Social Comparison of Idealized Female Images and the Curation of Self on Pinterest

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Abstract

Corresponding to the increase in adult use of social media is the popularity, since its introduction in 2010, of Pinterest perhaps because of its emphasis on visual content known as "pins." According to the Pew Research Center, when it comes to Pinterest, "Women are about five times as likely to be on the site as men, the largest difference in gender" among popular social networking sites. While the literature indicates that idealized images in traditional advertising venues have a negative impact on women's self-perceptions, the present study extends this research to consider how a social bookmarking site, like Pinterest, affects women's body image and self-esteem. The empirical

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findings of the present study, based on the results of an online survey of women, will provide greater understanding of the degree to which exposure to idealized images on Pinterest have an effect on self-evaluations. The study is based on social comparison theory as a moderator of effects, along with body image and self-esteem. The findings will be of interest to those concerned with the unintended consequences of social media use.

What happens when an individual is confronted with idealized media images to which they compare themselves? Such comparison is likely as it is engrained in the human psyche to compare oneself to another – we cannot escape the desire. There is a body of research regarding social comparison to images seen on television or film and in magazines, based on the idea that viewing idealized images—successful, attractive people and luxurious things—may lead to dissatisfaction with one's own physical traits and economic status, among other comparisons. Oftentimes individuals measure themselves against what they perceive to be the unattainable. On the other hand, it is possible that individuals will see themselves as better off than others depicted in the media when they view less than ideal images (Alperstein, 2012).

Pinterest is a highly visual environment, including photographs and other artistic renderings that can serve as a bookmarking site, as well as a search engine, for individuals to discover products and associated design ideas or events, providing many opportunities for individuals to engage in comparison. It is only recently that questions have been raised regarding social media's ability to harm

women's self-esteem (Henderson, 2012). Stefanone, et al. argue that self-esteem is an antecedent to online social behavior, whereby individuals do assess their self-worth online. Furthermore, they suggest that self-evaluation is a means by which individuals use social media to create and maintain personal identity (2011). It is through the process of social comparison that individuals curate their "self" – their identity. Perhaps because of the unique qualities of Pinterest, there is little research regarding the use of this social bookmarking site for social comparison.

Feminine Ideals in Western Culture Displayed in Advertising and New Media

As women spend significantly more time than men on Pinterest (Rainie et al., 2012), it stands to reason they are spending more time managing their bodies. If we think of the body as a medium of culture, there is perhaps no better place to see culture at work than on digital networks that are highly imagistic. The proliferation of images on social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, as well as Pinterest, suggest that the stereotypical female body image—tall, extremely thin, and blond—is always in play, volatile, and subject to continual re-consideration. Women are faced with unrealistic expectations every time they open up a fashion magazine or watch a TV program or movie. With regard to advertising images, most photos are airbrushed or use computer software to eliminate blemishes or other physical flaws that don't meet the ideal (Derenne & Beresin, 2006). Unfortunately that ideal is unattainable for the vast majority of females, which contributes to low self-esteem and negative body image, the latter of which refers to assessment of one's own body in relation

to social norms (Champion & Furnham, 1999). This instability manifests in idealized images of fashion, body shape, seminal events like weddings, and even home décor as a reflection of the self; sometimes attainable, yet other times not.

Bordo (1994) adopted Bateson's 1956 concept of double bind in which both males and females are confronted by two contradictory ideals, making a decision in either direction untenable as the individual works to reconcile the two. Food and diet, according to Bordo, are "central arenas for the expression of these contradictions" (p. 199). The idea that one can "have it all," for example, plays against the idea that "I'm not good enough." As such, the "self is torn in two mutually incompatible directions" (Bordo, 1994, p. 199). Such a manifestation of the double bind can be found in the Dove Real Beauty Pinterest site, where you would see "corrective" images that play against notions of the stereotypical feminine ideal, which may be compared to the Optifast (a weight-loss supplement) Pinterest page in which images of extreme thinness are displayed. Women who view these and similar Pinterest pages, among other social networking sites, are placed in a double bind that may lead to uncertainty, anxiety and perhaps depression.

