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### Why Do College Students Use Pinterest? A Model and Implications for Scholars and Marketers

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# Why Do College Students Use Pinterest? A Model and Implications for Scholars and Marketers

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**Marketers are rushing to establish a presence on social media based on the promise of reaching a growing segment of users, and with the intention of achieving brand and sales-related objectives. Our recent study of Pinterest usage among college students was designed to produce findings to aid such endeavors. While there is much in the practitioner press and the blogosphere to suggest that Pinterest is shaping the purchase behavior of users, there is no theory to explain why college students use this social media. This article reports findings from a multistage study of college students' Pinterest usage. The purpose of the study was to stimulate new thinking and aid future theory development efforts. Findings suggest that Pinterest-using college students are psychologically healthy and grounded, and seek and find authentic experiences and enrichment on Pinterest. We draw implications for scholars interested in developing theories of social media usage, and for practitioners interested in harnessing the power of Pinterest.**

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**Keywords** Pinterest usage, college students, multivariate model

Many marketers want to feature their brands on Pinterest because the descriptive statistics of this rapidly growing social media are highly compelling. Since its launch in March 2010, Pinterest has become the third most popular social network, behind Facebook and Twitter (Spitznagel 2013). This social network seems unique in several important ways. First, it is an online medium devoted almost entirely to photographs and images. Second, users engage in posting original images but more often “like” and/or “repin” the images posted by others to produce curated albums. Third, of the 48.7 million users reported in June 2013 (Smith 2013); 83% were women

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(Spitznagel 2013), and 97% of fans of Pinterest's Facebook page are also women (Honigman 2012). While most of the content (57%) is food related (Honigman 2012), fashion, do-it-yourself (DIY) projects, exercise/fitness, gardening, design, and weddings are among the popular categories of photographs pinned and posted (Smith 2013). Currently, the average user is between ages 25 and 54, a mother, and located in the American heartland, in other words, Missouri, Utah, Alabama, Oklahoma, and Kansas (Jacques 2012; Habash, Reid, and Roback 2012). Among its early adopters were Utah Mormon females; Ann Romney was one of the pioneers (Chafkin 2012); 81% of American women trust Pinterest, while 67% trust Facebook and 73% trust Twitter (Heussner 2012). The average user reportedly spends 89 minutes on Pinterest per month, which compares favorably with 21 minutes on Twitter (Spitznagel 2013).

Marketers are interested because social media marketing is known to enhance brand equity (Kim and Ko 2012). Pinterest is popular among a lucrative segment: one-third of users have family incomes of more than \$100,000 (Palis 2012); 70% of Pinterest users seek inspiration for shopping on this site, versus 17% for Facebook (McGee 2012), and 21% have purchased a product based on what they saw on this site (Dunnett 2013) and spend an average of \$180—a number that compares favorably with \$80 for Facebook and \$70 for Twitter (Chafkin 2012, p. 94). Traffic to brand websites is driven more by Pinterest than by Google+, LinkedIn, and YouTube combined (Blair 2012).

Crone (2012) notes that retailers are attracted because Pinterest delivers better numbers than Twitter and Facebook when it comes to the average number of retailers followed; Pinterest users follow 9.3 retailers; the relevant numbers are 8.5 for Twitter and 6.9 for Facebook. Moreover, according to Sevitt and Samuel (2013), Pinterest is helping reverse the “showrooming” trend most retailers have found onerous, in other words, the increasing use of retail outlets as showrooms for making purchases online. After browsing on Pinterest, these scholars note, 21% of Pinterest users bought products in

store. These descriptions have prompted many marketers, retailers, and e-tailers to establish a presence on Pinterest.

Despite compelling statistics, there is little theoretical evidence to explain Pinterest's popularity among more narrowly specified demographic segments. This article reports findings from a study of Pinterest usage among college students and aims to produce empirical evidence to foster new thinking and theory building about the central issues that explain its popularity among this segment of users. We focused on this segment for two key reasons. First, media habits vary with demographics; a study of a defined demographic segment versus the general population is more likely to produce actionable insights. Industry experts too caution against formulation of social media strategies based on a general understanding of heterogeneous populations of users. Instead, they strongly advocate for understanding the motivations and behaviors of narrow demographic segments and tailoring strategies based on this learning:

If you are listening in via social media you're probably only hearing a very particular group, representative at best only of those with similar demographic characteristics. Until you know and understand those demographics, it's important not to extrapolate too much from the data. (Hertz 2013)

Second, the college-student segment is sizable, lucrative, and heavily engaged with social media. There are about 31 million Americans between 18 and 24 years old, 22 million in college (The Douglas Stewart Company 2013). Nearly all (98%) are "more likely to engage with a friend's post over a brand's post" (SocialChorus 2013) and will spend an estimated \$117 billion in 2013–2014 (Hertz 2013). Moreover, 44% of 18- to 34-year-olds are already using Pinterest. Despite lower income during their time as students, some if not all social media habits learned in college are likely to endure as they reach their peak earning years.

