

# Pinterest: Inspiration or Manipulation?

by [Jasmin Sabirin](#)

For its hundreds of millions of users, Pinterest is synonymous with inspiration. The platform hails itself as a “visual discovery engine” curated by you, for you (“What is Pinterest?”). Pinterest claims to operate like a specialized version of search engines like Google. Ben Silbermann, Pinterest’s co-founder and CEO, wanted to create a unique space for users to focus on “your own future and your own inspirations” (“Is the Future” 00:01:20-00:01:22). On other social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, users compare their lives to those of their friends and family, communicate with others, and keep up with the latest celebrity news. But on Pinterest, it’s all about *you*, the user. Pinterest, unlike most social networks, is a non-competitive public forum. In this way, users can share and explore their passions without fear of judgement or rebuke; content on the site functions as an extension of the user’s identity, rather than a bid for likes, shares, or comments. Silbermann frames Pinterest as a platform that protects users from the influence of others in their journey of self-discovery (00:13:54-00:14:15). This ideal does not align with reality, however; Pinterest actually serves, in *Wired*’s Lauren Goode’s words, as “a super-fast channel to commerce” (00:09:10-00:09:14). While we may not have to compare ourselves with other human users on this platform, it is now a speed game to see which advertisers can get you to buy their product based on a personalized algorithm that recommends products to enhance your quality of life.

In an interview with CNN Business, Ben Silbermann explains that Pinterest was inspired by his childhood habit of collecting insects and stamps; his co-creator collected baseball cards (“Pinterest CEO” 00:01:16-00:01:18). “The things that you collect say a lot about who you are,” he elaborates (00:01:25-00:01:28). What exactly do the things we collect say about us? In his book *Snoop: What Your Stuff Says About You*, social psychologist Sam Gosling argues that we use certain objects as “identity claims,” which may be “directed toward others or directed at the self” (13). In other words, the things we collect are an extension of how we choose to present ourselves. Ben Silbermann’s collection of insects, which he discussed with his interviewers, represents a part of his personality. In his essay “Why We Need Things,” psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi suggests that we risk losing our personal identity without “external props,” which he claims “stabilize our sense of who we are” (22-23). We claim physical things as evidence to preserve the identities we carefully construct over the course of a lifetime. Pinterest allows for this preservation in digital space. But how much of the self can we preserve online before it collapses under the influence of other forces, from advertising to algorithms?

Silbermann claims that Pinterest’s mission is to get its users offline and doing the things they love (“Is the future” 00:11:03-00:11:12). Of course, there is an irony to this statement, given that Pinterest’s users spend hours and hours on the platform, cultivating digital extensions of their identities over having experiences in the physical world. That being said, Silbermann himself did exactly what he encourages users to do, quitting his job at Google in order to pursue the thing he loved – application development. Silbermann takes monetizing the hobbies he loves to another level, raking in over a billion dollars in revenue in 2019 with his co-creator (Armental). While most of us likely won’t invent a multi-million dollar application to express our personalities and interests, we can apparently emulate that experience through the application itself. However, while Pinterest gets to hail itself as an actual business, we only get to use the

platform for the purpose of self-discovery and leave it with feelings of optimism about our interests and future plans.

In his 2020 book *What Tech Calls Thinking*, Adrian Daub discusses the potential for tension between a platform and its content. According to Daub, Silicon Valley has cemented a line between the billionaires who invent and build platforms and the content creators who use them for free. This split between platform creators and content creators is gendered: Most of the programmers at Yelp, for example, are male, while most of its users, who contribute content, are female (79-80). Likewise, women dominate the user demographic for Pinterest, with many running blogs that link to Pinterest (“Your audience”). Central to this tension between platform creators and content creators is that “the act of providing content . . . isn’t recognized as labor” (Daub 80). This exploitation of the labor of content creators is justified by arguments like “It’s not their job; it’s a hobby” (82). Casual users who go on Pinterest solely for inspiration may have no issue with pursuing their ‘hobbies’ for free, but content creators might expect otherwise. However, the idea of exploring our passions through Pinterest is only feasible if users don’t expect anything other than ‘good feelings’ from the platform.

