Dreams of Gain Without Pain

The Affective Allure of Pinterest's Studyinspo Phenomenon

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Studyinspo – a portmanteau of the words "studying" and "inspiration" – is a name for a loose online community wherein users on different social media platforms document and share their academic pursuits in photographic form and access the content created by others, all in order to inspire and draw inspiration from one another. One of the most peculiar characteristics of the phenomenon is the distinctive visual look of the content associated with it. Not only is Studyinspo imagery easily recognisable due to its focus on certain subject matters – most notably, study-related everyday items such as books, note pads, and writing utensils – but the feeling one is imparted with when encountering these images is that of an almost overwhelming pleasure. In these photographs, typically quite unremarkable objects are portrayed in a highly attractive manner, and the harmonised compositions they form evoke a deep sense of satisfaction within the viewer. Even when cluttered writing desks or pages after pages of hand-written notes are depicted, the content circulating within the community remains inexplicably pleasant to look at.

Studyinspo imagery's peculiar effect on us poses various questions to those interested in the relationships between people and digital media. Why do these images make us feel this way, and why has a community like this formed in the first place – especially around studying? In this master's thesis, these questions will be answered through phenomenological media analysis, drawing dominantly from the insights of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. By examining Studyinspo imagery as it exists on image-centric social media platform Pinterest, it will be demonstrated that the phenomenon's appeal is based on the haptic dimensions of individual photographs – particularly their smoothness and orderliness – which the viewer experiences both as a visual fact and as a deeply pleasurable tactile affect. Furthermore, as an exploration of the neoliberal realities of contemporary education systems in the USA and Europe reveals, engaging with virtual content that depicts studying as a deeply pleasurable activity serves a clearly defined purpose. In a world where the mental wellbeing of students is at all-time low, the pleasure emanating from Studyinspo images relieves the community member's mental anguish and encourages them to continue their pursuits in hopes of attaining the same sense of enjoyment in their personal lives. Ultimately, it will be argued that what Studyinspo content on Pinterest provides are dreams of gain without pain – attractive glimpses into a world which, for as long as the realities dictating the Studyinspo enthusiasts' lives remain the same, will unfortunately remain out of reach.

Keywords: phenomenology, photography, Pinterest, social media, studying

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1   Introduction

The contemporary world is abounding with visuals. Regardless of if one actively seeks them out or not, an average person sees countless images – both traditional and of the moving kind – every day. There are photographs, audiovisual media, illustrations, graphs, and symbols of various sizes, styles, and purposes all around us: some of them inform, some argue, some advertise, and some entertain.

While the creation of images is a practice as old as humanity itself, the limits of their circulation has always been tied to the technological realities of each era. Indeed, the abundance of the visual that we enjoy today is a result of numerous developments throughout history. What began with the invention of the printing press and was later advanced by photography and videography has now reached yet another milestone with the introduction of digital technologies and the internet. Today, practically all constraints for the circulation of visual content have been removed: as long as an image has been uploaded to the internet, it can – at least in theory – be viewed simultaneously by a limitless number of people from all across the globe.

Contemporary technologies have also revolutionised how images are created and reproduced. Today, an increasing number of digital devices come with built-in cameras and programs aiding with the creation of visual content from illustrations to infographics, while other applications allow one to create copies of or edit already existing content. When these creations are shared with others, it is more often than not through the internet, as it has been estimated that the number of images online grows every day by 1.8 billion photographs alone (Meeker 2014). All in all, it is no exaggeration to say that the digital technologies have revolutionised everything about our relationship with man-made visuals.

1.1   Studyinspo – inspiration for studying

As accessing and sharing visual content digitally has become easier and easier, the internet has seen the emergence of many pictorial online phenomena. *Studyinspo* (a portmanteau of "studying" and "inspiration") is one of the many names for a loose online community of people who create and share digital content related to studying. As the name implies, the goal of those involved with the community is to inspire and be inspired by one another in ways related to studying. This inspiration can range from general motivation to keep working hard for one's academic goals to practical tips on how one can improve as a learner. The most

visible and arguably the most popular activity associated with Studyinspo, however, involves simply "sharing" one's studies with others in the form of photographs or video.

Although it is near impossible to measure the popularity of phenomena such as Studyinspo, its notability has been recognised by multiple writers. The community has been generally met with positivity, and not for the least because of its popularity among high school and university aged girls and women (Vickery 2015: para. 1). Although one might assume that great preoccupation with academic success would encourage overworking and harsh competition between community members, Iris Dumoulin notes that mental health and self-care are frequently discussed topics among Studyinspo enthusiasts (Dumoulin 2019: para. 10). In a similar vein, Jacqueline Vickery commends the spirit of peer-to-peer learning that permeates the community (Vickery 2015: para. 13). Kaite Welsh even goes as far as to defend the phenomenon as profoundly feminist, as it provides young women with a space where the focus is not on their appearance, but rather, on their skills and abilities (Welsh 2015: para. 8).

That said, there is something peculiar about Studyinspo that all these writers make note of, but none explore further: the fact that the visual content circulating within the community has a very particular look to it. Here, I do not refer to the mere subject matter. While it is true that Studyinspo imagery tends to depict almost solely certain objects – mainly study-related everyday items such as books, note pads, and writing utensils – what I am more interested in is that there is something extraordinarily pleasing about these images, a quality which is hard to pinpoint, but is seemingly shared between all of them. Their compositions are pleasant to look at, the balance between different elements feels extremely harmonised, and even when cluttered writing desks or pages after pages of hand-written notes are featured, these areas impart the viewer with a sense of satisfaction rather than anxiety. All in all, something about the visual style of the content circulating under the Studyinspo name is homogenous to the point that one cannot help but wonder about the significance of its aesthetics.

1.2 Pinterest – an image-centric social media platform

Out of the countless communities and networks hosting content online, the most popular ones today are so-called social media platforms. Although most social media providers support multiple kinds of user-created content on their platforms, some of the most popular services worldwide – such as 2,5 billion active users' video sharing site YouTube and 2 billion users'

photo-centric platform Instagram (Statista 2023) – have been developed specifically with visual content in mind.

Another social media site of a smaller, yet still notable, calibre is Pinterest with its 442 million active users worldwide (Statista 2023). As the site's self-described title of a 'visual discovery engine' (About Pinterest n.d.: para. 1) suggests, the content circulating on it is, as in the case of YouTube and Instagram, of the visual kind – specifically images. However, what makes Pinterest quite interesting is the fact that its core purpose differs greatly from the previously mentioned platforms, as the main activity on the site is not publishing or viewing, but a wholly different way of engaging with the content circulating on it.

In practice, this engagement with content on Pinterest takes the form of "collecting" images on the website by sorting them into self-created collections. These collections – or, in the language of the platform, "boards" – function as the organizational unit of the website. The term is likely intended to evoke an association with real-life notice boards, as the two share many features: just as one would pin things on a notice board, a Pinterest user can add visual content to a digital board with a click of a mouse. Each user can create up to 2 000 boards (Pinterest Help Center, n.d.), and as such, maintain multiple collections dedicated to different topics. To further draw comparisons between physical notice boards and the Pinterest variant, the act of adding content to one's collections is called "pinning", and each image in a collection is called a "pin" – hence the name of the website. Following these naming conventions, the user base of the website is also sometimes referred to as "pinners".

Because the content on Pinterest consists solely of images, the Studyinspo community has found a solid foothold on the site. However, estimating the popularity of the phenomenon on the platform is difficult due to the lack of data on the topic. That said, Studyinspo enthusiasts who identify themselves as such do definitely exist on the site, as simply typing "studyinspo" in Pinterest's search bar brings up hundreds and hundreds of images that are aesthetically identical to the content circulating on all other popular visually focused social media sites.

1.3   Studysinpo on Pinterest – dreams of gain without pain?

Studyinspo is in many ways a curious online phenomenon. Firstly, the heavy emphasis on visual content within the community evokes various questions. In an abstract sense, the idea of being inspired by images does sound plausible, but how does one do so in practice? To

phraise the question differently, what exactly do Studyinspo enthusiasts draw inspiration from – what is it about the phenomenon that captures their hearts and minds in the first place?

Secondly, there are the questions evoked by the very particular aesthetic of Studyinspo imagery. Why does there seem to be a certain "look" to the content circulating under the Studysinpo name? Alternatively, what defines the aesthetics of Studyinspo – what stylistic choices does this imagery employ, and what is their exact effect on those consuming Studyinspo content? There is likely a connection between the phenomenon's particular aesthetic and its "inspirational" qualities, but how are the two related to one another?

Thirdly, societal implications of Studyinspo as a phenomenon are also of particular interest to me. Of all activities to be represented in this highly pleasing manner, why does studying in particular have a whole community dedicated to it? What are the circumstances from which Studyinspo has emerged, and what can the phenomenon tell us about the realities that learners all around the globe are facing today?

The peculiarities of Pinterest make its Studyinspo community a particularly interesting case study. The dual acts of providing and drawing inspiration form the throughline of Studyinspo on all platforms, but on Pinterest these functions are built into the very concept of the website. As Linder at al. argue, the user activities on Pinterest – discovering, collecting, and organising content – resemble the processes involved in any kind of ideation: namely, the use creativity and human reasoning to generate new ideas from already existing information (Linder et al. 2014: 2411). In this sense, to use Pinterest is synonymous with being inspired by the content one interacts with on the platform. Seeing as questions regarding the inspiring nature of Studyinspo imagery form the very core of this master's thesis, it is my contention that focusing specifically on Pinterest could prove especially fruitful when it comes to understanding the phenomenon.

Based on these deliberations, the research questions of this master's thesis are the following:

- What about Studyinspo imagery makes it so appealing to the people frequenting the Pinterest community dedicated to it?
- What qualities define the visual look of Studyinspo imagery, and how do they contribute to the phenomenon's overall appeal?
- What societal factors help to explain the popularity of the Studyinspo phenomenon as it exists today?

This master's thesis approaches the Studyinspo phenomenon through the tradition of media phenomenology, influenced largely by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Against this theoretical backdrop, several Studyinspo images and comments attached to them will be analysed, all deriving from a set of 275 pins collected via Pinterest's built-in search engine using the keyword "studyinspo" in December of 2022. Although the images analysed in this master's thesis are all photographs, the theorists cited will come from a great variety of backgrounds from visual arts to cinema. This is done to both address the gaps in the phenomenological theory of photography and to deepen it by drawing from closely related fields of study.

As will be demonstrated by my analysis of Studyinspo as it exists on Pinterest, the crux of the phenomenon's allure rests on the haptic qualities of its imagery – particularly their smoothness and orderliness – which are capable of evoking great visual and tactile pleasure within the viewer. The appeal of these photographs, however, goes even deeper than this. In a world where neoliberal ideology has gained a solid foothold in educational systems throughout the world, the increasing pressure to perform well at school and compete with one's peers has led to an alarming rise in stress, depression, and anxiety among students. Studyinspo imagery helps to relieve some of this suffering by not only enhancing the mood of the individuals consuming such content, but also by encouraging them to continue believing in studying as a meaningful and pleasurable activity. However, seeing as the real-life circumstances surrounding Studyinspo enthusiasts remain dreary, the highly aestheticized and deeply pleasurable imagery circulating within Pinterest under the Studyinspo name ultimately amounts only to – as the name of this masters' thesis suggests – dreams of gain without pain.

2 The overlooked tactility of inspiring imagery – literature review and methodology

Ever since the platform's initial launch in 2010, Pinterest has garnered interest from all across academia. Owing to its status as one of the social media juggernauts, researchers from a variety of fields – from media studies to computer science and from sociology to consumer and marketing research – have sought to understand what Pinterest users do with the time spent on the platform and what compels them to keep coming back to it. Seeing as the question of the site's allure is central to this master's thesis, this chapter will examine what previous research has revealed about the underlying motivations for the continued use of Pinterest by its userbase. As will be demonstrated, there exists an overlooked dimension to the experience of using the platform – one which, if examined further, has the potential to broaden our understanding the appeal of not only Pinterest, but also of its Studyinspo community.

2.1 Past research on the pleasures of Pinterest

At first glance, Pinterest seems quite similar to other contemporary social media platforms. Making use of the full range of the site's features requires one to create a user profile on the platform, and as the "social" in social media implies, Pinterest provides these profiles various means to interact with one other: public discussions between users are made possible through a commenting function embedded with each pin, whereas the platform's direct messaging system facilitates more private conversations. In addition to these, there exists a function through which users can "follow" other profiles or individual pinboards. In practice, this means being able to see whenever a followed user has pinned something new or when new pins are added to a followed board. These pins can be found from the user's so-called Home feed which, in addition to followed content, recommends the user new pins based on their previous activities on the site.

Despite the various features supporting interaction between users, one of the key findings of previous research has been that pinners are surprisingly disinterested in socialising with one another. Unlike the users on platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, they are unconcerned with gaining the attention of their on-site peers (Zarro et al. 2013: 656 & Linder et al. 2014: 2415): for example, Barbara J. Phillips et al. note that the user profile descriptions on the platform tend to be short and vague, communicating very little about the pinner to others

(Phillips et al. 2014: 641). Similarly, Pinterest's user base often disregards the platform's existing social features, with the ability to add comments to individual pins being a particularly overlooked function (Hall & Zarro 2012: 5; Linder et al. 2014: 2415; Phillips et al. 2014: 641). Studies have also found that Pinterest users prefer to follow individual boards rather than each other (Zarro et al. 2013: 656), which indicates that even when these social features are made use of, pinners show little interest in the people they are engaging with. All in all, researchers have described Pinterest as a 'private' (Phillips et al. 2015: 640) and 'solitary' (Linder et al 2014: 2415) online space, a 'community of people who [do not know] each other' (Zarro et al. 2013: 5).

If interacting with other people is not what compels Pinterest's user base to continue using the site, what is? Most researchers agree that the main appeal of the platform is the content circulating on it and the ability to sort said content into collections of the user's fancy. Many (Phillips et al. 2014; Lui 2015; Wilson & Yochim 2015) have likened this activity to scrapbooking, a practice wherein physical pictures are used as crafting materials to create decorative albums that pay homage to an individual's life, interests, and aspirations. Indeed, pinning resembles scrapbooking in many ways: both revolve around bringing together suitable visual content in order to craft collage-like assemblances with meanings that can at times differ greatly from the ones given to the images in their original context (Phillips et al. 2014: 636–634). Just as a glamour shot of a celebrity can be cut out from a magazine and be placed in a scrapbook dedicated to an individual's dream outfits, the same can happen now in the digital environment.

While the comparison between pinboards and scrapbooks seems rather apt, there has been some debate regarding its accuracy. Hillary A. Jones (2016) has challenged some researchers' tendency to conflate the two practices, as there is one notable difference between them. Whereas traditional scrapbooks have largely been invested with an individual's past – commemorating important events in their lives such as holidays, weddings, and births of new family members (Jones 2016: 358) – pinboards do not operate the same way, as demonstrated by the fact that sharing personal images on the site is a rare occurrence (Phillips et al. 2014: 641). Instead, Jones argues that the scrapbooking-like activity taking place on Pinterest is, above all else, focused on what is yet to come (Jones 2016: 358). The pinned images do not represent the users' pasts or even presents, but what they are hoping for their futures to look like: as Jones describes,

> Pinterest's yearning engages users in imagining […] all parts of life. Browsing the site is like being assailed by Vogue, Shape, GQ, Better Homes & Gardens, and hundreds of other magazines, all at once. […] The "ideal" woman constructed rhetorically on Pinterest plans perfect meals and custom cocktails for perfect parties […], dresses a body honed by perfect workouts with the ideal outfit, dons perfect makeup and nail polishes, dresses her partner and children perfectly, and welcomes guests into a perfectly designed home featuring perfect photos from perfect vacations and previous parties. (Jones 2016: 359)

Because of the aspirational nature of pinning as an activity, Jones describes the manner in which users engage with the content on the platform "future-oriented yearning" and argues that the pleasure derived from this phenomenon is one of the key factors accounting for the allure of Pinterest as a platform (Jones 2016: 358, 356).

The idea of future-oriented yearning as a central motivation for using Pinterest has been recognised by many researchers (Phillips et al. 2014; Wilson & Yochim 2015; Bore 2019). One particularly useful addition to Jones' framework are the concepts of aspirational and inspirational engagement, as suggested by Phillips et al. (2014). In their textual analysis of 20 pinboards containing almost 2 300 images, the researchers observed that while the boards were indeed typically dedicated to yet unrealised goals and dreams of the users, their temporal orientations could differ greatly. Some boards were focused on the users' immediate futures, in which case their pins tended to form a coherent vision and depict feasible, realistic scenarios. At the same time, other boards were oriented towards more distant futures, as demonstrated by their less defined focus and tendency to include images with vague or more fantastical content. To separate these two different modes of thinking about the future, Phillips et al. call the former kinds of pinboards "aspirational" and the latter "inspirational". (Phillips et al. 2014: 640)

When examined through Phillips et al.'s framework, examples of both aspirational and inspirational motivations can be found everywhere in scholarly work on pinning. On the aspirational side of things, Elizabeth A. Pittard (2017) has found that Pinterest's teaching-related content is an important resource to elementary school teachers in the United States, whose previously guaranteed access to state-sponsored materials has dwindled as the result of the country's recent education policies. Similarly, the interviewees in Rhema Linder et al. frequently brought up situations where they had used pinboards to aggregate ideas and visual

references for specific near-future occasions such as birthday parties (Linder et al. 2014: 2417). When it comes to users with an inspirational approach to pinning, examples include Julie Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim's study of Pinterest's mothering-focused "mamashphere" (2015), Nicola Rodger's analysis of the platform's literature-celebrating "bookish" community (2019), and Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore's examination of yet another curious on-site phenomenon of celebrity airport photography (2019). In each study, the underlying motivation behind pinning has been identified as the joy derived from the users being able delve into their fantasies of an ideal future, or as Phillips et al. describe it, to 'daydream out loud' (Phillips et al. 2014: 648).

While a notable amount of attention has been dedicated to the aspirational and inspirational pleasures of Pinterest, previous research has for the most part failed to examine what about the visual content on Pinterest in particular encourages the pinners to let their fantasies run free. In the case of aspirational pinning, the explanation provided by Phillips et al. seems rather satisfactory. Because of their specificity and real-life feasibility, the images on aspirational pinboards are best understood as practical purchase decision aid: by arousing the users' imaginations, they help one to parse together the plans one has for one's immediate future, such as renovating one's kitchen or organising one's wedding reception (Phillips et al. 2014: 644–645). On the other hand, the scholars focusing on inspirational kinds of pinning have for the most part ignored the question of the pins' appeal. Most (Phillips et al. 2014; Wilson & Yochim 2015) seem satisfied with the notion that the objects or scenarios featured in individual images are what makes them attractive for users, but the vagueness of this explanation begs for elaboration.

When previous research has examined the appeal of inspiring imagery, however, the resulting insights have been of great potential. One particularly interesting work in this regard has been the previously mentioned study by Rodger (2019), which analyses a Pinterest community of literature lovers referred by her as the "bookish" community, the imagery of which – consisting of tastefully arranged bookshelves and close-ups of beautifully illustrated book covers – resembles in many ways the content circulating within the Studyinspo community (Rodger 2019: 475). What makes Rodger's work especially insightful is her exploration of the affective dimensions of books and reading. She suggests that the sensory experiences associated with books are so strong that even mere photographic depictions of them can at times arouse these sensations within us – 'to urge [us] to engage with the affective and effective powers of a book'. A pinboard collection consisting of these sensorially potent

images can thus be understood as yet another example of the inspirational nature of Pinterest. Here, one does not daydream of merely possessing a great number of books, but also of the sensations of being 'surrounded […] enveloped [and] overcome' by them. (Rodger 2019: 482).

