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by

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**Pain, Pleasure and Postfeminism:
An Analysis of Body-Related Content on Pinterest**

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Report

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Dedication

To my parents for freeing my mind, my teachers for stretching it, and to Jay, for following it all the way to Texas – I am grateful for all of you.

Abstract

Pain, Pleasure and Postfeminism: An Analysis of Body-Related Content on Pinterest

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This study examines how Thinspiration, Fitspiration, and Health & Fitness content found on Pinterest vary along axes of source, popularity, and usage of postfeminist visual rhetorical strategies, and the larger social reality this content exists within. It begins with an introduction to Pinterest's unique world, followed by a literature review which examines the key issues and themes surrounding body-related content on Pinterest - namely those of consumption, identity and obsession - and the history these themes have specifically for the young, educated, female demographic that characterizes Pinterest's audience. Additionally, the structure and politics of the site itself are considered as a potential contributing force in the body-related content that was studied. Following this review, the methodology and results of a content-coding analysis are reported, along with a discussion of the results, and potential implications of the aspects

that have come to characterize body-related content not only in Pinterest, but also in society at large.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Originally launched in beta in March 2010, Pinterest is an online social networking site where users are able to visually bookmark sites from the Internet, by way of the creation of boards where users can pin the links and their associated thumbnail images. Beyond acting as a mere tool, however, Pinterest acts as a destination unto itself, with 80% of user pins coming by way of “repinning” from within the site (Zhong, 2014). Pinterest’s almost exclusively visual infrastructure features an endless feed with an infinite scroll, where users can browse through the pins that other pinners are currently pulling from the web, either by popularity (the default), by different categories (e.g., Food & Drink, Apparel & Accessories) or through a search bar (e.g., “Brownie recipes”, “Gold bracelets”).

Pinterest is a useful tool, undoubtedly, but its implications are also noteworthy – the site, to date, was one of the fastest growing social-networking sites in history, and continues to achieve rapid growth (Bennett, 2015; Constone, 2012), and its popularity, along with the rise of other visual-based networks like Instagram and Snapchat, have led academics and industry experts alike to note a shift in social networks, and more largely, the Internet, from ‘Tell’ to ‘Show’ (Walter, 2012). That is, both companies and users are preferring the visual as a means of communication – companies find they receive more engagement with content when the visual is pushed forward, and users are not only preferring to engage with this content, but are using it themselves to display and communicate their own senses of tastes and identity.

As Pinterest is used less as a tool, and more as destination unto itself, certain themes have arisen across the content on the site – themes of aspiration, motivation, and overall self-improvement, or increased self-actualization, which manifest through what I

argue is a limited language. Pinterest has become known as a place to find specific things in the collective imagination of the Internet – recipes, DIY crafts, workout tips, hair tutorials, and as a place to keep a sort of Internet registry of things we want - both to *have*, but also, to *be*. Furthermore, unlike other social networks, Pinterest appeals to a very specific demographic – namely young, educated, higher income women (Ottoni et al., 2013). Not only are 80% of users on Pinterest women, but 90% of the pins being created and shared are by women, and women are five times as likely to be on the site as men (Sterling, 2014).

Along with other websites and larger societal factors, Pinterest has been associated with a renewed, predominantly female, upper-class millennial interest in domesticity, with trends such as craftmaking and baking being popular on the site (Matchar, 2013). While Pinterest’s predominantly female users may not be especially psychologically ‘vulnerable’ to ubiquitous trends like hand knitting or bread-making that are present on the site, there are more dangerous trends present, especially around body image – namely photos of strikingly thin women, self-loathing language, and the depiction of the female body as a set of parts to be collected. People have been creating representations of the female form for thousands of years, but it seems our interest in how these representations affect us has only grown, as the means by which we can access said representations multiply through the advent of technologies such as social media. While much attention has been given to magazines, billboards, television and commercials as a battleground for women and socially acceptable constructions of the female form (Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Tiggemann, 2003; Wolf, 1991; Wykes & Gunter, 2005), the Internet and the sites within it are especially interesting, given the way Web 2.0 allows users to share and perform their tastes for friends to see. Pinterest is no exception,

particularly as it relates to two very specific types of content found on the site, known as ‘Thinspiration’ and ‘Fitspiration’.

Thinspiration is a label given to content meant to inspire the viewer to become thin – this could be a picture or a quote or even a link to a weight-loss blog, technically speaking. However, Thinspiration originated within pro-eating disorder communities, and as such, operates using a very visual rhetoric, namely of very thin women’s bodies. One need only conduct a cursory Google image search to see that this is the case. At the time of this paper’s writing, Pinterest considers the content dangerous and issues a warning to users about eating disorders when searching for the content. Fitspiration, on the other hand, is a label given to content meant to inspire the viewer to become fit – things like workout tips, health and diet advice and inspirational quotes. However, just like Thinspiration, Fitspiration has some alarming trends present – namely images of very thin women (albeit with muscles) and quotes and sayings that involve obsessive negative language. It seems on the surface, that looks and health are becoming conflated in the cultural imagination, and if that is the case, it could hardly be argued that Pinterest is not a contributing force, particularly in the minds of its users.

It is for this reason I am conducting a content-coding analysis of Thinspiration, and Fitspiration, and Health & Fitness pins to see if some of the same elements that make Thinspiration dangerous enough to warrant a warning are also present in the more insidious Fitspiration, and potentially the more ‘mainstream’ “Health & Fitness” category on the site. While Thinspiration and Fitspiration are just names given to content that is present on the Internet, and in this case, Pinterest, I contend there are larger forces at play that must be considered in the study of not only these specific types of pins, but also the site itself. The way that certain languages (both written and visual) are used in the promulgation of certain content needs to be further explored, particularly as it relates to

body image and self-esteem. To begin to understand how Pinterest operates, and the sort of dynamics that are at work, in what follows I offer an overview of literature as it specifically relates to the consumptive acts of acquisition, possession and transmission, and the political nature of Pinterest. Afterwards, I present my methodology and coding schema, results, and finally, a discussion of the results and suggestions for future research.

Before I delve into my analysis, it is important to underscore the focus of the study, which revolves around Pinterest's core demographic, which as previously mentioned, is young (20s-30s), well-educated, upper-income, and female (Ottoni et al., 2013). Furthermore, the content that will be explored in the content coding analysis, Thinspiration, Fitspiration, and Health & Fitness pins, are very specific types of content on the site, and the Health & Fitness category does not even figure into the top ten most popular categories (Hall & Zarro, 2012; "10 Most Popular Pinterest Pin Categories", 2014). I selected these types of content because I am specifically interested in how these different representations of health, fitness, and attractiveness (which often overlap) appeal to young, educated, high-income women, who have long been the demographic most closely associated with eating disorders, and how they differ, if at all. The literature that I cover in my review will frequently address this specific demographic and/or content, albeit in different historical and practical contexts. The goal of studying such a specific interaction – between Pinterest users and various types of content – is not meant to be exclusionary but serve as an exploration of how visual rhetoric operates in a socially performative digital space in a postfeminist world. Even though Pinterest is now over five years old, there is still very limited academic research on it, and the research that does exist is primarily oriented around quantitative measures of popularity, pinning, repinning, etc. The aim of this analysis is to better understand the site, the audience, and

even the way that content operates, by focusing on the central question of whether or not Fitspiration should also have a warning on the site similar to that on Thinspiration: are these two sites (and possibly other content collections) showcasing similar ideas?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

THE TRIAD OF CONSUMPTION

There exists a multitude of ways to begin to understand the relationship between a technology and its user, ranging from the simple to highly complex. In an effort to provide a review of literature that is cognizant of both micro and macro scale influences and interactions, I have developed what I term the ‘Triad of Consumption’, which investigates consumption by way of acquisition, possession and transmission. I chose to explore Pinterest in this way because to use this technology is, in its very nature, to consume. While Ruth Schwartz Cowan’s ‘Consumption Junction’ (1987) is more concerned with technological diffusion, her interest in the consumer and the way different forces interact with each other is an additional useful framework that will help not only in thinking about Pinterest as a whole, but also the composition of its content.

Acquisition

Although Pinterest is considered a social network, at its core it operates as a site of consumption. While pinners are ‘consuming’ pins in that they are consuming them as a piece of media, in the case of Pinterest pinners are also acquiring – they acquire pins, repins, boards, likes and followers. The site allows the users to acquire and keep the information and photos they consume, organized by themes of their own choosing. The site is comprised entirely of pins to be acquired and enjoyed and boards to be filled with one’s selections. Beyond the pins themselves, however, the act of acquiring the pins – the searching through the duds to find the good ones – becomes an enjoyable occupation unto itself. Part of the reason that Pinterest has been valued so highly by the tech world is because users are coming to the site frequently, staying longer, and spending more money at the websites where they ultimately end up (Bennett, 2015; “Younger users spend more

daily time on social networks”, 2014). With Pinterest able to engage its users for so long, even to the point of calling themselves “addicted” (Griffin, 2012), one must ask, why are Pinterest users so interested in this site? To begin to understand some of the ways in which Pinterest appeals to its users, it is prudent to look at other technologies that attracted similar audiences, even if the mechanics are different.

In a 2014 study, scholar Lingyuxiu Zhong studied Pinterest in comparison to another historically female-user activity that seemed to have some of the same appeal as Pinterest – the creation of paper dollhouse books, kept by girls and women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In her study, “My Pins are my Dreams”, Zhong notes, “...since the rise of image-based mass marketing, American middle-class females have collected commercial images and creatively adapted them to form personal collections that activate an imagined world of pleasurable consumption” (p. 11). She discusses paper dollhouses, in which girls would cut out furniture, windows, shrubs, and things of the like, from sources like magazines and the Sears Roebuck catalog, and cut, paste, draw and paint together a room of their dream home on each different page of the book.

What is notable about these paper dollhouses is the ways in which they mirror Pinterest. In the case of the dollhouses, girls were encouraged to collect cutouts that appealed to them visually, and use creativity to recontextualize the images they found into a fantasy of their own making. While Pinterest certainly has its fair share of home décor and gardening pins, the site offers much more than that. Almost anything can be brought into Pinterest (with the exception of certain pages, usually ones without associated thumbnail images) and so the paper dollhouse of old can be updated to reflect every aspect of a person’s life – from boards on home design to workout tips and articles

on career advancement, Pinterest users are able to indulge in this form of ‘pleasurable consumption’ that, like the paper dollhouses, requires very little financial commitment.

Pinterest is interesting within the larger context of consumption because one need not spend money specifically to participate in the pleasurable ‘consumption’ available on the site – they need only to be willing to be advertised to and treated as a commodity audience. In other words, one’s attention is the only price of admission. Women and men alike can go onto the site and daydream about the lives in which they have the perfect material possessions, go on great vacations, or are able to do enough DIY projects to create the home of their dreams. Historically, advertisements have always aimed to create this state of imaginative consumption so that consumers would be tempted to purchase their goods, to fulfill those aspirations of happiness and contentment. But the vastness of the information available to us on the Internet, along with the increased capabilities of technologies, mean that often times, especially in environments like Pinterest, the line between advertisement and entertainment is unclear, if not nonexistent.

