

The Importance of Keeping it Real

A thematic Analysis of Adolescents' (18-25) Perceptions of Gymshark's Branded Entertainment

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ABSTRACT

Today's world of media is more saturated than ever, as companies' online presence is becoming of increased importance. However, only so much space exists in the already overcrowded minds of young adults. Brands are continuously contesting for the attention of adolescents. As a result, young consumers have created a mechanism to protect themselves from the significant quantity of persuasion attempts every day. Brands have started producing Branded entertainment (BE) in order to provide consumers with real value, hoping to achieve brand resonance and loyalty in return, as opposed to direct sales. This works most effectively when employing a resonant authentic narrative. This study aims to answer the research question: "How do adolescents (18-25) perceive the authenticity of Gymshark's branded entertainment? It will attempt to do so by conducting semi-structured qualitative interviews in order to fully grasp what authenticity means to consumers. Subsequently, a thematic analysis will be conducted in order to formulate multiple patterns that emerged from the large quantity of data. The first theme displayed the significance of the main premise of BE, which is providing genuine value. Participants indicated that they were not bothered by the apparent commercial nature of BE as long as value was provided. Secondly, participants found the authenticity of BE to be dependent on the extent to which they were able to identify with the influencer/content. Identification was possible through perceived body and lifestyle similarity. However, most participants indicated that a large extent of Gymshark content felt inauthentic to them due to the perceived unobtainable nature of both bodies and lifestyles represented. Third, the continuity of Gymshark's branded entertainment was doubted in some cases, as participants found it difficult to identify with the predominantly entertaining content due to the lack of values presented. However, the events were deemed relatable. Lastly, the quality of Gymshark clothes was found to have decreased over the years, even though product quality explained the largest part of brand authenticity according to consumers. The overarching theme found that adolescents expect company's like Gymshark to *be real*, displaying transparency, relatability and honesty across all forms of communications. This thesis is limited due to participants being asked to think about BE very deeply, it is possible that this evaluation does not fully align with the way they ordinarily evaluate brand communication. Future research could focus on this thesis' observation that adolescent wish to take matters into their own hands when it comes to their engagement with brands. Although this observation was true for this sample, a quantitative overview of the ways in which consumers deal with persuasion attempts would be insightful.

KEYWORDS: *Branded entertainment, perceived authenticity, Gymshark, influencers, realism*

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List of abbreviations:

Branded entertainment = BE

Uses and gratifications theory = UGT

1. Introduction

In contemporary media landscape, consumers are becoming increasingly aware of marketing practices due to the sheer quantity of persuasion attempts they encounter on a daily basis (Sweeney et al., 2020, p.2). As a result, audiences have developed a mechanism as to protect themselves from attempts aiming to convince them called persuasion knowledge. Latter concept determines the way in which consumers evaluate a sender's possible motivations/goals behind a certain message (Tabassum et al., 2020, p.4). Marketers are attempting to achieve favorable outcomes for their company, without triggering this persuasion knowledge. They aim to obtain this by utilizing emerging forms of marketing like branded entertainment (BE). This relatively new form of marketing aims to obtain brand resonance rather than direct product sales by providing audiences with genuine value in the form of entertainment (Van Loggerenberg et al., 2021, p.323). Entertaining content is found to play into the hedonic values of audiences, and thus fitness influencers and brands have started creating entertaining content in order to strengthen the bond with their audience (Stollfuß, 2020, p.1). Because of the increased emphasis on providing consumers with value compared to promoting products, BE is found to be perceived less intrusive than more traditional forms of advertising, decreasing the likeliness to trigger persuasion knowledge (Van Loggerenberg et al., 2021, p.323). The degree to which BE is perceived to be authentic, constitutes a large part of the possible success of the initiative, which is the reason marketers strive to create authentic content (Van Loggerenberg et al., 2021, p.323). The aim of this thesis is to gain an understanding of the factors that determine the authenticity of Gymshark's BE attempts.

A research conducted on the best utilisation of BE concluded that the balance between persuading and entertaining consumers is significantly delicate and must be chosen with great care (Chang, 2024, p.398). Specifically, greater prominence of products/services lead to a greater brand recall, brand awareness and engagement. However, this might cause the activation of persuasion knowledge and thus lower evaluations of perceived integrity. BE which focussed more on entertaining audiences leads to the same potential benefits, but with less activation of persuasion knowledge and thus a more favourable brand idea. Additionally, according to research conducted on the conceptualization and effect of authentic narrative in BE, latter concept in general was found to be more authentic than traditional advertising (Van Loggerenberg et al., 2021, p.9). Perceived authenticity in BE was found to be a significant predictor of brand resonance. Through latter concept, relationships brand loyalty, and purchase intention might arise making it the paramount goal of BE.

Furthermore, the utilization of influencers in BE increases the perceived authenticity of initiatives (Khamis et al., 2017, p.195). This is due to the strong identification that consumers feel when engaging with content featuring likeable influencers (Khamis et al., 2017, p.195). Furthermore, the relationship between influencer and brand is significantly important, both characteristics and expertise need to be fully aligned with the brand. Audiences will evaluate this as more authentic,

which ultimately results in a higher degree of brand resonance (Vrontis et al., 2021, p.637).

Additionally, influencers that stay true to themselves and refrain from rotating their identity around brands are more authentic (Vrontis et al., 2021, p.637)

Previous research on consumer engagement with BE has indicated that audience's engagement with the content is determined by the value they are able to obtain from the initiative (Chang, 2024, p.403). These values can entail acting as a learning tool, entertainment or motivation, specifically in a fitness setting (Stollfuß, 2020, p.1). This can be provided by highly specialized (micro) influencers whom are generally considered to be opinion leaders and specialists in their field, called infotainers (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2018, p.6). As a result, consumers experience feelings of enjoyment and appreciation, which potentially results in brand loyalty and resonance (Wirth et al., 2012, p.419). Additionally, Shahid et al., (2023, p.68), found that consumer loyalty and brand resonance is obtained through parasocial relationships. These are forged when consumers can relate to an influencer's personality, content or appearance Shahid et al., (2023, p.68).

1.1 Research Questions

This research will aim to answer the question: "How do adolescents (18-25) perceive the authenticity of Gymshark's BE"? Gymshark is a fitness-clothes company whom have been a front-runner in both influencer marketing and BE since 2012. They mainly post short-form content which attempts to entertain/inform audiences, as well as free events to bring influencers and audience together. According to Van Loggerenberg et al., (2021, p.323), BE should be amusement created by a brand that aims to genuinely provide audiences value, as to create brand resonance, instead of product sales, by employing an authentic narrative. In this case, BE is divided into three parts: informational short-form content, entertaining short-form content and experiential event organization, as these are most consistent with the BE efforts of Gymshark. Authenticity will be operationalized using the Perceived Brand Authenticity model by (Morhart et al., 2015, pp. 201-203). Latter source explains perceived brand authenticity to emerge from a sum of four concepts, continuity, credibility, integrity and symbolism. This thesis is concerned with BE specifically done by utilizing influencers. Latter personalities have been associated with being personal brands, making the application of this model highly relevant (Khamis et al., 2017, p.195). This thesis thus proposes 4 sub-questions, which all individually explain a segment of authenticity, in order to explain the perceived authenticity of Gymshark's BE and thus the research question. The first sub-question is: "How do adolescents (18-25) perceive the continuity of Gymshark's BE?" Continuity refers to whether consumers perceive a company to be consistent over time, staying true to their identity and being future proof. The second sub-question is: "How do adolescents (18-25) perceive the credibility of Gymshark's BE?" Brand credibility is concerned with the extent to which consumers perceive the brand to deliver on their promises, including trust and transparency. The third sub-question is: "How do adolescents (18-25) perceive the integrity of Gymshark's BE?" The concept of integrity deals with brands that display true

virtue and willingness to act not only from a financial standpoint, but also for the greater good or customer benefit. Lastly, the sub-question: “How do adolescents (18-25) perceive the integrity of Gymshark’s BE?” will be answered by exploring the concept of symbolism which is concerned with the degree to which brands are perceived to be similar to oneself, providing recognition regarding identity, norms and values, and thus being relatable. By answering all sub-questions, this thesis will have obtained a comprehensive overview of adolescent’s authenticity perceptions. Answer the main question will thus be done by combining the most important findings from each sub-question.

1.2 Academic and Social Relevance

Prior research on the perceived authenticity of BE has been quantitative only, focusing on effects that BE has on consumers, or the conceptualization of the phenomenon (Chang, 2024, p.399; Chan-Olmsted & Shay, 2015, p.11-30; Van Loggerenberg et al., 2021, p.323-327). Even though these insights provide significantly relevant data on consumer wants and needs from BE, it still remains relatively broad. Qualitative consumer perceptions and deep meaning-making practices of BE have not been researched, even though they could significantly enhance the current understanding of authentic BE. For example: Van Loggerenberg et al., (2021, p.327) describes the factors significant to create authentic BE, including disseminating the brand’s norms and values through communication, being genuine, and carry emotional meanings. Similarly, Morhart et al., (2015, p.202), research and introduce the components that determine the perceived authenticity of brands. Although this is extremely valid information, the research body lacks data of the perception of the specific audiences that brands want to target, on what these components mean to them. This thesis aims to fill this gap in research by deconstructing the previously researched constructs that determine the authenticity of BE and provide a complete overview of what factors like brand symbolism and integrity mean to consumers and how they interpret them. An attempt will be made to do this by subjecting these deconstructed concepts to already existing examples of BE to forge practical data on this phenomenon. This will hopefully result in the ways in which companies can most effectively utilize these factors to provide content that is as authentic as possible and thus create brand resonance.

According to (Stollfuß, 2020, p.7), BE is an excellent way to teach audiences and disseminate relevant information on important societal matters. The dissemination of information has been growing due to the increase of so called infotainers, these are popular social media figures who are usually considered to be experts in certain topics like fitness for example (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2018, p.7). It is widely known that a significant percentage of the world’s population would benefit from increased movement, as well as improve their general nutrition. However, Chen et al., (2022, p.6) found that the problem of internalizing health information in traditional media forms lies in the difficulty people find information to internalize. Meaning that easy-implementable, and highly relatable health content decreases avoiding behavior (Chen et al., 2022, p.7). The popularity of infotainers lies in their excellent skills to combine entertainment and information in their content, as well as their

reliability and personal approach, making information easily digestible (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2018, p.7). Thus, understanding the best ways in which to create content that significantly resonates with audiences by being as authentic as possible, will increase the degree to which consumers find health information to be implementable. This will ultimately lead to a higher degree of health literacy and thus healthy behavior among people (Chen et al., 2022, p.7).

1.3 Research Design

Previous research on BE has primarily been quantitative, Focusing on the conceptualization and effect of BE (Chang, 2024, p.399; Chan-Olmsted & Shay, 2015, p.11-30; Van Loggerenberg et al., 2021, p.323-327). As this thesis will aim to gather data on what constitutes the authenticity of BE, semi-structured interviews will be utilized in order to provide a comprehensive idea of authenticity perceptions. The purpose of the data collection is to provide interviews explaining the ways in which to produce authentic content for audiences. The interview guide will be based on the Perceived Brand Authenticity model, to capture the notions of authenticity as complete as possible. The interviews will be recorded, and the emerged data will be transferred ATLAS.ti Web (version 5.8.0), after which a thematic analysis will be conducted on interview data. This procedure will be based on the 6-step thematic analysis method of Braun & Clarke, (2006, pp.86-93), allowing the researcher to effectively analyze the large body of data and will allow substantial flexibility. Ultimately, themes will be formed, which will constitute the results. To ensure the validity of data collected, interviewees cannot be acquainted to the researcher, must be familiar with the brand Gymshark, and together, provide a diverse group of people.

1.4 Outline

The second chapter of this thesis will be concerned with the provision of a comprehensive overview of research conducted on authenticity in BE. Specifically, it will be explained how modern consumers engage with BE and what needs and wishes they have for BE, in order for practitioners to facilitate this as to create brand resonance. Additionally, the significant role that influencers play in this process will be highlighted, explaining the ways in which consumers typically identify with these opinion leaders, followed by the ways that companies might utilize this power. The third chapter will ensure that the readers gain an understanding of the process which is utilized in order to conduct a valid and reliable research. An interesting overview will be given of the ways in which continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism are understood from interview data and subsequently coded. Furthermore, definitions for the important constructs of BE, influencer marketing, and authenticity will be given. This thesis provides an interesting definition of BE as it is considered to be both brand created and influencer created, due to the BE model that Gymshark provides. The fourth chapter will introduce the most prevalent perspectives on the authenticity of BE by Gymshark, highlighting the

importance of similarity between the identity of content produced and consumer identity. Similarly, the role of displaying omnipresent values and identity in content and events organized will be discussed in relationship to participants' identity perceptions of Gymshark as a brand. The final chapter will answer the research question and particularly highlight the importance of "keeping it real" when producing BE. Additionally, the findings will be compared to previous research and an emphasis will be placed on the extent to which brand's attempt to persuade consumers as compared to genuinely entertain them.

