Dreaming out loud on Pinterest
New forms of indirect persuasion

Barbara J. Phillips
University of Saskatchewan, Canada
Jessica Miller
Southern Methodist University
Edward F. McQuarrie
Santa Clara University

Pinterest represents a new kind of social media that satisfies distinct purposes for female consumers, even as it opens up new opportunities for advertisers. We approach Pinterest as a web-enabled form of scrapbooking and collage, where novel forms of indirect persuasion take place. An analysis of 20 pinboards with 2,291 images showed that women use Pinterest to play with possible future selves and imagine alternative consumption trajectories. The key distinction relative to traditional scrapbooking is a focus on the future rather than the past. Relative to traditional collage, the ease with which large numbers of images can be pulled off the web facilitates taste discovery. Women gather images, particularly of branded commercial products, to help refine their taste and better understand which styles match their aesthetic preferences. Because Pinterest represents a kind of 'daydreaming out loud', advertisers who seek to promote via Pinterest must adapt existing social media techniques if they are to be successful, and focus on opportunities for indirect persuasion.

> Advertising doesn't mirror how people are acting,
> but how they are dreaming.
> (Jerry Goodis, quoted in Jhally 2012)

Introduction

As of 2013, online advertising revenues had reached a peak of almost $43 billion, surpassing both broadcast and cable television revenues for the first time (IAB 2014). Advertisers are interested in understanding how best to allocate their rapidly increasing expenditures online. However, achieving goals for consumer persuasion across new media can be difficult when different types of new media are springing up daily and the overall media landscape is in flux. This study examines one promising new media site – Pinterest – to provide knowledge of how consumers use it. With more insight into what consumers

actually do on Pinterest, advertisers can consider how best to incorporate Pinterest into their campaigns.

Pinterest.com is a social networking site where any web image or personal digital image can be posted ('pinned') to a digital scrapbook, where it can then be viewed by the public. Pinterest was one of the fastest-growing new media sites at the time of this research, with approximately 53 million unique visitors, second behind Facebook (Colao 2013). Because many of the pictures posted to Pinterest are of products and brands, Pinterest drives more traffic to product websites than Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn and YouTube combined (Hempel 2012). In addition, the pictures pinned to Pinterest have a long shelf life; half of product orders driven by Pinterest occur at least two months after the picture appears (Marketing Charts 2014). These promising statistics have prompted Pinterest to be embraced by brand advertisers (e.g. Whole Foods, Honda, Oscar de la Renta), online retailers (e.g. Zappos) and traditional media channels (e.g. *Better Homes and Gardens, Country Living, Elle Décor*) alike.

Although Pinterest is a social network, it differs from other social networks such as Facebook and Twitter on several key dimensions. First, Pinterest is primarily visual, as opposed to the text-based postings common on other social media. Pinterest has been cited as an example of the 'rise of the visual Web' (Shayton 2012), and advertisers have been urged to use Pinterest to build visual brand identity and achieve visual persuasion (Laird 2012).

Second, unlike other electronic forms of communication (Maclaran *et al.* 2004), early adopters of Pinterest were 68% female (Needleman & Tam 2012), described as the 'Midwestern scrapbooking set', who use Pinterest for craft, decorating and baking ideas (Hempel 2012). In fact, during its initial, rapid period of diffusion, Pinterest was sometimes described as 'digital crack for women' (Dvorak 2012). This remark highlights the addictive quality of using Pinterest, but also asserts that this intense engagement was particularly likely to be experienced by women. In fact, many male investors initially passed on Pinterest because they didn't understand what people (i.e. men) would do with it. Consequently, even as advertisers scramble to incorporate Pinterest into their persuasion strategies, it remains unclear how exactly they might best engage the predominantly female consumers of Pinterest, who are taking part in a predominantly visual exchange.

It is conceivable that persuasive tools common to other social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, may not be as effective in this particular social media environment. Our intuition is that effective promotion of Pinterest may require indirect strategies of persuasion (Kardes 1988, 1993), rather than the more direct frontal assault typical of some new media. The Pinterest user might have to be granted an active role: as with all kinds of indirect persuasion, self-persuasion by the consumer may be the best goal of the advertiser. In light of the above, our research question is straightforward: how do women collect and display pictures on Pinterest? What do they actually do on the site? The opportunity for advertisers requires understanding and then adapting to these consumer practices.

What gives this question importance is that no image encountered on the web has to be possessed by being placed in a personally owned virtual scrapbook; in most cases, that image will continue to exist without consumer action, often in multiple locations, so that

it can be bookmarked and viewed again at any time. One doesn't need a digital scrapbook of images to secure the possibility of viewing images at will; new images appear on the web every day and the supply of images not yet viewed is inexhaustible. The question becomes, 'What images do women choose to collect on Pinterest, and to what end?' By understanding how consumers are using Pinterest, we also can begin to understand the persuasive strategies that might be particularly suited to Pinterest, approached as a new media site of interest to advertisers.

In this article, we situate Pinterest as a continuation of the centuries-old womanly art of scrapbooking and as an adaptation of art collage by ordinary consumers. This vantage point allows us to explore how activities on Pinterest are the same as, or different from, what consumers could do with pictures before the advent of Web 2.0 technologies. The goal of the research is to provide insight for understanding how advertisers can use Pinterest in their visual persuasion strategies; thus it answers the call for more relevant academic research on social media (Choi 2011), while providing practical advice for advertisers looking to build their brands through Pinterest.

Pinterest as scrapbook

Prior to the web, paper scrapbooking was the dominant form of collection of imagery by women (Christensen 2011). A scrapbook is a 'blank book in which pictures, newspaper cuttings, and the like are pasted for preservation' (Christensen 2011, p. 176). The word was first used in the 1820s, when compiling a scrapbook became popular as a proper leisure hobby for women and girls (Secord 2006); this paper craft now accounts for more than $2 billion in consumer spending in the United States per year (Christensen 2011). The rise of scrapbooking mirrored the rise of personal photography (Wills 2010), as scrapbooks and family photo albums sat side by side in middle-class drawing rooms. Modern scrapbooks meld the two forms as the paper scrapbook design is used to present and frame personal photographs.

