

“A Formula.” This "gold rush" around the self-initiated project for social media has become more explicit in designer and illustrator Lauren Hom's online course called "passiontopaid" where she teaches creatives to launch their freelance careers using side projects as a "secret weapon to success in the creativity industry" and a way to build a following around a passion project and "turn that following into people and companies who will actually PAY YOU to be your creative awesome self"(Hom, n.d.). As such, the effort invested in these personal projects often took on what Dina referred to as "a formula" in the mediated environment:

> "If you're gonna do a side project, you get a URL, and make a website, you give it its own space to live, and then if you wanna share it on Instagram, you share it on Instagram."

For instance, “ even side projects,” Trent, noted "have their own [Instagram] accounts." Indeed, designers invested in branding these projects through staking out territory or digital spaces for their projects including— building websites, multiple Instagram accounts, custom hashtags, and developing Skillshare and Teachable online classes. These strategies were largely a way to attempt by designers to hold on to value of their free work—a way to share work for exposure *and* to demarcate the territory for future deals that might pay off from these personal projects. In this fast-moving digital environment of image-circulation and distribution, designers had limited success in these techniques to hold on to a style or approach that was uniquely theirs (see Chapter 3, Inspirational Labor).

“Spec Designs for Fun.” Full time studio designer and freelancer, Sebastian decided to try the approach of creating a side project to launch on Instagram. Sebastian explained, *"My goals were to grow my following, and get some work from it."* Indeed, Sebastian attributed a jump "from 7k to 10k followers in maybe a week or two" to the project but was cautiously optimistic noting that a recent post of that series "got about half the engagement of the previous two." He continued,

> "I feel like this series touches on maybe three or four subcultures of Instagram, the travel Instagram, through design and lettering and graphic design. So, I tried to get some hashtags from each of these, and then some sort of location-specific hashtags. But I feel like, I hashtag a lot... A lot of the purpose of hashtagging is for people to find you, obviously, but also so these other big feature profiles will see your work and then hopefully feature it. And that's where the big bumps in follower growth happened, but I feel like it happens once every 50 posts or something."

It was common for designers to think of projects for Instagram as a 'series'—a project made up of multiple posts was key for visibility and staying power around a personal project but it also meant a greater investment in time and design labor. Sebastian estimated that each original design in the series took about 12 to 24 hours to create but viewed that work and time as an investment for potential career opportunities. Sebastian's uncompensated digital design labor in the present is largely framed as a "meritocratic investment" (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2103, p.21) in one's future career opportunities.

Following the lead of others, Sebastian found a way to mention larger brands in each post as a pitch to the particular brand, *"Take a look at what I did with your product, maybe you wanna hire me to an ad campaign like this."* Related to the blogger practice of mentioning a brand in order to gain the attention of brands, some designers saw the personal project as a form of spec work to bring in new work from brands. Freelance lettering artist, Beth was working as a full time graphic designer doing more traditional brand identity work when she "had a distinct thought:"

> "If I post a lot of this type of stuff to Instagram and if I show how I can be used commercially by like multiple brands then people will probably hire me or be would more likely to hire me. So, I liked tried to add products into my designs, these are just like *spec designs for fun* that I would just post to Instagram. In like some of them I included like bottles of soda or like a cereal box stuff like that."

For Beth, the *"spec designs for fun,"* became a path to transition to doing more lettering work and eventually *"getting paid to create"* that type of design work. After using the strategy of tagging various brands and designing lettering around their products, her efforts paid off and a large energy bar company came back to her saying, *"We want to hire you to create two more of these [designs]."* Even though Beth was very purposeful in her intent to use these spec designs to garner to new work opportunities, the term *'spec designs for fun'* veils the labor investment involved since it is framed as a leisure activity.

The practices of Beth and Sebastian follow a similar strategy to that of design bloggers-what Duffy (2017, also 2015c) terms *"entrepreneurial brand devotion*, wherein social media creators visibly align themselves with certain commercial brands as they pursue income and recognition" (p.139). In the case of graphic designers, the "entrepreneurial brand devotion" (Duffy, 2017) is intensified as designers log tedious hours creating speculative design work in the of gaining future design work-be it ad campaigns, lettering, or brand identity design work. Moreover, these success stories position the uncompensated work as "an investment that pays off for individuals based on merit" despite the fact that participation in un- or under compensated work perpetuates the precarity of industry opportunities (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013 p. 9). In some ways the speculative nature of these self-initiated digital projects, in part contribute to the challenges the graphic design community faces with getting fairly compensated for their professional expertise. So while the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) takes a firm stance on advising designers to never participate in what the design industry refers to as "spec work" where *speculative work* is "work done for free, in hopes of getting paid for it" (AIGA, 2011), as freelance designers compete in the social media economy, the line on "spec designs for fun" becomes increasingly blurred as designers are continually compelled to promote their abilities through more and more unremunerated digital labor.

Blinded by the Brand (Platform). These tensions around "spec work" get even more complicated for the graphic design community, when the social media platform, acting as a brand, asks designers to create free work for the platform. Kieran had just left his full time gig and was "freelancing within an agency" when he got a call to design geotags stickers for a popular social media platform. He exclaimed, *"I got so blinded by the name sort of that I was like, 'Sure, I'll do it!'"* Since they had described how *"when you clicked on the sticker, it would say 'sticker by @kieran,' and it would click you through to the profile"* he reasoned, *"maybe it was worth it because the platform is just so integral to lettering and design?"* Unfortunately, only after the final geotag stickers were released did Kieran realize that the geotags didn't give any attribution back to the individual designers and illustrators who did the work. In addition to being uncompensated for the work, the promise of exposure fell through as well. Kieran described how he later realized the implications of free work:

> "But it felt kind of bad afterwards? I don't know, I sort of had ... I don't know. I'm proud of the work I did for it, but it's weird for me as a platform that exists to push creatives forward to not pay creatives to do work for it is deeply disconcerting. Additionally, I know that he [Social media platform employee who reached out] got accolades within the company for his work with it, and I was kind of like, "Fuck." This like puts you forward in like a very real way and it didn't really [do anything]...for the people that did the work, you know?"

Kieran's experience speaks not only the issues of exposure in lieu of compensation for creative labor but also to the degree to which platforms are viewed as aspirational 'brands' to work with by creative communities. As such, some creatives see these platforms as having a central altruistic mission of helping designers to succeed or as Kieran says being *"a platform that exists to push creatives forward."* For design centric platforms such as Bēhance, Dribbble, and

Working Not Working, many of the designers I interviewed would frequently bring up how they knew the founders or had the sense that the founders were committed to helping the creative community. This sense of *affect* toward the founders and their missions often compelled designers to continue stay to be a part of various platforms. At play is also the shift to *platforms as brands* (van Dijck, 2013a) and their ability to cultivate affective relationships with the cultural producers that produce the high-quality content for their platforms as a part of community development efforts. (i.e. Dribbble community podcasts featuring designers, features of designers on platforms, Working Not Working community events in various cities for freelancers, Instagram fellowships or artist in residence programs).

