

DISSERTATION

PINNING FOR LEISURE OR LABOR?:

UNVEILING CONSTRUCTIONS OF WEDDING PLANNING VIA PINTEREST

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### PINNING FOR LEISURE OR LABOR?:

### UNVEILING CONSTRUCTIONS OF WEDDING PLANNING VIA PINTEREST

Pinterest, a digital bulletin board website where users can create digital visual collections of meaningful content (i.e., pins), has been criticized for “killing feminism” (Odell, 2012), promoting “tight gender boundaries” (Pynchon, 2012), and encouraging “female cyber-exhibitionism” (e.g., promotion of images that perpetuate female domesticity) (Sandler, 2012). Further, the site has been critiqued as being a place for “wedding-obsessed” women who passively consume content and fantasize about a dream life (Tekobbe, 2013, p. 384).

In an effort to investigate such criticisms more fully, this study examined an alternative understanding of Pinterest—one that describes the site as a digital structure that enables women to construct versions of the current and/or aspired self. The purpose of this study was to explore why and how the women interviewed use Pinterest as a tool for wedding planning. Specifically, this research examined how the site may contribute to identity construction, with focus devoted to how women construct a current and/or aspired self (with attention to an aspired bride identity). Using theoretical and conceptual frameworks of third-wave feminism, creativity, and structuration theory, it also explored how using Pinterest as a wedding planning tool connects to broader ideological discourses about feminism, cultural hegemony, and cultural consumption.

The overarching question this study sought to address is whether using Pinterest as a wedding planning tool extends the traditional feminine role of wedding preparation (i.e.,

contribute to specific behavior determined by a patriarchal society) or provides an opportunity for women to engage in user-controlled behavior (i.e., offer an avenue to find voice and agency)?

To investigate this complex digital phenomenon, 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with white, heteronormative, cis-gender, predominately middle to upper-middle class women who used Pinterest as their primary wedding planning tool (with the exception of one participant who was interviewed because she purposely chose not to use Pinterest as a planning tool). Analysis of interview transcripts and select pin boards was completed using constant comparison (Glaser, 1965).

From this analysis, four key themes emerged: (1) The Labor of Wedding Planning and Pinterest; (2) Pinterest as a Place for Digital Collecting; (3) The Power of Pinterest: Escaping, Dreaming, and Visualizing; (4) Pinterest as an “Ideology of Personal Confidence.” Within each of these themes, notions of user control and determinism were examined using Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory. Further, repowered feminism and cyberfeminism (third-wave feminist theories) were used to analyze if and how user control can be experienced within the wedding planning experience both on and off Pinterest. Additionally, the concept of “little c” creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) was found to be present in how many of participants used Pinterest to find, appropriate, and actualize ideas in a physical sense (i.e., engage in meaning-making, which is argued to be user [or consumer]-controlled behavior).

Drawing from the interpretations formed through interviews and analyses of exemplar pin boards, it was found that using Pinterest as a wedding planning tool facilitates both user-controlled and deterministic behavior. Although structural constraints such as patriarchy, hegemony, and economic factors play a role in how women experience determinism in using this platform, this study also found that user control occurs through meaning-making in the online

and offline sense, as well as through wedding planning itself. For example, all 20 interview participants reported that they were the primary wedding planner within their relationship. Though it can be considered stereotypical in nature, holding this role allowed participants to experience control in making decisions that helped them to enact their wedding day vision (which oftentimes was formed through using Pinterest).

Thus, in response to the overarching questions, it appears that Pinterest, as a form of “feminized popular culture” (Levine, 2015, p. 7), is perhaps best located somewhere in between—the experience is neither entirely deterministic nor is it entirely controlled by the user. Importantly, Pinterest also affords its users the opportunity to blend the offline and online wedding planning experience. The ‘labors’ associated with wedding planning are integrated as aspiring brides engage in planning via offline and online contexts and create meaning through the act of constructing wedding-oriented Pinterest boards. Ultimately, it seems that building one’s wedding identity is dependent on processes in both spheres (online and offline).

Further, findings from this study point to the need to re-address the definition of feminism in today’s digitally-driven world. Although Pinterest has been criticized for its ability to contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypical gender roles (i.e., determinism), participants interviewed for this study reported feeling in control of and empowered by how they use the platform (i.e., agency). As a relatively new form of social media, Pinterest is unique in that it, at least to an extent, places power in the hands of the user. Rather than ‘framing’ an aspiring bride to think about weddings in a particular way, Pinterest enables users to create their own ‘frame.’ In other words, users exercise control by pinning content that resonates with the type of bride they want to be and the type of wedding they want to have (influenced by various identity factors).

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### Overview of Question

#### *How Pinterest is Killing Feminism...or is it?*

On October 1, 2012, *Buzzfeed* staff writer Amy Odell posted an article titled “How Pinterest is Killing Feminism.” In this article, she bashes Pinterest for being a platform full of “retrograde, materialistic content” (reflective of *Cosmopolitan* or *Glamour*) and describes it as “one big user-curated women’s magazine.”

People don’t go to Pinterest for articles, they go there to scrapbook every imaginable physical aspect of their dream lives, right down to the Mason jar candle holders you really hope to get around to DIY-ing for your next cocktail party (Odell, 2012, n.p.).

Sandler (2012) generalizes curators of domesticity on Pinterest and Tumblr (and female-oriented blogs), as living in a “sexless aspirational world” (n.p.). She calls activities (i.e., posting images that perpetuate female domesticity) on these sites “female cyber-exhibitionism,” and claims “lifestyle blogging barely even acknowledges that physical pleasure exists, never mind its key role in domestic bliss” (n.p.). Her argument implies that women are spending their time (too much of it) pinning pictures of the lives they want to live instead of actually going out and living them.

Both Odell (2012) and Sandler (2012) criticized Pinterest for being full of stereotypical content that could take women back to the days of “Suzy Homemaker.” They argue that the plethora of feminized content could promote the idea that women’s primary job is in the home. “Pinterest looks like the *Ladies’ Home Journal* of 1962 or *Good Housekeeping* in 1958” (Pynchon, 2012). Pynchon (2012) claims that Pinterest promotes “tight gender boundaries”

through its popularization of topics related to stereotypical female activities and failure to acknowledge women “working for a living” (i.e., in the categories users can choose from) (n.p.).

At root, Odell (2012), Sandler (2012), and Pynchon (2012) share the concern that the Internet (in the form of Pinterest) is pushing women back, not launching them forward. Their arguments suggest that to be a feminist today, a woman should not be drooling over the delectable desserts, wedding gowns, or dream homes that populate many Pinterest feeds as these images could influence the roles women occupy (i.e., it could be potentially dangerous for a woman to fantasize about her wedding day or dream home). Additionally, it is implied by the critics that using the site to long for these types of things could perpetuate stereotypical gender roles (e.g., woman as wedding planner, woman as homemaker). The generalization that pinners gravitate to the site to curate elements of their “dream lives” suggests that women are using the site for frivolous reasons (i.e., not reading articles), and that they are concerned with domesticity and physical elements of the life to which they aspire. However, these critics provide no evidence that they examined Pinterest using a systematic method. To accurately claim that sites like Pinterest and Tumblr push women backwards to the confines of gender norms *and* that women are using the sites in the aforementioned ways, a more thorough investigation is necessary.

Further, Pinterest has been stereotyped as a feminized space where women frivolously post pictures of the plush, dream wedding they will never have, or the mansion in Malibu that will always be out of reach.

The wedding-obsessed-woman trope is common shorthand in tech culture – it characterizes women as idle dreamers rather than active creators as they passively bide their time shopping and fantasizing about their fairy tale prince. The prevailing fiction of these idle dreams serves to marginalize web site content that is perceived as specifically created for a female audience (Tekobbe, 2013, p. 384).

The above quotation leads to the overarching question that drove this project: Does using Pinterest as a wedding planning tool extend the traditional feminine role of wedding preparation (i.e., contribute to specific behavior determined by a patriarchal society)? Or does using Pinterest as a wedding planning tool provide an opportunity for women to engage in user-controlled behavior (i.e., offer an avenue to find voice and agency)? Or can Pinterest use be more helpfully located somewhere in between?

Before moving forward, I want to offer some explanation about notions of voice and agency, as both are important concepts for this study (which relies on interviews), broadly speaking and in regard to the central research question. Nick Couldry, author of *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics After Neoliberalism* (2010), discusses voice as “a form of reflexive agency,” which helps to define voice and user control (or agency) in the context of the above question:

The exchangeable narratives that constitute our voices are not random babblings that emerge, unaccountably, from our mouths, hands and gestures. Voice is a form of agency, and the act of voice involves taking responsibility for the stories one tells, just as our actions more generally . . . “disclose us as subjects” [Hannah Arendt, 1958, p. 193] (Couldry, 2010, p. 8).

The above statement is meaningful to the present study for two reasons. First, the stories my participants shared were not “random babblings” but instead accounts of the world in which they were acting (Couldry, 2010, p. 7). Similarly, Hoover et al.’s (2004) research on the role media plays in family and home life also draws on the notion of “voice,” using the concept “accounts of media” in the context of audience research. Champ (2004) explains:

But it is not enough to declare that people simply use media and then leave it at that. We must determine what their expressions of use tell us about their worlds, about the ever-pervasive media they are aware of, and ultimately, about them (p. 166).

Regarding the present study, an “account” can thus be understood as a narrative of how Pinterest was used as a wedding planning tool by each participant as they assumed the role of primary wedding planner in their relationship.

Second, returning to the overarching question I stated above – does using Pinterest provide an opportunity to find voice and agency? – it is helpful to include another key statement from Couldry (2010). He explains that a key part of agency (in taking the view described above) is reflexivity:

Since taking responsibility for one’s voice involves an additional story—of oneself as the person who did say this or do that—voice necessarily involves us in an ongoing process of reflection, exchanging narratives back and forth between our past and present selves, and between us and others (p. 8).

In this study, I explore the possibility that a Pinterest user is exchanging narratives with herself (and possibly others) as she constructs the ideal version of who she ‘wants to be’ on her wedding day (e.g., how does she want to look? what are her desires for the wedding venue, ceremony, food, drink, décor, etc.?) through pinning inspirational images. Stated another way, I will consider how a bride-to-be constructs the aspired self via Pinterest as she plans her wedding. Therefore, in posing the above question regarding voice and user control, I aim to generate an understanding of the relationship between exchanging narratives with oneself (and possibly others), and notions of voice and user control.

This research investigates the idea that Pinterest might operate as a digital toolkit that enables women to construct versions of an aspired self (particularly in the context of wedding planning), and that this social media platform plays an important role in the lives of its users—it is perhaps more than a “longing machine” (Chocano, 2012). This study was inspired by my desire to address the claim that Pinterest has the power to put an end to feminism (Odell, 2012) and more deeply explore the stereotype that it is a place where wedding-obsessed women go to

idly dream (Tekobbe, 2013). My perspective is shaped by my own long-time use of Pinterest for life planning activities (i.e., gathering home décor, recipe, fashion, and beauty ideas), and my recent use of Pinterest in planning my own wedding. I argue that the site is a unique tool that affords customized collecting and identity expression through the evolution of pin boards — practices important to the formation and maintenance of self.

In using Pinterest, a woman can create a board devoted solely to wedding dress styles she likes and can add ideas to this board whenever she comes across them. Today, a bride-to-be may be unlikely to create a scrapbook page or folder to contain her wedding dress inspiration as this would involve cutting and pasting hard copy images from magazines or catalogs. On Pinterest, however, this can be done with greater ease and customization – she can peruse wedding boards and pin ideas as she scrolls through her Pinterest feed. An aspiring bride may experience control in using Pinterest to gather inspirational images and categorize them to fit with her select pin boards. In studying how women engage with Pinterest – for wedding planning and otherwise – I may be able to offer insight into how this is unique compared to the experience of using more text heavy and socially oriented site, such as Facebook or Twitter. On a personal level, this research is important because it has allowed me to combine my interests in studying digital media and third-wave feminism.

## **Background**

Before Internet use became widespread, many women often kept track of meaningful content by making scrapbooks, collages, vision boards, and/or by keeping a diary. Recipes, photographs, magazine clippings, and other such artifacts were collected, but these collections were only maintainable in analog hard copy form. Today, hundreds of thousands of women, and

many men, utilize the digital bulletin board website Pinterest to curate visual images that can be used to plan, manage, and reflect on their lives. The name Pinterest combines the terms pin and interest to communicate the idea of pinning one's interests. The site enables users to create customized pin boards where they can organize content (i.e., "pins") that are meaningful for personal and/or practical reasons.

Pinterest went public in 2010 and acquired 10 million users within its first year of launching, making it the fastest site in history to break through the 10-million unique visitor mark (Constine, 2012). The platform is ranked as the third most popular social network site in the United States (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016). As of October 13, 2016, the site boasted 150 million users – 70 million within the United States, and 80 million outside of the United States (Silbermann, 2016). According to Pinterest co-founder and CEO Ben Silbermann (2016), 40% of new sign-ups each month are men, while 60% are women. Russell (2017), cites Pew's 2016 Social Media Update 2016, noting that of all American adults using the internet, 45 percent of women use Pinterest compared to 17 percent of men. Thus women continue to be the dominant Pinterest users. Of further interest to the present research is the fact that Pinterest houses 1.4 billion wedding idea pins (Bagadiya, n.d.). Additional information about Pinterest demographics can be seen in Figure 1 (below).

<b>31% of online adults (26% of all Americans) use Pinterest</b>	
<i>% of online adults who use Pinterest</i>	
All online adults	31%
Men	17
Women	45
18-29	36
30-49	34
50-64	28
65+	16
High school or less	24
Some college	34
College+	34
Less than \$30K/year	30
\$30K-\$49,999	32
\$50K-\$74,999	31
\$75,000+	35
Urban	30
Suburban	34
Rural	25

Note: Race/ethnicity breaks not shown due to sample size.  
Source: Survey conducted March 7-April 4, 2016.  
"Social Media Update 2016"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

**Figure 1:** Pinterest demographics among internet users, the % who use Pinterest (PEW Research Center, November 11, 2016)

## The Problem

Pinterest is a digital environment that numerous new media researchers argue facilitates meaning construction and exchange for its users. While there is a growing body of literature that explores women’s use of digital texts, scholarly work focused on Pinterest is only beginning to emerge (see Antonio, 2013; Friz & Gehl, 2016; Gilbert, Bakhshi, Chang & Terveen, 2013; Hall & Zarro, 2012; Linder, Snodgrass & Kerne, 2014; Jones, 2016; Levine, 2015; Ottoni, Pesce, Las Casas, Franciscani, Meira, Kumaraguru & Almeida, 2013; Phillips, Miller & McQuarrie, 2014;

Tekobbe, 2013; Zarro, Hall & Forte, 2013).

This study investigates the possibility that Pinterest operates as a digital structure that enables women to construct versions of the current and/or aspired self, and that it plays an important role in the lives of its users—it is perhaps more than a “longing machine” (Chocano, 2012). These ideas are explored, in part, through the lens of Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory to discuss how this technology impacts users through formal rules (domination), the emergence of social norms (legitimation), and languages (signification). Structuration theory provides a helpful lens for examining this multifaceted medium as it acknowledges the technological and social systems that comprise a digital community and the interactions that can take place there (Rosenbaum & Shachaf, 2010, n.p.). Additionally, this study uses theories of creativity to explain how using Pinterest can foster creativity among its users (Sawyer, 2012a). Finally, I incorporate theories of repowered feminism and cyberfeminism (both with origins in third-wave feminism), to showcase the potential for user-controlled behavior through using Pinterest as a wedding planning tool.

Taking the aforementioned theoretical perspectives together, this research examines how language, social norms, and formal rules contribute to identity construction and self-expression, which may facilitate building the current and/or aspirational self. “Pinterest affords exploring and shaping identity”—when pinners pin images pertaining to personal interests, skills, and beliefs, they are engaged in identity construction (Linder et al., 2014, p. 6). Pinterest is a place where people can go when they want to dream about their past, present, and/or future. Users selectively pin content that may relate to the person they were, are, or want to be. Pinners devote pin boards to home décor, weddings, beauty, fashion, recipes, children, and more.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore (broadly speaking) why and how the women interviewed use Pinterest as a tool for wedding planning. Specifically, this research examines how the site may contribute to identity construction, with focus devoted to how women construct a current and/or aspired self (with attention to an aspired bride identity). It further explores how using Pinterest as a wedding planning tool connects to broader ideological discourses including feminism, cultural hegemony, and cultural consumption. Drawing solely from the perspectives of 20 women who participated in this research, this study provides an indication about whether using Pinterest perpetuates deterministic behavior (i.e., stereotypical gender roles such as wedding planning) or if it promotes user-controlled behavior that reflects third-wave feminism and its status in our digitally-driven society.

## **Rationale and Significance**

### ***The Importance of Studying Pinterest as a Tool for Wedding Planning***

In 2005, Sniezek investigated the division of labor involved in wedding planning. In short, she found that while a couple may describe their wedding work as equal, women take on the bulk of this stereotypical labor – much of which is time-consuming and can be considered “invisible” (e.g., behind-the-scenes legwork). During the course of her qualitative interviews, Sniezek met with couples to observe their wedding planning. She notes that in every scenario (20 interviews), the bride always brought with her a binder (or similar device) to maintain and organize wedding materials including cards, schedulers, samples and brochures (p. 221). “The planning material was a resource for reminding the participants of the forgotten details of their planning” (p. 221). If Sniezek’s project was carried out today, it is likely that many of the women

interviewees would pull up Pinterest wedding boards to showcase their planning activities.

The wedding provides women a status and power she does not ordinarily have. She, by managing and completing wedding work, gains control over it and a degree of status and attention from it. Yet, on the other hand, this work is time consuming, underappreciated and stereotypically women's work. Thus, women are faced with an ongoing tension between the benefits and burden tradition offers (Sniezek, 2005, p. 230-231).

The above quotation helps to situate the present study. Because Pinterest has been stereotyped as a place where women go to fantasize about their dream wedding (Tekobbe, 2013), I was intrigued to talk with women who were actively planning (or had recently planned) their wedding using Pinterest as the primary tool. Approximately 10 years after the publication of Sniezek's (2005) research, I was curious whether the tension she references still exists.

### ***Self-Presentation and Identity***

Before explaining identity construction in the realm of Pinterest, it is necessary to briefly highlight some of the foundational theoretical background concerning the broad and often intertwined constructs of identity and presentation of self (also referred to as symbolic interaction). Among the many definitions of identity, Barker (2000) offers a relatively concise and straightforward explanation:

A temporary stabilization of meaning, a becoming rather than a fixed entity. The suturing or stitching together of the discursive "outside" with the "internal" processes of subjectivity. Points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us (p. 386).

Erving Goffman, a Canadian-American sociologist and writer, explained symbolic interaction as a performance, in which individuals are actors who perform on a stage and use props. This is often understood as the dramaturgical approach and is very relevant to the study of digital environments. Goffman (1959) describes the term performance as referring...

[T]o all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers (p. 22).

Certainly, this changes to a degree based on constraints of given social media environments. For instance, the structure of YouTube requires a user to share elements of his/her appearance and personality with the audience—e.g., age range, sex, race, physique, speaking capability, education level (possibly inferred), facial expression(s), etc. Griffith and Papacharissi (2010) note “vloggers must present themselves in a way that they hope will generate a desired impression” (n.p.).

Research into online environments has made clear that they enable digital performance of the self (Marwick & boyd, 2010; Good, 2012; Linder, Snodgrass & Kerne, 2014; Papacharissi, 2011 & 2012; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). Papacharissi (2010) has described the possibilities of social networking sites in terms of identity:

SNSs (social networking sites) provide props that facilitate self-presentation, including text, photographs, and other multimedia capabilities, but the performance is centered around public displays of social connections or *friends*, which are used to authenticate identity and introduce the self through the reflexive process of fluid association with social circles. Thus, individual and collective identities are simultaneously presented and promoted (304-305).

For instance, Pinterest allows a user to upload a photo and write a brief description, but less desirable physical attributes that could be more obvious on a YouTube video do not necessarily have to be shared on a site like Pinterest. Engaging in self-presentation in social media environments often require the user to put forth aspects of his/her identity that will be interpreted in both desirable and undesirable ways by various audiences. Nonetheless, whether a user cares about audience reception may depend on how (and why) the platform is used. For instance, a YouTube vlogger may very much want to generate positive reviews from his/her audience; and the same could be said for more socially interactive environments like Facebook,

Instagram, and Twitter, where generating “likes” indicates recognition and/or approval from fellow users. Pinterest, however, appears to serve different, often non-social purposes.

As will be illustrated through the findings presented in this study (drawing solely from my 20 interview participants), a “performance” on Pinterest may often be said to be for an audience of one – the self. In other words, rather than performing for others in hopes of generating positive reviews for one’s display, Pinterest users may be more concerned with performing (i.e., connecting) with the self. Griffith and Papacharissi (2010) reinforce the notion that using social media enables participants to navigate multiple facets of their identities: “through online dramas, people find new ways to think about their identities” (n.p.). The present study provides a first-hand look at how identity navigation and construction can take place through wedding planning via Pinterest.

### ***The Bride to Be: Identity Construction on Pinterest***

Phillips, Miller, and McQuarrie (2014) studied Pinterest as a “web-enabled form of scrapbooking and collage” (p. 633) to understand how persuasion takes place within this highly visual environment. They viewed Pinterest as “a continuation of the centuries-old womanly art of scrapbooking and as an adaptation of art collage by ordinary consumers” (p. 635). This study found that women use Pinterest to experiment with potential future selves and to envision “alternative consumption trajectories” (p. 633). Pinterest is a distinct social media environment in that it facilitates public display of purchasing collections (i.e., products a woman desires). It provides a way to digitally observe, collect, and organize the many elements that can be involved in planning a wedding (e.g., dresses, rings, décor, food and beverage, venue, ceremony, etc.) – a “consumption trajectory” (Phillips et al., 2014). If a woman finds her dream dress, she can pin it

to a wedding dress board and return to it months later when she begins the shopping process. In talking to women about what they pin and why, I was able to begin to develop a sense of understanding of the aspired self in the context of wedding planning.

Snieszek (2005) believes that the wedding serves as a tool the bride can use to build her identity (p. 216). Social media domains like Pinterest provide users with a space to engage in re-constructing identities that have been assigned to them. According to Antonio (2013):

Pinterest celebrates the fact that there is no wrong way to be a woman. As a platform, Pinterest allows women to rewrite the meanings that have been assigned to them as passive individuals, devoid of voice, and provides women with the opportunity for expression through the self-publication of digital cookbooks (n.p.).

Linder, Snodgrass, and Kerne (2014) report that Pinterest users “pin for themselves” (i.e., not to impress or satisfy the needs of others), and that the site facilitates identity construction and exploration (p. 6). Further, they argue that the pinner appropriates pins into a “found object” as they “find, choose, and place” it into a new context. Through this process, the user negotiates meaning and decodes the content so it fits with elements of his/her identity. Similarly, Good (2012) compares the traditional scrapbook to Facebook with the goal of highlighting the social and archival dimensions of each. She posits that both scrapbooks and social media can be thought of as sites of “personal media assemblage and personal media archives,” and that both are “deeply social texts” (pp. 1-2). Her research promotes thinking about current social media as enmeshed in a longstanding history of customs and pastimes that allow individuals to engage in social expression and lifestyle documentation (p. 3).

Based on research from Linder et al. (2014) and Good (2012), it appears that identity construction and exploration can take place through using Pinterest. This project further explores how identity is navigated and constructed within the context of wedding planning through this platform. Since weddings have become commercialized within American culture (Boden, 2003;

Engstrom, 2008; Ingraham, 1999/2008; Otnes & Pleck, 2003), women have been conditioned to treat the wedding day as one of the most important in their life. Wedding planning has also become commodified as “women’s work” (Blakely, 2008; Sniezek, 2005). Because the wedding is viewed as one of the most meaningful days in a woman’s life – as well as an event she is expected to plan – it is critical to understand more about how women use Pinterest to engage in such planning and construct a wedding identity.

Moreover, Pinterest is an entirely new phenomenon that combines elements of traditional cultural practices (e.g., collecting, scrapbooking, journaling, and archiving) with online communication. This platform enables users to curate customized bulletin boards in an interactive social environment. On Pinterest, complete strangers will connect (i.e., follow one another) because they share similar interests and/or tastes. Of note, however, is that they may never exchange a single word – they may simply re-pin one another’s content and admire from afar. Pinterest is one of a kind because it does not revolve around social commentary or connection to the extent often seen on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, for example. Pinterest offers users solitude. Users can log in, peruse images, and construct boards for their own benefit (e.g., no need for approval from others). Affordances such as these may contribute to the site’s wide appeal.

Further, understanding how and why women interact with this medium is important for two reasons. Firstly, women have been stereotyped as passive individuals devoid of voice (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Antonio, 2013). Pinterest is one digital platform that may allow women to exercise their own voice, as well as selectively expose themselves to and produce content they find meaningful (Tekobbe, 2013). Knowing more about this type of control is of great value to discourses of feminism and cultural studies. Secondly, though Pinterest has

been criticized as being for wedding-obsessed women, it may be far more than a site for women to fantasize over their dream wedding. In the words of Janice Radway (1984), "...a literary text is a complex but fixed object containing several layers of meaning that can be peeled away like the shell and skin of an almond to reveal the text's true core of significance" (p. 5). Because Pinterest has grown to be incredibly popular among female users, it is a feminized popular culture text in need of greater examination so that a thorough analysis about why and how it is used can be generated. Perhaps Pinterest can provide us with a glimpse into a key life moment many contemporary women experience in a rapidly growing digital media environment.

We must also recognize that Pinterest can be considered a cultural artifact that will eventually be added to the ever-growing timeline of popular culture that has impacted our society. Therefore, the present study is also significant because it will serve as a reference point indicating how such technologies shape individual identities (micro-level) and our culture (macro-level). Manovich (2009) poses the question: "...is the replacement of mass consumption of commercial culture in the twentieth century by mass production of cultural objects by users in the early twenty-first century a progressive development? or does it constitute a further stage in the development of the culture industry...?" (p. 321).

This question relates closely to the activities Pinterest users engage in as they mass produce/re-produce cultural objects (in the form of digital visual images) that are exchanged (and sometimes discussed in the form of comments or personal messages) among millions of users. Based on this inquiry posed by Manovich (2009), a secondary question is posed by this study: is Pinterest a progressive development or does it primarily benefit large-scale cultural production industries?

## Summary of Method and Data

This study used semi-structured interviews with 20 regular Pinterest users (i.e., white, middle to upper-middle class, heteronormative, cis gender women), as well as a brief analysis of select interviewees' Pinterest pin boards to interpret how and why the platform is used. This study focused specifically on use of the site for wedding planning. To understand how users engage with the site to co-construct meaning and ultimately versions of their current and/or aspired identities, this study gathered data through semi-structured interviews with active female users who were (at the time of the interview) engaged and involved in wedding planning *or* married within the year prior to the time of the interview (and had used Pinterest as their primary tool).

The rationale for interviewing solely females is twofold: women act as the primary wedding planner (Boden, 2003, Sniezek, 2005; Engstrom, 2008) and women are the dominant Pinterest user (Russell, 2017). Further, Pinterest has been criticized for being a feminized digital space; therefore, I was interested in learning why this platform is so widely appealing among women. Radway (1984) used interviews to understand the meaning-making processes women were involved in through their consumption of romance novels. The following quote illustrates why interviews are a strong methodological approach to use when the researcher's goal is to interpret why and how an individual uses a popular text (i.e., Pinterest):

To know then, why people do what they do, read romances, for instance, it becomes necessary to discover the constructions they place on their behavior, the interpretations they make of their actions. A good cultural analysis of the romance ought to specify not only how the women understand the novels themselves but also how they comprehend the very act of picking up a book in the first place. The analytic focus must shift from the text itself, taken in isolation, to the complex social event of reading where a woman actively attributes sense to the lexical signs in a silent process carried on in the context of her ordinary life (Radway, 1984, p. 8).

A good cultural analysis of Pinterest needs to make clear how women understand the site itself (i.e., what does it signify to them) in addition to “how they comprehend the very act of” pinning an image on Pinterest. Further, a focus needs to be given to realizing the “complex social event” of pinning “where a woman actively attributes sense to the lexical signs in a silent”—yet digitally interactive—“process carried out in the context of her ordinary life.”

Although Radway was writing specifically about romance novels, we can see that the above can be extrapolated to fit with the study of wedding planning via Pinterest. Based on Radway’s approach, it was also necessary to examine the text(s) (i.e., Pinterest as a structure, pins and ultimately pin boards created by users). Taken another way, the “act of picking up a book” and “the social event of reading” can be connected with the act of logging in to Pinterest and navigating the social symbols that populate one’s page (i.e., pins). How do users comprehend the event (which can be considered social because it is visible to Pinterest followers) of pinning images (i.e., consuming this form of media)? Hodder (1998) makes a strong case for why a researcher needs to do more than talk to users of a given text. “What people say” is often very different from “what people do” (p. 113). In the context of this study, examining pins and pin boards created by participants was required in order to fully explain some of the key themes that emerged.

The constructivist ontology is also helpful here in its acknowledgement that individuals can have multiple realities that are socially and experientially based (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, pp. 110-111). This was important to consider when interviewing Pinterest users, as one of my objectives was to understand how multiple simultaneous realities shape how and why the site is used. For example, does being a wife, mother, and/or professional influence use? The

constructivist approach focuses on gathering subjective meanings of participants' experiences (i.e., directed toward objects or things) (Creswell, 2012, p. 24):

These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas. The goal of this research then, is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation (Creswell, 2012, pp. 24-24).

Thus, it is critical to listen to the user of the text and not resort to making sweeping generalizations (Radway (1983, 1984) has demonstrated the negatives of this) so that my interpretations stem first and foremost from the women who engage with this platform. This idea resonates with the constructivist notion of co-constructing meaning. In the present research, I engaged in the co-construction of meaning by creating a comprehensive narrative that describes this phenomenon as authentically as possible. This narrative, however, is a joint endeavor that resulted from the contributions of the interviewee and interviewer. Stated another way, the interview process involved negotiating meaning with my interview participants. I began by listening to the stories my interview participants shared regarding their use of Pinterest, and then incorporated my role as a Pinterest user and researcher to develop an account of this phenomenon (Alters & Clark, 2004).

Because I have been an active Pinterest user for more than five years, this research is informed by my insights as a participant in this environment. While it is beneficial that I have knowledge of this medium through my immersion as a user, I strove to be reflexive in my approach. As Lindlof and Taylor (2011) importantly note, “[T]he practice of reflexive research dispels the myth of objectivity in social science” (p. 72). I found it essential to recognize and account for my biases, acknowledging how my role as a Pinterest user, researcher, and female third wave feminist scholar colored my interpretations. Within the constructivist paradigm, the researcher, item, and/or person under investigation are thought of as “interactively linked,”

which results in findings that are created through inquiry processes (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111). In other words, the investigator and the investigated are involved in the co-construction of meaning to present a sense of decoding the phenomenon or topic under study. Through listening to and conversing with my participants, I formed my own interpretation about how and why the women (referring only to those I interviewed) wedding plan and construct an aspired bride identity by using this digital bulletin board.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge the debate and criticism that has surrounded the nature and value of qualitative methods. Historically, qualitative methods have been criticized as being less rigorous and possibly less accurate (or even truthful) in comparison to quantitative approaches out of the positivist and post-positivist paradigms. Because this project is entirely qualitative in nature, it is necessary to mention a technique that can be used to validate my work. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) cite Laura Ellingson's (2009) approach to qualitative inquiry that she calls "crystallization" (p. 277). In brief, crystallization rejects the positivist claim to objectivity and a single version of truth. Instead, "It brings together multiple methods and multiple genres simultaneously to enrich findings and demonstrate the inherent limitations of all knowledge" (Ellingson, 2009b, p. 13 – as cited in Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 277). The concept of crystallization is explained in greater detail in the forthcoming method chapter.

In this way, crystallization differs from triangulation because the concept does not focus on "seeking one version of truth" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 277). Instead, it emphasizes reflexivity, narrative consistency, contrasting genres, and plausibility and verisimilitude (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, pp. 277-278). In conducting this study, I did not seek one version of the truth because I do not believe there is one "truth" to offer concerning how women experience wedding planning via Pinterest. Instead, this project attempted to blend stories from multiple users to

understand the complex layers of meaning (Radway, 1984) attached to using Pinterest. Crystallization, as a methodological approach, was achieved by combining firsthand accounts from my participants, analyses of their pins and pin boards, and my interpretation of the findings (i.e., multiple sources of evidence). In other words, the partial accounts I gathered and interpreted complement one another and, taken together, culminate in a methodologically rigorous and valid (the way constructivist qualitative researchers would think of it) examination of this popular culture sensation. It is important to note that rigor and validity are conceived of differently in constructivist qualitative research (this notion is expanded upon in a later chapter).

### **Potential Contribution of Study**

This study is of value to researchers in multiple disciplines. First, it adds to the growing body of literature concerning Pinterest as a digital phenomenon. In this way, it contributes to discourses of communication and new media studies. At the beginning of this chapter, I posed the question: “Does a platform like Pinterest provide a new individual and/or social experience for its users?” I believe the findings I present provide indications about the potential role(s) and capabilities of new media technology, which will be relevant regardless of whether Pinterest maintains its popularity.

For instance, I argue that Pinterest is unique in that it provides users with the opportunity to create their own ‘frame’ as opposed to being ‘framed’ to think about (and ultimately plan) their wedding in a culturally acceptable way (as may have been the case for brides using more traditional media [e.g., bridal magazines, catalogs, and/or television shows]). Stated another way, Pinterest affords the opportunity for an aspiring bride to construct a wedding identity that connects with who she wants to be, how she wants to look, and the type of ceremony she wants

to have for her wedding (the groom may play a role in at least some of these decision-making processes). As a digital tool, Pinterest blends the online and offline ‘labors’ of wedding planning as brides-to-be engage in meaning-making through the creation of wedding-oriented pin boards. In sum, Pinterest is different from other media forms because through using this platform, an aspiring bride’s identity becomes dependent on her experiences in both online and offline contexts.

Additionally, considering this platform may not exist indefinitely, it may be helpful to understand environments that are similar in structure and experience that emerge in the future. Therefore, this study may offer a broader sense of possibilities of using media like Pinterest, which would contribute to discourses of communication and new media on a larger scale.

This research also utilizes third-wave feminist theory (i.e., repowered feminism and cyberfeminism) to explore whether Pinterest offers women a space to exercise control and to “...rewrite the meanings that have been assigned to them as passive individuals, devoid of a voice...” (Antonio, n.p., 2013). By examining Pinterest in this way, this study adds to the body of literature concerning women’s use of new media and third wave feminism. Additionally, I explore Pinterest as a form of technologically-mediated leisure (Parry & Light, 2014). Doing so allows me to make additional arguments about if and how women experience control in using the site as a form of leisure as opposed to labor (Jones, 2016), and also consider how structural influences play a role in this user experience. I believe that insights gleaned from this project offer new ways for thinking about feminism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially within the context of new media environments. Given that women’s interest in, use of, and contribution to digital technologies will continue to grow, it is important to widen our understanding of what participation in such environments means to (and for) those who participate.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Looking Back: Did “Pinning” Begin with *Ladies’ Home Journal*?**

#### ***From Scrapbooking Trade Cards to Pinning***

Before moving into a literature review about producing and consuming media in the digital age, I want to offer some helpful perspective by briefly discussing women’s use of a particular consumer magazine: the *Ladies Home Journal* (hereon referred to as the *Journal* or *LHJ*). This periodical was influential in shaping women’s identities during the late 1800s and early 1900s, as well as other women’s magazines of this era (Garvey, 1996, p. 136).

Acknowledging how women engaged with this popular magazine (and others targeted specifically toward women) helps to further situate Pinterest. In many respects, this digital environment with expansive female user base resembles a traditional magazine or catalog.

For instance, Pinterest is very visual in nature—users encounter a flowing stream of pins that can be categorized by topic (e.g., home décor, food and drink, gardening, DIY and crafts, hair and beauty). Many of these topics reflect the same section headers found in a women’s interest magazine. Additionally, using Pinterest involves the collecting of images that will be artfully categorized to fit with a given pin board. Thus, there is a scrapbook element to this platform in that users arrange pins in ways they find personally relevant, similar to what one would do when designing the pages in a scrapbook.

“Everyone possesses, or has possessed, a scrap-book of some kind or other. . . . What histories lie hidden between the leaves—true histories of our inmost selves—each addition to our scrap-book a mile-stone on our mental journey!” (Janet Ruutz-Rees, *Home Occupations*, 1883, as quoted in Garvey, 1996, p. 16). This quotation is included at the beginning of a chapter

devoted to understanding how readers interacted with advertising during the 1880s and 1890s, specifically with the “trade card” advertisement that many readers incorporated into their personal scrapbooks. More than 130 years later, this quote seems to resonate with Pinterest and how it can be used. For example, a reader might have collected different trade cards that featured products she desired and arranged them in her scrapbook to express herself and her material longings. For example:

Cards may embody projections: saving an advertising card of a sewing machine in its idealized setting expresses a compiler’s wish for a happy and comfortable home, prosperous enough to afford a sewing machine and grant her a life free from tedious handsewing (Garvey, 1996, pp. 30-31).

Fast forward to the dawning of Pinterest and envision a woman with a pin board titled “my dream home” that is loaded with images of everything she wishes for in a future home (e.g., a mint green Kitchen Aid mixer or an in-kitchen wine bar). Other than the medium (i.e., analog vs. digital), does this differ from a scrapbook filled with images from advertising trade cards? The same question can be asked for a Pinterest board titled “Dream Wedding,” filled with engagement rings, wedding dresses and décor.

Garvey (1996) describes early scrapbooks filled with such ad cards as “wish books,” noting that what is wished for may not only be the merchandise (e.g., a sewing machine), but also “the particular relationship to the world expressed through the cards” (p. 31), meaning a woman may long for a sewing machine because she believes it will enhance her social circle and serve an important role in her domestic life (Garvey, 1996, p. 31). Chocano (2012), wrote in *New York Times Magazine*, that Pinterest (and Tumblr, a similar digital bulletin board platform) essentially operate as “longing machines.” In other words, these domains provide users with the opportunity to express what they yearn for, which in some respects communicates the aspirational self—who one wishes to be and/or what one wishes to have. Therefore, expressing

what one longs for is not a new concept; perhaps it is only the medium through which this can be done that is new.

At one time, female readers of the *LHJ* (and similar magazines) communicated their desires by using a traditional, hard-copy scrapbook. Today, many women do the same thing only with digital images amassed through the Internet. Thus, it seems that only the medium has changed, not the motivations. Women appear to be using Pinterest as a way to communicate or denote aspects of their “mental journey” (Ruutz-Rees, 1883, in Garvey, 1996, p. 16), which in the case of the present research describes the process of planning a wedding.

### ***From Earning “Pin Money” to Pinning***

The *LHJ* (and other such magazines of the time) were strategic in providing women with content that would appeal to their primary role: the homemaker. Edward Bok, editor of the *Journal* from 1889-1919 (“Edward Bok,” 2015), took advantage of the fact that women were a confined audience—“immobile women made the best customers” (Garvey, 1996, p. 136). Bok popularized women’s relationship to consumption and discouraged any sense of autonomy or earning power, which was embraced by other middle-class magazines during his time as editor (Garvey, 1996, p. 136). Although the *Journal* was incredibly popular during Bok’s reign, it was geared primarily toward middle-class readers who lived in urban areas. Mail-order monthlies surfaced as an option for readers with lower income and for those living in rural areas. Unlike the *LHJ*, monthlies including *Ladies’ World*, *Comfort*, and *People’s Literary Companion* were more open to the notion of women earning money (Garvey, 1996).

In fact, such publications featured articles and stories that highlighted ways readers could earn money, but also identified the social repercussions attached to earning and spending (Garvey, 1996, p. 137):

*Ladies' World* stories repeatedly suggested that women could earn money by starting a business or by taking on for money some task or variant of a task they already performed, and that doing so would not only enable but also legitimate consumption. The similar plots of several stories reflected the same suspicions about the source of goods and concern with how commodities had arrived in a household (Garvey, 1996, p. 137).

“One Woman’s Way,” a story published in an 1890 *Ladies' World*, explains that John’s mother perceives John’s wife as extravagant because she bought a \$35 bedroom set. The set, however, was bought with money earned through selling berries grown on the family farm. “She [the wife] used the money from each year’s berry sales to make the home—her workplace—more comfortable, for example, by buying rocking chairs” (Garvey, 1996, p. 138). The mother-in-law brags that she has never earned nor wasted a cent from the time she was married, which is compared to the wife’s more modern approach to earning and spending (Garvey, 1996, p. 138). It seems that frugality or moderate consumption is viewed as honorable by an older generation (i.e., make and mend instead of buy), while a newer generation of women (e.g., John’s wife) valued being industrious and independent so as to enhance the home with material goods (e.g., tools or products to make their work life easier).

“Eventually, women began to write stories for smaller scale monthly publications. “*Ladies' World* stories repeatedly proclaimed that earning money gave women a necessary measure of power and control over their own workplace, the house” (Garvey, 1996, p. 142). In other words, it was acceptable for a woman to do a small amount of work to earn money, as long as the money was spent on her primary domain: the home. Further, the stories helped to demonstrate that earning money independent from the husband was likely the only way such

household goods could be gained (Garvey, 1996, p. 142). For Bok (*LHJ* editor), the idea of women writing for a magazine and making money was laughable. He believed that "...men should earn while married women should take charge of consumption" (Garvey, 1996, p. 151).

Moreover, Bok censored a great deal of reader-generated content that appeared in the reader's departments (e.g., reader's letters about child-rearing, etiquette, religious activities, and appearance)—if it came from women, that is. "The fact that the letters themselves rarely appeared reinforced the sense that women's voices should not be heard in public and that the editors must protect women from speaking indiscreetly" (Garvey, 1996, p. 151). Although it was a magazine targeted toward women, the actual voices of female readers posing questions about women's issues were not to be heard. "The result was that women's words were mediated through the magazine's control: readers received only the oracular advice of the column's editors, rather than learning directly about other ordinary women's lives—perhaps through messy, indiscreet letters" (Garvey, 1996, p. 151).

Important to note here is the fact that even when looking at women's early use of magazines, we see strong structural elements at play, but user control is also present. For instance, at one time, women could earn 'pin money' (i.e., a modest income used for homemaking) by submitting to magazines that would allow a female voice to be heard (e.g., *Ladies' World*, *The Household*, *Comfort*, and *Housekeeper's Weekly*). Readers of these magazines felt a sense of community based on the reader-generated material that was featured (Garvey, 1996, p. 151). Today, Pinterest users may feel a sense of community when they sift through pins and find that they share interests and/or tastes with other women (who are complete strangers). This shared interest or taste may result in a pinner commenting on a pin or "following," so that she can see more of what is pinned by this fellow user. Of note here is that

material on Pinterest is user-generated (that is, the pins are not oracular, coming down from a magazine editor). Often, the image may come from a personal blog or website (which some women may use to generate income). Further, Pinterest provides an outlet where women seem to exercise their own voice (i.e., what can be considered user-controlled behavior)—a great improvement from the censorship that took place when Bok was in charge of the *Journal*.

I began this section by drawing parallels between the trade card scrapbook of the late 1890s and early 1900s and the Pinterest pin board of the 2000s. Next, I discussed the *LHJ* and other women's magazines that influenced women's consumption practices and their interest in earning money independently. So far, I have found it helpful to juxtapose Pinterest to women's media like the *LHJ* because it allows me to compare and contrast how such media forms are similar (or different). Further, examining media targeted to (and in some cases created by) women in a historical context allowed me to gain insights to inform the present study. For instance, how are gender roles and/or stereotypes communicated via Pinterest? Does this differ from how they were communicated via women's magazines in the past? What, if anything, has changed? These are the types of questions that I address in the following chapters.

In the forthcoming literature review, I briefly discuss what I refer to as "The Digital Watershed," outlining the overlap between user consumption and production that takes place on Pinterest (as well as many other new media platforms), referred to as "produsage" (Bruns, 2008). Additionally, I explore related conceptual and theoretical work as I believe each connect to the study of Pinterest as a form of feminized popular culture. I begin with an overview of the key conceptions of creativity. Because this study investigates if and how women who use Pinterest to exercise creativity, it is worthwhile to understand some of the key tenets in creativity research.

This section begins with an overview of the foundational views of creativity, explain “little c and Big C” creativity, and highlight some of the benefits of the group creativity perspective.

Additionally, I use Anthony Giddens’ (1984) structuration to explore Pinterest as a digital structure; specifically, the concepts of domination, signification, and legitimation and how each may be at play within the Pinterest environment. This chapter concludes with a discussion of two important third-wave feminist theories: repowered feminism and cyberfeminism. These theories provide a helpful lens to understand how women might engage with and/or understand digital environments like Pinterest in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This section also investigates arguments concerning Pinterest as a platform capable of “killing feminism.”

## **An Era of New Media: The Digital Watershed**

### ***Consuming and Producing Digital Media: Welcome to the Age of “Producersage”***

The internet has paved the way for a multitude of new media that have created a gray area between producer and consumer as they have traditionally been understood (duGay, 1997). Media consumers can now be producers as they re-tweet, re-pin, or re-mix content in ways they find personally relevant or more in line with their expected use. In other words, the media producer no longer needs to work at a newspaper, magazine, radio or TV station, to disseminate information to a larger audience. Platforms like Twitter, Pinterest, and YouTube make it possible for those with access to technology and at least some know-how to produce their own content at a rapid rate. Axel Bruns (2008) introduced the concept of “producersage,” which “is intended as a means of connecting such developments in the cultural, social, commercial, intellectual, economic, and societal realms” (p. 5) in response to Web 2.0 technology. Bruns (2008) presents this as a concept and theory in hope it will be a “...useful tool to understand and describe the

present shift away from industrial modes of production towards collaborative, user-led content creation” (p. 6).

Digital environments such as Pinterest, Tumblr, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter exemplify where the concept and theory of produsage could be employed to better understand how consumption and production have merged. The advancement of the Internet as a mass medium has introduced several “important challenges to the traditional, industrial mode of information production and distribution” (Bruns, 2008, p. 13). One such challenge is the greater access individuals have to producing and distributing information. Bruns (2008) notes that consumers can now behave as active producers and distributors of information that is made available to all who use a given network (p. 14). Digital collaborative communities can “communicate and engage directly with one another on a global scale, entirely bypassing traditional producers and distributors of information” (Bruns, 2008, p. 14).

In the context of Pinterest, this can be seen when users pin original content (e.g., a photograph they took, edited, and then posted), when they re-pin an image from a fellow pinner, and when they “like” a pin and/or comment on a pin (e.g., provide feedback or insight related to the content of the pin). Pinner do not always gather content from corporate level producers (e.g., Williams-Sonoma, Whole Foods, Sephora, Anthropologie)—though such companies can maintain a prominent presence on Pinterest, depending on how they market their brands and product lines (Moore, 2014). According to Moore (2014), Etsy (an e-store that offers unique and homemade items) is the most frequently re-pinned domain. Users may also curate content from user-generated sites such as Flickr, Tumblr or Blogspot, which fits into Bruns’ (2008) produsage model. The consumer is now a producer of his/her own digital texts and is no longer solely dependent on media dispersed by a traditional producer. The age of produsage facilitates

distribution of user-generated media (UGM), collaboration among creators of UGM, and reduced reliance on (and possibly use of) the corporate (i.e., traditional) producer.

The produsage model (Bruns, 2008) provides a helpful segue into examining the new era of media effects in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Bruns and others illustrate (duGay, 1997; Hall, 1980; Radway, 1983; 1984; Seiter, 1999), media consumers are not resigned to always mindlessly absorbing messages. Instead, they may filter and reconstruct meaningful content (user-generated or from a traditional producer) in a way that is useful or important to some aspect of their life. Meaning may be constructed and not simply “found” (Hall, 1997, p. 5). In other words, a producer cannot send a message to the masses and expect it to be received the same way, or mean the same thing, to all. Users of any cultural text will engage in processes of negotiation and appropriation as they decode the text in a way they find personally fitting or relevant.

Hall (1997) argued that meaning should be thought of “less in terms of ‘accuracy’ and ‘truth’ and more in terms of effective exchange.” He viewed this as a process of translation, allowing cultural communication to take place while acknowledging the “persistence of difference and power between different ‘speakers’ within the same cultural circuit” (p. 11). Applying this to the study of popular culture texts, one must realize that the reading of a text will set in motion a dialogic process in which the reader (or user) may interpret the content by reflecting on his/her cultural codes or perspectives and potentially constructing his/her own meaning.

Social media domains like Pinterest may provide users with spaces to engage in reconstructing identities that have been assigned to them. According to Antonio (2013):

Pinterest celebrates the fact that there is no wrong way to be a woman. As a platform, Pinterest allows women to rewrite the meanings that have been assigned to them as passive individuals, devoid of voice, and provides women with the opportunity for expression through the self-publication of digital cookbooks (n.p.).

Linder, Snodgrass, and Kerne (2014) report that Pinterest users “pin for themselves” (i.e., not to impress or satisfy the needs of others), and that the site facilitates identity construction and exploration (p. 6). Further, they argue that the pinner appropriates pins into a “found object” as they “find, choose, and place” it into a new context. Through this process, the user negotiates meaning and decodes the content so it fits with elements of his/her identity. Similarly, Good (2012) compares the traditional scrapbook to Facebook with the goal of highlighting the social and archival dimensions of each. She posits that both scrapbooks and social media can be thought of as sites of “personal media assemblage and personal media archives,” and that both are “deeply social texts” (pp. 1-2). She provides some thinking points that can be used to identify parallels between the traditional practice of scrapbooking and digital curation as seen on Pinterest. Her research promotes thinking about current social media as enmeshed in a longstanding history of customs and pastimes that allow individuals to engage in social expression and lifestyle documentation (p. 3).

The media consumer today thus has the potential to be an active creator equipped with tools to use the plethora of digital content available to his/her advantage while navigating everyday life (Hall, 1980; Manovich, 2009). Manovich (2009) applies Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* to his examination of “everyday (media) life.” Drawing from Certeau:

[I]n modern societies most of the objects that people use in their everyday lives are mass-produced goods; these goods are the expressions of strategies of designers, producers, and marketers. People build their worlds and identities out of these readily available objects by using different tactics: bricolage, assembly, customization, and...remix (Manovich, 2009, p. 322).

Scholars including Hall (1980/1997), Manovich (2009), Radway (1983, 1984), Papacharissi (2011), Parks (2011), and Davies (2004/2007), are instrumental because their work serves as a

reminder that processes of meaning-making, appropriation, and identity negotiation are at play in media (traditional or digital) environments.

## **Key Conceptions of Creativity**

The research concept known as creativity provides helpful conceptual tools to use when thinking about Pinterest. Sawyer (2012a) provides a solid background for understanding the key conceptions of creativity. He explains the three different waves of creativity research and indicates that his goal is to bring them together (personality approach, cognitive approach, and sociocultural approach) to put forth what he calls the interdisciplinary approach (p. 4). Sarah (2012a) bases this goal on the fact that two famous creativity researchers, Sternberg and Lubart (1999), believe that the lack of multi-disciplinary study has obstructed a full understanding of creativity (p. 4). Sawyer (2012a) notes that the majority of scientific books about creativity have been confined to “expressions of creativity” as they are regarded in Western cultures (p. 4).

By limiting their studies to “high” forms...these researchers have implicitly accepted a set of values that is culturally and historically specific. These biases must be discarded if we want to explain creativity in all societies, in all cultures, and in all historical time periods (pp. 5-6).

It is important to recognize that the ways creativity has been comprehended are shaped very much by Western ideals. To describe creativity, a wide range of creative behaviors, not only the high arts of Western, European cultures, need to be investigated (Sawyer, 2012a, p. 6). The Internet has made participatory creativity available at an incredibly large scale. Web 2.0 technologies enable anyone with an internet connection and at least some technical skill to create, edit, and post content in the form of music, video, and/or text for all the world to see (Sawyer, 2012a; Bruns, 2008). “Although audiences have been declining for the so-called high arts, the audiences for these new creative forms are huge and continually expanding. Any serious

study of creativity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must explain the full range of human innovation” (Sawyer, 2012a, p. 7). This quotation highlights the importance of examining how creativity can and should be studied in a society that is increasingly influenced and impacted by digital media.

Bruns’ (2008) notion of “produsage” speaks to Sawyer’s (2012a) claim that to understand creativity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, all human innovation needs to be considered. “...the rapid speed of change in online information, knowledge, and creative work which is described by produsage serves to indicate the magnitude of the continuing paradigm shift we are currently experiencing” (Bruns, 2008, p. 6). Therefore, to accurately explain creativity as it exists today, one should consider user-generated content seen in domains such as Flickr, Tumblr, Blogspot, Facebook, Pinterest, or Instagram. In order to identify creativity as it may be seen in user-generated media environments, it is worthwhile to distinguish between the individualist and sociocultural approaches to this multifaceted concept.

### **Individualist and Sociocultural Approaches**

In the individualist approach to creativity, a single individual might be studied while they partake in creative thought or behavior. “Because individualists focus on single individuals, the individualist definition of creativity refers only to structures and processes that are associated with a single person” (Sawyer, 2012a, p. 7). John-Steiner, Connery, and Marjanovic-Shane (2010) explain that traditionally, creativity has been investigated as an individual process, “...a result of predisposition, talent, apprenticeship, and recognition of prevalent trends” (p. 13). The other major tradition in creativity research is the sociocultural definition. Sawyer (2012a) defines it this way: “Creativity is the generation of a product that is judged to be novel and also to be appropriate, useful, or valuable by a suitably knowledgeable social group” (p. 8).

Because the present study explores creativity in a pop culture context, the sociocultural tradition will be given greater attention as it aligns more closely with the phenomenon of Pinterest and the examples of creativity that may be seen there. Pinterest, as a platform, can be considered a collaborative product and/or community. Sawyer (2012a) helps to reinforce why studying it from a sociocultural approach is beneficial: “With collaboratively created products, it’s extremely difficult to apply our individualist conceptions of creativity” (p. 212). Bruns (2008), as well as Linder, Snodgrass, and Kerne (2014), demonstrate that digital environments function due to the individual contributions that form the collective whole. Sawyer (2012a) explains, “the most important forms of creativity in our culture...are joint cooperative activities of complex networks of skilled individuals” (p. 212). Thus, because Pinterest is a thriving environment due in large part to group contributions, it can be argued that studying it from a sociocultural perspective is the most logical and necessary. The next section will discuss the systems model, as it further explains processes involved in the sociocultural approach to creativity.

### ***The Systems Model***

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a famous creativity researcher, can be given partial credit for the development of the systems model of creativity (which fits the sociocultural tradition). Creativity researchers refined this model during the 1980s and 1990s based on the findings of Amabile and Csikszentmihalyi (Sawyer, 2012a, p. 214). This model features three elements: the person, the domain, and the field. Sawyer (2012a) and Csikszentmihalyi (1996) explain the model in a different order though the elements remain the same. In Csikszentmihalyi’s version, the first component is the domain, “which consists of a set of symbolic rules and procedures” (p.

27). He cites mathematics as a domain and explains that algebra or number theory could be considered finer domains (p. 27). “Domains are in turn nested in what we usually call culture, or the symbolic knowledge shared by a particular society, or by humanity as a whole” (p. 28). In other words, the domain is comprised of “all created products that have been accepted by the field in the past” (as explained in Sawyer, 2012a, p. 216).

Next is the field wherein gatekeepers monitor or protect what enters the domain. “It is this field that selects what new works of art deserve to be recognized, preserved, and remembered” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 28). An example of this might be seen when a scholar submits a manuscript to an academic journal for publication consideration. “If the article—the individual’s creative product—is rejected by this group of ‘gatekeeper’ individuals, then it will never enter the domain: the shared body of accepted scientific knowledge (Sawyer, 2012b, p. 64). Lastly, the person is “the source of innovation” (Sawyer, 2012a, p. 214). Csikszentmihalyi (1996) explained that, “Creativity occurs when a person, using the symbols of a given domain...has a new idea or sees a new pattern, and when this novelty is selected by the appropriate field for inclusion into the relevant domain” (p. 28).

While the systems model has proven useful for understanding creativity and the adoption of creative output, it poses some challenges when examining a phenomenon such as Pinterest: a place where anyone can publish in the form of pinning images (either original or curated) and displaying their interest in and/or capacity to engage in creative activities. The next section explains “little c” and “Big C” creativity as this notion informs my brief examination of the idea that aspiring brides can engage in creativity through wedding planning via Pinterest.

### ***Creativity: “Little c and Big C” in the Realm of Pinterest***

Modifying a recipe, planning a surprise birthday party for a romantic partner, creating a homemade latte recipe, coloring in a coloring book—these are very basic examples of where “little c” creativity could be at play. “Little c creativity includes activities that people engage in every day” (Sawyer, 2012a, p. 8) and is part of the individualist approach. “Big C” creativity, on the other hand, falls into the sociocultural realm and is seen when creative output has gone through the systems model. In this version, “Only solutions to extremely difficult problems, or significant works of genius, are recognized as creative” (Sawyer, 2012a, p. 8). According to Csikszentmihalyi (1996) Big C creativity changes some aspect of a given culture and “is never only in the mind of a person” (p. 27).

The concept of Big C and little c creativity is necessary to consider in the context of Pinterest as users are actively engaged in content curation, which to some, is considered a creative exercise. “Curation affords gathering and organizing information” (Linder et al., 2014, p. 1). Pinnerers are constantly curating information as they pick and choose what to pin to a given board. Drawing on Kerne et al.’s definition of information-based ideation (IBI), Linder et al. (2014) note: “As people engage in IBI, they search for, find, organize, compile, and collect information, creating a curation product” (Linder et al., 2014, p. 1). Their study finds that pinnerers participate in everyday forms of IBI. In light in of definitions provided by Sawyer (2012a) and Csikszentmihalyi (1996), it seems that pinning activities constitute little c creativity. No groundbreaking solutions to world problems are being pinned, but users are actively engaged in meaning exchange and construction, which fits the definition of little c creativity.

The majority of content circulated on this site is not “new,” but it may be new to a user and possibly spark an idea (e.g., a DIY project) or motivate a personal goal (e.g., plan a month-

long backpacking trip). In this way, Big C creativity could come into play if such little c creative activities feed into larger, more involved projects (i.e., that require higher level thinking and devotion).

### ***Bridging the Gap: Individualist and Sociocultural Approaches Lead to Group Creativity***

Group creativity can be viewed as a multi-level process including creative mental development at the individual level and the creative collaborative process at the group level (Sawyer, 2012b, p. 62). As a collaborative environment, Pinterest operates at these two levels. Individual contributions can be seen in the form of pins that are shared by one single user, which are then compiled by the mass number of users to serve a larger purpose—the individual pins make up the multiverse of images that users can select from. It is the individual contributions that comprise the Pinterest feed. Were it not for the hundreds of thousands of pins produced (or re-produced) by individuals, collectively, users would lack content to choose from. Bruns (2008) provides a broad description of this as it takes place among participants in digital locales:

[T]hey collaborate on creative projects both by pooling together their individual contributions to form a composite whole, and by directly editing, rearranging, and remixing the material already provided by others; and in the process they in effect collaboratively curate an ever-expanding, constantly changing exhibition of the community's creative works (p. 228).

By the same token, Linder et al. (2014) report that Pinterest facilitates “lightweight social engagement and collaboration” wherein users can operate independently while also utilizing the ideas of others (p. 9). Sawyer (2012b) explains that when groups of individuals participate in “free-flowing and unstructured conversation” (e.g., pinning activities on Pinterest), “the flow of the conversation emerges from the successive individual contributions of the participants” (p. 63). Applied to Pinterest, the individual contributions are the pins, while the larger

“conversation” is the constant stream of pinned content that appears on the main page feed. A benefit of the group creativity approach is that it bridges individualist and sociocultural perspectives: “[A] complete explanation of creativity requires scientists to bring together studies at both the individual and group levels of analysis” (Cole & Engestrom, 2007; Sawyer, 2006b (as cited in Sawyer, 2012b, p. 62)).

Lastly, it is worthwhile to discuss thought communities, as this concept demonstrates another way in which a digital environment like Pinterest can be understood. John-Steiner (2006) maintains that through collaboration “we can transcend the constraints of biology, of time, of habit, and achieve a fuller self, beyond the limitations and the talents of the isolated individual” (p. 188). This is interesting to consider in the domain of Pinterest. Can producing and consuming images assist a user in developing a fuller self? Andersen (2013) reports that creating vision boards on Pinterest can influence users’ emotions and motivations (n.p.). Pinning inspiring images shared by others with similar interests could positively change one’s life. Linder et al. (2014) reinforce this, noting that participants interviewed in their study reported feeling motivated by pins (p. 4). “Everyday ideators use Pinterest to be inspired, not only by newfound ideas, but also by others engaged in everyday design in unexpected ways” (Linder et al., 2014, p. 5).

As a thought community, Pinterest provides a platform that allows users to engage in information exchange (via pinning) that could impact processes of identity construction “through sustained and varied action, through the interweaving of social and individual processes” (John-Steiner, 2006, pp. 188-189). According to John-Steiner (2006), thought communities allow participants to take part in “the co-construction of knowledge as interdependent intellectual and emotional processes” (p. 196). Because this study looks at how women individually and

collectively participate in planning a social event through a collaborative digital environment, the group creativity perspective is highly relevant.

The Western conception of creativity that focuses primarily on the individual is somewhat dated when one considers the vast and ever-expanding world of digital technologies that foster thought communities where participants can engage in creative and collaborative activities (many of which are little c). The Western cultural model of creativity inspired by 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic images (e.g., the starving poet) contrasts starkly with the collaboratively created products this model yields (Sawyer, 2012a, p. 212). To understand creativity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it may be beneficial to shift focus from the individual to the group. By employing the group creativity viewpoint, this study may serve as a steppingstone in moving beyond the individualist approach.

The next section explores Giddens' (1984) structuration theory. This theory is helpful for further examining the structure of and activities that take place in and around Pinterest. Structuration theory bridges notions of language, social norms, and formal rules that influence how individuals engage with a technological system. Additionally, it makes noticeable the complex nature of this phenomenon by addressing the recursive nature of agency and structure.

### **Structuration Theory applied to Pinterest**

Structuration theory presents us with a more complex yet helpful approach to studying a social media environment. For the scope of this literature review, the theory will be used to present an overview of the recursive relationship among the rules (or codes), the language, and social norms as they exist on Pinterest. I draw from work done by Rosenbaum and Shachaf (2010), as they used the theory to inform their study of communities of practice (hereon CoP) in

online Q&A sites. Rosenbaum and Shachaf (2010) explain that an online community is where people "...are engaging in conversations and interactions in online information spaces" (n.p.). They cite Preece and Maloney-Krichmar's (2003) definition that an online community could be "long or short term, large or small, national or international, and completely or only partially virtual" (p. 599). In a CoP, "practices are enacted within a context that includes structures and meanings that are created, maintained and sometimes changed by the community's participants" (Baker-Eveleth et al., 2005, as cited in Rosenbaum & Shachaf, 2010, n.p.).

The aforementioned descriptions of how and why a person might use Pinterest qualify it as a community of practice. In short, the practice of pinning is done within the structural confines of the site (i.e., pinners must operate under the rules of the site), but nonetheless, users are engaged in meaning making and negotiation as they wade through the mass amount of images available and selectively pin content to their boards. It is important to mention, however, that within the Pinterest phenomenon, there is a fair amount of non-virtual activity taking place. For instance, users gather inspiration by collecting pins in the digital sense, yet enact this inspiration in the physical sense (e.g., by making the recipe they pinned). Thus, Pinterest qualifies as an online community (using Preece and Maloney-Krichmar's [2003] definition) in that users engage in creative practices through implementing their pinned ideas outside of the virtual domain (i.e., the Pinterest experience is only "partially virtual" [p. 599]).

Structuration theory is valuable to use when examining the structural components of Pinterest "because it accounts for the technological and social systems" that comprise a digital community and the interactions that can take place there (Rosenbaum & Shachaf, 2010, n.p.). Even so, it can be hard to differentiate some of the structural components of Pinterest in using this theory as each of the modalities are intertwined and often overlap. The following sections

explain how Giddens' structures of domination, signification, and legitimation can be applied to Pinterest.

### ***Domination***

In Giddens' structure of domination (power), he distinguishes between two types of resources: allocative and authoritative. His notion of "allocative resources" will be used to dissect several rules and/or guidelines that exist in the realm of Pinterest. "Allocative resources refer to capabilities—or, more accurately, to forms of transformative capacity—generating command over objects, goods or material phenomenon" (Giddens, 1984, p. 33).

As a technological and material phenomenon, Pinterest provides its users with "allocative resources" that may ultimately afford, influence, or even constrain some of the activities users can take part in. Such allocative resources ultimately influence the ways in which the site can (or cannot) be used. For instance, to start using Pinterest, the site requires a user (i.e., individual person, company or organization) to set up a profile. The user will be prompted to add a profile page image as well as a short biography or description of his/her profile. Once this process is complete, he/she can begin perusing the site, creating individual pin boards, and finding pins to build digital bulletin boards.

Interspersed throughout the forthcoming chapters, I feature interview excerpts and examples generated through observation of select exemplar cases of the following "allocative resources" of the Pinterest interface. Each upcoming 'Theme' chapter ends with a discussion of how exemplary cases presented from several interviewees can be understood using structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), with attention to notions of domination, legitimation, and signification.

- 1) The requirement to pin visual content (i.e., a user must pin an actual image) and to allow for re-pinning (i.e., in using the site, a pinner must allow their pins to be re-pinned by fellow users).
- 2) The option to “follow” other pinners (i.e., users can choose to follow other pinners with whom they share interests and/or aesthetic taste).
- 3) The option to include a caption for each pin and board title. Users can bypass including text with a pin caption by entering the space bar one time.
- 4) The option to create private pin boards (i.e., boards viewable by only the creator and those she elects to add as collaborators).
- 5) The 33 topics a user can choose from when searching within a specific category (i.e., health, outdoors, or wedding).

### *Implications of Pinning (and Re-Pinning) Visual Content and “Following” Fellow Pinners*

What follows is an overview of the structures inherent in Pinterest that can be considered in relation to Giddens’ (1984) theory. As a structure, Pinterest requires its users to pin visual content—a user cannot solely pin text. The Pinterest user must adhere to this; in order to participate, they have to pin an image of some sort. In comparison, a Facebook user can post a status update featuring only text. Therefore, the Pinterest user needs to have at least some interest in using visual content to build their page or they will not find the site appealing or useful.

On its “Terms of Service” page, Pinterest notifies users that, “If you post your content on Pinterest, it still belongs to you but we can show it to people and others can re-pin it” (Terms of Service, 2015). In other words, the site requires users to agree to their content being shared (original images or re-pins). Given that the site has millions of users, it can be assumed that the element of image sharing is what makes the site widely appealing—if users did not want their pins to be shared, they would not use this platform. The rule of content sharing can be considered an affordance of the site and one that positively influences its popularity. Consequently, pinners generally gravitate to and benefit from the continual exchange of content that can be customized to fit with their interests and tastes.

I pause briefly here to explain Gibson's (1979) notion of affordance as I refer to this concept throughout the study:

The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill. The verb to afford is found in the dictionary, but the noun affordance is not. I have made it up. I mean by it something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment. (Gibson 1979, 127; emphasis in original, as cited in Scarantino, 2003, p. 950).

Further, Gibson explained that "affordances of the environment" are contributions or aids of that environment: "...roughly the sets of threats (negative affordances) and promises (positive affordances) that characterize items in the environment relative to its organisms (Scarantino, 2003, p. 950; see also Gibson, 1977). Relating this idea to the present study, the notion of affordance can be understood by looking at the structural elements of the site that allow the user to do (as opposed to not do something) in regard to how the site can be used (e.g., 'follow' users who share similar interests; 'like' content so that it is archived for later use within one's profile).

Authorship of a pin is a structural component of the site as well, which may also play a role in how the site is used. For instance, at the bottom of the pin, a 'Visit' button is included, which allows users to navigate to the site the image originated from. To the left of the 'Visit' button are the words 'Saved from' and the name of the user who saved the pin (below it). Below these words a user will see a small text bubble containing the words 'Get more pins from (name of the pinner who saved the pin being viewed).' These aspects are a standard part of every pin's layout and an element the user has no ability to adapt or modify. Such features might entice a user to navigate to the website the pin was originally saved from or view a fellow pinner's profile (which may result in 'following').

Here is where taste and interest come into play, as users will gravitate toward those who share similar tastes and preferences. If a pinner likes what they see after perusing a user's board,

they may choose to ‘follow’ one individual board or all boards created by that user. The act of ‘following’ requires the user to allow content from the newly followed pinner to appear in his/her content feed. One affordance associated with this structural aspect is that the user can choose to follow one or all boards produced by a fellow pinner. Meaning, if they have an interest in two of 20 boards, they can choose to follow only those that relate to their interests. This may influence use in a positive way, because it allows the Pinterest user to customize what topic areas appear in their feed. In a sense, social media platforms like Pinterest, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter (among others) allow users to create their own communities in an *a la carte* fashion. While this can be a positive in that it enables customization and personalization, it can also lead users to “wear blinders,” metaphorically speaking. In other words, users can selectively expose themselves to the content they choose, but opt out of exposure to content that does not align with their personal and/or political interests, for example.

