

Caring in Curating: Curating Art, Spaces, and the Self

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Abstract

This paper explores how curation extends beyond the art world and is applied to various professional spheres like libraries, news production, and social media. My approach to historicizing the concept of curation is largely inspired by Van der Heijden's concept of hybridization among media apparatuses. Rather than solely looking at the interrelation of media tools, I also looked into how the role of a curator transpires in offline and online spaces. Meanwhile, my understanding of curation is mainly drawn from Balzer's (2014) book on curationism and Obrist's (2008) discussions with other prominent figures in the art scene. My paper does not intend to discount the profession of a curator, but instead, I argue that users continuously embody the role of curators as they navigate and shape their external identities within the dynamic landscape of digital platforms. This paper posits that such practice not only involves users curating their online personas but also fuels the continued growth and influence of these platforms (Smythe, 1977).

Keywords: curation, digital media, social media, audience commodity

Every week, I receive a notification from my phone about my average screen time. For this week, my daily average was seven hours and nine minutes—with two hours of this spent scrolling through the bottomless pit of TikTok. This popular video-sharing app allows users to upload short-form videos of no more than 10 minutes. My friends mostly use the app to partake in the latest TikTok trends. However, as an introvert, I prefer to go incognito and mostly use TikTok as a search engine for food, travel destinations, and beauty must-haves.

TikTok is widely known for providing a virtual space where one can be their authentic selves (Schellewald, 2023). It's been two years since I created my TikTok account, and throughout this period, I've seen how fellow users leverage the platform to create feel-good content via dance challenges, tutorials, and thrift finds. Popular influencers, personalities, and, to a certain extent, A-list Hollywood stars have also used the platform to present themselves as someone relatable or ordinary who experiences the same joys and struggles as the rest of us. At that time, I found it refreshing to see users and friends deviate from the aspirational and picture-perfect life we once lived on Instagram. However, looking back now—and having the opportunity to look into publications about TikTok—it seems that the authenticity that we enjoy watching on TikTok is just as curated and performative as uploading a photo on Instagram or a vlog on YouTube (Barta et al., 2023).

In scholarship, they attributed authenticity and relatability to what makes content on TikTok viral or popular among its users (Schellewald, 2023; Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022). This means that the videos that become famous on the platform are primarily determined by users who spend time watching and engaging with these videos. As a result, this becomes an invisible trigger for others who aspire to become famous on the platform, as they aim to create content that resonates with the platform's users (Schellewald, 2023; Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022). This implies that, as users, we meticulously shape our online identities to align with the norms of each platform, thus assuming the role of curators for our online personas. I find it noteworthy that curation, a practice that has been historically and intricately linked with the organization of artwork in museums and galleries (Obrist, 2011), now extends to the curation of online personas on social media platforms alongside the prevalent documentation of our daily lives and milestones online.

My position to delve into curation on blogs and social media stems from my professional experience in public relations and corporate communications. In these fields, curation was consistently done to garner public favor and bolster brand reputation via press releases, interviews, social media content, and publicity stunts. Meanwhile, my interest in looking into LookBook, Instagram, and TikTok is driven by professional and personal motivations. LookBook and Instagram were once recognized as one of the leading platforms (Ewens, 2021; Iqbal, 2024) and

subsequently held significant influence over my fashion preferences during my collegiate years in an exclusive girls' school. As for TikTok, its rapid rise in popularity intrigues me, despite concerns surrounding data privacy (Samaniego, 2023). I am interested in examining how curation practices unfold on TikTok, especially given the platform's emphasis on authenticity. Recent statistics also indicate that Filipinos lead in video consumption with 50.7% and rank the highest in terms of watching vlogs or influencer videos each week (Tan, 2024). Ergo, the country's rich usage of online platforms, armed with the Filipinos' continuous dependence on mobile phones to access and consume information from the Internet (Diaz, 2024), provides a favorable ground to explore the interconnectedness of the curated self and audience commodification within these virtual spaces.