Making Work *for* Social Media (Platforms)

Overall, these types of design content illustrate how designers were experimenting with platform constraints and developing new forms of design work made specifically for platforms like Instagram. However, this notion of ‘making work for Instagram or Dribbble” and the notion of social media as portfolio was fraught with worry as designers felt they had invested a lot of work (both relational labor (Baym, 2015) and content) into these platforms and felt they could easily disappear at any moment.

Discussion and Conclusion

Intensified Labor. Neff et al., (2005) pointed to the ways in which “portfolio-based work can exacerbate the forces of entrepreneurial labor by placing a burden on the cultural worker to create highly visible products” (p.323). The rise of social media and its call to “brand the self” (Duffy et al., 2017) means that the intensity and frequency of creating highly visible products has amplified. While diverse groups of amateur and professional content creators are engaging in “portfolio building” through the projects they take on or the sponsorships they participate in, the case of graphic designers highlights the mechanics of how personal brand is performed through a portfolio of content and skills across an exhaustive social media ecology.

Graphic designers are concerned with not only the portfolio-building efforts themselves, but also the *visibility* of those efforts as a visual designed product. For graphic designers who design graphic content as a part of their profession, the designed content shared was viewed as the key part of self-branding practices. Echoing the advice of a graphic design star Jessica Walsh that when “creating a name for yourself”— “it’s about your content” (Walsh, 2017, June 20), the graphic designers I interviewed emphasized the primacy of producing and promoting design content as self-presentation strategy for developing a unique personal brand. Thus, in this study, I draw attention to the ways graphic designers designed and packaged new kinds of content to build their personal brands. In this context, process work and self-initiated projects became a value-generating commodities. The ‘feed’ nature of the digital portfolio was experienced by designers as a demand to produce new work—a call to which designers frenetically tried to supply. As such, the practice of making original work specifically for platforms can be considered a new type of design labor that designers are compelled to participate in as a part of their work. The call to continuously be making new design work was taken up by designers as a way to develop reputational capital and go after new work opportunities. To this end, these design practices suggest that the rhetoric of meritocracy and passion for the work combined with the ‘gold rush’ mentality around social media has resulted in the normalization of creating and pitching unpaid or underpaid design.

A portfolio used to be the documentation and presentation of completed project work—a collection of what Tom Peters (1997, August 31) referred to as “braggables.” In the digital era, a portfolio is about the ongoing, on-demand packaging and presenting of creative endeavors that expand beyond the finished client project work—including both personal aspects of the creative's life and the professional parts of the project work including the public pitching of ideas, the inspirational content, the process work, and the final design work. This 'portfolio' of work is evaluated instantaneously through follower likes (or lack thereof), comments, mentions, shares, pins, and features. While creative industry proponents champion the way that the Instagram portfolio "reaches more people with less effort and fewer resources," (Greenfield, 2014, April 11), my interviews with graphic designers suggest there is much more invisible labor being performed. While social media affords exciting reach for aspirants, the *platformed portfolio* requires an intensified 'always on' laboring that is all encompassing—where the meta composition and sequence of content combined with the "relational labor" (Baym, 2015) of networking across a fluid social media ecology becomes part of the design evaluation of portfolio.

Value. Ross (2013) asserts that while networked technologies don't necessarily create occurrences of free labor practices, they make it easier to participate in free or undercompensated labor practices and extract value from the work. As the design portfolio becomes digital and networked via social media platforms, it becomes public and thus potentially monetarily *value-generating* In contrast to the physical or even website portfolio where the designer reaped the primary value from the effort of building and displaying the portfolio of design work, a socially mediated portfolio means that *others* can also more easily extract value from the designer's portfolio-building labor. On social media *'others'* take the form of a diverse audience composed of advertisers, brands, prospective clients looking for free ideas or speculative work, other designers and the platforms who depend on designers' creative content. Thus, designers are continually working to ensure that as their design portfolios freely circulate, that they still are reaping the maximum value from their own portfolio building efforts. This tension becomes especially prominent where designers are sharing their work with large brands on their social media feeds where the sharing is a form of portfolio building for designers but free promotional work for the brand.

Portfolio-Based Careers. Scholars have used the term “portfolio careers” to describe the project-based, contract, and entrepreneurial forms of employment that pervade the creative industries including music, magazine publishing, and television (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011), new media workers and fashion models (Neff et al., 2005), fashion designers (McRobbie, 2002), technology workers (Neff, 2012). More specifically, the portfolio demonstrates skills (McRobbie, 2002) and is central to evaluation and hiring among creative professionals (Neff et al., 2005; Soar, 2002). More recently, Duffy (2017) illuminates the ways blogger groups face struggles between portfolio building and brand sponsorships. Yet, the evolving form of the portfolio has been underexplored. This study on graphic designer’s socially mediated portfolio-building labor demonstrates how the concept of ‘portfolio’ for the creative industries is being reconfigured as it takes on a digital form. The *platformed* and *connected* portfolio suggests a new temporal structure, quantitative metrics for evaluation, evaluators as followers, value commitments, and forms of presenting work that are in shaped in part by the platforms for which they are produced. As a part of digitally networked environment, the portfolio becomes public and value-generating. The struggle of having a portfolio tied to platforms, which could disappear suggests a new precarity for creative producers across industries who are increasingly relying on these platforms to build their portfolios and careers. This study finds that the labor tensions surrounding portfolio-building, undercompensated brand sponsorship work in the graphic design community are shared with more amateur communities. Thus, the platformed-portfolios of graphic designers illuminate the tensions at the center of creative careers, digital labor, and self-branding practices that are relevant across creative industries in both amateur and professional communities.

Boundary Work. Although, the line between who reaps the most value from designers' work is blurred, this study shows how *designers* are working to shore up that line—such that the payoff for the work comes back to the designer in the form of compensation, attribution, and exposure. To do so, graphic designers are participating in boundary work (Gieryn,1983) in order to maintain and assert their value and status as "cultural intermediaries" (Bourdieu, 1984). While designers are participating in social media influencer programs of promoting products for pay, they are working hard to distance themselves from "blogger types and influencers" who are engaging in similar practices. In the order to minimize this risk but still participate, designers employed strategies to be identified as *designer-influencer* rather than *influencer-designer*—where one's professional design identity takes center-stage.

