

THESIS

“DO YOU LIKE MY BODY?”: AN INTERPERSONAL APPROACH TO THE GROWTH OF  
BIKINI COMPETITORS ON YOUTUBE

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### “DO YOU LIKE MY BODY?”: AN INTERPERSONAL APPROACH TO THE GROWTH OF BIKINI COMPETITORS ON YOUTUBE

This study investigates the popularity growth of bikini competitors on the social media outlet of YouTube. This content falls into the category of “fitspiration” content, otherwise known as fitness social media content that advocates for health and well-being. While fitspiration content has been shown to be damaging to the consumer regarding body image and self-esteem, consumers are increasingly choosing to engage with it. Therefore, this project takes an audience approach, probing why this phenomenon is spreading rapidly regardless of its potentially harmful effects. Using a qualitative interview approach, I explore the appeal of this YouTube content by interviewing women who actively engage with the YouTube videos of bikini competitors. I utilize three communication theories—social identification theory, parasocial interaction theory, and narrative theory—to explore why the fitspiration YouTube content of bikini competitors is becoming more popular. The findings indicate that all three theories play a role in drawing women to fitspiration content, although identification seemed to be the most reported factor. The findings not only provide valuable insights about the appeal of fitspiration content, but also about the potentially damaging effects of fitness-related social media and bikini competitions regarding privilege, body image, and expectations of media consumers.

*Keywords:* fitspiration, YouTube, identification, parasocial, narrative, social media, interview

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
LIST OF TABLES.....	vii
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	6
Context: The Bikini Competition.....	6
Rationale: Fitspiration Social Media Content.....	10
Connection and Interpersonal Gratification Through YouTube.....	13
Theoretical Foundations.....	16
Social Identification Theory.....	16
Parasocial Interaction Theory.....	19
Narrative Theory.....	22
3. METHOD.....	26
Participants.....	26
Procedure.....	27
Recruitment.....	27
Analysis.....	29
Role of the Researcher.....	32
4. RESULTS.....	33
Social identification.....	33
Perceived realism.....	35
Similar style/appearance.....	36
Similar struggles/challenges.....	37
Similar beliefs/values.....	38
Similar goals.....	38
Parasocial interaction.....	39
Influenced behavior/mindset.....	41
Emotional impact/response.....	43
Intentional and specific seeking.....	44
Narrative.....	44
Opportunity for identification.....	46
Curiosity/fascination.....	47
Inspiration.....	48
Lack of diversity.....	50
Potential effect of bikini competitors on YouTube.....	51
5. DISCUSSION.....	56
Perceived authenticity and identification.....	56
Parasocial interaction and consumerism.....	58
Narrative, voyeurism, and lurking.....	59
Lack of diversity.....	61
Potential effect of bikini competitors on YouTube.....	62
Limitations.....	66

Future Research Directions.....	67
6. REFERENCES.....	70
7. APPENDIX A.....	90
8. APPENDIX B.....	91
9. APPENDIX C.....	93

## LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1- PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTIONS.....	27
TABLE 2- SOCIAL IDENTIFICATION CODES.....	34
TABLE 3- PARASOCIAL INTERACTION CODES.....	40
TABLE 4- NARRATIVE CODES.....	45

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nearing her high school graduation, one of the participants in this study, Arianna, decided that she wanted to be more fit. She purchased a gym membership, altered her diet, and in doing so, looked to social media for easy and convenient health and fitness advice. She watched YouTube videos for up to two hours each day, eager to discover more recipes and exercises that could bring her closer to her fitness goals of losing weight and having more energy. As Arianna became more involved in fitness and began to see results in both her appearance and her physical performance, she noticed the increasing prevalence of bikini competitors on YouTube, and wondered if this was the next step in her health and fitness journey. She watched other women on YouTube, similar to her age and with similar interests in fitness, record videos of themselves on their journeys to attain lean, extremely fit physiques, to then compete on stage in shimmering bikinis, often winning large, glorious trophies. Not only that, but Arianna watched these women expand their social media presences and gain online fame, frequently being applauded for their "perfect" bodies. "What a fun, glamorous hobby for women who love fitness," Arianna thought, and she decided to take on the same challenge.

Yet, Arianna's experience was far from fun and glamorous. In around 12 weeks, Arianna lost over 30 pounds for her first bikini competition, and while she did not win a trophy like she had hoped, she was more confident than ever about the appearance of her body. Although, after the competition when Arianna did not necessarily have to diet anymore, she found herself binging on copious amounts of food (otherwise known as post-show rebounding), and gained back the 30 pounds she had lost in a little over a month. She suddenly hated herself and her body, and felt depressed for over a year to follow. She constantly compared herself to other

bikini competitors on YouTube, and longed for the body she once had. It took her around a year and a half to stop comparing her body to other women on social media, and to begin to build a healthier relationship with herself and her appearance.

Every year, thousands of women, such as Arianna, spend twelve to sixteen weeks relentlessly exercising and rigorously counting the calories of every morsel of food that they eat in order to lose fat and attain a level of leanness seen in fitness magazines. Then, at the end of the twelve weeks, they douse their bodies in coats of spray tan, don an embellished bikini, and strut in six-inch-high heels in front of a large crowd and a panel of judges who critique their entire appearance. This is the life of a bikini competitor, and this lifestyle is not only a growing trend in the world of physique competitions, but on various social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and most recently, YouTube.

While I have not competed in a bikini competition, I have been involved in the fitness community for a long time, and have had similar experiences to Arianna's. I have allowed the media to dictate how my body should look, and the drastic measures I should take to attain culturally-constituted physical ideals. I have adhered to these culturally-constituted demands, and have yearned for bodies that were not mine. As fit as I became, I was never fit enough, as I was subconsciously comparing my body to other women, especially to lean, tan, “perfect” bikini competitors whom I watched on YouTube.

Therefore, one may call this thesis project a selfish endeavor. I am taking my own experience and using communication theory to delve more deeply into why I have been drawn to the social media content of bikini competitors, and what the potential consequences are for this interaction. Yet this thesis is propelled by much more than a curiosity of a growing fitness social media phenomenon. This project is motivated by a need to prevent other women from

experiencing the problematic trend of self-deprecation brought upon by societal expectations communicated through media. I argue this can be done by continually seeking to understand consumers' relationships with social media, and how social media can affect them. Once we fully understand these relationships and potential effects, we can take active steps toward solutions. This project will be one of many precursors for women having better relationships with both social media and with their own bodies.

This thesis project focuses on the emerging social media fame of female bikini competitors, delving into why these women and the media content that they produce is enticing to users. This is done by analyzing fifteen interviews with women who engage with YouTube fitness content frequently. The interviews probed participants' interests, attraction to this content, and their perceptions of how this content affects their lives. After analyzing the data, examining the relationship between social media producer and consumer using communication theory, this project then discusses the potential effects that this type of health and fitness-related media content, also known as "fitspiration," can have on consumers. The YouTube content produced by bikini competitors falls into the category of "fitspiration" content (derived from the combination of "fitness" and "inspiration."), as it claims to advocate for a healthy lifestyle and includes images of muscular physiques, diet food, and quotes pushing one to exercise in pursuit of physical greatness (Boepple & Thompson, 2014). This analysis supplements previous research suggesting that fitspiration content may not necessarily advocate for health (Homan, 2010; Boepple & Thompson, 2015; Markula, 1995; Vaterlaus et. al, 2015, Tiggerman & Zaccardo, 2015, Carrotte, 2015), while exploring fitspiration's growth on an understudied media platform.

This analysis focuses on bikini competitors on YouTube specifically. Bikini competitors, as opposed to all social media producers within the fitspiration genre (such as bodybuilders,

fitness models, etc.), were chosen for this analysis for clarity, allowing for a concise focus on one demographic. In addition, I chose to study bikini competitors for this analysis because while scholarly work on this subject is sparse, it has been stated that bikini competitions demonstrate the degrading and sexist reality for women caught in the intersection of patriarchy, gender expectations, capitalism, and an industry that thrives off the exploitation of women's bodies (Hunter, 2014; Land, 2015). These societal implications coupled with previous research highlighting the potential negative effects of fitspiration content (Boepple & Thompson, 2015, Homan, 2010, Koven & Abry, 2015, Carrotte, 2015), warrant further investigation and discussion of bikini competitors social media content, which is what this analysis provides.

In addition, this analysis focuses on the new media platform of YouTube. Within the past two decades, there has been an increasing awareness of the importance of media in psychology and communication research (Kirschner & Kirschner, 1997; Livingstone, 1998), and this analysis further advocates that media should continue to be studied through a communicative lens. YouTube has not yet been researched in the context of the fitspiration genre (Perloff, 2014), and this project supports previous assertions that YouTube and the communities found within it are a phenomenon that should be studied and understood because interactions on YouTube are different than previously studied media platforms such as television (Head, 2015). All media platforms should be analyzed for the effects that they can have on consumers, and that includes new burgeoning social media platforms and interactions.

Finally, I chose to focus on the audience of this media content, rather than the content itself, because there is a gap in the literature. Previous scholarly work examining fitspiration content has largely consisted of content analyses (Boepple & Thompson, 2016; Hodler & Lucas-Carr, 2015; Boepple, Ata, Rum, & Thompson, 2016; Simpson & Mazzeo, 2016), or experiments

focusing on the immediate effects of fitspiration content (Chasler, 2016; Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016; Tiggerman & Zaccardo, 2015; Carrotte, 2015). However, no work has been done examining the audience responsible for the growth of fitspiration. As I will explicate in my rationale, previous research strongly suggests that fitspiration content can be detrimental to the psychological well-being of those who engage with it. Therefore, this project asks, if research insists that fitspiration can be exceedingly damaging, why are people increasingly choosing to engage with it?

In this thesis, I outline and describe the bikini competition and the growth of bikini competitors on social media, focusing on the migration to YouTube. I then review previous research about YouTube and interpersonal interaction on this new media platform. Next, previous research on fitness-related media content, also known as “fitspiration” content is described, focusing on the effect this content can have on consumers. Then, three communication theories—social identification theory, parasocial interaction theory, and narrative theory—are described, as I utilize them as frameworks to explore growth of bikini competitor-produced content on YouTube. I then describe the methods I used to conduct and analyze fifteen qualitative interviews with women who frequently engage with the YouTube videos of bikini competitors. The findings are then presented using the three communication theories above to better understand the appeal of this YouTube genre and the connections that viewers build with bikini competitors on YouTube. Finally, I explore and discuss important themes found in my interviews, and conclude by describing how this project paves the way for future research in this area.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Context: The Bikini Competition**

It is essential to describe and discuss the bikini competition and what a being a bikini competitor entails in order to build a contextual foundation for this project. In short, the bikini competition arose out of necessity in order to revitalize the deteriorating sport of female bodybuilding. While female bodybuilding became popular as women entered the sport in 1977 at the Ohio Regional Women's Physique Championship, its popularity dissolved by the late 1980s due to steroid controversies and participants who did not want to appear “too manly” (Shea, 2001). The extreme muscularity of female bodybuilders directly contradicted and complicated the gendered expectations of femininity, as American cultural norms imply that the female form must be toned and fit without revealing the denser, harder muscle which tampers with her “femininity” (Butler, 1985; Ndalianis, 1995; Land, 2015). To many, female bodybuilding threatened sexual difference because muscular women “disrupted the equation of men as strong and women as weak, underpinning gender roles and power relations” (Holmlund, 1989, p. 42). Hence in 1992, a series of "femininity" rules were created, stating that competitors could not be “too big” in order to “retain a higher level of female aesthetics” (Hunter, 2013, p. 5). Regardless of these new femininity rules, the popularity of the sport continued to decrease due to low ticket sales, which many suspected was largely due to the conflicts surrounding the “ideal” female bodybuilder physique (Roussel, Griffet, & Duret, 2003).

Then in 2010, the bikini competition was created as a completely new category of women’s bodybuilding. This new category involves much less emphasis on muscularity, and instead emphasizes a lean and toned physique, aligned much more closely to what many women

in Western culture yearn to look like (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999; Hunter, 2013), compared to conventional women's bodybuilding. The bikini competition was created to attract more female competitors, claiming to, "open up the world of bodybuilding to women who didn't want to 'get too big' or 'too bulky'" (The History of Bodybuilding, 2014). Since the bikini competition was created, it has grown rapidly in popularity, attracting thousands of female participants (IFBB Official Website, 2016; WNFB Official Website, 2016). The National Physique Committee (NPC), the World Natural Bodybuilding Federation (WNBF), and the International Federation of Bodybuilders (IFBB) are currently the most widely known and influential bikini competition federations in the United States, producing hundreds of local, regional, and national shows and competitions around the country every year (Hunter, 2013).

There are many requirements to compete in and win a bikini competition. While the average body fat percentage of women in America is 25-30%, bikini competitors aim to be around 10% body fat, (Brehm et al, 2013). Bikini competitions require that participants walk across a large stage and posing in a two-piece swimsuit with a v-shaped bottom (embellishments are suggested). Competitors must wear high heels, obtain a deep tan, and jewelry and hair extensions are strongly encouraged (NPC Online, 2016). Competitors are then compared to one another and are judged in a line-up based on their overall level of fitness, their beauty presence taking into account facial beauty, tan, hair, make-up, nails, and their presentation/model walk (WNBF Official Website, 2016). According to the IFBB bikini rules (2011), the physique of a bikini competitor should neither be excessively muscular nor excessively lean, and should be free from muscle separation and striations, or tiny grooves of muscle that can be seen through the skin on extremely lean bodies. A competitor's overall appearance should complement the "Total

Package” of the athlete, based on the perceptions and opinions of the judges, which has been a source of conflict and controversy since the bikini competition began (Boyle, 2012).