The affordance of customizing one’s feed so that it is filled only with content shared from users the pinner has chosen to follow allows a Pinterest user to engage in selective exposure. Essentially, Pinterest enables users to create a structure of linkages among pinners, which are fundamental to filtering content. Ultimately, such filters could result in communities of practice that may take on their own substructures. In the context of the present study, this could be exemplified through a user’s feed that she has customized to include only pins pertaining to a vegan diet, fitness, beauty, fashion, and rustic weddings. Meaning that, she has selected to only follow pin boards about those topics (ultimately keeping her own feed very selective).

### *Describing Individual Pins and Providing Social Commentary*

After deciding the board to which a user wants to pin an image (or possibly creating a new board should one not exist), the user is prompted to add a caption to the pin. Here the user can re-appropriate by deleting the previous caption and writing something more useful or elaborate depending on the purpose of the pin. For example, will the pin be shared with a wedding vendor who needs a full description to understand how the bride wants to use it? In this case, the pinner might decide she needs to write a caption to explain what about the image she likes and/or wants to implement. Another example might be that the pin's original caption is so outlandish in comparison to the user's intentions for it that she feels compelled to write something new to accurately capture why it was saved. Finally, as I learned from my interviews, many participants do not take the time to re-write any pin captions unless for one of the aforementioned reasons. Stated another way, rather than spend time re-writing the caption, many participants explained that they can recall why the image was saved simply by looking at it.

One rule associated with this aspect of the platform is that pin descriptions cannot be longer than 500 characters. The character limit may influence how and what users write – shorter, more concise captions may be used and in some cases hash tags, if the user wants to write only one word descriptors. In some respects, the text requirement could be considered a constraint in that a user may not always want to apply text to an image. For example, a user might want to pin numerous images of wedding dresses (as she is brainstorming what she wants to wear), but not feel like taking the time to describe each pin. Further, she might want to keep her thoughts about a given pin to herself and not share such information with fellow pinners. A user can bypass entering a caption if she highlights the caption in the pin she is about to save, and presses the spacebar key one time. Doing so removes the text, leaving the caption box blank.

Through interviews, I also learned that this can be a popular route to take if one does not want any text associated with a given pin.

Nonetheless, including a written description for each pin enables the user to create a virtual note that can serve as a reminder for why the pin was saved, which speaks to the allocative resources provided by Pinterest. Additionally, users are allowed to return to a pin and edit its description should they desire (e.g., the meaning of or use for a pin could change over time). Tekobbe (2013) highlights the freedom afforded to pinners as they describe individual pins and possibly boards to which pins are assigned:

She is certainly free to establish either consciously or unconsciously her own rules, for example, she might apply a naming convention that implies purpose, e.g., research-based collections are named first with research and then with research subject. Or several product listings she is saving as possible gift ideas for friends and family might be sorted into individual boards named for each individual person (p. 393).

Additionally, Pinterest allows for commentary among users as they can comment on a pin if they want to share an opinion or idea. Hall and Zarro (2012) describe the Pinterest interface as one that “operates on a simple grid based layout with strong support for social browsing (Lerman & Jones, 2006) and serendipitous discovery” (n.p.). They also explain that the site facilitates social validation through commenting and social reward for re-pinned content (n.p.). If a pinner wants to link his/her account to Facebook, s/he can authorize this function and let Facebook friends know what his/her pinning activity includes (this is a way to generate more “likes” for different activities). It is worth noting, however, that this is not a requirement. If it were, Pinterest may not be as popular among its highly female user base. Pinterest appeals to many users because it facilitates connecting with the self rather than others, which my findings support. In talking with my participants about how they socialize on Pinterest, I had no user tell me that she connects Pinterest to her Facebook account to publicize her pinning activity; nor that she

strives to generate ‘likes’ (on Pinterest) for her pins. Arguably, it seems that being afforded the option to keep one’s pinning activity more anonymous (or even private) appeals to many users.

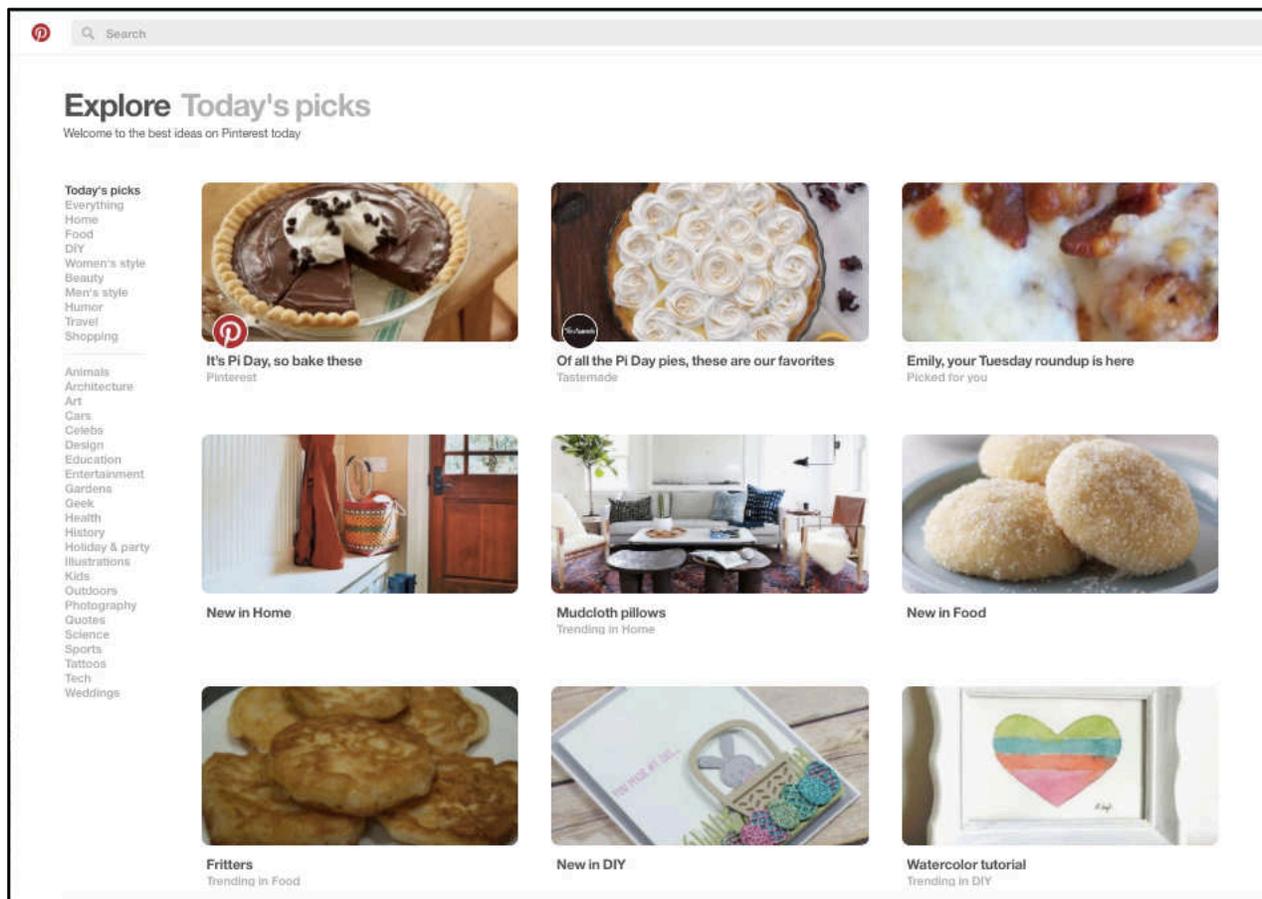
Nonetheless, for those who enjoy the social interaction, Pinterest offers the ‘liking’ function wherein users can click a heart-shaped button to indicate they have positive feelings toward a select pin. While the social element of Pinterest is not nearly as strong as it is on sites such as Twitter and Facebook (i.e., where interacting with fellow users is a major draw), the fact that pinners can comment, like, and share content in private messages may influence its level of appeal. The ability to share meaningful content with friends, family, clients, and/or colleagues could contribute to the appeal of this platform. Sharing pins privately (via personal message) allows users to exchange ideas for projects or recipes discretely instead of displaying for all followers (which could invite unwanted feedback or social commentary).

This ‘private’ feature could come in handy for a woman planning her wedding – she could secretly share pins with her bridal party to generate feedback, but prevent information from being shared with an unwanted audience. Similarly, the site allows users to create entirely private boards (to be seen by no one but the original creator). Such a function removes any pressure that could be associated with how a pin is received by the audience and/or unwanted feedback. More importantly, and related to the present study, is the fact that creating a private board allows an aspiring bride to keep her plans for the wedding day top secret – shared only with those she chooses. This affordance is addressed in greater detail in a forthcoming chapter.

### *Perusing Pinterest Categories: Today’s Picks or Customized Searching?*

When Pinterest users enter the site, they can choose from 33 categories in which to peruse images. Additionally, Pinterest recently added a feature called “Today’s picks,” where

users can choose to explore trending topics. Using the tagline, “Welcome to the best ideas on Pinterest today,” users are given the option to click on one of the trending categories and explore more. Figure 2 (below) provides a visual representation of category choices as well as an example of prompt to “Explore Today’s Picks.”



**Figure 2:** Screenshot of Pinterest Categories & “Explore Today’s Picks”  
Source: <https://www.pinterest.com/discover/topics/485172843624007474/>

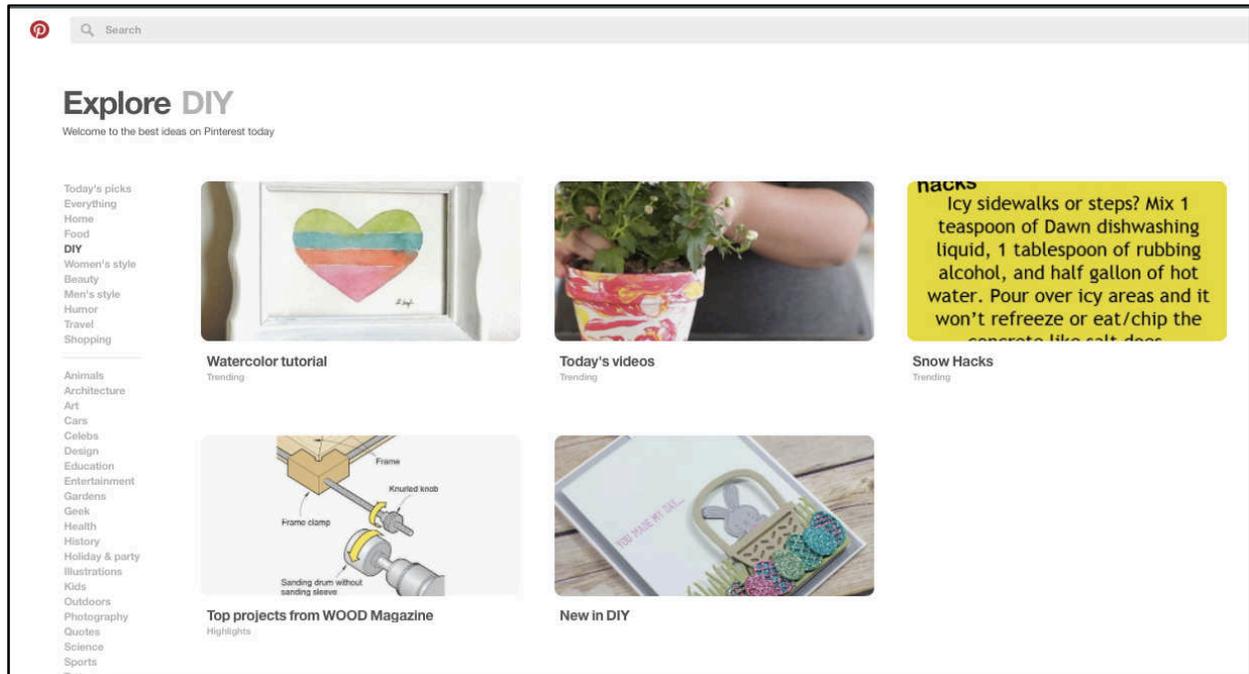
In some ways, the fact that users are given 33 categories to use for more customized searching can be viewed as a constraint (i.e., if a topic of interest is not on the list, there is not a feed designated for that subject). Nonetheless, a user can bypass this constraint by searching for the topic of interest using the search bar (featured at the top of the Pinterest home page—see Figure 1). In other words, while a feed devoted to a certain topic may not exist, pins about that

subject can still be found by entering key terms in the search bar. This route may also provide results more quickly if a user is searching for something specific.

The 33 featured categories serve as locating devices for users to employ when they want to peruse images pertaining to a given subject area. A user can log on, navigate directly to a select category, and search for exactly what she is looking for. This can speed up the information gathering process and allow the pinner to make more effective use of her time spent on the site. The list of categories can be viewed as an overt rule of the site because users cannot add or delete categories—Pinterest controls it. Unlike the rest of the site, which focuses on curating and customizing to one's own liking, the list of categories is not available for customization.

Further, when a pinner selects a category (e.g., “Explore DIY”), she will be taken to a page featuring a handful of pins (see Figure 3). If a user clicks on one of these pins (e.g., “New in DIY”), she will be taken to a page of pins that relate to the pin topic she originally clicked on (see Figure 4).

Based on this example, it seems that Pinterest guides the pinner through different processes, where she is afforded the option of picking what she wants to look at so long as it falls within the list of categories. As mentioned, another way to use Pinterest is to employ the traditional search bar option rather than “explore topics” option in the category list. Based on my preliminary observations, this route seems to afford the user more freedom (as compared to the latter). In using the customized searching option, the user is then afforded the “guided search” feature, which allows for advanced searching about the topic. Using the maxi skirt example featured in Figure 5, the user would then be able to engage in more focused searching by clicking on “For Summer,” “Black,” “DIY,” or “Bridesmaid” (to name a few of the areas in which she could peruse images).

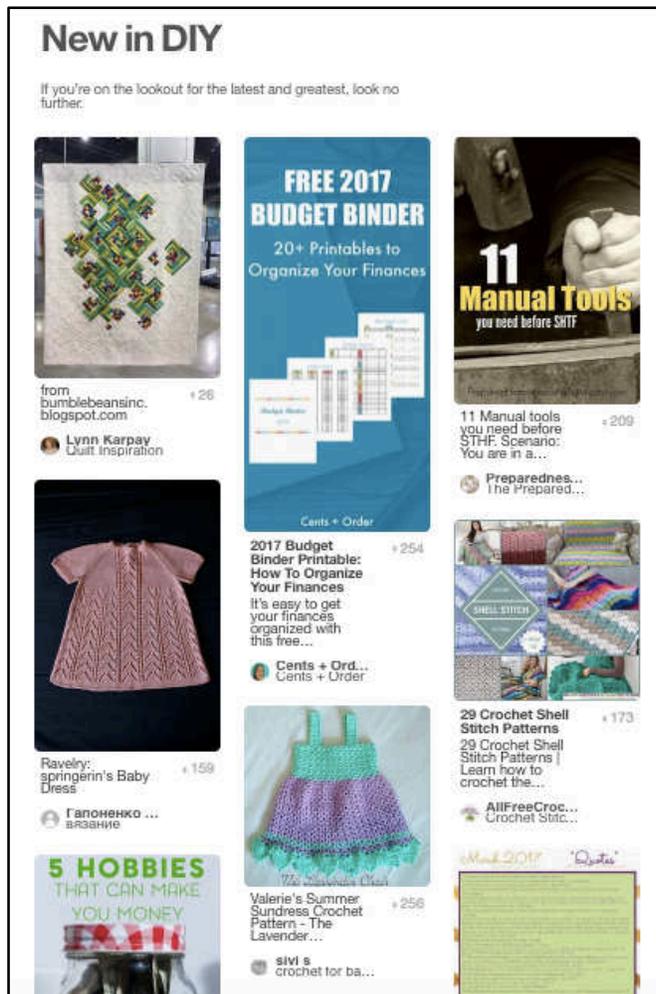


**Figure 3:** Screenshot of “Explore DIY” Category on Pinterest

**Source:** <https://www.pinterest.com/discover/topics/4841830090415293347/>

This example provides an indication of the level of customized searching a user can engage in using Pinterest. For instance, if a user typed “maxi skirt ideas” into the search box, a feed similar to the one featured in Figure 5 would be generated. In sum, users do have a great deal of control regarding what topics they want to explore, how such topics can be explored, and ultimately, what content they want to be exposed to. Further, users have control over what content they decide to pin and what is included (if anything) in the pin caption. Finally, Pinterest also places power in the hands of its users in that the site populates based on what users are posting—the content is quite literally “hand-picked” by pinners. At the same time, however, users are controlled (or constrained) in that they must operate under the rules the site enforces if they want to participate. This next section provides a brief overview about what some of these

rules (broadly speaking) look like and the types of affordances and constraints that influence how the site is used.



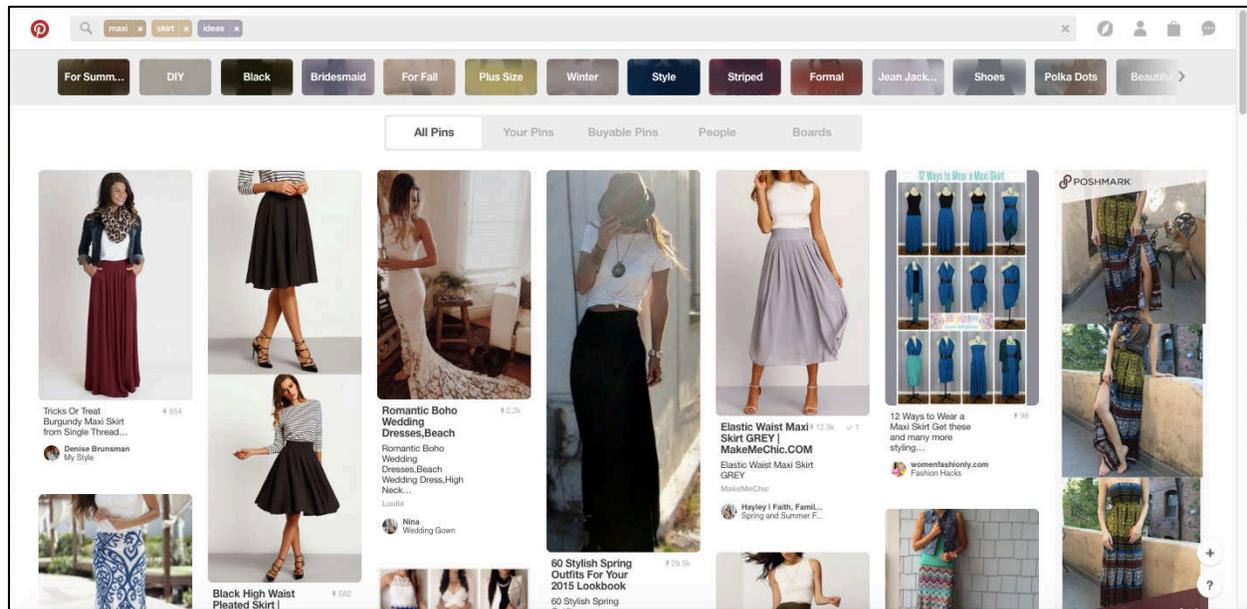
**Figure 4:** Screenshot of “New in DIY” Pinterest Feed

**Source:** <https://www.pinterest.com/discover/article/BMUVDShkwxFQJ--XASKTnG7a6F2Pei5uU6A/?topic=4841830090415293347>

### ***Signification***

Giddens’ (1984) concept of signification can be understood as “how individuals produce meanings of the structure through communication and language” (as explained in Hardaker & Singh, 2011, p. 228). Language on Pinterest is primarily seen in the form of visuals (i.e., the pin) as well as text that may be accompanied with it in the form of a description and/or comments

posted to it. The language and vocabulary of Pinterest is discussed in a forthcoming section. As has been previously discussed, a pinner may negotiate a pin to fit with his/her identity (either current or aspired) and essentially repackage it (which involves meaning-making) so that it aligns with the focus of a given pin board.



**Figure 5:** Screenshot of “Maxi Dress Ideas” Pinterest Feed

Source:

[https://www.pinterest.com/search/pins/?q=maxi%20skirt%20ideas&rs=rs&eq=&etl=2982&term\\_meta\[\]=maxi%7Crecentsearch%7C5&term\\_meta\[\]=skirt%7Crecentsearch%7C5&term\\_meta\[\]=ideas%7Crecentsearch%7C5](https://www.pinterest.com/search/pins/?q=maxi%20skirt%20ideas&rs=rs&eq=&etl=2982&term_meta[]=maxi%7Crecentsearch%7C5&term_meta[]=skirt%7Crecentsearch%7C5&term_meta[]=ideas%7Crecentsearch%7C5)

For example, a young woman about to graduate high school may construct a pin board that communicates who she aspires to be when she gets to college. A young woman fantasizing about marriage might piece together a board to help her visualize her dream wedding, while an expecting mother might develop a board to help design her newborn’s nursery. “Pinterest users curate Pins for both personally practical and emotional reasons, planning for life’s current and future needs” (Linder et al., 2014, p. 5). Stated another way, Pinterest users may engage in

interpretive practices as they select content for their boards. As I found through my interviews, these boards evolve over time as the user's tastes and life goals change.

Pinnerers participate in processes of longing and self-actualization, which fit the modality of signification. Rosenbaum and Shachaf (2010) maintain that a "point of contact" between structuration and CoPs (e.g., Pinterest) is the "processes of identity formation and maintenance" (n.p.). An active user of Pinterest is likely to partake in identity formation and maintenance if they are routinely using the site in the way it is intended. In other words, a major draw of Pinterest is its affordance of discovery and self-expression. A habitual user would, in this way, be engaged in processes of identity formation and maintenance through pinning.

Boards constitute a medium for assemblage of Pins to support planning, goal setting, comfort, entertainment, gains in expertise, and self-actualization. By appropriating Pins and information from others, people use boards as lightweight social contexts in which they juxtapose and recontextualize found objects, supporting information-based ideation (Linder et al., 2014, p. 10).

To discuss signification in a macro level sense (in the context of Pinterest), the site itself (as a sign) may communicate to users that it is a tool to help with life planning and management as well as a space to engage in self-expression and creative discovery.

### *The Language of Pinterest*

Pinterest is loaded with images that are often stereotypically feminine in nature. The Pinterest user can expect to encounter a plethora of images related to fashion, beauty, home décor, gardening, food and beverage, photography, weddings, and travel. This is not to say that at least some men do not take interest in these topics. However, because female users dominate Pinterest, its main page feed is loaded with content generally popular among girls and women. Mouthwatering desserts, extravagant wedding gowns, trendy hairstyles, and DIY projects (to

name a few) are certain to crop up in the average female user's home page, which foregrounds the visual language that encompasses Pinterest. Scenic photographs of tropical oases, sparkly engagement rings, wrinkly-faced puppies, uplifting quotes, beautifully sculpted stomachs, and perfectly painted nails serve as signs to communicate to many female users what they should strive to be, have, do, and/or look like. In fact, Jones (2016) argues that Pinterest use constitutes a form of unpaid "third shift" labor, wherein women are reminded that they should strive for absolute perfection in their physical appearance as well as home and family life (on top of professional pursuits) (p. 358).

The vocabulary often featured with pins and/or in pin captions may contribute to Jones' (2016) idea that Pinterest helps to reinforce patriarchal expectations for women. Therefore, it is worthwhile to briefly highlight some of the most common verbiage and phraseology seen in pins relating to the aforementioned categories as well as implications this may have on users.

Because Pinterest is a place to which women sometimes go when they want to learn how to do something (oftentimes on a budget), "how to," "ways to," "idea," "DIY," "101," "pro," "tips," "simple," "easy," "repurpose," "organize," "save," "frugal," and "budget friendly," are commonly used to describe pins, or in the pin itself. Further, given that the site features pins related to fashion and beauty products and trends, many of the pin captions contain descriptive language such as: "gorgeous," "cute," "beautiful," "sexy," "pretty," "everyday," "perfect," "amazing," "love," "try," "want," "need," "every woman," "own," "upgrade," "before and after," "how to," "simple," and "tutorial." This vocabulary is often used to explain how to try a given makeup or fashion look, how simple or sexy the look may be, and/or why it is popular among women. Such language may communicate to women that they need to maintain a flawless face and buy expensive beauty products, which could be considered a downside to using the site.

Lastly, terms and/or phrases including “ingredients,” “skinny,” “weight loss,” “homemade,” “best ever,” “no-bake,” “10-minute,” “crockpot,” “need,” “leftovers,” “try,” “calories,” “healthy,” “easy,” “slim down,” “delicious,” and “recipe” are often used to explain pins found in the food & drink category.

Exposure to this type of language could send the message that not only does a woman need to maintain a certain look, it is also her duty to find healthy, nutritious recipes to make for herself and family. Phrases like “quick and easy,” “no-bake,” and “10-minute” could imply that even if she is busy, a woman should still be able to find time to make a delicious homemade meal.

Vocabulary pertaining to body image (e.g., calories, weight loss, and skinny) can be linked to the societal pressures placed on women to maintain a certain body image (which speaks to the feminization of Pinterest). Verbiage connected to healthy, quick, homemade cooking can be attributed to the longstanding role of woman as homemaker. However, because women choose to use the site and selectively pin content, an in-depth analysis about the influence of such language is necessary before claims about if and to what extent this aspect of Pinterest is damaging to female users can be made (while the present study does not address language on Pinterest in detail, this is a future research direction I am interested in pursuing).

Moreover, the fact that it is primarily women who pin recipes again points to the feminization of the platform, which links to the stereotypical role of the female as homemaker. The site is loaded with quick and easy recipes for the “mom-on-the-go” as well as activities that appeal to children. Nonetheless, because users control the content they choose to view and possibly save, this experience may be more user-controlled than it is deterministic. I address this idea in greater detail throughout the forthcoming chapters.

### *The Power of the Pinner*

According to McQuail (1997), “The communication process itself has been reconceptualized as essentially consultative, interactive, and transactional” (p. 142). Turner (2003) takes this idea one step further in his discussion of encoding/decoding, stating that audiences are not passive dupes—message reception is impacted by demographic elements such as race, religion, and socio-economic status. “So there is bound to be a lack of fit between aspects of the production and reception processes—between the producer’s and the audience’s interpretation of the message—that will produce misunderstandings or ‘distortions.’” He claims that both the construction and reception of a message are “an active, interpretive and social event” (p. 73).

Relating these ideas to the present study, pinners, as consumers, are not considered to be passive, cultural dupes (Hall, 1980; Radway, 1984; Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Manovich, 2009; Levine, 2015). It could be argued that Pinterest requires active participation from users because they are required to selectively expose themselves to and use content in a way they find personally relevant. Further, pinners may exercise power in their ability to re-appropriate or remix the pins they choose to use, which can be considered an “active, interpretive and social event” (Turner, 2003, p. 73).

Interestingly, the pinner exercises the power to help corporate level producers in the offline world. For example, Nordstrom, a high-end department store, started placing small signs featuring the Pinterest symbol on merchandise in the store that received a high number of pins (Lutz, 2013). This informed shoppers that a pair of shoes, designer handbag, or cosmetic was popular among women pinners (and ultimately served to indicate product value). Additionally, World Market and Marshalls, popular home décor retailers, have launched sweepstakes using

Pinterest, where pinners were asked to pin favorite items (produced by the retailer) for a chance to win their pinned items or a gift card (PR Newswire, 2016; “Marshalls Partners,” 2016).

“Pinterest says ‘I want this.’ It’s aspirational,” wrote Moore (2014), “People pin products they’d love to own, recipes they want to cook, and projects they want to tackle” (n.p.). Here, there is a dialectical process taking place between pinners and corporate level producers: pinners have the power to pin images of material objects they aspire to have, which informs producers on what products to create, adapt, and/or promote. Pinners may then pin this adapted and/or promoted content which then re-informs the producers, and so on. Many retail websites have installed the “Pin It!” button so that visual content featured on their page can be pinned by users (and then tracked by the company). A 2014 study of the most popular pin categories among women revealed that “food & drink,” “DIY & craft,” “home décor,” and “women’s fashion,” rank the highest (Chang, Kumar, Gilbert & Terveen, 2014). These findings suggest that pinners often pin for practical purposes (i.e., to catalog recipes, home projects, and/or fashion ideas) and that economically speaking, they have at least some disposable income to use to engage in the activities they pin about. A board devoted to gardening might provide motivation for a user to make it through a long, cold winter, knowing she has fun projects to look forward to starting in the spring. A board like this could speak to other users, in need of the same incentive, and inspire them to find additional ideas for spring gardening.

Antonio (2013) focused on women’s use of Pinterest as a place to create virtual cookbooks. She argues that the site empowers women because they create digital cookbooks by choice—not because of stereotypical gender demands. “They are choosing to embrace this platform and are using it as a means of creative expression and an outlet of empowerment that transforms cooking from a domestic chore into an activity with public significance” (n.p.). This

example ties into Kuhn's (2000) perspective regarding the power of the image. She notes that feminism has always given attention to "ideas, language and images as crucial in shaping women's (and men's) lives" (p. 63). Important to the argument that pinners exercise power in their act of pinning is the following: "In practice, the operations of texts and various levels of context are rarely in harmony, and there is always some space for 'aberrant' reception of dominant representations" (p. 66).

For instance, a woman might pin mouthwatering dessert recipes not because she wants to please her husband and/or children (i.e., by making these items), but simply because she loves sweets, loves to bake, and takes pleasure in the act of cataloging enticing recipes for future use. A collection of images devoted to desserts might signify times of happiness through family bonding and celebration. Kuhn (2000) helps make this clear in stating "meanings...are circulated between representation, spectator and social formation" (p. 66). Before assuming that a woman's digital cookbook collection on Pinterest is a symbol of servitude to her family or romantic partner, one must realize that there may be a deep experiential history behind what was pinned and why. "For, in practice, images are always seen in context: they always have a specific use value in the particular time and place of their consumption" (Kuhn, 2000, p. 66).

### ***Legitimation***

Unlike Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, where frequent communication with fellow users is a norm, Pinterest users can be thought to spend more time communicating with the self. Linder et al. (2014) explain, "despite the myriad of repinning, users perceive Pinterest as a solitary space for collecting ideas" (p. 5). Participants in this study reported sites such as Facebook as being more for conversation (p. 5). Similarly, a respondent in Zarro et al.'s (2013)

research about Pinterest described the site as a “community of people who don’t know each other” (n.p.). These authors maintain that Pinterest complements other social media sites but does not replace them. Hall and Zarro (2012) also provide data that speak to the more individualized nature of Pinterest. That is, users are not as concerned with self-presentation and how their pinned content is received because they use the site for more personally motivated reasons.

The act of commenting on pins is relatively rare and most often seen taking place between family members and friends (Hall and Zarro, 2012; Linder et al., 2014), which connects to the notion of interactivity on Pinterest. Although interactivity may not be seen as frequently in the form of comments, it is prominently seen in the act of re-pinning content from one user to the next. According to Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997) “Interactivity is the condition of communication in which simultaneous and continuous exchanges occur, and these exchanges carry a social, binding force” (n.p.). Therefore, Pinterest can be considered an interactive domain, but the interactivity observed there is different from what one sees on more text-based, socially oriented sites such as Facebook or Twitter. Simply re-pinning an image could be considered the primary form of interactivity that takes place on Pinterest.

Hall and Zarro (2012) discuss user actions on the site and note that although pin comments are the least frequently observed, they may be the most enlightening. “Pinterest asks that users be respectful of individual tastes and despite a rapid population increase it seems that civility still reigns” (p. 7). They found that the wide majority of comments were positive in nature, geared toward the content of the pin (i.e., it was cute) or praising the uploader (p. 7). These authors maintain that Pinterest appears to facilitate a generally “positive community,” where participants try to avoid “confrontation and antagonism” (p. 6). On a similar note, Linder

et al.'s (2014) participants reported not feeling judged or watched during their pinning activities, which positively impacted their creative self-efficacy (p. 3).

On Pinterest, users will gravitate toward other users with whom they share a common interest or style. A woman who loves primitive home décor may seek out users with similar tastes and follow their boards because they feel a sense of connection, which can result in collaborative exchanges of information. “As a social and collaborative platform, Pinterest fosters creativity with ‘just for me’ workspaces, which remove fear of evaluation, while enabling positive feedback” (Linder et al., 2014, p. 10). When fear of social evaluation is removed, users may feel more comfortable posting content that they find personally meaningful and are less concerned with how (and by whom) it is received. This is a unique aspect of Pinterest, as on other social media platforms, users are often very concerned with performing for others and gaining social approval or respect.

Linder et al. (2014) note that participants in their study replaced prior entertainment habits with Pinterest because it “uplifts their lives.” They observed two types of “seeking behavior”: casual browsing with no specific goal in mind and responding to a certain information-based ideation task (e.g., finding a new makeup trend) (p. 7). If at least some Pinterest users are replacing their traditional entertainment practices with pinning, it is fair to say that positive social norms may tend to make this environment a place where users can go when they want to be uplifted, inspired, or motivated to meet their goals. It may be that the non-hierarchical structure of Pinterest is in part what draws many users to the site—they can pick and choose what they want to use and do so with little interference from other community members and/or media sources and negative feedback. On Pinterest, there is no need to compete with others to impress the “imagined audience” (Litt, 2012). A digital space that promotes creativity,

discovery, and self-actualization through customized pin board assemblage may make Pinterest a very appealing platform to its users.

### *Implications of Social Norms on Pinterest*

Pinterest encourages “lightweight social engagement and collaboration,” wherein users can operate independently while incorporating the ideas of others (Linder et al., 2014, p. 9). Users do not feel pressured to engage in conversation via commenting or “liking” activities (as is more common on Facebook), but instead are able to engage in a free-flowing exchange if they so desire. As previously noted, social interaction is not what makes this site popular. Instead, the site appeals to many because they can log on and focus solely on themselves and their interests. Linder et al. (2014) found that participants in their study cared little about who the “author” of a pin was unless it was a friend or family member (p. 5). “...users perceive Pinterest as a solitary space for collecting ideas. They see other social media, such as Facebook, as spaces for conversation, e.g., self-promotion” (p. 5). Thus, unlike other social media platforms where heavy involvement with other users is the norm, Pinterest operates as a more individualized environment where users can interact with others directly (e.g., comment, like, or message), but do not feel obligated to do so in order to maintain a certain status or presence.

Pinning inspiring images shared by others with similar interests could positively change one’s life. Linder et al. (2014) reinforce this, noting that participants interviewed in their study reported feeling motivated by pins (p. 4). “Everyday ideators use Pinterest to be inspired, not only by newfound ideas, but also by others engaged in everyday design in unexpected ways” (Linder et al., 2014, p. 5). Andersen (2013) reports that creating a virtual vision board full of inspiring images is more effective than writing goals down or mentally cataloging (n.p.).

Pinterest users are “collectively and individually organizing information as pastiche, montage, art, and, ultimately, as a statement of digital/virtual identity” (Tekobbe, 2013, p. 386). Through this practice, they learn the Pinterest visual and textual lingo (often by drawing on others whose pins they find useful or intriguing) and then re-appropriate content in ways they find personally meaningful. As has been illustrated, using this platform can result in greater motivation to achieve goals for at least some of the women who participate.

### *Connecting via Collage Creation*

A number of researchers have characterized Pinterest as a feminized space where women go when they are in need of inspiration, direction on how to do something (e.g., make a certain food or drink), or simply entertainment (Antonio, 2013; Linder et al., 2014). As a text (broadly speaking), Pinterest can be interpreted as a space for women to connect through shared interests sparked by visual content as well as reflect on their past, present, and/or future selves (Tekobbe, 2013; Zarro et al., 2013). During the late 1800s and early 1900s, suburban and rural women read the *Ladies Home Journal*, as well as other smaller scale weekly magazines, to stay up-to-date on topics including home décor, cooking, as well as romantic and familial relationships. In the 1980s and 1990s, women read romance novels as a way to escape from stressors of their everyday lives, fantasize, and bond with friends reading the same books (Radway, 1984). Today, women may be using Pinterest for many of the same reasons. Individual pins are added to larger pin boards that collectively create digital vision boards, which may help the female user in her everyday life (i.e., with decorating, cooking, relationships, etc.). As described by Tekobbe (2013), Pinterest is more than a gendered space where only “sharing” practices take place; she

argues that the space enables serious content creation, which has been overlooked because of dominant cultural and masculine narratives (p. 393).

The constant flow of idea exchange on this platform provides both an on-and-offline dialogue for users to engage in. Online, users may comment on or like content pinned by complete strangers, which is perfectly acceptable in the realm of this social network. Offline, users may chat about what has been trending on Pinterest or actually engage in physical activity based on content pinned (e.g., a crafting project with girlfriends that was discovered via Pinterest). Tekobbe (2013) argues that Pinterest is popular because of its “interactive design, authoring tools, and its reciprocal community” (p. 389). Zarro et al. (2013) report that sharing pins with family and friends occurred frequently among participants in their study, which at times resulted in “real world collaborative activities like family outings or home renovation projects” (n.p.).

Pinterest facilitates personalized collage construction that may enhance or simplify the life of the pinner curating such content. The site encourages users to engage in self-reflection, exploration, and discovery by creating dynamic vision boards that may work individually or collectively to signify who they were, are, or want to be (or have). What makes this site stand out from other social media platforms is that through connecting with others (i.e., following different pinners) users connect with the self by using signs from those with similar tastes and/or interests.

This section sought to explain notions of language, social norms, and formal rules that impact how users interact with Pinterest as a technological structure, drawing primarily from structuration theory. While it is important to explore Pinterest using Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory as a framework, it is also worthwhile to investigate this platform from a more critical/cultural lens. The final section of this chapter will discuss third wave feminism,

namely repowered feminism and cyberfeminism, in relation to Pinterest. Within this section of the paper, I further develop some of the ideas presented in the introduction as they provide important context for the study as a whole. Because scholarly work concerning Pinterest *and* feminism is relatively limited, I found it necessary to use articles from non-academic sources as well.

## **Feminist Perspectives: Pinterest and the Third-Wave**

### ***How Pinterest is Killing Feminism...or is it?***

On October 1, 2012, *Buzzfeed* staff writer Amy Odell posted an article titled “How Pinterest is Killing Feminism” with the subtitle “This isn’t where the internet was supposed to take us.” She bashes Pinterest for being a platform full of “retrograde, materialistic content,” reflective of what women’s magazines (e.g., *Cosmopolitan* or *Glamour*) have been promoting for decades. In her view, the internet was supposed to help overcome this problem. She describes Pinterest as “one big user-curated women’s magazine,” and claims that the internet has become known as a place where women can discover “smarter, meatier reads just for them” (i.e., content superior to pins about recipes, weight loss, workouts, or home décor ideas).

People don’t go to Pinterest for articles, they go there to scrapbook every imaginable physical aspect of their dream lives, right down to the Mason jar candle holders you really hope to get around to DIY-ing for your next cocktail party (Odell, 2012, n.p.).

Sandler (2012) generalizes curators of domesticity on Pinterest and Tumblr (and female-oriented blogs), as living in a “sexless aspirational world” (n.p.). She calls activities (i.e., posting images that perpetuate female domesticity) on these sites “female cyber-exhibitionism,” and claims “lifestyle blogging barely even acknowledges that physical pleasure exists, never mind its key role in domestic bliss” (n.p.). In other words, her argument implies that women are spending

their time (too much of it) pinning pictures of the lives they want to live instead of actually going out and living them.

Sandler (2012) compares the lifestyle blog (as a genre) to advice that might be offered to a woman by her friend, to help improve or enhance “every aspect of *your* lifestyle.” “Those secrets though, are products and humblebrags. The advice they offer is merely how to make ourselves, as women, even more decorative” (Sandler, 2012, n.p.). In other words, in Sandler’s view, the content trending on a site like Pinterest perpetuates stereotypical gender norms where women are valued for how they look and their homemaking skills. Sandler (2012) claims that the digital world has become “regressive and prudish,” which has undermined the potential of both the bedroom and the internet (n.p.).

Odell (2012) and Sandler (2012) criticized Pinterest for being full of stereotypical content that could take women back to the days of “Suzy Homemaker.” They argue the plethora of recipes, home decorating ideas, beauty products, as well as diet and fitness tips, could promote the idea that women’s primary jobs are to cook, clean, and child rear (and to look good while doing so). “Pinterest looks like the *Ladies’ Home Journal* of 1962 or *Good Housekeeping* in 1958” (Pynchon, 2012). Pynchon (2012) claims that Pinterest promotes “tight gender boundaries” through its popularization of topics related to stereotypical female activities and failure to acknowledge women “working for a living” (i.e., in the categories users can choose from) (n.p.).

Odell (2012), Sandler (2012), and Pynchon (2012), appear to be loyal to the notion that the internet was not supposed to push women back but instead launch them forward. Their arguments suggest that to be a feminist today, a woman should not be drooling over delectable desserts, wedding gowns, or dream homes that populate many a Pinterest feed, as these images

could influence the roles women occupy (i.e., it could be dangerously limiting for a woman to fantasize about her wedding day or dream home). Further, using the site to long for these types of things could perpetuate stereotypical gender roles (e.g., woman as homemaker). The generalization that pinners gravitate to the site to curate elements of their “dream lives” all the way to creating DIY candleholders suggests that women are using the site for frivolous reasons (i.e., not reading empowering articles), are concerned with domesticity, and physical elements of the life they aspire to.

However, to accurately claim that sites like Pinterest and Tumblr push women back to the confines of gender norms *and* that women are using the sites in the aforementioned ways, a thorough investigation is necessary. Alford (2013) scrutinizes Odell’s (2012) declaration that “Pinterest is killing feminism.” By examining definitions of feminism provided by seminal feminists including Naomi Wolf and Betty Freidan, and their application to women’s use of Pinterest, she attempts to disprove Odell’s argument. The assertion that digital environments like Tumblr and Pinterest are powerful enough to abolish feminism (i.e., based on how women use them) is a lofty one in need of deeper examination.

### ***More than Female Cyber-Exhibitionism: The User-Curated Women’s Magazine***

Certainly, Pinterest has fielded its share of criticism. The site does provide users with content that could be viewed as “retrograde” (Odell, 2012)—but the content is user-generated. Therefore, it might be overly simplistic to think of Pinterest, as a medium, pushing specific content at its users. Rather, the content is better thought of as curated by Pinterest users and populated in feeds based on who each individual user ‘follows.’

But the characteristics of women’s magazines that have made them detrimental to women are actually what make Pinterest as a female-dominated, mass media space so appealing.

Unlike print magazines, Pinterest does not employ editors to determine the content to which women should be exposed. Instead, users make this determination by creating pins of the content they enjoy reading or are relevant to their lives or the lives of their friends and followers (Alford, 2013, p. 11).

Thus, the Pinterest user is not force-fed content. If a pin looks un-interesting, it can easily be bypassed. Note that the pins that fill a user's homepage appear there because the user elected to follow the fellow pinner. This digital environment allows the user to selectively expose him or herself to fellow users with whom they share interests or tastes.

Antonio (2013) argues that the site empowers women because they can create digital cookbooks by choice, not because of stereotypical gender demands. As noted in an earlier section of this chapter, she argues that women use Pinterest as a tool to creatively express themselves and publicize their cooking activities (n.p.). This ties into Kuhn's (2000) perspective regarding the power of the image, as she states that feminism has always given attention to "ideas, language and images" as being key factors that influence how one constructs his/her life (p. 63). Pinnerers exercise control in their act of pinning and refashion messages to fit with their identities. "In practice, the operations of texts and various levels of context are rarely in harmony, and there is always some space for 'aberrant' reception of dominant representations" (Kuhn, 2000, p. 66). In other words, control comes into play here as users appropriate, or re-contextualize, content in ways they find personally meaningful.

Pinterest enables users to curate content that serves personal and practical purposes. The magazine reader, however, is provided with content selected by the magazine editor(s)—their control resides in choosing what articles to read and bypass. The Pinterest user can selectively expose herself to content she finds personally meaningful—she can literally build her own digital repository that continuously populates content from fellow pinnerers she has elected to follow. "The user becomes more critical and more determined to find content that appeals to her own

specific interests as opposed to blindly consuming whatever content is placed in front of her” (Alford, 2013, p.11). Thus, if the Pinterest user purposefully builds pin boards that reflect individual needs, interests, and tastes, is she truly engaged in “cyber-exhibitionism” (Sandler, 2012), or is she using Pinterest as a digital tool to help plan, manage, and interpret elements of her daily life? The forthcoming section examines this notion in more detail.

### ***Repowered Feminism & Cyberfeminism: Rethinking the Definition of Feminism***

#### *Repowered Feminism*

Many media scholars argue that the era of new media has given way to the potential for a new type of consumer—one that has a greater degree of control over what he/she is exposed to and how it is used. In a sense, this new reality lessens the power of the analogy of media consumer as victim and foregrounds the notion of media user as creator. Media consumers are no longer *victims* of the mass media but rather *creators* in their own right. Just as media consumers are shifting away from a victim to creator role, a strand of third-wave feminism (i.e., 1990s to present) known as repowered feminism (Foss & Foss, 2009) views women as active agents who can create the world in which they want to live, rather than victims constrained by systems of oppression. Foss and Foss (2009) developed a “repowered” version of feminism. They felt compelled to do so based in part on an experience where they witnessed a fellow feminist theorist’s ideas being booed at a conference because they diverged from the traditional feminist hegemonic paradigm (p. 42).

Because we [feminists] ignored (and largely did not allow the publication of) ideas that did not support the dominant feminist paradigm, we witnessed a diminishing of creative ideas in the feminist movement. As we became as hegemonic as the hegemony of the dominant culture, the excitement that comes with new ideas and ways of thinking was gone (p. 42).

By operating under a strict code, the feminist movement has bypassed or ignored (and may continue to ignore) important voices and ideas simply because they fall outside the dominant paradigm. In the same way, Odell's (2012) claim supports a very inflexible way of thinking about feminism (one that resonates with the problems outlined by Foss and Foss (2009)). As such, it was refuted by women who believe one can be a feminist and enjoy using the site (Alford, 2013; Antonio, 2013; McDonnell-Parry, 2012).

Sometimes I want to spend 15 minutes drooling over mac 'n' cheese recipes I could make this weekend. Sometimes I'm in the mood to consider a hairdo change and need ideas. A website like Pinterest...makes it easier to catalog and organize those things which would either clutter up my bookmark bar or get lost in my overly stuffed brain (McDonnell-Parry, 2012, n.p.).

To say using Pinterest is anti-feminist could marginalize women who want to be part of the movement but do not see pinning recipes or home décor ideas as endangering or staggering feminist goals. Baumgardner and Richards (2000) explain that part of the problem with the feminist movement today is that many women do not understand (or are confused by) what it stands for and its history (p. 49). They mention a disconnect between groups and sub-groups within the movement: "For instance, young, culturally driven Girlie feminists share few strategies with the old-school Second Wavers—and vice versa" (p. 49). Certainly, women who consider themselves feminist but enjoy the more stereotypical gendered content on the site (e.g., beauty, fashion, home décor, recipes) could be looked down upon by more traditional, hardcore feminists who see the popularity of such items as dangerous. Nonetheless, it is also damaging to assume that women who pin on Pinterest are harming feminism as a movement (Odell, 2012).

Because the feminist movement is supported by diverse women, it would be impossible to find "one platform for action that all women agree on" (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p. 47). "What weaves a feminist movement together is a consciousness of inequities and a

commitment to changing them” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p. 48). Foss and Foss (2009) explain that feminism has always been committed to allowing individuals to make their own choices about how they want to live their lives (p. 45).

This commitment to self-determination is manifest in our definition of feminism in that each feminist has the opportunity to create a world of her choosing and does not require agreement by others on what that world should be like. The desired world will continue to evolve for each feminist, then, as she continues to make choice after choice (Foss & Foss, 2009, p. 45).

While the above statement is directed toward more than digital environments like Pinterest, it is worthwhile to consider in the context of this gendered space that has been criticized for perpetuating stereotypical roles. On Pinterest, a user makes choices ranging from who she follows, what she pins, and how she employs the pin in her everyday life (if she does at all). The pinning she engages in matters on an individual level and does not require approval or recognition from others. As McDonnell-Parry (2012) alluded, a woman might use Pinterest because it helps her organize (possibly de-clutter her brain), because she likes finding recipes to make for her significant other, or because she needs to find ideas for a new hairstyle.

Surely, not all women who use Pinterest identify as feminists. Nonetheless, the repowered feminism concept allows one to view Pinterest as a space that may enable women to create something they find desirable (i.e., both digital and physical in nature). Women who use the site are perhaps not “victims” of mass media messages that promote domesticity or the “Suzy Homemaker” ideal. Instead, they may be empowered to interpret and use the content in ways they find personally relevant.

From our perspective, the power of symbolic interpretation is feminism’s most powerful tool because it means that any feminist, no matter what her current condition, has the capacity to achieve the world she desires (Foss & Foss, 2009, p. 57).

The above quotation speaks to the idea that Pinterest can be considered a place that allows women to rewrite the stereotypical roles that have been assigned to them.

### *Cyberfeminism*

While the idea of repowered feminism is certainly helpful for situating Pinterest as a platform that may promote user-controlled behavior, the theory of cyberfeminism is also valuable as it looks more closely at women's use of new technology. Minahan and Cox (2007) describe it as a construct designed to "allow a voice to women who wish to participate in technology on their own terms" (p. 9). Further, Luckman (1999) describes cyberfeminism as referring "to a diverse range of practices and discourses all generally identifiable by their commitment to exploring non-oppressive alternatives to existing relations of power through the manipulation of information technologies" (p. 36). Such ideas align well with the notion of repowered feminism, as it too perceives women as having control—the power to create the world they want to live in.

For instance, Wajcman (2004) provides a description of young women of the 2000s, who at that time were experimenting with new media:

Wired women in cyber-cafes, experimenting with new media, clutching mobile phones, are immersed in science fiction and their imaginary worlds. It presents a seductive image for a culture with an insatiable appetite for novelty. The possibilities of reinventing the self and the body, like cyborgs in cyberspace and the prosthetic potential of biotechnologies have reinvigorated our thinking (Wajcman, 2004, p. 107).

Although the statement above was used to describe women engaging with new media more than a decade ago, I argue that it maintains relevance regarding how women may use Pinterest today. While Pinterest is not science fiction, it does provide an opportunity to participate in an imaginary world and possibly reinvent the self.

In a forthcoming chapter, I use repowered feminism and cyberfeminism as theoretical lenses to explore my interview findings from a third-wave feminist perspective.

### ***Concluding Thoughts***

Media researchers like Radway (1983, 1984), Seiter (1999), Levine (2015), and myself suggest that perhaps we are not asking all of the important questions regarding the impacts of media (i.e., the questions being asked may be partial or limited). Perhaps more attention should be given to what people are *doing* with the media as opposed to what it can do *to them*. The “digital watershed” section of this chapter highlighted the notion of produsage (e.g., users doing something in new ways with media), as it is a helpful concept to employ when studying Pinterest. Lastly, I identified three important and related conceptual areas I have found helpful for thoroughly and accurately understanding Pinterest as a new media phenomenon—these include conceptions of creativity, structuration theory, and a third-wave feminist theory. Incorporating each of these ideas into the present study contributed to what I consider a full-bodied exploration of Pinterest from numerous yet complementary lenses.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

### **Overarching Questions**

- Does using Pinterest as a wedding planning tool extend the traditional feminine role of wedding preparation (i.e., contribute to specific behavior determined by a patriarchal society)? Or does using Pinterest as a wedding planning tool provide an opportunity for women to engage in user-controlled behavior (i.e., offer an avenue to find voice and agency)?

### **Re-Defining Feminism in the Digital Age: Repowered Feminism and Cyberfeminism**

- What is the relationship between using Pinterest to plan one's wedding and the third-wave feminism concepts of repowered feminism as well as cyberfeminism?
  - Based on the interview findings, as well as answers to the above question, do we need to re-address what it means to be a feminist in today's digitally-driven world?

### **Pinterest as a Wedding Planning Tool: Pinning for Leisure or Labor?**

- Is Pinterest perpetuating the stereotype that wedding planning is 'women's work'?
- Does using Pinterest as a wedding planning tool allow women to push back against this stereotype?
- What does the use of Pinterest for wedding planning tell us about the extension of the traditional female role in wedding preparation?

### **Identity (aspired self)**

- How do brides-to-be construct an aspiring bride identity through using Pinterest?

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## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

To investigate the research questions posed in the preceding chapter, I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with 20 female Pinterest users and an observation of select pin boards from exemplar participants (i.e., boards pertaining to wedding planning). Through qualitative analyses of the interviews and pin boards, I thoroughly explored the complexities associated with using Pinterest as a wedding planning tool and, in so doing, reflected on my own use of Pinterest as a former aspiring bride. The findings presented in this study allow me to make a statement about yet another new contribution to human experience of new media technology—specifically, a form of feminized popular culture (Levine, 2015).

Lofland and Lofland (1995) discuss the notion of “starting where you are” when selecting a topic to study in the realm of social science. They note that this approach could cause methodological and ethical difficulties, but that they are “a small price to pay for the very creative wellsprings of the naturalistic approach” (p. 15). In other words, when selecting a topic to study for a project as large as a dissertation, the researcher needs to have a deep interest in and passion for their topic of study.

In 2010, “I started where I was” and began investigating women’s production of haul videos on YouTube—a phenomenon I became absorbed in on both a personal and academic level. My interest in haul videos turned into the primary topic for my master’s thesis and further instilled my desire to understand how and why women (including myself) use certain social media to construct the self. Through carrying out the present study, I advanced my program of research by investigating how women use a platform stereotyped as being “for women,” to perform a stereotypically feminine role—wedding planning. This investigation allowed me to

explore how identity can be negotiated and constructed around the life event of a wedding. Further, this study fueled my passion to examine wedding planning via digital media as I think some of the same questions could be explored through an analysis Instagram and other emergent platforms.

In the following sections, I outline the study's methodological framework, data collection, and analysis procedures. Before explaining the methods, however, I believe it is important for me to share my ontological perspective, as it influenced how I conducted this study.

### **The Constructivist Perspective**

Constructivism is an ontological perspective that views reality as pluralistic. In other words, reality will vary in form and content across individuals and social groups. Within this view, realities can be “socially and experientially grounded” and “local and specific in nature” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, pp. 110-111). A constructivist researcher will not grant more ‘truth’ to a given construction of reality. Instead, they may see one construction as “more or less informed and/or sophisticated” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111). A constructivist researcher aims to gather subjective meanings of participants’ experiences (i.e., directed toward objects or things):

These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas. The goal of this research then, is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation (Creswell, 2012, pp. 24-24).

Guba and Lincoln (1994) describe the epistemological component (meaning, one’s belief about what we can know and how we should try to know it) of this paradigm as being “transactional and subjectivist.” The researcher and subject, or person, under investigation are thought of as “interactively linked,” which results in findings that are created through inquiry

processes (p. 111). The interviewer and the interviewee are thus involved in the co-construction of meaning in an effort to decode the phenomenon or topic under study. Within this perspective, the researcher does not generate the interpretations alone. Rather, it is the joint interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee that facilitate this co-construction of meaning. “The knowledge that emerges from interview-based constructivist methodology is therefore at least in part created, not discovered, by the researcher” (Clark, 2004, p. 23).

I appreciate that this perspective views data collection as a joint endeavor, which is one of the reasons I embrace constructivism. In the forthcoming section, I explain more about why I am attracted to this ontological perspective.

### **My Research Ontology**

I began to gravitate toward a constructivist perspective relatively early in my graduate studies, though I did not adequately understand what this meant or how it would influence the research I conducted until I took a qualitative methods class while completing Ph.D. coursework. Learning about the different ontologies (including positivism, post-positivism, critical-culturalism, and constructivism, as defined by Guba & Lincoln, 1994), allowed me to more fully understand how I interpret the relationships I hold, the communities I belong to, and ultimately, how my identities influence my work as a communication and feminist scholar. This learning experience also re-affirmed that “starting where I am (or was)” (Lofland & Lofland, 1995) was the right choice, as it led me to develop a program of research that involves understanding how and why women use social media to build the self—something I have often wondered about myself.

For instance, I chose to explore women's consumption and production of YouTube haul videos for my master's thesis (Keats, 2012). When I discovered this phenomenon, I was instantly infatuated because I was exposed to hundreds of women in my age group who took extreme (in some cases obsessive) interest in buying the latest MAC makeup palettes or newest style of Steve Madden booties (in other words, I wasn't alone). I sought to understand this new media sensation from an academic perspective, but wanted to use my position as an active consumer of such media to inform my work.

My immersion into this new media phenomenon (which began months before I began interviewing haulers), allowed me to understand the trend on a more personal level. This resulted in authentic conversation with my interviewees because I understood the norms and practices they were referring to (in the realm of YouTube) from a user's (or consumer's) perspective. Further, taking a genuine interest in the content showcased in haul videos (e.g., fashion and beauty products) helped to facilitate more in-depth dialogue, as I was able to express my shared interest in certain fashion or beauty brands, etc. Taken together, this meant that I was closely linked to the phenomenon I was studying. I was involved in the co-construction of meaning due to my deep immersion in the phenomenon—I understood the “local meanings and practices” and was able to use my researcher role to produce “credible knowledge claims” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 9) based on the interview conversations and analyses.

The present study is similar in that, again, I was (and am often still am) very much immersed in my environment of study. For instance, I spend approximately 40-60 minutes per week perusing Pinterest and pinning images that relate to my current and/or future life—recipes, home decorating tips, and formerly wedding planning ideas (to name a few of the categories).

Consequently, I brought to my interview conversations a broad understanding of what it means to use Pinterest based on my own experience with the platform (I began using the site in May 2012, roughly two years after it became publicly available). Supplemental to this, the majority of research conducted during my doctoral program focused on Pinterest (i.e., class papers and conference presentations). Therefore, I began the present study with a strong foundation for studying Pinterest already in place.

### ***Reflexivity***

In offering what they call a “generic definition” of qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) explain that this type of research is a “situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (p. 3). Given that I am immersed in the environments I choose to study, the naturalistic and constructivist perspectives align well with how I approach my scholarly endeavors. Taking on dual roles (researcher and participant), however, means that I need to be self-reflexive. “Reflexivity—the process of engaging in mutual recognition of, and adaption with, others—enables the researcher to manage the twisting, turning road of qualitative research” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 72). By enacting a reflexive approach in the present study, I acknowledged how my relationships with the texts and people I study impact my interpretations and construction of meaning (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 72). Stated another way, in social research it is a given that the researcher will carefully describe and characterize the research participant. But if the goal is a co-construction of meaning, we also need to adequately describe and characterize the other constructor—the researcher.

“...a constructivist perspective argues that our awareness of our own relation to what we observe and analyze is particularly important” (Clark, 2004, p. 30). This quote speaks to the fact

that the interviews I conducted, transcribed, and analyzed, as well as the pins I collected and interpreted, were explained through my own experience as an active user of Pinterest. As I moved through this research process, I subjectively engaged in meaning-making as the findings were filtered through my own worldviews (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p. 26). Reflexive research “dispels the myth of objectivity in social science,” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 72). This means, I acknowledged that my dual roles as Pinterest user and researcher resulted in a project not entirely objective. Instead, these dual roles may have informed and strengthened my interpretation of the findings. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) reinforce this in stating: “Intimate familiarity with local meanings and practices is considered a requirement for successful explanation” (p. 9). Related to the present study, I employed my position as an active Pinterest user to complement my research, but took the precautions necessary to ensure my voice (e.g., pinning experiences) did not overpower the conversations with my participants, alongside whom I was crafting meaning. Maintaining an ongoing awareness about “who I am” in the work I conducted was critically important (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p. 26).

The “inquirer as instrument” concept can be considered one of the most difficult aspects of naturalistic inquiry, as the inquirer holds the role of instrument administrator, data collector, data analyst, and data interpreter simultaneously (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 128). Considering I took on all such roles, it was important for me to enact self-reflexive practices as doing so may result in “better data” (at least on a practical level) (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 72). For instance, I wanted participants to share with me everything about their identities (as Pinterest users and aspiring brides). I interpreted the information shared with me in part through my identities (e.g., Pinterest user, female, feminist), and ultimately developed a comprehensive interpretation of the collective findings. It is imperative to recognize here that the co-construction of meaning (i.e.,

the “better data”) emerged through the continual dialogue fostered between my participants and my interpretive activities.

### ***Concluding Thoughts***

Echoing the value of “starting where you are” (Lofland & Lofland, 1995), Lindlof & Taylor (2011) maintain that meaningful scholarship is “not just ‘okay,’—it is perhaps the best way to live the scholars’ life” (p. 77). In carrying out this project, I was engaged in meaningful scholarship because I studied an environment in which I actively participate. Because I situate myself as both user and researcher of new media phenomena, I am confident in my ability to justify how my dual roles serve to inform my scholarly inquiries. Using a constructivist perspective allowed me to exercise reflexivity and engage in necessary and critical reflection as I interpreted my participants’ use of Pinterest as a wedding planning tool and the role Pinterest played in constructing an aspiring bride’s identity.

### **Description of the Method**

Performances and practices, then, constitute the texture of our everyday communication. Through them, we enact the meanings of our relationships in various contexts. Virtually any communicative act can be studied as a kind of performance, which can, in turn, be viewed as a variation on a practice (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 4).

Pinterest can be considered a digital stage on which participants can perform aspects of their past, present, and/or future selves. These digital performances and practices, arguably, are linked to the relationships that comprise the everyday lives of users (for instance, the roles and relationships that unfold around wedding planning). Given that Pinterest users often use the site daily, it is possible that they are engaged in performing the self by participating in active meaning making and forming relationships with the self and others. Examining this digital

phenomenon using a qualitative approach provided detailed and contextual findings that contributed to my interpretation of how and why users practice in this new media spectacle, specifically in a wedding planning context. To understand how Pinterest influences the “texture of our everyday communication” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 4), I talked with brides-to-be as well as women who were recently married to understand how using Pinterest influenced the wedding planning process as well as other aspects of their lives (e.g., professional, romantic, spiritual, and/or maternal).

Qualitative methods are helpful when a researcher seeks a “complex, detailed understanding” of a particular issue or phenomenon (Creswell, 2012, p. 48). Further, such methodologies can be beneficial when a researcher wants to “empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participant in a study” (Creswell, 2012, p. 48). This study was motivated by my desire to generate a deep understanding of Pinterest on several levels: a) Pinterest as a new media phenomenon; b) Pinterest as a new media phenomenon often stereotyped as being for “wedding-obsessed women” (Tekobbe, 2013); and c) Pinterest as a form of feminized popular culture (Levine, 2015) that may grant women control. To explore these standpoints, I found it necessary to talk firsthand with women who actively used Pinterest as a wedding planning tool, given that some researchers critical of this social media venue has not actually asked Pinterest users what the experience meant to them (Jones, 2016; Friz & Gehl, 2016).

Qualitative methods allow the researcher to more freely investigate and interpret a given phenomenon. For example, Boellstorff (2008) conducted ethnographic research about Second Life, using participant observation, interviews, and focus groups to understand this virtual environment. “Culture can be implicit and even subconscious, but much of it is part of everyday

awareness; members of a culture can sometimes be its most eloquent interpreters” (p. 76). That is to say, those who actively participate in an environment like Pinterest may be the most adept at explaining it based on their level of immersion to and understanding of the culture. The insights shared by Boellstorff (2008) resonate with those of Radway (1984), which help to further illustrate the importance of speaking with, not simply for, the participant:

To know, then, why people do what they do, read romances, for instance, it becomes necessary to discover the constructions they place on their behavior, the interpretations they make of their actions. A good cultural analysis of the romance ought to specify not only how the women understand the novels themselves but also how they comprehend the very act of picking up a book in the first place. The analytic focus must shift from the text itself, taken in isolation, to the complex social event of reading where a woman actively attributes sense to the lexical signs in a silent process carried on in the context of her ordinary life (p. 8).

Janice Radway (1983, 1984) is well known for her research concerning women’s use of romance novels, which provides a strong example of how a researcher can place interpretive power in the hands of the participant (i.e., the interviewee). The above quotation highlights why investigating a popular culture text necessitates a qualitative approach that allows the researcher to look at the text not in isolation but in conjunction with firsthand accounts from those who use it (i.e., interviewees), as well as observe or analyze the text itself (e.g., content analyses). Her use of the word “discover” indicates that as a researcher, she is not assigning meaning or significance to what is said or found, but rather, interpreting through a dialectic process.

The qualitative researcher is often the primary instrument and thus tasked with filtering and sifting through relatively massive amounts of information as well as interpreting. His/her selections—interviewees, their statements, and the textual content produced (e.g., pins, pin boards, comments)—work collectively to form an understanding of a given phenomenon on a deeper level. This dialectic process—the genuine, authentic negotiative conversation that unfolds between the researcher and the researched—facilitates a deeper look at the unspoken cultural

ideological discourse and attempts to interpret it. Radway (1984) provides a helpful explanation of how she carried out this process:

[I]n making the interpretation, in formulating what might be called my informants' covert agenda, I have always worked first from their conscious statements and beliefs about their behavior, accepted them as given, and then posited additional desires, fears, or concerns that complement rather than contradict those beliefs and assertions. As a result, the account oscillates back and forth between the readers' perceptions of themselves and their activities and a more distant view of them that makes an effort to include the unseen cultural ground or set of assumptions upon which they stand (p. 10).

Radway's approach effectively illustrates what Guba and Lincoln (1994) mean when they explain that the constructivist inquirer understands and reconstructs "...the constructions that the people (including the inquirer) initially hold, aiming toward consensus but still open to new interpretations as information and sophistication improve" (p. 113). As a researcher who identifies with this paradigm, I admire that Radway took what her respondents shared as "given," and elaborated and explained where she felt it necessary. Her use of the term "oscillate" is effective in that it speaks to the dialectic, interactive process that should unfold between the investigator and participant within this type of research setting.

Boellstorff (2008) also touches on the notion of oscillating, explaining that his exchanges were generally "two-way affairs," where the interviewee would also pose questions to the interviewer (p. 77). Rubin & Rubin (2012) developed the responsive interviewing model under which they refer to interview participants as "conversation partners" (p. 7). This type of interviewing sees both parties as active contributors to a conversation and emphasizes how important it is for the interviewer to adapt questioning to what he/she is learning as the conversation unfolds. Using Rubin and Rubin's (2012) approach, I engaged with my participants as a "conversation partner" rather than a conversation dictator.

In the forthcoming sections, I provide background about semi-structured qualitative interviews and content analyses, as these are the two methods I used to investigate the research questions posed in the preceding chapter. I find Radway's work regarding women's reading of romance novels to be incredibly valuable. Therefore, her work was consulted as an exemplar for how to study a popular text (i.e., Pinterest) using an interpretive framework and a responsive interviewing style.

### *The Qualitative Interview*

This project was fueled by my interest in unveiling how and why aspiring brides interact with Pinterest (e.g., why do they pin, what does pinning mean, how do they use pins, how much time do they spend pinning, etc.). I was not interested in collecting quantitative data to enable making broad claims about this platform. Instead, I sought to understand what this platform signifies to the aspiring brides I interviewed on a deeper, more intimate level. To accurately explore this, I found it necessary to engage in firsthand conversations (through semi-structured interviewing) with women who were engaged (at the time of the interview) and/or had recently been married and used Pinterest as their primary wedding planning tool.

Radway (1983, 1984) was devoted to understanding the meaning-making processes women were involved in through their consumption of romance novels. In applying her approach to the present study, my goal was to discover how aspiring brides understand Pinterest (i.e., what does it signify to them) in addition to "how they comprehend the very act of" (Radway, 1984, p. 8) pinning an image on Pinterest (i.e., how does pinning wedding-related content play a role in the ultimate planning of the wedding). Further, through conducting my interviews, I attempted to gain an understanding of what a woman thinks about the "complex social event" of pinning

where she may “actively attribute[s] sense to the lexical signs in a silent”—yet digitally interactive—“process carried out in the context of her ordinary life” (Radway, 1984, p. 8). Specifically, I sought to understand the aforementioned ideas from Radway (1984) in relation to the historically feminine role of wedding planning (Ingraham, 1999; Boden, 2003; Sniezek, 2005; Blakely, 2008; Engstrom, 2008; McKenzie & Davies 2010).

These research objectives are subjective in nature—what the act of pinning means for one woman may be entirely different for another. Therefore, a method that encourages conversation in an effort to unpack such nuances is key. In their discussion of the purposes of qualitative interviewing, Lindlof and Taylor (2002) state that interviewing is beneficial in that it helps the researcher to learn the “...social actor’s experience and perspective” (p. 173). The following statement fits well with the goals of my study:

Social actors also produce explanations of their behavior. They explain how they apply what they know in certain areas of their lives, how they negotiate certain issues, how they moved from one stage of their lives to another, how they interpret certain texts, and so on. The interviewer’s goal is to draw out the individual, interpersonal, or cultural logics that people employ in their communicative performances (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 174).