Although Rodger never elaborates how the bookish imagery on Pinterest could evoke such experiences, the possibility of affect-laid daydreams accounting for the attractiveness of pinning as an activity is an intriguing one. To explore the topic further, however, one would need to dive deeper into the images themselves: noting that pins are capable of arousing desirable sensations within individuals is a great start, yet breaking this process down ought to be the next step towards deepening the scholarly understanding of Pinterest as a platform. Seeing as this task is yet to be taken on by past researchers, it is only appropriate that this master's thesis will dedicate its full attention to it. While Rodger's study as a whole leans towards ethnography, her brief exploration of Pinterest's affective dimensions draws from the academic tradition of phenomenology, particularly the work of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. As such, I will now move on to discuss the history and present of this tradition, particularly its influence in the fields of media and cultural studies.

2.2   The possibilities of phenomenology

At its simplest, phenomenology can be defined as 'the study of lived experience of the world' (Laverty 2003: para. 6). The birth of the tradition as it exists today can be attributed to German philosopher Edmund Husserl. Dissatisfied with the positivist ethos of the philosophical community at the turn of the 20th century, Husserl sought to challenge the then dominant idea of our knowledge of the world as a stable given (Husserl 1907/1999: 15–16). As he noted, the experiences of an individual are always mediated by their senses, and thus, there exists a difference between the world as is and the word as we experience it: 'perception is nothing more than an experience that belongs to me, the perceiving subject' (Husserl 1907/1999: 17). As such, he argued that the task of the phenomenologist is to study the world as it is humanly experienced – what he called the 'lifeworld' – and its complex relationship with the 'pure phenomenon' of the world as a matter-of-course (Husserl 1907/1999: 33). To Husserl, being able to differentiate the initial experience of the world from the cognitively formulated interpretations of it was a crucial part of phenomenological analysis, and as such, much of his life's work focused on developing means to ground one's deliberations to what

he considered the bottommost layer of human experience – that which emerged from direct, immediate contact with the world (Laverty 2003: para. 6).

The newly established school of thought soon began to attract other thinkers, among them French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Like Husserl, Merleau-Ponty held that senses made the emergence of lifeworld possible yet argued that the individual sensations could only began to make sense when connected to a larger whole. To him, this whole was the human body, and it was this body's connection to the senses that made the emergence of human experience of the world possible: 'sensing […] invests the quality with a living value, grasps it first in its signification for us, for the weighty mass that is our body, and as a result sensing always includes a reference to the body' (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012: 78). Crucial here is Merleau-Ponty's notion of human experience as a bodily whole rather than the sum of individual, easily separable senses. Discussing the relationship between the body and the senses, he describes how

> I say that my eyes see, that my hand touches, and that my foot hurts, but these naïve expressions do not convey my genuine experience. They already present me with an interpretation of it that detaches it from its original subject. Because I know that light strikes my eyes, that contact is made by the skin, and that my shoe hurts my foot, I distribute the perceptions that belong to my soul into my body; I place perception within the perceived. But this is nothing but the spatial and temporal wake of conscious acts. If I consider them from within, *I find a single knowledge that has no location, a soul that has no parts*. (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012: 257. Emphasis mine.)

To Merleau-Ponty, then, the body is the vessel for the entirety of the human experience: 'the meaning that I give to the world is […] fundamentally informed by how I perceive it through my body' (Pearson 2019: 8).

In addition to proposing that different senses come together under the unifying influence of the body, Merleau-Ponty also suggests that they complement each other in peculiar ways. As he describes,

> We see the rigidity and the fragility of the glass and, when it breaks with a crystal-clear sound, this sound is borne by the visible glass. We see the elasticity of steel, the ductility of molten steel, the hardness of the blade in a plane, and the softness of its shavings. The form of objects is not their geometrical shape: the form has a certain

relation with their very nature and it speaks to all of our senses at the same time as it speaks to vision. (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012: 275)

This idea of the unity of the senses provides an explanation to an experience many of us have had, but few have examined further: that of an image – either traditional or of the moving kind – stirring sensations within us which somehow feel reminiscent of senses other than sight. Every once in a while one encounters an artwork that inexplicably "feels" a certain way – "soft", "rough", "smooth" or "sharp", for example – or sees a film that made them feel "like they were really there". While it would be easy to dismiss these experiences as either fantastical misinterpretations of one's bodily reactions or as elaborate figures of speech, Merleau-Ponty provides a compelling alternative explanation to the question of why man-made visuals can at times have such a profound impact on us.

Indeed, the value of Merleau-Ponty's insights has not been lost on scholars from the fields of media and cultural studies, especially those analysing visual artforms. At the visual arts side of things, theorists such as Nigel Wentworth (2004) and Paul Crowther (2017) owe a great deal to Merleau-Ponty, as does the lively field of phenomenological film studies as spearheaded by Vivian Sobchak (1992, 2004) and Jennifer M. Barker (2009). However, when it comes to the phenomenology of photography – the visual medium to which the content on Pinterest dominantly belongs to – Merleau-Ponty has been frequently overlooked, especially in lieu of another philosopher, Roland Barthes.

In an approach quite different from that of Merleau-Ponty, Barthes located much of photography's impact in the medium's complex relationship it has with reality: the fact that a photograph is always a depiction of something, 'carries its referent with itself' (Barthes 1981: 5). In addition to this, Barthes noted that photography 'immobilizes' the moments it depicts (Barthes 1981: 91) and was thus also an artform with a peculiar temporal dimension to itself. While Barthes' work does include many references to the bodily dimensions of the photographic experience, this idea of the medium as a capturer of what has once been remains central to his whole theory. Even his famous concept of punctum – a 'piercing' or 'pricking' sensation that one sometimes experiences when encountering a particularly impactful photograph (Barthes 1981: 26–27) – is something that he discusses for the most part only in relation to images that he sees as temporally arrested depictions of past events. For example, he describes the photographic portrait of Lewis Paine, an attempted assassinator of American civil rights activist William H. Steward in 1865, as follows:

> The photograph is handsome, as is the boy […] But the *punctum* is: *he is going to die.*
> I read at the same time: *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an
> anterior future of which death is the stake. (Barthes 1981: 96. Emphasis in original.)

While Barthes described his analysis as merely '[borrowing] something from
phenomenology's project' (Barthes 1981: 20), his influence on the deliberations on the human
experiences of photography cannot be overstated. Although later theorists have been critical
of certain aspects of his work, the same questions of photography's 'aboutness' (Purcell 2010:
24) and its ability to capture a 'trace' of something that has happened in the past (Petterson
2011: 189) have dominated the phenomenological discussions of the medium to this day. To
such writers, these two attributes form the unique essence of the medium, and as such, are the
sole basis from which all human encounters with individual photographs emerge from.

While I recognise the value in the work of Barthes and those following in his footsteps, one of
the critical flaws of their accounts is their failure to consider photographs that depict their
subject matter in an abstract way and hyper-realistic visual art that can at times pass itself as
photography. In such cases, the attributes that Barthes and others take as the essence of
photography might not emerge, or might emerge but incorrectly – a photograph might be
mistaken for a piece of visual art, and vice versa. Even under such circumstances, however,
the viewer does not suddenly become incapable of forming an experience based on what one
is seeing: as anyone who has ever encountered a piece of art of an undisclosed medium
knows, such pieces can still touch us, move us and speak to us – in other words, evoke
something in us at an affectual level. As such, it seems to me that the sense of a photograph's
aboutness or its pastness do not emerge from the image itself, but rather, from the knowledge
that what one is seeing is a photograph. In other words, they arise as the result of social
mediation (Fisher 2008: 26).

It is here that the ultimate problem with the current accounts on the phenomenology of
photography is revealed. While the attributes identified by Barthes and others surely shape the
human experience of photography, they constitute but one layer of this experience:
furthermore, as my discussion regarding medially confusing or undisclosed artworks suggests,
something must exist beneath this layer, an initial exchange between the work and the viewer
from which the more novel reflections can emerge from. We have, in other words, circled
back to the fundamental phenomenological truth that human experience always has a pre-
reflective aspect to it – an impression which raises directly from our engagement with the

world surrounding us. However, we have also now discovered that the previous attempts to plunge into this bottommost layer of human experience of photography have failed. Where do we go from here? If the attributes unearthed by Barthes and others are of no interest to us, where should phenomenological analysis of photography begin?

The answer to this question, at least to me, is to start over. What makes Merleau-Ponty a particularly great candidate to build such a project around is that his approach does not see it necessary to define photography against other mediums in order to understand the human experience of it. His so-called existential phenomenology stands in stark opposition to the eidetic approach adapted by Barthes and the others. As we have seen, the latter 'rules out many important aspects of photography that strongly suggest themselves for critically oriented […] analysis' – in case of Merleau-Ponty, the potential role that the body and the senses play in the photographic experience (Fisher 2008: 26–27). If the single-minded focus on photography's assumed uniqueness is the problem, the solution seems straightforward: an alternative phenomenological account on the medium ought not to be afraid to draw from research from a wide variety of sources, as long as they follow the same Merleau-Pontyan principles as my own analysis. As such, this master's thesis will make use of authors from a wide range of academic disciplines, especially the previously discussed theorists from the fields of film and visual arts.

2.3   Overview on the data gathering process

As is the case with many philosophical approaches, phenomenological analysis does not adhere to any particular research method: rather,

> there is tradition, a body of knowledge and insights, a history of lives of thinkers and authors, which, taken as an example, constitutes both a source and a methodological ground for present human science research practices. (van Manen 1990: 30)

That said, in order to capture the 'fullness and completeness of detail' that characterise the human experience, phenomenologically oriented analysis necessitates a qualitative approach to its subject matter (van Manen 1990: 17). Because my interest lies in the peculiar visuals of Pinterest's Studyinspo content, conducting close textual analyses of individual pins is an obvious methodological choice for this master's thesis. Not only does close textual analysis allow for the proper depth needed to uncover the true allure of the platform's studious imagery, but combining it with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological framework has already

proved a successful research method. My main inspiration in this regard is Barker (2009), whose framework on the affective dimensions of cinema bases itself on a number of masterfully articulated, in-depth analyses of individual film scenes.

However, one of the challenges of conducting phenomenological media analysis is the fact that human experience is ultimately subjective. Whatever feelings and sensations arise from our encounters with art cannot be scientifically quantified, and as such, what the reader is always left with is one researcher's interpretation of that which has expired. While it would thusly be easy to doubt the rigor and validity of phenomenological research as a whole, Max van Manen warns against undermining the discipline's worth. Although phenomenological insights will always be derived from subjective experiences, he insists that this does not necessarily mean that the resulting research would lack rigour of scientific credibility. As he describes,

> Phenomenology claims to be scientific in a broad sense, since it is a systematic, explicit, self-critical, and intersubjective study of its subject matter, our lived experience. It is systematic in that it uses specially practised modes of questioning, reflecting, focusing, intuiting, etc. [It] is explicit in that it attempts to articulate, through the content and form of text, the structures of meaning embedded in lived experience (rather than leaving the meanings implicit as for example in poetry or literary texts). Phenomenology is self-critical in the sense that it continually examines its own goals and methods in an attempt to come to terms with the strengths and shortcomings of its approach and achievements. It is intersubjective in that the human science researcher needs the other (for example, the reader) in order to develop a dialogic relation with the phenomenon, and thus validate the phenomenon as described. (van Manen 1990: 11)

As will be demonstrated throughout this master's thesis, these four principles form the very basis of my analysis. Although my ultimate source of knowledge regarding Pinterest's Studyinspo imagery is my personal experiences with it, my theoretical approach and the actual analysis itself have both been refined to adhere to the high demands that van Manen sets for phenomenological research. If 'a good phenomenological description is an adequate elucidation of some aspect of the lifeworld' insofar as 'it resonates with our sense of lived life' (van Manen 1990: 27), it is my hope that my analysis is capable of doing just that:

ringing true to not just my own experiences with Pinterest's Studyinspo content, but also those of the reader.

While it is the actual phenomenological analysis that demands the most rigour from the researcher, it is my contention that carefully designing my study can also be greatly beneficial when it comes to reducing the subjectivity of my findings. Choosing suitable images to conduct close textual analysis with, for example, is not as easy as simply taking one's pick. Firstly, as is the case of Pinterest's Studyinspo community, the sea of potential candidates is seemingly endless, which makes choosing one image over another difficult: secondly, if the freedom to make such a decision is left to the one conducting the analysis, there exists the real danger of the researcher choosing images that might corroborate their desired outcomes, no matter how much critical self-reflection one practices during the process. To ensure that the images analysed in this master's thesis would be representative of the Studysinpo phenomenon as a whole – as opposed to being chosen based on my personal, potentially biased fancy – I thusly deemed early on that gathering a data set and limiting my analysis to the images within it was a necessary procedure to ensure the integrity of my research.

Collecting data in a digital environment comes with a unique set of challenges. Not only have the traditional methods to aid with the process been developed with the physical objects in mind, but the fundamental differences between platforms also mean that few existing online-specific practices suit most research projects. As such, Janet Salmons suggests that researchers ought first and foremost to 'immerse themselves' with the platform of their choice to 'learn its features in order to design the study' (Salmons 2016: 195). This principle informed each part of my data collection process from the planning stage to the execution. When it came to the method through which the data would be gathered, for example, I wished to stay as close to the ways in which regular users navigate Pinterest as possible. As such, while there exist various independent tools for collecting and extracting data from the internet, I decided I would gather the images analysed in this master's thesis through one of Pinterest's built-in functions.

As of writing, there are two main ways for a user to find content on Pinterest. One can explore one's Home feed, which is constantly updated by Pinterest's recommendation algorithm based on one's previous activities on the site (see Pal et al. 2020 and Xia et al. 2022), or one can use the site's Search function, which makes use of a keyword-based data retrieval system with an algorithmic ranking system embedded within it as well (see Pancha et al. 2021). As

my descriptions of the two functions reveal, the most crucial aspect to take into consideration when gathering data on Pinterest is the site's recommendation algorithm. Although the use of computational systems to filter content are necessary to alleviate the information overload on contemporary social media sites (Monteiro-Krebs et al. 2021: 994), what makes Pinterest notable is the extent to which the user experience is affected by the site's algorithm. While some platforms, such as Twitter, allow one to choose between algorithmically and chronologically organised user feeds, Pinterest does not grant its users such options.

The centrality of Pinterest's recommendation algorithm posed a few issues that I needed to address during the planning stage of the data gathering process. When choosing between the two on-site functions for the purposes of my research, the decisive factor was the extent to which their algorithmic processes were affected by user activity. The goal was to minimise the researcher's – my – ability to influence the results of the data gathering, and seeing as the content on the Home feed would be wholly dependent on my earlier actions on the site, it was deemed that using the Search function had the greater potential to produce unbiased results.

After this decision, it felt necessary to develop a deeper understanding of Pinterest's Search function. Here, a common challenge faced by those researching social media made itself known: not only are the inner workings of recommendation algorithms typically treated as company secrets by the owners of the platforms, but they are also constantly changing, which makes avoiding their influence over one's study that much harder (Monteiro-Krebs et al. 2021: 994). Pinterest, too, has avoided revealing too much about the ranking system embedded within the platform's Search function. That said, as of writing it is widely believed by social media marketing companies that at least the following factors contribute to the order in which the results of a Pinterest Search query are presented:

- the popularity of a pin, i.e. how often it has been opened for further inspection, pinned, and commented on;
- the "quality" of the user who uploaded the pin, i.e. how often and frequently they pin content and otherwise interact with the site;
- the relevance of the pin, i.e. how well the keywords associated with it match the keywords used in the search query; and
- how long ago the pin was uploaded on Pinterest, as the platform prioritises new content over old. (Ghufran 2022, Socialchamp 2022, Jungletopp 2021)

The better an individual pin meets these criteria, the higher it is displayed in the Search results. This ordering of the content does not solely dictate what content users will end up interacting with on the site, but as Monteiro-Krebs et al. argue, it does have a tangible effect on it. Because of the sheer overload of information on most contemporary social media sites, the content that appears first or is otherwise privileged within a platform's interface simply has 'a greater chance of receiving user attention'. (Monteiro-Krebs et al. 2021)

This deeper understanding on Pinterest Search's ranking algorithm had ultimately very little influence on my data gathering plan, as the available information regarding it did not reveal any points of interest that would have needed to be considered further. In fact, it was the scarcity of verifiable information regarding the algorithm that ended up having the greatest impact on my research. Although there are no sources suggesting the ranking of Pinterest Search results would be influenced by the same user-specific recommendation systems used on the Home feed, the possibility of this could not be ruled out either. Because I remained concerned about the potential researcher bias effect on my study, I decided that it would be for the best to gather the data via a Pinterest account used only to conduct this one Search query.

The final issue that needed to be addressed in preparation for collecting the data was choosing the suitable keywords to use in the search. As briefly alluded to earlier, Studyinspo is only one of the many names used for the phenomenon. At times, the word is broken down to its root words – resulting in the variation "Study inspiration" – and other times names such as "Study aesthetic" or "Study motivation" are used instead. There are also platform-specific names for the phenomenon: for example, YouTube's Studyinspo community calls itself *Studytube* and the one on Instagram *Studygram*, both portmanteaus of "studying" and the name of the corresponding platform.

The Studyinspo community on Pinterest does not have a dedicated name for itself, which made it easier to reduce the number of viable search options. Another factor that affected the decision was the fact that all the remaining options other than "studyinspo" consisted of two words. While multiple-word lexemes are well supported by most contemporary search engines, using them can still pose surprising challenges, because computers cannot always accurately infer nuanced aspects of natural language such as polysemy or compound words (Siddiqi & Sharan 2015: 18). As such, conducting the search with the keywords "study aesthetic" or "study motivation" might have resulted in some of the gathered images coming

not from to the Studyinspo community, but other users and sources interested in learning and education. In the end, "studyinspo" was deemed the most suitable phrase to use when gathering data for the purposes of this master's thesis.

In 4.12.2022, I created a Pinterest account and used it to conduct a query through the site's built-in search function with the keyword "studyinspo". The data set was then created manually by saving the retrieved images one by one to a newly created Pinterest board in the order they had appeared in the search. The final data set consists of 275 images – a sample size comparable to image-focused social media studies similar scope, such as Yukari Seko and Stephen P. Lewi's (2019) study on self-harm imagery on a microblogging site Tumblr. For the rest of this master's thesis, all observations made of Pinterest's Studyinspo phenomenon will be based on these images. Furthermore, the few images that will be later featured for illustrative purposes have all been used with permission from the original owners. However, that will have to wait a bit longer: in the next chapter, the data I have gathered will first be examined to test my hypothesis that the allure of pinning Studyinspo content is linked to the perceived aspirational/inspirational qualities of the images circulating within the community.

3 "When I see this, I actually WANT to study" – locating the "inspo" in Studyinspo

In the previous chapter, I posited Phillips et al.'s (2014) dual concepts of aspirational and inspirational engagement as the potential means to further our understanding of the allure of the content circulating on Pinterest. However, I am yet to discuss this idea in relation to the actual topic of this thesis – that is, the platform's Studyinspo community. In other words, all I have provided thus far is a mere hypothesis that the attractiveness of the Studyinspo imagery might somehow be related to its perceived aspirational or inspirational qualities.

Although my true interest lies in the affective dimensions of the Studyinspo imagery, it is my contention that I cannot advance before I have put this hypothesis to test. In order for my later analysis to make sense, I first need to demonstrate that Pinterest's Studyinspo enthusiasts do indeed participate in pinning specifically to motivate themselves to conduct their life in a studious manner. As such, in this chapter I will temporarily arrest my phenomenological pursuits to evaluate the very basis upon which the rest of this master's thesis rests on. How do Pinterest's Studyinspo enthusiasts engage with the content circulating within their community, and can this relationship be made sense of through my previously proposed theoretical framework?