While Pinterest only began selling advertising space in 2014, each pin on the site is inherently an advertisement unto itself. When a user pins an item they want to purchase from a website, that item is shared with the rest of Pinterest, making each pin its own billboard. While pins like objects, from a store website such as Target, read clearly as advertising, other pins like those for recipes or workout advice are harder to catch – even though there may not be a ‘product’ to be advertised, the website that each pin directs to is credited with each click, and can therefore be turned into advertising space. Blogging has become so synonymous with Pinterest that one academic study found that upwards of 45% of the pins on the site are coming from blogs (Hall & Zarro, 2012). Certainly, not every blog on the Internet is profitable, but the Internet abounds with stories of individuals (it seems, mostly women) who were able to turn their websites into profitable

advertising space (and often times, careers). Pinterest is a space where women are going to consume boards and pins, but it is also a place where they are going to create them.

Although most Pinterest users do not end up making a living off of their use of the website, anyone is able to participate in the creation and/or circulation of content – it is part of the fundamental design of the site. Even for the individual who uses the site to house links from the rest of the Internet (and does not visit the site to peruse pins), there is a chance to engage creatively with Pinterest. After creating a profile, users are able to either pin to the default setting boards that exist on the site, or create their own board titles. Additionally, users may comment or favorite a pin, change the ‘cover pin’ on any given board (which represents that board’s album of pins) and use spaces allotted in the site’s framework to “explain what this board is about”, presumably to other users who may click on one’s profile, but it also seems to be for oneself, to explain textually the ‘story’ that each board is telling about the user who created it.

Although Pinterest is limited in the ways in which it allows its users to engage creatively directly within the space of the site itself, it is almost implied that the creativity happens (or at least, should happen) outside of Pinterest. The site’s about section reads “Pinterest is a place to discover ideas for all your projects and interests, hand-picked by people like you” (“About Pinterest”, 2015), implying the site is merely a jumping off point for one’s own creative identity, a way for people to share information to pursue things they find personally enriching. Users pin to engage more with things that they are passionate about and connect with the things they dream of doing (or being, or having) and in turn, even though Pinterest is certainly not something we would consider a ‘private’ space, it becomes an representation of how one sees oneself (and/or, how one wants others to see them), an intimate reflection and a sort of diary of interests.

Beyond interests, however, Pinterest users are also using the site to keep track of aspirations, and view their accounts as valued possessions, a sort of self-portrait made of information and websites. Regardless of the pin's content, research has found that pinners often treat their boards and pins in similar psychological ways as individuals have done with real, tangible, material objects, notably engaging in rituals of "claiming, storing and hoarding, personalizing, and sharing" (Schiele & Ucock Hughes, 2013). Furthermore, interviews with Pinterest users have found that they treat their boards as treasured collections, engaging in acts of curation, editing and storytelling (Griffin, 2012; Hall & Zarro, 2012). The pins that users are pinning on Pinterest are those that appeal to them on a personal level – one study found that "use, look, want and need were the Pinterest verbs of choice" in the way users describe their collections (Zarro, Hall & Forte, 2013). It stands to reason that if a user pins a pin to a board, it is because they find something about it personally relatable to the point of wanting to 'keep,' or at least, have a digital copy of it. Users come to be so attached to their boards that the same study found that when confronted with the knowledge that someone had repinned one of their pins, some of the users felt flattered while others felt irritated (Zarro, Hall & Forte, 2013). Users so closely relate to their boards that they are able to be flattered by imitation while simultaneously lamenting the loss of uniqueness.

In the case of pins of things to have, Pinterest accounts provide a way for users to, in a sense, 'own' things in the digital realm that they could never afford in reality – Zhong's Pinterest study specifically references a Pinterest account where a user creates two different boards for clothing – one for clothes they would have if they could afford anything, and another to keep track of clothes she actually wished to purchase (2014, p. 61). Users are also able to engage with the things they want to be in a similar way. Namely, even if one cannot 'afford' the time or energy (or even motivation) to engage in

the activities that the pins prompt (baking, cleaning, crafting, etc.), they are at least able to engage in a different way, by curating a knowledge and information collection that is reflective of who they are, or at least wish, to be.

Particularly in the age of the Internet, there exist a vast number of ways in which an individual is able to express oneself, but the way which capitalism prefers is through consumption. This is especially true for women, who have a deeply entrenched history with gender norms, consumption and identity. When men went outside of the home for work after the Industrial Revolution, women became the purveyors of everything domestic, including purchases for the home. What originally started as another chore on a woman's list turned into a means of identity-formation, however, particularly if we look at Zhong's paper dollhouses. Girls were encouraged to become familiar with consumerism and specifically homemaking, as it would be their primary 'work' throughout their lives so while boys were taught to collect scrapbooks of useful knowledge and newspaper clippings, young girls were encouraged to create paper dollhouses. Trying to frame society's limited vision of womanhood as something fun if only one was creative, the paper dollhouse making "was an ultimately creative pastime, making something orderly, whole, and new out of disparate pieces" (p. 32).

The development of mass media technologies in the early part of the twentieth century meant that women and men were having access to more information, and therefore, advertising. Additionally, as infrastructure continued to develop across the United States, shipping became easier and more and more brands could reach more and more people. Businesses capitalized on the options for various goods in the market through marketing schemes that appealed to an individual's sense of self and identity to distinguish themselves from other businesses (for more on this topic, see Ewen, 1977),

and since women made, and continue to make, most household purchasing decisions, they were and are often appealed to the most.

During World War II, women began to work more outside of the home, helping with the war effort. As the war ended, however, women's jobs were taken away and given to returning soldiers, and women returned to the domestic sphere with a vengeance. Rhetoric from both the state and advertisers painted the domestic sphere as a women's ultimate purpose, and made the task of homekeeping and childrearing more 'fulfilling' by 'allowing' women to assert their identities through the types of products they bought, and the 'expert' knowledge accumulated in the maintenance of a home that was becoming increasingly mechanized (Ewen, 1977; Friedan, 1964; Wolf, 1991). While Pinterest has been around for many years, the site only began beta testing for advertising in September 2013 (Silbermann, 2013). Because Pinterest drives the highest dollar sales to websites of all social networks (regardless if the content's exposure was paid for) companies of all sizes, from large corporations to fledgling bloggers, are using Pinterest as a site to grab eyes, and in turn, dollars. This means that on a larger scale, Web 2.0 and sites like Pinterest have magnified while at the same time confused where the line between advertising and 'reality' lies: it is often unclear what the vested interests of content promoters and sharers are - altruism or capitalism.

As advertisers have competed over time, the types of identities, ideas and images specifically pushed towards women have been limited. As women acquired more rights and financial independence over time, advertising pushed increasingly unattainable versions of womanhood and motherhood on them in an effort to keep working moms spending even though they were no longer in the home. After the feminist movement of the '60s and '70s, there was a renewed sense of possibility – women were delaying marriage and having children, climbing the corporate ladder, and achieving (at least

some) upward socioeconomic mobility. In response to this, theorist Naomi Wolf argues in *The Beauty Myth* (1991), cultural norms surrounding a woman's appearance, and duty to her appearance, became stricter, placing a new burden on women that continues to prevent them from reaching gender parity and fulfillment, and most importantly, keeps them buying. Focusing explicitly on the very limited messages women are exposed to, she notes:

A man reading Popular Mechanics or Newsweek is browsing through just one perspective among countless others of general male-oriented culture, which is everywhere. A woman reading Glamour is holding women-oriented mass culture between her two hands. Women are deeply affected by what their magazines tell them (or what they believe they tell them) because they are all most women have as a window on their own mass sensibility (p. 70).

While there are many more spaces on the Internet for women than have perhaps ever existed in mass culture, Pinterest is considered *the* female space, the Glamour in Wolf's description. If this is the case, shouldn't we be concerned about the images and words that are within our edition of Glamour?

Even as the Information age has served to broaden the scope of opinions and perspectives available to anyone with a connection, the larger patriarchal media industry still has a large effect on what we are exposed to. Goods and services that are marketed to women give a false choice – between being a Marilyn or a Jackie but not a choice to be Eleanor Roosevelt– and when women go along anyway and keep buying for themselves and their families, the larger culture infers that they must be creating what women want. Author Peggy Orenstein noticed this trend specifically as it relates to the 'princessification' of a girl's childhood, in her bestseller *Cinderella Ate My Daughter* (2011). It's not that young girls are biologically determined to love pink and princesses, it's the fact that those are the only options given to them that explain their allegiance to all things that shimmer and sparkle – it is the only way they are taught that they are girls.

As women grow up they become accustomed to building their senses of self and identity through the types of things they like, do, and possess – this is normal. However, what is worrisome is the fact that specific identities, tastes and possessions are sold to women, which often prey on the relationship they have with traditional gender roles.

A woman living in this so-called ‘postfeminist’ world is expected to be fit, well groomed, cook delicious meals, keep a clean, personalized home, have a successful career, be a loving mother and beautiful, exciting wife. These elements of a perfect woman have been depicted in the media for many decades, almost unchallenged. For so long, women have been told that there are right and wrong ways to be, and the ultimate mark of a valuable woman is the mastery of her body and identity (which, for much of history, have been deeply entangled) and her ability to conform them to the specifications of society’s wishes. In this way, Pinterest is a consumption, or at least acquisition, aid: there is a large enough of variety of viewpoints to make users feel as though they have the opportunity to identify themselves as distinctive through the act of the specific pins they acquire, but the content on the site has been vouched for by other users, (and more notably, women) so users know that they are navigating a site of acceptable female interests and identities.

That Pinterest serves as a site for millennial women in particular is especially pertinent in the larger discussion of how the site intersects with identity. In her study of a generation of women’s embrace of what she terms the “New Domesticity”, Emily Matchar (2013) describes how this apparent return to the domestic sphere has been affected by larger societal factors, like the dawn of postfeminism and anxiety about globalization. Matchar argues that as the world has become increasingly interconnected and women’s opportunities in particular have opened up, there’s been in an increase in anxiety about the ability to control one’s own life. Women who came of age after the

feminist movement were expected to ‘have it all’ – the career, the family, a beautiful body and all the right material possessions to match. However, Matchar argues, “Feminism raised women’s expectations for career satisfaction, but the larger culture didn’t rise up to meet these expectations” (p. 163). Specifically, a lack of maternity leave, flexible scheduling and affordable childcare left many women dissatisfied with their day-to-day lives. Matchar notes that women “...can no longer rely on jobs and careers to give [them] a personal identity or a sense of security. This sense is greatest among mothers, who have long felt particularly disenfranchised by the corporate world’s antifamily policies” (p. 21). In turn, Matchar argues, unable to control the workings of a capital labor system, many women have chosen to leave a career, to raise children, to make crafts and blog about it, to become masters of tiny spaces that they are able to control.

For the genre of women on Pinterest, specifically educated and upper-income, around 10% of these women are leaving their jobs, or ‘opting out’ rather than ‘leaning in’ in their career environments, which have failed to keep pace with societal progress – namely benefits like maternity leave and flexible scheduling (Cain & Alderman, 2014, Leek, 2013; Livingston, 2014). While this ultimately represents a small sample of women, it is important. Matchar goes on to interview a scholar who believes “the New Domesticity phenomenon wouldn’t even exist without blogs, because educated women crave the kind of external validation they’re used to getting from careers” (p. 56). These blogs, particularly when implanted into Pinterest, have the potential to set trends, standards and norms for more than just a niche demographic, too. Furthermore, many woman who keep their jobs, argues Matchar, are often times unsatisfied or feel alienated working at a computer all day, so the domestic sphere becomes the space in which they hope to construct their ‘true’ identities, usually through the aid of online content and advice.