This boundary work was motivated in a large part by portfolio-building concerns—you will be hired to do the work reflected in your portfolio. These designers negotiated the delicate balance of sussing out opportunities that would support their livelihood *and* foster opportunities for design work in the future. Too many promotional posts unrelated to the design industry, design practices, or what it means to do design work could exclude you from being sought after for more cutting edge graphic design opportunities

Klein, Meiers & Power (2017) argue that in the creative industries like the music industry, selling out has become extremely nuanced such that there is "no single act" that demonstrates one has lost "cultural autonomy" as a creative producer (p.234). However, while the notion of "selling out" has evolved, the idea of creative integrity still persists leading to “countless considerations, decisions, and justifications” to maintain integrity as a music-maker (Klein et al., 2017, p.234). In a similarly hyped promotional context of self-branding and reputation building on social media, graphic designers are continuously making decisions about how the work they create and publicly display on social media signals their design autonomy. At this snapshot in time, nuances of selling out for the graphic design community have centered on participation in paid influencer activities and what type of work is central to design making.

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CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Situated at the intersection of design culture and communication, this dissertation points to the ways the rise of digital platforms and connective technologies is reconfiguring the tools, processes, and practices of design in profound and complex ways, while also highlighting how studying designers advances understanding of communicative and labor practices across creative industries. This dissertation analyzes the ways in which designers' activities on social media platforms, including their efforts to develop and manage their professional reputations across social networks constitute new forms of *design work.* I conceptualize their online self-promotional and evaluative strategies as a mode of *labor*. In this dissertation, I identify the three forms of digital labor that design professionals engage in as they use social media to promote their creative work, cultivate their self-brands, and publicly evaluate the creative products of their peers. This dissertation expands the scope of "economies of design," (Julier, 2017) to conceptualize a *social media design economy.* As a part of this social media design economy, I identify three forms of *digital* design labor: *curatorial labor, inspirational labor,* and *entrepreneurial labor*. Together these forms of labor illustrate how design professionals work among tensions of *profession, labor,* and *platform* all at once. As curation, inspiration, and portfolio-building practices become socially mediated, they take on an increased pace, constancy, and subjectivity. I argue that altogether curatorial, inspirational, and entrepreneurial labor result in a continual laboring—an 'always designing' subjectivity on social media platforms.

In addition to highlighting design-profession implications, my findings contribute to a broader understanding about the future of creative work amidst an increasingly independent and entrepreneurial employment market. Since, many designers, especially graphic designers fluidly work across different modes of employment (i.e. agency, in-house, freelance, independent, design firm) over the course of their careers, their project-based work culture presages current employment trends in freelance and entrepreneurial work. These findings lead to additional questions about labor, gender, and platforms. This chapter is divided into several sections: 1). article specific findings and implications, 2). over-arching contributions and implications, 3). future research, and 4). conclusions.

Article Specific Findings and Implications

This dissertation expands the scope of "economies of design," (Julier, 2017) to conceptualize a *social media design economy.* As a part of this social media design economy, I identify three forms of *digital* design labor: *curatorial labor*, *inspirational labor*, and *entrepreneurial labor*. Below I summarize the key findings and implications for each form of work.

Curatorial Labor. This study focused on how *interior designers* engaged in what we term digital "curatorial labor" on Pinterest as a means of actively developing their professional identity online and was central to their value production. *Curatorial labor* is the ongoing aesthetic selection and arrangement of digital images and mediated connections as a form of original design production and identity development. The designer's performance, process, and products on Pinterest mutually constitute a curatorial labor that publicly conveys their original and professional value. Our study shows that professional designers on Pinterest create value by *curating* not creating content for Pinterest. The *publicness* and *socially mediated* nature of *curatorial labor* calls attention the ways in which designers brought their process-oriented design strategies to their curatorial work online and the way that their pinning practices impacted their offline design processes and communicative practices.

Several key implications emerged from designers' curatorial labor. The curatorial labor of the designers reveals evolving beliefs around design and digital objects, which in turn are shaped by the technological affordances of the platform itself. Studying the labor practices of designers on Pinterest suggests that evaluations of creative value stem from discovery of image (effort to search and find image from huge amount of available content), source of image (linking to the original source of where the image originated from), degree of contextual change (in this case, distance from Pinterest site), and amount of transformation or innovative recombination (new combinations of images for new meanings on boards rather than perceived prearranged images). Second, meta-composition is a central curatorial labor practice whereby design professionals came to understand what their profiles, pins, and boards together communicate about who they are. Meta-composition was an ongoing process of arranging and re-arranging digital artifacts and affiliations to convey and refine designers' creative labor. Whereas previous social media research has suggested that curation focuses on the selection and filtering of content to share with others (Hogan, 2010; Jenkins et al., 2013), our research highlights the aggregate nature of online curatorial work. Our study suggests it is important to place attention on the shared digital artifact (e.g. image, video, link) not just as a singular object but part of a broader collective whether that be technologically explicit like a Pinterest board or profile page on Twitter. The designers' continual articulation of the role of inspiration in relation to Pinterest practices within this study spurred me to explore the broader notion of *inspiration* beyond curation— in the context of career oriented platforms, where design professionals are promoting their own original work.

Inspirational Labor. Moving from a platform-specific approach, this study focused on how *graphic design professionals* engaged in what I term digital “inspirational labor” across digital media ecologies as a means of continually managing the distance between *inspiration* and *imitation* within their own digital creative work and within the community to police the ownership of creative products and their own self-brand. While *curatorial labor* focused on the mechanisms of culling and curating existing online content on public digital pin boards, this study expands beyond the curatorial aspects of inspiration to situate related design practices in the larger context of a *digital inspirational economy,* where one designer's shared design work becomes another designer's design inspiration. *Inspirational labor* is the reciprocal, affective, and constant comparative strategies that designers employ to both protect and promote their original design work through socially mediated platforms. As such, *inspirational labor* is marked by both consuming/producing design inspiration and protecting/promoting original design work using affective strategies to ensure an ‘inspiring’ brand presence across platforms. For example, designers prioritized *connections* over direct callouts for in situations where their work was being imitated in order to develop their what Gandini (2016) terms “reputational capital.”

The findings illustrate the *amplified* time, energy, and effort that designers are investing in digital inspiration as a part of their creative processes. In the era of digital platforms, the largely invisible and private work of inspiration has become a *public* and *socialized* creative work practice. Moreover, the *digital inspirational economy* compels designers to make the work of inspiration *visible*. As such, the logics of social media platforms have made the work of inspiration never ending. Thus, *inspirational labor* provides a corrective to the decidedly labor-obscuring orientations of ‘finding digital inspiration,’ problematizing the work of inspiration in the digital era for design professionals through key dialectics of design. This study maps out the key tensions of *inspirational labor* experienced by designers using these design-centric social media platforms including: 1). Being inspired vs. Getting inspired, 2). Abundance vs. Filtering, 3). Visible Self-Brand vs. “Style Rip-offs” 4). “Over inspired” vs. “Inspired By,” and 5). Connection vs. Call-out.

