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**Crossing the #BikiniBridge:  
Exploring the Role of Social Media in Propagating Body Image Trends**

**ABSTRACT**

Prior research considering the influence of traditional media in shaping body image trends reveals how magazines and television negatively influence consumers' personal perceptions of body image. In today's technology saturated culture, surprisingly limited attention has been given to the emerging role of social media in shaping female consumers' body image expectations. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the role of social media in presenting, propagating, and perpetuating body image trends among women. Data are collected via Twitter, exploring the emerging body image phenomenon of the *bikini bridge* (#bikinibridge), characterized by protruding hipbones and an inverted stomach. The study follows a case approach examining *Operation Bikini Bridge*, which began as an Internet hoax and quickly developed into an online body image trend. Findings suggest the bikini bridge body image ideal gained spread through social media due to four key factors: 1) simplicity (i.e., the singularization of skinny), 2) believability (i.e., the reality of the body image "hoax"), 3) cooptation (i.e., adoption by pre-existing communities), 4) controversy (i.e., conflicting narratives among users). Implications suggest female body image ideals are becoming increasingly fragmented by body part and body image ideals are user-generated via social media to reflect offline cultural expectations of beauty.

*4Chan manipulated social media and fooled all of us into thinking [the bikini bridge] was actually the next unhealthy obsession of teen girls. ... We're now standing on the outside looking in on a weird phenomenon being played out in front of our eyes. You can see clearly how ridiculous this is right? So ridiculous that a bunch of guys over at 4Chan could poke fun at our desire for vanity and play on our insecurities. Ya, that's kinda mean...but we're so conditioned to think we need to be thin that we actually believed this was true.*

- Cassey Ho, founder of Blogilates.com (2014)

## INTRODUCTION

Social media websites such as Tumblr, Instagram, Pinterest, and Twitter provide visual and verbal representations of idealized body images and motivational phrases, creating an online culture of “thinspiration,” or thin inspiration (Balter-Reitz & Keller, 2005). The potentially negative role of marketing and media in shaping body image ideals is nothing new (D’Allesandro & Chitty, 2011; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). Previous research suggests the prevalence of thin models in advertising can negatively affect body image perceptions and evaluations of one’s own attractiveness (Martin & Gentry, 1997; Myers & Biocca, 1992). In today’s digitally driven marketplace, social media are increasingly supplementing or replacing traditional media in terms of how consumers learn and interact (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). Although extant research on body image and traditional marketing media is extremely valuable, it fails to account for the rapidly changing digital media landscape. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to explore how body image trends evolve in the social media marketplace and to examine the power of social media in shaping body image ideals. Specifically, we examine the emergence, propagation, and reappropriation of the #bikinibrige phenomenon, which began as an Internet hoax and quickly developed into an online body image trend. First we outline our theoretical foundation at the intersection of body image and social media. Next, we outline our methodology, employing a netnographic approach to understanding the evolution of one body image trend online: the bikini bridge. Findings suggest body image trends, even those that are unsubstantiated, can go viral quickly through social media. Based on our analysis of the bikini bridge phenomenon, we identify four factors which helped it emerge as an online body image trend: 1) simplicity (i.e., the singularization of skinny), 2) believability (i.e., the reality of the body image “hoax”), 3) cooptation (i.e., adoption by pre-existing communities), 4) controversy (i.e., conflicting narratives among users).

## BODY IMAGE AND THE INTERNET

Traditional advertising media have been deemed one of the biggest influencers of how women view their bodies (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). A well established body of research explores the role of culture and traditional media in shaping consumers’ body image perceptions (e.g. D’Allesandro & Chitty, 2011; Groesz, Levine, & Murden 2001; Levine & Smolak, 1996; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). A meta analysis of studies published between 1975 and 2007 examining the link between media use and women’s body image and related concerns conducted by Grabe, Ward, and Hyde (2008) demonstrates that media use is negatively related to women’s body image, including bodily dissatisfaction, increased investment in appearance and increased endorsement of disordered eating behaviors. The increasingly thin ideal communicated via movies, magazines and television programs is pervasive and normatively

reinforces the value of this ideal in spite of it being unattainable to most. It communicates to all that a woman's worth is demonstrated through her body, an object of desire which in turn becomes a burdensome lifelong project (Brumberg, 1997). Consequently, exposure to and internalization of the thin ideal has been linked to a variety of physical and health problems for women, including disordered eating, low self-esteem and depression (Neumark-Sztianer, Paxton, Hannan, Haines, & Story, 2006; Paxton, Neumark-Sztianer, & Hannan, 2006).