2. Theoretical Framework

The following section will provide a comprehensive overview of all relevant theories and concepts on which this research is based. This theoretical framework will also act as the foundation of the interview guide, shaping the concepts and theories on which the data collection protocol will be based. As the main topic of this thesis concerns BE, this will be operationalized first, added with the interpretation this research will embrace to use the concept. In the 2nd section, the interesting perspective of utilizing influencers as the face of the brand, inspiring Gymshark's BE will be explored. The following section will take this perspective of BE and visualize the ways in which Gymshark specifically uses and creates BE in order to create a comprehensive overview. Thereafter, the perceived brand authenticity model will be introduced, and its utilization for the collection and analysis of data will be clarified. The final section will create an overview of the reasons for consumers to engage with BE, using the Uses and Gratifications theory (UGT), as well as the concept of parasocial interaction (PSI). Latter constructs will provide the thesis with valuable insights regarding consumers demands for BE, prior to the data collection and analysis.

2.1 Branded Entertainment Conceptualization

2.1.1 Branded Entertainment Definition

BE can be approached from different angles. The most researched form of BE is product placement, which includes showcasing a product in a form of (external) entertainment, without it being integrated in the story generally (Chang, 2024, p.400). However, brands can also be integrated into the story, by sponsoring the creation of a popular show, and ensuring the content of the show resonates with the brand, "The LEGO Movie" (Lord & Miller, 2014) for example (Chang, 2024, p.400). The most utilized definition of BE is when a product or service is woven into a form of entertainment to satisfy audiences, and still achieve brand resonance (Hudson & Hudson, 2006, p.499).

In this definition, differences exist between the extent to which product/services are positioned prominently, or more "hidden". For example, product placement is very obvious, while providing audiences with entertainment without, or barely showcasing their product, is less obvious (Chang, 2024, p.401). When examining the differences between approaches, research shows inconclusive results as product prominence is positively associated with a greater brand recall (Gupta & Lord, 1998, p.57). However, prominent products in BE are also associated with diminished brand attitudes, derived from disruption of consumers engagement with the content and the feeling of being persuaded (Chang,

2024, p.402). This indicates that although clearly presenting and communicating product values and information, it may hinder their experience with the content.

Latter definitions are primarily concerned with the dissemination of product information in order to familiarize audiences with their products or services. However, the latest definitions of BE move beyond the purpose of direct selling and displaying products prominently or hidden, rather acting as a touching point for consumer-brand resonance. Specifically, Van Loggerenberg et al., (2021, p.323) BE should be a genuine effort of brands to produce entertainment that aligns with consumer's norms, values and identity, to achieve brand resonance. Latter concept determines the extent to which consumers feel aligned and connected with brands on an emotional level (Van Loggerenberg et al., 2021, p.323). Possible results of achieving brand resonance through BE can entail brand loyalty, increased engagement and emotional attachment to a brand (Van Loggerenberg et al., 2021, p.323). Latter findings flawlessly describe what should be the goal of BE: brand resonance. Obtaining brand resonance through BE is only possible through creating an authentic narrative that aligns with brand values (Van Loggerenberg et al., 2021, p.323). Additionally, BE must be brand created as compared to product placing in content produced by other brands, as this way the authentic narrative can be kept (Van Loggerenberg et al., 2021, p.327). As Gymshark utilizes a large extent of influencers whom are contracted by Gymshark, this thesis expands this definition by adding contracted influencer BE. Now that the definition of BE which will be applied in this thesis has been identified, the history of BE will be introduced. This will clearly display how the use of BE has shifted over the years, going from product placement to providing audiences with branded services. This will contribute to our understanding of what contemporary BE means, and does not mean.

2.1.2 Branded Entertainment History:

BE has received extensive attention amongst researchers over the past century. However, the definition has significantly shifted, especially over the last decade (Marti-Parreno et al., 2015, p.4). The origins of BE can be found in the early 1900's where filmmakers were in charge of their own films which resulted in many brands creating their own films. The brands were highly visible in these movies and brands were thus able to deliver a controlled narrative to their audiences. In the 30's and later, soap operas became the standard through which brands could advertise themselves by means of mentioning/showcasing brands, products or services (Marti-Parreno et al., 2015, p.5). Before that, print media were already creating BE through recipe books, and strip stories. In 2001, the first sponsored book was published, blurring the lines between personal life and advertising even further (Marti-Parreno et al., 2015, p.5). The book sparked controversy amongst professionals, arguing that this would revolutionize the product placement business on the one hand, but caused increased skepticism amongst consumers on the other hand (Marti-Parreno et al., 2015, p.5). The controversy sparked by the first brand sponsored book, has its roots in the main ethical dilemma concerning BE,

which is the attempt of brands to position themselves into people's personal lives. As books are widely considered to be a significantly private part of people's lives, this felt extra intrusive. Hudson & Hudson, (2006, p.499), add to this perspective by laying emphasis on concerns like, loss of privacy, and a declining sense of freedom in one's leisure time. It will be interesting to measure the extent to which interview participants will evaluate BE initiatives as intrusive, and what the factors are that determine this intrusiveness. BE should not irritate its consumers, but rather provide them with value (Chang, 2024, p.399). It will be interesting to see whether BE that provides value to consumers is still perceived as intrusive.

When increasing amounts of consumers got access to the internet, BE took a new step, becoming omnipresent in all forms of online entertainment, including games, and short form content (Marti-Parreno et al., 2015, p.6). However, the main focus of BE was to display prominent product information as to persuade consumers (Marti-Parreno et al., 2015, p.6)

According to Van Loggerenberg et al., (2021, pp.327-328), BE is most effectively utilized to entertain audiences to achieve a positive evaluation of the brand. This indicates that although possible, communicating product information through BE is not mandatory (Van Loggerenberg et al., 2021, p.332). The focus of BE should thus not be on "selling" products and product information, but rather with providing audiences with a service, creating favorable brand attitudes. This shift in definition is extremely important as it could explain a large variety in the degree of perceived intrusiveness of BE (Chang, 2024, p.407). Specifically, prior research has indicated that consumers displayed more favorable evaluations of brand communication when it was found to be enjoyable on any level, highlighting the significance of providing value as a brand (Chang, 2024, p.407). Modern brands are providing consumers with branded services like branded experiential events, short-form entertaining/informational content and influencer sponsorships/marketing (Chang, 2024, p.402). As previously established, traditional advertising perspectives and early forms of BE were mainly concerned with displaying product information, ultimately persuading consumers (Marti-Parreno et al., 2015, p.5) Most participants evaluated this as an unwanted break to their favorite TV show or book. As BE must be brand created following Van Loggerenberg et al., (2021, p.327), audiences have a choice whether or not to consume it, rather than being a forceful interaction of their favorite entertainment.

Audiences are consuming contemporary BE, as it aligns with the general interests and content types they usually engage with, and are genuinely perceived as entertaining, providing significant value to audiences (Chang, 2024, p.407). An increasing amount of companies are utilizing influencers when creating BE, making forging a connection with audiences easier (Vrontis et al., 2021, p.625). The next section will explain the ways in which Gymshark uses influencers.

2.2 Influencer Marketing and Branded Entertainment

The emergence of social media has given rise to new ways for companies to market their products, influencer marketing (Ladhari et al., 2020, p.1). It involves utilizing the individual networks that online personalities have built up over the years in order to promote brands/products. Influencers are usually domain experts/opinion leaders whom are regarded as credible, making them excellent brand endorsers (Ladhari et al., 2020, p.1). Influencer marketing has become increasingly popular over the last years, bridging the gap between brands and consumers through popular and likeable people promoting brands (Chang, 2024, p.400). Influencer marketing grants consumers the ability to emotionally connect with brands through relatedness, competence and humanity, and it was found that 49% of consumers is now relying on influencers for their product purchases (Vrontis et al., 2021, p.625). Additionally, influencer marketing is found to be less intrusive as compared to more traditional ways of advertising, as consumers feel less forced to purchase (Vrontis et al., 2021, p.637). This increases perceived authenticity, but only when the match between brand and influencer is congruent (Vrontis et al., 2021, p.637). This congruence can be explained as the perceived “normality” for the influencer to use/promote the brand. For example, a brand selling fitness clothes like Gymshark would profit from engaging with an influencer that ordinarily uses fitness clothes and is also considered an expert in the fitness world (Vrontis et al., 2021, p.637). Additionally, overlap between influencer and target audience is preferred as forming bonds and relationships with the target audience is the ultimate goal, showcasing the importance of influencer-brand congruence. Lastly, corporations should use multiple influencers for different campaigns/goal, as choosing the most congruent influencer with a campaign is so important.

Putting in perspective, Gymshark is a fitness clothing and accessory brand who have been front-runners in influencer marketing since 2012, contracting fitness youtubers and influencers to establish a brand connection with their audience (Thescaleupcollective, 2024, p.1). Gymshark is regarded as selective when choosing influencers and aim to engage in long-term relationships with influencers that embrace their brand values.

An example of this is David Laid, a fitness influencer who was contracted by Gymshark in 2016, and now serves as the ‘creative director of lifting’. This is unique as Laid still creates its own content, which is mostly dedicated to Gymshark and vice versa. Gymshark has now created a network of hundreds of similar influencers, utilizing their already existing followers and fans to strengthen the brand of Gymshark (Thescaleupcollective, 2024, p.1). On their Instagram page, content shot by a legion of influencers can be found, all showcasing the brand.

2.2.1 Types of Branded Entertainment

This thesis will focus on the three most relevant subtypes of BE in the context of Gymshark. These include: entertaining short-form content, informational short-form content and the organization of branded events.

Informational short form content is generally associated with the dissemination of knowledge to consumers, which is presented in the way of entertaining content (Chang, 2024, p.402). Gymshark mostly utilizes influencers to create this content, which Gross & von Wangenheim, (2018, p.6), refer to as infotainers, they are mostly domain experts providing valuable information in an entertaining manner. This is effective as consumers want to satisfy their desire for expert-information, as well as interpersonal connection/relationship and entertainment (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2018, p.7). Gymshark provides its followers with specific workout routines, scientific information on optimal lifestyle choices regarding movement and nutrition, as well as motivational videos to inspire audiences.

Secondly, primarily entertaining content satisfies the needs of consumers to have a good time and relax, a reciprocal relationship, is considered less important than with infotainers, as consumers wish to extract content they enjoy, rather than personally relevant information this way (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2018, p.7). Gymshark provides consumers with entertaining content through funny skits about the life as a fitness enthusiast, behind the scenes content, and general lifestyle content.

Third, this thesis will analyze the organization of experiential events. This type of BE refers to the creation of experiences and engaging activities for consumers to interact with (Song, 2024, p.9). Gymshark has organized many free LIFT events over the years, in which consumers are granted the opportunity to meet their favorite influencers in-real life (Thescaleupcollective, 2024, p.1). Consumers and influencers practice their passion of fitness together, working out, having Q&A sessions ultimately creating friendships. Additionally, Gymshark have regularly opened pop-up stores which offered free products and the opportunity to meet influencers.

According to Song (2024, p.20), experiential marketing has the ability to enforce brand loyalty amongst generations, especially for Gen Z, as they demand personalized experiences with a brand. Additionally, research shows that in-person events can foster brand loyalty through education about the brand (Michela et al., 2018, p.601).

All types of BE created by Gymshark features contracted athletes wearing Gymshark clothes, but refrain from verbally promoting the clothes or tools. Since Gymshark's products in their content are not overly prominent but rather integrated, it is likely they are aiming for the earlier discussed outcome of brand resonance, rather than direct sales as their main goal, aiming for consumer loyalty (Van Loggerenberg et al., 2021). To spark the memory, brand resonance is the extent to which consumers feel aligned and connected with brands. A higher extent of brand resonance can lead to consumer loyalty, increased engagement and emotional attachment to the brand (Van Loggerenberg et

al., 2021, p.323). Gymshark refers to this phenomenon as the “Gymshark community”, building real relationships and meaningful connections with their target audience

this thesis will study the three types of content to gain an understanding into differences of authenticity perceptions which will be explored in the following section. this is interesting as each type provides consumers with a different type of service, ranging from pure entertainment, to information and experiences. As BE’s main premise is to provide services to consumers, it is significant to understand which types of content mostly aligns with audience’s needs, adding to the existing body of research. Additionally, the brand is utilizing a strategy in which the influencers are not merely utilized in specific campaigns, rather they are the face of the brand, creating significantly broad and widespread associations with the brand. This is different to traditional conceptualizations of the use of influencers as they lay emphasis on “using” influencers in their campaigns, rather than creating the brand around them (Kapitan et al., 2022, p.347; Khamis et al., 2017, p.195; Ladhari et al., 2020, p.7). However, prior research has indicated that the more an influencer aligns with the purpose of the brand, the higher the perceived authenticity of the collaboration is (Vrontis et al., 2021, p.637). It is thus likely that when influencers “are” the brand, the evaluation of authenticity will be even higher. As multiple sources indicate successful BE efforts to be highly depend on how authentic they are perceived (Eigenraam et al., 2021, p.61; Kapitan et al., 2022, p.347; Van Loggerenberg et al., 2021, p.327). The BE efforts will be analyzed using the perceived brand authenticity model by Morhart et al., (2015, pp.201-203), which will be introduced in the next section.

2.3 Perceived Authenticity of Branded Entertainment

The following section will focus on the Perceived Brand Authenticity model by (Morhart et al., 2015, pp.201-203). It will then be applied to BE to gain an understanding of practical examples.

