



## Article

# Rival Bodies: Negotiating Gender and Embodiment in Women's Bikini and Figure Competitions

Favor Campbell <sup>1</sup>, Timothy Haverda <sup>2</sup> and John P. Bartkowski <sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Sociology, College for Health, Community and Policy, The University of Texas at San Antonio, San Antonio, TX 78249, USA; favor.campbell@utsa.edu

<sup>2</sup> Department of Sociology, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403, USA; thaverda@uoregon.edu

\* Correspondence: john.bartkowski@utsa.edu

**Abstract:** Women's bodybuilding has attracted attention from gender researchers. However, increasingly popular fitness shows that feature different competitive tracks—bikini and figure—have garnered very limited scholarly consideration. This study draws on interview data from twenty bikini and figure competitors as well as ethnographic research conducted at several prominent bodybuilding shows in Texas with fitness competition tracks. Our investigation provides a comparative analysis of women's participation in bikini versus figure fitness competitions as an embodied gender practice. Participation in this relatively new sport underscores the interconnections between gender and variegated forms of embodiment that we call athletic, aesthetic, erotic, and everyday bodies. Pre-competition regimens pose challenges for women's management of their bodies due to dietary deprivation, rigorous workouts, and the specter of track-specific judging criteria. Pre-competition strains are often evident in primary relationships as women's bodies are prepared for aesthetic presentation in a way that, for bikini and especially figure competitors, can undermine physical functionality and social capabilities. Competitions themselves reveal relationships marked by a mix of camaraderie and hierarchy among competitors, with those in the figure track often viewed as more "serious" athletes but less conventionally "feminine" than their bikini counterparts. Post-competition, women often struggle to accept the return of their "normal" everyday body. This study reveals the agency of women and their bodies in the context of a fast-growing sport while considering the broader social implications of fitness competitions given their tracking of women's bodies.

**Keywords:** fitness competition; bikini competition; figure competition; gender; women; embodiment; bodybuilding



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## 1. Introduction

This study offers a comparative analysis of gender practices undertaken by two different types of amateur fitness competitors, namely, participants in women's bikini and figure competitions. While previous scholarship has examined women's bodybuilding (Boyle 2005; Brace-Govan 2002; Heywood 1998; Lewis and Page 2004; Lowe 1998; McGrath and Chanie-Hill 2009; Obel 1996; Patton 2001; Roussel and Griffet 2000; Martin and Gavey 1996), increasingly popular fitness competitions have not attracted the scholarly scrutiny they are due. Previous research on women's bodybuilding merely makes brief reference to the then emergent bikini and figure categories within fitness competitions that are now commonly featured as premiere events during bodybuilding contests. Two studies have explored fitness competitions with a focus on a single competitive track, either bikini (Tajrobehkar 2016) or figure (McTavish 2015). Using a combination of ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with twenty fitness competitors, our study renders a comparative analysis of the perceptions, motivations, and experiences of women who have competed in one or both of these competitive tracks.

Gender is a relational construct. It therefore stands to reason that new insights can emerge by exploring the points of connection and distinction between bikini and figure competitions. Aside from augmenting current scholarly understandings of women's bodybuilding, our investigation renders a comparative appraisal of the socially constructed yet bodily inscribed boundaries between bikini and figure tracks. The bikini track privileges what we call the aesthetic body based on appearance and allure. By contrast, the figure track emphasizes what we call the athletic body predicated on power and performance. Gender theory and the sociology of the body (Connell 1987, 2005; Davis 1995, 2003; Theberge 2003; Brown 1999; Aiba 2017; Velija et al. 2011; Channon 2014; Boyle 2005; Le Breton 2000) provide complementary interpretive frameworks to analyze the narratives and practices evident in competitors' interviews and fieldwork observations.

Although bikini and figure competitors are an increasingly prominent part of the bodybuilding subculture, they have not been the subjects of sustained research. Competitors' impeccably conditioned bodies are lean and muscular. Yet, unlike their bodybuilding counterparts, bikini and figure competitors strive for proportionality and definition rather than aiming primarily for muscle size (Lohre 2017). Among these competitors, levels of muscularity vary depending on the category in which a woman chooses to compete, such that figure competitors are expected to exhibit considerably greater muscularity than their bikini counterparts (Lohre 2017). Competitors typically train for many months by working out individual body parts (often referred to as split training or a split workout) on a daily or sometimes twice-daily basis and eating "clean" (i.e., mostly all natural) foods (cf. Spencer 2014). However, with this level of dedication also comes a contradiction. Bikini and figure competitors must struggle to negotiate how to exhibit the muscle that is expected to be displayed in these competitions without "sacrificing" their femininity (Channon 2014; Velija et al. 2011). This line is indeed fine, because participants in these competitive tracks intentionally avoid developing the extreme muscularity of women bodybuilders. This study, then, aims to answer three research questions while examining how fitness competitors seek to resolve this gender paradox.

The first research question related to our study is this: How do women negotiate gender within the context of fitness competitions? Although fitness competitors might not recognize it, the broader public could see these competitions occupying a middle space between beauty pageants and bodybuilding contests. The parallels to a beauty pageant are quite obvious to even the observer who is unfamiliar with fitness competitions as evident in the smiles, coiffed hair, makeup, painted nails, judges' scoring of contestants, and audiences' scrutinizing gazes (Lowe 1998). However, unlike beauty pageant contestants, fitness competitors are expected to have a more muscular body and are judged predominantly on bodily display, albeit with different degrees of muscular development. This study examines strategies women use to negotiate this delicate balance.

Second, what bodily practices do women enlist in preparation for these competitions and how are these practices influenced by track-specific ideals related to gender and embodiment? Questions asked during the interviews with competitors help to uncover specific training and dieting regimens along with other efforts to mold and even discipline their bodies. Competitors are strongly encouraged to accessorize their bodies by tanning, wearing stage makeup and, even in some cases, having cosmetic surgery to enhance their breasts. Therefore, this study recognizes the embodied character of gender in fitness competitors' contest preparation while detecting distinctive bodily practices across competitive tracks.

Third, how do competitors manage their social relationships in the context of these pursuits, especially during contest preparation? Training for a competition can be done alone. Yet, there are often other individuals in close relation to the competitor who are affected by the rigors of contest preparation and participation. A competitor's trainer, for example, occupies a space that can either be helpful or detrimental. Expectations of a trainer go far beyond the watchful bystander. A trainer is an active participant that critiques every nuance of the competitor's body, often with permission from the competitor

to infringe on personal space (e.g., tactile checks of muscular development, firmness, and separation). Trainers cannot do their job efficiently without there being an understandable (yet respectable) intrusion of privacy. Negotiating the boundaries of personal space and preference, however, can be quite challenging for the competitor and trainer.

Additionally, a competitor's preparation for a fitness contest can also have a profound effect on their intimate relationships, physically and emotionally. We aim to uncover how family, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances all react to the intense changes that occur with the competitor's strict lifestyle while examining the influence of these reactions on competitors themselves. Given no previously published comparison of women fitness participants across competitive tracks (cf. [McTavish 2015](#); [Tajrobehkar 2016](#)), and only brief mentions of these competitions in prior studies of bodybuilders ([Heywood 1998](#); [Lewis and Page 2004](#); [Lowe 1998](#)), our investigation provides ample opportunities to arrive at new insights concerning the gendered dimensions of a fast-growing sport.

Many who are unfamiliar with fitness competitions may not understand the organization of categories available to these competitors. Moreover, the different nuances on which judges critique each competitor may be unfamiliar to non-competitors. For example, judges look for certain competitors to have striations (i.e., lines within each muscle indicating extreme leanness) or muscle separation (i.e., distinctions evident between adjacent muscles). Table 1 outlines the distinctions between each category available to women fitness competitors as well as judging criteria most commonly used within each competitive category (track).

**Table 1.** Women's Fitness Competition Categories (Tracks) and Judging Criteria <sup>1</sup>.

Women's Fitness Competition Categories				
Bikini <sup>2</sup>	Figure <sup>2</sup>	Fitness	Physique	Bodybuilding
Competitors compete in two-piece suit	Competitors compete in two-piece suit	Competitors compete in two-piece suit	Competitors compete in two-piece suit	Competitors compete in two-piece suit
Competitors must wear high heels	Competitors must wear high heels	Competitors must wear high heels <sup>3</sup>	Competitors do not wear shoes	Competitors do not wear shoes
Competitors divided into height classes	Competitors divided into height classes	Competitors divided into height classes	Competitors divided into height classes	Competitors divided into weight classes
Judging Criteria				
Required posing: Front and back stance with hand on hip <sup>4</sup>	Required posing: Quarter turns with arms moderately extended out	Required posing: Quarter turns with arms moderately extended out	Required posing: Quarter turn posing, includes front and back biceps, side triceps with leg extended, side chest, front ab/thigh	Required posing: Includes front and back biceps, side triceps with leg extended, side chest, front ab/thigh
Judged on balance, shape, and overall physical appearance including complexion, poise, and presentation	Judged on small degree of muscularity with separation but no visible striations. Competitor judged on overall muscle tone with shapely lines, overall firmness, but not excessively lean.	Judged on posing and fitness routines. <sup>5</sup> Posing routine judged on firmness, symmetry, and appearance. Fitness routine judged on strength, flexibility, and routine tempo.	Judged on symmetry, shape, muscle tone, poise, and beauty. A 90-s posing routine is required. <sup>6</sup>	Judged in three rounds: relaxed (relaxed pose); individual (60-s routine); mandatory (mandatory poses listed above)

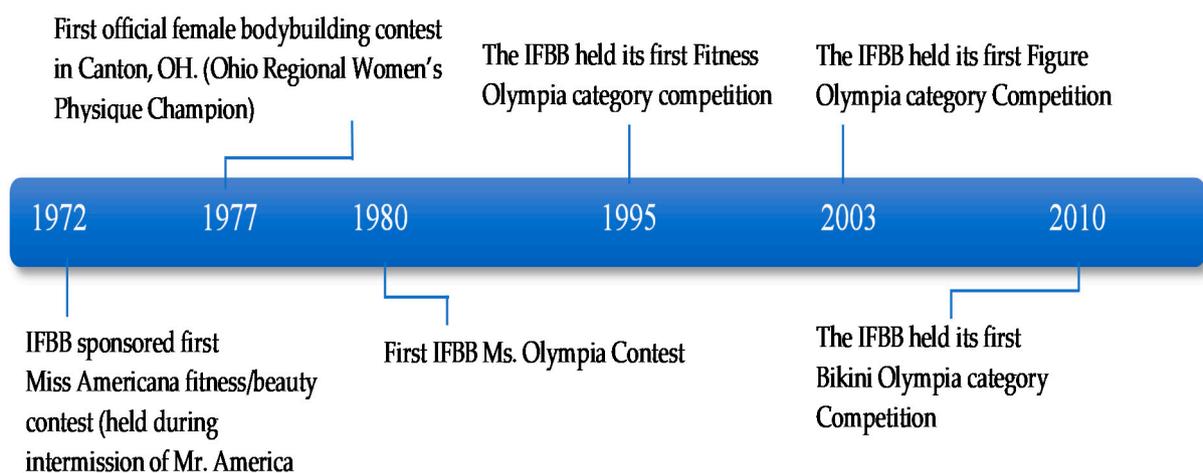
<sup>1</sup> All data were retrieved from the National Physique Committee (NPC) and International Federation of Bodybuilding websites: <http://www.npcnews.com>; <http://www.ifbb.com> (accessed on 24 January 2021). <sup>2</sup> The first two categories, bikini and figure, are the focus of our research. <sup>3</sup> Heels are only worn during posing routine, not during fitness routine. <sup>4</sup> Posing usually entails completing a "model" walk where the competitor walks to 2–3 places assigned on stage and poses in those places. <sup>5</sup> Two-minute fitness routine must include push-up, high kicks, straddle hold, and side split. <sup>6</sup> In contrast to the fitness category, the physique routine is posing only with no aerobic component. Physique is similar to the bodybuilding category in this way.

At the time Lowe's pathbreaking ethnographic book, *Women of Steel*, was published in 1998 ([Lowe 1998](#)), the National Physique Committee (NPC)<sup>1</sup> boasted over 20,000 members and hosted between 800 to 1000 fitness competitions annually, prior to the addition of the

<sup>1</sup> The National Physique Committee, also known as the NPC, is the largest amateur bodybuilding organization in the United States. Once a competitor places first in a national-level NPC show and wins their pro card, they can then compete in the professional organization, the International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness (IFBB).

bikini and figure categories (Lowe 1998). To understand the phenomenal growth of these competitions, brief attention to their history is warranted (see Figure 1 for a timeline of women's fitness competitions). The first ever International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness (IFBB)<sup>2</sup> sponsored women's fitness competition was known as Miss Americana in 1972 (Lowe 1998). This contest, held during the intermission of the Mr. America contest, was strictly based on fitness and beauty, not muscularity. As women began to show more interest over the next several years in developing muscle, they had a new opportunity to compete in their first official bodybuilding contest, the 1977 Ohio Regional Women's Physique Championship. This competition differed in that, unlike the Miss Americana contest, women were judged on levels of muscularity and definition (Lowe 1998). This contest was the precursor for the first Ms. Olympia women's bodybuilding contest in 1980.