Although extant research on body image and traditional media is extremely valuable, the media landscape is rapidly changing. Not only do magazines, television programs, and movies provide outlets of influence, but today's generation is exposed to a whole new beast: social media. Social media driven by active consumer engagement and user generated content are increasingly displacing traditional media in terms of how consumers learn, interact, and even consume products, services, and lifestyles (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). Shankar and Malthouse (2007) suggest that "the Internet has empowered consumers to interact with companies on their terms, and enabled them to communicate with other consumers" (p. 3). Increasingly, consumers turn to the Internet for weight loss advice and discover social support for their efforts (Hwang, Ottenbacher, et al., 2010). However, such weight loss communities are not always healthy. Recent years have seen an emergence of pro-anorexia online communities, which serve to perpetuate and support the eating disorder (Burke, 2009). An online culture of "thinspiration" has emerged from such websites (Balter-Reitz & Keller 2005), in which users share online images or montages of slim to emaciated bodies, often as motivation for weight loss.

Recent studies have highlighted that like traditional media, social media perpetuates body idealization for women (Slater, Tiggemann, Hawkins, & Werchon, 2011; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Research has demonstrated that time spent on social media is associated with increased body surveillance, body shame, internalization of the thin ideal, heightened body dissatisfaction, decreased sexual assertiveness and appearance-based comparisons (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Manago, Ward, Lemm, Reed, & Seabrook, 2015; Tiggemann & Miller 2010; Tiggemann & Slater 2013; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). In particular, engagement in photo-based sharing activities is significantly related to body image and eating concerns (Meier & Gray, 2014) and the increasingly visual impression management that is conducted online by consumers reinforce traditional gender stereotypes and reproduce dominant cultural ideologies of attractiveness (Bailey, Steeves, Burkell, & Regan, 2013; Kapidzic & Herring, 2011; Strano, 2008; Whitty, 2007).

Whilst there is an increasing body of literature on individual disposition and vulnerability to the effects of social media on body image (Perloff, 2014; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), other researchers argue that a broader range of approaches are needed, such as better accounts of embodiment (Williams & Ricciardelli, 2014). Researchers also point to the vast differences between social media and traditional media and the need for theory to account for this accordingly (Andsager, 2014; Turner, 2014). Importantly, Manago et al. (2015) identify investigations of the relationship between social media and body image must not focus on social media use in isolation but rather the "investment in a cultural milieu where social interactions mediated by images on a screen promote a disembodied experience of the self" (p.3). One underexplored area in this regard is how body ideals communicated in and through social media gain traction and attain 'trend' status.

### MESSAGE DIFFUSION IN A DIGITAL ERA

Social media websites such as Tumblr, Instagram, Pinterest, and Twitter provide visual and verbal representations of idealized body images and motivational phrases. In particular, Twitter facilitates real-time propagation of information to a large group of users, making it an ideal environment for the emergence and dissemination of trends (Castillo, Mendoza, & Poblete, 2011). Previous

consumer research has explored the factors characteristic of online viral messages (Berger, 2016; Berger & Milkman, 2012; Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013). That is, what makes something shareworthy online? How does one trend catch on in a sea of digital information overload? Berger and Milkman (2012) find content that elicits strong negative or positive affective responses (e.g., awe, anger) is more likely to go viral. In a study of how political messages spread on Twitter, Bastos, Raimundo, and Travitzki (2013) found messages can spread quickly through the intense activity of individuals with relatively few connections. This is in contrast to traditional gatekeeping approaches (e.g., traditional newspapers), in which highly connected individuals and highly trusted media outlets serve as a bottleneck for delivering messages. On social media, hashtagging and trending topic algorithms contribute to the visibility of online messages.

Hashtagging is a common feature across modern social media (e.g., Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram). Hashtags have traditionally been employed to help consumers sort, find, and organize content; however, more recently, hashtagging has transitioned from a functional tool to a cultural genre. Daer, Hoffman, and Goodman (2014) suggest hashtagging serves as a metacommunicative process in which consumers tag photographs with words and phrases reflective of their own inner thoughts and feelings about the photograph itself. For example, a posted selfie may include a semantic tag (e.g., #selfie) in addition to a metacommunicative tag (e.g., #selfiesareawkward). These tagged “metacomments” demonstrate how consumers have repurposed online hashtagging from a utilitarian search tool to method of identity performance (Daer, Hoffman, & Goodman, 2015). Similarly, body part hashtags (e.g., #thighgap, #bikinibridge, #hotdoglegs, #thighbrow) palpably capture the market-driven emergence of body image trends by giving them cultural brand names, or “that part of a brand which can be vocalized” (Kotler, 1991, p. 442). As Greenfield (2013) writes, body-related hashtags are a “disturbing outgrowth of the thinspiration and body dysmorphia issues that proliferate on Tumblr, Pinterest, and Instagram. In particular, the position, lighting, and summery backgrounds seen in these images make for great “inner thigh gap” shot — Inner thigh gap, or ITG, is one of the popular tags used alongside thinspiration on the Internet — an absurd beauty standard that defines a space between one’s thighs as an indicator of ideal thinness and sex appeal” (Greenfield, 2013, para. 2).

Hashtags provide context for the content with which they are posted and offer consumers a searchable resource for discovering and sharing online trends. Contributing to the stream of literature marketing and body image ideals, the purpose of this chapter is to better understand how body image trend evolve in the social media realm and to examine the power of user-generated content in shaping body image trends.