Given the lack of theory, we began with focus groups and identified relevant constructs, developed measures, and formulated hypotheses. Then we used survey data to assess reliability and validity of newly developed scales and test our conceptual model and hypotheses. Because our study is the first of its kind, we offer the following findings to stimulate new thinking and research; and not as generalizable theory. Briefly, our two-stage study suggests the following: First, for college students, the process of pinning and posting photographs and creating carefully curated albums and virtual scrapbooks on Pinterest is driven by their desire for an experience of authenticity. Second, Pinterest-using college students are psychologically healthy, in other words, psychosocial groundedness emerges as a significant antecedent of authenticity seeking on Pinterest. Third, Pinterest usage produces an experience of enrichment; college students feel they have become more expressive and organized, and better connected with themselves and with their cultures and traditions.

## CURRENT EXPLANATIONS FOR WHY PEOPLE USE PINTEREST

Why people use media, and the nature of gratification they derive from their usage, has long interested scholars (see research related to uses and gratification framework; e.g., Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch 1974; McQuail 1983; Ruggiero 2000; and West and Turner 2010). In terms of Pinterest usage, scholars have made pioneering and valuable contributions (see Gilbert et al. 2013; Hall and Zarro 2012; Ottoni et al. 2013; Zarro, Hall, and Forte 2013). Scholars have examined, for instance, the ways males and females use Pinterest (Ottoni et al. 2013), how Pinterest serves as a curatorial tool (Hall and Zarro 2012), and as a "repository-building tool" for individuals and professionals (Zarro, Hall, and Forte 2013). Gilbert and colleagues (2013) have found that repinning content posted by others is the most common activity on Pinterest, and that content posted by females, Americans, or British people receive most repins.

The intents of Ben Silbermann, the founder of Pinterest, are clear; he notes: "When you open up Pinterest, you should feel like you've walked into a building full of stuff that only you are interested in. Everything should feel handpicked just for you" (qtd. in Chafkin 2012, p. 93). Whether these feelings motivate college students' Pinterest usage remains unknown from empirical studies. Current explanations for why people use Pinterest emerge from writers for business and general-interest periodicals, blogs, and "how to" books (e.g., Hayden 2012; Miles and Lacey 2013; Neher 2013). Chafkin (2012), for instance, notes the following: First, Pinterest is popular because it offers a low-pressure, noncompetitive environment without prominent display of number of followers; and offers a forum for unabashed exhibition of one's material desires without the crassness that can result from the verbal articulation of such desires. Users are attracted to vividly depicted catalogs from businesses that promote a lifestyle through visuals and imagery, without gratuitous "buy now with price off" deals. For instance, Whole Foods does well because their Pinterest pages show good-looking people cooking in well-appointed kitchens (Churchwell 2012). Second, eschewing frequent page clicks, Pinterest adopts an infinite scroll—making for a "hard to leave" site. Third, Pinterest liberates users from verbal articulation. Users are not required to express their thinking in words to initiate a conversation or satisfy their needs; they can pin photographs that express this idea: "Here are beautiful things that make me who I am—or who I want to be" (Chafkin 2012, p. 93). Fourth, Pinterest makes it easy for shoppers to peruse curated lists produced by others to guide their purchase behavior. In other words, seeing other people's curated albums reduces time spent making choices. While these are plausible, compelling explanations, empirical evidence currently lags.

## STAGE I: SECONDARY RESEARCH AND FOCUS GROUPS

The study was conducted during the spring 2013 semester as part of a "learning by doing" project in two sections of an

undergraduate class on marketing research taught by a coauthor at a business school in northeastern United States. Students applied the topics they learned to every part of the study; They conducted secondary research; developed exploratory frameworks and research questions to guide focus groups; analyzed qualitative data to produce hypotheses, scales, and a questionnaire; tested the scales for reliability and validity; and conducted preliminary quantitative analysis. After the end of the semester, the coauthors further analyzed survey data and developed the multivariate model, the findings, and the implications reported in this article.

### Secondary Research

Based on literature reviews, students produced box-and-arrow models to answer the question: Why do college students use Pinterest? Initially, 40 students produced 40 unique frameworks that showcased their best literature-derived explanations. The process was iterative and emergent; students learned about secondary research, read literature, worked in small groups in classrooms, and repeatedly revised their framework based on the instructor's feedback over a two-week period.

The lack of empirical evidence about motivations that drive Pinterest usage precluded literature-derived hypotheses. Hence, the following research questions were derived for exploration: (a) What can college students who use Pinterest tell us about why they use the medium? (b) What are some plausible antecedents of their self-reported explanations; in other words, what do they say about why they use Pinterest? (c) What are some of the consequences of Pinterest usage that may help explain its popularity.

### Focus Groups

Eight students from each class, self-identified as avid Pinterest users, participated in the two focus groups we conducted. Of the 16 participants (males = 6, females = 10), all were pursuing a marketing major, between the ages of 20 and 23, and enrolled full time in college (juniors = 3, seniors = 13). The volunteers sat in a circle in the center of the class and were surrounded by nonparticipants and the instructor. The purpose of the focus group was to draw inferences about why college students use Pinterest. Because all participants had self-identified as avid users, we asked students to respond to the following guiding research questions of the study:

1. Why do you use Pinterest?
2. What motivated you to get started? What motivates you to use Pinterest now?
3. What benefits do you derive from your Pinterest usage? What does it allow you to do?

One of the coauthors moderated both focus groups; he sought clarifications and asked probing questions based on the

response of participants. In particular, participants were asked to provide specific examples to illustrate their answers.