This project aimed to learn the social actor’s experience(s) with and perspectives on using Pinterest in the context of daily life. In one respect, this research sought to uncover whether Pinterest acts as a tool that enables performance of the self and user-controlled behavior. Therefore, the qualitative interview is a strong instrument to use in meeting these research goals.

Through flexible questioning (i.e., posing a question but allowing room for the respondent to answer freely and possibly shift between topics), I incorporated a responsive interviewing technique (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), “which emphasizes flexibility in question formulation and allows the interviewer to respond to what is learned” (Ellis, 2013, p. 433). Rubin and Rubin’s (2012) responsive interviewing model views the interview transaction as fluid

“...allowing the researcher to change questions asked, the sites chosen, and the situations to study” (Creswell, 2012, p. 163). The responsive interviewing model resonates with my methodological focus in that I appreciated the flexibility to alter questions (based on the interview exchange) and the situations I want to study (given new areas of foci may emerge through the transactional relationships that unfold during the interviews).

As “storytellers,” humans are undoubtedly biased when they share information during an interview because they are talking “...from a perspective that is uniquely their own” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 173). These authors explain that as “cultural animals,” humans are going to organize the “how,” “what,” “when,” “where,” and “why” regarding their interactions with an interviewer, depending on the situation (p. 173). Additionally, the interviewer will bring with him/her a certain amount of bias if they are close to the topic under study. It is critical for the interviewer to take note of any biases (regarding the primary topic and participant) and create questions to offset any ideas that could bias the interview exchange (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 72).

After collecting stories from as many “conversation partners” as the researcher deems necessary, it is then his/her job to assemble the stories “...in a reasoned way that re-creates culture or describes a process or set of events in a way that participants would recognize as real” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 7). Thus, it is not only the researcher’s job to carry out un-biased, thorough, and effective interviews. He/she must also interpret the stories shared by participants accurately and completely so that the final write-up encapsulates what the respondents (i.e., original storytellers) would consider truthful—especially when individual accounts are blended together to tell one larger story. Methods for interpreting qualitative data are discussed at length in a forthcoming section.

## **Interview Procedures**

### ***Setting and Interview Structure***

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face (i.e., a coffee shop or my home) or digitally (i.e., via Skype or Apple FaceTime). Specifically, 12 interviews were conducted digitally and eight were conducted face-to-face. The interview format was dependent on my proximity to each participant (i.e., distance interviews were conducted digitally). Most interviews were approximately one hour in length (though several ranged from one hour and 30 minutes to two hours). Interviewees were asked a series of approximately 15 questions pertaining to how they used Pinterest as a wedding planning tool in addition to a daily life planning or management tool (the semi-structured interview guide can be found in Appendix A). Using a responsive interviewing technique (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), I attempted to create a comfortable environment that facilitated authentic and free-flowing conversation between the participants and myself.

According to Fontana and Frey (1998), “Unstructured interviewing provides greater breadth than the other types, given its qualitative nature” (p. 56). While I maintained control over the interview to ensure that the order and phrasing of my questions was clear (i.e., the participant was not confused), I did not use a formulaic interview style that felt sterile or promoted a sense of distance and/or power differential between the interviewee and myself. “...interviewers must necessarily be creative, forget ‘how-to’ rules, and adapt themselves to the ever-changing situations they face” (Fontana & Frey, 1998, p. 62). This idea fits with the type of interaction I aimed to create with my interviewees.

As I learned through interviewing YouTube haulers for my master’s research, subjects sometimes go off on tangents. In doing so, they often provide what often turns out to be valuable

information. I found the same to be true in the present study. Several participants talked at length about a given topic, often taking the interview in a different direction (deviating from my planned questioning). Such deviation stimulated my thinking and prompted me to ask additional questions, resulting in supplemental and valuable interview material. Therefore, the interview is most definitely “ever-changing,” and requires the interviewer to adapt and maintain confidence that he/she will obtain the needed information they are in search of. Further, Ogle and Damhorst (2005) explain their interviewing experience as follows:

Although a set of open-ended questions was developed to guide topics of discussion for the interviews . . . the interviewer allowed the participants to provide direction for the conversation, following their lead by posing questions in response to their comments and teasing out richer meanings from the dialogue. Thus, the interviews resembled a conversation between equals more than a rigid, question and answer session (p. 5).

The description of their interviews speaks to the responsive interviewing technique, and accurately reflects how my interview sessions unfolded.

I attempted to create a comfortable interview setting wherein my participants did not receive me as “superior” to them in any way. Showing a genuine curiosity in what each participant had to share helped me to establish a strong rapport. “If interviews are the ‘digging tool’ of social science, the skilled interviewer should ask questions in an effective, nonthreatening way” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 171). Consequently, my goal was to create a feeling of camaraderie with each interviewee so that they were inclined to share the innermost details about their Pinterest use in planning a major life event. To help establish this bond, I began each interview by explaining that I too was actively involved in the planning of my wedding and using Pinterest as my primary tool.

Even though I was the one doing the questioning, I could relate firsthand to the stress and tension often associated with wedding planning, as well as the excitement and joy. The ideal

scenario is one in which “a richly expressive *inter-view*,” that neither entity could have created alone, will emerge as a result of the shared interactions and resemble “the form and feel of a talk between friends” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 171). By putting myself on the same “level” as my participants (i.e., I was also an aspiring bride experiencing some of the same emotions), I would like to think I was successful in creating a comfortable interview setting, ultimately generating significant interview findings.

### ***Sample Selection Rationale***

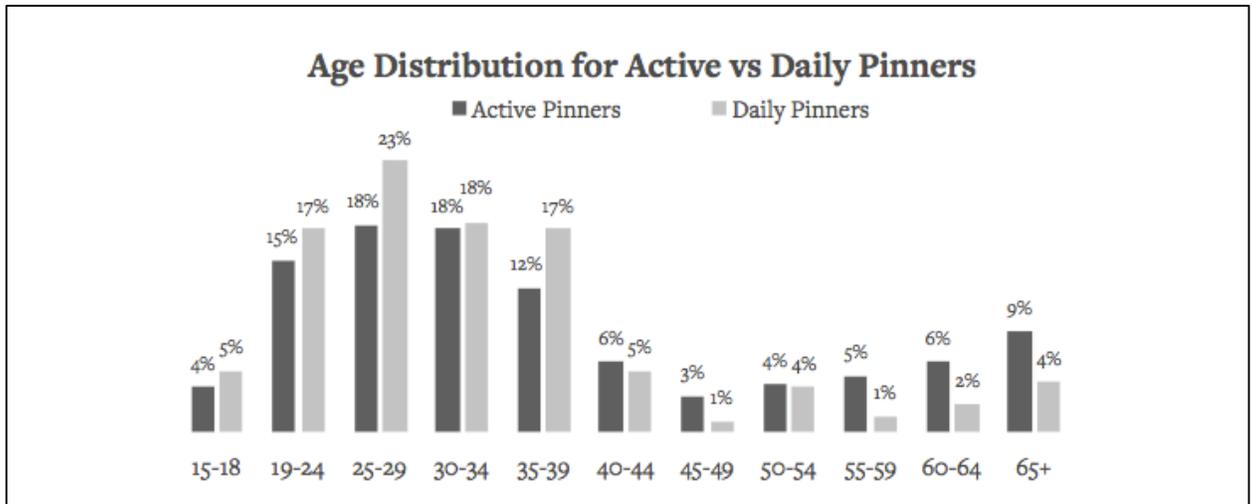
According to Ahalogy’s<sup>1</sup> 2015 Pinterest Media Consumption Study, 67% of active pinners (users who access Pinterest once a month or more often) and 82% of daily pinners (users who access the site daily) were under the age of 40 (pp. 5-6). Further, they report that 82% of pinners identify as female. Based on the statistics presented from Ahology (2015), I tried to recruit participants from the top three age ranges: (1) 19-24; (2) 25-29; and (3) 30-34. Figure 6 (below) features a bar graph from Ahalogy’s 2015 report that illustrates the age distribution for active versus daily pinners.

### ***Participant Recruitment***

To recruit participants, I used a maximum variation sampling strategy (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 113). This sampling method allows the researcher to examine a variety of “qualities, attributes, situations, or incidents of the phenomenon under study” (p. 113). In other words, the objective is to encourage enough diversity to generate a relatively wide variety of narratives.

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<sup>1</sup> “Ahalogy is the Marketer's Solution for Pinterest. As an official Pinterest Marketing Developer Partner, Ahalogy’s optimization technology, licensed content, and focused expertise helps brands Source, Optimize and Scale content for success on the platform.” The company works with numerous global brands and content creators to provide “meaningful marketing” on Pinterest (“About Ahalogy,” 2015).



**Figure 6:** Age Distribution for Active vs Daily Pinners  
(Ahalogy 2015 Pinterest Media Consumption Study, p. 6)

While the maximum variation approach did not ensure a diverse sample, it was the most feasible method for me to employ given the scope and nature of this project. Maximum variation sampling prompts the researcher to pay close attention to a broader range of possibilities in the process of gathering stories. This approach can allow one to obtain “information-rich cases...from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the evaluation’ as opposed to ‘gathering little information from a large, statistical [sic] significant sample’” (Patton, 1987, p. 9 as cited in Ancavitu, Vitcu, & Marcu, 2007, p. 9).

In the case of the present research, this sampling technique proved valuable in that it facilitated the collection of detailed narratives instead of large-scale quantitative data that cannot adequately assess questions of how and why women use Pinterest on an introspective level. Further, maximum variation sampling is often used in qualitative research because “...when a researcher maximizes differences at the beginning of the study, it increases the likelihood that the findings will reflect differences or different perspectives—an ideal in qualitative research” (Creswell, 2012, p. 157).

“The chief value of qualitative research lies in achieving in-depth understanding of social reality in a specific context” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 109). This statement speaks to the present study in that I explored the social reality of one gender (i.e., female) in a specific context (wedding planning via Pinterest). Nonetheless, because this study is exploratory and emergent in nature, I did not find it necessary to broaden my sample to include women of varying demographics. Further, “[I]t is not necessary to know everything in order to understand something” (Geertz, 1973, p. 20). Applying this idea to the present research helps to illustrate that to understand Pinterest as a new media phenomenon, it is not necessary to know every single detail regarding who uses the platform and how.

The interviews and observation of several exemplar pin boards I conducted for this project have provided me with a significant amount of data I can investigate in the future. Through analyzing my findings, I have generated new questions and themes I plan to explore in future iterations of this research. The interpretations presented here are in no way generalizable to the phenomenon of wedding planning via Pinterest at large given they are limited to a sample of 20 women from a rather homogenous group (i.e., all women identified as Caucasian, cis gender, and as being in heterosexual relationships). Additionally, participants fell within the range of 23-33 years of age. Although it was not asked directly during the interviews, through conversation, it became apparent that the sample consisted of primarily middle-income to upper-middle income and fairly educated women. Through asking participants to share their occupation, it became clear that the majority held at minimum a Bachelor’s degree. Participants were not asked to disclose their religious affiliation, education level, or income level.

Here, it is also important to note that I realize that it can be fairly argued that there is a certain type of individual who has the luxury and/or ability to engage in an isolated media

experience such as using Pinterest to find wedding inspiration. In other words, because my participants fell within a category of educated and middle to upper-middle income status, they had the luxury to use Pinterest as a form of “technologically mediated leisure” (Parry & Light, 2014) to temporarily ‘escape’ daily stressors. I understand that this is not the case for all, and that a future study of this nature should include a sample of women for whom media leisure time is not a reality (e.g., due to financial and/or familial constraints [i.e., not all women can afford a device from which they can access Pinterest; not all women have ‘free time’ they can spend perusing social media]).

Furthermore, it is important to mention that as the researcher, I share many of the same demographic characteristics as my participants (i.e., I am a Caucasian, cis gender, middle-income, educated woman). I chose to pursue this sample population as doing so allowed me to reflect on my own experiences as a woman who also used Pinterest to plan her wedding. Because this project served as the launching point for my research trajectory, I chose to “start where I was” (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). This is just the start. As I move forward with this area of inquiry, it will be imperative to broaden my sample to include a wider demographic of women as I am interested in understanding how individuals of various backgrounds engage with this medium.

### *Recruitment Procedures*

To recruit participants, I began by sending an email to several friends and acquaintances asking if they could put me in touch with any of their friends or colleagues (unknown to me) who were using (or had recently used) Pinterest to assist with their wedding planning. This method proved to be very useful in that I generated my first set of participants (approximately five

individuals). From here, I began to engage in snowball sampling. Briefly, snowball sampling involves asking participants “for the names of friends, relatives, or acquaintances they know who may also qualify for the research study” (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006, pp. 99-100). Specifically, during my first round of interviews (i.e., the first five or so that I conducted), I asked each participant if she had any friends or colleagues who might consider participating in my study. After receiving the email addresses of potential recruits from my initial participants, I sent an email introducing myself, explaining my study, and requesting participation. This approach was successful and allowed me to obtain 20 total participants. Appendix B features the recruitment text that was provided to all participants.

#### *Selection Criteria and Sample Details*

Participants were selected if they reported using Pinterest at least one time per month (considered an active user [Ahology, 2015]) to assist with wedding planning and agreed to participate in an interview of approximately 60 minutes. Participants were selected for the study if they were actively engaged in wedding planning at the time of the interview or if they had been married within the past year (and used Pinterest as a planning tool). In consenting to take part in the study, participants also agreed to share their Pinterest profile URL so that I could explore their pin boards. My sample included four women from the 19-24 age range, 12 women from the 25-29 age range, and four women from the 30-34 age range, resulting in 20 participants total.

## **Crystallization and Constant Comparison**

In addition to conducting interviews, I explored the wedding-related pin boards of several exemplar participants (i.e., interviewees whose Pinterest experience I found to be unique) (see Hoover, Clark, Alters, Champ, & Hood, 2004) to generate an understanding of what their wedding-oriented pinning activity entailed. Through conducting interviews and analyses of exemplar participant boards, the academic rigor of this project may have been increased and validity of the findings strengthened through the cross-analysis of multiple dimensions of the wedding planning via Pinterest.

“What people say” is often very different from “what people do” (Hodder, 1998, p. 113). In the context of the proposed research, it is thus necessary to examine “what people do” with this platform (i.e., their pinning activities) in conjunction with what they say about using the site in order to present a full and accurate picture of the phenomenon. Hodder (1998) maintains that the study of material culture is of value for qualitative researchers who want to examine “multiple and conflicting voices, differing and interacting interpretations” (p. 114). He reinforces the idea that to adequately investigate a site of social interaction (e.g., Pinterest), the inclusion of “mute material evidence” is necessary (p. 114). Research conducted by Radway (1984) and Hoover et al. (2004), and more recently Zarro et al. (2013) and Linder et al. (2014), highlights the value of incorporating primary data (i.e., interviews) as well as secondary analyses (i.e., observing the material artifact) when engaged in exploratory and interpretive research.

### ***Crystallization***

Because this study is naturalistic in nature, I found it helpful to focus on my target (i.e., Pinterest) from more than one direction. Many researchers label this approach “triangulation”

and argue that it strengthens validity. Lincoln and Guba (1985) maintain that unless it can be triangulated, “no single item of information (unless coming from an elite and unimpeachable source) should ever be given serious consideration” (p. 283). Therefore, I combined in-depth interviews with analyses of pinned content from exemplar participants, as doing so helped to “bolster confidence in the objective reality” (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011, p. 274) of my findings. I hereon refer to my approach as crystallization, as opposed to triangulation, because it more closely aligns with the constructivist approach (which is expanded upon later in this section). By engaging in crystallization, the validity and credibility of my findings and interpretations may have been strengthened, ultimately producing a more complete and perhaps trustworthy portrayal of this phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), “If the data from two or more methods point toward the same conclusion, then validation is enhanced” (p. 274). Further, these authors cite Laura Ellingson’s (2009b) approach to qualitative research known as “crystallization” (p. 277).

[C]rystallization eschews positivist claims to objectivity and a singular, discoverable truth...It brings together multiple methods and multiple genres simultaneously to enrich findings and demonstrate the inherent limitations of all knowledge; each partial account complements the others, providing pieces of the meaning puzzle but never completing it, marking the absence of the completed image  
(Ellingson, 2009b, p. 13 – as cited in Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 277).

In this way, crystallization differs from triangulation because the concept does not focus on “seeking one version of truth” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 277). Instead, it emphasizes reflexivity, narrative consistency, contrasting genres, plausibility and verisimilitude (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, pp. 277-278). In conducting this research, I did not seek one version of the truth because I do not believe there is one “truth” that can be put forth to understand how and why women use a site like Pinterest—for wedding planning as well as other reasons. Instead, this project incorporates stories from multiple aspiring brides to understand the complex layers of

meaning and identity linked to using Pinterest. Extrapolating this to Radway's (1984) study of romance novels, Pinterest can be viewed as a text complete with "several layers of meaning that can be peeled away like the shell and skin of an almond to reveal the text's true core significance" (p. 5). My goal as a researcher was to reveal the "core significance" of Pinterest as a wedding planning tool by using crystallization.

The crystallization approach was enacted by blending firsthand accounts from aspiring brides, analyses of select pin boards, and my interpretation of the findings (i.e., multiple sources of evidence). This served as a starting point for unpacking the complex phenomenon of wedding planning via Pinterest. In other words, the partial accounts I gathered and interpreted complement one another and, taken together, culminate in a methodologically rigorous and valid examination of how some women engage with this new media sensation. It is important to note that rigor and validity are conceived of differently in constructivist qualitative research. Notions of validity and reliability, as they apply to the present study, are expanded on later in this chapter. The following section provides an overview of the constant comparative method and explains how it will be used to examine interview transcripts in the present study.

### **Analysis of Interview Findings**

Returning to the methodological approach known as crystallization (Ellingson, 2009), I want to reiterate that the goal of this study was not to generate a flawless representation of a reality (i.e., the realities presented by my interview participants). It has been argued that constructivist qualitative research strategies instead aim for the metaphor of the crystal.

According to Ellingson's (2009) notion of "crystallization," the qualitative researcher builds...

...a rich and openly partial account of a phenomenon that problematizes its own construction, highlights researchers' vulnerabilities and positionality, makes claims about socially constructed meanings, and reveals the indeterminacy of knowledge claims even as it makes them (p. 4).

In other words, crystallization models a reality (or multiple realities) in which we assume those we study exist within meaningful worlds, we as researchers occupy our own spheres of existence, and the audiences for our research reports possess a sense of their own realities. Thus, any descriptive claims are always contingent upon fluid, processional, continuous assessments of the different parties in play.

That said, when working with information in the form of text and pictures (i.e., interview transcripts and pinned images) quantitative methods that provide broad but shallow statistical data (often in the form of frequencies) are inadequate. In and of themselves, they do not offer the deeper sensitivities required to imagine a multifaceted crystal of experience. To generate a thorough analysis of the wedding planning phenomenon as experienced in part through using Pinterest, I chose to use a constructivist qualitative approach that allowed me to "feel" the data. Taking on this role of "feeling" my data (i.e., working with it extensively through re-listening to interviews as well as writing and coding interview transcripts), I was able to subjectively sift through and interpret the findings.

I used Nvivo qualitative software as my primary tool, as it allows for coding individual words as well as sentences within the interview transcript and creating codes (or "nodes" as they are called in Nvivo) with the goal of forming node hierarchies to help visualize the relationships among the coded content. Nvivo allows for analyzing data for frequency and provides visualization tools for interpreting (i.e., "feeling") the data. Therefore, Nvivo was the tool I employed to engage in constant comparison (further explained below).

### ***Constant Comparison***

Constant comparison is a qualitative method that can be useful when the researcher's goal is to extract key themes from the data to form a better understanding of a phenomenon and possibly build a theory. The method is often applied to studies that deal with observations, interviews, documents, articles, and books (Glaser, 1965, p. 438). Originally developed by Glaser (1965) (also see Glaser and Strauss [1967]), as a tool of grounded theory, it takes an inductive approach as it allows themes or patterns to emerge from the data. Generally, data will be broken into units of analysis as appropriate for the topic being studied. In the case of the present study, units of analysis consisted of individual words as well as sentences analyzed within each interview transcript.

Constant comparison usually involves the following steps:

1. "Comparative assignment of incidents to categories
2. Elaboration and refinement of categories
3. Searching for relationships and themes among categories
4. Simplifying and integrating data into a coherent theoretical structure" (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006, p. 117).

Once engaged in the coding process, the researcher must delineate each category's "core properties" by revisiting the data multiple times (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 219). "The total number of categories also begins to level out as most incidents are accounted for (although some may be uncategorizable for different reasons or simply stay uncoded due to their lack of relevance)" (p. 219). The end result will be a list of categories the researcher can use as he/she begins to interpret the findings.

Regarding the present study, my interview analysis process very much reflected the constant comparison process described by Wimmer and Dominick (2006):

1. I read through each interview transcript and developed initial codes as themes began to emerge.

2. Over the course of several months (while continuing to code transcripts), I reflected on these ideas from a personal standpoint (as I too was engaged in planning my own wedding), pondered what they meant on a broader scale, and engaged in conversation with my advisor to determine major themes and sub-themes, and how they were related.
3. Eventually, I condensed my expansive list of codes to something more manageable, which included a fair amount of sub-codes (i.e., lower-level themes within a larger theme). Engaging in this process allowed me to “feel” my data; that is, to understand the relationship between the themes that emerged during the analysis process. Ultimately, it helped me to create a shared narrative—my interpretations of the stories told by my participants—of what it means to use Pinterest as a wedding planning tool. The forthcoming chapters have been titled “Theme Chapters” as they reflect what I consider to be the major themes to have emerged from my deep exploration of this “complex social event” (Radway, 1984, p. 8).

## **Reliability and Validity**

Qualitative research methods have been, and continue to be, the focus of debate and critique in many academic spheres (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Historically, they have been criticized as being less rigorous and possibly less accurate (or even truthful) in comparison to quantitative approaches out of the positivist and post-positivist paradigms. “...there exists a widespread conviction that only quantitative data are ultimately valid, or of high quality” (Sechrest, 1992, as cited in Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 106). Because of this widespread view, the qualitative researcher has to work extra hard to illustrate the reliability and validity of his/her project.

As a researcher who uses qualitative methodology in the majority of her scholarly endeavors, it is important to be well-versed in demonstrating the reliability and validity of my work.

In qualitative research, the processes of collecting and analyzing data are ultimately resolved by rigorously developing increasingly precise and useful language for conceptualizing, interpreting, explaining, and critiquing recorded communication (Waite, 2007, as cited in Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 13).

If the qualitative researcher is interested in exploring and understanding a given phenomenon, and has less interest in more positivist-oriented practices such as measuring, manipulating, or experimenting, the evaluation of validity and reliability should be much different. “The naturalistic researcher looks for confirmability rather than objectivity in establishing the value of the data. Both dependability and confirmability are established through an auditing of the research process” (Creswell, 2012, p. 246).

Guba & Lincoln (1994) ask: “what criteria are appropriate for judging the goodness or quality of an inquiry” (p. 114), which speaks to notions of reliability and validity. According to these authors, the concept of “trustworthiness” parallels internal validity, “transferability” parallels reliability, and “confirmability” parallels objectivity (speaking in positivist terms for all) (Guba, 1981 as cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rossman and Rallis (1998) pose a series of questions that speak to ways in which the reliability and validity of a qualitative study can be assessed. Most applicable to this project are the following:

- “Can someone else understand the logic and assumptions of the study and see the reasoning that resulted in the interpretations put forward?
- Are these interpretations sound and grounded in the data?
- Is the process of analysis clear and coherent?” (p. 47).

In the present study, therefore, I attempted to be meticulous and clear when explaining how I carried out data collection, analysis, and interpretation procedures. Additionally, I make it known that the findings are context specific, as well as bounded by space and time (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p. 46).

## **Interpretation of the Research Findings**

### ***The Art of Interpretation***

The claim to attention of an ethnographic account does not rest on its author’s ability to capture primitive facts in faraway place and carry them home like a mask or a carving,

but on the degree to which he is able to clarify what goes on in such places; to reduce the puzzlement—what manner of men are these?—to which unfamiliar acts emerging out of unknown backgrounds naturally give rise (Geertz, 1973, p. 16).

The above quotation speaks to my goal as a qualitative researcher who seeks to “reduce the puzzlement” surrounding Pinterest as a new media phenomenon; and more specifically, the stereotype that it is a place where women go when they want to fantasize about their wedding (Tekobbe, 2013) or dream life (Odell, 2012; Sandler, 2012). As an interpreter, my job is to paint a picture—an indication—of what this media sensation could be imagined to look like, drawing from the interviews and analyses I conducted and from my own reflections as an active user. As Geertz (1973) states, “Cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, not discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape” (p. 20). In other words, I took the necessary steps to ensure that my interpretation sincerely and sensibly presents a story of what I learned through the multi-modal approach I have outlined in this chapter. Thus, my interpretation will be a single narrative that features a collection of narratives I have intermingled in a way I believe best represents multiple perspectives. This account, however, is strictly my interpretation and not all-encompassing of the Pinterest phenomenon.

For many qualitative researchers, the interpretive component of a scholarly inquiry can be incredibly difficult. Denzin (1998), Hodder (1998), Lindlof and Taylor (2011), and Radway (1984) have written about the complexities that accompany this type of research. After conducting interviews, field observations, and/or content analyses, for instance, the researcher is tasked with interpreting all that he/she has found. In describing this, Denzin (1998) calls the act of “making sense of what has been learned the art of interpretation” (p. 313). He explains that to sift through piles of “impressions, documents, and field notes,” the qualitative researcher should

learn the “art of interpretation” so she/he can communicate findings into a “body of textual work” that tells an honest and full story about whatever chosen topic of study (p. 313). “In both texts and artifacts the problem is one of situating material culture within varying contexts while at the same time entering into a dialectic relationship between those contexts and the context of the analyst” (Hodder, 1998, pp. 112-113). In some scenarios, the analyst may be tasked with trying to report the intricacies of events and behaviors the members of a given culture are privy to, “for others not in or of that culture” (Radway, 1984, p. 9).

Radway (1984) and Boellstorff (2008) have described the interpretive research process in relation to the concept of oscillation—a continuous moving back and forth between what was shared by the researched and the subjective translation by the researcher. When interpreting the responses from her interviewees, Radway (1984) began with their conscious statements and beliefs about their behavior, recognized them as given, and then added information about desires, fears, or concerns that “complement rather than contradict” the original sentiments shared by the subjects (p. 10).

As a result, the account oscillates back and forth between the readers’ perceptions of themselves and their activities and a more distant view of them that makes an effort to include the unseen cultural ground or set of assumptions upon which they stand (p. 10).

As showcased in the forthcoming chapters, I took the same approach as Radway. I present excerpts of conversations I had with my participants and interpretations of those conversations based on my own ideas, as well as those presented in previous research (i.e., the “distant view, [Radway, 1984, p. 10]).

### ***Reading the Text: Consider Context***

Radway (1984) emphasized understanding what a text “means” to its reader. Similarly, Hodder (1998), drawing on Derrida (1978), stated that “[M]eaning does not reside in a text but in the writing and reading of it” (p. 111). He also noted that as a text is reread in different contexts, new meanings will be created and assigned, which are often “contradictory and always socially embedded” (p. 111). Further, he explained that texts can be combined with other types of evidence so that biases can be realized and contrasted (Hodder, 1998, p. 111). In the case of this study, the combination of interviews and pin analyses may facilitate a more robust and credible interpretation, allowing certain explanations to be ruled out.

“Words are, of course, spoken to do things as well as to say things—they have practical and social impact as well as a communication function” (Hodder, 1998, p. 112). In a similar vein, pictures “say things” and most certainly have a social impact and communicative purpose. At first glance, as discussed, it may be easy to look at Pinterest and label it as nothing more than a site where women mindlessly pin images that communicate physical desires (e.g., a fancy wedding, lavish home, or ideal body image). When explored on a deeper and more intimate level, however, it is possible that one may find that using the site facilitates meaningful self-exploration and meaning-making that spans far beyond mindless pinning.

Kuhn (2000) argues, “meanings...are circulated between representation, spectator and social formation” (p. 66). Thus, before assuming that a woman’s digital cookbook collection on Pinterest is nothing more than a symbol of domesticity, it is important to acknowledge that there may be varying contextual factors that contribute to what was pinned and why. “For, in practice, images are always seen in context: they always have a specific use value in the particular time and place of their consumption” (Kuhn, 2000, p. 66). A user’s emotional, financial, and/or

professional status, for instance, could have a significant impact on her pinning activities during a given period.

If a user lost her job, for example, she might focus on pinning cost-effective recipes so that she can save money. If a romantic relationship ended, a user might develop a pin board devoted to uplifting ideas and quotations to help cope during a difficult time. “Text and context are in a continual state of tension, each defining and redefining the other, saying and doing things differently through time” (Hodder, 1998, p. 112). Considering the context attached to pinning activities (e.g., what does [or did] a pin mean to the pinner at the given time?) is paramount, as many users may receive images differently. Further, the reason an image was pinned may vary greatly across users. Therefore, it is important to prompt a conversation to hear the stories behind why a pin was saved to formulate an interpretation that accounts for multiple perspectives and contexts.

### ***Interpretation of Findings***

“A good interpretation of anything—a poem, a history, a ritual, an institution, a society—takes us into the heart of that of which it is the interpretation” (Geertz, 1973, p. 18). My aim is to present an interpretation of this phenomenon that delves deeply into some of the negative claims that surround Pinterest. After interviewing 20 women who used Pinterest as a wedding planning tool, and analyzing select pin boards, I am equipped to interpret whether women’s use of Pinterest perpetuates stereotypical gender roles (i.e., deterministic behavior) or if it enables user-controlled behavior (specifically, an agentic form of behavior wherein women are viewed as capable of creating their own reality, as opposed to victims oppressed by patriarchy). Additionally, after conducting this research, I am able to present evidence (based on only my

sample) that speaks to the extent to which pinning is frivolous and meaningless (as it has been stereotyped), if using the platform influences the consumption of material objects, and whether using the site enables self-expression and creativity.

The act of interpreting a phenomenon as multi-faceted as Pinterest is not a simple or straightforward task. Because I am an active user of the environment, my interpretation may be more authentic because I understand this digital culture from a user's point of view (i.e., I am "closer" to it and not an outsider looking in). "Field-workers can neither make sense of nor understand what has been learned until they sit down and write the interpretive text, telling the story first to themselves and then to their significant others, and then to the public" (Denzin, 1998, p. 317). To accurately and effectively interpret my findings, I began by re-telling the stories shared through interviews and textual analyses to myself. That is, I revisited my notes, transcriptions, and code sheets to re-tell the story of what I have learned (to myself). To conclude, it is important to note that the interpretation(s) I offer should be considered a "working document"—this will be my attempt to "make sense out of what has been learned" (Denzin, 1998, p. 316) and to "reduce the puzzlement" (Geertz, 1973, p. 16). In other words, the research presented here is exploratory and emergent.

## CHAPTER 4: THE LABOR OF WEDDING PLANNING AND PINTEREST

### **Introduction: Some Background on the American Wedding**

Through surveying literature on the broad and complex topic of the American wedding, I came across several key sources that help to demonstrate its evolution and some common perceptions about what it means to be a bride in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This chapter presents a brief overview of some key elements of the American wedding—namely the bride and groom’s traditional respective roles in the planning—drawing from both previous literature and my own findings. The goal of this chapter is to expose the types and amount of labor involved in wedding planning, which, consistent with previous findings, seem to be performed primarily by the bride-to-be (and often her female counterparts).

In 2007, Mead wrote: “Being a bride has become a category in and of itself, an occupation—one that requires tutelage at the hands of experts whose curriculum has been established with the interests of an ever-expanding wedding industry foremost in mind” (p. 30). One decade later, it appears that “being a bride” remains an occupation primarily reserved for women—one that goes without pay (Sniezek, 2005) and oftentimes with a fair amount of stress (Engstrom, 2008). Perhaps of greater importance to the present study, however, is that such “tutelage at the hands of experts,” may take on a new form when Pinterest is used. No longer does the aspiring bride rely solely on mass-produced traditional wedding media (e.g., magazines, television, or catalogs) for wedding planning inspiration and etiquette. As this chapter helps to demonstrate, Pinterest, as a relatively new form of feminized popular culture, may, in some cases, lessen some of the pressure aspiring contemporary brides feel about planning a wedding. In some respects, Pinterest may act as a “cultural mechanism” (Jellison, 2008, p. 5) by offering

ideas for how to plan a wedding on a budget, in possibly a non-traditional fashion (i.e., a manner different from the traditional, often lavish, white wedding).

It is beyond the scope of this study to fully cover the history of the American wedding. However, it is worthwhile to provide some detail about the evolution of this important cultural event to situate how the American wedding is enacted in contemporary society. Before launching into the history of this event, I want to define the term “white wedding,” as it is a concept referred to throughout this chapter.

White weddings, as the dominant wedding form, permeate both culture and industry. Specifically, the stereotypical white wedding is a spectacle featuring a bride in a formal white wedding gown, combined with some combination of attendants and witnesses, religious ceremony, wedding reception, and honeymoon (Ingraham, 1999, p. 3).

According to historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, weddings were “one of the last female rituals remaining in twentieth-century America” (as cited in Jellison, 2008, p. 2). Further, weddings remain to be “female-centered celebrations in the early twenty-first century” (Jellison, 2008, p. 2). In other words, American society has taught women to care about this event more (as compared to the groom), and therefore, devote a great deal of time, energy and money toward making the event all they have ever dreamed of (Engstrom, 2008). In the words of my research participant, Lauren: “. . . I do think the gender roles, or the gender stereotypes, are very present in our wedding planning, but I still think that it’s probably because we [women] thought about this so much more than they [men] have. Like our entire lives.” Smith-Rosenberg (1975) refers to this as the “Female World of Love and Ritual” (as cited in Jellison, 2008, p. 2):

Brides and their mothers, sisters, and other female relatives and friends remained the wedding’s chief planners, consumers, and participants. And on the other side of the counter frequently stood female wedding coordinators, cake makers, clothing merchants, and other businesswomen who made their living in this hospitable, female-oriented sector of American enterprise (Jellison, 2008, pp. 2-3, drawing from Smith-Rosenberg, 1975).

Interestingly, throughout my interviews, my participants referred to their wedding planning activities in much the same way—the husband-to-be and male associates were not involved nearly as much as mothers, sisters, and other female associates. Why is this the case?

The female-centeredness of the wedding that continues to pervade American society today may stem from post-World War II (WWII) dynamics. For instance, during the first quarter century after WWII, the wedding industry helped to promote traditional “gender prescriptions” in which grooms served as the breadwinner and brides as the “housewife-consumer” who launched a “lifetime of domestic spending,” with the purchase of a wedding dress (Jellison, 2008, p. 3). Further, it was widely accepted that “a woman walked up the aisle a bride and back down it as a housewife, whether or not she continued to work or study” (Jellison, 2008, p. 3). This cemented the traditional gender roles of the period, which placed women at the head of wedding planning.

Brides and their shopping companions thus enthusiastically responded to retailers who characterized the white wedding as a celebration of all women’s domestic role. The shopping experience itself frequently served as a training exercise in domestic consumption. Mothers helped daughters choose wedding clothes, decorations, and menu items as a sort of dress rehearsal for the tasks a bride would soon undertake in her home (Jellison, 2008, p. 4).

While the above description sheds light on what the wedding planning phenomenon may continue to look like for some American brides, it is important to note that as a society, we have moved on from viewing wedding planning as a form of domestic training (at least to an extent). Jellison (2008) explains that “planning, purchasing, and enacting the formal wedding provided memorable ways for female friends and relatives to interact and sustain their relationships” (p. 4)—which, at least based on my findings, continues to hold. Nonetheless, factors such as higher divorce rates, age of first marriage, and the development of gender roles, sexual attitudes, and

retail trends, played a role in the evolution of the meaning of the formal wedding (Jellison, 2008, p. 6).

During the 1950s, women were barraged with images promoting the white wedding and domesticity, which led many to “pursue marriage as an obligatory goal” (Jellison, 2008, p. 23). Those who chose not to accept this “wisdom” and not marry at a young age, “could find themselves unwittingly ending all hope of eventual marriage and social acceptance” (Jellison, 2008, p. 25).

The 1960s saw a continued celebration of the young bride as “Suzy Homemaker” and of the nuclear family, with a focus on domestic consumption (Jellison, 2008, p. 25). This decade was described as featuring the “crabgrass frontier” where couples married at a young age, started a family early in marriage, and lived in nice homes filled with cars, washing machines, refrigerators, television sets, and other “appropriate” appliances for the time. These appliances were viewed not as “luxuries” but “necessities” (Jellison, 2008, pp. 25-26). The “white wedding” was also viewed as a consumer necessity during this time, and brides were often encouraged by their parents (who married during WWII in a hasty, “simple,” and often “drab” fashion), to have a “lavish” wedding (Jellison, 2008, pp. 26-27). According to a psychologist from this era: “Any father who complains he is spending thousands for his daughter’s wedding . . . isn’t complaining. He’s bragging” (p. 27). This era was marked by a focus on “white-wedding splendor,” as many families had disposable income and wanted to showcase their ability to consume and provide for their children (p. 27).

Moving into the 1970s, producers and consumers of wedding culture acknowledged social and demographic changes and “recast the purposes of a formal wedding” accordingly. Rather than promoting the “white wedding” as a “celebration of female domesticity,” customers

and businesspeople restructured the meaning of a wedding to accommodate “more nonwhites, divorcees, older and career-minded women, and persons in same-sex relationships” (Jellison, 2008, pp. 4-5).

Furthermore, the way children were socialized and taught to think about gender roles and marriage during the 1970s also played a role in how domestic relationships and marriages were viewed and pursued. Accordingly, girls growing up during this era began to contemplate their futures in a new way (Jellison, 2008, p. 43). A 1980 survey of girls ages 13-19 revealed that approximately 75 percent of those not yet attending college planned to enroll in an institution of higher learning with the primary goal of securing a higher paying job (Jellison, 2008, p. 43). “In summarizing the survey’s findings, a writer for *Seventeen* magazine noted, ‘The surveyed girls are not Susy-Stay-at-Homes: 87 percent say they will probably work after marriage, as well as over half plan to work after having children’” (p. 43). Stated another way, the country’s aspiring brides planned for a future where their primary role was not performed in the home (Jellison, 2008, p. 43).

Sociologist Rosanna Hertz, as well as other observers of the 1980s and ‘90s, described young women of this period as embracing a “new version of the marriage fairy tale” (p. 43).

Hertz noted:

Earlier generations of young girls grew up on Cinderella and Snow White, dreaming of princes to carry them off so they too could live happily ever after. Young girls today dream a different plot. There is still the prince, but happily-ever-after now includes a career (as cited in Jellison, 2008, pp. 43-44).

In other words, young women of the late twentieth century envisioned a life that featured a “work-place identity” (Jellison, 2008, p. 44, drawing from Hertz).

Thus, the once prized image of the “virginal Cinderella marrying her one true love” – symbolizing bridal virginity and youthful marriage—is no longer relevant for many people in

today's society (Jellison, 2008, p. 6). We have reached a time where "the transition into marriage" means a great deal less than it once did (Mead, 2007, p. 30). That is to say, most newlyweds in contemporary American society no longer face shock or hardships associated with leaving one's parental home for a marital home, "the virginal intimidations of the marriage bed," or the newfound obligations of housekeeping or breadwinning (Mead, 2007, p. 29).

With the transition into marriage meaning so much less than it once did, the preparation for a wedding must be made to mean so much more... Being a bride has become a category in and of itself, an occupation—one that requires tutelage at the hands of experts whose curriculum has been established with the interests of an ever-expanding wedding industry foremost in mind" (p. 30).

This statement provides a helpful transition into the overarching concept this chapter explores. Drawing from my 20 interviews, I examine wedding planning as a form of labor and how using Pinterest as a tool plays a role in the "occupation" (Mead, 2007) of becoming a bride. Worth noting, however, is that it is beyond the scope of this study to provide full accounts from all of my interviews. This chapter explores the concept of "wedding planning as labor," drawing from the three themes that emerged during my analysis process: (1) "I Didn't Do Shit": A Deeper Look at the "Hands-Off Groom;" (2) "Wedding Bullshit": Surviving Wedding Planning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; and (3) Is It Just "The Bride's Day"?

### **"I Didn't Do Shit": A Deeper Look at the "Hands-Off Groom"**

Groom oriented wedding literature urges men to refrain from the entire process of aesthetic planning alluding to the flowers, table settings, and cake as mysterious, incomprehensible, and trivial female affairs. ("Does it really matter to you if you have pansies instead of daisies? Will you simply die without baby's breath?") (John Mitchell, 1999, as cited in Geller, 2001, p. 297).

The above statement struck me as one that should be included early in this chapter because it helps to demonstrate a common sentiment I gathered in talking to my interviewees, all

of whom reported that they were the primary wedding planner in their relationship (though one had also hired a professional wedding planner). The statement from John Mitchell, author of *What the Hell Is a Groom and What's He Supposed to Do?*, a wedding planning guide geared toward men published in 1999, seems to accurately reflect how the majority of husbands-to-be (of the women I interviewed) felt about the wedding planning process. Although I did not speak directly with any of the male counterparts of my interviewees, I talked at length with many of my participants about the dynamics of wedding planning as they existed within their relationships.

Moreover, the above statement reflects the general attitude my husband exhibited when I discussed the aesthetics and logistics for our wedding, which took place in September 2016. Taking on the role of primary wedding planner for my own wedding, while simultaneously interviewing women who were involved in the same process, helped me to be more engrossed in and reflexive about my interviews (Lofland & Lofland, 2005; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), as well as to reflect on how my experiences were similar to or different from those shared by my interviewees.

Thinking back to my planning process, I am reminded of several humorous (but at the time mildly frustrating) episodes that took place with my husband, Tyler. When deciding on the color scheme for the wedding, he had no preference regarding what colors were used. I ended up picking a sage green, blush pink, and gray scheme. The bridesmaids wore sage green and blush, the grooms wore gray vests and dress pants complemented by a sage green tie, and Tyler wore a full suit in a slightly darker shade of gray. All of this was perfectly fine with him—until asked to wear a blush pink dress shirt under his tux (to match my blush pink dress). This turned into an argument, resulting in him wearing a cream undershirt and a blush tie.

After talking to 20 women who were also navigating (or had recently navigated) the sometimes rough terrain of wedding planning, I learned that my experiences were similar in many ways. To begin, I share Christy's (a 32-year-old organizational marketing and communications manager living in central Wisconsin) story about the "division of labor" in her wedding planning process. As will be illustrated, her husband did very little to assist with planning and its execution, which Christy actually preferred. During her husband's wedding speech, he actually stood up and said "I didn't do shit, I hope you guys have the best day." Which Christy validated, noting that she would not have enjoyed planning if her husband had been "super involved." The excerpt below sheds additional light on Christy's experience:

**Interviewer:** When you think about your planning, and how that all unfolded between you and your husband, would you say you were the one primarily in charge, the decision-maker?

**Christy:** Yes, I was everything—truly when he says "I didn't do shit." That's a fact. He owns his own business and he's very busy and he honestly was just like "Chris, whatever you want, just do it, you can have whatever you want. If that's important to you, do it." So even when I would ask him questions, like I asked him to come and sit with me for the caterer conversation, and I also brought my mom cuz my mom actually engages in it and helps me make decisions. Where he is pretty much like "yeah I want cheese potatoes, and it's like alright babe."

**Interviewer:** Hahah yeah.

**Christy:** Even when I was like "would you rather have brisket or would you rather have pork?" He was like "hmmm they both sound good." He really wanted me to have it how I wanted, and I think because I really was very patient for the length of time we dated. I never pressured him, I never said we need to get married, like nothing. So I think he just knew, and maybe he even said, he was like "you waited so long for this, thank you for waiting." . . . I think he just wanted to give me what I wanted based on I was a trooper! Haha. And I wasn't looking to be crazy in expense either, so it wasn't like he had to rein me in, I'm probably the more frugal of the two. It wasn't like he really needed to be involved, beyond there were certain things that were important to him, and those he expressed. But even those were not, they wouldn't have been deal breakers. He wanted to wear black, and if I had really wanted him to wear what I originally would have wanted, like a wheat, he probably would have done it. Because if that had been that important to me, he would have. I asked him do you want to have a wedding in town kind of outside, or do you want to do a destination? So he weighed in on some things like that, but honestly, as a whole, he just really kind of was hands-off.

Christy's classification of her groom as "hands-off" very much aligns with the main finding I gathered from talking with my participants (i.e., comprised of white, heteronormative, cis-gender, middle to upper-middle class women), about the role the groom-to-be played in wedding planning. Across all 20 of my interview conversations, it became apparent that the aspiring bride was the one primarily in charge of gathering ideas (most often through using Pinterest), doing research on how to execute the ideas, and putting them into play for the actual wedding day. When asking participants if they could give me a rough percentage of the amount of work they put into wedding planning, compared to the groom-to-be, the answers varied from 90/10, 85/15, 70/30, and 75/25—in all cases the woman holding the higher percentage.

This finding aligns with research from Sniezek (2005). Through interviewing 20 couples about their wedding planning experiences, she found that 17 of the couples reported an unequal division of labor wherein the woman partner conducted more of the "planning work" (p. 224). Sniezek (2005) also gathered findings regarding the division of labor in percentages, with the lowest percentage reported for a groom being 5%, compared to the bride's 95% (p. 224). In line with my findings, she did not discover a case in which the groom performed more work than the bride (p. 224). Additionally, Boden (2003) makes the statement that, "On the odd occasion grooms are invited to participate in wedding preparations they are advised to indulge their partner's 'truly feminine' side which is flourishing thanks to the bridal identity" (p. 61). In other words, if they are asked to take part in the planning, according to Boden, they should let the bride "do her thing," realizing that performing this role may involve bringing her dream to life.

Interestingly, I found that many brides wanted to include their groom in making what were often referred to as "big" decisions (e.g., venue, food, music, or ceremony style). This parallels Sniezek's (2005) finding that brides used multiple "strategies" to involve the groom to

“construct a joint effort,” to make the planning a “shared experience,” and present the event as a joint accomplishment made possible through the work of both—not just the bride. Such “strategies included giving the male partner brochures to look at, having various industry specialists speak to their male partner and soliciting assistance with decision-making” (Sniezek, 2005, p. 224).

While a bride may try to create a “shared experience” for herself and the groom, the experience may also be contingent on how wedding industry vendors interact with the couple, which impacts how such an experience unfolds. The excerpt below from my interview with Danica helps to illustrate this idea further. Additionally, it speaks to Danica’s (a 24-year-old homemaker living in North Carolina [unemployed at the time of the interview from her usual job as a secretary for a naturopathic doctor]), acknowledgment of the larger cultural structures in place that may help to perpetuate the wedding being viewed as “the bride’s day:”

**Interviewer:** So what are your thoughts on that division of labor idea?

**Danica:** . . . I understand it, the only difference is I also think it’s part my personality . . . I know that I’ll do what I like, so I’ll just do it type of thing. You know, not to say that if he gave input, I would have been like “No, that’s not how I want to do it.” It’s more just like the way I think that our specific dynamic works. I do think that it’s [wedding planning] a very women-oriented process. I think that it’s built that way, it’s structured that way for sure. Like everything’s catered to the bride . . . he came to our food tasting, and it’s almost as if they acted like Tim didn’t exist. They were just like “well what do you think about it Danica?” Cuz they knew that he would be like this is awesome, like it tastes great, like it’s food, ya know? So, I understand the divide. I acknowledge it, I wouldn’t change anything about it. I wouldn’t have had Tim be more involved just so that we could change gender structure. It’s not a big deal to me.

**Interviewer:** Okay, so if you flipped it around and said “well men have a huge interest in picking out flowers, or picking out a color scheme or something” . . . if you think about that in the context of your relationship, if it was not a gendered process, do you think that he would have an interest in doing any of those things?

**Danica:** No, I don’t. Just knowing Tim he’d be like “what flowers are the cheapest? Cuz that’s what we’re getting.” I think his wants just were different in that way, like his desire would have just been to spend the least amount of money. Whereas mine would more be like “well what’s the flow, what do we want it to look like?”

**Interviewer:** Yeah, so it just fit you and your personality and your interest to take charge and kind of do this?

**Danica:** Mmmhmm. Yeah.

Danica described her groom-to-be as being a “backseat groom” during their planning process, noting however that they were in a long-distance relationship at the time, which may have contributed to his lack of involvement. Below, she goes into greater detail about the wedding planning process and how for her, it primarily involved her sister (which illustrates the female-oriented nature of the wedding planning phenomenon as described earlier):

**Interviewer:** . . . did using Pinterest . . . provide you with a sense of voice in regard to your wedding and/or your relationship with your fiancé? And I can explain that.

**Danica:** No, I understand, it’s kind of a hard question for us cuz we were long distance, when I was wedding planning. So he was definitely a backseat groom – he was totally fine with “you do your thing, I’ll be at the altar” . . . we didn’t go to things together. If anything, I went to things with my sister more than anything, she was like my wedding planning guru. She would just go to everything and help but have the questions that I didn’t think of sort of thing. But we also have very similar style, and so most everything that I pinned she’d be like “oh that’s really cute” or like “that’ll be awesome.” Ya know, it was never like “I don’t like that.” Cuz she would very much be “like this is your wedding, and if that’s what you want then let’s do it.”

**Interviewer:** Yeah, so your fiancé kind of was just cool with whatever you decided?

**Danica:** Yeah, he definitely was more just like . . . the only thing he really really wanted to do was register. Which I think is so odd.

**Interviewer:** He wanted to be there . . .

**Danica:** He wanted to be there when we register, like go see all the things, and pick out plates and things like that.

**Interviewer:** Ohhh okay.

**Danica:** Other than that, he was like, “this is your show, I’ll just be there.”

While the common theme among my participants was that they took charge of the planning of the wedding, many talked about wanting to include the groom-to-be, noting that they are opposed to the “it’s the bride’s day” label that seems to permeate wedding industry culture, at least in Western society (Snizek, 2005; Mead, 2007). I expand on this idea in a forthcoming section of this chapter.

### ***What Does the Groom Actually Do?***

Through my interviews, I learned that although the bride-to-be led the planning, in several cases, the aspiring groom played a role in making some of the larger, logistical decisions—or at least participated in this process. Sniezek (2005) reports that brides-to-be often solicit the male partner’s input when it comes to decision-making (p. 224), which lends support to my own findings, as I found this to be a common theme across many of my interviews. For instance, the excerpt below provides an example of an aspiring bride presenting different options to her male partner. Further, it sheds light on how the labor of wedding planning is viewed as “women’s work,” a role women have been socialized to undertake (Boden, 2003, p. 61).

Consider this conversation with Leah, a 23-year-old heavy machinery operator living in Fort Collins, Colorado:

**Interviewer:** . . . do you think that wedding planning is considered women’s work?

**Leah:** Oh for sure.

**Interviewer:** Yeah?

**Leah:** Yeah, I mean guys don’t like to help with that kind of thing nor do they want to have anything to do with it. Like Cody had said that he was going to help me with things because he saw me getting emotional over invitations, so he’s like “okay, she needs help.” And so he sits down and five minutes later he’s off doing something else. So it’s definitely stereotypical for women to be doing the planning.

**Interviewer:** . . . can you give me a percentage of how much you feel like you did and how much you feel like your significant other did?

**Leah:** He actually helped me a lot more than I thought he would. With the wedding in general, I would say it was 90/10 – I’m gonna give him that 10% because he did manage to get stamps on some of the envelopes, even though he forgot to do a lot of them. He did help me with that. But when it came to the planning thing, he did give me his opinion. Like I would say “okay, these are your choices—this this or this,” he’d say “I like this one” and he’d pick the one he knew I liked the least so we would go with that one.

**Interviewer:** He picked the one he knew you liked the least?

**Leah:** Just to be an ass. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Oh my gosh. . .

**Leah:** Or, like when we went to go try and figure out what kind of cake we wanted. Neither of us had any real opinion cuz I’m not a cake person. So I’m like alright we’ll get white. That was our decision. And then like five minutes later he’s like let’s do carrot cake. And I’m like what the fuck? You don’t even like carrot cake. So we ended up going with carrot cake and vanilla and chocolate stuff. . . . it was one of those I think he just

wanted it to be different, and he wanted to feel like it was ours and it wasn't just black and white.

**Interviewer:** . . . with all the big stuff, like venue, food, cake, DJ, all of that—did you make all those decisions or was it a joint conversation?

**Leah:** I made the decisions and then I would ask him if he would do anything differently or change it. Because I knew if we tried to sit down and agree on something it'd be that "whatever you want."

**Interviewer:** And then with smaller stuff, like flowers, colors, whatever you consider the smaller decision making for the wedding—you would present him with choices and then he would pick?

**Leah:** Basically, and that's a hard question to answer because like the flowers—I made him go with me just because of the timing and I was like "well I don't know anything about flowers, all I know is I wanted sunflowers and now we have to improvise." And he's like "well I like that blue one over there, we should use that one." And I'm like "okay that's fine." You know, the things I wasn't heart set on being a certain way were the things he got to decide on.

**Interviewer:** Okay, so that's kind of my question about like the sense of voice or authority that you might have in wedding planning because it can be considered women's work—like I think nine out of 10 people would say that.

**Leah:** Oh for sure.

**Interviewer:** Because you're the one who is doing all of the research and figuring out all of the stuff, did you just feel like that gave you authority to be like well this is what we're doing?

**Leah:** Yeah basically. And I think that was a lot of him too. They [the groom-to-be] look at it as "this is her thing, she can do it the way she wants to, I don't really have to do anything with it." So yeah.

Leah's explanation of allowing for compromise, especially with aspects of the wedding she was not "heart set" on having a certain way, is what I consider to be typical of how the brides I spoke with generally approached the planning process. If the groom-to-be had strong feelings about a particular element of the wedding, the bride-to-be took this into account and generally negotiated in some way. This notion is expanded on later in the chapter.

Most of the women I interviewed described the planning process as one in which they did most of the "leg work," that is, the backstage research and evaluation of options (Sniezek, 2005, p. 225). The excerpt below supports this idea, as Laurie, a 25-year-old executive assistant from Boulder, Colorado, explains how she performed all of the backstage logistical work. However, her experience is also unique because it presents a different version of the planning process, one

where the aspiring groom was more involved, making the planning a more collaborative process (at least to an extent):

**Interviewer:** . . . So in the dynamics between you and your significant other, did the fact that you were primarily in charge of planning . . . have any bearing on your relationship?

**Laurie:** Not really, I mean, he definitely helped with what he could. But, I think you know we're pretty traditional in the fact that like I had a vision of what I wanted for my wedding—and he mostly just wanted me to be there. . . . he was in charge of the things that he really cared about. . . . he was in charge of food and suits and the groomsmen gifts and . . . he helped me taste the cake and pick the cake so the things that he cared about he was involved with . . . he tried to lessen some of the burden on me, but for the most part, I don't think it changed any dynamics between us. I don't think there was any power struggle or anything. He was helpful when he could be, when he couldn't, like when it came to dress and shoes, I mean I showed him anyway. Even though he didn't care.

**Interviewer:** Okay, so tailing off that of same question—do you consider wedding planning to be stereotypical woman's work?

**Laurie:** I guess it is probably yeah. . . . most of the work is fairly gendered . . . So, when I'm thinking of stereotypical woman's work . . . I do start thinking of party planning and you know taking care of those details that make something beautiful or extravagant, and that is kind of a lot of what weddings are about, and I don't think it necessarily has to be, it depends on the kind of wedding that you want. And ours was fairly rustic. So we had a cigar bar and we had a whiskey bar and those kinds of things but essentially it does seem like stereotypical woman's work to me because you're creating an atmosphere and you're creating a party and that to me is a fairly feminine thing to do. . . . I've been working in events for a long time and I've never met a male event planner. Not ever.

**Interviewer:** So all the things that you described so far that you've done with the planning, it all sounds like things that you took an interest in and you wanted to do. Is that right?

**Laurie:** . . . meaning outside of my wedding?

**Interviewer:** No, with your wedding. If you took an interest in doing the flowers and picking out the aesthetic items . . . so if you flipped it and thought that a man would have an interest in doing those types of things, would you have fought to be in charge of that?

**Laurie:** Honestly, probably, yes. But only because I don't think that's something that my husband would have really been interested in. And I don't think that it would have mattered as much to him as it would have to me. So if he would have taken an interest in it, you know it probably would have been a collaborative process rather than my decision.

**Interviewer:** . . . When you think back to the division of labor in terms of your wedding planning. If you had to put it into a percentage—what percentage did you do?

**Laurie:** I would say I probably did 75-80% of the work and he probably did 20-25%.

**Interviewer:** And would you say that the stuff that he participated in primarily was the bigger things, like your venue, your food . . .

**Laurie:** Yeah I suppose it probably is the bigger things but he was a part of a lot of the process . . . we would talk about things but ultimately I was the one making the phone calls and making the decision. But he was definitely a part of the process. If there was something that he hated that I had picked out for decorations, I would take it off the

board. So it was a collaborative process, but as far as like the actual work of figuring out logistics and making payments and you know adding it to our budget and those kinds of things. I would say that was the majority of the work that I did.

**Interviewer:** Okay, so you would sit down with him at times and actually scroll through your boards and look at pictures?

**Laurie:** Oh yeah, all the time.

**Interviewer:** How often would you say you guys did that?

**Laurie:** I don't know maybe once a week or something like that. We'd sit down and one of our planning tools was that we had a big white board calendar. And every week we had a list of things that we would want to get accomplished for that week. So at the end of the week we'd go through and make sure that everything from that week had been accomplished and if not, we would sit down and figure it out and get it done.

**Interviewer:** Wow, that's awesome! I'm planning my wedding right now and there's never been a time that we sat down and looked at my Pinterest board together.

**Laurie:** Really?

**Interviewer:** Haha no!

**Laurie:** I think he'd [male partner] be interested. In the beginning, I had to force Hayden to do it with me a little bit but he started to get into it and get an idea in his head of you know like what he started to want. We decided to [do] it in a barn and we had lanterns that led out to a fire pit where we had our cigar smoking area for everybody and he had this whole idea that he wanted it to be lit by fire all the way down.

**Interviewer:** That's cool!

**Laurie:** . . . I think once you start talking to him about the things that would be really cool to him and you start pinning things that are a part of that, a part of his vision, he'll be more interested in scrolling through some of the things that you're excited about.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, that's just really cool that he had involvement in looking at the pins cuz so far I've talked to seven other people and I think only one of them has said that she's like had him looking at the pins too. So that's interesting!

**Laurie:** Yeah, I mean it's how we picked his ring, it's how we picked the color of his suit, you know we debated on a lot of things . . . I kind of wanted him in tweed but the groomsmen didn't want them. So we even had some of our friends and groomsmen looking at the pins too.

**Interviewer:** That's cool. So it sounds like it was definitely a very collaborative process.

**Laurie:** Yeah, definitely.

My interview findings—based solely on conversations with 20 white, heteronormative, cis gender, middle to upper-middle class women—lend further support to the idea that women perform the “mundane, behind-the-scenes ‘leg work’” (Sniezek, 2005, p. 225). I found that among the aspiring brides I interviewed, gathering and filtering information as well as presenting options to the groom-to-be, was a time-consuming yet frequent aspect of the planning process.

Research from Engstrom (2008), McKenzie and Davies (2010), and Mead (2007) also support that such tasks are predominantly performed by the bride-to-be.

Nonetheless, the above excerpt from Laurie's interview provides an indication that using Pinterest may in fact provide an opportunity for the planning process to become more collaborative for the aspiring married couple (and possibly others involved with the wedding). For example, Christy provided details about how her engagement ring is a product of Pinterest. The brief version of this story is that her mom created a seven-page booklet full of ring examples (obtained from Christy's Pinterest board) for her fiancée, to give him a very specific idea of what she wanted. Eventually, Christy's mom and (now) husband designed the ring together based on the images included in the booklet. When she received the ring, Christy said she was shocked by how closely it matched what she had envisioned. Though this example is slightly outside of the realm of wedding planning, specifically, it provides an example of how Pinterest was used collaboratively, and to help a groom-to-be perform his role.

Taken together, the excerpts featured in this section, along with my overall interpretation gathered through my 20 interview conversations on the broad topic of "wedding planning roles," help to demonstrate that women continue to hold the role of primary wedding planner. However, it appears that at least some brides value the input from their significant other and want the decision-making process (at least for some aspects of the wedding) to be a joint endeavor. In some cases, I learned that a groom may take part or even take the lead in the planning of the honeymoon and/or the rehearsal dinner, or building different decorative items per request of the bride.

Citing Pepin, Schindler-Zimmerman, Fruhauf and Banning (2008), McKenzie and Davies (2010) explain that the bride is viewed as the one most devoted to "the outcome of successful

wedding planning” because she will reap the social benefits for such accomplishments (p. 791). This idea helps to summarize my interpretation of what I believe is happening here: Although some of the aspiring brides I interviewed indicated that they wanted feedback from their partner during the wedding planning process, it appears that ultimately, they preferred to be in charge of the planning so that they could ensure the day would be structured primarily with their own desires in mind. In other words, by taking charge of planning, it ensured the bride-to-be was able to make her wedding vision a reality.

McKenzie and Davis (2010) claim that wedding planning guides geared toward the primary planner (the bride in all guides for heterosexual couples), present the wedding as a “project in need of management” (see also Boden, 2003). By presenting the wedding in this way, such guides “provide an appropriately gendered identity for the bride-to-be as ‘both ethereal icon and micromanager’” (Geller, 2001, p. 296, as cited in McKenzie & Davies, 2010, p. 791). I find this statement to be a powerful one in need of greater examination, as well as a helpful transition into the next section of this chapter. Are women, as the primary planners, acting both as an ethereal “icon and micromanager?” In the next section, I explore this question by further investigating the “labors” of wedding planning as explained by my participants.

### ***“It was Women’s Work and it was Awesome Work”: The Division of Labor in Wedding Planning***

As mentioned, wedding planning has long been a role viewed as feminine and performed by women (Sniezek, 2005; Engstrom, 2008; McKenzie & Davies, 2010). Through talking with my 20 participants, I learned that for the most part they were happy to take on the primary role as wedding planner because it allowed them to have control over the vision they had for the day,

and to make decisions that helped this vision become a reality. Christy, for example, talked extensively about her husband's very minimal involvement, noting his main role was to provide "muscle" when she needed it (i.e., to make or position a decoration). Though lengthy, the excerpt below is from my interview with Christy wherein she discusses her role as the primary decision-maker, why she was happy to be in charge, and how her mom served as her "go-to" when she needed help (as opposed to her to-be husband):

**Interviewer:** Okay, so do you consider wedding planning to be women's work in a stereotypical sense?

**Christy:** Yeah, I do. And I'm happy that it was that. So where my friend [also planning her wedding at the time of our interview], I think she appreciates her fiancée's involvement and sometimes doesn't because it can differ from what she wants, but I was happy to be able to control the day the way that I wanted it. And by control I don't mean in a negative way, but the vision that I had . . . I didn't have to brush that by unnecessary extras including, that sounds terrible, my husband who did not care. So it was women's work and it was awesome work. I loved it. And it was very fun and it was a great thing that my mom and I worked on together. And we both went through a depressive state when it was done cuz we were like "oh now what are we gonna work on? That was so fun." And it was so special and I just had amazing parties thrown on my behalf, and people were so good to us, and it's like now we're just regular citizens again. So yeah, I guess I would probably fit the stereotype, but like happily so.

**Interviewer:** Okay, which is also really what I'm finding . . . The person I interviewed last, she was saying that when it came to doing invites, she sat up and put stamps and the labels on all of them, and then eventually she was getting mad, so she asked him [fiancé] to help, but then he was doing it upside down . . . she's like "no, don't do it, cuz I just want it done my way." So it's like even if you do get mad, well if you want it your way, then [you might just have to do it yourself].

**Christy:** Then it's not right [agreeing]. And I mean I did all of those things, I designed our wedding invite, and I asked his opinion on it . . . but again, I wrote everything for it . . . I did all of the custom printed labels on the back, I put all the stamps, I did everything. And I didn't care.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Christy:** I think even when I selected, I got the final design laid out [for the wedding invite], and I showed it to him, and he did weigh in actually on a couple things. . . . So his brand [logo features his face] . . . we used from the gym [husband is a gym owner], and swapped out the gym logo and did a heart on his hat, and then we recreated it as me . . . he was like "oh your hair is not big enough, like you gotta get your mane bigger."

**Interviewer:** Awww.

**Christy:** So he would weigh in on stuff like that which was great, but as a whole it's not like he was like "oh that language doesn't work for me." He was like "oh babe, your hair

is just not maney enough.” . . . So he was minimally involved. Even the stationary I went and picked with my mom. It’s not like he cared.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Christy:** Cuz I had less to deal with. It’s like my mom knows my style better than anyone, she can help me discern if I’m vacillating between . . . it was just a great, it worked out.

**Interviewer:** . . . based on everything you said, there was no feeling of resentment or anger [toward husband]?

**Christy:** No. I mean I feel like I don’t ever remember . . . No. I think the only time I was just maybe frustrated like “okay, I’m doing all these things, and then on top of it I’m helping then with the rest of our life.” I think that’s where the frustration might have come in. But I never had this thing that I needed him to do that he didn’t do. Or like I needed this decision made. Like the example you used, “I need your help, you’re gonna help me do it, but then he doesn’t do it right.” I didn’t really have that.

**Interviewer:** Okay, so there was a little frustration when you were doing a lot of wedding stuff?

**Christy:** Yeah, so it’s like I have my full-time job, which is a big role and it’s a solo role. I don’t share it, I’m my own department. And then I help him a lot with the gym. With the stuff that is more in my realm of expertise. And then obviously doing all of the wedding stuff. And then I feel like because I work remotely and I’m not tied to a space, that it’s like our home and our food and it’s like, so I think I would get frustrated and be like “listen sir, like you can throw me a bone here when I’m like doing everything else. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure the mortgage gets paid and our wedding gets planned and my work gets done and your social media gets handled.” So things like that, I think it was just one more thing that got added. We also remodeled our bathroom right before the wedding, which was a really stupid choice. So I feel like those things, real life, just felt a little more elevated when I felt stressed about deadlines related to the wedding. But even then, it wasn’t really stuff that I wanted him to do for the wedding. Maybe instead it would had been nice if you had made dinner, or you had stopped at the grocer to pick up that. So, the wedding was an add-on, but again it wasn’t anything that I actually wanted him to take over or take on.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Christy:** Even our honeymoon, I booked that.

**Interviewer:** You did all that?

**Christy:** Mhmm. With my mom. She’s like the super star of all super stars. You’d love her. She’s awesome.

Although Christy notes that on occasion she felt frustrated because of the lack of contribution her partner was making in other areas of their life (i.e., non-wedding), she states that she does not have feelings of resentment. Interestingly, this correlates with Sniezek’s (2005) report:

[W]omen partners did not blame their partners nor express direct resentment towards their partners for the unequal division of labor, even when they clearly felt burdened by the wedding work. To express such feelings just prior to marriage might suggest the relationship and/or the partner was not compatible or desirable (p. 230).

Correspondingly, my interpretation of the present interview findings is that feelings of resentment or anger toward the groom-to-be did not surface because, by taking charge of the planning, the aspiring bride could manage and control the wedding, and gain recognition for her work, which lends further support to Sniezek's (2005) research. Additionally, in talking about the "division of labor" in planning a wedding with my participants, I learned that some attribute their desire to be in charge to having a "Type A" personality. For instance, Angela noted:

I'm just very type A personality. So I want to do it my way, and not really have the voice of others constantly chiming in . . . I like to do it my way and just be done with it and have no conflicts.

The excerpt from Christy's interview highlights a bride-to-be who was happy to "fit the stereotype," and took on this form of unpaid labor, which can be "time-consuming, seemingly unending and frequently unnoticed" (Sniezek, 2005, p. 230). Similarly, Angela, a 26-year-old intensive care unit nurse living in suburban Chicago, seems to identify as an aspiring bride who was also happy to take on such labor, so long as she didn't have to deal with unwanted outside influences (i.e., partner, friends, or family). Nonetheless, these examples should not be viewed as a reflection of how all of my participants felt during the planning process. In the forthcoming section, I discuss the pressures and expectations that can be associated with planning a wedding, which sometimes complicate the planning process for aspiring brides who feel they need to please others, such as family or friends.

## “Wedding Bullshit”: Surviving Wedding Planning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Rebecca Mead, author of *One Perfect Day*, explains the conflict and stress that is expected to arise during wedding planning:

Brides and grooms expect that their wedding will demand months of stressful, time-consuming planning. There will almost invariably be conflict between husband—and wife-to-be, as well as between themselves and their families. The process will be financially burdensome beyond many couples’ means. It is as if the bygone traumas that were a necessary part of the life of a newlywed have been transferred and transformed into the new, invented traumas of planning a wedding. Surviving the wedding and its preparations has become the first test of a couple’s compatibility while under duress: “I just keep telling myself if we can get through this, we can get through anything,” wrote one participant on a wedding-planning Internet discussion board. She was contributing to a thread entitled “Anyone else wish it were over with?” (Mead, 2007, pp. 29-30).