## METHOD

Our research adopts a case study approach to exploring the role of social media in shaping body image trends. We selected the evolution of the *bikini bridge* as a unique case for understanding the diffusion of body image ideals through social media. A bikini bridge occurs when “bikini bottoms are suspended between the two hip bones, causing a space between the bikini and the lower abdomen” (Urban Dictionary, 2009). The term *bikini bridge* dates back to at least 2009. In 2014, the bikini bridge became popularized through strategic and organized social media efforts, initiated by members of the social network 4chan.org. 4chan has over 7 million users. Content on its popular online imageboard, /b/, is notorious for pushing boundaries in order to “hack the attention economy” (Bernstein, Monroy-Hernandez, Harry, André, Panovich, & Vargas, 2011; boyd, 2010). 4chan/b/ is responsible notorious and often harmful pranks. For example, in 2014, 4chan users created and publicized an advertisement for a fake iOS8 feature called Apple Wave, which convinced consumers

iPhone devices could be charged wirelessly by microwaving the hardware. Apple warned Twitter followers not to microwave their iPhones, but it was too late. Pictures of melted and flaming iPhones began to appear online. In this same vein of internet trolling, 4chan members aimed to create a new body image ideal through social media. On January 5, 2014, 4chan users launched Operation Bikini Bridge, a campaign to garner buzz for the bikini bridge (see Figure 1). As part of Operation Bikini Bridge, 4chan users were encouraged to create bikini bridge themed social media accounts on Twitter, spread bikini bridge propaganda (see Figure 2), and target consumers who have body conscious predispositions. The bikini bridge was revealed as an Internet hoax within days of its launch; however, many online users and media outlets already succumbed to the prank. The purpose of this chapter is to uncover insights on how body image ideals emerge through social media, specifically analyzing the development of Operation Bikini Bridge as an exemplary case.

**Figure 1.** 4chan.org's Operation Bikini Bridge\*

File: [1388971882223.jpg](#) (38 KB, 500x375, 1388880977155.jpg) Anonymous 01/05/14(Sun)20:31:22 UTC-5 No.525339787 [\[Reply\]](#)



Welcome to Operation Bikini Bridge.

**Phase 1:**  
The premise is simple. Create propaganda parading the "bikini bridge" to be the next big thing(pic related). Circulate it throughout the internet. Simultaneously, we create reverse propaganda, denouncing the bikini bridge as an unhealthy obsession. This, too, we circulate throughout the internet. Our mission during phase 1 is to garner support for these social outlets. The more followers/subscribers the better.

**Phase 2:**  
After a fair amount of circulation has been accomplished, we circulate the images throughout parts of the internet known to be biased on the subject of weight (i.e. thin privilege, fat shaming, etc). This should cause large enough of a stir to snowball into a fairly big subject.

**What you can do to help:**  
>online-image-editor.com/  
Text font is "times new roman" and "little days" and works well with a shadow effect.  
><http://bikinibridge.tumblr.com/>  
>/r/bikinibridge

Remember quality, artsy pictures that really showcase the bikini bridge for pro bikini bridge propaganda. Weird, odd, or pictures showcasing the lack of a bikini bridge for anti bridge propaganda. Also, use slogans that have already been popularized("Health at Every Size")  
>Fake Facebook, Twitter and other social accounts  
To help circulate the propaganda. The more friends, the better.

**If you're feeling lazy**  
>Good slogans/text suggestions/pic  
>Spread the word (casually)  
Through facebook/twitter/tumblr and other media outlets.  
>Post a picture(dont spam, but think passive repetition)

**Remember:**  
You do not have to push either side, even just mentioning "bikini bridge" or a slight preference will create a buzz. In fact, most often it is beneficial to show no preference at all.  
Think of viral marketing, and the power of repetition.  
#BikiniBridge2014 can be pushed as a new years resolution ordeal. Target NYRers, weight loss pages/groups(as a "goal"), etc. These people already hold a predisposition.

tl;dr  
GET IN HERE. OPERATION BIKINI BRIDGE IS A-GO.

\*Reprinted with permission from 4chan.org.

**Figure 2.** Illustrated recreation of Bikini Bridge propaganda



Following previous online case research in marketing (e.g., Cova & Pace, 2006), our study utilizes a netnographic approach to exploring the bikini bridge phenomenon. Netnography operates in an interpretivist paradigm, allowing the researchers to understand a cultural phenomenon through in depth examination of associated meanings and contexts (Kozinets, 2002). Data consist of tweets associated with the “bikini bridge” hashtag (#bikinibrige) on Twitter. Twitter restricts posted messages to 140 characters in length, and users can link to photos or external hyperlinks. Tweets were downloaded from Twitter using hashtag harvesting software (i.e., Twitter Archiving Google Spreadsheet, or TAGS), which collects public tweets associated with a given hashtag (#bikinibrige) in addition to supplemental data (e.g., username, date posted, location). TAGS software is an automated system that works within Twitter’s API guidelines. Previous research suggests the search API may fail to capture a robust representation of fringe activity within the social network (González-Bailón, Wang, Rivero, Borge-Holthoefer, & Moreno, 2014); however, for the purpose of our research, we are more interested in the central social media conversation spurred by Operation Bikini Bridge. We created one data archive per day, for 8 consecutive days, beginning with the January 5, 2014 when Operation Bikini Bridge was initiated on 4chan.org. This unique dataset tracks the rise of the bikini bridge trend in real-time. A sample of tweets were automatically downloaded each day. This amounted in a total of 10,310 tweets from 3,627 users between January 5, 2014 and January 12, 2014. Table 1 provides an overview of the daily data collected. The top contributor made 163 tweets using the #bikinibrige hashtag; however, most users tweeted three times or less. An additional unique feature of the data is the conversational nature of the tweets. Conversations between users were captured as they unfolded. The tweets were coded for common themes and allocated into categories. We utilized the aggregated tweets to characterize the bikini bridge trend in terms of the temporal evolution of the tweets and the pulse of the sentiment observable in the tweets. Data analysis was deemed complete when no new themes emerged (Wolcott, 2012).