Paper scrapbooks have been conceptualised as tangible memory-keepers of life's events and activities (Katriel & Farrell 1991; Wills 2010). Although scrapbooks may chronicle important moments (such as graduation ceremonies), day-in-the-life scrapbooks are the most common (Wills 2010; Christenson 2011). These types of scrapbook are a chronological display of mundane tasks such as car-pooling and walking the dog. The physical materiality of scrapbooks is important because most domestic activities such as cleaning and caregiving are ephemeral; by taking slice-of-life photographs and crafting a paper page around them, women give significance to their daily lives (Christenson 2011).

From the beginning, commercially produced blank books and printed sheets of material suitable for cutting and pasting were made available by publishers, making scrapbooking a profitable, mass-marketed pastime. Typical scrapbooks often contain brands and ads, such as one woman's scrapbook from the 1920s with labels of chocolate bars and snacks pasted in it, captioned 'for my sweet tooth' (Helfand 2008). Scrapbook 'houses' were popular between 1875 and 1920; in these books, each page depicted a different room in the house with furnishings and accessories cut out from catalogues and advertisements

(Gordon 2006). Advertisers often facilitated their brands' inclusion into scrapbooks – for example, advertising trade cards flourished for a decade (1880–90) as salesmen distributed cards marked with colourful pictures to be pasted into books to promote brand recognition (Gruber Garvey 2006). In the present day, entertainment brands such as sports teams, cruise ships and Disney produce stickers, patterned paper and other ephemera for inclusion in scrapbooks.

In light of this history, Pinterest can be thought of as a social network enabling the creation of virtual scrapbooks. Once a consumer joins Pinterest, she can pin as many or as few pictures as she wishes on the board, and create as many boards as she likes. The boards can be given a title (e.g. 'Party Ideas') and each picture on the board can be captioned with a verbal label or description (e.g. 'Floral centrepiece'). The pictures on each board can come from (a) copies of other Pinterest users' images, called 'repins', (b) images taken from other websites, and (c) users' own personal digital images; regardless of source, these pictures often display products and brands.

Although Pinterest can be considered a new media site for the construction of electronic scrapbooks, such *virtual* scrapbooks may well differ in purpose from paper scrapbooks. As public artefacts stored on a social network and viewed by anonymous peers, pinboards may not be as focused on the private domestic sphere as paper scrapbooks. Constructing a pinboard may instead be more analogous to other forms of digital production and consumption – called 'prosumption' by Beer and Burrows (2010) – such as writing a blog or posting to a discussion forum. Digital prosumption has been reported to serve such purposes as sharing an identity (Schau & Gilly 2003; Hodkinson 2007; Kozinets *et al.* 2010), forming a community (Mathwick *et al.* 2007; Schau *et al.* 2009; Muntinga *et al.* 2011) or claiming status over others (Lampel & Bhalla 2007; McQuarrie *et al.* 2013). However, most work on digital prosumption has focused on verbal, text-based sites, which may not provide a good explanation for the purely visual content posted on Pinterest. Hence, prior work on these earlier forms of social media may not provide guidance to advertisers contemplating Pinterest as a media choice.
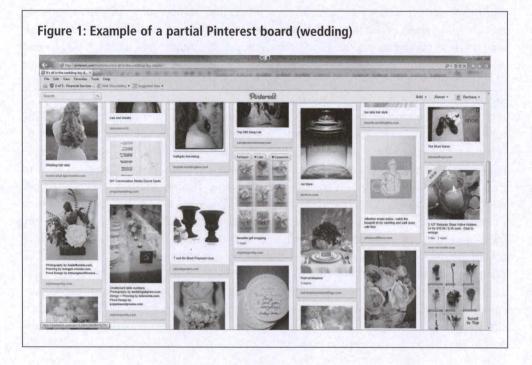
Pinterest as collage

Collage consists of purely visual content and includes all forms of composite art and processes of juxtaposition (Hoffman 1989). A key element of collage is intertextuality (Kuspit 1989), in which the juxtaposition of images from different contexts produces a commentary on those contexts (Kristeva 1980). Intertextuality in collage is manifest in the philosophy of mixing high art with 'the common stuff of daily life' (Rosenberg 1989, p. 60); this common stuff often includes brands and advertisements. For example, Seitz (1989) provides an example of intertextuality with the use of mirrors in collage, which can bring to mind barbershops, the story of Narcissus, beauty advertising, and the fairy-tale incantation 'Mirror, mirror, on the wall.'

There are clear parallels between paper scrapbooks and high-art collage, in the use of similar processes and materials, the inclusion of brands and advertisements, and the focus on meaning through intertextuality. A scrapbook, literally and visually, comprises other

texts, intermingled to express new meanings (Buckler 2006). Intertextuality is also a key feature of Pinterest. Each Pinterest board provides a kaleidoscope of images of different sizes, types and origins, jumbled together on one digital page, which may be many screens deep (Figure 1). If pictures are repinned from other users, the captions written by the original user also transfer to the new user, although these can be changed. Below each picture, Pinterest includes the original photo credit, which links to the originator website (e.g. bhg.com for *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine). Because of this automatic link, Pinterest pictures always intertextually reference the first pinner and the original source of the picture.

Unlike collage, Pinterest does not allow pinners to organise or control the juxtaposition of pictures on their boards, but instead places each picture by date of pin, with newer pictures at the top of the board. Hence, pinboards seem unlikely to mirror the specific aesthetic functions of high-art collage inasmuch as juxtapositions of images are not controlled by the pinner. However, Pinterest may reflect other kinds of aesthetic judgement, perhaps more appropriate to the needs of ordinary consumers. The time-structured nature of pinboards suggests they may be useful for studying changes in and the development of how a consumer approaches the product category being pictured.