Accessing this content and advice comes for a fee, however, and that is being advertised to, both directly and indirectly, and the messages, largely, are still selling the same types of identities that they have been for a long time. Women who choose to leave a career are often faced with even higher standards of their femininity, since society often treats these women as though they need to prove that they are contributing to society in a non-career way – by raising excellent children, cooking them delicious food, keeping a meticulous house and by making household purchases. The problem, however, is that many women embracing the New Domesticity were born to Baby-Boomer mothers who did not pass on knowledge or skills that women were now needing – they assumed women would not be returning en masse to the home since careers would be so rewarding. Furthermore, Matchar argues that this generation of women returning to the domestic sphere is more geographically disconnected from their families and communities than any generation before, and as such, is turning to the Internet to construct their own notions of what it means to be a woman in a postfeminist world.

Possession

The problem with this dependence on the Internet, so eloquently argued by Matchar, is that “... people will never stop ‘comparing their insides to other people’s outsides’” (p. 63). With a burgeoning distrust of mainstream media and corporations, individuals are turning towards ‘real’ people as examples of how to live in an increasingly confusing world – and they’re finding them in bloggers who share some aspect of their lives (their fitness routine, craft-making business, etc.) through an online journal, both with the hopes that other women can use the information, and that it will drive enough traffic to their blogs to earn them advertising revenue. With all the competing blog content out there, there is a pressure for the recipes to be delicious,

homes to be beautiful, and children picture-ready at all times, to make one's blog more likely to have its content shared. The result, unfortunately, is that even in an era where a diversity of perspectives can be shared via Web 2.0, a lot of content begins to look the same, reminiscent of the gender ideals that have been pushed at women for the greater part of a century.

With all of the different strangers' lives we now have access to, however, there is pressure to measure up. We're not necessarily looking at a professional designer's page, so when we see Jane Doe from Cincinnati and her home is beautiful and her kids eat organic, whole foods, there's a tendency to find it more obtainable, despite the fact that what is presented on social media is not real life, but a curated representation. Technology has made many improvements to society, but it has arguably distorted our sense of reality. Matchar notes this cheekily:

Ten or fifteen years ago, a woman could only compare her house and cooking abilities and child-rearing techniques to those of people she actually knew. And, since she actually knew them, she knew perfectly well that their living room smelled like kitty litter and their kids needed a dram of Ritalin to stay still for pictures (p. 64)

So what has changed in the ten or fifteen years that Matchar mentions? Among other things, the development, and ultimate explosion of "curation". This notion of curation is certainly not new, but has sparked renewed interest in response to the development of not only blogging culture and social-networking sites, but also Web 2.0 writ large. With the abundance of raw data (in the form of words, images, videos, metrics, etc.) now available, the word "curation," once almost applied exclusively to museums, is seemingly everywhere from industry, academia, to mocking metacritical blogs (Johnston, 2014; Rosenbaum, 2012; Rosenbaum, 2014; "Curating the Curators", 2015). In response to the explosion of the term "curation," scholar Leslie Johnston (2014)

writes about what it actually means to curate, specifically noting elements of acquisition, exhibition and preservation (which interestingly enough, can all be seen on Pinterest). Regardless of its overuse, however, the choice to pin or not pin, to add or delete, to add a filter or not, all of these small little decisions represent acts of curation, which in the context of online identities, add up to completely change how people feel about each other, and in turn, themselves. Now that these curated forms of communication are completely integrated into our daily lives, there is a tendency to forget that what we are seeing is not real – it is a form of static reality television, which depicts a staged performance under the guise of reality. This unfortunately puts women in a familiar historical spot, chasing unattainable ideals that for too many ultimately end in personal distress.

Some argue that the relationship between women and the standards placed on them is often one of obsession. Feminist scholar Susan Bordo argues that spikes among women in agoraphobia in the '50s and '60s and in eating disorders initiated at about same time, and these phenomena are in direct conversation with the ideals that were being pushed on women at the time (Bordo, 1989). Women internalized the dominant ideology – that they should be in the home, that they should have a slender, beautiful body – to the literal point of madness. Much more mainstream than these disorders, however, is the tendency of women towards self-improvement. Recent polls show that 54% of women believe that “the best way to do good in the world is through self-improvement” as compared closely to 46% of men (Blakeley, 2009; Sifferlin, 2014), but industry analysts note that women are much more likely to seek out self-improvement content as compared to men, and the larger content and advertising industry is aware of this. According to one gender studies expert, “When a woman has a problem, she immediately blames herself” (Blakeley, 2009). There are, of course, a vast number of ways in which one can self-

improve, but perhaps no self-improvement project is as commonplace for women as that of the improvement of one's body.

While a breadth of work exists about the ways in which these ideas relate to women's bodies, Joan Jacobs Brumberg's *The Body Project* (1997) begins to explore the relationship between the body and self improvement at the beginning of the twentieth century, ultimately noting at the time of the book's writing in the 1990s that "the body has become the central personal project of American girls" (p. 97). Women, Brumberg argues, particularly in response to their obtaining the right to vote, learned that "a slender body was central to female success" (100), and began their obsession with dieting, proper clothes, makeup and hair, which has only intensified in the wake of mass media. Now free to 'speak for themselves' as autonomous humans and not property, women came to believe that "the body is the ultimate expression of the self" (p. 97) and wanted to communicate cultural tastes and physical beauty that would lend themselves to finding proper husbands to have a proper life with. Naomi Wolf's research in *The Beauty Myth* specifically traces the intensification of standards on women's appearance as a direct response to their entry and growing success in the workforce, noting "Inexhaustible but ephemeral beauty work took over from inexhaustible but ephemeral housework" (p. 16). If women were no longer confined to the standards of the domestic sphere, they would be confined to the standards placed on their own bodies, which were sold to them through the mainstream media.

The relationship between media exposure and body image has been a point of public interest in the past years, particularly in response to the rise of the Internet and social media. While there are a vast amount of studies one could turn to which often come to differing conclusions (for a collection of these, see Wykes & Gunter, 2005), the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) acknowledges that media exposure can

play a role in the development of eating disorders, and encourages individuals to be critical of the media they consume (“Media, Body Image and Eating Disorders”, 2015). This is consistent with several studies which have found that women who are exposed to larger amounts of thin-ideal media are at the very least much more likely to accept this as a norm than someone who is not exposed to said media (Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Tiggemann, 2003; Van Vonderen & Kinnally, 2012). Wykes and Gunter’s *The Media and Body Image: If Looks Could Kill* (2005) features an overview of a very large amount of research on the subject, which often underscores the intersection of home life, peer groups and media consumption as the ‘formula’ for determining the effect of media on body image. Looking at themes throughout the research they are exploring, Wykes and Gunter note that it appears “the ability of magazine copy or pictures to influence readers’ self-perceptions of their own shape and attractiveness is mediated by the degree to which they have absorbed the surrounding culture’s ideals about body shape and by whatever the cultural ideal may be” (p. 159). While it would be wrong to assume that everyone is absorbing the surrounding culture’s ideas about beauty, some authors suggest the women on Pinterest may be especially vulnerable. Emily Matchar notes in her study of the New Domesticity that these millennial women (who are the same users of Pinterest) are turning to the Internet to form a sense of community and learn in the face of stagnating workplace advancement and geographical dislocation from family and friends, making them particularly vulnerable to comparison. It would appear then, that Pinterest users may be especially susceptible to the internalization of cultural beauty standards presented through the Internet, especially on social sites like Pinterest.

More recently, a study by researchers at the University of Strathclyde has begun to investigate the links between body image and social media networks. The study found that increased time on the social network Facebook was correlated with poor body image

(although, not with an increased likelihood of eating disorders). Petya Eckler, one of the researchers, noted “The attention to physical attributes may be even more dangerous on social media than on traditional media because participants in social media are people we know” (Cukan, 2014). While Pinterest is certainly different than Facebook in that the images on the website are not necessarily of friends of the user, the practices of editing, staging and curation that occur on Pinterest also happen on Facebook. This seems to suggest that images on social media seem more ‘real,’ or at least, more attainable in the case of beauty ideals.

There is reason to believe that this is particularly true in the case of Thinspiration and Fitspiration content on the site, along with the health and fitness blogs from which the pins often originate. Bloggers post about their weight-loss and/or fitness journeys, pictures of their food, recipes, workout tips and almost always before and after pictures. In her study of fitness blogging culture, scholar Cassandra Stover frames such behavior within the larger theoretical framework of postfeminism, specifically in regards to self-surveillance, and the framing of the mastery of one’s body as “fun” (Stover, 2014). While having access to a ‘real’ person’s weight loss journey at the click of a trackpad seems like a huge advantage of living in the 21st century, Stover notes that really fitness and health blogs “are often just a culturally acceptable avenue for celebrating the skills of diet and exercise, of self-control and body-monitoring that are so valued by postfeminist media culture” (p. 10). While I agree with Stover, I would add that these blogs are not merely celebrating more than the mere “skills of diet and exercise”, but rather celebrate in totality the idea of Brumberg’s Body Project, of the self as a thing to be perfected. Furthermore, the sites provide an avenue of validation for those who enact specific rituals of self-monitoring and goal-fulfillment, evidenced by comments which usually congratulate will-power and control and lament failure. In other words, much of this

blogging culture is predicated on a performance of the body as transformed, as a product of will power, as accepted. Meanwhile, women who are coming to these sites are made to feel as though they are peering into someone's personal life through the amount of personal details and photos being shared, and that their reality lacks in comparison to that of the blogger. Fitness blogs become a place to perform allegiance to self-discipline and be validated for that allegiance and chided for its neglect.

Stover also notes in her study how much of the rhetoric found in the fitness blogs she studied frames exercise and diet management as “fun”, equating it with self-care and health, which is something the beauty and diet industry has been doing in an effort to drive female purchases in an era of loosening social gender norms. This sort of self-surveillance stands as a foundation in the concept of postfeminism, which Rosalind Gill defines as “dramatically increased intensity of self-surveillance, indicating the intensity of the regulation of women (alongside the disavowal of such regulation)” (Gill, 2007, p. 261). Women today are free to do anything and be anyone, but media representations, including blogs and content on Pinterest have not caught up; at their core they still often teach women to self-objectify, or what Naomi Wolf terms “the desire to be desired” (1991, p. 157). One study found that young girls are already so trained to think of themselves in terms of how they appear to others that when asked about their feelings, they might answer with things like “I feel fat” – despite the fact that “fat” is not a feeling. When researchers told the young girls this, they did not understand how the difference between how they looked and how they felt – their internal status was dependent upon how they appeared to others.