Several key practices central to inspirational labor emerged. For example, filtering is a central inspirational labor practice that designers employed to manage their exposure to the unprecedented abundance of digital design inspiration to avoid contributing to the perceived the ‘homogenization’ of design work. Designers saw homogenization as a result of everyone drawing on the same sources of inspiration from digital galleries, popular boards, and featured work on digital platforms. Second, the sheer abundance of digital media ‘inspiration’ has resulted in the explicit articulation of references or sources of inspiration—the term ‘inspired by.’ However, among digital platforms the term "inspired by" has become an increasingly fraught term used to give credit or to link to someone else's work—a practice that many within the community saw as a *superficial form of attribution*. Significantly, "inspired by" attributions fundamentally allowed a person to get value from another designer's labor in multiple ways—both the design work and their promotional self-branding work.

Entrepreneurial Labor of Portfolio Building. This third study focused on how *professional graphic designers* engaged in what I term digital “entrepreneurial labor of portfolio building” across vast media ecologies as a means of developing their design reputational capital. *Entrepreneurial labor of portfolio building* is a future-oriented, content creation focused, self-promotional production of creativity for both client-facing audience and creative industry-facing audiences. *Entrepreneurial labor* is marked by continual ‘designing,’ demonstrated through the frequency of new design content created and posted across digital platforms. A designer's employability is linked to their entrepreneurial efforts—demonstrated through the self-initiative of side projects. As such, the *self-initiated* project was a central entrepreneurial strategy whereby designers created projects *for* platforms such as Instagram in hopes of future employment opportunities or exposure. Self-initiated design work was viewed as a speculative strategy that could pay off in reputational capital, if not in future monetary rewards.

This study identifies two new dimensions of ‘portfolio’ as a part of the digital economy: portfolio as *platformed* and *connected.* The *platformed portfolio* is a result of “platform-specific self-branding” practices (Duffy, Pruchniewska, & Scolere, 2017). The *connected portfolio* is the result of the design portfolio following social media logics. In contrast to personal web portfolios where designers showed diverse projects, often times the *platformed portfolios* of designers were marked by *specialization*—a focused version of portfolio, with one particular cohesive style. [18] *Performed design specialization* on the part of designers was a self-branding practice central to entrepreneurial portfolio building labor. This was largely a result of convergence of several factors of technology, practices, and culture: 1) platform affordances of comparability, 2). platform-specific self-branding practices, and 3). freelance employment market. The “connective affordances” of social media serve to make a once static and controlled portfolio presentation, a *connected portfolio*—marked by interactivity and tied to tangible *popularity metrics* where the success of portfolio becomes quantifiable by the number of likes, shares, and comments attached to it.

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[18] This is also related to the specific type of work a designer is participating in (eg letterer vs graphic designer) and freelance work more broadly. In addition to professional norms and employment modes, the findings from this project also indicate the role of platforms and related self-branding practices in shaping the form of the creative portfolio as a part of socially mediated networks.

Implications. In contrast to the physical or even the personal website portfolio where the designer reaped the primary value from the effort of building and displaying the portfolio of design work, a socially mediated portfolio means that *others* can also more easily extract value from the designer's portfolio-building labor. On social media *'others'* take the form of a diverse audience composed of advertisers, brands, prospective clients, other designers and the platforms who depend on designers' creative content. Thus, designers are continually working to ensure that as their design portfolios freely circulate, that they still are reaping the maximum value from their own portfolio building efforts.

The practice of making original work specifically for platforms can be considered a new type of design labor that designers are compelled to participate in as a part of their design work. The call to continuously be making new design work was taken up by designers as a way to develop "reputational capital" (Gandini, 2016) and go after new work opportunities. To this end, these design practices suggest that the rhetoric of meritocracy and passion for the work combined with the 'gold rush' mentality around social media has resulted in the normalization of creating and pitching unpaid or underpaid design work.

Over-arching contributions and implications

The insights from this dissertation examining the labor of design professionals continue to advance our understanding of labor across creative and cultural industries. Research on creative labor has focused on the media industries around television, film, music, magazine publishing, theater, and new media workers (e.g. Banks, Gill & Taylor, 2014; Blair, 2001; Duffy, 2013; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; McKinlay & Smith; 2009; Neff et al., 2005; Neff, 2012). Significantly, McRobbie (1998/2003; 2016) has examined the work of fashion designers. More recently, scholars have examined the relational labor of creatives such as musicians (Baym, 2015), the aspirational labor of social media producers (Duffy, 2015a; Duffy, 2015b; Duffy, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2015), the crowdsourced labor of DIYgraphic designers (Massanari, 2012), and the journalistic labor practices online (Bruns, 2005; Deuze, 2005; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Singer 2014; Lewis, 2012). With the rising importance of the visual in the social media sphere (Highfield & Leaver, 2016), the work of designers advances our understanding of the production of visuals—*beyond photography*. The insights from studying design professionals provide implications in several areas: 1). Reconfiguration within the design professions, 2). Creative industries labor, 3). Portfolio, 4). Self-branding, and 4). Platforms

Reconfiguring design. This research highlights the extent to which emergent media ecologies and designers' practices are reconfiguring design worlds and reorganizing lines between professional/amateur and work/inspiration.

***Professional | Amateur*.** With the variety of capacities in which creative workers find employment from freelance, to independent to being permanently employed by a commercial organization, contemporary scholars argue that the distinctions between amateurs and professionals may be better understood on a "spectrum" from amateur to professional (Luckman, 2015) or conceptualized as a "continuum of relationships between individual and organization" (Brabham, 2012, p. 402). In their study of YouTube, Burgess and Green (2009) argue that social media platforms should be viewed as an example of "co-creative culture" where "amateur and professional media content, identities, and motivations are not so easily separated" (p. 90). The three studies suggest that the professional/amateur tension plays out unevenly *across different platforms.*

On platforms like Pinterest where there is blurring between amateur and professional, curatorial labor illustrated how professional interior designers developed and maintained their “professional status” through the meta-composition of pin boards where they delimited their pins to design related images and projects. The meta composition of boards by our participants is not that dissimilar to the tweeting practices of professionals whereby professionals delimit their topics in order to distinguish themselves as experts in their professional field (Marwick & boyd, 2010). The collection of digital objects, whether they be tweets or boards, reflects back upon the identity of the social media user who is aware of this and actively performs accordingly. In this study of Pinterest, we saw early indicators of designers experimenting with *self-branding practices*—developing color and naming themes for their boards to distinguish their boards and identity from the display uniformity (van Dijck, 2013b) that is central to platforms. Since that initial study “theming,” as a self-branding practice has been widely adopted users on platforms such as Instagram (Manovich, 2016).