Observers were also encouraged to ask questions and seek clarifications. One of the key questions asked by observers was: "What makes you say that?" Observing students were asked to draw inferences based on participants' responses in this format: "Based on the evidence that the following was said during the focus group, it leads me to draw the inference that. . ." The focus groups lasted approximately 70 minutes. They were tape recorded and transcribed by the instructor.

The transcripts were content analyzed based on the guidelines of Miles and Huberman (1994). Our intent was to produce internally consistent findings and derive hypotheses for future testing. We therefore (a) identified major constructs and themes from the data, strongly informed by the inferences derived by students—which they had submitted in writing—and (b) derived hypotheses that reflected our learning about relationships between the key constructs we had identified which answered the guiding research question: Why do college students use Pinterest?

### Qualitative Research Findings and Hypotheses

Figure 1a serves as a guideline for the following discussion. Briefly, it shows the central concept of Pinterest usage, its key antecedent and consequence. "An experience of authenticity" emerged as the central theme in the motivations for using Pinterest. College students use Pinterest because the process of pinning and posting photographs on their pages, developing visual narratives and a deeply personal curated list, is an experience of authenticity; a process that is closely aligned with the discovery, definition, and development of an authentic sense of self. Users come to define what they are truly about and produce a verifiable self-portrait in the form of curated albums. This experience stands in sharp contrast to one related to posing, posturing, or positioning oneself for the validation of others.

For instance, Jill (not her real name), describing how her usage behavior reflects her real self, notes:

I am not posing or anything like that . . . or trying to be someone different. I am pinning what I like, what I want it to be like. I don't post my photos like that. . . I pin what reflects me. This is me. If you see what I am doing, you will see the real me. I can see the real me. What I am thinking about at that time.

Megan, suggesting that the anonymity she enjoys on the medium helps her pin photographs that initially reflect her true



FIG. 1a. Focus group derived conceptual model: Why college students use Pinterest.

wants, and eventually serve as a reminder of her true desires, notes:

I don't know these other people [who follow me on Pinterest]. I can be like real, like be true. My perfect wedding pictures. What I want. It reminds me of what I really want every time I see it.

That Pinterest allows users not just to portray their authentic needs and desires but also to use this authentic expression as a way of connecting with others emerges as a central theme in participant voices. Jack, explaining his interest in DIY projects and in providing evidence of what he can do in his workshop, notes:

Pinterest allows people to connect with others in an authentic way. . . . This is who I am for real. It produces an authentic environment, the information is verifiable. . . . Look what I can do, what I did. . . . You can do this too if you want.

Tiffany, explaining her interest in recipes and in representing her true self without concern for what others might think of her on this medium, notes:

[It is] authentic, because you can verify what I posted. Like the recipes. . . . I have to be interesting to me, I don't need other people to follow me. They can if they want to, but I don't care if they do or if they don't follow. They don't get to decide what I like and stuff like that. On Facebook, if I don't get "likes," then it is something different. They are two different things.

The key cognitive, emotional, and behavioral milestones in the experience of authenticity are (a) the discovery of interesting photographs, mostly the content posted by others on Pinterest, and (b) the act of selecting and pinning photographs to pages that eventually come to reflect curated albums devoted to specific interests. The process is akin to a self-directed conversation about one's interests, and eventually about one's development of "self." Several curated lists tend to emerge to define multiple interests and eventually define the complex facets of the user's personality. This finding resonates with recent studies (e.g., Hall and Zarro 2012). Participating student voices add value because they speak to the strongly temporal context in which the experience of authenticity emerges. Users develop visual narratives that are not just contextually bound by their changing definition of interests and their sense of selves but also shaped by the temporal order of events. Students note that the experience of authenticity is inseparable from the notion of how it emerged over time. Nora, pointing to the temporality of the expression and sense-making process, explains:

When I go back and look at all the stuff I've pinned, it kind of like tells me better about me, of myself, it comes together. I can't explain it. . . . you have to see it. I don't have to explain that to someone; it is just there in the pictures. It does that for me. Then I can build on that. It kind of builds on what I am.

The central theme of "Pinterest usage as an experience of authenticity" resonates with current theory in several ways. First, the notion that authenticity seeking is largely self-directed, without concerns for what others might think, is supported in the literature. For instance, Harter (2002, p. 382) notes that authenticity requires free expression, unencumbered by extraneous concerns about what others might think, in other words, the defining feature of Pinterest-using college students. Scholars note that authenticity seeking is related to (a) getting in touch with what one is truly about and with one's values (see Harter et al. 1996; Kernis and Goldman 2005, 2006; Peterson and Seligman 2004), (b) the complexity of one's personality (see Bennis and Thomas 2002; Goleman 1995, 1998; Luthans, Youssef, and Avolio 2007), (c) the choices one has made about one's life (see Liedtka 2008; Yacobi 2011), (d) a clear, reliable, credible, and enduring portrait of one's personality (see Vossoughi 2008; Wood et al. 2008), (e) one's true interests (see Luthans et al. 2006), (f) one's expectations set for oneself (see Morin 2010), and (g) what one finds meaningful (see Sheldon et al. 1997).