Given these contexts, I argue that users continuously embody the role of curators as they navigate and shape their external identities within the dynamic landscape of digital platforms. This paper posits that such practice not only involves users curating their online personas but also fuels the continued growth and influence of these platforms. My paper is inspired mainly by Van der Heijden's (2018) approach to historicizing media apparatuses based on hybridization. I illustrate how curation is applied in various professional spheres and online media. Meanwhile, my understanding of curation and its application outside the art world is mainly drawn from Balzer's (2015) discussion on curationism. Although his book discusses the evolution of curated works over time (Balzer, 2015), I mainly apply the fundamental principles of curation in offline and online spaces like the library, blogs, and social media. I also want to make it clear that my paper does not, in any way, intend to discount the profession of an art curator, especially the works of Hans Ulrich Obrist and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev or the likes of Roberto Chabet and Patrick Flores, who are recognized as some of the most influential personalities in the local art scene. Instead, I aim to illustrate how the fundamental concepts of "arranging and editing of things" in curation (Balzer, 2015, p. 35) have become a standard practice when depicting our lives and personas online.

Structured into three sections: I will first briefly discuss a historical overview of curation, tracing its roots back to Ancient Rome, as well as existing literature that engages the practice beyond the realm of art. Then, I will examine how curation manifests in offline and online spaces, particularly in libraries, news productions, and social media platforms such as LookBook.nu, Instagram, and TikTok. Finally, I will conclude my paper by highlighting how immaterial labor is inherent in the curated self, thus making it a currency that users pay to social media platforms in exchange for a safe and interconnected user experience. My conclusion is based on Smythe's (1977) conceptualization of 'audience commodification,' which identifies the immaterial labor of audience attention as a critical contributor to the economies of scale within mass communication systems.

The Curator, To Curate, and The Curatorial

Our perception of curation has become multifaceted due to its prevalence within and outside the art world (Balzer, 2015). To use curator as a noun, to curate as a verb, and the *curatorial* as an adjective is no longer strictly confined to discussions around art but instead applies to a myriad of definitions that can be related to personal branding. In Christov-Bakargie's interview with Balzer (2015), she shares that society has grown fearful of having the same interests in music, books, etc., and wishes to distinguish themselves from the rest. Therefore, curation occurs when we intentionally shape the presentations of our external selves, and similar to institutions and businesses, we curate "to cultivate and organize things in an expression-cum-assurance of value and an attempt to make affiliations with, and to court, various audiences and consumers" (Balzer, 2015, p. 14). Meanwhile, George (2015) likens the role of a curator to that of a "selector and interpreter of works of art for an exhibition" as well as a "person responsible for writing wall labels, catalog essays, and other supporting content for the exhibition" (p. 11). Here, the curator acts as a gatekeeper who protects and preserves the message an exhibition wishes to convey, similar to a blogger or influencer who curates and preserves their online identity. These statements from Balzer (2015) and George (2015) illustrate that the curator adheres to a particular branding or identity they wish to present to their respective audiences.

Such alterations in presenting our external selves can be traced back to Ancient Rome. Obrist disclosed in an interview that the word 'curating' is derived from the Latin word 'curare,' which means "to take care of something" (Jeffries & Groves, 2014). Morton (n.d.) also shared that curators used to be civil servants who oversaw and ensured that public works such as the Empire's aqueducts, bathhouses, and sewers were smoothly running. Meanwhile, in Medieval times, *curatus* referred to a priest responsible for the spiritual welfare of the souls (Mair, 2020). In contrast, others claimed that it meant either "attendant," "keeper," or "guardian" (Rubantseva & Hoffmann, 2020). These early definitions consistently highlight the meticulous care work involved in the curation process, a principle that continues to exist today; whether their role requires them to tend to larger-than-life infrastructures or delicate cultural artifacts, it is the responsibility of the curator to safeguard the preservation of these objects. The sense of guardianship has also persisted into the 20th and 21st centuries, with curators who worked as exhibition makers or those hired by institutions to create or reinforce meanings, narratives, and ideas from chosen works of art (Hosein, 2020). In this context, curators oversee not just human life and physical objects but also the stewardship of spaces that evoke emotions and spark conversations about pressing issues through art.