In talking with my interviewees, I learned that many encountered at least some conflict with their partner (and on occasion, family members), and at times felt stressed during the planning process. On a personal level, I can relate to the above mindset of wanting the wedding to be over. Toward the very end (roughly the two weeks leading up to the event), I was incredibly stressed and almost anxious for the wedding to pass. My tension stemmed from the amount of work that needed to be done to prepare for the day (e.g., hand-making and putting into place decorations, ensuring that we would stay within our budget as late purchases needed to be made, and even trying to re-do the seating chart to accommodate last-minute RSVPs).

In a similar vein, Andrea, a 24-year-old account manager at a bank in Urbana, Illinois, told me that she would go through phases where she purposely avoided pinning any wedding-related content on Pinterest because she was annoyed with family members interjecting their opinions about a wedding that was not their own. In other words, such external influences made her un-motivated to gather ideas on Pinterest and proceed with planning.

**Interviewer:** If you could somewhat give a rough idea, how many hours or minutes a week do you think you’re on it [Pinterest]?

**Andrea:** . . . the last few weeks, probably not as often. To be honest, purely because I'm going through this stage right now where Ben and I are just like "everyone's being super annoying with the wedding stuff" so we're intentionally not doing anything with the wedding. . . . the most stressed I've been, has been with picking my dress. And, then after that I was kind of like "yeah whatever I don't care." Which is really annoying to everyone else. And I kind of get that. But then it's like it's supposed to be our day. And everyone's really bugging me. So lately maybe an hour or two a week. But usually, I'd say probably four hours a week maybe? Maybe less. Three to four probably on average.

Moreover, I interviewed one participant who purposely chose not to use Pinterest because she wanted her wedding to not have any "traditional" or "overdone" Pinterest flair to it. In other words, she did not want attendees at her wedding to recognize anything as being an idea taken from Pinterest. Instead, she chose to "get crafty" on her own by coming up with different ideas. Ironically, however, in talking about her wedding day (which had taken place prior to our interview), she explained that had she had more time to plan, she likely would have used Pinterest because she could have taken the time to search for unique ideas and make them her own.

**Interviewer:** So if you had more time with planning and didn't have other commitments, you may have used Pinterest or other sources?

**Leah:** I probably would have, honestly. I mean if I wasn't working as much as I was, I definitely probably would have made that time. Because it is fun to plan a wedding, or it can be, and in reality for me it was just a giant stress trip. So I was ready to get it done.

Additionally, using Pinterest makes it simple to share an idea with a fellow pinner, because pins can be sent through the platform (which as I learned, can be "good" and "bad"). In talking with my participant Sam about this, she shared the following:

**Interviewer:** Okay, do you feel like that's invasive to your life and what you're [doing] if it's wedding related, or something for your personal life, do you get frustrated? Do you enjoy that?

**Sam:** . . . like the wedding stuff, I feel like I have to reply and I hate it because there's been quite a few times that I don't like what people will send me. So it's just like "leave me alone," kind of thing. . . . more recently I've been super frustrated and felt like it was something like . . . [they're ] trying to tell me what to look at.

**Interviewer:** Is it friends and family members who send you stuff?

**Sam:** Yeah, yeah.

While many of my participants reflected on the planning experience fondly, noting the fun they had dress shopping, picking out colors, decorations, and flowers, for example-- conversation also unfolded around the pressures that often accompany planning such an event, as family members can muddle the process by interjecting unwanted ideas and/or opinions. For instance, Andrea talked about managing a sometimes conflicting relationship with her sister, and credited Pinterest for helping her be able to express her wants more authoritatively:

**Andrea:** I've also I think been a little bit more confident in being able to tell people like "no, that's not what I want." My sister is seven years older than me, and she's my only sister, and we have three brothers. She's a control freak. She likes to kind of give her opinion a lot on everything and she always wants to kind of force that at me. So I've been able to use Pinterest to kind of say like "this is what I want, and look this is a thing, this is not difficult, this is something that we can totally accomplish." And, I don't care what you want. I guess it's kind of helped me be a little more confident in what I want to be as a bride and what I want for the wedding itself.

In addition to showcasing how Andrea dealt with the pressure she faced from her sister, the above excerpt also sheds light on the idea that a woman can "choose" the type of bride she wants to be. For instance, in studying popular bridal magazines in the United Kingdom, Boden (2003) explains that through using such media, women are presented with different "bride varieties" they can pick from. Examples from the magazines she studied include "Millennium-minimalist," "Trend-setting," "Summer" or "Girls on a budget" as different bride "types" (p. 60). Importantly, this speaks to the notion of "becoming a bride," which I expand on later in this chapter.

Presently, however, this also helps to demonstrate that making such decisions, like the "type" of bride one wants to be, can contribute to a stressful planning experience—especially if one is working on a strict budget. According to Boden (2003), "bridal magazines construct the illusion that each bride retains full autonomy over her wedding choices" (p. 60). For a bride-to-be on a budget, however, it may not be possible to construct a wedding around all she has hoped

and dreamed for—it may be more realistic to build the wedding based on what her budget allows for. Thus, as this chapter (broadly speaking) attempts to illustrate, autonomy over choices is not always a reality for every bride-to-be.

Jessica, a 33-year-old office manager living in Fort Collins, Colorado, shared some details about deciding on décor as well as her wedding dress shopping experience, which provides a firsthand look at wedding planning on a budget—and the stress that can come with it:

**Jessica** [A]nd then décor is really hard for me cuz I am like on a super budget...and trying to actually be on a super budget. So everybody says that they're on a budget, but then they spend \$600 on a dress, and to me, maybe that's a budget if you have ya know, if you would have spent \$1,500. You know but to me spending that much on a dress for a day is kind of . . . It's just personally [not something she would do]. Cuz I know you're planning your wedding, so I don't want to step on any toes [trying to make sure I'm not offended by her comments].

**Interviewer:** No, I'm in the same boat. No.

**Jessica:** Yeah and then you know I went and got laughed at by dress companies when I told them what my budget was. And “I'm like you have dresses for sale for that much. Why are you rolling your eyes at me, like I can't get a dress for that much” you know? So I ended up buying a dress off the rack and then all of the cleaning companies said we're only going to preserve it, it's \$250 to preserve it. I'm like that's how much I spent on the dress, I'm not gonna preserve it before the wedding, I just need to get it cleaned.

**Interviewer:** That's weird.

**Jessica:** Ya know, and so there's all this stuff surrounding it that really makes me angry. So décor was one of the things that I wanted to try and DIY, but keep cheap, but not look cheap, but you know? And then, and so that's a tough one. I still don't know what I'm going to do about décor. I'm like I'm gonna go to Arc and find like a bunch of old sheets and just tear them up and make them look [stylish in some way].

According to Jellison (2008), “The perceived cost of the wedding—what we as a culture have now decided is the standard for a wedding—is very powerful” (p. 5). Given that Jessica was “laughed at” when she shared her budget with clerks at a wedding dress store, it seems that this expectation or “standard,” for what a wedding should be—including the cost of the bride's dress—remains relevant today.

The continuation of my interview with Jessica (below) helps to illustrate that while expectations regarding what a wedding “should be” still exist, it may also be that American

society has moved past the traditional, “white wedding” (Ingraham, 1999; Jellison, 2008) expectations. In other words, it is now more common for weddings to take place in less formal settings such as a barn, the beach, or one’s backyard, with less focus on the lavishness of the event. For instance, Jessica explained that her wedding venue was her parent’s backyard, the dinner was barbecue, and guests were invited to camp nearby. Jessica and her fiancé were on a strict wedding budget. They made choices that allowed them to host a special event, but not break the bank in the process.

**Interviewer:** When you think about like your pinning . . . you agree that what you’re doing does reinforce the stereotypical gender roles, um, but the fact that you’re pinning the content—do you feel like that gives you any power or agency over what it is you might potentially do with that pin? And how will it impact your life in a way?

**Jessica:** Sure, yeah.

**Interviewer:** Do you think that goes against any of the stereotypical ideas surrounding it because you’re the one who found it, you’re the one who pinned it?

**Jessica:** Sure, instead of somebody telling me like “you should be doing this thing?”

**Interviewer:** Yes.

**Jessica:** Yes and no. Because especially with this wedding stuff. . . . There’s so many expectations. People think this is what your wedding should be. You know, “you have to do this and you have to do that.” And so all the pins that come up are very traditional and you know this is what you’re supposed to be doing and this is your timeline and this is the stuff that you have to book and all this. And I’m just finding that with everything wedding and it just annoys me. We’re not having a traditional wedding by any means.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Jessica:** And that’s the hardest part is to say like “it is my pin and so I do have control over it.” And “it’s my wedding” . . . it’s really hard not to get kind of sucked into that whole like “this is how it’s supposed to be” kind of feeling.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Jessica:** Especially being on Pinterest where everybody is looking at the really traditional stuff. I think, I get the feeling.

Jessica’s statement “all this stuff surrounding it that really makes me angry” sheds light on the determinative financial implications and/or social structures that can make planning stressful, especially for the bride. However, Jessica struck me as an exemplar interviewee because she presented somewhat of an alternative approach—or even backlash—to planning a wedding in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. Although angered and/or frustrated by some of the financial

implications of planning, my interpretation is that she still enjoyed the process because she completed it in a way that worked for her (i.e., not caring a great deal about the “expectations” that surround this event).

I want to pause here and showcase some content from Jessica’s Pinterest board that contributed to my interpretation. First, she titled her only wedding-oriented pin board “wedding bullshit,” which in itself, speaks to her mentality (described above) regarding the wedding planning process (see Figure 7).

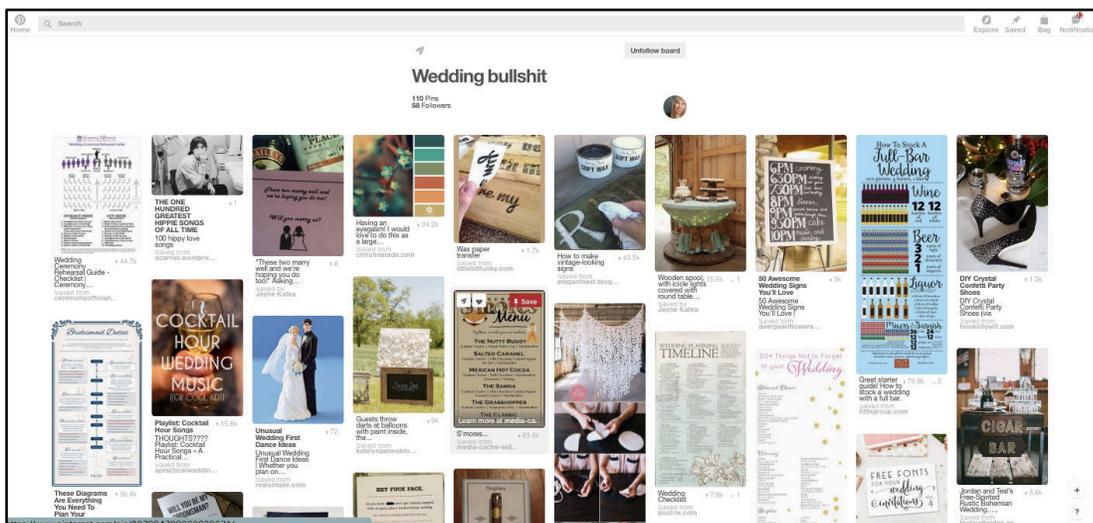
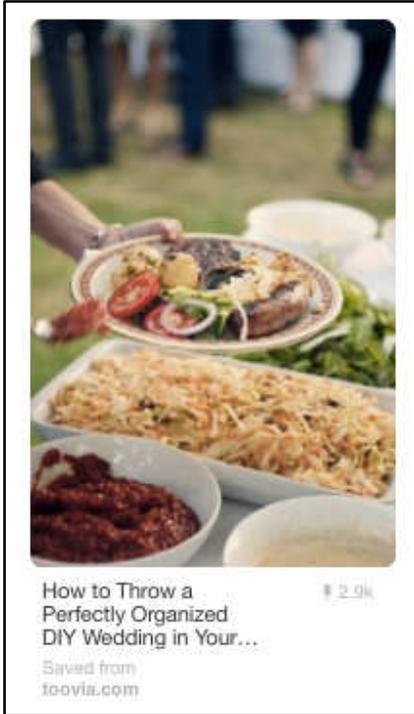
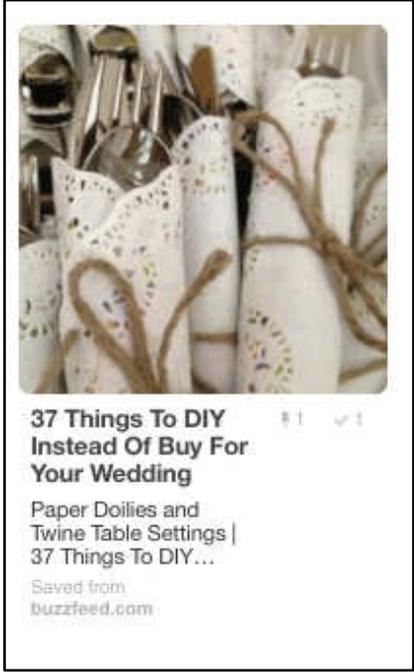


Figure 7: Screenshot of Jessica’s “Wedding bullshit” pin board

In addition, below (see Figures 8-10) is a sample of pins found on Jessica’s board, which help to demonstrate that her wedding was planned with a budget in mind.



**Figure 8:** Sample Pin: “How to Throw a Perfectly Organized DIY Wedding in Your Backyard”



**Figure 9:** Sample Pin: “37 Things to DIY Instead of Buy For Your Wedding”

The name of Jessica's board "Wedding bullshit," stood out as being unique from many of the others I had viewed, which prompted me to ask questions about this during our interview.

Jessica's response is provided below:

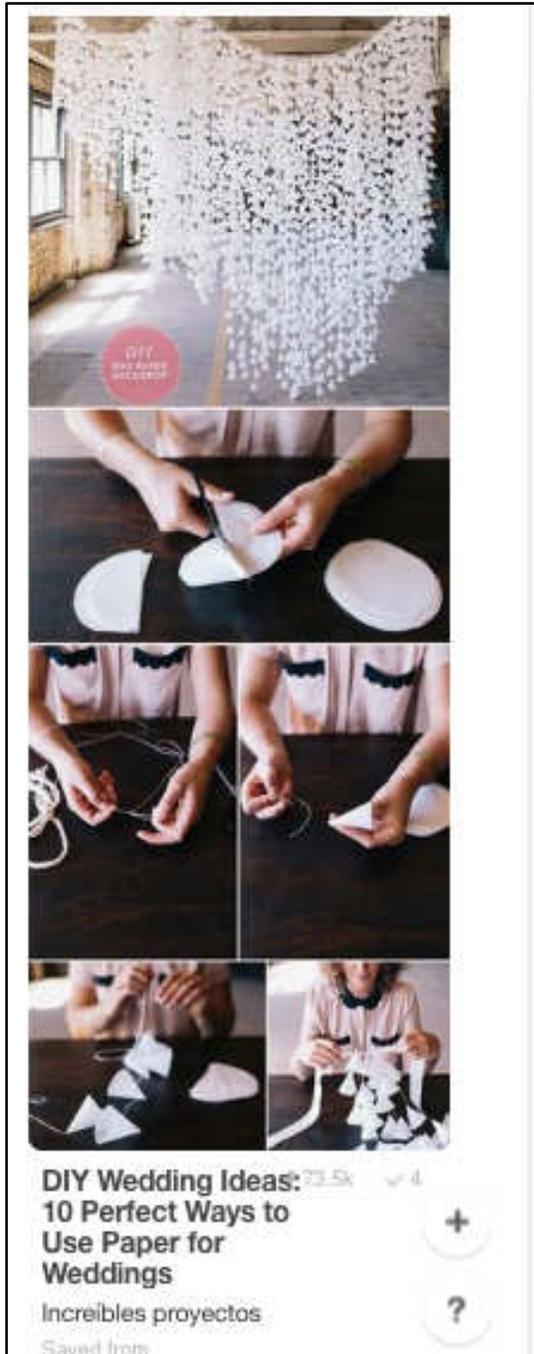
**Jessica:** . . . I named it wedding bullshit because I'm so sick of calling places and them being like "it'll be this much" and I go "yeah it's for a wedding, about 100 people" and they're like "it'll be 3 times that much" because you say "wedding."

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Jessica:** You know it's like immediately super expensive and you can't get what you want unless you pay ridiculous amounts. So I was really upset about all sorts of stuff.

**Interviewer:** And that's what prompted the name? . . . That's one of my questions that I was going to get to . . . so it's just kind of a response to like being frustrated about certain things?

**Jessica:** Yeah, and just the expectations that go along with planning a wedding. And all the political stuff. Like I don't care about any of that. I just want it to be easy. And I want people to be happy at the end. I don't want my bridesmaids to not be my friends anymore, cuz I told them that they have to wear this and that, and this and they have to pay to get their hair done and pay to get their make up done. I'm like NO! I'll get my hair and makeup done, I'll be the prettiest one there, and that's good! Like you guys just have fun.



**Figure 10:** Sample Pin: “DIY Wedding Ideas: 10 Perfect Ways to Use Paper for Weddings”

Jessica’s excerpts make clear that she at times became discouraged planning the wedding because of the determinative financial and societal expectations she references. However, the explanations provided during her interview and physical examples I found through exploring her

Pinterest board indicate that, on some level, user control was also present (e.g., a board titled “wedding bullshit” and pins geared toward planning a budget wedding). What does this mean on a larger scale? Could it be that on a societal level, we are starting to move away from what historically has been viewed as a “requirement” or “expectation” for the white wedding (Ingraham, 1999; Jellison, 2008). Is Pinterest contributing to this shift in that it provides brides with do-it-yourself (DIY) ideas that help to create a beautiful wedding, but on a budget? While the answer to this is a complex one that is expanded on in forthcoming chapters, it is important to give attention to my participant, Cassie, who had a large budget for her wedding,<sup>2</sup> and also used Pinterest as a key planning tool.

The excerpt below stems from a conversation that began with me asking Cassie (who works in the field of finance and lives in Chicago) to talk about how she used Pinterest as a planning tool. As becomes apparent, it seems that Cassie was able to engage in wedding-oriented consumption far more extensively than Jayne. I expand on the implications of this following her excerpt.

**Interviewer:** [D]id using Pinterest with your wedding serve as a practical tool for you to define what it is you were looking at and then eventually decide?

**Cassie:** I would say that Pinterest gave me the ideas, and then it showed me what the possibilities were, and then I interpreted it. I turned those pictures into my own thinking. . . . I really wanted to dig for the most unique . . . sometimes I felt I used it as a confirmation. That like “I think I want to do this, I can do this.” And then if I saw someone do it, it’s like “yes, I know that I can do this because someone else did this, and I’m gonna do it with my own twist on it.”

**Interviewer:** That’s something I’m really interested in . . . the idea that you find all these ideas and then you mold it in some way to make it your own.

**Cassie:** Mhmm.

**Interviewer:** So do you feel like you did that for a good chunk of your planning?

**Cassie:** Yeah. Totally.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

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<sup>2</sup> My interpretation that Cassie had a large budget for her wedding is based on what I gleaned from our interview conversations. She did not tell me the total cost of her wedding, but she provided me with many details about the venue, aesthetics, rehearsal dinner, and associated events that led me to believe her wedding cost at least \$75,000.

**Cassie:** Some things were 100% unique and stuff I thought of, but then if I needed more things to it, I referenced Pinterest to help me get those ideas. . . . I have a couple examples. I got married at a venue that basically it's like a raw space, you have to recreate the whole entire space. And you know people kind of moved through different rooms, each room was a different theme, had a name. It was just totally catered to the bride and the groom. The last room was called the Energy Lab, and it was where the dancing was and all this stuff, and it was based upon . . . each name had a meaning. So the Energy Lab came from . . . I'm a runner, I ran in college, and Mark my husband, he does triathlons, he does the Ironman, and the year to the day we got married, he was competing in the world championships for the Ironman, and there's a part in the race called the Energy Lab, where there is a legit energy lab, and it sucks the energy out of the athletes because it's so hot there.

**Interviewer:** Oh my God.

**Cassie:** I know it's crazy. So I thought it'd be really cool to name a room the Energy Lab and put all these energy drinks, and the band's gonna be in there and the desserts and the drinking, all this kind of like . . . so we kind of ran with the lab part of it where the servers were in lab coats and like the floral was in test tubes and beakers and there was smoke machines and it was just kind of scientific. . . . I was looking up all these different things for it to kind of go with it. . . . when I was like doing my floral, I really wanted . . . I'm not a colors person at all, I'm more of a neutral person so I chose gray, and gray's a really hard color in general. Like the term "50 shades of gray," I realized that during my wedding like there really are 50 shades of gray. . . . that was really hard for me to match and find the correct shade of gray that I was looking for. So then I was like "are there gray flowers?" So I went to Pinterest, like gray floral bouquets to see what people have done and all this stuff came up so I ended up getting ideas that way. What else? Oh! My invites. My invites were actually pieces of wood. . . . it was Pinterest that gave me that idea because I really wanted . . . I went to this wedding and it was completely over the top. Like the most insane wedding I've ever been to where like there was special deliveries. . . . I could not afford to do something like that because it was just ridiculous. I knew that I wanted to do something unique for my invites, I didn't want just paper. So I was researching unique invites. And of course on Pinterest all the stuff comes up . . . and whatever I was plugging in and then wood came about and I was like "this is perfect, I totally am gonna do wood." And that sparked the idea and that was just the theme throughout the whole time.

**Interviewer:** Cool. So venue, invites, anything else that sticks out in your mind as something that you were excited about through what you found on Pinterest?

**Cassie:** Yeah so the wood invites. I did the floral, let's see here. Oh, I did goody bags [for] the hotel room and kind of looked at like wording for that. . . . everything was like "get" something. "get sweet," "get..." I don't even remember but like it was just like, it was, they [Pinterest] helped me create themes throughout. . . . whatever I was doing, there was a theme.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Cassie:** So they [Pinterest] helped me figure out what were good things to put in the goody bags. . . . even after the wedding, I really wanted to preserve as much as I can as well cuz so much thought went into the day. I looked up dry floral arrangements and ended up making this really cool arrangement out of my bouquet so that way I can like

remember it. . . . wording for any of my paper stuff. I had every single paper thing possible that you can have for a wedding from you name it, we had it. And I did it. So, wording for paper, for my invites, for the RSVP cards, for the ceremony books . . . the person who did my paper stuff, we did everything possible. Looked at every way possible to make things cool and unique as possible. From the escort cards to the programs, the wedding invites, the floral bouquets. I was trying to find something really unique for the escort cards, my wording for it. My nails—I looked for unique ways to do your nails . . . for finding the color and the right shade for my bridesmaids’ dresses, cake ideas, though I did not do a cake because I decided I didn’t want to. . . . I did do a small cake. . . . How to ask my bridesmaids, I researched that on Pinterest. I copied how we asked our groomsmen to be our groomsmen. . . . other props and stuff like that, like glow sticks and stuff like that. Like we had, the wedding weekend essentials that were in the guest [rooms], we copied a lot of that [from Pinterest]. Gifts for people, I got ideas for that. Gifts for the bridesmaids and the groomsmen. Bouquets, how all the florals were gonna be put on the guys I researched. Wedding signage, I researched the flower girl dresses. My wedding ring. I looked at Pinterest and I actually ended up going with a very . . . there’s this Pinterest picture that looks exactly like my wedding ring.

Based on the above excerpt, it can be assumed that Cassie’s wedding budget was far greater than Jayne’s (as well as other participants interviewed for this study). Cassie describes the processes she engaged in (primarily using Pinterest) to find inspiration for many of her wedding elements. It seems that “surviving the wedding” for Cassie was a much easier and likely pleasant experience for Cassie than it was for Jayne, given her large budget.

This interpretation is based on some of Cassie’s statements such as “I had every single paper thing possible that you can have for a wedding from you name it, we had it” – and the fact that she hired someone to create many of these products. Further, her budget allowed her to create a special room devoted to her “energy lab” theme where she served specialty drinks and desserts. Through my interview conversation, I gleaned that Cassie was able to execute many of the visions she gathered through Pinterest based primarily on the fact that she had the funds to do so. Comparing this to Jayne (as well as other participants), creating handmade invitations and decorations, and hosting a more scaled-back and casual reception (i.e., a barn or backyard venue) was the reality given the wedding budget. In other words, creating the most unique wedding

invitations, building a bridal bouquet with the perfect shade of gray, and gifting guests with goody bags were simply not options due to financial constraints.

Before closing this section, I want to return to research from Mead (2007) who, broadly speaking, examined wedding industry and culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In her book, she poses an important question I extrapolate to the present study:

What does all this wedding-industry hype mean for the woman who turns to the bridal magazines for guidance and inspiration? One of the things it means is that an expectation that getting married is going to be a very costly endeavor has been drummed into her head well in advance of the start of her wedding planning (p. 27).

If we remove “bridal magazines” and insert the word “Pinterest” into the first sentence of the above statement, I argue that it maintains relevance, given the latter is known for being a source of guidance and inspiration for many users based on my own findings as well as others outside of the wedding planning context (Linder et al., 2014; Phillips et al., 2014). Further, it is also similar in that some of the content on Pinterest is produced at a corporate level (i.e., the wedding industry). While Mead (2007) may be accurate in stating that women have been conditioned to view the wedding as an expensive life event, I disagree with her statement below:

If a bride has been told, repeatedly, that it costs nearly \$28,000 to have a wedding, then she starts to think that spending nearly \$28,000 on a wedding is just one of those things a person has to do, like writing a rent check every month or paying health insurance premiums” (Mead, 2007, p. 27).

Mead’s research was published in 2007; therefore, a decade later, the figures for what a wedding costs have only continued to rise. As a bride who recently went through the planning process, I take issue with Mead’s statement that “she starts to think that spending . . . is just one of those things a person has to do.” Relating this to my own experience, I was never “told” there was a certain amount that needed to be spent. In fact, I was informed by my parents (who generously covered the majority of wedding expenses), that I had a budget far less than \$28,000.

If my husband and I wanted to exceed this, the additional expenses were our responsibility. Even with a larger budget, I do not think I would have felt I had to reach a certain number in spending so that my wedding would live up to a societal expectation.

Additionally, a fair number of brides I interviewed provided insight that led me to believe they were also working with a budget far less than \$28,000, and did not necessarily feel like they “had to” spend a certain amount (Mead, 2007). The excerpts featured earlier from Jessica’s interview offer an indication that planning a wedding on a budget can certainly be stressful and sometimes off-putting. Further, Christy made several comments that led me to believe she tried to hand-make as much of her wedding décor as possible. For instance, she tried to buy as many materials from second-hand stores as possible. Further, she explained that her mom’s sewing and do-it-yourself talents came in very handy, as they re-created many of the ideas gathered through Pinterest (expanded on in a forthcoming chapter). Similarly, Allison, a 26-year-old entrepreneur and executive assistant living in Burlington, Wisconsin, stated “we’re trying to keep it low key, not as expensive, so it’s [Pinterest] helping me with money-saving projects that you can do on your own.” For instance, she was gathering free scrap wood from her family-owned RV dealership to make her own decorations. Collectively, such examples may speak to a new trend emerging within the wedding planning phenomenon—a trend focused on DIY, money saving, and creativity.

Do such examples provide any indication that as a society, we may be starting to move away from the traditional (and often expensive) “white wedding” that has pervaded Western culture for decades? Numerous cases presented in this section help to demonstrate that some aspiring brides prefer to exercise their creativity to make the wedding their own rather than replicate what is found in bridal magazines (often very pricey), and even on Pinterest (sometimes

overdone). Leah, for instance, avoided Pinterest so that her wedding could be a reflection of her own ideas, rather than a regurgitation of popular Pinterest trends. Jessica planned a backyard barbecue style wedding at her parent's house because when she saw the price of venues, she said "no way!" Further, Laurie and her husband were married in a rustic barn, treated guests to a cigar and whiskey bar, and planned it on a "very tight budget." Finally, Christy made it clear that in creating her decorations, she frequented thrift stores to find second-hand materials she could reuse.

Not only do such cases speak to the "little c" creativity idea (e.g., aspiring brides finding and appropriating craft ideas found through media such as Pinterest), they also shed light on emergent trends within the complex landscape of wedding planning, which may indicate societal transition away from the "white wedding" (Ingraham, 1999). In other words, weddings featuring a bride in a formal white wedding dress, a religious component, lavish wedding reception, followed by a honeymoon, may be on the decline. Returning once more to my interview with Jessica, her experience buying a wedding dress appeared to be a source of major stress and tension, to the point that she said: "That's where those expectations come in. I'm just gonna go buy a white dress from Old Navy that's cute." Though Jessica is an exemplar within this study, her experience may be applicable to other modern brides who are fed up with wedding expectations—and no longer willing to accept them. Perhaps we will see more Pinterest boards with titles like "Wedding bullshit."

### **Is It Just "The Bride's Day"?**

During some of my interviews, conversations about wedding planning roles led into a deeper discussion about the popular conception that the wedding day is "for the bride" (Sniezek,

2005; Mead, 2007). This common perception can perhaps be attributed to the female-centeredness of this event that stems from the post-WWII era (see Jellison, 2008). Nonetheless, through interviewing 20 brides (either aspiring or recently married), I learned that not all support this way of thinking, and some are in fact frustrated when this lifetime event is often promoted in this way. Below, I showcase several interview excerpts that help to illustrate that not all brides (among my participant group) view the wedding day as “the bride’s day.” Additionally, I compare my findings with prior literature.

**Interviewer:** Okay. So thinking back to when you were actively in your wedding planning phase . . . it sounds like you were the primary one in charge of planning, doing the research, making decisions, at least for some of the stuff.

**Cassie:** Yes, yeah all of it.

**Interviewer:** So did that provide you with any type of status or power in your relationship that you feel like you wouldn’t have had otherwise?

**Cassie:** Ahh, no.

**Interviewer:** No? Was it just kind of a given between you and your significant other that you would do all this research, come to him and maybe show him some stuff, but then would you ultimately be the one making the decision?

**Cassie:** Yeah. I mean I thought of everything but then I always wanted him to like, I don’t know, I feel like it’s not just my day, ya know? It’s his day too. And I don’t want him to stress about having to plan a wedding but I want him to be part of it and I want him to know like ya know I want him to have part of whatever he wants, and also to be excited about it and give input and I care about his input. I think that some brides just run with it and then the groom just shows up, you know? And I definitely know a lot of grooms that happens [to]. And I didn’t want that for Mike, I wanted him to be part of it. . . I’m really good at finding A., B., and C. options – “what do you think? Do you like B. or C.? I think I like this one? What do you think?” There was a lot of that conversation going on too.

**Interviewer:** So that concept of “it’s the bride’s day and she should be in charge and making all the decisions,” you didn’t have that mentality? You at least wanted his input?

**Cassie:** Yeah, oh totally. That was my worst nightmare kind of thing. I just really wanted it to be his day too . . . and then there were some things that when he walked into it he was just like “this is the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen.” Yeah, he was so excited and he’s just like “I can’t believe you did this.”

**Interviewer:** Ohhh.

**Cassie:** Yeah, he knew of what was going on, but he didn’t know the depths of it.

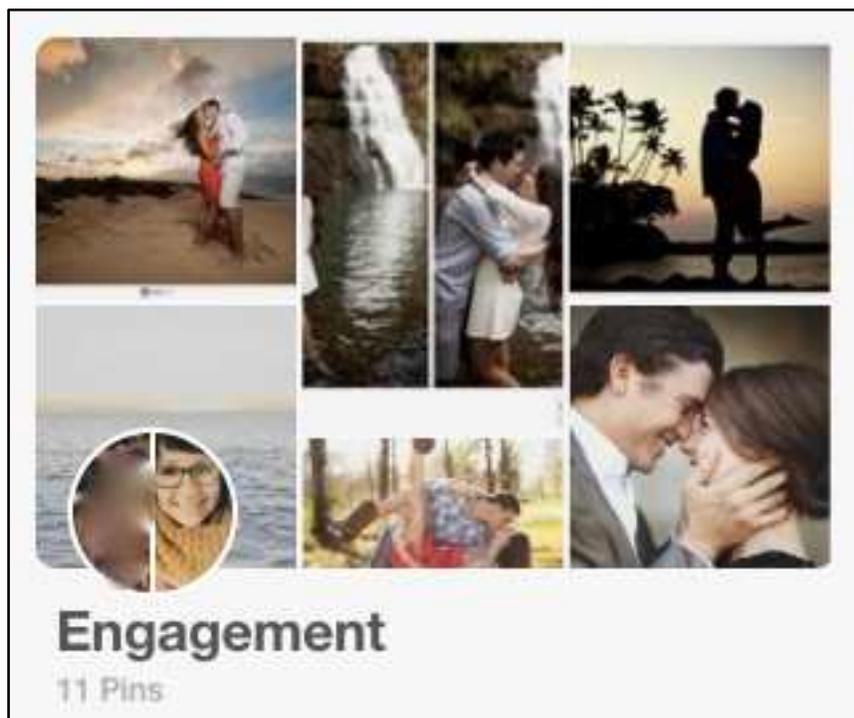
Although Cassie notes that it would be “her worst nightmare” for the wedding day to be only “her day,” and not her husband’s as well, her interview indicates that she went to great

lengths to create the dream wedding—and that she completed nearly all of the behind-the-scenes legwork. Engstrom (2008) uses the term “superbride” to describe a bride who takes control and exhibits an almost “masculine attitude” in “creating the perfect dream wedding” while also making herself beautiful. “...even as they control their ‘special day,’ they succumb to and happily accept the stress, worry, and even pain required to look the part of the blushing bride” (p. 77). Even though Cassie described her planning process as one that involved some joint decision-making with her groom-to-be (e.g., presenting him with A., B., and C. options)—stating she wanted her partner’s input on all things he cared about—I believe Cassie (among other participants) fits Engstrom’s (2008) “superbride,” description in that she was the primary planner and decision-maker, while also performing as the “blushing bride” (p. 77). The notion of a “superbride” who may exhibit a “masculine attitude” helps to demonstrate the complexity of wedding planning. In one respect, the bride is expected to take charge and execute her vision (which could in fact require giving “orders” and being assertive with friends and/or family), while at the same time, present herself in a stereotypically feminine way so that she embodies the “blushing bride” (Engstrom, 2008, p. 77).

For instance, Cassie created six separate Pinterest boards devoted to her wedding and related wedding events: “Engagement,” “Bachelorette,” “10.10.15 Wedding,” “Wedding,” “Wedding Shower,” and “Shoot” (a board devoted entirely to inspirational photos to use for a boudoir photoshoot book she created as a wedding gift for her husband). The fact that she constructed such boards for the event, indicates to me that she took planning very seriously and wanted each element of her wedding to be as unique and well-planned as possible. In addition, by developing a pin board for her boudoir shoot, buying the lingerie and necessary items for it,

as well as paying for the photography and book creation, Cassie not only fulfilled the “superbride” role, she also succeeded in showcasing her sex appeal for her soon-to-be-husband.

Included below are screenshots of Cassie’s six wedding planning boards from Pinterest. I believe these help to demonstrate Cassie’s level of effort in regard to planning. For instance, her board titled “Wedding,” features 374 pins (which ranks among the highest in pin numbers across all of my participants). Further, the fact that she created a board specifically for her bridal shower (containing 86 pins) as well as a board for her boudoir shoot and bachelorette party speaks to the amount of detail and planning she put into other wedding-related events.



**Figure 11:** Screenshot of Cassie’s “Engagement” Pinterest board

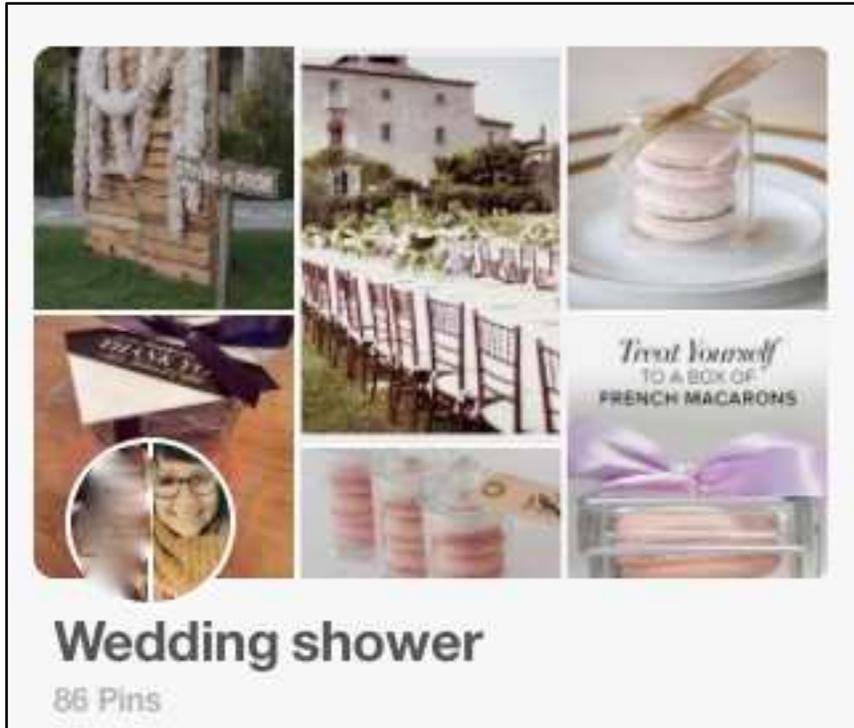


Figure 12: Screenshot of Cassie’s “Wedding shower” Pinterest board

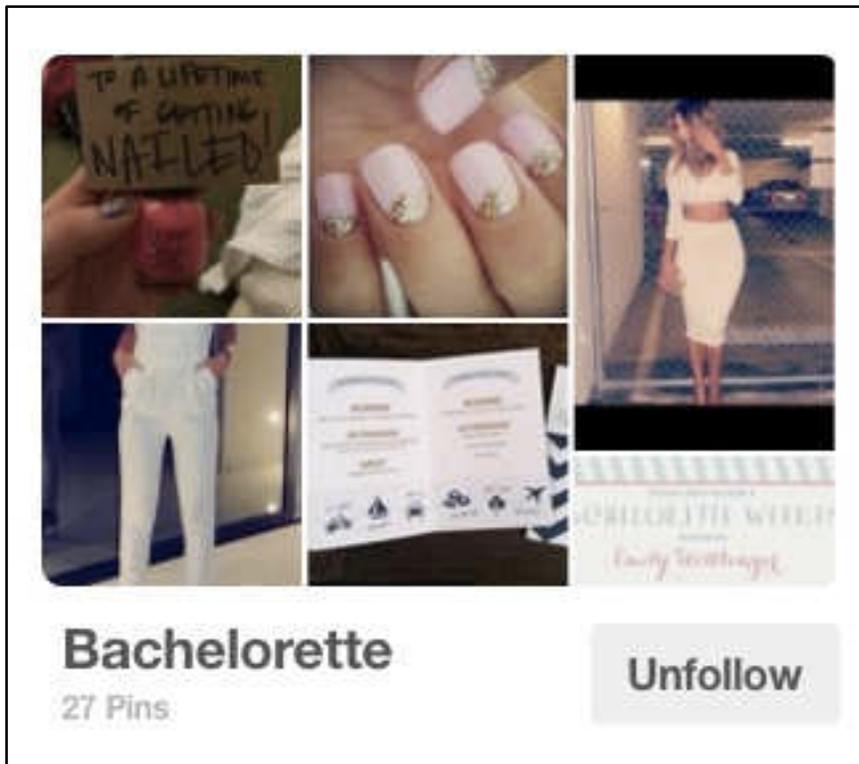


Figure 13: Screenshot of Cassie’s “Bachelorette” Pinterest board

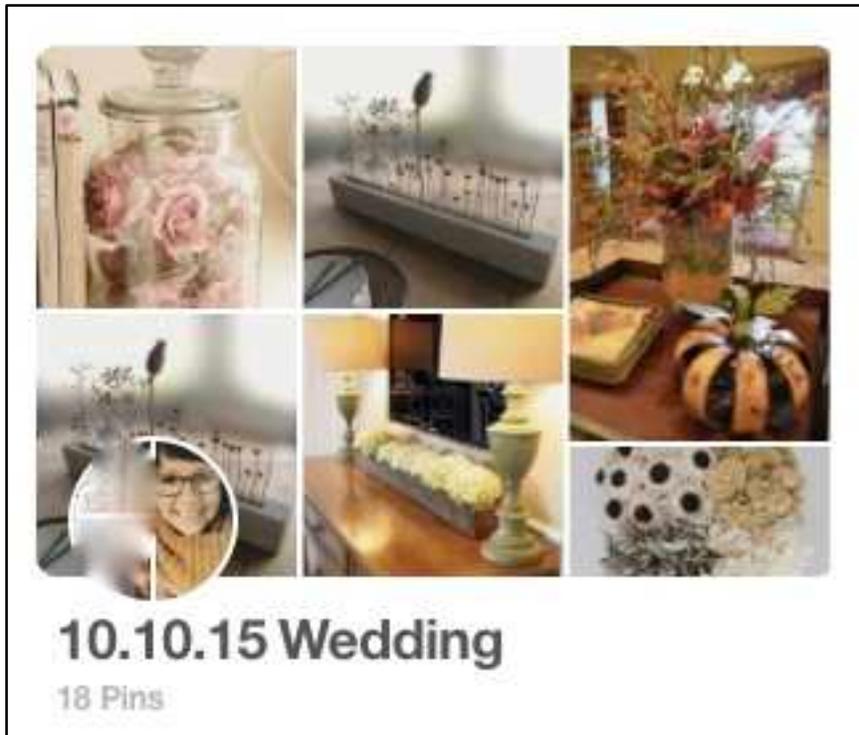


Figure 14: Screenshot of Cassie's "10.10.15" Pinterest board

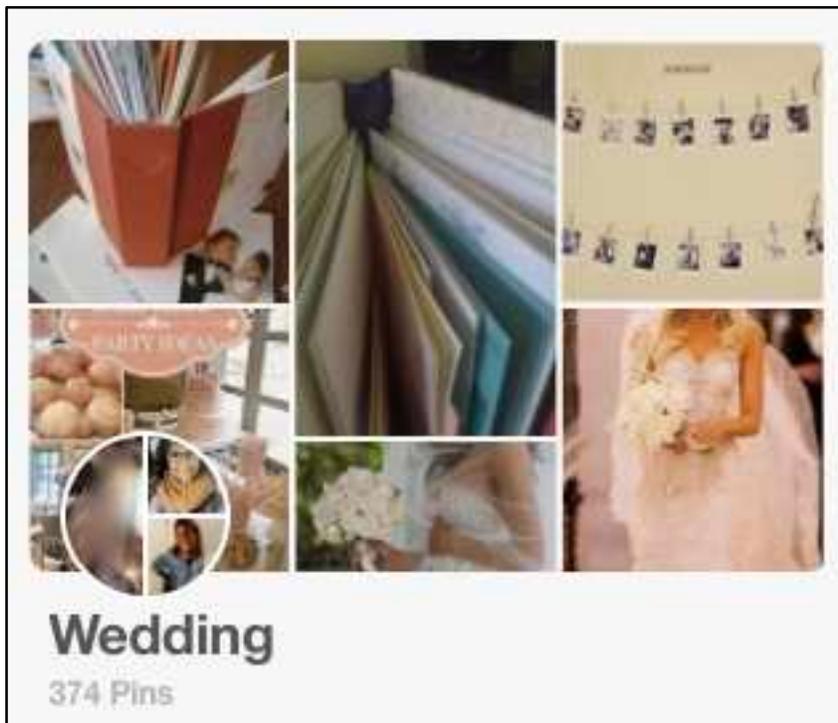
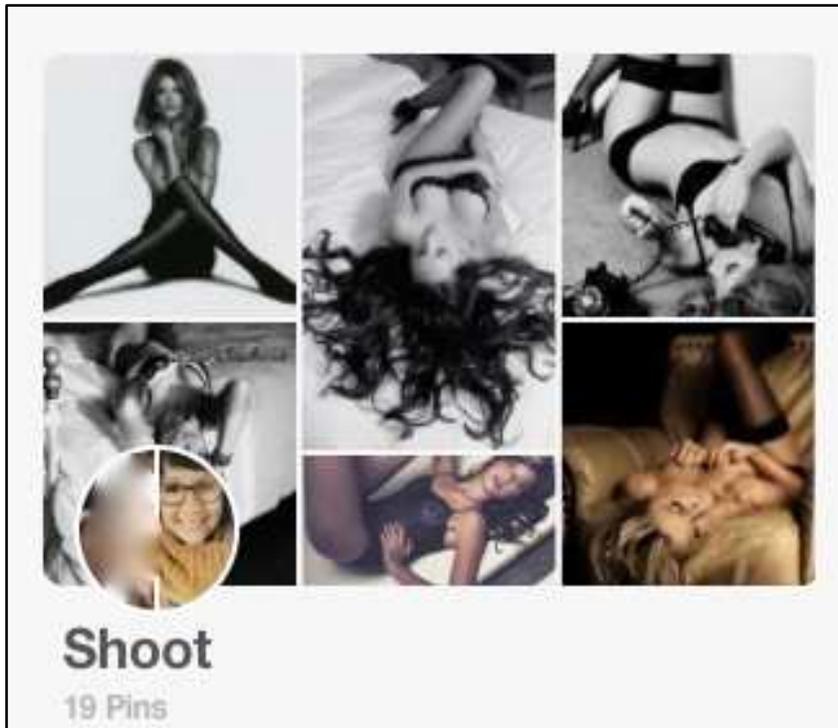


Figure 15: Screenshot of Cassie's "Wedding" Pinterest board



**Figure 16:** Screenshot of Cassie’s “Shoot” (i.e., boudoir shoot) Pinterest board

My examination of Cassie’s boards and interview continues in the final section of this chapter, where I use structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) to unpack some of the key ideas to emerge through my analyses. Returning now to other interview excerpts, I highlight a portion of my conversation with Sadie, a 24-year-old graduate student living in Fort Collins, Colorado, where we talked about the role her groom-to-be played in the planning process:

**Interviewer:** Does planning a wedding provide you with any type of status or power in your relationship that you do not have otherwise?

**Sadie:** I don’t think so. I think he and I are on pretty equal ground when it comes to [our relationship]. I mean, we both want to be equally part of this wedding. . . . if he doesn’t like something, I’m definitely gonna take that into consideration and try to find it . . . but if I really like something, I’ll try to like see if there’s compromise. I believe in that a lot with relationships, my relationship is compromising. But I know that he is giving me, ya know, the reins, in a lot of aspects.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Sadie:** Like I said, I wish he was a little more decisive. And maybe you know helped take a little of the pressure off me.

**Interviewer:** . . . was it a spoken thing where you were like “well I’m gonna just kind of take charge” and like start researching this stuff? Or was it like he actually flat out said, “go ahead and just do this”?

**Sadie:** I mean we bounce around a lot of ideas with each other. And we do talk about some stuff like colors I talked with him, I don't want to pick colors that he doesn't like. . . . and then we even talked about venues. Venues I was like "well maybe," and he even actually pitched the idea of a winery. And I was like "oh, yes, perfect for us."

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Sadie:** So, and then but he has said you know before, like "this is more about you and your day, I mean for a woman it's your day, I just want to get married to you." I mean there are certain things that he is . . . like the food, yeah he's gonna be picky about that. Our cake.

**Interviewer:** Uh huh.

**Sadie:** But other aspects, you know he's letting me decide, "however you want your hair, dress or whatever. I'm good with that. Whatever you choose." . . . but he's flat out said what he does care about. And then he's also said that he knows it's my day and that he's not gonna dictate what kind of things I can and can't do.

As noted above, the concept of "it's the bride's day" came through during my interview with Sadie as a topic she had feelings about. While Sadie and Cassie (among other brides I spoke with), acknowledged that they wanted the aspiring groom's input and were willing to compromise, a flavor of the "it's the bride's day" mentality emerged during numerous interviews. For instance, in the excerpt below, I continue to showcase my conversation with Sadie, wherein she elaborates on why she believes in the idea that it is more so "the bride's day:"

**Interviewer:** Okay, so with that idea of it's the bride's day—what are your thoughts on that?

**Sadie:** I think it is kind of true. . . . I mean, it is a lot about the bride, and the bride's family usually pays a lot of money for it. I mean that's how it's traditionally been for a long time.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Sadie:** I mean the groom is . . . he'll just come and show up. I know there's some grooms out there who want to be part of it and want to design for it. But I mean, most guys, I think most guys would be fine with just getting married in a courthouse.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Sadie:** If they really want to get married bad enough. But I do think it is a lot about the woman and her day. I mean her family is spending . . . my family is spending quite a bit of money on it. Compared to you know him. I don't think his family's gonna spend a lot of money on it. He's already spent money on my ring. . . . I have thought about that a little bit. About why it is the woman's day. And why it is, and I think it's just like that big moment when you walk out on the wedding aisle and everybody's looking at you. And I mean you're . . . most women change their last name. It's I guess, it was just developed into that.

**Interviewer:** Mhmm.

**Sadie:** I bet advertising even promoted that even more, that it is the bride's day. With wedding rings, and wedding gowns, and that probably fostered a lot of that. But I do think the groom should have you know a little bit of a say and it is important that they're happy . . . that day too.

For Sadie, it appears that because the bride's family may spend more money on the wedding (if following tradition), it is somewhat the bride's "right" to have more say in the planning of the wedding. Further, her remarks that "it's just like that big moment when you walk out on the wedding aisle and everybody's looking at you" as well as her acknowledgment that advertising promotes the wedding as the "bride's day," connect to a statement from Geller (2001):

The notion that each weddings' look should represent a purely feminine initiative stems from an underlying belief that this is an event for the bride rather than the groom. It is her day to shine, her ultimate moment, the ritual marks her improvement. The design motif exists to enhance her appearance and set the mood for her metamorphosis. She must therefore dominate the aesthetic production, laboring over flower arrangements, table settings, and centerpieces (p. 297).

Although Sadie explained that she wanted her husband-to-be to weigh in on some of the wedding decisions, it seems that she views the wedding as her "day to shine" (Mead, 2007, p. 297). On the other hand, Leah's remarks help to indicate that because the bride often devotes significantly more of her time to planning the wedding, more attention may be given to her that day.

**Interview:** What are your personal thoughts about the concept of like it's "her day" and that kind of thing with what people say about a wedding?

**Leah:** That's always kind of bothered me how . . . it completely revolves around the bride and it's like the groom's just there hanging out. I mean even in our wedding per se did not go like that at all. I didn't feel like it was about either of us, I felt like there was a lot of really selfish people involved. But even when we were doing pictures, I made sure that there was as many pictures of him taken before the wedding as there was of me. I didn't want it to be a bunch of pictures of just me. Or when we were arranging the pictures, I didn't want the bride-to-be standing in front of everybody, the bride needed to be with everybody. And when we did our speeches, I was sure that when we stand up to talk or something, I didn't want it to be directed towards me. So the people who I knew were going to be giving speeches, it had to be equal between us. Cuz it always has kind of bothered me that it was about just the bride, but I can see why. Because she's the one

who puts the entire thing together so it's almost like a "thank you for throwing an awesome party" kind of thing.

Based on the above, it appears that Leah made a strong effort to have equal attention given to her and her husband on their wedding day. Nonetheless, she recognizes that brides often receive more attention for the work they put in to making the day a success (for more on this idea see Sniezek, 2005; McKenzie & Davies, 2010).

Lastly, my conversation with Trisha, a 27-year-old architectural designer living in Fort Collins, Colorado, sheds light on the notion that for at least some couples, the wedding planning process can be more of a joint endeavor:

**Interviewer:** . . . Do you consider wedding planning to be women's work? And I say that in the sense of stereotypical women's work-childrearing, all the stereotypical things that women traditionally have been like associated with. Do you consider wedding planning to fall into that category?

**Trisha:** I sort of feel like we're at the dawn of a new age or whatever where I don't think it's something where "gosh oh women should be planning." I definitely appreciated, even when he was a pain in the butt, that Andy wanted to help with the decisions cuz it's about both people. But I do also think that there's sort of a component of it that I found really tricky . . . my parents wanted to be really traditional, and they wanted to pay for the wedding. And so there were a lot of times where it would come down to who gets to make a decision—and it came down to well, "Trisha's parents are paying for the wedding, so she gets to make the decision." And I felt like in terms of why I was making more decisions than Andy, that's more what it was than about that it was my responsibility to do it.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Anything else that sparks ideas for you about what you did to help with planning your wedding and that division of labor?

**Trisha:** I'm trying to think. It was all, it's all so funny. . . . I think the biggest thing we did, cuz we planned the whole wedding in five months, so it was really tight. Was we made an Excel spreadsheet that was sort of like "these decisions have to be made by this time," and that started out super well. We got the really big things sorted out within our time schedule and that just sort of went to shit and I just started being like "you have to tell me what you want for the linens."

[ . . . ]

**Interviewer:** Okay, so it sounds like maybe the most frustration centered around needing to have answer for things and his was just like leisurely . . .

**Trisha:** Yeah, it's a very like I'm a Type A and he's a Type B, I'm punctual and have a schedule for things and he doesn't . . .

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Trisha:** When you're actually planning something that actually takes place at an actual time, you sort of have to have the planning mentality. And he wasn't there with me.

Though Trisha is an outlier in stating that we may be at the “dawn of a new era,” regarding how wedding planning takes place between couples, this comment may at least indicate that as a society we may be starting to shift away from the “white wedding” and the expectations that come with it (including gendered planning roles). However, because Trisha's parents were traditional in paying for the wedding, she experienced more authority in the decision-making process compared to her husband. Arguably, this may be an example of why the “it's the bride's day,” ideology persists. Moreover, Engstrom (2008) claims that the unequal division of labor in wedding planning—where men are primarily excluded—“further demarcates the line between the feminine and masculine,” thereby perpetuating wedding planning as “women's work” instead as a joint endeavor for the couple (p. 77).

### **Concluding Thoughts: “Becoming a Bride” in the Age of Pinterest**

Drawing from both my interview findings (based on discussions with 20 white, heteronormative, cis gender, middle to upper-middle class women) and prior research, this chapter provided an overview of how planning a wedding can be considered a form of unpaid labor, primarily performed by the bride-to-be and her select female counterparts. Mead (2007) refers to such labor as “becoming a bride,” noting that the process involves far more than saying “I do” to one's “intended” (p. 16). As presented by editors of *Brides* magazine, “planning a wedding would demand hours of time and advanced organizational skills” (Mead, 2007, p. 16). I believe Mead's (2007) argument can be extended to include Pinterest in that the site promotes (broadly speaking) the idea that planning a wedding requires time and organization on behalf of the bride.

Young women today [2007] often refer to bridal magazines as “wedding porn,” and the analogy—with its suggestion that the contents of bridal magazines are somewhat illicit, eminently compulsive, and pathologically fantastical—is a good one. Bridal magazines offer an invitation into a fantasy world, but the editorial tone they strike is one of the utmost practicality, as if there were nothing the least bit extraordinary about decorating the entryway of a church with topiary obelisks and a carpet of moss, or selecting as one’s own “signature hors d’oeuvre” a bite-sized pizza topped with cranberry, smoked mozzarella, and thyme and served in a miniature monogrammed pizza box. (Mead, 2007, pp. 17-18)

Can the above statement be extrapolated to the Pinterest wedding planning phenomenon as presented in this chapter and study as a whole? Mead (2007) posits that bridal magazines invite readers to step into a fantasy world of wedding planning where extravagant food, drink, and décor is presented as the norm. Can the same be said for Pinterest? I argue such a position is a bit of an oversimplification. Pinterest has been criticized for its ability to promote consumption and fantasy (Sandler, 2014; Odell, 2014; Jones, 2016). Cassie, for example, engaged in consumption (as well as fantasy in some respects) by purchasing lingerie and hiring a photographer for her boudoir shoot.

While this criticism, in my view, is at least partly accurate, I think there is more to investigate as this is a complex phenomenon. Is fantasizing about one’s wedding a “bad” thing? Is finding material goods that one aspires to have a “bad” thing? Because Pinterest is a platform populated with user-generated content, at least some of the pins are produced and consumed by aspiring brides like Jessica, who are planning a wedding on a tight budget. If she gathered inspiration via Pinterest to create her backyard barbecue wedding, can that somehow be viewed as a negative? As was demonstrated through the excerpts featured in this chapter, not all aspiring brides are able or want to plan a lavish wedding. Therefore, they may seek media like Pinterest because it offers ideas for those not planning a white wedding (i.e., in the traditional sense described at the beginning of this chapter).

Stated another way, Pinterest is different from the traditional bridal magazine. It may appeal to aspiring brides because it presents unique and creative ideas for wedding planning on a budget. Additionally, it offers an ease of use much different from a bridal magazine. No longer must a bride-to-be sift through a dense magazine to find wedding inspiration. This idea is expanded on in a forthcoming chapter, but it is also worth mentioning here.

Print magazines and interactive Web sites offer the bride quite different experiences: For one thing, it's easier for a woman with an office job surreptitiously to take time out from the workday to plan her wedding online than it is for her to hide a five-hundred-page print magazine on her lap under her desk. . . . But while the means of delivery may be radically different, the bridal fantasy promoted online and on the page is very similar. It is also more complex than immediately meets the eye (Mead, 2007, p. 19).

The above quotation sheds light on several key topics covered in this chapter. First, Mead's (2007) statement that although the delivery methods differ (i.e., print versus digital), the message still revolves around the promotion of wedding fantasy. Though a bridal magazine may promote a more expensive white wedding compared to the popular budget-friendly wedding planning tips often found on Pinterest, both encourage the aspiring bride to fantasize about her wedding. Perhaps of even greater importance is Mead's (2007) acknowledgement that wedding planning falls on the bride-to-be's shoulders. This speaks to the central argument presented in this chapter—wedding planning continues to be a role primarily assigned to women (drawing solely from those I interviewed and prior research). Although this chapter highlights several unique cases wherein the groom-to-be took part in the planning and decision-making process, it appears that many brides prefer to be in charge when it comes to planning this special day.

Finally, Mead's (2007) claim that the fantasies promoted in bridal media (which arguably would include Pinterest), are “more complex than immediately meets the eye,” (p. 19) lends support to a fundamental theme I return to throughout this study. If we view wedding planning and consuming wedding media (i.e., Pinterest) as a complex phenomenon (rather than the

simplistic way Pinterest has been commonly criticized), it becomes necessary to unpack whether the stereotypical activities women engage in (i.e., fantasizing, consuming, beautifying, and ultimately “laboring”), are “bad” or “good,” as this is often debated in academic and non-academic realms. Ultimately, this connects to the overarching question this study seeks to address: are such activities user-controlled, deterministic, or a mixture of both? I continue to address these complicated questions in forthcoming chapters.

To close, I return to Jellison’s (2008) research on the evolution of America’s “precise and expensive” standards for the ritual of wedding. She notes that our society has “guaranteed the survival of the white wedding into the twenty-first century by amending the ideology that supported it and reinterpreting the functions the rite served (p. 5). In her book, she systematically analyzes “the cultural mechanisms that disseminated, updated, and sustained the notion that a white wedding was the American way to marry” (p. 5). To relate this to the present study, I argue that Pinterest acts as a contributing “cultural mechanism” that takes part in disseminating, updating, and possibly sustaining the American white wedding. As the upcoming chapters indicate, Pinterest works as a “cultural mechanism” that helps aspiring brides re-define the type of bride they want to be and more broadly engage in identity construction that spans beyond the wedding day.

### **Structuration Theory Applied to Theme 1: The Labor of Wedding Planning and Pinterest**

This chapter focused a great deal on the notion of the “white wedding” (Ingraham, 1999) and its evolution to present day society. The excerpts I shared from my interview with Jessica (among others) help to illustrate the stress and/or tension that can be involved in planning a wedding – as well as user control (or perhaps backlash) in response to such tension. To conclude

this chapter, I explore Jessica's case using structuration theory as a lens, drawing on Giddens' (1984) dimensions of domination, legitimation, and signification as well as his description of agency.

First, I argue that the tradition of and expectations associated with the white wedding can be viewed as a 'structure' of domination. Although the 'structure' of the white wedding in America is not codified as a formal 'rule,' arguably, this chapter helped to demonstrate some of the underlying expectations (or informal rules) associated with this cultural event that is often marketed as 'the most important day' in a woman's life.

Giddens' used the concept of authoritative resources as a term for having "command over individuals" (Hardaker & Singh, 2011, p. 224). In this example, it seems that authoritative resources align more closely with the idea of the white wedding, a form of domination, as it can involve a "transformative capacity generating commands over persons or actors" (Giddens, 1984, p. 258, as cited in Hardaker & Singh, 2011, p. 228). Stated another way, an aspiring bride may in some ways feel controlled by the ideology/hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) of the white wedding (e.g., economic constraints, division of labor, familial expectations) as promoted in Western culture. For instance, wedding-oriented media such as magazines, television, and/or wedding planning guides may generate "commands" the bride-to-be is expected to follow.

For example, Jellison (2008) refers to the "white wedding ideal" – noting the different institutions that played a role in communicating to the American public the significance of this event and what it should look like: the bridal-wear business, celebrity weddings, movie weddings, and media coverage of "the wedding next door" (i.e., a non-celebrity event recognized in national media) (pp. 5-6). Mead (2007) provides a statement that helps to further situate the

notion of the white wedding as a structure of domination (i.e., one in which women are directed on how to perform the expected duties):

For help in such matters, she [the bride-to-be] turns to the bridal magazines, which typically serve as a young woman's first point of entry into the world of weddings once it has been determined she is to participate in one. The experience of buying one's first bridal magazine—like the experience of stepping into a formal gown for the first time—can be disorienting in the extreme. Its pages offer both the seductive pleasure of taking up what may be a long-anticipated role and the shock of realizing just what enacting that role is going to require in terms of money, time, and energy expended (p. 17).

Here, however, it is important to call attention to the fact that structuration theory “articulates the relationship of the social subject” (i.e., the bride) “to his [or her] structural environment” (e.g., wedding planning media messages, wedding retailers, and/or wedding vendors) (Dixon et al., 2016, p. 992). “Structuration theory suggests that, although individuals have agency, they are bound or constrained by social structures that they, in turn, reinforce” (Dixon et al., 2016, p. 992). Applying these ideas to the present chapter, I take the position that agency can be exercised through using Pinterest to plan a wedding, and at the same time, reinforce (at least to some degree) the idea that “the world of weddings” (Mead, 2007, p. 17) is a domain primarily created for and maintained by women.

The fact that Pinterest has been stereotyped as being for the wedding-obsessed woman, helps to demonstrate this idea – women may experience control planning via this platform, but at the same time, remain bound by social structures that they simultaneously reinforce. For example, by using Pinterest to plan a wedding, an aspiring bride participates in pinning commercialized images including wedding dresses, venue and décor ideas, food and beverage inspiration, flower arrangements – the list goes on. In doing so, she may experience agency as well as determinism. Through pinning and appropriating content to fit with her personal needs and taste preferences, she may exercise control. While engaged in such pinning activities,

however, she may also be contributing to the perpetuation of wedding planning as ‘women’s work.’ Thus, the commercialization of the American wedding continues along with the traditional gender roles (i.e., woman as planner) that have long been associated with this event.

Nonetheless, because I situate myself as a researcher who aligns more with the idea that social media (or Pinterest) users may exercise a certain amount of control in their online activity, I want to further investigate what I consider to be a related concept characterized by Giddens (1984) as *agency*. I argue Jessica’s case provides a nice example of this...

Agency lies in the possibility of individual action. He [Giddens] emphasizes the role of the individual in determining outcomes: ‘Agency concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently’ (Giddens, 1984, p. 9, as cited in Dixon et al., 2016, p. 993).

Applying the above statement to the present study (broadly) and this chapter (in particular), it perhaps becomes more apparent that, although operating under patriarchal and economic structures, women have some control (again, what Giddens [1984] would characterize as agency) regarding if and how they engage in wedding planning. In other words, as individuals, women have the power to act “differently” (which perhaps can be thought of as resisting structures).

For instance, my interview with Jessica revealed that she was frustrated with the ideology surrounding Western weddings. As a result, she rejected economic structures and traditions by creating a budget wedding using Pinterest. Later, I elaborate on my interview with Jessica as I think it helps to demonstrate the structuration of this phenomenon – the recursive nature of domination, legitimation, and signification.

For instance, Jessica’s one and only wedding board geared toward wedding planning was titled “Wedding bullshit.” Her title alone draws on the dimensions of domination, signification, and legitimation. For Jessica, the overall ‘structure’ (or ideology) of the white wedding was a

source of stress and frustration. As previously mentioned, she had a difficult time finding a wedding dress that fit her budget and was actually laughed at by clerks when dress shopping because her budget was considered too low. Here, legitimation, as well as domination, come into play as the clerks responded in this way due to economic social norms surrounding wedding attire (i.e., a dress should cost a certain amount).

Legitimation focuses on social norms attached to or emergent from a given phenomenon. I presented evidence for the fact that women take on the primary role as wedding planner based on my own interview findings as well as past research (Engstrom, 2008; Sniezek, 2005). Though this duty is not written as any type of formal rule or law, it seems fair to argue that women fulfilling this role has evolved into an accepted social norm within our society. Arguably, this idea fits Giddens' (1984) definition of legitimation.

Further, Jessica pinned a great deal of content focused on budget wedding planning including DIY ideas (i.e., décor and invitations) as well as informal food and drink (i.e., backyard barbecue style). Though such ideas step outside of the traditional white wedding aesthetic (i.e., formal venue, ceremony, venue, and amenities for guests), Jessica's collection of budget wedding ideas can certainly be viewed as 'valid.' Arguably, her pins can be considered as a response to challenges imposed by the economic structure(s) that surrounds weddings (i.e., not all aspiring brides can plan a lavish wedding).

Additionally, social norms (i.e., legitimation) can be seen in Jessica being told her dress budget was too low (i.e., she would not be able to purchase a dress [though she did] for the amount of money she wanted to spend – and being treated rudely by clerks. Furthermore, legitimation (and possibly domination) is evident in Jessica's experience trying to hire vendors and/or caterers. For instance, as soon as she mentioned the word “wedding,” she was told that the

cost would be higher. That is to say, social and economic structures (both informal and formal) contributed to Jessica's wedding planning processes. Nonetheless, she often chose not to adhere to such structures and appropriate for her own needs. This is where Pinterest – and signification – come into play.

Jessica's title "Wedding bullshit," could be seen as a "sign" (using Saussurean terms) about how she felt about planning her wedding. When asked why she chose this title, she explained that some negative experiences early on in her planning phase contributed to the title (i.e., being told the cost was higher for anything wedding related, stressful/hurtful experience wedding dress shopping [due to a limited budget], societal expectations attached to the event).

Returning to an excerpt from Jessica's interview, these statements help to showcase signification, as well as legitimation and domination, at play:

**Jessica:** . . . I named it wedding bullshit because I'm so sick of calling places and them being like "it'll be this much" and I go "yeah it's for a wedding, about 100 people" and they're like "it'll be 3 times that much" because you say "wedding."

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Jessica:** You know it's like immediately super expensive and you can't get what you want unless you pay ridiculous amounts. So I was really upset about all sorts of stuff.

**Interviewer:** And that's what prompted the name? . . . That's one of my questions that I was going to get to . . . so it's just kind of a response to like being frustrated about certain things?

**Jessica:** Yeah, and just the expectations that go along with planning a wedding. And all the political stuff. Like I don't care about any of that. I just want it to be easy. And I want people to be happy at the end. I don't want my bridesmaids to not be my friends anymore, cuz I told them that they have to wear this and that, and this and they have to pay to get their hair done and pay to get their make up done. I'm like NO! I'll get my hair and makeup done, I'll be the prettiest one there, and that's good! Like you guys just have fun.

Jessica's experiences in both the physical (e.g., dress shopping, working with vendors, buying supplies for and making decorations, and communicating with family and her bridal party) as well as the digital realm of planning (i.e., Pinterest) contributed to her meaning-making process. Collectively, such experiences played a role in the titling of her board "Wedding

bullshit.” In further explaining her board title, Jessica said, “well mine’s like super obvious – F the man.” This statement alone helps to further demonstrate signification, in some respects, as a response to the economic structures (domination) Jessica encountered during her planning.