There is a quote from John Berger that summarizes the way self-surveillance configures into this postfeminist world: “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but

also the relations of women to themselves” (Berger, 1972, p. 45-47). While I agree with Berger, I would additionally add that women also look at women, women watch themselves being looked at by other women, and that this also determines most relations between women and other women. Just as women learn to objectify and monitor themselves, they learn to do it to each other as well (Levy, 2005; Wolf, 1991). The convoluted politics that can often emerge from a group of women subconsciously and consciously judging and objectifying themselves and each other is so well-known at this point that it is often the basis for jokes and characterizations of women as ‘catty’. In the 2004 film *Mean Girls*, the ‘queen bee’ Regina George is banned from sitting with her popular clique after she wears sweatpants on a non-approved day – the other girls in the group are all too keenly aware of how Regina’s body in sweatpants looks to other people and what it signifies about the type of person she is, and in turn they are. When Regina explains that sweatpants are the only clothing that fits and is comfortable for her at the moment, the group does not care. They do not care how Regina feels, but only how she looks – she is object first person second. While this is certainly an extreme (and satirical) example of the way self-objectification influences the relations of women, one could argue a very similar thing is happening on a much smaller (and less humorous) scale on Pinterest – women are grouped together, watching each other both directly and indirectly while also performing taste and identity, knowing full well that performance will be available for other members on the site to see. It is this final aspect of the Triad of Consumption that makes Pinterest particularly interesting – the transmission that occurs of identity, tastes, status and power to different groups and social networks within the site. Pinterest may not be as intense as a high school, but it seems reasonable that many of the same politics are present, and it is not merely limited to the interactions between

individual Pinterest users and the authors of the content that they are interacting with, but also with other users on the site.

Transmission

Every time a user pins a site (with the exception of pins placed onto ‘Secret’ boards which will not be covered in this analysis), either from within Pinterest itself or from somewhere else on the Internet, the pin is put into the user’s board of choice, but also in the feed of that user’s friends (the pin also has the potential to end up in the site’s ‘Popular’ feed, but Pinterest does not disclose its algorithms). Underneath the pin is the profile picture and name of the person who pinned it – scrolling through a Pinterest feed is akin to getting a list of recommendations from a large, spatially disconnected, interest-bound group, composed of both friends and strangers. Arguably, this allows users to see who is pinning what in case they want to ‘follow’ said user, but it also results in something much more interesting – a performance of cultural capital that includes the transmission of tastes, norms and identity to the other individuals on the site.

Cultural capital, of course, is the way that cultural tastes can act as signifiers of class and power (Bourdieu, 1986), and over the past ten years there has been a renewed interest in the way this capital works, especially as it relates to the Internet, and specifically social media. Scholar Jakub Macek (2013) summarizes the way cultural capital and social media work together as follows:

Through [online] participation, we establish our common interest in shared content and so we ensure that our cultural capital (and thus our values, preferences, tastes and opinions) and that of those included in our social circles are compatible, that we are surrounded by ‘proper people’ with ‘proper interests’ and that our textual interest and pleasures are consistent with the rest of our habitus (p. 298).

Additionally, research has found that many users use the site and want to “be viewed by their contacts as having authority, good taste, or style” (Zarro, Hall & Forte, 2013). In other words, online social networks are a place where cultural tastes are put on a value scale and broadcast. We deem what types of things are appropriate, or in Macek’s words, ‘proper’ so that we can present ourselves as having tastes and connections that are important and refined. Online social networks serve as a validation and trading system where users are able to organize around their interests and gain and trade cultural capital. In short, the cultural tastes we have are one of the only aspects of our identities we feel we have real control over, which can result in a feeling of tribalism or kinship with others based on our interests. In reference to our online ‘possessions’ and identities, scholar Russell Belk (2013) notes:

We have come to feel that not only are these things ours, but they are a part of us; a part of our identity, an important element of who we are. With a number of websites devoted to certain brands, bands, films, television shows, sports teams, or other foci of our devoted and loyal interest, we may feel we are joint devotees of a cult or tribe. This is potentially a doubly extended self-focusing both on the object of interest and on the community of fellow believers (p. 86).

In other words, when we consume things online, we do not do so within a vacuum – even if we never meet these people face-to-face, we “may still feel a vague sense of imagined community with them” (Belk & Llamas, 2013, p.265). This intersection of digital consumption and community is typified in Pinterest, in which we are sharing our interests and interacting with others who identify with our content, even if it is only by means of pinning and repining or following each other’s boards. If I go on Pinterest and pin a picture of a wedding dress, I do so within a community that heralds the collection of all things beautiful as its goal. When other individuals, whether known to me or not, repin or ‘favorite’ my content, there is an implicit nod of approval – we are a community of individuals trying to collect and curate our tastes to reflect beauty and cleverness, and an

affirmation that I have found something a fellow collector finds worthy of collecting, too validates my taste and aspirations. Of course, one needn't go on Pinterest to share their interests or post things pictures of beautiful things or covetable products – there are numerous other social networks that do that, and often allow us to more directly interact with people we know in an offline context.

But this, evidently, is a characteristic of Pinterest that appeals to users. Studies have shown that users appreciate the non-direct aspect of Pinterest since they get to avoid the inflated, self-promoting posts that have come to saturate sites like Facebook (Zarro, Hall & Forte, 2013; Zhong, 2014), and additionally are able to focus on interests instead of who is posting them. While the various content depicted on Pinterest features which user pinned it, the identity of the pinner is not really in the foreground of the image – pinners see the pins and make decisions based on their own interest – in the words of one study's respondent – “It's about your interests, it's not necessarily about who” (Zarro, Hall & Forte, 2013, p.655, emphasis original). While there is a general feeling among Pinterest users that the site is about connecting users to their interests, it must be said that Pinterest is indeed a social network, where power structures and hierarchies exist.

The difference between groups and networks, for network scholars Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler, in their work *Connected* (2011) is that networks “allow groups to do things that a disconnected collection of individuals cannot” (p. 9). While to date no political movements have started on Pinterest, the site has had a strong role in disseminating tastes and trends across a large amount of people very quickly. If I share a brownie recipe on Facebook, that recipe is competing with a number of other types of information, like my friends' posting personal status updates. Pinterest is uniquely designated as the space for what's relevant in terms of interests and hobbies so there is a larger receptive audience present on the site.

Social networks do not merely act as different platforms from which individuals broadcast their lives, however. In *Connected*, their book investigating social networks and how they affect peoples' day-to-day lives, scholars Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler highlight how trends move among friends of friends of friends. This can be anything from an infectious disease, the likelihood of quitting smoking, or merely a good mood. In their work they discuss the idea of Emotional Contagion, for which they state "Emotions spread from person to person because of two features of human interaction: we are biologically hardwired to mimic others outwardly, and in mimicking their outward displays, we come to adopt their inward states" (p. 37).

While the type of human interaction Christakis and Fowler are referring to specifically relates to face-to-face interaction, studies on exposure to Thinspiration hint that this type of behavior can not only move into the online sphere, but also thrive in spaces like Pinterest. Another study, more focused on the development of disordered eating attitudes, found that the attitudes of one's peers, along with one's own self-esteem, were the strongest predictors of internalization of the thin ideal (Van Vonderen & Kinnally, 2012). Even more intriguing is a study that found that magazine reading is much more correlated with internalization of the thin ideal than television or films are, which is interesting given Pinterest's magazine-like structure (Tiggemann, 2003). While the effects of exposure to these types of images differ person to person, these studies all hint that audiences are still more likely to adopt behaviors that fall in line with the message of the content. Furthermore, the vastness of information featuring virtually any opinion is enough to overwhelm anyone.

It's not merely that you have a friend that constantly talks about dieting or going to the gym, it's that these posts and content, which so easily lend themselves to sharing and collecting, come to inundate aspects of our digital lives (which are becoming

increasingly indistinguishable from our non-digital lives) whether we want them to or not. Thinspiration was able to move from pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia niche sites into some of the most popular social networking sites (Steinkellner, 2014), and as a result, we can assume that many more women have been exposed to these sorts of images than would care to. Research has found that women who read magazines, even if they are not specifically looking for content on health, beauty or fitness, are more likely to internalize the thin ideal than those who did not look at the magazines at all, because of the indirect exposure (Tiggemann, 2003). If this applies in any degree to Pinterest as well (and it may, given the site's magazine-like structure), then 'niche' content like Thinspiration and its cousin Fitspiration suddenly have a lot more power and influence, especially in such gargantuan social-networking sites.

It is not suddenly that pro-eating disorder communities are popping up everywhere in equal force, but rather, it appears media have developed that lend themselves perfectly to the goals and aims of these niche communities as evidenced by Thinspiration's close association with highly visual and vast sites like Pinterest, Tumblr, and Instagram. While Thinspiration and, arguably Fitspiration, are very specific kinds of content, it is clear from examining the site, and the relationship between it and its content, that there are politics inherently embedded in Pinterest, and those politics are what lends the site as a tool in the postfeminist world it serves.

THE POLITICS OF ARTIFACT

It is clear from the preceding literature that the interactions occurring on Pinterest are fraught with socio-historical baggage, however, it is important to not merely reduce a technology to the sum of its social forces. To avoid this pitfall, I will now investigate Pinterest and its content as political artifacts using Landon Winner's theory of

technological politics, which insists “that we pay attention to the characteristics of technical objects and the meaning of those characteristics” (Winner, 1986, p. 22). Specifically, Winner mentions, “What matters is not technology itself, but the social or economic system in which it is embedded” (1986, p. 20). On that note, I am interested in how the very fundamental structure of Pinterest interacts with larger social and economic forces to directly and/or indirectly affect how users interact with the site and its content. While an analysis of this kind could be an entire study in and of itself, here I will only be delving into the more salient aspects of the site which speak to the social and economic systems in which they are embedded. The aim of this analysis is not to be exhaustive, but rather, to acknowledge the technology through which content is being accessed, which research has continually proven to play a role in self image, particularly in the access to thin-ideal media (Tiggemann, 2003; Wykes & Gunter, 2005).

Pinterest

It should first be reiterated that the physical structure of Pinterest as a technology is incredibly simple. The site features an endless scroll of pins, a dropdown menu that is just as easily navigated as getting to the website itself, and a search bar. Anyone who has an email address and/or Facebook account is able to sign up, and there are no restrictions in who is able to participate in the pinning, repinning, or creation of content. In addition to a regular account, users are able to sign up for a Business account, which is also free, but features tools to use Pinterest to drive traffic to one’s site, including analytics, and an option to promote one’s pins for a fee (“Reach More People with Promoted Pins”, 2015). On its face then, Pinterest appears to be inherently democratic – available to all in all ways. And for the most part, this seems to be the case. It should be mentioned, however, that Pinterest does make some choices as to whose content is more likely to be repinned

and featured on the site. It is not clear how pins come to populate the default Popular feed, or the subcategory feeds, other than a sense that this is content being pinned ‘right now’. Unfortunately, Pinterest does not publically disclose the algorithm that it uses for its site.

Social

While the structure of the site appears democratic, it should be noted that a strategic move made early in the company’s management did affect how the site was ultimately used. Although Pinterest now advertises itself as more of a tool for project making, in the first few years of its existence, Pinterest advertised itself as a “Place to keep all the beautiful things you find on the web” (Hall & Zarro, 2012), and it seems actions were taken to ensure that happened. When founder Ben Silbermann created the site, the first invited to the beta version were individuals who were known in the Internet community for their good taste, mostly through the blog community – people who created content that was visually appealing. The site has been designed from the beginning as a place that contains beautiful things from people who know about beautiful things – a community of credibility.