3.1 Examining the engagements between people and phenomena

In the previous chapter, the other scholars besides Phillips et al. (2014) that I credited as having discussed the idea of pinning as an aspirational/inspirational activity was Jones (2016). Although her article postdates Phillips et al.'s by a few years, its analysis of Pinterest as encouraging 'future-oriented yearning' within its userbase (2016: 358) approaches the topic from a wholly different theoretical tradition. Although Jones' was thusly not the first one to make the same findings, she seems to have come to her conclusions through original means. As established, much of Jones' article is built around comparing pinning to the much older tradition of physical scrapbooking. Ultimately, she concludes that the two activities differ in their temporal orientations: whereas scrapbooking is oriented towards the past, pinning is more forward-looking.

While Phillips et al.'s (2014) concepts of aspirational and inspirational engagement add useful nuance to Jones' insights on the allure of Pinterest, returning to the latter scholar here is

particularly useful due to her unique approach to the topic. Much of Jones' analysis draws from Jenkins (2014), whose theoretical framework of modal analysis involves the researcher examining user attitudes towards a particular phenomenon in order to deepen one's understanding of it. That said, Jones' work in this area is surprisingly shallow, as her original analysis of Pinterest consists of one brief paragraph describing the typical content circulating on the site and no attempts to understand pinners' opinions or thoughts. However, I cannot help but feel that had Jenkins' framework been applied more carefully, the conclusions drawn by Jones would have been the practically the same – only more throughout. As such, what I wish to do here is to turn to Jenkins' model of modal analysis and use it to develop a more in-depth account on pinning as an activity, specifically as it pertains to Pinterest's Studyinspo community.

What forms the basis of Jenkins' method is his observation that the traditional means of studying creative works have typically sought to ground them in fixed contexts such as a certain historical period, cultural regime, or rhetorical situation (Jenkins 2014: 444). Although this approach does have its undeniable strengths, it ignores the fact that all works are in constant circulation – especially today, thanks to the developments in digital technologies. The meaning of any individual work, then, is ultimately fluid: the further it spreads, the more likely it is that the way it is understood will change and prompt 'different identifications and affections' within different viewers. (Jenkins 2014: 445) Modal analysis seeks to recognise this polysemic nature of creative works by not focusing solely on the works themselves, but on the diverse relationships that exist between them and viewers (Jenkins 2014: 443).

The key concept of modal theory are modes, which Jenkins defines as 'relational assemblances' of meaning which are 'constituted in the processes of constructing and perceiving' between an object and its viewer. Put differently, a mode is a certain manner in which a person engages with, and thus, makes sense to, a text, image, or other creative work. (Jenkins 2014: 443) Here, the word "manner" is of special importance, as it emphasises the virtuality of modes as a phenomenon. As described by Jenkins, modes are 'neither located in [individual objects] nor in viewing subjects', but rather, they are that which emerges when these two actors collide (Jenkins 2014: 447). In other words, modes exist not as corporeal "things" but as the relations between them. As Jenkins summarises, 'the virtual designates the reality of the relation between substances': put differently, modes help us to orient ourselves with our environments by working as vehicles of meaning-making between us and the rest of the world. (Jenkins 2014: 447)

Although modes manifest in interactions between objects and viewers, they exist prior to them. This is because their emergence is collective, borne out of the "contributions of numerous viewers and rhetors, spread across space and time". (Jenkins 2014: 446.) Because of this, modal analysis holds that modes have the potential to evolve over time as more and more encounters between objects and viewers take place within different situations and circumstances (Jenkins 2014: 443). This allows one to understand modes as phenomena which exist in relation to wider historical, cultural, and ideological contexts – not determined, but rather, shaped and affected by them.

In his original article, Jenkins examines Fail/Win meme, a popular image-based joke format among English-speaking internet users in the late 2000s and early 2010s. A typical Fail/Win image is most commonly a photograph depicting a situation that the viewer is supposed to view either as a hilarious failure or an amusing success. Although the intended interpretation can typically be inferred from the image alone, the perceived "failure" or "success" of the situation is emphasised with corresponding textual descriptions "Fail" or "Win", most often edited either at the very top or bottom of the image (Jenkins 2014: 443). Although the Fail/Win meme could thus be understood as actually consisting of two separate jokes, the juxtaposition between the two suggests that they function more as two sides of the same humoristic coin.

Although the term "meme" was originally coined by Richard Dawkins to describe pieces of cultural information which spread from human to another through imitation – examples of this being "ideas, catchphrases, clothes [and] fashions" (Dawkins 1976/2016: 249) – Jenkins maintains that its modern usage in reference to phenomena such as Fail/Win is rather apt, as each individual Fail/Win image is merely an actualisation of the wider Fail/Win phenomenon (Jenkins 2014: 443). It then follows that this phenomenon is something intangible, a pre-existing concept that helps the viewer to interpret any chosen Fail/Win image in the intended manner. A viewer familiar with the meme will not, for example, interpret an image accompanied with the word "Fail" as serious mockery of a certain individual, but as one humoristic actualisation among million others, all featuring situations that remind us of the troubles that people's idiosyncrasies and the world's unpredictability can cause in life. This is the very "point" of the Fail/Win meme, and thus, its mode.

However, being able to provide a description of an individual phenomenon's mode is not enough, as it does not tell us what its particular mode is *made of*. Whereas modes exist prior

to any individual actualisations, the actualisations are dependent on the modes: something about an image must "match" something about the mode for a viewer to recognise it as being part of a certain phenomenon. In the context of the Fail/Win meme, Jenkins describes how

> Viewers can dispute whether they see a fail or win, whether it is truly epic or banal, how funny or authentic is it, but all this occurs within the modal frame. Different viewers see different images as extreme, unique, or interesting, yet these images are measured as such against the modal criteria; the mode structures an experience in which viewers ask whether these images are interesting emblems of success and failure. […] Indeed, submitters [of Fail/Win meme images] can be conceived as playing within the mode to produce actualizations of this virtual structure. (Jenkins 2014: 447)

How can this "modal criteria" be determined? A mode, as established earlier, is a certain manner of engagement between a viewer and an object. Even though these engagements are virtual, Jenkins argues that they are not that different from physical ones: in both cases, engagement emerges when two or more actors collide, and affect and are affected by one another as a result of this collision (Jenkins 2014: 447). That said, the ways in which actors engage with each other are not random. Jenkins demonstrates this by citing philosopher Gilles Deleuze, who argues that the different "capacities" of an actor "select what affects or is affected by the thing, what moves it or is moved by it" (Deleuze 1970/1988: 126). To use a famous example by Deleuze and Félix Guattari, a collision between a wasp and an orchid takes place because the insect has the capability to sense pollen whereas the flower has the ability to emit it: in other words, an engagement between the two is possible because they both provide something that the other is able to react to (Deleuze & Guattari 1980/1987: 10). Modal criteria, then, is made up of the capacities of the different actors that make a certain manner of engagement – a mode – possible (Jenkins 2014: 448).

According to Jenkins, the modal criteria of the Fail/Win meme is made up of a number of different capacities. As the term "modal criteria" suggests, the purpose of these factors is to help a viewer to determine whether an image-object they are looking at meets the requirements to be considered as an actualisation of a certain mode: "as a virtual structure, modes create fields of potential with poles that limit what is and is not selected" (Jenkins 2014: 450). Indeed, as Jenkins' analysis of the comments on individual Fail/Win images reveals, viewers frequently make use the meme's modal criteria when evaluating the quality of different actualisations. On one hand, obviously fictional "fails" or "wins" – for example, a

scene from a film or a television series – are met with criticism because the situations they depict are not real, and therefore not as amusing and relatable; on the other, too literal versions of the meme – such as calling a game-winning shot in football game a "win" – also tend to gain little positive attention, but for the opposite reason. Similarly, images that depict serious or tragic situations do not fare well either, as their dark subject matters discourage the playful game of judgement that to Jenkins are inherent to the mode of the Fail/Win meme (Jenkins 2014: 450–451).

3.2 Pretty pictures, studious daydreams

With all this considered, what factors constitute the modal criteria of Studyinspo? Because modes exist as virtual, ever-shifting relations between viewers and images, Jenkins emphasises that their nature cannot be inferred from any one actualisation (2014: 443). Instead, his analysis makes use of comments posted to Failblog, a website dedicated solely for images belonging to the Fail/Win meme format. The value of these comments lies in their ability to reflect the thoughts and opinions of the people engaging with a particular phenomenon: by commenting, individuals have an opportunity to express whether certain actualisations resonate with them or not and elaborate on the reasons behind their differing reactions. As such, analysing user comments is a particularly potent way for a researcher to gain an insight on the previously discussed capabilities for affecting and being affected that modes emerge from.

Fortunately for me, following Jenkins' example here requires no additional research effort, seeing as the pins gathered for the purposes of this master's thesis each have an individual comment section embedded within them. As such, I will now take a deeper look into these comments and examine them through Jenkins' theoretical framework. By doing this, I wish to get to the bottom to the question I posed at the beginning of this chapter: does my hypothesis of Studyinspo imagery's aspirational/inspirational nature truly hold water?

Examining the comments embedded within the pins collected for the purposes of this master's thesis, it is striking how often the remarks made by wholly unrelated users resemble each other. As will be demonstrated throughout the rest of this chapter, the overlaps that exist between the comments are frequent and challenging to address, but with careful consideration, the sentiments expressed by Pinterest's Studyinspo enthusiasts can be divided into loosely-defined groups. The first one of these consists of comments expressing the commentor's admiration or amazement regarding the image itself. 'Looks gorgeous!' praises

one user (Pinterest n.d.-a); 'It's beautiful!!!' marvels another (Pinterest n.d.-b); 'OMG I LOVE THIS' (Pinterest n.d. -c) exclaims a third, all commenting on different images circulating within Pinterest's Studyinspo community. Closely related to this comment type is one where users express their admiration by making wistful remarks relating to their own life situations. Examples of this include 'I wish my table was this managed a mess' (Pinterest n.d. -d) and 'i wish my notes were this pretty' (Pinterest n.d. -e). Third comment type of the same ilk consists of declarations that a particular pin has given the commenter an itch to engage in studious activities of one's own. Comments such as 'i see this and motivated [sic] to study' (Pinterest n.d. -f) and 'See, when I see this, I actually WANT to study' (Pinterest n.d. -g) share their marvelling tone with the previous types but are also the only ones to allude that Studyinspo imagery might also have an additional effect on its viewers beyond providing pleasant visual stimulus.

Yet another type of comment that one commonly encounters while exploring Pinterest's Studyinspo community is questions regarding the items featured in individual pins. Interestingly, these questions almost always inquire about a product's brand or its origin of purchase: 'what's the notebook called?' (Pinterest n.d. -h), 'where's the pencil case from???' (Pinterest n.d. -i), and 'where do people get the containers to store their highlighters and pens like the one in the pic [picture]' (Pinterest n.d. -j) are all examples where commenters seem more interested in identifying an item and learning how one could obtain it rather than sharing their opinions on the pin itself. The last distinctive comment type approaches Studyinspo imagery from a more critical perspective. Here, the issues the commentors have with individual images are typically related to the real-life applicability of the scenarios featured in them. For example, Studyinspo pins featuring drinks often gain remarks regarding the dangers of keeping liquid too close to handwritten notes or technical appliances. 'It's all cool till someone spills the coffee' (Pinterest n.d. -k) muses one user in the comment section of a pin featuring a café table with a laptop and an iced coffee on it.

What can these comments tell us about the modal criteria of Studyinspo? According to Jenkins, the most revealing comments are typically the ones critiquing individual actualisations, as they help the researcher to delineate what falls outside of a particular mode (Jenkins 2014: 450–451). Indeed, the critical remarks made on Studyinspo imagery are perhaps the easiest to interpret through the framework of modal analysis. Although these comments are generally quite civil, the fact that issues such as drinking liquids while studying evoke debate within the community reveals one of the characteristics of Studyinspo's mode:

the scenarios featured in individual actualisations need to be at least somewhat reasonable from a real-life point of view, lest they risk becoming a topic of discussion.

Recognising certain viability as part of Studyinspo's modal criteria also helps to make sense of other comment types. A particularly good example of this are the comments where an individual actualisation is credited as the motivating force behind one's own studious pursuits. After all, in order for something to be motivating, it must have some real-life applicability to it: wholly impossible scenarios provide nothing to strive for, and as such, it would make no sense to speak of them as "motivational". The comments where people inquire about the manufacturers and sellers of specific items corroborate this argument even further. Underneath a pin depicting a colourful page from someone's notebook, for example, one commenter expresses their desire to know the name of the pen used for the hand-written headlines (Pinterest n.d. -l). Explicitly, the way in which this question is worded indicates that the commenter feels inspired by the pin and wants to imitate the way the image's original taker has written their notes; implicitly, it also suggests that they believe achieving this goal is possible, provided they get their hands to the same pen used to craft the original notes.

Not only does my analysis confirm viability as a key modal criterion of Studyinspo, but it also reveals the existence of another: the sense of being motivated by what one is seeing. This key characteristic of the phenomenon cannot be inferred from negative comments, but the lack of thereof. Indeed, was the motivating nature of the Studyinspo pins not a central part of the phenomenon's mode, the frequent positive allusions to it – the accounts of users feeling inspired to conduct their own lives in a studious manner, and the inquiries about the items featured in individual pins – would simply make no sense. We have thusly reached the same conclusion of Pinterests' allure as Jones (2014) and Phillips et al. (2014) but have done this through our own means. Feeling motivated – experiencing the desire to do something after an encounter with some external driving force – is an integral part of the allure of many of Pinterest's communities, and it seems that the Studyinspo phenomenon is no different in this regard.

What about the nature of this motivation – is it the kind that is likely to spur one into action, which in Phillips et al.'s (2014) model would make it aspirational, or is it more abstract, leading one to classify it as inspirational? Interestingly, the answer to this varies on a case-to-case basis. Users inquiring about the manufacturers or sellers of specific items or praising individual pins for motivating them to study suggest that many Studyinspo enthusiasts engage

with the content circulating within the community with aspirational goals in mind, but this near-future oriented attitude is not shared by all commentors. The previously discussed wistful comments featuring sentiments such as "I wish I had this" or "I wish I could do this" fit much better under the definition of inspirational engagement, where pinners explore their different hopes and dreams for the future with no clear plan of action (Phillips et al. 2014: 646). The use of the word "wish" is particularly revealing here, as it emphasises how distant the commenters feel their desired future is from them: to wish is, after all, to hope for an outcome that one has no personal control over, to hold out for a possibility that has no guarantee of coming true. All in all, it seems that the sense of being motivated that is so very crucial to the mode of Pinterest's Studyinspo phenomenon can take on both an aspirational and inspirational form, depending on the individual.

This chapter has already answered most of the questions presented at the beginning of this chapter, but one issue I wish to discuss here still remains. The aspirational/inspirational nature of Studyinspo content hints to yet another attribute that contributes to the phenomenon's modal criteria. In order for something to be considered motivating – that is, worth striving for – it is not enough that doing so is viable: there also needs to be a reason for one to exert effort in the first place, *a motivator.* This attribute makes itself known as we turn our attention to the praise targeted at images circulating within the community. Here, the very first comment type discussed is the most revealing. While remarks such as 'beautiful setup!' (Pinterest n.d. -m) or 'so pretty' (Pinterest n.d. -n) might at first seem like generic compliments with no further meaning behind them, I believe that they highlight what many commentators consider the most valuable aspect about Studyinspo pins: their aesthetic value.

A great occupation with the visual look of individual Studyinspo pins is present, albeit more implicitly, within other comment types as well. Let us consider, for example, the previously cited wistful remark of 'i wish my notes were this pretty' (Pinterest n.d. -e). Not only is this comment a prime example of one user's inspirational engagement with the pin in question, but it also openly states the very reason as to why they consider this particular image worthy of their attention: it is the pleasant visual look of the notes, their "prettiness", that is posited as the most praiseworthy aspect about the image. Once again, one key attribute of Studyinspo's mode can be identified by examining not what is criticised about individual images, but what is commended about them. Was the visual look of content circulating within the community irrelevant to Studyinspo's mode, such frequent allusions to it by the commenters would make no sense.

Following Jenkins' theoretical framework, we have thusly identified three key attributes that define Studyinspo as a visual phenomenon. Firstly, in order to be recognised as such by the users frequenting the community, individual actualisations of the wider Studyinspo mode have to evoke a sense of motivation within the one encountering them. Secondly, to achieve this, the featured scenario has to be at least somewhat viable in real life. Thirdly, and just as importantly, the scenario needs to provide the one viewing a particular actualisation something to strive for. This "something", as the comments praising individual pins' visuals suggest, is of aesthetic nature – exactly as I hypothesised at the very beginning of this master's thesis.

That said, what needs to be recognised here is that different pinners do not necessarily mean the exact same thing when describing the visual pleasantness of Studyinspo pins. In the latest example discussed (Pinterest n.d. -e), the commenter specifically identifies the notes depicted in the pin as the source of their aesthetic appreciation. However, comments such as 'Looks gorgeous! (Pinterest n.d. -a) or 'so pretty' (Pinterest n.d. -n) do not single out any one aspect about the image. Making sense to this requires us to refer back to the previous chapter, where I discussed how other researchers have attempted to make sense of the aspirational/inspirational pull of Pinterest's content. Let us recall Phillips et al.'s suggestion that pins collected for aspirational purposes can be understood as kind of a purchase aid (Phillips et al. 2014: 644–645). Would it not be reasonable to assume that those already on the lookout for particular items would leave comments where the focus is on them? Alternatively, would it not be equally plausible that those engaging with Studyinspo content for inspirational purposes would be more inclined to leave remarks that refer to pins as singular entities, seeing as it is the overall fantasy of an ideal future that motivates these people to continue pinning?

This explanation clears up a lot of confusion regarding the small differences in comments praising individual Studyinspo pins: in both cases, the visual look of Studyinspo imagery remains part of its allure, and it is the type of engagement assumed by different users that varies. However, we are once again facing the same challenges as in the previous chapter. When people call an individual object attractive, understanding what they mean is rather easy; however, when the same is said about a whole image, much more vagueness is involved. In other words, while this chapter has proved that some Studyinspo enthusiasts do indeed engage with the content circulating within the community in an inspirational manner – and that this content's attractiveness is tied directly to the visual look of the said content – it is yet to be revealed what makes these images so pleasant to look at in the first place.

The answer to this question is the very one this master's thesis seeks to find, and fortunately, I have already presented my theory as to how one could begin to approach the topic. As discussed in the previous chapter, analysing visual media through applying Merleau-Pontyan phenomenological lens has often proved quite successful in expanding our understanding of the allure of images – both traditional and of the moving kind – when other means have failed. As such, it is finally time to turn our whole attention to the affective dimensions of Studyinspo imagery in order to shed some much needed light on the allure of the phenomenon as it exists on Pinterest.

4 Smooth surfaces, controlled chaos – the phenomenological allure of Studyinspo aesthetics

At the beginning of this master's thesis, I summarised my initial impression of Pinterest's Studyinspo imagery as it being 'extraordinarily pleasing' in its aesthetics. In the previous chapter, it was revealed that I am not alone in feeling this way, as those involved with the community frequently make note of the visual pleasantness of the pins they encounter. That said, many commenters do not specify what they consider the source of this pleasure to be. I thusly suggested that such remarks might refer to the images as a whole, which in turn would make them ripe for phenomenological analysis.