In summary, prior to the advent of Pinterest, advertisers had few opportunities to exploit the essentially private practices of scrapbooking and collage, despite the high engagement of consumers. High degrees of engagement and intimacy generally provide opportunities to reach consumers when their defences against persuasion are relaxed; these situations also require advertisers to proceed indirectly, lest these defences be

Figure 1: Example of a partial Pinterest board (wedding)

triggered anew (Kardes 1988, 1993). Now that scrapbooking and collage occur virtually and in public on Pinterest, advertisers have what may be their first opportunity, since the demise of trade cards, to insert themselves into these hitherto private activities. The question is how best to do so.

We turn next to an empirical examination of Pinterest pinboards to better understand how women collect pictures on Pinterest. Because there are so many unknowns, this effort is necessarily exploratory and preliminary, aimed at giving advertisers some anchor points from which to proceed.

Method

We analysed the visual texts in 20 Pinterest pinboards that contained 2,291 separate images. We treat the pictures on each pin board as primary sources (Stern 1996), with a secondary examination of the captions and titles. This pictorial textual analysis differs from netnography in that it is not intended to be an ethnography of the pinners (Kozinets 2009). It is modelled instead on the analysis of historical archives, literary texts and aesthetic objects (e.g. Scott 1994; Schroeder 2002), and follows recommendations for the study of scrapbooks and other visual constructions (Katriel & Farrell 1991; Tucker *et al.* 2006; Gleeson 2011). The idea behind these recommendations is that the retention, placement and omission of certain images reveal a distinct view of the world that can be identified (Helfand 2008), and that a study of such images will illuminate what consumers are trying to accomplish.

Two of the authors independently analysed these pinboards for behaviours studied within the scrapbooking and collage literatures – that is, what did the users choose to include and value? What kinds of pictures were deemed aesthetically appealing? What was the role of brands on the boards? How were the images assembled together and organised over time? Around what themes did meanings cluster? What was the source of each picture? How were the pictures intertextually related, and to what? What role did identity or community play in this context?

Pinboards created by women were selected for inclusion in the study based on the topic of each pinboard. The topics were chosen to be associated both with women's consumption of products and with traditional media advertising to women (i.e. popular picture-based women's magazines). Previous research demonstrated that 40% of Pinterest users interacted with the category of 'home' (Caine 2012). Consequently, we selected the Pinterest category of 'home décor – kitchens' as our first category, which mirrors the focus of more traditional print media such as *Better Homes and Gardens*. Moving outside of home décor, we selected the next category of 'wedding' as another female theme, which is reflected in the popularity of traditional bridal magazines. The category 'kids' was selected as a nod to parenting magazines, and also to allow products, and the commercial aspects of Pinterest generally, to (possibly) take a backseat to personal relationships. Finally, the category of 'miscellaneous' (as a specific Pinterest classification) was included to allow new themes and ideas to emerge without the authors specifying the parameters of the category.
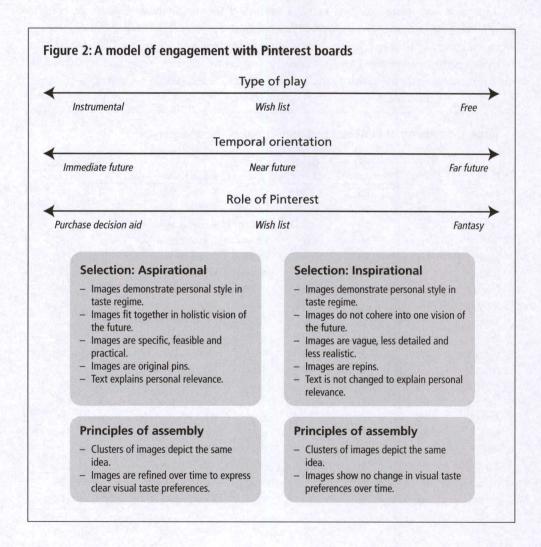
For tractability, we included boards that contained between 70 and 200 images. We determined in a pretest of pinboards (not included in the final study) that boards with only a few images (20 to 40) did not provide enough information for a meaningful visual analysis; boards with more than 250 images made it difficult to discern thematic patterns. One researcher randomly selected the first five boards that met our criteria in each of the four topic categories, and the second researcher analysed the same boards during the same week, as Pinterest boards can change daily. Data saturation (Corbin & Strauss 2007) occurred after analysing five boards in each category, and after analysing 20 boards in total. Each pinboard is described further in Table 1 (as it was at the time of analysis); pinner names have not been changed as the pinboards were open to the public for viewing. Other pinboards created by the same consumers were also examined to provide more information about that individual; for example, a board called 'Kindergarten Crafts' suggests that the pinner may be an elementary school teacher.

The pinboards were analysed using a grounded theory method (Corbin & Strauss 2007) where key findings are allowed to emerge from the data. That is, the authors had no a priori expectations or hypotheses about how consumers used Pinterest. Line-by-line (in this case, picture-by-picture) analysis and the constant comparison method were used to identify emergent themes, such as the key theme that Pinterest boards are future-oriented.