To attain the low body fat percentage and physical ideal for a competition, bikini competitors are notorious for engaging in extreme caloric restriction, often consuming around 1,000 per day—the average recommended daily caloric intake for women is around 2,000 calories (Jakubowicz, Barnea, Wainstein, & Froy, 2013). Strict calorie-counting is very common, as is long durations of exercise, often reaching up to multiple hours at the gym per day (Smith, 2016). Many competitors take multiple pills and supplements, including fat-loss caffeine capsules, protein powders, muscle-growth supplements such as creatine monohydrate powder, and much more (Johnson, 2016). While many competitors admit that the route to a competition-ready body is extreme (Henderson, 2016; Weiss, 2014; Turner, 2015), bikini competitions continue to attract many young women seeking to attain a competition-worthy physique.

As the bikini competition has grown in popularity, so has the presence and popularity of female bikini competitors documenting their fat-loss journeys on social media. Bikini competitors began to share their journeys on the photo-sharing social media application, Instagram, these journeys largely consist of photos of all of the diet foods competitors eat to lose weight, 15 second videos of the exercises they perform in the gym, motivational quotes in the form of colorful graphics, and progress pictures and video clips displaying weekly improvements toward their physique goals. This social media content was originally created so that competitors could record their progress and also exchange encouragement and support with other competitors and dieters struggling to reach their fitness goals and lose fat (Kosek, 2015). Yet, the popularity of this content increased exponentially, and many bikini competitors have gained thousands (occasionally even millions) of followers on Instagram, as well as fame, money, and

sponsorships from producing content that discloses their journeys toward fat-loss. The competitors that tend to gain the most followers are those who share the fastest and most dramatic physical results, and also those who tend to display more pictures of their fit bodies in limited clothing.

The quickly-growing interest and popularity on Instagram since its inception in 2012 could suggest why many bikini competitors have migrated to the video-sharing social media platform of YouTube in the past 1-2 years. YouTube provides a platform where bikini competitors can produce and publish longer, more elaborate videos, as opposed to just images and shorter videos. YouTube provides more opportunities to connect with one's audience and go more in-depth on various fitness and fat-loss topics. YouTube allows bikini competitors to elaborate about their fat-loss diets, exercise routines, and supplementation choices, and also allows them to spend more time discussing the challenges of preparing for a bikini competition with their viewers.

Bikini competitors usually address topics casually, taking their cameras with them as they go about their days, speaking to the camera as if it is their friend. These types of videos are often in the form of video logs, also known as "vlogs." These are technically simple videos that have been popular on YouTube since its inception in 2006, and include a person facing a camera and addressing a public viewership briefly, informally, and more or less intimately (Werner, 2012). These largely unrehearsed, unedited, and unorganized vlogs, such as those that bikini competitors produce as they prepare for a competition, have been known to create almost religious zeal in viewers, attracting a large number of loyal followers (Molyneaux et al, 2008; Wesch, 2009).

A popular and highly-requested type of vlog that bikini competitors often produce is a “Full Day of Eating” vlog, in which competitors film every food that they eat for fast fat-loss. In addition, increasingly popular videos often consist of bikini competitors addressing issues such as extreme physical fatigue due to caloric restriction, the loss of menstrual cycles due to low body fat percentages, and various eating disorders, all symptoms that are common amongst bikini competitors losing weight for a contest (Dantone, 2016, Ho, 2016, Revela, 2016). This thesis project seeks to discover why these types of videos are increasingly attractive to social media consumers, and how consumers describe their experiences watching them. First, though, we will delve into previous research in this arena about the potentially detrimental effects fitspiration and fitness-related social media content can have on people, especially young women.

### **Rationale: Fitspiration Social Media Content**

Now that the context of this project has been outlined, it is essential to explore why the relationship between social media-famed bikini competitor and media consumer should be analyzed. Fitspiration and fitness-related social media content should be studied and critiqued in order to create awareness of the potential negative effects that it can cause. People, especially young women, are increasingly turning to social media as a source of health-related information (Vaterlaus, 2014), and nearly 90% of American young adults aged 18 to 24 have indicated they would trust medical information found on social media (PWC Health Research, 2015).

Considering the growth of social media as a health resource, even though it is notorious for running into conflicts of quality, reliability, and predictability (Moorehead, Hazlett, & Harrison, 2013), it is important to understand the appeal of these videos and the influence they have on consumers, and we can use communication theory to begin to understand such influences.

As of now, there has been little research on the effect of newer media formats on body image (Perloff, 2014), and while studies are emerging, delving into formats such as Instagram (Vaterlaus et. al, 2015; Tiggerman & Zaccardo, 2015, Carrotte, 2015; Fardouly et al., 2017), YouTube has yet to be analyzed for its potential effects on physical ideals and body dissatisfaction amongst women. Health and fitness-related social media content, or “fitspiration” content was hashtagged (a word or phrase preceded by a hash or pound sign (#) and used to identify messages on a specific topic) in over 3 million images on Instagram in 2015 (Chan & Segupta, 2016), indicating that fitspiration content is growing rapidly, further promoting the omnipresence of weight as central to females’ worth in the media (Bordo, 2003; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2002; Markey, 2012).

Fitspiration content was originally produced on the internet, often on online blogs, as a healthy antidote to another Internet trend known as “thinspiration,” (a previous internet trend that encouraged women to stop eating to be thin) and claims to advocate for health and well-being (Ghaznavi and Taylor, 2015). Yet, fitspiration has been criticized for conveying unrealistic goals, for focusing on appearance rather than health, and for praising one particular “athletic” body type (Markula, 1995). Studies of thinspiration and fitspiration content on the internet show that they do not differ on guilt-inducing messages regarding weight or the body, fat/weight stigmatization, the presence of objectifying phrases, and dieting/restraint messages (Boepple & Thompson, 2015). Thus far, research has highlighted a direct association between an increase in engagement with fitspiration social media content and increased compulsive exercising and negative mood (Homan, 2010). In addition, fitspiration has been found to encourage the eating disorder orthorexia nervosa, an obsession with healthy eating and food “purity” with links to obsessive-compulsive disorder and anorexia (Koven & Abry, 2015). Consumers of health and

fitness-related social media content, who are dominantly young females aged 13-22, are more likely to have eating disorders and misuse detox/laxative teas or diet pills compared to those who did not consume any health and fitness-related social media content (Carrotte, 2015).

Moreover, research shows that acute exposure to fitspiration images leads to increased negative mood, body dissatisfaction, and decreased self-esteem regarding appearance (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2006), and this is especially poignant on new media forums due to the increased immediacy and vast accessibility of content (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). Body dissatisfaction has emerged as a core aspect of women's physical and mental health (Hyde, 2008), and is regarded as one of the most consistent and robust risk factors for eating disorders such as bulimia, low self-esteem, depression, and obesity (Grabe, Hyde, & Lindberg, 2007). Scholars have speculated that these negative effects occur because women often develop an interpersonal attraction to thin and/or fit media personalities who are thinness-promoting, and hence influence body dissatisfaction and disordered eating beyond the mere media exposure (Harrison, 1997).

Past literature suggests that media exposure is considered the most powerful and pervasive force linked to general body dissatisfaction amongst women as it can shape an individual's body image ideals (Grabe et. al, 2008, Thompson et. al, 1999 and Tiggemann, 2011; Levine & Murnen, 2009; Dittmar, 2007; Levine & Harrison, 2004; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Therefore considering the potentially harmful effects fitspiration and fitness-related can have on consumers, it is vital that all platforms of this content are analyzed in an attempt to better understand the causes of the conditions listed above. To begin this project, it is important to explore the platform where this analysis is taking place—YouTube. First, I give a brief background on YouTube and how it functions, and then discuss previous research on how

consumers use YouTube to satisfy interpersonal needs. I then use three communication theories, parasocial interaction theory, narrative theory, and social identification theory, to theorize why fitness content on YouTube is growing in popularity. These three theories were chosen for this project because they have been frequently used as frameworks to study interpersonal connections through media (Jin, 2010, Head, 2015, McCabe, 2009, Morley, 1992; Cohen, 2001), each providing reasons suggesting why consumers are drawn to bikini competitors and the content they produce on YouTube.

### **Connection and Interpersonal Gratification through YouTube**

YouTube is a free video-sharing website established in September 2005, and is the world's leader in the market for online videos (Artero, 2010). YouTube allows users to upload and share videos through the Internet via websites, mobile devices, blogs, and e-mails. It has quickly become one of the most popular social media websites worldwide, reaching more adults ages 18–34 in the United States than any cable network (YouTube Statistics, 2015). As of 2012, over 2 million videos per minute were viewed on YouTube, and users around the world tend to spend a total of 2.9 billion hours a month watching YouTube videos (Lavaveshkul, 2012).

YouTube exemplifies a social environment in which everyone has the potential to be both a consumer and purveyor of content, and illustrates the vast speed with which social networking innovations can achieve widespread penetration and utility (Holtz, 2006). The videos on YouTube come either from the traditional mass media (e.g., television, movies), or are created and uploaded by YouTube users (Lange, 2007). On this website, any individual with access to the Internet can upload videos, like or dislike others' videos, post comments, or share videos with others. Video sharing on YouTube is augmented by various social tools. Users create personal profiles ('channels'), which display the users' social relations (e.g., friends, comments

and bulletin boards), interests (channels the user is subscribed to), content related data (number and dates of the videos posted), and a brief personal introduction created by the user (Rotman, Golbeck, & Preece, 2009). Users are able to adjust all of these settings to reflect their preferences, depending on their personalities and/or the audiences they wish to attract. Once a video is posted on YouTube, users can communicate through various ways, such as written comments and ratings, and users can also share videos through e-mail, Facebook, text-messaging, and much more (Rotman & Preece, 2010).

YouTube encourages users to “Broadcast Yourself” and invites people to communicate with countless others through video sharing (Burgess & Green, 2013). Because of this encouragement to share with others and the wide availability of access, YouTube is creating an online world where anyone can gain a large following and achieve Internet fame in the comfort of their own homes (Cheng, Dale, & Liu, 2007). Many people have taken advantage of this opportunity to achieve online fame, and stardom through the use of YouTube has become increasingly common since the website’s conception (Lavaveshkul, 2012). This is done with good reason, as YouTube provides people with the agency to create content at their discretion for little or no cost to them (Pinto, Almeida, & Goncalves, 2013). Yet questions still exist as to why audiences increasingly engage with YouTube, fueling this trend of internet fame and why people have been drawn to this platform so quickly.

Many scholars have argued that people use media to satisfy interpersonal needs (Rubin, 2001; Flanagin & Metzger, 2001; Wolfradt & Doll, 2001; Madianou & Miller, 2013). And while around half of YouTube users claim to engage with YouTube for entertainment purposes (Haridakis & Hanson, 2009), it is also a place where users can connect and form interpersonal relationships (Strangelove, 2010). Since YouTube was founded, its distinctly social aspect has

been celebrated as an important space for consumers, especially for youth. YouTube affords new opportunities for individuals to connect with others, provide and receive support, share difficult experiences, and even make efforts to create safer environments for marginalized groups (Vance, Howe, & Dellavalle, 2009; Chau, 2010; Wattenhofer & Zhu, 2012; Tompkins, 2014). YouTube has been found to facilitate natural community building (Sureka et. al, 2010), and scholars have also asserted that YouTube empowers people to create more connections (Bloom & Johnson, 2013). This is largely because websites like YouTube allow users to control when they interact with others, eliminating anxieties and fears associated with face-to-face interactions (Spinzy et. al, 2012).

As YouTube producers and consumers interact and satisfy interpersonal needs, it is common for online communities to develop. These communities create unique communal cultures, filled with commonly shared interests and commitments to particular YouTube channels and/or video producers (Rotman & Preece, 2010). YouTube channels within the fitness genre are no exception to this, and communities gathering around particular fitness-related and/or fitspiration domains have existed since the website was created (Williams et al, 2014). YouTube has always been a popular place for people to discuss their weight-loss and fitness goals, gather, and build communities out of a shared interest in more fit physiques (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Rasczyk & Stephens, 2015). And while studies have recognized the growth of YouTube in the realm of health, fitness, and weight loss (Vance, Howe, & Dellavalle, 2009), studies have not examined *why* these fitness communities are so popular beyond the fact that humans like to share their interests. In addition, literature has not yet studied the effects that these fitness and weight-loss social networks can have on those within them. This study offers

three theoretical frameworks to examine why fitness-related YouTube channels, such as those produced by bikini competitors, are so attractive on this thriving new media website.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

It is clear in previous literature that fitspiration social media content can have negative effects on those who consume it (Homan, 2010; Boepple & Thompson, 2015; Markula, 1995; Vaterlaus et. al, 2015, Tiggerman & Zaccardo, 2015, Carrotte, 2015). It is now important to discern *why* consumers are actively choosing to engage with fitspiration content in order to understand this community and offer solutions to the problems that can arise within it. Entering this project, I explore three communication theories—social identification theory, parasocial interaction theory, and narrative theory—to begin to understand to why the social media content of bikini competitors is enticing to consumers. I will define and explore previous research about these three theories and elaborate on how each applies to the context of this analysis.