Provided the arguments about curators as caretakers and meaning-makers in the realm of art, I refer to Balzer's (2015) insights about curation as a widely used

practice in constructing favorable external identities. He argues that curation, outside the art world, is “powerful but also diffuse,” like a celebrity whose image can be customized based on a public event or their scope of work (Balzer, 2015, p. 21). Hence, curation is done “in relation to ourselves, using the term to refer to any number of things we do and consume on a daily basis” (Balzer, 2015, p. 22), which thus makes the curated artifact an extension of ourselves.

Curating Offline Spaces

Curating Libraries

To borrow Van der Heijden’s (2018) approach to historicizing media apparatuses, practices, and discourses, I relate curation to the catalogs in analog media based on their similarity in how things are arranged and edited. Catalogs are universally defined by Oxford (n.d.) as a list of items that people can look at or buy. Although I must say, encountering the word ‘catalog’ makes me feel nostalgic since it immediately reminds me of the magazines I used to read in my pre-teen years, i.e., *Total Girl* and *K-Zone*, and even the Avon representatives who would go to our house to sell perfumes and lipsticks. However, catalogs have an extensive history dating back to how libraries were managed in the 7th B.C. (Mason, n.d.). Fons (2016) reveals that the first name ever recorded in the role of a librarian was Amilanu, a Babylonian whose primary responsibility was presumed to involve listing the contents of his library’s collection to make sure that he and his readers were aware of what he had collected. The act of recording collections has thus influenced how modern libraries continue to manage their books for return or borrowing. From listing items on clay tablets to organizing them on index cards stored in large green cabinets, libraries have developed a system reliant on the diligence found in the coding and decoding of items (Battles, 2013). Furthermore, such meticulous organization gave birth to the concept of ‘bookkeeping’ in the world of finance and business (Hennigan, 2023). In this context, bookkeepers, like the Babylonian Amilanu, are entrusted with organizing, classifying, and maintaining financial records for a business. Thus, rather than simply listing books, bookkeeping and the practice of cataloging are applied to document the activities of one’s business, regardless of its size.

So, how does curation apply to the history and practice of library catalogs? To answer this simply, I base it on Battles’ description of a library as a place that breathes books in and out of its bookshelves and how books “must be counted and classified before they are desired” (2013, p. 9). Cataloging helps demystify the overwhelming quantity of books, transforming them into accessible objects that can satisfy readers’ appetites. This may also shed light on why genres categorize books; those who seek inspiration and hope for love turn to romance; others who need a boost or motivation engage in self-help books; and those who wish to enter

a new and imaginary universe can read fiction. Cataloging books according to genres contributes to the re-mystification of art discussed by Balzer (2015) in the context of curatorship—librarians or bookshop custodians curate these genres to ensure that their book collections meet the users' desire within the premises of their library or bookshop.

Balzer (2015) further illustrates the curator through the concept of connoisseurship, which entails "a display of taste or expertise that lends stylized independence to the act of caring for and assembling" (p. 39). Obrist (2011) also shares the same insight as he reveals the selective curation that Szeeman used during his time at Kunsthalle; he considered both connoisseurship and sharing factual information when he curated an exhibition. Librarians and bookshop custodians embody the role of curators as connoisseurs by meticulously selecting and organizing books to cater to the preferences and interests of their customers. In return, they can build the reputation of their libraries as a place that provides not only credible and sought-after books but also a space that enhances the satisfaction and engagement of readers and customers alike.

Curating Consumption

Beyond art galleries and libraries, the role of the curator-slash-connoisseur similarly extends to various spheres, including the dissemination of information. This application is evident in the development of gatekeeping theory (Lewin, 1943), which examines the flow of information through gates or channels akin to curatorial decisions. Just as curators deliberately select which artifacts can effectively convey a message (Balzer, 2015), gatekeepers in mass communications act as guardians in deciding which news stories to include in shaping public discourse.

