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Sharing the Pain in Social Media: A Content Analysis of #thinspiration Images on Instagram

Agustina Amon
East Tennessee State University

Sharing the Pain in Social Media: A Content Analysis of #thinspiration Images on Instagram

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Agustina Amon

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Dr. Susan E. Waters, Committee Chair

Dr. Robert Andrew Dunn

Dr. Melanie B. Richards

ABSTRACT

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#Thinspiration is an online trend that depicts thin-ideal media content specifically found on the social medium Instagram. The images found under the #thinspiration intend to inspire weight loss while encouraging and/or glorifying dangerous behaviors that are usually attributed to eating disorders including anorexia nervosa (AN), bulimia nervosa (BN) and eating disorder not otherwise specified (EDNOS). This study provides a content analysis of thinspiration imagery on the popular social networking site Instagram. A set of 300 randomly selected images was coded. Images tended to objectify women and sexualize them with a focus on bony and extremely thin women. Results seemed to point to harmful effects and users is the #thinspiration community view and contribute sexually suggestive content that objectifies females. Please be cautious when reading this paper as it includes media that could possibly be a trigger to those dealing with body image or eating disorders.

DEDICATION

To all the girls and women who struggle with body image and/or eating disorders and have found in social media an outlet to share their pain.

This study is dedicated to my parents Marcela and Fernando who have always supported and believed in me. Their sacrifice and dedication has opened the doors for me to study abroad and have the opportunity to conduct this research. I would also like to thank my siblings Fernando, Juan, and Valentina and my best friend Sofía for encouraging me day after day and for believing in me even on my worst days.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites like Instagram attract 500 million users on a daily basis (Aslam, 2018). A small body of research has indicated an association between social networking sites and the internalization of body dissatisfaction and the thin-ideal after young women were exposed to thin-ideal media content (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015). This chapter will discuss how women was portrayed in the media in the past and how it is being portrayed now in social networking sites. This thesis is an overview of young women who post pictures on Instagram under the hashtag thinspiration.

In the past, women have been exposed to thin-ideal media content on traditional media such as magazines or television shows. However, social networking sites differ from traditional media as this time, young women are the ones that generate the content and decide when and for how long they want to be exposed to it (Holland & Tiggemann, 2017). This action is what makes all the difference, as Instagram users are the ones constantly generating and consuming content. Different online communities are persistently emerging from social media websites allowing people to network with others by creating, posting, sharing, and exchanging all types of information and ideas (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011).

Social Networking Sites

What is unique about social networking sites and separates them from traditional media is that a social media platform like Instagram has interactive features that allow users to interact with each other in real time. These interactive features combined with not only young women's heavy online presence but also their reliance on social media, and could be a reason of their body dissatisfaction and direct proof of how powerful and influential social media really is (Perloff,

2014). To date, more than 40 billion pictures have been posted on Instagram (Aslam, 2018), and different online communities have been created. Among those are the ones that encourage thin-ideal media content and may produce harmful effects (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008) in a community of like-minded users (Amichai-Hamburger, 2007).

This thesis is an overview of young women who post pictures on Instagram under the hashtag thinspiration. Instagram is a social networking site mainly known by the posting and sharing of pictures that has been growing in popularity since it was first founded in 2010 and later bought by Facebook in 2012 (Aslam, 2018). The purpose of this study is to review past research and further the debate on how young women are using Instagram and #thinspiration to encourage pro eating disorder behavior through explicit images. This study will present findings from the content analysis of thinspiration imagery on the popular social networking site Instagram. A set of 300 randomly selected images was coded in seven different categories to examine the intentions behind the pictures posted under this hashtag.

#Thinspiration consists of pictures and text that are created to motivate weight loss and a lifestyle ruled by an eating disorder (Holland & Tiggemann, 2017). This dangerous online trend depicts women posing in a sexually or demure manner for a camera with the goal of inspiring others to achieve body perfection and make a cult of the ideal body.

According to Fardouly and Vartanian (2015), the use of social media is significant among young women as well as body dissatisfaction, as those who spend more time browsing through Instagram tend to compare themselves to others and be more aware of their flaws than those who do not. This shows how "image-based social media platforms like Instagram may be especially influential" (Holland & Tiggemann, 2017, p. 76). A search on October 24, 2017, of #thinspiration on Instagram revealed over 48 thousand pictures. This total is without counting all

the non-standard lexical variations such as #thinspo, #thinspi, #thinspire, #thinspiraton and #thinspiring among others. Although there are some aspects of #thinspiration that are not alarming, such as pictures of young women that encourage others to live a healthier lifestyle and share healthy recipes and snacks after a workout, #thinspiration mainly includes guilt-inducing messages concerning weight and other evidence of disordered eating (Boepple & Thompson, 2016).

To date no other study has explored women who post images with the #thinspiration on Instagram. Academics and professionals in the medical field are mentioning that pro-eating disorders content in social media platforms are prolific despite efforts of these networking sites to control them. Taking this into account, and given the rising popularity of #thinspiration content, this is a contemporary issue that needs to be openly discussed and further research should be conducted.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study builds on #thinspiration content posted on Instagram, one of the most popular

social media platforms used by young women all around the world. Its purpose is to determine if

content posted with this hashtag could possibly be a negative influence on young women.

Social Media Landscape

Social media is fundamentally about connecting people and its use has been steadily

growing around the globe. When people interact with others online their behaviors may not be

the same as if they were interacting face-to-face (Bryant & Oliver, 2009).

With the creation of the Internet, millions of lives have been transformed. The way we

communicate with each other has suffered an alteration as well. How we communicate our

feelings, emotions and thoughts does not have to be said with words, it can be simply expressed

by posting a picture. Some people may argue that social media has caused people to struggle in

social settings; others may have found an outlet to share their life, their happiness as well as their

struggles and pain. Some may view it, as hiding behind a screen while others may believe that

new and innovative ways of communicating and forming relationships have been born.