**Social identification theory.** A reason that viewers are increasingly choosing to watch the YouTube videos of bikini competitors may be presence of identification. Social identification theory is a psychological process where individuals relate to others and/or a group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). When identification occurs, it often leads people to categorize themselves into social units, transforming *I* into *we* (Hogg & Turner, 1985). It has been speculated that social identification is caused by a fundamental human need for validation and similarity to others (Brewer, 1991). When this need is gratified and social identification takes place, it provides individuals with their social identities and attitudes, which may contribute to their self-concept and level of self-esteem (Erikson, 1968; Perreault & Bourhis, 1999).

For decades, social identification has been regarded as an important motivation for, and outcome of, media exposure (e.g., Ang, 1982/1985; Basil, 1996; Maccoby & Wilson, 1957), and

scholars have advocated that media cannot have an emotional effect on consumers without identification (Morley, 1992; Cohen, 2001). Identification with media characters has generally been understood to denote feelings of affinity, friendship, similarity, and liking of media characters (Katz, 1990; Liebes, 1996; Cohen, 2001). When media consumers identify with an emotion, story, or situation disclosed by a media producer online, this can lead to increased emotional investment in the media producer and/or online community (Bainbridge, 2014). Moreover, Oatley (1994) argued that when a media consumer relates to the goals of a media personality, this provides an exceptionally important basis for identification, increasing the likelihood of emotional investment.

Social identification and increased emotional investment with a media personality and/or media text can occur in the online fitspiration community, as people can identify with bikini competitors and their goals through their YouTube videos. For example, it is common for bikini competitors to produce videos disclosing their dissatisfaction with their bodies, describing what they would like to change about themselves physically. Often times, this dissatisfaction revolves around the perception of excess fat, as bikini competitors aim to lose weight. Considering that over 50% of girls and women in America are dissatisfied with their bodies and wish to lose weight (Bearman, Presnell, Martinez, & Stice, 2006; Markey, 2012), many female viewers can identify with women online with similar feelings and goals to themselves. Female viewers of this YouTube content can adopt the weight-loss goals of bikini competitors online, and this identification can then draw these viewers in and increase emotional investment in the content that bikini competitors produce.

In addition, research hypothesizes that perceived realism of a character and/or media personality can promote identification (Press, 1989; Cohen, 2006). YouTube promotes itself as

being a platform that welcomes any and all users (Keen, 2011), and bikini competitors often produce videos in the form of vlogs that denote a seemingly unrehearsed, casual tone. This can add an element of reality, as many people on YouTube are (or at least seem like) everyday people (Werner, 2012). People who vlog, including bikini competitors, often discuss their days, problems, accomplishments, hopes, dreams, and fears, which has been suggested as contributing to the increased popularity of vlogs (Wesch, 2009). This disclosure of emotions could be attractive to YouTube viewers because such online discussions display a wide array of common and seemingly realistic emotions that viewers can identify with. It has been asserted that the ability to relay emotion in online videos, especially emotion displayed bodily through facial, vocal, and gestural expression, can be magnetic to viewers as it can draw them in as they become more emotionally invested (Werner, 2012). YouTube allows video producers to express emotions in a variety of ways at their discretion, and this can create for more opportunities for identification, making YouTube content more magnetic to consumers.

There are many ways in which YouTube consumers can identify with bikini competitors and the video content that they produce. Consumers can identify with similar goals, interests, and emotions, especially if the producer is perceived as real and honest. This identification can enhance the appeal of this YouTube content, and can also increase emotional investment. Considering social identification's vast history with media content, suggesting that it is an integral part of the media consumption process (e.g., Ang, 1982/1985; Basil, 1996; Maccoby & Wilson, 1957; Morley, 1992; Morley & Robbins, 2002; Cohen, 1999/2001/2006), it is probable that identification could be taking place in the realm of bikini competitors on YouTube. This concept is an integral component of this analysis, possibly explaining why viewers are increasingly choosing to engage with fitspiration social media content. Therefore, the first

research question of this project asks: *How do female viewers of fitspiration content on YouTube identify with bikini competitors in the videos that they watch?*

**Parasocial interaction theory.** Scholarship has suggested that social identification with media characters and/or media personalities can be a predictor of parasocial relationships (Hoffner, 1996; Eyal & Rubin, 2003). Thus a second theoretical framework that can help us explore why viewers are enticed by YouTube content produced by bikini competitors is parasocial interaction. Recent research has found that YouTube can act as a place where consumers can digitally self-construct, self-present, and parasocially interact with online others (Jin, 2010; Chen, 2013; 2014; Head, 2015). Yet parasocial relationships on YouTube have not been studied in-depth (Madison & Porter, 2016), and the fitspiration genre has not been explored.

Parasocial interaction theory (PSI) is a well-established concept within media and interpersonal communication literature, first developed by Horton and Wohl (1982) as the illusion of a "face-to-face relationship" with a media personality (p. 215). Parasocial interaction is commonly referred to as interpersonal involvement of the media user with the media content that he or she consumes (Rubin, Perse, & Powell 1985), or as a "one-way friendship" with a media personality (Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin, 2003, 2003; Eyal & Rubin, 2003) who media users often seek advice from as if they were friends (Rubin, 1985; (Cortese & Rubin, 2010). Parasocial relationships are often derived from long-term associations that develop during viewing and/or consumption of a media text, which then extend beyond media exposure (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016).

Scholars speculate that PSI arises from an altruistic human instinct to form attachments with others, no matter how remote the distance (Perse, 1989). Research has found that people use

fundamentally the same cognitive processes during both face-to-face and mediated communication (Perse & Rubin, 1989), although the satisfaction received from PSI's is largely dependent on an individual's personality, level of perceived loneliness, and level of social anxiety (Johnson, 2015). Papachrissi and Rubin (2000) found that individuals who find face-to-face interaction unrewarding use the internet as a functional alternative, and those who were socially anxious were more likely to use online newsgroups, chat rooms, and have more close relationships with characters and figures they encountered and engaged with through the media. In particular, video channels online have been found to be especially beneficial for those who choose to watch them, because online video channels allow people to communicate in a more natural way resembling face-to-face communication (Bruce, 1996). Largely due to such benefits of online communication, studies argue that people in digital environments have come to know more people parasocially than through direct interpersonal contact (Jin, 2010; Madison & Porter, 2016).

Parasocial relationships on the internet have been associated with social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) as this theory suggests that physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, and attitude homophily of a media personality (in this case, a YouTube vlogger) can increase parasocial behavior (Lee & Watkins, 2015). This is because individuals are drawn to compare themselves with peers who share similar outlooks and common values, and who are perceived to be of higher status than themselves (Festinger, 1954). This assumption is supported by research in social identification theory as discussed above (Katz, 1990; Liebes, 1996; Cohen, 2001), and has also been supported in studies connecting PSI and social comparison. For example, according to Greenwood, Pietromonaco, and Long (2008), women who tend to form parasocial

relationships also wish they could look like the media personality, suggesting that perceived physical attractiveness serves as a significant predictor of PSI.

PSI provides a lens through which to explore why fitspiration YouTube channels produced by bikini competitors have grown in popularity and viewership. This concept also separates vlogging in the fitspiration community from conventional vlogging that is not fitness related. As described in the paragraph above, Social Comparison Theory suggests that the appearance of the YouTube producer could be a factor in creating parasocial relationships with viewers, especially female viewers. And considering that the vast majority of bikini competitors on YouTube frequently flaunt their lean, fit physiques in their videos, this could encourage viewers to develop parasocial relationships with them because viewers admire them and wish to look like them. Bikini competitors' bodies represent the sought-after physical ideal for women in Western culture (Thompson et al, 1999; Dittmar, 2007; Pozner, 2010) and this could increase the potential for parasocial relationships on behalf of their viewers. The media tells women that their bodies are in need of monitoring and policing, and by constantly striving for a particular ideal, one can avoid depression and can gain more social acceptance (Meyer, Fallah, & Wood, 2011). In addition, YouTube could be an ideal platform for PSI to occur and sustain itself because for PSI to occur, one needs to retain his or her self-identity and interact with the character, thereby maintaining at least a minimal social connection (Horton & Wohl, 1956). On YouTube, people can easily maintain that social distance by liking, sharing, and/or commenting on videos. Therefore, YouTube could be providing an ideal platform for PSI to occur, as well as a tool for women to strive for a lean ideal, using one-way parasocial friendships to guide their lifestyles in hope that it will lead them to a fit physique. Thus, the second research question of this project is:

*How do female viewers of fitspiration content on YouTube describe their relationships with bikini competitors in the videos they watch?*

**Narrative theory.** The final theory that this project builds on looks beyond potential identification and friendships between media consumer and producer, and questions the presence of an attraction to stories and narratives disclosed on YouTube. Recent scholarship has analyzed the appearance of extreme-dieting and weight loss support groups online as a means through which women connect through shared stories and collectively reconstruct the narrative of their lifestyle choices as admirable, warranting social support (Eichhorn, 2008; McCabe, 2009). Therefore, this project aims to delve more deeply into these narratives, studying how narratives publicly depicted by bikini competitors through YouTube videos can appeal to viewers. The third theory of this analysis is narrative theory, offering another framework to consider why the YouTube content of bikini competitors is enticing to consumers. Attraction to narratives and the stories of others is another possible reason why the YouTube content of bikini competitors has grown in popularity.

Narrative is considered a format for constructing psychological and cultural realities (Bruner, 1986), helping people to make sense of the world (Clarke & Rossiter, 2008). Narratives can serve to connect individuals through symbols, knowledge, and meaning, and are often used to enlighten listeners about how a particular group and/or culture creates a social reality (Shore, 1996). The narrative paradigm in communication studies was developed by Walter Fisher and is a theory of symbolic actions. Fisher advocated that words and/or deeds have deep and important meanings for those who live, create, or interpret them (Fisher, 1985). The narrative paradigm insists that people are attracted to narratives as a way to connect with each other, and that narratives have vast potential for connection and community building (Fisher, 1999).

Like many societies, the West is a culture of storytellers, using stories and narratives to share information, express emotions, and connect with others (Roberts, Narayanan, & Isbell, 2009). The use of narratives while communicating in the workplace has been shown to increase compassion and interpersonal connection (Bushe & Marshak, 2009; Carlsen & Pitsis, 2009; Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012), and narrative use in online advertisements has been shown to lead to more favorable attitudes toward a product, especially when people within the advertisement reference personal experiences (Ching, 2013). Moreover, research in the medical field suggests that patient narratives can encourage healthcare participation (Polkinghorne, 1988; Wise, 2008), and studies suggest that use of narrative online can lead to improved psychological wellbeing (Valkenburg & Schouten, 2006; Milani, Osualdella, & Blasio, 2009). A systematic review of research published between January 2003 and April 2013 found that adolescents who told and listened to the narratives of others online on various social media websites reported increased self-esteem, perceived social support, and increased social capital compared to those who did not (Best, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2014). Indeed, the use of narrative has the potential to connect people and influence their attitudes in both interpersonal and parasocial communication situations.

This narrative paradigm applies to the context of this project and the social media realm of bikini competitors because it suggests why audience members are attracted to this content. People use social media to share memories, ideas, opinions, experiences, states of mind, and personal narratives (Sanchez-Cortes et al, 2015), and the YouTube videos that bikini competitors produce are no exception. Bikini competitors on YouTube often have a particular fitness and/or weight loss goals, and as they pursue that goal, they encounter obstacles, challenges, and triumphs along the way. The YouTube audience is invited to join this journey, watching and

listening to many stories, experiences, and personal disclosures from YouTube producers as if they were confiding in a close friend. This narrative sharing and disclosure on YouTube can create an online community of people making meaning together, forming connections through stories and experiences.

In addition, the largely informal, unrehearsed, and casual way of communicating that bikini competitor-produced YouTube vlogs often exemplify creates a seemingly ongoing dialogue with viewers. Previous research has asserted that more casual, unedited internet vlogs can attract and enthrall viewers because they are easy to follow along, and are constantly being updated with new stories about the vlogger's life (Werner, 2012). Because YouTube provides a platform where producers can constantly upload new videos disclosing new aspects of their lives and journeys, countless narratives can be told in an easily-digestible manner, inviting audiences to seek and follow along with their favorite story. Narrative theory therefore could provide another explanation as to why people are increasingly choosing to engage with bikini competitors on YouTube; they want to be a part of the storyline and in turn, the community. This leads to the third and fourth research questions of this project: *What are the compelling narratives described by female viewers of fitspiration content on YouTube? What makes these narratives compelling?*

### **Research Questions**

To summarize, this project offers four research questions:

**RQ1:** How do female viewers of fitspiration content on YouTube identify with bikini competitors in the videos that they watch, and how do viewers describe these social identifications?

**RQ2:** How do female viewers of fitspiration content on YouTube describe their relationships with bikini competitors in the videos they watch?

**RQ3:** What are the compelling narratives of bikini competitors on YouTube?

**RQ4:** What makes the narratives of bikini competitors on YouTube compelling to viewers?

These questions can help us to better understand viewers' relationships with bikini competitors on YouTube. These questions help us learn more about how viewers describe their relationships, how they identify with bikini competitors, and whether or not they show signs of being attached to narrative depicted through these YouTube videos. In the next section I explore the methods used to address these questions.

### 3. METHOD

This project interviewed fitspiration consumers who frequently watch YouTube videos produced by bikini competitors. Interviews were conducted by phone as phone interviews to allow me to interview participants regardless of geographic location (Burke & Miller, 2001; Olson, 2016). Telephone interviews may allow respondents to feel relaxed and able to disclose sensitive information (Novick, 2008), and these types of interviews have been shown to produce data which is comparable in quality to the face-to-face method (Car & Worth, 2001; Sturges & Hanrahan 2004; Carduff, Murray, & Kendall, 2015).