Designer | Influencer. While graphic designers have been accustomed to defending the boundaries of their profession by the threat of amateurs since the rise of desktop publishing software (Turner-Rahman, 2008), the social media environment has given way to a new take on professional/amateur boundaries. Gieryn (1983) refers to “boundary work” as a means of making distinctions between bodies of knowledge and practices among fields or professions. The motivation of this boundary work may be to *expand authority, monopolize authority*, or to *protect autonomy* (Gieryn, 1983, p.791-792). Moreover, Gieryn (1983) argues, “expansion, monopolization, and protection of autonomy are generic *features of professionalization*” (p. 792). As such, this “professionalization” follows the “ideologies” of the specific field or profession (Gieryn, 1983). For example, Becker (1978) points to the field specific ideologies of art vs. craft that are part of professionalization. Similarly, the professionalization for the design professions takes on its own features and characteristics.

This project highlights the emergence of a *designer/influencer boundary* as newly contested line within graphic design communities.   This tension is particularly contested because it threatens what design communities perceive sets design apart from other forms of knowledge production. That is, “the creative act” is considered the distinct body of knowledge for design professionals (Wang & Ilhan, 2009, p.6). As such, the identity of the designer is premised on the creative act of *designing.* While designers were participating in fundamentally the same ‘social media influencer’ activities as the fashion bloggers amateur communities studied by Duffy (2017), they used strategies to distance themselves from influencers. To minimize professional risk but still participate in activities, designers employed self-branding strategies to be identified as *designer-influencer* rather than *influencer-designer*—where one’s professional design identity takes center-stage through content focused on the design industry, design practices, and demonstration of design skills. The *designer-influencer* boundary becomes an example of professionalization with features of expansion and protection. In contrast, the *influencer-designer* is spotted by other designers through their perceived lack of discriminatory decisions about the fit of products promoted with one’s design personal brand. As such, professional design identity was 1). Evaluated based on a designer’s aggregated portfolio of work, 2). Signaled through *continuous designing,* and 3). Developed through “network sociality” (Wittel, 2001) of reputation building. Designers illustrate how professional identity status within digitally networked communities is fluid and thus needs to be continuously managed through numerous decisions and considerations. Thus, similar to the music industry studied by Klein, Meiers & Power (2017), ‘selling out’ or the loss of ‘creative integrity’ is no longer defined by any one single act, but rather is defined by a continual considerations and evolving creative industry norms.

Work | Inspiration. The *curatorial labor* and *inspirational labor* studies illustrate how the digital renders "inspirational" sources public. As a part of digital platforms, the relationship between a designer's new work and one's source(s) of inspiration is afforded much more visibility. Moreover, the publicness of Pinterest boards makes *inspiration* a design product, thus value-generating. As such, a designer's *sources of inspiration* become another evaluative measure of a designer's taste and social capital—requiring additional labor. In the broader media ecology, the concern about imitation led to the explicit articulation of design references or sources through the use of the term 'inspired by' as a form of attribution. Moreover, the "inspired by" attributions fundamentally allowed the person to get value from another designer's labor in multiple ways on social media— both the design work and their promotional self-branding work. With an increased value and visibility placed on inspiration in digital economies, designers were very concerned with ensuring 'originality' in *both* their sources of inspiration (curatorial labor) and their new design work (inspirational labor) and maintaining the distance between the two The three studies suggest that the *design work/inspiration* tension plays out unevenly *among different design professions.* For example, the tension between imitation and inspiration was more fraught in graphic design communities whose design work took the same form as the inspiration—digital 2D graphic image or illustration and thus a higher reproduce-ability.

Labor in the Creative Industries. This dissertation situates the relational activities (Baym, 2015) of posting, liking, commenting, and following of designers as economically and socially value-generating forms of *design labor.* This dissertation project builds on the foundation of "entrepreneurial labor" of portfolio-based careers in the creative industries (Neff et al., 2005), "venture labor" and the internalization of risk (Neff, 2012), "hope labor" as a meritocratic investment" in one's career (Keuhn & Corrigan, 2013), and "aspirational labor" as passion and career motivated (Duffy, 2017). The three forms of labor put forth in this dissertation—*curatorial, inspirational,* and *entrepreneurial portfolio-building labor* expand these theories of labor to highlight the role of *designing visual content* (beyond content creation) as a part of digital labor.

This study illustrates how designers view their “un- or under compensated labor” (Keuhn & Corrigan, 2013) and freely distributed design work largely as an investment—a portfolio-building investment in the hope of future pay off. As such, many designers viewed any un- or under compensated work with large brands in the frame of a ‘nearly equal trade.” Similar to Gandini’s (2016) findings about marketing digital workers, the work of self-branding on social media was seen specifically as an investment in “reputational capital.” Rather than being ‘unknowing cultural dupes,” this project highlights the degree to which some designers are trying to shore up the value of their design work—especially when it comes to partnerships with brands—negotiating to be paid for *both design and influence* and in some cases ensuring that the brand promotes their personal ‘brand’ as a part of the work (reciprocity of brands promoting brands). This speaks to the degree that designers are wielding their ‘professional status’ to get in on the social media marketing boom in way that advances their creative career prospects. While these specific examples are promising, they are not indicative of the prospects of my entire sample. Overall, designers are increasingly creating a prolific amount of original design work *for platforms* as a part of self-branding and reputation building—work that one designer referred to as “spec designs for fun.” Framing the design work as a leisure activity, the term *‘spec designs for fun’* veils the design process labor investment.

This speaks to a broader finding among specifically graphic design communities where there line of speculative or free work is increasingly blurred. Design communities and scholars

(Massanari, 2012; Kennedy, 2015) illustrate that crowdsourcing design communities represent a clear boundary of identifiable ‘free creative labor’ that is “unacceptable” to professional communities. This project identifies a more nuanced and pervasive version of everyday speculative work that is happening among designers across media ecologies. As freelance and independent designers compete in a social media economy, the line on “spec designs for fun” becomes increasingly blurred as designers are continually compelled to promote their abilities through more and more unremunerated digital design labor.