Table 1: Summary of Pinterest pinboards used in the analysis

Pinner	User picture?	User description?	Number of boards	Board category	Board name	Number of pins
Julie	Yes	Yes	84	Kitchen	Kitchen Ideas	112
Paula	No	Yes	20	Kitchen	Kitchen	107
Kelly	Yes	No	26	Kitchen	Home-Kitchen	72
Tori	Yes	Yes	86	Kitchen	Smitten Kitchen	93
Joyce	Yes	Yes	16	Kitchen	Dream Kitchen	114
Lindsey	Yes	No	9	Wedding	Wedding Ideas	108
Donna	No	No	12	Wedding	Wedding Ideas	158
Michelle	No	No	10	Wedding	Soon to be Mrs	203
Toria	Yes	No	8	Wedding	Future Wedding Ideas	170
Heather	Yes	No	19	Wedding	All I Need is a Ring	108
Samantha	Yes	No	18	Kids	Kids	140
Amanda	Yes	No	14	Kids	Stuff For My Kids	83
Jaime	No	No	40	Kids	Kiddos	96
b.b.	Yes	No	13	Kids	Children's Stuff I Can't Resist	140
Kathy	Yes	No	43	Kids	When We Have Kids	71
Kristy	Yes	No	40	Misc.	Misc.	84
Niki	Yes	Yes	30	Misc.	Misc. Misc. Misc.	74
Kat	Yes	No	10	Misc.	Misc. Misc. Misc.	128
Chaz	Yes	No	3	Misc.	Inspiration Board	89
Holly	Yes	No	24	Misc.	Art Art Art Art Art	141

The constant comparison method ensured consistency and allowed non-confirming cases to be identified; for example, the idea that pinners decide wedding details with friends through posting potential choices on Pinterest was not supported. Preliminary themes were discussed, tested, expanded and refined as the analysis progressed. Through this iterative process among the three researchers, provisional themes were transformed into the grounded theory model in Figure 2, based on the clarity with which the themes emerged and the weight of evidence supporting each theme.

The textual analysis was supported by wide reading in the trade and popular press on Pinterest. We also informally interviewed users of Pinterest personally known to us and joined Pinterest ourselves to facilitate observation. These activities provided a useful background for interpreting the results of the textual analysis of our primary data source, the 20 pinboards and the 2,291 images found there.

Figure 2: A model of engagement with Pinterest boards

Type of play

Instrumental — Wish list — Free

Temporal orientation

Immediate future — Near future — Far future

Role of Pinterest

Purchase decision aid — Wish list — Fantasy

Selection: Aspirational
- Images demonstrate personal style in taste regime.
- Images fit together in holistic vision of the future.
- Images are specific, feasible and practical.
- Images are original pins.
- Text explains personal relevance.

Selection: Inspirational
- Images demonstrate personal style in taste regime.
- Images do not cohere into one vision of the future.
- Images are vague, less detailed and less realistic.
- Images are repins.
- Text is not changed to explain personal relevance.

Principles of assembly
- Clusters of images depict the same idea.
- Images are refined over time to express clear visual taste preferences.

Principles of assembly
- Clusters of images depict the same idea.
- Images show no change in visual taste preferences over time.

Findings

Private pleasure on Pinterest

In contrast to other social networking sites, such as Facebook and Flickr, activity on Pinterest does not appear to fit well into the community-building or identity-sharing frameworks seen in scholarly work on digital prosumption. Most Pinterest pinners do not provide an introductory description of themselves on their main page, and those descriptions that do exist are short and vague, such as Niki's: 'Your life is what you make it. Make it good.' Most of the images on each pinboard have no comments at all attached to them by other users of Pinterest, even when other users repin those images. One of the biggest surprises was that none of the pictures in our sample of 2,291 was a personal digital photo – there were no pictures of a pinner's own children in the kids category, no pictures of a pinner's wedding dress or ring in the wedding category, and no pictures of a pinner's own kitchen remodel in the kitchen category. All of the pictures were sourced from other Pinterest pages or the web in general. In short, activity on Pinterest does not appear to be other-oriented: for the most part, users are not interacting with one another within Pinterest, but with themselves.

A key piece of evidence that Pinterest is not being used as an other-directed activity is the observation that pinners do not usually change the captions on the pictures they repin. That is, when pinners post other users' pictures to their own pinboards, the other users' captions transfer to the pinner's board and are left unaltered by the pinner. This lack of caption personalisation occurs even if the old captions are extremely specific and unsuitable for the new board. For example, Samantha repinned a picture of an elephant poster on her kids board with the caption, 'Definitely making this, but with birds for Clara's room.' However, the caption originated with the original pinner of the image, not Samantha – Samantha's daughter's name is Emma. Another example is Kathy's repin of a craft idea on her kids board that bears the caption, 'I'm making this for my in-laws with our boys'; however, Kathy does not have children. If these pictures were meant for sharing with others, it seems that pinners would indicate their meanings by customising the captions – elephants for Emma's room, not birds for Clara's. Although deemed a social medium in both the trade press and its own mission statement ('Our goal is to connect everyone in the world through the "things" they find interesting'), Pinterest turns out not to be very social.

Taste discovery

What, then, are pinners doing when they pin images to their pinboard on Pinterest? We find that the purpose of assembling images on a pinboard is to discover, develop and refine one's personal taste. By taste we mean aesthetic preference within a fashion context – what looks good and what does not, in a domain where multiple looks are on offer (McQuarrie *et al.* 2013). In turn, fashion is to be understood as pertaining not just to clothing, but to any consumption domain where multiple aesthetic options are both available and subject to change over time (Gronow 1997).

Given the wide variety of choices across many consumption categories, taste uncertainty becomes a fact of life in any consumer society. What do I like? Does this go with that? In this regard, the spread of the web has fundamentally changed the resources available to the ordinary consumer for coping with taste uncertainty. The key transformation is the costless abundance of imagery now available, with Pinterest playing a key role. It is pervasive taste uncertainty, combined with the cost-free abundance of easily acquired images on Pinterest, that makes *taste discovery* both possible and pleasurable for ordinary individuals.

On Pinterest we find consumers engaged in pleasurable acts of taste discovery; this taste discovery takes the form of alignment with a taste regime and then refinement in how that taste regime can be applied to concrete instances. The concept of taste regime is developed by Arsel and Bean (2013) in their study of the *Apartment Therapy* blog. The idea is that, although there are countless ways of styling a dwelling, consumers seek an overall style – a taste regime – from among a small number on offer in a given cultural context. An example would be the minimalist aesthetic, which abhors clutter and opulence in home décor. Once a consumer aligns with a taste regime (e.g. minimalism), she proceeds to develop her understanding of that taste regime as it might apply to her life (e.g. purchase of chair, coffee table and lamp).