#### **Participants**

Fifteen telephone interviews were conducted in this study. After performing the fifteen interviews, I felt as if I had reached saturation, or data adequacy filled with thorough, comprehensive results where patterns and themes begin to make sense (Morse, 1995). I felt that the data I had collected was rich and detailed, and that by the end of the fifteen interviews, I “knew it all,” for this study (Morse, 1995, p. 2). The participants for this study were female fans and/or frequent viewers of the fitspiration YouTube content of bikini competitors. The participants’ ages ranged from 19-35 with an average age of 23. The participants were from nine different U.S. states, and two lived in Canada. Fourteen of the participants identified as white, while one identified as Italian and Persian. Thirteen of the participants had competed in at least one bikini competition, and six of the participants had produced video content on YouTube. Participant descriptions and interview lengths are described in Table 1. The participant names used in this study are pseudonyms.

*Table 1. Participant descriptions*

<u>Participant pseudonym</u>	<u>Length of Interview</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Ethnicity</u>	<u>Competed previously</u>	<u>Produced YouTube content</u>
Amanda	20:43	22	White	Yes	Yes
Taylor	17:20	26	White	Yes	Yes
Megan	29:52	19	White	Yes	No
Annie	18:55	20	White	Yes	No
Kendall	27:04	32	White	Yes	No
Kelsey	35:03	23	White	Yes	Yes
Katie	21:41	23	White	No	No
Rebecca	28:27	21	White	No	No
Andrea	19:00	25	White	Yes	No
Arianna	24:12	23	Persian & Italian	Yes	Yes
Alice	23:42	19	White	Yes	No
Brittany	26:52	20	White	Yes	Yes
Angie	17:32	28	White	Yes	No
Alex	22:30	24	White	Yes	Yes
Gina	25:12	21	White	Yes	No

**Procedure**

When recruiting women for this study, the only criteria for participation was that the women had to be over 18, and had to watch the YouTube videos of bikini competitors at least 2-3 times per week. The majority of the participants were recruited in person or through direct e-

mail, as I had acquaintances of women in the fitness community, and also e-mailed women who were popular producers of fitspiration YouTube videos. Snowball sampling was also used in this study, or gathering a study sample through referrals made among people who know of others who possess characteristics that are of research interest (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Before the interview came to a close, participants were asked if they knew anyone who may be willing to participate in the study. This method was beneficial, as six participants were recruited through this snowball method. I also posted on bikini competition prep and fitness-themed boards and forums on Reddit titled “Bikini Competitoin: Need Advice” and “Female Bodybuilders/Bikini Competitors” asking for participants to be interviewed about fitness-related social media. Only one participant was recruited through this means. The post requesting participants for the interview for this study is in Appendix A.

After the participant contacted me through e-mail agreeing to participate in the study, the participant and I found a time for a phone call when the participant had one hour free to talk. Then before the interview began, I read through the participant consent form and informed the participant that the interview would be recorded, although the information disclosed in the interview would remain private. If the participant agreed and gave their consent, the interview continued. The participant consent form is shown in Appendix B.

The phone calls were either recorded through an application titled “TapeACall” on my cell phone, or on an audio recorder when another application titled “WhatsApp” had to be used to call the participants in Canada without charges. A total of 6 hours and 32 minutes were spent interviewing participants with the average interview being 24 minutes long. There were 57 pages of single-spaced transcriptions, and the average interview transcript was 3 1/2 pages. Participants were not given any compensation for their participation in this study.

During the interviews, participants were asked about their relationships to the bikini competitors they watch on YouTube, and what draws them to particular channels. Additionally, participants were asked whether or not they identify with and see similarities between themselves and the bikini competitors they watch. This was done to determine if social identification is occurring in this social media genre, and to better understand how it arises. Then, participants were asked about their relationship with different bikini competitors on YouTube, and how engaging with the YouTube content of bikini competitors affects their lifestyle, if at all. This was done to discover whether or not parasocial relationships are present in this area, and to learn more about the nature of these parasocial relationships. Participants were then asked about stories told by bikini competitors on YouTube, if the participant was drawn to these storylines, and how so. This was done to better understand the appeal of narrative in this context, and why viewers are attracted to narratives on YouTube, if at all. Finally, participants were asked what the term “fitspiration” means to them, and if there were things about fitspiration YouTube content that should change. This was done to get a general idea of how viewers perceive the fitspiration YouTube community and to better understand the genre as a whole, at least from an audience perspective. See Appendix C for the interview questions for this study.

## **Analysis**

After the interviews were transcribed, I used open codes to classify participants' statements (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I aimed to separate participants' answers and descriptions to match theoretical concepts, with the goal of grouping participants' responses into theoretical categories based on common characteristics and meanings (Sonenshein, DeCelles, & Dutton, 2014; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufman, 2006). Yet I always allowed new phenomena to emerge from my data, remaining open to any potential new meanings and interpretations (Strauss &

Corbin, 1998). Hence if participant responses consistently did not align with a theoretical category, a new category was created and analyzed. I moved back and forth between my interview data and the three theories of this analysis to develop a set of constructs grounded in my data, using the existing theoretical frameworks this project is grounded in to elaborate on phenomena that I discovered (Burnard, 1991) while remaining open to unexpected phenomena. The names and labels of each category depended on my interpretations of the data, although I strived to label a particular category based on the context in which it was used (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For example, if a participant stated that they relate to or identify with the goals of their favorite bikini competitor, this statement will likely be sorted into the “goal identification” category. After labeling was finished, I delved into a microanalysis, discerning a wide range of potential meanings within my data. This included creating memos, that is recording my interpretations and/or questions of particular statements in the collected data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I had multiple conversations with my advisor, helping me to make sense of the data I collected and derived general themes from my data, making sure to adhere to the words and perspectives of my participants (Aronson, 1995).

After reading through the transcriptions of my data many times, a total of 32 open codes were created — 30 codes that related to the research questions of this project, and two codes emerged inductively. Concerning the codes pertaining to the research questions, fifteen codes in the identification category, eight in the parasocial category, and seven in the narrative category. For example, within the fifteen identification codes, when a participant said something along the lines of, "I relate to my favorite bikini competitor because we have similar body types," this example would be sorted into the "similar appearance" category. Moreover, when a participant stated, "I identify with her clothes; we have a similar sense of style," this statement would be

sorted into the "similar style" category. Then, the original open codes were unpacked and were narrowed into five axial codes. In this case, both of these quotations would be sorted into the "similar style/appearance" axial code because they both revolve around identifying with how a bikini competitor looks.

Concerning the eight parasocial open codes, if a participant stated, "I often choose my meals based on what my favorite YouTuber is eating," this quote would be coded into the "changing lifestyle" category. Additionally, if a participant said, "I now judge the people around me as lazy because I watch so many fit people on YouTube," this would be coded into the "changed expectations of others" category. Then when the eight parasocial codes were unpacked and narrowed to three axial codes, both of these quotations were sorted into the "influenced lifestyle/mindset" theme.

Furthermore, regarding the seven original narrative codes, if a participant stated, "I love when bikini competitors talk about their struggles, especially when I've gone through the same thing. It makes me feel like I'm not alone," this would be sorted into the "opportunity to identify with struggles/stress" category. Additionally, if a participant said, "When she won a competition and started crying, I got really emotional too. I connected with her and empathized with her emotions," this quotation was also sorted into the "opportunity to identify with emotions," category. Then, when the seven original open codes were unpacked, they were narrowed to three axial codes, and in this case, both of these quotations were sorted into the "identification" category.

Finally, two separate codes were created to account for the themes that arose inductively. One of those codes revolved around the lack of diversity in the online fitspiration community (titled "lack of diversity"). A quotation would be sorted into this category when a participant said

something such as, "Fitspiration on YouTube is a bunch of white, pretty girls who are cisgendered and straight. There aren't any people of color—they don't have a voice." Lastly, the final code revolved around the potential damage that fitspiration YouTube content can cause on consumers ("potential damage"). A quotation would be coded into this category if the participant stated, "I worry about little girls who could compare their bodies to bikini competitors with six packs. That's not real life."

### **Role of the Researcher**

Before delving into the results of this study, I want to highlight that it is possible that the role of the researcher elicited subconscious biases when collecting and analyzing the data. I have been negatively affected by fitness-related social media content, and this could have impacted the overall perspective of this project. To prevent any prejudices from influencing the results of this project, I engaged in reflexivity to legitimize, validate, and question research practices and representations. I kept a journal, and would write detailed notes after each interview concerning my observations in order to demonstrate how my interpretations were reached, recognizing the importance of being reflexive about how I interpreted my data (Pillow, 2003). Although, because I am involved in the fitness community and have had many similar experiences to those described by the participants in this study, I was able to relate to many of the participants, and this seemed to make them more comfortable during the interview, which seemed to produce more fruitful results.

In the chapter that follows, I address the results of this study and the four research questions of this project. I then address the two separate codes and themes that did not apply to the research questions, providing participant quotations for each code and theme.

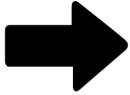
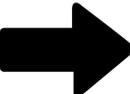
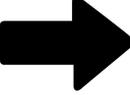
## 4. RESULTS

The data collected through the individual interviews resulted in an interesting data set that not only allows me to confidently draw conclusions about the fitspiration community, but also highlights areas worthy of further investigation of bikini competitors on YouTube and the women who choose to engage with their content. The purpose of this study was to examine the appeal of YouTube fitspiration content, exploring why women choose to participate in this growing online phenomenon. The following chapter provides an overview of the research results. I address each research question of this project, presenting relevant findings and excerpts from the interview data to support my findings. As mentioned previously, all names provided in these examples and excerpts are pseudonyms.

### **Social Identification**

The first research question of this project asked how do female viewers of fitspiration content on YouTube identify with bikini competitors in the videos that they watch, and how do viewers describe these social identifications? This question aimed to discover if identification was a factor attracting women to the YouTube content of bikini competitors. Below is a table displaying the codes that were created to signify social identification taking place between YouTube viewers and the bikini competitors they watch. The original open codes on the left represent all of the ways participants identified with bikini competitors on YouTube. The narrowed axial codes on the right combine original codes for a more concise description of sources of identification.

Table 2. Social identification codes

Open codes		Axial codes
An authentic personality – someone “normal”		Perceived realism
More attainable “realistic” body types		
Realistic filming – no fancy camera shots		
Balances an “everyday” life		
Style		Similar style and/or appearance
Appearance		
Struggles/challenges		Similar struggles, issues, or challenges
Flaws/body issues		
Beliefs regarding steroid use		Similar values, beliefs, and ethics regarding fitness
Values regarding definition of health		
Choices/ethics		
Fitness goals		Similar goals and motivations to be fit
Interests in fitness & dieting		
Desires to be fit and healthy		
Discipline & work ethic		

Based on the interviews conducted, social identification appears to be present, and was the most commonly coded category throughout all of the interviews. Based on the data collected in this study, social identification is a prominent reason why consumers choose to engage with fitness YouTube content made by bikini competitors. Many participants contended that identification and similarity were essential factors when deciding who to watch on YouTube. For example, when asked if she identifies with her favorite bikini competitor on YouTube, Amanda stated,

Yes, absolutely. I guess that's just human nature - you want to align yourself with people who have the same beliefs and values as yourself. The people who I like are the ones who I relate to, and I've found that the people I once thought I admired, I don't care to keep up with their journeys anymore because I don't have the same work ethic as them or the same belief system as them anymore, and I gravitate towards those who I am more similar to.

Additionally, Taylor said,

I do identify with her. I would say we have similar mindsets. We've created some type of social media internet friendship throughout the years and I think it's because we have similar mentalities wanting to learn more trying to be better, and we have similar ideas about how we live our lives. That makes it easy for me to want to watch her videos and connect with her.

Comments similar to Amanda's and Taylor's were common, asserting that identification and similarity encouraged them to watch particular bikini competitors. Yet the ways in which participants related to bikini competitors on YouTube varied. In fact, fifteen categories were created representing the different ways consumers identified with bikini competitors on YouTube. After unpacking these identification categories and studying them more in-depth, they were grouped into five categories: (a) perceived realism, (b) similar style/appearance, (c) similar struggles and challenges, (d) similar values, and (e) similar goals and motivations.

**Perceived realism.** The most common source of identification occurred when participants expressed that they wanted to engage with YouTubers who seemed “real,” honest, transparent, authentic, and were similar to their face-to-face friends in their everyday lives. Participants actively chose to watch people who had these qualities over those who appeared to be more “fake” and inauthentic. For example, Kendall said,

I think one of the problems I see with fitness YouTube and with fitness-related social media is that everything feels curated now. It feels like I’m walking through a museum of perfect fitness stuff and things and none of it feels real. I think unfortunately a lot of what we see on YouTube promotes privilege and idolization, even though it can be a tool to show the vulnerable and authentic side of someone. I think it has strayed from that... I mean people are hiring their own media personnel to film for them, which I find incredibly distancing. I can’t relate to that. I can’t relate to someone following you around with a camera all day.

Here, Kendall illustrated both what can potentially distance a YouTube producer from their audience, and also expressed the fervent desire to watch people on YouTube who seem to be relatable, authentic, and real. Additionally, when asked what or who she would like to see more of on YouTube, Alice stated, “I just want to watch a normal human being reaching out to people. No fluff, just an honest person sharing their journey. I can relate to that.” Moreover, Gina said, “I tend to watch people who I feel I would be friends with in my everyday life. Real people who I could just hang out with.” In these statements, Alice and Gina express that on YouTube, they gravitate toward people whom they perceive to be normal and “real,” and by “fluff” Alice means a perceived insincerity when watching many bikini competitors. Alice and Gina want to watch people who they can relate to—someone “normal” like themselves.