Returning to my personal feelings on Pinterest's Studyinspo content now, I am convinced that this contention is no mere speculation. When looking at the images circulating within the community, a strong sense of pleasure washes over me, and when I think about how to describe this feeling, words such as "beauty" do indeed come to me almost reflexively. That said, I cannot quite place this sensation. It has no one clear location, but instead, it seems to emanate from everywhere at once: my eyes do not focus anywhere in particular, but I still feel deeply affected by the totality of the elements that are present in each individual image. I thus feel more confident than ever in asserting that what defines Studyinspo's aesthetics is a certain affective quality that most if not all content circulating under the phenomenon's name share. In this chapter, I will attempt to identify this quality by examining Studyinspo imagery and the sensations it evokes in me through the lens of Merleau-Pontyan phenomenological analysis.

4.1 The phenomenology of visual artforms

As previously discussed, the phenomenological insights of Merleau-Ponty have served as the inspiration for many contemporary researchers examining the affective dimensions of visual artforms. Among these writers, the one whose work resonates with me in particular is film theorist Vivian Sobchak, whose exploration of the profound effects that man-made imagery can have on us draws from her personal experiences with cinema. Reminiscing on her first time seeing Jane Champion's film *The Piano* (1993), Sobchak discusses experiences not dissimilar from mine. As she describes,

Campion's film moved me deeply, stirring my bodily senses and my sense of my body. The film not only "filled me up" and often "suffocated" me with feelings that resonated in and constricted my chest and stomach, but it also "sensitized" the very surfaces of my skin—as well as its own—to touch. Throughout the film my whole being was intensely concentrated and, rapt as I was in the world onscreen, I was wrapped also in a body that was achingly aware of itself as a sensuous, sensitized, sensible material capacity. (Sobchack 2004: 51)

Sobchak's allusions to the physicality of her reactions are of particular interest to me because they highlight something that I have thus far not had words to describe: the fact that the sensations Pinterest's Studyinspo content evokes in me feel *bodily*. Previously, I briefly talked about experiences where an artwork might evoke unexplainable sensations such as "roughness" or "softness" or a film makes one feel like they are wholly immersed in its world, "as if they were really there". Here, Sobchak describes the very same phenomenon, but her wording makes everything fall into place. Finally, I recognise that the sensations which arise from my encounters with Studyinspo imagery feel – no matter how nonsensical such an assertion may sound – physical. When I engage with these images, something about my bodily disposition shifts, and as a result, I become 'intensely sensitized' (Sobchak 2004: 62) to that which I see.

How can we begin to make sense to such an unusual experience? Sobchak's answer draws from Merleau-Ponty's previously discussed assertion that different sensations are always experienced together under the unifying influence of the body. As she notes, there exists ample neuroscientific evidence that the boundaries between senses are, indeed, rather blurred. For example, researchers have found that the brain's visual cortex activates when blindfolded subjects handle objects, which indicates that under normal circumstances, the parts of the brain involved with looking work alongside the parts involved with touching when converting sensation into experience. (Sobchak 2004: 57) In other words, when Merleau-Ponty argues that our experiences of the world emerge from our bodies translating 'the tactile perceptions obtained by one organ […] into the language of other[s]' (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012: 372), what he is describing rings true to our current scientific understanding of how human brains process information. This, in turn, grants credibility to Sobchak's notion that encounters with visual mediums such as cinema or photography could 'be [experiences] of touching, tasting, and smelling' (Sobchak 2004: 57).

That said, the man-made nature of the visual phenomena me and Sobchak are talking about poses certain challenges to the credibility of this explanation, as common knowledge would have it that the sensorial stimulus that cinema or photography provide is not comparable to that which emerges from our interactions with real-life objects (Sobchak 2004: 50). However, Sobchak insists that such an assertion undermines the true capabilities of visual artforms. According to her, what makes cinema in particular such a powerful medium is that it both *represents* – that is, captures the people and objects caught on camera – and *presents* – that is, depicts these targets in a certain manner. In other words, no film is ever a mere representation of the events that have once transpired in front of the camera, but it is also an *expression* of them. (Sobchak 1992: 9)

To express something is to be capable of signifying, which in turn indicates that every film we encounter is imbued with meaning. This, according to Sobchak, is precisely what makes cinematic works more than simple objects of our gaze. When watching a film, what we come in contact with is an entity of its own right, an agent with an agenda it wishes to impart to us, 'an anonymous, yet present, "other"' that reaches out in hopes that what it is trying to get across resonates with us (Sobchak 1992: 9). Sobchak calls this entity the body of the film (Sobchak 1992: 133).

While the body of the film is, naturally, not of the same flesh and blood as our own, this term aptly highlights the ontological similarities between our encounters with other human beings and sensations that arise as we immerse ourselves in what we see on the silver screen. Physical bodies express themselves primarily through touching: a gentle caress, a playful flick and an aggressive push are all examples of the kinds of gestures that the bodies of human beings use to communicate with one another. Cinematic bodies, on the other hand, use visuals, sound, and movement to impart their desired meanings (Sobchak 1992: 4). That said, both target the pre-reflexive, sensorial, 'wild' layer of human existence (Merleau-Ponty in Sobchak 1992: 11). Caressing, flicking and pushing target our sense of touch, while visuals and sound appeal to our eyes and ears. As Sobchak thusly argues, the cinematic experience is meaningful 'not to the side of our bodies but because of [them]' (Sobchak 2004: 51).

Having established this, the rest of Sobchak's theory falls neatly into the place. By taking seriously the concept of film having a body, we finally see the cinematic experience as the complex multisensorial encounter that it has always been. Just as a physical body, the expressive body of the film is capable of communicating its meanings directly to us by

addressing our senses of sight and hearing. However, due to the previously discussed interconnectedness of our senses, that which speaks to our bodies or our ears also speaks to the rest of our body. As Sobchak thusly summarises,

> insofar as I cannot literally touch, smell, or taste the particular figure on the screen that solicits my sensual desire, my body's intentional trajectory, seeking a sensible object to fulfill [sic] this sensual solicitation, will reverse its direction to locate its partially frustrated sensual grasp on something more literally accessible. That more literally accessible sensual object is my own subjectively felt lived body. Thus, "on the rebound" from the screen—and without a reflective thought—I will reflexively turn toward my own carnal, sensual, and sensible being to touch myself touching, smell myself smelling, taste myself tasting, and, in sum, sense my own sensuality. (Sobchak 2004: 61)

4.2 Hapticity and the photographic image

Until now, I have discussed Sobchak's ideas only in relation to cinema. Could the same principles be applied to photography? Some theorists, such as Jennifer M. Barker, have taken quite a critical stance against the phenomenological impact of the medium. In fact, she argues that photographs lack the expressive power of cinema: to her, they are nothing but 'product[s] of what [the photographer] saw at a given moment in a given space' (Barker 2009: 9). However, I take issue with this claim. Cinema may, at least outwardly, have a more varied expressive repertoire at its disposal, but that does not necessarily mean photography has no means to communicate with us on a sensorial level. Here, I wish to highlight one affective dimension that has been frequently discussed in relation to cinema, but which I believe provides a particularly valuable starting point for phenomenological inquiry into photography, too: hapticity.

Hapticity refers to a particular attitude assumed towards the world which shapes our engagements with objects we encounter. It is characterised as a particular kind of touch, one that is tangible but only skin deep: hapticity is that which 'allows us to come into contact with […] the surface of things' (Bruno 2002: 254). Talking about cinema, Laura Marks argues that cinema frequently encourages this sort of engagement by employing what she calls haptic images, the kind of visuals that elicit a very particular way of looking in the viewer. The way haptic images are looked at 'tends to move over the surface of its object rather than plunge

into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture. It is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze' (Marks 1999: 162).

Returning to Sobchak's assertion that the relationship between a film and the viewer is comparable to an encounter between two bodies, the sense of tactility present in Mark's description is not merely allegorical. According to Barker, coming in contact with haptic images is particularly analogous with the act of touching and being touched by something, seeing as their emphasis on textures and materiality 'encourages the viewer's gaze to move horizontally over the image, like fingertips caressing a particularly lush fabric or the dry grain of a sandy beach' (Barker 2009: 37). When we think back to Sobchak's description of how the information we gain through sight and hearing becomes supplemented by our bodies as we watch a film, this argument begins to make sense. When we engage with haptic images, our bodies translate that which we see on the screen into tactile sensations that can vary from smooth to rough or from soft to hard, all depending on the qualities of the image itself.

What makes hapticity a useful concept for my analytical purposes is that cinema is far from the only visual artform capable of producing haptic images. The biggest difference between cinema and mediums such as visual arts or photography is the fact that the former is able to capture movement, but movement is not needed for the sense of hapticity to emerge. Consider, for example, the greatly textured paintings of Justin Gaffrey, who has a tendency to render objects with thick gloops of paint which adds an almost sculpture-like quality to many of his works. Here, the variations in depth on the surfaces of the paintings practically beg for similar kind of engagement as the haptic cinematic images described by Marks. Indeed, when I look at Gaffrey's paintings, it requires conscious effort from me to shift my focus on the whole image, as the textures present are so enticing that they almost subdue everything else.

When it comes to photography, this sort of literal variation on the surface of the images is not possible. After all, traditional photographs are famous for the smoothness of the paper used to develop them, and digital images have no physical form to begin with. However, what makes the medium interesting is that it is almost like a missing link between visual arts and cinema. As is the case with visual art, the subjects that photography depicts are incapable of movement; on the other hand, as is the case with cinema, the medium is characterised by its ability to capture the world as it appears to us, which is something that visual arts – barring the previously discussed hyper-realistic pieces – typically do not attempt.

The hapticity of the photographic images, then, is a unique amalgamation of the capacities of the other two mediums. Unlike cinema, it cannot express itself through movement or sound, but the visual stimulation it provides shares notable similarities with the filmic images. While the differences between the photography and cinema are undeniable, it is therefore my contention that Sobchak's phenomenological framework provides a suitable theoretical basis for the rest of this chapter, as long as my analysis is successful in unearthing the expressive characteristics of photography and remains focused solely on them.

There is, however, one theoretical issue I wish to address before turning my attention the haptic dimensions of Pinterest's Studyinspo imagery. In academic literature discussing hapticity, many scholars tend to conflate two closely related, yet still distinctive, visual qualities. In Barker's analysis on the topic, for instance, she sometimes talks on the surfaces of the objects *on the screen*, and other times the surface of *the film itself.* A good example of the latter is her discussion of Carolee Scheemann's experimental film *Fuses* (1967), where scratches, layers of paint and specks of dust inflicted upon the original film strip account for a great deal of the viewer's tactile pleasure (Barker 2009: 23).

While Sobchak's concept of the body of the film would have it that these two textural layers are part of the one and the same expressive entity, there are cases when the presence of potentially tactile elements on the surface of a film strip or a photograph seem unintentional. In case of Pinterest's Studyinspo imagery, what one encounters every now and then is a photograph that is notably grainy or otherwise of lower visual quality. At times, the resulting visual "patina" of these images feels comparable to the layers of scratches, paint, and dust that grant *Fuses* its strong sense of hapticity. That said, most content circulating within Pinterest's Studyinspo community feature no such surface qualities. This leads me to believe that the haptically potent overlay on top of certain Studyinspo images is most likely not a result of certain photographers' artistic endeavours, but occurs due to a myriad of technological factors. The differing quality of the cameras used to take the photographs circulating within Pinterest's Studyinspo community probably account for the majority of the differences between them, as do the great number of digital image formats that individual images can be saved as.

Ought my analysis extend to the haptically potent qualities present in certain Studyinspo images, even if they occur rarely and do not seem to have intentionality behind them? Due to the limitations set for this master's thesis, I have decided to ignore this additional layer of

hapticity in my subsequent discussions on the phenomenology of photographic images. However, this does not mean that I consider the issue unworthy of further examination: instead, I would argue that the overlay-like surface qualities present in certain visual artworks, when an intentional part of the artist's creative vision, deserve research dedicated solely to them. As such, I feel justified in my decision to spend the remainder or this chapter focusing on the hapticity of content circulating within Pinterest's Studyinspo community as it presents itself on the objects featured in the individual photographs. As will soon become evident, it is there that the most haptically expressive characteristics of the phenomenon make themselves known.

4.3   Smooth surfaces…

What expressive characteristics does Pinterest's Studyinspo imagery employ, and what kinds of haptic sensations do they evoke within the viewer? Answering this question requires the researcher to turn inwards towards their own experiences with the subject of their analysis. This is because, as already established, phenomenology is the study of the human *experience* of the world, not the world itself. The world can, after all, only exist to us insofar as we have the means to experience it: 'the object is only determined as an identifiable being through an open series of possible experiences, and only exists for a subject who produces this identification' (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012: 257).

As previously discussed, my analytical approach draws its inspiration mainly from the similarly personal textual analyses produced by Barker (2009) as part of her exploration of the haptic dimensions of cinema. While the arguments presented in this chapter will, in other words, be based on one person's subjective experiences with Pinterest's Studyinspo imagery, the photographs chosen for closer examination will all be featured as illustrations that accompany my analysis. By doing this, my goal is not only to provide the reader with a better impression of the kinds of images circulating within the community, but also to encourage them to reflect upon my arguments while engaging with the very same photographs as I have. My hope is that the strength of my analysis, alongside the reader's ability to compare their experiences with mine, will substantiate my arguments more than a mere written description ever could.

When I turn my whole attention to the photographs circulating on Pinterest under Studyinspo's name, it takes almost no time at all before a peculiar sense of easiness washes

over me. Looking at Studyinspo imagery feels, for the lack of a better word, *effortless*, as if my eyes had no trouble grasping every visual detail immediately and simultaneously. Figure 1. is an example of an image that has this exact effect on me. In typical Studyinspo fashion, it is a photograph featuring a number of study-related objects – most notably a penholder and a pile of notebooks – taken from a slight top-down angle. Laying on the same table are also a cup of coffee and a small case for wireless earbuds. Although there are many objects present in the photograph, its overall impression is remarkably harmonious. The most eye-catching parts of the image – the penholder at the top left corner, the coffee mug at the top right, and the pile of notebooks taking up roughly a quarter of the space – are positioned with ample space between one another, which prevents the composition from feeling cramped.

Figure 1. Used with permission from the original owner.

What haptic dimensions are present in this photograph? If I think about the movement of my eyes as comparable to a physical caress, the resulting feeling of effortlessness does indeed seem to have a tactile side to it. When my gaze wanders across the photograph, my focus moves from one object to another without major disruptions: I would even go as far as to argue it *glides* over the image, tracing a seamless trajectory from the pencil holder to the table, from the coffee cup to the pile of notebooks. As a type of movement, gliding implies continuity, travelling from point A to point B without distractions or disturbances. When thinking of this experience in terms of tactility, one particular quality thusly comes to mind: that of *smoothness.*

Out of all possible sensations this image could evoke in me, why is it smoothness that emerges? The answer to this question is almost deceptively simple: because it is not my first time feeling this way. I vividly remember, for example, how it is like to hold a sea-smoothened pebble in my hand – how easy it is for my fingers to glide across its surface, and how enchanting this sensation is compared to what I am used to stony material usually feeling like. Encountering Studyinspo imagery, this photograph in particular, resonates in my body the very same way, and thinking back to Mark's and Barker's work on cinematic hapticity, I am finally able to locate the source of this sensation. Haptic images, as previously established, are characterised by their prioritisation of textures and materiality, and the main tactile quality present in this image is, indeed, that of smoothness. The solid wood of the pencil holder and the table radiate it, as does the glossy exterior of the coffee mug and the leathery surface of the notebook.

To better explain what I mean by this, I would like to propose the following hypothetical. Let us imagine that there were more objects present in this photograph, or that the objects already featured here were positioned differently: let us say, for example, that some of the pens in the penholder were laying on the table or on top of the pile of notebooks instead. Doing this would change the way this image is experienced. It would, in particular, result in the previously uninterrupted strips of solid surfaces becoming fragmented, which in turn would destroy their sense of smoothness completely. This happens because an excess of detail inevitably prevents one's gaze from gliding freely across the picture which, as established, is necessary in order for a sense of smoothness to emerge. This, in turn, is because of how we as human beings process visual information. As Marian Schmidt notes, scientific studies examining how people process images has revealed that the more 'rich in meaning' an area of an image is, the more likely it is to cause the viewer's eyes to pause before moving along (Schmidt 2011: 1–2). Haptic smoothness, then, is an experience that can only emerge from images where relatively few of these detailed points of fixation are present.

When I reflect upon my experience of looking at Figure 1. in light of this new information, the sense of smoothness I attributed to the photograph makes even more sense than before. Although my eyes do indeed glide across much of the photograph, I was previously oblivious to the fact that they also pause every now and then for a fraction of a second to process certain parts of it. The coffee cup, likely due to its irregular shape, is one such point of fixation; the pens resting on top of the pile of notebooks, quite detailed as they are, is another. However, these elements are positioned rather sparsely, and between them there aways exists an

undisturbed strip of smoothly textured surface. Furthermore, the amount of space taken up by these more detail-rich objects pales in comparison to the area claimed by the table and the notebooks. If I were to liken this photograph to a sea-smoothened stone, then, I would argue it would be a somewhat imperfect one: its surface would have few dents in it, which would momentarily interrupt the gliding movement of my fingers tracing across it. That said, the majority of the experience would be – and indeed, as my analysis has revealed, it haptically speaking *is* – characterised by an almost overwhelming sense of smoothness.

Having identified the haptic sensation that is the most characteristic of Pinterest's Studyinspo imagery, we can finally make sense of the peculiar feeling of pleasure which this whole master's thesis originally set out to understand. Encountering smoothness, as I briefly noted when comparing Figure 1. to a stone refined by waves, is an experience with an extremely pleasing effect on us. When our fingers – or for that matter, our eyes – come in contact with a surface without bumps or dents, the sensation of pure satisfaction that is elicited within us feels almost *magical*. I can personally attest to this fact, and I believe the one reading this can, too. After all, who among us has never found themselves lost in the pleasure of handling materials such as silk, glass, or porcelain?

While uncovering the exact mechanism that leads to smoothness evoking deeply pleasurable affects within us is ultimately beyond the scope of this master's thesis, there is one hypothesis I wish to present here. Let us, however briefly, return to the previously discussed idea of smoothness as characterised by a *lack* of other sensations: let us recall how the presence of textural details such as bumps or dents on the surface of an otherwise refined object completely changes our experience of it. Thinking about this in Schmidt's terms, such details are comparable to the points of fixation present in photographs and other images, insofar as they halt one's previous sensorial experience and demand heightened attention in order to become meaningful. Although having our senses of touch and sight stimulated in this manner is typically by no means *unpleasant*, I would thusly argue it is *more demanding* for our bodies than encountering a surface on which such disruptions are not present.

Previously, I described my experiences with Pinterest's Studyinspo imagery as characterised by a peculiar sense of ease. If my hypothesis is correct, even this seemingly metaphorical expression would suddenly make sense – not only figuratively, but haptically as well. When our fingers brush against satin or our eyes graze across images such as Figure 1., there are no textural surprises, pleasant nor unpleasant, to complicate the experience. When this happens,

our experience is that of an endlessly continuing smoothness: an undemanding and peaceful sensation filled with an almost overwhelming sense of relief. The haptic smoothness characteristic of Pinterest's Studyinspo imagery, then, bears within itself a certain sense of ease, which in turn is mutually constitutive with a particular type of pleasure. As such, I feel confident in asserting that the visual appeal many Studyinspo enthusiasts and I have made note of when discussing the content circulating within the community is not based on any vague notion of such images' "beauty", but on the deeply pleasurable haptic sensation of smoothness that emanates from the great majority of them.