While Wood and colleagues (2008) have presented an authenticity scale in the personal counseling psychology context, and Kernis and Goldman (2006) have extensively discussed measurement issues of authenticity in the personal psychology context, we constructed a new scale grounded in participant voices to capture the essence of the construct in the Pinterest-usage context (see White 2011 for extensive discussion of existing authenticity scales and inventories). The following 11-item, five-point Likert scale is derived from actual participant voices:

The photos I pin or post on Pinterest:

- a. Represent what I am truly about.
- b. Show the true complexity of who I am as a person.
- c. Are a reflection of the choices I have made about my life.
- d. Have helped me develop a clearer sense of who I am over time.
- e. Are a reliable reflection of who I am, and this reflection will endure.
- f. Provide a credible and verifiable portrait of what I am as a person.
- g. Reflect my true interests.
- h. Reflect what I truly value.
- i. Say a lot about the expectations I have set for myself.
- j. Is the most accurate, undistorted image I have of myself.
- k. Reflects what I find highly meaningful.

### Key Antecedent

We identified one clear theme in participants' explanations about why they started using Pinterest and continue to use this medium. We named this theme *groundedness*; it emerged as a feature independent of Pinterest but intrinsic to the user that anteceded their authenticity seeking on this medium. The basic premise of the argument presented during the focus groups is distilled as follows: Pinterest appeals to some but not all college students; not all derive the same value. Pinterest's attractiveness to students depends on key personal factors, in other

words, the extent to which they are clear about the values that drive their behaviors, are unapologetic and aware of the positive aspects of their personality, and are in touch and engaged with the reality in which they find themselves. While describing the Pinterest user among college students, focus group participants overwhelmingly made references to emotionally healthy people who were engaged, vibrant, and comfortable in their own skin, and point to the differences between this group and the posers, pretenders, and wannabes immersed in fantasy who were seemingly more attracted to other social media (see Sashittal, Sriramachandramurthy, and Hodis 2012 for findings related to Facebook users).

Nora, pointing to the connection with Pinterest as a connection with an updated version of her grandmother, around whom she remains grounded, behaving in ways that are consistent with her values—for fear of being called for her dishonesty or fakery—notes the following about how she is on Pinterest:

[The Pinterest user is] grandma 2.0. Grandma for my generation. She is wholesome...familiar...no pretensions...She lets you see what she is; I don't think my grandma cares what I think. She says what she wants...does what she wants anyway. You can be, you've got to be yourself around her. [I have] no pretenses around her... 'cause she can see through it. I am like that on Pinterest, you know, kind of my grandma,... grandma 2.0.

Jane speaks of herself as grounded, as opposed to pretentious and unreal; she believes she is not an expert showing off her unique capabilities but is sharing her sense of well-being, happiness, and the positive aspects of her personality:

[The Pinterest user is about] authenticity, as anti-expert. It is for real people. Not for experts who know something important. Real people have power. Because they are real. And they are happy with themselves. They already feel good about themselves.

In explaining how she came to use Pinterest, and was attracted to it because it is a medium that she strongly associates with her mother, and feels compelled to “keep it real,” Jane explains:

I was [initially] turned on [to Pinterest] by my Mom. I would not go to her for anything. But she is my mom...I trust her. I feel that way on Pinterest. I am like her on Pinterest, you know, no nonsense... Yes, she keeps it real.

Our learning about the groundedness theme is credible because it resonates with current theory. For instance, grounded people are clear about the values that drive their behaviors (e.g., Rath, Harmin, and Simon 1978), are aware of the positive aspects of their personality (Kernis and Goldman 2006), and believe they are in touch with the reality in which they exist (Rogers 1961). There is evidence to support that notion that groundedness is a significant antecedent; grounded people are known to seek emotionally healthy experiences such as authenticity (see Stevens-Long 2011 for further elaboration).

Moreover, groundedness is closely associated with psychological well-being and getting connected to one's true sense of self—both of which are known as convergent to authenticity (e.g., Ryff 1989; Stevens-Long 2011; White 2011). Hence, based on the language participants used, we developed the following three-item, five-point Likert scale to assess the groundedness of Pinterest-using college students:

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

- I am very clear about the values that drive my behavior.
- I am very aware of the positive aspects of my personality.
- I think I am strongly in touch with the reality in which I exist.

### Key Consequence

We identified one central theme in participants' responses about the benefits they derived from Pinterest usage. We termed this theme *enrichment*; it relates to the following thoughts expressed by participants: (a) they developed a sense of confidence in their ability to express themselves; (b) they improved their capacity to reflect their genuine cultural background and (c) they felt they were better organized and discovered the true complexity of their sense of self.

Jill, explaining how her Pinterest usage has made her feel better and helped her communicate with her best friends in an authentic manner, notes:

After I did this... maybe all this past semester, I think I am better for it. I know more about what I want; I think it makes me feel better. I can show them to my best friends and say “This is what I want for me.”

Norah explains the power of visuals in developing an enriched sense of self and the improvement she experienced in terms of expressing herself to others in the following way:

Because this stuff is real. I get to know what I really, really am. I get better somehow. It's not like I didn't know that before, but I know it better now, like visually, like through pictures... Now that I can see what I like, really see it, it tells me that I am better able to express that. I couldn't have done that before. Not just for others to see, but I can see it too.

Jack, describing how the facility he has to produce DIY projects in his workshop and post the evidence on his Pinterest page has helped him connect with the culture and traditions in which his family is embedded, notes:

I show what I do... you can do the same thing. The traditions, we are like that. The woodworking is ingrained in me, done it since I was in junior high. Someone... anyone who does that knows what I am doing; we are very alike—people who do woodworking.