Dixon et al. (2016) note: “Giddens argues against the lack of power accredited to individuals in the fact of structures as theorized by functionalism and structuralism” (pp. 992-993). In the context of the present study: if Giddens was analyzing the phenomenon of wedding planning via Pinterest, he might say Jessica demonstrated control (or agency) by creating the “wedding bullshit” board and resisting the aforementioned structures. Additionally, Jessica’s board may ultimately contribute to the overall structured meanings of the contemporary wedding—that it can be too much, it must be controlled. “One of my principal ambitions in the formulation of structuration theory is to put an end to each of these empire-building endeavors” (Giddens, 1984, p. 2, as cited in Dixon et al., 2016, p. 993). With all of this in mind, perhaps the most effective way to think about the wedding planning via Pinterest phenomenon is recursively. As Giddens makes clear, structure is present. At the same time, however, he provides an approach that allows for the complex way meaning is negotiated as an ongoing process over time and space.

## CHAPTER 5: PINTEREST AS A PLACE FOR DIGITAL COLLECTING

### *The Passionate Digital Collector*

Christy described Pinterest as "a visual collection of greatness," she gravitates to when in need of a mental break from work or in search of "cool ideas." Sometimes she is purposeful when using the site (e.g., she needs to find a pork recipe for dinner) and other times she will "cruise it just to cruise it" (i.e., mindlessly scroll through her feed). The way Christy, as well as many of the other participants interviewed for this study, use Pinterest aligns with what Linder et al. (2014) call "seeking behavior." In their study, they identified two types of seeking behavior, which are consistent with my findings: "(1) casual browsing with no particular goal in mind" and "(2) responding to a specific IBI (information based ideation) task" (p. 7). Casual browsing equates to Christy's description of "cruising Pinterest," and responding to a specific IBI task is related to purposeful searching.

Generally, Christy is purposeful in her pinning. She goes to Pinterest with a purpose in mind and searches primarily for relevant pins so she does not get "sucked in" and veer off track. However, she will also "cruise" when she finds fellow pinners who share her tastes and interests (e.g., neutral home decor, wedding planning, travel, writing).

**Interviewer:** Okay, so you don't go there [Pinterest] for entertainment—if you're bored and you're like I just need something to do?

**Christy:** I will, but I feel like lately I would say I go more on Instagram than Pinterest.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Christy:** But yes, I mean I will definitely just like cruise because I've followed people that meet my interests, right. So like "oh, you really love neutral homes?" so I cruise. Or oh, 'you have a wedding?' so yes.

**Interviewer:** Then you just kind of get sucked in a little bit?

**Christy:** Yeah, I guess entertainment, I didn't think of it that way but yes. To fill space that I shouldn't, yes I definitely go to Pinterest.

Christy is very much a digital collector in that she gathers images that inspire her plans for home decor, fashion, wedding, cooking, motherhood, etc. Before the dawn of Pinterest, Christy collected images she found online and stored them in a folder on her computer. She has since re-found these images and saved them to her Pinterest boards. She does not, however, pin just any image. Christy describes her pinning as "intentional," meaning that she pins only images that fit with her select boards. She utilizes the "like" function on Pinterest (i.e., clicking a heart-shaped "like" button above the pin) as doing so allows all the images she has "liked" to be compiled within her account, but not pinned to boards. She will then sift through her "likes" to decide if she likes any of the pins enough to add them to a board. Using Pinterest in this way exemplifies Christy's desire to keep her boards very "collected." That is to say, she takes time to sift through the mass amount of content available on Pinterest so that her boards are a true and concise reflection of who she presents herself to be in regard to her style, interests, and plans.

The way pins are selected and organized seems to be dependent on the user. Throughout my interviews with 20 white, heteronormative, cis gender, middle to upper-middle class women, I learned that some participants strive to pin only images they truly love and plan to implement, while others pin mass numbers of images and are less concerned about whether the pin will be used. As with other social media platforms, users tend to develop habits that aid in how they use the platform (e.g., lurking, commenting, sharing, private/direct messaging, etc.). A Pinterest user habit that emerged is a theme I have titled "board evolution." In brief, I define this as the process of change over time that occurs as users participate in wedding planning (regardless of their relationship status). The forthcoming section features several interview excerpts that illustrate the theme of board evolution (Linder et al., 2014).

## **Inspiration to Implementation: The Evolution of Wedding Pin Boards**

As noted, Christy is a digital collector. Before Pinterest, she stored inspirational images she found on blogs and websites in a folder on her personal computer. She describes the site as a great resource for finding ideas and as a tool that helped her to evaluate what she wanted the most for her wedding décor. “I like, joke—what did we do before Google and Pinterest? Cuz it just has, like, everything.” Some brides reported feeling overwhelmed when using Pinterest because it is loaded with so much content. Meaning that Pinterest can sometimes provide users with information overload, making it more difficult to choose potential wedding ideas (among other topics) (Jones, 2016).

Though she did at times feel overwhelmed, for the most part Christy reported that Pinterest helped her to narrow down her ideas.

**Christy:** James and I dated...it was nine years when we got married. So I have a collection [of images gathered pre-engagement] um and then when we actually did get engaged, I created an “Official I Do” private board. That then I sifted through from the old board and then new stuff to sort of be like “yeah, this is really cool, but this isn’t my cool.”

In other words, Christy’s wedding planning evolved over the course of her relationship. She began by pinning to her pre-engagement board (“Someday I Do”)—this is the board she pinned ideas to before she was actively planning her wedding. It served as sort of a repository where she collected images she thought were cool and could possibly fit into her wedding décor someday. Once she became engaged and actively started planning, however, she sorted through her pins and only ideas that were “in the running” for the wedding day were saved to the “Official I Do” board.

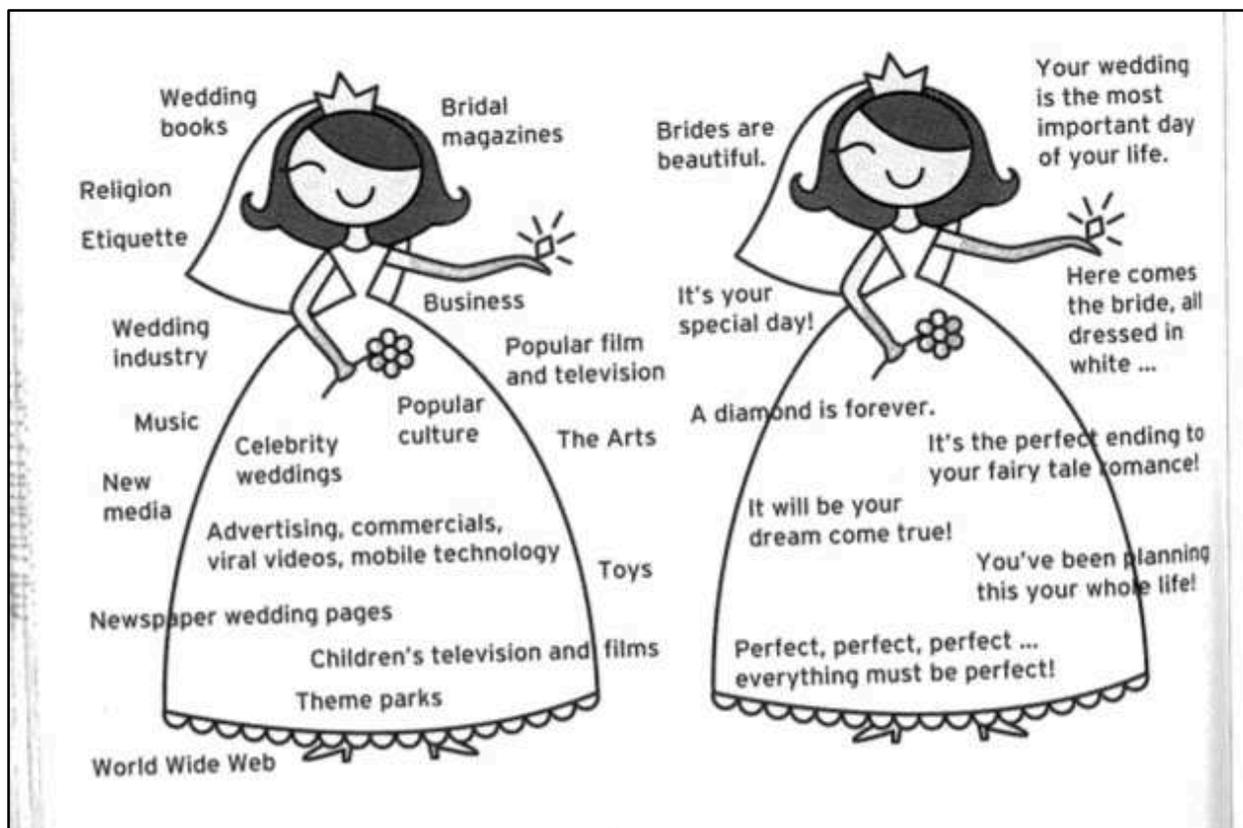
The notion of “board evolution” as illustrated through Christy’s use of Pinterest emerged as a theme among 13 of my 20 participants. It appears to be somewhat commonplace for women

to create a wedding board before they are engaged (or even in a serious relationship) to which they pin images of the wedding they hope to someday have (i.e., daydreaming; pinning for inspiration). Although Pinterest has been criticized as being a place for wedding-obsessed women to daydream (Tekobbe, 2013), my findings suggest that at least some of this daydreaming leads to doing (i.e., putting pins into action; implementation).

For instance, Odell (2012) claims that people gravitate to Pinterest “to scrapbook every imaginable physical aspect of their dream lives” (n.p.). It is fair to assume, then, that weddings constitute part of many women’s dream lives (Engstrom, 2008; McKenzie & Davies, 2010). The notion that girls have been taught from early childhood the significance of their wedding day is what Ingraham (2008) refers to as a “wedding ideological complex.” According to this idea, women are reared from early childhood prepare for this day as it will be “the happiest day of their lives” (Ingraham, 1999, p. 81). Ingraham (2008) argues that the wedding industry is “recession proof” because people will endure the costs of a wedding “no matter what” (p. 119). She explains that the wedding ideological complex is:

[M]ade up of those sites in American popular culture—children’s toys, wedding announcements, advertising, film, internet, television, bridal magazines, jokes, cartoons, music—that work as an ensemble in creating many taken-for-granted beliefs, values, and assumptions within social texts and practices about weddings (p. 119)

Ingraham (2008) provides a visual representation to help explain this complex (see Figure 17):



**Figure 17:** Wedding Ideological Complex and Messages (Ingraham, 2008, p. 119).

In short, Ingraham (1999/2008) argues that the messages from media and popular culture help to condition women to view the wedding as a life event they should dream and fantasize about starting in childhood. Consider this excerpt from my conversation with Dawn, a 31-year-old music teacher and musician living in Minneapolis, Minnesota:

**Interviewer:** Okay. So do you think that you had a really strong vision of your wedding day and how you wanted to look on that day pre-using Pinterest? Or do you think that Pinterest use really pushed that into place?

**Dawn:** [Pinterest] Totally pushed it into place.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Dawn:** Cuz I had, I don't know, I was one of those girls who always dreamed of the wedding. Like since I was a little girl, but I never actually tried to construct the exact like color palette in my brain. And I know what I like, I mean the colors and stuff that we're using are typically things that I really, really like. But no, I would have been completely clueless without Pinterest.

Here, Dawn acknowledges that she has dreamt of her wedding day since childhood (in line with the wedding ideological complex) and credits Pinterest for helping her vision(s) for that day come to fruition.

Phillips, Miller, and McQuarrie (2014) have argued that as a platform, Pinterest makes it possible for women to “dream out loud” by gathering visual ideas they may want to incorporate into different life projects:

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 (Phillips et al., 2014, p. 648).

Sentiments shared by Andrea reinforce the notion of “dreaming out loud” (Phillips et al., 2014):

**Andrea:** And I kind of have this dream world on Pinterest where it’s not a for sure commitment to anything, but rather just a space where I can create a wedding that I probably never would want to pay for, but I guess that’s just kind of . . . it’s a dual-edged kind of thing where it’s really beneficial but at the same time it’s kind of like “ahhh I’m just like every other girl with a Pinterest board”

Linder et al. (2014) talk about the evolution of pin boards, stating that “the purpose and meaning of Pins and boards may change over time” (p. 8). This relates to my findings in that for some participants, the first wedding pin board served a dream or inspirational purpose and the second wedding pin board served a more official or pragmatic purpose. For instance, pre-engagement, Angela created a board titled “wedding fun” that she used to dream about this important day in her future. Once engaged, she created the board “real wedding” that she used for pinning more realistic ideas. This response from Beth, a 27-year-old computer programmer from central Wisconsin, sheds further light on the theme of board evolution:

**Beth:** Generally before you get engaged, everybody has their “wedding board,” and it’s full of just a bunch of junk. And so I’ve been trying to put it into different categories on Pinterest now and go through all of the thousands of pins I had pinned over the years. And narrow it down into actual ideas that I want . . . Yeah, I mean I think when I got engaged I had a couple thousand wedding pins, and just a general bucket, and now I have one that’s specifically “Mrs. Cooper.” This is what I want at my wedding—this is the

vibe that I want at my wedding—and then I narrowed that one down and re-pinned the specific lighting aspects and flower aspects into a separate board.

Moreover, Linder et al. (2014) found that pins become more meaningful to users after they have been used. For instance, a participant in their study explained that once pins have been put to use, they accumulate “intrinsic value—serving both as a record and a reusable system” (p. 8). In regard to my findings, this notion of pins amassing intrinsic value is present, at least among a few participants. For instance, Dawn explained that she has a system for how she captions her recipe pins:

**Dawn:** So I go through and I’ll put little green checkmarks before the description. I don’t really change the description. I also delete the ones [recipes] that I’ve made that were bad. So I can keep track if I go through I can see what I’ve made and what I haven’t made.

**Interviewer:** So you’re pretty invested in actually keeping it up to date and editing out things that aren’t applicable or you didn’t like?

**Dawn:** I edit out a lot of stuff. I don’t keep my Pinterest, I mean comparatively to some people’s that I’ve seen, like yours, or you know a lot of people’s it’s relatively small. But that’s because I edit it a lot. I do use it as a pin board where I’m saying these are the things I want to do or want to make. Or the things that I legitimately am trying to sculpt my wedding after or something like that. And it’s not perfect to what I’m doing, or what I want to do anymore, which of course ideas change, I’ll go and delete. I deleted a whole bunch of stuff the other day cuz, like I said, I’m cutting my hair off, so I went and deleted a whole bunch of stuff that I won’t need anymore because I want to focus in on that.

**Interviewer:** So would you say you keep it as concise as possible to what’s relevant in your current life?

**Dawn:** Yes.

For Dawn, it is important that her boards accurately reflect who she is (i.e., her current life projects). This same idea also came through during my interviews with Christy and Andrea. Thus, for some users, board evolution involves deleting pins so that boards are not cluttered with irrelevant pins.

In sum, it appears that pinning for inspiration may eventually become pinning for implementation. That is, women may begin to “try on” (Phillips et al., 2014) visual images to experiment with or fantasize about a future possible self (in this case, the self as bride).

Ultimately, such pins may be implemented into the bride's planning. For example, an early wedding pin board might contain multiple ideas for engagement rings, color schemes, venue ideas, wedding dress styles, bridesmaid dresses, flower arrangements, food and beverage, etc. A later wedding board (i.e., a board created by a bride-to-be) may feature the aforementioned ideas but fewer of them. In this case, the bride-to-be has solidified her wedding style and is pinning only images that fit with her motif for the day (i.e., pins that will be implemented in her planning).

### **“I’m Looking at Cute Babies in White:” Selective Exposure on Pinterest**

In part, this study investigates the idea that Pinterest aids in perpetuating stereotypical gender roles based on the popular content within the platform. To explore this notion, I asked participants to talk about whether the content they pin (in particular) and the trending content on Pinterest (in general) aligns with stereotypical gender roles. Christy stood out as an exemplary case in part because of the discussion that unfolded around this question. Although Christy may have a heightened awareness of user experience and digital media given her profession (marketing and communication), her response sheds light on the concept of selective exposure and user control within a platform that has been highly criticized for promoting gender boundaries (Odell, 2012; Sandler, 2012; Pynchon, 2012).

**Interviewer:** Do you think that Pinterest as a platform serves as a way to kind of perpetuate gender norms or gender roles in the content there?

**Christy:** Honestly, I'd like to say that my board would say yes [i.e., the content on her pin boards], but I think most of the things I select . . . so if I wanted to select a board of all tattoos or all cutting timber or all skydiving, I could do that. That's just what I selected. So I don't actually think it perpetuates those norms other than what the female herself selects.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Christy:** Because it's all there. I get to create what I want to follow, what I'm interested in, even if Pinterest remembers the things and then spits pins to me, it's because those are

the ones I'm looking at. So they're not sending me ones of motocross because I'm not looking at motocross. I'm looking at cute babies in white."

**Interviewer:** It's based on the user?

**Christy:** Correct. So I think it's open—I don't think it's at all closing me into norms, I think I selected those norms.

Pynchon (2012) disagrees, claiming that Pinterest promotes "tight gender boundaries" through its popularization of topics related to stereotypical female activities and failure to acknowledge women "working for a living" (i.e., in the categories users can choose from) (n.p.). It is important to consider, however, in relation to Pynchon's claim, the fact that what users are confronted with when they log in to Pinterest is content they have chosen to see. That is, Pinterest populates a user's feed based on search history and pins posted from fellow pinners the given user has elected to follow—content the user herself has curated. Thus, a user has the power to construct her Pinterest feed based on her interests and the pinners she chooses to follow. Therefore, if a woman wants to be fed pins about cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, and beautifying, she can configure Pinterest to provide her with information about these topics. Conversely, she can also develop a feed that generates stereotypically male content—automobiles, sports, and body-building, for instance.

Throughout her interview, Christy stressed that as the user, she has control over what content she is exposed to. In discussing the notion of Pinterest perpetuating stereotypical gender roles, she stated:

**Christy:** If anyone is feeding into [stereotypical gender roles] it, it's my own self. . . . I mean I'm proudly proclaiming what it is that I want to look at on the Internet. . . . So if I want to look at things like only related to war or um motorbike, or extreme in the things that are the norm, like recipes, I could have selected those. I opted out of those cuz they don't interest me. . . .if I'm looking for really great you know intellectual things, I'm not looking at the Internet anyways. I'm a reader, so like I read books, and I look for things to ignite me intellectually beyond what I'm looking for visually on the Internet. I don't read great literary things on the Internet. I look at pretty things on the Internet, and then I go read great literary arts in my book.

This excerpt from Christy connects with structuration theory in that here, Christy is talking about agency—a central tenet of the theory stressed by Giddens (1984). By acknowledging that she is feeding into stereotypical gender roles, but “proudly proclaiming” what it is she wants to look at online, Christy is being self-reflexive (Scott, 2013). Drawing on Giddens (1984), Scott (2013) states “Structuration theory also acknowledges that individuals are knowledgeable, and are able to talk about what they do and why they do it” (p. 304). This excerpt from Christy, arguably, is an example of a user’s control (i.e., Christy is aware that her pinning activity feeds into stereotypical gender roles, and she provides an explanation about why she is okay with it (she discusses why she uses Pinterest in this way). “Through agency, individuals are able to adapt structure to meet their needs” (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994, as cited in Scott, 2013, p. 304). Christy uses the internet to “look at pretty things.” Thus, it seems fair to argue that she is adapting the structure (i.e., broadly speaking, the internet; more specifically, Pinterest) to meet her needs—which I believe is an example of user-controlled rather than deterministic behavior.

### **Affordances of Pinterest: Customizing and Curating**

Across all of my interviews, I talked with participants about the affordances provided by Pinterest. Often, these conversations turned into discussions about how Pinterest enables curating content of one’s choosing (though the majority of participants did not explicitly use the word “curation” in these discussions). Curation is a term that has become somewhat of a buzzword with the advent of media like Pinterest. “Curation, in the digital age, means searching, gathering, collecting, organizing, designing, reflecting on, and interpreting information” (Webb, Linder, Kerne, Lupfer, Qu, Poffenberger, & Revia, 2013).

During many interviews, I asked participants to compare Pinterest to a traditional women's magazine, such as *Cosmopolitan*, and to talk about how user control differs between the two mediums. The majority of participants explained that they prefer using Pinterest over a magazine because they can more easily search for and find topics of interest (i.e., curate content). For instance, Trisha explained that Pinterest is more appealing to her because "you can just like get to the substance a lot easier than buying you know a 100-page magazine and having 12 pages be useful." Similarly, Alex, a 26-year-old elementary school teacher from Green Bay, Wisconsin, noted:

**Interviewer:** So when you say that it might be like a little more interesting to look at some of those things [topics such as kitchen remodel ideas] on Pinterest versus a magazine—can you tell me why that is?

**Alex:** I guess just the more variety. I mean a magazine, there's only so much you can fit into the paper magazines. Where Pinterest normally can go on for quite a while. I feel that too sometimes when I'm searching things like I'll search on Google too, but it's like it doesn't always necessarily get the search that I'm looking for. Where I feel on Pinterest I'm more successful with the search of what I'm looking for.

Further, Alex mentioned that the platform offers the user more choice as compared to a traditional women's magazine. "You choose kind of what you're seeing. It's like, 'do you want to see things about how to improve your body?' Sure. But I like how you can kind of narrow it to what you personally wanna see." Alex's opinion connects to Alford's (2013) statement below. Pinterest, unlike a women's magazine, may allow the user to become the editor as she picks and chooses the type of content she wants to see.

But the characteristics of women's magazines that have made them detrimental to women are actually what make Pinterest as a female-dominated, mass media space so appealing. Unlike print magazines, Pinterest does not employ editors to determine the content to which women should be exposed. Instead, users make this determination by creating pins of the content they enjoy reading or are relevant to their lives or the lives of their friends and followers (Alford, 2013, p. 11).

In other words, Alford (2013) makes the case that Pinterest empowers its users to curate content of their choosing—much of which may be generated from blog posts produced by average women (i.e., non-professional marketers and/or writers). Sentiments shared by Laurie help to further highlight this idea:

**Interviewer:** But considering that Pinterest is user-generated and so the pins at least are being put out there by some average citizens, who may not work for a publication, do you think there's any positive side to the fact that it's user generated content to an extent?

**Laurie:** I do think there is a lot of positives things about that because you're not seeing what somebody else wants you to see, you're seeing what everybody else is posting. What everybody wants to see. You know? I do think that there's a lot of content on those sites that you know it is a lot like traditional female publications like *Cosmo* and those kinds of things. But again, it's all about what you're looking for. If you're looking for that, you're going to find it. If you're looking for different travel sites or you know hacks about you know how to save money and how to budget that's there, that's there and available as well. So I think the fact that users are posting those things, it makes it more likely that you're going to find a wider array of information and things that are helpful to you then if it was being published by someone whose pushing products.k

In her discussion of feminized popular culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Levine (2015) talks about women's media, noting that although many of the topics have not changed, the mode of transmission has. The quotation below parallels sentiments shared by many of my participants (some of which have been highlighted in this chapter). Further, it broadly speaks to why Pinterest, as a medium, has become such a popular information source for many women in American society:

Yet the more recent incarnations of such concerns do take on new dimensions. Because the advice and ideas about fashion, or beauty, or personal relationships are likely to be mediated in the horizontal, peer-to-peer versions like the blogs and social media pages of “regular” people as they are to be transmitted in more typically mass-mediated forms, they also have the potential to embrace a wider range of experience and to resist some of the normative assumptions of a strictly top-down media culture (Levine, 2015, pp. 7-8).

My findings reinforce the idea that at least some women gravitate toward peer-to-peer versions of media because they value content produced and shared by non-corporate sources (i.e., “regular people” (Levine, 2015, p. 8)). This is not to say that my participants steer clear of

traditional top-down media, as several of them commented on the fun they had reading through bridal magazines. However, I found that Pinterest appeals to brides-to-be because it provides them with an avenue to plan a wedding in an individualized and realistic manner (e.g., planning on a budget, working with venue constraints). Though beautiful, the glossy pages of *Modern Bride* or *The Knot* may not present wedding planning in ways attainable for the average bride. This connects with Levine's (2015) claim that new media forms present consumers with a wider spectrum of experience. On Pinterest, a bride can digitally curate the wedding of her dreams by drawing inspiration from other women who have engaged (or are engaging in) the same experience.

Moreover, Pinterest offers "Related Pins" as an affordance for users who appreciate being provided with content based on their search history. For instance, Pinterest delivers a variety of recommended pins to the user's home feed. "Related Pins are picked specially for you based on the unique things you're into, such as other Pins you've saved or liked" ("Freshening up your home feed with related Pins," 2013). Christy explained that she is happy to be fed content based on her search history within Pinterest.

**Christy:** So I'm happy to see a beautiful bride or a boho bouquet or a full neutral home with lots of wood. Like I picked basically what's showing up. And I have followed a lot of people, so my feed is, I haven't done it for a long time, but my feed would be people that I selected as a whole and then whatever Pinterest might be selecting for me. So I don't look and be like "oh gosh this is so chic stuff, like this is the chic stuff I picked."

Further, Pinterest is a popular wedding planning tool for its powerful search capabilities. For instance, Christy created a bohemian-inspired wedding with a neutral color palette of black and champagne. When searching for ideas, she typed in "neutral, bohemian, with black suits" which resulted in pins that matched what she was looking for—making the search process easier and more efficient (compared to Google searching or scanning blogs).

**Christy:** So yeah, I can't imagine the search that I would have had to do and the amount of extra junk I would have had to go through in a blog. So let's say I was in Green Wedding Shoes [a blog], again as an example, for every one wedding I liked, I probably would have gone through 12. Where now I can say I want neutral, bohemian, with black suits. Like I could sift that and get what I wanted.

In sum, Pinterest is a tool brides-to-be can use to curate content that pertains to their wedding planning needs and desires. The site allows its users to selectively expose themselves to information that matches their tastes and interests. Further, it facilitates customized searching that makes pulling inspiration for wedding elements (e.g., a color scheme or floral arrangements) more efficient as compared to a hard-copy bridal magazine or a blog. Even so, are women who plan a wedding using Pinterest being culturally “duped” (see Radway, 1984; Seiter, 1999)? Perhaps I only interviewed Pinterest celebrators.

### **Appropriation and Creativity**

Digital environments such as Pinterest (Linder et al., 2014; Phillips et al., 2015), Instagram (Gyorffy, 2013; Fallon, 2014), and Facebook (Good, 2012) provide users with an opportunity to explore and experiment with their identities, engage in creativity, and showcase their aesthetic preferences as well as cultural capital. Whether digital or non-digital in form, “Engaging in creative pursuits allows people to explore their identities, form new relationships, cultivate competence, and reflect critically on the world” (Silvia, Beaty, Nusbaum, Eddington, Levin-Aspenson, & Kwapil, 2014, p. 183). Findings from the present study touch on all of the above “creative pursuits,” which I elaborate on in this chapter.

There are several ways to understand the complex concept of creativity. Most applicable to the realm of Pinterest is “little c” creativity, as this type of creativity focuses on activities people engage in on a daily basis (Sawyer, 2012a, p. 8). For instance, finding and completing a

DIY project on Pinterest constitutes little c creativity. According to Linder et al. (2014), “Digital curation is a creative activity that requires human reasoning to collect and organize items into a meaningful whole. The result is a collection of items with value beyond the sum of the assets” (p. 2). The brides-to-be I interviewed digitally curated by collecting and organizing wedding-related pins to create boards that would be useful in the wedding planning process (i.e., the pins would eventually actualize to serve a purpose). The actions of collecting, organizing, and executing pins, I argue, represent both little c creativity and the ongoing process of identity construction.

Throughout her interview, Christy cited examples of projects she found via Pinterest. She talked about the fun she had collaborating with her mom to create wedding décor that matched her wedding budget and taste. Further, Christy created a board for her mom (within her own Pinterest account) titled "BethAnne (lovely mom's board)" so that her mom could partake in pinning ideas for Christy’s wedding.

**Christy:** We, by we I mean my mom and I, collected tons of different things. Even up until the week of [the wedding]. She would send me something and be like “okay what about this—do you think we should do this?” And my mom can recreate anything. So we saved a ton of different things from Pinterest and then that absolutely set the tone for some of the cool stuff that we did.

The act of re-creation speaks to the notion of creativity within the domain of Pinterest, which reflects how Christy utilized Pinterest as a wedding planning tool. She explained that the majority of her wedding theme and decor was inspired by ideas she found through Pinterest, but adapted to fit her budget and tastes. "So I'm not like 'oh, I have to go to Target now and find it.' I would be more like I can find it second hand and make it what I wanted." While Christy used Pinterest digitally, her mom actually copied pinned images into a Word document and printed it so that she would have a hard copy to look at. "...she's a little bit more old school...so like a

ceiling installation for example—she had like a Word file that was let's say eight pages long..." Whether pins were made a reality via digital (looking at one's phone for details/instructions) or hard copy (i.e., printing images) methods, it seems fair to argue that participants who carried out DIY projects found via Pinterest engaged in little c creativity. Linder et al. (2014) reports that "In trying new things, people gain skills and expertise, key components of creativity." (p. 9).

Christy describes her wedding as "do-it-yourself" (DIY), explaining that Pinterest was helpful because it allowed her to sift through ideas she did or did not want. "Pinterest was great because ideas that I had or ideas that my mom had, we could actually visually share and talk about and then make a reality." She credits Pinterest for providing her with "really cool ideas I wouldn't have thought of" and helping her to hone in on her true wedding style. That is not to say, however, that her wedding was an exact replication of the ideas she found on Pinterest. Christy explains that she made everything "her own in some way." "You could look at my board and see totally like "oh, yeah that really inspired what she did here. Or okay, yeah see that makes sense that she selected that because that looks just like that..." The excerpt below helps to exemplify how Christy put her own twist on the ideas she gathered via Pinterest.

**Interviewer:** Okay. So it was really like Pinterest was an idea generator, gave you a source, and then you adapted it?

**Christy:** Yes, yup. So we might have seen really cool hanging chandeliers [on Pinterest]. And, we created a chandelier installation in our bar. Like we didn't find the exact thing they had, we found things that worked for my style and my colors and what things I already had. And then added other things to it. So it's not like if you were to go and look and see oh, this chandelier, these are so cool Christy did exactly that, that wouldn't be true. Or this dripping ceiling...that was like a big inspiration to me. But um, it didn't end up looking really that much like what I went with in the end. The idea was there, things dripping from the ceiling, but I didn't do all the colors, and all the . . . it's like I deselected what I didn't want from it. But it was the inspiration, it was not at all what it ended up looking like.

Similarly, Beth talked about finding pins of very expensive weddings on Pinterest but generating inspiration through such images. For instance, a décor trend she came across was

“living walls,” which she described as “big boxwood walls with ivy and stuff and then they have like flowers all over it as like the backdrop.” Though some of the images she found on Pinterest were from celebrity weddings and high fashion shows, Beth explained that she also found examples of DIY living walls and said she was going to make her own for the wedding day. She planned to rent the backdrop from a floral company and then add her own decorations and flowers. Her statement below helps to further demonstrate the notion of appropriation within the context of wedding planning via Pinterest:

**Beth:** You can take a big lavish idea that probably costs thousands of dollars and like figure out how to recreate it yourself through Pinterest. Because they do have like “okay here’s a picture of this living wall,” and then if you search living wall, they have all these other pins about do it yourself.

When talking about the notion of appropriation with Danica, I asked her if she replicates projects in the exact way they are shown on Pinterest, or if she makes an item her own in some respect:

**Danica:** I probably make it my own for the most part in some way. Like have some little twist on it, like whether it be like monogramming something on, or you know, just something that makes it a little more unique and more like “mine” instead of something I could have bought like on Etsy or somewhere.

Regarding her wedding planning, Danica referenced the hanging flower balls she created with her photographer based on a pin she found via Pinterest. Instead of using sunflowers hung with twine (as shown in the original pin), Danica and her photographer created similar flower balls using purple and blue carnations and hung them with large ribbons so that they matched the color scheme.

I argue that women who use Pinterest as a wedding planning tool engage in little creativity. Research presented by Linder et al. (2014), Webb et al. (2013), and Silvia et al. (2014) help to support this finding. Linder et al. (2014) report that users “apply information-based ideation and creative thinking skills in seeking, collecting, analyzing, and testing ideas from

Pins” (p. 4). Participants in my study searched for, collected, sifted through or interpreted pins in regard to their own wedding needs and desires and ultimately experimented with and/or implemented at least some of the pins.

In other words, participants analyzed and tested ideas found via Pinterest to determine whether they fit with their wedding style or motif (e.g., does the color scheme complement a winter wedding? does this type of bouquet fit with the overall theme of the wedding?). In sorting through a mass number of pins, brides narrowed their choices and made final decisions to move forward with the planning process. Such processes illustrate little c creativity at play. Further, Silvia et al. (2014) note that engaging in creative activities allow individuals to “explore their identities” (p. 183). By sorting through and selecting pins that complemented an aspiring bride’s wedding identity, I believe my participants (i.e., 20 women identifying as white, heteronormative, cis gender, and middle to upper-middle class) engaged in identity exploration.

This section illustrates ways in which little c creativity exists within the phenomenon of wedding planning via Pinterest. Little c creativity is attached to the construction of a wedding identity as brides select pins that best align with their wedding day vision. However, the conception that brides can construct a wedding identity, at least in part, through using Pinterest is a broad topic. During my interviews, I spent a fair amount of time talking with participants about the ways in which Pinterest helped and/or hindered the creation of an aspiring bride identity. I elaborate on my findings in the forthcoming chapter.

## **Structuration Theory Applied to Theme 2: Pinterest as a Place for Digital Collecting**

This chapter concludes with an analysis of the structures of Pinterest, drawing again from Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory to discuss how this technology influences users through

formal rules (domination), the emergence of social norms (legitimation), and languages (signification). Structuration theory is useful to employ for examining this multifaceted medium as a place for digital collecting because it acknowledges the technological and social systems that comprise a social structure and the interactions that can take place there (Rosenbaum & Shachaf, 2010, n.p.). Even so, it can be hard to differentiate some of the structural components of Pinterest in using this theory as each of the modalities are intertwined and often overlap. That is to say, they are recursive in nature.

Pinterest operates as a technological social structure through which language, social norms, and formal rules contribute to identity construction (i.e., a current and/or aspired self [the woman one wants to be]). Important to note is that all of this takes place through the digital assemblage of pinned images; that is, using Pinterest as an archival tool or repository to store ideas for the present and/or future.

The following quote from Christy helps to illuminate how Pinterest operates as a tool for digital collecting:

**Interviewer:** . . . Pinterest can be considered a place where you can digitally collect meaningful information. And it kind of gives you a way to create all of these collections that could be really unique that you would never do in another way.

**Christy:** Right.

**Interviewer:** Do you think that's the case for you? Would you be collecting these things if it wasn't for Pinterest?

**Christy:** I think I would be collecting things if it wasn't for Pinterest only cuz I did prior to its existence.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Christy:** I just don't think it would be as easy and I don't think it would be as robust of a collection because to access it was just more challenging. So I would have, let's say I'd have to go on like six blogs to get four pictures, right? And that's a half hour of time versus in five minutes I could easily have 10 pins. So I think it definitely is something I would do, but just not at the level and how great it is. I mean it is an awesome resource.

The above excerpt also helps to demonstrate several of the affordances Pinterest grants to its users. For instance, compared to traditional web-searching (e.g., Google), Pinterest saves

users time in that they can engage in customized searching within one platform and they can collect images at a more rapid pace. In short, Pinterest greatly enhances the digital collecting experience. Nonetheless, users are also constrained (or determined) in how they can use the platform, which I address in the forthcoming sections.

## **Structures of Pinterest as a Place for Digital Collecting**

### ***Domination***

As a digital structure, Pinterest requires users to operate under formal rules. These rules afford and constrain pinner activity, which ultimately influence user engagement. Most prominent is the requirement to pin visual content—a user cannot solely pin text. Essentially, a pinner is required to envision how a pin fits into the context of her life – past, present or future—and ultimately, build collections around these contexts (i.e., by creating different boards). A user must also decide what board she wants to pin an image to (i.e., categorize and/or create new boards). The fact that users must think about how a pin fits with a board and ultimately an aspect of their identity (current or aspired) shapes how they engage with the medium. This can be seen in how users categorize and describe their pins as well as how they might be put to use in the offline world.

Friz and Gehl (2016) argue that the Pinterest interface promotes the idea that “Pinterest is for women,” a perception that is then manifested in user behaviors (p. 686). While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the multiple examples they use to support this claim, it is important to highlight one as it connects to the dimension of domination (as well as legitimation).

These authors explain the ways in which the Pinterest interface promotes gendering of the technology using Van Oost's (2003) concept of "gender script." A gender script "refers to the representations an artifact's designers have or construct of gender relations and gender identities," which are then infused into "the materiality of the artifact" (Van Oost, 2003, p. 195, as cited in Friz & Gehl, 2016, p. 688). If we think about a gender script using the structural dimension of domination, arguably, we could view this as a sort of 'rule' or 'code' embedded into the Pinterest technology.

Presenting a technological artifact as something that bears a 'script' – metaphorical 'stage directions' for the performance of using the technology – draws attention to artifacts as *actants*, things that can make a difference in a situation (and thus things we might describe as having agency) (Friz & Gehl, 2016, p. 688).

The central argument posed in this dissertation is whether using Pinterest provides users with a level of control in their social media interactions, or if we should consider it a strictly deterministic activity (or a mixture of both). Although Friz and Gehl (2016) make clear that the Pinterest interface encourages a feminine perception of the site (which could be viewed as a form of determinism), they also acknowledge that Pinterest can facilitate agency. They note that their "analysis does not preclude performances of counter-hegemonic femininity; in fact, hegemonic femininity might be taken up in resistive ways" (p. 700). Relating this to the present study, it seems fair to argue that users may resist hegemonic notions of femininity by claiming (or owning) the fact that their pinning activities perpetuate stereotypical feminine roles (firsthand accounts of this are provided throughout the discussion chapters).

Drawing on research from Cockburn (1985) and Mohun (2003), Friz and Gehl (2016) importantly note:

Pinterest could serve as a means to re-present and re-inscribe the technologies of the home and home-making as highly technical, vigorous accomplishments. Pinning up the result of much hard work and achievement – say, pinning images of one's own process of expertly-baking desserts or custom-sewing a dress – could make public the traditionally

private sphere of domestic production and reveal it for the technical accomplishment that it is (p. 700).

Arguably, findings from Friz and Gehl (2016) also link to the notion of legitimation.

Through pinning, users may (though not necessarily intentionally) support the deconstruction of social norming that has led Pinterest to be viewed as an environment reserved primarily for the wedding-obsessed woman (Tekobbe, 2013). Friz and Gehl (2016) also note:

...we might interpret the use of Pinterest as a spring-board for creating, crafting, or cooking offline as contradicting the preference for passive curation. Users who then return to Pinterest to curate their own personal creations can be seen as resisting the gendered dualism by blurring its neat divisions (p. 700).

In other words, viewing Pinterest as an environment wherein pinners are active agents rather than passive cultural dupes may help to socially legitimate the activities that take place within this environment (and ultimately, the offline world).

### ***Legitimation***

Unlike Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, where frequent communication with fellow users is a norm, Pinterest users spend more time communicating with the self. Pinterest operates as an individualized environment where users *can* interact with others directly (e.g., comment, like, or message) but do not feel required to do so in order to maintain a certain status or to gain approval or respect. As noted earlier in this chapter, Pinterest provides the opportunity for users to socialize (though this appears not to be a draw for using the site) and collaborate. It “fosters creativity with ‘just for me workspaces’” (Linder et al., 2014, p. 10), wherein users have little concern for how the content they pin is received. Further, this digital environment is one where users do not feel pressured to connect with others (i.e., engage in conversation through commenting), nor do they feel obligated to perform or self-promote (i.e., generate followers).

Identity construction via Pinterest may be more authentic because pinners are truly invested in what they are pinning and why—with little regard for social approval.

For instance, Leah explained that she does not care about what fellow users think about what she is pinning. “I do have a lot of boards that I keep hidden, because there are certain things that I don’t . . . want my ideas getting stolen, but it’s not necessarily a matter of ‘oh I wonder what so and so is going to think if they see me putting this on there.’” Moreover, Christy stated that she is “indifferent” regarding who does/does not follow her on Pinterest. She noted, “I just think that I honestly collect it just for myself. And if other people think ‘oh, that’s a really interesting board, I want to follow it,’ great.” Based on the general consensus gathered through my interviews, it seems that a social norming aspect of using Pinterest is disregard for how audience members receive pinned content as well as the number of followers one has. In other words, through distanced connection with others (i.e., following complete strangers with similar tastes and/or interests), users construct the self, one pin at a time.

I turn now to the case of Sam, as one of our interview conversations connects to the concept of legitimation, but more so in the corporeal sense (i.e., non-digital social norms). In Chapter 7, I discuss Pinterest as a platform that enables its users rather than constrain them (at least in some respects) using third-wave feminism as a theoretical lens. Briefly, this version of feminism sees women as active agents, capable of creating the life they desire rather than passive beings oppressed by patriarchy. Here, it seems worthwhile to include a statement from Sam, a participant who talked about Pinterest as a source of inspiration for cooking. I believe this excerpt links to third-wave feminist thinking, as well as exemplifies legitimation:

**Interviewer:** So you can think of Pinterest as a place where you can digitally collect things – images that you may not collect in another aspect of your life. . . . it’s bulletin boards essentially of different topics that you’re interested in. . . . and it kind of allows you to create boards that are very specific if you want them to be. In your personal use of

Pinterest, do you feel like you're collecting things that . . . you wouldn't do if Pinterest wasn't here?

**Sam:** I would have to say I probably wouldn't have gotten so interested in cooking if it wasn't for the whole recipe thing . . . It just wasn't something I did [experiment with recipes]. And you know I didn't cook. But seeing all the recipes gives you excitement, inspiration, like "oh I want to try this." I would say it was a big help planning our trip to San Francisco, cuz I looked on there for a lot of [travel ideas].

**Interviewer:** So it kind of like gives you access to collecting or saving things that are going to serve a purpose in your life, but would you be doing it on that level if you didn't have a platform like Pinterest?

**Sam:** No, not at all. Yeah. I'd be sticking to the basics of macaroni and cheese like I used to. Which Jim [her partner] probably would prefer sometimes because he gets sick and tired of me coming up with these crazy recipes.

As has been stressed throughout this dissertation, Pinterest has been criticized for promoting stereotypical gender roles. Jones (2016) argues, drawing on other scholars (mentioned earlier in this chapter), that using Pinterest to perfect the self (which could include pinning recipes to cook for one's family or partner), constitutes a form of "third shift" unpaid labor (p. 357). However, this excerpt, arguably, presents an alternate view when we consider Sam's statement that prior to using Pinterest, she did not cook. In other words, she was not fulfilling the stereotypical role of homemaker primarily in charge of cooking.

This excerpt sheds light on the fact that for Sam, pinning recipes was not necessarily a 'chore,' because it was her 'duty' to cook for her partner (i.e., not a form of "third shift" labor). Instead, it seems that using Pinterest in this way inspired her to experiment with cooking. Her statement: "But seeing all the recipes gives you excitement, inspiration, like 'oh I want to try this,'" provides evidence for the fact that she may have merely wanted to exercise creativity rather than please her partner. And as she notes—her partner may have actually preferred she stop being adventurous in the kitchen. Returning to Giddens' (1984) notion of legitimation, this case helps to exemplify how using Pinterest to find recipes and experiment with cooking may have actually shifted gender norms within one couple's relationship. Importantly, Sam's case

also demonstrates signification in that, through viewing inspiring images via Pinterest, Sam engaged in meaning-making as she encoded and decoded pinned content by deciding what recipes she wanted to try, if she would modify them, and how they would fit into her meal planning routine. In the forthcoming section, I further explain how signification exists within the context of digital collecting via Pinterest.

### *Signification*

In short, signification deals with meaning-making through language and signs ). Language on Pinterest is primarily visual (i.e., the pin) with accompanying text in the form of a description or comment. As previously mentioned, the platform has been described as a place where people go to collect digital items they aspire to have and/or activities they want to engage in (Moore, 2014). By engaging in this type of digital collecting, pinners appropriate content by using language that fits with how or why they will use the pin. Pinterest language often uses verbs such as “use,” “look,” “want,” and “need,” which illustrates the consumption-oriented aspect of the site (Gilbert, Bakhshi, Chang & Terveen, 2013, n.p.).

Manovich (2009) examines “everyday (media) life” by drawing on de Certeau’s notions of everyday interaction with objects and spaces. He explains that in modern society, commercial objects form the stuff of everyday life, and that, “people build their worlds and identities out of these readily available objects by using different tactics: bricolage, assembly, customization, and...remix” (2009, p. 322). Pinterest users construct the aspired self through remixing digital objects that correspond with what they hope to do, be, or have.

Schiele and Hughes (2013) report that participants in their study “actively re-contextualized the images they collected, situated them in a larger collection and gave them new

meanings and significance” (p. 48). I argue that my participants engaged in this same process through creating pin boards and appropriating content for their own wedding needs. The following excerpt from my interview with Sadie provides evidence for this claim:

**Interviewer:** When you think about your wedding identity and this vision of you on that day and not only how you look, but just what it’s going to be, how do you think Pinterest has or has not helped you to construct that?

**Sadie:** . . . I had somewhat of a vision before using Pinterest. So I knew I wanted, I knew I wanted to get married in a winery. I knew that I wanted a wedding dress that has black hem. I’m looking for like some type of black feature in a wedding dress. I knew that I . . . was really into wine and cork décor. But I think it’s [Pinterest] helped develop my vision a little bit more. I really didn’t know what colors I wanted . . . until I saw it on Pinterest and thought “yeah . . . that’s perfect for me.” You know it has that wine aspect color in it and also some of my favorite colors. So I can make a board now for that and get more inspiration for it.

**Interviewer:** Mmmhm.

**Sadie:** So I think it’s just further enhancing and developing my vision. And I try not to get too sidetracked with other things cuz I also had I mean I saw ideas for a ‘20s wedding and I was like “maybe I’ll do something with that too,” and I was like, “oh that’s just Pinterest talking to me” {laughs}.

**Interviewer:** Mhmm. So developing and enhancing somewhat, like you kind of have a vision and then if you want more information about a color scheme or something you can develop that through pinning and looking for more stuff?

**Sadie:** Right.

The above excerpt helps to demonstrate how the act of signification can take place through Pinterest (which is visually mapped [using a different participant as an example] in the previous chapter). Here, we see that user control comes into play as Sadie makes her own choices about the aesthetic she wants for her wedding day. In discussing the importance of audience-oriented research (i.e., gathering firsthand accounts from those who engage with the medium under study), Radway explains that “comprehension” of a text is a “process of meaning making, a process of sign production where the reader actively attributes signifiers on the basis of previously learned cultural codes” (p. 7). Using Sadie as an example, Pinterest plays a role in this process by feeding her culturally-produced content. During this process, Sadie decodes pins by drawing on her own identity (e.g., “learned cultural codes”) and ultimately constructing

meaning by deciding which pins fit with the vision she has constructed for her wedding day.

Arguably, she engages in a co-construction of meaning that involves herself and Pinterest as a

“cultural mechanism” (Jellison, 2008, p. 5).

## CHAPTER 6: THE POWER OF PINTEREST (ESCAPING, DREAMING, AND VISUALIZING)

It's completely meditative. I've had days where I've been crazy stressed out at work, and I'll come home and make a microwave dinner and Pinterest wedding dresses. And I'm immediately in so much of a better mood. It's totally chill, like the outside world sort of drops away and you're in this sort of fantasy world of Pinterest where everything is perfect and lovely and you think you can do whatever, make whatever, it's really lovely (Dawn, personal communication, August 1, 2016).

*—Referring to Pinterest in 2016*

In 1980 and 1981, renowned audience researcher and cultural studies scholar Janice Radway conducted 60 hours of individual and group interviews with 16 women who regularly read romance novels. Her work is widely known within the realm of audience research. An important finding from Radway's study is that romance novel readers cited escape and fantasy as a central reason for reading such books. Consider the following statements provided by a handful of Radway's interviewees:

"Everyone is always under so much pressure. They like books that let them escape."

"Because it is an escape, and we can dream. And pretend that it is our life."

"I'm able to escape the harsh world a few hours a day."

"It is a way of escaping from everyday living."

"I enjoy reading because it offers me a small vacation from everyday life and an interesting and amusing way to pass the time."

(Radway, 1983, p. 59)

*—Referring to romance novels in the 1980s*

Nearly 40 years later, women continue to use a popular culture medium—Pinterest—to temporarily escape from their daily lives and dream about the future. While romance novels were once a popular choice for this type of mental escape, this chapter illustrates how Pinterest plays the same role in our contemporary media landscape. Does this tell us something about the type of

media women gravitate to when they are stressed out or simply wanting alone time? Possibly. This narrative explores why Pinterest appeals to women today in the same way romance novels did four decades ago.

### **A “Declaration of Independence:” Escaping and Dreaming via Pinterest**

This narrative focuses on Pinterest as a form of media that allows users to escape, dream, and visualize. To explain these ideas, I have included excerpts from some of my exemplar interviewees who referred to Pinterest as a world they could enter when in need of refuge from daily stressors (personal and professional). Additionally, I interweave stories told by other interviewees that help to further explain escaping, dreaming, and visualizing via Pinterest.

The first statement (above) came from “Dawn,” a 31-year-old teacher and musician living in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Dawn stood out as an exemplar interviewee for several reasons, all of which will be discussed in this section. Foremost, Dawn described Pinterest as a retreat she could escape to when she needed to decompress from her day (or even for a few moments when taking a break from work).

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me a little bit about what it is about the act of going on Pinterest that you find soothing or a good way to de-stress? What is it about Pinterest?

**Dawn:** It’s such a positive lovely shiny world. You know? Facebook is so brutally negative and then Instagram can get this horrible jealous undertone to it sometimes, for me. Pinterest is a world where you can go and do something and you can DIY it, you can cook it, you can make it, and everything looks beautiful and lovely and yeah. It’s a world where anything is possible.

Similarly, Danica explained that she finds using Pinterest “calming.” After a long day of work, she enjoys going on Pinterest because her “creative side likes to zone out and pin stuff.” Another participant, Andrea, stated that Pinterest provides her with “an escape from, like, reality, and the stresses of everyone else freaking out about a wedding that’s not even their own.” She

expressed that Pinterest allows her to have a “dream world” where she has no commitment to anything but instead a space where she can create a wedding she would “probably never want to pay for.”

The above sentiments shared by Dawn and Danica echo Phillips et al.’s (2014) description of Pinterest as a play space for fantasy about one’s future. These authors cite Iser’s (1993) notion of “free play”—“play without a purpose or motivation in mind, other than enjoyment and fun” (Phillips et al., 2014, p.644). According to Phillips et al. (2014), fantasy can be defined as “imagination unrestricted by reality” (p. 646). Thus, when Danica refers to Pinterest as providing her with a “dream world” she can participate in by pinning images for a wedding she would probably not want to pay for, it seems that she is engaged in “free play” (Iser, 1993). Stated another way, her pinning is not restricted by reality.

By the same token, Dawn’s reference to Pinterest as a “world where anything is possible” helps to illustrate the same idea. On Pinterest, she is free from the realities that constitute her everyday life and able to fantasize about possibilities for her future. This notion of Pinterest operating as a platform that facilitates free play and fantasy is similar to Radway’s (1983/1984) findings. She found that women gravitated to romance novels because reading the books offered a temporary escape from the monotony and/or stress of daily life, as well as a chance to fantasize or daydream about a life different from their own.

“When asked to specify what they are fleeing from, they [Radway’s interviewees] invariably mention the ‘pressures’ and ‘tensions’ they experience as wives and mothers” (Radway, 1983, p. 60). While mothers once escaped the pressures and tensions associated with their daily life in the home, it appears that women interviewed for this research often attempt to flee from the pressures and tensions associated with professional life by using Pinterest.

Romance novels, as well as Pinterest, can be categorized as feminized popular culture (Levine, 2015). When women's primary duties centered on the home and family, they used romance novels to break away from the demands of their daily reality. Nearly 40 years later, when more women work professionally inside and outside of the home, they continue to seek popular culture geared toward women as they can find content that corresponds with personal and professional needs or interests.

Feminized popular culture in the early twenty-first century has continued to value and foreground those areas of feminized concern that are simultaneously required of women and culturally dismissed as trifling. Whether matters of personal appearance—fashion or nail polish, for example—or of maintaining interpersonal relationships, from the romantic to the maternal, conventionally feminized subjects remain as central to the feminized popular culture of the early twenty-first century as they were to that of the twentieth (Levine, 2015, p. 7).

Related to Levine's (2015) above argument, Valtchanov, Parry, Glover and Mulcahy (2016) claim that "technological advancements in ICTs [information and communication technologies] and the connections they facilitate change the possibilities for mothers to connect with other mothers (p. 52). In other words, such technologies make it possible for women to digitally converse about and bond over "areas of feminized concern." Important to the present study is the fact that while such bonding once took place through reading romance novels (non-digital), the same experience appears to be happening in a digital fashion on Pinterest.

I want to briefly highlight Radway's examination of romance novels, as some of her findings parallel those of the present study. One of Radway's key informants was a woman named Dot. Dot was a bookstore saleswoman who acted as sort of a gatekeeper in helping Radway to recruit her interviewees. Further, Dot had extensive knowledge of romance novels and was known by customers as an expert on which romances to read and avoid (Radway, 1983, p. 56). In one conversation with Radway (1983), Dot explained that romance reading "constitutes

a temporary ‘declaration of independence’ from the social roles of wife and mother” (pp. 60-61). “By placing the barrier of the book between themselves and their families these women reserve a special space and time for themselves alone” (Radway, 1983, p. 61). In other words, women were able to temporarily forget the “concerns that plague them in reality,” as reading a romance novel required producing meaning by becoming fully engrossed in the story (Radway, 1983, p. 58).

Although Radway conducted her research during a time when many women commonly held the primary roles of housewife and mother, it is interesting that women cited alone time as being a primary motivation for reading romances. While my research concerning women’s use of Pinterest was conducted nearly 40 years after Radway’s, I too found that the women I interviewed reported enjoying this medium because it provides the opportunity to be alone (possibly physically and mentally), and to temporarily break away from reality.

Based on my interview findings and past research, it seems that Pinterest may appeal to women because in this environment, the focus is not on interacting with others as is often the case on Facebook, Twitter, and/or Instagram (e.g., posting pictures of one’s social activities, commenting on posts). Pinterest users interviewed for this study (20 white, heteronormative, cis gender, middle to upper-middle class women) mostly reported interacting with the self (see Phillips et al., 2014; Zarro et al., 2013; Linder et al., 2014). In other words, Pinterest facilitates building personalized bulletin boards that do not require approval from or engagement with others. For instance, a participant in Zarro et al.’s (2013) study stated: “you can like stuff of random people and you don’t have to make a further connection” (n.p.). Further, Linder et al. (2014) found that users gravitate to Pinterest because it offers “the feeling of separateness” and “creates a sense of personal space” (p. 6).

The idea that Pinterest offers a feeling of separateness, providing users with personal space, surfaced during some of my interview conversations. Trisha referred to Pinterest as “a network of thoughts rather than a network of people.” Further, in discussing the social affordances of Pinterest, she explained:

**Interviewer:** Okay so you feel like it’s a network of thoughts, a place where people can share ideas but you don’t have to communicate with anyone if you don’t want to?

**Trisha:** Yeah exactly. I’m not going on there looking at my friend’s Pinterest posts. And I don’t feel like I have any need to have one of my friends like my Pinterest post.

**Interviewer:** Okay, do you follow any of your friends on other social media, such as Facebook or Instagram, do you follow them on Pinterest?

**Trisha:** Yeah, but when I first joined Pinterest and I was trying to understand how it worked I think I would just blanket follow people. And since then I’ve sort of started looking at people’s boards and following specific boards that I like. And so I won’t follow them just because they’re my friend. If I’m really interested in what they’re pinning [she will follow that person].

**Interviewer:** Do you think you follow more random people on Pinterest based on their interests rather than friends you have in real life?

**Trisha:** Yeah totally.

Additionally, Trisha reported that she does not receive any social gratification through using Pinterest. For Trisha, using Pinterest is for self-gratification, not connecting with others.

Leah also expressed feelings that help to reinforce the notion of Pinterest as a “personal space:”

**Interviewer:** When you’re on Pinterest do you feel like it’s a chance for you to connect with yourself or truly do things that are only for your own interest and you’re not really concerned with how other people receive it?

**Leah:** Yeah, I think so. . . .that has a lot to do with it. I don’t intentionally follow certain people . . . I don’t care about what people think about what I’m pinning or keeping. I do have a lot of boards that I keep hidden, because there are certain things that I don’t quote unquote want my ideas getting stolen, but it’s not necessarily a matter of “oh I wonder what so and so is going to think if they see me putting this on there.”

Through conversation with Danica, I learned that she does not follow any specific pinners—including her friends. She stated, “I do Pinterest specifically for myself” (alluding to the fact that she does not use the site to interact with real-life friends). Further, she explained that she likes the anonymity of Pinterest (as compared to other social platforms). Most of all, Danica

enjoys using Pinterest because as the user, she is not required to create a network (i.e., build a follower base) to have access to the ideas. “You don’t have to have your friends’ ideas to get your creative inspiration,” she said, expressing that she enjoys the collaborative nature of the platform.

The above examples resonate with past research concerning the sociality of Pinterest. For example, Linder et al. (2014) report that users do not feel as though their activity on the site is under surveillance (p. 6) as it might be on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram.

They [users] are more interested in the Pins themselves than where they came from, or who found them. This contributes to the feeling of anonymity in Pinterest users, which serves to dampen the kind of extrinsic motivation that is detrimental to creativity (Linder et al., 2014, p. 6).

Across all of my interviews, I had no participant tell me that she pins images in hopes of generating “likes” and/or amassing followers. This aligns with interview findings from Zarro et al. (2013). “If passing strangers took an interest in personal pins that was often viewed as positive, but was not the primary motivation for personal activity on the site” (n.p.). Phillips et al. (2014) also consider Pinterest to be different from other social media in that activity in this environment “does not appear to fit well into the community-building or identity-sharing frameworks seen in the scholarly work on digital prosumption” (p. 641). Therefore, based on my own and past findings, it seems fair to argue that Pinterest users seem to connect more with the self than with others.

While the majority of interviewees reported that they do not use Pinterest to socialize, there are of course exceptions to any rule. Allison, a 26-year-old executive assistant working at an RV dealership in Wisconsin, shared that she does in fact bond and plan her wedding with bridesmaids by using the Pinterest messaging system:

**Interviewer:** [D]o you socialize in any way through using the site [Pinterest]?

**Allison:** Yes. I have I think almost every single one of my girls that are in the wedding are on there, so we're always in the chat part, where you can send things . . . or with my sister, we have the one board that we share . . . they're sending me things saying "hey we should do this." Or I'm sending them, "Hey do you guys like this?" So we can try this. So we're always talking through there. I have a message on there almost every single day from somebody.

A few of my participants talked about messaging and/or sharing wedding-related boards with family and friends involved with the wedding planning. This type of interaction, though, was primarily restricted to only those participating in the wedding. Several interviewees explained that they created collaborative boards (an example is provided in the previous chapter) wherein they added pins to a group board. But this was not found to be a common motivation for using the site. It appears that users interviewed primarily interact with only family members or close friends (but not unknown followers) by messaging or pin sharing through Pinterest (Zarro et al., 2013).

My findings support this same idea as interviewees generally reported using Pinterest in a non-social fashion (noting their appreciation for the low expectation for social interaction). Thus, my interpretation is that Pinterest operates as a place of digital solitude in a mental (and at times physical) sense. Could it be that these feelings of separateness and/or personal space generated through using Pinterest provide users with what Dot (returning here to Radway's research on romance novels) called a temporary "declaration of independence?" Stated another way, does Pinterest act as a barrier between women and the stresses or concerns attached to their daily life (e.g., work, social, family)? The forthcoming sections delve deeper into this idea.

### *Escaping Reality via Digital Daydreaming*

The idea that Pinterest provides a way for users to escape daily realities, as well as to relax, emerged as a noteworthy theme. Not only did this theme come through in my dissertation interviews, it was also present in earlier research I conducted regarding how Pinterest, as a form of popular culture, compares to romance novels. Therefore, it is worthwhile to include several quotations from this earlier project as they reinforce the notion that women use Pinterest to leave reality behind and digitally daydream by collecting pins.

Before showcasing some exemplary excerpts related to escaping and dreaming via Pinterest, however, I want to highlight several important concepts presented by Phillips et al. (2014) as they help to further explain some of the key themes that emerged from my analyses. Phillips et al. (2014) analyzed 20 pin boards (a total of 2,291 images) and report that “women use Pinterest to play with possible future selves and imagine alternative consumption trajectories” (p. 633). To explain how women engage in the creation of possible selves and futuristic consumption, these authors offer the following categorizations of pinning:

- *Purchase decision aid*: pinning devoted to an immediate upcoming event (e.g., renovating a kitchen, planning a wedding, raising children).
- *Wish list*: pinning devoted to the near future (e.g., thinking of moving to a new house, recently engaged, pregnant).
- *Fantasy*: pinning devoted to the far (quite distant) future (e.g., having a new kitchen, a husband, a baby)

(**note**: all descriptions taken from Phillips et al., 2014, p. 644).

Further, these authors define pinning for an immediate or near future purpose as aspirational—“a hope or ambition of achieving something” (p. 644). “These immediate and near-future pin boards are characterized 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” (p. 644).

To connect ideas from Phillips et al. (2014) to my own findings, it appears that the women I interviewed were primarily pinning for aspirational purposes (i.e., pinning focused on purchase decision aid). That is, by building boards focused on the wedding and its associated events (e.g., bridal shower, bachelorette party, rehearsal dinner, honeymoon), the brides I interviewed were focused on immediate or near future event planning. However, I learned that participants also engaged in “wish list” and “fantasy” pinning during different phases of their life (possibly pre-engagement). Phillips et al. (2014) describe this idea as “temporal orientation.” In short, this type of pinning is based on the user’s orientation in time to the life event for which she is planning.

For example, a bride planning a wedding that is two months away would be likely to save images that are practical, with an eye for implementing the pin in some way. Whereas a single (not currently dating) woman dreaming about her wedding would be likely to save images for inspirational purposes (i.e., the event is far off, there is no immediate goal for the pins). As a woman moves through different life chapters (i.e., single, engaged, married, having children), her boards evolve based on current needs and interests.

During interviews for my earlier project, I did not explicitly ask participants to talk about Pinterest as a wedding planning tool. Interestingly, however, Maria talked about Pinterest as a platform she can use to dream about different aspects of her future, including her wedding.

[Pinterest is] a way to dream because there’s the wedding boards so you can look into the future. I have a wedding board and not only is it filled with themes and colors that I’d like to have in my own. . . . My house or whatever—a bunch of ideas for when I get an apartment or house. What girl doesn’t dream of her house or dream apartment? I never planned it out when I was a kid so now this is an easier way to do that...

Similarly, Katie shared:

When you see things like a dream house or dream closet that you want. When you see those things on Pinterest it really helps you solidify those types of things . . . . It gives me an idea about what I want my life to be like.

The above quotations help to exemplify the notion of fantasy pinning (Phillips et al., 2014) at play. At the time of the interview, Maria was not engaged. Therefore, it is fair to argue that her wedding pins centered primarily on fantasy—what she hoped to one day have at her own wedding. Similarly, Katie’s statement that pinning images helped her construct what she wants her “life to be like,” connects with concept of fantasy pinning. Moreover, these quotations point to a concept known as life longing (hereon referred to as LL). Making reference to research conducted by Baltes and Scheibe (2008) as well as Scheibe, Freund, and Baltes (2007), Kotter-Grühn, Wiest, Zurek, and Scheibe (2009) state that LLs have at least two “developmental functions” for life assessment: “planning and management” (p. 428).

They give direction to one’s life, functioning like utopian visions or overarching goals from which more concrete goals or values are derived. Further, life longings can operate as compensatory self-regulatory mechanisms: Through imagination and fantasy, important, yet unattainable aspects of life may be maintained and nurtured and thus contribute to feeling “more complete” (Kotter-Grühn et al., 2009, pp. 428-429).

The aforementioned quotations highlight the idea that Pinterest may serve as a vehicle for LL. As has been illustrated by numerous examples thus far, Pinterest allows users to engage in imagination and fantasy play by creating digital bulletin boards that may one day be actualized. Therefore, by using Pinterest, women are able to create an aspirational life based on temporal orientation (Phillips et al., 2014). Consider a response shared by Leslie, a 20-year-old user:

I use it as an escape from my actual reality in a way to make up my own reality. A lot of things I find on Pinterest is stuff I would never actually be able to have—a house I would not actually be able to afford—but I pinned it so now I kind of own it. It gives me a way to show how I would want my life to be without actually having to have it be that way.

Through pinning, Leslie feels at least a partial sense of ownership over a house that in reality (at least not her current reality) she would not be able to afford. Phillips et al. (2014) suggest that pinning an image to one’s pin board can offer “the same pleasure as the acquisition of a desired physical object (p. 643) (citing Campbell, 1987). Similarly, Schiele and Hughes

(2013) explain that consumers today experience a sense of “symbolic ownership” of digital images they have collected on sites such as Pinterest (p. 47). The ability to showcase one’s taste and/or social status via collected digital images may contribute to its appeal. Further, as several participants alluded to, it allows them present a desired version of the self (oftentimes an aspirational version of self).

Therefore, based on findings from the dissertation interviews with 20 white, heteronormative, cis gender, middle to upper-middle class women, as well as those conducted for this earlier project, I argue that Pinterest, like romance novels, appeals to women because it offers a temporary escape from daily life. It may be that women find pleasure in escaping via Pinterest because it facilitates digitally dreaming one’s future into being. The acquisition of digital materiality (i.e., pins of a beautiful farmhouse, an expensive handbag, and/or pale pink nursery) may inspire women to strive to build the life of their dreams (in the real, physical sense). For Katie, using Pinterest inspires her to accomplish her goals in real life. By pinning objects she wants to one day have (e.g., a fancy closet), she’s driven to study hard in school as it may result in a good job down the road. Stated another way, a collection of digital images may serve as a motivational visual reminder of what a woman aspires to be, do, and/or have.

### ***The Logistics of Using Pinterest: “Relaxation and ‘Me’ Time”***

During my interviews, I questioned participants about the logistics of their Pinterest use (i.e., what type of device do they use when perusing Pinterest? what time of day do they most frequently use? what is their general location when using Pinterest?). Many of my interviewees reported using Pinterest in the evening (e.g., after dinner when relaxing on the couch or while lying in bed getting ready to go to sleep).

Participants Jessica, Mary, and Chelsey noted that they will use Pinterest at night when their partners are watching TV or playing video games. For Jessica, Pinterest is part of her winding-down routine after work. “I’m on the couch most of my evenings. . . . I get home and eat dinner, ya know, grab a beer, get on Pinterest, sit on the couch.” In addition, Abby shared that she unwinds from her day by going on social media (including Pinterest) at night. “it’s nice to, after a long day, see what’s going on with the rest of the world . . . just hop online and see what people are saying or dreaming about.” For some participants, I found that Pinterest fits into their day multiple times. The excerpt below helps to exemplify this:

**Interviewer:** When do you find yourself using Pinterest generally speaking, wedding oriented or not? What time of day?

**Dawn:** All day! Hahaha...let me think. It’s more Instagram in the morning. I use it [Pinterest] on my lunch break to sort of de-compress from my very stressful day. And when I’m laying in bed, right before I go to sleep, I know it’s terrible with the whole screen thing, and I’m trying not to do as much of it. But those would be probably the most common times of day. Otherwise I’m doing it if I’m stressed out and it doesn’t matter what time of the day it is, I’ll find time to pin. To pin away my sorrow [laughs].

It seems that using Pinterest before bed is very popular, as it provides a relaxing way to unwind after a busy day (romance readers also reported that they enjoy reading before bed, see Radway [1983]). Further, Leslie explained that she really likes to go on Pinterest before bed to “drain” herself and finish her day with something “nice and easy.” She says Pinterest helps to take her away from the stress of her life and she prefers to do it every day, if possible, though school and work may get in the way. “I love the feeling of curling up on my couch and having a TV show going in the background and pinning—that sounds like the most satisfying thing in the world to me. It means relaxation and ‘me’ time.”

In all but three of my interviews, I talked with participants about their device of choice when using Pinterest. Twelve participants prefer using their smart phone, four prefer a computer, and one prefers a tablet (though two participants noted that they also enjoy using a tablet because

of the bigger screen size). A few participants explained that they will use their laptop if they are doing more “serious” searching. When pinning ideas for the wedding, Abby said that she was “on a mission” (i.e., serious about finding important details for this special day) and preferred the larger screen. In regard to her post-wedding Pinterest use, Abby said that she uses her phone more out of convenience. In similar fashion, Leah reported that she prefers using her computer if she is working on a project (i.e., she needs to see larger pictures), but enjoys using her phone if she is just scrolling through to look at random topics. In contrast, however, Allison shared that she does not like using Pinterest on her laptop because she finds the page to be too busy (or overcrowded) with images. She prefers her smartphone because there is less content crowding the screen and it is more specific to what she is looking for.