**Similar style/appearance.** Furthermore, participants also stated that they often gravitated toward bikini competitors who were similar to themselves in appearance, either based on their skin color, age, body shape, or choice in clothing. For example, Megan stated,

I tend to watch people who look like me, because I can better gauge how their lifestyle choices will work for me. Also, when my favorite bikini competitor posts her outfits, I'll look at shopping there, because when you're watching somebody that you can relate to and who you look like, and they're promoting things that they like, you feel like you would also like that due to common interest. You also have a good idea of what it would look like on you.

Additionally, Kelsey stated, "I like to watch people who seem to have the same body type as me. I feel like I can then apply stuff that they're doing to my life and I feel like it is more likely to work for me." In these statements, Megan and Kelsey expressed how they gravitate toward bikini competitors who are similar to them in appearance. This could be due to a bias against those who do not look like them, although this is difficult to conclude. Megan and Kelsey could be watching people who look similar to them in order to feel as if they are accurately applying video content to their lives, not necessarily due to a bias based on appearance. Regardless, this warrants further conversation and will be examined in the discussion section.

**Similar struggles/challenges.** In addition, many participants also expressed a desire to watch and connect with bikini competitors who had gone through or were going through similar struggles as themselves, such as dieting, weight-loss plateaus, or various health issues. For instance, when asked what she likes to see on YouTube, Annie stated,

I like when people are totally honest about their journeys and the struggles they go through and show me every step of the way. I've seen some people make videos and they're just so happy the entire time and like they never have a hard day and maybe they don't but then they're one in a million. It's okay to be transparent and honest; it shows me that I'm not alone.

Here, Annie expressed how she appreciates and is attracted to bikini competitors who openly talk about their struggles and challenges, and she finds it much easier to relate to them when they do this. She feels connected to bikini competitors more when they expose their honest struggles to

her. Additionally, when asked what stories and/or journeys she prefers to follow on YouTube, Rebecca stated,

I like watching weight loss stories, especially when I see how difficult they are. Sometimes I become frustrated when I'm not seeing results, but when I see some else's weight loss progress, I connect their experiences to my own journey. Their progress through their struggles is a reminder that it takes time.

Rebecca described that she is attracted to stories that include weight loss challenges, because she is then better able to connect the stories to her own life and to her own struggles.

**Similar beliefs/values.** Moreover, participants gravitated toward competitors who had similar beliefs and values as themselves, regarding particular approaches to health, exercise, dieting, steroid use, or the effects of bikini competitions on competitors. When asked about why she identifies with particular bikini competitors, Kendall asserted,

I watch people who are on the same page as me when it comes to achieving health and a fit body, and I don't watch people when I disagree with their values. For example, I used to watch this girl named Amanda, but I found it really hard to relate to her because she was on super low calories and she was starving. I could not connect because I would not have done what she did, and I don't believe that was what health is.

Also, Angie said, "Even though I love the body of one really popular YouTuber, I just found out that she takes steroids, and I just don't believe in that. I can't follow someone if we believe in such different things." These quotes show us that many YouTube viewers are aware and pay attention to beliefs and values being communicated by bikini competitors on YouTube, and gravitate toward those who they align with best.

**Similar goals.** Finally, participants stated that they related to bikini competitors' goals regarding fitness, and if they had a similar goal as a competitor such as weight loss, muscle gain, or more balance in their everyday lives, they were much more likely to watch that competitor on

YouTube. For example, when asked what types of videos she likes to engage with most, Kelsey replied,

The videos I like to watch depend on my own goals. For example, I'm bulking right now (a period where competitors strive to gain muscle mass before they lose fat for their next competition), so I'm watching more videos on how to gain weight and muscle, but when I was prepping and was losing weight, I just wanted to watch other prepping videos of people losing weight and preparing for competitions as well.

In addition, Brittany stated,

I only really watch bikini competitors who are striving for the same thing as me. For example, when I was competing, I only wanted to watch other women who were preparing for a competition too. Then once I stopped competing, I stopped watching videos about competing.

In these instances, Kelsey and Brittany chose to watch videos that aligned with their fitness goals so that they could apply the concepts within them to her own lives, and also so that they could better relate to the competitors within the videos.

Indeed, based on the data in this project, social identification seems to be a powerful factor that draws women to the videos of bikini competitors on YouTube. These findings provide valuable insights, helping us to better understand media consumers and their wants. Next, I will discuss the results found revolving around potential parasocial interactions with bikini competitors, and signs that parasocial interactions are taking place in this context.

### **Parasocial interaction**

The second research question of this project asked how do female viewers of fitspiration content on YouTube describe the relationships between themselves and bikini competitors in the videos that they watch? This question aimed to discover if parasocial interaction is a factor attracting women to the YouTube content of bikini competitors. Below is a table displaying the codes that were created to signify parasocial interaction taking place between YouTube viewers

and the bikini competitors they watch. The original open codes on the left represent all of the signs of a parasocial connection. The narrowed axial codes on the right combine original codes for a more concise description of signs of parasocial interactions found in this study.

*Table 3. Parasocial codes*

Open codes		Axial codes
Changing lifestyle	➔	Influenced lifestyle/mindset
Becoming more involved with fitness		
Altered expectations of others		
Looking up to/admiring the YouTuber	➔	Deep emotional connection & response
Feeling encouraged & motivated by the YouTuber		
Empathizing with emotions		
Feeling like they know the YouTuber face-to-face		
Intentional & specific searching of YouTuber	➔	Intentional & active connection

Before delving into the results for parasocial interactions found in my interviews, it is essential to establish the difference between coding for social identification and parasocial interaction in order to clarify how I coded my data. Parasocial interaction is partially suggested by the degree to which a person relates to media personalities and their personal lives (Papa et al., 2000), yet there is a clear distinction between PSI and social identification. While identification is often present within parasocial relationships, a person moves from merely

identifying with a YouTube personality to having a parasocial relationship when they respond to or are clearly influenced by a media figure as if she/he was a personal acquaintance (Cohen, 1999). These responses could include behavioral responses (e.g., actively choosing to engage with a specific type of content) and cognitive responses (e.g., making psychological inferences about a figure's behavior) (Scannell, 1996). Therefore, while identification occurs when a consumer senses similarity between a media producers and themselves, a parasocial interaction occurs when that consumer is influenced by the media producer and changes his/her behavior and/or cognitions due to this parasocial interaction (Giles, 2002).

That being said, the second research question of this project probed how female viewers of fitspiration content on YouTube describe their relationships with bikini competitors in the videos they watch. This question aimed to examine whether or not parasocial interactions may be a contributing factor to the growth of bikini competitors on YouTube, and if so, how parasocial relationships influence consumers of fitspiration YouTube content. While this theme was less common than social identification, there is evidence that parasocial interactions are a factor attracting female viewers to the YouTube content of bikini competitors. There were eight initial codes created showing signs of parasocial interaction between YouTube viewers and YouTube producers, and they were narrowed to three overarching themes. The three themes were (a) YouTube viewers having changed their behaviors and/or mindsets due to their engagement with bikini competitors on YouTube, (b) viewers having a deep emotional connection and response to bikini competitors on YouTube, and (c) viewers actively and intentionally seeking specific bikini competitors on YouTube.

**Influenced behaviors/mindset.** First and foremost, parasocial relationships between YouTube viewers and bikini competitors appear to be evident because many participants stated

that their lives have been drastically altered because of the advice given by various bikini competitors on YouTube. For example, when asked how the YouTube videos of bikini competitors have impacted her life, if at all, Megan responded,

I have taken a lot of exercise and training tips, especially from those who are certified and accredited. Also, countless training and coaching techniques. I've gotten some workout clothing recommendations, healthcare products, makeup, nutrition tips, and recipes. I've taken many recommendations over the years. Now that I think about it, I think wow, these women have changed my life quite a bit.

Similarly, Katie shared,

If one of my favorite bikini competitors shares a meal on Instagram or YouTube, I will go get the same thing and that's what I'm going to have for my next meal. It's like sometimes, their life is a guide for mine.

These two participants expressed how bikini competitors, especially competitors whom they like, respect, and admire, have the power to influence their lifestyles in a variety of ways, from the food they eat to the clothes they purchase. This influence and impact is a sign of a parasocial connection, and a deep one-way relationship between media consumer and media producer. In addition, the consumerist nature within these responses is an important theme to take note of. Based on the results in this study, bikini competitors appear to have a strong influence on what their YouTube viewers purchase, and could affect how much they consume as well. Especially considering the powerful influence that these parasocial connections appear to be having on viewers, this topic warrants further discussion and research, and will be explored in the discussion section.

Next, on a more cognitive level, a participant displayed signs of a parasocial connection because she expressed that frequently engaging with bikini competitors on Youtube altered the ways in which she thought about and judged other people. And while only one participant

disclosed her deep cognitions in this way, it is strong evidence of a parasocial relationship. When she was asked about how watching bikini competitors on YouTube has affected her life, if at all, Rebecca disclosed,

One thing I definitely noticed was because I was constantly being stimulated by these lean, strong, tan women, when I would watch TV shows or when I would be talking with my coworkers, I would constantly be noticing how little muscle they had because I was used to seeing more muscle and “tighter” bodies. Then, noticing everyone eating food that is considered “junk food” really bothered me because I was surrounded by clean eating and calorie counting and I would label my friends as slobs for what they ate and how they acted.

Here, Rebecca expressed how watching and engaging with bikini competitors on YouTube impacted her cognitions and the ways she viewed other people. And while she was the only participant to disclose such a dramatic shift in her daily thinking, it was a powerful disclosure. Because Rebecca was so immersed in fitspiration social media content and was looking at fit women so often, she began to think about less fit people differently, often in negative ways. This is a clear sign of a parasocial connection, and also lends itself to how bikini competitors on YouTube can affect their viewers.

**Emotional impact/response.** In addition to signs of bikini competitors impacting the lifestyle choices and cognitions of their viewers, another sign of a parasocial connection can be found in the emotional impact that bikini competitors have on their audience. While this effect was less common, a few of the participants expressed that their favorite bikini competitors elicited emotional responses from them. For example, when describing her favorite bikini competitor, Kelsey expressed,

I loved watching her bikini prep journey. She finally won a big competition and I cried. She’s the only YouTuber who’s been able to elicit an emotional response from me. I like watching a lot of people’s journeys, but she’s the only one I really feel genuinely connected to and who can have that effect on me.

Additionally, Alice stated, “When bikini competitors get emotional on camera, I feel like I know them and really connect with their emotions. I really sympathize and sometimes I feel what they feel.” Perspectives such as these show signs of emotional connections between YouTube viewers and YouTube producers, and can be signs of parasocial interactions occurring. Kelsey and Alice appear to be so emotionally attached to their favorite bikini competitors to the point where this deep emotional bond can produce sympathetic emotional responses out of them, and this can be a sign of a parasocial connection (Cohen, 1999).

**Intentional and specific seeking.** The third sign of parasocial interactions found in my interviews was participants intentionally seeking specific bikini competitors on YouTube to watch because they felt an exceptional connection to them. When users actively seek out specific media personalities to engage with, this can be a sign of a parasocial relationship because it can be a sign of an established, personal relationship (Scannell, 1996). For example, when asked about what types of videos she likes to watch most, Gina stated,

There are a select few people whose videos I search for and watch whenever I watch YouTube. They have credentials, experience, knowledge, and I like them as a person. I feel like the people I follow have it down and I’ve definitely improved my life since following them.

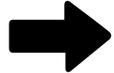
In addition, Taylor said, “I go by the people when I watch YouTube videos, so I’ll search for people I like or relate to and I stick to their videos. I don’t like just watching random people I’m not familiar with.” In these two statements, Gina and Taylor expressed that they seek out specific bikini competitors on YouTube, and *who* they watch on YouTube matters as much to them as *what* they watch, if not more. This active seeking is another sign that parasocial interactions are occurring between viewers and producers on YouTube.

Based on the findings in this project, there are several signs that parasocial interactions are taking place in this context, and this is another powerful factor that draws women to the videos of bikini competitors on YouTube. These findings can teach us both about what creates parasocial relationships, but also about the impact that parasocial relationships can have on consumers. In the following section, I will explore and discuss participant feedback on how narratives may be attracting women to the YouTube content of bikini competitors.

### **Narrative**

The third and fourth research questions of this project asked what are the compelling narratives described by female viewers of fitspiration content on YouTube and what makes the narratives of bikini competitors on YouTube compelling? These questions aimed to better understand the influence of narratives disclosed by bikini competitors on YouTube. Below is a table displaying the codes that were created to signify the appeal of narratives on YouTube. The original open codes on the left represent all of the reasons why participants are attracted to the narratives of bikini competitors on YouTube. The narrowed axial codes on the right combine original codes for a more concise description of the appeal of narrative.

Table 4. Narrative codes

Open codes		Axial codes
Opportunities to identify with struggles/stress		Identification
Opportunity to connect and identify with emotions		
Unexplained interest/curiosity		Curiosity/fascination
Interested in the suspense of how a competitor will perform		
To understand the rest of the story		
Inspired by story		Inspiration
Motivated by seeing others overcome adversity		

As is shown above, seven original codes were created revolving around the appeal of narratives, and those codes were then narrowed down to three categories that could suggest why viewers are attracted to the narratives of bikini competitors on YouTube. The first code was identification, as narrative seemed to create more opportunities for YouTube viewers to relate to bikini competitors. The second was curiosity/fascination, as many participants disclosed that they were simply fascinated by the lives of many bikini competitors on YouTube, even though they did not feel as if they related to them at all. Finally, the third code was inspiration, as many participants thought that many stories disclosed by bikini competitors were inspirational in a variety of ways.

