Female Bodybuilders: Caught in the Crossfire of Patriarchy and Capitalism

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Female Bodybuilders: Caught in the Crossfire of Patriarchy and Capitalism

Honors Thesis
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Department: Women’s and Gender Studies
Advisor: Rebecca Whisnant, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Philosophy
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April 2015
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Abstract  
This project examines the evolution of women's presence in the bodybuilding industry in relation to the newest and increasingly popular category, women’s bikini. As I will show, the category of bikini was created to increase the revenues of the major bodybuilding companies by attracting more competitors and spectators to the sport. While on the surface a profit driven motive does not seem immoral, when one examines the emotional and physical damage the prepping and post-competition process does to bikini competitors (more so than any other bodybuilding category) it can be seen that women’s bodies are particularly expendable when profit is at stake. The experiences unique to women competitors within the bodybuilding industry, and particularly within bikini, demonstrate the degrading, immobilizing, and sexist reality for women when caught in the intersection of patriarchy, capitalism, and an industry that thrives off the exploitation of women’s bodies.

Dedications  
Dr. Rebecca Whisnant, you have taught me to stray from paths of least resistance and stay strong when it seems impossible. You have opened my eyes. It has been an honor working with you.

Thank you to my mother, Dr. Rona Shapiro. Everything I do, I do to make you proud.
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Introduction

Rationale for thesis

Ever since I can remember, I have loved athletics and staying active. It is safe to say that a lot of that had to do with my parents. Like me, my parents always stayed active; they played sports, did triathlons, went hiking, and tried to stay fit through various exercise programs. For the most part, my childhood was pretty standard; I went to a good school, had gymnastics practices, and play dates with my neighbors. I grew up experiencing the things society dictates as “normal” for children to experience. There was just one thing that was a little out of the ordinary: my mother was a bodybuilder. For seven years my life revolved around my mom’s competitions. We all ate her bodybuilding diet, went to her competitions, and helped her practice her posing routines. As a child, I loved it. My mother has always inspired me and her success in the sport showed me how strong she truly was, inside and out. My mom began competing in 2000 and stopped in 2007 when she was 50 years old.

As I got older and could no longer eat the way I did when I was in high school, I decided to try bodybuilding as a way to accomplish my weight loss goals. However, when I started looking into the categories that I could join, I was very surprised. The images that I had stored in my mind about the competitions I went to as a kid did not match the images that I saw when I began to look into the industry again. When my mom competed, there were three categories for women: bodybuilding, figure, and fitness. All of these focused on intense muscularity, although fitness and figure were less muscular and more feminine than bodybuilding. By the early 2000’s the categories began to shift
slightly. The category my mom competed in was almost completely replaced by a more feminine, yet still very muscular category called physique. Women’s figure and fitness still remained. In 2011, the newest addition to the bodybuilding industry emerged called women’s bikini. When I looked deeper into bikini competitions, I was shocked and I never imagined that this sport would grow to the popularity it has reached now.

When I first looked into the sport, I originally was appalled by the hyper-sexualization of bikini compared to the other categories for both women and men. However, once I looked further into bikini and the rationalization for its creation, I realized that there was more of an underlying issue than just the objectification of women’s bodies. Through my research, I realized that the industry created this category to increase their fan base and profit margins. It was at that point that I realized the creation of bikini, its popularity, and its requirements demonstrate the effects that capitalism and patriarchy can have on women’s bodies.

Research process

To develop a thorough analysis of women’s experiences within the bodybuilding industry I knew that I would need to get as close to the process as possible. For that reason, while researching I attended two bodybuilding competitions, one professional and one amateur. I also interviewed judges, trainers, and competitors. I interviewed people who competed in men’s bodybuilding, women’s bodybuilding, women’s figure, and women’s bikini. I also read over fifty online blogs that documented women’s experiences before, during, and after competing.
**A Brief History of Bodybuilding**

Bodybuilding has roots tracing back to ancient Greece. However, the form of bodybuilding that took place was not for bodily modification as we mainly see today but rather a way for athletes to improve at the main sport in which they participated. The first recorded form of bodybuilding for bodily modification was in 11th century India. Men in India were known to use primitive dumbbell weights (carved from stone) for the sole purpose of gaining muscle mass (“History Of Bodybuilding”).

By the mid-19th century, bodybuilding had evolved into a way of improving health and increasing strength. Typically, the general public became aware of bodybuilding by encountering the travelling strongmen of the time. For example, in the Victorian era, Eugen Sandow, a professional strong man, was known around the world for his strikingly muscular build. While professional strongmen existed long before Sandow, none surpassed his muscularity. Once realizing how interested people were in his physique, Sandow developed poses that he called “muscle display performances.” These performances are considered to be the foundation for the poses in the bodybuilding industry today. In 1901, Sandow organized and judged the first ever-recorded bodybuilding contest (Pednaud). Bernarr Macfadden was another massively influential figure in bodybuilding due to his promotion of physical culture. Macfadden wrote many books and was also responsible for the creation of what was to be the forerunner of today's bodybuilding magazines, *Physical Culture Magazine*. It was in 1904 that Macfadden began to organize and promote bodybuilding competitions for both men and women (Joyner).
In the late 1940’s, bodybuilding came to resemble what we recognize it as today. Specifically, in the 1940’s the International Federation of Bodybuilding (IFBB) held its first amateur competition for men and women. A professional division was later added in 1952, followed by Miss Physique in 1968, and Miss Figure in 1986 (Ferrigno Fit). Women’s bikini is the most recent development within the bodybuilding industry and was officially recognized as a new sport by the IFBB Executive Council and IFBB Congress on November 07, 2010 ("Women's Bikini Fitness Rules").