Pinterest

According to its website, Pinterest is a "tool for collecting and organizing the things that inspire you." Pinterest is also referred to as a social bookmarking site where individuals may create an archive of things they find online, referred to as pins. Like a curator in a museum, the Pinterest curator selects photos and other images

through which a manipulated version of the self is represented to followers. Yet followers participate by re-pinning, liking and commenting and in the process curate their own self-image as well. The process of pinning and repining makes one's self-image malleable as one can change aspects of the self as they select images that represent their interests and desires.

There are significant gender differences when it comes to social media use in the United States. The majority of the user base for the leading networks—Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest—is women. When it comes to Pin-terest, "Women are about five times as likely to be on the site as men, the largest difference in gender" among popular sites (Rainie et al., 2012, p. 5). Ottoni, et al. (2013) found in their analysis of gender roles and behavior on Pinterest that females were more active with regard to content generation, i.e. creating pins. They also conclude in their study that females are more likely to create rela-tionships with other Pinterest followers. Females, they

Table 1

Current Pinterest Users	
Women	80%
Men	20%
Age 25-44	55%
Age 25-34	30%
Age 35-44	25%
College degree or higher	25%
HHI $25-$75,000	50%+

Source: Google Ad planner

found, are more likely to be "more generalist" when it comes to organizing boards based on categories.

Theoretical Framework

This study sought to investigate how female users of the social bookmarking site Pinterest compare themselves to images presented on fashion-oriented pages where idealized images of feminine gender identity are represented. The ways in which female users of Pinterest view themselves in relation to the images they see, fits within the rubric of social comparison theory, an area of research that examines psychological phenomena initiated by the presence of at least one "other" (Staple & Blanton, 2007, p. 2). The other to which Staple and Blanton refer can be "actual, imagined, or even implied," making women's responses to images of idealized femininity a prime arena in which to see this theory at work (2007, p. 1).

Social Comparison

Much research has taken place since Festinger (1954) developed the theory of social comparison that described comparing oneself to another as a basic human need. Over the years, the theory has been revised and expanded to go beyond self-evaluation to include self-improvement or enhancement, varying degrees of interest regarding social comparison among individuals, and consideration of an individual's social environment (Wood, 1989). With regard to the latter, social comparisons are influenced by social environment when one makes upward (someone who is better off), downward (someone who is worse off) or lateral comparisons (someone is like me).

Considering an idealized image, one would expect that comparisons would be made in the upward direction, although it is clearly possible that the individual will evaluate the idealized image as one that is unattainable (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). Viewing images of those less fortunate, however, directs comparison downward, leading individuals to feel superior to others (Dreze & Nunes, 2009). Complexity grows when one considers that a viewer could evaluate an image of an inferior other as beneath her or worse off than her, and therefore the evaluation might be self-enhancing. Depending on the ways in which individuals construe the comparison, there may be strong identification with the objectified other, in which case the comparison may be downward, perhaps threatening self-esteem or upward depending on the context of consumption. Generally, however, research has found that "downward comparisons tend to be self-enhancing while upward comparison are generally threatening to well-being and self-esteem" (Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997, p. 1141).

The social costs extracted through the social comparison of advertising images among females have been demonstrated (Richins, 1991; Martin & Gentry, 1997). It should be acknowledged that men participate in social comparison (Alperstein, 2012), and research indicates that cross-sex comparisons are an important part of the social comparison equation, for example when a male looks at the advertising image of a very attractive female and evaluates her as someone with whom he would have no chance of developing a relationship, perhaps threatening his self-esteem (Aubrey & Taylor, 2009). As a relatively new social media platform, heavily utilized by females,

Pinterest represents an ideal space in which to see social comparison theory at work.

The current study is conducted with the goal of describing and explaining how women use idealized images of Western femininity displayed on Pinterest for social comparison, and in the process how women use those idealized images to negotiate their own feminine gender identity with particular regard to body image and self-esteem. It is intended to complement other research that has focused on idealized imagery with interest in the construction and maintenance of gender identity. Specifically, the research addresses the following questions:

> How do women compare themselves to the representation of a Western feminine ideal through the images on Pinterest?
>
> How do women negotiate the meanings of female gender identity based on their self-esteem and body image?