Participants' attributions of enrichment as a significant outcome of authenticity seeking on Pinterest are credible because

TABLE 1  
Iterations in the Process of Purifying the Measurement Model

Model	NFI	NNFI	CFI	IFI	RMSEA	Action based on Lagrange multiplier test
1	.809	.858	.875	.876	0.077	Dropped A4
2	.849	.904	.916	.917	0.063	Dropped A7
3	.86	.912	.924	.925	0.062	Dropped SI1
4	.875	.926	.937	.938	0.058	Dropped A1
5	.891	.941	.950	.951	0.053	Dropped A1
6	.905	.956	.963	.964	0.047	Final model

their voices resonate with current theory. For instance, scholars note that improved personal expression is linked to psychological wellness (Coatsworth and Sharp 2013). Identity development, and learning about oneself, is similarly inseparable from psychological health (Plotkin 2013; Waterman 2011). Ability to organize and connectedness to one's culture are inseparable from cognitive and psychophysical health (Niemeyer 2013). Similarly, seeking an authentic experience or a metacognitive process of discovering one's sense of self is known to predict enrichment-related constructs (Schlegel et al. 2011). Extant theoretical evidence also points to the strong linkage between authenticity and enriched emotional health and a sense of well-being (Ryan, LaGuardia, and Rawsthorne 2005). Hence, we developed the following six-item, five-point Likert scale to assess enrichment as an outcome of authenticity-seeking behaviors of Pinterest-using college students:

As a result of the photos I pin or post on Pinterest, I can truly say that . . .

- I have discovered who I really am.
- I have greater confidence in my ability to express myself to others.
- I have become a more organized person.
- I have learned a lot about myself in terms of what I want.
- I have become better connected with who I really am.
- I have become better connected with my culture and traditions.

## Hypotheses

Qualitative data analysis yielded the following hypotheses, all in the context of college students who reported pinning and posting photographs on Pinterest (i.e., excluding "browsers only"):

**H1:** Higher the level of groundedness of the Pinterest user, greater the experience of authenticity as a result of Pinterest usage.

**H2:** Greater the experience of authenticity as a result of Pinterest usage, the higher the level of reported enrichment.

## STAGE II: SURVEY AND SAMPLE

A survey was developed and administered via Qualtrics. Students enrolled in the class were encouraged to complete the

questionnaire and forward the Qualtrics link to their friends on their Twitter feeds and Facebook pages. No extra credit or incentive was awarded for completing the questionnaire to students or nonstudents. The survey was attempted by 445 respondents. Incomplete surveys and/or those completed by college students who did not pin or post photos to Pinterest (i.e., they merely browsed) were discarded from the sample. The hypotheses were tested using EQS software on 257 completed surveys.

Women are more represented in our sample of pinners and posters of photographs on Pinterest (89% female, 11% male). Most participants were between the ages of 18 and 25 (78.6%), 10.9% reported ages of 26 to 34, and 10.5% were 35 or older. Users pin photographs to their pages at an average rate of once a week, 20% pin them more than five times a week, and 29% pin two to five times a week. Original photographs are posted only about once a month. Similarly, photographs seen on other websites are posted about once a month; 36.5% of users report that they do so more than twice a week. A total of 68% of participants never posted an original photograph, and 20% of participants never posted a photograph they had encountered on the web; in other words, the Pinterest environment emerges as somewhat of an echo chamber: a small percent of users post most of the original photographs and the rest select them for pinning on their pages (e.g., Biddle 2012).

Most common photos pinned relate to recipes (70%), home décor (61%), DIY (60%), weddings (41%), travel and leisure (38%), and plants and gardens (11.3%). Most Pinterest usage occurred on laptops (39.7%) followed by iPhones (32.3%), desktops (16%), and iPad (10.5%). Of sampled users, 93% were also registered users of Facebook (40% highly active users), 69% used Twitter (29.6% highly active users), 56.8% used Instagram (23% highly active users), and 52.9% used YouTube (6.6% highly active users).

## DATA ANALYSIS

The hypotheses were tested simultaneously using a structural equation model (using EQS 6.1 software). The data analysis was conducted as follows. First, because all scales are qualitative data derived for the Pinterest-usage context, we

took steps to purify the measurement model. A six-step confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to determine whether the defined constructs were structurally coherent (see Table 1 for associated statistics). The base model included latent factors and measured variables for the three major constructs in the hypothesized model (i.e., groundedness, authenticity, and enrichment). Robust estimation was used to estimate goodness of fit because nonnormality is known to bias multivariate estimation (Bentler and Wu 2002). The Lagrange multiplier (LM) tests were used to identify items that cross-loaded on more than one latent variable, which were then deleted from the model.

### Reliability and Validity of Scales

We used Hair and colleagues' (1998) guidelines to assess composite reliability of latent variables. As Table 2 shows, the values of composite reliability for each of the three constructs is greater than 0.7 (see Table 3 for Cronbach's alphas of original measurement scales).

We used only five-point Likert scales for measuring the three constructs of interest to ensure face validity. Content validity was established in the following way. We used qualitative data to identify the constructs of interest and to identify the universe of items that constituted each construct. The scale development was guided by Churchill (1979) and Gerbing and Anderson (1988). We also found theoretical evidence to support the inclusion of each item in the measurement scales. Because we used qualitative-data-derived scales, we closely followed the guidelines of Fornell and Larcker (1981) and Hair and colleagues (1998) to ensure construct validity. Convergent validity was established as follows. The notion that groundedness antecedes authenticity was first derived from qualitative data. We also identified supporting notions in the literature that show psychological well-being—a construct analogous to our data-derived notion of groundedness—as convergent to authenticity (see White 2011). The significant linkage between this antecedent (groundedness) and the main construct of interest (authenticity) suggested convergent validity of the latter construct.