**Table 1.** Twitter Data

Date	Number of #BikiniBridge Tweets in Sample
January 5 <sup>th</sup>	610
January 6 <sup>th</sup>	1,463
January 7 <sup>th</sup>	1,448
January 8 <sup>th</sup>	1,477
January 9 <sup>th</sup>	1,493
January 10 <sup>th</sup>	1,448
January 11 <sup>th</sup>	898
January 12 <sup>th</sup>	1,473
Total Tweets in Sample	10,310

## FINDINGS

Our study aims to understand how body image ideals are presented, propagated, and perpetuated in the marketplace through social media. Here, we identify four factors which contributed to the notoriety of the bikini bridge trend through social media: 1) simplicity (i.e., the singularization of skinny), 2) believability (i.e., the reality of the body image “hoax”), 3) cooptation (i.e., adoption by pre-existing communities), 4) controversy (i.e., conflicting narratives among users). We provide exemplary tweets to support each theme. Twitter handles have been removed replaced with pseudonyms.

### **Simplicity: The Singularization of Skinny**

The spread of the bikini bridge trend lied in part to its simplicity. In marketing, brand names can reflect a product’s quality, use, and value (Rao & Monroe, 1989; Richardson, Dick, & Jain, 1994). Similarly, the bikini bridge term acted as a simple name for a body part for which females should strive. The sheer, simple act of naming the “bikini bridge” body part resonated with consumers. Twitter users acknowledged that girls have always sought to have a slender frame, a flat stomach, or prominent hipbones. However, these generalized goals did not have the same level of simplicity as the term: *bikini bridge*.

Riley (1/7/2014, 9:34 PM): *Y is having a #bikinibrige suddenly 2014 news? Please, I was obsessed w/ bikini bridge before it even had a name.*  
[photo shown in Figure 3 included in tweet]



**Figure 3.** The illustration below is a recreation of the #BikiniBridge social media content posted with this tweet



Riley suggests the body image ideal of the bikini bridge, preexisted the *bikini bridge* term itself. The term bikini bridge contributes to singularizing the idea of skinny and provides a specific goal for which female consumers can strive. The use of hashtagged body image trends indicates an obsession with small physical aspirations, in which the ideal body image is determined by a singularized physical feature (e.g., bikini bridge). Social media exacerbates the body image trend toward singularizing the skinny ideal body image and encouraging women to fixate their body consciousness on one individual body part. Given the importance of hashtags on social media, the bikini bridge trend initially gained traction online due in part to its hashtagability. The #bikinibrIDGE trend is not the first hashtagged body part to create buzz. Some online users in the data referenced the thigh gap (#thighgap), a term referring to the separation between the inner thighs when standing with one's feet together. Thigh gap related online images have been popularized throughout the past few years on social media. In fact, websites like Tumblr and Instagram now provide an eating disorder warning on the screen when a user searches for the thigh gap hashtag.

Kelly (1/11/2014, 6:34 PM): *Thigh gap. Bikini bridge. Can we stop coming up with cutesie nicknames for women to starve themselves to achieve? #ED #thighgap #bikinibrIDGE*

Like Riley, Kelly's tweet highlights the important role names play in popularizing body image ideals on social media. The name *bikini bridge* provides online users a quick and easy way to refer to the singularized body part it represents. Lee and Baack (2014) find brand names with greater sound fluency lead to higher brand recall. Likewise, the bikini bridge term refers to one single body part and uses alliteration to, as Kelly says, make it a "cutesie nickname." This shift toward the online singularization of skinny is in line with previous body objectification research (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). Simplistic, social media driven, body image ideals, such as the bikini bridge, move cultural messages away from generalized ideals of body perfection (e.g., "you should be skinny," "you should lose weight") and toward a singularized version of body perfection (e.g., "you should have a bikini bridge," "you should have a thigh gap").