**Bodybuilding Today**

*The larger organizations*

Today, the bodybuilding industry is divided into two major divisions, amateur and professional. The National Physique Committee (NPC), founded in 1982, is the largest amateur bodybuilding organization recognized in the United States. The NPC sponsors local and national year-round bodybuilding competitions for amateur bodybuilders. To compete in the NPC division, one must annually submit a registration card (which costs $120.00) (“Join”). This card must be renewed every year for every member.

The IFBB is the international organization for bodybuilding. As opposed to NPC, IFBB sponsors professional, not amateur, athletes and events. However, one amateur organization is recognized per country by IFBB. In the United States, NPC is that organization. Currently, IFBB includes national federations, like NPC, from 184 countries. According to their site, IFBB is a “not-for-profit international amateur sport governing body with a democratically elected Executive Council” that was founded in
1946 ("The History"). IFBB has the same bodybuilding, physique, fitness, figure, and bikini categories as NPC ("Rules").

**Men’s categories**

**Bodybuilding and physique**

Within bodybuilding, there are only two categories for men to compete in, bodybuilding and physique. The judging criteria for bodybuilding are based on muscle mass, muscular definition and tone, and muscular symmetry ("NPC Men's Bodybuilding Division Rules and Regulations"). For physique, judges look for “proper shape and symmetry combined with muscularity and overall condition.” However, physique competitors are expected to be less muscular than bodybuilders ("NPC Men Physique Division"). Male bodybuilders also wear small bikini bottoms, whereas physique competitors wear board shorts.

Below is an image of a man posing during his bodybuilding competition (Manion).
Below is an image of men competing in physique (Manion).

Women’s categories

Bodybuilding and physique

The women’s division has five categories: bodybuilding, physique, fitness, figure, and bikini; however, the original category for women was women’s bodybuilding. In women’s bodybuilding, the competitors are evaluated by the same criteria as in men’s bodybuilding. However, their facial expressions are also taken into account. Women’s bodybuilding has steadily been declining “because the figure, fitness, and bikini model divisions have taken over, and the contest promoters have to promote what sells the most tickets” (“The History of Bodybuilding”). Additionally, given that the extreme
muscularity of female bodybuilders directly contradicts the gendered expectations of femininity, “many people are repelled (or repulsed)” by the appearance of the competitors (“The History of Bodybuilding”).

Below is an image of women bodybuilders posing (Venuto).

By the early 2000’s, the category my mom competed in was almost completely replaced by a more feminine, yet still very muscular category called physique.

Below is an image of women competing in physique (Venuto).
Women’s fitness competitors are expected to be less muscular than bodybuilders and they also perform gymnastic/strength routines while competing. For fitness, the competitors also line up on stage and compare their muscularity in bathing suits. The judges take their routine and their muscularity into consideration.

Below are images of competitors performing their fitness routines (Manion).
Women’s figure was originally created in response to the negative reactions to women’s bodybuilding. Specifically, figure is a less muscular and more feminine version of bodybuilding. However, the women are still extremely muscular. For figure, competitors are expected to wear high heels and jewelry, and the poses are sultrier than in the previously mentioned categories.

Below is an image of women competing in figure (Manion).

![Image of women competing in figure](image)

**Bikini**

Bikini is the most recent addition to the bodybuilding industry. For bikini, women are judged on having a “healthy and fit physique,” and whether they bring a “total package” to the stage (Johnston). Bikini competitors have the least musculature of the women’s bodybuilding categories. It was the introduction of bikini to bodybuilding that spurred my analysis. A more thorough description of bikini is in the next section.
Are You Bikini Ready?

The prepping process

Women’s bikini, like all other categories in bodybuilding, is guided by criteria established by IFBB that are designed to explain the body type judges look for in competitors. These criteria guide the prepping process that is infamous among those who compete in the industry. Depending on the category and the demands it has on the body (mainly the level of muscularity), the prepping process (the time between your decision to compete until a competition) can be anywhere from weeks to years. Information about how to prep for a bikini competition can be found all over the Internet. There is also a large market for online and in-gym trainers whose job is to explain how to diet, train, and...
master the expected stage presence for bikini competitions. For this article, I have divided the bikini competition prepping process into the rules, diet, training, and posing.

The rules of the show

During each competition, the competitors are judged twice. In the first round of judging, each woman walks on the stage in her two-piece swimsuit, high-heeled shoes, and jewelry. Once on the stage, she performs her full “Model Walk” (“NPC Bikini Division Rules”).

For the second round of judging, also known as the comparison round, the competitors are brought onto the stage in a group. At that time, every competitor does a full front and back stance. The judges score based on “balance,” “shape,” and “overall physical appearance including complexion, skin tone, poise and overall presentation” (“NPC Bikini Division Rules”).

According to the IFBB Bikini Rules, judges need to “take the whole physique into account.” This assessment includes the competitors’ “hair and facial beauty; the overall body development and shape; the presentation of a balanced, symmetrically developed, complete physique; the condition of the skin and the skin tone; and the athlete’s ability to present herself with confidence, poise and grace” (“Women's Bikini Fitness Rules”). Further, judges are to assess,

overall body tone, achieved through athletic endeavors and diet. The body parts should have a nice and firm appearance with a decreased amount of body fat. The physique should neither be excessively
muscular nor excessively lean and should be free from muscle separation and/or striations. Physiques that are considered too muscular, too hard or too lean must be marked down. The assessment should also take into consideration the tightness and tone of the skin. The skin tone should be smooth and healthy in appearance, and without cellulite. The face, hair and makeup should complement the “Total Package” presented by the athlete. The judge’s assessment of the athlete’s physique should include the athlete’s entire presentation, from the moment she walks onstage until the moment she walks offstage. At all times, the Bikini-fitness competitor must be viewed with the emphasis on a “healthy and fit” physique, in an attractively presented “Total Package” ("Women's Bikini Fitness Rules").