According to (Morhart et al., 2015, p.203), the concept of brand authenticity is constructed from multiple concepts, resulting in perceived brand authenticity being defined as: “The extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful toward itself (continuity), true to its consumers (credibility), motivated by caring and responsibility (integrity), and able to support consumers in being true to themselves (symbolism)” (Morhart et al., 2015, p.203).

Continuity refers to the extent to which consumers perceive the brand to be a constant factor over many years, being able to live through different periods of market shifts and staying true to themselves (Morhart et al., 2015, p.202). Furthermore, continuity was also associated with the perceived ability to be future resistant.

Credibility is the next factor and describes a brand’s ability to adhere to the agreements they make with consumers and deliver every time (Morhart et al., 2015, p.202). Credibility also includes the brands transparency and willingness to deliver each time, and the extent to which it lives up the expectations of consumers.

Integrity refers to the brand's intentions and the values they share with their consumers (Morhart et al., 2015, p.203). It showcases a brand's willingness to act from a perspective of virtue and good intentions for people and planet, instead of merely for themselves or for financial purposes. It has been argued that authentic brands are created due to intrinsic values of the creators (Morhart et al., 2015, p.203).

Symbolism refers to the extent to which consumers can identify and see themselves in the brand (Morhart et al., 2015, p.203). Consumers can use brands to understand and portray themselves in very explicit way, as well as construct a particular identity of themselves this way. Brands that understand their consumers and can try to reflect their norms and values will be perceived as more authentic.

As previously mentioned, the Gymshark athletes (influencers) are the brand, and thus the perceived authenticity is highly likely to differ amongst consumers. The Perceived Brand Authenticity theory is highly applicable to influencer marketing as recent studies have shown the emergence of "personal branding" among influencers on social media (Khamis et al., 2017, p.195). This entails that micro-celebrities or influencers are marketing themselves in similar ways that real brands do, tailoring to emerging audience interest while simultaneously aiming to display their "authentic" selves. They can do this by truly engaging with their audience, by responding and having conversations with them which has the potential to break the traditional idea of sender-receiver communication (Khamis et al., 2017, p.195). As previously mentioned, influencer marketing displays higher perceptions of authenticity compared to more traditional ways of advertising (Kapitan et al., 2022, p.342). However, perceived authenticity reaches optimal levels when created content and collaborations aligns with their personal traits, aligning with "symbolism" (Kapitan et al., 2022, p.342). Additionally, influencers that are perceived to be motivated intrinsically and act from their values and beliefs are also considered more authentic, aligning with the "integrity" dimension (Kapitan et al., 2022, p.342). As previously mentioned, brands can create higher brand resonance with their audiences by utilizing influencers that are significantly similar to the brand (Vrontis et al., 2021, p.637). This relates to the concept of continuity as brands are expected to remain true to themselves, indicating the selection of influencers is significantly important. Lastly, apart from endorsing brands and products, influencers and BE are expected to disseminate relevant and more importantly credible information to their audiences, highlighting the significance of the concept of credibility for this research.

Furthermore, this model will allow this research to capture authenticity perceptions in a comprehensive manner due to the clear separation of concepts, all contributing to brand authenticity. These concepts will be researched separately, asking participants questions about all aspects that explain brand authenticity. Gathering data on the individual concepts, will provide a much clearer overview of the exact factors that contribute to whether audiences deem a particular BE effort authentic or not. For example, a participant could experience a particular initiative to be significantly relevant to them individually (symbolism), but feel like the content does not accurately explain the

best way in which to work out. Thus, having participants explain their evaluations of the individual factors, will make perceptions of authenticity more verifiable.

It is widely accepted that the perceived authenticity accredited by consumers is significantly important for branding objectives and brand resonance. In current media landscape, many brands are continuously contesting each other for consumer attention, which gives consumers the power to make choices (Morhart et al., 2015, p.201). Consumers tend to favor brands that are original, provide them with value, are outspoken, and align with their own values (Morhart et al., 2015, p.201). the favorability of particular brands and thus BE initiatives can be explained by all the factors contributing to perceived brand authenticity as explained by (Morhart et al., 2015, p.201), utilizing the Perceived Brand Authenticity Model to examine authenticity perceptions will thus provide this thesis with a comprehensive overview of the perceptions that ultimately determine whether audiences favor the content, or not. Researching BE that uses influencers on the basis of latter concept, it thus highly relevant for future marketing endeavors. The following section will explain how and why consumers engage with BE, which could be useful for providing this research with an understanding of consumer wants and needs, prior to the interviews are conducted. This will help form the interview guide and place subsequent findings in perspective.

2.4 Consumer Engagement with Branded Entertainment

2.4.1 Uses and Gratifications Theory

To effectively research the authenticity perceptions of commonly used forms of BE, the researcher must gain an understanding of the reasons that consumers would engage with such initiatives and what gratifications they fulfill with this content in the first place. Understanding the gratifications that consumers get out of this content will help explain the consumer agency in choosing the types of media they consume.

To understand the reasons for consumers to engage in a particular form of media, and what they aim to obtain from it, the uses and gratifications theory will be used (Ruggiero, 2000, p.8). From the emergence of the uses and gratifications theory in 1984 (p.105), in which Dozier and Rice coined the theory of immediate and delayed gratification, many different motivations for the consumption of media have emerged (Ruggiero, 2000, p.8). However, the affordance of media to provide entertainment and information has stood out throughout time (Ruggiero, 2000, p.8). This similarly is the case in BE according to (Stollfuß, 2020, p.9).

The uses and gratifications framework embraces the definition of an audience deliberately choosing the content they want to see instead of being passive consumers (Ruggiero, 2000, p.8). Additionally, the uses and gratifications theory assumes audience's goal-oriented approach in which audiences have an objective they aim to fulfill using certain media. According to Chang, (2024,

p.403), people mainly consume BE for its enjoyable nature. Specifically, Wirth et al., (2012, p.409), differentiate consumer experience of BE into hedonic and eudaimonic experience. Hedonic experiences refer to feelings of enjoyment and were prevalent mostly among humorous advertisements. Eudaimonic experience refer to feelings of appreciation and meaning, these feelings were prevalent in TV shows/movies which were encoded as more meaningful as compared to humorous (Wirth et al., 2012, p.419). Additionally, it was found that such emotions can increase wellbeing and feelings of competence among audiences, which can further increase brand loyalty and congruence. Because of the feelings of enjoyment and the shareable nature of BE, consumers are likely to share content and with that improve interpersonal relationships (Wirth et al., 2012, p.409). specifically, Stollfuß, (2020, p.9) found that entertaining fitness content is consumed both as a learning tool and a source of entertainment. Additionally, consumers were found to engage with this entertaining content as it motivated them to pursue their goals (Stollfuß, 2020, p.9)

The second motivation concerns information acquisition specifically, in which consumers are looking for educational and supportive content which can be provided by a highly specialized (micro) influencer in a field (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2018, p.6). The main motivation for consumers to retrieve information from influencers is their highly perceived expertise, as well as their humanity in the sense of engaging with them and providing them with engagement and answers on their comments (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2018, p.6).

As UGT identified the main motivations for consumers to engage with BE to be information acquisition and enjoyment/entertainment, it is highly applicable to BE. As previously mentioned it is highly important for BE efforts to provide audiences with real value, instead of demanding things from them. The first step for practitioners is thus identifying the reasons why consumers use media, to understand what they must provide them with in order to strengthen the relationship. Additionally, as the engagement rates on Gymshark's entertainment are generally high, this research assumes the audience's willingness to engage with their content, in order to satisfy their goals. As UGT assumes this notion, it is significantly useful.

2.4.2 Parasocial Interaction

To take a deeper look into the ways in which consumers engage with content provided by influencers, the concept of parasocial interaction will be used. Parasocial Interaction refers to individuals engaging with media figures the same way as they would in real life interactions. Horton and Wohl (1956, p.2) discovered that audiences not only react with just a passive observation. Rather, audiences can form bonds with media figures/brands and establish an emotional connection (Horton and Wohl, 1956, p.2). It explains how audiences can find intimacy, psychological needs and understanding through a person they might have never met. However, due to the emergence of social

media influencers, the nature of relationships and bonds formed online are becoming less one-sided and more reciprocal (Shahid et al., 2023, p.68).

In most cases, BE includes a media personality in order to make the content easy to identify with (Chang, 2024, p.399). It was found that almost half of respondents depend on influencers for product recommendations, but only when the influencer was found to be entertaining (Chang, 2024, p.400). Leveraging this increasing influencer power is key for brands to form relationships with their audience. Additionally, it was found that parasocial interaction with an influencer in branded content can significantly increase brand loyalty and purchase intention (Shahid et al., 2023, p.68). Furthermore, the loyalty towards the influencer can transfer over to the brand, creating a mutually beneficial relationship (Shahid et al., 2023, p.68). These findings indicate the power of relationship building with audiences. As previously mentioned influencers are able to bridge the gap between brand and consumer. The origin of this phenomena can be found in the concept of parasocial interaction , explaining the perceived relationships that audiences have with influencers (Shahid et al., 2023, p.68).

The concept of parasocial interaction significantly aligns with the Perceived Brand Authenticity Model, specifically with the concept of symbolism which explains the degree to which audiences feel connected to brands. As previously mentioned, connectedness and loyalty to influencers can transfer over to brands, making parasocial interaction a fundamental aspect of marketing endeavors (Shahid et al., 2023, p.68).

This study will analyze the authenticity perceptions of social media influencer collaborations and the utilization of influencers when hosting real-life events, and other forms of BE. Understanding a theoretical foundation of how audiences perceive these influencers before analysis, will provide the researcher with significant knowledge to interpret the findings and link them to existing theory. As identification and perceived relationships with influencers and brands explains a large part of brand authenticity through the concept of symbolism, the participants' assessment will be interesting (Shahid et al., 2023, p.68).

2.4.3 Persuasion Knowledge

Persuasion knowledge refers to the consumer's understanding of the true intentions lying behind a marketing message. This entails the consumers beliefs about benefits the message creator gets, the suitability of specific persuasion techniques, and evaluating the value of the marketing message (Tabassum et al., 2020, p.4). The persuasion knowledge of an individual is a certain assumption about persuasion. This involves resistance techniques and beliefs about the power and appropriateness of intentions and marketing tactics. Persuasion knowledge is acquired over time through experience with the market (Tabassum et al., 2020, p.4). Latter concept will be utilized to interpret the answer given by interviewees in light of their knowledge of being persuaded.

The previous paragraph has drawn an overview of the theories and concepts that will be used in this research as the basis of the interview guide, as well as the framework with which the findings of this research will later be dialogued. The next section will discuss the procedures of this thesis, ultimately providing a comprehensive overview of choices made during the data collection and analysis.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The following chapter will provide the reader with an overview of the methodological approach taken in order to conduct a comprehensive and reliable research on: “How do adolescents (18-25) perceive the authenticity of Gymshark’s BE?”. The justification for semi-structured interviews will be discussed, after which the sampling method and the operationalization will be explained in detail. Subsequently, a detailed explanation will be given on the specific ways in which the data was collected and analyzed. Lastly, the validity and credibility of this research will be justified through safeguards like role of the researcher, positionality and bias management.

A substantial amount of quantitative research has already been conducted on the potential benefits/effect which BE potentially has for corporation and implications these studies may hold for practitioners. (Chang, 2024, p.399; Chan-Olmsted & Shay, 2015, pp.11-30; Michela et al., 2018, pp.600-605; Parreno et al., 2015, pp.4-8; Shahid et al., 2023, pp.62-70). Latter studies all acknowledge potential positive effects BE has on consumer loyalty, and brand connection/resonance. However, large-scale quantitative research aims to generate numerical data about a certain phenomenon in order to generalize findings to a whole population, rather than uncover the deeper meanings and desires of consumers (Brennen, 2021, p.15). This means that although interesting and relevant, latter studies do not provide a detailed explanation of the specific needs and wishes consumers have for BE efforts, in order for them to be engaging and interesting to interact with. According to Chang (2024, p.401), the extent to which BE is perceived as intrusive/unobtrusive is extremely delicate as it attempts to play into people’s lives and interest to create a sense of connection with them. When consumers evaluate BE efforts as intrusive, it is potentially harmful to brands and must thus be avoided (Chang, 2024, p.402). In-depth meaning making practices and opinions thus are necessary to understand the perceptions around BE, specifically the authenticity/ intrusiveness of specific instances. Babbie (2017, p.319) emphasizes that when exploring perceptions and processes of meaning-making, a qualitative approach is most appropriate, as these phenomena cannot be effectively quantified. Qualitative analysis is a research stream that aims to uncover meaning making processes throughout society by listening and observing carefully (Babbie, 2017, p.297) . Additionally, Truly understanding the thought processes and perceptions of people only happens through the interaction of researcher and

subject, as opposed to the distant data collection of quantitative research (Babbie, 2017, p.319). For example when asking participants about perceived authenticity, qualitative methods allow the researcher to listen carefully and ask follow-up questions to explore the foundation of this authenticity and what it depends on, resulting in significant and valid data. Given that this study examines how adolescents (ages 18-25) perceive and interpret BE within the fitness and health industry, qualitative research is deemed the most suitable method.