### **Believability: The Reality of the Body Image “Hoax”**

The data suggest initial acceptance of the bikini bridge resulted from its innate believability as body image trend. Despite the fact that it was almost immediately outed as a hoax, the bikini bridge trend gained traction in the media and among social media users. Media outlets referred to the bikini bridge as “the next thigh gap.” Similarly, social media users quickly accepted the bikini bridge as a body image trend in 2014, given the previous notoriety of the thigh gap trend in 2013. In this way, the thigh gap created a gateway for online body image trends like the bikini bridge to materialize. The following example tweets reveal the familiar thigh gap provided a reference point for the bikini bridge.

Pat (1/5/2014, 5:13 PM): *Bikini bridges are in. Thigh Gaps are out. #bikinibridge*

Keeley (1/6/2014, 5:31 PM): *What the fuck is this #BikiniBridge shit? Thigh gap V2.0?*

Danielle (1/12/2014, 10:24 AM): *If 2013 was the year of the thigh gap, then 2014 is looking to be the year of the #bikinibridge I don't want to live on this planet anymore.*

In the midst of Operation Bikini Bridge, Twitter users reacted to the bikini bridge as if it is a real goal – in large part because it seemed like something that *could* be real. As the previous tweets suggest, the thigh gap paved the way for a category of social media driven body image goals to emerge. Despite its impetus as an internet prank, the bikini bridge was, at its core, a believable body image goal. In an exemplary case, Cassey Ho, founder of the popular fitness blog, Blogilates (@blogilates), found herself among the masses of consumers duped into believing the bikini bridge trend was real. Cassey immediately condemned the bikini bridge trend and called for her online followers to do the same. The following day, Cassey discovered the bikini bridge trend was a prank initiated by 4chan and tweeted a link to her blog article about the issue.

Cassey (1/6/14, 7:00 AM): *Wow. Apparently the #bikinibridge is the new inner thigh gap of 2014.*

-- (1/6/14, 7:01 AM): *#bikinibridge: phenomenon wherein bikini bottoms are suspended between the two hip bones, causing a space btwn the bikini & the lower abs.*

-- (1/6/14, 7:04 AM): *Be aware of this weird #bikinibridge obsession...a space between your abs and your bikini bottoms does not define your beauty ladies!*

-- (1/7/14, 3:53 AM): *#BIKINIBRIDGE WAS A HOAX!!!! <http://t.co/skO2sRASDz>*

Cassey’s article, quoted in the beginning of this chapter, suggests the bikini bridge body image trend is initially believable because it draws on the innate cultural beliefs in society about how a female body should look. Her argument echoes many others in the data. 4chan users made the bikini bridge trend go viral, but they did not create the obsession in the first place. Notably, bikini pictures, such as those used in the Operation Bikini Bridge propaganda, were preexisting on websites like Tumblr, Instagram, and Pinterest. Data suggest the bikini bridge trend was nurtured by an existing culture of comparison, objectification, and body image issues.

Chrissy (1/10/2014, 1:46 PM): *You can't blame the Internet for a body image culture that already existed #bikinibrige <http://t.co/xWdnBGWuKh> via @thedailybeast*

Nick (1/9/2014, 12:54 AM): *So #thighgap is real but #bikinibrige is a hoax? Starting to wonder if this internet thingy is really my best source of body image advice...*

Melanie (1/10/2014, 9:44 PM): *Heard of #BikiniBridge? Started as a prank, but it could have a greater, dangerous effect on body image.*

Ellie (1/11/2014, 10:03 AM): *#bikinibrige Trends like these only exist due to insecurity and it's fucked up that people would try to escalate it for their own kicks*

Laura (1/12/2014, 6:52 PM): *Regardless if #bikinibrige is a real or planned viral trend, +body image responses are worth perusing. #bodyimage <http://t.co/dUNkonV8Bi>*

For better or worse, the bikini bridge resonated with online consumers who operate in a culture obsessed with body image. The plausibility of the bikini bridge trend blurred the line between fact and fiction on social media. As social media users were quick to point out, it did not matter if the bikini bridge was “real” – the greater concern lied in that it was believable. In a culture in which young consumers turn to social media for information and social cues about their bodies (Perloff, 2014), the line between real and fake is increasingly blurred. A dark side of social media lies in its ability to make something fake (e.g., the bikini bridge) appear real. The images used in Operation Bikini Bridge propaganda were not created for the mission itself. Many of the images used were selfies young women posted while laying at a pool or beach. These images pre-existed the bikini bridge hashtag. The creators of Operation Bikini Bridge gave these images a collective life, centered on the common body image goal of achieving a bikini bridge. The bikini bridge joke reflects the prevailing unhealthy relationship some women have with their bodies. Social media, in this case, was used to perpetuate the societal expectations of the female body.

### **Cooptation: Adoption by Pre-existing Communities**

The bikini bridge trend was initially propagated by 4chan users but was quickly accelerated by other online communities. Tweets on the first day of Operation Bikini Bridge (January 5th) were primarily generated by brand new Twitter accounts, presumably created for the sole purpose of promoting the #bikinibrige trend on Twitter through multiple tweets. One week later (January 12<sup>th</sup>), 63.2% of the #bikinibrige tweets were one-off tweets from a multitude of Twitter users. The bikini bridge body image ideal was quickly adopted by social media users outside of the 4chan community. As the creators of Operation Bikini Bridge suggest, in Figure 1, the #bikinibrige hashtag aimed to “target NYRers [New Years resolutioners], weight loss pages/groups(as a “goal”), etc.” because “these people already hold a predisposition.” Operation Bikini Bridge was dependent upon its cooptation by preexisting online communities. Specifically, the data reveal two online communities which emerged as fundamental to the diffusion and ongoing espousal of the bikini bridge trend: proanorexia groups and online pornographers.