When judging, the judges are also “reminded that this is not a body fitness contest,” thus, “competitors should have shape to their muscle but not the separation, definition, very low body-fat level or hardness that are seen at body fitness competitions” and “any competitor who exhibits these features is to be marked down” (“Women's Bikini Fitness Rules”).

At competitions, there are strict rules that guide the movements, performance, and clothing of bikini competitors. According to the IFBB, competitors must compete in a two-piece suit. For the suit, the bottom must be v-shaped. However, it cannot be a thong. Additionally competitors can be “scored down if the suit is not up to standard.” On the rule sheet, there is a disclaimer that states, “All swimsuits must be in good taste. Athletes
will be warned about improper suits and are advised to bring two suits to check in”
(“NPC Bikini Division Rules”). Another rule for bikini competitors is that they must
wear high heels and jewelry (“NPC Bikini Division Rules”). In addition to their clothing,
competitors must also have “a natural and healthy tan;” however, “staining and
removable bronzers are strictly prohibited” ("Women's Bikini Fitness Rules").

The following images are taken directly from the IFBB “Rules” page. The
images, titled “Bikini Sizes in Pictures” describe the permitted bottoms and footwear for
bikini competitors. However, when looking the other images of bikini competitors in this
analysis, it can be seen that most competitors do not follow the regulations for bikini
bottom size.

The images on the left show the types of bottoms approved by the IFBB Congress
during a bikini competition, while those on the right show the unapproved bikini bottoms
("Bikini Sizes in Pictures").
Similarly, the images above show the types of footwear approved and unapproved by the IFBB Congress. Specifically, the images on the right demonstrate that the high heels worn may not have platforms on their soles. Platforms function to make the wearer’s foot at less of an angle than in a shoe with the same heel height without a platform ("Bikini Sizes in Pictures").

**The diet**

According to Kim Oddo, who has had 20 years of experience training professional bodybuilding competitors, “most people fit into a 12-14 week period for contest preparation, as long as they are within 15-20 pounds of their desired weight goal” (Smith). To meet the desired weight goal for a competition Oddo, like many other online
coaches, suggests eating six to seven small meals a day and consuming fewer calories than the amount you burn off. The widely accepted nutritional breakdown for a bikini competitor is the following:

\[
\text{Out of 1,200 calories a day:} \\
100 \text{ carbohydrate grams} \\
40 \text{ fat grams} \\
1 \text{ protein gram / body weight (if I weigh 100 lbs then I would eat 100 protein grams)}
\]

To put these numbers into perspective, a banana’s nutritional information is the following:

\[
110 \text{ calories} \\
30 \text{ carbohydrate grams} \\
0 \text{ fat grams} \\
1 \text{ protein gram}
\]

According to the Mayo Clinic, one of the world’s leading hospitals, to have a balanced diet the average woman should consume:

\[
\text{Out of 2,000 calories a day:} \\
225-325 \text{ carbohydrate grams}
\]
To diet for the competitions, competitors have extremely strict caloric intakes. They also closely monitor their proteins, carbohydrates, and fats. Because their diet regimes are so strict, many women plan and prepare their meals at the beginning of each week. For example, many women cook their meals for the week, place them into organized containers, and then only allow themselves to eat from those containers. Other competitors sign up for meal delivery services that send their meals for the day to their homes. According to Brian Kelly, owner of Next Level Training who has trained over 50 bodybuilding competitors, “90% of the work is diet and only 10% is working out” (Kelly). Kelly shared this opinion with me when I was expressing my own stress about not being able to lose weight. Kelly also gave me the same advice he gives his trainees when they are struggling to accomplish the weight drops they need in order to stay on their competition schedule, “Any guy can come into the gym and throw around some weights, but it takes a real man to put the fork down” (Kelly). For clarification purposes, I asked if that advice pertained to both men and women. Kelly seemed startled that I picked up on the fact that he referred to only “guys” (and real man[hood]), and explained to me that it applies to both men and women.

Training for a bikini competition means following a diet that is not only tedious but also expensive. It means you have to buy items for their nutritional breakdown and not for their price. The diet is also extremely hard on the competitors mentally. In my interviews almost all of the women explained that diet and cardio are the hardest parts of
the prepping process. For example, Lisa San, an insurance broker who competed in her first bikini competition in 2012, explains:

The hardest part for me was the diet. Sometimes I really just wanted to have a sandwich for lunch. Nothing too crazy, I did not crave fries or onion rings. I just wanted bread. But I knew if I had bread, I would have to do 40 minutes of extra cardio. After a while of giving into my cravings, I eventually learned that no food was worth the extra calories.

The diet required to become competition-ready is so restrictive that it leads to uncontrollable binging and purging behavior. One manifestation of this can be seen in competitors’ fantasizing about their first post-competition meal. The idea of unrestricted eating is so alluring to the competitors that the moment they step off stage, they start binging on any sweets they can get their hands on. According to Rachel Mac,

You will spend hours strategizing your post-show meal. Have a cheat meal after the show; maybe have a cheat breakfast the next day. And loosen up on your diet once your show is over; super restrictive dieting can drive you crazy. But don’t fall completely off the wagon. After my first show, I ate sugar almost non-stop for a week and a half, and gained ten pounds (Mac).
Below is a woman eating her first meal after competing (Manion).