Social networking sites allow users to connect by posting pictures and by also adding

hashtags below. These hashtags can become a powerful tool if used correctly. In fact, they can

allow users to connect with others that share similar points of view allowing people to become

part of an online community. Instagram communities form when a particular hashtag is created

and people start using it with their pictures.

Social media is essentially about connecting with others, however it can also be seen as a

"pervasive force in shaping physical appearance ideals while negatively impacting females

bodies" (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004, p. 7), it can rapidly become a battleground for self-objectification.

Instagram

Instagram, a social media platform founded in 2010, is a community of more than 800 million people (Aslam, 2018) with more than 40 billion pictures shared to date (Aslam, 2018). Instagram is a social networking site that allows users to share pictures and videos in a contemporary and innovative way (Abbott, Donaghey, Hare & Hopkins, 2013). These self-generated pictures and videos can be shared either privately or publicly. Previous research done on Facebook, suggested that photo-sharing sites are specially related to body image issues (Holland & Tiggemann, 2017). Instagram is first and foremost a visual platform. According to Abbott et al. (2013), "visual images retain more impact and are far more engaging that text alone" (p. 3).

Human beings would rather get information and interpret it through sight and Instagram is a great example of the importance of visual content to communicate with others (DeMers, 2017) content is powerful, and there is science behind the reason why images are more powerful than text. Ninety percent of all the information that comes to a person's brain is visual and that is because the human brain is designed to recognize visual content faster than content with text ("The Power of Visual," 2017). Instagram's success is a consequence of the potential behind visual content, the brain takes 0.25 seconds to process visual information and the average person's attention span is now eight seconds according to the National Center for Biotechnology Information ("The Power of Visual," 2017).

A particular characteristic of Instagram is that unlike with traditional media, anyone with an Instagram account is at the same time creating and consuming content (Holland &

Tiggemann, 2017). Besides, the platform encourages its users to assign hashtags to images which allows users to engage with others that share same experiences or feelings and it allows them to expand their reach (jade, 2017). Hashtags are effective tools to help users connect in the moment and be discovered and increase engagement. By creating specific hashtags users can begin to create Instagram communities, as these hashtags are always public. By including a hashtag, users have the option to attribute opinions and emotions in order to connect with others that are facing similar situations or share same interests (Abbott et al., 2013).

This study builds on images posted under the #thinspiration on Instagram and the impact they may have on its viewers. When analyzing Facebook, Meier and Gray (2014) resolved that "the amount of time spent engaging in Facebook's photo-activity was related to body image concerns" (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015, p. 61) and not the total time spent on the website.

Unlike traditional media, social media allows users to create their own profile and post whatever they decide by allowing them to easily interact with others, no matter if they are followers or not (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016). Instagram, a popular social media website, has become a platform in which mostly women share and become advocates for disorderly eating, weight loss and body dissatisfaction under content expressly labeled as thinspiration (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015). Social media's popularity has encouraged women to worry about their appearance and be more appealing to their audience. Everyday young women are predominant in #thinspiration and have transcended online as relatable personas (Cooper, 2004) as opposed to famous people.

Over the past few years, more and more companies have joined social networking and people have become overwhelmed with the content. This in turn has led to increased competition to gain the user's attention. People are trying to find new ways to filter the feed and receive only

the content and information they truly want. For marketers, this means that they have to be more strategic about creating interesting content that people really want, otherwise they will not be noticed (Neher, 2013).

Beauty Standards in Social Media

The way media portrays women creates a faulty picture on how a woman should look like in order to be accepted by society. In fact, women who are displayed in the media are often 15% below their average weight (Hawkins, Richards, Granley, & Stein, 2010). Women are faced on a daily basis with a body ideal that is almost impossible for the majority of people to achieve in a healthy and realistic way (Cramblitt & Pritchard, 2013). Body dissatisfaction, however, cannot be attributed solely to the media. Magazines or Instagram cannot be blamed in the totality for the outburst of body dissatisfaction among young women. Research suggests that body dissatisfaction reveals itself "when media ideals are internalized as personal goals and those goals are not met" (Cramblitt & Pritchard, 2013, p. 442)

The beauty concept has been planted in women's minds by objectification of the female and has been cultivated into self-objectification. Unlike women viewing themselves as an object that has both good and bad sides, they are choosing to portray their image as an object for the viewer's pleasure or discomfort. They intentionally or unintentionally decide what they want to provoke and it depends on who sees the image, as they will be the ones in charge of determining if the picture makes them feel pleasure or discomfort.

Effects of Media on Body Image and Thin-Ideal Internalization

It is not a novelty that modern media influences the way people think of others and themselves. Extended research has been conducted over the years on how the media particularly influences young women on their body shape and weight (Levine & Harrison, 2004). It is also

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without doubt that mass media platforms like Instagram somehow mirror and "contribute to body dissatisfaction, unhealthy eating and weight management, and disordered eating in females and males who are vulnerable to these influences" (Levine & Harrison, 2004, p. 695). Everyday people are exposed to and engage with a broad selection of media that praises exceedingly lean bodies.

Multiple studies support the idea that mass media have the power to promote worldwide and significant internalization of the thin body ideal. Body image, according to Borzekowski and Bayer (2005), closely relates to low self-esteem and self-concept and is defined as "the internal representation of one's own outer appearance which reflects physical and perceptual dimensions" (Borzekowski & Bayer, 2005, p. 290). Having poor body image is particularly harmful to young women who are constantly exposed to provocative content. Those who go to the extent of comparing themselves with the photoshopped images of models they see on magazines or social media are exposing themselves to an unrealistic thin-ideal. When women become obsessed with achieving the perfect body after comparing themselves to models, this can lead to unhealthy behaviors and body dissatisfaction (Cramblitt & Pritchard, 2013).