Specifically, interviews were chosen as the method of data collection. Interviews are characterized by one-on-one conversations between researcher and interviewee, in which a phenomenon is attempted to be understood through asking a specific set of questions (Brennen, 2021, p.28). The extent to which these questions asked are flexible, is what determines the type of interview guide, ranging from structured to unstructured interviewing. This study will utilize semi structured interviews which are based on a specific set of questions, but enable the researcher to probe, ask additional questions or slightly divert from the topic, to gain a more profound understanding of a certain phenomenon. This study aims to capture the authenticity perceptions of BE on the basis of the four factors determining brand authenticity (Morhart et al., 2015. pp.201-203). Asking each participant the same questions about credibility, symbolism, continuity and integrity is thus fundamental to create a thorough understanding of the perceived authenticity. However, perceptions of authenticity can be placed on a broad spectrum, and it is impossible to capture the extent of the four factors into a limited amount of questions. It is thus fundamental that there is space for diverting from the fixed questions in the form of asking follow up questions, elaborations or touching other topics when the researcher deems it to be of significant worth to the overall research. This added flexibility as compared to structured interviews will enable the researcher to discover deeper meanings and interpretations outside of the preliminary ideas, resulting in the most valid and significant information (Brennen, 2021, p.28)

Table 3.1*Overview of participants*

Name (pseudonym)	Age	Profession/Study	Nationality	Habits
Carla	22	Healthcare student	Dutch	Frequent Gymshark purchaser
Maddie	24	PR consultant	Irish	Runs frequently
Leonie	21	Computer science student	German	Purchases Gymshark
Anna	19	Communications student	Dutch	Views Gymshark content
Marc	23	Political science student	Australian	Views Gymshark content
Siebe	23	Sales employee	Dutch	Views Gymshark content
Sergen	23	Data analyst	Hungarian	Views Gymshark content
Samuel	20	Engineering student	Dutch	Views Gymshark content
Nico	24	Logistics employee	Dutch	Frequent Gymshark purchaser
Yanko	23	Personal trainer	Dutch	Frequent Gymshark purchaser

3.2 Sampling

Sampling in qualitative research is a significant step in ensuring the validity of the results, as participants are purposefully selected on the basis of possessing certain characteristics in most cases (Flick, 2018, p.6). Since this study attempts to uncover the perceptions of adolescents around BE produced by Gymshark, participants were required to be 18-25 years old and familiar with Gymshark's presence on social media. Familiarity with the brand Gymshark was of importance as particular interview questions were related to perceptions of the continuity of content with the brand Gymshark, having a preliminary idea of the brand Gymshark was thus fundamental for the validity of answers given. Additionally, the participants are not allowed to be in the researcher's direct network. This might cause bias when conducting and evaluating the research, decreasing the overall reliability of the thesis. Since this study aims to uncover experiences, perceptions and ideas, specific expertise or knowledge on this topic was not required. Due to the limited timeframe and resources of this thesis, the goal was to sample the most diverse adolescent population possible. Maximum variation is when a sample size is small, but is able to reach a higher validity and richness due to the diversity of people being interviewed (Flick, 2018, p.6). To reach this population, a combination of both criterion and snowball sampling was used.

As already mentioned, criterion sampling refers to a technique in which participants are selected on the basis of certain factors, in this case their familiarity with Gymshark, their age and diversity (Flick, 2018, p.6). Additionally, recruited participants were asked to share the research with

other potential candidates, this is known as snowball sampling and can be highly effective as participants usually surround themselves with people who share their interests and might thus be relevant subjects (Flick, 2018, p.6). Specifically, A LinkedIn update was posted, asking the researcher's direct network to share the update in their network, hoping to acquire relevant candidates with varying nationalities and not acquainted to the researcher. Additionally, friends and family were asked to deliver the call to acquaintances orally, when they deemed them a fit to the research. Latter methods resulted in 10 participants N=10, of which 4 were female identifying, 6 male identifying and 6 Dutch speakers in total. Half of the sample were students, while the other half were employed. Most participants contacted the researcher either through text message or LinkedIn message after being recruited through the LinkedIn post or orally. 2 participants were recruited through snowball sampling after prior interviews. Prior to the interviews, participants were asked about their familiarity with Gymshark as a brand, ensuring their fit with the study, ensuring sound results. The interviews were conducted in the period between April 15th and April 22nd, after which the data analysis could commence.

Although no interviews were held with direct acquaintances, the utilization of their networks can potentially cause a biased sample, as worldviews potentially transfer from acquaintance to acquaintance, decreasing sample variety, and possibly causing bias towards those with similar opinions. Additionally, recruiting participants for a 1+hour long interview proved difficult, resulting in merely 10 subjects willing to participate. As a result, selecting participants based on maximum variety was not an option, which led to the interviewing of 6 Dutch people. However, the researcher believes to have mitigated a potential bias towards participants with similar worldviews by repeatedly reflecting on the questions asked and reminding of his independent role as a researcher. Additionally, this sample is still believed to be reliable as variation was still present in this sample despite the substantial amount of Dutch people. This was noticed when noticing the broad extent of answers given among the sample. Additionally, although N=10 participants can be considered limited, all interviews were between 55 and 75 minutes long, producing both quantity and quality data, allowing the researcher to form well-grounded themes and answer to the research question.

3.3 Operationalization

The aim of this research is to answer the question: "How do adolescents (18-25) perceive the authenticity of Gymshark's BE?". Even though this research is of qualitative nature and is thus more flexible in terms of interpreting data collected in light of the concepts used, in order to answer this research question, the concepts of authenticity, and BE were required to be well defined (Babbie, 2014, p.127).

First, the definition of BE in the context of Gymshark had to be operationalized. As concluded in the theoretical framework, Gymshark and other modern fitness brands are providing consumers

with infotainment, indicating a mixture between informative and entertaining content, utilizing influencers (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2018, p.7). Additionally, Song (2024, p.20) explains the increase in branded events organized by health and fitness brands in order to further engage audiences. BE was thus divided into informational content in which the main goal is to disseminate knowledge to consumers, entertaining content in which amusing is the goal, and the organization of branded events. For each subgroup, different videos were chosen to show participants, including both influencer and brand created BE. Video material was picked based on the researcher's evaluation of the content's nature, keeping in mind the theoretical knowledge the researcher possesses about BE.

To make the concept of authenticity more observable, the perceived brand authenticity scale by Morhart et al., (2015, pp.201-203) was used. Authenticity in this model has been divided into the components of, continuity, credibility, integrity and symbolism, all contributing to perceived authenticity of brands. Subsequently, each respective concept had to be operationalized in the form of interview questions. Morhart et al., (2015, p.213), propose the psychometric properties of each concept. Latter appendix was utilized to construct interview questions which would ultimately lead to valid data. For example, when trying to capture participants' perception of the continuity of Gymshark content, questions like: "Can you elaborate on your associations with the brand Gymshark"? Followed by: "How do you evaluate the consistency of this content with your idea of the brand Gymshark"? were asked, to answer the first sub-question. Questions like: "how do you feel about the honesty of this content/event?" were asked to capture the degree of credibility participants ascribed to the content and a significant part of the second sub-question. Furthermore, in order to obtain an understanding of the perceived integrity of shown artifacts and answer a major part of the third sub-question, questions like: "How do you evaluate the ratio between commercial goals and providing for customers with this content?". Lastly, symbolism was operationalized using questions referring to connection, similarity and meaningfulness, for example: "what does this content represent and how do you relate to it?". Largely answering the fourth sub-question. Latter questions analyzing each concept made up the interview guide's main body and was utilized to answer the largest part of each respective sub-questions. Specifically, the concept of continuity was questioned first to obtain an initial idea about their perception of the brand Gymshark, which might later be utilized to interpret future answers.

Prior to this main part, participants were asked introductory questions, after which they were asked about their main motivations for the consumption of Gymshark's BE, following the uses and gratifications (UGT) framework (Ruggiero, 2000, pp.5-8). Additionally, Stollfuß, (2020, p.9) was utilized to place preliminary understandings of reasons for audiences to engage with fitness content into context. Commencing with this section can prove useful as obtaining an insight into the desires and needs of participants related to BE could provide early insights about their perception of authenticity and with that act as a foundation for potential follow up questions. Subsequently, after showing each type of video, prior mentioned questions were asked, complemented by a pair of questions regarding the overall opinion about the content. For example: "what stood out to you about

this content/event in general?”. After all videos were displayed and all questions about the Perceived Brand Authenticity were asked, participants were asked about their general perception of brand authenticity. Subsequently, it will be revealed that all content is BE, and opinions about this nature will be asked. The reasoning to end with these questions is that a potential difference between perceptions on non-disclosed and disclosed content could provide useful insight about the known “hidden” aspect of BE as described by (Chang, 2024, p.300). Lastly, it is important to obtain data on participants’ overall perception of authenticity to form coherent themes.

To conclude, due to the standardized questions following perceived brand authenticity to understand authenticity perceptions, the data collection will primarily be deductive. Latter method of data collection is concerned with utilizing existing scales to interpret/gather data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.83). However, due to the additional open ended questions about authenticity perceptions as well as UGT, the analysis will include inductive elements. Meaning certain meanings and perceptions will be utilized to form a more complete approach of authenticity perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.83). The next section will elaborate on latter process further.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The majority of interviews were conducted online (9), Teams was utilized for 7 of those, while google meets was used for the other two. One interview was conducted face-to-face in the researchers home. Prior to all interviews, an informed consent document for recording the interview and using the data for analysis was sent to participants, requesting them to sign it. However, all participants preferred oral consent as soon as the interview commenced. Prior to all interview recordings, an attempt at rapport was made, that is making conversation and being friendly to make the participant feel comfortable (Babbie, 2014, p.329). Comfortable participants will increase the likelihood of relevant and deeper data. During and after the first interviews, it was vital to analyze the questions asked and subsequent answers given, so necessary alterations/adjustments could be made to enhance the quality of data collected (Babbie, 2014, pp.318-319). Reasoning is that knowing exactly what one will observe when doing qualitative research before commencing the research, is nearly impossible (Babbie, 2014, p.319). Rather, every point of interaction guides the researcher towards the most significant phenomenon. For example, after conducting the first two interviews it was evident that one particular video was not consistent with the group of video’s it was situated in, which led to the removal of this particular video for the rest of the interviews.

After conducting the interviews, participants were asked whether they wanted to come back on answers or elaborate, granting them the opportunity to have control over their data. The majority of interviews were transcribed using the “transcribe” option on Teams, while the Dutch transcripts were translated by hand in order to make all transcripts similar thereby making the thematic analysis process less complicating.

Approximately 10,5 hours of data was collected which needed to be studied. All transcripts were transferred into the platform ATLAS.ti Web (version 5.8.0), which was utilized to create and merge codes in a comprehensive and organized manner. The analysis chosen is thematic analysis as explained by Braun & Clarke, (2006, pp.86-93). This was deemed them most appropriate method as thematic analysis allows researchers to process large volumes of data relatively quickly, without sacrificing validity and reliability (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.97). Specifically, thematic analysis allows the researcher to “summarize” data relatively quickly and engage with the most relevant insights. Additionally, unexpected insights can arise, which could prove especially helpful in this analysis as looking for patterns beyond the perceived brand authenticity Morhart et al., (2015, pp.201-203) could enrich the notions around perceived brand authenticity.

Specifically, thematic analysis concerns a recursive and iterative 6 step process in which the researcher becomes increasingly familiar with their data and continuously engages in critical observation of the patterns observes, to ultimately create multiple “themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.86).

Phase 1 is concerned with becoming acquainted with your data, transcribing or translating data if necessary. Additionally, data is re-read and initial reflections are logged (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87). During the interview process, the initial ideas were written in a notebook to reflect on later. Additionally, due to the required translating and transcribing, data became natural swiftly.

The open coding starts in the second phase, in which all excerpts deemed relevant by the researcher are assessed in the most basic way, creating codes that clearly indicate the nature of the excerpt (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.88). In this case, only the pieces of data that potentially displayed notions of perceived authenticity needed to be coded, as this thesis is relatively data driven. However, this requires extreme caution as potentially interesting data could be lost when wrongly interpreting them in this phase, it is thus wise to code more excerpts rather than less. Even though this thematic analysis is theoretically driven, open codes were not directly placed in categories in this stage, resulting in approximately 700 quotations.

In the third phase researchers look for themes, potentially forming them by combining multiple open codes or promoting open codes to themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006,p.89). During this phase, open codes were first rearranged under 5 categories: continuity, credibility, integrity, symbolism and miscellaneous. All codes were judged on which categories they would fit best and when in doubt, codes were placed into multiple categories. Thereafter, the initial codes were combined to form initial themes within each category, taking into account the recurrence and significance of each open code, as well as the relationships/similarities of open codes to one another. This resulted in the formation of +- 70 initial themes, of which many would turn out to become sub-themes.

The fourth phase is concerned with reviewing the initial themes, initially on whether the data excerpts they individually hold make sense and are similar (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.91) This lead to discarding/combining a significant amount of themes, resulting in the remainder of 30 themes among

the 5 categories. Subsequently, the remainder of themes were checked on their representativeness off the category in which they were placed and off the dataset as a whole. This left each category between 3-6 themes.

In phase 5, the most significant themes were chosen and defined, creating a clear idea of what each theme says exactly and what the implications could be (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.92). This resulted in the creation of four main themes, all based on one aspect of the perceived brand authenticity model (Morhart et al., 2015, pp.201-203).