Lewin (1943) introduced the gatekeeping theory to analyze the food habits of families in Iowa and defines a 'gatekeeper' as someone who decides which food to buy, store, and consume. Their decisions are then influenced by external and psychological factors such as household finances, daily priorities, and preferences. Building on Lewin's work, Shoemaker and Vos (2009) applied gatekeeping theory to news curation, highlighting how media editors curate information into newsworthy pieces. Meanwhile, Barzilai-Nahon (2008) proposed a network-based gatekeeping theory, suggesting that the Internet empowers individuals to act as gatekeepers. In this digital age, news receivers can curate and disseminate information online, thus reflecting the idea of a participatory culture where users actively engage with content rather than passively consume it (Jenkins et al., 2016).

The evolution of the gatekeeping theory illustrates the decision-making process that governs the act of curating information. Here, the curator becomes a professional necessity that can be applied in non-art domains like a news editor

and a social media user (Balzer, 2015). It becomes an experience grounded on being authorial and undaunted in shaping information, directly impacting them as members of society and individual Internet users.

Curating Online Spaces and Our External Identities

The Rule of Code

Referring to the process of coding and decoding mentioned earlier in the discussion of curating libraries, this resembles Manovich's (2002) definition of data in the era of information technology. He defines data as pieces of interpretable information that computers can read, transform, and analyze (Manovich, 2002). Coupled with the advent of digital technologies such as social media, the internet, and mobile devices, the proliferation of 'time-stamped digital footprints' reflects our online interactions and activities (Golder & Macy, 2014) and thus becomes tangible information for capitalists. With every action we conduct online, from keywords to reactions to posts, we leave behind a digital footprint that can yield valuable economic insights. As a result, the role of the curator extends beyond the action and the noun itself; it now encompasses the tools we use to curate content, becoming an integral part of the curation process.

Shaping the Blogosphere: When Computers Were a Bit High-Tech

In an age where devices and media tools are becoming more handheld and miniature in size, thinking about a heavy-weight and stationary box computer seems archaic. However, I think the computer deserves more credit, especially when it's by far one of the best technological inventions ever known to mankind. The origin of this ultimate machine, as described by Augarten (1984), can be traced back to two starting points: the first during World War II, when scientists from the University of Pennsylvania invented a generic electronic calculator called the Electronic Numerator, Integrator, Analyzer and Computer (ENIAC); and the second with the invention of the abacus. Computers in earlier times were predominantly designed to assist in intellectual work, particularly in the field of mathematics; there was the Arithmometer, invented by Charles Xavier Thomas de Colmar (1820), that enhanced the possibility of mechanics calculations, and the Difference Engine of Charles Babbage (1882) that addressed the inaccuracies in mathematical tables (Augarten, 1984). A computer that was able to code or store programs was only invented in 1935 when Konrad Zuse introduced the Z1, the first mechanical computer that could operate with binary numbers, and the Z3 in 1941, which closely resembles our modern-day computers (Müller, 2023). Meanwhile, John von Neumann, a mathematician who contributed to the US atomic bomb project, designed a fundamental model for all computers in 1945 that facilitated data movement, computations, and sending results to output devices like printers

(Dainow, 2017). After the war, he focused his efforts on devising a more practical and efficient computer, which led to the influential IAS computer in 1951, a design that greatly influenced subsequent computers worldwide (Dainow, 2017).

The life cycle of the Internet mirrors how computers came into being: to address the lack of mobility in sharing information—a vision that is similarly shared by social media platforms wherein interconnectivity, regardless of geographical and time hindrances, is made possible. What's also fascinating to note is how computers and the Internet emerged out of the necessities of war. If von Neumann exhausted his post-war efforts to make computers more useful, then the Advanced Research Projects (ARPA) formulated the Internet's basic framework (Moschovitis et al., 1999). This visionary step in history paved the way for the interconnected world that we experience today in modern computer networks and communications.