As previously mentioned, the gender gap on Pinterest is stark, as it relates to both the user base as a whole and content creators specifically (Sterling, 2014). When asked to try and hypothesize the gender gap on Pinterest, site users claimed that women have inherent characteristics such as being “competitive, emotional, prone to collecting and organizing, and creativity” (Griffin, 2014, p. 22) to explain their draw to the site. Others have suggested that blogs and sites like Pinterest attract women because they provide an accessible space for women to come together and get the external validation they crave (Matchar, 2013). The fact that the structure of Pinterest is so simple and open means that

in the beginning, the site most likely could have lent itself to any type of content. However, early decisions in the development process appear to have set how the site was conceived of, and ultimately used as a female-centric space of validation, reflection and voyeurism.

It is clear then, from Ben Silbermann's quest for 'trendsetters' at the inception of Pinterest that the site was geared towards the formation of social hierarchies, even if those hierarchies are more subtle than on other sites. When you look up a user's profile on Pinterest, you not only see their various boards and pins, but you also see how many people follow them and how many people they follow – even if these numbers aren't at the forefront of the user experience, one's popularity, influence, and social status as trendsetter is quantified on their profile.

The way that Pinterest's structure is set up, a screen and endless scroll of vast beauty and appeal, causes the content to function in a particular way. One reporter, Beth Felker Jones, decries the problem of Pinterest in that "to become a popular pin, an image has to work only as an image. It does not have to translate into real life" (Felker Jones, 2012). This disconnection, argues Felker Jones, between what our eyes want and the reality of life causes Pinterest, along with its content, to function as a sort of pornography which "deadens our senses" and "traps us in a bizarre fantasy world in which we are all insatiably hungry and never satisfied", with her ultimately asking the question "Does Pinterest turn real households, real family dinners and real women into bad pins?"

Because Pinterest is a visual network, for a pin to be successful, as Felker Jones (2012) argued, it must function primarily and almost exclusively as an image. This, unfortunately, means that the site's users are only able to conceive of their identities and intersects visually within the confines of Pinterest. Users are able to bring in pins from outside Pinterest, but unless the content has been visually optimized, it's very unlikely to

spread on the site and be shared among others. The social network for women on the Internet, then, is a place where, by the very nature of the site, everything must be visually appealing. Studies from both academia and industry have consistently found Food & Drink, Home Décor, Apparel & Accessories, DIY/Crafts Travel & Places, and Hair & Beauty among the most popular Pinterest categories, with the majority of content being repinned coming from these sections (Hall & Zarro, 2012; and “Ten most popular Pinterest pin categories”, 2014). While these categories represent different interests, they all have one thing in common – they visualize well. While Pinterest can be used as a tool to collect less ‘pretty’ interests, it is clear this is not how the site is being used, since 80% of pins come within the site itself (Zhong, 2014).

Winner argues in that in his theory of technological politics that one must see “the importance of technical arrangements that precede the use of the things in question” (1986, p.25) in order to understand the subtle (but not trivial) differences between different iterations of technology. If we are to apply this to Pinterest, then, the unique politics of the site become clearer. Prior to Pinterest’s debut in 2010, the only similar technology or site experientially would have probably been blogs, which users had to go to by searching through websites like Tumblr and Wordpress. Blog users could follow, like or comment on a given post, and in that way, keep a record of things they found interesting – recipes, instructions for crafts, a lot of the same content that would be found on Pinterest today, and a lot of stuff that might not, since it is not inherently visual. Pinterest, then, seems to have developed from a blog-centered framework – one that was interested in similar social hierarchies of followers, likes, and the blending of friend and stranger social networks, but was more accessible to individuals who would or could not spend the time and energy to find these sorts of things on the Internet themselves. The site’s intense visuality and infinite scroll practically beg for its users to look, scroll and

pin, not read, scroll and pin, which in turn motivates content creators to make pins that are meant to operate first and foremost as beautiful digital collectibles for the users, and ornaments for the site.

Economic

While it is unclear what the long-term economic plan was for Ben Silbermann and investors at the beginning of the site's launch, it is well-known industry knowledge at this point that Pinterest is an incredibly valuable marketing tool (Falls, 2012). When users go to a retail website from Pinterest, they spend far more than they do when coming from Facebook or other social networking sites, arguably because the structure of the site is not only compatible with marketing, its fundamentally compatible with capitalism.

Each space on a user's Pinterest feed is real estate that many bloggers, advertisers and companies want to get to, so that the user can not only click through to buy their product or visit their site or article, but do so because they see that other people have vouched for its value by pinning and repinning it. Furthermore, every time a user pins something, it automatically populates in other people's feeds, making every person who pins something from a given company an advertiser for that company. Pinterest must have realized how incredibly valuable their site was for small and large business alike after it began to gain traction, and in March 2013, began offering business analytics, free of charge, so that business could track which pins were gaining more traction and driving sales and website traffic and which ones were not. In other words, they offered every user a free service, telling them how to game the system, invest time and strategy in using the site as a tool, and reap financial benefits.

It is clear from this technological political analysis of Pinterest that the site is indeed democratic, but it is also capitalistic, it has few rules, but is 'gameable,' is

designed for beauty, but also represents a particularly universal standard of beauty. Pinterest is a space where everyone has the chance to utilize to full financial and strategic potential, but it is also not very clear who is and who is not – who is sharing something because they want it on their board or because they want it to end up invariably on someone else’s board. In Pinterest, the line between private and public, producer and audience, and choice and compulsion are blurred, and when the historical baggage of consumption and feminism are inserted into the framework, it begins to hint at, in the words of Winner, “the ways human ends are powerfully transformed as they are adapted to technical means” (1986, p. 21).

BACKGROUND ON THINSPIRATION AND FITSPIRATION

Before delving into the study’s methodology, I thought it pertinent to provide a brief primer on not only Thinspiration and Fitspiration, and the larger dialog around disordered eating. Despite the fact that only so many different versions of identity can be expressed in a visually optimized medium, it is not stopping content creators from trying to promote an identifiable ideal. This is particularly noticeable in the case of Thinspiration and Fitspiration content, which are treated very differently by websites, but seem to be visualized very similarly. Thinspiration as we know it now – photos of flat stomachs, defined collarbones, thigh gaps, etc. – has been around virtually as long as the Internet, and in some of the earliest social media sites, like LiveJournal and Xynga (Greenfield, 2012). The term “Thinspiration” also originally started on pro-ana and pro-mia sites (short for pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia, respectively) but began to infiltrate more mainstream social-networking sites as pro-ana and pro-mia websites were shut down by companies that did not want to support these sorts of communities (Steinkellner, 2014). Between then and now, however, much has happened; between 2006 and 2008 the

number of pro-anorexia and/or pro-bulimia social media posts rose 470% (Cincotta, 2014). As niche content began to infiltrate mainstream sites at alarming rates, websites were unsure of what to do. In 2012 after urging from NEDA, Pinterest, Tumblr and Instagram originally outright banned all “Thinspiration” content. However, psychological researchers urged the platforms to reconsider, as they provided a safe space for individuals suffering from disordered eating to gather and support each other (Casilli, Pailler & Tubaro, 2013). Ultimately, in 2012, Pinterest posted a caution to users upon searching for the term, noting “Eating disorders are not lifestyle choices, they are mental disorders that if left untreated can cause serious health problems or could even be life-threatening” and issuing a phone number for the NEDA helpline.

Spokespeople from various eating disorder organizations, including NEDA, have pointed out a specific problem with Thinspiration, noting, “even if the person in the picture doesn’t “look” anorexic, tagging it [Thinspiration] emphasizes shape and size, rather than health (Greenfield, 2012). More largely, eating disorder organizations, including NEDA and the Multi-Service Eating Disorders Association (MEDA), advocate for a paradigm shift, one where “the focus should change from ‘skinny’ to ‘healthy’” with one of the spokespeople noting that there is a need to “Change some of the dialogues... not just taking the images down, but putting out messages that will counteract the overall cultural continuum” (Greenfield, 2012). Enter Fitspiration.

Fitspiration, like its cousin (or probably, more closely, sister), is any and all content that is meant to inspire its viewers to achieve fitness, whether by photo, quote, or links to resources. While it is unclear when precisely this term came about, it seems to at least have appeared after ‘Thinspiration’, as it often engages in a dialog with it – for example, propagating the oft-pinned quote ‘Strong is the New Skinny.’ In this guise, working out and eating well are not about ideals being pushed forward onto women,

they're for women because they deserve to be healthy and feel strong and well. Searching for "Fitspiration" on Pinterest does not cause the site to offer the user a warning at the top. Fitspiration, it seems, is all about health, and not about appearance, despite that the content often focuses on things like discipline, control, and depicts photos of chiseled abs and lean, muscular thighs.

Despite the 'health' theme being pushed forward in this time of a renewed focus on fitness, people are beginning to notice the trouble with Fitspiration. One blogger termed 'Fitspiration' as "[Thinspiration] in a sports bra," with psychologists noting that while the language is often encouraging (e.g., "Failure isn't falling down; it's refusing to get back up"), these messages are intercut with photos of what appear to be fitness models – an unattainable standard for most women (Dahl, 2013). Furthermore, studies have already shown that exposure to Thinspiration can have immediate effects on eating and body image attitudes after only ninety minutes (Dahl, 2013). In other words, it appears that Fitspiration, which seems to just be a sweaty version of Thinspiration, also probably will not get users to work out, but may result in disordered eating. However, this content features no warning label at the top. While this content is apparently very problematic, a large aspect of what makes it so dangerous has to do with how it interacts with the network structure and social media components of Pinterest.

Proponents and users of Pinterest and its content argue that the website offers motivational images and information to help people accomplish their goals, whether they be fitness- and exercise-related or not. However, the question of whether or not Pinterest is able to be motivational has been a point of interest in the media. In his article on Fitspiration's ability to be motivational, Dave McGinn asks an expert on exercise and behavior, Dr. Michelle Segar of the Sports, Health and Activity Research and Policy (SHARP) Centre for Women and Girls at the University of Michigan, if images really

have the potential to motivate people to get into better shape, to which the expert replies “For most people, the answer is absolutely not” (2012). The expert goes on to say that these images will only really help people who are already thin to accomplish fitness goals, leading Pinterest to be an area where the thin obsess over becoming thinner. A movement therapist interviewed in the same article says she believes that the pins “just really perpetuate this image-based obsession”. So is Fitspiration, which exists on a spectrum somewhere between Thinspiration and mainstream content, also just perpetuating this so-called ‘image based obsession’?