A decade and a half passed before the introduction of the Olympia Fitness category in 1995. The introduction of a fitness category<sup>3</sup> occurred in response to complaints that women bodybuilders were becoming too masculine due to the increased use of steroids (Lewis and Page 2004). Moreover, the fitness category gave less muscular women another option to compete on stage without having to bulk up to the size of traditional bodybuilders. Competitors performed a strenuous and physical aerobics routine in addition to the required poses. Subsequently, Olympia Figure was introduced in 2003, followed by Olympia Bikini in 2010.



**Figure 1.** Timeline of Women's Fitness Competitions.

Bodybuilding as well the other female fitness categories occupy a space that both transgresses and reinforces cultural definitions of femininity. Yet, beyond this general similarity, the proliferation of competitive tracks begs the question of how the boundaries—bodily and otherwise—among these tracks are established and sustained. Since gender is constructed in a relational fashion, often through the logic of difference, a comparative analysis examining distinctive standards across competitive tracks is warranted. Difference, however, is not to be understood as a lateral contrast between two or more equal phenomena. Difference is ineluctably linked to dominance. Dominance, that is, hierarchy and asymmetry, confers privilege and prestige on some while withholding them from others. Therefore, to understand how cultural definitions of femininity are constructed in the context of fitness competitions, power dynamics must be explored. Our study recognizes the agency of women competitors but also indicates that their pursuits are interconnected

<sup>2</sup> The IFBB is the international governing board for all amateur bodybuilding organizations, and is the professional organization for competitive bodybuilders.

<sup>3</sup> The fitness category is distinct from the broader label of "fitness competition". The fitness category has its own rules and guidelines similar to that of bikini and figure; however, all are categories under the overarching event commonly called a fitness competition. Rather confusingly, fitness is an overarching cross-category description of the event as well as its own competitive category (generally more athletic than bikini or figure).

with, and often checked by, other actors and social forces. For example, gatekeepers are those who establish and enforce rules in any social domain. In sports, gatekeepers (i.e., trainers, judges, sponsors, and promoters) exercise a great deal of influence in defining and applying normative standards. However, their power is capable of being challenged by other constituencies (e.g., competitors, fans). Without a clear understanding of power dynamics in fitness competitions, we fail to understand the “how” and the “why” of competitors’ actions in the broader interplay of forces within this social domain.

## 2. Empirical and Theoretical Background

What have we learned from prior research on women’s bodybuilding? A series of studies have carefully detailed that women bodybuilders often struggle to balance the paradoxical demands imposed by a sport that expects extreme muscularity while aiming to preserve traditional gender distinctions (Boyle 2005; Brace-Govan 2002; Heywood 1998; Lewis and Page 2004; Lowe 1998; McGrath and Chananie-Hill 2009; Obel 1996; Patton 2001; Roussel and Griffet 2000; Martin and Gavey 1996). Consequently, many women bodybuilders present an unusual mix of remarkable muscle size coupled with an array of clearly displayed “feminine” markers (breast implants, painted manicured nails, makeup, and even distinctly feminized poses when compared with their male counterparts). The juxtaposition of masculine-yet-feminine display is visibly evident in highly competitive women bodybuilders. The rigorous dieting regimen employed by women bodybuilders often leads them to “lose” their breasts along with minimizing other body fat. Consequently, it is standard practice for such competitors to have breast implants, the circular outlines of which can be easily discerned against their highly developed “pecs” (chest muscles) during posing routines. Professional women bodybuilders also face lower compensation and enjoy less prestige in this sport subculture than their male peers. Moreover, whereas men’s bodybuilding may be perceived as an obscure sport compared to football, basketball, etc., it is widely accepted as a masculine endeavor (see Brown 1999). Yet, women bodybuilders often face questions about why they would wish to acquire a “masculine” body and compete in a “men’s sport.” Additionally, because women bodybuilders deviate from conventional expectations regarding femininity, they often find less social support from friends and family in pursuing their sports-related goals.

Prior research on women’s bodybuilding has only mentioned fitness competitions in passing. Research on fitness competitions is quite sparse, with only track-specific investigations having been conducted previously. One study has examined the experiences of nine participants in the bikini category of fitness competitions and revealed that these women are often critical of the beauty standards imposed on them by judges but strategically deploy gender and sexuality to leverage those same oppressive standards to their advantage (Tajrobehkar 2016). This paradox is aptly captured in the article title, “Flirting with the Judges.” And, a book on the Feminist Figure Girl Project has argued that feminism is not antithetical to participation in the figure track of fitness competitions, and has given sustained attention to the strong social bonds that can develop among women in the sport as well as their collective, though episodic, efforts to resist patriarchy (McTavish 2015).

With such limited research conducted thus far, there remains much to be learned about fitness competitions. Despite the insights provided by the two aforementioned studies, the gap in the literature is remarkable in light of the dramatic growth of fitness competitions during the past two decades. Our study recognizes gender and embodiment as relational constructs, thereby providing new empirical insights by rendering a bikini versus figure track comparison. Fitness competitions are often featured with bodybuilding shows but are distinct contests in their own right, thereby requiring empirical and theoretical approaches attuned to these relational differences. Regardless of their specific competitive category (i.e., bikini or figure), fitness contestants feature less muscularity than their bodybuilding counterparts and, at first glance, seem more conventionally feminine. However, there are variegated types of fitness competitions, with the bikini category featuring significantly

less muscularity than the figure category. Thus, sociological accounting for the diversity of women's bodies within the broader world of fitness competitions is needed.

Our study is also focused on gender as a series of embodied practices that are situated in time. Thus, our inquiry aims to follow the arc or trajectory of fitness competitions by considering different phases of competition, namely, contest entry and preparation, the competition itself, and the post-competition aftermath. Therefore, we theorize bodily diversity (difference and dominance) not only in terms of competitive categories but also with respect to distinct temporal phases associated with these contests. Methodologically, our study combines data from interviews and participant observations at various events, thereby exploring how both narratives and experiences of gendered embodiment are evident in this competitive realm. Moreover, much of the research featured here was conducted through reflexive ethnography on the part of the first author. Thus, where appropriate, personal experiences and interactions involving the first author are featured.

Turning to the specifics of our theory, we follow others in the sociology of the body and gender theory by conceiving of gendered bodies as at once socially inscribed and capable of exhibiting agency (e.g., [Connell 1987, 2005](#); [Davis 1995, 2003](#)). Bodies are indeed gendered, but beyond this axiomatic point is a great deal of complexity. [Connell's \(2005\)](#) volume, *Masculinities*, is particularly prescient in analyzing the gendered contours of bodily experiences by way of body-reflexive practice ([Connell 2005](#)). Taking a cue from structuration theory, Connell charges that bodies reflect a duality inasmuch as bodies are both objects and agents of social practice. Women fitness competitors' bodies are objects of social practice in that they are trained and subject to dieting, quite specifically, to shape their bodies to conform to the gendered expectations of judges and trainers. However, those gendered expectations are contingent on the category in which these women compete. Thus, figure category competitors are expected to be more muscular than bikini category competitors. Women's bodies are, at the same time, agents of social practice. Fitness competitors' bodies do not always comply with social expectations. Bodily agency can be exhibited through those "stubborn few pounds" that defy women's best dieting efforts as a contest approaches, as well as by women's loss of menstruation (amenorrhea) and diminished sex drive as severe pre-contest dieting takes its toll. In short, body-reflexive practice underscores how bodies are subject to complex social forces that are gendered and how, at times, those same bodies may act back against and even defy social demands related to gender.

Fitness competitors' bodies are, quite obviously, "rival bodies" because they are locked in direct competition against other women within their competitive category on contest day. Yet, rival bodies are also those that draw out contrasts across different categories governed by distinctive gender expectations (bikini versus figure). Finally, rival bodies are located in an arena wherein powerful social forces often collide with manifestations of bodily agency. Gendered embodiment within the realm of sport represents potential empowerment by displacing hegemonic narratives of domination and violence ([Theberge 2003](#)) as well as destabilizing conventional gender norms more broadly ([Boyle 2005](#); [Channon 2014](#)). Sport practices often result in the development of greater self-confidence and therefore a reconfiguration of gendered embodiment ([Aiba 2017](#); [Velija et al. 2011](#)). At the same time, sports that seek to instill confidence through masculinized bodily practices may reestablish gender hierarchies by linking masculinity with strength and dominance even as they redefine feminine embodiment and physicality by challenging common conceptions that equate femininity with weakness and submission ([Channon 2014](#); [Velija et al. 2011](#)). Thus, gendered embodiment within the realm of sport can both challenge as well as affirm normative categories of gender and sex.

As noted, rival bodies must also be situated in a temporal trajectory. Using fitness competitions as our empirical case, we examine body-reflexive practices across four key moments in the competition cycle: (1) contest entry (decision-making processes about if and when to compete), (2) contest preparation (training, dieting, tanning, posing practice and, for some, breast augmentation), (3) competition day (bodily display via posing routines,

along with attention to accessories such as the posing suit, heels, hair, makeup, jewelry, etc.), and (4) post-competition (the practice of “reverse dieting,”<sup>4</sup> the resumption of more “normal” training routines, the inevitable weight gain, etc.). Our study examines how women’s bodies are gendered objects and agents of social practice across the temporal trajectory of fitness competitions.

Finally, it is useful to consider different dimensions of gendered embodiment across the fitness competition trajectory. Our theoretical perspective calls attention to four distinct but interrelated dimensions of gendered embodiment while examining their ascent and descent at diverse points across the fitness competition trajectory. The four dimensions of gendered embodiment related to fitness competitions are as follows: (1) the athletic body, (2) the aesthetic body, (3) the erotic body, and (4) the everyday body. The athletic body is characterized by its functionality, including its ability to withstand vigorous exercise, adhere to grueling diets, and achieve and sustain a low body fat level. The athletic body is judged on its ability to perform particular sports-related tasks and respond to rigorous physical demands. The aesthetic body, by contrast, is based on its appearance. This body is scrutinized through panoptic gazes that size up and appraise the body based on its looks (e.g., proportionality, tanning, proper accessorizing). The rendering of judgments about bodily aesthetics can vary by source, including self-appraisals, scrutiny by trainers, and evaluation by judges. Bodily judgments are also subject to situational criteria. Standards by which to “size up” women’s bodies vary for models versus athletes, differ among athletes of various types, and may have a “sliding scale” quality across the age spectrum. The erotic body refers to the sexual dimensions of the body, including capacities evident during sexual encounters and the body’s physical appeal to oneself or others. The everyday body is the physicality that is needed to complete normal daily routines such as chores and dependent care at home along with stamina—physical and otherwise—needed to conduct workplace tasks. It is important to note that these four forms of bodily expression are not mutually exclusive. A single body can be both athletic and erotic, which is to say highly functional in the gym and in the bedroom. Moreover, a single body can be both aesthetic and erotic, as is commonly the case with the come-hither poses and air-brushing techniques that are regularly employed in porn industry modeling. Yet, different dimensions of embodiment may also be at odds with one another, such as when endurance for workplace tasks (the everyday body) is undermined by strict pre-contest training and dieting (the athletic body).

### 3. Materials and Methods

This project uses ethnographic research and semi-structured in-depth interviews to contrast the motivations and experiences of women bikini and figure competitors. All data were collected in 2014 and 2015 by the first author who herself has participated in fitness competitions. Qualitative research aims to examine meaningful perceptions and practices from the standpoints of people whose lives the researcher wishes to understand (Hesse-Biber 2017). Our use of these methods aims to provide a holistic picture by permitting a combined (triangulated) analysis of interview narratives and interactions observed in natural field settings. Qualitative methods are best suited for our study in that they allow for a more in-depth understanding of complex social processes (e.g., motivations for training, competition-day interactions, etc.), in contrast to statistical analyses based on preconceived categorical survey responses (Babbie and Rubin 2014). Specific to our study, qualitative methods allow us to investigate strategies and processes of gender negotiation and embodiment among fitness competitors. Furthermore, qualitative methods permit us to explain daily life experiences and routines in relation to being a fitness competitor. Unlike quantitative methods, our chosen methodology is better suited to illuminate the feelings, values, motivations, and perceptions that influence these women to compete as

<sup>4</sup> Reverse dieting is the process of reintroducing foods once a competitor has reached their desired goal weight. Although bikini and figure competitors can easily consume 2000-plus calories per day while preparing to compete, they often must reduce their caloric intake significantly to around 1200 calories daily as the competition day approaches and during the day of the contest.

well as the contours and consequences of their competition experiences, social encounters, etc.

### 3.1. Data Collection Procedures

To provide a rich portrait of fitness competitors' training and competition regimens, this study uses two forms of ethnographic research: participant observation and unobtrusive observation, both undertaken by the first author. Participant observation has long been used to observe and engage study subjects in their natural settings, while simultaneously taking notice of how research participants act and interact with each other in their surroundings (Zahle 2012). Conducting participant observation prior to interviewing sensitizes researchers to key issues while simultaneously familiarizing them with the environment and its vernacular (Rubin and Rubin 2012). The addition of unobtrusive observation aids in rendering a rich portrait that describes how each fitness show is prepared, conducted, organized, and judged. Unobtrusively observing these events and participants' interactions highlights connections and potential contradictions that emerge in the context of social interaction. As an observer only, this approach keeps the researcher insulated from direct encounters in the field setting. The combination of participant observation and unobtrusive observation permits the researcher to occupy different vantage points. The field researcher is able to be personally immersed in the social world being investigated (participant observation) and to step away from goings-on toward the setting's periphery (unobtrusive observation). The use of ethnographic research consisted of attending four daylong fitness competitions. The competition itself is the pinnacle event for each competitor. Therefore, it is imperative that participants be observed in this setting. The first author competed in two events as an actual competitor, while the other competitions were unobtrusively observed as a spectator. The first author kept field notes about what she observed in all contests, and subsequently coded these notes by looking for themes observed at each of the four competitions based on the research questions and core constructs that govern this inquiry.