4.4   … and controlled chaos

Smoothness is, however, not the only haptic sensation that frequently emerges in my encounters with Pinterest's Studyinspo imagery. Here, let us consider two different photographs, Figures 2. and 3. – both of which, just as was the case with Figure 1., depict a working desk with carefully arranged study-related items on top of it. In Figure 2., the most prominent objects featured are a laptop and an open book lying next to it, while in Figure 3. the laptop is accompanied by a large ring binder and some loose sheets of paper. Some other items in Figure 3. include a pile of books with a potted plant on the top of them, and a wall full of small posters and postcards against which the whole table is positioned. In contrast, the background in Figure 2. is much less detailed. The only objects on the table, besides the previously mentioned laptop and book, are a lamp, a candle holder, and what looks like it could be a creamy drink in a tall glass.

When I turn my full attention to Figures 2. or 3., the same sensation of smoothness I already discussed in relation to Figure 1. makes itself known almost instantaneously. This is no wonder, seeing as both photographs feature vast areas where no excessive detail is present, which haptically speaking means that my eyes can glide across their surfaces with ease. What is interesting here is how much the sense of smoothness in enhanced by the fact that the areas radiating it are all white. Because of the brilliance of white as a colour, even the smallest non-white detail would immediately stand out and disrupt the movement of the viewer's eyes across the image if it existed: however, in Figures 2. and 3., the largest undetailed surfaces, namely the walls and the counters of the working desks, are spotless. As a result, the sense of smoothness that emanates from these photographs feels somewhat heightened when compared to that of Figure 1.
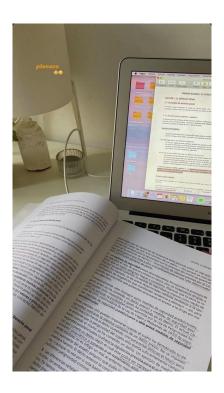
Figure 2. Used with permission from the original owner.

Figure 3. Used with permission from the original owner.

That said, something about the Figures 2. and 3. also makes them feel, for a lack of a better world, *busier* their previously discussed counterpart. Although my eyes move across their white, scarcely textured surfaces with no trouble at all, certain parts of these images have a completely opposite effect. When my gaze fixates on the pages of the book in Figure 2. or the

contents of the ring binder in Figure 3., for example, the sensation that is evoked within me is that of restlessness: suddenly, my eyes move across the black-on-white mass of text in a rapid manner that feels like an antithesis for the relaxed pace with which they were processing the image mere moments ago. The same also happens when I turn my attention to the busily decorated wall featured in Figure 3. Despite this, the underlying sense of smoothness does not fully disappear, nor does the sudden jolt of energy feel unpleasant. All in all, the haptic effect Figures 2. and 3. has on me is not radically different from that which emerged from my encounter with Figure 1., but it is not identical to it, either.

How is it possible for these two seemingly opposite sensations – one of peaceful gliding, and the other of busyness characterised by constant spikes of heightened need for attention – to occur simultaneously? Even more importantly, does this finding mean that everything I have said throughout this chapter is suddenly in need of total re-evaluation? Answering this question requires us to expand our thinking beyond the mere lack or excess of detail and consider how qualities such as the shape, angle, or direction of a visual element can affect our haptic experience of it. Here, I would specifically like to allude to Paul Crowther, whose insights, while originally developed to describe our encounters with drawings and paintings, provide quite a suitable basis for phenomenological analysis of photography, too.

To Crowther, just as to his fellow phenomenologists, the expressive qualities of a piece of art constitute its meaning: 'the artist's use of the medium to change how the world appears enables us to identify with the choices and values at issue in such transformations […] the way the work is made becomes the focus of meaning (Crowther 2017: 4). According to him, drawing and painting communicate with the viewer dominantly through various 'pictorial strategies', which include creative decisions ranging from the direction of the artist's strokes to the pressure with which one handles one's pencil or brush. These strategies, each with their unique 'psychological meaning in terms of how we inhabit space' are the source of our phenomenological experience with visual arts. A straight line, for example, is experienced differently than one that zigzags, which in turn imparts us with a different impression than a line that squiggles. (Crowther 2017: 48–49, 51)

What makes Crowther's work useful for the purposes of my analysis is that the visual elements in photographs share some of their inherent qualities with those featured in drawings and paintings. Let us consider, for example, his analysis of Italian renaissance artist Pisanello's drawing *Luxuria*, which depicts a woman with wild, curly hair laying languidly on

her side with her eyes turned towards the viewer. When describing the effect this image has on him, Crowther pays special attention to how the woman's hair is rendered: that is, with the use of a countless individual pencil strokes spaced densely next to one another. Such excess of detail, according to him, gives this drawing certain 'energy', which he sees as heightening the sense of eroticism already emanating from it (Crowther 2017: 53)

What I would like to suggest here is that this energy is also of a more literal, haptically experienced, kind. If the hair in Pisanello's drawing can be said to be rich in detail, this description applies just as aptly to, for example, the large areas of text present in Figures 2. and 3. If we think about these little black marks as purely visual elements and ignore their potential linguistic meanings – which is not difficult to do, seeing as all of them, except the words on the book at the foreground of Figure 2., are near impossible to read – we notice that they, too, form a particularly dense area of individual lines. Previously, I noted that this area caused my eyes to move restlessly over it, and described the resulting sensation as that of busyness. If we think about this experience haptically, what I am saying makes perfect sense. If my experience with the smooth surfaces of Figure 1. was characterised by a sense of undisturbed continuity, I would say that the opposite is true here: the restlessness of my eyes is mutually constitutive of the sense of busyness that evokes in me as a result of my encounter with images such as Figure 2. or 3. In other words, when Crowther described the phenomenological affect of the curly hair in Pisanello's drawing as energizing, what I believe he is talking about is the same haptic sensation of busyness that certain images circulating within Pinterest's Studyinspo imagery elicit in me.

It is still my contention, however, that Figures 2. and 3. maintain some of the same pleasantness that emanates from Figure 1. Understanding why this might be requires us to return to Crowther's original argument of different visual qualities producing distinctive psychological effects on us: what I would specifically like to focus on here are the questions of *shape.* Real-life objects, like the ones featured in Figures 1., 2., and 3., always have a shape to them. The shape of an object is determined by how the materials of which it consists of express themselves: whether they curl into themselves or push outwards, whether they bend and meander under pressure or stand up, solid and unyielding. As anyone who has ever practiced figure drawing knows, these shapes can only be expressed through certain kinds of linework. A chair made of stainless steel becomes recognisable as such only if the lines the artist uses retain a certain firmness to them, while capturing the likeness of a beanbag chair requires a different approach. Seeing as the direction of an artist's lines and the shape of an

object are mutually constitutive of one another, applying Crowthers's insights to analyse Studyinspo imagery becomes thusly a feasible way to deepen our understanding of these photographs' phenomenological effect on us.

When I return to examine Figures 2. and 3. after this brief theoretical detour, I am suddenly made aware of something that I had previously overlooked completely. It is still true that parts of these images, such as the decorated wall in Figure 3., continue to evoke a sense of haptic busyness in me, as focusing on it causes my gaze to move faster than before. However, I am now noticing that the posters and postcards that make up this densely detailed area are also shaped in quite a peculiar manner: they consist, in fact, of perfectly straight edges. Previously, I described the hair in Pisanello's drawing as "wild" due to of its irregular and almost out-of-control shape. The posters and postcards featured in Figures 2. and 3., on the other hand, could not be tamer when it comes to their figurative outlines. They feel, for lack of a better word, highly *controlled.*

Why does straightness make us feel this way? As previously stated, Crowther's theory rests on the idea that artistic gestures and the traces they create are mutually constitutive of one another and carry within themselves certain qualities which dictate how each visual element is experienced. When it comes to straightness in particular, I would argue that it is always a result of an *unwavering* gesture. Did one's hand tremble even slightly when drawing a straight line, the trace left on the paper would be many things, but never that which it was originally intended to be. Another way of putting this would be saying that straightness emerges only when the artist has a certain amount of highly precise *control* over their movements. Control, then, is an inherent quality of straightness: not only does it emanate control, but also consists of it and nothing *but* it. In other words, the heavily detailed areas featured in Figures 2. and 3. feel controlled because they *are* so, and this is due to their very shape.

It is precisely this controlled shape of the heavily detailed areas of Figures 2. and 3. that diminishes some of their busyness: it transforms them, bends them in shape, and coaxes them to conform with a certain order. This becomes evident as soon as we to think about my experiences haptically. Let us consider, for example, the decorated wall featured in Figure 3. When I reflect upon my initial experience with this area, I now realise that the movement of my eyes, while indeed quite rapid in its pace, was far from chaotic. I did not process what I saw haphazardly, jumping from one detail to another without rhyme or reason. Instead, the

movement of my gaze was reminiscent of the act of *measuring*, as the perfectly straight figurative outlines of the posters and postcards created clear trajectories for my eyes to follow.

Follow my eyes did, and they continue to do so even now: looking at this picture again, I notice that they feel particularly drawn to the right vertical edge of the green "Flower market" poster, and prefer moving up and down alongside it rather than plunging into the myriad of details featured in it. While the pull of this one edge is exceptional in its strength, it is not the only element present in this image that has a similar effect on me. Whichever poster or postcard I focus on now, I realise their straight edges have always dictated how I have processed them. Time after time, my gaze has instinctually gravitated towards these figurative outlines, and each time this has happened, my eyes have moved alongside their trajectories, changing direction only when an edge I have been following has come to its end. The movement of my eyes, then, has been extremely controlled: not only has it always had a clear path to follow, but this path itself has been unwavering in its absolute straightness.

The same observation holds true even when I turn my attention to the blocks of text that take up a great deal of space in both Figures 2. and 3. In fact, it is only now that I become aware of the fact that these areas consist of perfectly straight rows and columns of text, and that my eyes have always felt drawn to their edges. When I think back to my very first encounter with the book at the forefront of Figure 2., for example, I remember my eyes practically clinging to the wide, empty gaps between the paragraphs of text printed on it. At least to my eyes, these small strips of pure white paper are alluring in their own right, and I now realise this is due to their shape. Once again, yet another even-sided rectangle is present, and its figurative outlines feel much more appealing to my eyes than the bustling busyness of the blocks of text themselves. Perhaps even more importantly, the trajectories these outlines draw move my eyes in a way that is nothing short of pure order: just as was the case with the decorated wall in Figure 3., the edges of these blocks of text pave a clear path for my gaze to follow, and my instincts gladly respond to this invitation.

All of this ultimately boils down to one addition that I wish to make to Crowther's theory of visual arts and gesture. As my analysis of these two Studyinspo images has demonstrated, making sense of the effects that visual elements can have on us requires us to pay special attention to how different elements guide our gaze as we process that which we are seeing. In case of Figures 2. and 3., I have shown how the orderly shape of their seemingly chaotic areas guides the viewer's eyes to move in a certain way, which in turn helps to reduce the sense of

busyness that otherwise emanates from them: after all, as my previous discussions of Barker, Marks, and Schmidt have shown, the way human beings process visual information inevitably influences our experiences of individual images. All of this considered, I feel confident in positing that orderliness is not only the visual quality that certain areas in Figures 2. and 3. possess, but also a haptic sensation that such areas elicit within those viewing them.

Were this indeed the case, it would provide a much needed explanation as to how Studyinspo imagery is capable of producing two seemingly incompatible sensations within us simultaneously. Even the most detailed areas in Figures 2. and 3. feel orderly because our eyes process them in such a manner. On the other hand, the excess of detail present in these areas means that there is more for us to take in, and as such, our experience with them is also characterised by a sense of busyness. Due to the sheer number of posters and postcards present in Figure 3., for example, there are plenty of different straight edges to follow, which means that my gaze is constantly presented with new information. Every time one trajectory comes to an end there is a new one just next to it: truly processing this area, then, requires my eyes to take many twists and turns, which evokes a sense of restless busyness within us. As confusing as it may have originally seemed to me, then, these areas are experienced as both orderly *and* busy, and since these experiences have a shared origin – the movement of my eyes across a certain visual area – their emergence is simultaneous, and thusly far from contradictory. All in all, what this analysis has revealed to us is that the haptic sensations elicited by Studyinspo imagery are manifold. Smoothness is one of them, and a certain orderly busyness is another, even if visual elements emanating the latter are not present in all Studyinspo images.

4.5   Pleasure before all

That said, there is another characteristic to straightness as a visual quality – one which, as is my contention, helps to explain why Figures 2. and 3. evoke the same sense of satisfaction in me as their previously discussed counterpart. When reflecting upon my experiences with Figures 2. and 3., I cannot help but notice the similarities between straightness and smoothness when it comes to their haptic influence on our bodies. Previously, I was careful when describing the way my eyes moved when encountering the orderly edges of the busy areas in these images, because saying too much would have risked giving my argument away too soon. Now, however, I can finally name the manner in which the trajectories present in these images caused my gaze to move. There are no other words for it, and I am confident that

I am not mistaken: processing these perfectly straight lines, my eyes were *gliding* across these areas, just as they had done previously with the smooth surfaces present in Figure 1.

Even more importantly, my body's reactions to this gliding movement were near identical to those I have described before. Processing the busy blocks of text or the richly detailed, decorated wall featured in Figures 2. and 3. did not only evoke a sense of orderliness within me, but there was a peculiar, yet extremely familiar, side effect to them. To be more precise, moving my eyes alongside the unwavering straight edges of these areas resulted in a powerful wave of pleasure washing over me. My experience of even the most detailed parts felt seamless and effortless: it was as if my gaze was *flowing* to the rhythm of the trajectories presented to it, focused yet relaxed. This sensation is, of course, the very same one that I first made note of as early as the introductory chapter of this master's thesis. That said, whereas I previously contributed its emergence purely to the visual quality of smoothness that is so central to Studyinspo imagery's particular look, I am now convinced it has yet another source. If my experiences are of any indication, the orderly straight edges present in photographs such as Figures 2. and 3. are just as haptically pleasurable as the smooth surfaces present in all the images discussed throughout this chapter.

Why does straightness have this additional effect on us? According to Crowther, one of the defining features of a line of any kind is its continuity. In fact, a line without continuity cannot be a line at all: only an unbroken gesture moving from point A to point B can produce a trace that will be understood as one. (Crowther 2017: 51) I would argue this applies especially to straight lines. Let us think back to what I previously said about straightness being a product of an unwavering gesture, and how only a line that wholly adheres to this principle can ever be recognised as straight. A line with even one small bend could never be registered as perfectly straight, as our eyes following alongside it would immediately make not of this imperfection and react accordingly. Haptically speaking, then, the sensation of straightness is always tied to a certain continuity – to be more precise, that of *shape.*

It is my contention that this continuity of shape is what grants evenly-shaped visual areas in Figures 2. and 3. their ability to influence us the same way as the smooth surfaces discussed previously in this chapter. As I have noted, smoothness, too, is characterised by a kind of continuity – to be more precise, that of *texturality*. Both straightness and smoothness are dependent of this quality because their very nature demands it: after all, they can exist only when no competing shapes or textures are present. Previously, I argued that it was this lack of

potential distractions or disturbances that allowed our eyes to process the smooth areas of Figures 1., 2., and 3. with ease, and suggested that the pleasure we experience when encountering these areas owed its existence to the thusly emerging sense of effortlessness. As my analysis of the orderly yet busy areas in Figures 2. and 3. has demonstrated, the way we haptically experience straightness follows the very same process. My eyes glide alongside the unwavering edges featured in these photographs because that is the only way that our gaze *can* move when presented with their unwavering straightness, and because gliding as a movement implies certain ease, it makes sense that my haptic experience of straightness, too, would have a deeply pleasurable side to it.

As such, we have finally made it to the end of the line of inquiry which I laid out at the very beginning of this chapter. By approaching Pinterest's Studyinspo imagery through hapticity – a theoretical concept which owes its existence to the phenomenological principles of Merleau-Ponty – we have uncovered the visual characteristics that account for the majority of the pleasure elicited in us as we engage with the content circulating within the community. An almost overwhelming sense of smoothness dominates these images, and although some them also feature large, heavily detailed areas that require us to pause and process that which we are seeing, the even shape of even the busiest parts guides our eyes to process them in a remarkably orderly manner. When we think of our experiences with these images haptically, we notice both smoothness and straightness are visual qualities that cause our eyes to move in a particularly effortless manner, which in turn helps to explain why our encounters with Pinterest's Studyinspo imagery feel deeply satisfying both visually and bodily. All in all, the work of Sobchak, Marks, and other phenomenologists has revealed to us that the allure of these photographs goes much, much deeper than what one might have initially been willing to recognise.

One could, however, criticise my conclusions by noting that smoothness and orderliness of these images arises solely from the objects featured in them. To some extent, this argument is something that I cannot wholly refute. Smoothness and certain evenness of shape are, after all, innate physical qualities of many factory-produced products, and those featured in Figures 1., 2. and 3. are no exception. As such, any photograph featuring these objects would – at least theoretically – be capable of evoking similar haptic sensations in us. An important question thusly emerges: are smoothness and orderliness innate qualities of Studyinspo *imagery* or merely the objects *featured* in it?

While I recognise the validity of this criticism, what I would like to emphasise is the amount of intentionality that goes into creating these images. When I first encountered Studyinspo imagery myself, I soon noticed that individual photographs seldomly appeared as if they had been taken in the midst of one's study session. Rarely if ever did I encounter images where one's table would be swimming in piles upon piles of papers, books, and pens; neither did I come across hastily scribbled notes nor even as much as a single piece of eraser crumb dotting an otherwise spotless table. Even the photographs discussed in this chapter are full of details that make their depictions of studying feel quite removed from my memories and knowledge of the realities of conducting academic research. In Figure 1., for example, the notebooks are not open, which means that this photograph was taken when none of them were in active use. Similarly, in Figure 2., the open book is resting on top of the laptop's keyboard, which in reality would prevent one from typing and additionally risk the weight of the book pressing the buttons of the laptop's keyboard.

If the content circulating within Pinterest's Studyinspo community does not consist of actual snapshots depicting individuals' actual study sessions, what should we make of these images? Here, my previously mentioned idea of intentionality is of upmost importance. Although these images are not wholly truthful records of the photographer's academic pursuits, what is notable is that they *appear* as if they were. Figure 3. is a particularly interesting example of this: while the working desk depicted in it is just as spotless and nicely organised as the ones in Figures 1. and 2., the way the loose pieces of paper have been spread across it make the photograph *seem* like a convincing scene of a busy studying session. Such balancing between ostensible real-lifeness and carefully maintained visual pleasantness is the norm for Studyinspo images, which makes understanding them quite challenging. That said, at the end of the day it is clear that these photographs have not been taken in midst of actual research, which leaves one with no other option than to deduce that they are at least somewhat staged.

Here, it is important to note that my use of the word "staged" is not intended as a value judgement of any kind. Rather, what I wish to emphasise is that the effort that goes into creating these images is extended with a very specific goal in mind. This goal is, of course, to produce a photograph that meets certain visual qualifications. Earlier, I spent most of the previous chapter to demonstrate how central "beauty" and "prettiness" were to Studyinspo imagery. Most importantly, I suggested they were essential for the phenomenon's mode – that a study-related photograph, no matter of its other qualities, would only gain traction within the Studyinspo community if it was deemed visually pleasing enough. Here, we see that my

proposal is indeed correct, and can finally understand why Figures 1., 2., and 3. are the way they are. All these images have been created with one shared intention – that of evoking visual pleasure within the viewer – and this has been achieved through the employment of certain visual qualities – that is, the previously discussed smoothness and orderliness, which due to their haptic qualities are particularly potent sources of visual and bodily satisfaction.