Methodology

In order to examine the relationship between self-image, body image and social media use, an online survey was conducted during November through December 2013. The survey was launched in November 2013 using Qualtrics.com, an online survey research tool. Conducting research over the Internet opens new ways to investigate online behavior, although the Internet population represents an inherently biased sample of the total U.S. population. However, it can be demonstrated that such an approach to online research can be a powerful tool for researching users of online social networks. This research employed a contact strategy based on the likelihood of in-

terest among the targeted population, an incentive (chance to win a $25 gift card) and technological factors, like consideration of social media in which to plant the seed. To that end, the researcher published a post on the blog site, Medium (Alperstein, 2013), and subsequently Tweeted the message and link to the survey. The post on the Blog site Medium encouraged readers to Tweet, Facebook and pin the link to their followers. As the subject for this research is the Pinterest page of Laura Santo Domingo, the most widely followed fashion and home décor person on Pinterest, a tweet was sent to @laurasantodomingo requesting that she re-tweet the message to her followers.

This approach to finding research subjects can best be described as virtual snowball sampling, a form of chain referral in which participants are asked to recruit other participants (Brown, 2005). In this case individuals were asked to use their own social networks to link to the researcher's "seed." This approach was employed because of its usefulness in exploratory, qualitative and descriptive research. The approach may be beneficial for reaching difficult to reach populations, and it can minimize some barriers normally associated with online data collection (Baltar & Brunet, 2012). A total of 113 individuals participated in the survey, although the completion rate was 66 percent. All of the respondents were females. Ages ranged from 18 to over 55, with 35-44 being the average age range. Regarding race, 77% were white/non-Hispanic, 8% were African-American, 8% were Hispanic, and 7% were Others. On average, the highest level of education completed was a Bachelor's degree or higher, 54% were single, and 72% are working as paid employees. The primary residence of respondents includes: Alabama, Arizona, Califor-

nia, Colorado, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Maryland, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia and Washington, D.C.

The Pinterest board that was the subject of this study is from Lauren Santo Domingo, an editor with Vogue magazine and a "fashionista" with a high number of Pinterest followers. As of this writing there are approximately 170,000 follows of the LSD Pinterest page.
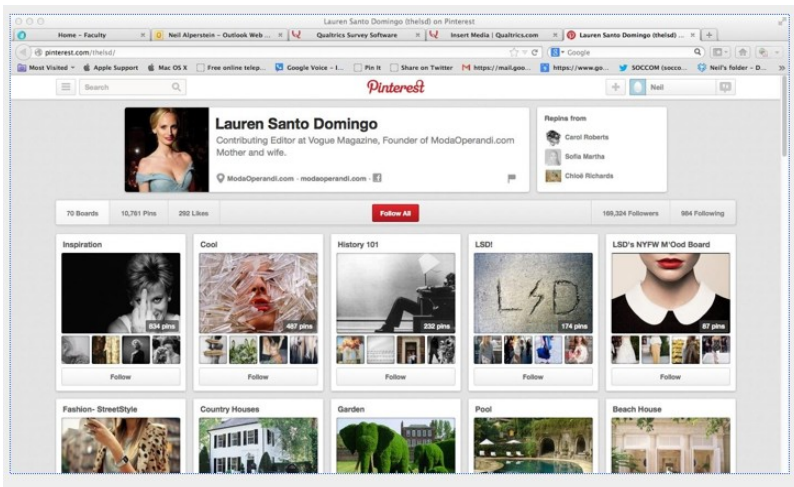
Additionally, three pinboards were included in the research in order to allow respondents some latitude in choosing what they wanted to evaluate.
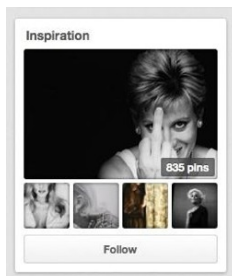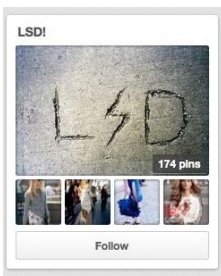
The study that follows is based on an analysis of open-ended questions from 52 respondents. Respondents were asked: "In your own words, please describe your initial impressions and emotional reactions to this Pinterest page." After selecting a particular pinboard to respond to, respondents were asked (after reviewing the board) to describe their emotional reactions to the images they saw on the board. Respondents were asked to describe what they thought Lauren Santo Domingo was trying to communicate through this Pinterest page, how they know she was trying to communicate whatever it is they described, and to describe how the respondent thinks others might interpret the pinboard. This is an exploratory study in which respondents' emotional reactions and social comparisons to the pinboards were categorized based on emergent themes. The analysis follows the approach taken by Elliot and Elliot (2005) in their study of idealized images in advertising, which is based on pattern coding techniques. Pattern coding was developed by Miles and Huberman, and the technique looks for recurring themes that are explanatory in nature, what researchers refer to as "repeatable regularities" (1994, p. 69). Analyzing emergent patterns allows the researcher to describe and interpret the phenomenon under study in order to provide greater understanding of some of the ways in which social comparison theory may be applied to reports of respondents' evaluations of Pinterest boards.