Fitness shows that were located in cities in South Texas metropolitan areas are the focus of this study given the first author's proximity to them and knowledge of this competition locale. Although there are numerous organizations that conduct fitness competitions, observation was limited to natural bodybuilding shows only.<sup>5</sup> South Texas hosts a sufficient number of natural contests each year (at least ten or more shows) that allowed ample options in choosing shows to attend and in which to compete. Observing natural-only shows permitted a sole focus on competitors who are left to their own efforts to get their bodies ready to compete. Moreover, because the first author has competed in natural shows personally, these events provide better access to data and facilitate a strong rapport with subjects.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews with competitors lend additional richness to this study. The process of using in-depth interviews includes talking with individuals who have knowledge or experience in a specific area (Rubin and Rubin 2012). Semi-structured interviews are the most suitable option for the articulation of narratives that convey rich reflections about motivations and experiences while permitting follow-up questions to be pursued when necessary. All respondents are asked the same set of questions in semi-structured interviews, but exchanges have a free-flowing conversational character designed to balance consistency (posing the same scripted questions) with discovery (using unscripted probes when warranted). Prior research on women's bodybuilding has successfully used participants' narratives to gain an understanding of their subculture from each competitor's perspective (Boyle 2005; Brace-Govan 2002; Heywood 1998; Lowe 1998; McGrath and Chananie-Hill 2009; Roussel and Griffet 2000).

Our interview sample consisted of twenty women who have competed in the bikini category or figure category (or both) of a fitness competition. At the time of the interview,

<sup>5</sup> Natural bodybuilding shows are contests that mandate that all competitors take a polygraph test and sometimes a urine test. Competitors are required to have no illegal or banned substance use for the past seven years.

competitors must have been at least eighteen years of age and needed to have competed in at least one show. An effort was made to find women who have placed in at least the top five<sup>6</sup> in their respective categories; however, for maximum variation, women who did not place were also interviewed. (The recruitment script and pre-interview questionnaire ensured that participants met all criteria for inclusion in the study sample. See Appendix A for the pre-interview questionnaire and Appendix B for the interview guide.)

Competitors were recruited primarily in South Texas so the majority of the interviews could be conducted in person. However, because some participants travel to shows, competitors living outside of this area were also allowed to participate in this study by using electronic forms of communication (such as videoconferencing). Scholars have identified purposive sampling as an exceptional strategy for obtaining data that have excellent internal validity, that is, empirical trustworthiness (Babbie and Rubin 2014). Purposive sampling (sometimes called theoretical sampling) is governed by the intentional selection of knowledgeable subjects with extensive experience in the area of inquiry. The first author recruited an initial pool of participants with whom she already had a relationship. She then employed a snowball sampling technique to obtain further interviews (“Do you know another bikini or figure competitor who might want to interview . . . ?”). Once in contact with a competitor, the first author explained through email or a phone conversation what the interview entailed. Competitors were asked to volunteer 45–60 min of their time to answer questions pertaining to all aspects of their contest experiences, from contest entry decisions to preparation and the post-competition aftermath. If they agreed to participate in the study, a time convenient for them to meet at the place of their choosing was arranged. Suggestions were given for ideal meeting locations (e.g., coffee shops, restaurants, or their homes if they chose). Each participant was asked a series of questions from an interview guide that was designed to elicit their experiences about being a fitness competitor (for interview guide, see Appendix B). Questions were centered on topics such as training, dieting, empowerment, relationships, and motivations for competing. All interviews were conducted, audio-recorded, and transcribed by the first author. Data security procedures were implemented to ensure the confidentiality of participant information, and the study was approved by the University of Texas at San Antonio Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to conducting data collection (#14-088). All data were also de-identified, with names changed to pseudonyms.

### 3.2. Data Analysis Procedures

Data obtained from observational research were fully transcribed and coded manually. At the competitions at which the first author was not an active participant, careful notes were made, recording all accounts into a field notebook. Retrospective field notes were recorded shortly after competitions in which the first author participated. Ethnographic field notes were analyzed with attention to social practices (i.e., actions undertaken by competitors as well as interactions among competitors, promoters, judges, and audiences). These data reveal how fitness competitions are a social accomplishment that involve “doing” gender and embodiment. Interview transcripts were analyzed with the use of software suitable for coding and comparing interview data for thematic elements. Interviews were analyzed for key themes (e.g., standpoints and strategies) as well as experiential narratives (i.e., stories). Interview data provide an opportunity to examine discursive sense-making such as post-hoc explanations and reflections.

Data analyses were governed by a series of sensitizing concepts (Bowen 2006; Charmaz 2003), particularly those related to the themes of embodiment, gender difference, and gender dominance. Instead of analyzing the data for definitive concepts which leave little room for interpretation, we used sensitizing concepts (themes anticipated by theory, prior research, and questionnaire or study topics) during separate passes through the data that

<sup>6</sup> Most contests provide awards to the competitors who place in the top three positions within their category; however, some competitions provide awards to the top five if there are a large number of competitors in each category.

detected patterns in the field notes and transcribed interviews (see Table 2 for sample sensitizing concepts). For example, we anticipated that interviewed study participants would share stories regarding challenges or issues they experienced from rigorous forms of dieting and exercise, the personal sacrifices they made while training for a competition, and the quality of their relationships with friends and family due to their strict lifestyles. Participants also shared details regarding insecurities or forms of empowerment they experienced concerning drastic changes to their bodies. We were attuned to themes of difference (e.g., distinctions between tracks) and dominance (i.e., the privileging of one track over another).

**Table 2.** Examples of Sensitizing Concepts Utilized to Guide Data Analysis.

Embodiment	Gender Difference	Gender Dominance
Doing gender, such as performing and negotiating “femininity” in a masculinized sport	Stage presentation: bikini versus figure competitors (i.e., posing suit, makeup, hair, jewelry, high heels)	Dominant category between bikini and figure (perceptions from non-competitors, judges, judges, competitors themselves)
Heavy weightlifting, extensive cardio training, physically challenging workouts	Posing: bikini versus figure competitors	Competitor perceptions of non-competitors
Competitors having more muscle than the “average” woman	Judging, with separate criteria each competitor must meet based on chosen category	Views of typical non-healthy lifestyle
Sexuality questioned as a result of perceived masculinity	Organization and preparation of competitions	Attitudes of preeminence toward non-competitors
Intentional displays of pronounced femininity (i.e., breast implants) due to high body fat loss	Isolation, based on participation in individual sport versus team sport	Comparisons to male counterparts in gym while training
Competitor’s body resisting changes sought through training	Lifestyle differences evident among competitors	Men not accepting of women competitors in their “territory”
Competitor’s body resisting changes pursued through extreme dieting	Relationship maintenance with non-competitor family/friends	Natural competitions (i.e., drug tested) versus non-natural competitions
Empowerment and insecurities due to being a physically and aesthetically strong woman	Romantic relationship maintenance	Non-natural shows as the only path to Ms. Olympia, considered the most elite bodybuilders
Physical mastery of each mandatory pose and overall posing routine	Family lifestyle interruptions (family activities, dieting, time at gym away from family)	Subjectivity of judges as gatekeepers who determine competition winners
Evidence of athletic, aesthetic, erotic, and everyday forms of embodiment		

Data encompassing sensitizing concepts were organized into findings that are supported through various field observations and interviews. Quotes from interviews that are relevant to this study’s topic allowed us to connect themes to the negotiation of gender difference and dominance as well as embodiment. A final series of passes through the data were also completed using an emergent themes technique. At this point, sensitizing concepts were set aside and themes embedded in the data were discerned. This final phase of analysis is sometimes called a grounded theory approach. Demographic information describing participants’ general background such as age, marital status, and race-ethnicity is featured to describe the sample and provide a context for specific responses (see Table 3). The data collected for this study are not used to make generalizations about fitness competitors, but rather to explore deeply their aspirations, motivations, and experiences. For this reason, attention to widely observed (prevalent) patterns was complemented by evidence of counter-tendencies and “outlier” (idiographic) themes, all of which illuminate the subject of inquiry.

**Table 3.** Demographics of Competitors.

Name (Pseudonym)	Age <sup>1</sup>	Marital Status <sup>2</sup>	Race	Education <sup>3</sup>	Category <sup>4</sup>
Alice	37	M	Black/White	College	F
Ursula	44	M	White	College	B
Stacy	40	D	Black	Graduate	F&B
Emily	43	M	White	Some Col.	F
Amanda	51	D	Black	Some Col.	F
Hope	29	M	Black	Graduate	F
Isabella	27	NM	Hispanic	Graduate	F
Rachel	28	NM	Black	Some Col.	B
Ivonne	27	M	Black/White	High School	F
Olivia	38	D	White	College	F&B
Ivy	34	NM	White	Some Col.	F
Elaine	40	D	Black	College	F&B
Audrey	40	M	Black	Some Col.	F
Reese	45	M	White	College	F
Amber	26	NM	Hispanic	Graduate	B
Courtney	43	M	White	College	F
Christine	43	M	Black	Graduate	F
Mary	42	D	Black	College	F
Rayna	34	M	White	Graduate	F&B
Joy	50	M	White	College	F

Notes: <sup>1</sup> Average age of competitors interviewed is 38; <sup>2</sup> Marital Status (M = Married, D = Divorced, NM = Never Married); <sup>3</sup> Education is 4-point ordinal measure ("High School," "Some College," "College Degree," and "Graduate Degree"); <sup>4</sup> Category (competitive track) is defined such that F = Figure, B = Bikini, F&B = Figure and Bikini.

#### 4. Results

This section conveys key findings based on analyses of the interview data with twenty fitness competitors as well as data from ethnographic fieldwork (unobtrusive and participant observation). The findings are organized according to the four phases of a bikini and figure competitor's fitness journey: (1) contest entry (deciding to compete); (2) pre-competition (workout and diet regimens, balancing relationships during contest preparation, etc.); (3) competition day (negotiation of femininity, masculinity, and embodiment given gatekeepers' criteria, managing relationships with other competitors, etc.); and (4) post-competition (mental, physical, and relationship maintenance in the aftermath of an event). Our data analyses are structured chronologically given that this temporal trajectory is how competitors experience their fitness journey. The constructs of embodiment (athletic, aesthetic, erotic, and everyday bodies) and gender (difference and dominance) are woven throughout this organizational scheme to aid in understanding the experiences of fitness competitors.

##### 4.1. Point of Entry: Deciding to Compete

What factors influence women's decisions to enter a fitness competition? Questions asked through interviews and during ethnographic encounters revealed that all the competitors fell into one or both of two categories regarding their motivation to compete: (1) influenced by social factors and/or (2) a desire for personal growth and challenge. Competitors who were motivated by social factors shared that they often had people approach them in the gym inquiring whether they competed. This approach by strangers and acquaintances was often due to the intense and dedicated nature of their workouts as well as their already fit bodies. The point of entry for many of these competitors illustrated the dual character of rival bodies: gendered embodiment is at once socially inscribed (bodies that are acted upon) and is a site for bodily agency (bodies that act on their own accord). Put differently, athletic bodies are at once objects of social practice (gym workouts are designed to yield responses in specific muscle groups while such publicly performed routines are subject to the scrutiny of others) and agents of social practice (women's bodies

gradually increase their capacity for intense training, ultimately prompting reactions from others).

Yet, it is not mere athleticism that is sized up here. The aesthetic dimension of embodiment also looms large. Many women had no previous desire to compete; however, comments from strangers and acquaintances about the shape and proportionality of their bodies, in many cases, eventually motivated them to contemplate entering a competition. The rendering of judgments about workout performance (athletic body) and physical shape (aesthetic body) in a public environment like a gym demonstrates how women's bodies are acted upon through social inscription. Foucault (1977) suggests that bodily docility is achieved by the possibility that one is under surveillance at any given time (Foucault 1977). Male bodybuilders, for example, incorporate social judgments and self-regulation through the transformation of various bodily aesthetics and lifestyles (Brown 1999). Additionally, male bodybuilders must negotiate their gender identity and masculinity through the incorporation of socially subjective value judgments and meaning making (Brown 1999). The panoptic gaze and social judgment of pre-competition bodies illustrate the multifaceted nature of gendered embodiment: inquiries and gazes from onlookers regarding their participation in fitness competitions eventually led some women to make the decision to compete in a fitness competition. Questions such as "Are you training for a competition?" or "Have you competed?" were meaningful encounters for many women who ultimately decided to compete. Embedded within these questions is an implied affirmation about the performance and presentation of the competition-worthy body of the person to whom the questions are posed.

Making the decision to compete, however, did not come without concerns and consequences. Most of the women interviewed shared that they were already working out and eating in a moderately healthy fashion prior to training for their competition. Nonetheless, deciding to compete—and the specter of publicly displaying their body before a crowd of judges and onlookers—meant that their diets would need to become stricter (e.g., less carbohydrates, little to no sugar, no alcohol, increased protein) and their training more intense (e.g., longer workouts overall coupled with targeting specific muscle groups). However, women's bodies were not always wholly compliant. Excessive calorie-cutting too abruptly can result in a more sluggish metabolism that "holds onto" each morsel of scarce food while an insufficient protein intake can inadvertently bring about muscle loss. Here again, bodily agency and the need for women to "learn their bodies," including its response to nutritional and workout demands, is evident.