As previously noted, one cannot deny that my focus throughout this chapter has been on the kinds of visual qualities that seem at least somewhat innate to the objects featured in these photographs. However, considering that these images show such clear signs of being at least somewhat staged, there is no way of knowing which objects are featured ad-hoc and which have been included purely to deepen the viewer's visual enjoyment. For example, while the blocks of text in Figures 2. and 3. are shaped the way they are due to their formatting – meaning that the original photographer has had no control over their appearance – the decision to feature them so prominently in these images in the first place is a different matter altogether. This is to not even mention how these busy areas have been positioned in relation to other visual elements: how, for instance, the open book in Figure 2. takes up roughly a half of the image and thusly leaves ample space for the smooth surfaces of the table and the back wall to bring much needed counterbalance to the composition. With all these factors considered, it would thusly be naïve to propose that the haptic impact of these photographs owed its existence purely to the visual qualities of the real-life objects featured in them. In this chapter, I have sought to understand Studyinspo images as expressive entities of their own right, which not only does away with this problem, but also places my theoretical focus on the human *experience* of the phenomenon – the very thing which phenomenology as a discipline has dedicated itself to.

Furthermore, while some smooth or orderly areas in these images might have been included without any further thought given to their visual qualities, the fact that almost every pin gathered for the purposes of this master's thesis emanates these qualities cannot be overlooked. In this chapter, I have only had time to analyse three individual Studyinspo images, yet my other experiences with the study-related content circulating on Pinterest have been almost bafflingly similar when it comes to their hapticity: at the very beginning of this master's thesis, I described Studyinspo imagery as visually homogenous, and I continue to stand by this contention. In fact, many photographs gaining traction within Pinterest's Studyinspo community emanate smoothness and orderliness even more plainly than the Figures 1., 2. and 3 discussed in this chapter. One particularly popular "subtype" that I had no

time to analyse, for example, consists of photographs in which study-related objects are organised to form a perfectly straight-edged grids of sorts. To me, these images represent Studyinspo imagery in its purest form. Everything about their composition emanates visual order, and as a result, encountering these images provides nothing *but* haptic pleasure to the viewer.

When I return for one last time to my encounters with not only Figures 1., 2., and 3., but Studyinspo imagery as a whole, I notice that what I just said capsulates perfectly my experiences with them. Despite the name of the phenomenon, the content circulating within Pinterest's Studyinspo community provides nothing concrete to strive for. These images do not *teach* the other community members anything, were it related to a specific school subject or studying in general. Previously, I suggested that the original takers of these photographs created them to share their studies with others, but as has been demonstrated in this chapter, this is not wholly true, either. The only reason for Studyinpo images' existence I can think of, then, is the haptic pleasure they provide to the viewers. Everything in them aims for this goal, and if the comments analysed in Chapter 3. are of any indication, they do so quite successfully.

All in all, if I were to summarise the purpose of these images in just one sentence, I would say that they exist purely for pleasure. Haptic pleasantness is all they have, everything they strive for. Although they are also united in their subject matter – studying – what ultimately defines Studyinspo imagery is that it aims to appeal to its viewers in a manner that encompasses both visual and bodily dimensions of human experience. This, in turn, explains why the visual look of these photographs has fascinated me from the very beginning. The pleasure that looking at these images elicited in me was never a coincidence, but the outcome intended from the very start: back then, I did not have the words to explain why this was the case, but I am now much wiser in this regard.

That said, my curiosity regarding Studyinspo as a phenomenon has not been completely quenched. Out of all activities that could be presented in this way, why does studying have an entire community dedicated to it? In the previous chapter, I speculated that examining the "beauty" of Studyinspo aesthetics might help us to understand what makes this content so inspiring in the eyes of pinners. If this "beauty" is indeed synonymous with the sense of satisfaction that arises from the haptic qualities of these images, what does this tell us about the aspirations of those engaging with the community? In other words, what we are yet to

understand are the circumstances which have allowed a phenomenon like Studyinspo to emerge and flourish: furthermore, it is my contention that ignoring this issue would produce only an impartial account on the popularity that images like this enjoy online. The penultimate chapter of this master's thesis will seek to complete the picture by discussing why so many users on Pinterest and other social media platforms would be particularly invested in consuming visual content which portrays studying as a deeply pleasurable and satisfying activity.

5 Virtual pleasures, real-life pains – the societal implications of the Studyinspo phenomenon

In the previous chapter, I proposed that Studyinspo's appeal can be largely attributed to the peculiar look of the content circulating within the community. As I demonstrated, the visual qualities of smoothness and orderliness dominate these photographs, and by exploring the haptic dimensions of our experiences with them, I concluded that Studyinspo imagery exists first and foremost to produce a deep sense of pleasure within the viewer. That said, I also felt that something was missing from my account. Namely, I was left wondering about the community's single-minded focus on studying as an activity. What compels this specific subsection of Pinterest users to seek out content related to academic pursuits, and what purpose does the haptic pleasure emanating from these photographs serve?

In this chapter, this question will be answered by examining the societal context within which Studyinspo has emerged from and continues to exist to this very day. To do that, however, I feel like it is necessary to note that Studyinspo is far from the only media phenomenon with a focus on producing a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment within the one engaging with it. As such, I will begin this chapter by discussing the so-called *iyashi* boom of 1990s Japan and charting the many similarities between it and Studyinspo. That said, doing this will be but a prelude to the actual issue at hand. As will be demonstrated, the *iyashi* phenomenon was born during a time characterised by a number of societal crises, which resulted in an increasing number of people seeking out media that would help them to relax and self-soothe. Could the same also be said about Studyinspo, and if so, what stressors and pressures of the contemporary Western world would lead a group of individuals to consume content that portrays studying as a deeply pleasurable activity?

5.1 Virtual pleasures…

According to Paul Roquet, *iyashi* is a nominal form of the Japanese verb *iyasu*, which refers to both physical and mental type of healing or mending. For the past 30 years, the term has also been used as the name for the growing number of products and services designed to produce a sense of calm and relaxation within the consumer. The so-called *iyashi* boom, which emerged in Japan in the mid-1990s, brought to the market a myriad of commodities with the promise of helping individuals to regulate their mood 'both in the therapeutic guises

[…] and more generally in contexts of relaxation and stress relief'. These include, but are not limited to,

> '"healing art," "healing music," *iyashi*-themed magazines and books, implements for a wide variety of therapeutic modalities (aromatherapy, pet therapy, color therapy, plant therapy, sound therapy, art therapy, massage therapy, sex therapy, etc.), *iyashi*-style television shows, relaxation DVDs, *iyashi*-style pornography, and *iyashi* robots. (Roquet 2009: 87–88)

It is important to note here that many commodities promoted under the *iyashi* umbrella are media products, ranging from visual and auditory art to audiovisual works. Roquet's article, for example, focuses on contemporary Japanese *iyashi* fiction, where engaging storytelling and various literary devices are utilised to produce the sense of being "healed" within the reader. This fact alone highlights one undeniable similarity between *iyashi* and Studyinspo as phenomena. In both cases, the consumers engage with media in order to enhance their mood: to feel, in one way or another, better than they did before.

That said, the similarities between *iyashi* and Studyinspo go much deeper than just this. In his analysis of Yuki Kurita's novel *Oteru Moru* – a book often praised for its "healing" influence on the readers – Roquet makes note of the author's frequent focus on sensorial detail. As he describes, *iyashi* writers such as Kurita tend to feature 'detailed mimetic depictions of the act of encountering *iyashi* qualities in sensory objects – the soothingness of sound, texture, color, light, temperature, and so on' in their works in order to heighten the feelings of calm and relaxation they wish to evoke within the reader. One example Roquet provides is a scene where *Oteru Moru's* main character spends a paragraph describing her tactile experience of sitting down on a chair made of cowhide, with the emphasis on the velvety and supple feeling of the leather and the solidity of the armrests and the back. While this brief tactile moment bears no significance for *Oteru Moru's* actual plot, Roquet argues that it 'plays the […] function of invoking a calm affective orientation toward the world and in turn reinforcing the overall [relaxing] mood', which is something he sees as a crucial part of *iyashi* literature's allure. (Roquet 2009: 97)

Yet another defining feature of *iyashi* literature according to Roquet are certain linguistic choices that the authors of the genre frequently employ. As he describes, Kurita favours 'common, familiar' words and utilises evocative and straightforward sentence structures with

'short, light, and succinct' phrasing. These stylistic features, according to him, contribute greatly to the relaxing and calming atmosphere of the novel: in fact, the use of matter-of-fact words and simple sentences makes Kurita's prose easy to consume to the point that many critics have characterised her style as 'smooth' – a term with obvious soothing implications to it (Roquet 2009: 95–95). Here, we see that the tactile dimensions of *iyashi* literature are not limited to certain particularly enticing scenes, but that the calming and relaxing effect of the genre is also woven to the very linguistic fabric of works such as *Oteru Moru.*

That said, *iyashi* literature does not sustain itself solely on smoothly flowing vignettes of soothingly tactile encounters. Even in *Oteru Moru*, the main character faces conflict and challenges, as she tries to juggle between the demands of her new job and having to take care of her sickly twin sister who her ex-boyfriend cheated on her with. However, as Roquet notes, Kurita utilises these potentially upsetting elements of the story extremely carefully. She does this mainly by oscillating between the relaxation-oriented scenes and the more tension-heavy ones in a manner that reduces the impact of the latter, and by finally merging the two: not only does the main character slowly gain competence in her new position as a hotel clerk, but her workplace's relaxing atmosphere and the confidence that thriving at her job provides also helps her to mend her relationship with her sister. As Roquet thusly describes, *iyashi* literature 'draws upon the absorptive and rhythmic qualities of [its] narrative description' in order to 'fold' the more tension-heavy moments back into the calming and relaxing mood that defines the genre. (Roquet 2009: 104–105)

As this short rundown of *iyashi* literature's most defining characteristics demonstrates, the inner workings of the phenomenon closely resemble those of Studyinspo. As previously argued, the viewer's experiences with Studyinspo imagery are predominantly of haptic kind – that is, simultaneously visual and tactile in their effect on the viewer. In fact, as analysis of the staged nature of Studyinspo images demonstrated, the content circulating within the community invites one to engage with them in a manner that prioritises tactility over everything else. As Roquet's example of the plot-halting cowhide chair scene in *Oteru Moru* demonstrates, this is something that *iyashi* literature, too, does quite frequently.

Similarly, the tactile dimensions of both *iyashi* literature and Studyinspo imagery owe a great deal of their effectiveness to the corresponding linguistic and visual choices utilised in them: indeed, as one reading this has surely already made note of, the use of common words and simple sentence structures in *iyashi* literature have an almost perfect analogue in Studyinspo's

key visual characteristics. In Studyinspo's case, the large undetailed areas that individual images so commonly feature, too, could be characterised as smooth, seeing as they also facilitate effortless procession of information present in them. In addition to this, the visual orderliness that is an equally defining characteristic of Studyinspo imagery has an almost identical effect on the viewer, which enforces the resulting sense of ease even further.

Most important, however, is the fact that the *affects* that *iyashi* literature and Studyinspo imagery produce are similar to the point that treating them as two separate sensations is almost impossible. Just as gliding one's eyes across the perfectly smooth surfaces and orderly compositions of Studyinspo images evokes immense pleasure within the viewer, the simple and efficient linguistic choices of writers such as Kureta provide an equally fulfilling experience, especially during the scenes dedicated to the alluring tactile qualities of the story's world. The only real difference between the effects of these two phenomena lies in the words used to describe them: throughout this master's thesis, I have preferred rather general allusions such as "pleasantness" or "satisfaction", whereas Roquet has opted to more specific terms, particularly "calmness" and "relaxation". Upon further inspection, however, it seems that we are referring to roughly the same sensation.

Indeed, I find Roquet's frequent use of the word "soothing" in reference to *iyashi* literature as a particularly apt description of the pleasure that Studyinspo imagery continues to evoke in me. In both cases, engaging with a particular piece of media has a positive effect on one's overall mood, but the nature of this mental boost is of a unique kind. Unlike a spark of joy or a rush of excitement, it is a subtle shift, the kind that emerges when something pleases us, satisfies us, provides us with relief or nourishment. As Roquet suggests, there is something extremely calming and relaxing about this sensation, but I also maintain that it is first and foremost a deeply pleasurable one. For consistency's sake, I will stick to the words used thus far for the reminder of this master's thesis, but what I wish this comparison has demonstrated is that affectually speaking, the mood-improving effects of *iyashi* literature and Studyinspo are so close to each other that they might as well be considered one and the same.

There is one more similarity between *iyashi* and Studyinspo media that bears mentioning here. Seeing as both phenomena are geared towards producing a sense of satisfaction within the one experiencing them, any elements that might disrupt this affect are placed under tight control within individual manifestations of both phenomena. In the case of writers such as Kurita, this is achieved by maintaining careful balance between the calm-inducing and the

more tension-heavy moments, and by slowly dissolving the latter so that by the end of the book, the sense of calm and relaxation is the one dominating the overall experience. In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how the orderliness of Studyinspo imagery achieves something similar: how the neat compositions and carefully maintained relations between different image elements help to reduce the sense of busyness that would otherwise emanate from the more richly detailed parts of these photographs. If we take my previous assertion that Studyinspo as a phenomenon exists purely for the sake of the pleasure it elicits within Pinterest's userbase, we see that the very same thing could thusly be said about *iyashi.*

All in all, the similarities between *iyashi* and Studyinspo are staggering, which is quite curious considering that these phenomena have seemingly no relation to each other: whereas the former emerged commercially in the 1990s and was tied mainly to physical goods and services, the latter rose in popularity in the mid-2010s and revolves around user-created virtual content. It is important to note here, however, that the word "virtual" has two different meanings. While the content circulating within Pinterest's Studyinspo community is virtual in the sense that it is purely digital, can *iyashi* media, too, be described as virtual when it comes to the effect it has on the consumer. There is, after all, something rather artificial about being able to transpose one's mood at will.

My intention here is not to start a philosophical debate about the implications of media geared towards influencing one's mental state, but to simply note of the relative novelty of such media. As Roquet notes, 'using sensory cues to directly affect mood' is not a new phenomenon – after all, the use of propaganda for this very purpose has existed since time immemorial – but he also insists that what makes *iyashi* goods and services unique is that their arrival marked the first time that a regular citizen had the means to manipulate their emotional state by their own volition (Roquet 2009: 89). As has been demonstrated throughout this master's thesis, Studyinspo seems to be the same way: whereas gaining motivation to study would previously have required one to find the incentive within themselves, today the spark to ignite one's will to work is just a few mouse clicks away. The pleasures these two phenomena provide, then, can both be called virtual, insofar as their emergence is tied to the consumption of media works, rather than the real-life circumstances surrounding the individual.

5.2   … and real-life pains

By now, one might wonder what relevance these comparisons have to the question at hand – that is, understanding the reasons behind the emergence of Studyinspo. The answer to this question is simple. Over the past 30 years, theorists have debated *iyashi* goods' rise in popularity among consumers, finally reaching consensus where the rapidly changing societal realities of Japan in the mid-1990s are widely considered as the main factor propelling the population's interest in mood-enhancing goods and services. Considering the numerous similarities between *iyashi* and Studyinspo as phenomena, it is my contention that examining the historical backdrop of the former's emergence might help us to identify the factors contributing to the growing popularity of the latter as well.

According to Roquet, sociologists and cultural theorists have identified various events and shifts within Japanese society in the 1990s that help to explain the increasing demand of mood-enhancing media among the consumers. For example, arguably the two largest Japanese cultural traumas of the late 20th century – the Kobe earthquake and the Aum Shinrikyo terrorist attacks – both occurred in 1995, sowing pain, fear, and anxiety among the populus (Roquet 2009: 89). However, most commentators agree that the most influential forces behind the *iyashi* boom were more inconspicuous. After the country entered a period of economic downturn in the early 1990s, the realities of the Japanese job market changed for the worse. As Roquet explains,

> The pervasive lifetime employment of the bubble years began to be replaced by more flexible, temporary, cheaper forms of employment. On-the-job training—a mainstay of the previous model—declined, and workers were often on their own in the struggle to remain competitive. (Roquet 2009: 108)

In other words, while the Japanese workers had previously enjoyed a relatively high degree of financial and job-related security, the country entering a period of economic stagnation led to everyday life becoming more unstable and stressful. Examining the *iyashi* boom from this perspective provides a backdrop against which the true appeal of the phenomenon finally makes itself known. The myriad of "healing" products and services entering the marketplace in the 1990s gained popularity because they promised something that the Japanese populus was desperate for: an on-demand way to enhance one's mood during a turbulent time in the country's societal and economic life.

Would a similar explanation help us understand the popularity of the Studyinspo phenomenon as it exists today? I certainly believe so. However, what is missing from Roquet's analysis is explicitly naming the wider societal trend that the changes brought by the burst of Japan's bubble economy in the 1990s are but one manifestation of. This trend – or perhaps it would be more accurate to talk about an ideology – is called neoliberalism, and it is by now widely recognised as perhaps the single most powerful force shaping what life in an increasing number of societies looks like today.

At the heart of neoliberalism lies one belief: that the most preferable way for society to function is in a manner where the state has as little to say as possible when it comes to how the market works (Cambell et al. 2005: 100). According to early neoliberals, wellbeing within capitalist societies was already dependent on economic growth. As such, maximising private companies' ability to conduct business as they saw fit would be the only way to ensure high employment rates and to prevent poverty. (Standing 2011: 9) In addition to lobbying for the removal of laws or regulations that would hinder the flourishment of the market, neoliberalists argued that society as a whole would benefit from becoming more like the business world (Standing 2011: 1). They considered the principles of the free market as providing much-needed efficiency to all areas of human life, which in turn would grant countries embracing neoliberalism an edge over others within the increasingly competitive sphere of global economics (Springer et al. 2016: 3; Standing 2011: 62).

While the collection of ideas and practices that define neoliberalism today can be attributed to economists such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, whose work dates back to the 1930s and 1940s, they entered the political sphere only in the late 1970s and early 1980s, propelled by prominent state figureheads such as United States' Ronald Reagan and United Kingdom's Margaret Thatcher (Springer et al. 2016: 3). Some changes that these policymakers promoted included

> the deregulation of capital and labour, the casualisation and outsourcing of the
> workforce and the disintegration of working patterns, trade union bargaining powers
> and centralised authority (Wilkins 2012: 198).

Today, neoliberal policies have been widely implemented all around the world. The new realities of the Japanese employees in the 1990s are a prime example of this: as companies entered the time of economic downturn, the money-saving solutions they resorted to were

perfectly legal, but as Roquet's allusion to the "pervasive bubble of lifetime employment" suggests, the more temporary and lower-cost employer-employee relationships were a relatively new addition to the country's job market. That said, Roquet's example also highlights what many view as the insidious underbelly of the neoliberalist ideology. Although the cheaper types of employment and equally cost-efficient ways to manage the workers no doubt helped many enterprises stay afloat during a very difficult economic period, the fact that they increased insecurity and stress among the population demonstrates that the emerging neoliberal order did not serve everyone's needs.

While it would be easy to explain the appeal of Studyinspo with vague allusions to the neoliberal realities of the world today, I believe that more precision is needed to get to the root of the issue at hand. Seeing as the phenomenon is quite peculiar in its single-minded focus on studying and studying alone, turning our attention to the state of education systems under neoliberalism ought to be the best place to start. According to Amanda Keddie, the efficiency-obsessed neoliberal paradigm makes itself known within educational establishments through a myriad of 'business-derived concepts of measurement, evaluation and comparison' which have been implemented to make it easier to assess the students, teachers and even schools themselves 'against quantifiable standards of "success"' (Keddie 2016: 109). In case of students specifically, the most notable of these new evaluative tools are standardised testing and the continuous monitoring of their performance in the classroom setting (Keddie 2016: 115). What is important to note here is that these practices have real-life impact on the individuals being evaluated. The better an individual is perceived to succeed in these areas, the higher they will be graded, and the higher their grades, the more educational and career opportunities become available to them.