**Opportunity for identification.** The first and most prominent reason interview participants were compelled by narratives on YouTube was that narratives provided opportunities for participants to relate to and identify with bikini competitors. Many times, when

bikini competitors decide to tell stories on YouTube, these stories revolve around struggles, challenges, and life problems, and many participants found that these vulnerable disclosures made the bikini competitor seem more authentic and easy to relate to. For example, Andrea stated,

I love the videos where bikini competitors talk about all the struggles they've gone through or what they're currently going through. I think you see the most authentic side of someone in those types of videos. Those videos make them seem like more of a real person and it's easier to relate to them, especially if I'm going through something similar.

In this statement, Andrea described how stories, especially stories that involve personal struggles and issues, can create opportunities for listeners to identify, both with this issue itself or with the vulnerable emotions of the bikini competitor. Narrative can create the perception of a more authentic person, which can be endearing to YouTube viewers.

Moreover, participants felt similarly when watching stories within “vlogs” (video blogs), or videos that casually show the daily lives of bikini competitors. These stories that bikini competitors film and are being shown to the YouTube viewer as they happen, as opposed to a bikini competitor describing a story that took place previously. When reflecting on watching a vlog about a bikini competitor who binged and ate large amounts of food after a bikini competition, Rebecca stated,

Michelle made a vlog where her and her friends binged on a box of donuts after a competition, and I remember being enthralled by her experience. It was so interesting to me because she was so lean. I didn't think that her body would be affected by just one night, but it was, just like mine would be. I realized that we're really similar and I related to how her body acted when she binged. It made her seem normal.

The reflections above indicate that stories and narratives act as tools for identification; they provide opportunities for viewers to relate to bikini competitors on YouTube. Stories provide

more opportunities to expose flaws and show a more authentic, less rehearsed side of oneself, which appeared to be endearing to consumers, who identified with this perceived authenticity.

**Curiosity/fascination.** Another reason why the narratives of bikini competitors may be compelling to viewers may be because viewers are puzzlingly and unexplainably interested in the stories and lives of the bikini competitors. Many participants expressed that they were attracted to the narratives and stories of various bikini competitors simply because the stories were inexplicably interesting to them. Participants admitted that while they could not explain their fascination with particular bikini competitors on YouTube, they found themselves intrigued by the lives and stories of YouTubers, even if they did not relate to them. For example, Amanda disclosed,

I really like Buff Bunny when she talks about her history or her break-up stories. She also had a story about a stalker and she gets personal about it. And it's not that I can necessarily relate with everything that she's saying, but I find that I am interested in her life for some reason.

Additionally, Arianna stated,

Yeah the stories bikini competitors tell kind of just suck you in sometimes; it's kind of like a guilty pleasure. I don't want to care, but I'm like, "What are these people doing?" It's so strange. Even though their life is nothing like mine, I care and I'm curious.

Statements such as these are testaments to the idea that people are simply attracted to narratives and stories (Fisher, 1999). Even though, in these two quotations, identification does not seem to be present, the participants are inexplicably enthralled by stories about other people, even if these stories cannot be applied to their own lives. While this incomprehensible interest in others' lives is interesting and consistent with the concepts within narrative theory and the narrative paradigm, it may not adequately explain why narrative is compelling. One possible explanation is voyeuristic tendencies, which is explored further in the discussion section.

**Inspiration.** Finally, the third reason that the narratives disclosed by bikini competitors on YouTube seem to compel those who watch them is that many of the stories revealed are inspirational to viewers. Based on the data collected, this inspiration seemed to attract many participants to the YouTube content of bikini competitors because viewers felt that these stories benefitted them and provided value to their lives. When viewers listened to stories that they thought were inspirational, they felt encouraged when confronting problems and challenges in their own lives, even if they did not identify with the story that the bikini competitor was disclosing. For example, when asked why she likes listening to the stories of her favorite bikini competitor, Megan stated,

I love listening to her stories because she has a really inspiring story with health and family issues. Even though I haven't gone through what she's gone through, I admire her so much, and when I watch her talk about her life, I feel encouraged to kick butt in mine. So I followed her for those reasons.

In addition, Kendall said, "I just feel empowered when someone tells me about how they overcame a problem, even though it was so difficult. It makes me want to get my ass in the gym and conquer my own problems." Here, both participants describe how watching and/or listening to stories about overcoming adversity can inspire and embolden them overcome problems in their own lives. These statements are testaments to the positive impact that fitspiration social media content can have on consumers, and also demonstrate the powerful effects of narrative.

Based on the findings in this project, narrative is another powerful component that draws women to the videos of bikini competitors on YouTube. These findings help us to better understand the appeal of narratives and why audiences may be drawn to them. Next, I explore two unexpected themes that appeared in my interviews that did not necessarily relate to the research questions of this thesis. These two themes are the lack of diversity within the fitspiration

genre, and how the YouTube videos of bikini competitors can impact viewers and their perceptions of their bodies.

### **Lack of Diversity**

The first important theme that arose inductively from my interviews was the perceived lack of diversity and the high level of perceived privilege in the world of bikini competitions and bikini competitors on YouTube, with the lack of diversity feeding and encouraging the privilege of one particular demographic. This was initially a personal observation, as 14 out of the 15 of the participants in this study identified as white, and the vast majority of bikini competitors on YouTube being white, heterosexual, cisgender, young, attractive, and seemingly wealthy women. Yet, this lack of diversity was an unexpected and reoccurring topic brought up in many interviews. Many participants commented on the lack of diversity that they see when they watch bikini competitors on YouTube, and emphasized that this lack of diversity can be problematic because it only focuses on the voice and perspective of one type of woman. For example, when asked how bikini competitors on YouTube and fitspiration content in general can/should change to improve, Angie stated,

I think there is a huge lack of any kind of diversity in the fitness industry and on fitness social media. It's a bunch of white, pretty girls who are cisgendered and straight. There aren't any people of color - they don't have a voice. You don't see any trans people; you don't see people who aren't privileged. You only see people who have the time and the money to do these kinds of things and it doesn't leave room for people who don't. I would like to see someone who can legitimately connect with any of those people, but it has to be one of those people. So I think fitness people on YouTube are just this closed off group, like this little clique where people who are different just don't have a place. They obviously exist in this world and they should have the same amount of pull and voice and importance as everyone else does.

Additionally, when asked what the term fitspiration means to her, Rebecca stated,

I think the typical fitspo (a man or woman who produces social media content in the fitspiration genre in attempt to encourage others to be more fit) is the white bikini competitor who is jacked, beautiful, and perfect, and while I think that's productive when

someone is selling something, psychologically, it's super harmful. I can't help but ask myself, how are these perfect bodies affecting people who just don't look like them?

The quotes above highlight many critical issues that not only are present on fitness-related social media sites, but are present throughout many media genres (Dworak, Lovett, & Baumgartner, 2014). And building off of this lack of diversity in the fitspiration YouTube community, a few of the participants commented on the high level of privilege afforded to many white, fit, heterosexual bikini competitors on YouTube, which they felt encourages this lack of diversity.

When asked about fitspiration, Alex responded,

I hate the term fitspiration because consumers put YouTubers and social media celebrities on pedestals for the simple fact that they have abs, they look "perfect," and they're willing to count their calories. You can look up to someone who is really great at fitness, but really sucks at life. Yet we look up to people because they look like the "ideal" person who we should all try to look like.

In addition, Annie said, "We celebrate this one type of body, and I ask myself, what about women with wider hips or bigger thighs? Do these videos impact people who don't look like this and will never look like this?" These statements emphasize how the YouTube videos of bikini competitors can tend to celebrate and idealize one type of woman, and this can impact viewers in a variety of ways. The ways in which viewers could be affected by this lack of diversity, as well what future research can do about this issue, will be further explored in the discussion section.

Next, I will present and describe participants' feedback concerning the potential impact that bikini competitors on YouTube can have on consumers.

### **Potential Effect of Bikini Competitors on YouTube**

Finally, a critical theme in my findings revolved around the potential impact that bikini competitors on YouTube can have on viewers. Although, before delving into the potential impacts, it is essential to acknowledge that it is difficult to determine if and how fitspiration

content affects consumers. In fact, a few of the participants recognized this difficulty, because there are many variables that influence and affect how women feel about their bodies.

Nonetheless, data collected in the interviews offers valuable insights about the potential effects that bikini competitions and fitspiration YouTube content can have on women.

Beginning with quotations regarding bikini competitions themselves, 13 out of the 15 participants had competed in a bikini competition before. And while a few of the participants expressed that they enjoyed competing thus far, many participants expressed the detrimental impact that bikini competitions can have on a woman's body image. Alice described her first competition experience, stating,

After my show, I really felt like I was at an all-time low. Even though I placed well, there was no disclaimer at the bottom of the sign-up sheet that said you'll never be happy with your body after you compete. You're standing in front of hundreds of people and they're looking at everything that's right and wrong about you and comparing you to other girls and that was a really low point for me. Even though I was in the best shape of my life, I felt really bad because I looked at other girls and I knew that some of them were better than me.

This experience was echoed by Arianna, disclosing,

I competed two years ago and during my prep I was happy with myself and confident, then I rebounded really hard post-show, and all that happiness was taken away. I hated myself and I was super depressed for around a year, hating my body. Nothing was good enough. I was binging all the time. I've had to stop comparing myself to others on social media, and that has taken a long time.

In these two statements, Alice and Arianna described how competing in bikini competitions caused them to compare their bodies to other women, and this caused them believe that they were physically inadequate. Comments such as these suggest that bikini competitions can potentially have negative effects on women and their self-esteem, and that negative effect could have an escalated impact due to the growth of the bikini competition on YouTube. Based on the feedback collected in my interviews, bikini competitions *can* be harmful, although body image

can be affected by many variables, therefore it would be incorrect to assume that bikini competitions *are* harmful.

It would appear that an easy solution to body image issues caused by bikini competitions would be to not compete in them and to not associate with social media content that involves them. Yet, the prevalence of bikini competitions is increasing, largely due to the growth of bikini competitors on social media, celebrating and glamorizing this process, and this can have damaging effects. This sentiment is discussed by Kelsey as she reflected on her competing experience, stating,

People think that bikini competitions are the next step of a fitness journey and that is totally wrong. I was one of those girls who thought that. I started working out and then I had to do a show. I was taught that competing is the next step, and I think that's awful. I think YouTube has glorified bikini competitions and has taught people that you have to compete if you're into fitness, and I wish that didn't exist. In a way competitions are trendy; they have become the next thing to do and something you have to do. And worst of all is that people associate them with health and that's not health.

In this statement, Kelsey asserts that based on her experience, there is a pressure to compete in bikini competitions. She expresses that this pressure can be damaging, as it can teach people that bikini competitions represent health, when in many cases, they do not. Insights such as those above highlight the potentially harmful effects of competing in bikini competitions and pressure that women can feel when engaging with the YouTube content of bikini competitors.

The potentially misconstrued idea of health which Kelsey asserts, lends itself to another important theme that was touched on when discussing identification with bikini competitors—the lack of authenticity regarding how bikini competitors communicate with their audiences on YouTube, and how this lack of authenticity can affect YouTube viewers. I previously discussed the perceived “realness” of bikini competitors on YouTube, and while many participants stated that they appreciate when a bikini competitor seems authentic and real, an alarming number

expressed a severe lack of authenticity among people within the fitspiration community and people who produce fitspiration social media content. And participants not only expressed irritation due to this lack of authenticity, but emphasized that this issue can have negative effects on those who engage with this fitspiration. For example, when asked what needs to change in the world of fitspiration social media content and the YouTube videos made by bikini competitors, Andrea stated,

Too many girls are really superficial and fake. I think there's a level of transparency that needs to happen; the smoke and mirrors need to come down. Whether that's women who need to take off their makeup and admit how hard their busy lives are, that transparency needs to be seen more. There is a lot of tans, makeup, hair extensions within this social media world, and I think that takes away from what everyday life as a competitor is really like. This teaches people that this is reality, and if they think it is, they're in for a terrible surprise.

In this statement, Andrea emphasized how bikini competitors on various social media outlets distance themselves from their viewers by relentlessly pursuing a particular appearance, and many forget to relate to their audiences.

Many participants echoed Andrea's sentiments, insisting that this lack of authenticity in the fitspiration genre can be very damaging, especially for young women engaging with this type of content. For example, within many YouTube videos, bikini competitors will share everything that they eat in a day, including calorie amounts, in order to show consumers how to lose weight. These food amounts and calories are usually calculated in MyFitnessPal, a popular calorie-tracking phone application. Yet Kendall disclosed that she discovered a way to hack into the MyFitnessPal accounts of many famous bikini competitors on YouTube, and uncovered very problematic information. Kendall disclosed,

I actually found out how to access someone's Myfitnesspal diary, and was able to look at someone I know promoted that they were eating a lot of food. I was able to find their diary and look and the image that they're portraying on social media is very different

than how they actually live their life. They were promoting that they were eating around 1,500 calories, when they were only eating around 800. This person has so many young women following them wanting to look like them, and the young girls don't understand what's actually going on behind the scenes, and that is so problematic. I think most of the viewers of these YouTube videos are young women in high school and college because they don't have full time jobs and they have the time to watch these videos, and they are seeing this ideal picture of health. Yet they have no idea what is really going on concerning the fitspo model that they want to look like.