To illustrate the duality of bodies as both objects and agents of social practice, Mary and Rayna were both motivated to compete by being approached at their local gyms. Mary and Rayna explained that even though they were already working out regularly, the strictness of a competitor's diet was not something they initially desired.

I was working out in the gym pretty religiously and I was approached by Christine. And she had asked me if I competed. I had no desire to do so. I was currently working full-time in a position that I really didn't like. I was on the verge of terminating my employment with this company. And I like to eat and I like to engage in beverages, you know, occasionally, so I didn't have any desire. But she was pretty persuasive. I really didn't have any desire. But the seed had been planted and other people had started asking me. (Mary)

I was just working out in the gym and in a span of about, I don't know, four to five months, I had four different people approach and ask, "Are you training for a show?" I said no. Then I thought I really didn't have the time for it. I knew a little bit about the competitions but only from reading magazines. I didn't really know what it would take. At first, I was pretty sure I could not do the diet. I think that's what held me back. At first, I was like, "I cannot do the diet! I just want to eat." (Rayna)

Mary and Rayna both agreed that the rigidity of a competitor's diet caused the most concern for them in their decision-making process. All twenty of the competitors that were interviewed had prior athletic backgrounds that assisted in their transition to becoming a fitness competitor. Some women played sports in high school while others were dedicated runners, dancers, or had been working out already in the gym for several years. These women, then, already exhibited a kinetic connection, which is to say an intimate awareness of their bodies' performative capabilities. Already having an athletic background was beneficial for navigating through the gym workouts. However, just like Mary and Rayna, many of the competitors felt that the lifestyle change that was the most daunting was the rigidity of the diet.

Interviews and fieldwork encounters also revealed that several competitors were motivated by a desire for personal and physical growth. To these women, the personal challenge of competing was attractive. Many decided that participating in a fitness competition was something they could do to push their bodies further in their workouts or to personally improve themselves. Fieldwork conversations often indicated that competitors' workouts were intensified by the decision to compete. The specter of public humiliation on stage and the threat of disappointing friends or family who have marked the competition day in their calendar often "amped up" workouts significantly. Fieldwork and interview discussions indicated a clear delineation between the time prior to contest entry (hard but routinized workouts) and afterward (brutal and highly energetic workouts). Even before contest day, the very idea of participating in a fitness competition inspires the imagined presentation of self to various constituencies (judges, audiences, friends, and family). Ursula, like a few other competitors, wanted to check it off of her "bucket list," but also addressed the welcome sense of urgency that competition imposes.

I turned forty-one and it was just kind of on my bucket list to do. I had done pageants and all of that when I was younger and I was fit but I wasn't reaching my goal. I thought if I had a specific goal and signed up for a show then I would force myself to do it. (Ursula)

This desire for personal growth does not reflect a total shift away from social influence, as this type of gendered embodiment resonates with the aesthetic body. These competitors echoed the desire to improve upon the social status of their bodies, and therefore achieve a greater sense of self-confidence and reconfigure their own identity. The rendering of judgments about bodily aesthetics need not come from others. It can also arise from self-appraisals and personal evaluation.

A few competitors had both social factors and personal growth as motivations for competing, such as Alice and Amanda. Alice was socially motivated by onlookers in the gym but was also motivated personally by believing she already looked better than a woman who had previously competed.

I've worked out the majority of my adult life. And in working out, every once in a while, people would come up to you, "Oh, you look so great! Do you compete?" And I was like, "Oh my gosh, no, no way! I would never do that!" And then at my previous job there was a guy whose wife competed. And I was like, "Oh, that's kind of interesting." And then I saw her and not to be mean but I'm like, if she can do that, I can do that! (Alice)

Similarly, Amanda was a competitor with a military background. Once out of the military, Amanda was faced with some serious issues that led her on her fitness journey.

I became involved in fitness competitions after I came back from a tour in Iraq. I had numerous issues, a lot of mental issues, PTSD to name one. Bipolar, anxiety, things of that nature. So, I was advised by my psychiatrist that I needed to get into something that I could focus on and [that would] keep my attention. So, I decided to dabble in fitness. And so, with that being said, this is where I am today. (Amanda)

Alice and Amanda's narratives illustrate the interactional, institutional, and embodied contexts for contest entry decision-making. For Alice, the appearance-oriented aesthetic body inspired her entry into fitness competitions. Thus, the social assumption that she already competes (even before she did), along with her (negative) judgment of another competitor's body, provided a strong desire to enter a fitness competition. For Amanda, personal interaction with institutional authorities in the military and psychiatry, along with the mental health management benefits provided by pursuing the performative athletic body, prompted her to enter fitness competitions.

All competitors explained the motivations that led to their decision to compete and, for some, it was a mix of social factors and a desire for personal growth. Competitors also shared that they were concerned about the rigorousness of the diet and increased amount of training. Ultimately, competitors were able to persuade themselves that the benefits of competing exceeded the challenges. Regardless, if the competitor was in the bikini or figure category, the next step in their journey was to find strategies that would help them navigate the extreme lifestyle of being a fitness competitor.

#### *4.2. Pre-Competition I: Workouts, Diet, and Bodily Discipline*

Competitors revealed that their workouts differed greatly in intensity and style from "average" women in the gym. Fitness competitors felt that they possessed a higher level of discipline in their training and diet that surpassed even the most avid gym-goer. A competitor's workout may appear very unconventional when compared to a woman who works out frequently but does so only to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Admittedly, competitors shared that they felt a sense of dominance when working out due to their strength and dedication. Moreover, competitors did not view themselves as "average women" in the gym. Christine referred to the majority of women in the gym as "cardio bunnies," suggesting that her weight training was superior to the typical, cardio intensive workouts of many women she saw in the gym. Her narrative also highlights how bodies are spatially segregated in gyms between areas sets aside for free weights and those designated for cardio equipment.

Most women are cardio bunnies. And I'm not one. They're not over by the weights. If you're not over by the weights, I'm not going to get to know you because I'm not a bunny and I'm not in the dance classes. I'm over by the weights.  
(Christine)

Every woman interviewee and many ethnographic subjects devoted five to seven days per week in the gym to their workouts. Many used training techniques that consisted of "splits" (training or splitting regions of the body, such as the back, legs, arms, chest, and abs into different training sessions on different days). The performative athletic body and its product, the stage-ready aesthetic body, demand such specialization. Training based on a split method is highly rational for a fitness competitor given that this approach often works best for muscle growth while allowing time for each body part to recover from its intense yet targeted workout. Split training thereby leverages bodily agency (post-workout recuperation) in a way that still permits training intensely but also daily. Splitting body parts is a specialization that is incorporated by many bodybuilders and may seem foreign to those who only attend the gym on occasion. Thus, competitors negotiated embodiment through dissecting the athletic body into its constituent parts, with each part trained on a rotational basis.

Several competitors shared that they would do "two-a-days," whereby they would work out earlier in the day and then return to the gym later in the evening to complete another workout. When competitors are preparing for a show, a missed workout is not an option. Rachel explains that, despite her sometimes 50 to 60-hour workweek and required travel with her job, she manages to find ways to fit in a workout. Her training technique, however, may appear extreme to non-competitors.

I had to travel to LA for work a couple of weeks ago. I was only there for three days but I brought my tennis shoes with me. I brought all my stuff. I got there and found out there's no gym in the hotel. Dang! So here I am in the hotel hallway, lifting my suitcase. Doing jump squats with my suitcase and got up at like 4:00 in the morning running around. (Rachel)

Audrey also placed a high priority on making sure she completed her workouts, regardless of the situation. At the time of the interview, she was working a full-time job, studying to become a personal trainer, maintaining her own part-time business, and in preparation for a championship competition out of state.

Interviewer [FC]: So, describe for me what a typical gym workout looks like for you on any given day when you're training for a competition.

Audrey: Ahhhh, nothing's typical about it. (Laughter.) I get up in the morning. I'm already dressed for the gym. I'm like cutting down my time or whatever because it's like from the time . . .

Interviewer [FC]: So, you go to bed dressed for the gym?

Audrey: I go to bed dressed for the gym. So, I get up, grab my stuff, brush my teeth, go!

A woman jump-squatting in the hallway of her hotel, going to sleep in her gym clothes, or even working out more than once a day may seem extreme to even the most avid fitness enthusiast. Most competitors shared that working out consistently became a normal addition to their lifestyle change and was therefore "typical." However, these changes did not come without challenges.

The time spent working out for a competition was often much more time than the competitor was used to investing. Interviews permitted competitors to elaborate on the challenges that arose from their intense training schedules.

Getting up at 3 a.m. to go downstairs to get on the treadmill for 30–45 min, then working all day, and getting off at 7, and then going to the gym again. That was really challenging. (Hope)

Every morning, it was an hour of cardio on an empty stomach and I would always do the stepmill [stair-stepping machine]. From there, I'd cook my meals, prep, go to school, and mid-afternoon I'd have a meal. I would either train at school or go to Gold's [gym] and have my weight training in the afternoon. Come back, have another meal, get all my meals done, and at the end of my meals, I would go back for another hour of cardio. (Isabella)

Hope and Isabella's narratives provide insight into the differences that make a woman a committed fitness competitor. Most competitors worked out twice per day to maximize their workout intensity and their body's ability to adapt to the workouts. The examples given by competitors regarding their workout styles support the differences that exist between frequent gym-goers and fitness competitors. Not only did competitors have to adjust to the lifestyle change of more strenuous and time-consuming workouts. They also had to adjust to a different lifestyle in terms of their diets.

Bikini and figure competitors both agreed that the competition diet is one of the most important and sometimes most challenging parts of the entire process. Competitors were asked to describe their competition diet and to explain any challenges it posed. Amanda discussed the monotony of her diet while Emily described her source of motivation to keep her on track.

Breakfast, four to six egg whites, two servings of grits or a serving of oatmeal. Second meal, chicken breasts, brown rice, green beans. Third meal, chicken breasts, brown rice, broccoli. Chicken breasts, brown rice, sweet potato. Last meal is six egg whites and then the meal before that is chicken breasts, brown rice, green beans, or broccoli. (Amanda)

In the beginning, it was pretty much egg whites with brown rice or a sweet potato. I pretty much found myself eating tilapia and asparagus and 1/3 cup of brown rice pretty much for every meal. Definitely about the last two months. I had been to so many competitions before watching, because I love to go watch those, and there would always be the girls that you're like, "Oh, she should not be up there." Not being mean but you know. That was NOT what I was going to look like and that's why I was horrified and why I was so strict with my diet because in my head I was like, "I will NOT be THAT girl with that ugly butt up there on that stage!" (Emily)

The majority of interviewed competitors had diets similar to Amanda that consisted of a substantial amount of protein such as chicken or white fish, one to two different varieties of a healthy carbohydrate, and lots of vegetables. All twenty interviewed competitors shared that they had a regular eating schedule that consisted of five to six meals per day (forcing competitors to eat every two to three hours). Eating became a task that was done in order to "fuel your body" instead of eating for pure enjoyment. The rigorousness of the competition diet, however, brought specific challenges. Even with the constant eating of meals, competitors sometimes struggled with their bodies having an insatiable appetite due to their consistently intense training.

I mean there were days you're just hungry. You just feel hungry and you feel exhausted. Coffee was my best friend. I would use that in between. It seemed to hold me over in between meals. There were days I was drinking six cups of coffee. (Rayna)

While in competition prep, competitors often take exceptional measures to make sure they do not do anything to jeopardize their diets. Common efforts included preparing all of their meals in Tupperware and taking them wherever they went. Amber recalls a time when she began to feel awkward around other people because of her competition diet lifestyle.

I always felt like I couldn't just live a normal life necessarily because people would look at me weird if I pulled a Tupperware out of my bag or my friends wouldn't like it, you know what I mean? So, I'd always try to avoid it. Or being at like a party. I went to a banquet, my ex-boyfriend's banquet. Just all firefighters. And here I am pulling Tupperware out of my purse. And just seeing how people reacted to that. People were like ugh, is she crazy? She's eating just salad right now? Out of her purse? Like, she can't eat everything else everyone else is eating? (Amber)

Another challenge caused by this extreme dieting was the likelihood of becoming temperamental. Many competitors had a diet that consisted of low carbohydrates that eventually affected their moods negatively as well as their ability to function daily without exhaustion. In short, as the contest-ready aesthetic body became paramount, the functionality of the everyday body waned. Alice and Rayna described the emotional toll their regimented lifestyle took on their mental and physical states.

I remember one time I didn't feel like cooking eggs. I was tired. And so I said, well, I'll just get some precooked hard-boiled eggs and some fresh green beans and that's what I'll eat for my first few meals. And I went to HEB and I wandered around for 45 min just not knowing what I was doing. Just being in la-la land. I was so carb-depleted, I was getting no fat. It was so weird, and people were like, "What's wrong?" I would want to fall asleep at my desk. It was just, it was awful. (Alice)

Marcus [her trainer] was the one that suggested that I just close my mouth because I talked to him about, you know, just being kind of bitchy. He was just like, "Close your mouth." He's like, "I've done it the hard way, I've learned the hard way. So, zip it and go on." There were times where I had to go cry

somewhere else. I don't like crying very much but there were times where I would just cry. (Rayna)

The extreme dieting and demanding fitness lifestyle of these bikini and figure competitors illuminates their dedication and discipline. Additionally, this discipline is gendered because, as women competitors, the goal is to strip away body fat while revealing the shapely and toned muscles expected for their competitive track. Many of the strategies used by these fitness competitors stand in stark contrast to non-competitors who attend the gym on a regular basis and who habitually eat a healthy diet. To have a body suitable for public display at a competition, that is, a body judged favorably in terms of its shapeliness, tone, and so forth (aesthetic body) requires nothing less than using the gym and diet as disciplinary tools to test and expand one's physical limits (athletic body) during the pre-competition phase.