The final phase regards writing the report. The pieces of evidence collected were written out in the results section, followed by its academical and societal implications.

3.5 Validity and Reliability

Since analyzing perceptions of BE in fitness contest is significantly in line with the researcher's personal interests and participants interviewed were of similar age, it is significant to reflect on his role as a researcher. Relatability with both topic and interviewees potentially caused some unintended bias in the form of pre-conceived ideas. However, this research believe to have minimized this potential bias by being reflexive of this position and redirecting thought processes when noticing such pre-conceived ideas. Additionally, potential bias could arise when selecting artifacts to show participants individually, especially as a Gymshark consumer. However, by utilizing existing research on the video types' different uses and gratifications, the researcher believes to have grasped a comprehensive overview and thus expertise to minimize this potential bias. Additionally, by utilizing an already existing and highly trusted scale to base data gathering and analysis on Morhart et al., (2015), potential biases and inconsistencies have been minimized.

When conducting qualitative research, it is highly important to remain reflexive and as objective as possible throughout the entire process (Babbie, 2014, p.319). During the entire process of both gathering and analyzing data, the researcher built in moments of reflection to question the direction of the analysis and whether this was consistent with the interviews conducted. This allowed for timely redirecting of certain assumptions to avoid reasoning from own perspectives and remain as objective as possible. Additionally, the thematic analysis method was broken down into 6 comprehensive steps including significant time to be reflexive, critical and flexible while analyzing data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.86-93). This resulted in the slight alteration of thinking processes and conclusion on multiple occasions. To add to that, it was made sure that each data artifact received similar attention, to avoid the potential of biased results due to unbalanced representation. Additionally. The highly transparent description of sampling, interviewing and data analysis processes, it makes this research more transparent, increasing the repeatability and thus reliability.

During this research, participant's rights and wellbeing were protected by multiple safeguards. First, all participants were given a consent form which they were required to read and agree to. Additionally, it was made clear that they could alter their answers and even stop the interview at any

point they would start feeling uncomfortable. Establishing rapport and making conversation before the data collection was a genuine attempt to comfort participants, potentially with added benefits of more valid answers as a result.

4. Results & Discussion

The following section will provide an overview of the most prevalent themes observed during the semi-structured interviews. The themes are consistent with each sub-question, each answering an individual one, meaning 4 themes in total. All themes were constructed using open codes, which were merged into sub-themes and subsequently combines into overarching themes. The goal of this thesis is to answer the question “How do adolescents (18-25) perceive the authenticity of Gymshark’s BE?” using the perceived brand authenticity model by Morhart et al., (2015, pp. 201-203). Each theme is based on one of the determining factors and will together explain the perceived brand authenticity of Gymshark’s BE efforts. Each sub-theme will be in *italics*.

The primary theme that was identified was that the perception of whether a BE initiative is fair to consumers, significantly depends on the benefit the initiative has for them. Potential benefits entail being entertained, being relevantly informed or provided with an experience. It was made clear that interviewees do not wish to engage with marketing initiatives that merely benefit the company.

Second, participants identified that Gymshark’s BE is not always relatable, highlighting the large extent of unobtainable bodies of the influencers they use and the content they produce. Participants emphasized that the relatability of the content that Gymshark produces, determines their engagement with the content. Ultimately, participants want and need influencers-content that is more similar to them.

The third theme is concerned with the continuity of Gymshark’s BE with the brand, arguing that it is fundamental for brands to always display their brand identity and values in the BE they produce. This also means refraining from using popular social media trends.

Lastly, 3/10 participants identified that the growth of Gymshark is hurting their produced quality. They argued that the quality of clothes and influencers is declining due to them having to equal the rapid company growth. Only 3/10 participants mentioned this, but they were the most frequent Gymshark customers, and thus had the most experience with their quality, making it a significantly relevant theme.

Table 4.1

Themes and Sub-Themes

Perception of fairness BE depends on usefulness	Gymshark’s BE is not always relatable	BE displaying brand identity is more authentic	Gymshark’s growth is hurting their quality
Branded entertainment perceived as marketing	Gymshark displays ideal lifestyle	Events are most authentic due to consistency with values	Quality of Gymshark clothes declining
BE is fair when it gives something back	Physically similar influencers are appealing	EC least authentic due to lack of values represented	Quality is the most important authenticity factor
marketing initiatives unfair when content is useless	Relatable branded entertainment is appealing		Non-credible influencers are hurting Gymshark

4.1 Fair Branded Entertainment Must Benefit Consumers

This section will answer the sub-question: “How do adolescents (18-25) perceive the integrity of Gymshark’s BE”? The overarching theme found was that the perception of BE depends on the usefulness of the content. This theme originated from three sub-themes that were prevalent during the interviews. First, it was identified that *BE is perceived as marketing*, as participants identified making money as the primary reason for companies to create BE. Latter finding is commonly associated with negative feelings as consumers know they are being encouraged to purchase. However, a clear distinction was found between the extent to which consumers evaluated the BE as ‘fair’. Thus the distinction lies in the extent to which *BE gives something back to consumers*, of which the organization of events was perceived as the most “fair”. Additionally, *BE initiatives are unfair when content is useless*.

9/10 participants interviewed identified “selling clothes” as the main goal of all BE efforts, both content and event. This indicates that participants evaluated *BE to be marketing*. Latter sub-theme is related to the concept of persuasion knowledge which explains the degree to which consumers are aware of the financial motives that are behind brands and marketing messages, offering them a stronger protection mechanism (Tabassum et al., 2020, p.4). In the majority of times when consumer

persuasion knowledge is activated, this leads to decreasing levels of brand integrity as consumers feel misled (Chang, 2024, p.401). This can cause a decreased sense of perceived authenticity.

For example, Marc (23) displays his persuasion knowledge: “As soon as I see like someone putting on their like gym, shark shirt and the Gymshark logo is there like I feel like I already know”.

Additionally, Siebe (23) explains how Gymshark aims to achieve brand resonance through the use of popular influencers:

For them, of course, the goal is always to grow as a brand. So I think they don't necessarily have the underlying thoughts of hopefully a lot of people are going to get a good back workout from this video. But that of course for them revolves more around those clothes that they sell. That they see from an influencer that I look at and get my information from, who wears Gymshark every time. So he looks good, let me also buy clothes from Gymshark so that I can also look good or maybe I can get the ideal picture of my favorite influencer and I can get closer to that.

Even the Gymshark events, which are free to enter were identified to be of commercial nature: Maddie (24):

even though the event is free, they clearly must end up making money from the sales of the clothes that they have there, and especially because it's like personalized and specific event merch. Like I'm sure people are buying it. So it does just probably feel like an underlying sales and marketing push.

The significant amount of persuasion knowledge possessed by contemporary adolescents (Gen Z) is supported by previous research (Tabassum et al., 2020, p.4). Latter research explains the increased persuasion knowledge amongst gen Z as partly caused by the increase in persuasion messages in the information society (Tabassum et al., 2020, p.4). This general increase in persuasion knowledge could be potentially troublesome for BE as the main effectiveness of BE has traditionally been associated with its ability to achieve consumer brand resonance subconsciously, without activating the consumers' persuasion knowledge (Chang, 2024, p.401).

However, the degree to which participants perceived BE efforts to be persuasion attempts, was not the determining factor of perceived integrity, due to the general perception of money making purposes. Rather it was the degree to which participants deemed the initiative beneficial for consumers, thus: *BE is fair, when it gives something back* mentioned by all participants. The organization of free events was acknowledge as beneficial by all participants, as consumers are able to meet influencers and knowledgeable people as well as like-minded people. Additionally, the event being free added to the feeling of being cared for by Gymshark. Anna (19) explains her view on the integrity of event organization, despite acknowledging commercial goals:

such an event does give me a bit more of a feeling they also want to do something nice for the fans. Despite the fact that I think there is a mega commercial goal behind it, because setting up an event like that costs a lot of money and time, so I think. That also feels to me a little bit more like this is also for the Gymshark community.

Additionally, Leonie (21) explains why the event is fair for her: “I think it's great. I think it's very good to like build a sense of community and I think that's what they're doing with those meetings”.

Subsequently, informational content was identified as fair, as it was associated with helping people. More specifically, participants mentioned they could use particular exercises demonstrated through Gymsharks BE. Nutritional advice was accredited as specifically useful, as well as advice on how to create an efficient day to day life structure. For example, Nico (24) mentions the benefits Gymshark’s BE gives him:

That can be an exercise that they are doing in a specific way, making me think like: okay that that can be done that way, so that you get something out of it that way. But also about nutrition. Like: What is the good way to feed yourself or to stay in shape.

When asked whether participants deemed the self-acknowledged marketing purposes of BE to be fair, Nico (24) mentioned: “So I see it as fair, because they give something that their target audience craves, apparently”. Latter quote perfectly demonstrates the dominant discourse about appealing BE efforts conducted by Gymshark.

However, participants identified certain *BE efforts to be useless*, which was simultaneously associated with lower degrees of perceived integrity. For instance entertaining content was evaluated as useful and thus fair by some participants, identifying it as funny, enjoyable and relatable, with the possibility to achieve a laugh. However, it was found to be less useful than the informative content block, with 7/10 participants confirming this, among them Carla (22): “ I personally prefer informative content. That's what I look for, for example. Or I get that on my feed. But entertainment is fun, but I don't get much out of it”. Additionally, participants were shown a “day in the life” video as part of the entertaining content block, which entailed a Gymshark athlete taking his audience along for a day in his life, including his workout, breakfast etc. The consensus about his video was that the video was mostly for the influencer to brand himself, and to show himself off, instead of providing for audiences. For example, Nico (24) explains: “Yes, that's purely about just showing yourself so yes, there's nothing of information in there either, so I wouldn't necessarily see that as very fair”. Furthermore, participants were asked to compare their opinions about traditional advertising to the content they had been show, after it had been disclosed as being BE efforts. The consensus among all participants was that BE is more fair than traditional advertising in general, as a clear tradeoff is happening between time spent watching and a return of entertainment. Many participants identified that this rarely ever

was the case in traditional advertising, where the main goal is to persuade audiences, making it less fair.

As already mentioned, the main goal of all for-profit organizations is to make revenue. However, the degree to which consumers perceived content as fair/unfair, heavily depended on whether consumers profited from the particular initiative. Informational content, and immersive events were identified as the most useful to consumers, compared to merely entertaining and funny content. This partially aligns with the concept of brand integrity, which is based on the extent to which consumers evaluate a brand to act not merely from financial motivations, but also from virtue or a general intention to provide their consumers with a superior experience (Morhart et al., 2015, pp. 202-203). While interviewees were not particularly concerned with the money making motivation of organizations, BE initiatives that provided consumers with a positive experience were interpreted as more fair/honest. This indicates that when creating BE, brands should be less concerned about avoiding persuasion knowledge/subconscious persuasion, as it will be perceived as persuasion regularly. Rather they should attempt to thoroughly understand the target audience's desires from an entertainment point of view and deliver exactly that. Furthermore, it aligns with existing literature about the uses and gratifications of consumers to engage with fitness related BE on social media (Stollfuß, 2020, p.8). The research has shown that although content must be of entertaining nature to be interesting, it is mainly the informative nature to improve their workout/nutrition that is perceived as useful, explaining this thesis' findings. Furthermore, research conducted by Gross & von Wangenheim, (2018, p.7) explains that contemporary consumers are increasingly demanding brands to care for them, as well as form relationships with brands. This indicates that the integrity of a brand thus coincides with the extent to which they are perceived to "give back" to their consumers, which can be done in the form of engaging BE. To conclude, the integrity of Gymshark's BE efforts depends on how useful it is perceived by their audience, highlighting the importance for brands to connect with their audience, granting them the ability to fulfill their wishes. Indicating that the centre of attention for Gymshark's marketing efforts should revolve around the value it provides their consumers. Highly entertaining efforts like event organization and providing significantly useful informative fitness content could fulfill this audience demand.

4.2 Gymshark's Branded Entertainment is not Always Relatable

This section will answer the sub-question: "How do adolescents (18-25) perceive the symbolism of Gymshark's BE"? When discussing symbolism as a part of the Perceived Brand Authenticity Model, many participants referred to "relatability". Latter concept is an important predictor of brand authenticity, making it significantly relevant for this research. The overarching theme found was that *Gymshark's BE is not always relatable*, meaning they can improve the relatability and thus symbolism of their content. The majority of participants found a large part of Gymshark's content to be unrealistic and thus unrelatable. It was found that this relatability of the

shown efforts was associated with consumer brand connection. Increasing the relatability of their athletes/content could thus be the key.