Chapter 3: Methodology

It is clear then, from the literature, that women have long been given standards of what to look like, how to act, and how to form their identities through the limited opportunities they were offered. As women advanced in society, Wolf argues in *The Beauty Myth* (1991), the ideas about how they should act, look and feel were resold to women in different packaging – as a smorgasbord of choices to choose from that were the source of their empowerment. The problem with this model is that historically, choices have been and continue to be limited for women, and in no case is this clearer than with a woman's appearance. While the postfeminist world we live in lauds the fact that women have the freedom to look any way they like, representations of female bodies say otherwise. Since it is no longer acceptable for society writ large to prescribe the appearance of a woman, it is done in subtler ways, notably through the conflation of appearance and health, which Wolf argues was in direct response to the achievements of the feminist movement

While it would be considered completely rude to tell someone they are fat, it is completely acceptable to tell someone that we are 'worried for their health'. Women and men alike are told through media representations the types of acceptable versions of 'health' they may possess, and it appears, on the surface, they resemble much older, pre-feminism versions of beauty and value. This, I argue, is the potential danger of Fitspiration: that it rebrands long-held gender norms and body politics as not only a choice, but *the* source of female empowerment and identity-formation. It is for this reason I have decided to look at Fitspiration, to examine the ways in which it does and does not resemble the arguably more niche and dangerous Thinspiration, and the more mainstream and accepted Health & Fitness content. I hypothesize that while the term

“Fitspiration” is innocuous and appeals to mainstream ideas of health, this content coding analysis will show the content employs similar strategies and rhetoric as Thinspiration, making it more ‘dangerous’ than the word “Fit” might lead one to believe. Furthermore, if there is a strong similarity between Thinspiration and Fitspiration, I argue that Fitspiration content deserves the same warning as Thinspiration content on the site does, especially as eating disorder experts begin to ponder the role of health-related media in the larger discussion about body image and disordered eating.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were developed in order to better understand the content being examined in light of the reviewed literature, specifically focusing on postfeminist visual and textual rhetoric, popularity, and commercial interests that make Pinterest such a unique space on the Internet. Following each question I provide some information on why these questions were asked and at times examples.

Q1: To what degree are the categories of Thinspiration, Fitspiration and Health & Fitness saturated with different types of commercialism? Are sources of content – commercial or individual - associated with a specific category of content?

Pins can come from anywhere on the web as long as Pinterest can find a ‘pinnable’ image associated with it. However, I am specifically interested in the source of the pins as it relates to the scale of its source. While historically large companies have been involved in the fabrication of cultural standards for women, Web 2.0 and the development of social networking sites have provided spaces where individuals are able to directly compete with larger companies for viewership, and in no case is this truer for Pinterest, where 45% of the content comes from blogs (Zarro, Hall & Forte, 2013). Just

because a pin's creator has not paid for advertising through 'Promoted Pins' does not mean that the pin is not inherently advertising, so my coding options reflect the different connotations and applications of advertising and commercial interest. I recorded the source of the pin to understand how saturated a given category was with different types of commercial content, and the degree to which companies and bloggers permeate the respective categories. I hypothesize that because of its niche association, Thinspiration content will much more frequently come from personal blogs than mainstream company websites, while Fitspiration content will have more pins from company websites. I hypothesize the intense commercial nature of Fitspiration since I believe that its utilization of postfeminist rhetoric lends itself more to advertising a product or service.

Q2: To what degree are the Thinspiration, Health and Fitness, and Fitspiration categories saturated with more popular, and thus more mainstream, content?

There are two metrics presented on pins on Pinterest – the number of times a pin has been repinned, and the number of times it has been 'liked.' Repinning an item will allow a user to place a 'copy' of a pin onto one of their personal boards of their choosing, while 'liking' a pin automatically places a pin within a user's 'Likes' list. While it is not immediately clear why a user would choose to like something on the site over repinning it, the lack of integration into one's personally curated boards could signal users are approving content that they may not be entirely adopting for their own boards. Additionally, repinning and liking pins are not mutually exclusive, so it stands to reason a user could adopt content into their personal boards, and then also like it to keep a collection of one's most favorite pins. Regardless of user motivation, pins with higher repin and like numbers can thus be interpreted as being more representative of the categories to which they are joined, since they appeal to a larger amount of people. I

hypothesize that Thinspiration content will exhibit lower popularity given its niche association, while Health & Fitness content will contain content much higher in popularity, given its unique category position as a default category on Pinterest.

Q3: To what degree do specific types of images saturate the three categories?

Q3a: How frequently are only parts of bodies (as opposed to full or mostly complete bodies) displayed?

The fragmentation of the female body as a collection of items to be possessed (by both men and women) is a long referenced societal tendency (Friedan, 1963; Wolf, 1991). In content such as Thinspiration, female bodies are often cut up into parts to be envied, through ubiquitous trends like the ‘Thigh Gap’ and popping collarbones. While fitness and health connote overall states of well-being and capability, the depiction, and often times, fetishization of body parts takes place there, too, through a focus on defined abdominal muscles, buttocks and arms and legs. The removing of body parts from their contexts (i.e., the entire person) reinforces this tendency towards fragmentation and collection of body parts as both being within and without us, encouraging a state of self-objectification that reduces people to things. Images that fixate on body parts have been recognized as a trigger for those suffering from disordered eating (“Guidelines for Sharing Your Story Responsibly”, 2015), and are often criticized by health and fitness professionals for conflating health and fitness with a specific appearance (Greenfield, 2012). If images of this sort are so dangerous, why do they seem so commonplace? Specifically, are certain types of content on Pinterest more likely to fixate on specific body part of a person? While it may seem obvious that Thinspiration, with its warning, will have more images that fixates on body parts, and Health & Fitness will have less, I hypothesize that the proportion of Fitspiration pins that do this may be much closer to the

incidence among Thinspiration content than among Health & Fitness content, despite Fitspiration's rhetoric of 'health' and 'fitness'.

Q3b: How frequently do bodies include a face?

While not showing a person's face in an image, and instead choosing to focus on their body can contribute to dehumanization or fixation on a certain body part, the tradition of using headless and faceless mannequins to sell products (and images) at this point in time is so entrenched as to render the incidence of images of people with no faces virtually insignificant. Many industry articles feature tips for making popular pins, which usually include using pictures that do not show faces (Lee, 2013). The goal of this code is to locate which types of content are more likely to show a person's face despite the overwhelmingly trend to 'remove' them – namely, which sources and types of content are trying to humanize health and fitness by showing an entire person? Specifically, I hypothesize that the Health & Fitness pins will show more faces than Fitspiration, and that Fitspiration will show more faces than Thinspiration, since it appears more instructive pins (such as those depicting visual instructions for an exercise) appear in higher incidences in Health & Fitness, then Fitspiration content.

Q3c: How frequently are bodies presented for comparison?

It is clear from the pertinent literature that comparison is going to happen between people and images and people and people, especially on social networking sites like Pinterest (Cukan, 2014; Wolf, 1991, Wykes & Gunter, 2005). However, content which directly focuses on elements of a body as being 'correct' or 'incorrect', or juxtaposes bodies against each other for comparison (as in the case of 'Before and After' photos) is doing more to not only reinforce audience comparison, which most often results in

audience feelings of low self-esteem and body image but also to reinforce the idea of self-transformation and improvement that occupies so much of the literature Brumberg references in *The Body Project*. Images and pins that present ‘Before and After’ photos or juxtapose two very different bodies are almost unanimously placing value judgments on how people look (despite the fact the transformation is often framed as once centered on health) since it is impossible to determine health from a photo, and as such should be noted in this study. Specifically, I am interested in this specific type of content as it relates to categories -namely, which category is most often guilty of comparing bodies? While I anticipate these types of content will appear in all categories, I hypothesize that Fitspiration content will be most likely to present bodies for comparison, since the transformational stories often associated with these sorts of comparative images often operate on the same postfeminist, faux empowerment rhetoric that seems to fuel Fitspiration.

Q4: To what degree do specific types of textual rhetorical strategies saturate the respective categories?

Q4a: How frequently does content utilize self-objectifying language?

As previously mentioned, there has been a long history of objectification of women, and in the wake of postfeminism, an encouragement for women to take on the task themselves (Friedan, 1963; Gill, 2007; Wolf, 1991). As media consumers become savvy to the types of messages they are being sold, this language is sometimes more subtle, but still present. Messages like the now infamous “Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels” encourage self-objectification through the conflation of appearance and emotions, lest one were to forget that ‘skinny’ is itself not a feeling, but rather, an appearance. I argue that any language that focuses specifically on how one looks (i.e.,

‘How to get Ballerina Collarbones’, ‘How to get rid of Love Handles’), references weight or pounds explicitly or links emotions (good or bad) with appearance (i.e., ‘To feel beautiful in anything’, ‘To never feel fat again’) is self-objectifying language and should be noted. While I fully expect higher incidence of this language in Thinspiration content, I also expect it to have a strong presence in Fitspiration content, given the way that health and looks are often conflated not only within the site, but also within society at large.

Q4b: How frequently does content utilize self-surveillance language?

While there are indeed a great number of ‘encouraging’ pins that exists in the area of health and fitness, many perpetuate the fitness-blogging rhetoric described in Stover’s research on fitness blogging where a developed sense of self-surveillance is paramount; as Naomi Wolf writes, “The Beauty Myth is always actually prescribing behavior, not appearance” (Wolf 1991, p. 14). As Stover notes in her research, this self-surveillance is often framed as fun and enjoyable, and many individuals would argue that fitness and health are not activities forced on them from outside, but rather a source of personal empowerment, and as Stover states, fun. The language I am referring to in this instance is language that specifically focuses on an individual’s power over her own body. Examples of these include pins that say things such as “No thanks. I’m not hungry” (usually paired with a “Remember to say this more often” caption); “‘I’ is the only difference between ‘Fit’ and ‘Fat’;” or “You get what you work for, now what you wish for,” and often adopts the voice of the culturally loved and hated ‘mean fitness trainer.’ It is important to note here that language around self-control and discipline is not always inherently problematic in health-related content. However, I do think it is important to understand the degree to which that mode of thinking has saturated the collective imagination, given the literature on the importance of self-surveillance in a postfeminist world (Gill, 2007;

Wolf, 1991). As with many of the other codes, I expect to see the highest incidence of this language in Thinspiration content, followed by Fitspiration content, given the extreme nature of eating disorders, and Thinspiration's associations with that community.

Q4c: How frequently does content utilize fear-based language?

Language that appeals to emotions such as shame, guilt, and regret is used to promote internalization of good and bad behaviors. It is why people often talk of feeling “guilty” for not exercising more or eating that bag of cookies despite the fact that these actions did not harm anyone else – because they have been taught to feel badly for committing them. In our context, pins that utilize shame and guilt as a motivating force are creating a fear – a fear not only of one's body, but also of the ability of one's body to move beyond their control, that the ‘neglect’ of one's body will ultimately lead to emotional turmoil and dysfunction, that a failure to adopt to societal standards will result in self-loathing. Research has even found that emotions like fear often act as a mediator between self-objectification and the eventual development of eating disorders (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998). Pins which utilize this rhetoric may say something along the lines of “Is it worth the calories?” in reference to food or “You can be happy a year from now or you can be sorry” in reference to working out. While it may seem intuitive that Thinspiration content would have the highest incidence of fear-based language, I hypothesize that this incidence will actually be highest amongst Fitspiration content, which on its faces appears more commercially saturated, and, I argue, therefore, has something to gain through the promulgation of fear.

Q4d: How frequently does content specifically encourage body acceptance?