#### 4.3. Pre-Competition II: Balancing Social Relationships

Competitors had to learn strategies to negotiate all aspects of their lives, especially relationships with those closest to them. Relationship maintenance was frequently needed in the context of close friendships, marriages, and even sexual relationships (the last of which was discussed mostly by married competitors). All twenty of the women who were interviewed acknowledged that there is a level of selfishness and self-absorption synonymous with being a competitor. During competition preparation, bikini and figure competitors' lives become highly consumed with training, dieting, and body maintenance. This selfishness often caused relationship difficulties with people closest to them. In some ways, this pattern indicates that a greedy identity is needed to pursue an athletic body in the greedy institutional milieu of fitness contests. Other areas of life were to be sacrificed in the pursuit of athletic achievements that, in the end, were needed to mold the body into its stage-ready aesthetic best.

Women who were single or divorced often commented that they were "lucky" or "fortunate" that they did not have to worry about balancing their lifestyle with a significant other. Despite not having a spouse or a family, however, single competitors still had to find strategies that helped them balance their fitness competition pursuits with other areas of their lives, such as with close friendships. For example, single competitors often found it difficult to maintain relationships with boyfriends, and differences in their lifestyles were often the reason for termination of a relationship. For example, Ivonne explains that during her competition prep, the extra time away from her friends caused them to not be supportive, while Amber shared that her distinctive lifestyle caused her and her boyfriend to end their relationship.

I notice that you kind of find out who's really supportive of you being successful and who's not because some people, they can be like, I don't know if it's jealousy or just whatever's going on with them. It brings it out in them how they're not really supportive and they'll back out of your life so to speak. After a few shows, I learned who those people are and when I know I'm going to be competing I just kind of cut down on my communication with them and then when I'm not [competing], you know, we can be friends. (Laughter.) (Ivonne)

Me and my ex broke up right after the Phil Heath [competition] because of time constraints. We lived in different cities and then on top of that I felt like every time I went over there, I had to pack everything I needed, food-wise, to take over there, so I'd be prepared and I wouldn't screw up. If we went to the gym, we wouldn't work out together. We would work out on our own just because we had different types of training. He was just like, "I feel like you put the gym before me and you put your food before me." (Amber)

Married competitors rarely experienced the same challenges with friendships when compared to their single counterparts. This distinction could be attributed to the fact that their time is already limited with friends, so the extra time spent away from their friends

was not felt as significantly as it was among single competitors. With a lot of time spent at the gym and a change in dietary needs (synonymous with athletic bodies), married competitors learned very quickly that their decision to become a fitness competitor did not always equate to support from their spouses. Although conveyed in various fashions, the ten married competitors indicated that their husbands were “as supportive as they could be.” In effect, this “support” equated to their husbands often displaying signs of animosity towards them for the time spent away at the gym as well as for the difference in lifestyle when compared to their own. Emily, Audrey, and Reese all had spouses who made it apparent to them that their husbands were not highly supportive of their lifestyle. Differences in diets, too much time spent away from home, and not having any more “fun” were all dissatisfactions expressed by their husbands.

Well, my husband likes to eat and he’s not a healthy eater. And like, for him, going out to eat is a big deal. So, he often made me feel guilty about that and it was hard when we would go on little mini trips to Galveston for three days or whatnot. That was challenging because he wanted to go out to eat at all these great restaurants. And for me it was not a big thing because when I’m in a zone, I am in the zone and I could care less. I’m like, it doesn’t bother me that I don’t get to order some great meal at a great restaurant, you know. I would actually sneak my food in and have it on my lap. Not a big deal. But that was the hardest thing, was really with him. (Emily)

The sacrifices, unfortunately, have been in the marriage. Because it’s like right now, he has a job where he has strange hours. I’m already having strange hours and he’s like, “You live in the gym.” I’m like, well, I gotta compete. I’m getting up to leave, he’s either already at work or he is in the bed asleep. But then, by the time I’m gone, I’m gone. So, trying to find that us time together has been a HUGE, HUGE deal. (Audrey)

I would say where it maybe hurt a little bit is that I would get so strict towards the end with my food where he was like, “Can we not even have any fun now?” (Reese)

Similar to her counterparts, Joy’s husband had objections with her choice to compete. However, her husband’s reaction was among the most critical shared by interviewees. Indeed, while many of the married competitors shared that their husbands were only negative during particular times, Joy highlighted a different scenario that involved children in their family.

I thought about doing it not too long ago and I mentioned it to him and he was not happy about my wanting to get into it. And he thought, well, why? And again [he thought] it’s stupid. It’s going to take more time away from our family and just thought maybe I was going to look for, you know, a boyfriend or he would say, “Why [are] you doing this?” I want to do it for myself and he didn’t get it. He was just opposed to it and so I didn’t have that support or encouragement at home. And then that turned into the kids. They would hear his negative comments and then the kids would feed off of that and so nobody was supportive. (Joy)

Joy’s husband took the difference in their lifestyle personally, attributing her desire to be away from home so that she could frequently workout as her “looking for a boyfriend.” Joy went on to share in her interview that her decision to compete was not worth the sacrifice of her marriage, so she would no longer compete after her next competition. These narratives illustrate that balancing a fitness competitor’s lifestyle with a family produces challenges that are distinct from being a single competitor.

Competitors who were married expressed that they were often challenged by not only the time restraints of maintaining a home while wanting to find time to work out, but also with maintaining a frequent and satisfying sexual relationship with their spouse. Several

married competitors found a humorous irony in the fact they now donned what many might consider to be ideal feminine bodies that consisted of six-pack (abdominal) muscles, small waists, and shapely legs, but they lacked the energy to maintain a satisfying sexual relationship with their husband.

I'm too tired to have sex. I'm so exhausted that I'm just like, I really don't have one more ounce to give. As soon as I touch the bed I'm passing out. I try to be cognizant of that so that I'm not, because my husband's probably sick of it. Because he told me, he even said, "What good is a hot bikini wife when she can't put out?" (Laughter.) (Rayna)

Well, no carbs means "get away!" (Laughter.) There's just a lot of snapping and it's interesting because to your husband you look great, but you're like, "I'm tired, I'm hungry." That's the last thing on your mind. So, lots of complaints from the husband. (Alice)

I feel like it [training for competitions] can get in the way just because you're exerting so much energy. Just like working out and cooking and going to the grocery store and doing laundry from all your sweaty workout clothes. And you're constantly being pulled in so many different directions that sometimes it can decrease your libido a little bit. But I mean on the other side, I feel so good about myself, I'm like, "Heey!" (Laughter.) (Ivonne)

These narratives from Rayna, Alice, and Ivonne add to the revelations that there are a lot of relational sacrifices that accompany being a married fitness competitor. Competitors explain the irony of feeling satisfied with how their bodies look but having little to no desire to be sexually active with their husband because of their exhausting lifestyles. These narratives shed light on the tangled relationship between the athletic, aesthetic, and erotic bodies. While preparing for a competition, the athletic body of the gym is the singular means by which to achieve the stage-ready aesthetic body. Where does this leave the sexually capable erotic body? Exhausted! Bodily agency asserts itself in this tangled mix of bodies, as sex is an activity that the calorie-deprived, gym-worn body cannot readily afford (cf. [Connell 2005](#); [Davis 2003](#)). Competitors often find their bodies resisting any effort to engage in peripheral physical activities outside of working out at the gym, and sex is among these extraneous pursuits.

#### 4.4. Competition Day I: "Weighting" for the Stage

A fitness competition event is the culmination of vigorous training, strict dieting, and immense personal sacrifice by bikini and figure competitors who have worked toward an ideal body that is defined by the normative standards of the track in which they are competing. All fitness competitions are divided into two segments, a morning show (pre-judging) and an evening show (final judging and awards). The morning show is strictly for competitors to come on stage with all other competitors in their category to get judged and scored in a preliminary fashion. The evening show is the pinnacle all competitors are eager to reach. Competitors often shared that the evening show was more "fun" and less stressful because the judging had already been completed. The evening segment also drew more audience members. Each of the four shows the first author attended or in which she competed appeared to have had anywhere between 200–300 members in the audience during the evening segment whereas the morning audience attendance averaged about 100 people or less. Additionally, bikini and figure competitors often wore black silk robes or long baggy sweatpants to cover up their bikinis when not on stage. Blurring the lines between aesthetic and erotic bodies, this cover-up leads to a seductive final reveal that keeps audience members, as well as other competitors, intrigued to see the bodies of all the competitors.

When not on stage, competitors were often seen eating (minimally) foods that consisted of rice cakes or chicken breasts. Foods high in carbohydrates had the potential to cause a competitor to not look as lean on stage. For the same reason, competitors often only

sipped minimal amounts of water throughout the day. An irony of the day of competition for these participants is that as fit as they appear, their bodies are not in a healthy condition. Competitors are often severely calorie-deprived and dehydrated due to their lack of water consumption. Since all competitors had been on an extremely strict diet during the final weeks leading up to competition day, it was also common to hear women backstage share with each other what their post-show “cheat meal”<sup>7</sup> was going to be. Many competitors seemed to relish the idea of eating their cheat meal as much or more than the idea of winning a trophy.

All fitness shows have a similar format and look. At the bottom of the stage was a panel of about seven to eight judges charged with evaluating and scoring the physical attributes of each competitor. Every judge, who was introduced at each show by the emcee, was acknowledged for his or her fitness accomplishments. Judges often had competed themselves in a competition, owned fitness studios, or were personal trainers, giving them the authority to sit as the show’s gatekeepers. These gatekeepers determine which competitor’s hard work, dedication, and sacrifice will be rewarded with a trophy. Not all fitness shows offer monetary awards; however, three of the four shows the first author attended had monetary prizes that were awarded to the top placements. These awards often ranged from USD 200 to USD 1000.

Just prior to taking the stage, bikini and figure competitors can be found backstage making last minute touch-ups to their hair and makeup, applying a gloss over their tan, and “pumping up” with resistance bands or weights to get their muscles to stand out on stage. The atmosphere is one of camaraderie and support. Competitors often complement each other and help apply any last-minute touch-ups, while wishing each other well before taking the stage. Each woman could relate to the perseverance it took to get to this day. Attitudes of support and encouragement were evident. Competitors had prepared to compete against one another but there is little sense that the competition trumped the accomplishment of making it to competition day. Many competitors shared a similar perspective during interviews, stating that competing should always be more than about just winning a trophy.

You’re in competition to become the best person on that stage that you can and then if you want, you know, to continue to get better so that you can go pro or whatever, that’s great. But mainly, just be in competition with yourself. (Olivia)

The biggest thing I wish women that did this in general would take away from this is, compete with yourself. Stop competing with the women next to you or on either side of you. Compete with yourself because my philosophy is the best me on stage is the best I’m going to be and the best competition I’m going to put out there for you. I can’t be you, you can’t be me. I can just be the best me, so that’s my philosophy. (Elaine)

Olivia and Elaine both agreed that the primary focus of the competition should not always be about winning a trophy. They concur that, ultimately, competing should be about working to improve one’s overall self, while winning should be a secondary motive. Several other competitors shared similar feelings. The experience and discipline of training and becoming a better version of oneself was much more gratifying to competitors than any other aspect of that day.

To enhance the positive atmosphere of the competition, each evening show began with upbeat music playing in the background to set the mood for the audience to cheer for each of the competitors. This atmosphere is also designed to provide energy to the competitors as they walk across the stage. All competitors (men and women) come out on stage one by one, pose twice, and walk backstage, similar to the format of a beauty pageant.

<sup>7</sup> “Cheat meal” was a term used by all competitors to describe a meal that was not considered a part of their training diet. These cheat meals often consisted of foods that are high in fat and sugar.

It was after this grand entrance that individual categories (e.g., bikini, figure) were ushered back on stage one at a time for final judging and to announce the winners.

Several competitors divulged that competing was equivalent to a performance, as they could not imagine their “everyday” version of themselves being on stage in heels and a bikini. Competitors smile, pose, and sometimes interact with the audience to enhance their stage presence. Participation in a competition is a particular type of embodied practice that is highly performative (Butler 1990). Competitors literally perform on stage before judges and an audience, with competition placement very much at stake. Bikini and figure competitors must be concerned with striking a delicate, yet subtle balance between expected amounts of femininity while also exhibiting muscle tone, symmetry, and physically fit beauty. This all must be done while simultaneously “performing” for the judges and audience through displays of bodily comportment that demonstrate mastery of walking, posing, and smiling consistent with normative standards that govern these events. Ivonne and Joy both revealed it was the performing aspect that transformed them and helped them to be confident on stage.