***Implications for creative labor*.** While the designers I interviewed saw a lot of upside to social media for self-promotion as investment—in skills, experience, creative satisfaction, and employment, this project points to some concerning patterns for labor in the larger creative industry. Skilled in designing high quality graphic content with media production savvy and training in communication design, it is in the best interest of brands to seek out graphic design professionals as *paid influencers* to create content. The deeply ingrained narrative of portfolio-building in design culture, ensures that designers will create high quality content, resulting in brands receiving a higher caliber content for less than what they might have to otherwise pay. As more designers flood the market with un- or under compensated design work, they may contribute, in part to the de-valuing of the labor of their design services—labor services which are already precarious. Keuhn & Corrigan (2013) refer to this as an “economic paradox,” whereby creative laborers “undermine the very labor market that they aspire to enter by continually supplying it with individuals who are willing to work for nothing” (p. 20). While prevalent in traditionally deemed amateur communities (Duffy, 2017, and others), this study points to the ways under compensated work, especially brand sponsorship work has infiltrated professional communities, indicating a more pervasive practice that crosses and further complicates amateur professional divides.

Context Collapse: Design culture & Metric Culture. Older web portal platforms mainly catered to a closed peer design community where sharing links of work or inspiration with other designers served to build reputational credibility through technical skills demonstrated (Turner-Rahman, 2008). These places were sources of knowledge building. Self-promotion while existent was more about building reputational standing and designer credibility within the design community. In contrast, contemporary social media platforms create “context collapse” (Marwick & boyd, 2010) in how they bring together a multitude of audiences. In addition to personal networks of family and friends outside of the creative industry, designers described diverse audiences on these platforms including: 1). fans or aspiring creatives who are inspired by their work, 2). peer-designers, vendors, and specialists who may serve as collaborators, 3. art directors and creative directors who often hire freelance and independent graphic designers for various media sector work, 4). companies, ad agencies, & design consultancies scouting for talent, and 5). potential clients made up of small business owners and brands across a diverse range of industries who want to hire or partner with designers directly.

As career-oriented creative platforms (van Dijck, 2013b), these sites not only bring together multiple audiences, they *broker* relationships between designers and potential employers and clients. This “context collapse” is challenging in that it brings together two very different considerations about audience: *design community* facing values and commitments vs. *client facing* values and commitments for design professionals. When communicating to a design audience, designers draw on *design culture,* which gives “primacy to the work” (Soar, 2002) above all else—the demonstrated quality of the work, freshness, and “newness” (Nixon, 2003, 2006). When communicating to clients or those outside of the creative industry, it is about ‘performing creativity” or what it means to be “designerly” (Julier, 2017)—which prioritizes pitching and educating clients on the value of design and one’s uniqueness as a designer. This context collapse is further complicated by the social media logics of popularity (van Dijck, 2013a) whereby metrics of follower counts, likes, and views stand in as indexes of ‘good design work’ and ‘talented designers.’ This conflation of ‘good work’ with metrics of popularity (Suhr, 2015) is most pervasive for client audiences who aren’t as discriminating about the nuanced differences between individual designers’ visual work and degree of originality. As such, metrics count more depending on who is doing the hiring and evaluating. For example, my interviews revealed that the technology sector, at times, used Dribbble metrics as part of the hiring evaluation of designers. This is something my participants vehemently asserted would never be part of the evaluation by design firms or creative studios. On the other hand, this study illustrated that designers made evaluations of other designers’ seriousness and creative commitment based on maintaining followers but *not too many followers* to suggest a ‘preoccupation’ with metrics to the detriment of good design work. As such, freelance designers, who moved fluidly between employment *within* design communities and *outside* of design communities, deployed self-presentation strategies to meet the *metric culture counts* necessary to appeal to potential employers or clients outside of the design industry but not so much so that it would hurt their “reputational capital” (Gandini, 2016) within the design community for potential gigs with creative directors and other design collaborators. This “entrepreneurial labor” represents online strategies that designers employed to minimize risk in a precarious employment landscape, to help ensure keeping future opportunities for work open.

Portfolio Implications. Scholars have used the term “portfolio careers” to describe the project-based, contract, and entrepreneurial forms of employment that pervade the creative industries including music, magazine publishing, and television (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011), new media workers and fashion models (Neff et al., 2005), fashion designers (McRobbie, 1998/2003), technology workers (Neff, 2012). More specifically, the portfolio demonstrates skills (McRobbie, 2002) and is central to evaluation and hiring among creative professionals (Neff et al., 2005; Soar, 2002). More recently, Duffy (2017) illuminates the ways amateur groups of fashion bloggers face struggles of between portfolio building and brand sponsorships. Yet, the evolving form of the portfolio has been underexplored. This study on graphic designers' portfolio-building labor demonstrates how the concept of 'portfolio' for the creative industries is being reconfigured as it takes on a digital form. The *platformed* and *connected* portfolio suggests a new temporal structure for the design portfolio including new metrics for evaluation, evaluators as followers, value commitments, and forms of presenting work that are in shaped in part by the platforms for which they are produced. As a part of digitally networked environment, the portfolio becomes public and value-generating. The struggle of having a portfolio tied to platforms which are fluid and could potentially disappear, suggests a new precarity for creative producers across industries who are increasingly relying on and investing in these platforms to build their portfolios and careers. This study finds that the labor tensions surrounding portfolio-building, undercompensated brand sponsorship work in the graphic design community are shared with more amateur communities. Thus, the platformed-portfolios of graphic designers illuminate the tensions at the center of creative careers, digital labor, and self-branding practices that are relevant across creative industries across increasingly blurred amateur and professional communities.

Self-branding Implications. Like van Dijck (2013) argues of professional platforms like LinkedIn, *platform owners* have a "vested interest" in standardized and uniform presentation of content to “maximize connectivity” and potential employers use these platforms to quickly evaluate and scout talent (p. 211). While the feeds of many of the social media platforms allow for comparison of content, career centric platforms like Bēhance and Dribbble have activity feeds and featured galleries or popular feeds which are organized in infinite scrolling style where thumbnail images of design projects (Bēhance) or a "shots" (Dribbble) appear side by side in a grid. The consistency of the grid display within these platform feeds and galleries allowed for designers *and potential clients and employers* to easily make comparisons between designers' works in a way and scale that has been unprecedented. Although design career platform founders laud how networked platforms such as Bēhance have ‘organized the creative world,’ this *organization* tips in favor of the platform owners and the people doing the hiring rather than the individual designers using these platforms for self-promotion. By this, I mean that this project illustrates the additional work of participating and promoting work through these platforms for design professionals. This *comparability* afforded by these platforms intensified an already competitive design market for graphic designers. These platform-structure challenges faced by designers are particularly relevant in light of the rise of new platforms aimed at changing the “participant structure for hiring” across industries (Gershon, 2017, p.176).