Alignment with a taste regime helps in dealing with taste uncertainty. For example, once one commits to the minimalist aesthetic in home décor, there is never again a need to choose among antimacassars. But any taste regime can be interpreted in countless ways without deviating from that regime. Therefore, alignment with a taste regime is only a beginning as far as resolving taste uncertainty is concerned; the consumer must still discover how that regime is to be interpreted in her own individual case. And this is where the consumption of images on Pinterest comes into play. Specifically, pinners discover and develop their own taste by using Pinterest to assemble a consumption constellation of complementary products that appear to 'belong together because of their symbolic rather than functional complementarity' (Lowrey *et al.* 2001, p. 29). In terms of collage, it is the ease and rapidity with which diverse images can be juxtaposed that makes Pinterest so powerful as a means of discovering one's own aesthetic preferences.

For example, Lindsey's wedding board contains pictures that present her vision of a rustic, outdoor, country wedding. She includes pictures of mason jar candle holders and vases, burlap napkins and pillows, cameo invitations and cookies, all within a blue-and-white colour scheme. Thus, Lindsey claims the country taste regime to express her personal aesthetic as she compiles wedding images on Pinterest. Similarly, the pictures on Tori's kitchen board (Figure 3) express a shabby-chic taste regime, with soft colours, feminine details and vintage style. Notably, Tori includes on her kitchen pinboard a picture of a blonde model in a pink shirt holding a rabbit. This picture has nothing to do with kitchens, but perfectly matches the taste regime; thus, to Tori, it fits into her collage as part of the consumption constellation she is assembling there.

The term 'taste refinement' risks being misconstrued as some kind of labour, but this is not what occurs; rather, actively consuming images on Pinterest emerges as a form of play (Holbrook & Hirschman 1982). To come upon a new image that is to

Figure 3: Tori's kitchen board (partial) and with enlarged detail

one's taste can provide aesthetic delight. To be able to possess that image by pinning it to one's board can provide the same pleasure as the acquisition of a desired physical object (Campbell 1987). Taste refinement on Pinterest refers to the pursuit of pleasure, which is a matter of resolving uncertainty about what it is that one likes by playfully entertaining alternatives.

The ideas of taste discovery and the pleasures of taste play provide the motivation for the browsing of images on Pinterest, along with the collection of images for one's pinboard. This is why it is important for a consumer to acquire the images she likes, so that she can perhaps experience a new pleasure in the re-consumption of that image (Russell & Levy 2012). But these pleasures of discovery require a proliferation of images and nearly costless access to this abundance, and that is what Pinterest provides.

Play and temporal orientation

Taste discovery explains why consumers amass images on Pinterest. In turn, the temporal orientation of the pinner determines how this playful discovery proceeds. We found most of the pinboards examined to be future-oriented, with titles such as 'When We Have Kids', 'All I Need is a Ring' and 'Future Wedding Ideas'. This contrasts sharply with the temporal orientation of traditional paper scrapbooks, which provide tangible mementos of a concrete, realised past. These titles, along with the absence of personal digital photos and the failure to customise captions of photos pinned from others, indicate that Pinterest boards do not serve the same memory archive function as physical scrapbooks. While scrapbooks look to the past, pinboards look to the future.

The primary way women discover their taste on Pinterest is through *playing with alternative futures* – that is, Pinterest is a way to 'try on' possible selves. According to Markus and Nurius (1986, p. 954), possible selves are not the same as the ideal selves sometimes studied in persuasion: 'Instead, they represent specific, individually significant hopes, fears, and fantasies.' Possible selves are important to advertising research because they provide both clues to a consumer's future behaviour, as well as a context for her current view of self. And the nature of these selves is revealed by how the consumer selects and juxtaposes images in the ongoing collage that a pinboard represents.

White (1990, p. 184) suggests that the type of play that develops possible selves occurs through imagination: 'to imagine something is to think of it as possibly being so' (for a review of imagination in marketing, see Martin (2004)). Iser (1993) identifies two types of play: (a) free play is play without a purpose or motivation in mind, other than enjoyment and fun, and (b) instrumental play is more goal driven. These two types of play exist on a continuum and can be observed in the Pinterest boards in our sample. As depicted in Figure 2, the play continuum of each Pinterest board (from instrumental to free play) is driven by the temporal orientation of each board (from immediate future to near future to far future).

Although all the pictures on each board express personal taste, differences in selection and inclusion are aligned with temporal orientation. As Iser (1993, p. 6) states, 'selection reveals the intentionality of the text' and the inclusion of specific types of pictures reveals the role of Pinterest for these women (Figure 2). Some pinners are in the midst of kitchen renovations or wedding planning or raising children; these women's focus is on an immediate upcoming event and they use Pinterest as a *purchase decision aid*. Some pinners are thinking of moving to a new house, or have just got engaged, or are pregnant; these women's focus is on the near future and they use Pinterest as a *wish list*. Finally, some women are only dreaming of a new kitchen, husband or baby; these women's focus is on the far future and they use Pinterest for purposes of *fantasy*.

When a woman's focus is on the immediate or near future, we categorise the selections and inclusions on her pinboard as *aspirational*: a hope or ambition of achieving something. These immediate and near-future pinboards are characterised by more specific, detailed images that fit together like a puzzle to convey a coherent vision of the holistic taste regime being explored on that board by the consumer. The images depict ideas that

are feasible and practical, and more pictures come from sources external to Pinterest (e.g. blogs, websites, digital catalogues) than from Pinterest repins. Kelly's kitchen board is a good example of a purchase decision aid (Figure 4). Kelly is remodelling the kitchen in her current house and all of the pictures on her board convey a sleek, contemporary kitchen with white cabinets. She is the original pinner of almost all of her images (i.e. they are not repins), suggesting that she has sought far and wide for the exact pictures she wants to pin. Kelly includes many pictures of specific kitchen elements, such as countertops, cabinets, light fixtures and drawer pulls. She uses pictures that are feasible and conform to the actual layout of her kitchen, and pins practical solutions for storage and food preparation. In terms of the verbal captions for each picture, these are more often personalised and changed when a woman is closer to the immediate future end of the temporal orientation continuum. In this case, the captions appear to be meant as musings or notes to self, as when Kelly writes 'use a stainless steel mock island when we rip ours out during kitchen remodel'. Kelly uses Pinterest to discover her taste preferences in the course of developing a coherent vision for her about-to-be-realised new kitchen.