While the inherent focus of much of the content found within these specific categories on Pinterest is related to the transformation of oneself, I did not want to discount content that may serve to ‘counter’ much of the language related to Wolf’s Beauty Myth (1991). Much of my coding criteria can be interpreted as relating specifically to the ‘dangerous’ aspects of content, but I am not discounting the possibility and capability of Pinterest and its users to reappropriate content to fit more in line with less historically entrenched feminine standards. Furthermore, text and image can be coupled to critical ends on Pinterest, as evidenced by the pairing of the image of an emaciated woman and the text 'Thinspo is not okay' or a pin that is fairly popular at the time of this paper’s writing, which comically transposes the most intense ‘motivating’ language of Fitspiration and Thinspiration onto photos of people drinking. Because mainstream media appears to be acknowledging Fitspiration’s potential as a wolf in sheep’s clothing (Angelilli, 2015; Dahl, 2013) Fitspiration content appears to be more prone to larger social commentary, even within its own domain – Pinterest.

SAMPLE SELECTION

To collect the pins that were coded, a new Pinterest account was created and accessed on a browser window size that permitted the site to populate pins in five columns (this is notable because Pinterest will add and redistribute content to fill larger screen sizes). Using a quasi-randomization procedure, one hundred pins were collected from the first, third, and fifth columns and every other row from each of the three categories of study: search term “Thinspiration”, search term “Fitspiration”, and Pinterest’s default category “Health & Fitness”. To preserve the content being studied, each of these pins was pinned onto a board with other pins from the same category. The repin and favorite metrics at the time of the pin’s collection were noted in the comments

section to preserve this data, which is reset at a user's collection (since they are creating a new copy of the pin). Because the content on Pinterest, at least within the categories themselves, appears on its surface to be homogenous throughout different times of the day or week, the time over which these pins were collected was deemed inconsequential to the study; the data were collected on Sunday, March 22, 2015. It should also be noted at the time the Pinterest account used was created, users were required to select five 'interests' so that the site could recommend content – "Fitspiration", "Thinspiration", "Health & Fitness", "Thinspo" and "Fitspo" (shorthand terms for the first two categories) were selected, although it is unclear how this may have influenced the content recommended.

CODING

Each of the pins was then coded according to the following criteria in order to determine similarity across the three sites' content. The criteria were developed to address the questions I had about body-focused content on Pinterest, and were operationalized based on literature from postfeminism (Gill, 2007; Stover, 2014), effects studies (Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Van Vonderen & Kinnally, 2012; Wykes & Gunter, 2005), and information from the NEDA website, ("Guidelines for Sharing Your Story Responsibly", 2015). Following each code I provide how it was operationalized and why the code was considered for the study.

CODES

1. Code: Category. Codes include (1) Thinspiration, (2) Fitspiration, (3) Health & Fitness.

As stated previously, the three content categories analyzed were the pins yielded by the search term "Thinspiration", the search term "Fitspiration", and the "Health &

Fitness” category on Pinterest. Because users appropriate the same content differently, it is possible that the same content appeared under different categories. While Pinterest may inform a user if they are attempting to repin a pin that they already have on a different board, it is unclear if these alerts work when dealing with a different ‘copy’ of the same pin. For this reason, it was not possible to note a priori when the same specific content appeared across different categories, although it should be noted it was neither rare nor entirely commonplace.

2. Code: Source of the image. Codes will include (1) a ‘Promoted Pin’, (2) a company, (3) a monetized personal blog, (4) a non-monetized personal blog or (5) other.

Pins were coded as follows:

(1) Promoted Pin – Pinterest labels Promoted Pins as such, and this was noted upon moving the pins to their respective boards;

(2) Company – Pins were labeled as coming from a company if they linked to a website that appeared to be both monetized and institutional in scale;

(3) Monetized Blog –The monetization of a blog was judged by the presence of advertising space on the blog. It should also be noted that when referring to blogs in this instance, I am specifically referring to personal blogs, which have the feeling of being run by a single, or very small group of people;

(4) Non-Monetized Blog – Any personal blog without the presence of advertising;

(5) Other – This was used to label pins who had no source other than an image, or linked to sites that eluded the other categories, such as pins that linked to spam or videos on YouTube.

3. Code: Popularity. Popularity will be measured in two ways: by the number of times content is repinned, and by the number of times it is “liked.”

Repin and like numbers range from zero into the tens, if not hundreds, of thousands, so popularity categories were constructed based on repin numbers only (which tend to be higher), and were used in the analysis as follows: Low 0-49, Low-Medium 50-499, Medium-High 500-1999, High 2000+. I recorded popularity primarily in an effort to reveal the degree to which a viewer of a given category’s content is exposed to highly popular (or conversely, unpopular) content; a cursory examination of content revealed that certain categories were more prone to more popular pins, and I wanted to account for this trend. Categories with higher popularity numbers also indicated an increased likelihood that users would be exposed to a narrower range of content, since popular content can stay on the site for very long periods of time.

4. Code: Content Type. Codes will include (1) image, (2) text, or (3) both.

While the content that the pins link to can be any sort of content at all (including, arguably, no content, in the form of broken links and spam), the pins themselves can either contain an image, text, or both. It is important to note here that when I reference text, I am only interested in text embedded in the pin itself. While the captions which accompany the pin are often interesting windows into the ways in which users are interpreting and reappropriating content, the captions are often the result of leftover promotional comments from the content’s publisher and a lack of interest in users recaptioning pins as they collect them. Additionally, Pinterest has the option to create so-called ‘rich’ pins, which contain more details on the pins such as titles, bylines and icons (“Rich Pins”, 2015). While this extra information, like the previously mentioned captions, provide interesting contexts to interpret the pin images themselves, I maintain

that the emphasis on Pinterest is still on the images themselves and the text within them. For this reason then, only the language within the pin's image was analyzed. While I am interested in seeing the proportion of various content types in relation to other codes like popularity and source, this step primarily exists to assist in the sorting of pins to be analyzed along the remaining schema.

All pins containing an image were evaluated by the following codes:

4a: Code: Partial body. Of pins depicting a person, does the image fixate on a specific body part? Codes include (1) Yes, (2) No, (3) No person depicted.

4b: Code: Face. For pins depicting a person, is the person's face shown? Codes include (1) Yes, (2) No, (3) No person depicted

4c: Code: Encouraging Comparison. Does the pin's image present multiple bodies, or multiple images of the same body for comparison? Yes or No?

All pins containing text were evaluated along the following codes:

4d: Code: Self-Objectifying Language. Does the pin's text utilize self-objectifying language? Yes or No?

4e: Code: Self-Surveillance Language. Does the pin's text utilize language that appeals to notions of self-control, will power, or self-discipline? Yes or No?

4f: Code: Fear-Based Language. Does the pin's text utilize language that is based on fear, such as shame, guilt, or regret? Yes or No?

4g: Code: Body-Acceptance Language. Does the pin's text utilize language that specifically promotes body acceptance, or uses text to critical ends? Yes or No?

ANALYSIS

The author served as the primary coder, and a fellow graduate student coded a ten percent sample, with ten pins from each category. After analysis the coding was found to have an inter-coder reliability of 96%, suggesting the operationalizations were clear and amenable to consistent interpretation. Frequencies and percentages of code incidences by category were calculated, and Chi Square tests were performed for each code across the three different categories.

Chapter 4: Results

After collection of data and the calculation of percentages and Chi Square values, the results were placed into Table 1. It should be noted that the data from each of the codes was found to be statistically significant, and as such, it is unlikely that chance is to account for the differences that appear between the respective categories' content, in terms of this content analysis. Additionally, while the “%” symbol represents the percentages by content code, because category samples each consisted of 100 pins, the “F”, or “frequency” column digits can also be read as percentages of the category's content. For example, Fitspiration's five Promoted Pins may represent 62.5% of the Promoted Pins found, but only 5% of Fitspiration's content.

	Thinspiration		Fitspiration		Health & Fitness		Pearson Chi Square	df	p<
	F	%	F	%	F	%			
Source							29.28	4	.001
Promoted	0	0.0	5	62.5	3	37.5			
Company	57	27.8	74	36.1	74	36.1			
Monetized Blog	23	43.4	10	18.9	20	37.7			
Non-Monetized Blog	16	72.7	5	22.7	1	4.5			
Other	4	33.3	6	50.0	2	16.7			
Popularity							139.73	3	.001
Low	69	43.9	7	4.5	81	51.6			
Low-Medium	18	36.7	27	55.1	4	8.2			
Medium-High	12	16.7	53	73.6	7	9.7			
High	1	4.0	13	5.9	8	36.6			

Table 1: Code Frequencies, Percentages and Chi Square values by Category.

Images							42.7	4	.001
Contains image	89	33.3	91	34.1	83	31.1			
Contains image of a person	80	39.8	72	35.8	45	22.4			
... And fixates on a body part	48	57.8	23	27.7	12	15.6			
... And shows their face	35	34.7	37	36.6	29	28.7			
.... And presents different bodies for comparison	8	66.7	3	25	1	8.3			
Text							26.33	4	.001
Contains text	48	25.8	70	37.6	68	36.5			
... Which utilizes self-objectifying language	19	46.3	12	29.3	10	24.4			
.... Which utilizes self-surveillance language	13	41.9	15	48.3	3	9.7			
... Which utilizes fear-based language	7	63.6	3	27.3	1	9.1			
... Which specifically encourages body acceptance	0	0.0	4	80.0	1	20.0			

Table 1 (cont'd): Code Frequencies, Percentages and Chi Square values by Category.

In order to unpack the results of the analysis, I will interpret the results as they apply to my specific research questions.

Q1: To what degree are the categories of Thinspiration, Fitspiration and Health & Fitness saturated with different types of commercialism? Are sources of content – commercial or individual - associated with a specific category of content?

As expected, Thinspiration content was the least commercial, with content coming from personal blogs (both monetized and non-monetized) at much higher rates than Fitspiration and Health & Fitness content, which exhibited fairly similar distributions of content by source. This suggests then, that Fitspiration is conceived of very similarly to Health & Fitness, since companies and different types of blogs and bloggers are creating and sharing content at similar rates across these two categories. Furthermore, the higher incidences of commercial content in these two categories suggest that there is a wider spread acceptance of Fitspiration content over Thinspiration content, since companies are more readily associating their brands with Fitspiration content.

Q2: To what degree are the Thinspiration, Health and Fitness, and Fitspiration categories saturated with more popular, and thus more mainstream, content?

Interestingly enough, across popular pin distribution, Thinspiration and Health & Fitness distributions were very similar, with large proportions of low popularity pins and small proportions of high popularity pins. Fitspiration, on the other hand, had much higher numbers of medium to medium-high popularity pins. This would appear to suggest that Fitspiration pins have higher general rate of recirculation within the site than Thinspiration and Health & Fitness content, since pins higher in repin numbers have usually had much more exposure than lower popularity pins. What this means is that

users exploring Fitspiration are more likely to be exposed to more of the same types of content than they are to discover a new perspective or opinion. This can be construed as both good and bad: while Web 2.0 encourages the voicing and sharing of all ideas and perspectives, some of those ideas – such as Thinspiration – are not only niche, but dangerous.

Q3: To what degree do specific types of images saturate the three categories?

Q3a: How frequently are only parts of bodies (as opposed to full or mostly complete bodies) displayed?