To recall, brand symbolism is the extent to which consumers identify with a brand, as a result of recognizing parts of their identity in a brand (Morhart et al., 2015, p.203). A greater evaluation of a brand's symbolism with themselves, will contribute to a higher degree of perceived authenticity (Morhart et al., 2015, p.203). The first sub-theme found was that *Gymshark displays ideal lifestyle*, which was perceived as a negative factor in the evaluation of the relatability and thus symbolism of their content. Many participants perceived content to be unrealistic due to a mismatch between their daily lives and those of the influencers: "So I think sometimes it can be a bit hard to like, have them as role models, when it's like no I have a job I work from 9:00 to 17:30. You know, I don't have time to go and run three hours every day." (Maddie, 24). Other participants mentioned similar opinions, all coming down to influencers who preach and advice audiences to live a certain lifestyle, which frankly is not achievable for the average person. Maddie (24) also mentioned to be vulnerable to ideal content, disabling her instead of enabling her to practice healthy habits. Similarly, participants mentioned the prevalence of "ideal" bodies in Gymshark content. Although not being asked directly, 2 interviewees mentioned that ideal bodies in Gymshark content were more prevalent than in content produced by other fitness brands: (Carla, 22): "And of course, they have perfect gym bodies and I don't know if that's realistic for everyone when you compare it to other brands". Carla additionally mentions that fitness influencers whose bodies are perceived as unrealistic diminishes their function as role model as consumers are unable to reach a similar physique. Latter section adequately displays the potential counterproductivity of the utilization of hyper muscular influencers whom appear unreachable for the majority of people. The heavy representation of ideal bodies is confirmed by multiple articles (Cataldo et al., 2021, p.6; Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018, p.14). Prior source about perceptions of fitness content among young adults indicates that 55% percent of all bodies showcased in fitness content are perceived as muscular, which is highly skewed when comparing this to real life bodies (Cataldo et al., 2021, p.2). Furthermore, the source confirms that bodies perceived as highly muscular, disable participants in their strive for health, rather than enabling them (Cataldo et al., 2021, p.3). Additionally, not being able to meet the standards set by "ideal" content, adds to inadequate feelings.

As a result, participants agreed that *physically similar influencers are more appealing*. When asked why she felt a higher degree of connection with a particular video as compared to another, Maddie (24) described: "I don't know, I suppose. Well, also, it was a woman in the video, so maybe that's part of it. Is like, you know, I see myself a bit in that". Gender, as well as physical attributes of influencers served as a recurring determinant of relatability for interviewees. All participants were more attracted to content that was created by influencers who looked similar to them or a potential future version of them, meaning an obtainable physique. Samuel (20): "But I think what appeals to me most is content from someone with a physique I would like to work towards". Latter finding is

consistent with a research conducted by Kapitan et al., (2022, p.342) in which they conclude that physical traits of online media personalities determine the extent to which consumers identify with them. To add, 5 participants also identified why physically similar influencers are so important, Sergen (23): “especially if they are the kinds of persons who, I wouldn't say role model, but like displays a way you want to live your life”. Additionally, since Gymshark is a clothing brand, these participants also mentioned the importance of physically similar influencers to envision themselves in the clothes.

In addition to body types, all participants mentioned that *relatable BE is more appealing*. For instance, the content that was the most in line with the fitness goals of participants was the most appealing. For example Anna (19) explains what content resonates best with her lifestyle:

“all those rules to make it as good as possible and as optimal as possible and a little bit of Alpha Male Energy, I don't like that very much, so I'm more of the: Oh you're doing so well, something is better than nothing. “Yes, and my goal is just exercise and just feel good and I don't have to get super strong or run a marathon or something”.

Latter excerpt displays the importance of content relatability, specifically the similarity between influencer and consumer regarding their goals for fitness. This demanded symbolism between content and personal lifestyle/goals largely explains the appeal of branded events for consumers. The large majority of participants indicated that the possibility of like-minded individuals coming together at an event is what makes it appealing. 5 participants indicated that creating a connection with people sharing similar interests and values at a Gymshark event can possibly be a welcome break from the large extent of ideal content present on social media. For example, Leonie, (21) on the appeal of branded events: “Just like meeting people that are doing the same things as you, maybe making new friends, knowing that you there's a community that lives a similar life to yours that likes to lift or run”. Moreover, Anna (19), elaborates on the realism of event organization: “You invite people and they just come there in real LIFE. It's not like with content that that is planned all the way. So yes, I think it also feels real”.

As introduced in chapter 2, symbolism in the Perceived Brand Authenticity Model refers to a brand's ability to reflect consumers' norms, values and identities, allowing them to relate to the brand (Morhart et al., 2015, p.203). As symbolism constitutes a significant part of brand authenticity, it is vital for brands to strive for it. Participants evaluated a large majority of Gymshark content to be unobtainable and thus not symbol of themselves. However, all participants were able to identify a particular influencer or type of content with which they could connect and appreciate, in all cases this was an influencer/lifestyle which is or could be obtainable to each individual participant. This indicates that Gymshark provides participants with what they need, but they are severely distracted by the significant amount of unrelatable content. The consumer need for content that aligns with their

lives and with which they can form a connection with, is grounded in the construct of parasocial interaction (PSI). Latter concept describes the inherent human need for individuals to form relationships with one another, which can also be obtained virtually (Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956, p.2). In contemporary time, these relationships are becoming more realistic due to the emergences of social media influencers who represent the most interactive way of engaging with brands. The results found suggest that it is fundamental for these influencers to portray a lifestyle that is as “real” as possible. Gymshark could thus benefit from altering the ratio between ‘ideal’ content/influencers and start advancing towards displaying a majority of lifestyle content that is perceived as achievable for the larger part of their consumers. Latter argument is supported by Shahid et al., (2023, p.53), who highlight the importance of similarity between media personality and consumer norms, values and characters. Practically, this would entail discussing everyday challenges around the gym life, showcasing the difficulties of combining work, a social life, and pursuing fitness goals according to participants. Additionally, participants need influencers to be honest, display their realistic lives and refrain from merely showing the best versions of themselves. Enforcing this as a brand value when contracting influencers would be a useful first step.

4.3 Branded Entertainment Displaying Brand Identity is More Authentic

The following section will answer the sub-question: “How do adolescents (18-25) perceive the Continuity of Gymshark’s BE”? 7/10 participants indicated that the *Events are most authentic due to consistency with values*, evaluating this type of BE most authentic. The values associated with Gymshark are to motivate people to work out and the importance of a community, these motivations are communicated in the most compelling way at the events. Furthermore, 5/10 participants found the *Entertaining content least authentic due to lack of values represented*. Interviewees deemed this particular content to be less deep and more consistent with trends, which 4/10 participants found inauthentic. Resulting in an overall consensus that *BE displaying brand identity is more authentic*.

When attempting to capture the continuity of BE efforts with participants’ associations with Gymshark as a brand, their idea of Gymshark as a brand was significantly relevant. Thus, participants were primarily asked to describe the brand values and identity they associated with Gymshark. As a result, 6/10 participants described “community building” to be a significant part of Gymshark as a brand. Specifically, Maggie, (24) describes this notion: “I feel like I do see quite a lot of efforts from them in that like community building, for their consumers and with their influencers”. According to participants, this sense of community was derived from the ability to connect with the brand through influencers, making the brand more tangible and approachable. Adding to that, 5/10 Subjects additionally identified that motivating people signifies a major part of Gymshark’s brand identity. To elaborate, Gymshark is perceived to motivate people to go to the gym, be committed to their goals, constantly aim for improvement and enhancing their mind and body. ‘I feel like the whole Gymshark vibe is about being the guy, the consistent guy, the proactive guy’ (Sergen, 23). The notion of

Gymshark being a relatively masculine brand, displaying traditional masculine features like perseverance, and performance was a regular recurrence.

The specific type of BE that was evaluated as being the most consistent with aforementioned conceptualization of the brand Gymshark were the organized branded events. This led to the first sub-theme: *Gymshark events communicate their values most effectively*. 4/10 participants found the presence of multiple fitness and business experts, who provide advice and make contact with visitors the most consistent with their idea of Gymshark. Anna (19), describes latter idea: Also with giving those tips, and you know those speakers who speak about how can you get the most performance out of your body, what tips do you all have? So yeah". Additionally, participants were shown content shot at that event, also including content regarding the "lifting zone" which entails a communal space for visitors to train together. The communal aspect of latter phenomenon, added with the recognizable Gymshark nudge to move one's body was a recurring point of recognition of Gymshark brand values. Concluding this section, Gymshark branded events was perceived as an embodiment of brand norms and values. This way, the social media content participants had been consuming over the years which familiarized them with Gymshark and its identity is brought to life. This enables consumers to engage with the physical embodiment of Gymshark, reinforcing their brand identity for consumers in a consistent manner.

However, consistency between brand identity and BE was not omnipresent, arriving at the second sub-theme identified: *Entertaining content is least consistent with Gymshark's brand identity*. Opposite to previous section, the entertaining content was found to be inconsistent with the Gymshark identity, due to the lack of proper motivational, community and perseverance values. Entertaining content was perceived as less deep than the other BE efforts by 6/10 participants. Specifically, many participants questioned what the primarily entertaining content was really about, doubting the purpose and identity of the content. The explanation of this lack of depth may lie in the degree to which entertaining content is unique to Gymshark or relatively similar to BE efforts of other brands. For example: "I think the funnier TikToks are the least authentic to Gymshark. I think a lot of people have already done that" Samuel (20). Previous excerpt highlights perceptions of inauthentic content prevalent when utilizing existing social media trends to create content. Furthermore, participants indicated that by directly copying social media trends, brands are undermining their own positioning. When asked what makes BE inauthentic, Carla (22) answered: "That you go along with trends and, let's say, allow your business to be influenced by trends". It is thus evident that through entertaining content, replicating already existing social media trends, Gymshark is appearing inconsistent with their brand identity which could result in negative associations. To support this view, 3/10 participants directly linked the authenticity of BE with staying true to its values, which is absent in the entertaining content type. However, 9/10 participants mentioned Gymshark's potential strategy of utilizing entertaining content and specifically social media trends in order to engage and address a different audience, allowing Gymshark to increase their current following and growth as a brand. When asked,

participants also identified this strategy to probably be effective concerning growth. This poses an interesting dilemma as profitable companies are constantly attempting to grow. However, as the results suggest, they might harm their brand identity in doing so.

Research indicates that conveying brand values and identities, is seen as the main purpose of BE as it seeks brand resonance rather than direct sales, which is the exact reason consumers heavily engage the BE that is relevant to them (Van Loggerenberg et al., 2021, p.327). This suggests that attempting to appeal to different audiences is not the main purpose of BE, and could be pursued using different forms of marketing. This is in line with the perceptions of this studies participants, who evaluated the event to be significantly more authentic than the entertaining content as brand values were significantly more apparent.

The significance of producing BE that coincides with brand identity and values lies in the concept of continuity (Morhart et al., 2015, p.202) Latter concept explains the degree to which a brand remains consistent through its identity, regarding both future and present proceedings (Morhart et al., 2015, p.202). A high degree of perceived continuity will demonstrate a significant extent of perceived authenticity. Additionally, research conducted on BE's conceptualization, argues that alignment with the brand identity is the most important factor when producing an authentic narrative and thus resonance around the brand. (Van Loggerenberg et al., 2021, p.333) This way, brands allow consumers to identify with the brand, through brand recognition (Van Loggerenberg et al., 2021, p.327). Latter excerpt explains the way in which consumer may feel more connected to a brand as a result of the clear identification of having similar values. Section 4.2 mentioned that participants felt the most connected to the Gymshark events, as being together with like-minded individuals and engaging with fitness and influencers at the event increases the connectedness. This implies that for these participants, perceived continuity of brand values in BE coincides with the extent to which they feel connected with it.

To conclude, a high variety in perceptions of continuity was present in interviewee answers. Specifically, participants found the organized event to be the most consistent with Gymshark values like perseverance, community, and motivation. It was clear this resulted in more favorable opinions towards the brand as brands that remained true to their value was perceived as highly authentic by participants. Contrarily, the entertaining content type was evaluated as inconsistent with Gymshark brand values as they had difficulties identifying what the content represented, significantly impacting the extent to which they deemed the content to be authentic. Many participants identified this to be cause by Gymshark following social media trends, which were evaluated to hinder the brand recognition this way. To answer the third sub question, it was found that staying true to brand identity, significantly impacts the degree of authenticity. However, this might not be the easiest choice for brands as social media trends could boost online engagement and traffic with a brand (Eigenraam et al., 2021, p.1). However, when social media trends and viral content produced by brands is perceived as incongruent with consumers brand image, the increased brand traffic and engagement is shifted

towards negative sentiment in most cases (Eigenraam et al., 2021, p.1). This highlights the importance of brands like Gymshark staying true to their identity even when that means missing out on popular trends.

4.4 Gymshark's Growth is Hurting the Quality

The next section will answer the sub-question: "How do adolescents (18-25) perceive the Credibility of Gymshark's BE?". The first sub-theme found was that *the quality of the product is the most important authenticity factor*. 5/10 participants argued that social media content and branded events can be a significant factor in brand resonance, but the quality of the product was still the biggest predictor of brand authenticity. Secondly, Participants mentioned that *the quality of Gymshark clothes has come down*, while the prices have been steadily increasing, expressing negative associations with the brand as a result. Lastly, participants expressed a concern for the quality of social media content associated with Gymshark, as they feel that *non-credible influencers are hurting the brand Gymshark*. Specifically, participants express that continuous enlargement of the Gymshark creator network, has resulted in a decrease in influencer quality. Together, these sub-themes explain the perceived *decrease in overall Gymshark quality*.