Findings
Four Emergent Themes

Four themes emerged from the analysis of the responses to the open-ended questions described above. The

themes include Admiration, Unattainable, Lateral, Disdain and a sub-theme of visual noise. Paradoxically, admiration and unattainable are examples of upward comparisons, and they reflect the double bind identified by Bordo (1994). It was posited that women utilize Pinterest in order to negotiate meanings and in the process they not only curate images perhaps on their own Pinterest pages, they curate themselves as they compare themselves to what they see. The history of Twentieth Century advertising has been built on the idea of emulation. The presentation of idealized images is based on the idea that individuals viewing them will want to be like what they see, especially if this can be accomplished through purchasing products. This is consistent with Festinger's original theory of social comparison, as the expectation is that comparison would lead to self-enhancement. As can be seen in the reactions to the LSD Pinterest page, there is much more going on than a linear route from comparison to self-enhancement.

Admiration

The category of admiration, within social comparison theory, suggests the direction of the comparison will be upward where one would expect emulation to take place. This category is complex as respondents might admire some aspect of the images they were looking at, but perhaps their evaluation of those images was not as straightforward as one might expect. For example, respondents made repeated references to images of independent looking women (something that is admirable), but their evaluation of those images referenced that these were "the woman behind the man." This was further exemplified by a respondent who looked at the images as expressions of

rebellion, but that rebellion—images of scantily clad women who are smoking cigarettes, but "leaning on a man"—in her mind placed the images within traditional standards of masculine power and female subordination. This paradox is aptly stated in the following: "The message seems to be—Fight the system, one cupcake at a time." This paradox was not lost on others who saw expressions of individuals in the pinboards, but because of the nature of the images as "trendy," some of the value associated with individualism was diminished. Others used words like "strong," "confident," "capable" and "beautiful" to describe the images. Respondents repeatedly made references to "breaking the rules" or being a rebel as a reflection of a youthful attitude. And the images, they said, were reflective of personal power. Speaking purely from an aesthetic perspective, one respondent mentioned, "Most of the images, especially the ones of houses and rooms, represent a very tasteful rich upper class aesthetic. They make me swoon. Oohhhh that pool looks FABULOUS." This response would be a reflection of the emulation one would expect through social comparison. Not that the respondent felt she needed to attain that level of material accomplishment, but she appreciated the possibility of its existence.

Respondents also mentioned that the images of independent women represented an "evolutionary" gender struggle: "so the evolution isn't just about glamour; it's about the evolution of the independent woman." And, one respondent stated that "These seem to me the role models I'd take after, more so than a lot of the ones out there today."