As the pinner looks further out into the near future, her board starts to become a *wish list* rather than a decision aid. The pictures are still specific and detailed, but they do not always cohere into a clear holistic taste regime. On Julie's kitchen board, most of her kitchen pictures are contemporary in style, but a few veer towards country style, with butcher block counters and farmhouse sinks; this suggests that she remains open to alternative paths along which her taste might yet develop. Many pictures illustrate a specific element (e.g. light fixtures) but some are just attractive kitchens. When this middle-distance temporal orientation is present, we find that fewer pictures have personalised captions, and more pictures are repinned from other Pinterest boards. Wish list consumers

Figure 4: Kelly's kitchen board (partial)

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are looking farther into the future, and thus have more time to discover their taste preferences in the course of exploring alternative taste regimes.

As the temporal orientation shifts from the near to the far future, the role of the Pinterest board shifts from wish list to *fantasy*, which can be defined as imagination unrestricted by reality. Selection and inclusion of texts is now based on *inspiration*: the process of being mentally stimulated to feel something, especially something creative. There is little sense of planning on these boards; rather, pinners are engaged in free play while dreaming about the future. Taste discovery is ongoing and exploration is wide ranging.

The pictures selected for these distant future boards do not fulfil a coherent aesthetic vision and are not chosen to be feasible or actionable. There are fewer pictures of fine detail, and almost no practical, solution-type pictures. For example, Toria's board presents a young woman's fantasy of a wedding, with a focus on the bride and her girlfriends. Most of the pictures are for dresses, dancing shoes, nail polish, hairstyles, jewellery and chocolates, with almost no pictures of the practical aspects of planning a wedding. The venues shown in the pictures are both inside and outside, rustic and sophisticated. No wedding is imminent but Toria has fun playing with possibilities. In the same fashion, b.b. focuses on pictures of glamorous (but impractical) frilly baby dresses, with the far-forward-looking caption: 'My child will look this fabulous.' In these boards, the role of Pinterest most closely resembles the free play of Iser (1993), as imagination fuels fantasies of a far future. Consumers could, of course, simply daydream in silence about these consumption constellations, as consumers did for generations prior to the advent of the web. Our suggestion is that the ability to make daydreams concrete, in the form of a collage of easily gathered images, enhances the rewards of daydreaming about consumption and stimulates further engagement with fantasies of consumption.

Taste refinement

Pinterest does not allow pinners to organise the pictures on their boards, but instead places each picture by date of pin, with newer pictures at the top of the board. An interesting result of this forced assembly process is that one can examine the development of the board over time. A finding that emerges for all Pinterest boards is that sets of pictures tend to cluster together; pinners imagine an object or idea and then place several similar images of it in a row on their boards. For example, Joyce has a cluster of images of different vintage coffee signs on her kitchen board, while Amanda has a cluster of images of baby footwear on her kids board. These clusters demonstrate that pinners go through phases where they will fixate on a certain idea, item or colour, and insert five or six different images of that object. Once the pinner is satisfied that she has captured her taste preference, whether for decorative owls or pendant light fixtures or wedding cakes, she moves on to the next consumption object, as the play of her imagination proceeds.

Principles of assembly seem to be influenced by the temporal orientation of the board and not just by aesthetic considerations of what looks good together. Aspirational boards – those that are created for the immediate or near future – show a progression over time

as pinners refine and clarify their taste preferences. Images near the start of the board may cohere less closely to a central taste regime; they may be less specific and practical, and resemble the type of pictures from far-future fantasy boards. However, over time as the board becomes populated with pictures, the images start to cohere into a holistic vision, and smaller details (e.g. invitations, table settings) are depicted and 'settled'. For example, Joyce's kitchen board starts with many pins of white cabinets. Later, she refines these choices by posting pictures of kitchen islands, noting: 'I like the contrast of the black island against the white cabinets.' She posts a picture of a kitchen with white cabinets and taupe walls with the caption 'maybe', but after a few more similar pins, her caption turns to 'Love the dark paint with white cabinets.' Joyce's first pins are images of entire kitchens, but over time she starts to pin specific elements, such as beadboard walls, light fixtures and dishes. Thus, Joyce's board exemplifies the refinement process of her taste preferences over time. In contrast, no progression of images is evident in far-future fantasy boards; the future possible self and its tastes are still open.

Intertextuality and brands

Pinterest boards are obviously intertextual, as each picture pinned to the boards in our study comes from an external source, such as websites, blogs or digital catalogues, either directly or as a repin from another Pinterest board. That is, none of the 2,291 pictures in our study was a personal picture. Pinterest automatically attaches the original photo credit and hyperlink to each image; in almost every case, this link leads back to a marketing source, such as a company website, media provider or retailer. However, pinners appear to be unconcerned with the commercial origins of their pictures, instead repurposing them into individual fantasies of their future possible selves. Comments added by pinners almost never mention the brand name, store location, price or availability of an item, in contrast to what McQuarrie *et al.* (2013) found to be the case in fashion clothing blogs. Nonetheless, every time a pinner adds a beautiful image to her pinboard, she tacitly endorses and promotes the brand that provided it.