This same comparability afforded by social media platforms compels designers, especially freelancers to put forth a unique and recognizable self-brand through the aggregation of design work posted. In the context in which individuals are prodded to *act as brands* and businesses on social media (Gershon, 2017; Duffy; 2017; Hearn: 2008), designers’ digital work is a form of brand content distributed across media ecologies As such, I argue that in *aggregate* this brand content being produced by designers represents an established look meant for the purposes of distinguishing one’s product from another designer’s work. Yet, this same push to develop and promote a visible brand style of work, left designers open to few options for legal recourse from would be imitators because there isn't necessarily a copyright for "aggregate works" and trade dress hasn't been a widely effective claim as a of yet (Amy[19], personal communication, 2017). More broadly, this finding suggests that for creatives who are increasingly compelled to hype their content and ideas via social media networks (Marwick, 2013; Duffy, 2017) there are real risks to being able to hold on to their unique economic value in the face of imitators and platforms which help shape the 'look' of the design work that becomes popular. This was especially important for graphic designers whose "tailored creativity," (Lee, 2017, p.7) was often viewed as *easily substitutable*. This 'replace ability' of the graphic design labor presents an ongoing challenge to designers to define and articulate their economic value in a market that views their labor as *easily substitutable*. This is especially relevant for other sectors of the creative industries whose creativity is tailored to clients such as "architecture, web design, and advertising" (Lee, 2017, p.7).

Implications. Collectively, these studies on digital labor suggest it is important to place attention on the shared digital artifact (e.g. image, video, link) not just as a singular object but part of a broader collective whether that be technologically explicit like a Pinterest board or profile page on Twitter. To that end, the findings of this project further highlight the prominence of sequencing of content or what Manovich (2016) refers to as the "temporal pattern" of content distribution by social media producers (p.15). Although scholars have called for examining social media use in the context of a broader social media ecology ((Zhao et al., 2015; Wilken, 2015; van Dijck, 2013), *digital labor* in the context of the social media ecology has been underexplored. Thus, this project conceptualized the labor of social media production through the lens of what van Dijck (2013) terms “an ecosystem of connective media” (p. 21).

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[19] Pseudonym used

Affect *toward* ‘creative’ platforms. Underpinning the labor of these creative communities was a feeling of *affect* toward the creative platforms by individual designers. This affect stemmed from the size of design communities, founders’ ties and insider status among design communities, and direct appeals on the part of platforms. Since many of the creative centric platforms such as Bēhance, Dribbble, and Working not Working were founded by designers, there was a sense by many of my participants that these platforms had an altruistic mission to help designers succeed. This sense of *affect* toward the founders and their missions often compelled designers to continue stay to be a part of various platforms. Further, this sense of affect (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011) toward these platforms may not be surprising given the incentive these creative platforms have to cultivate affective relationships with the cultural producers that produce the high-quality content for their platforms (i.e. Dribbble community podcasts featuring designers, features of designers on platforms, Working Not Working community events in various cities for freelancers, Instagram fellowships or artist in residence programs). This affect, extended beyond design centric platforms to include popular platforms like Instagram. As Instagram increasingly, directs their appeals to creative communities, creative communities imagine the platform as being specifically for them—an example of Nagy & Neff’s (2015) concept of ‘imagined affordances.’ This came up explicitly in an interview with one designer asserting that Instagram was *"a platform that exists to push creatives forward."* As platforms are viewed as compelling, brands (van Dijck, 2013), they become even more powerful in how they cultivate brand loyalty with creative producers who rely on their services. These affective attitudes toward platforms in the creative industries may further complicate *free labor* (Terranova, 2000) tensions at play within the digital environment for a range of creative communities such as designers, musicians, artists, fashion bloggers etc.

Next Steps and Future Research. For next steps, there are three immediate next projects that include the following: 1). Does the labor of social media production pay off economically?, 2). How are professional design identities shaped through and positioned through career centric platforms Bēhance and Dribbble? and 3). How is design labor through social media gendered?

Does it payoff? The common question that comes from the all this time and investment in social media is does it pay off for these social media producers (Duffy, 2015b)? Most recently, Klawitter (2017) has examined how peer production communities benefit from social media participation. The interviews I conducted get at how designers thought about their work as an investment but I'm interested in the economic benefits that these designers receive from their efforts. For example, what is the relationship between time invested and economic benefit for independent and freelance designers? As such, I sent a post-interview follow up survey to my participants that asks questions about amount of time spent and income, among other questions around motivations for participating in social media platforms. So far, approximately about seventy-five percent of my sample has completed the survey. I hope to analyze the data from these surveys as a way to tie social media labor to metrics of economic pay off.

Comparative Platform Analysis. As a part of this project, I collected both data related to how designers think about a larger media ecosystem as well as platform-specific data. I'd like to finish my analysis of platform design features/site features of Bēhance and Dribbble and bring that together with platform specific user interview data and platform communications (policies etc) to do a comparative analysis between Bēhance and Dribbble as distribution platforms.

Gender Studies Approach. Inspired by Duffy's (2017) call to understand gender in the context of labor, I hope to explore gender in relation to *design labor*. Because of the platforms and industry that I studied, the sample of designers for this dissertation was predominately male. Through this research, I came across sites dedicated to promoting the visibility of women illustrators (Women Who Draw) and a series called Women, Wine & Design. I'd like to explore how 'visibility' is experienced by the women participating in these sites and understand how labor is gendered among design and illustration communities.

Conclusion

With the rising importance of visuals as a part of social media environments (Highfield & Leaver, 2016), the digital labor of designers is marked by the continual production of visuals that extend beyond photography to include graphic compilations, vector based graphics, illustrative work, lettering, motion graphics, and many more forms. As a part of the interviews I conducted with designers and my online participant observation, the visuals produced and promoted among these social media platforms formed a key part of understanding the digital labor of designers. The design images being created and promoted by designers represent important enactments of creative expression, self-branding, and reputation building. Moreover, the visuals and projects being distributed through these digitally networked platforms represent 'branded content' of the designers. As such, the visuals are potentially highly recognizable by other members of the design community and potentially larger publics making it fairly easy to link a visual exemplar to an individual designer. Although these visuals were referenced in my interviews with designers, informally analyzed, and form an important representation of design production as part of these dissertation, specific examples of designed visuals are not included in this dissertation because they would effectively de-anonymize my participants. These studies were classified as exempt by Cornell's Institutional Review Board such that including visuals linked to human subjects' identities could potentially violate the terms of the project's exemption status without getting explicit permission from these designers to include images of their works. However, future work should include more formal visual analysis to continue to advance our understanding of the role of designed visuals across both professional and amateur communities.