According to Section 3a of Pinterest’s terms of service, users “retain all rights in, and are solely responsible for, the User Content” that they post to the site (“Terms”). In short, Pinterest is not responsible for any of the content its users choose to post. In Section 3b, “How Pinterest and other users can use your content,” the degree of control Pinterest holds over User Content becomes clearer: “You grant Pinterest and our users a non-exclusive, royalty-free, transferable, sublicensable, worldwide license to use, store, display, reproduce, modify, create derivative works, perform, and distribute your User Content” (“Terms”). Here, the same accountability they shrug off three sentences earlier grants them and all other users the right to redistribute your content however they want. By offering users the ability to “reproduce, modify, [and] create derivative

works” without requiring that they credit content creators, users are encouraged to steal ideas from each other without ever having to consider the people who invest time and labor into their craft.

By taking away any opportunity to communicate with community members, Pinterest places focus solely on the individual users and their personal development. By the same token, users are unable to recognize the faceless and nameless labor behind the content. A ‘me first’ mindset has been built into the platform: On Pinterest, *you are the only thing that matters*—at least, that is how they want users to think. That way, no one can comment on the fact that, even more than being a visual discovery engine, Pinterest is an advertising platform. Silbermann’s vision of Pinterest as an individualized platform all about self-discovery and self-making is flawed, because it is so easy to forget that the ideas made available on Pinterest are produced by real people, working real hours, not born out of a machine’s algorithm. Pinterest simply compiles stolen work and calls it inspiration. Daub notes that “The genius aesthetic that rules the tech industry relies again and again on this purely gestural kind of courage, on hyping everyday things into grand acts of nonconformism and even resistance” (115). Using Pinterest means that you convert your physical scrapbook into an online one, but now, someone else gets to profit from it. Nothing about Pinterest defies the conformity other platforms have forced us into. All Pinterest offers is a smaller echo chamber between ourselves and the algorithm.

Finding myself in one of these echo chambers was daunting. In the fall semester of my freshman year, I was overwhelmed and exhausted by the time difference between America and Malaysia. Every day I took classes from 8:00p.m. to 5:00a.m., flipping my body clock completely upside down. Between classes at 3:00a.m., I would often swipe open my phone for a quick serotonin boost. While I am aware of Pinterest’s unethical practices, sometimes I cannot help but log in to look at art from my favorite novels. On Pinterest, reposted photos will autoplay and fit around each other like blocks from

Tetris. I never need to click on a post to view the full image or burden myself with the knowledge of who produced the art (if it was properly credited in the first place). The original artist does not cross my mind because I am here for myself, not them. I consider scrolling through Pinterest a guilty pleasure. It is impossible to tell what helps the art reposters sleep at night with the knowledge that they have stolen the spotlight from the original artists. Perhaps they are working in accordance with the terms of services by Pinterest. On a website where the focus is on you, there is no need to think of how your actions may affect others.

In the 2020 Netflix docudrama *The Social Dilemma*, former Google employee Tristan Harris issues a warning: “If you’re not paying for the product, then you *are* the product” (00:13:19-00:13:23). While Pinterest presents itself as a gift basket of ‘free’ content, it can only call itself ‘free’ because it siphons work from other content creators without crediting them. The idea that Pinterest’s content is communally contributed only works when no one knows – or cares to know – the origin of the content. Computer scientist and philosophy writer Jaron Lanier elaborates on Harris’s warning: “It’s the gradual, slight, imperceptible change in your own behavior and perception that is the product” (00:14:20-00:14:27). We pay for so-called ‘free’ content with our constant attention, subjecting ourselves to advertisers. All of this, then, wears the mask of being an extension of our physical personalities when in reality, what’s underway is the steady change in our personalities to fit their business model.

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