Mac’s experiences are far from unique. Too often, during the prepping process and (especially) immediately after competing, women engage in binge-like eating that not only leaves them physically sick, but also distraught with guilt and shame. In order to stay clear of the mental hardships associated with nutritional deprivation, many competitors have to develop a way of thinking about food that ensures they will not go over their already limited caloric allotments. This can be seen in an interview with self-proclaimed “fitness pro” Joelle Murphy, in which she explains how she trained herself to stay away from food. Murphy explains that she “constantly thinks about food” by mentally preparing her next meal, “counting down the time” till her cheat meal,” and that she will “go for a brisk walk or have a cup of coffee” to keep her mind off food.
Additionally, Murphy reports,

Sometimes, I crave sugar so badly that I get mad because I can't have it.
So I try to change my perception of food from one of instant gratification
to one of nourishment for survival.

Fitness blogger Kristine Fretwell also shares her experiences while competing in
bikini on her blog titled, “Busy But Healthy.” In her article, “Why I Will Never Compete
Again,” she explains how common the post competition binge period is:

Any one that has competed knows all too well about the after-math.
You’ve dreamed about all the food you couldn’t have, and afterwards you
binge. Sometimes for days, or sometimes for weeks. Your body has been
literally starved via no carbs to a low body-fat, it is a natural reaction by
your body to want food, and lots of it.

Fretwell also explains the feeling of losing control she experienced when she could not
help but binge and purge:

You try to maintain control by counting calories and exercising more than
necessary to ‘maintain’ an unattainable stage image. This leads to a lot of
unhealthy thoughts and body image issues. I don’t know how you would
avoid being somewhat disordered about food and image. You’ve put
yourself in that position.
The diet required to meet the bodily expectations for bikini competitors not only involves unbelievable organization (planning out the meals, calculating their nutritional information, determining the time that specific meals should be consumed, and recording the information down to track their progress) but also the emotional fervor and discipline to follow through with the diet plans.

The training

Most bikini competitors train multiple times per day, six-seven days per week. Muscle and Body Magazine explains that women training for bikini competitions should do 30-45 minutes of cardio every day coupled with 40-60 minutes of intense weight lifting (Smith). The goal of this training is to create “an hourglass shape, with developed glutes and shoulders” that gives “the illusion of having a tiny waist and a long, lean torso” (Smith).

All over the Internet are seemingly countless workout programs designed to make “any woman” bikini competition ready. In most of these workouts, particular areas of the body are focused on the most. These areas include the butt, thighs, and abdomen. As seen with the types of workout machines geared towards women (like the ThighMaster and ButtMaster) it is common for fitness activities to target these sections of women’s bodies; however, within bikini, that focus is overwhelmingly more intense. As a result of this extreme concentration on specific parts of women’s bodies, certain bikini competitors are idolized in the industry for their respective “parts.” As a result, they become the “experts” advising all other competitors on how to improve.
The intense concentration on specific body parts of women in bikini can be seen with the article written by the self-titled “Glute Guy,” Brett Contreras, titled “How to Train for a Bikini Competition: It’s all about the glutes.” In this article, Contreras explains that the most important body parts to workout for bikini competitors are the gluteal muscles:

Sometimes the judges award the softer, more feminine looking ladies, and sometimes they go with the leaner, more ripped ladies. What the judges never go for is the competitor who has pancake butt! (Contreras)

While on stage and during the judging process, bikini competitors are visually dissected by those in the audience and the judges. Every body part is evaluated and graded on how visually appealing it is. While the close examination of competitors’ bodies is common to all bodybuilding categories, none do it in as sexual a manner as in bikini. Specifically, compared to the other categories, the women have to pose in such a way that highlights all of their secondary sexual characteristics as they objectify themselves with their poses, facial expressions, and clothing.

The diet and training required to meet the bodily requirements for a bikini competitors are geared towards shaping and proportioning their bodies to meet the expectations the IFBB dictates in their judging criteria. Typically, to meet these expectations competitors drop to 8.5–14% body fat. These percentages are widely accepted in the industry to “exhibit a statuesque figure with firm muscle tone and a curvy silhouette” (Kotel). To put these numbers into perspective, the healthy body fat range
for women is 20-24% (“The Normal”); furthermore, “having too little body fat impacts muscle function and other body systems” (“The Normal”). I have also heard numerous testimonies about how the dieting process causes women to lose hair and stop menstruating.

While training for bikini competitions, competitors are also expected to start tanning for their shows. According to one fitness blogger found on Bodybuilding.com, “competitors should begin tanning 6-8 weeks away from their competition” and go 3-4 times a week (Smith). The reason for having a tan while on stage is that it highlights muscular definition. Additionally, bikini competitors are judged on how healthy and tan their skin looks. The beauty expectations for bikini competitors go far beyond body size and shape. According to bikini blogger Natalia Kern, who won the titles of Ms. Bikini Universe, Ms. Bikini Florida, and Fitness Model World Champion:

You can work on your body for several months, sculpt your physique and really screw it up with such simple, but extremely important things as makeup, hair and your tan. Facial beauty plays a big part after your body. So, make sure that you take care of your face before the competition. Have a facial, nice massage and please, hire a great professional to do your makeup.

In addition to muscle sculpting, tanned skin, and extreme makeup, many bikini competitors also get breast implants to compensate for the fat that they lost while dieting for their shows. This can be seen with the quote from Kern,
Based on what I know, most serious competitors get implants to get that perfect shape. Nothing says you have to; you can compete without them, but once you get serious, it's probably something that will help you take it to the next level.

Thus, for bikini competitors, it is not enough to diet for months, workout every day, coat themselves in makeup and tanning sprays, and meticulously train their movements for the stage to meet the criteria set out by the industry. Rather, in order to have the “healthy,” “fit,” “total package” that the judges call for, bikini competitors must resort to expensive and painful surgeries. According to the IFBB rules, however, bikini competitors are judged on their “natural beauty.” What is natural about breast implants?