Health and fitness oriented communities have become increasingly present on social media (Teodoro & Naaman, 2013; Vaterlaus, Patten, Roche, & Young, 2015). The January 2014 launch of Operation Bikini Bridge strategically paralleled existing marketing strategies of health and fitness brands (e.g., gyms, weight loss supplements), which tend to increase advertising around the beginning of the year when many women make weight loss goals and resolutions. On Twitter, the bikini bridge

hashtag (#bikinibridge) was paired with hashtags (e.g., #GetChallengED, #thinspo) affiliated with the weight loss and, more commonly, pro-anorexia communities.

Arianna (1/12/2014, 12:35 AM): *The #bikinibridge might not have had a name until now, but the concept is not new to the #eatingdisorder world. #Recovered @ilookthetype*

Emily (1/11/2014, 9:54 PM): *Thin is in laddies! The newest craze to the #thinspo is the #bikinibridge which IMO is more realistically obtainable than #thighgap!*

Bexley (1/12/2014, 10:19 PM): *I was feeling pretty sexy until I heard the term #BikiniBridge, didn't know what it was, and Google Imaged it. Now I hate myself. #Thinspo*

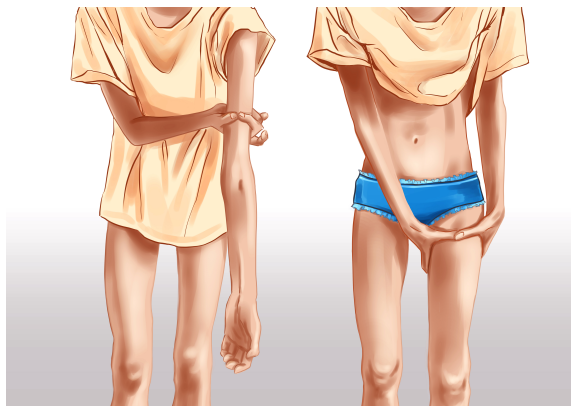
Proanorexia communities use social media to share weight loss tips and promote eating disorders (Veer, 2010). The previous example tweets demonstrate how the bikini bridge hashtag was used as a form of “thinspiration,” or thin inspiration. The proanorexia community on Twitter adopted the bikini bridge terminology, using it as a shared goal within the community and as an indicator of extreme weight loss success. Proanorexia social media users posted images very thin girls paired with the bikini bridge hashtag. Many of these users’ accounts were deleted as they were found to be in violation of Twitter’s regulations and potentially harmful to online users. The following exemplary tweets demonstrate how the online proanorexia community coopted the bikini bridge hashtag for its own purposes.

**Figure 4.** The illustration is a recreation of the #BikiniBridge social media content posted with this tweet.



Ashley (1/12/2014, 8:05 PM): *Perfectly concave #thinspo #bikinibridge #hipbones [photo shown in Figure 4 included in tweet]*

**Figure 5.** The illustration is a recreation of the #BikiniBridge social media content posted with this tweet.



Selena (1/12/14, 2:28 PM): *I wish... #thinspo #thighgap #bikinibrige #skinny* [photo shown in Figure 5 included in tweet]

Taking the bikini bridge trend to an extreme, Twitter users in the existing proanorexia community urged one another to strive for a bikini bridge as a measure of anorexic achievement. The bikini bridge was acutely salient for members of online proanorexia groups, who were already predisposed to body consciousness, body dysmorphia, and unattainable body image ideals. Thus, proanorexia communities on social media coopted the bikini bridge term.

A second online community playing a key role in the success and proliferation of the bikini bridge trend is online pornographers. Social networks like Tumblr and Twitter have become portals for posting, sharing, and viewing online pornography (Tiidenberg, 2015; Tzialles, 2016). The anonymity and freedom of social networks appeal to both professional and amateur pornographers. The bikini bridge was coopted by these online pornographers as an overtly sexual term, coupled with highly sexualized bikini bridge images. The data include many nude or sexually suggestive photographs of women accompanying the bikini bridge hashtag. Sexually charged hashtags (e.g., #hotgirls, #sexysselfie) were often coupled with the posts. Within existing online communities of pornographers, the bikini bridge became an impetus for sexual objectification.