As expected, Thinspiration content most frequently fixated upon body parts, with Fitspiration content doing so half as often, and Health & Fitness doing so half as often as Fitspiration. Put another way, almost 1 in 4 Fitspiration pins contain a picture which fixates on a body part, compared to over half of the pins on Thinspiration. Again, while this is lower than the incidences that occurred with Thinspiration content, it should be noted how prevalent this visual strategy is, even within such a commercially dominant space.

Q3b: How frequently do bodies include a face?

Across all categories, the proportions of images featuring a face were very similar, appearing roughly in one third of the content. I found this surprising given not only the different categories, but also the varying distributions of pin source and popularity. This suggests that regardless of context, the showing of headless bodies (the other two thirds) likely operates more as a ubiquitous advertising strategy than one linked to body politics inherently.

Q3c: How frequently are bodies presented for comparison?

As expected, Thinspiration content most frequently presented bodies for comparison, doing so twice as often as Fitspiration. However, Fitspiration content presented bodies for comparison at three times the rate of Health & Fitness, suggesting that in this regard, Thinspiration and Fitspiration are very similar, since they operate on the distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ bodies.

Q4: To what degree do certain textual rhetorical strategies saturate the respective categories?

Q4a: How frequently does content utilize self-objectifying language?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Thinspiration content was most likely to utilize self-objectifying language (19% of its content), with Fitspiration in second (12%), and Health and Fitness a close third (10%). This means that as far as self-objectifying language is concerned, Fitspiration is actually a lot more like Health & Fitness, although the incidence gap across categories still appears relatively small, a range of only 22% difference across categories.

Q4b: How frequently does content utilize self-surveillance language?

Despite the results from the previous code, the coding of self-surveillance language revealed different distributions compared to that of self-objectifying language. Namely, when it comes to the self-surveillance language that has become a staple of postfeminist culture, Fitspiration utilized it most frequently, with Thinspiration a close second, and Health & Fitness a distant third, utilizing this language in only 3% of its content. Perhaps this self-surveillance aspect of the content is part of what makes it ‘inspirational’ enough to be included in the Fitspiration and Thinspiration categories,

although it is unclear why that same rhetoric would not be permeating Health & Fitness content at a higher rate.

Q4c: How frequently does content utilize fear-based language?

As with many of the other codes, when it came to fear-based language, Thinspiration content was more likely to utilize it, with Fitspiration in second and Health & Fitness in third place. Although I was expecting this to be the case, I was pleasantly surprised by the relatively low occurrence of fear-based language across all categories, given that it is often an element of the content that is often cited for its troublesome nature (Dahl, 2013).

Q4d: How frequently does content specifically encourage body acceptance?

As expected, Fitspiration proved to be the category most likely to specifically encourage body acceptance, either through direct text or through subversive editing and sharing of content. I was surprised to not see any of these subversive messages in the Thinspiration category, but given the larger popular social commentary (and worry) around health, fitness, and images, it is unsurprising that Fitspiration appears to be optimum environment for the sharing of these messages.

Chapter 5: Discussion

So what are we able to make of the results of the content-coding analysis? Most notably, it is clear that the categories and content that were studied did not differ for the most part, at least in the incidences of the content codes, which are in no way meant to be exhaustively descriptive. But across these codes, it is clear that the relation between Thinspiration, Fitspiration and Health & Fitness content and the larger social structures of which they are a part (consumption, postfeminism, eating disorders, etc.) are complicated – they overlap in different areas but diverge in others. As previously mentioned, in addition to serving as a tool to collect content, Pinterest also serves as a destination unto itself, with 80% of pins coming from within the site (Zhong, 2014). While the degree to which Pinterest's various algorithms analyze and favor certain types of content or visual rhetorical strategies is unknown, it is clear from the content-coding analysis that certain strategies – namely those that encourage self-objectification and self-surveillance - thrive in Pinterest's environment.

It is important to note here that while Thinspiration, Fitspiration and Health & Fitness content were all coded for the presence of certain types of rhetoric, the context in which those strategies were utilized differed category-to-category, pin-to-pin. That is to say, not all pins that fixated on a body part were inherently 'bad,' but they created their own sets of meanings and interpretations depending not only on the co-presence of other strategies, but the larger category and pins that surrounded it upon viewing. In fact, a spokesperson from NEDA has even noted that despite any hypothetical similarities between content, the term "Fitspiration" is an improvement upon "Thinspiration" because the term encourages individuals to approach the content from a different context – one of health and fitness (Greenfield, 2012). Despite this different context, recently there has

been a large amount of news and opinion stories on Fitspiration and its danger, with stories often focusing on the intensive self-discipline encouraged by the content (Dahl, 2013) or what some sources see as an intense sexualization of fitness content (Angelilli, 2015).

Either way, there appears to be something about Fitspiration that is attracting attention by critics. While most people (myself included) would say that Thinspiration is the more harmful of the two types of content, there is a simplicity to it; it originated in the eating-disorder community, has the word “thin” in it, and often shows what appear to be dangerously thin women – that make it easier to handle. Thinspiration’s harm then, is easy to see – the emaciated women in the pictures draw a direct link between the viewer and eating disorders, which is likely a reason that the NEDA warning exists on Pinterest. Fitspiration, I would argue, is a little more insidious. While the images of women (and/or their body parts) in Fitspiration are typically not as emaciated as those in Thinspiration, the bodies in Fitspiration are still being put on a pedestal to be coveted and compared. The language of intense self-discipline, self-surveillance, and fear of one’s own body that has been used in Thinspiration since the dawn of the Internet (and against women’s bodies for much longer) is now being reconfigured and repackaged in Fitspiration as responsible self-care. Perhaps the most notable finding of this study is the strong correlation between self-surveillance language and Thinspiration and Fitspiration content. As previously mentioned, it is conceivable this self-surveillance language is the aspect that the Internet has come to characterize as ‘inspirational’, since it encourages (at times very strongly) that users pay increased attention to their bodies. It appears the reason that Fitspiration is beginning to draw so much criticism and attention is because it is encouraging the same types of behaviors and perspectives that have long been prescribed by Wolfe’s so-called Beauty Myth, even if the pictures look a little different.

Again, the categories analyzed in this study are not particularly popular categories for Pinterest; rather, the goal of this content analysis was to find out how similar Thinspiration and Fitspiration content were, particularly in relation to body image related characteristics, despite the fact they are treated differently, by the site. In spite of the fact that they are so similar, Fitspiration has appeared to successfully repackage self-objectification, self-surveillance, and body fear in a socially acceptable rhetoric of self-care and responsibility, which ties in nicely to larger public interest (or more accurately, worry) about growing obesity rates in America, and potential solutions. It is logical that a person who is specifically seeking out Thinspiration be given a NEDA warning, given Thinspiration's long-held association with eating disorders, but it is also logical that a person who is specifically seeking out Fitspiration be given a similar warning, given the content works in very similar ways.

In 1991, Naomi Wolf lamented the conflation of health and appearance, and how it could and was used against women, most often without them realizing it. Flash forward to 2015, and the conflation of health and appearance has only exploded in the wake of Web 2.0, and particularly visual-based networks like Pinterest, where the internal state of health is sold through an external portrayal of beauty and desirability. The larger public confusion (and obsession) about weight, food, exercise and appearance has not become any easier. In fact, in the past few years have seen a push for the American Psychological Association to recognize a new eating disorder in its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), Orthorexia Nervosa, which is characterized by an unhealthy obsession with healthy eating, and, according to NEDA, "appears to be motivated by health, but there are underlying motivations, which can include safety from poor health, compulsion for complete control, escape from fears, wanting to be thin, improving self-esteem, searching for spirituality through food, and using food to create an identity"

(“Orthorexia Nervosa”, 2015). Although a doctor first coined the term Orthorexia Nervosa in 1997, there has been a renewed interest in and push for its recognition by the DSM in light of all the (often times confounding) information about food and health that is so readily accessible, especially as the Internet has developed into a household health resource. Now, more than ever, it seems, “health” is not only confusing, but confounding to the point of triggering eating disorders.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The aim of this study was not merely to ascertain the degree to which certain rhetorical strategies saturate body-related content on Pinterest, but understand at a deeper level how its users approach, interpret and interact with the content, the site, and the other users. Although Pinterest debuted in 2010, it is clear from the literature that it ties into more historically entrenched practices and patterns of consumption, imaginative play, voyeurism, and the performance of cultural capital, that have been used to appeal to (and in Wolf's view, control) women for much of the twentieth century and into the 21st century. What is also clear from the research and the content analysis, is that despite the fact that the site has very few rules regarding types of content, its structure and the community that has developed around it greatly influence what types of content become popular and how users interact with the site. Its users, as previously mentioned, are female, young, well educated and come from higher income households. Although Thinspiration, Fitspiration and Health & Fitness content are all treated and perceived differently depending on the context, the degree to which they utilize very similar rhetorical strategies speaks to the limited range of perspectives that may be available in a visually optimized environment.

Media effects studies have long recognized a text's ability to change the way that a viewer feels about a topic, the world, or themselves, and the latter half of the twentieth century saw an increased acknowledgement of the way media specifically could affect a woman's own body image (Friedan, 1963; Wolf, 1991). As Web 2.0 has developed and people have more control over the types of media they choose to consume, there has been an increased hope that with it will come a greater individual sense of autonomy and democracy, and specifically as it relates to the depiction of the female body, a greater

variety of body types being depicted as normal. While many sites, bloggers and pins feature a more variegated representation of the female body, many sites, bloggers and pins are using Web 2.0 to create content that seems to be very similar to what has been on television and in magazines for a long time. Why, with all the different types of content on the Internet, has the female-driven space of Pinterest become one associated with cupcakes, crafts and looking pretty? Why, with all the different types of content on the Internet, does so much body-related content on Pinterest focus on self-objectification and self-surveillance? Sites like Pinterest may not be taken seriously because of their association with consumption and all things feminine, but the way in which users are engaging with the content makes it matter. The theoretical framework presented here suggests that users are using Pinterest for pleasure, but also for comparison and obsession; they are using the site to daydream, but also to increase and broadcast their cultural capital, and above all, these things matter to not only how all people, but especially women, conceive of themselves and the world around them. The analysis conducted in this study further suggests that the content with which users are interacting is very limited, at least in this specific case of body-related content. When the literature and this analysis are coupled, it would appear the language with which users are constructing their own senses of self, particularly around their own bodies, is limited not only in terms of the types of things they see, but also limited in terms of its capabilities of disrupting long-held gender norms.

Further research on Pinterest is needed, particularly as the effect of paid advertising on the site becomes clearer. While this study looked at a microcosm of Pinterest in the form of body-related content, the other content on the site should be further studied, particularly as it relates to its female user base and overall mental wellness. Studies have shown people who spend more time on Facebook are typically

more depressed (Cukan, 2014) than those who do not, but is this the same for Pinterest? Is it more pronounced because of the focus on consumption, or less so because it is a more indirect social-networking site? Finally, it appears as though the conflation between health and appearance is here to stay. If that is the case, further research needs to be done to understand how and when this is happening, and the way it intersects with mental health and disordered eating. With an increased public recognition of sleight of hand media tactics and a developing language to articulate it (as with the development and usage of Orthorexia Nervosa), now is certainly time to do so.

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