In this situation, Kendall discovered that a popular bikini competitor is telling her audience that she is consuming a moderately healthy amount of calories to lose weight, while she is actually consuming around 800 calories a day, which is a dangerously low calorie amount for the average woman (Wu et al., 2002). Insights such as this could be problematic because they can cause women to misconstrue weight loss and what it means to be healthy and fit. What is especially problematic, though, is that there are innumerable young, impressionable young female YouTube viewers who can be exceptionally negatively affected by these distorted depictions of health and fitness. Consumers of health and fitness-related social media content are dominantly young females aged 13-22 (Carrotte, 2015), and a few of the participants expressed a deep concern for the young women watching bikini competitors on YouTube, troubled by how fitspiration YouTube videos can negatively affect young girls.

Brittany, a popular bikini competitor on YouTube herself, expressed this concern, also disclosing that she has drifted away from producing YouTube videos because of the questionable practices and trends she has observed on YouTube. When asked how fitspiration content can/should change to be better, Brittany disclosed,

I think we need more of people focusing on actual health. I think in the YouTube world especially people focus solely on aesthetics and I'm going to eat all of these chemicals and very little calories. I always think about young girls that might be watching this who comment on my videos saying, 'I want to compete in a bikini competition and I'm twelve!' and I think, 'What?!' Young girls could take the ideas in these videos, and these ideas don't always equate to health. So we need more content discussing actual health

nutrition and listening to your body. More stuff devoted to helping people, instead of videos that just say, “Look at me here is my butt.”

Similar concerns for young women were voiced by Kendall. When discussing how she feels about her body, she stated,

It’s crazy because fitspiration and these YouTube videos made by these beautiful women affect me so much, and I’ve been working out for a long time and feel like I’m good at managing my body image. So I can’t imagine how a young girl would react to this content. Sometimes I watch these videos and I have these moments of comparison and I just feel like my body is nothing compared to these women, so I can’t imagine being a young girl watching this stuff.

Here, Brittany and Kendall described how beautiful, fit women flaunting their bodies on YouTube can be damaging, especially for young girls, largely due to body comparisons. These are important observations and insights that are worth being looked into, and I explore these observations further in the discussion section.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Based on the research findings in this project, all three of the theories proposed in the literature review seem to be factors drawing women toward the YouTube content of bikini competitors. While identification was the most notable and prominent finding, parasocial interaction and attraction to narrative seem to be present in the context of fitspiration YouTube content. This project provides valuable insights about fitspiration social media content, the women who choose to engage with it, and the relationships formed on this new media platform.

In this section, I will present and discuss poignant findings from the three theoretical frameworks of this analysis, and directions for this subject in the future. Additionally, I will discuss the two themes from my findings that do not apply to the research questions of this project, but are important topics to research further. These two themes caught my attention and demand conversation because they were often brought about by participants passionately advocating to change aspects of bikini competitions, fitspiration social media content, and members within the fitspiration community. These themes can act as a foundation for future research, which I argue would be valuable in this area.

### **Perceived Authenticity and Identification**

Based on the findings of this project, social identification appears to be a powerful force attracting women to the fitspiration YouTube content of bikini competitors. Yet, while the identification codes were narrowed to five categories, I want to highlight and discuss that the most common way in which participants related to bikini competitors on YouTube was through the perceived “realness” and authenticity of a bikini competitor. This overarching theme throughout the interviews can help us to better understand this fitspiration community, and lends

itself to helping us discern problems within it. Authenticity is commonly associated with presenting a genuine, critically reflective, and true self (Kreber et al., 2007), and studies examining authenticity on YouTube describe it as about being open and expressive of one's individuality (McCormack, 2011). Throughout the interviews, participants expressed that authenticity was vital when deciding who to watch on YouTube. If a participant did not perceive a bikini competitor to be "real" and thought that the bikini competitor was fake and inauthentic, the participant would stop engaging with that bikini competitor, and many participants expressed a keen desire to engage with authentic, transparent, more "normal" people similar to themselves. These insights not only call attention to the lack of transparency that social media often creates (Van Dijck, 2013), but to the needs to audience members when it comes to who they prefer to connect with on social media.

Yet, as many participants mentioned, it can be difficult to decipher what is real and authentic and what is not. Authenticity, in all contexts, is personally determined (Napoli et al., 2014), and scholars have largely concluded that "what one person experiences as completely authentic, another may view as completely inauthentic, and a third may be somewhere in between" (Gilmore and Pine, 2007, p. 92-3). Studies exploring how authenticity is determined on YouTube have largely gathered that it is the presentation of a truthful and honest self (Allen & Mendick, 2013), and scholars have argued that YouTube and vlogging offer young people a more authentic medium of media because it appears to be unscripted and informal (Tolson 2010). Yet, scholars have yet to determine how YouTube viewers decide what is truthful and honest and what is not (Morris & Anderson, 2015). Therefore, while many participants felt certain that they knew the difference between an authentic bikini competitor and an inauthentic bikini competitor, this difference remains ambiguous.

Hence, this theme of ambiguous conceptions of authenticity could benefit from more research exploring how viewers perceive an authentic media personality versus an inauthentic one, and how this can impact YouTube viewership. This reoccurring theme of identifying with authenticity and transparency should be explored more deeply in future research, especially considering how prevalent identification was in this study, how much it seemed to impact viewer engagement, and how much influence viewers have on the success of various YouTube channels (Rotman & Preece, 2010). More research on this subject can be useful in a variety of contexts, helping us to learn how to improve the relationship between media producer and consumer.

### **Consumerism and Parasocial Interaction**

Another theme that arose while analyzing both the identification between social media consumer and producer and the parasocial relationships that can develop between them is the presence of consumerism in the fitspiration community. Many participants stated that bikini competitors on YouTube strongly influence their purchasing decisions, and this was especially apparent when the participant expressed an emotion connection with a particular bikini competitor on YouTube. When consumers strongly identified with or felt connected to a bikini competitor on YouTube, they were much more likely to buy the supplements they were using, the clothes they were wearing, etc. And while taking shopping advice from a YouTuber is not inherently harmful, this theme could be feeding into a growing trend that could be problematic.

YouTube endorsement marketing and sponsorships, otherwise known as native advertising, is a form of marketing where advertisements are seamlessly incorporated into the video content, often by sponsoring popular YouTubers (Wu, 2016). In the past five years especially, companies have increasingly paid popular YouTubers to promote products because YouTube content can be far more effective than traditional marketing (Shah, 2015). This

combination of influential parasocial connections and native marketing can enhance consumerism, which can be unsustainable and/or socially irresponsible (Pecoraro & Uusitalo, 2014). Additionally, this growing trend can hinder consumer-producer relationships. YouTubers can compromise their honest opinions on products in hopes of maintaining financial relationships with advertisers and sponsors (Chapple & Cownie 2017), and this can negatively affect viewers' desires for authenticity as discussed above (Karlsson & Welander, 2015).

Considering that this project provides promising evidence that impactful parasocial relationships are developing on YouTube within the fitspiration genre, and that parasocial relationships can be highly influential to media consumers (Moyer-Guse & Nabi, 2010), more research should explore the impact of increased native marketing on consumers' purchasing habits when parasocial relationships are present. Specifically, research should focus on how the increase in native marketing affects viewers' perceptions of authenticity, how this impacts their viewing habits, and how parasocial relationships impact the native advertising process.

### **Voyeurism, Lurking, and Narrative**

Another important topic to discuss revolves around the inexplicable attraction to narrative that was evident throughout the interviews. While the data collected helps us to better understand why women are attracted to the narratives of bikini competitors and supports previous research that advocates for the attractive power of narrative (Fisher, 1999), participants' inexplicable curiosity and fascination of YouTubers and their personal lives left me (and oftentimes them) puzzled. Yet, I suspect there could be underlying concepts at work here that could help to explain this perplexing interest—voyeurism and lurking. Voyeurism is the wistful identification with some distant, unattainable idea of self. It is the desire to lean into another person's life, often in attempt to disengage from one's own identity and life (Boxer & Phillips, 1979). Voyeurism is

often considered a sexual practice of spying, although many people engage in voyeurism do not have sexual desires or intentions and are simply gratified by partaking in the lives of others (Rye & Meaney, 2007). Additionally, more research is examining the concept of lurking in social media contexts, otherwise known as subtly examining a person and/or group from afar (Cranefield et al., 2011). Researchers speculate that lurking is simply a developmental stage of membership in a community, as "lurkers" lurk in order to study and better understand a person or community before they decide to contribute to it (Muller, 2012). In the case of fitspiration YouTube videos, many people could be attracted to narratives because they are an easy way to gain information about an online community, and many people could be lurking as they decide whether to become members of this community.

Therefore, I am not asserting that viewers choose to watch the YouTube videos of bikini competitors to satisfy voyeuristic needs. Instead, I am suggesting that voyeurism and the act of lurking could be components attracting some viewers to the narratives within these YouTube videos. YouTube videos seem to welcome voyeurism and lurking, allowing viewers to peer into the personal lives of media producers. When bikini competitors disclose stories and narratives on YouTube, they welcome countless people into their personal lives, and this can satisfy the inclination to lurk and/or the voyeuristic desires of audience members. Scholars argue that the countless posts of pictures and videos online expose people to voyeuristic strangers constantly (Carrabine, 2014), and I assert that this exposure is spurring voyeuristic and lurking tendencies. Considering that narrative can help to construct psychological and cultural realities (Bruner, 1986; Murray, 2015), the constant open narrative disclosures through YouTube could be constructing a reality where voyeuristic and lurking tendencies are considered normal. I encourage future research to delve more deeply into this subject, focusing on fitness personalities

on YouTube, as it could produce fruitful and interesting research about why people are inexplicably intrigued by the narratives of social media fitness media personalities.

### **Lack of Diversity**

Shifting away from the four research questions of this thesis, it is clear from the interviews that there is a need to enhance the diversity in the fitspiration YouTube community, and it is crucial that diversity and privilege are addressed and discussed further. A lack of diversity in any arena can be a problem, especially because it can convince people that this lack of diversity is reality. Research shows that media's consistent depiction of a particular physical ideal can lead people to see this ideal as normative, expected, and central to attractiveness (Hyde, 2008), and adopting this reality can lead to decreased satisfaction with one's own appearance (Levine & Harrison, 2004). In other words, if this social media genre continues to lack diversity, and people accept this as an ideal, people who are not white, heterosexual, young, cisgender, or wealthy, are more likely to feel inadequate and unimportant (Levine & Murnen, 2009).

It is important that we ask ourselves, what are the repercussions of privileging and celebrating one demographic in the media? What happens to the women who are not put on a pedestal in these YouTube videos, and how can this affect the community-building abilities of YouTube (Sureka et. al, 2010)? Based on my interviews, this theme is being observed and evaluated by the users of this content, and I argue that critical communication theories could be applied to this context and could provide valuable insights. For example, critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) could be applied to this area to dissect how race affects power and influence in this social media genre. Also, queer theory (Halperin, 2003) could help to question and destabilize heteronormativity that seems to be taking place here. And while privilege can be an overwhelming topic and has been discussed in new media contexts (Portwood-Stacer &

Berridge, 2014; Shoat & Stam, 2014), more is needed in the world of fitness-related social media content.

In addition, future research could include the three theories to this thesis when examining diversity and privilege in the fitspiration genre, especially considering how prevalent each of the theories appear to be in this arena. For example, researchers could examine how diversity, or lack thereof, could affect identification, and how this can impact social media engagement. Similarly, it would be interesting to study how parasocial relationships are affected by diversity and privilege, and whether or not social media users take these factors into account when developing parasocial connections with media personalities. Finally, it could be very insightful to examine how diversity and privilege affect the poignancy of narratives, and if audiences consider diversity when listening to stories.

### **Potential Effect of Bikini Competitors on YouTube**

Many women in interviews strongly advocated that the YouTube videos of bikini competitors can be harmful to other women, and that changes should take place within the genre. This was an especially interesting topic for me to examine when analyzing my data, because I began to notice that many of the women felt dissonance when reflecting on their experiences watching bikini competitors on YouTube, both adoring and disliking this content. While many participants grew to admire their favorite bikini competitors and enjoyed consuming the content of women who had similar interests as themselves, they seemed to be haunted by negative patterns that they were noticing. While they loved fitness fitness, they struggled with negotiating their love of fitness with the negative ways in which bikini competitions and bikini competitors on YouTube could impact consumers negatively. While there were many positive statements praising bikini competitors and their YouTube content, these positive statements were frequently

interlaced with negative themes, as participants were openly negotiating what is good and bad about this content. Therefore, while there are many positive quotations throughout the results section, it's essential that I acknowledge the more negative themes that repeatedly accompanied these statements.

For example, many participants expressed concerns for others regarding the negative effects that bikini competitions can have on women, largely because of body comparisons with other women and because of the negative consequences that can ensue when a woman attains an extremely lean physique that may not be maintainable long term. In addition, bikini competitions aside, participants expressed apprehensions about young women watching fitspiration YouTube videos, as young girls seemed to be more impressionable and eager to achieve the lean bodies of the women they watched on YouTube. And considering previous research on fitspiration insists that this content can be detrimental, especially to young women (Vaterlaus et. al, 2015, Tiggerman & Zaccardo, 2015), their concerns are warranted. This is an important issue that demands more attention. As I have mentioned previously, while fitspiration social media content can be harmless to some and it is difficult to determine how it can affect young women, evidence shows that it can impact viewers negatively, and can create unrealistic expectations for young girls concerning what their bodies “should” look like (Perloff, 2014; Andrew, Tiggermann, & Clark, 2016). And while the current literature in this area largely agrees with these assertions, we need more research focusing on what to do about the growing media platforms that can communicate these unrealistic expectations, and how women can overcome the potential negative effects of this content (Holland & Tiggermann, 2017).