Teenage girls who read women's magazines regularly as found in Field et al.'s (1999) study, are more likely to report being influenced to consider striving for the perfect body and to be disappointed with their own bodies, leading them to look for different diets and trying anything that will make them lose weight. According to Jones, Vigfusdottir, and Lee (2004), girls who are exposed to media-fueled slender beauty ideals, are more prone to be dissatisfied with their own bodies. This also relates with self-objectification and is both a direct and indirect factor on young women's stance on body image, eating behavior and weight management (Levine & Smolak, 2006).

Previous research on the effects on media and obesity makes it almost impossible to deny a link between media and disordered eating and body dissatisfaction give me some citations here that show the link. The effects of media on negative body image will be discussed next.

The Female Body Ideal in the Media

Society is overwhelmed with media messages from the moment they turn on their phones, to the moment they step outside their house or log into their Instagram account or any other photo-sharing social media platform. The media is constantly saturating society with messages about physical appearance and the significance it has on people's lives, for example, the way they view gender roles or perceive as happiness (Bryant & Oliver, 2009). This is a reason why it is possible to consider that contemporary media, which is extremely popular among young women, is somehow to blame for body dissatisfaction and eating disorder behaviors (Bryant & Oliver, 2009). In fact, researchers Stice and Shaw (2002) concluded that "body dissatisfaction was the key mediator through which females go on to develop eating pathology (Stratton, Donovan, Bramwell, & Loxton, 2015, p. 72). Young women are a demographic for which body dissatisfaction has the potential of becoming a problem (Bryant & Oliver, 2009). Media content does not always send positivity; in fact, plenty of negative and damaging messages are being sent about the ideal body types, food among others (Bordo, 1993). Greenberg, Eastin, Hofschire, Lachlan and Brownell (2003) studied "the body sizes of characters in primetime fictional programs and found out that "about 5% of U.S women are underweight and that over 30% of female television characters were underweight" (Greenberg et al., 2003, p. 1343).

The ideal female bodies on mass media platforms "proclaim the glory of thinness and leanness" (Bryant & Oliver, 2009, p. 494). They show these types of women as desirable and

depict fatness as unpleasant or worse, unbearable and the male character's punch line. Nobody wants to be criticized for his or her image nor made fun of. Avoiding this at all costs or trying to stop it could be one of the reasons of why young women are developing disordered eating behaviors (i.e., DEB).

Body Image and Disordered Eating Behavior

Body image. Young women are subjected to receiving negative comments about their body from several different sources. These include friends, family, and peers due to their position as formative influences (Stratton et al., 2015). However, mass media plays an important role in the development of body image dissatisfaction and disordered eating. Mass media is vital because its purpose is to communicate and transfer sociocultural messages to the masses regarding the thin ideal and unreachable image standards (Grabe et al., 2008). A woman may be impacted by the media and believe the messages that she should look a certain way in order to be liked and accepted by society, exhibiting a lack of self-compassion and optimism (Andrew, Tiggemann & Clark, 2015).

According to the American Psychological Association (2018), the American society is one that keeps on glorifying thinness even though Americans are becoming heavier than ever before; in fact, more than one-third (36.5%) of U.S. adults are obese (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017).

Eating Disorders. Eating disorders "are a group of psychiatric disorders" (Pater, Haimson, Andalibi & Mynatt, 2016, p. 1186) where an individual becomes fixated with their weight, how many calories they consume and their body image (Pater et al., 2016). Social media plays a key role when discussing eating disorders, which is basically the term for an unhealthy

relationship with food and it reveals in numerous different behaviors depending on the person (Pater et al., 2016).

Eating disorders are "not a new phenomenon" (Pater et al., 2016, p. 1185) and are now medical illnesses that can be treated. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (2007), eating disorders principally affect girls and women. Their most popular types of eating disorders are anorexia nervosa (AN) and bulimia nervosa (BN) and are the extremes of what is known as disordered eating behavior (DEB) (Levine & Harrison, 2004). Disordered eating behavior encloses changeable combinations and severity of negative body image, binge eating, and restrictive dieting, among others (Levine & Smolak, 2006). Between 10 million and 20 million Americans "suffer from a clinically significant eating disorder" (Pater et al., 2016, p. 1185). Statistics are scary, a 15-24 year old woman that suffers from anorexia "is 12 times more likely to die" (Pater et al., 2016, p. 1185) than one without the illness.

There is such a broad range of DEB that its spectrum can have crippling, physical and emotional effects as it is often followed by social anxiety, depression and emotional instability (Levine & Harrison, 2004). This is one of the reasons why people who suffer from these disorders find it extremely hard to have a stable life and struggle both at work and school (Thompson, 2004). This produces frustration as "all types of eating disorders can become debilitating, chronic, and isolating" (Levine & Harrison, 2004, p. 697).

Young women who suffer from disordered eating behaviors may not be only fighting against the disease but against something that could become even more detrimental to their health: isolation (Carey, 2015). Those that suffer from marginalized illnesses, like eating disorders, have found in social media an outlet to share their pain (Pater et al., 2016). This maybe

one of the reasons why in 2001 different news outlets begun to report about an increasing online presence of people who suffer from anorexia and have formed marginalized online communities (Pater et al., 2016).

As a consequence of easy access to new media platforms, individuals who suffered from ED did not have to meet up at a hospital at a designated time and day but instead established thriving pro-ED communities online (Pater et al., 2016). Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa could be considered the most popular eating disorders, however, the most common is "eating disorders not otherwise specified," also known as EDNOS (Pater et al., 2016). Nonetheless, some may consider that it is not a continuous behavior that is killing them, but isolation. Those who suffer from eating disorders found online an outlet to share their pain but most importantly to connect and share inspirational content known to these particular communities as thinspiration (Pater et al., 2016). This connection is important because it makes them feel a sense of togetherness. Members share a same purpose even if its detrimental to themselves.