Unattainable

As respondents reflect on the images they viewed, many felt that what was being depicted was unattainable; they could not appreciate the images as mere fantasy or as wish fulfillment. Rather, respondents felt "bad" as the following illustrates:

> "I feel bad when I see how much other people are doing and feel like I'm not doing as much as I should with my life."

Or, another respondent felt that looking at the images provoked a negative emotional reaction:

> "It's sort of depressing, but mostly I just look at the pretty pictures, dismiss it as something unattainable and move on."

Yet other respondents referred to the images as "Totally unrealistic and unattainable," "overly pretty and clean/ sterile looking… Stepford wife-ish, idealistic and expensive," or made reference to "all the 'fab' rooms in 'fab' houses I can't afford and would feel uncomfortable in." The references to the material things that are presented plays against the individual's inability to obtain them; an expression of the paradox described by Bordo (1994) and in some sense a tease that may lead to depression, a concern expressed by others. The idealized images on the pinboard play against the respondent's self-image suggesting an incompatibility between the two, setting up an internalized tension that may be psychologically damaging to the individual. However, the tensions described above attributed to the contradictions present between the images and the individual are not the only response, as the lateral comparisons suggest there may also be strong identification with the idealized images.

Lateral Comparison

Lateral comparison refers to the reaction to images where there is identification, as if to say, "I am already like the individual to whom I'm comparing myself." One respondent, for example, says: "There's some overlap between her boards and mine, so I'd probably go through some of her boards to pin some images." In this sense perhaps there is some co-optation as the individual feels empowered to not only align herself with the images she sees, but to make them her own as she pins them to her board. And, it is important to point out that Pinterest is also a site that draws consumers to purchase products.

In an effort to monetize the social network, Pinterest in the past year launched what they refer to as "promoted pins," a space for advertisers to promote products. Etsy, a handcraft e-commerce site, is one of the active purveyors of goods on Pinterest. Other major brands like Gap, Lululemon, and Ziploc, among others use promoted pins. It may be the similarity between the respondent and their own interests in particular brands that may draw them to promoted pins. As one respondent says: "I was really drawn to the specific room's images. I am interested in interior design and love decorating, so it's nice to pull some ideas from these pins." Social sites, like Pinterest, have the ability to bring people together, an ideal that plays into the hands of advertisers; this is especially so when individuals express strong identification with the images they see. However, there is also the potential within the complex ways in which individuals come to social networks that can also drive them away.

Disdain

Disdain refers to the disassociation and perhaps dissatisfaction between the respondent and the images they are observing; it is a form of resistance. And, it would be too naive a view to consider that Pinterest users come to the social bookmarking site with the same motivations. For example, a pinboard may make references to race or class, perhaps unknowingly or unintentionally, that may cause users to express resistance to such pins. For example, one respondent rhetorically raised the question about class when she said, "Do these women LOOK like they shop at WalMart, drink Budweiser and get beaten down by life?" And, another respondent said the look the board was going for is "so wealthy, we don't need to talk about money anymore. It reminds me of the saying: if you have to ask how much something costs, you can't afford it and shouldn't be asking." This theme was particularly interesting, because of the repeated references to class and race. With regard to race, one respondent said:

> "This looks like a bunch of BS from a stereotypical, materialistic, privileged Caucasian-American woman, and that none of the images presented interested me at all."

And another said: "It's very typically white fashion magazine content. Nice, but not for me." In overall reaction to the LSD Pinterest page, one respondent said the "vast majority of the women shown are white," that the images were of women in stages of life that didn't correspond to this individual and therefore were difficult to relate to, and that the women depicted in the images were "very glamorous and made up, proving hard to relate to." Others commented on class issues, as in the following:

"Completely frivolous and only useful for extremely wealthy people. It doesn't represent me or my interests." And, several respondents mentioned being offended by some of the pins.