We addressed issues of discriminant validity in three ways. First, the correlations between the latent variables range from 0.16 to 0.577 (see Table 2)—in other words, significantly less than 0.8—which would indicate that a problem validity likely exists with discriminant (see Yanamandram and White 2006). Second, we correlated responses to two similar but conceptually different constructs based on extant theory. For instance, White (2011) notes that the five personality traits are discriminant factors of authenticity. Based on this theory, we included three items designed to assess “emotional stability” (part of the five personality trait measure developed by Wood et al. 2008). As theoretically predicted, the correlation between this scale and our data-derived scale for authenticity is insignificant ( $r = 0.017$ ,  $p = 0.791$ ). We also tested the discriminant validity of each of the three latent variables in our study using guidelines by Hair and colleagues (1998), and Fornell and Larcker (1981). In particular, we estimated the average variance extracted (AVE) for each of the three latent variables and compared them with the squared correlations among them. As Table 2 shows, all AVE values are greater than 0.5 and greater than squared correlations ( $R^2$ ) among constructs, attesting to discriminant validity (e.g., Fornell and Larcker 1981; Hair et al. 1998).

### Findings

Once cross-loading variables were eliminated, and the purified constructs were tested for reliability and construct validity, the two guiding hypotheses were simultaneously tested, in other words, the structural equation modeling (SEM) procedure was conducted after paths linking groundedness, authenticity, and enrichment were specified (see Figure 1a for the hypothesized model derived from the focus groups). Even though the Wald's test is used at this stage to identify paths in the theoretical base model that should be dropped because of insignificant  $t$  statistics, this step was not necessary; the model converged at the first iteration with excellent fit indices (Bentler and Wu 2002). The fit statistics are excellent; Mardia's coefficient was 49.92; and average absolute standardized residual was 0.0368 (off-diagonal residual was 0.0417), RMSEA = 0.046 (90% confidence interval was 0.029 to 0.6),

TABLE 2  
Key Statistics

Construct	$CR^a$	$AVE^b$	Correlations ( $R^2$ ) <sup>c</sup>		
			Groundedness	Authenticity	Enrichment
Groundedness	0.79	0.56	1	0.283 (0.08)	0.16 (0.026)
Authenticity	0.88	0.51	0.283 (0.08)	1	0.577 (0.33)
Enrichment	0.84	0.52	0.16 (0.025)	(0.33)	1

<sup>a</sup>Construct reliability (all values are greater than 0.7, attesting to reliability of measures). <sup>b</sup>Average variance extracted. <sup>c</sup>Please note that all AVE values are greater than  $R^2$ , attesting to discriminant validity.

TABLE 3  
Scales (Five-Point Likert)

Construct	Variable name	Survey item
Groundedness (Alpha: 0.76)	G1	I am very clear about the values that drive my behavior.
	G2	I am very aware of the positive aspects of my personality.
	G3	I think I am strongly in touch with the reality in which I exist.
Authenticity (Alpha: 0.896)	A1	The photos I pin or post on Pinterest . . . . . . represent what I am truly about. (dropped at step 4 of the purification process)
	A2	. . . show the true complexity of who I am as a person.
	A3	. . . are a reflection of the choices I have made about my life.
	A4	. . . have helped me develop a clearer sense of who I am over time. (dropped at step 1 of the purification process)
	A5	. . . are a reliable reflection of who I am, and this reflection will endure.
	A6	. . . provide a credible and verifiable portrait of what I am as a person.
	A7	. . . reflect my true interests. (dropped at step 2 of the purification process)
	A8	. . . reflect what I truly value.
	A9	. . . say a lot about the expectations I have set for myself.
	A10	. . . is the most accurate, undistorted image I have of myself. (dropped at step 5 of the purification process)
	A11	. . . reflects what I find highly meaningful.
Enrichment (Alpha: 0.85)	SI1	As a result of the photos I pin or post on Pinterest, I can truly say that . . . . . . I have discovered who I really am. (dropped at step 3 of the purification process)
	SI2	. . . I have greater confidence in my ability to express myself to others.
	SI3	. . . I have become a more organized person.
	SI4	. . . I have learned a lot about myself in terms of what I want.
	SI5	. . . I have become better connected with who I really am.
	SI6	. . . I have become better connected with my culture and traditions.
Personality traits (for discriminant validity)	Low emotional stability	Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements: I often feel critical of myself. I often envy others. I am temperamental.

NNFI = 0.965, CFI = 0.964, and IFI = 0.965 (Hair et al. 1998; see Table 4 for standardized solutions). In other words, the hypothesized model we derived from focus groups (see Figure 1a) was validated in the first iteration of the SEM procedure (the parameter estimates are shown in Figure 1b).