While the grading of students based on their performance during exams and in the classroom has become so commonplace that one does not typically even bother thinking about it, there are certain concerning implications to these practices that many researchers have made note of. On one hand, they incentivise students to prioritise the quantifiable results of their labour over the process of gaining an in-depth understanding of what is being taught (Fitzsimmons 2015: 212), and on the other, they subtly push academic responsibility from the institutions onto the individual (Keddie 2016: 117). The latter issue, often called responsibilisation, is one of the key characteristics of the neoliberal ideology, under which individuals are seen as

autonomous, self-determined and self-sustaining subjects whose moral quality is based on the fact that they rationally assess the costs and benefits of a certain act as opposed to other alternative acts. As the choice of options for action is, or so the neo-liberal notion of rationality would have it, the expression of free will on the basis of a self-determined decision, the consequences of the action are borne by the subject alone, who is also solely responsible for them. (Lemke in Shamir 2008, 7–8)

In case of educational faculties, neoliberal responsibilisation is prominent in the assumption that an individual's grades reflect their skills and the amount of effort they have put in their studies and are thus a fair and objective way to evaluate them as learners. This, however, obscures the existence of a great number of independent factors that can hinder one's ability to succeed within an academic setting, especially those related to structural inequalities such as the student's gender, race, or class background (Keddie 2016: 109).

When the spirit of responsibilisation is combined with the equally neoliberal realities of the contemporary job markets, a rather depressing picture emerges. As previously alluded to, most higher education and occupational institutions today pose certain credential criteria in order to regulate the number of people entering them. More often than not, one's grades – or the degrees they have earned based on them – are the determining factor regarding whether one is offered an admission into their desired university or lands the job of their dreams. This puts special emphasis on the importance of "doing well" in school in order to ensure one's ability to pursue the kind of life they wish to lead. Furthermore, considering that having a well-paying and stable job is the most widely accessible way to live an economically secure life under the capitalist system, there is even more of an incentive for an individual to "work hard" for the sake of their future: to maximise one's chances in life, it is better to aim high and land somewhere slightly disappointing than risking doing "not enough" and ending with a job that pays poorly or is otherwise insecure.

However, due to neoliberal changes to what kind of employment practices are now legal, attaining a secure and well-paying job might be easier said than done. As Guy Standing notes, the changes pushed by neoliberalist policymakers have led to the widespread introduction of more "flexible" employer-employee relationships, reminiscent of the ones that began to appear in Japan in the 1990s. The changes introduced around the world, however, were not just about temporality. At the same time that the previously for-life, full-time contracts were replaced with fixed-period and part-time deals, numerous other "flexibilities" were also

becoming normalised. For example, it became easier for companies to adjust the wages paid for the employees in demand, 'particularly downwards' did the economic situation ever seem sour, and the same applied to work benefits such as employer-provided health care (Standing 2011: 9–10; 57) In essence, then, neoliberalism-driven legal changes lead to the decrease of jobs offering secure, long-time employment, and created a situation where workers could no longer reasonably expect that the amount of money at their disposal would keep up with the overall costs of living. While positions with high job security, good benefits and adequate pay still exist, they are becoming increasingly rare, which is bound to add to the pressures experienced by students who see doing well at school as their best bet at gaining a competitive edge against their similarly high-aspiring peers.

The toll that all of this has had on learners has not gone unnoticed among those researching student well-being. According to Amanda Keddie, British children as young as 9–11 show keen awareness of the significance of high academic achievement regarding their futures, and tend to view landing "a good job" as not only the means to gain high social status, but as the prerequisite for base-level survival: as stated rather direly by one child interviewed by Keddie, '[if you're] not clever academically [you] won't have a good job when [you're] older which means [your] life is over basically' (Keddie 2016: 112). This knowledge, combined with the neoliberal spirit of responsibilisation that permeates the United Kingdom's educational system, has had a very negative impact on the mental health of the even most high-achieving pupils. In Keddie's study, such children frequently lamented how much stress maintaining high grades caused them, and expressed fear that even one mistake could ruin their carefully maintained streaks of good academic performance and thus threaten the dreams they had for their futures. (Keddie 2016: 113 –115) The link between these anxieties and the consequences the interviewees believed would befall were they ever to fail to meet the expectations placed on them demonstrate that the Japanese workers of the 1990s were far from the only ones whose personal lives neoliberalism has changed for the worse.

School-aged children are not the only ones who have been deeply affected by the neoliberal realities of being a student in today's world, as studies measuring wellbeing among those pursuing higher education clearly demonstrate. In American College Health Association's survey from 2022, 72% of the university students in the country reported having experienced moderate of severe psychological stress within the past 12 months (American College Association 2022), while in another study, it was estimated that more than 60% met the criteria to be diagnosed with at least one mental illness during the 2020–2021 school year

(Lipson et al. 2022). In the United Kingdom, a recent estimate suggests that 7 in every 10 university students are either diagnosed with long-term mental health condition, are experiencing a short-term condition, or think they might have an undiagnosed one (Randstad 2022). Similarly, in the newest nation-wide student health and wellbeing survey from Finland – a country often seen as an example of the social-democratic Nordic model that has successfully resisted the neoliberalist ethos – 68% of the respondents reported having experienced symptoms of anxiety or depression within the past few weeks (Finnish institute for health and welfare 2021).

While all these studies were conducted during the COVID19-pandemic, multiple sources have noted that the number of students struggling with mental health issues has been on the rise all around the Western world long before the virus forced entire societies into quarantine and took the lives of millions worldwide (Eromäki 2021: para. 7, Abrams 2022: para. 2). Furthermore, although very few studies have looked deeper into the actual reasons behind university students' mental anguish, the ones that have done so have found that it is precisely the stress to do well at one's studies that contributes greatly to the emotional distress experienced by many. For example, in a 2022 survey conducted by research company Randstad, which focused on university students in the United Kingdom, academic stress was the most often cited cause of mental health struggles among the respondents. Whereas financial troubles – an understandable issue in a country where tuition fees are in use everywhere except under certain circumstances in Scotland – were mentioned by 39% of the students, worries related to one's academic performance were brought up by the whopping 63% of them (Randstad 2022).

As this look into the contemporary realities of students from primary schools to higher education demonstrates, studying under neoliberalism is a heavily loaded activity. In an increasingly competitive world, the importance of good grades has become particularly pronounced, while the changes introduced to the educational systems all around the globe have pushed more and more academic responsibility onto the learners themselves. Under these conditions, "working hard" – dedicating lots of time and effort to one's studies – has become more than a mere virtue: for any individual seeking to maximise their chances in life, it is now practically a requirement. That said, both Keddie's study and Randstad's 2022 survey suggest that learners of all ages and skill levels struggle under the pressure to perform well at academic settings, which often translates into mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. All in all, studying under neoliberalism is an activity with a painful side effect to

it, which is only made that much worse by the fact that this suffering is now a prerequisite for an individual to have a shot at living enjoyable and secure life.

5.3 Cruel dreams of a world out of reach

When considering the existence of Studyinspo against this background, a clear image of the phenomenon's appeal emerges. If the booming popularity of *iyashi* products and services in Japan was tied to the calm and relaxation they provided in the midst of the societal and economic chaos of the mid-1990s, it seems that the same could be said about Studyinspo. The difference here is that the stresses alleviated by the latter are more specific. While Studyinspo imagery is no doubt visually pleasant enough to appeal even to people with no personal interest in the subject matter, the fact that studying under neoliberalism is such a stressful activity cannot be overlooked when discussing the phenomenon.

Indeed, Studyinspo enthusiasts themselves seem to agree with this assertion. Thinking back to the kind of comments analysed in Chapter 3., the enthusiastic expressions of individuals' motivated states of mind are the most revealing in this regard. If we combine these comments and our newly found knowledge of the contemporary realities of surrounding academic pursuits, our understanding of the topic deepens considerably. Not only are these images being praised for the encouragement they provide, but for the fact that they provide it specifically in context of studying – an activity which, if the numerous studies done on the topic are of any indication, is often a source of notable distress to those engaging in it.

Here, it is important to return to an assertion I made all the way back in Chapter 3.: that the content circulating under the Studyinspo name on Pinterest can, depending on the goals of the one engaging with it, function in either aspirational or inspirational manner. Previously, I suggested that the visual pleasantness of Studyinspo imagery would matter more to pinners without clearly defined motivations, but considering the issue now, this seems like an oversimplification. The appeal of the phenomenon, as has been demonstrated throughout this master's thesis, is tied so tightly to the pleasing look of the content associated with it that it would be ill-judged to assert that those collecting Studyinspo images for aspirational reasons would somehow not be influenced by it. Instead, the purpose that these images serve are best capsulated by a concept that those discussing neoliberalism frequently make use of: the technologies of the self.

Technologies of the self, according to the term's coiner Michel Foucault, are methods that

permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault 1988: 18)

Among those analysing life under neoliberalism, Foucault's concept has been widely used to refer to the myriad of ways people utilise to maximise their chances of good life under increasingly precarious conditions. The mood-enhancing *iyashi* products and services, for example, fit this definition to a T (Roquet 2009: 89). Considering the countless similarities between *iyashi* and Studyinspo, the same likely applies to the latter phenomena, too. Regardless of an individual pinner's exact motivations behind seeking out studying-related content online, the visual and haptic pleasure provided by Studyinspo images is rewarding in itself, and to those struggling under academic pressures, it also proves an easily accessible yet extremely potent means to alleviate study-related stress and anxiety.

This is, however, not all there is to this issue. As Roquet notes, technologies of the self also encompass methods that individuals perceive as helping them to bridge the gap between to where they are and where they wish to be: self-help literature, for example, serves this specific purpose (Roquet 2009: 89). Thinking back to my analysis in Chapter 3., this is exactly what those engaging with Studyinspo content aspirationally seek to accomplish. What is important to note here is my previous assertion that Studyinspo images almost never provide any concrete guidance as to how one ought to conduct their studies. That said, while I continue to stand behind this contention, a problem arises when we think back to Chapter 3., where it was revealed that many Pinterest users nonetheless *treat* these images as if they were a practical source for enhancing one's academic performance.

All of this begins to make sense if we are to accept that the pleasure associated with these images might be the very thing that these commentors are seeking in the first place. Considering the amounts of stress and anxiety that studying under neoliberalism causes, it would be no wonder if many aspirational pinners were primarily concerned with finding ways to reduce these pains. The visual and haptic pleasantness emanating from Studyinspo images makes them seem like an obvious solution: considering how pleasurable it is to merely perceive these scenarios, it is not hard to see why one would want to emulate them in one's own life, too. With this explanation, some previously quite curious comments, such as the ones inquiring about specific items featured in individual Studysinpo images, are suddenly

much easier to understand. To these commentators, the objects they wish to possess are not desirable only because their practicality, but for the pleasure that they emanate when photographed, and if the abundance of their accounts is of any indication, many see acquiring these items as a viable way for individuals to enhance their own experiences with studying.

What about the more inspirationally oriented pinners? The same principles seem to apply here, too. Even if some people engage with study-related content on Pinterest in a more daydreamy manner, the fact that these images emanate such intense pleasure makes them incredibly enticing, especially considering how harsh studying under neoliberalism often is. Indeed, the scenarios featured in Studyinspo imagery are a perfect source for the kind of fantasising that Pinterest so famously encourages: while their high visual and haptic appeal makes these images immensely desirable, their seeming viability allows one to entertain the idea that what is being presented is wholly achievable. To pinners of both aspirational and inspirational inclinations, then, Studyinspo images function as proof that despite the pressures created by neoliberalism, studying can be a source of pleasure for the one undertaking it. This motivates the former to carry on with their academic pursuits while encouraging the latter to continue fantasising about a future which will never seem farther than a little bit of extra effort away.

However, this idea has some insidious implications to it. As outlined in this chapter, the stress and anxiety experienced by learners around the globe today did not appear out of nowhere, but emerged as a result of fundamental changes to the very way the society itself is organised. The responsibilisation of individuals within educational institutions is one example of this; the increasing competition between workers-to-be is another. That said, neoliberalism does not see these issues as unfortunate byproducts of its ideology, but as necessary, even morally good, proponents of it. The suffering caused by these practices is not considered something worthy of even addressing: either its existence is blamed on the individual, or it is dismissed as simply part of life (Keddie 2016: 109). Even then, as the brief history of the rise of neoliberalism provided in this chapter demonstrates, life used to look very different than how it does today. While the negative effects of neoliberalism on students are thusly far from "natural", they are inescapable insofar as the economic and political systems in the West and elsewhere continue to perpetuate them.

Viewed in this light, Studyinspo as a phenomenon can be understood as exemplifying what Lauren Berlant calls cruel optimism. According to her,

a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially. (Berlant 2011:1)

Studyinspo, as noted earlier, promotes a positive message within its very core: that studying can be a deeply pleasurable activity to the one undertaking it. This view, however, does not align well with reality. As the shocking prevalence of mental illnesses and overall anguish among learners of all ages from the USA and Europe suggests, academic pursuits under neoliberalism bring stress and suffering to an increasing number of learners. Furthermore, seeing as the problem is institutional, the solutions that some Studyinspo enthusiasts resort to – for example, seeking to purchase utensils featured in individual images – are doomed to fail. The pressures that compel many to seek out the pleasures of Studyinspo in the first place are, in fact, amplified by this imagery. By prolonging the pinners' belief in that there is happiness to be found as long as one simply keeps working hard and consuming the right products under the neoliberal system, Studysinspo content cruelly prevents individuals from identifying the true source of their suffering.

What I am saying here is by no means a total condemnation of Studyinspo as it exists on Pinterest. The accounts on the feminist spirit permeating the community, cited at the introductory chapter of this master's thesis, are a good example of the genuinely positive sides of the phenomenon. However, what cannot be denied is the fact that Studyinspo's appeal is made of much more than merely the visual pleasantness of the content circulating under its name. The socio-political implications of any given phenomenon are just as important to take into consideration, especially when they are as dire as the ones discussed in this chapter. By expanding my analysis to the societal context surrounding Studyinspo as it exists on Pinterest, I have demonstrated that what the phenomenon ultimately provides are dreams of gain without pain – glimpses into an idealised world which, as long as the realities surrounding Studyinspo enthusiasts remain unchanged, will continue to exist only in a virtual form.

6   Conclusion

At the beginning of this master's thesis, I set out to examine the peculiar aesthetics of the content circulating on Pinterest under the Studyinspo name to better understand the allure of the phenomenon. My exploration has proved quite fruitful, as I have identified some of the key visual attributes that characterise this imagery, and provided a thorough explanation as to what makes them so appealing to the platform's userbase.

By basing my analysis on the phenomenological insights of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others, I have demonstrated that the almost overwhelming sense of satisfaction evoked by these photographs is a deeply haptic experience. My argument has been as follows: the typical objects depicted in Studyinspo imagery – shiny new writing utensils, carefully arranged study materials, and spotless surfaces of squeaky-clean working spaces – all emanate a particular sense of smoothness which the viewer experiences both visually and tactilely. Even though some Studyinspo images are also capable of eliciting an additional sensation of busyness within us, the elements producing this affect are shaped and arranged in such a manner that no photograph circulating within the community ever feels restless. When engaging with these images, then, our viewing experience is dominated by an almost overpowering sense of satisfaction and pleasure as our eyes glide across them with near perfect ease.

In addition to this, I have also pointed out what I see as a definite link between Studyinspo imagery's popularity and the current state of education systems all around the Western world. As I have demonstrated, not even these institutions have been able to fend off the neoliberalist ethos: instead, an increasing pressure to compete with one's peers and prove one's worth within a cut-throat capitalist system has led more and more students suffering from depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses. The rise of Studyinspo imagery, as I have suggested, is related to these very trends. The world of learning they represent depicts studying as deeply enjoyable and endlessly pleasurable activity, which stands in stark contrast with the neoliberal realities of the matter. As such, I have suggested that Studyinspo's appeal has a somewhat insidious underside to it. By strengthening the belief that working hard and purchasing the right products will make academic pursuits fulfilling, the study-related content circulating on Pinterest only amplifies the real-life suffering of many Studyinspo enthusiasts.

Although I have strived for my analysis of Pinterest's Studyinspo imagery to be as comprehensive as possible, there are certain additional layers to the phenomenon that I have

not been able to address. The first of these pertains to the fact that the content circulating within the community exists online. As a social media platform, Pinterest enables certain ways to interact with pins and prevents others, both of which are sure to shape users' experiences with the images they encounter. For future research, pinning in particular might prove an interesting activity for closer examination. How does the fact that Studyinspo images are sought out for this specific purpose influence Pinterest user's experience of them, and how is pinning itself experienced phenomenologically?

Another Pinterest-specific aspect shaping the users' experiences of Studyinspo content that this master's thesis has had no time to discuss is the platform's architecture. For example, the way pins are displayed on on-site feeds and pinboards relies on a grid-style presentation, which means that images are rarely viewed in a one-by-one manner. This, too, is a topic which future research on Pinterest ought to pursue. How are the users' phenomenological experiences of Studyinspo content influenced by this display style?

Closely related to these two topics is the question of how Studyinspo enthusiasts' relationships with the pins they have collected change and develop over time. In this master's thesis, I have focused solely on the initial impact of individual images. However, seeing as Pinterest's very purpose as a social media platform is to allow the users to save visual content and retrieve it later, one's first impression of them will likely not be the lasting one. While his topic is something that media phenomenology as a whole often struggles with, those analysing online phenomena have a considerable advantage in this area: considering how easy digital technologies make the saving and retrieval of virtual content, the number of case studies to aid with research is likely much higher than among those whose interest lies in studying people's relationships with less accessible artforms like fine art or cinema.

Lastly, there is also the fact that this master's thesis has focused on Studyinspo content from the point of view of ones consuming it. However, these photographs would not exist without the community members that create them and upload them online. To understand the phenomenon more deeply, examining the motivations and goals of Studyinspo content creators is in order. Overall, future research would benefit greatly from evaluating the ideas presented in this master's thesis against the accounts of real-life Studyinspo enthusiasts, seeing as my analysis has been limited to my own personal experiences with the phenomenon.

That said, what has been revealed about Pinterest's Studyinspo phenomenon here is likely to benefit the field of media studies in more ways than one. What I ultimately wish this master's thesis has achieved – besides shedding light on a visual online phenomenon which has thus far gained little to no academic attention – is demonstrating the unique possibilities of Merleau-Pontyan phenomenological analysis when it comes to analysing visual content, particularly photographs. In a world where images are absolutely everywhere, understanding the impact that they have on us is more important than it has potentially ever been throughout human history. While Pinterest's Studyinspo imagery makes up only a fraction of the content circulating on the internet, the question I wish to part with is this: what other kinds of media do we engage with in our everyday lives for the purposes of pleasure, and what functions does this pleasure serve in our lives?

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Appendixes

Suomenkielinen lyhennelmä

Kuvat ja muu visuaalinen sisältö ovat läsnä elämässämme päivittäin. Loputtomana virtana luoksemme vyöryvillä valo- ja videokuvilla, piirroksilla, kaavioilla ja symboleilla on moninaisia tehtäviä. Jotkin niistä pyrkivät tiedottamaan, jotkin vaikuttamaan; joidenkin tavoitteena on mainostaminen, toisten taas viihdyttäminen. Nykyaikana huomattava osa niistä kuvista, joita arjessamme kohtaamme, löytää tiensä luoksemme internetin välityksellä. On esimerkiksi arvioitu, että pelkästään internetiin ladattujen valokuvien lukumäärä kasvaa päivittäin 1,8 miljardilla (Meeker 2014).