**Figure 6.** The illustration is a recreation of the #BikiniBridge social media content posted with this tweet.



Macho Magazine (12 Jan 2014, 12:30 PM): *Would you dare cross this #BikiniBridge? #SexySunday #HotPicAtNoon* [photo shown in Figure 6 included in tweet]

**Figure 7.** The illustration is a recreation of the #BikiniBridge social media content posted with this tweet.



BikiniBridges (1/7/2014, 6:34 AM): *Sometimes you dont need a bikini for a #bikinibridge! #Sexy* [photo shown in Figure 7 included in tweet]

The previous example tweets reveal the sexualized nature of the bikini bridge term on social media. Spreading bikini bridge images alongside sexually explicit hashtags and captions reemphasized the idealized cultural perceptions of attractiveness in women. In Western culture, a bikini, in and of itself, is not sexually suggestive. Yet, when paired with sexually explicit commentary or images, the bikini bridge term became a facilitator for online pornography. In an effort to curtail online pornography, social networks, such as Tumblr, censor some searchable “NSFW,” or not suitable for work, hashtags (#sex, #porn, #breasts, #panties; Romano, 2013). The bikini bridge hashtag was coopted by the online pornography community as a workaround for users to solicit and search for sexually charged content.

Andy (1/7/2014, 11:36 PM): *Instead of arguing, post more pics of #bikinibridge #hotgirls*

Chris (1/11/2014, 7:27 PM): *RT @Sean: I'm sorry but there is something very sexy about the #bikinibridge // I'm not sorry at all. It's the naysayers who are sorry.*

Many Twitter users, like Andy and Chris, responded favorably to highly sexualized images of the bikini bridge. Sexualized bikini bridge pictures and those who solicit them encourage women to present their bodies as parts of a whole, from the waist down. Previous research suggests advertising media uses dismemberment, or a focus on one part of the body (e.g., breasts, legs; Kilbourne, 2017). The hips-only focus of the bikini bridge demonstrates how dismemberment of women’s bodies continues to operate in an online user-generated context. The bikini bridge started as a body image ideal; however, online pornographers coopted the term to share and spread sexually suggestive content.

### Controversy: Conflicting Narratives among Users

Social media, particularly Twitter, thrives on controversy (Garimella, Mathioudakis, de Francisci Morales, & Gionis, 2016). Social media platforms have been heralded as democratizing spaces in which all users have a voice and debate is encouraged. Our data suggest controversy surrounding the bikini bridge trend was a key factor in its proliferation. Much of the bikini bridge debate was purposefully generated by Internet trolls involved in the 4chan operation. 4chan members created conflicting Twitter handles for- and against- the bikini bridge, and social media users took the bait by joining the conversation. From a macro perspective, online debaters found themselves in two camps: pro-bikini bridge and anti-bikini bridge. Pro-bikini bridgers supported the bikini bridge trend through spreading bikini bridge propaganda and dismissing critics of the body image ideal.

Chris (1/11/2014 7:27 PM): *#Bikinibridge: Body image experts are calling it another unhealthy trend, but then, they're all ugly & lonely.*

Cary (1/8/2014, 11:55 PM): *#bikinibridge movement is an effort to get women to be healthy. Not saying big isn't beautiful..... My two cents*

Andrew (1/8/2014, 11:42 PM): *My tweet praising the #bikinibridge was my most retweeted \*ever\*. Remember haters, nobody held a gun to ladies' heads & made them eat cake*

Anti-bikini bridgers criticized the bikini bridge trend by promoting body positivity and satirizing the body image ideal.

Eva (1/9/2014, 9:10 AM): *this #bikinibridge thing is making me lose hope in humanity. the protrusion of you hip bones does not define your attractiveness.*

Kellie (1/11/2014, 3:53 AM): *Was going to post a selfie of my bikini bridge, but it just looks like a crepe lying against the edge of a frying pan... #bikinibridge*

Alysia (1/12/2014, 10:54 PM): *cuz I have a bridge AND a beer gut. Are we burning bikinis now? Can't think for self. Help.*

Within each of these camps, social media users presented narratives to support their own beliefs. For instance, 4chan users purposefully presented the bikini bridge as a feminist ideal suggesting women should be able to look however they want; however, online feminists quickly criticized the bikini bridge movement as one more societal trend telling women what it means to be attractive. The following debate between users demonstrates conflicting narratives.

BridgesAreBest (1/7/2014, 12:06 AM): *@FeministGroup This is a movement for feminists, by feminists. Free your body. Its your choice. Embrace the #bikinibridge*

FeministGroup (1/7/2014, 12:08 AM): *No way! The #bikinibridge craze is the new thigh gap - telling young women their worth is based on their lack of body size. Not ok!*

Beth (1/7/2014, 12:48 AM): *Actually its the only feminist movement of the year. Every woman has the right to have the looks she loves #feminism #bikinibridge*

Amanda (1/7/2014, 1:21 AM): *I'm a person with an opinion. #bikinibridge is a patriarchal standard that fetishizes little girls.*

Much of the outcry against the bikini bridge centered on body positivity, a movement which suggests women should feel comfortable, beautiful, and culturally accepted no matter what their bodies look like (Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2010). In the case of the bikini bridge, Twitter users argued women should not be held to a specific societal standard of beauty; however, others accused these users of ironically "thin-shaming," or making one feel guilty for being thin. Beggan and DeAngelis (2015) find individuals who are normally or naturally thin report receiving unwanted attention and otherness as a results of their bodies. Similarly, the conflicting narratives on social media spurred by the bikini bridge trend included fat-shaming and thin-shaming.