The posing

Beyond dieting and training, competitors are expected to know how to pose while on stage. Most competitors take posing classes 6-8 weeks out from a competition that cost anywhere from $30 to $1,000 per session (Kotel). Here is some advice about posing from Natalia Kern:

Now, you can look like a goddess, you can have the best makeup, hair and the most beautiful suit, but if you can’t walk and pose, you are going to lose to a plain girl with a killer stage presence. Think about it, people who watch and judge you on stage see so many girls on stage
within 1-2 days of the competition, gorgeous girls with rocking bodies that they almost get numb to it. So, your goal is to STAND OUT.

According to NPC, during bikini competitions competitors must walk onstage alone and perform their “Model Walk”. Their “Model Walk” is up to their own personal preference within the general guidelines set out by NPC. After considering the regulations governing the “Model Walk,” however, there is not much room left for creative movement. For example, as seen on NPC’s website, the “Model Walk” consists of the following:

Walk to the center of the stage, stop and do a front stance – hand(s) on hip front pose – then a full turn and do a back stance – hand(s) on hip back pose - then turn to the front again – hands on hip - and face the judges as directed then proceed to the side of the stage. No lewd acts are permitted.

Length of time allowed is 10 seconds (“NPC Bikini Division Rules”).

The drawing below goes into full detail about the movement path that the competitors are expected to follow while posing on stage (Mccloud).
The posing component of the competition counts heavily into the competitors’ scores. For posing, competitors are usually organized into two segments, prejudging and the night show (and spectators have to pay separately for the prejudging and night shows). Typically, prejudging is where most of the actual scoring happens. During prejudging, all of the competitors first line up parallel with the front of the stage. Once all of the women are lined up, the posing begins. During the first pose, called a front stance,
the women aggressively shift their weight to one leg while placing one hand on their hip (as seen under Poses A/B/H/I). In this pose, they look particularly off centered and unbalanced while their ribs and chest are pushed forward. To shift into the next pose, signaled by asking for a “180,” the women turn perpendicular with the stage by stepping one foot towards the front of the stage and cocking their hip as far to the audience as possible (as seen under Pose J). They repeat this movement (taking two steps) until they are once again parallel with the stage; however, their backs are now to the crowd. Once they have completed turning to the back of the stage, the women place their hands as if in imaginary front pocket, pinch their shoulders together, lean forward and arch their back to the point where the audience can begin to see the front of their bikini bottoms (as seen under Poses C/K). During this section of posing the women stand with their legs far apart, however, it is also very common to see women doing the exact same stance with their legs crossed at the ankles (as seen under Pose L). Whether with their legs apart or crossed, it is only considered to be a well performed pose when their butts are so upturned, you can begin to see their crotches (barely covered by their bikinis). During my interviews, some of the judges commented on how frequently women unknowingly flash the audience during this part of posing. With their backs to the crowd, competitors often also peek over their shoulders towards the judges while making enticing facial expressions to those viewing them (as seen under Poses D/E). Competitors are then asked to turn back towards the audience, during which most competitors go through the same exaggerated and sexualized movements they performed to turn around, and end positioned in their front pose (as seen under Poses F/G/M). Bikini competitor and blogger Rachel Mac sums up the experience of being on stage nicely:
Your body will be visually dissected and judged by several people who don’t know you and don’t care much about your feelings and if you are a great person with a golden heart. Really, it’s all about the way you look that day comparing to the other athletes on stage.
After this line of judging is complete, specific women are “called out” (that is selected for further judging after initial poses). During “call outs” judges select the competitors they want to compare and, have them stand side by side to perform their poses (as seen in the image below). It is widely accepted in the world of bodybuilding that “first call outs” are typically the top placing competitors of that round. During these rounds the competitors do the same pose routine. However, given that judges closely examine the different body parts of the women, they are often asked to move back and forth in some variety of the poses listed above. During call outs there is also an additional walk that the women must perform. Specifically, once they have reached the pose where their backs are to the crowd, they walk 7-8 paces, while extremely exaggerating the sway of their hips, and then pause to continue the back pose.

The image below shows the walking section of the callout rounds (Contreras).
From Sexploitation to ‘Health’: The Marketing of Bikini

Compared to all of the other categories in the industry, women’s bikini is undoubtedly the most sexualized. As we have seen, the competitors are required to wear high heels, jewelry, intense stage makeup, barely-there bikinis, manicured nails, have their hair professionally done, and to perform in intensely and overtly sexualized ways. Thus, it is no surprise that the very reason the IFBB established this category was to get more fans into the stands. After all, sex sells. The bodybuilding industry needed a
larger fan base in order to make more money. More fans meant more tickets sold and wider recognition of the industry itself. So the industry created bikini because they knew people would pay to watch sexy, tan, and almost naked women on stage: a form of live almost-pornography, with the barest veneer of respectability.

The strategy has paid off handsomely. Shortly after women’s bikini was introduced to the industry, the first bodybuilding competition was aired on cable television in over 50 years. The money given to the winners of the competitions also reached an all-time high after the addition of women’s bikini. In 2009 (one year before women’s bikini was introduced), the largest bodybuilding competition in the United States, Joe Weider’s Olympia, gave out a combined amount of $800,000 to the top placing competitors at the competition. After the addition of bikini the prize amount began to steadily increase. For example, in 2011, the prize money totaled $825,000 for the entire competition. Of that $825,000, the winner of the men’s bodybuilding division received $200,000 and the winner of women’s bikini received $15,000. In 2014, the competition awarded over $1,000,000 in prize money to the top-placing competitors. Of that $1,000,000, the winner of the men’s bodybuilding division received $275,000 ($675,000 total went to that division) and the winner of women’s bikini received $20,000 ($40,000 total went to that division) (Muscle & Fitness).