Interconnectivity and Democratized Speech

In the continuous ascent of the internet, especially with Web 2.0, interconnectivity has shaped how we engage with media technologies (Alemu & Stevens, 2015). Gone are the days when we simply consumed news from newspapers or television and entered a time when we could actively engage and become content creators ourselves. Like a curator, the journalist before the age of the Internet was a profession that was generally exclusive. It meant earning a degree in journalism or learning on the job from seasoned journalists (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

In contrast, blogs offered amateur writers a platform to share their thoughts and opinions while also democratizing news publishing through participatory journalism or Indymedia (Lievrouw, 2023). The early days of blogging started in 1994, when a university student, Justin Hall, launched 'Justin's Homepage' to share links with friends and American Company Ty, Inc., started Daily Diary, the world's first business-based blog later that year (Hardy, 2024). Since then, blogging has become a popular outlet for aspiring writers, especially from the early 2000s up to the mid-2000s (Digital Limelight Media, n.d.; Duermyer, 2022). Additionally, it was during the height of blogging when content creators were introduced, as bloggers became driven by their entrepreneurial ambition to build their own media brands (Arriagada, 2020).

I didn't get to write my blogs, but I remember creating a Tumblr account, a micro-blogging platform where you can upload photos and write content or re-post, like those created by other Tumblr users (Bercovici, 2013). I also admired the fact that similar to major blog publications, WordPress and Blogspot, I can create my own domain and use it for the same purpose as any existing platform: as a form of expression. My interest in blogging may have died down in recent years, but when dealing with bloggers in PR, I saw how they treat their blog sites as

professional writers. Discussing blogging in the age of proliferating disinformation in the country has its setbacks, but I attest to the fact that blogs allow aspiring writers to use their platforms as a sideline or a hobby that fulfills their creative pursuits.

Like how curators act as connoisseurs or media editors assign journalists to certain beats, blogs have their specialties. Parenting blogs post parenting tips and share their lives as parents, food bloggers publish food reviews, film bloggers upload their film critiques, and fashion blogs upload their “outfit of the day” (or OOTD) online. Their branding has become ingrained in their identity as writers, leading them to curate their content to serve the interests of their audience. This parallels the responsibilities of a curator as bloggers are tasked with envisioning the bigger picture for their blogs, growing their network by attending physical events, acting as ambassadors of their own media brands, and shaping how they arrange their content (Balzer, 2015). It is in the age of blogging where the curator is no longer tied to organizing things for a certain occasion. It rather evolves as a day-to-day act that individuals perform to safeguard their branding.

LookBook and Outfit of the Day

I want to focus on LookBook.NU, a website that my friends and I, dare I say, religiously followed during our college days. We were teenagers constantly trying to figure out what to wear, especially when we could wear civilian clothes instead of our uniform. On top of that, our school was in the middle of Makati City, a place where it was not uncommon to encounter television personalities and fashion gurus, even along the overpass of Greenbelt. There was considerable peer pressure to look good. So, naturally, off to LookBook we went.

LookBook.NU was a fashion, youth culture, and community website. While it's no longer an active website today, it cultivated a dedicated online community focused on street fashion content and boasted over a million monthly visitors during its heyday (MacDonald, 2014). Users were empowered to submit photos of their outfits and stage photo shoots in key cities across the metro. The platform also had state-of-the-art features that went beyond simple search-and-click functionalities, allowing users to vote for their favorite looks and filter content by brand, color combinations, and locations (Allentrepreneur, 2009). This was also a time when I became a fan of Blogger Besties—a group comprised of Filipino fashion bloggers Laureen Uy, Patricia Prieto, and Kryz Uy, among a few others. I'd usually see their outfits being voted on LookBook as one of the most popular, alongside other fashion bloggers from around the world.

The process of uploading photos to LookBook demands a meticulous level of production. Figure 1 shows how a famous Filipina blogger dedicates considerable time and effort to crafting high-quality content, often employing professional

cameras and occasionally enlisting the services of photographers. Moreover, she curates glamorous looks and makeup in pursuit of recognition and popularity within platforms such as LookBook—a blindspot that Smythe (1977) talks about in audience commodification wherein digital platforms profit from user-generated content. He argues that instead of paying for advertising, they rely on the free time that their audience spends engaging with their platform (Smythe, 1977). In LookBook's case, the fact that their users would spend time thinking about what to wear, producing the content, and uploading it to their platform only equates to their economic success rather than the intrinsic value of the content itself (Smythe, 1977). Curation, therefore, becomes an invisible guiding force that shapes trends and encourages users to conform to the platform's standard of what is deemed trendy.