Mac (1/11/2014, 5:10 AM): *hey fatties, stop whining and work out. Then maybe you can get a #bikinibridge by the time summer comes around.*

Jenny (1/10/2014, 1:34 AM): *Fuck the #bikinibridge. Fuck the #thighgap. Fuck the notion that the only form of pretty is skinny. "Beautiful" isn't synonymous with skinny*

Individual perceptions of beauty depend on "a complex set of influences on preferences, including socio-cultural factors such as ideal body sizes ("beauty norms") and the stigmatization of overweight ("obesity penalty") or underweight (Ali, Rizzo, & Heiland, 2013, p. 539). The bikini bridge spurred controversy about agency and stigmatization surrounding body image. Online participants felt compelled to voice their opinions in a public forum, such as Twitter. In this way, the controversy became less about the bikini bridge itself and more about cultural perceptions of beauty and the role of social media in shaping body image ideals.

## CASE IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The overarching goal of this research was to explore how body image trends are presented, propagated, and perpetuated through social media. The case of the bikini bridge hoax provides an initial understanding of how body image ideals can quickly become viral sensations through social media. The bikini bridge case is unique because it was purposefully prompted by a group of self-proclaimed Internet trolls seeking to prank unsuspecting consumers. Yet, the bikini bridge case offers a rare perspective on viral body image trends in the digital age. Our research suggests the bikini bridge trend gained social media notoriety due to four factors: 1) simplicity (i.e., the singularization of skinny), 2) believability (i.e., the reality of the body image "hoax"), 3) cooptation (i.e., adoption by pre-existing communities), 4) controversy (i.e., conflicting narratives among users). In terms of body image concerns and the future of social media, the first two factors are most disturbing.

First, our case suggests body image ideals are becoming increasingly singularized. Young women growing up in the digital age are receiving constant cues from their friends, peers, celebrities, and strangers through social media. While previous body image research tends to focus primarily on traditional media, the rise and diffusion of the bikini bridge trend on social media is alarming given previous research which suggests young girls, in particular, increasingly internalize body norms from online communities (Oksanen, Garcia, & Räsänen, 2016). Singularized body image ideals (e.g.,



#bikinibridge, #thighgap) simplify cultural perceptions of beauty and undercut healthy body image. Through trends like the bikini bridge, consumers are encouraged to value women's fragmented bodies. Online body image trends like the bikini bridge reward women for achieving a single body part, rather than focusing on overall health and wellbeing.

Second, our case provides evidence toward an increasingly blurred line between perception and reality. Unlike traditional media (e.g., television, radio), consumers can easily create and disseminate their own content to a wide audience with little concern for regulation or standards. Thus, as evident in the bikini bridge case, social media users can create an entire body image phenomenon through a series of keystrokes. Advancements in social media have certainly afforded consumers the ability to gather information, make more informed decisions, and achieve their goals in a shorter period of time; however, the increased opportunities for social comparison and the wide distribution of potentially illegitimate information may prove to negatively impact body image across genders. Of critical note, social media users identify body image goals or ideals through naming them and giving them life. For instance, prior to the thigh gap or bikini bridge, societal norms intrinsically suggested women should be conscious of their legs and hips. Thus, hashtaggable body image ideals (e.g., #bikinibridge, #thighgap) lie latent in culture, waiting for social media to identify them as the next new body image craze. For instance, the bikini bridge phenomenon caught on quickly because it reflected women's underlying insecurities about their bodies. In a way, the Internet popularizes and perpetuates existing cultural body image ideals by giving them branded nicknames.

Many consumers find positive health and body image support through the Internet. Yet a dark side of social media lies in its ability to dictate body image ideals and expectations. The bikini bridge case study presented here marks a first step in understanding the complex role of social media in shaping modern body image ideals. Future research should build upon previous body image and nontraditional media studies to better understand the role of user-generated social media in shaping cultural perceptions and ideals of body image among both men and women (Perloff, 2014). Social networks provide platforms for consumers to instantly engage in multiple conversations and express divergent views. Future research should explore how consumers actively navigate social media conversations surrounding body image ideals. We must better understand consumers' lived experiences in negotiating body image through online media. How does social media experiences affect online perceptions of one's body, and vice versa? Young consumers are growing up in a digital age of filtered photos and doctored selfies. If the #bikinibridge and the #thighgap are evidence of future cultural norms, a glib outlook might expect young girls to hashtag their bra or clothing sizes as they mature. From a more optimistic perspective, future research might analyze how the democratic nature of social media can be used to combat potentially harmful body image expectations. For instance, social media users were quick to berate the popular retailer, Target, for photoshopping a thigh gap on several images of bikini models for its website (Stampler, 2014). Through social media, consumers can keep companies accountable for their representations of body standards. Future theoretical and substantive research should better understand the public policy and regulatory implications prompted by potentially harmful online body image ideals.

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