### Implications for Research

A brief mention of caveats and limitations of the study is essential for framing the discussion of implications that

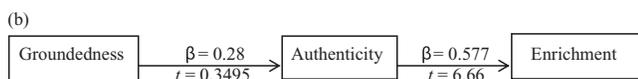


FIG. 1b. Model (and hypotheses) validation by the SEM procedure: Why college students use Pinterest (parameter estimates and  $t$  statistics).

follow. First, our findings are consistent with our intent to stimulate new thinking and research; caution should be exercised before treating them as generalizable theory. Additional testing of constructs, scales, and linkages shown in Figure 1a, using random samples, is clearly warranted. Second, our model is intentionally parsimonious. We focused on the most plausible answer to our research question (why college students use Pinterest) based on qualitative research and its most plausible antecedent and consequences. Although we do not find evidence in our focus groups, additional motivations, antecedents, and consequences likely exist. Their discovery is left to future research. Third, although we collected data from 445 respondents, we conducted our analysis based on respondents who reported they pinned or posted photographs to their pages ( $n = 257$ ). In other words, we eliminated the responses of people who took the survey but only browsed without

TABLE 4  
Standardized Solution for the Hypothesized Model (Shown in Figure 1b)

Latent variable	Variable	Beta	Error	R-square
F1: Groundedness	I am very clear about the values that drive my behavior.	.762	.648	.580
	I am very aware of the positive aspects of my personality.	.837	.547	.700
	I think I am strongly in touch with the reality in which I exist.	.627	.779	.394
F2: Authenticity	... shows the true complexity of who I am as a person.	.617	.787	.381
	... is a reflection of the choices I have made about my life.	.646	.763	.418
	... are a reliable reflection of who I am, and this reflection will endure.	.734	.679	.538
	... provides a credible and verifiable portrait of what I am as a person.	.798	.603	.636
	... reflects what I truly value.	.753	.659	.566
	... says a lot about the expectations I have set for myself.	.691	.723	.478
F3: Enrichment	... reflects what I find highly meaningful.	.760	.650	.578
	... I have greater confidence in my ability to express myself to others.	.668	.744	.446
	... I have become a more organized person.	.635	.772	.403
	... I have learned a lot about myself in terms of what I want.	.805	.594	.647
	... I have become better connected with who I really am.	.836	.549	.699
	... I have become better connected with my culture and traditions.	.650	.760	.422

pinning or posting. Exploration of differences between browsers and pinners/posters is left to future research. Moreover, the 16 students who participated in the focus groups also completed the survey; the remaining enrollees in the classes ( $n = 22$  and  $28$ , respectively) were not Pinterest users. Hence their responses were removed from the data. We cannot estimate the extent to which these 16 responses (of 257, or 6.2%) may have biased our results. Hence, it remains a weakness of the study. Fourth, we used SEM methodology to conduct CFA to purify scales and simultaneously estimate path coefficients; we do not claim to have produced evidence of causal relationships (consistent with Fornell and Larcker 1981). Estimation of causal linkages is similarly left to future research. Finally, the argument for the direction of the arrows shown in Figure 1a is derived entirely from the qualitative research and not from the SEM procedure, and our interest in antecedents and consequences of the primary motivation that drives Pinterest usage. This should address concerns about why the arrows point the way they do in Figure 1a. Exploration of relationships other than those shown in Figure 1a is left to future research.

### Brands as Authentic Experiences

Leading marketing scholars have long advocated that brands ought to focus on consumption experiences of users (Holbrook 1999). Aligned with this line of thinking, our findings point to the merits of conceptualizing brand experiences of authenticity—because it emerges as a powerful driver of Pinterest usage among college students. Consider the following evidence to suggest that new research into authentic experiences sought by social media users is warranted. First, one-third of all today's marriages begin with online dating

(Steinmetz 2013; Lo, Hsieh, and Chiu 2013). A sizable segment of Americans seems willing to navigate around psychosocially risky terrain filled with posers and false representatives, and overcome their fear of trusting people on the web who may falsely represent themselves, in their search for meaning, authenticity, and intimacy (i.e., the desire for authenticity trumps their fears of being “catfished”). Moreover, the notion that social media usage, brand experiences, and authenticity are inextricably linked is also supported in the literature. For instance, scholars have presented compelling evidence to show that Facebook users use brands to reflect both their authentic as well as their ideal sense of self (e.g., Hollenbeck and Kaikati 2012). Second, recent evidence suggests that (a) customers want to relate to firms, particularly those with higher incomes, based on authenticity and (b) organizations aiming to create authentic brand experiences produce “loyal advocates for the brand.” Hence, the following questions deserve fresh academic scrutiny: (1) To what extent, if any, do marketers (and their brands) produce experiences of authenticity and enrichment for their targeted customers—not just for college students (for some pioneering thinking about authenticity in marketing see Beverland 2006 and Leigh, Peters, and Shelton 2006)? (2) How can the “brand usage as an experience of authenticity and enrichment” construct be defined and measured (see Srivastava and Thomas 2010 for more on “brand experience”).