I was nervous about being on stage, but it seemed like it came naturally. After I do a show, I’m like, how did I get on stage like that and do that? But it’s almost like it transforms me into a different person. (Ivonne)

People say, “Oh, I could never do that!” But you don’t have to be yourself. You be that person that you want to be. (Joy)

Ivonne and Joy discovered that they were able to embrace being on stage by performing as a different person. Similar to Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis of human interaction (Goffman 1959), these competitors engage in a performance to minimize their fears of being on stage. Competitors “act” by performing poses, smiling, and interacting with the audience and judges to gain points for high placement in their respective category.

Competitors were called out one by one by name according to category. Once all competitors were lined up across the stage, they were ushered off, and the top three to five placements were asked to come back out on stage. While competitors often agreed that winning was not the primary reason for competing, it was evident that there was nothing short of elation from competitors who did place in the top positions of their respective categories. Mary humorously shared that winning for her was a top priority.

Winning is pretty cool. I like to win, and my first non-win was kind of, it was just kind of a big difference in feeling. I placed fifth and ninth out of twenty something women in a non-drug-tested [competition], so in the big picture, that’s pretty darn good. But I still didn’t get no trophy! (Laughter.) So for me, winning is important. If it wasn’t a COMPETITION, you could still do all that stuff and stay at home and not spend all that money. So yes, I like to win. Who trains to lose? (Mary)

Competitors that won their categories were often unpretentious in their demeanor. All received their trophies graciously and even congratulated other competitors for their placement. All the competitions end with announcing winners who have won their overall categories. Bikini and figure categories are divided typically by height and age (competitors usually over the age of 35 compete in a Masters category). The winners of each of the categories end the evening show by competing against one another and one winner, each from bikini and figure, are crowned the overall winners. These winners are granted pro-cards, which enables them to compete at a higher level of the sport.

Bikini and figure competitors’ journey to the stage is characterized by a paradox. These women engage in traditionally “masculine” activities (e.g., weightlifting to put on a significant amount of muscle) to prepare themselves for the highly feminized presentation of their stage-ready body. As noted, the gym-going athletic body is therefore the vehicle through which the stage-ready aesthetic body is pursued. Regardless, competitors must engage in a challenging gender balancing act to embody the characteristics on which they are judged while on stage. To be sure, expectations of muscularity are considerably greater

for figure competitors than for those in the bikini track. Still, cultural norms of femininity are often exhibited on stage by both bikini and figure competitors. Nonetheless, both groups of women commonly have different attitudes surrounding acceptable amounts of overt femininity and masculinity displayed in a fitness competition, leading to ideas of dominance between competitors.

#### 4.5. Competition Day II: Femininity versus Masculinity and Gatekeepers' Influence

The ethnographic portion of the study that focused on contest day revealed a set of gendered and embodied processes we call hegemonic muscularity for men and emphatic eroticism for women. As it turns out, hegemonic muscularity and emphatic eroticism are highly gendered counterpart processes that have meaningful implications for fitness competitors. These divergent normative standards are literally embodied by men and women on contest day and provide the context for interactions among competitors and their performances on stage during competitive rounds.

Fitness competitions are held within bodybuilding shows, and the latter have been around for many decades while the former is a relatively new sport. Hegemonic muscularity is the practice of privileging body mass (more muscle is better) and doing so in a gendered fashion (men's competitions in any competitive category are the "main event" of that category). In many sporting and entertainment events, the main event ("headliner") is always the final act to appear. According to this crescendo-like logic, all that comes before the headliner is a "warm-up" series of performances designed to gradually build up to that main event. Bodybuilding contests are structured in just this fashion. Hegemonic muscularity is institutionally inscribed by having women's bodybuilding events precede corresponding men's events. Thus, it is difficult to imagine a bodybuilding contest in which any women's competition truly headlines the overall event. This gendered dimension of hegemonic muscularity is overlaid by a bodily order in which the series of competitions gradually build toward the traditional pinnacle event, such that men's physique competitions precede men's bodybuilding competitions.

Quite interestingly, this musclemen-as-headliner logic is inverted for women's fitness competitions, which are instead beholden to what we call emphatic eroticism. In women's fitness competitions, a premium is placed on the sexualized and objectified character of women's bodies. While shows may vary in their ordering of categories, bikini competitions are commonly the most popular headliner act for women and have, in many cases, upstaged and even "demoted" women's muscularity events to warm-up act status. In fact, a good case could be made that women's bodybuilding has become further marginalized with the rise of women's fitness competitions because women's bodybuilding risks blurring the lines between men's and women's bodies. The bikini competition preserves and even underscores that gendered boundary.

Hegemonic muscularity, this hierarchical ordering of men's bodies by degree of muscle mass, is reified by audiences attending daylong bodybuilding shows. Generally, the degree and, in fact, decibel level, of crowd responsiveness changes as the competition moves toward the pinnacle event, namely, the men's bodybuilding competition, especially the men's heavyweight bodybuilding competition (the ultimate "headliner"). In a sort of embodied collective effervescence, the bodies of audience members themselves become more animated, demonstrative, and raucous (standing up, cheering, whistling, etc.) as the show moves toward the main event.

Emphatic eroticism, which governs women's fitness competitions, means that the loudest cheering and greatest audience response is for the most "not-male" bodies, namely, the bikini competitors. In this way, bodybuilding contests contribute to the creation of rival bodies not just within a particular portion of the shows (which competitor wins that specific event) but categorically and hierarchically organize various types of bodies by gender, muscle mass (for men), and erotic objectification (for women). In this embodied and gendered performance, the most muscular men's bodies occupy a privileged status,

followed closely—and conversely but gender-appropriately—by the most erotic of the women’s bodies atop the gender hierarchy.

Despite these hierarchies, contests are not cut-throat endeavors. Competitors often are “sportsmanlike” (note the intentional use of “man” here given hegemonic muscularity) inasmuch as rivals wish one another luck, share equipment for pre-contest “pumping up,” and even oil up one another’s backs prior to stage performances. Thus, ethnographic fieldwork revealed that there is an odd mix of camaraderie and rivalry all within any single show. However, the formidable presence of the latter—rivalry within and among contest day performances—is unmistakable and institutionally inscribed by the very structure of these events and the ritualized responses of audiences. Interview narratives speak to the means by which women competitors in the bikini and figure tracks negotiate these norms.

To achieve top placement in either the bikini or figure category, competitors must adhere to the rules of presenting an “appropriate” body, one that conforms to the aforementioned norms. For women, this not only includes a physically fit body, but it also requires flawless makeup, perfect hair, an eye-catching bikini, jewelry, and the proper high heel shoes to present an ideal aesthetic body.<sup>8</sup> While observing competitors prior to them taking stage at all four competitions, it was evident that competitors embraced the competition-mandated feminine characterizations. Competitors spent their time backstage prior to going on stage adding last minute touch-ups to their makeup, hair, and tans. These moments were contrary to the masculine characterizations that are often associated with the muscular bodies that many of the competitors presented.

Many competitors develop strategies to distance themselves from being labeled “too masculine.” The most common strategy used by several competitors to enhance their femininity entailed getting breast implants. With a substantial loss of body fat, many competitors lose most of their breast tissue, leaving many of them with feelings of insecurity. Isabella and Audrey both shared their initial insecurities with not having large breasts. Isabella does not utter the word “breasts” in her description, but she does not need to do so. By counterposing terms like “nothing” versus “the package,” she adroitly speaks to this issue.

I remember when I cut down, I mean had nothing. So, at one point, I was like, if I’m going to be doing this for the rest of my life, I mean competing and being like this, man, maybe I should consider having that enhanced to just add to it. So that did make me a little insecure as far as when I was up there seeing these females like really with the package there. I felt I was missing out on that. (Isabella)

I didn’t like the way that my bikini top looked for a show. It made me look flat. So, I was like, okay, obviously if you’re working your chest, you lose the fat. I didn’t feel very feminine. Although I looked feminine on the pictures, I didn’t feel very feminine that day. When you’re doing certain poses, your bikini top rolls up on you and then I’m looking from the side view. It’s almost like, okay, I should have stuffed myself up a little bit. (Audrey)

Although Isabella and Audrey shared insecurities about their bodies not appearing and feeling feminine enough, they both agreed that breast implants were not for them. Other competitors felt similarly and described that they embraced their “natural” bodies after getting over the initial insecurity they encountered. Nonetheless, the majority of the competitors that were interviewed were supportive of the idea of a woman getting implants, if it were “done for the right reason.” Several competitors used terminology such as “to each her own,” believing that there was nothing wrong with getting implants as long as it was not done just to place well in a competition. Stacy’s comment regarding breast implants represented sentiments expressed by many of the competitors.

<sup>8</sup> Most organizations require bikini and figure competitors to wear four- to five-inch clear high heel shoes. The clear shoe gives the illusion of an elongated leg.

I'm definitely all for women, or anybody, altering their bodies the way they want. But I'm kind of bothered by the idea of women feeling pressure to get breast implants or something strictly for the purpose of the show. That's just a personal concern that I have, you know, but apart from that it's okay. (Stacy)

Competitors often felt that there was a pronounced preference for having breast implants. This attitude supported the idea that overt displays of femininity would prevail over a more masculine look (i.e., little to no breasts) in fitness competitions. Even though many of the women felt that there was nothing essentially wrong with competitors having the implants, they did concur that competitors with breast implants ultimately have an advantage over other competitors. Elaine forthrightly stated that women with breast enhancements hold a dominant position over those who do not have them, while Amber pointed to the pro ranks of the sport setting the tone for this gendered expectation.

If you look at the same body with different people and one has enhancements and one is without enhancements, the one with enhancements will always do better, without a doubt. And I mean, that's just the way it is. So, you have to make up your mind whether that's something that you want to do or if it's something you're not going to do. And just be willing to accept the results of it. (Elaine)

In bikini, when you look at all the pros, EVERY SINGLE one of them has them. There's not one that doesn't have big boobs. There may be one or two but it's a very small number. And the same thing at my show. Most of the girls had them. So, my thing is like, I think if I take it to next level, I think I might need them. (Amber)

Undoubtedly, these attitudes pertaining to breast enhancements suggest that prevailing ideas of femininity are reinforced even through fitness competitions. While many competitors were satisfied with having their natural breasts (regardless of the size), competitors recognized that breast enhancements could be advantageous to a high placement in a competition. The attitude that many women held regarding bikini and figure competitors with breast enhancements substantiates how conventional views of femininity are prevalent in these shows.

Dominance also surfaces through the power held by the judges of each competition. Many competitors expressed their frustrations with not always knowing what the judges were looking for given the subjectivity of the sport. General guidelines gave competitors an indication of what their body should look like (e.g., figure competitors must have defined muscles; bikini competitors must have a softer look and not be too muscular). However, no matter how fit a competitor appeared, the final decision of the competitor's body was ultimately left up to the judges. Elaine's account illustrates how her efforts seemed to miss the specific objectives of the competition gatekeepers.

So, they [the judges] told me off the bat, that was my one and only critique, you are too hard for [the bikini] category! I was like, "You mean I did all this work for what?!" So that's when I showed up for the next show, which was like a month and half later, since I already had the body. It was an NPC show. I bought a figure suit and entered that competition. And I was basically a bikini girl in the figure competition. (Elaine)

Elaine's narrative suggests that the subjectivity of the sport can be problematic for the competitors. Standards are provided to competitors about the expectations that govern their track. However, track-specific criteria are open to interpretation and often leave competitors—especially those without a trainer—puzzled. What exactly does "hard" and "soft" mean and where is the line between them? It can be difficult to tell. Further complicating matters is the application of such nebulous standards by the sport's gatekeepers. What judges are looking for at each individual show varies. While one set of judges may want the bikini competitors to look a little "harder" with more muscle, another set of judges may require a much softer look with relatively less muscle. And, as can be quickly revealed

by a comparison of pictures featuring winners in these tracks over the past decade, these standards are quickly evolving. Elaine expressed that she was too muscular for the bikini category of her first show but with the same body, she was not muscular enough for the figure category in a different show. So how then does a competitor make the decision as to what category is right for their body type? The competitor makes her best effort to figure out this puzzling set of subjective standards, sometimes with help from a trainer, more seasoned competitors, or her own experiences with judges in previous contests.

#### 4.6. Competition Day III: Bikini Versus Figure

More women are opting to compete in the bikini and figure categories when compared to traditional women's bodybuilding. The large number of competitors in the bikini category at each show made it apparent that bikini was more popular than figure. Competitors' narratives revealed that due to the amount of muscle a woman had to put on her body to become a figure competitor, this category was often more difficult to enter. Moreover, given the rising standards of muscle mass in men's bodybuilding, the proliferation of women's competitive tracks has unleashed women bodybuilders to become more muscular than ever before. Gender being a relational construct, these changes in bodybuilding have repercussions for other competitive tracks among women. In some measure, today's fitness track competitors are yesterday's bodybuilders. Fitness competitors, who do sport considerable muscle, are a far cry from bikini competitors, much less the everyday bodies of women who stay in shape but do not compete.

Every competition that the first author attended or in which she competed had approximately five to ten competitors in each of the figure categories while bikini averaged about fifteen or more competitors. Competitors revealed various reasons for the popularity of the bikini category. Several competitors remarked that they thought the figure category was "too serious" while stating that the bikini category was "more fun." A few competitors felt that being a figure competitor involved having "too much muscle." Ursula and Rayna both competed in bikini. (In fact, Rayna competed in both bikini and figure to see how she would place in both.) Both shared sentiments about how "masculine" they felt figure competitors appeared.