After the four concepts that explain perceived brand authenticity had been examined, participants were asked what brand authenticity meant to them. 4/10 participants answered this question, specifically mentioning that *quality of the product is the most important authenticity factor*. Interestingly, participants mentioned that the importance of product quality increases, when marketing increases as well. Siebe (23) indicated that the content Gymshark produces should never interfere with the product quality, meaning that Gymshark should never put more emphasis on their online presence than their product quality. Another example, explains the added responsibility of brands to deliver high quality products when they increase their marketing/online presence Marc (23),:

"like from the video that you showed me, the events that they're delivering, it feels authentic and it it. feels done for the greater good, but at the end of the day they're not. That's not their primary revenue stream. Like, they're not making, they're not building their like apparel empire on events, they're building it on unit sales. And so then for a real sense of authenticity, I would need to see the product for me".

This provides an interesting perspective as Marc (23) and 4 other participants mentioned that they take the marketing of a product with a grain of salt before having tested the product. This indicates that BE like the organization of events can be significantly authentic, but ultimately companies must "walk their talk".

Furthermore, the two participants who indicated to own/have owned multiple Gymshark clothing items, both identified *the quality of Gymshark clothes has declined* while the costs have

increased. Both participants expressed their increased sense of persuasion, as they felt like sales were more important than the provision of company. To support this view both participants pointed towards the expansion of Gymshark's clothes offering, moving towards casual clothing like hoodies and hats. Carla (22) and Yanko (23) both expressed that this contributed to their feeling of a decreasing quality of the Gymshark fitness clothes, as less emphasis was put on these. For example, Yanko (23) explains this perspective: "Well I must say that the quality of the products in my opinion has become a bit less and more expensive, and they have started Offering clothes that are now relevant to most People. You know, instead of the best gym equipment". As a result, both participants expressed negative emotions about the authenticity of the brand Gymshark.

The third sub-theme identified was that *non-credible influencers are hurting Gymshark*. Similar to previous paragraph, participants indicated that the expansion of the brand Gymshark, is hurting their brand image, rather than improving it. 3/10 participants argued that this expansion of the brand Gymshark, has led them to contract influencers that do not meet the previous criteria of their athletes. The argue that Gymshark's aim to grow as a brand, has made them ignorant to the importance of providing quality content by the best influencers, as was previously the case according to influencers. For example, "if they see that someone has around 10,000 followers, for example, they're already being asked to collaborate. So it's spread a lot through influencers. not always people who, in my opinion, really know what they're talking about" Carla (22). 3/10 participants also indicated distrusting Gymshark content, as they evaluate the content they provide to not be trustworthy enough to implement in their lives.

The previous three sub/themes found, combine to express the notion that *Gymshark's growth is hurting their overall quality*. As previously mentioned, the best way for interview participants to grasp brand authenticity is by purchasing their product. However, 3/10 participants mentioned that the quality of Gymshark has been declining, due to the utilisation of non-credible influencers, and the overall declining quality of offered fitness clothes. The consumer need for product quality is significantly aligned with the perspective of Morhart et al., (2015, p.202), explaining brand credibility. This concept explains a significant part of brand authenticity and is concerned with the extent to which company's "walk their talk", meaning provide a product worthy of the marketing attention it receives. It was found that brand authenticity in product communications is significantly affected by the extent to which consumers evaluate the product they receive as worthy of the attention and uplifting it has received in its communications. Additionally, Holt, (2002, p.88), already posed a warning for this phenomenon, mentioning that future brands must be careful to refrain from taking a brand "identity", further than the quality of the actual product as this might cause consumer resistance. This combines with the results obtained, as participants were demanding more from the quality of the product as opposed to the marketing of it. As mentioned in chapter 2, and concluded in section 4.1, consumers are becoming increasingly aware of persuasion attempts, decreasing the possibilities for brands to convince them (Tabassum et al., 2020, p.4). This increases the importance of being fair to consumers

in the sense of providing them with genuine quality. Latter findings could initiate that even though consumers are found to heavily engage with BE and are found to benefit from these initiatives as well as perceive them as more authentic than more traditional sources of marketing (Chang, 2024, p.400; Eigenraam et al., 2021, p61; Hudson & Hudson, 2006, p.499). Proving to be an authentic company to a target audience, starts with the provision of a product that consumers are and will be happy with. This thesis thus proposes a mix between the provision of relevant BE efforts to create brand resonance, as well as giving consumers the opportunity to test products. Additionally, it could be wise for companies to include some extent of product endorsement next to pure entertainment, this way companies could partially avoid missing the balance between enforcing brand resonance and reinforcing their product.

5. Conclusion

The following chapter will combine all the conclusion of each sub-question to form a comprehensive answer to the main research question. This answer will be compared and contrasted to existing research on the perceived authenticity of branded entertainment. The main finding presented is the importance for companies engaging in BE to “keep it real”. Additionally, findings will be discussed regarding their social and academical implications, and will be compared to the social and academic implications discussed in the introduction. Lastly, the limitations and lines of future research that became prevalent during this research will be introduced.

This study’s aim was to take a deeper look at the ways adolescents perceive BE initiatives by Gymshark, specifically their evaluations of the initiatives’ authenticity. The perceived brand authenticity model by Morhart et al., (2015, p.202) was utilized for this and applied to already existing BE efforts by Gymshark. The concepts that explain brand authenticity were broken down into easily-digestible questions, aiming to capture the audience’s evaluation of these concepts. Subsequently, data was coded following the 6 step method by Braun & Clarke, (2006, p.86-93), this way the data could be effectively organized according to the concepts aimed to discuss.

The first sub theme regarded the integrity of BE and participants concluded that branded entertainment was perceived as a marketing tool, even when its nature had not been disclosed. However, this was not the determining factor of the perceived fairness of BE, since participants saw no moral harm in BE in general. Rather it was the extent to which consumers were supplied with something genuinely useful to them, as opposed to just being subject to another marketing attempt. For example, many participants evaluated a specific type of content to be unfair as it was based on “showing off” and not concerned with providing genuine entertainment or information. When creating BE it would most likely be counter-productive to attempt “hiding” the purpose of BE as consumers are aware of this nature nonetheless. This way, companies will likely come across as genuine due to being as transparent as possible, whilst providing consumers with services.

Furthermore, participants described the importance of BE being relatable to one’s own body and lifestyle, underlining that physically similar influencers living a similar life are evaluated to be the most authentic. For example, most participants would rather watch content produced by an influencer who also works a 9-6 job rather than someone pushing them to work out 2 hours a day which undermines relatability. The overall pattern observed describes the absence of relatability in a large percentage of Gymshark content. Specifically, the majority of influencers displayed have unrealistic bodies and lifestyles, harming the content’s relatability. Latter findings indicate the importance for Gymshark to diversify their contracted influencers regarding body types, domain expertise, and lifestyle. This will display a more correct representation of consumers and thus each Gymshark consumer will have access to an influencer which they can relate with, highlighting the importance of realism.

Third, participants concluded that BE that displayed brand identity is considered more authentic than content aiming to appeal to a larger audience. Latter perception was relevant for entertaining content, as interviewees doubted the nature of content, experiencing difficulties identifying the brand identity of Gymshark in this content. Participants elaborated that Gymshark content should be consistent with values like perseverance, and motivation and should not blindly follow trends to appeal to the biggest group of people. Norms and values were more prevalent in the organized LIFT events of Gymshark. According to participants it would thus be wise for Gymshark to deploy their narrative in as many communication efforts as possible as these are perceived to be the most authentic by Gymshark consumers.

Lastly, participants evaluated the rapid growth of Gymshark to have caused a disturbing influencer on their brand. Primarily, the product quality of content was found to be the most important factor in their authenticity perceptions. Stating that communication efforts will never reach their full authentic potential when Gymshark fails to deliver on their promises. The participants who had the most experience with actual Gymshark clothes, expressed the decrease and quality, which made them less favorable of the brand. These results suggest that Gymshark should always prioritize the product they deliver, over the communication they disseminate about the product.

The main question the following section will answer is: “How do adolescents (18-25) perceive the authenticity of Gymshark’s branded entertainment? The answer to this question will not relate to whether audiences find Gymshark’s content authentic or not, rather it will give insight into the specific variables that Gymshark must embrace to be perceived as authentic. A significantly clear common denominator was found among sub-questions: the importance of “*keeping it real*”. Throughout all interviews it was evident that consumers wish for transparency, honesty and realism. For example, participants did not appreciate hidden advertisements, as they are aware of the commercial goals of BE, but choose to engage because they resonate with the brand. Latter finding does not align with previous findings on the activation of persuasion knowledge. Chang, (2024, p.402) explains that branded entertainment is likely to trigger persuasion knowledge when the product or service offered is significantly prominent. The difference in outcomes probably has to do with the different approaches of BE. Specifically, content shown to participants in this thesis was brand/influencer created, while the BE shown in Chang, (2024, p.402), regarded sponsoring in Tv-shows created by another brand. This way, consumers evaluate the BE as an obstacle, while Gymshark consumers choose to engage with the content. This further strengthens the proposition that BE must be brand created (Van Loggerenberg et al., 2021, p.323). *Keeping it real* thus means being transparent and offering participants a choice to engage with the content. Additionally, participants experienced Gymshark content to be largely unobtainable due to the unobtainable bodies and lifestyles showcased. Participants thus need for Gymshark to *keep it real* by increasing the representation of “normal” people to improve their relatability. Latter finding is consistent with a research conducted by (Kapitan et al., 2022, p.342) explaining that consumers must feel a connection with an influencer in order to come across authentic,

which is fostered through the norms, values and identity they represent. This indicates the importance of providing a *real* representation of the population through Gymshark BE. Furthermore, the theme of *keeping it real* is also apparent when evaluating the perceived continuity of Gymshark BE, through wishes of consumers for Gymshark to continuously display brand values and identity. *Real* in this example is proudly presenting the Gymshark identity through values like motivation, perseverance and community. Blindly copying social media trends is not *real* Gymshark content. Many sources underline this notion, explicitly Van Loggerenberg et al., (2021, p.335), describe that a company's beliefs and principles must be prevalent in order to obtain authentic BE. Lastly, *Keeping it real* in the context of brand credibility means Gymshark must stay true to their original purpose, selling fitness clothes. BE can never be *real* when product quality is absent.

In chapter 1, the increase in consumer persuasion knowledge was linked to the increase of advertising spending every year, resulting in consumers protecting themselves against the attempts (Sweeney et al., 2020, p.2). This indicates that contemporary adolescents (Gen Z) have grown up in a world dominated by marketing and advertising. Tabassum et al., (2020, p.2) support this idea as they highlight the difficult task for marketers to capture Gen Z's attention. This thesis argues that growing up in a generation controlled by advertising has forced today's adolescents to approach advertising and marketing on their own terms. Meaning they have specific demands for brands such as *keeping it real*. Adolescents resist becoming subjects in the story of brands, rather they wish to participate. Adolescents aim to find out what brands have to offer them in return for their loyalty, rather than providing them with their loyalty. Gymshark is doing a relatively good job especially providing consumers with excellent services as well as having a strong identity with which consumers can identify. However, Gymshark can work on their relatability by providing a more realistic stream of influencers, as well as sticking to their values no matter what. Furthermore, it is important for them to retain their loyal audience by continuously providing them with a consistent quality of products, never give in on quality. As these findings were relatively consistent among a diverse international group of people, Gymshark might use these findings globally, which could result in a significantly resonant brand strategy.

5.1 Social and Academic Implications

Go back to the social and academic relevance you discussed in the introduction. See how your thesis relate to that. Go a bit beyond and reflect on how your thesis may implicate in other social and academic points. Can it be used to support current studies? To challenge? Can it be used by people to prove a social point?

In the introduction it was discussed that no qualitative research had been conducted on the perceptions of branded entertainment yet as previous research was mainly concerned with the

conceptualization of the concept, and the effects it has on consumers (Bowman, 2024; Chang, 2024; Chan-Olmsted & Shay, 2015; Van Loggerenberg et al., 2021; Morhart et al., 2015). The added value in this research lies in the practical testing of what previous research attempts has classified as branded entertainment by conducting semi-structured interviews. Primarily this thesis has enforced and supported the relevance of many of these constructs. For example, the importance of the brand-generated requirement of perceived authenticity, through which companies have increased agency in constructing their own authentic narrative as they are not dependent on a different entity (Van Loggerenberg et al., 2021, p.327). Furthermore, the results of this thesis highlight the importance of companies being sincere, meaning having a real willingness to entertain and provide for consumers (Van Loggerenberg et al., 2021, p.327). Similarly, all aspects determining perceived brand authenticity formulated by (Morhart et al., 2015, p.202) have been confirmed to be applicable to the authenticity evaluation of branded entertainment. Specifically, the role of producing content that is relatable and services that do not decline in quality over time, has been reinforced in this thesis. However, this thesis challenges the notion that when producing BE practitioners must be concerned with striking the balance between persuasion and entertainment (Chang, 2024, p.398). This thesis' findings clearly indicate that when producing BE, practitioners should merely be concerned about the value it provides consumers, as this constitutes a considerable part of authenticity perceptions.

BE being a relevant construct to teach audiences about important matters like fitness and health is also confirmed by this thesis. All participants indicated to engage with Gymshark BE in order to become more familiar with specific exercises, as well as nutrition and general health. Additionally, they confirmed the implementable nature of BE by describing times in which they used an influencer's recommendation. This indicates that BE is an excellent way with which to make health information more accessible, at least to adolescents. This thesis has provided the ways in which health companies can most effectively do this.