Through these communities, individuals can feel a sense of belonging, a safe place to talk about their feelings and thoughts without the fear of being judged. These interactions encourage members of the community to share and inspire others with tips on how to avoid food or ignore hunger, lose inches, how to lie to their parents and other destructive behaviors in spite of facing possible censorship. The idealization of a thin body promotes body dissatisfaction, and should not be taken lightly (Smolak, Murnen & Thompson, 2005).

#Thinspiration on Instagram

#Thinspiration is not an online trend born on Instagram. It is a hashtag that first became popular on Tumblr, the social networking website founded in 2007. Tumblr is a place for people to express and discover themselves while connecting with others, quite similar to Instagram.

Thinspiration is a dangerous online trend and a play of words between "thin" and "inspiration" that depicts thin-ideal media content with the specific purpose to promote weight loss in a way that motivates or praises dangerous behaviors that are usually attributed to eating disorders (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015). The word is usually shortened to #thinspo and different variables like #thinspi, #thinspireme or #thinspiring among others, can be easily found on Instagram as well.

On the other hand, content under #fitspiration could be considered the opposite to thinspiration. According to Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2016), #fitspiration is an online trend created to motivate viewers towards a healthier lifestyle by encouraging healthy food and exercise. #Fitspiration is a made up word. It includes fitness and inspiration and images or videos that appear under this hashtag are designed to inspire others to seek a healthy lifestyle through positive eating behaviors and exercise (Holland & Tiggemann, 2017).

Under #thinspiration, Instagram users have easy access to content presented under the same number, but with two completely different purposes. One is the healthy side that shows colorful fruit bowls, healthy recipes, and fit women who encourage users to maintain a healthy lifestyle or give out tips for those who are looking to lose weight. This content shows positivity and a desire for a better and healthier lifestyle.

However, thinspiration on Instagram also serves as an interactive and visual platform that encourages their audience to become Pro-Anorexia or Pro-Bulimia known as well as Pro Ana or Pro Mia. #Thinspiration opens up a world of fit women, protein shakes, and fun work out plans while also showing skinny legs (see Appendix A, photo number 1 for reference), thigh gaps, protruding collar bones and hip bones, rib cages and words of encouragement from those who also struggle with suicidal thoughts and other eating and mental disorders. Getting obsessed with

a specific number on the scale is the norm for those who follow the hashtag or create accounts around it. Obsession also goes to those who create accounts to help them keep on track with their weight loss or for those who are looking to get motivated whenever they feel that they are not doing their best. Pictures of obese women are also found under this hashtag and are used as ways to disgust and keep the followers on track and with the only clear goal in mind of not eating and keep losing.

#Thinspiration could also be perceived as a term for empowerment and togetherness. People who struggle with eating disorders are more prone to isolate themselves from society (Levine & Harrison, 2004). To date, no other studies could be found that have investigated the characteristics of women who share #thinspiration content on Instagram. Due to the rising popularity of #thinspiration and all its variations on social media platforms, this study comes on time.

Theoretical Framework

Three theories serve as a guiding framework to help explain media's influence on young women. When a person spends time consuming media, he or she may not know or expect being influenced by it in the long term, which can be explained by George Gerbner's (1970) cultivation theory as media have the capacity to cultivate a worldview in the minds of viewers that is similar to what is seen in the media landscape. Secondly, people, specifically young women, may put themselves in a position where they expose their body on a social media platform like Instagram and become objectified. This can happen due to the fact that women expose themselves in a sociocultural context that sexually objectifies women and their bodies. In this case, Fredrickson and Roberts' objectification theory (1997) provides a guiding framework for better understanding this. The third theory relates to young women who feel the need to inspire others

by portraying themselves with an ideal body on social media platform. This can be explained through Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory.

Cultivation Theory

George Gerbner was the first researcher that became interested in studying media effects, particularly on those who heavy watch television. He was interested in understanding the "consequences of growing up and living in a cultural environment led by television" (Bryant, Oliver, 2009, p. 34). It makes sense that somebody would eventually dive in to research television, as it "is the source of the most broadly shared images and messages in history" (Bryant, Oliver, 2009, p. 34). Besides, television has been since our childhood a big part of our upbringing and it is a loyal companion throughout our lives. Gerbner and Gross (1976) mention that TV is in constant movement and "television does not require literacy," (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 176) unlike print. When Gerbner and Gross mentioned that, they were unaware of what was coming. Social media is a continuous cycle of information that never stops.

Social media encourages users to keep track, stay up-to-date and to always be aware of what is going on in the Internet. So much so, that it has caused some people to develop anxiety and a fear of missing out, also known as FoMO (Elhai et al., 2016). Social media could be considered even more addicting than television as there is no other than oneself to access it and no specific time and place is needed to consume it (Elhai et al., 2016). Whether social networking habits are controversial or not, they are a distinguishing media consumption phenomenon that takes us back to previous studies of television addictions which prove it to be hypnotic (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

Cultivation analysis is about the long-term effects television has over its heavy viewers, it centers on what television gives to viewers' idea of social reality, on its independent contribution

(Bryant & Oliver, 2009). This same idea could be translated to social media users and the long-term effects social media will have on them and their perception of social reality. Gerbner believed that those who spend long hours watching television are more inclined to believe that media messages are truthful and valid. This is because television is a socially constructed reality that is continuously cultivating in the viewer's mind what is right or wrong, what is important, what is related to what and why and it does it in a logical way (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 176) just as social media. Social media is also constructed by people who are the same that consume it. Television and social media reach both large and diversified audiences (Bryant & Oliver, 2009).

Cultivation theory serves as framework as it bases itself over media effects and the social construction of reality (Bandura, 2001). Those who are heavily exposed to the symbolic world that television offers are more likely to make the televised images seem to be the actual representation of human affairs (Bandura, 2001) just as it could be social media. However, television's influence can be best represented by the content people watch instead of the amount of time they spend in front of the television (Hawkins & Pingree, 1982), same as with social media as somebody that spends less time on it will not be impacted in the same way as somebody who spends a lot of time on it.