Jones (2016) reports that most Pinterest “labor” is done using a tablet (p. 355) (including smart phones). According to research presented by eMarketer (2014), “Approximately 75% of users access Pinterest via a mobile device, and of the time users spend on the site, 93% of it occurs via mobile devices” (as cited in Jones, 2016, p. 355). A central argument presented by Jones (2016) is that users engage in what they think is a leisure activity (i.e., pinning). Presenting research from Stawarz, Cox, Bird, and Benedyk’s (2013), Jones (2016) draws attention to the claim that using a tablet, in comparison to a desktop or laptop, signifies leisure over work (p. 356). Therefore, by pinning products users would like to own and developing “marketing profiles,” they are participating in “unpaid labor that masquerades as free time” (Jones, 2016, pp. 355-356).

## **Pinning for Leisure...or Labor?**

It is worthwhile to situate Jones' (2016) notion of pinning as a leisure activity masked as labor with my findings. While the majority of my participants talked about the feelings of joy and comfort they experienced during pinning sessions, such was not the case for all. In talking with one interviewee about the logistics of her Pinterest use, she shared the following:

**Interviewer:** you don't think "oh, I can't wait to come home and get some wine and sit down and go on Pinterest?"

**Sam:** No. Half the time it's like I'm tired of staring at the computer screen all day, you know? And it's almost like I think "Oh I should look at Pinterest for this," so I do it really quick. And I wouldn't say I'm thrilled to be going to Pinterest, you know what I mean? I'm just doing it because it's kind of like a . . . I know I can get my answer but it's a chore or something. You know what I mean? . . . If I could come home and not use any devices that would be the best thing ever.

The above statement illustrates the notion of pinning as a laborious activity. In this example, it is an activity not met with enthusiasm by a full-time working woman who is also heavily involved in planning a wedding (arguably, another form of labor [Engstrom, 2008; Sniezek, 2005]).

In every case examined for this study, the bride took on the majority of work involved with planning a wedding. While this may seem unfair, in repeated questioning of my interview participants, many stated very strongly that they wanted to be in charge because it meant being in control and making many of the decisions they cared about (more so than the groom). Examples of such labor include selecting a color scheme, attire for the bridal party, flowers, and décor. In making these decisions, women spent time on Pinterest gathering ideas and doing research about cost, vendors, etc. (see Sniezek (2005) for more details about labor associated with wedding planning).

While participants talked fondly about their experiences using Pinterest to gather and execute ideas, several also expressed frustration with their significant other for the lack of help

they received. For instance, Christy talked about her growing stress level as the wedding approached. I asked if she experienced feelings of anger or resentment toward her partner because she prepared almost everything (with the help of her mom) for the wedding:

**Interviewer:** Okay, so there was a little frustration when you were doing a lot of wedding stuff?

**Christy:** Yeah, so I have my full-time job, which is a big role and it's a solo role. I don't share it, I'm my own department. And then I help him a lot with the gym [partner's business], with the stuff that is more in my realm of expertise. And then obviously doing all of the wedding stuff. I feel like because I work remotely and I'm not tied to a space, that it's our home and our food [that she takes care of and/or prepares], so I think I would get frustrated and be like "Listen sir, like you can throw me a bone here when I'm doing everything else. Don't worry, I'll make sure the mortgage gets paid and our wedding gets planned and my work gets done and your social media gets handled." So things like that, I think it was just one more thing that got added. We also remodeled our bathroom right before the wedding, which was a really stupid choice. So I feel like those things, like real life, just felt a little more elevated when I felt stressed about deadlines related to the wedding. But even then, it wasn't really stuff that I wanted him to do for the wedding. Maybe instead it would had been nice if you had made dinner, or you had stopped at the grocer to pick up that. So, the wedding was an add on, but again it wasn't anything that I actually wanted him to take over or take on.

Jones (2016) discusses postindustrial and postfeminist labor in the digital sense, including explanations of shiftwork women have historically participated in (p. 357). The first shift involves women working outside of the home. The second shift includes work performed outside of the home (first shift) coupled with domestic work done at home such as cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing (Jones, 2016, p. 357)<sup>3</sup>. And finally, the third shift focuses on "unpaid activities that purport to be leisure activity but yield production that advantages capitalism" (Jones, 2016, p. 357). Examples of third shift activity might include working on the body (i.e., fitness), volunteering and contributing to one's community, and striving to improve the self (see Jones, 2016, p. 357 for cites pertaining to women and the third shift). Ultimately, by engaging in such

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<sup>3</sup> For more research on shiftwork, see Boyd, 2002; Gerson, 2010; Hochschild, 1983 & 1989; Stone, 2007 (as cited in Jones, 2016, p. 357).

third shift activities, women enhance their performance in the first and second shift (Jones, 2016, p. 357).

Regardless of the specific motive or enjoyment experienced by any individual, labor that is unpaid, purports to be leisure, and benefits capitalism constitutes a third shift. By placing Pinterest into these larger conversations about postindustrial, post-feminist digital labor, I argue that Pinterest users (almost all women), responding to the site's affective capacity of yearning, labor on a third shift by engaging in perfecting practices driven by self-surveilling (Jones, 2016, p. 358).

Clearly, the case could be made that wedding planning is unpaid labor that benefits capitalism. Wedding planning falls into the realm of stereotypical 'women's work' (Engstrom, 2008; Sniezek, 2005), and arguably takes place during the third shift. Meaning, another form of unpaid labor women participate in after completing first and second shift duties. Though the above excerpt (from Christy) talks about labor primarily in the non-digital sense, many of Christy's wedding-related plans originated from Pinterest. The work began in a digital capacity and later came to life in a physical capacity. Christy's sentiments help to illustrate the concept of second and third shift work at play.

The idea that women engage in a "third shift" when they log in to Pinterest is a provocative one (Jones, 2016). Throughout this and forthcoming chapters, I showcase interview excerpts that may exemplify a third shift at play. Nonetheless, in a broader sense, my investigation did not confirm that women are engaged in unpaid labor when pinning. The statements I interpreted from my interviews indicate that the issue is more complex. For instance, many of my participants talked about their motives for and the enjoyment experienced in being the primary wedding planner. Does this still constitute a third shift as explained by Jones (2016)?

As I move into further discussion about whether using Pinterest is viewed as a form of leisure or labor, it is worthwhile to include a statement from Levine (2015). She states: "feminized popular culture of the early twenty-first century has become extraordinarily focused

upon labor, upon the multiple forms of work that women in particular are expected to do. Sometimes popular culture can assist with these labors” (p. 8). Because wedding planning, historically, has been performed by women, it is an important topic to talk about at length in a separate chapter. Therefore, Chapter 4 provides more detailed accounts of how wedding planning via Pinterest does in fact align with Jones’ (2016) line of reasoning.

Jones (2016) argues that Pinterest encourages its primarily female user-base to yearn for material items as well as perfect what can be considered traditionally feminine practices (p. 358). This aligns with research from Belk, Ger, and Askegaard (2003). In their study, they conducted interviews and other “interpretive methods” like collage construction to understand feelings of longing and desire related to modern consumerism. They found that participants’ fantasies associated with the acquisition of consumer goods were often socially motivated by the media (p. 341). In other words, by being exposed to Pinterest (a social medium dominated by women), a bride-to-be may find objects she desires to have for the wedding. For instance, she might find a pin of the perfect wedding dress and begin to “self-seduce” herself into believing she must have this object. It is worth pointing out that the seduction may center on the price of the object (e.g., a good deal). For instance, a bride might settle on a dress that she likes, but doesn’t love, because the price fits her budget and it is the smart choice (and later wish she had not been swayed by the price tag). “The social object seduces us (Baudrillard, 1983), but we want to be seduced, and we play an active role in the seduction” (Belk et al., 2003, p. 341).

### ***Seducing Oneself into the Wedding Dress***

The notion of self-seduction (Belk et al., 2003) comes into play as women construct wedding-related pin boards about what they *think* they want to incorporate for the wedding. A

bride's wedding identity evolves as she moves through the planning process. In talking with Angela about how she used Pinterest to discover the type of wedding dress she wanted, she shared:

**Angela:** I pinned all this stuff and all the ideas of what I thought I wanted in a dress. And I think that the dress I chose is nothing like that. So, it's crazy that you could pin and love everything that you thought was gonna be awesome but then when you go and you actually look and you pick out the dress . . . I was shocked to buy the one I did.

Angela also noted that she likes that Pinterest allows for the reinvention of one's wedding style should a new idea come along that the bride wants to incorporate. Because Pinterest presents a user with a mass amount of ideas, it is not uncommon for a bride to become confused about the style and products she ultimately desires for this special day. Through the pinning process, the bride-to-be engages in digitally "trying on" (Phillips et al., 2014, p. 648) different images that help to construct the aspirational bride identity. In so doing, she envisions multiple constructions of what it might be like to wear a certain dress or have her hair and/or makeup styled in a particular way. In this manner, Pinterest acts as a space where the bride can reinvent or reimagine how she will look and/or what she (and the groom) will have (e.g., venue, food, music, décor, etc.) on the wedding day.

According to Belk et al. (2003), "Building expectations and excitement by rehearsing what it will be like to obtain the object of desire rests on fantasizing about the sensory as well as the social" (Belk et al., 2003, p. 341). By using Pinterest, brides-to-be fantasize and create hype around the wedding day. For a bride, a great deal of importance is placed on choosing her wedding dress. In conversations with several participants about the experience of moving from pinning wedding dresses to purchasing one, the notion of imaginative elaboration came through. Interestingly, for Angela, Andrea, and Jessica, however, the dress they decided to purchase did not correlate with the pins they had saved as inspiration for dress shopping. This disconnect—

between the dream dresses that were pinned and the dress that was purchased—appears to have caused some mixed emotions for Andrea and Jessica. Consider the excerpts below:

**Andrea:** [T]hat was why I was so stressed with the dress was because I had that entire board of pretty similar style dresses, and then the dress I ended up buying was nothing like any of those. It was like kind of similar to some of em, but it wasn't, like it wasn't that dress. So I had this conflict in my head where I bought a sample dress. So I took it home right away, it's at my parent's house, and I can do whatever I want with it. But there was another dress that was the exact same style that I had been pinning all along, that I had been showing my sister all along, but it was a trunk show dress. So I would have had to buy it that day, I wasn't gonna have it for months afterwards. I could have altered it to make it my own, which I think every bride kind of wants because they want it unique to themselves. Um, but, my sister started talking and she goes "do you think that you're freaking out so much because it doesn't look like what you've been talking about or what you've been showing us this whole time?" And I thought about it, and I realized that was the whole reason why. It was because it didn't look like my Pinterest board, which is stupid, so I got over it. I was like "yeah, I'm super happy in this dress, I look killer in it, and get over that."

**Interviewer:** Yeah, I can understand that.

**Andrea:** "Get over it, I don't know!" And I ended up looking back at my Pinterest board and there were like two or three dresses on there that look like it [the style she ended up buying]. I'm just completely overlooking it because it got lost in the sea of other white and blush dresses that I had pinned so...

Jessica also shared a similar dress shopping experience:

**Interviewer:** [Y]our wedding dress pins, were those more to get an idea of the style you were looking for?

**Jessica:** Yeah, definitely. When I started going out [dress shopping], I picked out something totally different. Which is kind of causing me some heartache right now. Cuz when I go and look at the board and see the stuff that I really liked [pins on her board], and what I ended up with . . . I'm like {lets out a sigh} . . . really like those ones a lot [her earlier pins]. And I even tried on a few that were just amazing, and expensive. But I just have to tell myself, "you're happy with your dress, it's fine. It's totally functional."

**Interviewer:** So when you look back at the pins, it kind of—{Jessica jumps in}

**Jessica:** It kind of stabs me a little bit. Like "Oh I wish I would have just gone with my gut on that one instead . . . and said no to the dress until I found one of that style that also matched my price range." But I think at that point I was like I'm never going to find anything in my price range

Although the stories above are from only three women who used Pinterest for wedding dress inspiration, and thus not representative of this study's interview sample, my extensive study of Pinterest use in general, and for wedding planning in particular, gives me reason to

believe that other brides-to-be share similar experiences. That a bride might feel dismayed about the dress she chose to purchase because of visual reminders (i.e., pins) of dresses that she had initially desired aligns with some of the more critical critiques of Pinterest. Jones (2016) claims that Pinterest's "primary affective capacity" is "future-oriented yearning" (p. 358). She maintains that this type of yearning "leads to virtually hoarding items of excess value (images of products/practices for imaginary future consumption)" and ultimately "consummate perfection" (p. 358). It may be that the brides I spoke with were not satisfied with the dress they chose because it did not reach a certain standard of perfection as displayed via Pinterest.

### ***The Making (and Re-making) of the Perfect Bride***

The aforementioned dissatisfaction may be due in part to the messages put forth by bridal magazines and the media's coverage of weddings. According to Engstrom (2008), such media messages communicate "that weddings serve as the endpoint of romantic relationships . . . and the life goal for women" (p. 61). Therefore, a bride may place a great deal of pressure on herself to find the perfect dress—and one that aligns with the vision(s) she saved on her pin boards. Engstrom (2008) reinforces this idea: "More so than the bride herself, it is her *dress*—her 'packaging' (Goldstein-Gidoni, 1997)—rather than her person as a human being that serves as the center of attention" (p. 9).

Jones (2016) argues that Pinterest use is disguised as a leisure activity when it is actually labor (p. 358). She draws attention to the fact that in using Pinterest, women are exposed to content aimed at perfecting their physical image and traditionally feminine activities (cooking, cleaning, child-rearing). This resonates with Engstrom's (2008) point that greater emphasis is placed on the appearance of the bride (as compared to the groom) not only on the wedding day,

but every day (p. 70). “One can consider the process of the wedding, that is, the ‘making’ of the bride, as a disciplinary practice that creates ideal feminine beauty” (Engstrom, 2008, p. 70). It may be that in using a site like Pinterest to “make” oneself a bride, feelings of longing for what one cannot have or dissatisfaction with what one does have are heightened.

Pinterest is loaded with pins relating to a woman’s appearance on the wedding day— wedding dresses, fitness tips, makeup and hair products and how-to tutorials, and diet ideas (to name a few). Because of this plethora of ever-growing content, Pinterest, as a social medium, is arguably capable of contributing to the perpetuation of the wedding as “life goal” message that has been made prominent by the media. “Pinterest converts leisure time into a postindustrial, postfeminist third shift comprised of extending technologies of the self and publicly fashioning and performing the yearned-for self” (Jones, 2016, p. 360).

It is possible that the “fashioning and performing the yearned-for self” via Pinterest played a role in several of my participants feeling disheartened about the wedding dress they chose to purchase. By looking back at pins of the original vision a bride had for how she would look on her wedding day, she might feel anxious or nervous that the dress she chose does not match up. “The process of enhancing emotions through imaginative elaboration often includes rehearsing what it will be like to obtain the object of desire” (Belk et al., 2003, p. 341). If the dress purchased does not match with what the bride initially rehearsed, as was previously illustrated, she may experience mixed emotions.

While I do not disagree with some of the aforementioned claims put forth by Jones (2016) and criticisms of the media’s portrayal of weddings (in general) (see Engstrom, 2008; Ingraham 1999, 2008), I believe it is important to unpack them further, alongside firsthand accounts provided by my participants. It is difficult to argue against the idea that Pinterest, as a

social medium, promotes consumption. While it may assist women in creating future desires in the material sense, I believe it does so in a way that also allows users to appropriate content in personally meaningful ways. For instance, this appropriation might involve pinning an expensive chandelier for the wedding, but with the intention of recreating the same idea on a budget (e.g., DIY-ing it instead of buying it). In part, this involves constructing pin boards to physically visualize what a bride does, and does not, want to incorporate for the wedding day. This idea is supported by research from Schiele and Hughes (2013) who, through interviews and netnography, found that Pinterest users “actively re-contextualized the images they collected, situated them in a larger collection and gave them new meanings and significance” (p. 48).

Throughout my interviews with 20 white, heteronormative, cis gender, middle to upper-middle class aspiring brides, I learned that for many, Pinterest is an appealing tool because it allows for the visualization of the multiple elements involved in wedding planning. In short, it allows for the remaking (or reimagining) of a bride-to-be as she gathers inspiration and culls through the ideas she wants to implement for the wedding. First, it seems that women use Pinterest as a source for inspiration and dreaming (i.e., wish list and/or fantasy pinning activity, Phillips et al., 2014). Once engaged and actively planning, it appears that Pinterest helps brides-to-be execute (i.e., physically create and/or purchase) the visions that have evolved to be part of the decision-making aid (Phillips et al., 2014) phase of their pinning activity. The forthcoming section examines Pinterest as a visualization tool and incorporates further discussion of consumption.

## **“A Consumption Constellation of Complementary Products”: Pinterest as a Visualization Tool**

In the previous section, I introduced Pinterest as a place to which many of the women I interviewed gravitate when they want “alone time” and/or to escape daily stressors attached to social, family, and/or professional roles. In the quote below, Levine (2015) references the myriad pressures women experience to succeed in such roles, which may contribute to the desire for escaping via Pinterest.

Pinterest has been criticized for being a platform that helps to perpetuate feminine stereotypes (Odell, 2012; Sandler, 2012; Pynchon, 2012; Jones, 2016; Friz & Gehl, 2016; Sandler, 2012). However, it is also worthwhile to present the other side of this argument—Pinterest as a digital tool that assists women in planning and/or managing different facets of their life. Consider the following statement:

But the feminized popular culture of the early twenty-first century is also identifiable according to newer terms and concerns associated with the feminine conceptions of what it means to occupy this gendered space in a world altered by feminism. In some cultural realms, the multitude of pressures placed upon women encouraged to “have it all”—a formulation typically referring to the successful combination of career, personal and family life, and conventionally attractive physical appearance—has led to a focus on just how to manage such voluminous responsibilities and occasionally to critiques of this very logic (Levine, 2015, p. 8).

Could it be that Pinterest appeals to the women I interviewed because it assists them in managing “voluminous responsibilities?” This chapter examines Pinterest as a visualization tool by drawing from firsthand accounts gathered from my participants. In an effort to not over-celebrate Pinterest, however, I include important criticisms as they relate to the themes I have found. Additionally, in presenting these accounts, I realize that my interviewees comprise a miniscule portion of Pinterest users, and that findings may have varied if I talked to additional users of different demographic backgrounds.

### ***“This is Cool, but it isn’t My Cool:” Taste Discovery and Refinement on Pinterest***

A goal of this project, broadly speaking, was to learn how women use Pinterest as a wedding planning tool. In examining this phenomenon, I sought to answer a question previously posed by Phillips et al. (2014): “What, then, are pinners doing when they pin images to their pinboard on Pinterest?” Their answer: “We find that the purpose of assembling images on a pinboard is to discover, develop and refine one’s personal taste” (p. 641). This answer very much helps to describe some of the findings I uncovered in asking this same question, but specifically, within the context of wedding planning.

Before delving into my findings, it is worthwhile to present three concepts from Phillips et al. (2014) that I used to help interpret my findings. These include: taste uncertainty, taste discovery, and taste refinement. First, it is necessary to provide a definition of “taste.” Phillips et al. (2014) describe this as an “aesthetic preference within a fashion context,” which extends beyond clothing to “any consumption domain” that features numerous options and evolves over time (p. 641).

Because wedding planning involves selection of not only articles of clothing, but also décor, taste comes into play. I found that when brides begin the planning process, many do not have strong feelings about their taste (i.e., they are taste uncertain). Rather, wedding taste is something that unfolds as they explore via Pinterest and other media sources. Phillips et al. (2014) reinforce this idea:

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 (p. 642).

In other words, Pinterest seems to operate as a platform that in some respects generates taste uncertainty through the multitude of options presented, but also helps users acquire and refine their taste(s).

According to many of those interviewed for this study, when a bride begins using Pinterest, she is often pinning for inspiration—to gather ideas that might be used in the wedding. As she progresses, she likely decides on a motif and ultimately refines it to fit with her wedding (Phillips et al., 2014, p. 642). This idea connects with the theme of “pinning for inspiration to pinning for implementation” (see Chapter 6). Specifically, a bride pinning for inspirational purposes, is likely uncertain about her taste—she may be pinning a mass number of ideas to discover what appeals to her (taste discovery). Finally, she may engage in taste refinement. In this stage, the aspiring bride has likely committed to a wedding color scheme and style, and is therefore pinning for implementation purposes. Meaning that, she plans to implement the pins for her own wedding needs.

It is advantageous to position the concept of taste refinement against Jones’ (2016) critique of Pinterest as a form of third shift labor. According to Phillips et al. (2014), “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)” (p. 642). Stated another way, as a bride-to-be engages in “taste refinement,” she may not feel as though she is “working.”

In several of my interviews, participants used the word “fun” in describing their use of Pinterest. For example, Chelsey, a 28-year-old genetic counselor living in Boise, Idaho, stated:

“I enjoy it. I think it’s fun to find new recipes to try and things to do for our house. I also think people are very creative and it’s sometimes fun to see what other people come up with.”

Similarly, Sadie shared: “it’s just fun to look at pictures, it’s kind of like looking at a photo album, if I want to look at pictures, if I want to look at ideas.” In a lengthier statement, Dawn reflected on Pinterest as a space that allows for dreaming, creativity, and practicality:

**Dawn:** I think the healthy part of it is the creativity and being able to be open-ended, make things like you say a little bit your own. I like it because it’s a mix of both—it can be very realistic and reality-driven or it can be completely opposite and like your “dream life” that you would want in another universe. But I think it’s good to keep your optimism open always, and to be “like this could happen one day if I work 17 jobs . . . you know?” For right now it’s just for fun and I don’t think that it’s a heavy-hearted thing at all. I think it’s meant to be kind of just like a fun, creative outlet definitely primarily driven to women. But, there are practical . . . [trails off]. I think of it mostly as like a magazine. It’s exactly the same as like a *Cosmo*. You know, they have their cooking tips, and their sex tips, and if you wanna buy a \$500 purse, you can find that in *Cosmo* too, ya know? Like it’s not all realistic, I think it’s just more open-ended and definitely it adheres to current day trends and a little more up to date and at the tips of your finger . . . and it’s awesome because it’s all free! Most importantly, cuz you don’t have to pay for it!

Does the fact that several participants described their use of Pinterest as “fun” refute Jones’ (2016) claim that pinning is masked as leisure when it is actually a form of unpaid labor (pp. 355-356)? Here, it is worthwhile to return to Iser’s (1993) notion of “free play”: “play without a purpose or motivation in mind, other than enjoyment or fun” (Phillips et al., 2014, p. 644). Arguably, the aforementioned sentiments align more closely with pinning as a form of “free play,” and thus leisure activity, than a form of labor.

“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” (p. 643). For instance, Jennings explained that using Pinterest made her more confident in the choices she made because it took the “guessing” out of it. She stated that it alleviates wondering how something will turn out, “Because you have this vision and stuff, and you see the picture and you’re like ‘that’s what it’s gonna be like,’ . . . it doesn’t make you feel so unsure from the

beginning.” It seems that Pinterest attracts aspiring brides, in part, because it allows for the visualization of potential ideas—determining what appeals to one’s tastes and what does not.

The excerpts below showcase conversations that unfolded when I asked participants to talk about their wedding identity and the role Pinterest played in its evolution.

**Interviewer:** If you think about your wedding identity, everything that entails . . . how is that being constructed through using Pinterest?

**Jessica:** Yeah, I totally didn’t know what my wedding identity was when I started. But now I do. And that’s because going through all those pins and all that stuff and then actually going back through and looking at stuff. Cuz it’s been about a year now and I got really pin happy at the beginning. I’m like oh my God this and that. And the other thing. And I didn’t know what my theme was. We figured out right away what our colors were going to be. But you know it was this big onslaught of stuff and then it was like “yeah we’re good” [meaning she had compiled enough pins]. So I came back probably at the beginning of this year when I really started thinking about save the dates and invitations and scrolled back through. I’m like “ohhh okay, we’re having a bohemian wedding.” . . . I didn’t know that at the time, but going back through I figured okay now I can tell my mom, “no we don’t need fasteners because it’s not a Gatsby wedding,” you know?

**Interviewer:** . . . Would you say as you were kind of in the earlier stages, just getting ideas, you didn’t have a strict vision in mind. And then going through and looking at your pins helped you streamline what you wanted?

**Jessica:** Exactly. Narrow everything down and now I can actually answer people when they’re like “Oh what’s your theme” or “what’s your style?” You know, and in the beginning I’m just like “I don’t know, laid back?” {laughs}

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Jessica:** And that’s the same thing with house projects and food . . . I don’t know maybe not food as much, cuz I just like all food. But, party planning . . . I can narrow down exactly what I want to do and then be and then feel really confident about it because my ideas are all in one place.

The excerpt above featuring Jessica demonstrates the concepts of taste uncertainty and taste refinement at play. Early in the planning stages, Jessica describes her activity on Pinterest as “pin happy.” Over time, however, through reflecting on her pins, she realized that her style was bohemian. In a similar fashion, the passage below also helps to illustrate taste refinement as Lila used Pinterest to help decide on her bridesmaid dresses.

**Interviewer:** How would you say that your identity as an aspiring bride has come through, through using Pinterest? In other words, if you think of your wedding identity, how has that been constructed through using Pinterest?

**Lila:** Yeah, how has it been constructed? . . . maybe I'll go down this path and if I'm not directly answering your question let me know.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Lila:** . . . I think it's made me a more confident bride. I have been able to see what I for sure don't like, and I've been able to really explore what I do like to feel confident that I like it. When I originally showed my mom the bridesmaids dresses, she is a little more traditional, and so she was kind of "oh I don't know, I don't know how that will look." And I was like "No, I know, I know it will look good. I really really like the way this looks." So I think for me I was able to explore, I was able to find the hundreds of photos I wanted of it, picked the photos I liked, make sure that I knew what else was out there, and so that I really felt comfortable saying "this is what I want."

**Interviewer:** That's really really interesting. So is it that you used Pinterest as a way to see everything that's out there and then it kind of helped you to streamline your true style and what really is going to work for you?

**Lila:** Yeah. I would say so, cuz when I originally went down this path, like I thought I was gonna have like a smoky gray bridesmaid's dress, or like a really pale pink. And so I had pinned a bunch of different pictures of those, and originally, I don't know if I really delete many pictures off my Pinterest . . . if at all. So they're probably still hiding in there somewhere, but, I had definitely explored the different options that I thought of and realized that I didn't like all of the pictures that I had seen of some of the options I was considering.

The above excerpts touch on notions of taste uncertainty, taste discovery, and taste refinement as presented by Phillips et al. (2014). By using Pinterest, brides-to-be are able to construct evolving pin boards that can be used to visualize what different elements of the wedding day will look like blended together. Several of my interviewees (Dawn, Beth, and Laurie) expressed their appreciation for the fact that Pinterest allows for making sure pins fit together cohesively (i.e., everything flows together in an aesthetically pleasing way). For instance, Dawn, who was planning an October wedding inspired by Friday the 13th, commented: "you don't have something that is one glittery pumpkin that looks totally weird with everything else. You have one big cohesive look to everything and that's helpful."

My findings concerning taste uncertainty, discovery, and refinement (in regard to wedding planning on Pinterest) are supported by a statement from Phillips et al. (2014):

Specifically, panners 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 (p. 642).

As highlighted in the previous chapter, Christy used the phrase “this is really cool, but this isn't my cool” upon revisiting her earlier wedding pin board (the board created pre-engagement) to determine which ideas would be used for her wedding. A statement like this arguably helps to illustrate taste discovery and taste refinement as it evolves through using Pinterest. Christy was not engaged when she constructed her first wedding-oriented pin board—her pinning centered on collecting inspiration for her eventual wedding. Once engaged, Christy sorted through old pins and selected only those that fit with her refined taste for her more recent “I Do” board (the official board she took ideas from to implement for her own wedding). Pins she once thought were “cool” (i.e., years prior) no longer fit with her refined wedding style and therefore did not make the cut for her ultimate wedding plan board. Attaching this finding to the above quote from Phillips et al. (2014), I too support that Pinterest acts as a powerful tool that helps aspiring brides discover and clarify aesthetic preferences.

In the forthcoming sections, I present examples that reinforce the notion of using Pinterest “to assemble a consumption constellation of complementary products.” In so doing, I highlight some of the pros and cons to using Pinterest as a wedding planning tool. For instance, does using Pinterest prompt aspiring brides to want more for the wedding? Jones (2016) claims that “Pinterest's future-oriented yearning seats perfection, consumption, and surveillance front and center” (p. 360). While I do not disagree with the argument that Pinterest promotes consumption, it is important to dissect such claims alongside firsthand accounts shared by my participants.

### *Can Pin Overload be Problematic?*

For some users, Pinterest can be viewed negatively in the respect that it is filled with endless pins—an overflow of wedding inspiration that can result in yearning for more. That is, while it can be fun to use Pinterest as an idea generator, it can also be problematic in that a bride-to-be can continue to find more ideas she wants to incorporate, but her budget and/or timeline do not allow for more additions. The excerpt from Danica below speaks directly to this idea. It also sheds light on what Jones (2016) refers to as “prosumption/produsage,” where Pinterest prompts women to long for improvement if not absolute perfection (p. 358).

**Interviewer:** How do you think using Pinterest for wedding planning changed you or made you feel about yourself, during that part of your life?

**Danica:** Changed me? Maybe like the idea of doing everything . . . just having an answer for everything at some points kind of gets exhausting. Just the endless details . . . I’d be like “we’re done and we have everything we need pretty much.” And then just keep scrolling through Pinterest, “but we don’t have this cake topper, or we don’t have these fun little place cards to go onto the tables.” Or . . . “oh this sign would be really cute for our bar drinks that we’re having” you know? It totally would have been fine not to have those. People still would have been able to drink.

**Interviewer:** So, Pinterest kind of served as an extra consumption tool in a way where you thought you had things done, and they were the way you wanted, and then you’d see something else and be like “no, we need to add this?”

**Danica:** Yeah, just adding on, I feel like it just made me want more.

Danica’s statement, that scrolling through Pinterest made her continue to want more for the wedding, reinforces Jones’ (2016) argument that this platform prompts women to create a yearned-for self. Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman (2016) explored the impact technology has on consumer desire through an examination of “food porn” shared on social media and blogs, which they refer to as “networks of desire.” To explain this concept, they offer the following definition: “Networks of desire are complex, open systems of technologies, consumers, energized passion, and virtual and physical objects interacting as an interconnected desiring-machine that produces consumption interest within the wider social system and among the interconnected actors” (p.

667). These authors included Pinterest as an environment of study (among others) in the netnographic portion of their research. Applied to the present research, I argue that Pinterest acts as a network of desire that fosters the building of a yearned-for self (Jones, 2016)—in this case a yearned-for bride. I believe sentiments shared by Danica and others help to exemplify this idea.

Moreover, Danica shared that using Pinterest in general (not only for wedding planning) contributed to having unrealistic expectations about her crafting abilities. “I just pinned the other day this little bar table thing that I’m convinced I can make. We’ll see. I don’t think it’s gonna happen. I’ll try!” In other words, for Danica, using Pinterest sparked not only material consumption desires, but also the desire to be creative and build things herself.

**Danica:** Yeah, overall creativity, I’ll see someone do some insane thing with old jeans or something and I’ll be like “well I have a pair of old jeans. I could probably do that.” It’s like “but you don’t need to do that.” The things I get myself into starting Pinterest projects.

Although using Pinterest led Danica to take on time-consuming projects (wedding-related and otherwise) as well as increased her desire to consume, she shared that overall, it was a very valuable tool for wedding planning. It helped her to organize her ideas and pull together the details. “I feel like I wouldn’t have been so organized or been able to really understand what it was that I wanted or vice versa communicate what I wanted, if I didn’t have Pinterest . . . I have a very high love for Pinterest.” The fact that Danica credits Pinterest as a major contributor to her wedding organization and ability to share with others the vision she had speaks to another theme addressed later in this section—Pinterest as a visualization tool. Further, it helps to demonstrate that within this phenomenon, agency and determination are at play.

In every interview conducted, I asked interviewees to talk about the main sources used to assist with wedding planning. For instance, I asked if hard copy materials such as binders, wedding magazines, commercially produced wedding planners, books, etc. were used to compile

and organize wedding-related materials (e.g., inspiration, photographs, contracts, price lists, brochures). Because it is important to compare Pinterest as a digital tool to more traditional forms of media often used in wedding planning, a forthcoming chapter addresses this idea in greater detail. The excerpt below from my interview with Abby, a 28-year-old graduate student and communications manager living in Fort Collins, Colorado, offers a preview into this topic. Additionally, it sheds light on the notion of aspiring brides feeling overwhelmed by the abundance of information available on Pinterest.

**Interviewer:** When you think back to your wedding planning stage, did you have any type of hard copy document that you used to maintain your wedding materials besides Pinterest?

**Abby:** I did not. When I got engaged I bought a binder and some magazines and never used them. I think I flipped through the magazines, looked at some pretty pictures, got intimidated by some of the stuff . . . I think that's where Pinterest is appealing to people. It's [Pinterest] less traditional . . . weddings are a lot more about self-expression these days . . . like expressing both of your selves [bride and groom]. Making it about you and about what you want, and what you want people to know. And less about the traditions. . . somebody gave me a *Real Simple Weddings* magazine—it's like a nice, \$15, produced once a year kind of thing. And it was all about the timelines, and the traditions. And it was like the bigger the wedding the bigger the bridal party. The bigger the wedding, the bigger the dress. Your dress gets bigger and I'm like "why? how did those things correlate? In my modern day millennial mind they don't." So I definitely had the intention "oh, this is what I do, you get the magazines, and you get the binder and you go," and then found Pinterest to be a little less intimidating. And I think probably some people find it more intimidating because it's like infinite ideas, but to me I think it was less intimidating. It was less about tradition and more about showing you all the different kinds of ways that people express themselves and then giving you ideas for how you could do it too.

**Interviewer:** Did you feel overwhelmed at any point using Pinterest?

**Abby:** Not really, I think that I'm pretty in-tune with who I am and what my preferences are, so it was a little bit easier for me. But I can see how that would be overwhelming for people. And at that point, we had been together for like four years or something like that. So I had had time to think about it and we had time to know who we were together and we knew what our goal was. . . . a lot of my family is from Ohio and a lot of my husband's family is in Arizona, and we met and planted our roots in Colorado. So we wanted to give everybody a true Colorado winter mountain wedding experience. And we wanted it to be a destination since it would be for most everybody. And so that was kind of where we started and it just went from there. So we kind of knew what we were looking for. And by we, I mean mostly me because I feel like my husband was on board, but not necessarily invested in searching for ideas online.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Abby:** He was like sure, I like what you're saying, but you hash out the specifics.

This excerpt points to several of the themes mentioned in this chapter as well as others. Foremost, Abby explains that she was not overwhelmed by the vast amount of wedding planning ideas on Pinterest. Rather, she cites a wedding magazine as a source of intimidation regarding her own planning experience. Interestingly, she credits Pinterest as a source for finding ideas that break tradition and allow for self-expression. Does this contradict Jones (2016) argument that Pinterest encourages women to strive for improvement if not perfection (p. 358)? If a user (in this case Abby) in some way felt reassured that she could find ideas that addressed her wedding needs via Pinterest, is it fair to argue that the site pressures women to aim for perfection? Might it be more accurate to argue that Pinterest assists women with finding resources (wedding oriented or not) that complement the multi-faceted lives they live? Would it be a stretch to say that at least some women find using Pinterest liberating?

Jones (2016) argues that Pinterest is more detrimental to women than it is beneficial (i.e., not liberating). Women's relationship with technology has received more attention in recent years, as this topic is considered one of the most critical feminist issues today (Parry and Light, 2014, p. 41). Emerging strands of research are prompting conversations about where to position women's relationship(s) with technology (see Throsby & Hodges, 2009). For instance, several recent studies present women's use of social networks and technology as liberating rather than constraining (Valtchanov, Parry, & Glover, 2016; Parry & Light, 2014; Parry, Glover, & Mulcahy, 2013).

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to delve deeper into women's relationship with technology and to determine whether a relationship with Pinterest is liberating or constraining.

Chapter 4, however, expanded on some of these ideas as I investigated the ‘division of labor’ that exists between the aspiring bride and groom, and how Pinterest plays a role in this relationship. Additionally, I further explore the idea of Pinterest as a laborious (or constraining) and/or liberating platform in Chapter 7.

Returning now to interview findings that speak to “pin overload”—Cassie also explained that she did not feel overpowered by the never-ending information stream that flowed through her Pinterest feed. Instead, she described Pinterest as a “place of comfort” she would go to if she ever became stumped during the wedding planning process.

**Cassie:** Um the funny thing is people would say stuff like “isn’t Pinterest great?” but then it’s not that great because you get all these ideas and then you wanna use them all . . . And I could totally see some brides doing that. But I don’t think that really happened to me. I used it more as . . . it was a way for me to take notes, go to my meetings prepared, and then get ideas that way. I think sometimes I definitely came to a crossroad because of those extra ideas, it was hard, there were some decisions that were hard for me to make. I would rather have those ideas presented to me that I knew I could choose from than not have them.

In other words, Cassie appreciated the excess of pins. Although the plethora of wedding planning options presented via Pinterest may have at times caused her to question or rethink a certain choice, she was happy to have more content to sift through. Further, she reported that Pinterest helped her to confirm the choices she made.

[S]ometimes I felt I used it as a confirmation. That like “okay I think I want to do this, I can do this.” And then it was like if I saw someone do it, it’s like yes, I know that I can do this because someone else did this, and like I’m gonna do it with my own twist on it.

The above quotation helps to illustrate how Pinterest assisted Cassie in knowing that the choices she made for the wedding day (e.g., food, décor, activities) had been created and executed in the past. And as she explains, she found the ideas via Pinterest, but then put her own spin on them, which relates to the notion of appropriation discussed in the previous chapter.

As has been demonstrated, using Pinterest can sometimes put users on “information overload” due to the large amount of content available. To address this, I found that some users engage in a filtering process wherein they sift through pins and narrow down final choices. The forthcoming section explains this idea in greater detail.

### ***Filtering Until It Fits: Choice Confirmation via Pinterest***

It may come as no surprise that a bride might feel overwhelmed when she logs into Pinterest and is bombarded with wedding planning pins. As has been discussed, however, it seems that among the women I interviewed (women who identified as white, heteronormative, cis gender, and as middle to upper-middle class), an outpouring of pins was not viewed as problematic. I learned that many brides-to-be engage in a filtering process wherein they eliminate pins that no longer fit with the ultimate wedding aesthetic (i.e., the refined taste). In part, this involves narrowing down the mass number of pins one may have started with so that the final board(s) is a cohesive package that represents only the final choices. Eight interviewees described Pinterest as a tool that helped them to confirm and/or have confidence in the wedding choices they made (e.g., including bridal party attire, color scheme, decorative theme, etc.). Therefore, by creating a cohesive package of pins that blend together well aesthetically, aspiring brides build what Phillips et al. (2014) call a “consumption constellation of complementary products” (p. 642).

Because Pinterest allows users to visually review ideas (i.e., they can look at different pins side by side), it appears that a filtering process may ensue (at least for some users) where they disregard pins that no longer fit with the chosen wedding motif. Below is an excerpt from my conversation with Laurie that helps to demonstrate this idea:

**Laurie:** I used it [Pinterest] to find my dress. I did go dress shopping a few times but I ended up buying my dress online and I looked at a lot of different dresses online and a lot of different discount sites. So that was kind of how I picked my dress . . . I had narrowed it down to the ones I liked and I just would scroll through [pins on her wedding dress board] and eliminate the ones that I liked less. And that's how I chose my dress. . . . and I used it for flowers, for color patterns, for swatches, and then once we had chosen the colors, that's how I picked the grooms' outfits, that's how I picked a lot of our décor. And even the theme for our wedding. I kind of went really broad to a lot of different things that I like and then I sort of used Pinterest to narrow things down. So at first we had 10 different themes we liked for the wedding, and then we narrowed it down to the final two that we liked and sort of chose different things based on that.

**Interviewer:** Okay . . . did you start pinning mass amounts of ideas on your boards or did you wait till you had it narrowed and then pin like the select top choices.

**Laurie:** So I pinned a massive amount of things and then once I was able to look at them all side by side, um I sort of used that to narrow things down and start to make my decisions.

**Interviewer:** Is what currently is on your board—is that kind of a reflection of your ultimate decisions? The pins that you have on your boards now, do those kind of reflect your ultimate decisions and what you went with?

**Laurie:** Yes they do.

Alex also talked about how using Pinterest helped her to narrow her choices:

**Interviewer:** Do you think that you were overwhelmed ever with all of the different information you could gather through Pinterest? Or did it help you to narrow down what you were looking for?

**Alex:** I think it kind of helped me to narrow down more for me. I mean because there were just so many ideas that I liked and I kind of took some of each and I put it all together into one. So it's like some of the things that are on my board isn't necessarily exactly how it turned out. But I took a little bit maybe from this one [pin] and a little bit from that one [pin], and I was like "this is what I want for mine." So yeah, I'd say it helped me narrow it.

**Interviewer:** So some of it was gathering different ideas, different visuals and then taking little pieces and building what you ultimately wanted?

**Alex:** Yeah. Yup.

Moreover, the notion of filtering one's pins until they form a unified vision can also extend from the bride to a wedding planner. Beth talked about the role her wedding planner played in helping with the construction of cohesive pin boards.

**Interviewer:** So it sounds like Pinterest helps you to plan certain aspects of your future wedding oriented and more—can you just talk about that a little bit?

**Beth:** Yeah a lot of is floral and lighting [for the wedding] right now. Mostly because I don't know anything about flowers so I'm getting a lot of ideas with seeing everything. I

have no idea what the flowers are called . . . I'm using a wedding planner up in Minneapolis, and what they do is they take my Pinterest board and narrow it down into like a cohesive like package, and they'll do their own like Pinterest board for me.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Beth:** With the narrowed down ideas and same thing with the floral lady [the florist she hired]—she uses my planner's board to then plans the flowers. And then she'll look at all of my inspiration boards and whatever.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Beth:** So what I'm trying to do right now is like generally before you get engaged, everybody has their like "wedding board," and it's full of just a bunch of junk. And so I've been trying to like put it into different categories on Pinterest now and like go through all of the thousands of pins I had pinned over the years. And like narrow it down into actual ideas that I want.

**Interviewer:** That's really interesting . . . I'm finding that a lot of people are saying what you're saying in a sense. They're pinning mass amounts of stuff before they get engaged, or even after they're engaged, and then it really helps them to narrow down and filter out to what they really want.

**Beth:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** So, you're doing that, but then your wedding planner is really doing that for you?

**Beth:** Yeah, I mean I think when I um got engaged I had a couple thousand wedding pins, and just like a general bucket—and now I have one that's specifically "Mrs. Cooper." "Like this is what I want at my wedding—this is like the vibe that I want at my wedding"—and then I narrowed that one down and like re-pinned the specific lighting aspects and flower aspects into a separate board.

**Interviewer:** Okay. So you probably started out with like several thousand pins that you've . . .

**Beth:** Yeah, and I keep narrowing it down and then they'll [wedding planner] look at all of that and kind of see what I can do and what I can't do in my budget.

**Interviewer:** Okay. So your wedding planner is really using your Pinterest to help you?

**Beth:** Yeah.

Ten of my participants referenced Pinterest as a tool that helped them to filter ideas into board(s) that represented the final choices to be implemented for the wedding day (again, this links to the theme of pinning for implementation discussed in the previous chapter). Therefore, I argue that Pinterest can function as a filtering tool that helps aspiring brides construct cohesive wedding boards featuring their final aesthetic preferences.

Additionally, numerous interviewees talked about Pinterest as an easy-to-use image-sharing device. The next section examines Pinterest as a visualization tool that enables users to digitally and physically share ideas with relative ease.

### **“A Photo Album of Planning:” The Visual Power of Pinterest**

As a wedding planning tool, Pinterest appealed to Christy because it provided her with a way to visually collect and sort through ideas.

**Christy:** Visual is very appealing . . . very rarely do you see like shoddy photos or like Polaroids. These are like beautifully edited in just the right angle. And you get the whole idea, and it just elicits a feeling, it elicits an idea, it elicits like we're gonna do this, so I definitely think the visual piece is huge. I'm someone, for example, who I can have an idea and I don't need a visual. But my mom is someone that really likes to see it. So I might say “mom, I want a sweater that has a spider hanging down off a string,” and she'll be like “okay, find me a picture and I can do it for you.” So that was really helpful I think for her and I to collaborate . . . my mom helped me do everything.

The wedding planning process was a joint endeavor between Christy and her mom. Christy explained that providing her mom with visual examples gathered through Pinterest was very helpful.

**Christy:** Because when I would describe something, it didn't necessarily always translate as much as if . . . I could show her a picture and even my mom would then take those pictures and we would go to the site [wedding venue] and we would measure, and then she would draw out an exact diagram. I mean like very visual.

Moreover, Christy shared Pinterest images with her florist and caterer to visually communicate what she wanted for the wedding day.

**Christy:** I showed my florist several pictures. I said “this is what I'm looking for, this flower, this idea, this kind of messiness, I don't want these perfect.” Like absolutely, I gave her several photos, I would say at least seven.

**Interviewer:** Directly from Pinterest and then?

**Christy:** Directly from Pinterest and then gave her even notes based on what it was I liked about each one.

**Interviewer:** Okay. So that sounds like it's like a really big appeal, the fact that you can easily take your phone, hold it up and show someone, and you can send them the pin.

**Christy:** I showed it via my phone, I printed it, I even emailed it with my florist alone. I did those three things.

Like Christy, Trisha and Beth (excerpts below) also commented on the handiness of being able to pull up their Pinterest board (e.g., on a smart phone) and physically show a family member, friend, or wedding vendor what they were referring to specifically.

**Trisha:** [We said to] the person that was doing the flower arrangements, “here, here’s what we’re thinking.” So she sort of knew the themes I was looking at and my thought process. And to have it there when I was talking with Andy, my husband, about “you know well this is something we need to think about.” And just to be able to show them [pins] to him . . . I had done all of the prep work and he just had to point at something and say “that’s what I want.”

**Interviewer:** Okay, and you would actually pull up your Pinterest and show him the stuff and then he would. . . {Trisha jumps in}

**Trisha:** Yeah. To the point that we would have it on my phone {jumps to next topic}. . . his dad built us our ceremony arch and I just pulled up the picture and I was like “I want it to look like that” and he’s like “can you send me that?” So I sent him the picture so that then off of the Pinterest post, he could build the ceremony arch.

**Interviewer:** Okay, so that was a convenient tool for you to use to show people?

**Trisha:** Yeah, it was really simple.

Beth used the examples of a “twig chandelier” and “barefoot sandals” that she was trying to explain to her mom. Without being able to pull up Pinterest and show her the visual images, Beth said her mom would have had no idea what she was referring to. Andrea expressed similar sentiments in that Pinterest helped her to more authoritatively communicate the ideas she wanted to implement for the wedding, and that they were in fact achievable.

**Andrea:** I’ve also been a little bit more confident in being able to tell people like “no, that’s not what I want.” My sister is seven years older than me, and she’s my only sister, and we have three brothers. She’s a control freak. She likes to kind of give her opinion a lot on everything and she always wants to kind of force that at me. So I’ve been able to use Pinterest to kind of say like “this is what I want, and look this is a thing, this is not difficult, this is something that we can totally accomplish.” And, I don’t care what you want [her sister] . . . I guess it’s kind of helped me be a little more confident in what I want to be as a bride and what I want for the wedding itself.

**Interviewer:** . . . would you say that it’s like in part because Pinterest lets you actually visualize what it is you’re thinking about?

**Andrea:** Yeah. I do think that that’s a big part of it. . . . I will have an idea in my head of what I see it being.

**Interviewer:** Mhmm.

**Andrea:** To be able to visualize that, to have an image to show that this exists, this is a thing, and this is how we can accomplish it. Or this is me not being able to use my words all the time, here's an image for you to look at it. This is what I want.

Earlier, I explained the theme of Pinterest as a filtering mechanism. In part, this may be due to the ease with which users can sort through images side-by-side to narrow pins down to the final choice. In talking with Laurie about how she would have planned the wedding without using Pinterest, she shared the following:

**Laurie:** I probably would have ended up needing to print a lot of things. I probably would have had a lot of scrapbooks or a corkboard or something like that so that I could look and shop and compare my options that way. Because I'm a fairly visual person, so being able to look at things side-by-side, even if I'm just comparing, is really helpful for me. So I think it would probably have been hard copy had I not had Pinterest. And I think it would have honestly been a little bit harder. . . . the thing that Pinterest made the easiest for me was being able to compare side-by-side things that were in our price range. . . . I would use a lot of discount sites and those kinds of things. It was really easy to save it all in one place. So I think we may have ended up spending more money and I don't think that I would have gotten as many of the results that I wanted as I did.

**Interviewer:** Okay, that is really helpful to know. So, when you say comparing things side-by-side, do you mean actually having the pin in front of you, having your board open with a couple different pins . . . would you go and click through to the actual site with the information or would you use it based on the pin?

**Laurie:** So, I would usually use it based on the pin, because what I would pin was the photo of the thing, and then the price and then kind of my thoughts about it. So, I could literally just scroll through the page and use that as a comparison tool or method.

**Interviewer:** Okay, so you really like the visual aspect of it being able to see all that stuff in front of you and kind of cross things off as you go?

**Laurie:** Yeah. Yeah.

Schiele and Hughes (2013) conducted 10 interviews with Pinterest users, netnography, and participant observation to understand "possession rituals of digital consumers." As mentioned earlier, the notion of ownership comes into play as users collect images for their personal boards. Some users do, in fact, feel a sense of ownership over the pin, making it a digital possession. Schiele and Hughes (2013) report that participants in their study "actively re-contextualized the images they collected, situated them in a larger collection and gave them new

meanings and significance” (p. 48). I argue that my participants engaged in this same process through creating pin boards and appropriating content for their own wedding needs.

**Interviewer:** What is the most appealing aspect of Pinterest and its capabilities to organize your wedding topics? Why is that appealing?

**Dawn:** Like you were saying with the visual. I mean, you’re seeing—it’s just picture, picture, picture—it’s a photo album of planning. . . . I’m able to look through everything and have it all right there at my fingertips on you know, a large thumb nail effectively that will link me to the information. Instead of mindlessly bookmarking through, I mean that’s the place to do it, I mean you would just bookmark things online and you’d have to search back through and it was a pain. This [Pinterest], this is fantastic. . . . you can organize it that way and people have it organized better than I do. I only have one wedding board, and then I think an engagement photo board. Some people go like ceremony and reception and this and that, but it’s nice too because with that visual aspect you can make sure that everything is cohesive.

Julie Davies, a researcher from the United Kingdom who studies language and literacy within digital realms, explored image-sharing on Flickr. Though on Flickr it is more common for users to upload original photographs (compared to Pinterest, where users primarily engage in re-sharing non-original images), it is worthwhile to present a parallel between Davies’ (2007) findings, and my own. She states:

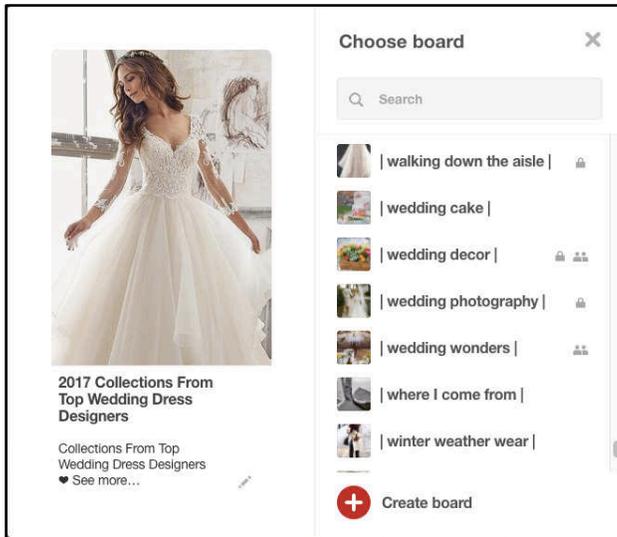
online images can accrue cumulative meanings from digital contexts. The process of uploading images to specific Web spaces and thus recontextualising them invests original artefacts with new meanings, transforming the original narrative or experience from whence they came, into new shared experiences, ones which develop meanings as a result of participation and collaboration (pp. 561-562).

In the above excerpt, Dawn refers to Pinterest as a “photo album of planning” and stresses the value of the visual. Based on this statement, it seems that for Dawn, text is not always of great importance. As the forthcoming section demonstrates, it seems that the visual component of the pin is more meaningful to users than text associated with it (i.e., the pin caption).

### ***Pin Captioning: A Picture is not Always Worth a Thousand Words***

To gain a sense of how users may interact with the medium, I asked interviewees to talk about how they utilized (or chose not to utilize) affordances of the platform. In part, I was interested in learning whether my participants re-wrote descriptions for images before pinning to their own boards. To clarify—when a user decides to “re-pin” a given image (on Pinterest this involves selecting the “save” button), she will be given the opportunity to delete the caption previously attached to the image she is about to pin to her board. Figure 18 provides a visual example of what this looks like. For instance, the wording “Collections From Top Wedding Dress Designers” is what appears when the “save” button is selected. At this stage, a user can select the board to which she wants to save the image, and enter a personalized caption if she so desires. For example, the user might write something about a particular dress that she likes or dislikes, so that she can recall why this pin was saved.

When I started using Pinterest, I often took the time to re-write each pin as I felt compelled to record why I saved the image and to keep my boards as organized as possible. Generally, I would write only a few words explaining why I liked the image and possibly how I might implement it in my future. Relatively early in my use of Pinterest, however, I stopped doing this and deleted all text from the pin caption. I entered a few spaces (i.e., hit the space bar



**Figure 18:** Example of the user prompt for saving a pin on Pinterest  
 [taken from my personal Pinterest feed: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/564075922063536008/>]

on my keyboard several times) within the caption box so that Pinterest accepted the caption as containing text (a requirement to save a pin). Thus, I shifted to saving most of my pins with no text (thinking back, this might have been five or six months into my use of the site).

Within a year of using Pinterest, I began to simply re-pin my images and left the caption as I found it (i.e., I made no changes to the text description attached to the pin when I selected it for one of my pin boards). I likely decided it was too time-consuming to re-write captions and rather pointless to delete them all-together. I learned that many of my participants exercised the same practice—they generally do not alter the pin caption before saving to their boards.

The majority of my interviewees explained that they do not take the time to re-write pin descriptions because the image alone is enough of a reminder for why it was saved. Specifically, 12 interviewees shared that they generally do not re-write a pin caption. Rather, the caption is transferred to the user’s board containing the same caption the previous pinner used. “Laziness” was cited as the primary reason for not re-writing pin captions. Consider the statement below from my interview with Sam, a 25-year-old merchandising assistant living in Duluth, Minnesota:

**Interviewer:** When you're using Pinterest, do you generally re-write the pin description or do you just pin it and leave the description as you found it?

**Sam:** Yup.

**Interviewer:** Leave it?

**Sam:** Yup, that's too much work.

**Interviewer:** Do you ever re-write anything?

**Sam:** I used to when it [Pinterest] first came out. Or half the time, when I'd pin my own stuff, cuz I used to pin my own stuff quite a bit and ah you had to fill it out. And I'd just put a space because you know the space works and you don't have to write anything. I don't know, too time consuming. I have more important stuff to do.

In the above excerpt, Sam makes reference to “pinning her own stuff.” Here, she is referring to taking images from outside Pinterest (e.g., a blog or commercial website) and saving to her own Pinterest boards. Interestingly, this example resonates with my own experience described earlier (I too used the space bar technique and eventually decided it was most time-effective to leave captions the way I found them).

It seems that early on in one's Pinterest “journey,” a user might be inclined to write her own pin captions because doing so puts a personal stamp on the image, possibly making it feel a bit more curated. Nonetheless, my findings (again, based solely on conversations with 20 white, heteronormative, cis gender, middle to upper-middle class women) illustrate that as users realize the time involved in re-writing pin captions, originality and customization take a backseat. The excerpt below from my conversation with Chelsey sheds light on this idea:

**Interviewer:** When you use Pinterest, do you ever re-write a pin description?

**Christy:** I used to, when I first started using it. It's funny you ask that, I don't like capital letters, so I would change everything to be something I wanted it to say and in all lowercase. And I gave that up a long time ago, years ago, when I realized like this is just way more effort than I'm willing to put in. So now I just save it, and whatever it says I don't even think I read it. Where before I think I used to be intentional with it. Like “oh, this is more collected.” Or if I wanted to remember what I liked in it, I may have changed it, like “oh the ribbon, like oh ribbon versus like the whole bouquet.” But otherwise no, in recent years I would not put any thought into it beyond just visually looking at it.

**Interviewer:** Okay. So if there's something about the picture where you're like “oh I need to remember this one specific thing,” you'll write, but otherwise you just leave it?

**Christy:** Yes. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** And is it enough for you to just see the picture where you're thinking “okay, I know exactly what I was doing with that?”

**Christy:** At this point I feel like I just know what it was that I liked and my style is distinct enough, that I felt like when I would see it again, I would know why it was that I saved it.

**Interviewer:** So that goes back to the visual power of Pinterest—it's enough to see the picture?

**Christy:** Yup.

Andrea provided a detailed answer regarding why she does not re-write the majority of pin captions. Generally, she only re-writes a caption if it is obnoxious or irrelevant to her needs. This same rationale was shared by several other interviewees (Trisha, Abby, and Beth).

**Interviewer:** .you said you don't re-write any descriptions unless they're like irrelevant to you or kind of obnoxiously written . . . ?

**Andrea:** Yeah. Definitely-I used to. . . . I don't want people thinking that I wrote this. And now it's kind of like I realize I don't look at it most of the time when people pin things. I don't look at what they're writing. So people probably aren't looking at what I'm writing.

**Interviewer:** So, is it just the image for you that's of importance and you can look back at any image and think “okay, I know why I pinned this and I know what context I was going use it in?” Would you say?

**Andrea:** Yeah. Probably. Majority of the time, yeah. . . . I mean, and I think the other way that I can keep it as just the image and “oh I know why I pinned this” is I have different boards. I have so many different boards. So, running stuff I put into a goals thing because my goal was to run a marathon, so I put it in there. Wedding stuff, that's why I have so many different boards because it becomes a cluster of obnoxiousness and I have the different boards . . . like the hair and makeup, and I have the secret one which is a dress one, which Ben knows about, he's seen it, so it's not actually secret. But yeah, I mean that kind of helps out that makes it a little bit easier where I can [refer to] just to the image itself. And if I'm using it for something besides the image, if I actually want to read the article and there's tips in it, most of the time those pins conveniently enough have that written in the description. So then I can refer to that description and I know, “oh okay, well there's an article that goes along with this and that's why I pinned it.”

Abby explained that she generally only invested time in re-writing captions if she needed to remember something specific about the image. For example, if she pinned a dress she liked from David's Bridal (a popular dress retailer), she might write something like “Dress #712,” so that she would have the style number on hand if she needed it down the road.

Similarly, Beth noted that she re-wrote captions if she knew the pin would be viewed by individuals involved in her wedding (e.g., wedding planner, florist, caterer). In reference to the board for her florist:

I have to describe what I actually like about the picture. . . . because usually it's a picture of an entire table setting with the lighting, with a whole bunch of different aspects. So I have to actually describe what I am talking about, not just pin a general picture. Cuz they're not gonna be able to tell like "okay, well does she like the setting, the place setting, or does she like the chandelier?" They can't tell.

Beth shared that she never re-writes pin captions for private boards (i.e., those not shared with her wedding vendors), and cited "laziness" as her reason why. ". . . I feel like if I'm looking at it, and it's for me, I'm gonna remember why I liked it," she said.

Lastly, Dawn explained that she engaged in minor editing to pin captions on her food-oriented boards. For instance, she has four boards devoted entirely to food ("Soups and Salads," "Morning Munchies," "Favorite Recipes," and "The Sweetest Things"). For pins on these boards, she added a green checkmark in the caption for recipes she has made (see Figure 19 for a visual representation). ". . . I go through and I'll put little green checkmarks before the description. I don't really change the description. I also delete the ones that I've made that were bad . . ." For Dawn, adding the green checkmark serves an organizational purpose—it serves as an easy reminder of whether she needs to try a recipe pinned to her multiple food boards.

What does this tell us about Pinterest as a visualization tool? It may be that Pinterest users prefer to spend little time customizing the pin beyond the act of picking its board. Selection of the appropriate board may be more valuable to a user than writing her own description for the pin. Among the women I spoke with, it appears that the words featured in pin captions do not carry a great deal of meaning. Instead, it is the image alone that contains value. Based on my findings, pinning an image to a specific board carries with it enough meaning that a description



**Figure 19:** Example of pin caption featuring a green checkmark from Dawn’s “The Sweetest Things” board

of the pin and/or why it was saved is not necessary. Most interviewees who reported not changing pin captions said that the image alone served as a solid reminder of why it was saved in the first place.

### **Structuration Theory Applied to Theme 3: The Power of Pinterest: Escaping, Dreaming, and Visualizing**

Drawing on research from Radway (1983, 1984) as well as Levine (2015), this chapter promoted the idea that although the women I interviewed may be using Pinterest in a way that perpetuates gender stereotypes (i.e., domination as well as legitimation), they may also experience control, or agency, through such use. In describing the “contradictory nature of feminized popular culture” (which includes Pinterest), Levine (2015) importantly notes that “all popular culture” is ‘a site of struggle over power’ (p. 3). Once again connecting this notion to structuration theory, Giddens (1984) claimed that “Structure is ‘always both constraining and enabling’” (p. 25, as cited in Dixon, Correa, Straubhaar, Covarrubias, Graber, Spence & Rojas, 2016, p. 993). This statement lends support to arguments put forth by Radway (1983, 1984),

Baumgardner and Richards (2001), and Levine (2015), which simply put, recognize the complexities associated with consuming popular culture media. Explained another way, by using Pinterest, women are both constrained (i.e., by consuming and producing stereotypically feminine content) *and* enabled (i.e., by engaging in meaning-making through the appropriation of such content). Remember that their user-controlled activities can also ultimately influence structure, according to Giddens (1984). In the forthcoming section, I further explore this idea using structuration theory as a theoretical backdrop.

“Giddens’ structuration theory (1984) helps establish that even as individuals have the agency to pursue their desires, social structures can influence their behaviors and the way they think about objects such as technology” (Dixon et al., 2016, p. 993). As this chapter demonstrated, Pinterest is a digital tool or “resource” (Giddens, 1984) that provides users with the opportunity to escape, dream, and visualize. Thinking about Pinterest in this way, I turn to Giddens’ notion of domination (or power). “All institutions operate [under] rules and structures that enable and constrain individual’s actions. The structure is not ‘external’ to individuals but instantiated in social practice” (Hardaker & Singh, 2011, p. 228).

In Giddens’ view, Pinterest can be considered an institution (or technological structure) in which participants are required to abide by the rules. For instance, on Pinterest, user action is controlled to an extent – in order to participate in the environment as intended by its designers, one must save an image to a board he/she freely creates (i.e., board title and content saved to it is up to the user). Such structural conditions can be viewed as constraints in that participants physically may not be able to use the platform in a different way (i.e., alter or bypass the requirements of the interface).

Further, if the pins being saved relate to hegemonic notions of femininity (e.g., homemaking, wedding planning, and/or appearance), it may appear, at least on the surface, that women who use Pinterest for gathering information about such topics are being controlled or constrained. That is to say, those who have criticized Pinterest (see Jones, 2016; Odell, 2012; Pynchon, 2012; and Sandler, 2012) might argue that women who use the site in this way are being ‘duped’ (Radway, 1984; Levine, 2015). By consuming and producing on Pinterest, users are contributing to the perpetuation of stereotypical gender roles, which using Giddens’ (1984) approach, would link to notions of domination and legitimation.

To clarify this idea: the consumption and production of Pinterest content that can be considered stereotypically feminine, the activity is in some ways presented as a social norm (i.e., using Pinterest to plan one’s wedding [as well as other life planning]) has been ‘naturalized’ into Western culture. Thus, using Pinterest in this way, arguably, is an accepted social practice (i.e., legitimation). At the same time, using Pinterest in such a way may contribute to the maintenance of the patriarchal structure of our society. In other words, the continual production of feminized content on Pinterest helps to reinforce or perpetuate the patriarchal—and hegemonic—structure our society operates in relation to (i.e., domination, or formal rules).

While notions of domination (power or control) and legitimation (social rules and/or norms) are certainly present in how the participants in the present study used Pinterest, so too are notions of agency and signification (i.e., meaning-making). Through interviewing 20 women who used Pinterest in a way that can be viewed as stereotypical (i.e., to wedding plan), I was able to gain an understanding of what this use ‘means’ (or signifies) on a deeper level. Through listening to and interpreting firsthand accounts from my participants, I learned that user control also played a role in how the site was used. Although users are ‘controlled’ (at least to a certain

extent) regarding how they can physically use (or manipulate) the Pinterest interface, the site grants certain affordances (i.e., it enables) as well. For instance, a user can appropriate a pin how she chooses. Meaning that, she can save the pin to a board she herself selects (i.e., this is not determined by Pinterest) and she can choose if and how she will caption the pin (i.e., she can write her own description for it). Additionally, the platform provides users with a way to visually organize their content. Consider this statement from Dawn:

**Interviewer:** What is the most appealing aspect of Pinterest and its capabilities to organize your wedding topics? Why is that appealing?

**Dawn:** . . . I mean, you're seeing – it's just picture picture picture – it's a photo album of planning. . . . I'm able to look through everything and have it all right there at my fingertips on you know, a large thumb nail effectively that will link me to the information. Instead of mindlessly bookmarking through, I mean that's the place to do it, I mean you would just bookmark things online and you'd have to search back through and it was a pain. This [Pinterest], this is fantastic. . . . you can organize it that way, and people have it organized better than I do. I only have one wedding board, and then I think an engagement photo board. Some people go like ceremony and reception and this and that, but it's nice too because with that visual aspect you can make sure that everything is cohesive.

The above excerpt helps to illustrate the fact that a Pinterest user can visually organize her boards in the way she finds most useful. Further, I talked about this idea, which arguably links to the notion of user control, with Trisha as well:

**Interviewer:** . . . So Pinterest can be considered a place where you can digitally collect meaningful information. And it kind of gives you a chance to collect things . . . [in a structured fashion] . . . so you could have a whole board devoted to veils or to your table-settings or something like that. Do you think you would collect digital things in a different way if Pinterest didn't exist? For a wedding, for example.

**Trisha:** Yeah I'm trying to think how I would do that. I think I would still want to do things digitally, but I think it'd be a lot more complicated. You'd have to like, oh I guess probably I'd end up with an InDesign document for the images I pull of the Internet or something. But I think that one of the things, I didn't mention this before, one of the things I think is really useful about Pinterest is you find an image you liked, and you'd pin it to the board, and then you'd want to see more images or you'd want to understand where that came from so you could go back to the source. And going back to the source then led to a bunch of other things – like that's really interesting. So I think that if I had had to do it a different way, you would have lost that sort of reverse engineering aspect of Pinterest.

**Interviewer:** Did you find that by going back to the source and getting additional information, like gave you more ideas and like sparked new stuff for you?

**Trisha:** Yeah, like you know, you'd look at a veil and be like well that's really cool and then you'd go back to the page that it came from and it was just like an entire web post about different veils. Instead there were 20 to choose from instead of just one. Or you'd end up at someone's wedding blog and you'd see all of the photos from that person's wedding, instead of just the one that they had chosen, so you got a better sense of the aesthetic and the DIY things they were doing or whatever.

**Interviewer:** Okay, so you would still prefer to collect and store that information in a digital way, but you would just have to come up with some other method?

**Trisha:** Something much more clunky I'm sure.

In the above statement, Trisha touches on some of the technological affordances of using Pinterest. Hayes, Carr, and Wohn (2016) explored meaning-making in social media platforms by examining what they refer to as paralinguistic digital affordances (PDA). They define PDA as “cues in social media that facilitate communication and interaction without specific language associated with their messages” and claim that engaging in PDAs constitutes one of the most frequent behaviors within social media environments (pp. 172-173). Further, Hayes et al. (2016) explain that the value of a social medium and its affordances appear to be “idiosyncratic” per platform. “...the meaning and motivations behind use of a technological affordance may, too, be idiosyncratic, as users may utilize similar affordances to achieve different goals or communicate different intended meaning across various services” (pp. 173-174). The idea that users experience different meaning and have various motivations behind why they use a site, in this case Pinterest, connects with the above excerpts from Dawn and Trisha, as well as those shared by several other participants.