This dissertation situated design work in the context of a larger social media design economy and examined the emergent social and cultural practices that are forming around communication technologies. As existing creative practices such as curation, inspiration, and portfolio-creation become digitally networked they follow social media logics, resulting in new forms of labor and amplifying existing forms of design work. The forms of labor identified within this dissertation can be understood as continual, self-promotional, future-oriented, and preoccupied with generated design value. Thus, the findings of this study contribute to a broader understanding about the future of design work amidst an increasingly independent and entrepreneurial creative employment economy. As such, this dissertation suggests implications for advancing theories of creativity online, design work processes, and the prominent role of visuals as part of digital platform ecologies. Much like Howard Becker's (1982) conceptualization of "art worlds" as being shaped by the activities and conventions of diverse stakeholder participants, this dissertation identifies the role of digitally networked platforms as contributing to the contours of *design worlds* – the continual shaping and reshaping of creative conventions and social practices by designers, technology platforms, professional organizations, clients, and the broader creative industry. This research highlights the extent to which emergent media ecologies and designers' practices are reconfiguring design worlds and reorganizing lines between professional/amateur, designer/client, work/inspiration, and labor/love. Moreover, this project points to an emergent area and program of research focusing on *socially mediated design*.

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APPENDIX

Sample of Designers[20]

Name	Address	State	Gender	Age
Andrea	Venice	CA	F	36
Beth	Garden City	UT	F	32
Brian	Basking Ridge	NJ	M	37
Conor	Dallas	TX	M	28
Cole	Silver Spring	MD	M	28
Cody	Tampa	FL	M	33
Carolyn	Charleston	SC	F	28
Dina	Columbus	OH	F	30
Doug	Houston	TX	M	40
Emily	Brooklyn	NY	F	31
Hannah	Oakland	CA	F	32
Jay	Lakewood	OH	M	32
Jayla	Brooklyn	NY	F	28
Jessica	Somerville	MA	F	38
Jesse	Louisville	KY	M	29
Julie	Salt Lake City	UT	F	29
Josh	New Hampton	NY	M	33
Jonathan	Oakland	CA	M	25
Jordan	New York	NY	M	33
James	Omaha	NE	M	36
Joel	Reston	VA	M	22
Kelsey	Jacksonville	FL	F	35
Kristen	Cleveland	OH	F	32
Kenneth	Murray	UT	M	32
Keith	Lowell	MA	M	29
Kacie	Brooklyn	NY	F	35
Kieran	Chicago	IL	M	29
Leila	St. Paul	MN	F	25
Lindsay	Brooklyn	NY	F	27
Luis	Houston	TX	M	25
Laura	San Francisco	CA	F	29
Lillie	Jacksonville	FL	F	23
Lucy	New York	NY	F	27
Miles	Portsmouth	NH	M	24
Mark	Washington	DC	M	29
Mason	Savannah	GA	M	29
Michelle	Jacksonville	FL	F	26
Mitch	San Francisco	CA	M	26
Marcus	Brooklyn	NY	M	35
Mathew	Grand Rapids	MI	M	42
Max	Brooklyn	NY	M	34
Noah	Seattle	WA	M	26
Sebastian	New York	NY	M	30
Natalie	San Francisco	CA	F	30
Nic	Valley Village	CA	M	26
Ray	Brooklyn	NY	M	28
Ross	San Francisco	CA	M	34
Stephen	Golden Valley	MN	M	38
Sean	New York	NY	M	27
Simon	Brooklyn	NY	M	23
Seth	Boston	MA	M	34
Sierra	NYC	NY	F	28
Steward	Austin	TX	M	28
Trent	Kansas City	MO	M	35
Thomas	Brooklyn	NY	M	27
Will	Brooklyn	NY	M	25

Pinterest Sample Interview Guide

Background

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[20] All of the names of the designers interviewed in this sample are pseudonyms to protect their identity.

- Which social media sites do you use most? What keeps you coming back to them?

Pinterest Use

- How long have you been using Pinterest?
- How did you come to join Pinterest?
- Would you describe yourself as a light, medium, or heavy user of Pinterest?
    - How many times per day do you login into or look at your Pinterest account?
    - How many times per day do you pin items?
    - When did you create your most recent board? How often do you create new board?

Pinning

- How would you describe pinning to someone who is unfamiliar with it?
- What does it mean to *pin*? What does it mean to *repin?*
- How often do you *repin* vs. *pin* original content?
- Have you ever created content to pin? (i.e., take a photo, create an image, share a completed project)
- What do you see as the potential benefits of pinning?
- What do you see as the potential negatives of pinning?

- Let's pull Pinterest up on the computer. Describe your process for pinning?
- What are the last 5 items you have pinned?
- Choose two of these and describe them to me
    - What are they?
    - Where did you find them?
    - What board are they pinned to? How did you decide on the name of the board?
    - Have any of these items been repinned by others?
    - How does it feel to have an item of yours repinned?
    - How does it feel to *repin* an item?

Boards

- How would you describe the concept of "boards" to someone who is not familiar with it?
- What motivates you to create boards?
- What are some of your most recently created boards?

- *Type of Boards*
- *How did you decide what type of board to make?*
    - *Secret Boards*
        - Have you created any secret boards? What were your motivations for creating secret boards?
        - Have you changed any of these boards from *secret* to *public?*
        - Currently Pinterest has a three board limit for secret boards. What do you think about that policy?
    - *Group Boards*
        - Have you created any group boards? What were your motivations for creating a group board?
        - How many members are a part of the group board?
        - Have you been invited to other group boards? Describe the circumstance.
        - Have you ever been invited to a group board that you did not want to be a part of? What kind of strategies did you use for dealing with this?

Identity/Self-Expression

- Tell me about your profile.
    - What were you trying to get across about yourself in your profile? How is this similar or different from your profiles in other social media?

- If someone were to know nothing else about you except the boards and items you have pinned to those boards, what do you think they would be able to tell about you?
- Have you ever found out about an interest via Pinterest that a close friend or partner had that you didn't previously know about?
- Followers
    - How many followers do you have? Why do you follow them?
    - How many people are you following?
    - How would you explain the concept of following to someone who wasn't familiar with it?
- What impact, if any, do you think Pinterest has had on discovering new things you are interested in and doing those things in daily life?
- How do you think about self-expression on Pinterest?
    - Is there a board or image that you think expresses something about who you are?
    - How are your pins a reflection of who you are?

Pinning Etiquette

- **Be Yourself** (Authenticity over # of followers)

  Pinterest has this guideline posted: *"Be Yourself: We think authenticity—pinning things that express who you really are and what you really like—is more important than getting lots of followers"*

    - What are your thoughts on this statement by Pinterest?
    - How do you think about authenticity on Pinterest?
- **Give Credit**
  Pinterest has this posted: *"Give Credit: Encourage artists to create great work by linking back to their pages, and leaving polite comments when you see pins that aren't correctly credited"*
    - How do you think about giving credit?

Image Elicitation

- What is your favorite board?
- What is your favorite pinned image? Why this image? How does this image make your feel?
- What kinds of things(images) would you never pin?
- What types of things have you wanted to pin but been unable to pin?