Figure 1. A Filipina fashion blogger teaches petite girls how to pose for LookBook. Note: Photo grabbed from Chen, R. (2014, July 17). Calling all petite girls: This Filipino fashion blogger shows you how to elongate your legs. Character Media – Asian Americans in Entertainment. <https://charactermedia.com/calling-all-petite-girls-get-longer-legs-with-this-filipino-fashion-blogger/>

User-Generated Content in Social Media

Smartphones

Curation as a standardized practice in making content has been further amplified with the rise of handheld devices like smartphones. Before, uploading photos on LookBook required taking these with professional cameras and editing

them on laptops or desktops; now, smartphones have become a hybrid of various media technologies that allow us to easily capture, edit, and upload content. To cite Van der Heijden's (2018) concept of hybridization once more, the evolution of media tools is not drawn from thin air but is rather made to comply with the needs of society. And in an age when content is king, there exists pressure on smartphone companies to innovate and market products that can capture moments and milestones instantly. However, what I intend to contribute to this discussion is that not only does hybridization exist among tangible media tools, but it also becomes a concept that shapes how mobile applications are becoming more ubiquitous and intuitive than ever.

Instagram and the Curated Feed

Curation and personal branding continue to go hand in hand in contemporary times. I've already discussed how the act, the noun, and even the very tools we use have become a part of the curated process, and what's left for me to explore is curation as a strategy that sets us apart from the rest. To borrow Balzer's (2015) words, we've become 'contemporary curators' in the age of consumerism, and social media platforms are no stranger to such context.

The Instagram era holds a special place for me. I found Facebook's demographic too old to the point that it felt like my parents and older relatives were monitoring my activity online. Instagram felt liberating because it caters to the younger demographic and focuses on uploading visually pleasing photos (Jin & Ryu, 2024). Additionally, content on Instagram was generally perceived as aspirational, and although the application itself seemed more approachable than a highly produced photo on LookBook, the effort it took to get that perfect, Instagram-worthy shot was more or less the same (Abidin, 2016). Therefore, curation manifests on the platform as a strategy for presenting ourselves online. It echoes what Balzer (2015) said about curation as a personal branding and the performative work I discussed about bloggers. What sets Instagram apart, however, is that the experience on the platform is already curated. By providing in-app filters and requiring content to adhere to its former square format, the users consequently conform to the aesthetic that Instagram dictates through its affordances as a platform.

Furthermore, Instagram capitalized on its feed, a page where users can easily see how all their photos act like pieces of a bigger puzzle in shaping how users want their feed to look. For Instagram users, maintaining a cohesive feed and the content they upload online are crucial to curating their profiles. Figure 2 shows a Filipino beauty blogger who is known for her curated feed on Instagram, even earning headlines from local fashion publications *Preview* and *Cosmopolitan PH*. Mobile applications have also been developed specifically to simulate how a new photo will appear as part of a user's Instagram feed before it's uploaded to the platform (Stephensen, 2018). These applications enable users to preview and schedule their

posts and ensure that the aesthetic of their feed remains consistent. I interpret this as analogous to how curators adhere to the standards and protocols of a specific institution (Balzer, 2015; George, 2015). Yet, within the expansive realm of social media, the platforms themselves govern and delimit the possibilities for content creation.

