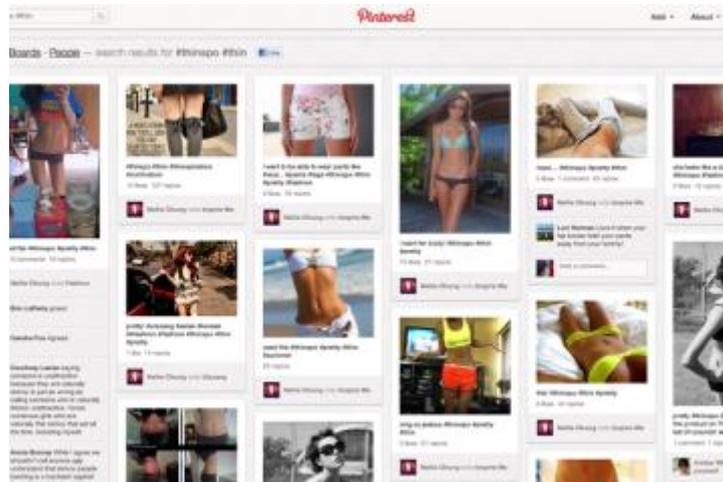


Thinterest? When social networks and body image collide

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Are websites like Pinterest, Tumblr and Facebook enabling eating disorders? And can they really do anything to stop it?



Pinterest screenshot - An example of content tagged with "thinspo" and "thin" on Pinterest.

Pinterest, the latest social-media site to be hailed as the next Facebook or Twitter, has reached an Internet milestone — though a rather suspect one. It's the latest website that's felt the need to ban thinspiration, or thinspo, content.

For the unfamiliar, thinspiration consists of photos, tips and angst-ridden quotes meant to provide visual inspiration and motivation for those looking to whittle their bodies down to tinier proportions. With a disturbing similarity to pro-anorexia websites, thinspo typically consists of photos of female bodies with pencil-thin arms and jutting ribs. It's nothing new, but as it spreads across the Internet, an increasing number of social-media sites are attempting to put a lockdown on it.

As Pinterest has generally been considered to have a female-heavy user base, it's not surprising that some female users are creating thinspo boards. And as the images compiled together can be an uncomfortable, if not alarming, sight, it's also not surprising that Pinterest has received a number of complaints about the boards. Rather than see-sawing over the issue, the company took decisive action on March 23 by announcing a ban on such content. "We updated our Acceptable Use Policy and we will not allow pins that explicitly encourage self-harm or self-abuse," the company wrote in an email sent to all users, adding that the new terms will go into effect on April 6.

Pinterest's ban seems to be taking a cue from Tumblr, which just last month issued a ban on content that advocates self-harm. While it's great to see that these sites want avoid being associated with unhealthy thinking or used as a virtual meeting place for women and girls who are looking for motivation to self-harm, the ban presents two problems.

First, enforcing the ban seems ultimately futile, particularly in Pinterest's case. There's a lot of wiggle room in the acceptable guidelines. Determining if a user is "explicitly" encouraging "self-harm or self-abuse" is a gray enough area that many of these thinspiration boards could slip through. So far, Pinterest has indicated that it plans on addressing users who have been flagged by other users, and dealing with them on a case-by-case basis. For its part, Tumblr's version of the ban seems hesitant about taking a hard line against specific content (though they do explicitly prohibit other kinds of self-harm, such as cutting and suicide, not just thinspiration), though they do note that they'll show health warnings to users who search for content tagged with "thinspo" or "anorexia." Unfortunately, however, it doesn't inspire a ton of confidence that this type of content will disappear from their sites.

The second problem with ban can be summed up in a question: what else can social networks do?

These sites don't create content — they're merely platforms for users to share their own or borrowed content. So the images that make up these thinspiration blogs and boards are user-compiled mixes of celebrities, fashion models and self-portraits of young women (often of the reflection-in-bathroom-mirror variety). Self-portraits are practically the currency of the Internet, and Facebook and Instagram have also been flagged for enabling unhealthy body images. And as Pinterest is essentially made up of shared content — and a lot of that content is advertisements — it's hardly a surprise that photos of ultra-thin women get pinned. The advertising industry, and particularly the beauty and fashion industry, has long been accused of perpetuating a beauty ideal that includes hip-free figures and vertebra you can count. We're bombarded with these images everyday, whether they're collated on a website by a struggling teenager or not.

Sure, you can attempt to ban the women and girls who collect these images into one disturbing collage, but a ban on the individual components is impossible because they're so insurmountably ubiquitous. We're so surrounded with images that promote a certain physical ideal that our culture is basically one big thinspiration board. Social-network bans or not, you don't have to look hard — or even really at all — to be bombarded with these types of images.

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