Discussion

We undertook an exploration of Pinterest with the aim of understanding how women collect and display pictures there. The most important finding is that Pinterest facilitates consumer play and exploration through imagination. The ability to freely, cheaply and easily amass large collections of images enables these women to play with future selves and to imagine alternative consumption trajectories. The abundance of imagery on Pinterest and the ease of gathering images from diverse sources also enables these women to discover their taste – to develop and refine their vision of what looks good together in any given taste regime. A second finding of note is the role of Pinterest in giving pleasure. Campbell (1987, p. 89) provides a rich explanation of how daydreaming itself can provide pleasure to consumers: 'The essential activity of consumption thus is not the actual selection, purchase or use of products, but the imaginative pleasure-seeking to which the product

image lends itself.' Pleasure is not commonly studied in advertising research and is thus not well understood (Alba & Williams 2013). A third finding stems from the Pinterest engagement model in Figure 2, which positions the temporal orientation of the pinboard (present reality to near future to far future) as the driver of the type of play engaged in (instrumental to free play). In addition, the temporal orientation of the board dictates the systematic selection and inclusion of particular types of image and text, as well as the principles of assembly of those elements.

Pinterest emerges as a place for female consumers to dream out loud, and thereby gain a perspective on their private fantasies of consumption. Psychological research has shown that daydreaming is universal in all people and is widespread during daily life (Singer 2009). Although daydreams typically focus on social relationships (e.g. making a home, getting married), products and brands form the background of these stories (d'Astous & Deschenes 2005; Jenkins *et al*. 2011). Because products and brands star in these personal narratives, and because consumer daydreaming is newly charged by the advent of websites like Pinterest, advertisers have a new venue where they can promote their brands as part of a consumer's possible self.

We situate Pinterest as a place that supercharges this common daydreaming experience, a site where women can collect digital images of advertisers' brands to provide themselves with both pleasure and diversion. Campbell (1987) notes that consumption daydreams enable experimentation through the imagination – to explore new tastes before risking doing so in reality. As a site for imaginative play, Pinterest allows women to 'try on' visual images to play with different possible future selves. An advantage of dreaming out loud on Pinterest is that the dreams of other Pinterest members provide a curated stream of images that can leverage one's own efforts. Pinterest thus provides pleasure while facilitating consumer fantasy.

Advertisers can observe these fantasies both to understand in more depth their target audience, and to craft the kinds of appeals best suited to tap in to the fantasies that predominate among this audience. Note that this formulation puts the advertiser into a responsive or follower position, relative to consumers, as is typically the case with indirect persuasion strategies (Kardes 1988, 1993). Consumers on Pinterest are actively incorporating brands into their daydreams and selecting brands that appear to advance their evolving taste regimes. It behoves advertisers to study what might be thought of as their brand's positioning in the real world, to better adjust the brand's desired position and to more effectively exploit emerging positioning opportunities, as glimpsed from studying consumer pinboards.

Limitations

We studied Pinterest early in its evolution, and it is possible that later adopters of the site will differ significantly from the early adopters studied here, based on how the site changes in structure over time. We likewise studied only women's pinboards and only pinboards within a few product domains. Whether less stereotypically female board categories, or male Pinterest boards, would reveal similar dynamics of fantasy and taste cannot be

known, absent further research. Likewise, a study that focuses on the passive browsing of images on Pinterest might reveal different aspects of Pinterest usage, as previous social network studies have demonstrated that 'creating' participants (like those in the current study) differ from 'contributing' and 'consuming' participants (Muntinga *et al.* 2011).

Our study relied on a visual analysis of the images contained on Pinterest pinboards themselves; formal depth interviews with pinners were not conducted. One direction for future research could build on the close similarity between the construction of a pinboard on Pinterest and the first step in the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (Zaltman & Coulter 1995), used by advertising researchers to understand brand meanings. It could be argued that millions of ZMET procedures are now under way 'in the wild' as consumers construct future-oriented virtual scrapbooks on Pinterest. The diffusion of Pinterest raises the possibility of sampling established pinboards and then interviewing the consumers responsible for them. This may yield better insight than the current practice of recruiting naive consumers first, and having them engage in the possibly unfamiliar activity of locating and assembling evocative pictures. Pinners on Pinterest have already completed this first step in the ZMET and it may be advantageous to interview them.

An intriguing managerial question is whether the interview portion of the ZMET technique is still necessary, under circumstances where either a scholar or an advertising manager could sample thousands of pinboards on a topic, rather than the dozen or two collages created in a typical ZMET study. In the spirit of Big Data, might it be possible to learn enough from the comparison of thousands of consumer pinboard-collages to dispense with the expensive and time-consuming step of interviewing a small number of individuals? Or might it be a matter of learning different things, through mass pinboard comparisons, than can be learned from interviewing a few consumers? Either way, to the extent that consumers' image assembly can be revelatory of how they relate to product categories and brands, then much more of this image assembly is ongoing, public and available on Pinterest for study than ever before. Future Pinterest board research – with and without consumer interviews – may establish the value of interviews separately from the value of visual analysis.

Future research

Advertising scholars have called for more research into the theoretical foundations of social media and advertising persuasion (Choi 2011). While definitional issues (e.g. Varadarajan & Yadav 2009; Hill & Moran 2011) and word-of-mouth influence (e.g. Vilpponen *et al.* 2006; Chatterjee 2011) have been the most studied aspects of new media, many other issues remain. Three key questions (Hill & Moran 2011) are: (a) how do consumers understand and use specific social media, i.e. how internally diverse are these new avenues for reaching consumers; (b) to what extent does each particular social media environment influence consumer behaviour in a distinct way; and (c) net of these first two, how do advertising strategies have to be adapted to maximise their effectiveness in each context? The current study has begun to answer these questions for Pinterest; further research should explore these topics for other types of new media.