Gerbner began researching about the effects of mass media long before social media entered the picture. He was aware that technology's ability to reach mass audiences brought along the capability to change the way people communicate with each other as well as the way people live. He was also aware that technology used in the right way has the capability of creating a false perception of the real world.

According to a report released by the Nielsen media ratings company in 2014, the amount of time the average American spends watching television is more than five hours of live TV every day and it increases steadily as they get older (Hinckley, 2014). Statista (2017) says that in 2017 Americans spend 135 minutes per day. With all this time that television consumes from their everyday lives, it would be strange that American viewers' "judgments" would not be affected or determined by the images they see on TV, same with social media. Gerbner's cultivation theory is mainly the viewer's perception of "social reality" (Morgan et al., 2002, p. 35), meaning that whatever the heavy viewer may see on television will be internalized and accepted as an accurate depiction of reality (Nwuneli et al., 1993). This same view could be translated to those who spend time on social media as they could potentially internalize what they see on social media and accept it as real.

Shanahan, Signorielli, and Morgan (2008) claim that sexism still exists on television and describe feminine gender roles. The effects of cultivation can also include gender roles for women. For example, several TV shows like *The Bachelor* and *Two Broke Girls* portray thin, beautiful, insecure and needy young women. These women in leading roles can become glorified models to those watching. The idea that the media is regularly bolstering similar messages across channels is part of the cultivation theory. Young women in leading roles on TV shows are crucial in determining how women should look like in order to be liked by a guy and receive a rose like in *The Bachelor*. If beauty is praised and valued in these TV and reality dating programs, then it is feasible that those who are heavy viewers and are continuously exposed to these similar messages will be affected on their perception of what a woman should look like in order to be considered beautiful and be likeable. It is also probable that men in reality dating programs like

The Bachelor would be seen as sex-driven while women would be seen as sexual objects, and the dating factor is just a game (Ward, 2002).

Cultivation theory is crucial because according to Bryant and Oliver (2009), it shows the involvement in "the media's symbolic world is associated with normative beliefs about the world in vivo" (Bryant & Oliver, 2009, p. 495). How a woman should look and what is acceptable for her to look like is represented in the media. The beauty and thin ideal is not viewed as an illusion, in fact, it is expected and approved by most people elevating the standard of what women should look like. The problem becomes tangible when what is being shown in the media is too hard to attain, but most people normalize it and still perceive it as doable and set it as a goal.

Objectification Theory

Women have been sexualized, objectified and dehumanized for a long time. Objectification theory is vital in an effort of understanding why women have been and still are presented as objects in the media. This theory serves an important framework for investigating an interceding "to improve women's lives in a sociocultural context that sexually objectifies the female body and equates a woman's worth with her body appearance and sexual functions" (Szymanski et al., 2011, p. 6).

Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), argues that in the Western culture, the female body is subjected to be sexually objectified, therefore, producing an infinitude of negative consequences for women. It also contends that lots of women are sexually objectified as well as treated as an object in order "to be valued for its use by others" (Szymanski et al., 2011,

p. 8). Self-objectification is a main consequence as it is a tendency that involves a "viewer's perspective as a primary view of their physical selves" (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 173).

Self-objectifying individuals see themselves as objects to be acknowledged by others and they are inclined to value and define the self, depending on what others think of them rather than how it feels or what it can do (Aubrey, 2006). Basically, young women are supposed to learn through the media what beauty looks like and to internalize what is expected of them. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) argue that sexual objectification of women leads them to take a third person perspective on their bodies. As reported by Noll and Fredrickson (1998), self-objectification relates to how individuals value their physical appearance-based attributes different from their competence-based body attributes.

An objectifying culture is spread mainly by the media (Aubrey, 2006). Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) argue that the media's perpetual attention on bodies and body parts in a manner "that seamlessly aligns viewers with an implicit sexualizing gaze" (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 176) and that this objectifying gaze is part of the American culture that infuses it (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Nonetheless, it can be possible that the link between self-perception and sexually objectifying media is not homogeneous among the majority of viewers and that constant exposure to sexually objectifying ideals could be a consequence of mental health physical risks (Aubrey, 2006).

Young women who deal with sexual objectification have to deal with how it impacts their lives, and they need to learn how to cope and manage it (Szymanski, Moffitt, & Carr, 2011). According to Bartky (1990) sexual objectification happens when a woman's body parts are singled out and disconnected from her as an individual (Bartky, 1990) changing her from a woman to a physical object exclusively for male sexual desire (Bartky, 1990). This guiding

framework hypothesizes that sexual objectification of women is prone to "contribute to mental health problems that disproportionately affect women" (Szymanski et al., 2011, p. 8) as it is has been proved by them that women are looked at and judged solely based on their physical appearance. It is reasonable that repeated exposure to media that are high in sexual objectification could increase negativity on women and their perception of their bodies. Besides, the media's focus on women's bodies and certain body parts generates ideals of attractiveness that are practically impossible to achieve (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In support of this assumption, Garner, Olmstead, and Polivy (1983), claim that in theory, thin-ideal internalization encourages body dissatisfaction as the thin-ideal propagated by the media is impossible to attain. As stated by Grabe et al., (2008) almost 50% of girls and women experience body dissatisfaction is at a larger risk to physical and mental health issues. Young women need to be alert to what the media presents to them and not let the media influence them on their body image through the consistent portrayal of the thin ideal.

The main purpose of thinspiration content is to encourage conformity to a thin ideal as images are being "crated, posted shared, and often sought with the goal of promoting thinness" (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015, p. 55). The explicit portrayal of certain body parts such as ribs, thighs, hips and collar bones is a constant. The intention may be to call someone's attention or to simply inspire their followers to keep striving to achieve their thin-ideal and induce them to a false sense of victory. They usually include celebratory words with their picture when they have not eaten anything throughout the day or have lost weight or inches and they view that as an accomplishment. These pictures do not only include hashtags with variations of thinspiration, but hashtags with words like anorexia, depression, and suicide usually follow. The first research question investigates the nature of the content that can be found under #thinspiration.