First, it could be valuable to study women who have overcome negative feelings about their bodies. Interviews and/or surveys examining the actions that women have taken to love

their appearances in the midst of engaging with fitspiration social media content could provide valuable insights about how to combat this potentially problematic trend. Additionally, there is literature examining various methods that help women recovery from eating disorders such as therapy, journaling, and intuitive eating (Strober et al., 1997; Grogan, 2016) in order to gain more body satisfaction. It could be useful to learn more about how young women respond to fitspiration YouTube content, perhaps through pre- and post-surveys, and then apply and suggest the techniques that have been shown to be the most effective for women who have overcome the negative effects of fitspiration. Regardless of the research approach, because many can be applied to this area, I strongly encourage research to examine techniques to overcome the potential negative effects of fitspiration YouTube content, and to use the knowledge gained from this research to help young women and their levels of body dissatisfaction. While research studying the effects of fitspiration will always be valuable, it is time to determine best practices for combating this issue.

Before delving into the limitations and conclusion of this study, I would like to clarify why the tone of the discussion section, especially concerning the two inductively gathered themes, took a critical turn. While many of the quotes described in the results were positive, I took an arguably more negative approach in my discussion section. I did this and chose to emphasize the more negative components of fitspiration for two reasons. The first reason is because bikini competitions and the social media content that surrounds them are primarily concerned with aesthetics, not health, and this has been shown to be damaging. Secondly, I feel that the best way to initiate change in this community is to call attention to what needs to be changed, paving the way for scholars in the future.

To speak to the first point, although participants appreciated the diet and workout tips distributed by bikini competitors through their YouTube content, these tips almost always revolved around how the body *looks*, not how it *feels*. The main concern of bikini competitors is to achieve a body that *appears* to be perfect, not a body that *functions* perfectly. Bikini competitors and bikini competitions are concerned with the end aesthetic product, not the process or how the body feels before, during, and after a competition. This concern with appearance has been shown repeatedly in research to be damaging and to be the root of disordered eating and body image issues (Tiggermann & Zaccardo, 2015; Tiggerman & Slater, 2015). Therefore, while a few of the participants in this study stated that they enjoyed the YouTube videos of bikini competitors, I do not see it as an optimal or beneficial media outlet for women. Any piece of media that advocates for a physical ideal can be damaging to those who consume it (Boepple & Thompson, 2016), and fitspiration, which is largely concerned with appearance, not health, is not a constructive outlet for women (Carrotte, 2015).

Moreover, I also accentuated the negative aspects of fitspiration to change, or at least heighten awareness of, the problematic and potentially damaging patterns within this genre. Scholars argue that societal expectations of different races, genders, etc. can shape our interactions, divide people, and leave us unaware of perspectives outside of the norm, and critical approaches to these expectations are essential to deconstruct them (Allen, 2000). I wanted to begin the critical conversation about fitspiration, not simply calling attention to what is problematic within it, but what we can do about it going forward. Therefore, while some may view my approach as negative, I see it as an approach that can lead to boundless positivity in the future if more scholars contribute to this discussion about critically deconstructing fitspiration. In the final sections, I will conclude this thesis by addressing the limitations of this project, as well

as the future directions specifying where I think research studying fitspiration social media content should go in the future.

### **Limitations**

Although the study suggested significant findings about the growth of fitspiration YouTube content, the research revealed a number of limitations that could be supplemented with further research in the future. Foremost, the different experiences of each participant could have influenced the data collected in this study. For example, as mentioned in the methods section, 13 of the 15 participants had previously participated in at least one bikini competition. The perception of a bikini competition may differ between someone who has participated and competed in one versus someone who has only watched one or heard about one from a friend or YouTuber. Therefore a study comparing these two perspectives could be very interesting and insightful, studying the differences in perception from those who have competed versus those who have not. This could allow researchers to compare the potential impact of preparing for and competing in a competition to watching a bikini competition take place without competing in it. By doing this, they could better understand both the potential effects of competing in a bikini competition and how in-group members (competitors) and out-group members (the audience) perceive this growing trend differently, and the implications of this difference.

Furthermore, six of the participants in this study had produced fitness-related YouTube videos before, and were both active YouTube consumers and producers. Additionally, three of those six participants disclosed that they had received sponsorships and/or financial assistance from fitness-related companies in the past, and this could have impacted their perception of YouTube fitspiration content. Women who receive financial assistance from YouTube and sponsors may view the social media platform differently than those who do not, and this could

have created biases that affected the results of this study. Therefore, it could be beneficial to perform a similar study, but separate participants who receive financial assistance from YouTube and those who do not in order to learn if this factor plays a role in biases toward the social media platform.

Moreover, the method used in this project could have been a limitation of this study. In telephone interviews, the interviewer cannot observe the respondent to further understand their emotions and responses, and this can impact how data is analyzed (Sukamolson, 2010). In addition, the inevitable subjectivity of interpreting interviews can influence the outcomes of an interview study (Stokes & Bergin, 2006). Hence, other methods could help us to better understand this area. Face-to-face interviews could allow a researcher to better observe and interpret the emotions of participants, eliminating the limitation that phone interviews often encounter. Moreover, pre- and post-surveys measuring the emotions of women before and after they watch Fitspiration YouTube videos of bikini competitors could provide a new perspective, eliminating the potential subjectivity of qualitative research. In fact, combining both a qualitative face-to-face interview method with a quantitative survey method could produce insightful results, as it would be able to compare how participants rated their emotions to how they verbally communicated them.

### **Future Research Directions**

This project encourages future research in many arenas. Foremost, this project promotes and justifies more research analyzing the fitspiration genre. Considering the growth of this media genre and the insights throughout this study indicating that fitspiration content can be damaging to those to engage with it, more research needs to analyze fitspiration further. This research

would be especially useful if it aspired to find solutions to this potentially damaging content, looking for ways that women can combat the damage that fitspiration can create.

This project is also a testament to focusing on the audience when studying a media text, especially a media text that has been shown to have negative effects on consumers. The feedback and disclosures gained from the participants in this study were insightful, and more research needs to focus on extracting similar insights from audiences who have valuable knowledge to share. These insights will help to fully explain the growth of the fitspiration genre, and can help researchers to better understand how to change potentially damaging trends taking place within the fitspiration community.

Next, this study encourages more of a focus on consumerism and social media. It could be beneficial to study how the growing fame of YouTubers and native advertising affect consumers and their purchasing decisions, especially when parasocial relationships are present or when viewers identify strongly with a YouTuber. This could both help researchers in marketing and business areas of study, as well as researchers seeking to better understand consumerist culture in order to hinder its growth.

Finally, more research needs to focus on the lack of diversity and the high level of perceived privilege of bikini competitors and the media content that they produce. Research should focus on the potential consequences of this lack of diversity, because while many bikini competitors have good intentions when producing media content, participants indicated that the lack of diversity throughout this genre could be harmful. Not only should this lack of diversity be explored further, but research should also focus on how to change and improve this lack, delving into how we can create a more diverse social media genre that celebrates all body types, genders, skin colors, etc. Considering how prominent identification was throughout this study, and how

influential people can be when identification is present (Walsh & MacDonald, 2014), I attest that this genre could have a much more powerful and potentially beneficial effect on consumers if it identified with a more diverse audience.

I am proud to present this project as it provides a valuable addition to the already-existing literature in this area. Not only does it further advocate that this area of study demands more attention, but it provides insights about communication theory, interpersonal connections through social media, and the feelings and needs of the media audience.

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## 7. APPENDIX A

Below is the message that will be posted on fitness forums and e-mailed to individuals requesting that they participate in the telephone interview for this study. The forums are on websites such as [BodyBuilding.com](http://BodyBuilding.com) and Reddit on conversations that revolve around preparing for bikini competitions.

Hello there! I'm Brooke Beytin, a graduate student at Colorado State University. I am writing my Master's thesis and am interested in interviewing women who watch health and fitness-related YouTube videos made by bikini competitors. I am studying what women like and/or dislike about this YouTube content and how it impacts their lives. I would greatly appreciate it if you would help me and allow me to listen to your opinion and views about this content. We can conduct the interview on the phone and it should take no more than 30 minutes, depending on your answers. Everything that you disclose to me will be kept confidential as I will assign pseudonyms when I report the results of the study. I can be flexible around your schedule when finding a time to talk. If you are interested in talking with me, please e-mail me at [brooke.Beytin@colostate.edu](mailto:brooke.Beytin@colostate.edu).

Finally, if you know of anyone who watches YouTube videos made by bikini competitors and may be willing to participate in this study, please let me know. I would be absolutely thrilled to hear from you; thank you so much.

## 8. APPENDIX B

### **Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

**TITLE OF STUDY: An interpersonal approach to examining bikini competitors on YouTube**

#### **PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR**

Dr. Elizabeth A. Williams  
Department of Communication Studies  
Colorado State University  
Contact: [elizabeth.a.williams@colostate.edu](mailto:elizabeth.a.williams@colostate.edu)

#### **CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR**

Brooke Beytin, MA Student  
Department of Communication Studies  
Colorado State University  
Contact: 1-408-476-9263 - [brooke.Beytin@colostate.edu](mailto:brooke.Beytin@colostate.edu)

Dear Participant,

My name is Dr. Elizabeth Williams and I am an Assistant Professor from Colorado State University in the Communication Studies department. We are conducting a research study on why individuals engage with fitspiration content on YouTube. I am the Principal Investigator and the Co-PI is Brooke Beytin, a Master's student in Communication Studies department at Colorado State University.

We would like to invite you to take part in an individual phone interview about your experience watching and/or engaging with the YouTube videos that bikini competitors produce. Participation will take up to 1 hour and the telephone call will be recorded. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time without penalty.

#### **Benefits and risks of being in the study:**

There are no known benefits for participating in this study, but it will be an opportunity to openly share your feelings and insights that may help yourself and others to better understand this realm of social media and those who engage with it.

You will not receive any compensation for participating in this study. Participation in this study will not cost you anything. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and your choice.

The risks associated with this study are no greater than everyday life. However, if you experience distress after participating in the study, you can contact the professional counselor listed below for further assistance.

Susan MacQuiddy - Director of Counseling Services - CSU Health Network Counseling Services  
123 Aylesworth NW  
Fort Collins, CO 80526  
Phone: (970) 491-6053.  
E-mail: [susan.macquiddy@colostate.edu](mailto:susan.macquiddy@colostate.edu)

**Confidentiality and Privacy Protections:**

The PI and Co-PI will not connect your name or personal identifiers to the data we collect. Your name will not be used, but rather we will use a pseudonym. When we report and share the data to others, we will combine the data from all participants. Colorado State University, as well as members of the Institutional Review Boards, have the legal right to review our research records and will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law.

With your consent, the interview will be audio recorded to aid in data analysis.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the IRB of Colorado State University. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, please contact the CSU IRB at: [RICRO\\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu](mailto:RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu) or 1-970-491-1553.

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might arise. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the Co-PI, Brooke Beytin, at [brooke.beytin@colostate.edu](mailto:brooke.beytin@colostate.edu) or at 408-476-9263. You will also receive a copy of this consent form.

## 9. APPENDIX C

### Interview Questions

#### Introduction

First of all, thank you so much for participating in this interview. Be assured that everything that you say will be completely confidential. At the end of the interview, I will assign you a pseudonym, or fake name, of your choosing to ensure your privacy when I write up the results of this study. I want to make sure that you know that I will be recording this interview, and the recordings will be saved on my password protected computer. I will completely erase all of the recordings when my analysis is finished. Is that alright with you? If so, please take as much time as you need to answer any of the following questions.

1. Tell me about when you first started watching fitness-related videos on YouTube.  
- How long have you been watching these videos?
2. Throughout a typical day/week how do you engage with these YouTube videos?  
- How often do you watch these videos?
3. Tell me about your favorite bikini competitor on YouTube.
4. How did you find out about their YouTube content?
5. What attributes and qualities draw you to particular bikini competitors and their YouTube channels?
6. What similarities do you see between certain bikini competitors and yourself?
7. Do you prefer to watch videos in chronological order and follow bikini competitors' journeys as they prepare for a competition or strive toward a goal?

-Why do you choose to watch this way?

8. Can you recall any stories told by bikini competitors about their fitness journeys or about their lives in general?

- What stories do you recall?

9. What makes a “good” health and fitness YouTube channel?

10. On the contrary, what constitutes a poor health and fitness YouTube channel that you are less likely to watch/subscribe to?

11. What types of videos do you like to watch most? (Please be as specific as you can be)

12. What type of content would you like to see more of on health and fitness-based YouTube channels?

13. Many bikini competitors manage accounts on multiple platforms like Instagram and Twitter as well as on YouTube. Do you prefer to engage with one platform over others? What do you like/dislike about different platforms?

14. What changes have you made to your lifestyle since you’ve started watching and/or engaging with this YouTube content?

15. How do you feel about your body? Would you change anything if you could and if so, what would you change?

16. What does the term “fitspiration” mean to you?

17. Is there anything that I didn’t ask you that you think I should know about YouTube or bikini competitors?

18. When I transcribe and analyze these interviews, is there a specific pseudonym you would like me to use for you?

19. If I have any follow-up questions for you, may I contact you?

Finally, before we finish, I would appreciate a few pieces of demographic information from you.

20. How old are you?

21. What ethnicity do you identify as? White/Caucasian, Black/African American, Hispanic, etc.