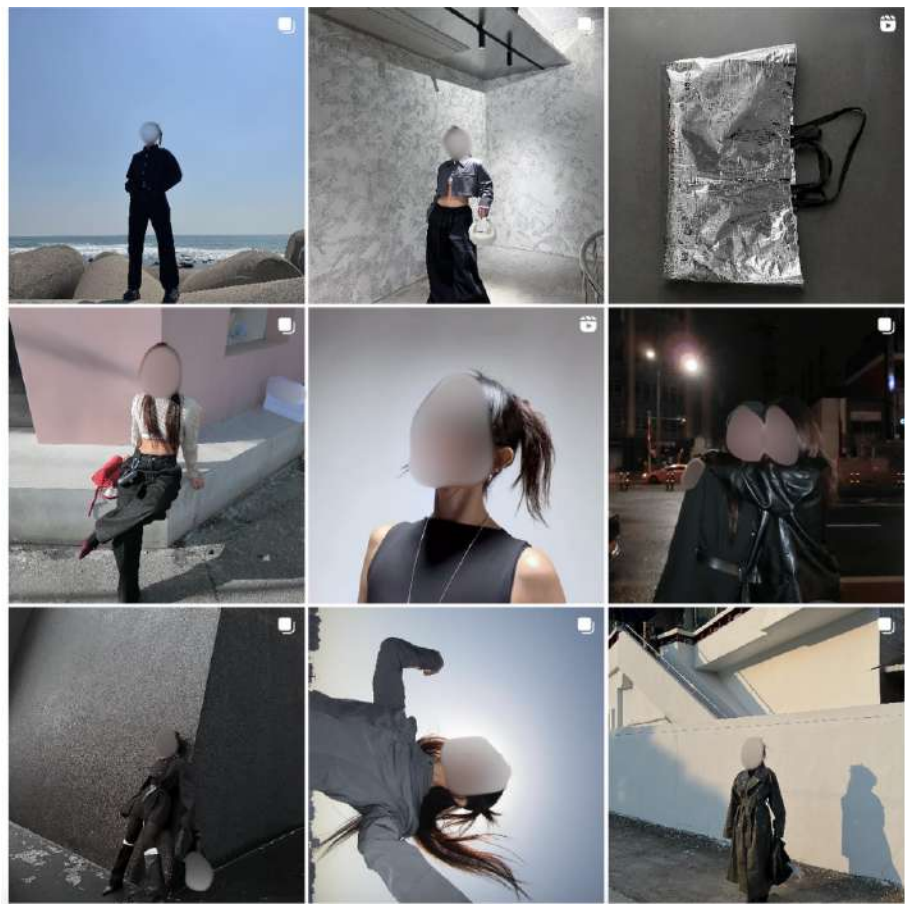


Figure 2. A Filipina fashion influencer's curated feed on Instagram. Note: Image screen-grabbed from her public Instagram profile.

TikTok Authenticity

I mentioned in my introduction that I've spent hours scrolling through the bottomless pit of TikTok. My deliberate use of the 'bottomless pit' was intended to describe my user experience on the platform: the endless feeling of being entertained as I scroll through one video after another, then a few more that follow. Studies have also pointed out the same sentiment when describing users' feelings

when scrolling through their “For You” (Schellewald, 2023). TikTok prides itself on its “For You” page as its most distinctive feature. By employing an algorithm for its “For You” experience, it allows TikTok to detect which kind of videos a user will likely enjoy based on user-initiated data like watching the video and skipping past it (Schellewald, 2023).

TikTok’s branding strategy is heavily anchored by the platform’s authenticity compared to the curated feed of Instagram. I’ve grown fond of binge-watching content from TikTok users who offer backstage passes into their professions. Figure 3 shows how a licensed pharmacist demonstrates his connoisseurship by curating educational and engaging content that reflects his professional identity. His content is centered around real-life encounters with his customers at the botika [pharmacy], and he even leveraged his following on TikTok to call for donations to help his elderly customers pay for their medicines. Another example is shown in Figure 4, wherein a user’s TikTok content is influenced by her work as a professional voice-over artist. Her profile photo does not show her wearing a professional outfit like the TikTok user in Figure 3, but her videos often depict the life of someone who is a voice-over artist for major events.