RQ1: What are the characteristics of #thinspiration content regarding image type and content?

Within numerous social media sites that are known for their photo-sharing features, such as Instagram, users are presented with the option to take any type of picture and upload it to their accounts without giving it a second thought. Studying what are the characteristics of #thinspiration content online gives place to better understand what content could be found under this particular hashtag.

RQ2: What are the characteristics of #thinspiration body depiction?

This study is concerned with how #thinspiration content depicts women's bodies and focuses on certain body parts in order to show progress to the audience. By showing body parts, young women could be using this to inspire others to keep losing weight and in that way, enhance their audience's disordered eating behaviors. Protruding bones and extremely thin bodies are expected.

RQ3: What are the characteristics of #thinspiration images for explicitness of attire and are those images sexually suggestive?

Szymanski, et al., (2011) argue that sexual objectification of women is prone to "contribute to mental health problems that disproportionately affect women" (p. 8) as it is has been proved by them that women are looked at and judged solely based on their physical appearance. Thinspiration content objectifies women to how thin they are and portray them as inspiration to those who are easily manipulated by those who are suffering from an eating disorder. Young women can be seen posing sexually in their underwear (see Appendix A, photo number 2 for reference), and sexually or casually posing in bed.

Social Comparison Theory

Leon Festinger (1954) created what is now known as social comparison theory. According to Kruglanski and Mayseless, (1990), the theory depicts the individual's motivation to assess ones opinions and capabilities in comparison to others. Festinger argues that individuals have a reason to self-evaluate and compare themselves and skills to others (Festinger, 1954). Because of Instagram's visual nature, social networking sites are perfect to analyze social comparison processes. According to Haferkamp and Krämer (2011) individuals have a more negative body image after they are exposed to users who are beautiful than to those who appear to be less attractive.

Social comparison theory argues that individuals tend to compare themselves to those who they believe are similar to them in order to define their successes (Festinger, 1954). There are two very distinct types of social comparison. As stated by Wills (1991), downward social comparison works to enhance mood and feelings of self-worth while upward social comparison, usually leads to negative mood as it can make individuals feel as if they were not enough and can threaten self-evaluation (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992) and they serve to inspire change in order to be more like the person one is comparing themselves to (Higgins, 1987).

Tiggemann and McGill (2004) found that adolescents and college-aged women who were engaged in social comparison to thin models experienced increased negative mood, greater body dissatisfaction and eating disorder signs. Social comparison theory shows that comparing ourselves to others could bring harmful consequences; however, when social media is included into the mix the consequences could be even more detrimental to those exposed.

Social Comparison and Social Media

Some can say that is human nature to compare themselves to others, which can have several outcomes such as evaluating the self (Festinger, 1954) and being inspired (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Social comparisons used to happen during face-to-face interactions, however, with the increase use of social networking sites, social comparisons could now occur online (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). Presenting oneself in the real world does not allow as much flexibility as presenting oneself in the online world (Ellison et al., 2006). Instagram is an appealing platform for this to take place. Social networking sites allow its users to express their personal traits such as emotions "via pictures and posts that can make them an upward or downward comparison target to other users" (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014, p. 207).

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Method and Procedure

Content Analysis

Content analysis is an essential research technique as it is a way of summarizing and

analyzing messages (Neuendorf, 2002) being communicated in different formats such as

pictures, videos, books among others. One of the primary advantages of this research technique

is to analyze social phenomena in a non-invasive way, contrary to compiling survey answers or

simulating social experiences. According to Waters (2006), recent content analysis research has

focused on body image ideals (Waters, 2006). This current study provides a content analysis of

thinspiration imagery on the popular social networking site Instagram. The core concepts

examined in the study are (a) characteristics of #thinspiration content regarding image type and

content; and (b) characteristics of #thinspiration body depiction and of #thinspiration images for

explicitness of attire and if those images sexually suggestive or not.

Sample

The sample was collected from the photo-sharing website Instagram. This specific

website was chosen due to its rising popularity. A set of 300 randomly selected images were

coded out of ~48,000 pictures. Images were perceived to objectify mostly young women and

sexualize them with a focus on bony and extremely-thin women. That is the reason why the

pictures that were coded only portrayed young women. Snapchat, Facebook and Instagram are

the most popular social media sites used by adolescents and young adults in the United States

(Statista, 2018). In terms of its global use, the top three countries with Instagram monthly users

include the U.S (110MM), Brazil (57MM) and Indonesia (53MM). (Statista, 2018).

In terms of Instagram's features and functions, content under #thinspiration can be found with just one condition, that the user accepts the terms and conditions that the content the person is about to access may encourage harmful behavior. See figure 1 for this condition.

Can we help?

Posts with words or tags you're searching for often encourage behavior that can cause harm and even lead to death. If you're going through something difficult, we'd like to help.

Get Support

See Posts Anyway

Cancel
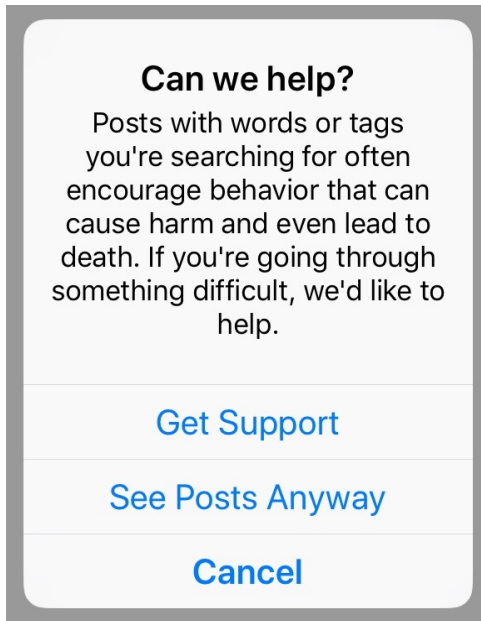
Fig. 1. Instagram's Warning. Supplemental information if needed. This is a screenshot from Instagram while accessing #thinspiration.