For example, Trisha talks about what can be thought of as a ‘snowball effect’ of using Pinterest, where finding one image can lead a user down an unknown path (e.g., to a newfound pinner’s board, or a blog or website outside of the Pinterest domain). The ‘snowball effect’ in some ways connects to this chapter’s central theme of ‘escaping’ via Pinterest wherein users

often experience a detachment from their corporeal world as they are transported into a digital world where everything else temporarily disappears. In other words, navigating Pinterest allows users to end up in ‘newfound territory’ (i.e., on blogs or websites outside of the site itself), which may contribute to its appeal (as indicated by Trisha). Lila discussed the same idea, calling it a “rabbit hole:” “I could get on there [Pinterest], find one thing I like, keep going over and over and over again” (i.e., find more pins or linking to additional content outside of Pinterest). Generally speaking, my interviewees referred to the ‘escape’ or ‘rabbit hole’ aspects of using Pinterest in a positive sense, discussing the appeal of mindlessly scrolling through inspirational and visually pleasing images (which arguably, can be considered a form of PDA as described by Hayes et al. (2016). The below statement from Dawn (presented earlier in this chapter as well) also connects to this idea:

It’s [Pinterest] totally chill, like the outside world sort of drops away and you’re in this sort of fantasy world of Pinterest where everything is perfect and lovely and you think you can do whatever, make whatever, it’s really lovely.

This ability to find new ideas—whether for fantastical or reality-driven purposes—may also link to research presented by Levine (2015). In describing the general premise of her book, *Pinterest, Cupcakes and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, she states: “In multiple instances, these chapters discover audience and user pleasures in women’s connections to other women and in culturally specific representations that indicate cracks in the hegemonic veneer of popular culture” (Levine, 2015, p. 7).

Connecting this idea to the present study, I believe we can consider the criticism of Pinterest for perpetuating stereotypical gender roles, and even more extremely, “killing feminism,” (Odell, 2012), as what Levine (2015) refers to as “cracks in the hegemonic veneer of popular culture” (p. 7). Through talking with 20 women who used Pinterest for wedding

planning and other purposes, it became clear to me that using this medium allowed them not only to temporarily “escape” the pressures of everyday life, but also exercise creativity (arguably a form of user control) and plan for the future (wedding-oriented and otherwise). For instance, Danica described her Pinterest use as a calming form of relaxation: “After a long day . . . it’s like my creative side likes to zone out and pin stuff.” In comparing Pinterest to other social media platforms, Dawn stated:

It’s [Pinterest] such a positive lovely shiny world. You know? Um Facebook is so brutally negative and then Instagram can get this horrible jealous undertone to it sometimes, for me. Yeah, Pinterest is a world where you can go and do something and you can DIY it, you can cook it, you can make it, and everything looks beautiful and lovely and yeah. It’s a world where anything is possible.

Though Pinterest may have been created with more of a social nature in mind (i.e., an environment wherein users connect over shared interests through following fellow pinners and commenting on pins), it seems that user pleasure is more commonly found through connecting with the self (as opposed to others). In other words, through using Pinterest, women are able to connect with other women over shared content (which is often criticized for its stereotypical nature), but the connection may not span beyond re-pinning an image pinned by a fellow user (i.e., digital social bonding does not take place).

Hayes et al. (2016) used Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST) to explore PDAs within social media. Originally proposed by DeSanctis and Poole (1994), AST takes into account “...the mutual influence of technology and social processes, noting the recursive relationship of the technology (and its use or lack of use) and the social processes involving the technology” (p. 175). Further, Hayes et al. (2016) explain that AST takes the position that a group can “appropriate the spirit of a technology” either “faithfully” or “ironically.”

In faithful appropriation, the group (both in structure and in social processes) follows the spirit of the technology, using it as intended by the developer(s). In ironic appropriation, the group uses a technology in a way that violates its intended spirit (p. 175).

In relation to the present study, it seems as though both faithful and ironic appropriation may have been present regarding the general way in which my participants described their Pinterest use. In further describing ironic appropriation, Hayes et al. (2016) note:

...users could ascribe additional meaning to PDAs beyond their faithful structures and adopt PDAs ironically as a means of ascribing meaning beyond the post's content, potentially including to indicate meaning toward the poster, the context, or even signal the PDA provider's own identity (p. 175).

For instance, earlier in this chapter I discussed a theme titled "Inspiration to Implementation: The Evolution of Wedding Pin Boards." In short, this theme focuses on the idea that Pinterest enables users to filter through mass amounts of content to create a final cohesive package (i.e., a pin board) that reflects their ultimate aesthetic choices for the wedding. Essentially, the ability to sift through and gather pins for one's personal board(s) (i.e., inspiration) and make final choices for the wedding day (i.e., implement) can be viewed as an affordance of the technology (as well as an example of agency). In this process, however, an aspiring bride may be engaging in an ironic form of appropriation if she is adapting her Pinterest use (i.e., how she utilizes her boards as a digital tool to filter content) to meet her own "communicative goals" (Hayes et al., 2016, p. 175). Stated another way, by communicating solely with herself (as opposed to socializing with others through the platform) about the ultimate vision she is constructing for her wedding day (through pinning), is she engaging in faithful or ironic appropriation, or both?

To close, I turn to a statement from Jensen (1995) wherein he draws on structuration theory in a way I believe helps to explain the cases I have shared in this chapter:

Mass media serve as both authoritative resources, circulating meanings that legitimate particular forms of conduct, and allocative resources, producing economic value like other means of production. Equally, media production and reception are subject to specific rules of interpretation and conduct (Jensen, 1995, p. 38).

In stating that “mass media circulate meanings that legitimate particular forms of conduct,” Jensen recognizes that a platform like Pinterest generates content that contributes to the perpetuation of women fulfilling stereotypical roles such as homemaking and wedding planning. Further, in noting that “media production and reception are subject to rules of interpretation,” I believe Jensen touches on one of the central ideas presented in this chapter. The women I interviewed described the individual ways in which they use Pinterest – which are shaped by structural dimensions of domination, signification, and legitimation. Through using Pinterest, women produce and consume content that lends support to the current patriarchal model Western society operates in relation to (i.e., domination). Nonetheless, participation in this environment also facilitates signification and legitimation, wherein women can respond to constraints imposed by patriarchal and economic structures in personally meaningful ways. As has been, and will continue to be demonstrated in the final discussion chapter, using Pinterest as a wedding planning tool is a cultural activity wherein users can experience control and determination.

The forthcoming chapter is my final “theme” chapter wherein I explore Pinterest as an “Ideology of Personal Confidence.” In short, this chapter examines Pinterest as a platform that can facilitate feminine empowerment, using theories of repowered feminism and cyberfeminism as lenses for my analysis.

## CHAPTER 7: PINTEREST AS AN “IDEOLOGY OF PERSONAL CONFIDENCE”

Women’s use of and contributions to the Internet have long been debated, devalued, and criticized (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Bratich & Brush, 2011; Levine, 2015; Throsby & Hodges, 2009; Tekobbe, 2013). In earlier chapters, I identified numerous academic and non-academic writers who criticize Pinterest because of its consumption-oriented nature and popularization of retrograde content. While such claims may be valid in some respects, it is crucial to more fully investigate these claims by talking, firsthand, with women who use Pinterest as a form of “technologically mediated leisure” (Parry & Light, 2014).

Referred to by Levine (2015) as “pioneers” and “trailblazers,” some of the earliest foundational scholarship concerning “feminized popular culture” (p. 3) came from female researchers<sup>4</sup> who did not automatically denounce forms of popular culture women engaged with.

Instead of wholly condemning these popular forms as duping women and girls into patriarchal passivity, these scholars identified what made these cultural experiences pleasurable and compelling. They sought to understand the social and political contexts within which feminized audiences gravitated to such texts, and sometimes turned to those audiences themselves to give voice to this brand of feminine cultural experience (Levine, 2015, p. 3).

Pinterest, as a contemporary form of feminized popular culture, has been criticized for promoting tight gender boundaries (Pynchon, 2012), teaching women to care more about the way their bed looks than what goes on in it (Sandler, 2012), and encouraging women to work a “third shift” that centers on perfecting the appearance of their home and themselves (ultimately prompting material consumption) (Jones, 2016). It can be argued that Pinterest has been

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<sup>4</sup> As cited in Levine (2015), this foundational scholarship includes: Tania Modleski’s *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-produced Fantasies for Women*, Ien Ang’s *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, Angela McRobbie’s *Feminism and Youth Culture: From Jackie to Just Seventeen*, Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Culture*, and Jacqueline Bobo’s *Black Women as Cultural Readers*.

ridiculed in the same way as earlier forms of feminized popular culture—for helping to perpetuate stereotypical gender roles, and more broadly, patriarchy.

Inspired by the work of the pioneers and trailblazers Levine (2015) refers to, the present study seeks to illustrate that women who use Pinterest are not necessarily being “duped.” In fact, some of the women I interviewed expressed frustration with the idea that using Pinterest, a “cultural product” (Levine, 2015, p. 3) that has been stereotyped as being for women, has also been referred to as anti-feminist and disempowering. As this chapter indicates, using Pinterest may instead be a form of feminine empowerment.

[T]his earlier generation of work understood feminized cultural forms as sites of hegemonic negotiation between the demands of patriarchy and the needs and desires of women. Such work validated the significance of frequently delegitimized cultural products while seeking to understand how they may have at once reinforced patriarchy and opened the door to feminist empowerment. In the contradictory nature of feminized popular culture, such work discovered, was a crystallization of that which makes all popular culture a site of struggle over power (Levine, 2015, p. 3).

The statement above speaks to the overarching question behind this study: Does using Pinterest for wedding planning extend the traditional feminine role of wedding preparation? Or, does Pinterest offer an avenue to push back against this traditional gender role to find voice and control?

From a critical-cultural perspective, using Pinterest as a tool to assist with wedding planning works against women in two ways: not only are they using a platform that has been stereotyped as being for the “wedding-obsessed” woman (Tekobbe, 2013), they are also performing a role that traditionally has been fulfilled by women (Boden, 2003; Sniezek, 2005; Blakely, 2008; Engstrom, 2008; Ingraham, 1999; 2008; McKenzie & Davies 2010). This chapter provides some indications that some women who use Pinterest as a wedding planning tool

(among other reasons) may in fact feel empowered and not as though they are being duped and/or anti-feminist.

That said, returning to the above statement from Levine (2015)—findings presented in this chapter help to validate Pinterest as a cultural product that may also reinforce patriarchy (p. 3). As Levine (2015) importantly points out, all popular culture is a “site of struggle over power” (p. 3). Thus, I return yet again to a question previously posed—do women who use Pinterest as a wedding planning tool (and sometimes as a form of leisure) experience a level of control in their interactions within this platform? Or, do they find the experience to be deterministic (or a mixture of both control and determinism)? It becomes complicated, if not impossible, to determine whether women who use Pinterest are striving for “consummate perfection” (Jones, 2016)—the deterministic side of the argument—or if they are engaging in “free play,” that is, pinning for fun without a specific goal in mind (Iser, 1993)—the control-based (i.e., agentive) side of the argument.

Statements like the one below, a paragraph from Lauren Sandler’s 2012 story titled, “No Sex, Please—We’re Domestic Goddesses” add to the complexity of this question:

Today, “lifestyle” is something to be curated online instead of indulged; not a lifestyle so much as the pixelated tyranny of the domestic goddess. Once-oppressive female chores are now framed as a dopamine delivery system; a bed exists to be dressed, rather than to be undressed upon. And “pinning” as it relates to fantasy has a new meaning entirely: Pinterest, the social network where a world of objects and paint colors gather together in an infinite web of self-aggregation, which boasts 15.4 million female users a month. Designer floor pillows (pinned!) are good only for the semi-ironic pleasure of playing vintage board games (pinned!) and Instagrammed for public admiration (and re-pinning!). Such are the thousands of sites aimed at women that devote themselves to the “yummy” and the “covetable,” featuring endless baking tips and décor “inspiration,” which, these days, apparently a lifestyle makes.

The above is a paragraph published in 2012 in a story on *The Cut*, a website produced by *New York Magazine* that describes itself as a publication that “explores a modern woman’s world

with intelligence, sophistication, and humor” as well as “sharp commentary.” Keeping this in mind, there appears to be plenty of purposeful sarcasm and sting interjected in Sandler’s writing. Nonetheless, it can be viewed as rather harsh and/or limiting in that she generalizes “curators of domesticity on Pinterest, Tumblr, and thousands of female-driven blogs” as living in a “sexless aspirational world” (stated earlier in the story) (n.p.). Further, she argues that today, women gravitate to sites like Pinterest to virtually curate a dream life instead of create one in the physical sense. This argument may shed light on why Pinterest has been critiqued as a place for women to fantasize. As this chapter will demonstrate, however, daydreaming or fantasizing via Pinterest may not necessarily be a “bad thing” or a “good thing,” but perhaps something more complex in between. A pin board might start out as more of a “someday in the future” collection, and eventually actualize in the pinner’s reality as pinning can motivate women to achieve the goals they set (Andersen, 2013). The forthcoming section features several interview excerpts that showcase why at least some women view using Pinterest as empowering rather than constraining.

Because this chapter examines women’s use of Pinterest from a third-wave feminist perspective, I will provide a brief explanation of each wave (first, second and third). Doing so helps us to better understand the user-controlled behavior argument I make throughout forthcoming chapters, as well as provides some background information about different eras of this movement. Though it has become commonplace to refer to the different phases of feminism as “waves,” Coleman (2009), referencing Bailey (1997), notes that the wave metaphor, is viewed by some as problematic as it “denotes some sort of succession” (p. 5). For instance, the second wave of feminism was named a “wave” to stress the “continuity with earlier feminist activities and ideas” (Coleman, 2009, p. 5).

However, the term “wave” does not accurately reflect how at least some feminists view the development between the different phases. For instance, some third-wave feminists view this era as “a distinct and deliberate break with the agendas and priorities of second wave feminism” (Coleman, 2009, p. 5). In other words, using the term “wave” implies that the different phases of feminism have been continuous, building upon one another, which is not entirely correct. Nonetheless, because this term is recognized in most feminist literature, I continue to use the term “wave” when referring to the different eras within this study.

#### *First-wave feminism (1848-1950s)*

The first wave of feminism is marked by political action, namely the women’s suffrage movement and the eventual right to vote. This first wave of feminism is often thought to have begun in 1848 when the first women’s rights convention took place in Seneca Falls New York (Covington, 2015). Additionally, this wave is noteworthy because the work of women during this time period “helped change the perception of women from voiceless dependents to independent thinkers with a valid voice in shaping the country” (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004). Nonetheless, women during this era were most often limited to ‘women’s work,’ which included a few paid jobs like secretary, librarian, nurse, and schoolteacher. “The doors to professional success and reproductive control had yet to be blown open” (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004).

#### *Second-wave feminism (1960s-1980s)*

The second wave of feminism is associated with social movement (Covington, 2015). Rowe-Finkbeiner (2004) refers to this era as “Our Mothers’ Fight,” noting its focus on “women’s independence from and equality with men” (p. 25). Activists including Gloria Steinem and Betty

Freidan advocated for equality in the workplace, access to reproductive health care and sexuality information, and civil rights legislation (Rowe-Finkbeiner, p. 26, 2004). Additionally, this wave campaigned for equal pay for equal work, legal abortions, and the end of discrimination in schools and lending (among other initiatives) (Rowe-Finkbeiner, p. 26, 2004). It is important to note that this wave was criticized for concentrating primarily on the needs of middle to upper class white women and leaving the “voices, and many of the issues, of women of color and lower-income women” out of the discussion. “As a movement, the second wave generally focused on specific goals relating to women’s issues, and by and large didn’t demonstrate fluidity in looking at other issues of social hierarchy (race, class, nationality, sexual orientation) through a feminist lens (Rowe-Finkbeiner, p. 26, 2004).

#### *Third-wave feminism (late 1980s/early 90s-present)*

Finally, the third-wave of feminism has been referred to as the “individual movement” (Covington, 2015). According to Covington, the 1980s experienced a “second feminist backlash” with this decade calling itself “post-feminist” (n.p.). Rowe-Finkbeiner (2004), offers a concise yet powerful statement that helps to explain why this wave is often associated with the individual—“A new culture of open-mindedness is emerging in the third-wave: there are many ways to be a woman” (p. 31). Covington (2015) expands on how this wave came to be:

The daughters of the second-wavers built their own wave as more of a reaction against the second wave than a cohesive movement of its own. Third-wavers were eager to dissociate from what they viewed as their mothers’ botched legacy. They decided to take back feminism, to redefine it. However, unlike the first and second waves, third-wave feminism never found a cohesive structure. It was deconstructionist in nature. Every woman could redefine feminism in her own way. Instead of a political or a social movement, this new feminism was individual (n.p.).

As I attempt to illustrate in this chapter and others, it appears that many of the women I interviewed (20 women who identified as white, heteronormative, cis gender and as middle to upper-middle class), support a central tenet of third-wave feminism: that there is more than one way to be a woman (Snyder, 2008, p. 185). Some of the excerpts featured in this chapter provide indications that today's digitally-driven contemporary world, a woman can identify as feminist, or at least endorse feminist goals, and still enjoy wearing makeup and using Pinterest (i.e., such activities do not disqualify her from participating in the feminist movement). The forthcoming section expands on this important notion.

Before moving forward, however, it is important to note that I recognize that third-wave feminism is a contested concept and one that cannot necessarily be defined as 'correct' or 'incorrect' given its broad scope and various meanings across feminist philosophy (Snyder, 2008). For instance, in trying to describe third-wave feminism, Jennifer Baumgardner (a third-wave feminist writer and activist) was quoted saying:

This insistence on definitions is really frustrating because feminism gets backed into a corner. People keep insisting on defining and defining and defining and making a smaller and smaller definition—and it's just lazy thinking on their part. Feminism is something individual to each feminist (Strauss 2000, as cited in Snyder, 2008, p. 177).

This quote helps to further demonstrate the complexity of this concept as well as make clear that what it means to be a feminist varies per individual. Third-wave feminism, however, is not a flawless, all-encompassing approach to interpreting women and their experiences. For instance, Snyder (2008) notes that third-wavers often "overstate their distinctiveness while showing little knowledge of their own history," which has resulted in criticism from second-wave feminists (p. 181).

For example, Snyder (2008) refers to Astrid Henry's (2004) book titled *Not My Mother's Sister* wherein she makes the argument that...

third-wave feminism can be viewed as the rebellion of young women against their mothers and as their desire to have a feminism of their own, even though their political agenda – when they have one – remains quite similar to that of their mothers (pp. 181-182).

Moreover, it is important to point out that third-wave feminism (alongside first and second-wave feminism) was often shaped by a white, middle-class bias (Snyder, 2008, p. 181). In describing how third-wave feminism was influenced by such bias, Snyder (2008) refers to *The BUST Guide to the New Girl Order* (a special publication from 1999 containing essays and select magazine feature articles from the magazine *Bust*), quoting a statement from the book: “our own Girl Culture—that shared set of female experiences that includes Barbies and blowjobs, sexism and shoplifting, *Vogue* and vaginas” (Karp and Stoller 1999, xv, as cited in Snyder, 2008, p. 181).

Snyder (2008) draws attention to the fact that “memories of playing with Barbie and reading *Vogue* probably resonate more with white girls than with others” (p. 181). Moreover, she points out that the authors of *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (explained more fully in the forthcoming section) “based their analysis on conversations with their friends who resided in New York City and held careers in the media (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000, p. 22, as cited in Snyder, 2008, p. 181). In other words, *Manifesta*, a book that described ‘girl power’ in contemporary American society using third-wave feminist thinking, was written by two white and educated women who drew at least some of their conclusions from a limited, and possibly biased, sample (i.e., privileged individuals).

As Snyder (2008) puts it “Thus, solipsism can affect even those with the best intentions” (p. 181). Relating this to the present study, I believe it is worthwhile to note that I am aware of

the fact that some of the early third-wave feminist thinkers were white, privileged women. Nonetheless, despite criticisms that surround this wave of feminism, I draw from two third-wave feminist theories in forthcoming chapters to more fully explain the phenomenon of using Pinterest as one's primary wedding planning tool. Specifically, I focus on repowered feminism (Foss and Foss, 2009) and cyber feminism (Plant, 1996; see also Luckman, 1999) as I believe they offer a helpful theoretical backdrop for exploring the phenomenon of wedding planning via Pinterest.

### **“Damn I Feel Good with my Oxblood Lip-liner:” Pinterest as an Ideology of Personal Confidence**

In 2000, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards published a book titled *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*. Broadly speaking, Baumgardner and Richards both have careers that focus on contemporary feminist writing and activism. In *Manifesta*, they begin by offering the following message for their readers:

To feminists everywhere—including those of our generation who say, “I’m not a feminist, but...” and others who say, “I am a feminist, but...”—with the faith that young women will transform the world in ways we haven’t yet imagined (n.p.).

In short, I interpret this message as an indication that women (at the time *Manifesta* was published) were hesitant to fully identify as feminist, or willing to identify as such, but with some caveat. Although more than a decade has passed since the time Baumgardner and Richards shared this message, I noticed a similar sentiment in some interviews when the topic of feminism came up. Specifically, this seemed to surface when talking with participants about their use of Pinterest and whether the platform contributes to the perpetuation of stereotypical gender roles. For instance, several participants identified as feminist (without any “buts”), while others proclaimed that they support feminist goals, but do not identify as one.

What does this tell us about the current state of feminism? Why are some women still hesitant to identify as feminist and/or at least associate with this movement? Is it problematic that we are still debating about whether using Pinterest, wearing makeup, and/or finding pleasure in domesticity is considered anti-feminist? This section features excerpts that provide insight into such questions from participants who identified as feminist and those who did not.

In nearly every interview conducted, I questioned each participant about whether her pinning activities (i.e., beyond wedding-oriented pins) perpetuated stereotypical gender roles. The most common response I received to this question was a short pause (to me, indicating the participant was pondering the question), most often followed by the participant laughing and saying “yes.” In asking interviewees to think about this it appeared to me, that it was not a concept they would have considered had I not brought it to their attention.

Although determining whether my interviewees identified as feminist was not a goal of my interviews, such knowledge was revealed during some of our conversations. Oftentimes dialogue concerning feminism unfolded when talking with participants about their individual pinning habits, as well as Pinterest on a broader scale and whether it, as a form of popular culture, could perpetuate stereotypical gender roles. Consider this conversation with Dawn:

**Interviewer:** Would you say your own pinning really fits into that stereotypical female activity?

**Dawn:** Yeah. It does. And I feel really girly and domestic when I do it, which is sort of the antithesis of how I try to live my life.

**Interviewer:** Mhmm.

**Dawn:** I’m into makeup, which is probably the girliest thing about me . . . but other than that, it really becomes, I become this sort of, if I want to throw out stereotypes it becomes this sort of housewife thing that I do when I’m reading these cooking blogs and these things. . . . there’s a little bit of guilt associated with it. But it’s so damn fun.

**Interviewer:** . . . that concept of guilt, do you know why it is that you feel a sense of guilt if you are looking at the stereotypical stuff?

**Dawn:** Because that’s not how I would act in real life. I mean . . . I pride myself on being a relatively independent chick. You know I front a band in our male-dominated sort of world and I take care of myself and so I’ve always thought I sort of stood out and I

imagine you know, I know people who choose to live their life in a very opposite sort of way where they got married straight out of high school and have lots of kids and they're housewives and they sit and I can imagine them just Pinteresting all day. Cuz they do . . . these extreme people I'm thinking about. They have a blog and they pin all day . . . they're pinning about their meal prepping. Like they do the freezer meal thing and it's certainly going on in my head, so then when I'm sitting and doing it I'm like that "oh that freezer meal thing sounds really interesting," which is totally unfounded cuz maybe it's a really good idea and I'm trying to live in this niche of "Oh I'm too cool for Pinterest." But really I'm not {laughs}.

When Dawn says "there's a little bit of guilt associated with it. But it's so damn fun," in regard to pinning "girly" content, what does this say about the current state of feminism? Is it problematic that she attaches the feeling of guilt to consuming content related to cooking or her appearance? Could it be that Dawn's statement highlights a tension between second and third-wave feminism? For instance, second-wave feminists may claim that Dawn should associate guilt with looking at stereotypical content and enjoying it—to do so might be viewed as an indication that she's submitting to patriarchal expectations.

Baumgardner and Richards (2000) address this tension in *Manifesta*, stating that second-wave feminists will not acknowledge feminism unless it matches the version they created. Diane Elam, a feminist writer and former professor of critical and cultural theory, created terms for this idea: the "Dutiful Daughter Complex," or the "Blind Obedience Syndrome" (as referenced in Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p. 224).

This phenomenon is explained by Elam in an essay titled "Sisters are Doing it to Themselves." Though lengthy, I believe it is worthwhile to include her explanation in full because it speaks to a central idea this study seeks to address. That is, does the tension between second and third-wave feminism—which is exemplified in Dawn's statement of feeling guilty for "doing this housewife thing" or feeling "girly and domestic" when she uses Pinterest—

indicate a need to reevaluate the current and approved “brand of feminism” (Elam, 1997) we are using (that is, if one exists)?

The problem manifests itself when senior feminists insist that junior feminists be good daughters, defending the same kind of feminism their mothers advocated. Questions and criticism are allowed, but only if they proceed from the approved brand of feminism. Daughters are not allowed to invent new ways of thinking and doing feminism for themselves; feminists’ politics should take the same shape that it has always assumed. New agendas are regarded at best with suspicion on the part of seniors, at worst with outright hostility. Daughters are regularly sacrificed if they step out of line (Elam, 1997 as cited in Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p. 224).

Although the above was written in 1997, and strides toward the creation of a new “brand of feminism” have been made (as Levine [2015] makes clear), it still holds relevance today. As will be illustrated, several of the women I interviewed expressed frustration with the idea that feminism needs not include Mason jar crafting, wedding dreaming, or meal planning via Pinterest (Odell, 2012; Sandler, 2012; Jones, 2016). While it may in fact be “junior feminists” (i.e., those of a younger generation) making the claim that Pinterest stands in the way of feminist advancement, I consider this an indication that we need to re-address what it means to be a feminist living in today’s digitally-driven world.

As my discussion with Dawn continued, it led to me ask if she identifies as a feminist, to which she responded “yes.” Eventually, I read Dawn an excerpt (featured below) from Amy Odell’s (2012) *Buzzfeed* article titled “How Pinterest is Killing Feminism: This isn’t where the Internet was supposed to take us”<sup>5</sup>.

Pinterest—which drives more traffic to marthastewart.com and marthastewartweddings.com than Facebook and Twitter combined—has become impossible to ignore, even as critics deride it as “the Mormon housewife’s image bookmarking service of choice.” But it’s much more than a collection of pretty pictures. In fact, the site seems like one big user-curated women’s magazine—from the pre-internet era. Sites like Jezebel were created as an antidote to women’s print magazines, which are rife with diet, fitness and dressing tips. The internet has for many years now

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<sup>5</sup> This excerpt was read to a handful of participants if a conversation developed around feminism and Pinterest use during the interview.

been thought of as a place where women can find smarter, meatier reads just for them. Instead, there's Pinterest: heavy on recipes (diet and otherwise), inspirational quotes, exercise tips, and aspirational clothes and homes. Kitchen porn, cupcake porn, bracelet porn — any kind of eye candy you can think of is probably on Pinterest, waiting for the next Pinner to covet it enough to re-pin it. People don't go to Pinterest for articles, they go there to scrapbook every imaginable physical aspect of their dream lives, right down to the Mason jar candle holders you really hope to get around to DIY-ing for your next cocktail party (Odell, 2012, n.p.)

After reading aloud the above excerpt to Dawn (and asking if she would like anything repeated given its wordiness and lengthiness), I asked her to share her initial thoughts.

**Dawn:** I love that, and I agree.

**Interviewer:** I was curious if you think a woman choosing to look at those things and use them and execute it in a way that she feels powerful through, is it negative?

**Dawn:** I think you have to go farther back than that. I think you can't say it's because of the fact that she's using Pinterest makes it, you know, and she feels powerful through using Pinterest. I think you have to go farther back to the life situation and how she got where she is. Why is she the one Pinteresting all the recipes? Why isn't her husband looking up recipes for things? And why is you know, why is she doing this amount of planning for such and such, and why is she in the situation where women have to stay home and be the caretaker. . . . it's sad that that role isn't reversed more, but then again if you are in that situation where you're staying home and you're making the meals, well that's a damn good way to find out meals to make.

In the above excerpt, it appears that Dawn is arguing that a stay-at-home mom in charge of making meals for her family is well-served to use Pinterest because it can be a helpful way to search for and collect recipes. Levine (2015) reinforces this idea in drawing attention to the multiple pressures women often face in today's society—a balance of career, personal and family relationships, as well as maintenance of a physically attractive appearance (p. 8). According to Levine (2015), feminized popular culture (e.g., Pinterest) can sometimes support fulfillment of the aforementioned roles, or “labors,” as she refers to them (p. 8).

Additionally, research concerning women's use of the Canadian social networking site *Momstown.ca* provides another example of how feminized popular culture can assist women in meeting the demands of motherhood. Valtchanov, Parry, Glover, and Mulcahy (2016)

interviewed 22 members of the *Momstown* community to uncover several themes that lend support to Levine's (2015) argument, as well as my own findings. These authors explain that collectively, the themes from their study "reveal how technology changes mothers' interactivity within private and public spheres, enabling mothers to both reinforce and resist ideologies of motherhood in new ways" (p.57). Similarly, Parry, Glover, and Mulcahy (2013) found that participation in *Momstown* can lead to "momances" ("deep platonic friendships among mothers") as well as community building. Participants reported experiencing "care, camaraderie, and felt connected, not isolated and alone" through using this platform (p. 23). Thus, these findings offer additional support to the idea that feminized popular culture can assist women in carrying out their differing forms of "labor."

Therefore, based on present and past findings, I argue that Pinterest operates as a form of feminized popular culture that can aid women in meeting personal, professional, and/or family-oriented goals. This provides a segue to the next topic—does using Pinterest to search for a vegan dinner recipe, the latest trends in fashion and beauty, or a color scheme for a bathroom remodel, qualify as anti-feminist? This is a question that needs further examination given the stereotypes (identified earlier) that surround Pinterest, ultimately contributing to tension among the different strands of feminism (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Shugart, 2001).

### **"Sometimes I Like Mason Jar Crafts:" Third-Wave Feminism and Pinterest**

Because the present study examines women's use of Pinterest from a third-wave feminist perspective, it is important to provide some additional background about what this wave of the movement entails. Baumgardner and Richards (2000) explain that young women of the early 1990s who were rejecting the "established" feminist movement (i.e., shaped by the first and

second waves) were not only rebelling; they were maturing and starting to take charge of “their lives and their feminism” (p. 130).

Third-wave feminism was also influenced by popular culture (Shugart, Waggoner, & O’Brien Hallstein, 2001; Coleman, 2009). Baumgardner and Richards (2000) use the term “Girlie” as an identifier for this strand of feminism:

We, and others, call this intersection of culture and feminism “Girlie.” Girlie says we’re not broken, that our desires aren’t simply booby traps set by the patriarchy. Girlie encompasses the tabooed symbols of women’s feminine enculturation—Barbie dolls, makeup, fashion magazines, high heels—and says using them isn’t shorthand for “we’ve been duped.” Using makeup isn’t a sign of our sway to the marketplace and the male gaze; it can be sexy, campy, ironic, or simply decorating ourselves without the loaded issues (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p. 136).

This description of “Girlie” feminism very much aligns with my argument. Pinterest, also a form of popular culture critiqued for perpetuating women’s so-called infatuation with all things considered stereotypically feminine, may simply provide a digital escape for women to leisurely peruse topics of personal interest. In other words, Pinterest is not merely a digital “booby trap set by the patriarchy” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p. 136).

Moreover, in 2001, Helene A. Shugart, a Professor of Communication at the University of Utah, wrote an essay about the intersection between third-wave feminism and Generation X. Importantly, her description of third-wave feminists links to the above statement that women who enjoy makeup and women’s magazines are not necessarily cultural dupes who have been victimized by patriarchy.

[T]he third wave is simply premised upon the assumption that the time of social revolution is past and the compulsive reification of those roles—of women as oppressed, men as the oppressors—is unnecessary and even harmful, serving to constrain women rather than inspire them to action (Shugart, 2001, p. 133).

Although Pinterest may present content that glorifies stereotypically feminine roles, which can be viewed as disadvantageous to the feminist movement at large, it may be more harmful to

criticize women for using the platform. To do so supports a very narrow definition of feminism, possibly deterring women away from the movement and/or making them hesitant to identify as feminist.

Nonetheless, women's consumption of and production in digital environments like Pinterest continues to be referred to (by some) as anti-feminist or at least detrimental to women's advancement (Jones, 2016; Odell, 2016; Pynchon, 2012; Sandler, 2012). Further, the argument that women who participate in such environments are being "duped" (Radway, 1984; Baumgardner & Richards, 2000) continues to hold. As I attempt to illustrate in this section, some of the interviewees I spoke with had strong opinions about what it means to be a feminist who enjoys wearing makeup and uses Pinterest as a tool to find the latest trends. As the excerpts presented here demonstrate, my findings are supported by Baumgardner and Richard's (2000) claim that to be a feminist, a woman does not have to reject reading magazines, wearing makeup, or using Pinterest.

The excerpt below is a continuation of my conversation with Dawn (featured above) wherein she responded to my reading of the statement (featured earlier in this chapter) from Odell's (2012) article titled "How Pinterest is Killing Feminism."

**Interviewer:** In your own personal life, if you are pinning makeup or hair or recipes or whatever it might be, do you feel that that makes you any less feminist or any less empowered?

**Dawn:** No, cuz I think makeup and fashion and how you hold yourself, I mean, I find that to be a very powerfully feminine thing. . . . certainly to its limits. I mean who you're doing it for, but I'm pretty damn secure with what I am and what I do and you know I wear my makeup and hair this way because I like it this way, and I'm pretty certain the guy that I was dating when I dyed my hair blue didn't want me to do it. But that's why I'm not marrying him. {laughs} . . . I'm doing it cuz "damn I feel good with my oxblood lip-liner...you know?" You know how it is when you get dressed up, it's for you. And I think that's an enormously feminist way to think about it. . . . people who do the whole "you're wearing too much makeup and you're dressed this way." I'll dress however damn how I want to and I'll wear however much or however little makeup that I want to.

**Interviewer:** Mhmm.

**Dawn:** You know, that's more of an ideology of personal confidence I think. And then you can use Pinterest however you want. I really sound hypocritical when I'm saying that. But no, I personally feel like I'm looking up stuff because I feel good about it, I want to, it makes me feel good, it makes me feel empowered. So that's why I'm saying I'm being a hypocrite because that could make such and such person feel overly empowered because that's her choice.

Dawn's phrase "an ideology of personal confidence" is a powerful one. It highlights that Dawn feels empowered in how she uses Pinterest as well as engages in what can be considered stereotypically feminine activities (i.e., wearing making, dressing a certain way). Though she does not explicitly identify as a third-wave feminist, I argue that she fits into this wave as her statement above aligns closely with the following description of third-wave feminist empowerment:

Empowerment takes on a different meaning in this new feminism in other ways, as well—not in collective terms, as with the second wave, but in very individualistic terms. Being empowered in the third-wave sense is about feeling good about oneself and having the power to make choices, regardless of what those choices are. Vigorous assertion of one's individuality, then, is highly prized by third wavers, such that an "in-your-face," confrontational attitude also can be described as a hallmark of the third wave (p. 195).

Dawn's statement, "I'm looking up stuff because I feel good about it, I want to, it makes me feel good, it makes me feel empowered," also helps to situate her as a third-wave feminist. In addition, statements such as these connect with the repowered feminism concept (Foss & Foss, 2009) expanded on in a later chapter. Repowered feminism views women as having the power to make their own choices—even if such choices contradict earlier waves of feminism. According to Elizabeth Wurtzel, author of *Prozac Nation: Young and Depressed in America*, "These days putting out one's pretty power, one's pussy power, one's sexual energy for popular consumption no longer makes you a bimbo. It makes you smart." (Wurtzel, 1997, as cited in Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p. 141).

Connecting these ideas to recent media coverage, Emma Watson, a young female celebrity who proudly identifies as a feminist, received backlash for posing in *Vanity Fair* wearing a risqué top. She was criticized for being a hypocrite “for doing the very thing she says women are expected to do” (Saltz, 2017). The following statement, however, helps to further frame an overarching question I pose in this chapter—what does this tell us about the current state of feminism? Is Emma Watson standing in the way of feminist goals by posing nearly topless in a popular consumer magazine?

Watson is different. She is among many women who have freely chosen to display their physical attributes as part of their overall package. That Watson might choose to show her body because it pleases her or it accentuates her image as an actress, model, and fashion icon, is her right as a woman, just as it is a right for male actors and models to do the same. It is a choice she has made and does not negate her position as a feminist who believes in equal rights (Saltz, 2017, n.p.).

As Saltz (2017) highlights in the above statement, third-wave feminism is individualistic in nature—a woman should be free to adorn (or not adorn) her body as she pleases. Further, Watson’s photo exemplifies the bold and sometimes self-exploitive nature that is associated with this wave (Shugart et al., 2001; Wurtzel, 1997; Coleman, 2009). Returning now to the overarching question this study addresses—does using Pinterest to look at ‘feminine’ content (wedding-oriented and otherwise) allow a woman to enact an “ideology of personal confidence,” or more broadly, user-controlled behavior reflective of the aforementioned descriptions of third-wave feminism?

Interestingly, Andrea offered sentiments that closely align with those shared by Dawn. During my interview with Andrea, I read the same excerpt from Odell (2012) and asked for her to share an initial impression:

**Andrea:** I definitely think Pinterest is playing into the traditional female media a lot, but I also have a real issue with the idea of “as a feminist you have to reject that kind of stuff.” I think that you find a way to use it to empower you, and you find a way to utilize

it in your own [way] . . . just because I watch beauty videos on YouTube doesn't mean that I'm not looking for female empowerment in any way or like I'm trying to keep women within that role of we should only care about our looks. I'm a big advocate for like [women] . . . I wear makeup because I like being able to change how my face looks, not because I care what somebody else thinks I look like. Like obviously me having matte or dewy skin is not going to change who I am as a female or where I want females to go. And Jake's not going to notice the difference between me using chartreuse on my eyelids or some other color of green. He doesn't care, that doesn't make me any more or less attractive to him.

**Interviewer:** Mhmm.

**Andrea:** There's this video [on YouTube] that's going around that's like "I wear glitter on my eyelids cuz I'm awesome as fuck," not because you know I want some guy to think that "oh her eyelids are shiny and sparkly, that interests me."

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Andrea:** I have a real issue with critiquing stuff like Pinterest because it can be an outlet for people for other things. It doesn't necessarily have to be perpetuating the same gender roles we've been stuck in for a while. Which I think it does to an extent. I think it's definitely guilty of it, I don't think it's free of that. But I also think to blame one website for us going back on all of the progress we've made as women, you're gonna find that so many other places on the internet in such a worse way than you will on Pinterest. So, I think Pinterest is a good mindless thing to do for anybody. Like, there are guys that I know that use it for food and for cooking. My friend Kyle, who is not a feminist, which is annoying, he openly rejects that whole idea. And we talk about that all the time. He likes to hype up his masculinity a lot, but he's on Pinterest. And he uses it for recipes. It's what you make of it. I think my biggest thing is "yeah, I use it and I perpetuate stereotypes about women on there and I question myself about it, but I'm not going to stop using a website or an app completely because it puts me in a position where I'm choosing to perpetuate those things.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. Yeah.

With the above excerpts in mind, I believe it is worthwhile to break away from interview dialogue for a brief discussion of prior research about audience-oriented critique, as I believe Andrea's statement "I have a real issue with critiquing stuff like Pinterest because it can be an outlet for people for other things," very much connects to an important argument within this strand of communication research.

At the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned Levine's (2015) use of the terms "trailblazers" and "pioneers" as she points to some of the earlier researchers who sought to understand what women who use popular culture do with it (i.e., how meaning may be created)

rather than what it might do to them. Also relevant is research from Klaus Bruhn Jensen, a professor in the Department of Media, Cognition, and Communication at the University of Copenhagen, who wrote about these ideas in his article titled *When Is Meaning? Communication Theory, Pragmatism, and Mass Media Reception* (1990). The quote below helps to situate how I have approached studying Pinterest as a wedding planning tool. That is to say, my goal was to understand (among other topics) how the 20 women I interviewed appropriated meaning as they navigated the “complex social event” (Radway, 1984) of planning their wedding through using Pinterest—a feminized form of popular culture (Levine, 2015).

Audiences may, to a significant degree, modify or oppose the specific meanings that appear to be proffered by mass media, and may, furthermore, appropriate those meanings for alternative ends as they engage in a questioning and reconstruction of social reality (Jensen, 1990, p. 4).

This quote lends support to the value of investigating a media form like Pinterest from an audience research perspective. I turn now to Janice Radway’s audience-oriented research on romance novels as her work served as an exemplar for modeling the present study. Radway’s exploration of how women used romance novels can be extrapolated to fit with the present study, as I too am exploring how women use a popular culture text.

### **Audience-Oriented Criticism in the Context of a Popular Culture Text: Romance Novels**

Radway’s (1983, 1984) work serves as a solid exemplar for understanding audience-oriented critique, a strand of cultural studies research. Additionally, her work helps to illustrate the value of using this approach when attempting to understand the effects of a mass medium, such as Pinterest. During the 1980s, many women in Western society became incredibly interested in reading romance novels. Harlequin Enterprises (a Canadian publisher of romance

novels) sold 168 million romances worldwide in 1979 alone (Radway, 1983, p. 53). Radway has written extensively about this phenomenon using audience/reader-oriented criticism. Those who have interpreted these texts maintain that the narratives sustain “patriarchal attitudes and structures” (Radway, 1983, p. 53). Radway, however, believes that the interpreters (i.e., scholars) of these novels failed to consider the context of romance novel reading and thus neglected to consider reader agency and reasoning.

[T]hey fail to detect the ways in which the activity may serve positive functions even as the novels celebrate patriarchal institutions. Consequently, they also fail to understand that some contemporary romances actually attempt to reconcile changing attitudes about gender behavior with more traditional sexual arrangements (Radway, 1983, p. 54).

The above quote speaks directly to why using an audience/reader approach to understand how and why women engage with popular culture media texts is not only important, but necessary if one hopes to develop an accurate and thorough understanding of a given media phenomenon.

Radway (1983, 1984) makes a strong argument as to why unveiling the true uses and gratifications (as told by the romance reader herself) of engaging with romance novels is critical if one wants to provide an authentic account. “The particular weakness of these interpretations as explanations of reading behavior can be traced to the fact that they focus only on the texts in isolation” (Radway, 1983, p. 54). Meaning, they lack empirical evidence provided by the readers themselves. She highlights the fact that trying to generalize that all readers will understand a text in the same way is problematic, and emphasizes the need to acknowledge that readers approach a text from varying perspectives (p. 54). In other words, it is inaccurate to assume that all readers will produce the same meaning from reading a romance novel considering the diverse set of identities they bring with them. Reader-theory and reader-response criticism generally recognize that “the reader is responsible for what is made of a literary text” (Radway, 1983, p. 54).

The benefit of such an approach, especially for women living in a patriarchal society, is that it gives them a voice—it allows them to tell a researcher what use of a particular text (not only romance novels) means or signifies to them. This approach enables the reader to share his/her story rather than have a “scholarly expert” make broad representations about a given text, as this can produce flawed and/or inaccurate portrayals of a media trend under investigation. To adequately analyze any given media phenomenon, for example, YouTube haul videos (Sykes & Zimmerman, 2014; Keats, 2012), Pinterest (Linder, Snodgrass & Kerne, 2014; Zarro, Hall, & Forte, 2014), Second Life (Boellstorff, 2008), or other types of vlogging communities on YouTube (Lange, 2007), a researcher(s) needs to consider what participation means for the user or reader and not only take a top-down approach.

Radway (1984) recognizes that the mass culture view is valid in some respects. However, she points out that “[T]he view is troubling because its conception of ideology and domination seems to preclude the possibility of any kind of social change or resistance from the very start” (p. 6). With this in mind, Hall (1980) is known for his contributions surrounding the encoding/decoding of media messages. Here the concept of dominant, oppositional, and negotiated readings come into play. This is important to consider in the context of how a woman might decode a romance novel (or any popular culture text).

Romance novels serve as one example of a media text that can be considered complex sites of meaning construction and exchange for users. The mass culture view assumes that women using the novels will take the preferred (or dominant) reading. Hall (1980) describes this as when the viewer “[D]ecodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded” (p. 136). Here, the reader would be accepting the “dominant-hegemonic position” as presented in the novel. As Radway (1983, 1984) illustrates, women who read romance novels are

more than passive readers who accept the dominant ideologies with which they are presented (e.g., the submissive heroine who exists to serve men). She explains that viewing the act of using a text as “ingestion” is risky “if carried too far” (pp. 6-7).

To do so is to petrify the human act of signification, to ignore the fact that comprehension is actually a process of making meaning, a process of sign production where the reader actively attributes signifiers on the basis of previously learned cultural codes (p. 7).

Radway’s stance resonates with sentiments shared by Seiter (1999) in regard to how media consumers decode texts. Seiter (1999) discusses encoding-decoding in regard to television viewing. She reinforces the notion that how individuals decipher television will be influenced by personal experiences including vocation, location, educational status, group memberships, as well as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class (p. 15). Therefore, a romance novel, television show, radio program, blog post, or Pinterest pin, for example, will be interpreted in a way that fits with the consumer’s view of the world he/she lives in, which is certainly not identical for all. Radway’s audience-oriented research helps to make this distinctly clear. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that broad, macro-level forces that influence message reception are undeniably at play (Radway, 1984; Seiter, 1999).

Keeping the audience research approach in mind, I return here to another conversation about stereotypes, feminism, and Pinterest that unfolded with Laurie:

**Interviewer:** [A]nother question—do you identify as a feminist?

**Laurie:** {sighs}—that’s a really tough question too because in a lot of ways I do, but, I would identify as a feminist in the definition of feminism. But I think a lot of feminists take it too far. And they essentially make themselves victims in a lot of ways. Which to me, goes against what feminism actually means and actually stands for. And I also think that they push for a lot of things that put women above men and I don’t think that that’s what, you know, definition of feminism is supposed to mean either. I think it’s supposed to mean equal opportunity. And equality and fair treatment. And you know, being treated as a person and not necessarily always as a woman.

**Interviewer:** When you hear some of those statements like “well it’s just women going to look at Mason jars and cupcakes and cooking and all those stereotypical things” and then when you think about the definition [her definition of feminism] and how you said

that some feminists take it too far and kind of push people away—when looking at Pinterest and some of those stereotypical things doesn't make you anti-feminist even if it's a really stereotypical topic—what do you think about that?

**Laurie:** {sighs} Again . . . I consider myself a feminist but I like makeup and sometimes I like Mason jar crafts, ya know? . . . I think that's a really narrow definition of feminism. And I don't think that it's very fair to judge someone [based on this]. I actually get kind of offended when I'm told I'm not a feminist because I like to bake, and I like to cook for my husband, and I like clothes and I like makeup. That doesn't necessarily mean that those are the only things that I think about. I think feminism is more about the relationship that I have with my husband. We are very balanced. And we are definitely partners and we support each other financially and emotionally and I think that's what feminism is more about. It's the fact that I'm an empowered woman to go out and do a good job at my job. And I feel empowered that if I get a job on the other side of the country that my husband's going to follow me. And I would follow him. I think that's what it's [feminism] supposed to be about, is equality in all relationships. It shouldn't be about the way that I dress or my hair or my makeup. And I think that's the wrong thing to focus on whether you consider yourself a feminist or not.

This final statement made by Laurie—"I think that's the wrong thing to focus on whether you consider yourself a feminist or not," sheds light on an important issue that has been referenced throughout this chapter—broadening the definition of feminism to account for the contemporary digital world we live in, where identity roles are more fluid. The excerpt below (part of my interview with Lila, a 28-year-old CPA living in Morristown, New Jersey) helps to further demonstrate the need for re-evaluating what today's "brand of feminism" (Elam, 1997) entails.

**Interviewer:** Do you identify as a feminist?

**Lila:** Ahhhh yes, but no. I would say I'm a feminist in that I support like women having equal rights . . . I'm in a career that is still largely dominated by men at the top. But, I see that there's no reason that I shouldn't be perceived as equally intelligent and equally as hard working. So for me, I support the female role in that regard.

**Interviewer:** Mmmhmm.

**Lila:** But, I don't see myself as a feminist in terms of what some people. . . you really see the articles like "ya know this is setting us back" or "this is bad." I don't see things like that. I don't think I'm overly offended by someone that might say a comment that might be seen as a gender dominated comment. I don't really care about it as much. I don't get worked up about it.

Paralleling Lila's remarks with Shugart's (2001) description of third-wave feminism, it seems fair to argue that Lila identifies within this strand. Lila's statement that feminism can carry a stigma of "this is setting us back" or "this is bad," connects with the notion that third-wave feminists do not view themselves as oppressed by patriarchy, broadly speaking.

Lastly, I want to return to my interview with Andrea, wherein she also references the stereotypical connection between Mason jars and Pinterest. The statement below helps to further illustrate how narrowly defining women's activities on Pinterest (e.g., Mason jar crafting) speaks to the longstanding tradition of dismissing women's participation in digital environments (Tekobbe, 2013; Levine, 2015).

**Andrea:** I mean it's funny. It's funny to me. I'd laugh if I read this article [Odell, 2012] because it's kind of true. But at the same [time], I think I'm self-aware enough and maybe not everybody is, so I'm a little biased in this. I know I'm never going to achieve half of the crap that I pin on there. But I don't view it necessarily as a scrapbook. Because scrapbooks are super expensive to create and also obnoxiously wasteful sometimes and probably something you'll never touch again. . . .Pinterest has that aspect to it. But it all comes back to that whole idea that it's what you make of it. . . . I have done stuff on Pinterest. I have cooked the food that I've found on Pinterest and I have altered the way that bookshelves look in my apartment because of ideas I got from Pinterest. . . . It's always the Mason jars. That's always what it comes back to on Pinterest. You see a Mason jar and you're like "oh, you must pin things on Pinterest. No, I like Mason jars and they're convenient and not expensive." Oh stereotypes!

As the excerpts above help to demonstrate, it may do more damage to think of feminism in narrow terms (i.e., a version that continues to view women as constrained, oppressed beings) as doing so can turn women away. Shugart (2001) explains that third-wave feminist philosophy focuses on the individual rather than the collective. "Rather than shouldering the burden of all women, third wavers are responsible to and for themselves, not representative of and thus beholden to generations of past, present, and future." (p. 133)

Do the excerpts provided thus far demonstrate a need to broaden the definition of feminism so that it recognizes and validates the digital activity many women engage in (not only

on Pinterest, but in other digital environments)? My interpretation of these findings leads me to answer ‘yes.’ However, I will continue to present firsthand evidence (reinforced by previous literature) to exemplify why I answer ‘yes’ to this important question.

### **Pinterest as Technologically-Mediated Leisure: “You Can also go to Work and Kick Ass”**

As stated in the previous section, there is no formula for the extent to which a given technology plays a user-controlled or deterministic role in the lives of the women who use it.

Throsby and Hodges (2009) expand on this same idea:

One of the core feminist concerns surrounding technologies is the extent to which they facilitate or obstruct feminist goals of equality and emancipation. Do they enhance women’s lives and capacities, or constrain them? There is, of course, rarely a zero-sum answer to such a question (p. 12).

In their introductory article to a special issue of *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, Throsby and Hodges (2009) discuss the vast topic of situating technology in women’s lives. They indicate that the articles presented in this special issue shed light on the capacity of select technologies to “enable, if not empower, women” (p. 12). In the spirit of this idea, I consider Pinterest as a form of “mediated leisure” (Parry & Light, 2014) that may in fact empower, not merely constrain, at least some of the women who use it. Parry and Light (2014) present the term “mediated leisure” to account for the multiple ways in which leisure behavior is enabled and impacted by various technologies (p. 51).

“Feminists argue that such technological advancements can empower and provide new opportunities for women, particularly through participation in online communities wherein women can engage in broader discussions that may be feminist-oriented” (Blair, Gajjala, and Tulley, 2009, p. 51). Nonetheless, it is also important to question the degree to which women’s

use of a new technology might contradict the broader goals of feminism. Parry and Light (2014) reinforce this: “[W]hile technology has the capacity to liberate women in their leisure consumption, it can simultaneously serve to reproduce gendered stereotypes, which may serve to invalidate the advancements of feminism” (51).

As a technological advancement, Pinterest arguably presents new opportunities (or ideas) to the women who use it (i.e., the vast number of topic categories a user can choose from on the site (e.g., “home,” “food,” “DIY,” “travel,” “shopping,” “humor”). In other words, women could explore such topics before the dawn of Pinterest, but using different media (i.e., magazines, newspapers, catalogs, books). On Pinterest, women can engage in more efficient and customized searching (as compared to a magazine) for topics of interest and digitally store meaningful information. These capabilities, in part, explain why Pinterest appeals to women (at least the 20 white, heteronormative, cis gender, middle to upper-middle class participants interviewed for this study). Levine (2015) touches on this same idea in the statement below:

While women’s magazines have long offered how-to content, and fictional narratives have long dramatized the challenges of feminine care work, the early twenty-first century is distinct in its overt attention to negotiating the multiple realms of feminized productivity. Such cultural forms strive to reconcile the ideals of conventional femininity (such as physical appearance and nurturance) with the more conventionally masculinized traits of career ambition and public prominence...” (p. 10).

The excerpt below is from my interview with Lila. During our conversation, I read her the same statement from Odell’s (2012) article. Her response lends support to Levine’s (2015) statement above (i.e., it acknowledges the multiple realms of “feminized productivity”).

Additionally, it helps to situate Pinterest as a technological advancement that can support women’s goals—even if those goals fall into a stereotypical category.

**Lila:** I have a hard time with that [Odell’s argument]. Because. . .when I think of the word feminism, it’s truly like supporting a female. Like supporting female goals. And so if my goal as a female is to become a good cook, maybe even a terrific cook, and I’m

using Pinterest to help me achieve that goal, someone might see that as fitting into a gender stereotype, but I might see that as advancing myself, because to be honest, I am a shitty cook, and I would love to be a better cook. And so to me, I would love nothing more than for someone to say “Lauren is awesome in the kitchen.” And I’m probably not going to be a stay-at-home mom, I’ve got a career that’s really demanding. So I wouldn’t say that I fit into a gender role in my current life, but then a great cook is something I actually would love to be.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Lila:** So I think it’s hard, because I think Pinterest helps people explore areas that they might not actually be that great in, but it still might be a little stereotypical. But, I mean, organization, yeah they might say like stay at home mom, cleaning the house, keeping things organized. Or just pinning for your wedding, but I feel like it is a lot more beyond that. It’s used a lot more beyond just that.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. So . . . you might be thinking like “well, who cares if it’s a traditionally feminine role if it’s something that you care about and you want to get better at, you’re not so worried about if it’s like a traditionally female thing?”

**Lila:** Yeah, I agree. I feel like sometimes we’re so focused on being feminist, that we’re almost turning our back on some of the things that are perfectly okay. You know as part of that . . . yes it might be seen as a gender stereotype, but there’s nothing wrong with wanting to cook and have an orderly home.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Lila:** You can also go to work and kick ass, but I think, maybe that article is a little too harsh in terms of what it’s. . . it’s a very selective article I think of what they’re portraying Pinterest as. They’re [the author of the article] saying probably like the wedding and the future like dollhouse.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Lila:** Rather than some of the other stuff.

Again, this excerpt speaks to the argument of user control versus determinism. If a woman wants to use Pinterest to become a better cook and she chooses to use the platform for this reason, is that user-controlled or deterministic behavior?

I also read aloud to Lila a statement from Sandler’s (2012) blog post titled “No Sex Please—We’re Domestic Goddesses” (featured earlier in this chapter) during many of my interviews. Below I present a response from Mary, a 25-year-old graduate student living in Fort Collins, Colorado, because it aligns very closely with the sentiments shared by Lila.

**Interviewer:** [read the quote] . . . So Pinterest, going back to the fact that you might say women’s pinning activities feed into stereotypical gender roles, cooking, cleaning, house presentation, all that stuff—do you think that it’s negative that Pinterest can be considered a gendered site?

**Mary:** That's a really hard question. Cuz I personally don't perceive it that way.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Mary:** I think that there's nothing wrong with wanting those things. And wanting to cook and wanting to clean and have a presentable house and have different ideas to do such. If it is part of your lifestyle, and it is something that makes you happy, and you recognize um that it is "women's work," and you're happy with that, um... Cuz it's really—it's a really hard feminist question is "are women who are happy in the kitchen actually happy?" . . . I have been running that thread and idea through my head for a long time and I feel like if that's actually, if you truly feel happy there and that's what you want, then there's nothing wrong with that.

**Interviewer:** Mhmm.

**Mary:** I think if it's not equal, and that's unhappy, then that's not okay. But I feel like Pinterest has no role in that almost because it's like well that information is out there for anyone, and the main users are women, and if they're happy doing that and they feel like "this is my role in our relationship and I'm okay with this," then that's a good thing.

The idea that using Pinterest can expose women to more than just tips on how to be a domestic goddess also came through during my interview with Beth. Consider her response after hearing the excerpt from Odell's (2012) article:

**Beth:** I kind of disagree. Just because there are a lot of quotes and stuff like that. There's a lot of blogs that you can't really find the little blogger, like the little travel bloggers that nobody's going to publish. There's a lot of intellectual stuff . . . the big tattoo on my back came from a blog. Like not the specific one I got, but that whole experience . . . who would really know that you can get a big bamboo tattoo in Thailand if it wasn't on a blog somewhere? I would have never known that they did that.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Beth:** So it's like a lot of different experiences and different cultural stuff that you can also find. I would never pick up a travel book and be like "Oh, you should really get a bamboo tattoo while you're there."

**Interviewer:** So that experience [getting the bamboo tattoo] transpired through using Pinterest?

**Beth:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Any other things that you've found or done?

**Beth:** I mean a lot of the DIY stuff is really like girly, but it's informative. I don't think it's like, it's more empowering to be able to do some of the home projects yourself than looking through *Cosmo* and seeing stupid sex tips or whatever.

Additionally, Christina had a noteworthy response to Odell's (2012) argument:

**Christina:** So I wouldn't agree with this. I think it's really interesting and I can see someone who lends towards a more feminist approach.

**Interviewer:** Mhmm.

**Christina:** Would make it that. I would lean the exact opposite way. . . .feminism to me is just not something that's a hot button. I think we all have opportunity . . . It's just it's not in my realm of reality. So I don't look at it at all that way. And again, I created the content. So if wanted to focus on things that were in the exact opposition of food and recipes and inspirational quotes and those things they're basically making fun of, well those are the things that I selected. So if anyone is then feeding into it, it's my own self. And that's my own, I mean I proudly proclaiming what it is that I want to look at on the Internet. So, this to me, is just a great way for me to actually collect the things that I want, that I would be selecting regardless. Because again, as the user, I control the content.

[ . . . ]

**Christina:** So I mean Pinterest, for someone who is a feminist, yup, it's a big problem. For someone who's not. No.

**Interviewer:** Okay, so you don't identify as a feminist?

**Christina:** No. Not at all.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Christina:** And again, the Mormon housewife, yeah I can totally see that. But again, the users select what they wanna see. So I'd love to see if someone started a brand new account what starts to show up, but for now, I'm getting what it is that I have opted to get.

Christina's response is interesting in that it arguably indicates she views feminism from more of a second-wave standpoint (I make this assumption based on her statement that she can see how a feminist would view Pinterest negatively). However, her statement also connects with third-wave feminism in that she thinks "we all [women] have opportunity." This remark situates her within a third-wave feminist standpoint (although she does not identify as one) as this philosophy does not view women as oppressed or victimized (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Shugart, 2001; Foss & Foss, 2009).

At this point, one might be wondering why all this matters? What can this tell us about the current state of feminism? This chapter illustrates that many of the women I spoke with feel empowered through using Pinterest (and more broadly reflect on Pinterest as a user-controlled form of media). Before concluding this chapter, I want to situate my findings next to a strand of third-wave feminism known as cyberfeminism. Because I view Pinterest as a digital form of

feminized popular culture, and one women may engage with for leisure, I find cyberfeminism to be a useful conceptual backdrop for further explaining my findings.

### ***Stitching, Bitching, and Pinning: Connections across Technologically-Mediated Leisure***

Third-wave feminists have been described as a “media-savvy generation” with a “penchant for personal narratives” (Coleman, 2009, p. 10). Pinterest, in some respects, allows women to build personal narratives through collecting and organizing images that correspond with different elements of their identity. In describing cyberfeminism, Luckman (1999) explains that “Cyberfeminisms are offered as a female-centered alternative to the overwhelming cultural dominance of men in regard to matters of technological agency” (p. 37). Further, she claims that “information technologies” are a key component in the everyday lives of cyberfeminists (p. 37).

Through interviewing women who use Pinterest as a wedding planning tool, I found that it plays a key role in their lives on a regular, if not daily, basis. Therefore, it seems fair to argue that Pinterest can be viewed as a domain wherein cyberfeminist activity can take place. Before further discussing this idea, it is critical to provide a definition of cyberfeminism. According to Luckman (1999), and others, this term was first coined by Sadie Plant (p. 36), a British philosopher, cultural theorist, and author.

Cyberfeminism refers to a diverse range of practices and discourses all generically identifiable by their commitment to exploring non-oppressive alternatives to existing relations of power through the manipulation of information technologies. Ideologically, cyberfeminist practices retains as a basic tenet a commitment to feminist principles of gender equality. Beyond this, there exists no singular cyberfeminism *per se*... (Luckman, 1999, p. 36).

Because cyberfeminism is a broad and complex concept, it was beyond the scope of the present study to explore it in full. However, in briefly examining this concept, I see overlap between some of its central tenets and the way in which Pinterest use has been described by my

interviewees. Therefore, I use this section to draw parallels between *Stitch 'nBitch*, a cyberfeminist information technology, and Pinterest.

Minahan and Cox (2007) explored a phenomenon known as *Stitch 'nBitch*, which is a global craft movement oriented around women gathering to “knit, stitch, and talk” (p. 5). In short, these authors describe this phenomenon as a reaction to large-scale “political, social and technological changes of the new millennium” (p. 5). These international groups are characterized as social, third place (i.e., outside of work or home), focused on craft production, with a largely female membership (p. 7). Additionally, *Stitch 'nBitch* members use technology to connect with others online, download patterns, and access other digital resources (p. 7).

Pinterest is similar to *Stitch 'nBitch* in that it is a website with a predominantly female user base, it can be considered a social environment (though I explain earlier it appeals to many due to the low expectation of social engagement), and a fair amount of its content centers on craft production (i.e., DIY creative projects). Finally, although Pinterest may not constitute a ‘third space’ in the same way as meeting *Stitch 'nBitch* members would in a pub, it can be argued that the platform at least offers women the opportunity to have alone time (wherein they are not disrupted by work or home-life distractions). As with the other forms of technologically-mediated leisure discussed earlier, *Stitch 'nBitch* provides another example of women engaging in a stereotypical activity (i.e., sewing or knitting for leisure), but gaining control, or agency, through the experience.

It is worthwhile to contrast my findings with an idea presented by Minahan and Cox (2007), who explored *Stitch 'nBitch* using a cyberfeminist perspective. These researchers explain that many of the women (who they refer to as Cybergrrrls [Everette, 2004]) who participate in *Stitch 'nBitch* were raised during the Information Age, and thus:

[T]hey may be neither trying to remedy its effects nor create a new way. . . . They may have little to resist, for they are able to move freely between home, work and third place, bringing knitting from the hearth to the pub and contacting each other via the internet in between their meetings. We suggest that theirs may be a playful, ironic comment and an unbundling/re-forming or even implosion (Baudrillard, 1993) of traditional associations and differentiations between time, place and gender rather than an earnest expression of a strongly-held desire for innovation, restoration, or resistance (p. 17).

Could it be that at least some of the women interviewed for this study are using Pinterest in the same way? Not feeling constrained by the challenges of living in a patriarchal society, but rather, pinning (sometimes as a form of leisure) as a way to more effectively manage the multiple and often overlapping roles of mother, wife, and professional?

Importantly, Minahan & Cox (2007) state: “It is proposed that the emergence of *Stitch ’nBitch* reflects a wish for more self-expression of creativity and social connection at a community level through leisure” (p. 8). While a *Stitch ’nBitch* community looks different from a Pinterest community in that members meet face-to-face and form friendships, I argue there is a lot of overlap between these experiences. Pinterest affords the opportunity for self-expression of creativity and connection (though not necessarily social in nature) through the exploration and collection of digital content often shared by complete strangers. For instance, Danica noted that she feels a sense of community when using Pinterest, but it is different than what she experiences when using Facebook or Instagram. She referred to Pinterest as a “community of ideas instead of followers,” explaining that she gravitates to different pinners because of their creative inspiration, not because she wants to connect with them socially. Similarly, Mary reinforced this same idea: “it’s not a community for me where it’s a social interaction. It’s a community of people who are generating ideas together, but we’re all anonymous. Even though you could find them or more information about that person.”

### *Pinterest as a Network of Thoughts*

Further exploring this notion of a Pinterest as a community of idea generation, I talked with my participants about whether they experienced a sense of community when using the site (in all but one of the 20 interviews). I found that 10 of the 19 women I talked with consider Pinterest to operate as a community in a non-traditional sense. In other words, they referred to community on Pinterest as distinct from the sense of community they experience on Facebook or Instagram, given Pinterest (in the way they use it) is generally not social in nature (i.e, they do not converse through commenting, etc.). Instead, the notion of Pinterest as a “community of ideas instead of followers,” very much reflects the general sentiment I gathered from talking with my participants about this subject.

It is worthwhile to parallel this finding with the argument that third-wave feminists are more focused on the self rather than the collective (Shugart, 2001). While this may be true, it appears that through the exchange of content (on an individual level), women generate a mass of information that may assist them in performing a variety of roles as well as enhance their leisure activities. For instance, García-Favaro (2016) explores the production and sharing of user-generated content by looking specifically at the publicly accessible *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* online discussion forum (active from 2006-2014). She reports that the primary participants in this platform self-identified as women and engaged with the forum to anonymously talk about a wide range of issues ranging in topic from beauty to sex to abusive relationships to favorite brands (García-Favaro, 2016, p. 353). Further, García-Favaro (2016) notes that although the forum provided pre-selected topics for users to post threads in, members more often posted to “disclose personal problems and ask for advice and support, with thread titles like “Please help! i need advice!” and “Confused and worried” (p. 353).

While the magazine was often criticized by forum users for its focus on hyper-sexualized women, narrow portrayal of beauty standards, and deep ideological contradictions, the forum users continuously referred to “the platform as an important space of advice and support” (p. 355). In 2014, *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* abruptly announced that they were closing the forums and provided no explanation as to why. García-Favaro (2016) reports that many members were incredibly upset about this, as they had formed strong bonds through using the forum (which could not be shifted to another platform that allowed for anonymity [pp. 355-356]). Connecting these findings to the present study, it is important to acknowledge that the women who used the *Cosmo* forums in this way had formed a community with which they felt comfortable sharing intimate life details—often with complete strangers (at least at first).

According to Sadie Plant, women should feel comfortable in cyberspace. After all, when you stop and think about it, the medium is more attuned to women’s way of working in the world than to men’s. Cyberspace has the potential to be egalitarian, to bring everyone into a network arrangement. It has the capacity to create community; to provide untold opportunities for communication, exchange, and keeping in touch. In other words, it is like an enhanced telephone (Spender, 1995, as cited in Luckman, 1999, p. 38).

Is Pinterest an enhanced telephone, but one that focuses on visual rather than audio?

Taking Plant’s claim that women should feel comfortable in cyberspace, and positioning it next to how women might engage with Pinterest or an online forum, it becomes evident that community can be created and relationships forged. Ultimately, this links back to the cyberfeminist goal of navigating a non-oppressive alternative to current power relations through the use of information technologies (Luckman, 1999, p. 36). Pinterest is certainly different from the *Cosmo* forum in that women are generally not disclosing intimate personal details nor conversing directly with others. Nonetheless, Pinterest users are interacting as part of a larger collective that one of my participants described as “a network of thoughts rather than a network of people.” Within this network of thoughts, however, it is the individual contributions (i.e., pins)

that make possible the vast amount of information users can select for personal use. Thus, I argue that the women interviewed for this study participate in cyberfeminist activity as they use Pinterest as a wedding and lifestyle planning tool.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

While the user control versus determinism debate may be one with a “zero-sum answer” (Throsby & Hodges, 2009, p. 12), the findings presented thus far (based solely on my interviews with 20 white, heteronormative, cis gender, middle to upper-middle class women), provide evidence for my argument that Pinterest operates as a user-controlled rather than deterministic tool. “Zero-sum” is a concept out of game theory “in which one person’s gain is equivalent to another’s loss, so the net change in wealth or benefit is zero” (Investopedia, 2017). Applying this idea to the present study, it makes sense to return to Throsby and Hodges’ (2009) statement that a central concern within feminism is the degree to which technology “facilitate or obstruct feminist goals of equality and emancipation” (p. 12), at least based upon the emergent indications evident in my research, it appears that Pinterest does not stand in the way of the broad feminist goals of equality and emancipation.