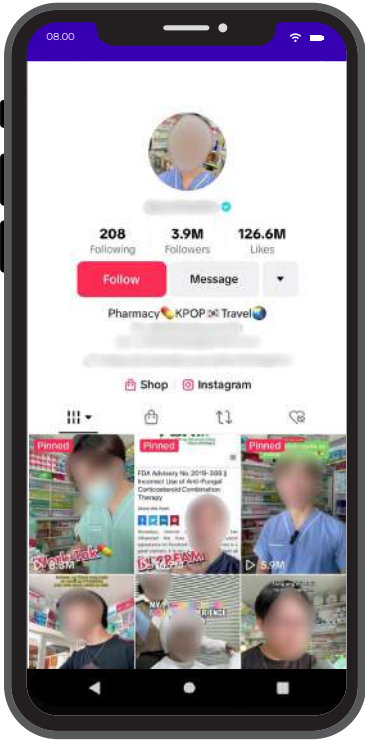


Figure 3. *TikTok profile of a user who’s also a licensed pharmacist. The curated self is demonstrated by skewing his content around pharmacy, his uniform being visible in his profile photo, and mentioning pharmacy in his biography. Note: Image screen-grabbed from his public TikTok profile.*

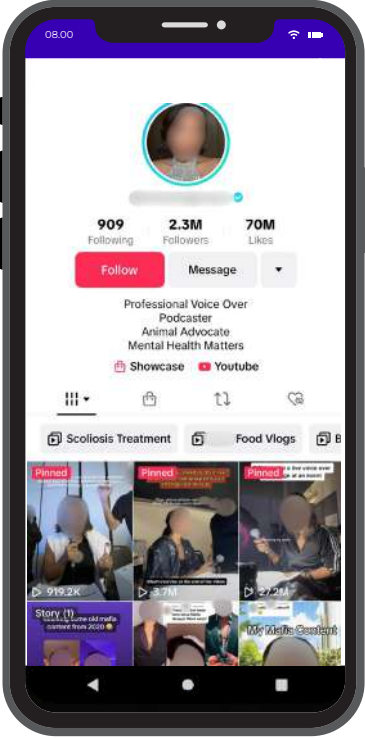


Figure 4. *TikTok profile of a user who’s a professional voice-over artist. The curated self is manifested by creating*

content around her work as a professional voice-over artist. Note: Image screen-grabbed from her public TikTok profile.

These examples illustrate how I see curation in the context of social media. Consistent with arranging and editing artifacts (Balzer, 2015), we see how these TikTok users embody the role of curators as they carve their online identities out of their real-life interests and expertise (Obrist, 2011). We also see this demonstrated in how users gain virality on the platform by engaging in dance challenges and other TikTok-trendy content (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022). However, when viewed through the lens of Balzer (2015) and Smythe (1977), it becomes apparent that projecting one's self as authentic or unscripted on TikTok requires similar performative efforts on LookBook and Instagram. Therefore, the application of curation in online spaces is a dynamic interplay of conscious, deliberate efforts that both the user and platform adhere to. Moreover, social media users have embraced these characteristics of TikTok, which influence how they behave on the platform and how they curate their content. This further demonstrates how the role of the curator is not only embodied by the users and the platforms themselves but also by their interaction within these spaces—a concept that aligns with Pariser's (2012) discussion on filter bubbles that shape what users see on the internet.

Unpacking the Curator, Curation, and the Curatorial

My paper explores how curation has extended the art world as an identity, a practice, and a concept. From curators dating back to Ancient Rome to libraries and bookshop custodians who safeguard library catalogs and to online spaces that curate the user experience in blogs and social media platforms, the curator has similarly evolved in how we arrange and edit an extension of our identities that we present to others. These insights also align with how Smythe (1977) discussed 'audience commodification' wherein platforms rely on free time in curating content, thus making our curated selves an invisible currency that largely benefits these platforms. At first glance, they appear to adapt and cater to our desire for engaging content that represents our idea of self, but it's crucial to recognize their deeper function. These platforms empower us, as users, to carefully curate our online personas, often at the expense of expression and authenticity.

It also asserts Van der Heijden's (2018) concept of hybridization in approaching media histories. Instead of solely analyzing the interrelation among media apparatus, I historicize how the practice of curation merges not only various professional spheres but also the interrelation of roles that arise out of these hybrid media technologies. While we can still distinguish between the roles of a curator in art galleries and the editors or producers of news production sites, the foundational principles guiding these professions persist in our interaction with digital media tools today. This observation does not diminish the expertise of professionals in their respective fields but instead highlights how practices that were once exclusive, such as curation, can be democratized and employed by individual users.

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