For example, Instagram is another fast-growing social network with a visual focus; 150 million users share 40 million pictures per day on Instagram (Simply Measured 2013). However, in contrast to what we found on Pinterest, the majority of these pictures are personal photographs, many of which have been filtered or augmented in some way. Consequently, the reasons consumers display pictures on Instagram may have more to do with past-oriented sharing of memories, or present-oriented displays of creativity, than the future-oriented day-dreaming of Pinterest users. It may be more difficult for advertisers to insert themselves into an Instagram feed, in contrast to Pinterest where, of their own volition, consumers have already incorporated the brand. Similarly, consumers who post Tumblr pictures to illustrate their narratives may share the same motivation as bloggers who wish to build a community of likeminded others. If so, more direct methods of persuasion may be effective in Tumblr, parallel to those used to stimulate blogger word of mouth (Kozinets *et al.* 2010). Future research that situates each type of new media within its particular consumer behaviour context can assist in identifying the types of persuasive message that will be most successful in that environment.

Managerial implications

The findings of this study provide some relevant managerial implications for brands that are considering Pinterest as an advertising medium. Because Pinterest makes the commercial source of each image overt, an obvious first step is for brands to make pinning their pictures to Pinterest as easy as possible, with the use of a 'pin it' button. This will allow promotional pictures to be selected for inclusion in personal pinboards, and thus potentially repinned over and over as other Pinterest users copy the image for their own use. Given the live link that accompanies the image whenever it is pinned on Pinterest, one way to approach Pinterest is as an advertising medium that propagates brand images without charge. Advertisers could go further and begin to create large numbers of beautiful and interesting brand pictures, in a quest to produce at least some that will go viral on Pinterest. This first adaptation to Pinterest parallels the creation of trade cards for inclusion in paper scrapbooks more than a century ago (Gruber Garvey 2006).

Pinterest also provides a treasure-trove of information on how consumers are dreaming, and how a specific product or brand may relate to those dreams. Based on the personal aesthetic styles of the boards, marketers can examine the taste regimes associated with their brands to determine if these are broad or narrow, optimal or undesired. Based on the refinement of the visual style of each board over time, marketers can gain insight into which elements of their brands' visual image remain part of the aesthetic vision of the pinner's board, and which pieces fall away. Pinterest thus provides new opportunities for segmenting customers according to taste regime (Arsel & Bean 2013), identifying targets that are predisposed to the brand's taste level or deciding among potential positions for the brand. Understanding a brand's visual identity through a Pinterest analysis will require a different set of skills from advertisers than those needed to tabulate survey responses. The imperative will be to find and train people who can grasp where the brand fits in to an emerging taste regime, and which taste regimes present opportunities for the brand.

Visual intelligence will grow in importance, relative to interviewing skill or statistical expertise – the traditional skill sets of the advertising researcher.

To give a concrete example of the possible managerial implications of our findings, we examined the Pinterest promotion conducted by IKEA in 2012. IKEA ran a contest where Pinterest users could pin their favourite room (i.e. page from the IKEA digital catalogue) on their Pinterest boards and win IKEA gift cards. In examining the results of this contest, we found that many Pinterest users created specific boards called 'Ikea contest' and pinned many pictures from the IKEA catalogue on to these boards, to increase their chances of winning a prize (Figure 5). But these boards were special-purpose creations that subsequently fell dormant. Thus, although IKEA received many pins, the company failed to connect its products with consumers' possible selves or plans for the future; it did not get included in these pinners' real, ongoing pinboards.

This lack of success came about despite the fact that, unlike most retailers, IKEA was specifically mentioned on several of our kids boards because it manufactures a rack that is considered by many mothers to offer a unique way to store children's books. We attribute IKEA's difficulty to a failure to understand the specificity of Pinterest among social media, and how it differs from blogs. That is, IKEA's contest approach conformed to recommended practice in managed word of mouth, based on research on blogs (e.g. Kozinets *et al.* 2010): that brands should attempt to seed social media with specific brand images through the use of free goods and other incentives, in order to drive word of mouth. But pinboards on Pinterest hold private fantasies and personal dreams; pinboards are not like blogs, which are deliberate efforts to go public and win an audience (McQuarrie *et al.* 2013). Advertisers' promotional strategies must evolve accordingly. What works for blogs won't necessarily work on Pinterest.

Brands might achieve more success on Pinterest by promoting small, imaginative ideas (favours for weddings, etc.) that become incorporated into women's individual fantasies, rather than by staging traditional large-scale contests with short-lived results. The goal would be to set up a circuit in which a brand monitors which of its plethora of images get taken up on pinboards, alters its image production to adapt, and monitors the success of

Figure 5: Example of boards created in response to IKEA contest

that adaptation. The goal would be the continual seeding of dreams, as opposed to their occasional force-feeding.

In conclusion, theories of both scrapbooking and collage provide a helpful perspective on what female consumers are doing when they pin pictures on Pinterest boards. The key to unlocking the advertising potential of Pinterest is to view it as a venue for a consumer's individual imagination, her dreams, aspirations and inspirations, as she plays with the future and discovers her taste. Pinterest offers a visual snapshot of how women are dreaming and how, through the collection of digital images, women choose and affiliate with products and brands that may find a place within their immediate, near and far-off futures. Thus, in a world saturated with social networks that allow the building of community and the rapid public dissemination of information, Pinterest emerges as a unique site where women can dream out loud.

Acknowledgement

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About the author

Barbara J. Phillips is Rawlco Scholar in Advertising and Professor of Marketing at the Edwards School of Business at the University of Saskatchewan. Her research program focuses on visual images in advertising and their influence on consumer response.

Jessica Miller is a graduate student at the Temerlin Advertising Institute at Southern Methodist University. Her research interests include narrative transportation and digital media.

Edward F. McQuarrie is Professor of Marketing at the Leavy School of Business at Santa Clara University. His research examines consumer behavior online with a view to the interplay of taste judgments, aesthetic preferences and social position.

Address correspondence to: Barbara J. Phillips, Rawlco Scholar in Advertising and Professor of Marketing, Edwards School of Business, University of Saskatchewan, 25 Campus Drive, Saskatoon, SK, Canada, S7N 5A7.

Email: bphillips@edwards.usask.ca