Non-profit organizations are expected to submit their financial information to the IRS on Form 990, and the IRS is expected to make that information public (“Nonprofit Financial Statements”). As a result of this, I was able to access NPC’s financial information for the years 2010 to 2013. Between 2010 (the year bikini became recognized) and 2013, the salary of the board of directors went from $383,080 to
455,049. The total revenues also increased from $2,524,888 to $3,617,226. The membership fees and sponsor fees also increased from $2,446,275 to $3,513,562 (Guidestar).

When I started my thesis, I thought the main reason bikini was so problematic was that it sexualized women in such an incredibly overt way. I also thought that the reason it was so popular among women had something to do with a sense of pseudo-empowerment. That is, I thought women were flocking to bikini because they were under the impression that they were taking charge of their own sexuality: choosing to make themselves into sexual objects instead of having others force that identity onto them. I still believe there is some truth to this analysis. I can see the logic behind the idea that if you cannot beat the ideals of femininity, you might as well join them, and strike some sexy poses while you are at it. After all, it is a lot easier to conform than to rebel.

Through my research and interviews, however, I found that most of the competitors expressed quite different motivations: almost without exception, they report being drawn to bikini as a way to get healthy and fit. As I explained earlier, I too initially looked to bodybuilding as a way to get in shape. It was marketed in such a way that I was convinced competing would be the way to meet my health goals.

The explanation lies in the industry’s need to dress up the commercial appeal of selling sexualized female bodies in a more respectable guise. How does the bodybuilding industry convince competitors to turn themselves into sexual objects on a stage to be gaped at? They wrap bikini in a bow and call it “healthy.”

The bodybuilding industry is closely tied to companies who sell products related to competing. The result is that all these brands (and their well trained marketing teams)
produce images that not only sell their own products but also emphasize the health and fitness benefits of competing at the same time. Very few of these advertisements promote their products through flat out sexual propaganda. Rather, just like bodybuilding, they market it as a way for their customers to meet their health goals. The result is the saturation of these pseudo-messages about the positive health effects of competing in bikini competitions. These promotions are directly related to increasing the revenues for companies selling the products, ideas, and spaces required to become a bikini competitor.

To demonstrate the stake different companies have in promoting bikini as a health movement, throughout my research I have been documenting brands and items that I have seen promote bikini and bodybuilding. These promotions are directly related to increasing the revenues for companies selling the products, ideas, and spaces required to become a bikini competitor. As a result, we can see that it is not just the bodybuilding industry (IFBB, NPC, etc.) that benefits from the upsurge of bikini’s popularity, but also all of the products that competing promotes.

For example, brands like Nike and GNC have paid huge sums of money to create images that sustain the healthy appearance of this sport because the more women who participate in it, the more money they can make. The result of this is the perpetuation of images that glorify bikini competitions (and other categories of bodybuilding). These images give those who go into bikini a false sense of what it will actually do to their body and mind.

Almost all major athletic brands including Nike, Adidas, Under Armor, Reebok, The North Face, Puma, Champion, Athletica, Lulu Lemon, and etc. have created advertisements geared towards bikini competitors. Specifically, when more women are
competing in bikini, more women invest in products like shoes, pants, shorts, sports bras, tops, headbands, gloves, socks, scarves, watches, bags, and towels. Additionally, there is a large niche for health food corporations to promote their products to competitors. I have seen promotions from GNC, Axis Labs, Bayer Health Care, Beverly International, Bioplex, Centrum, Evogen, MaxMuscle, Quest Nutrition, Slim Quick, and etc. The products that I have seen promoted from these businesses include, but are not limited to, the sale of protein bars, powders, shakes, snacks, pre-work out pills, drinks, shakes, snacks, fat burners, metabolism boosters, energy pills, and various vitamins. There is also an entire industry that benefits from the products used specifically on the day of the competition. For example, during the competitions, it is required that the competitors wear/use bikinis, jewelry, high-heels, hair products, makeup, and tanning supplies.

Some of the ads/sponsors I encountered can be seen below.
Beyond the direct marketing messages from various profit-driven industries, as we have seen, women involved in bikini (or considering getting involved) are also subject to an additional form of propaganda. This propaganda is called fitspiration (or fitspo) and demonstrates one of the many resemblances between training for bikini competitions and eating disorders. Fitspo’s name comes from the combination of “fitness” and “inspiration.” Many competitors use fitspiration to stay on track with their weight loss goals. Most of the women I came into contact with explained how they used these images, set them as their phone backgrounds, computer wallpapers, and taped them to their fridges and mirrors as a reminder of how far they needed to go to be stage ready.

The striking issue with this type of motivation is the similarity it has to “thinspo.” Thinspo’s name comes from the combination of “thin” and “inspiration” and has the same function within pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia circles as fitspo has for bikini competitors. Specifically, people with anorexia, bulimia, and other eating disorders often use thinspo as motivation to not eat. While I was looking at fitspirational posts on social media, it occurred to me that not only the names fitspiration and thinspiration resemble each other, but also their attempt to elicit the attention of viewers who envy the bodies they see in the pictures.

Below are screen shots of Pinterest (Image A) and Google (Image B) searches from when I typed in “Fitspo” to their image search functions:
Image B:
As seen with the blogs in the previous section, the women who compete in bikini express extreme anxiety about food, always planning out their next meals, obsessing over calories, withholding any food cravings. But most of the women I talked to explained that their willpower would not last for very long, and they would come crashing down with a binge, eating as much food as they could until they became sick. This behavior is strikingly similar to those with eating disorders not related to bikini competitions.