Users have the option to enter different variations into the search bar, which also returns all similar content tagged with the specific search term (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015). Data was collected from Instagram as users only need to have an account and #thinspiration content can be easily accessed. The units of analysis were images posted by Instagram users that were posted under the #thinspiration or any other word variations (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015). All "these terms were used either alone or with a "#" preceding the word in the search (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015, p. 56). All pictures were collected on October 24th and 25th of 2017. See Fig. 2 and Fig. 3 for examples of thinspiration images posted on Instagram.

Fig. 2. Reverse Trigger. This is a public image that can be found under the Instagram account *thelovelybones_*. This figure is an example of a *reverse trigger* image that might show up under the hashtag thinspiration and could also be found in any of the other word variations. Below the image there are usually different hashtags that describe the image or particular emotions.

Fig. 3. Trigger. This is a public image that can be found under the Instagram account *_e.u.n.o.i.a_*. This figure is an example of a *trigger* image that might show up under the hashtag thinspiration and could also be found in any of the other word variations. Below

the image there are usually different hashtags that describe the image or particular
emotions.

Coded Variables and Procedures

The next variables were coded to include every single research question: image type,

image content, body depiction, explicitness of attire, sexual suggestiveness and endorsement. See

Table 1 for an elaborate description of these categories. Two separated coders coded images for

all these variables.

Table 1
Descriptions of Coded Variables.

General Categories	Variables	Details
Image Type	**1.** Trigger, reverse trigger or N/A	Trigger (intended to stimulate weight loss but did not provoke feelings of discomfort), reverse trigger (intended to repel the viewer with extreme thinness images, provoking a sense of disgust to viewers)
Image Content	**2.** Person present or text present **3.** Number of bodies **4.** Posing sexually or casually or N/A **5.** Before and after weight loss post	
Body Depiction	**6.** Butt Arms Thighs/legs Breasts Hands Abdomen/stomach Pelvis Sum of body parts Rib bones Collar bones Hip bones Back/spine Abdomen muscles (athletic)	
Explicitness of attire	**7.** Demure, suggestive or	

	N/A **8.** Mostly clad, partially clad, nude or N/A	
Sexual Suggestiveness	**9.** Present, not present or N/A	Examples with bed and/or underwear as central are coded as suggestive
Endorsement	**10.** Brand or product endorsement, famous celebrity, or N/A	Product or brand name has to be explicit

In order to address the research questions, the characteristics of #thinspiration content regarding image type and content of the figure(s). Image type was coded as *trigger, reverse trigger* or other purpose using as a base whether images considered *trigger* intended to stimulate weight loss but did not provoke feelings of discomfort, those considered *reverse trigger* intended to repel the viewer with extreme thinness images, provoking a sense of disgust to viewers. Under the image content category, the numbers of bodies in the image were coded as well as if the person was posing in a casual or sexual way, if the post showed a before and after weight loss post, and if there was a person present or text present.

To determine the "objectification of figures within the images, the depiction of the bodies in terms of their visible body parts" (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015, p. 57) was coded making the first indicator of objectification involved fourteen body parts as part of the image (e.g., protruding rib bones, collar bones, spine, pelvis etc.). Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) argue that the media's perpetual attention on bodies and body parts in a manner "that seamlessly aligns viewers with an implicit sexualizing gaze" (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p.176). All these body parts were selected due to their constant reappearance in thinspiration content on Instagram.

Numerous indicators were chosen to address how sexualized were the selected pictures. Explicitness of attire and sexual suggestiveness were coded. Four distinct levels including

demure, suggestive, mostly clad, partially clad, and nude were coded to describe the figures' explicitness of attire (Soley & Reid, 1988).

      Coding reliability. As a result of the data's categorical nature, Cohen's kappa was selected using the software SPSS. Two sets of coding were used for each Instagram photo to determine characteristics of image type, image content, body depiction, explicitness of attire, sexual suggestiveness and endorsement. Each Instagram photo was coded once by the researcher and 30% of the photos were coded a second time by an assistant. Cohen's kappa was reported as an accepting level of .7 which corrected for chance agreement (Cohen, 1960, 1968).

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This study examines #thinspiration content on Instagram, one of the most popular social media platforms. This section will include the results from the data collected from content analysis of six different categories by using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The final sample consisted of 300 images from Instagram found under the hashtag thinspiration and/or other word variables. Thinspiration content generally depicts protruding bones to focus on extreme thinness.

Visual Categories

All research questions involve an examination of visual categories of Instagram's thinspiration content. 100% of the pictures coded were visual and did not have any text present. Types of image on the social media platform consisted mostly of *reverse triggers* (82.7%), *triggers* (4%) and other purpose (13.7%).

In order to address objectification, the human bodies shown in the Instagram posts were sometimes fragmented. Across Instagram, the majority of the human bodies were a sum of body parts (51.3%) showing part on arm, stomach and pelvis. Thighs and legs were also present in the pictures (17.7%) as well as rib bones (9.7%). The least represented body parts were thighs and arms (.3%) and butt (.3%).