### Social Media as Soliloquy

The focal cognitive process of Pinterest usage among college students is not a conversation with others; it is a soliloquy. Pinterest users are not telling others about how interesting they are; they are engaged in primarily defining for themselves their

deeply held, authentic interests. This finding is meaningful because it extends current thinking. The best minds who have spoken about effective ways of using social media have advocated the focus on a two-way conversation and highlighted the sharp contrast with current, one-way brand communication. Consider the following:

The biggest mistake companies make with social media is similar to the same mistake they've been making since the dawn of the digital age: They think of it as one-way communication. They think they can use these tools to talk AT people rather than chat WITH them, and fail to value the input coming from the other side of what becomes a pseudo-conversation. For example, marketing departments often talk collaboration, but when it comes to action, they still think of themselves as pushing a message out. (Kanter 2013)

To add to this line of thinking, we learn that effective communication via Pinterest is related to aiding a soliloquy. Soliloquy is linked to groundedness (e.g., Stevens-Long 2011); it is a powerful cognitive or "thinking mechanism" linked to intense emotional engagement (see Shields 2009, p. 559, for more on power of soliloquy). Soliloquys are critical to the process by which people come to define themselves as complex socioemotional entities (e.g., Athens 1994). Similarly, soliloquys help people structure their thinking, release their emotional energy, and eventually help people communicate with others (Grumet 1985). That the Pinterest user's soliloquy is critical to the drawing of meaning and in the search for authentic, enrichment experiences among college students is a clear implication of our study. It is likely that marketing communication functions—skilled at speaking to and interacting with customers—are underprepared to foster target audience's soliloquies. Additional thinking and research to help marketers develop these skills on social media is sorely needed.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERS

Our findings produce the following implications for managers interested in using Pinterest to target the college student segment of the population, and to build their brand and drive sales. First, contrary to what is recently reported, we find that Pinterest is more useful for branders interested in attracting female rather than male college students (for a contrary notion, see Aquino 2013). We find that the epicenter of usage among this demographic is likely to remain female (89% female users in our study). The emergence of new social media that mimic Pinterest but appeal to males suggests that this gender-based difference among users will likely endure. For instance, MANTERESTING.COM—a new social media platform—with photographs of muscle cars and workbenches, suggests that interested men might find compelling alternatives to Pinterest (Spitznagel 2013).

Second, branders should note that Pinterest usage occurs in a temporal context. Users draw meaning from their curated photographs *and* from the temporal narratives that produced

them (see Vallaster and von Wallpach 2013 for more on derivation of meaning from brands). The Pinterest experience is recalled more as a newsreel and less as a montage; consider the evidence of temporality. The experience of authenticity is composed of the following temporal components: (a) the results of choices made about one's life, (b) an enduring description of oneself, and (c) future expectations one has set. Branders might consider doing the same, in other words, providing temporal narratives of their brands via carefully curated photographs that viewers experience as a timeline. What came before, what came after, and what is coming in the future are clear concerns of Pinterest users. Not coincidentally, a search for "Coca-Cola" produces a large number of photographs of period posters and those that can produce nostalgic musings. Psychologists report something very similar: the concept of "self" is known to emerge as an experience over time and in light of shifting consciousness of the reality in which one finds oneself (e.g., Stevens-Long 2011). Memory and recall (particularly "remembering") is strongly linked to the recollection of temporal contexts (Rimmele, Davachi, and Phelps 2012).

Third, branders should consider that the Pinterest-using college student is developing a connection with her or his traditions and culture, and that such connections are critical components of their enrichment experience. Branders must learn to do the same on Pinterest; they must use their curated photographs in ways that allow Pinterest users to develop the connection with their own culture and traditions. Somewhere between "culture-vultures," or brands pretending to be overtly interested in history and arts, and "cultureless" brands, or those that are shallow, momentary, faddish, devoid of depth and fake, is the realm of "authentic portrayal of the brand's culture and traditions." Branders might find it useful to develop photographic narratives of their culture and traditions to connect with Pinterest-using college students. For instance, photographs of employees—the real people who design, manufacture, produce, process, distribute, and deliver the brand—may help showcase the firm's true self and its cultural traditions (see Thouli 2013 blog for similar notions). Fostering interactions between employees responsible for the brands and Pinterest-using college students is likely to (a) foster a brand community (see Zaglia 2013 for similar notions) and (b) generate meanings for the brand that can enhance the experience of authenticity (see Vallaster and von Wallpach 2013 for similar notions). Branders may consider showcasing not just their own but also the curated albums created by other, authentic users of the brand. Consider that Satsuki Shibuya, a Pinterest user with more than one million followers, gets paid \$15 to \$1,200 when she pins an image of a brand on her pages (Chafkin 2012, p. 147).

### CONCLUSION

College students are not just a sizable segment in their own right; they are the lucrative market of tomorrow. Learning

about their Pinterest usage and finding ways of connecting with them at this stage promises dividends for years. Our study suggests that Pinterest-using college students are psychologically healthy and seeking an authentic experience, and views their Pinterest usage as enriching. We learn that not all brands and not all firms can connect equally well with this segment of Pinterest users—for it is a realm of authenticity and enrichment that does not lend itself to all marketers or all brands. Harnessing the power of Pinterest will require marketers to carefully examine the brand's core proposition, produce historically and contextually rich, temporally ordered, and tastefully curated photographic albums to aid in their target audience's authenticity- and enrichment-seeking experiences—and these are skills that many brand managers do not currently possess. Despite what marketers espouse, an effective Pinterest presence may require them to (a) abandon assumptions that favor “it is all in the saying” and adopt new ways of thinking about customers seeking new experiences, for example, “it is all in the being of genuineness, veracity, and authenticity”; and (b) focus on psychologically healthy people and appeal to their desire for positive experiences rather than those associated with hedonism, voyeurism, narcissism, or fantasy. In other words, abandon old and adopt new ways of thinking and doing.

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