The photos below show some images found on a Pro-ED site when I performed a Google search for “thinspirational images:”
According to Stephen Lewis, and Alexis Arbuthnott, the authors of "Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking," pro-eating disorder (Pro-ED) websites are very common and are associated with “reinforcing and encouraging eating disordered behaviors” (Lewis). To demonstrate the accessibility of Pro-ED material, Lewis and Arbuthnott, using "a series of search terms" that were “entered to generate search-related data regarding actual pro-ED terms used in Google,” were able to determine that web users searched Pro-ED phrases more “than 13 million times annually.” The searches that included the terms “thinspiration and thinspo” were “associated with the most harmful Website content” (Lewis). Given the similarities between thinspo and fitspo and the testimonies of bikini competitors, it goes without saying that the arguments about the harm these images inflict can be made about both versions of digital motivation. One self-proclaimed fitness professional, Virginia Sole-Smith, states that although the types of images “aren’t entirely identical,” they are “pretty
much always about collecting pictures that glorify an unhealthy and unattainable standard of beauty” (Sole-Smith). Charlotte Hilton Anderson, author of "Is ‘Fitspiration’ Really Any Better Than “Thinspiration”? states,

After all, the problem with thinspo is that the images represent a mostly unattainable ideal that requires great sacrifices (both physical and mental) to achieve and I daresay that most of those “perfect” female bodies, albeit muscular instead of bony, are equally as problematic.

Both Sole-Smith and Hilton Anderson know well what they are talking about, since they both competed in bikini competitions to achieve their health goals and relied on fitspo as motivation.

**The [Not So] Pretty Side of Bikini**

As I showed earlier, despite the health complex surrounding bikini, irrefutable evidence shows how detrimental it is to competitors’ mental and physical health. Furthermore, the adverse health effects of the prep and post-competition lifestyles are widely known and easily accessible. Below are screenshots of the first pages of Google search results for “Obsessive overeating bikini competitions” (Image A) and “bikini competition eating disorders” (Image B). These search results include articles like “Post Contest Binge Eating,” “Why I’ll Never Compete Again,” and “Eating Disorders in the Fitness Community.”
The turmoil bikini competitors experience before, during, and after competing is devastating. During many of my interviews the women actually were brought to tears thinking about the mental anguish they experienced. Almost every woman I met explained the significant damage competing did to them physically and mentally. Many of them developed or amplified already-existing eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, depression, and more. However, most competitors I encountered continued to compete because they were so tied up in the idea that it was good for them and the
healthy thing to do.

Blogger Kira Williams, the self-proclaimed “get fit girl,” explains her struggle while training for her competitions in heart wrenching detail. She was too embarrassed to tell anyone around her that she was struggling because she was convinced competing was good for her, and she blamed herself for any emotional struggles she had. Williams developed multiple eating disorders and extreme anxiety. She explains that her obsession with food would consume her thoughts throughout the day:

I focused so much on all of the foods I wanted like peanut butter, more oatmeal, bananas, protein bars, dark chocolate, more sweet potato, coconut walnut chicken, etc that it drove me absolutely crazy. I was miserable.

However, much like other competitors, Williams was not able to beat her food cravings and as a result of her constant state of deprivation, she would binge eat until she was physically and emotionally spent. Once she began binging, she could not stop until her body was so full she would make herself sick:

I’d finally feel so disgusted by myself. It made me sick to my stomach, literally. I got so upset with myself. I was already tired, stressed, and frustrated from constantly restricting myself. I always cried myself to sleep.

Williams’ experiences are not uncommon for women training for bikini competitions.
Rather, as we have seen, binging, purging, and starvation are unbelievably common. For example, in her blog post titled “Why I Hung Up My Competition Heels,” Shelsea Sanchez explains not only why she chose to end her career in bikini, but also why she felt obligated to share her experience with other women interested in the sport:

The reason why I decided to be open about this is because I know there are many girls out there like me that have gone through the same things. They are just too scared and embarrassed to talk about it. I know they feel alone because I did and felt so terribly lost.

Later in the article Sanchez explains that her insecurities amplified while she was competing. She remembers particularly feeling self-conscious after her competition was over, when her body began to rehydrate:

I felt so embarrassed because I had gained weight. I started having a bigger social media following and women that looked up to me, so I felt a little more pressure to be super lean. When you’re in an industry where you get judged on your physical appearance including body fat, you feel more pressure to look a certain way.

Like many other women in the sport, Sanchez became obsessed with maintaining her competition look despite the fact that she knew it was physically impossible for her body to maintain it. Sanchez became obsessed with working out and would feel extreme
anxiety if she could not work out for more than two hours a day. She explains:

I was such an emotional mess because of the way I looked. It was a drastic change. I didn’t even want to leave the house. I thought people would talk about my weight gain (which in the industry THEY DO!). I felt so heavy and so tired. I switched gyms because I didn’t want people to talk about the super fit bikini girl that turned fat. I didn’t even have motivation to go to work.

IFBB Bikini Pro Ruthie Harrison also shares many of the same experiences with competing. In her blog, it becomes very evident that bikini’s existence is perpetuated by women’s insecurities and their dedication to meeting the unrealistic ideals of femininity that saturate the industry:

It is so difficult to try to explain why I would do such a horrible and destructive thing as eat copious amounts of the foods that I knew would ruin my fitness goals, and then shortly thereafter: drink hot water, lay on the floor rolling my stomach to loosen it back up, and then spend a half hour over the toilet bowl retching up as much as I could - until my eyes were swollen and tear filled, and my heart was beating in my forehead.