Lastly, in regards to sexual suggestiveness, most of the human figures were mostly clad (49.7%) and the attire shown was mostly suggestive (52.7%). Most of the women that could be

found under this hashtag could be seen covering their faces, no matter if the picture contained

sexual (49.3%) or casual posing.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Discussion of Findings

The results addressing the research questions disclose this current online trend on Instagram and these finding are reviewed in this section. Former studies have demonstrated how young women's heavy online presence and their reliance on social media can be direct proof of how powerful and influential social media really is (Perloff, 2014). Besides, different online communities have been created on Instagram and encourage thin-ideal media content that could produce harmful effects (Grabe et al., 2008) in a community of like-minded users (Amichai-Hamburger, 2007). Thinspiration is a dangerous online trend and a play of words between "thin" and "inspiration" that depicts thin-ideal media content with the specific purpose to promote weight loss in a way that motivates or praises dangerous behaviors that are usually attributed to eating disorders (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015). The word thinspiration makes use of the word inspire and takes advantage of its positive connotation to promote a destructive behavior.

Founded on significant theoretical frameworks, the image type that better characterizes thinspiration content on social media platforms such as Instagram is the type that gives place for objectification and sexualization of young women to happen. This occurs due to its influence of constant pressure to seem more sexual in the way one dresses and poses. Thinspiration is not particular of women, however, once an individual gets access to thinspiration content young women are the vast majority, this is why it has been decided to specifically target this demographic. Future research would profit from investigating the males involved in this online trend and the societal expectations and pressures they face towards body image.

This dangerous online trend depicts women posing in a sexually or demure manner for a camera with the goal of inspiring others to achieve body perfection and make a cult of the ideal body. Fardouly and Vartanian (2015), argue that those who spend more time exposed to social media content and browsing through Instagram are more likely to compare themselves to others and be more aware of their flaws as well as accept the conveyed messages as the norm. According to Holland and Tiggemann (2017) this is the reason why "image-based social media platforms like Instagram may be especially influential" (p. 76).

It should not be discarded that Instagram users that are in the search for healthy tips, weight loss motivation or workout plans, for instance, could be unwillingly exposed to thinspiration posts. While purposely looking for thinspiration content, users are only faced with one condition, which is accepting the terms and conditions that the content the person is about to access may encourage harmful behavior. Those who are more prone to access thinspiration content voluntarily are "late adolescent females with prior body concerns" (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015). Thinspiration content posted on Instagram tended to show sum of body parts, which may be a reflection of proud young women who want to show off and inspire others to accomplish the thinness they have achieved. The sexual nature of the posts could also be a reflection of who is posting, as young women have a new sense of sexuality. The female body is subjected to be perceived as a sexual object, hence, producing infinitude of undesirable consequences for women like mental health risks (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Instagram is used by a wide demographic; adolescents and young women are exposed to the same content. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (2007), eating disorders predominantly affect girls and women that could be a reason why young women exposed to this content are attracted to the thin-ideal and images of protruding bones. Young women are a

demographic for which body dissatisfaction has the potential of becoming a problem (Bryant & Oliver, 2009). Media content does not always inspire positivity, as it has been proven with thinspiration content, plenty of negative and damaging messages are being sent about the ideal body types (Bordo, 1993). Researchers Stice and Shaw (2002) argue that "body dissatisfaction was the key mediator through which females go on to develop eating pathology (Stratton et al., 2015, p. 72). Young women are a demographic for which body dissatisfaction has the potential of becoming a problem (Bryant & Oliver, 2009). Media content does not always send positivity, in fact, plenty of negative and damaging messages are being sent about the ideal body types, food among others (Bordo, 1993). One of the most vulnerable online communities is accessing Thinspiration content and the creators consume similar content under the hashtag. The active engagement on Instagram could increase the internalization of the thin body ideal and increase feelings of body dissatisfaction, negativity, disordered eating behaviors (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations. Even though the existing study provides valuable insights into the meaning behind thinspiration content on Instagram, several limitations have to be stated. It is a possibility that the content documented by this study will encourage audiences, this analysis does not prove that such effects happen. Although Instagram is one of the most popular websites among young women, different networking sites can show different thinspiration content. Another significant limitation is that #thinspiration cannot longer be found on Instagram under that name. However other variations of the word such as #thinspo, #thinspi, and #thinspire are currently in use.

Further Research. Future research should study other demographics of these Instagram users. It would be interesting to see how different races interact with thinspiration content. A

comparative analysis of this same content between two different cultures could also contribute a new perspective and keep shining light on this issue given the rising popularity of #thinspiration content. Given the fact that the top three countries with Instagram monthly users include the U.S (110MM), Brazil (57MM) and Indonesia (53MM), it would be interesting to see how these cultures react and interact to thinspiration content.

Conclusion

#Thinspiration consists of pictures and text that are created to motivate weight loss and a lifestyle ruled by an eating disorder (Holland & Tiggemann, 2017). This dangerous online trend portrays women posing in a sexually or demure manner for a camera with the goal of inspiring others to achieve body perfection and make a cult of the ideal body. This study is an overview of young women who post pictures on Instagram under the #thinspiration.

It is clear from this existing study that #thinspiration content produces images were women are perceived as objects and sexualized while striving to achieve perfection and the thin ideal. Young women who post on Instagram both create and get inspired by #thinspiration images. The ideal female bodies on mass media platforms "proclaim the glory of thinness" (Bryant & Oliver, 2009, p. 494) and the way in which these young women portray themselves in order to inspire others to engage in dangerous behaviors is worrisome. Another worrying element to this online trend is that it is becoming more popular and is present in one of the most popular social media platforms used by young women. Even though #thinspiration cannot longer be found on Instagram, variation of the words can be easily accessed.

Previous research shows that images present in social media platforms tend to be internalized and users then cultivate negative attitudes. #Thinspiration content on Instagram characteristically portray images that are not only detrimental to young women but have the

capacity of affecting them in a negative way and potentially leading them to body dissatisfaction

and disordered eating behaviors.

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APPENDIX

Thinspiration images on Instagram

Photo number 1

Photo number 2

VITA

AGUSTINA AMON

Education:	M.A. Brand and Media Strategy, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee 2018
	B.A. in Mass Communication, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee 2016
Professional Experience:	Graduate Assistant, East Tennessee State University, Career Services Department, 2016 – 2018