In other words, it may be an impossible feat to determine the extent to which Pinterest enables or impedes feminist goals. Nonetheless, I argue that Pinterest should be thought of more so in terms of facilitating user control, even though determinism is likely taking place on some level. On the surface, it may be easy to assume that a woman gathering meal prepping and fitness pins, for example, is doing so because of pressures associated with living in a patriarchal society. However, through deep interview questioning, I learned that some women pin content that can be

considered stereotypical because they want to—and by putting the pin into action (i.e., executing it in real life)—they may in fact feel empowered by it.

To close, I want to revisit Dawn’s phrase “an ideology of personal confidence”—expressed in regard to her use of Pinterest. In this incredibly powerful statement, Dawn acknowledges one of the central tenets of third-wave feminism—to create the world one wants to live in (Foss & Foss, 2009). For Dawn, this world is one where she embodies confidence through dying her hair blue, wearing as much or little makeup as she desires, and using Pinterest when she wants to feel inspired or even empowered. Nonetheless, I feel it is critically important to indicate that I realize Pinterest is not the end-all-be-all for women’s empowerment. While it may be a tool women can use to find voice and control (Cauldry, 2010) as well as inspiration, it is not without flaw. Coleman (2009) wisely notes:

Feminism is not simply about an individual woman choosing how she will live her life, and it is not sufficient to claim that an individual’s intention to resist and subvert dominant power structures or societal conventions equates to feminist resistance and subversion (p. 11).

In other words, by using Pinterest, a woman is unlikely to shatter the glass ceiling or change the dominant patriarchal narratives under which Western society operates. She may, however, empower herself to accomplish personal goals, which arguably, presents Pinterest as a tool of empowerment rather than disempowerment. Further, she may help other women find control (or agency) by contributing individually to a larger collective.

The sentiments presented in this chapter help to situate Pinterest as a digital tool women can use to construct versions of the self (possibly current or aspired). Whether that self aligns with stereotypically feminine roles or not may not be critically important. Perhaps of greater importance is the fact that a woman can exercise control through the act of pinning an image that connects with who she is or who she wants to be.

## **Structuration Theory Applied to Theme 4: Pinterest as an “Ideology of Personal Confidence”**

To conclude this chapter, I provide a brief overview of how I think structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) can be applied to the key theme this chapter centers on – “Pinterest as an ideology of personal confidence” – a compelling quote from Dawn, one of my participants. To further analyze this theme, I continue using structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), as it is a helpful theoretical framework to use when the goal is to more deeply explore the nuanced and complex experience of using a form of feminized popular culture (i.e., Pinterest).

First, it is important to note that I see the structural dimension of domination as patriarchy. I view patriarchy as a formal ‘rule’ contemporary Western society operates under (though not written as an official ‘code’ or ‘law’). Using a description from Hardaker and Singh (2011), domination can be understood as relating “to the use of power through the modality of facility. Facility refers to allocative resources (control over objects or materials) and authoritative resources (command over individuals) (p. 224). That said, patriarchy can be viewed as an authoritative resource in that arguably women are ‘commanded,’ at least in some respects. Nonetheless, as this chapter helps to demonstrate, the women I interviewed presented a general sentiment that they do not feel controlled or dominated by patriarchy (at least regarding their Pinterest experience and how such use manifests in their non-digital lives). Instead, I learned that many of my participants view Pinterest as an allocative resource (i.e., a digital object they can control and use in ways they find personally meaningful).

This chapter showcased how Pinterest, in some ways, can be viewed as a contemporary example of third-wave feminism in action (excerpts featured here provide firsthand accounts of this idea). Because third-wave feminism takes the position that “...third wavers are responsible to and for themselves, not representative of and thus beholden to generations of past, present, and

future” (Shugart, 2001, p. 133), it seems fair to argue that this wave can be understood using Giddens’ (1984) dimension of legitimation as a conceptual backdrop. To reiterate, legitimation is an aspect of social life where individuals respond to social structures by creating and adapting social norms. Arguably, feminism, and most recently third-wave feminism, can be viewed as a response to constraints imposed by patriarchal ideology/hegemony. If we consider the progression of the waves of feminism, leading to present day third-wave feminism, as a type of social interactive process wherein agents work(ed) together to create a version of feminism that responded to their current world, it can be argued that this is legitimation as Giddens (1984) might describe it.

Stated another way, it makes sense to use the notion of legitimation to understand the evolution of the feminist waves – the waves have been created and modified (i.e., a social process) to fit the needs and/or demands of the current period. As some of the excerpts presented in this chapter indicate, using narrow terms to define feminism (e.g. using Pinterest, wearing makeup, enjoying stereotypically feminine activities) may in fact turn some women away from the movement. Rather than viewing women as victimized, oppressed beings, third-wave feminism sees women as having power and control to create the life they want. Instead of dismissing women’s participation in digital environments, the third-wave perspective (broadly speaking—I realize not all third-wave feminists take this view) takes the position that such activities can provide opportunity for empowerment and control.

Dixon et al. (2016) explain that structuration theory identifies “a possibility for understanding the relationship of the individual to social structure that strikes a balance between understanding the power inertia of social institutions but also the possibility of individuals to enact change” (p. 993). With this statement in mind, we can view the waves of feminism as sort

of an informal social institution (i.e., the movement is not a formal law or code written into Western society). At the same time, Pinterest, as a social technology, can be understood as an environment wherein individual users can, on a very small scale, promote new or adapted social norms.

For example, Dawn's statement that Pinterest is "an ideology of personal confidence" could be considered an example of third-wave feminist thinking (i.e., an "enactment of change" [Dixon et al., 2016, p. 993] in response to the more rigid versions of feminism that preceded it). Through making this statement, Dawn is proclaiming that a woman can take pleasure in things considered stereotypically feminine (e.g., makeup, fashion, cooking) and still identify as feminist—arguably, an example of legitimation.

In describing third-wave feminism, Shugart (2001) explained that empowerment is viewed very individualistically. "Being empowered in the third-wave sense is about feeling good about oneself and having the power to make choices, regardless of what those choices are" (p. 195). Thus, the progression from a form of feminism that focused more on the collective well-being of women (i.e., the first and second waves) to the individually-focused version of the third-wave, can also be understood using Giddens' (1984) notion of agency (i.e., "the possibility of individual action" [Dixon et al., 2016, p. 993]). Drawing on third-wave feminist theory and the idea that Pinterest can be viewed as "an ideology of personal confidence," it becomes clear that pinning stereotypically feminine content is not necessarily a step in the backwards direction, as Odell (2012), Pynchon (2012), and Sandler (2012) have argued. Instead, if such activity results in users feeling empowered and "good about oneself" (Shugart, 2001, p. 195), it seems fair to argue that Pinterest provides the opportunity for user (or consumer)-based control. As several of my participants explained, motivations for and gratifications of using Pinterest included time for

self-reflection and expression, creativity, and relaxation (e.g., “a declaration of independence” (Radway, 1983, pp. 60-61)—alone time that many participants explained that they cherish). That said, I argue that user-controlled behavior (i.e., third-wave feminist thinking) and determination (i.e., societal structure of patriarchy) operate recursively within the multifaceted environment of Pinterest. Using the structural dimensions of legitimation and domination helps to further explain this dualism.

Moreover, signification comes into play here as well. Signification deals, broadly speaking, with the concept of meaning-making as it can take place through consuming and producing signs and symbols (De Saussure). Hardaker and Singh (2011) define signification as referring to “how individuals produce meanings of the structure through communication and language. Agents draw on interpretative schemes to make sense of actors own actions and actions of others” (p. 224). Applying this to the present chapter, it seems fair to argue that media like Pinterest (specifically, the signs and symbols [i.e., the visual and written texts] in such environments), have been used to create meaning about what it means to be a woman today living under the “structure” (Hardaker & Singh, 2011, p. 224) of a patriarchal society. Such meaning-making has contributed to the growth of feminism throughout the different waves, resulting in a more radical version of feminism—the third-wave (e.g., theories repowered feminism and cyberfeminism). In other words, here, we see user-controlled behavior affecting structure.

As demonstrated in Chapter 4 where I ‘mapped’ the visual process of signification that can take place within Pinterest, it becomes clear that as a form of feminized popular culture (Levine, 2015), it is an incredibly complex and nuanced phenomenon. Returning once more to another powerful statement from one of my participants, Andrea:

**Andrea:** I have a real issue with critiquing stuff like Pinterest because it can be an outlet for people for other things. It doesn't necessarily have to be perpetuating the same gender roles we've been stuck in for a while. Which I think it does to an extent. I think it's definitely guilty of it, I don't think it's free of that. But I also think to blame one website for us going back on all of the progress we've made as women, you're gonna find that so many other places on the internet in such a worse way than you will on Pinterest. So, I think Pinterest is a good mindless thing to do for anybody. . . . It's what you make of it. I think my biggest thing is "yeah, I use it and I perpetuate stereotypes about women on there and I question myself about it, but I'm not going to stop using a website or an app completely because it puts me in a position where I'm choosing to perpetuate those things.

Reiterating a key phrase from Giddens' (1984), "Structure is 'always both constraining and enabling'" (p. 25, as cited in Dixon et al., 2016, p. 993), which the above statement from Andrea illuminates. As I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this dissertation, there appears to be user control as well as determination taking place within this phenomenon, that is, a duality of structure (Giddens, 1984). Acknowledging this, perhaps the important question to address next is: how can we update our current version of feminism so that it takes into consideration the ways in which women, who use media such as Pinterest, experience and enact control within their everyday lives (even if such activities align with stereotypically feminine gender roles)?

## CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

This dissertation sought to understand the experiences of 20 women (all of whom identified as white, heteronormative, cis gender, and middle to upper-middle class) who used Pinterest as a wedding planning tool. Through in-depth interviews and analyses of several exemplary pin boards, I have started to unpack why and how these select women engage with this site, both for wedding planning and for other life planning goals. Additionally, I attempted to determine whether using Pinterest facilitates building of the self (e.g., past, present, and/or future).

Within my Methods chapter, I referenced Radway's (1984) metaphor that a cultural text like Pinterest contains "several layers of meaning that can be peeled away like the shell and skin of an almond to reveal the text's true core significance" (p. 5). I stated that my goal as a researcher was to reveal a "core significance" of Pinterest as a wedding planning tool using Ellingson's (2009) crystallization approach. Further, I committed to investigating the negative claims attached to Pinterest and to incorporate these claims into my interpretation of the wedding planning via Pinterest phenomenon. I am confident stating that I fulfilled my goal of revealing a sense of the "core significance" through carefully peeling back the "layers of meaning" surrounding this phenomenon.

I situate myself as a researcher within the constructivist paradigm, and therefore, believe that the knowledge produced from my interviews was created as a joint endeavor between my participants and myself (Clark, 2004; Guba and Lincoln, 1994). The accounts presented in this study, which were co-constructed by participants and myself, accurately portray how the users I interviewed engage with Pinterest.

By conducting 20 interviews with a limited sample of Pinterest users, I also hoped to gain an understanding about what each participant thought about the “complex social event” of pinning wherein she might “actively attribute sense to the lexical signs in a silent”—yet digitally interactive—“process carried out in the context of her ordinary life” (Radway, 1984, p. 8). Having explored themes such as the labor of wedding planning via Pinterest; digital collecting via Pinterest; escaping, dreaming and visualizing via Pinterest; and the conception of Pinterest as an “ideology of personal confidence,” I am confident that my analyses addresses the above inquiry originally put forth by Radway (1984) (extrapolated to fit with this study). Returning now to the research questions that drove this study, I briefly address each by summarizing the findings.

## Research Questions Revisited

### *Re-Defining Feminism in the Digital Age: Repowered Feminism and Cyberfeminism*

- What is the relationship between using Pinterest to plan one’s wedding and the third-wave feminism concepts of repowered feminism as well as cyberfeminism?
  - Based on the interview findings, as well as answers to the above question, do we need to re-address what it means to be a feminist in today’s digitally-driven world?

Chapter 7 provided insight into this question by exploring Pinterest as “an ideology of personal confidence”—a compelling phrase provided by my participant Dawn. Her statement connects with the larger question posed above regarding use of Pinterest to plan one’s wedding (among other uses), as with theories of third-wave feminism. Returning to my interview with Dawn helps to showcase what exactly is meant by the statement that how one uses Pinterest can be viewed as an “ideology of personal confidence” in relation to feminist thinking:

**Interviewer:** In your own personal life, if you are pinning makeup or hair or recipes or whatever it might be, do you feel that that makes you any less feminist or any less empowered?

**Dawn:** No, cuz I think makeup and fashion and how you hold yourself, I mean, I find that to be a very powerfully feminine thing. . . . certainly to its limits. I mean who you're doing it for, but I'm pretty damn secure with what I am and what I do and you know I wear my makeup and hair this way because I like it this way, and I'm pretty certain the guy that I was dating when I dyed my hair blue didn't want me to do it. But that's why I'm not marrying him. {laughs} . . . I'm doing it cuz "damn I feel good with my oxblood lip-liner. . . you know?" You know how it is when you get dressed up, it's for you. And I think that's an enormously feminist way to think about it. . . . people who do the whole "you're wearing too much makeup and you're dressed this way." I'll dress however damn how I want to and I'll wear however much or however little makeup that I want to.

**Interviewer:** Mhmm.

**Dawn:** You know, that's more of an *ideology of personal confidence* [emphasis added] I think. And then you can use Pinterest however you want. I really sound hypocritical when I'm saying that. But no, *I personally feel like I'm looking up stuff because I feel good about it, I want to, it makes me feel good, it makes me feel empowered* [emphasis added]. So that's why I'm saying I'm being a hypocrite because that could make such and such person feel overly empowered because that's her choice.

The emphasized phrases in the above excerpt help to explain what Dawn means when she says that her use of Pinterest in ways that may have at one time been considered anti-feminist (e.g., to find beauty, fashion, or cooking inspiration) is in fact a personal choice one can and should feel good about making. This very much aligns with the individualistic nature of third-wave feminist philosophy. For instance, repowered feminism views women as having the power to make their own choices—even if such choices contradict earlier waves of feminism (Foss & Foss, 2009).

In response to the secondary question posed above—do we need to re-address what it means to be a feminist in today's digitally-driven world?—my interview findings lead me to answer "yes." As several participants noted, drawing parallels between using Pinterest and anti-feminism presents a skewed and narrow view of what feminism is truly about and potentially deters women from the movement. Though the platform may present content that glorifies stereotypically feminine roles, which can be viewed as disadvantageous to the feminist movement at large, it may be more harmful to criticize women for using the platform.

In talking with my participants about whether Pinterest as a platform (broadly) and their use of it (specifically) is capable of “killing feminism” (Odell, 2012), I found that my subjects did not feel that Pinterest is killing feminism. My findings echo Baumgardner and Richard’s (2000) claim that to be a feminist, a woman does not have to reject reading magazines, wearing makeup, or using a form of popular culture media, like Pinterest.

It seems as though society at large is moving toward a version of feminism that acknowledges and values the participation in and contribution to digital environments like Pinterest as meaningful activity, or “feminized productivity,” as Levine (2015) has called it (p. 10). Levine (2015) importantly notes:

[F]eminized popular culture of the early twenty-first century has become extraordinarily focused upon labor, upon the multiple forms of work that women in particular are expected to do. Sometimes popular culture can assist with these labors” (p. 8).

The above statement helps to situate Pinterest as a technological advancement that can support women’s goals—even if those goals fall into a stereotypical category. With this in mind, it may be that American society is slowly moving in a direction that recognizes women’s use of feminized media as important and sometimes even necessary, as opposed to anti-feminist. Nonetheless, I believe there is much work to be done before American society can reach a time wherein women’s use of “technologically mediated leisure” (Parry & Light, 2014) will be accepted rather than criticized.

### ***Pinterest as a Wedding Planning Tool: Pinning for Leisure or Labor?***

- Is Pinterest perpetuating the stereotype that wedding planning is “women’s work?”
- Does using Pinterest as a wedding planning tool allow women to push back against this stereotype?
- What does the use of Pinterest for wedding planning tell us about the extension of the traditional female role in wedding preparation?

*Is Pinterest perpetuating the stereotype that wedding planning is “women’s work”?*

In response to the above, I feel confident in stating that, based solely on my interview findings (i.e., through talking with 20 women notably not representative of the larger Pinterest user-base), Pinterest supports the perpetuation of the stereotype that wedding planning is “women’s work.” The above questions, collectively, are addressed in Chapter 4, where I used the overarching theme “The Labor of Wedding Planning and Pinterest” to explain how Pinterest plays a role in the perpetuation of this stereotype. Beginning with an overview of the history of the American wedding (or the “white wedding,” [Ingraham, 1999]), I outlined the ways in which women in our society have been conditioned to view their wedding day as one of the most important in their lives. I explained how women have been taught that the wedding is an event they must prepare for by “becoming a bride” (Mead, 2007, p. 16). This can be considered an occupation in itself (Mead, 2007)—a form of third-shift unpaid labor (Jones, 2016; Sniezek, 2005), often accompanied by stress and relationship tension (Engstrom, 2008).

Returning to an important statement from Mead (2007): “Being a bride has become a category in and of itself, an occupation—one that requires tutelage at the hands of experts whose curriculum has been established with the interests of an ever-expanding wedding industry foremost in mind” (p. 30). In response to this statement, I noted that such “tutelage at the hands of experts,” may take on a new form when Pinterest is used. In other words, as this study helped to demonstrate, aspiring brides no longer have to rely solely on mass-produced traditional wedding media (e.g., magazines, television, or catalogs) for wedding planning inspiration and etiquette.

Based on the evidence provided in Chapter 4, I conclude that Pinterest offers aspiring brides a new form of media not produced solely from wedding industry leaders. In other words,

some of the content on Pinterest is user-generated (i.e., via Instagram, blogs, smaller-scale wedding companies, and/or original material from former brides [e.g., photos from real weddings as opposed to corporately produced content]). In this way, the “experts” can become average Pinterest users (or bloggers) who produce content that may be received as more meaningful to Pinterest users given it is not corporately produced (i.e., it may be received as more realistic or authentic by aspiring brides).

I presented the notion of Pinterest operating as a “cultural mechanism” (Jellison, 2008, p. 5) through its production of pins geared toward planning a wedding on a budget as well as non-traditional wedding ideas (i.e., not a traditional, lavish upscale white wedding). Findings put forth in this chapter help to demonstrate that, as a relatively new form of feminized popular culture, Pinterest may lessen some of the pressure aspiring contemporary brides feel about wedding planning in relation to familial expectations (i.e., family-oriented traditions they are expected to uphold) as well as patriarchal and/or economic structures (i.e., planning a wedding that meets certain societal standards as shaped by the evolution of the white wedding). These are some ideas worth expanding on briefly before moving into the forthcoming section.

This study situates Pinterest as a “cultural mechanism” (Jellison, 2008, p. 5) that provides an opportunity for aspiring brides to collect and ultimately implement wedding planning ideas. Gorelick (1991) provides insight that helps to demonstrate the ways in which Pinterest acts as a structure that allows women to challenge customs associated with the American “white wedding” (Ingraham, 1999). In an article that examines and stresses the need to refine feminist methodology, Gorelick (1991) brings forth the idea that women, as oppressed individuals, may be able to change a structure if they are given the opportunity to join forces.

Gorelick (1991) states: “To some extent these hidden relationships can be discovered (and are discovered) by the oppressed themselves as they begin to interact and collectivize their experience (for example, through consciousness raising) and start to change their situation” (p. 465). Relating this to the present study, Pinterest provides a space where aspiring brides who are influenced and/or controlled by patriarchy can “interact and collectivize their experience” through sharing pins about non-traditional wedding planning ideas (e.g., ideas for a wedding different from what has been considered socially acceptable). The following quote helps to further explain this idea:

To some extent, the hidden structure of oppression must be discovered anew by each group of women because of the great educative power of direct experience and because each concrete situation of oppression has its own historical specificity, its own lessons (Gorelick, 1991, p. 465).

In this way, Pinterest can help users navigate around and perhaps contest systems of domination (e.g., economic, familial, social, hegemonic) in our patriarchal society that influence contemporary wedding planning. In other words, Pinterest, arguably, provides an opportunity for aspiring brides to “start to change their situation” (Gorelick, 1991, p. 465) because it acts as a resource for sharing and collecting inspiration for non-traditional wedding planning.

*Does using Pinterest as a wedding planning tool allow women to push back against this stereotype?*

Although my findings support the idea that wedding planning very much remains a role fulfilled primarily by women, and one they do not necessarily want to “push back” against (explained further in the forthcoming section), using Pinterest does allow for “push back” in a different way. As explained in the above section, Pinterest provides users with alternate ways to create a wedding that may not necessarily correspond with traditional wedding expectations.

The case of my participant Jessica may be used to illustrate this idea. In her interview,

Jessica shared that she was frustrated with some of the expectations surrounding wedding planning and some of the economic hardships she experienced when purchasing a wedding dress and securing vendors. Such experiences led her to title her Pinterest board “wedding bullshit”—a response to her feelings about wedding planning.

Jessica explained that Pinterest was helpful in providing ideas for how to plan a wedding on a budget (as did many other participants). For instance, she used the site to find do-it-yourself (DIY) ideas she could incorporate into the backyard barbecue style wedding she planned. Similarly, Christy talked about how using Pinterest enabled her to find many DIY projects she completed with the help of her mom—putting her own twist on many of them (i.e., appropriating to fit individual needs and tastes).

Collectively, the women I interviewed did not describe Pinterest as a tool that allowed them to “push back” against the stereotype of wedding planning as “women’s work” (as all of them willingly fulfilled this role). It did, however, provide an avenue for resisting (at least to an extent) societal, familial, and economic factors that impact contemporary wedding planning by exercising control. In other words, Pinterest provided an outlet for finding creative ways to plan a wedding that matched individual constraints (e.g., budget, family-oriented expectations) as well as tastes (color scheme, venue ideas, décor, etc.).

*What does the use of Pinterest for wedding planning tell us about the extension of the traditional female role in wedding preparation?*

In some respects, this question has been partially addressed in the above paragraphs. It is important to address this more specifically, however, in relation to the findings presented within my theme titled “I Didn’t Do Shit:’ A Deeper Look at the ‘Hands-Off Groom.’” Within this section, I showcased findings from my interview with Christy, who explained that the “I didn’t

do shit” phrase was used by her groom during their wedding dinner in describing his lack of contribution to the beautiful wedding Christy created. The overarching answer in response to the above question is that it appears brides-to-be prefer to take on the primary role as wedding planner as doing so provides them with greater control in making decisions and ensuring the event unfolds according to their vision. As research from Sniezek (2005), Engstrom (2008), and McKenzie and Davies (2010) makes clear, wedding planning has long been viewed as a feminine duty performed by women, which findings from the present study support.

Through interviewing 20 women who unanimously described themselves as the primary wedding planner within their relationship, it became apparent that many preferred to take on this role due to the control it provided. For instance, Christy proclaimed that she was happy to “fit the stereotype” in performing this form of unpaid labor, because it meant she could make decisions without the influence of her partner (which she described as being easier). Similarly, Angela expressed that she preferred to fulfill the majority of wedding planning duties in order to avoid unwanted external influences (i.e., partner, friends, or family).

In sum, I found that Pinterest enhanced the wedding planning process by making it easier for aspiring brides to collect ideas digitally. Nonetheless, by using Pinterest in this way, aspiring brides engaged in unpaid labor as they implemented ideas gathered via Pinterest in the physical sense. Stated another way, compiling ideas through Pinterest, sharing such ideas with wedding vendors (e.g., caterer, florist, bridal consultant, venue coordinator, etc.), as well as physically creating DIY projects to be used for the wedding, constituted a form of work. Although acting as the primary planner allowed the women I interviewed to have more control in the decision-making process, it nonetheless resulted in more time and effort on their part (i.e., an unequal division of labor between the bride-and-groom to be).

***Identity (aspired self): How do brides-to-be construct an aspiring bride identity through using Pinterest?***

The above question is explored in Chapters 5 and 6. In Chapter 5, I use the theme titled “Inspiration to Implementation: The Evolution of Wedding Pin Boards,” to explain the idea of board evolution, which came through in 13 of my 20 interviews. It seems to be somewhat commonplace for women to create a wedding board before they are engaged (or even in a serious relationship), to which they pin images of the wedding they hope to someday have (i.e., daydreaming; pinning for inspiration). Pinterest has been criticized as being a place for wedding-obsessed women to daydream (Tekobbe, 2013), but my findings suggest that at least some of this daydreaming leads to doing (i.e., putting pins into action; implementation).

I believe this theme alone speaks to the above question in that an aspiring bride, whether engaged or not, engages in identity construction as she moves through the phases of board evolution. Specifically, she may begin by developing a pin board that focuses more so on “dreaming” (i.e., what she hopes to eventually have in her wedding). As she progresses in her relationship (by becoming engaged, for example), the wedding may become more “real”, and her approach to planning it may change. In this process, the aspiring bride participates in meaning-making as she creates a more “serious” version(s) of her wedding board. Returning to a key idea presented by Phillips et al. (2014), Pinterest allows users to engage in “imaginative play,” wherein they can experiment with possible future selves (in this case, the self as bride) by “trying on” different visual images (p. 648). Phillips et al. (2014) call this “dreaming out loud” (p. 648): an idea that lends support to my finding that through board evolution, brides-to-be participate in identity building via Pinterest.

I further examined the above question in Chapter 6 within the sub-themes titled “Seducing Oneself into the Wedding Dress” and “The Making (and Re-making) of the Perfect

Bride” (within the larger theme titled “Pinning for Leisure...or Labor?”). In these sections, I address some of societal pressures aspiring brides face in regard to planning a wedding in terms of both physical labor (e.g., time and effort put into making their vision a reality) as well as economic structures that may inhibit the construction of a “dream” wedding. Here, notions of identity construction also come into play.

My findings, broadly speaking, indicate that identity work takes place as brides-to-be participate in consuming material items (often inspired through Pinterest) for the wedding (e.g., a wedding dress, apparel for the bridal party, or decorative items). For instance, returning to Belk et al.’s (2003) notion of “self-seduction,” aspiring brides construct wedding boards around what they think they want to include for their wedding. In this process (again related to board evolution), a bride’s wedding identity evolves as she progresses through the planning process. In talking about her wedding planning experience, Angela stated that she likes Pinterest because it allows for reinvention of one’s wedding style (e.g., if new ideas come along during the planning phase). This idea also relates to the “dreaming out loud” notion from Philips et al. (2014).

Part of wedding planning involves fantasizing about how a bride will look on her wedding (e.g., how the bride will look in her dress, how the day will aesthetically come together, what will guests think about the venue, décor, etc.). Belk et al. (2003) discuss this idea, stating: “Building expectations and excitement by rehearsing what it will be like to obtain the object of desire rests on fantasizing about the sensory as well as the social” (Belk et al., 2003, p. 341). I expanded on this idea by noting some of the experiences shared by participants in relation to their wedding dress shopping and purchasing experience. Drawing on Jones (2016), I mention that the “fashioning and performing of the yearned-for self” (p. 360) was revealed in the way several participants described their post-wedding dress shopping experience. Specifically, a few

interviewees noted that they felt somewhat disappointed about the dress they purchased, which they partly attributed to revisiting Pinterest and looking at dress pins after they had bought their own. Keeping with Belk et al.'s (2003) notion of imaginative elaboration, some brides-to-be experienced mixed emotions because the dress they purchased did not match with what was originally rehearsed (or envisioned) for that day. In other words, using Pinterest as a planning tool allowed brides to compare their purchase decisions with what they had initially envisioned. In some cases, this caused discontent or a minor wedding identity crisis.

Lastly, within Chapter 6, I also explored a theme titled “A Consumption Constellation of Complementary Products: Pinterest as a Visualization Tool.” Here, I looked at concepts of taste discovery and refinement, which very much connects to the previously mentioned theme of “Inspiration to Implementation.” Briefly, this section addresses the idea that brides-to-be engage in “free play” (i.e., pinning for fun, in a way not restricted by reality [Iser, 1993]). Based on my findings, I argue that pinning is a form of leisure as opposed to a form of labor. Using the notion of taste refinement, I provide evidence from my participants that situates pinning for wedding planning (which can constitute both discovery and refinement) as an enjoyable and creative experience as opposed to a form of “third shift” labor (Jones, 2016).

“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” (p. 643). Taste refinement on Pinterest involves filtering out pins so that the user eventually has a board geared primarily toward the end goal (in this case the wedding). Ten of my participants described Pinterest as a tool that helped them to feel confident about the pins they chose to implement for the wedding day. The notion of taste discovery and refinement via Pinterest also speaks to the above question: how do brides-to-be construct an aspiring bride identity by using

Pinterest? As evidenced by the numerous themes that emerged in relation to the broad construct of identity, brides-to-be, at least those interviewed for this study, use Pinterest as a tool to gather inspiration and eventually implement such inspiration for the wedding day by engaging in a filtering process. By going through such processes, it seems that aspiring brides construct meaning through digital (i.e., pinning) and non-digital experiences (e.g., wedding dress shopping) that contribute to the making of the aspired bride identity.

### ***Overarching Question***

Before closing the section of this chapter devoted to my research questions, I turn now to perhaps the most important question this study addressed:

- Does using Pinterest as a wedding planning tool extend the traditional feminine role of wedding preparation (i.e., contribute to specific behavior determined by a patriarchal society)? Or does using Pinterest as a wedding planning tool provide an opportunity for women to engage in user-controlled behavior (i.e., offer an avenue to find voice and agency)?

My answer to this question is based on authentic interpretations of the co-constructed knowledge created by my participants and myself. Engaging in qualitative methods allowed me to thoroughly investigate this complex question because I was able to talk firsthand with 20 women (all of whom identified as white, heteronormative, cis-gender, and as belonging to the middle to upper-middle class) who engaged with Pinterest to perform a stereotypically feminine role. In doing, I obtained deeper knowledge about this experience than would have been possible using quantitative methods. Returning one final time to the constructivist approach, I include a statement that reminds us that the findings presented here are my interpretation of what was shared with me during my interviews and later subjectively analyzed.

Constructivists do not approach the research participant's statements as "raw data" that might be unproblematically analyzed so as to get us close to "the truth," but as

conditional statements made in a particular context and which of necessity require interpretation (Clark, 2004, p. 30).

Based solely on the findings gathered for this study (i.e., not generalizable to the broad Pinterest user-base), it appears that using Pinterest as a wedding planning tool extends the traditional feminine role of wedding preparation. At the same time, however, it provides women, as the primary wedding planners, an opportunity to engage in user-controlled behavior (evidence for this claim is provided in my response to the earlier research questions pertaining to the theme “Pinterest as a Wedding Planning Tool: Pinning for Leisure or Labor?”). Therefore, I argue that as a digital planning tool, Pinterest can be more helpfully located somewhere in between (i.e., a ‘gray area’). In other words, women who use Pinterest as a wedding planning tool experience both user control and determinism.

Regarding the notion of user control, I argue that Pinterest is unique in that it affords the aspiring bride an opportunity to create her own ‘frame’ rather than be ‘framed.’ In other words, many of the brides interviewed for this study claim to have the ability to construct their own wedding identities rather than having their identities constructed for them according to societal norms and/or expectations. That is to say—the brides-to-be interviewed seem to exercise control as they pin content that resonates with the type of bride they want to be in the type of wedding they want to have (influenced by various identity factors as well as possible input from the aspiring groom). Importantly, using Pinterest as a wedding planning tool integrates the online and offline ‘labors’ of wedding planning, allowing brides to create meaning through the construction of wedding pin boards.

This experience, arguably, is different from what an aspiring bride may have encountered even 20 years ago, before the advent of Pinterest, when an aspiring bride could not digitally create and express her wedding identity. As we move toward developing a new understanding of

the role social media plays in the lives of today's aspiring brides (or social media users in general), it is important to consider the notion of Pinterest serving as a type of 'third space.' Ananda Mitra, a professor in the Department of Communication at Wake Forest University, refers to this 'third space' concept as "synthetic cybernetic space," explaining the idea through his research on blogs produced by individuals who have experienced a diaspora.

Mitra (2008) claims that the internet can be understood as "a synthetic space made up of the real and the virtual where people are able to voice themselves" (p. 458). In other words, the production of a Pinterest wedding board is shaped by both online and offline experiences. In describing how bloggers built identity through experiencing a diaspora, he states:

...the person who writes a blog produces a specific identity narrative that is rooted in real space while at the same time expressing the voice in cyberspace, eventually using the blog to carve out a synthetic cybernetic space (p. 457).

Citing Watts (2001), Mitra (2008) notes that "voice can be considered a form of agency and the speaker, or agent, operates within a social milieu which implicates what the speaker may say and how something may be articulated" (p. 460).

Relating these ideas to the present study, it can be argued that the aspiring bride who pins select images to her wedding oriented pin boards is exercising voice (i.e., control) through the images she chooses to save. Though she may not actually 'speak' (i.e., include any text she herself produced in the form of a pin caption), we can consider the act of pinning an image to a pin board a form of 'speaking' in the realm of Pinterest. Stated another way, an aspiring bride can exert control as she 'speaks' through the creation of her pin boards (with or without captions she herself created). In this way, a bride-to-be may produce a "specific identity narrative" (i.e., an aspired wedding identity) that is "rooted in real space" (i.e., the offline wedding planning experiences that influence the construction of her digital wedding boards).

Thus, Pinterest acts as a ‘third space’ as it affords the opportunity to interweave the offline and online wedding planning experiences. The platform allows an aspiring bride to both create and tell her story (i.e., use her own voice) through collecting digital images. Ultimately, by using Pinterest this way, the bride-to-be “carves out a synthetic cybernetic space” (Mitra, 2008, p. 457). Using the ‘third space’ concept to understand wedding planning via Pinterest helps to further demonstrate the idea that Pinterest affords users the opportunity to create their own frame (as opposed to being framed by the medium).

Additionally, I return once more to the idea that Pinterest can be understood as a digital structure. In relation to my overarching question, it is worthwhile to recall Giddens’ (1984) statement that “Structure is ‘always both constraining and enabling” (p. 25, as cited in Correa et al., 2016, p. 993). In the previous discussion chapters, I showcased several cases that help to exemplify the ways in which notions of user control and determinism can be seen within the wedding planning via Pinterest phenomenon. Collectively, my findings suggest that women can experience control through using Pinterest as a wedding planning tool by exercising creativity as they engage not only in pinning, but also in executing pinned ideas in the corporeal world (i.e., implementing the pin). Women may also experience control as they appropriate pinned content in personally meaningful ways (i.e., contextualizing pins to fit with personal needs or desires).

Further, I argue that women can experience control in simply using Pinterest as a mental escape from the tensions associated with their everyday life (e.g., professional, social, or familial). In other words, women use Pinterest as a reason to carve out alone time from a busy schedule to connect with the self. This finding links to what Radway (1983/1984) found through her interviews with regular romance novel readers. As explained in Chapter 6, Radway reported that her participants relished time spent alone reading romance novels because it allowed for a

temporary ‘escape’ from the monotony, tensions, and/or pressures associated with motherhood, marriage, and/or homemaking. Additionally, Radway found that romance novel reading provided the opportunity to fantasize about a ‘dream life.’

In line with findings from Radway (1983/1984), the present study found that among the women interviewed, a majority enjoy using Pinterest because it affords the opportunity to temporarily leave behind stressors associated with personal and professional life. Returning to a quote shared earlier (see Chapter 6), Dawn described Pinterest as a “world where anything is possible,” which helps to further demonstrate the parallel between motivations for using Pinterest and reading romance novels. My interviewees generally reported using Pinterest *not* for social recognition (i.e., to generate ‘likes’ or social approval from followers). Instead, the common sentiment was that Pinterest is appealing because it encourages connecting with the self as opposed to others (consistent with findings from Phillips et al., 2014; Zarro et al., 2013; and Linder et al., 2014).

Although Pinterest may facilitate time to connect with the self, the experience is not entirely agentive, or user-controlled, as it must be stated that determinism is also present within this phenomenon. Although women may experience control in appropriating content, such content is often in line with stereotypical gender roles. Thus, using Pinterest to digitally collect recipes, beauty and fashion tips, and/or home décor ideas contributes to Western hegemonic and patriarchal ideals that such topics (and associated labors) are “for women.” Additionally, determinism plays a role in the economic structures that may indirectly be associated with Pinterest. For instance, as demonstrated through the case of Jessica, not all aspiring brides have high wedding budgets that allow them to implement popular trends found via Pinterest. Though a

bride-to-be might find her dream wedding dress through perusing Pinterest, economic structures may inhibit her from actually making the dress part of her reality.

Relating this example (which parallels others noted earlier in the study) to structuration theory—Giddens (1984) explains that structuration is recursive. Therefore, structure influences how people can exert control (i.e., to act agentively) in how they use a given platform, which can ultimately influence structure. An idea presented in this dissertation is that Pinterest facilitates exposure to what high-end wedding culture looks like (e.g., pins of designer wedding dresses, lavish venues, or expensive flower arrangements). It also facilitates “shortcuts”, wherein users can mimic some of the high-end trends in a more affordable fashion (i.e., appropriate; exercise creativity). Thus, within this recursive cycle, the structure of Pinterest may be affected based on how users engage with it.

To summarize, this study provides some preliminary evidence on whether Pinterest provides users with a unique individual and/or social experience. Such findings may span beyond Pinterest by offering a more wide-ranging sense of the capabilities of using social media (i.e., indications and potential implications of online communication). While I am confident in the approach and methods I have developed and executed, this study does feature several limitations that are important to note.

## **Limitations**

### ***Generalizability***

Perhaps the most notable limit associated with my constructivist approach is that it did not produce generalizable findings. My study focused on generating contextual data that speaks to questions of how and why users engage with Pinterest in their everyday lives, specifically as a

wedding planning tool. Therefore, the findings are relatively small scale and representative of only a minute portion of the women who use Pinterest (considering the site has 100 million users [Smith, 2015] and my sample was restricted to a specific region in the U.S.). However, because the goal of this project was to explore the phenomenon of Pinterest and become engrossed in deep analysis about what it means to/for its users, I do not view a lack of generalizable data as a “problem.” Rather, I view this project as a stop along the way to more fully understanding the role digital media can be play in the lives of women who use it. That said, it will be important for me to develop a more demographically diverse sample in future projects of this nature, as doing so may help to strengthen the generalizability of my findings.

Furthermore, it is important to reiterate that the women interviewed for this study were educated, most at the undergraduate and graduate level, and of middle to upper-middle income socioeconomic status. Therefore, these women could fairly be seen as privileged in the sense that they had the luxury and ability to engage in an isolated media experience. That is to say—they had the financial resources necessary to purchase a device from which they could peruse Pinterest in addition to ‘free time’ they could devote to finding wedding inspiration through this platform. Importantly, this is not a reality for all women. Therefore, a future study should investigate if and how women of lower socioeconomic status access a site like Pinterest to investigate the notion of “technologically mediated leisure” (Parry & Light, 2014) among groups for whom media leisure time is not the norm. Finally, a future study that explores Pinterest and how it is used as a tool for planning life events should include participants who identify as transgender, male, lesbian, bisexual, as well as various race, religion, age, and/or ability levels.

### ***Researcher Biases***

My Methods chapter addresses how my role as an active Pinterest user may have impacted my role as a researcher. To briefly summarize what was discussed in this section, I believe it was necessary for me to be reflexive in my approach. For instance, in a social science project such as this, it is important that the researcher carefully describe and characterize his/her participant(s). In doing so, however, the researcher should also describe and characterize him or herself if the objective is to co-construct meaning. In the case of this project, it was necessary for me to look inward and acknowledge how my role as a Pinterest user and researcher colored my methodological and interpretive practices.

Here, it is worthwhile to highlight a statement shared by Lindlof and Taylor (2011): “Intimate familiarity with local meanings and practices is considered a requirement for successful explanation” (p. 9). Given that I have spent hundreds of hours perusing the pages of Pinterest to build my own digital bulletin boards, I am confident my level of immersion enhanced my understanding of the “local meanings and practices” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 9) that were discussed during interviews. For example, in listening to participants talk about how they used Pinterest to assist with wedding planning, I could reflect on my own role as an aspiring bride who was (at the time of the interviews) involved in the same activity. Thus, I met the requirement (i.e., “intimate familiarity with local meanings and practices”) set forth by Lindlof and Taylor (2011), and believe my interpretations are genuine as I exercised reflexivity throughout this research endeavor.

## **Limitations of Methodology**

It is important to note that using in-depth interviews as my primary method may have limited my understanding of this phenomenon in at least one respect. That is, the researcher only learns what his/her participants explain they are aware of. In relation to my overarching research question, I may not have fully uncovered whether my participants, as aspiring brides, were fully aware of the potential determining influence of patriarchal structures. Through using interviews as my primary method, it may have been difficult to fully know if my interviewees were, at least to an extent, being affected by patriarchal structures (e.g., economic, familial, social, hegemonic) that play a role not only in contemporary American wedding planning, but also daily life for the white, middle to upper-middle class, heteronormative, cis-gender women I interviewed. This is due to the fact that I could only question each participant about what she thought or felt about a given experience to an extent.

That said, my research approach in this project has been to avoid appearing to be ‘above’ the participant and make her feel that as the intellectual academic I was looking ‘down’ on her or appear that I knew more about her situation than she herself did. Gorelick (1991) refers to this scenario as “false consciousness” and problematizes it by saying “it asserts that people may have an imperfect understanding of their own conditions” (p. 468). She states: The difficulty with the concept of false consciousness lies in the implication that a) there is a true consciousness that is known and complete, and b) the researcher-activist knows it, and the participant does not (p. 468).

Radway (1984) provides insightful commentary on how she approached this same challenge in conducting and interpreting her interviews with readers of romance novels. Though lengthy, I feel it is important to include this excerpt in full as it parallels the approach I used in

carrying out my interviews and interpreting the findings. To begin, Radway (1984) explains that her interpretation of women's use of romance novels (based on interviews and observations) makes "romance reading into a highly desirable and useful action in the context of these women's lives" (p. 9). She explains that her "inferential process" was guided by her individual feminist perspective—one that "situates the social practices of courtship, sexuality, and marriage within the analytic category of patriarchy, defined as a social system where women are constituted only in and by their relationships to more powerful men" (pp. 8-9). She continues this discussion noting that . . .

Assisted additionally, then, by previous investigations of the various ways in which similar women commonly experience the merits and problems of patriarchy, I have attempted to offer an explanation of my informants' self-understanding that accounts also for motives and desires very likely felt by them but not admitted to consciousness precisely because they accept patriarchy as given, as the natural organization of sex and gender.

This effort is obviously an interpretive one and thus it is open to dispute. But in making the interpretation, in formulating what might be called my informants' covert agenda, I have always worked first from their conscious statements and beliefs about their behavior, accepted them as given, and then posited additional desires, fears, or concerns that complement rather than contradict those beliefs and assertions.

Radway (1984) goes on to explain that her interpretation vacillates between her participant's accounts of their experience reading romance novels and a "more distant view" (i.e., drawing from her own feminist academic standpoint) that attempts to also encompass "the unseen cultural ground or set of assumptions upon which they stand" (Radway, 1984, p. 10). In other words, Radway built her interpretation of the romance novel cultural phenomenon by infusing the sentiments shared from her interviewees with her own feminist perspective and understanding of patriarchy.

Returning now to the present study, it was sometimes difficult to discern if and to what extent my participants were aware of the role patriarchal structures (e.g., familial, economic,

social, hegemonic) played in relation to their wedding planning experience. Nonetheless, I want to share several exemplary excerpts that help to demonstrate that at least several participants recognized that their pinning activities could be viewed as stereotypically feminine and/or as perpetuating stereotypical gender roles. Stated another way, these excerpts, arguably, indicate that at least some of these participants *were* aware of the ways in which patriarchal structures influenced their wedding planning experience.

**Interviewer:** . . . so part of what I'm looking at is this idea of Pinterest and does it perpetuate stereotypical gender roles? . . . Do you think that your personal pinning activities feed into stereotypical female roles?

**Jessica:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Can you expand or explain that a little?

**Jessica:** Because a lot of my stuff on there . . . well, I'm not the cook in our house {laughs}. So all of my food and recipe stuff is for him [her fiancé] to try {laughs}.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Jessica:** I tend to post food stuff and shopping and makeup and hair . . . Organization and house stuff and I mean the yard stuff is a little bit more [masculine]. We actually divide up our chores in the house and his chore is yardwork. So if it's a project to upgrade the yard, then I'm involved. But if it's just "you gotta work" [i.e., do physical labor], it's his job. Cuz I do the laundry {laughs}.

**Interviewer:** So when you think about your pinning, you agree that what you're doing does reinforce the stereotypical gender roles, but the fact that you're pinning the content—do you feel like that gives you any power or agency over what it is you might potentially do with that pin? And how will it impact your life in a way?

**Jessica:** Sure, yeah.

**Interviewer:** Do you think that goes against any of the stereotypical ideas surrounding it—because you're the one who found it, you're the one who pinned it?

**Jessica:** Sure, instead of somebody telling me like "you should be doing this thing" . . .?

**Interviewer:** Yes.

**Jessica:** Yes and no. Because especially with this wedding stuff. . . . There's so many expectations. People think this is what your wedding should be. You know, "you have to do this and you have to do that." And so all the pins that come up are very traditional and you know this is what you're supposed to be doing and this is your timeline and this is the stuff that you have to book and all this. And I'm just finding that with everything wedding and it just annoys me. We're not having a traditional wedding by any means.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Jessica:** And that's the hardest part is to say like "it is my pin and so I do have control over it." And like it's my wedding and I . . . it's really hard not to get kind of sucked into that whole like "this is how it's supposed to be" kind of feeling.

The above excerpt demonstrates that Jessica, at least to an extent, was cognizant of the ‘pressures’ (arguably stemming from patriarchal expectations that are considered commonplace within contemporary American society), associated with wedding planning and heteronormative cohabitation. Here, she briefly explains how chores are divided within her household while also acknowledging that her Pinterest use does fall in line with stereotypical gender norms.

Additionally, she makes clear that she has control over her pinned content (which extends beyond the digital realm [i.e., it applies to how she may or may not implement a pin offline]).

In a similar fashion, Chelsey also acknowledged that her pinning activities could be classified as stereotypically feminine. Nonetheless, this excerpt sheds light on the idea that she did not view Pinterest as a platform ‘for women,’ but rather, as a “tool” she could use to help with lifestyle planning.

**Interviewer:** . . . Do you think that your pinning activities feed into stereotypical female roles? So in other words, do you think that the type of content you pin perpetuates gender roles?

**Chelsey:** {laughs} That’s very interesting. I’ve never thought of it that way but yes. Cooking, wedding planning, being a mom, yeah there’s a lot of fitness and exercise ones [her pins], so I think there’s a lot of obsession with body perception and all of that but yeah. . . I’ve never thought of it like that.

[ . . . ]

**Interviewer:** . . . So this is one of the big questions that I’m really interested in, which we kind of talked about. . . this idea that Pinterest is criticized, stereotyped as a place where women go to plan their dream weddings, fantasize about their future, sometimes unrealistic. What are your thoughts about this?

**Chelsey:** . . . as I said before—I never thought about it that way but it’s kind of true. I don’t know very many men that have Pinterest. And if they do, they’re not usually fantasizing about these things . . . I view it [Pinterest] as a pastime and a tool to do things. I don’t really think of it as a way to fill a stereotype, but maybe subconsciously that’s why we’re all drawn to it.

**Interviewer:** . . . Do you think Pinterest perpetuates stereotypical gender roles and kind of keeps women doing those things that they’re known to do? . . . [to] be concerned with their appearance, spend time in the kitchen, spend time decorating?

**Chelsey:** Yeah . . . I think it does.

**Interviewer:** You think it continues to perpetuate the stereotypes.

**Chelsey:** I do, that's mostly what that stuff is all focused on.

**Interviewer:** . . . is there anything about the site that you think kind of lets women step away from those stereotypes at all and do something that makes it their own . . . not kind of fitting that norm?

**Chelsey:** I mean the fact that you can make your own boards and kind of have your own personality. . . . I think that's true, but I don't really know. I mean I think that's the organization of the site but I don't think they [Pinterest] go out of their way to get out of that. They definitely don't advertise [to men] . . . I don't think it's a very male friendly site. I think the whole thing is very feminine.

Here, Chelsey acknowledges that Pinterest is a feminized platform—but she does not appear to view that as a ‘negative.’ Further, this excerpt from my interview with Mary lends additional support to the idea that at least some participants were aware that their pinning tendencies aligned with stereotypical gender roles. Nonetheless, as Mary helps to demonstrate, even though crafting may be considered a feminine activity, she viewed her pins in this area as more of an artistic endeavor (as opposed to crafting to fulfill a homemaker ‘duty’).

**Interviewer:** . . . do you think that your pinning activities feed into stereotypical female roles?

**Mary:** {laughs} Probably. Yeah! I mean, so like for Fashion Fabulous [title of her pin board] I look at um outfit ideas. And typically those are probably going to be more gender-fied. Heels or flats or things like that. Things that are going to be flattering on the body. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Okay, so fashion. Any other boards that come to mind where you think you're feeding into stereotypical gender roles?

**Mary:** Ah I would definitely think the wedding. Definitely cuz I'm looking for all those traditional parts of the wedding. Mostly cuz that's what people say like “Oh, you're supposed to have this.” I'm like “Okay, I've never planned a wedding before, I guess this is what I'm supposed to have.”

**Interviewer:** . . . so wedding, fashion. Any other things that come to mind?

**Mary:** I guess with the crafts it's like homemaker? So I guess like you could say that. But I don't really see it that way. I see that from a more artistic point of view.

While it is true that not all participants were aware of and/or understood the structure of their own possible subjugation, these excerpts help to illuminate that in fact, at least some of them did. At the same time, however, I want to showcase an excerpt from my interview with Allison. Though she did express that she was “okay” with being in charge of all the housework

duties (i.e., cooking and cleaning), she paused somewhat when I asked her to talk about stereotypical gender roles (i.e., she seemed somewhat confused about the deeper meaning of this question). Though I cannot say for certain that she did *not* understand the structure of her own possible subjugation, her response sheds light on the fact that her willingness to perform these roles was based on how she was raised. Consider this excerpt:

**Interviewer:** . . . do you think your pinning activities feed into stereotypical gender roles?

**Allison:** Huh? {ponders the question} I don't think so, but maybe if you could be a little bit more specific?

**Interviewer:** So when you think about stereotypical female roles—I don't want to give away too much before you have a chance to talk—but I can if you want me to explain further . . . if you think about traditional female positions, historically, and then if you think about what the types of content that you're pinning—do you think that your pins kind of reinforce certain roles that a woman should have?

**Allison:** Like cooking and cleaning and that kind of stuff?

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Allison:** Yeah. Definitely. I am definitely a housewife. [I] do all the cooking, all the cleaning. I maybe baby my fiancé a little bit too much . . . I'm always obviously pinning things to do with him and kind of for him. So I would say in a sense, I was raised that you know that's just what the woman does as long as I'm not disrespected for what I do, I'm totally okay doing it as long as I'm also being thanked and you know he doesn't take advantage of me. You know that's how I was raised. I don't look at it like "oh my God I have to do all the cooking and all the cleaning." So when I'm pinning that kind of stuff, I don't look at it as a negative thing.

Additionally, my interview discussion with Leah about the notion of feminism and pinning activities, demonstrates that she may have not fully understood the concept of feminism and/or what it means to be a feminist. Interestingly, however, our conversation brought up a subject area not discussed in other interviews—using Pinterest (as a woman) to find stereotypically 'masculine' pins; in this case, pins related to hunting.

**Interviewer:** . . . do you identify as a feminist?

**Leah:** . . . that's a really hard question, cuz it's another one of those, I'm on both sides of the fence. Yes, I am to a certain extent but no because I know there's certain things that I cannot do that my husband can do. As much as I think I can or want to, I can't. Ha. And there are certain things I can do way better than he can do because I'm a woman . . .

**Interviewer:** So . . . the way that someone would interpret a pin about cooking . . . you think that it's user dependent on their view . . . [meaning] is this geared to teach me I have to do this kind of thing or is it more this is going to enhance something that I already do?

**Leah:** Yeah I think it's more enhance – I mean unless we're going to the extent of . . . it just depends on the topics. Like I said, I look at Pinterest as a woman's site, so when I get on there and look up something that a lot of people don't consider womanly, but I do, I don't necessarily, I'm not gonna get offended by it, but it just makes me chuckle. Like the hunting thing and you get on there, and it's like well I was looking for this, and instead it took me in a completely different direction of making hunting feminine. Instead of making hunting feminine, and having pink this and pink this, "well I wasn't looking for camo at all, I was actually looking for this" [a hunting product, not necessarily camouflaouge].

**Interviewer:** Yeah. Just the fact that you can't even find it on Pinterest...

**Leah:** Exactly, that makes me chuckle, but that's not what the site is . . .

I make the point above that Leah may not have fully understood what feminism stands for based on her statement that she cannot do all the things her husband can do (and vice versa). I did not feel it was my place, during the interviews, to provide a definition of feminism and/or what it means to be a feminist. Therefore, I refrained from stating that feminism is not generally based on one's physical capacity to 'do' something given Leah took this to be a relevant point in relation to her feminist identity.

Perhaps of greater importance here, however, is Leah's mention of Pinterest feeding her 'feminized' hunting products (i.e., pink camouflage) when she searched for hunting content. This is interesting in that it demonstrates Leah's 'radar' for noticing when Pinterest aligns with its stereotype of being a place 'for women' (i.e., it will provide information about hunting, but that information has a feminine twist [i.e., the color pink]). Though not related to wedding planning, this excerpt helps to complexify the question of the extent to which my participants were aware of their own possible subjugation. Here, we see that although Leah may not have fully understood feminism, she was fully aware of how Pinterest brought gender into the equation in its presentation of hunting topics.

Gorelick (1991) argues that “feminist research must be part of a process by which women’s oppression is not only described but challenged” (p. 462). Though limited in scope, the findings presented here in some ways ‘challenge’ the idea that to perform the role of primary wedding planner within one’s relationship is not necessarily a type of ‘oppression,’ but rather, a duty in which the aspiring bride may wish to lead the charge. In other words, although wedding planning has been (and continues to be) viewed as a stereotypical role to be performed by the aspiring bride (Snizek, 2005; Engstrom, 2008), this research presents an alternate view. Wedding planning, at least based on the interviews conducted for this study, is a type of ‘labor’ in which many brides want to take part. Pinterest provides an outlet where brides-to-be can exercise creativity and bring their wedding-oriented dreams to life—even if those dreams fall in line with patriarchal structures. Further, this study demonstrates that as a wedding planning tool, Pinterest can function as a ‘third space’ (Mitra, 2008) wherein aspiring brides can blend their offline and online wedding planning experiences and create their own ‘frame’ to explore and express their wedding identity.

## **Future Research**

I plan to use my dissertation as a building block in my research trajectory that focuses on women’s use of social media. Because platforms like Pinterest continue to evolve, the present findings may be useful in developing future studies around this topic. Future studies could involve a mixed-methods approach wherein I collect quantitative data to offer more broadly generalizable findings. Additionally, it will be important to study the Pinterest experience of others, such as men and/or women of various racial and ethnic, as well as religious, backgrounds,

in the future. It would also be interesting to investigate how women use Instagram as a wedding planning tool, as it too is a type of visually-oriented digital media.

For instance, it would be interesting to use a linguistic software program like Word Count or Linguistic Inquiry (see Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010; Schultheiss, 2013) that would allow me to quantitatively analyze the language used to describe pins and/or comments posted to pins, as these are important elements of the Pinterest structure to consider. Moreover, it would be valuable to engage in participant observation where I watch participants use Pinterest and then develop questions (based on this observation) about their pinning activities.

A focus group could also provide an interesting approach for understanding how and why women use Pinterest—it might be worthwhile to listen to women discuss their pinning activities in a group setting, considering there are at least some community oriented aspects to the Pinterest interface. A benefit of focus groups is not only capturing narratives, but also how like-minded people negotiate to co-construct narratives. Another idea for a future study would be to look at life course moments, such as social media use around birth of a child, using a more traditional content analysis approach.

Finally, it would be worthwhile to conduct a large-scale content analysis of wedding-oriented pin boards to examine the notion of consciousness raising (a type of activism that has been used to meet feminist goals). It would be interesting to examine the affordances of Pinterest (e.g., the option to post an image with or without a customized caption) with attention to consciousness raising by exploring whether the platform aids or hinders such an effort. For instance, does the ability to include personalized text (i.e., a caption the user herself wrote) to raise awareness about a given issue play a role in how pinned content is received by fellow

users? Such an inquiry may also require additional interviews with participants to learn more about the reception of textual content via Pinterest.

It is important to note that the present study was exploratory in nature—it was an initial attempt at comprehending Pinterest on deeper level (e.g., my use of crystallization may have produced more robust findings [e.g., as compared to a study drawing solely from one point of data] that help us to interpret this phenomenon). Importantly, this study helped to set in motion my program of research. Its findings have resulted in offspring for future scholarly endeavors concerning new media, women’s use of it, creativity, feminism, and construction of the self (or self-presentation). Ultimately, this research aids in further developing an understanding of what environments like Pinterest mean within the broader disciplines of communication and new media studies, as well as the third-wave of feminism.

Moreover, it is also worth noting that a great deal of my discussion is based on the notion that wedding planning via Pinterest can be understood through the lens of third-wave feminism. One limitation of this is the fact that we may already be developing a category of fourth-wave feminism—an idea that seemed to surface through the interpretation of findings for this project. Given the scope of this dissertation, I do not feel it appropriate to launch into that discussion here. Nonetheless, this is a fruitful area of inquiry to explore in forthcoming iterations of this project as I have great interest in continuing to examine this phenomenon using feminist theory as a lens.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

When I began this project, I did not expect to find that Pinterest was capable of disrupting patriarchy or dismantling feminism. Those expectations were confirmed. Through conducting

this research, I have learned that Pinterest is not powerful enough to disassemble structures of patriarchy, nor is it influential enough to rupture feminism and its accomplishments. Importantly, however, this dissertation serves as a starting point in demonstrating that Pinterest is capable of doing something ‘in between.’ Based on my interviews with 20 white, middle to upper-class, heteronormative, cis gender women, I argue that Pinterest affords at least some of the users the opportunity to create their own ‘frame’ wherein they can explore and create their aspired wedding identity. This affordance situates Pinterest as a medium that enables a ‘third space’ (Mitra, 2008) reality where users can blend online and offline wedding planning experiences. Drawing from Mitra’s (2008) description of the ‘third space’ notion, it can be argued that Pinterest is not simply a reflection of reality, or a completely “cybernetic” experience. It is something new that is made up of both experiences (it requires both to exist).

Moreover, though we cannot claim that Pinterest is capable of dismantling patriarchy, it might provide aspiring brides with the opportunity to move beyond some of the traditional aspects of the Americanized ‘white wedding,’ as it enables easy and customizable access to budget-friendly, non-traditional wedding inspiration. In this way, Pinterest makes it possible for an aspiring bride to combat some of the structures associated with wedding planning (e.g., familial, economic, and/or societal). That is to say—it does something ‘in between’.

As a woman who was actively engaged in wedding planning (as the primary planner) at the time I conducted the interviews for this project, I think it is worthwhile to offer some personal reflection here. I have given some thought to whether I experienced control or determinism during my planning as this is an important question to address after conducting this extensive research and examining such ideas from an academic standpoint.

In thinking back on my planning, I think for the most part I felt that I had control (i.e., agency) rather than determined during the process. Like my participants, I used Pinterest as my primary source for inspiration. I recall one particular evening when I was perusing potential color schemes and came across a palette featuring sage green, blush pink and gray. I immediately fell in love with it, and decided at that moment that this would be “our” color scheme (as if my husband-to-be would have a lot to say about it [he really could have cared less!]). I remember being very excited after I made this decision because it meant I could start searching for bridesmaids dresses as well as my own.

Another important memory—I asked Tyler (now my husband) if he could pinpoint what he considered the most stressful part of wedding planning. Our brief conversation as follows:

**Tyler:** My wife.

**Emily:** Why?

**Tyler:** Because you had so many questions for me to answer every day, that were outside of my realm of comfort and thinking.

Tyler’s statement very much connects with my theme “I Didn’t Do Shit”: A Deeper Look at the “Hands-Off Groom” in that planning a wedding, for Tyler, was a process he cared to have little involvement in. Other than helping to make several decisions about venue, food and beverage, music, and ceremony style, and, of course his rejection of the blush pink dress shirt, Tyler fits the description of the “hands-off groom.”

Though I certainly experienced moments of frustration (and possibly even anger or resentment) towards Tyler because of the labor required to plan a wedding, I would not change anything about how the labor was divided within our relationship. As many of the other brides expressed, I too wanted to be in charge of planning because it meant I had greater control over decision-making and could ensure deadlines were met. Like Christy, I was happy to adopt the stereotypical attitude that wedding planning is “women’s work.”

Completing this dissertation has further fueled my desire to continue studying how women engage with contemporary forms of feminized popular culture. I will continue to model my scholarly activities after the “pioneers” or “trailblazers” (Levine, 2015, p. 3), such as Radway (1983, 1984), Baumgardner and Richards (2000), and more recently, Levine (2015), who argued that there is in fact at least some user-controlled (or consumer) behavior that can be experienced in using feminized media. I believe that studying phenomena such as Pinterest, and the often undervalued and criticized activity that can take place in such environments (from the perspective of the user), is critical in regards to questions of communication and feminism in the digital age as well as notions of user-controlled behavior versus determinism.

I conclude this project feeling motivated to continue investigating these important inquiries. Moving forward, I know it will be important to investigate this phenomenon (as well as other social media phenomena) drawing from a more diverse sample than the one used in this study. Talking with participants who identify as transgender, male, lesbian, bisexual, as well as of various age, ability level, racial, ethnic, socioeconomic and/or religious backgrounds may result in a more full-bodied analysis of Pinterest – a place where users can wedding plan as well as engage in other forms of life planning activities.

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## APPENDIX A: PINTEREST INTERVIEW GUIDE

### PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS:

- 1.) Can you talk a little bit about your use of technology/social media since your childhood?
- 2.) Does using Pinterest fill any type of entertainment, mental, and/or social void for you?
- 3.) Do you feel a sense of community when using Pinterest?
- 4.) Does using Pinterest help you to plan or manage your future?
- 5.) Does using Pinterest help you to plan or manage your present life?
- 6.) Does using Pinterest help you to reflect on your past in any way?
- 7.) Do you think your pinning activities feed into stereotypical female roles? In other words, do you think the types of content you pin perpetuate gender roles?

### PINTEREST & WEDDING PLANNING QUESTIONS:

- 1.) What prompted you to begin using Pinterest to help with your wedding planning?
  - a. Are there other reasons you use Pinterest (not related to wedding planning)?
- 2.) When do you find yourself using Pinterest (i.e., what time of the day, what is your location, what device are you using...generally speaking)?
  - a. How often do (or did) you pin to your wedding board(s)?
- 3.) Before Pinterest (or other similar types of platforms existed), brides-to-be often contained their wedding planning materials in a shoebox, binder, or folder. With Pinterest, these materials can be managed digitally.  
-What are your thoughts about the organizational capacities of using Pinterest in this way?

- Are you still doing any of the more “old fashioned/traditional” types of wedding planning (e.g., binder)
- Has Pinterest helped you to manage your wedding ideas/plans?

- 4.) How does your identity as an aspiring bride come through when using Pinterest? In other words, how were aspects of your “wedding identity” constructed through using Pinterest? “How do you think using Pinterest for your wedding planning has changed you / how does it make you feel about yourself?”
- 5.) What does using Pinterest, as a tool to help wedding plan, mean or signify to you?
- 6.) Does planning a wedding provide you with a type of status or power (in your relationship) that you would not have otherwise?
  - a. Do you think Pinterest has changed that?
- 7.) Do you generally re-write the description for a pin when you re-pin it? Please explain why/why not.
- 8.) Does using Pinterest to wedding plan provide you with a sense of voice in regard your wedding and/or your relationship with your fiancée?
- 9.) Does using Pinterest to wedding plan provide you with a sense of agency in regard to your wedding and/or your relationship with your fiancée?
- 10.) Do you consider wedding planning to be “women’s work”? How would you describe the division of labor, in regard to planning your wedding, between you and your partner?
  - a. How does using Pinterest fit into the “labor” of wedding planning?
- 11.) Pinterest can be considered a place where you can digitally collect meaningful information. Do you feel that Pinterest provides opportunities to collect things that are otherwise inaccessible? For example, a collection of wedding dessert tables or centerpiece ideas.
- 12.) Start by reading quotes / talking about what the critics have said...

\*\*\*Now I'm going to ask you something and it might seem a little bit harsh, but I am really just trying to play the devil's advocate. Some critics say that Pinterest is a place where women go to plan their dream wedding and/or fantasize (sometimes unrealistically) about their future.

-What do you think about that? I am very curious to know your feelings on this.

-What do you think of people who are critical of Pinterest?

- a. Do you think Pinterest is a place that allows women to fantasize about their dream wedding?
- b. Dream life?
- c. What do you see as the pros/cons to using this site?

## **PARTICIPANT SPECIFIC QUESTIONS:**

### **Participant Information:**

- Name:
- Age:
- Occupation:
- Location:
- Race:
- Ethnicity:
- Wedding date:

## APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT EMAIL DRAFT

Hello,

My name is Emily Keats and I am a doctoral student and researcher from Colorado of State University in the Department of Journalism and Media Communication. For my dissertation research, I am conducting a study about women's use of Pinterest to wedding plan.

### **What I'm looking for:**

- Female interview participants between the age range of 19-39 who are actively using Pinterest to help wedding plan (i.e., use the site at least one time per month) *or* who have used Pinterest within the past year to help wedding plan (i.e., the wedding took place).

### **What will be requested of you?**

- You will be asked to talk about your use of Pinterest as a wedding plan tool during an informal interview (approximately 60 minutes).
- Additionally, you will be asked to provide a link to your Pinterest profile so that I can explore your pin boards.

### **Participation Details, Benefits, and Risks:**

- Your participation would be completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time without penalty.
- If you are not able to devote at least 60 minutes of your time, you should not participate. Additionally, if you do not use Pinterest at least one time per month, you should not participate.
- There are no direct benefits to participating in the study. However, participating may help you generate a better understanding of your personal Pinterest use.
- There are no known risks for participating in this study. If you consider any question to be too sensitive, you are free not to answer it. However, all of your answers are important to us.

If you are willing to participate in an interview, please email me at [emily.keats@gmail.com](mailto:emily.keats@gmail.com). When I receive your email, I will provide an electronic informed consent form, which provides additional details about this study and your participation. I will bring a hard copy to the interview and ask you to sign it at that time.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact me via email at the address listed above. I appreciate your time and look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



Emily Keats

## APPENDIX C: SELECT EXCERPTS FROM BLOG POSTS CRITICIZING PINTEREST

(read aloud to participants during interviews)

### **“How Pinterest is killing feminism: This isn’t where the Internet was supposed to take us”**

By Amy Odell, 2012 – *BuzzFeed.com*

This isn’t where the internet was supposed to take us. The women I know who work in online women’s media hoped that the online content they created would provide an intellectual but fun alternative to print publications’ predictable fare.

[later in the post]

Pinterest – which drives more traffic to marthastewart.com and marthastewartweddings.com than Facebook and Twitter combined – has become impossible to ignore, even as critics deride it as ‘the Mormon housewife’s image bookmarking service of choice.’ But it’s much more than a collection of pretty pictures. In fact, the site seems like one big user-curated women’s magazine – from the pre-internet era. Sites like Jezebel were created as an antidote to women’s print magazine, but are rife with diet, fitness and dressing tips. The internet has for many years now been thought of as a place where women can find smarter, meatier reads just for them.

Instead there’s Pinterest: heavy on recipes (diet and otherwise), inspirational quotes, exercise tips, and aspirational clothes and homes. Kitchen porn, cupcake porn, bracelet porn – any kind of eye candy you can think of is probably on Pinterest, waiting for the next Pinner to covet it enough to re-pin it. People don’t go to Pinterest for articles, they go there to scrapbook every imaginable physical aspect of their dream lives, right down to the Mason jar candle holders you really hope to get around to DIY-ing for your next cocktail party.

### **“No Sex, Please – We’re Domestic Goddesses”**

Lauren Sandler, 2012 – *TheCut* (NYmag.com)

The Internet’s most ostentatiously blissful women – the curators of domesticity on Pinterest, Tumblr, and thousands of female-driven blogs – occupy a sexless aspirational world, a modern Douglas Sirk fantasy of color-saturated feminine mystique. ... At the forefront of female cyber-exhibitionism, lifestyle blogging barely even acknowledges that physical pleasure exists, never mind its key role in domestic bliss.

Today, ‘lifestyle’ is something to be curated online instead of indulged; not a lifestyle so much as the pixelated tyranny of the domestic goddess. Once-oppressive female chores are now framed as a dopamine delivery system; a bed exists to be dressed, rather than to be undressed upon. And ‘pinning’ as it relates to fantasy has a new meaning entirely: Pinterest, the social network where

a world of objects and paint colors gather together in an infinite web of self-aggregation, which boasts 15.4 million female users a month