Harrison’s experiences also demonstrate how much influence the judging criteria have on bikini competitors. Harrison was willing to do anything, including starve herself,
train constantly, and stay up all night to practice posing, to be the best competitor she could:

I would do ANYTHING to be what the judges wanted. When the pressure got to great? Binge. A flurry of stuffing everything from peanut butter and cheese, to frosting, to straight coconut oil and sugar mixed together. Sometimes it was fast food: 3 orders of curly fries and cheesecake. Fast-forward... through the emotion-numbing and pressure releasing binge... to the guilt. A split second after realizing, "Oh SH!T, I just ate X,000 calories" comes the damage control: the purge.... The desperate attempt at preserving my "fit" image and perceived successful happiness. I blush to say this cycle would repeat itself up to ten times in a given day. I got too depressed to keep count.

*Ready, aim. Fire!*

Capitalism is not wicked or cruel when the commodity is the whore; profit is not wicked or cruel when the alienated worker is a female piece of meat; corporate bloodsucking is not wicked or cruel when the corporations in question sell cunt (209).

Andrea Dworkin

*Pornography: Men Possessing Women*

In bikini competitions we see a sexually objectifying performance that
emotionally and physically devastates competitors. Yet, regardless of how detrimental it is to these women—and even though the negative effects of competing are evident all over the Internet, including innumerable testimonies from women who have actually competed—bikini is still marketed as a health movement, not only by the bodybuilding industry but also by related industries that target similar audiences. And it seems the marketing is successful, since bikini competitions are growing at an extremely fast rate.

These industries are committed to tricking women into believing that bikini competitions are not only good for them but will make them into the best women they can be. Bikini competitions demonstrate how the expectations we force onto women to meet the ideals of feminine beauty, despite their devastating harms, are marketed to the public as something that will help, not hurt women. It is another manifestation of women’s constant oppression in patriarchy compounded by an aggressive capitalist market.

Why does this even matter? Why does it matter if these women put themselves into a position to be objectified and hurt? After all, they are the ones who put on the bikini and walk on stage, and they can stop anytime they want. It matters because the strange subculture of bodybuilding reflects a broader pattern within this patriarchal, capitalist society: women and their bodies are expendable if it benefits someone, somewhere. And this benefit can be monetary, sexual, social, or political. It can be making millions of dollars more a year or it can be getting to stare at women in bikini bottoms for a few minutes. The bodybuilding industry has adapted right alongside the capitalist market by changing the categories available to participants in ways that maximize their potential for profit. The problem is that the way in which they increase
their profit is through the sexual exploitation of women’s bodies. Again, “sex sells,” and since bodybuilding is set within a patriarchal social order, it is no surprise that the version of “sex” sold is women’s sexualized bodies.

This is nothing new. In fact, I would argue it is one of the oldest tricks in the book of patriarchy. How do you convince one group to be subordinate to another? Make that group believe they belong there and that it is where they want, should, and need to be. As a result, any suffering that happens to a woman as a result of her subordinated position is deemed irrelevant because it is just an inevitable part of being a woman, and probably her own fault anyway. As the renowned radical feminist theorist Andrea Dworkin states in *Right-wing Women*:

> It is impossible to remember as real the suffering of someone who by definition has no legitimate claim to dignity or freedom, someone who is in fact viewed as some thing, an object or an absence. And if a woman, an individual woman multiplied by billions, does not believe in her own discrete existence and therefore cannot credit the authenticity of her own suffering, she is erased, canceled out, and the meaning of her life, whatever it is, whatever it might have been, is lost. (21)

The internalization of how things should be is seen with the women who compete in bikini and the blame they inflict on themselves whenever they struggle with competing. They constantly feel ashamed if they are not tough enough to follow through with their bikini competitions or if they ever struggle meeting their weight drops, eating their diets, or completing their workouts. Most of the women I encountered did not blame
the system. They did not blame the expectations set out by IFBB and NPC. Rather, the
women blamed themselves for not being able to meet the expectations society, the
bodybuilding industry, the judges, and the audience placed on them. These women are
convinced that the best thing for them is to compete in bikini, but bikini is not good.
Bikini is not healthy. Bikini, like the broader sexist media, destroys women’s bodies but
is passed off as something else. High heels, breast implants, and bikinis have nothing to
do with women’s health . . . but they have everything to do with making money and
going men off.

This pattern is seen in many other industries in the US. For example, women’s
bodies are constantly distorted in the media. Nonetheless, knowing that this distortion
would not be good for PR, similarly to the bodybuilding industry, it is marketed to the
public as something else, something good. The distorted images we see of women with
long, tan legs, full hair, lips, and breasts, smiling, happy, and passive are marketed to the
public as embodying the innate ideals of womanhood and femininity. These images of
femininity are engraved into women’s minds and this internalization causes women to
think their worth is critically linked to them. This internalization is problematic because
the media has been built on the gender system that thrives off the systemic subservience
of all things associated with femininity. Similarly to the bodybuilding industry, there are
also other industries committed to perpetuating the idea that women in the media
represent the ideals of womanhood because they too can profit from women buying into
their own subordination. Think about the countless makeup companies and the fashion
industry; they too benefit when women buy into what they see on the television. These
industries benefit when women buy the products that promise to make them better
women. These companies exploit women’s desires to fulfill the ideals of femininity that are constantly thrown at them.

Patriarchy aims, capitalism shoots, and women are the ones caught in the crossfire.

Patriarchy aims when women are told we have to embody all of the ideals of femininity to have value. In our society, to be feminine means to be submissive, emotional, and pretty. To be masculine means to be brave, logical, and strong. We train ourselves to fit into these stereotypes and as a result, women’s subordination is legitimized—because what it means to be feminine is the opposite of what our society values.

Capitalism shoots, when it exploits this hierarchical relationship for no other reason than profit and hard-ons.

So who is left in the crossfire of patriarchy and capitalism? Whose bodies are expendable?
These bodies.
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