I feel that they tend to be a little more masculine looking, definitely harder, more cut up. For me, it's not what I want. But not saying they don't look good. If they're happy. (Ursula)

Bikini I still see as something very feminine. Very girly. The posing makes it, it makes you feel more like a lady or of something of interest to men. Figure, I think that it's still feminine, but the posing is a little bit more masculine. Really, after doing the competition, I don't even think I want to get my delts as big as the girls in the IFBB. My husband would be sad if my delts made his look like crap. (Laughter.) (Rayna)

Conversely, many figure competitors contend that the bikini category had too much of a voyeuristic or even sexual connotation to it. Moreover, the bikini category did not require the same rigorous training and dieting standards necessary to compete in the figure category. A common refrain among some figure competitor interviewees was what could be called the "not-sport" critique of bikini competitions. In these narratives, the bikini track is viewed as privileging the appearance-oriented aesthetic body to the detriment of the performance-oriented athletic body. Bikini bodies may look conventionally attractive because they fit traditional expectations of femininity. However, bikini competitors could never keep pace with the more athletic bodies of figure competitors in the gym, especially where the use of heavy free weights is concerned. Figure competitors, from this vantage point, are more "serious athletes." By extension, figure competitors are less bound by restrictive gender norms to which bikini competitors too readily defer.

Within these tangled critiques of bikini embodiment, the erotic body also surfaces, albeit by way of counterpoint. A few fitness competitors invoked phrases that likened

some of the sexualized poses in bikini competitions to stripping or semi-pornographic modeling. (Bikini poses and suits are, in fact, designed to be more sexually suggestive.) Interviews with figure competitors revealed that the posing and coquettish nature of bikini competitors diminished the status of this track in their eyes.

Bikini I see as more, I don't know, I guess even after a while the more I watched it I'm like, this is kind of like a T&A [tits and ass] show. Figure and now with physique, I just thought was more of being toned and lean but classy, you know, a little more classy. I don't see any sport in bikini whatsoever, just to be quite honest. (Emily)

So, bikini, I don't see that as much as a sport. It's like, some of the girls, especially the pros, are more muscular but the posing is ridiculous. You don't need to do all that! (Laughter.) (Alice)

Emily and Alice's narratives illuminate the perceived provocative nature of the bikini competitors' posing and flirtatious interaction with the audience. Women in both categories are required to perform quarter turns to give the judges an opportunity to evaluate them from the front, rear, and both sides. Rear poses for bikini competitors, however, accentuate attention to the glutes (the "A" in "T&A") in a flirtatious manner. In one rear pose, the bikini competitor bends at the waist slightly and arches her back while facing the back of the stage so her glutes are stuck out toward the judges and audience. This pose commonly elicits an enthusiastic reaction from audiences. Figure competitors, conversely, have mandatory poses that exhibit a clearer display of muscular development, somewhat akin to bodybuilding poses but stopping short of the all-out muscular display in the bodybuilding category (see Figure 2 below for illustrations).



Figure 2. Bikini and figure comparison (Lohre 2017).

In fact, these competitive categories remain very much in motion. A new women's "wellness" category is now situated between bikini and figure. Additionally, the women's "physique" category has for several years occupied an intermediate space between figure and women's bodybuilding. In fact, women's bodybuilding has diminished in status given the popularity of other women's competitive categories. Distinctions across categories are typically based on the combined continua of muscularity (degree of muscle size) and leanness (degree of low body fat that yields muscle hardness, definition, etc.). Poses also differ in each category. In fact, a cottage industry in training has emerged simply to help women distinguish between this dizzying array of ever-proliferating categories. Trainer Julie Lohre's website, for example, describes the new wellness category as an amalgam

of a “bikini top” and a “figure or fitness bottom” (Lohre 2017). Her website also features videos about the attributes judges emphasize in each category (division), with the bikini track recommended for women who fit a specific profile (Lohre 2017).

Amber and Hope, cited above, had situations that influenced their attitudes about the differences between the bikini and figure categories. At the time of her competition, Amber’s trainer felt that her body was not muscular enough for figure, so she competed in bikini. She enjoyed the experience of being a bikini competitor because it was “fun,” and it still allowed her to be “girly.” Amber nevertheless desired to compete in the figure category. Amber felt figure competitors occupied a dominant status when compared to bikini competitors since their bodies displayed evidence that they lifted heavier weights in the gym (thereby suggesting that they worked harder and dieted more strictly). She referenced the bikini category in a way that made it appear that it was a springboard to get to figure.

I think honestly, figure is more attractive. I like the size on girls’ shoulders. It’s just, to me, it’s more attractive. It’s more in the sense of like, what’s exactly behind it. Those girls have to move some weight to put on the shoulders that they do, or the legs that they do, or the back that they have and there’s just a lot more dedication. (Amber)

Not all figure competitors, however, were critical of the bikini category. Figure competitor Hope remained neutral about both categories and sought to value both bikini and figure categories.

I think all of the women in every category have to work really hard because a bikini workout is not an easy workout. Like bikini competitors don’t sit there and just dilly dally around the gym and they’re not all skinny, like naturally. They have to really work hard. (Hope)

Several competitors shared views similar to those expressed by Hope and more or less adopted an inclusion and diversity narrative akin to the sayings “you do you” or “different strokes for different folks.” These competitors acknowledged in their interviews that a mutual respect was owed to all, regardless of the category in which they competed. Many competitors felt as though they were part of a sorority. Regardless of the differences between the categories, competitors could relate to the intense training and dieting that was mandatory if they wanted to achieve a stage-ready body. Additionally, competitors shared similar accounts of the struggle to negotiate their post-competition challenges.

#### 4.7. Post-Competition: Managing Diet and Body Image Issues

Bikini and figure competitors faced various struggles with respect to a post-competition lifestyle. Many competitors shared that competing itself was not the most difficult part of their journey. Rather, acclimating to the return of their “everyday body”—especially weight gain as a form of bodily agency after severe deprivation—was an even more significant hurdle. Women’s bodies return to some normalcy once the competition had ended because training and dietary regimens necessary for competition cannot be maintained indefinitely. Learning how to manage their body’s weight gain and diet post-competition was a challenge for several bikini and figure competitors.

Two common themes surfaced from interviews with competitors that helped to illuminate the challenges competitors faced in the post-competition phase: (1) rapid weight gain while trying to manage a “normal” diet and (2) body image issues. All twenty competitors acknowledged that they battled with at least one of these challenges after their competition had ended. Many competitors indicated that after adhering to such a strict diet for so long, they often overindulged in foods high in fat and sugar post-competition, resulting in relatively quick and significant weight gain. The negative mental struggle that accompanied this behavior, such as feelings that they were significantly overweight, often left competitors in a remorseful and depressed state of mind.

Post-competition weight gain is inevitable for competitors in this sport. By the day of the competition, competitors have dieted down and depleted themselves so much that they are typically under what is considered to be a healthy bodyweight. Some of this unhealthiness is often the result of water depletion through intentional dehydration in an effort to shed any extra water in the body. This common strategy enhances the look of the muscles while simultaneously leaning out a competitor. Once a competitor begins to add more food and water back into their diet, their bodies often hold on to everything they consume, leading to what often appeared to be an eight-pound to ten-pound weight gain in a week.

Several competitors shared that once they understood that the low body fat percentage that is synonymous with a stage-ready body is not only atypical (aesthetically attractive for that reason) but unhealthy (worrisome in its riskiness), they were able to cope better with the weight gain that occurred post-competition. Moreover, some women competitors took comfort in the fact that their everyday body was still quite rare compared to women in general.

One of the hardest things for me, dealing with after my first show, is realizing that your body doesn't stay stage-ready forever. So, there was a little bit of insecurity, a little bit of disappointment. Like, I started gaining a little bit more weight back and then I was like, I was sad at first. And so, making sure you know this. Your body's not designed to stay like that forever. (Rachel)

So, before I competed, I roamed around with a two-pack [leanness sufficient to display two visible abdominal muscles]. But then for competition, I got like an eight pack [all eight abdominal muscles visible]. And so, then, it's difficult to get used to the fact that you're not going to keep that eight pack! So just kind of getting used to the non-competition abs. And being like, "Okay, the average person doesn't have a four pack. It's okay you don't have one because you're not on stage now!" I can't try to hold onto this competition body. This is meant for one day. (Christine)

Rachel and Christine, as well as many other competitors, acknowledged that they struggled mentally for weeks and sometimes months after the competition. Towards the end of competition preparation, their bodies often rejected being at such a low bodyweight and low body fat percentage, often gaining several pounds back in a short amount of time. During contest preparation, competitors received satisfaction watching their weight continuously drop on the scale. For those competitors who did gain a moderate amount of weight back post-competition, they were forced to learn ways of accepting their body without viewing themselves as being "overweight," which some recognized as a relative term, as in "Compared to what?" Coping with weight gain and a return to a somewhat discomfiting "normalcy" was a crucial aspect of negotiating their gendered embodiment. Some women, like those quoted above, emphasized that their everyday body was healthier. Moreover, joy in working out may be rediscovered without the calorie deprivation required to prepare for a contest. As working out while engaged in severe calorie deprivation is arduous, this type of embodiment required a careful negotiation and renegotiation of goal-setting and acceptable bodily risk, a common theme among sport activities which give the activity a sense of legitimacy, self-fulfillment, and meaning-making (Le Breton 2000).

Bikini and figure competitors revealed that they got accustomed to the accolades and praise they received concerning how fit their bodies were. Once the competition ended, however, competitors began to feel that others viewed them as being out of shape since they were not as lean as they had been on the day of the competition. Given the shadow cast by their competition day body, the question "Compared to what?" can work to their disadvantage. The internalization of these messages sometimes led to body image issues because they now believed that their bodies, while still exceptionally fit and toned, were comparatively "out of shape."

Several competitors revealed that they struggled with body image issues post-competition. Bikini and figure competitors both wrestled mentally with feeling overweight or “fat” because their bodies quickly gained back weight once they began incorporating previously “forbidden” foods back into their diet. Of course, bodies can become like objects to be transformed or improved upon while also being unpredictable and resistant to change (Davis 1995, 2003). This concept is indicative of the post-competition behavior of a competitor’s body. While competitors often continued their workout regimens post-competition, they also often became less strict in what they ate. In turn, their bodies held on to every calorie consumed since it had been in such a deprived state for so long.

Amber, Ivonne, and Reese were all admittedly fit following their competitions. However, they all dealt with similar body insecurities post-competition.

Post show and going into off-season, I’m really glad that there’s Instagram and people that actually show their reverse diets<sup>9</sup> and how they’re happy with their off-season body. I look at myself and I’m like, I’m where I want to be as far as muscle size, but I’m not as lean anymore. So that kind of messes with your head, big time. I’m like, “Oh my gosh, I look horrible!” So, even being in shape, I still deal with body image issues. Big time. (Amber)

I’ve dealt with body insecurities for a really long time and competing definitely helped with that. But now, it’s on a different scale in that, since I’ve been so lean, it’s almost like when I’m not, I’m like, “Oh my God! I’m ugly!” (Laughter.) And you start feeling fat when you’re not really fat. So that, I still struggle with even now. (Ivonne)

Just getting back to normal is tough, because when I competed, you know, that last ten days I dropped quite a bit under my healthy normal weight just to get that last little bit off of the hips and thighs. Getting back to normal took some adjustments in my head. To just accept it [extra weight] again on your body, even though I was like REALLY still healthy, you almost resist getting back to a healthy weight. (Reese)

Amber and Ivonne’s narratives reveal that, despite their bodies being in top condition relative to competition standards, they struggled with accepting any extra weight gain post-competition. Moreover, the weight gain led to insecurities that caused them to view themselves as fat and ugly. Reese’s narrative illuminates even more clearly the mental challenge of “getting back to normal.” Competitors acknowledged that while they were still in remarkable shape, they could not get their minds to cooperate fully with accepting weight gain as healthy or ordinary.

Prior experience was invaluable in managing this difficult transition back to the everyday body. The more fitness competitors competed, they eventually learned strategies, such as reverse dieting that helped them stay consistent in their diets. For many of these women, competing was something they had no intention of quitting in the near future, so it was imperative that they learn healthy habits that enabled them to not fall victim to post-competition depression and body image issues. For the competitors who chose to stop competing, they were eventually able to find a healthy balance of a fit lifestyle that enabled them to keep their hard-earned gains. Whatever the case may be, these narratives further reflect the challenge with pursuing—even molding—the stage-ready body.

## 5. Conclusions

Our analysis of women’s fitness competitions used insights from gender theory and the sociology of the body to answer three primary questions: (1) How do women negotiate gender in the context of fitness competitions? (2) What bodily practices do women enlist to participate in fitness competitions and how are these practices influenced by the distinct gender ideals that govern the bikini and figure tracks in such competitions? (3) How do

<sup>9</sup> Recall that reverse dieting is the process of reintroducing foods once competitors have reached their desired goal weight.

competitors manage their relationships with gatekeepers, other competitors, and close primary attachments before, during, and after competing in these events?