Visual Noise

The concept of visual noise has been applied to both the disruption caused by design issues and as a form of discontent expressed as a reduction in the use of technology or resistance to it content. Perhaps the disdain for the images and their interpretations are expressions of both of these conceptualizations of visual noise. In other words, it may be that the overwhelming stimulation of an image-dominant social media platform may relate to the individual's pushback or resistance to what they are experiencing. Several respondents raised the question relative to their own lives regarding, for example, the overwhelming number of images there are on a board, and they express, with disdain, how "this person" has so much time (implying they don't) to pin so many pictures. There is an expression of feeling overwhelmed, as there is "way too much content." And, the respondent expresses resistance when she declares: "I lack the patience to keep looking and leave." And, another respondent echoed, "Too many boards...I could get lost in Pinterestland for days." And, yet another said: "Overwhelming...the number of boards was stressful."

Such resistance may be a result of over-saturation of content and the visual overload or visual noise that I refer to as individuals develop their own social media practices for negotiating social media, like Pinterest, and at the same time overcoming disappointment and disillusion-

ment as they curate their own self as a reflection of the idealized images they see on Pinterest.

Discussion/Conclusion

This study began with the idea that due to the popularity of Pinterest among women that this social network is an ideal space in which to see how users compare themselves to the idealized images they see. This particular study utilized the Pinterest site of Lauren Santo Domingo, who is one of the most widely followed individuals on Pinterest. Respondents were asked to look at the LSD "live" Pinterest page and review the pinboards that are linked to the main page. They were asked to react emotionally—in an opened ended manner—to the boards, and they were asked to evaluate the pages comparing their own lives to that which is depicted on the pinboards.

The study utilized a snowballing approach by placing links to the survey within a blog post and a twitter feed. Perhaps because of the complex nature of the survey, and in that the demand on respondents' time, only half of the surveys started were completed. This exploratory study describes and explains the qualitative responses to the survey. Four broad themes emerged from the research indicating respondents compared themselves to the images as unattainable, with admiration, similarities between the pinner and the respondents, and downward comparison in which case the respondent looked at the pinboards with disdain.

Responses did not fit neatly into upward, downward and lateral comparisons – human beings are more complex than Festinger's theory of social comparison allows. Rather, individuals utilized those idealized images to

negotiate meanings and in the process to measure themselves against what they were viewing. The upward comparison, for example, included both having admiration for the pinner and perhaps the desire to emulate her. This was an imaginative process that involved wish fulfillment. However, upward comparison also included the inability to reach the desired status. This was described as a double bind in which the desirable is pitted against the desired. This may lead to a depressive and perhaps somewhat hopeless state.

Respondents also looked at the idealized images with disdain, and what makes this response so interesting, and perhaps unexpected, is that reactions were focused on issues related to class as well as race. The world of Lauren Santo Domingo as depicted on Pinterest is not an inclusive world; it is decidedly white, upper middle class, economically above average and caters to those whose tastes are commensurate with such status. For those respondents who look at the pinboards with disdain, they are also expressing a form of resistance. Ironically, Pinterest may become the site in which resistance takes on an ideological force beyond the traditional mainstream conversations about race and class. This finding is consistent with those who have looked at pushback, media refusal, or Internet resistance as these terms relate to identity and social class performance and social media usage (Foot, 2014; Morrison & Gomez, 2014; Portwood-Stacer, 2013). Understanding of this particular phenomenon has only recently come to light (Morrison & Gomez, 2014). And, the kind of response to visual noise expressed by respondents in the present study, should suggest it an issue worthy of further consid-

eration, as Pinterest may unwittingly offer a critique of the political economy.

This study demonstrates how individuals use the images on Pinterest to negotiate meanings that are personal, and it demonstrates the discursive context in which individuals dispute or find confirmation for their existing beliefs regarding class and race. The personal meanings they develop reinforce their own status but, at times, individuals reject the images before them. In the process of resisting and rejecting those images, they engage in a process of self-reflection, and thus, curate themselves. This study serves as a caveat for those who view the ways in which individuals utilize social networks as merely superficial or simply materialistic. As Pinterest users represent themselves in relation to the images they see, such interaction serves as a discursive context in which individuals not only engage in conversations about consumptive practices, but also are expressing an ideological critique of body image and self-esteem.

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