2020-luvulle tultaessa verkosta löytyvä visuaalisen sisältö on kasvanut niin massiiviseksi, että se on mahdollistanut lukemattomien sellaisten internet-yhteisöjen synnyn, joiden toiminta keskittyy täysin digitaalisten kuvien tuottamiseen ja jakamiseen. Studyinspo – sulautuma sanoista "studying" (opiskelu) ja "inspiration" (inspiraatio) – on yksi esimerkki tämänkaltaisesta, pääasiassa valokuvien ympärille keskittyneestä internet-ilmiöstä. Kuten ilmiön nimestä voi jo päätellä, keskittyy studyinspo-termin alla julkaistava ja jaettava kuvamateriaali yhteisön jäsenten omien opintojen ikuistamiseen sekä toisten ottamista kuvista inspiroitumiseen.

Erityisesti tyttöjen ja nuorten naisten suosiota nauttiva studyinspo on herättänyt positiivista huomiota ilmiönä, jonka on nähty mm. kannustavan tyttöjä menestymään koulu- ja työelämässä sekä auttamaan toinen toistaan kilpailemisen sijasta (Vickery 2015, Welsh 2015). Toisaalta vain harva on kiinnittänyt huomiota koko ilmiötä kenties kaikkein eniten määrittelevään seikkaan: siihen, että yhteisössä kiertävä kuvasto vaikuttaa visuaalisesti hämmästyttävän heterogeeniseltä. Studyinspo-kuville ominaiset piirteet kuten miellyttävät kompositiot ja eri elementtien välinen tasapaino herättävät katsojassa tyydyttyneisyyden tunteen, joka suorastaan häkellyttää voimakkuudellaan.

Vuonna 2010 kävijöille avautunut Pinterest on yksi niistä sosiaalisen median palveluista, jotka vetävät studyinspo-intoilijoita puoleensa. Alustasta mielenkiintoisen tekee sen uniikki käyttökonsepti, sillä itse luodun sisällön jakamisen sijasta Pinterestin pääasiallinen tarkoitus on toimia välineenä sivustolla jo kiertävän materiaalin – pääasiassa kuvien – keräämiseen. Käyttäjät "keräävät" kuvia profiileihinsa kytkettyihin kokoelmiin, joista käytetään alustalla nimeä "pinboard". Muistitaulua tarkoittava sana valaisee erinomaisesti kokoelmien

käyttötarkoitusta: siinä missä fyysistä muistitaulua käytetään tärkeiden lappujen ja papereiden säilyttämiseen, kokoaa Pinterestin pinboard yhteen kutakin käyttäjää miellyttävän kuvamateriaalin. Yksittäinen käyttäjä voi luoda yhteensä 2 000 pinboard-kokoelmaa (Pinterest Help Center, päiväämätön) ja täten onkin tyypillistä, että kukin kokoelma on omistettu omalle teemalleen tai aiheelleen.

Pinterestiä käsittelevä aikaisempi tutkimus on tarjonnut varteenotettavan selityksen sille, mikä houkuttelee käyttäjiä sivustolle. Jones (2016) on ehdottanut, että Pinterestin käyttäjäkuntaa motivoi alustalla kiertävän kuvaston inspiroiva luonne: äärimmilleen silotellun, arkisimmatkin askareet nautinnollisena kuvaavan sisällön kerääminen kannustaa hänen mukaansa käyttäjiä haaveilemaan tulevaisuudesta, jossa myös he voisivat elää näennäisen täydellistä elämää. Phillips ja muut (2014) kuvailevat tällaista käyttäytymistä "ääneen haaveiluksi", ja esittävät sitä olevan kahta eri laatua. Ns. aspirationaalinen haaveilu kohdistuu lähitulevaisuuteen, ja sille ominaista on sellaisten kuvien haaliminen, joiden visio tulevasta on konkreettisesti toteutettavissa. Inspiroituneesti Pinterestin kuvatulvaan suhtautuvien käyttäjien haaveet taas kohdistuvat kauemmaksi tulevaisuuteen, ja he keräävät kuvia kiinnittämättä juurikaan huomiota niissä esiintyvien skenaarioiden realistisuuteen.

Niin ikään Pinterestiä tutkinut Rodger (2019) on pohtinut sitä, mikä alustalla kiertävässä kuvamateriaalissa houkuttelee käyttäjiä haaveilemaan paremmasta tulevaisuudesta. Hänen mukaansa syitä tulisi etsiä Pinterest-kuvaston affektiivisista ulottuvuuksista. Rodgerin tutkimalle, lukemista harrastuksena palvovalle Pinterest-yhteisölle on esimerkiksi tyypillistä sellaisten kuvien jakaminen, jotka korostavat kirjojen materiaalisuutta ja käsinkosketeltavuutta. Hän kuvailee tällaisen kuvaston synnyttämää reaktiota kokemukseksi, jossa katsoja voi tuntea suorastaan uppoavansa kirjojen hänessä herättämiin aistimuksiin. Mikäli sama pätisi myös Pinterestin studyinspo-ilmiöön, tarjoaisi Rogersin selitys varteenotettavan lähtökohdan alustalla kiertävän, opiskelua ihannoivan kuvamateriaalin syvemmälle analyysille.

Harva teoreetikko on vaikuttanut käsitykseemme kuvien ja muiden visuaalisten taide- sekä mediamuotojen affektiivisuudesta yhtä paljon kuin ranskalainen filosofi Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Edmund Husserlin perustaman fenomenologisen koulukunnan edustajana Merleau-Pontyn kiinnostus kohdistui ihmiskokemukseen ja erityisesti aistinten rooliin sen synnyttäjänä. Hänen korosti ajattelussaan sitä, etteivät aistit keskinäisistä erilaisuuksistaan huolimatta koskaan toimi täysin erillään, vaan täydentävät ja tukevat toinen toisiaan. Merleau-

Pontyn mukaan tällainen aistien välinen yhteistyö ei olisi mahdollista ilman ihmiskehoa: eri lähteistä peräisin olevat aistimukset olisivat merkityksettömiä, jollei kehomme kykenisi yhdistelemään niiden välittämää informaatiota toisiinsa. Merleau-Pontyn filosofiassa keholla onkin keskeinen tehtävä aistinten keräämän tiedon prosessoijana ja näin syntyvän ihmiskokemuksen ensisijaisena lähteenä. (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012)

Merleau-Ponty keskittyi urallaan varsinkin näköaistin rooliin ihmiskokemuksen synnyttäjänä. Hän oli erityisen kiinnostunut ymmärtämään sitä, miten ihmissilmien välittämä informaatio maailmasta saattaa yksistään luoda varsin koherentin kokonaiskuvan tietyn esineen tai asian olemuksesta. Yksi Merleau-Pontyn keskeisimpiä huomioita oli se, että eri materiaaleista valmistettujen esineiden ulkonäkö kertoo usein jotain myös niiden muista ominaisuuksista: esimerkiksi jäähtyneen lasiaineen kiinteys ja särkyväisyys ovat piirteitä, joita kyseisen aineen ulkonäkö heijastelee. Kehon rooli aistien välisen yhteistyön mahdollistajana oli hänen mukaansa avainasemassa tällaisten kokemusten synnyssä. (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012)

Merleau-Pontyn ajatukset ovat innoittaneet lukuisia visuaalista mediaa ja kulttuuria tutkivia kirjoittajia pohtimaan katsomisen ja ihmiskokemuksen välistä fenomenologista suhdetta. Heihin lukeutuvat mm. kuvataiteeseen keskittyneet Nigel Wentworth (2004) ja Paul Crowther (2017) sekä elokuvateoreetikot Vivian Sobchak (1992, 2004) ja Jennifer M. Barker (2009). Merleau-Pontya tärkeämpi hahmo fenomenologisen valokuva-analyysin saralla on kuitenkin ollut Roland Barthes (1981), jonka ajattelussa korostuu aistikokemusten sijasta valokuvan kyky tallentaa todellisuutta. Barthesin aikaan, historiaan ja muistiin keskittyvä valokuvan fenomenologia tarjoaa kuitenkin varsin yksipuolisen kuvan taiteenlajin mahdollisuuksista: se on esimerkiksi kykenemätön selittämään sellaisten kuvien lumoa, jotka eivät näennäisesti esitä mitään katsojalle tunnistettavissa olevaa. Merleau-Pontyn ajatukset tarjoavat täten varteenotettavan vaihtoehdon valokuvien ja katsojien välisten suhteiden analysointiin.

Pohdittaessa studyinspo-kuvaston viehättävyyttä kiinnittyy huomio ensimmäisenä kysymykseen sen todellisesta luonteesta: herättääkö se todellakin Pinterestin käyttäjäkunnassa Jonesin (2016) ja Phillipsin ja muiden (2014) kuvailemia tulevaisuuteen kohdistuvia haaveita, ja voisiko osa niiden viehätyksestä selittyä nimenomaan ilmiölle ominaisen kuvamateriaalin esteettisillä ominaisuuksilla? Osviittaa Pinterest-käyttäjien ajatuksista ja mielikuvista aiheeseen liittyen tarjoavat studyinspo-kuvien keräämät kommentit, joiden läheisempi tarkastelu paljastaa, että ilmiö toden totta edustaa monille tavoittelemisen arvoista parempaa tulevaisuutta. Joillekin käyttäjille tämä tulevaisuus näyttäytyy saavutettavampana kuin

toisille. Siinä missä osa kommenteista kiittelee yksittäisten kuvien motivoineen myös heitä opiskelemaan ahkerammin, helkähtää osassa haaveellisempi, jopa kaihoisa, kaiku.

Kommenttien sävyeroista huolimatta niitä yhdistää yksi asia: studyinspo-kuvien keräämät kehut keskittyvät lähes yksinomaan niiden visuaaliseen miellyttävyyteen. Adjektiivit kuten "kaunis" (beautiful) tai "sievä" (pretty) toistuvat eri kommentoijien ilmaisussa niin tiheään, ettei tutkijalle jää epäilyksen häivääkään siitä, etteikö Pinterestissä kiertävien kuvien ulkonäöllä olisi merkitystä niitä kuluttaville käyttäjille. Vaikuttaisi kuitenkin siltä, että näitä ilmaisuja voidaan käyttää sekä kuvaamaan tiettyjä kuvissa esiintyviä esineitä että kuvaa itseään. Tästä voidaan päätellä, että studyinspo-yhteisön jäsenissä on sekä heitä, jotka lähestyvät kuvastoa aspirationaalisesta näkökulmasta, että heitä, joille sillä on enemmän inspiroivaa arvoa. Aspirationaalisesti studyinspo-kuviin suhtautuvat ihastelevat yksittäisten esineiden kauneutta tiedustellessaan, mistä he voisivat itse hankkia niitä itselleen, siinä missä tulevaisuuteen haaveellisemmin suhtautuvat käyttäjät lienevät heitä, jotka kohdistavat kommenttinsa kuviin kokonaisuutena. Eroista huolimatta kommentit osoittavat, että studyinspo-kuvaston viehättävyys on suoraan sidoksissa sen visuaaliseen ilmeeseen, mikä puolestaan tekee ilmiöstä erityisen soveltuvan Merlau-Pontyn ajatuksista ammentavaan media-analyysiin.

Yksi keino lähestyä studyinspo-kuvaston visuaalista viehättävyyttä fenomenologisesta näkökulmasta on turvautua Sobchakiin (1992, 2004), jonka alun perin elokuvakokemusta käsittelevät ajatukset soveltuvat erinomaisesti myös valokuvien analysoimiseen. Elokuvat ovat Sobchakin mukaan verrattavissa mihin tahansa ilmaisuvoimaiseen entiteettiin: aivan kuten oikean maailman esineet ja asiat ilmaisevat itseään kukin omalla olemuksellaan, elokuva tekee saman kuvien, äänen ja liikkeen avulla. Koskapa elokuvakokemus täten tarjoaa rutkasti ärsykkeitä aistiemme havaittavaksi, pätevät Merleau-Pontyn ajatukset aistien välisestä vuorovaikutuksesta myös siihen.

Vaikka valokuvan ilmaisulliset keinot voivat vaikuttaa vähäisiltä verrattuna elokuvaan, kykenee se ilmentämään yhtä elokuvallekin ominaista fenomenologista ulottuvuutta. Haptisuus viittaa ilmaisulliseen ja kokemukselliseen tapaan, jolle on ominaista materiaalisuuden ja teksturaalisuuden korostuminen. Kuvat, joissa nämä ominaisuudet ovat vahvasti läsnä, kannustavat myös katsojaansa keskittymään niihin. Haptisesti kuvia tarkastelevalle katsojalle on tyypillistä, että tämä lähestyy katsomaansa kosketuksenomaisesti:

hänen silmänsä tyytyvät liikkumaan kuvan pinnalla ja keskittyvät kuvassa esiintyviin pintoihin ja tekstuureihin sen sijasta, että ne pyrkisivät ymmärtämään sen muita merkityksiä.

Studyinspo-kuvia tarkastellessa on selvää, että materiaalisuus ja teksturaalisuus korostuvat niissä erittäin vahvasti. Oleellisin haptinen ominaisuus, joka toistuu lähes poikkeuksetta kuvasta kuvaan, on suorastaan häkellyttävä sileyden tunne. Tämän juuret juontavat studyinspo-kuville tyypilliseen tapaan sisällyttää itseensä paljon materiaalisilta yksityiskohdiltaan vähäisiä pintoja kuten uutuuttaan kiiltäviä opiskeluvälineitä ja täydellisen puhtaita kirjoituspöytiä. Haptisesti ajateltuna yksityiskohtien puuttuminen tarkoittaa sitä, että katsojan kokemus kuvasta on mahdollisimman häiriötön: mitä vähemmän visuaalisia elementtejä tällä on prosessoitavanaan, sitä vähemmän vaivaa kuvan katselu vaatii. Yksityiskohtien niukkuuden luoman tunteen kuvaileminen "sileytenä" on vuorostaan perusteltua, sillä sama pätee myös materiaalisuuteen. Esimerkiksi aaltojen hioman kiven siloisuus on aistikokemus, joka syntyy nimenomaan muiden mahdollisten tuntemusten poissaolosta.

Sileydestä tekee mielenkiintoisen sen syvempi emotionaalinen vaikutus kokijaansa. Aaltojen hiomien kivien kosketus herättää kokijassaan voimakkaan tyydyttyneisyyden tunteen, ja sama pätee myös haptisesti sileään studyinspo-kuvastoon. Tämä selittyy sileyden vaivattomuudella verrattuna moniin muihin tuntemuksiin. Siinä missä yksityiskohtien rikkaus lukuisine aistiärsykkeineen vaatii kokijaltaan paljon, on sileydelle ominainen yksityiskohtien vähyys kaikessa helppoudessaan miellyttävä kokemus. Studyinspo-kuvien katsojassaan herättämä voimakas mielihyvän tunne pohjautuukin osaltaan nimenomaan niiden haptiseen sileyteen: katsojan silmät ikään kuin liukuvat kuvissa esiintyvien häiriöttömien pintojen poikki tavalla, jonka vaivattomuus saa kehon reagoimaan aivan kuten se tekisi tullessaan kosketuksiin materiaalisen sileyden kanssa.

Monissa studyinspo-kuvissa esiintyy kuitenkin myös yksityiskohdiltaan hyvinkin rikkaita alueita, jotka ensisilmäyksellä vaikuttaisivat huokuvan miellyttävyyden sijasta kiireellisyyttä tai jopa kaaosta. Tarkempi tarkastelu kuitenkin paljastaa, että näiden alueiden säännölliset muodot ja niiden sijoittuminen suhteessa toisiinsa henkivät ennen kaikkea järjestystä. Studyinspo-kuvien kompositioille ominainen suoruus on paras esimerkki tästä, sillä haptisesti tarkasteltuna kyseinen ominaisuus on vaikutuksiltaan hyvin samankaltainen visuaalisen sileyden kanssa: suoraa viivaa seuraava katse etenee myös häiriöttömästi liukuen, onhan suoruus muotona aina riippuvainen muiden vaihtoehtojen poissaolosta. Suoran viivan

haptisten ominaisuuksien muistuttaessa monin tavoin sileyden vastaavia ei ole ihme, että jopa näennäisesti kaoottisimmat studyinspo-kuvat herättävät katsojassaan voimakkaan tyydyttyneisyyden tunteen.

Kaiken kaikkiaan on selvää, että studyinspo-kuvaston vetovoima perustuu kahden haptisilta vaikutuksiltaan lähes identtisen visuaalisen ominaisuuden, sileyden ja järjestyksen, mielihyvää herättävään yhteisvaikutukseen katsojassaan. Erityisen huomattavaa on kuitenkin se, että kuvista huokuvan visuaalisen ja kehollisen mielihyvän maksimoiminen vaikuttaisi olevan studyinspo-kuvien luojien pääasiallinen tavoite. Vaikka kuvat näennäisesti esittävät oikeita opiskelutilanteita, osoittaa lähempi tarkastelu niiden olevan lähes poikkeuksetta ainakin tietyllä tasolla lavastettuja. Studyinspo-kuville ominaiset visuaaliset ominaisuudet ovat toisin sanoen huolellisen suunnittelun, eivät sattuman tulosta.

Miksi studyinspon kaltainen, mielihyvään niin voimakkaasti keskittyvä ilmiö on syntynyt ja miksi se keskittyy nimenomaan opiskeluun? Vastauksia tähän kysymykseen voidaan löytää tarkastelemalla sitä todellisuutta, jossa opintojaan nykyaikana suorittavat ihmiset elävät. Viimeisen 40 vuoden aikana koulutusjärjestelmät ympäri maailman ovat omaksuneet entistä enemmän uusliberalistisen ideologian periaatteita. Oppijoiden tapauksessa tämä on ilmentynyt uusien arviointityökalujen lisääntymisenä (Keddie 2016) sekä arvosanojen kasvavana merkityksenä jatko-opintoihin pääsemisen ja työllistymisen kannalta. Kun mukaan lisätään kiristyvä kilpailu laadukkaista työpaikoista – joiden vähentyminen itsessään juontaa juurensa uusliberalistisen ideologian ajamiin muutoksiin työmarkkinoilla (Standing 2011) – on opinnoissa menestyminen ja täten hyvien arvosanojen haaliminen kasvattanut merkitystään. Tämä on puolestaan johtanut länsimaisten opiskelijoiden mielenterveysongelmien sekä heidän kokemansa stressin yleistymiseen niin peruskouluikäisten kuin korkeakoulutettavien keskuudessa (Keddie 2016, American College Health Association 2022, Lipson et al. 2022, Randstad 2022).

Tarkasteltaessa studyinspon vetovoimaa vasten nykyopiskelijoiden elämässään kohtaamia haasteita, tulevat syyt ilmiön suosion takana aina vain ymmärrettävämmiksi. Visuaalista ja kehollista mielihyvää henkivä kuvasto tarjoaa Pinterestiä käyttäville portin maailmaan, jossa opiskelu on mielekästä ja jopa nautintoa tuottavaa. Tämä motivoi aspirationaalisesti studyinspo-kuvia haalivia keksimään uusia tapoja kehittyä itsekin opiskelijoina, siinä missä inspirationaalisemmin kuvavirtaa suodattaville käyttäjille se toimii kannustimena jatkaa unelmointia vain tahdonvoiman päässä olevasta paremmasta tulevaisuudesta. Tästä huolimatta

uusliberaalin ideologian vaikutus koulutusjärjestelmiin ympäri maailman ja täten opiskelijoiden mielenterveyteen ei näytä heikentymisen merkkejä, mikä tekee studyinspo-kuvastosta omalla tavallaan myös julmaa. Kovien paineiden alla opiskeleville Pinterest-käyttäjille sivustolla kiertävä sisältö voi tuoda hetkellistä mielenrauhaa ja jopa motivaatiota, mutta niin pitkään kuin heidän elämäänsä ohjailevat realiteetit pysyvät muuttumattomina, edustavat kauneimmatkin kuvat todellisuutta, jota ei oikeasti ole olemassakaan.