Over the past decade, the bikini and figure categories of fitness competitions have become a prominent part of the larger bodybuilding subculture. Unlike their bodybuilding counterparts, bikini and figure competitors must learn how to negotiate having the muscle that is required to be exhibited in fitness competitions without “sacrificing” their femininity. Field observations clearly indicated that gender negotiations are distinctly different for bikini and figure competitors than for their women bodybuilding peers given the eschewal of extreme muscularity in these non-bodybuilding (fitness) tracks. Moreover, fitness competitions are embedded into “main event” bodybuilding contests that are all held on the very same day. The argument could be made that the preservation of conventional femininity in fitness competitions has given women bodybuilders even more license to pursue maximum muscle in an unbridled fashion. Fieldwork encounters and narratives from interviewed competitors vividly illuminate the intense nature of contest preparation, gender negotiation on the day of competition, and post-competition challenges that arise pertaining to body image and dieting. The constructs of embodiment (bodily practices, bodily agency), difference (gender distinctions), and dominance (gender hierarchies) revealed the complexities of participating in bikini and figure competitions.

Bikini and figure competitors share many similarities, such as dedication to training, strict dieting, and clear outward markers of traditional femininity the day of the show. They also assist one another during shows (e.g., applying oil to another’s back, wishing each other luck, sharing space and equipment “pumping up” before getting on stage). However, the differences between the categories are prominent as well. Bikini and figure competitors are judged by different criteria related to posing, symmetry, and muscle proportion. These differences among the competitors often lead to boundary work, that is, the creation and maintenance of in-group/out-group distinctions among competitors across various tracks. Track-specific differences also contribute to feelings of dominance expressed by competitors within each category. Bikini competitors often felt that figure competitors were too masculine due to their greater muscle size, while figure competitors thought the perceived sexual nature of the bikini category trivialized fitness competitions by steering dangerously close to beauty pageants or swimsuit modeling exhibitions. Here, the juxtapositions between the performance-oriented athletic body prized by figure competitors and the appearance-oriented aesthetic body pursued by bikini competitors are pronounced.

Gender negotiation is a persistent challenge in the lives of bikini and figure competitors, but presents different dilemmas across these fitness categories. Each group of competitors perceives the other as having the potential to make what could be characterized as “gender trouble” (Butler 1990) within this relatively new sport, thereby underscoring the core idea of bodily rivalries. Competitors with too *little* muscle will not place well in a competition, especially in the better muscled figure category. However, competitors with too *much* muscle would veer too closely toward the bodybuilder category, which many fitness competitors critiqued as “more masculine” than they personally preferred during in-depth interviews and fieldwork encounters. Additionally, these ideas about what is “too masculine” are not theirs alone. They are diffused throughout the broader social environment, in both public and private settings. For instance, Rayna humorously commented that her husband would be disappointed if her “deltoids” (deltoid muscles) were larger than his. Rayna’s husband’s attitude substantiates the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005) given that he does not believe his wife should have more muscle than him simply because he is a man. Additionally, competitors supported strategies such as getting breast enhancements that promoted prevalent displays of overt femininity. Isabella and Audrey elaborated on their insecurities because they no longer felt sufficiently “feminine” after losing their breast tissue from strict contest dieting. This pattern suggests that no matter how much muscle a competitor was willing to develop, there was still a desire to remain “feminine” according to cultural standards, not to mention judging criteria. Hence, both interviews and fieldwork observations revealed that these convictions are not

merely personal preferences. Gendered muscularity standards are normative expectations reinforced by trainers, judges, and even the victories of augmented competitors who have gone before them. Failure to place (that is, not making the top five) can, in many respects, be interpreted as objective (really objectivated) “evidence” of deviation from judging criteria that are as much about gender as bodily muscle. If “real women” indeed have curves, then a punitive placement due to a lack of curves in the “right” (feminine) place is ontoformative, which is to say standard-setting or standard-reinforcing. There are minimal avenues of resistance against the application of such standards in these contests. Fans, in some respects, have more power than competitors in expressing dissatisfaction with the decisions rendered by judges because competitors can quickly develop bad reputations for disputing judges’ decisions. Once earned, those reputations run the risk of being received poorly by judges in future competitions.

Balancing social relationships is an essential part of fitness competitors’ lives. Competitors revealed that friends and family did not always support their chosen fitness lifestyle. They acknowledged the selfishness of the sport given that much of their time was spent working out. Many described in detail how consumed they needed to be with contest preparation. Competitors were either forced to put friendships on hold during their contest preparation or, in extreme cases, terminate a relationship. Competitors often subjected themselves not just to the visual scrutiny of their trainers, but to physical prodding designed to ensure proper muscle tone, prior to contests and even on the day of the event. Married or partnered competitors revealed that the extreme effort they exerted during workouts contributed to their lack of sexual energy, often causing conflict with an amorous spouse or partner. Most competitors struggled to balance the demands of their rigorous athletic pursuits with the expectations of social relationships. According to one competitor, her husband lamented the irony between audiences’ adoration of his wife’s sculpted body and her lack of physical energy for sexual liaisons with him. Of what use, he asked her, is a “hot bikini wife” if her grueling gym sessions leave her too exhausted to “put out?” The disjuncture between what we called the athletic body pushed to its physical limits in the gym, the aesthetic body primed for display during competitions, and the sexually capable erotic body was quite pronounced in this case. In this situation and many like it, the athletic and aesthetic bodies are purchased at the price of the erotic body (lack of sexual desire) and the everyday body (difficulty completing mundane tasks at work).

There are a few limitations to this study. First, our focus on natural-only competitions excludes women who compete only in conventional organizations that are not typically drug-tested. There are numerous organizations in which women may compete, and although many share a similar format in how their shows are organized, each organization has its own set of standards and rules. For example, the National Physique Committee (NPC), the largest amateur bodybuilding organization, allows bikini competitors to have more revealing bikinis than many of the natural-only organizations. Competitors in natural-only organizations can be disqualified if their bikini reveals too much of their glutes (butt muscles). The NPC is also the organization in which competitors must compete if they desire to reach the Olympia level, the top echelon of the sport. Natural competitors can make it to the “pro” level of their respective organization, but it does not hold the same reputation as being an IFBB (International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness) professional. Hegemonic muscularity gives drug-using athletes greater status in this sport. Additional research is needed across organizational and amateur/professional lines.

Second, attention to intersectionality (that is, the connections between, gender, race, class, sexuality, etc.) was limited in our study given the sample size, but is important to pursue in future research (Collins 2000). How, if at all, do black fitness competitors’ experiences differ from those of their white counterparts? Do prevalent ideas of femininity favor particular racialized aesthetics over others? Does more muscle on a woman of a particular race require distinct gender negotiation strategies because of preconceived gender-racial-sexual stereotypes? Previous research on women bodybuilders has revealed that women can have different support systems depending on their race-ethnicity

(McGrath and Chananie-Hill 2009). Our findings concur with this research, such that white bodybuilders' families sometimes showed greater resistance to women's participation in this sport while the families of black bodybuilders were more supportive. Due to her culture's strict gender norms, the family of a woman who was of Palestinian decent showed the most resistance. Examining how competitors' intersectional identities are relevant to contest preparation and competition would expand on our principal focus, namely, gender negotiation.

Knowledge in the field would also benefit by drawing comparisons between bikini, figure, and the newer women's fitness category of "physique." While not yet having the substantial growth of bikini and figure categories, physique is gaining more participants. This category is situated between the figure and bodybuilding categories in terms of muscularity. Although physique competitors are most similar to bodybuilders, physique competitors present less muscle, density, and striation when compared to bodybuilders. Women bodybuilders are exceptionally muscular; therefore, they often need supplemental help (nutritional aids and, in some cases, drugs) to build the muscle they have. Physique gives women who desire a lot of muscle a category in which to compete without having to build what some may view as an "excessive" amount of muscle. An analysis of all women's fitness categories would be beneficial given the growth of these competitions.

A comparative examination of men and women fitness competitors would also be advantageous to determine if gender negotiation strategies in this sport are pursued in sex-specific fashions. Both men and women competitors share many common spaces during competition day at athletes' meetings, backstage during the show, and at times, the stage itself. Apart from competing against the same sex in separate categories, fitness competitors all share a similar competition trajectory—men and women both train rigorously in the gym, adhere to a strict diet, and aim to present their best bodies on stage. However, do men fitness competitors feel they are subjected to the same objectifications that surface for women competitors? Do male competitors have to justify their pursuit of non-hegemonic masculinity in fitness competitions when compared with hyper-masculine male bodybuilders? Studying men who are competitors relative to women would be an appropriate direction for future investigations.

As fitness competitions continue to gain popularity, scholars of gender, sport, and culture would benefit significantly from exploring many other facets of these events. These could include the proliferation of new competitive categories into which rival bodies can be placed and the evolving standards by which competitors are judged within these various categories. As the foundational sport for this whole arena, it is also worth noting that bodybuilding sets expectations for every other category. The extreme muscularity of bodybuilding is what gave initial rise to fitness competitions, and changes in bodybuilding profoundly shape expectations for every other fitness category. Until such research can be conducted, this study has clearly demonstrated that bikini and figure competitions are an important site for gender negotiation and embodied performance in a relatively new sport.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** All data used in this study were collected by the first author and remain proprietary. Consistent with the conventions governing qualitative research and the Institutional Review Board approvals under which these data were collected, the data are not publicly available.

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## Appendix A. Pre-Interview Questionnaire

### Appendix A.1. Personal Information

1. Please indicate your age. \_\_\_\_\_
  2. Please check the box that best indicates your race. (Select all that apply.)
    - White
    - Black
    - Hispanic/Latino
    - Asian
    - Other \_\_\_\_\_
  3. Please indicate how much education you have received.
    - Less than high school
    - High school/GED
    - Some college
    - College degree
    - Graduate or professional degree
  4. Please indicate your employment status.
    - Working full-time (40 or more hours per week)
    - Working part-time (less than 40 h per week)
    - Not employed
    - Student
    - Homemaker
    - Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
  5. If employed, please indicate your job title. \_\_\_\_\_
  6. Please indicate your income category.
    - Below \$20,000 a year
    - \$20,000–\$49,999 a year
    - \$50,000–\$79,999 a year
    - \$80,000 and above a year
  7. What is your marital status?
    - Married
    - Divorced
    - Separated
    - Widowed
    - Never Married
  8. Do you have children?
    - Yes
    - No
- (a) If yes, how many children do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

*Appendix A.2. Fitness/Competition Experience*

9. Please indicate the category in which you have competed.
- Figure only
  - Bikini only
  - Both figure and bikini
10. Please indicate the approximate number of shows in which you have competed.
- \_\_\_\_\_
11. Have you placed in any of the shows in which you have competed?
- Yes
  - No
- (a) If yes, please check all that apply for all shows.
- 1st place
  - 2nd place
  - 3rd place
  - 4th place
  - 5th place
12. Please indicate the type of fitness shows in which you have participated. (Please check all that apply.)
- Natural shows only (drug-tested)
  - Regular shows (not drug-tested)
  - Both
13. Approximately how many hours per week do you spend working out? \_\_\_\_\_
14. Do you typically use a personal trainer for your competitions?
- Yes
  - No
15. Have you served as a personal trainer for a fitness competition?
- Yes
  - No

**Appendix B. Interview Guide**

1. (a) To begin, tell me how you first became involved in bikini/figure competitions? (b) What motivated you to compete in fitness competitions? (c) What concerns, if any, did you have about becoming a fitness competitor?
2. (a) Describe what a typical gym workout looks like for you on any given day when you're training for a competition. (b) Are there any particular training techniques or approaches you use to prepare for a competition, as opposed to regular training?
3. (a) Could you describe for me your competition diet, and tell me how that differs from your normal diet? (b) What types of personal challenges have you faced with respect to dieting, and how have you dealt with these challenges? (c) Some competitors have talked about the adverse effects of competition dieting on their social relationships (for instance, family or friends). Have you had any experiences along these lines and, if so, could you describe them? [If not, ask if they've heard of adverse encounters.]
4. Let's talk about training more generally. Training for a competition requires a lot of sacrifice and dedication. (a) What type of sacrifices have you had to make when preparing for a competition? (b) What have these sacrifices taught you about yourself? (c) What impact have these sacrifices had on family and friends? (Here, I would like to hear both positive and negative experiences.)
5. (a) The number of competitive categories for women has really expanded recently. What do you see as the key differences between women's bikini, figure, fitness, and bodybuilding competitors? (b) How did you make the decision to compete in the category [or categories] in which you've competed, as opposed to any of the others?

- (c) As a [bikini/figure] competitor, what are your personal opinions of the bodies of women who compete in the opposite category?
6. (a) With the intense training and strict dieting, how do you personally balance being a fitness competitor with your everyday life? (b) Has there been anybody who has helped you to strike that balance in your life?
  7. This sport requires you to be on stage in heels, makeup, and a bikini, which some people believe objectifies women. Have you ever heard of these criticisms and how have you responded or how would respond?
  8. The bodies of fitness competitors are quite different than the average woman's body. Have you ever been in a situation where your body made you feel empowered? (b) Conversely, have you been in a situation where your body has made you feel insecure? (c) How did you deal with these feelings of insecurity?
  9. Some women have chosen to make enhancements to their bodies in the form of cosmetic surgery. What are your thoughts about cosmetic surgery in relation to competing?
  10. Women have opportunities to compete in conventional fitness competitions and natural fitness competitions. I see from your survey that you've competed in \_\_\_\_\_. (a) Can you tell me why you decided to do that? (b) What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages between the two?
  11. Has your participation in fitness competitions ever affected your romantic relationships and if so, how?
  12. If you knew of someone who was just beginning to participate in fitness competitions, what advice would you give her?
  13. Are there any final thoughts you would like to share regarding your participation in fitness competitions?

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