5.2. Limitations and Future Lines of Research

The first limitation of this research is the sample size: N=10, which unfortunately does not allow great generalizability. However, the interviews were of high quality, ranging from 50-75 minutes and demonstrating a great depth of data. Furthermore, 9/10 interviews were held online, potentially hampering the extent to which the researcher could build rapport with participants which could result in a loss of data validity. However, by being in a trusted environment, participants could have felt an increase in comfort, which could potentially lead to an increase of data validity. Lastly, as 5/10 participants were Dutch, interview transcripts were translated, during this process, it is possible that valid information has been lost. However, the decision made to conduct these interviews in Dutch was made based on the potential loss of data quality due to participants having to speak outside their mother tongue. Lastly, this research has forced participants to think about brand communications in a

way they might have never done before. Findings might thus not be completely representative of the way they would perceive the initiatives on their own, without thinking about it.

As this research has proven that the perceived brand authenticity by Morhart et al., (2015, p.202) is an excellent way to assess the authenticity of branded entertainment. Future research could focus on applying the perceived brand authenticity to other forms of BE, perhaps in a socially relevant field like education or politics. Additionally, future research could be dedicated to truly understanding the ways in which contemporary adolescents deal with persuasion attempts. This research argues that consumers want to take charge of their purchase behaviors rather than letting others decide for them. However, quantitative proof would be extremely helpful to understand in what ways to approach this demographic.

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Appendix A. Coding trees

Theme 1	Sub-themes	Open
<p>Perception of fairness branded entertainment depends on usefulness</p>	<p>Branded entertainment perceived as marketing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Describing event as profitable - Entertaining content as marketing - Informational content to persuade - Noticing branding in informational video's
	<p>BE is fair when it gives something back</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Honesty depends on what it provides - Joyful content not disturbing - Gymshark helps people get fit - Informational content is fair, helping people - Event fair due to benefit of meeting knowledgeable people
	<p>marketing initiatives unfair when content is useless</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - BE more fair than Advertisement due to trade off - "Day in the life" as show off content - "Day in the life as useless" - Show off content useless - Entertaining content less useful

Theme 2	Sub-themes	Open
<p>Gymshark's BE is not always relatable</p>	<p>Gymshark displays ideal lifestyle</p>	<p>Open</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ideal bodies unrelatable - Extreme muscles not relatable - Ideal content unrelatable - Ideal body idea Gymshark unrelatable IC
	<p>Physically similar influencers are appealing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Influencer relatable when having a similar physique - Influencers as obtainable physique appealing - Gender determines influencer relatability - Parasocial relationship with influencer
	<p>Relatable branded entertainment is appealing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Displaying unrealistic life content - No fit with lifestyle promoted at event - Content must fit lifestyle

Theme 3	Sub-themes	Open
<p>BE displaying brand identity is more authentic</p>	<p>Events are most authentic due to consistency with values</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Community building event consistent with brand Gymshark - Motivating people to workout at event (consistent) - Enthusiasm about sports prevalent at event (consistent) - event consistent with idea of Gymshark (perseverance)
	<p>EC least authentic due to lack of values represented</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - EC less consistent with Gymshark brand than IC - EC not consistent with idea of Gymshark - EC less deep - No connection to EC due to lacking depth - Gymshark is not an entertaining company - Trends not authentic - EC least authentic due to repeating trends

Theme 4	Sub-themes	Open
<p>Gymshark's growth is hurting their quality</p>	<p>Quality of Gymshark clothes declining</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Heavy marketing undermines product quality - Becoming bigger decreases quality - Quality come down more expensive
	<p>Quality is the most important authenticity factor</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Content must be followed up with good quality - Content should not influence quality - Providing quality as authentic - Quality must remain the same to be authentic
	<p>Non-credible influencers are hurting Gymshark</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distrusting influencer quality - Gymshark hiring all influencers - Gymshark influencers not all credible

Appendix B. Interview Guide

Interview guide:

Hi, my name is Thijmen den Hartog and thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview today. At the moment I am pursuing my master's degree in media and business at Erasmus University Rotterdam. For my thesis, I am doing research about the perceptions that adolescents have about BE in the fitness/health industry, specifically Gymshark. The interview will mainly cover the reasons for your engagement with this content, and then perceptions on multiple different forms of content that Gymshark uses. The recording of this interview will be confidential and will only be kept for educational purposes, you can refuse to answer questions at any time and/or change your answer or stop the interview. If you have any questions about your rights as a study participant, feel free to contact me, or Erasmus University Rotterdam anonymously when you want. The contact details are stated in the consent form you signed.

First I will ask you some introductory questions, and ask you about your social media habits. Then I will show you snippets from content produced by Gymshark and ask your opinion on them separately.

I want to let you know that there are no wrong answers so please feel free to speak your mind, even if you think it might not make sense! Do you have any further questions?

(1.) Warm up questions

- Can you shortly introduce yourself?
- How are you today?
- Are you familiar with Gymshark? How do you feel about their social media presence?

(2.) Uses and Gratifications

- What motivates you to watch Health/fitness content on social media?
 - Possible answers and follow ups: information, social, motivation, social pressure/comparison.
 - What do you get from watching this content? Emotions?
- Are there any things you like/dislike about health/fitness content in general?
 - Can you explain this?
 - Does this apply to Gymshark as well, in what way?
- Are there any Gymshark athletes/influencers you particularly like?
 - Can you explain this further?

(3.) Artifact Viewing and Questioning

3.1 Informational short-form content

Artifact Viewing:

Inform participant of the following information: Gymshark and its athletes posts a lot of similar content to this in which they provide you with content that is informational, enriching your understanding

Display video's:

Dre [@gainsbydre]. (2024, December 16). *The PERFECT back day?* [Video]. TikTok.

<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNdFe3g3r/> .

Dennison, A. [@abbi dennisonfit]. (2024, Augustus 27). *RUNNERS LEG DAY WORKOUT*

@Gymshark dc 'ABBIE' [Video]. TikTok. <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNdFeCygT/> .

Gymshark (2019, 30 Jan). #Gymshark66 | *Weight of The World: David Laid* [Video]. YouTube.

https://youtu.be/DJ560F_Kwak?si=NYKHNeHItyMsaPk4

Questioning:

- What did you think of this content/event in general?
 - What stood out to you about this content/event?
- Can you elaborate on things in particular you did/did not like?
- What feelings or thoughts did you have while watching?
- How do you assess the usefulness of this content?

Continuity

- Can you explain your view of Gymshark as a brand?
- How do you evaluate the content's consistency with Gymshark as a brand?
 - Can you explain this?
- Do you feel this content reflects the brand's identity or values?
 - In what way?

Credibility

- How do you feel about the honesty of this event/content?
 - Can you explain? (misleading or not)

- Did it seem genuine?
 - In what sense?

Integrity

- What do you think about the morality of this content?
 - What goals are they trying to achieve with this content/event?
- To what extent do you think Gymshark is giving back to its consumers through this content/event?
 - How?

Symbolism

- How do you relate to what this content represents?
 - Why?
- Does it make you feel connected?
 - In what way?
- What meanings does this content represent to you?
 - How?

3.2 Entertaining short-form content

Artifact Viewing:

Inform participant of the following information: Gymshark and its influencers also provide a lot of funny, entertaining content for people to enjoy On TikTok and Instagram:

Display video's:

Kothe, L. [@lucas.kth]. (2024, October 7). *Project Winter arc | @Gymshark LUCAS to saveee #gym #inspiration #motivation #fitness #workout #vlog* [Video]. TikTok.

<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNdFeHKDh/>

Gymshark [@Gymshark]. (2023, June 8). *Time to make them regret it. #meme #gym #gym* [Video]. TikTok. <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNdFegAoT/>

Gymshark [@Gymshark]. (2023, March 5). *He did say don't touch it #gym #meme #Gymshark @zacperna @_izzyflannery_* [Video]. TikTok. <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNdFeKJ4B/>

Gymshark (2020, 30 Dec). *HOW TO CHANGE YOUR LIFE IN 66 DAYS | Gymshark66* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/vSa9eNvtCT0?si=xx3Oy3uhNkBse-Mi>

Questioning:

- What did you think of this content/event in general?
 - What stood out to you about this content/event?
- Can you elaborate on things in particular you did/did not like?
- What feelings or thoughts did you have while watching?
- How do you assess the usefulness of this content?

Continuity

- Can you explain your view of Gymshark as a brand?
- How do you evaluate the content's consistency with Gymshark as a brand?
 - Can you explain this?
- Do you feel this content reflects the brand's identity or values?
 - In what way?

Credibility

- How do you feel about the honesty of this event/content?
 - Can you explain? (misleading or not)
- Did it seem genuine?
 - In what sense?

Integrity

- What do you think about the morality of this content?
 - What goals are they trying to achieve with this content/event?
- To what extent do you think Gymshark is giving back to its consumers through this content/event?
 - How?

Symbolism

- How do you relate to what this content represents?
 - Why?
- Does it make you feel connected?
 - In what way?
- What meanings does this content represent to you?
 - How?

3.3 Event Marketing

Artifact Viewing:

Inform participant of the following information: Gymshark organizes a yearly LIFT event which is free of charge in which fans can meet their favorite influencers, participate in lifting contests and connect with other gym enthusiasts.

Display video's:

Recap of LIFT MIAMI highlight reel Gymshark Instagram:

- 15 seconds of lifting zone: In this zone, participants can work out using Gymshark provided weights and equipment with fellow Gymshark enthusiasts.
- 15 seconds of main stage: On this stage the most famous Gymshark athletes will give speeches, hold conversations and answer audiences questions
- 15 seconds of retail zone: here audiences get the chance to purchase the latest and exclusive Gymshark items.
- 15 seconds of meet and greet content: visitors will have the chance to meet their favorite influencer and ask them questions

Gymshark [@Gymshark]. (2025, February 8). *LIFT: MIAMI* [Highlight]. Instagram. Retrieved April 13, 2025, from <https://www.instagram.com/gymshark/>

Questioning:

- What did you think of this content/event in general?
 - What stood out to you about this content/event?
- Can you elaborate on things in particular you did/did not like?
- What feelings or thoughts did you have while watching?
- How do you assess the usefulness of this content?

Continuity

- Can you explain your view of Gymshark as a brand?
- How do you evaluate the content's consistency with Gymshark as a brand?
 - Can you explain this?
- Do you feel this content reflects the brand's identity or values?
 - In what way?

Credibility

- How do you feel about the honesty of this event/content?
 - Can you explain? (misleading or not)

- Did it seem genuine?
 - In what sense?

Integrity

- What do you think about the morality of this content?
 - What goals are they trying to achieve with this content/event?
- To what extent do you think Gymshark is giving back to its consumers through this content/event?
 - How?

Symbolism

- How do you relate to what this content represents?
 - Why?
- Does it make you feel connected?
 - In what way?
- What meanings does this content represent to you?
 - How?

(4.) Wrap-Up (5–10 min)

- Out of the 3 pieces of content, which felt the most authentic to you? Why?
 - Were the other ones disruptive?
 - What content is inauthentic to you?
- Do you think branded entertainment is a good way for brands like Gymshark to connect with people your age?
 - Could you relate this to traditional advertising?
 - What are the main differences between authentic and inauthentic content to you?
- Any final thoughts on what makes a fitness brand feel real or fake online?

Appendix C. Codebook

Code	Code Group
(sincerity) painting perfect picture to sell	Integrity
BE is moral, selling is what entrepreneurs must do	Integrity
BE moral when consumers benefit	Integrity
brand connection through event	Integrity
brand recognition main goal o content	Integrity
community feeling of being together at event	Integrity
content focused on selling	Integrity
Content honest when providing information	Integrity
content must provide something	Integrity
disliking day in the life content	Integrity
disliking extreme content	Integrity
does not enjoy heavy sales	Integrity
event consistent with idea of Gymshark (community)	Integrity
event goals are selling as much clothes as possible	Integrity
event good for everyone	Integrity
event more beneficial than content overall	Integrity
event most authentic because most rewarding	Integrity
event to do something nice for people, due to effort put in	Integrity
expressing vulnerability to influencers	Integrity
extreme muscles fake IC (not fair)	Integrity
genuine intention to entertain event	Integrity
Gymshark becoming more inclusive	Integrity
helping people get fit as authentic	Integrity
honesty depends on what they provide IC	Integrity
HONESTY is not showing ideal picture EC	Integrity
IC did not feel like shoving in face	Integrity
IC to persuade to sell	Integrity
IC way more useful	Integrity
IDEAL body idea Gymshark IC	Integrity
ideal picture of bodies IC	Integrity
identification of sponsored post causes caution	Integrity
impressionable viewers	Integrity
information main goal of content	Integrity
informative content can be useful	Integrity
informative function of fitness content IC	Integrity
joyful content not disturbing	Integrity
Main motivation IC not to inform	Integrity
more vulnerable to marketing when starting working out	Integrity
no different goals EC and IC	Integrity
no intrinsic motivations event	Integrity
promotion of unnecessary tools	Integrity
providing people with help is authentic	Integrity

seeing celebrities in real life is cool	Integrity
selling coincides with Gymshark	Integrity
selling underlying purpose with all content	Integrity
underlying purpose of selling day in the life	Integrity
useful content blurs commercial goals	Integrity

Appendix D. AI Declaration

Prompts:

- Can you act as my research partner and generate a list of key concepts I should focus my data collection around?