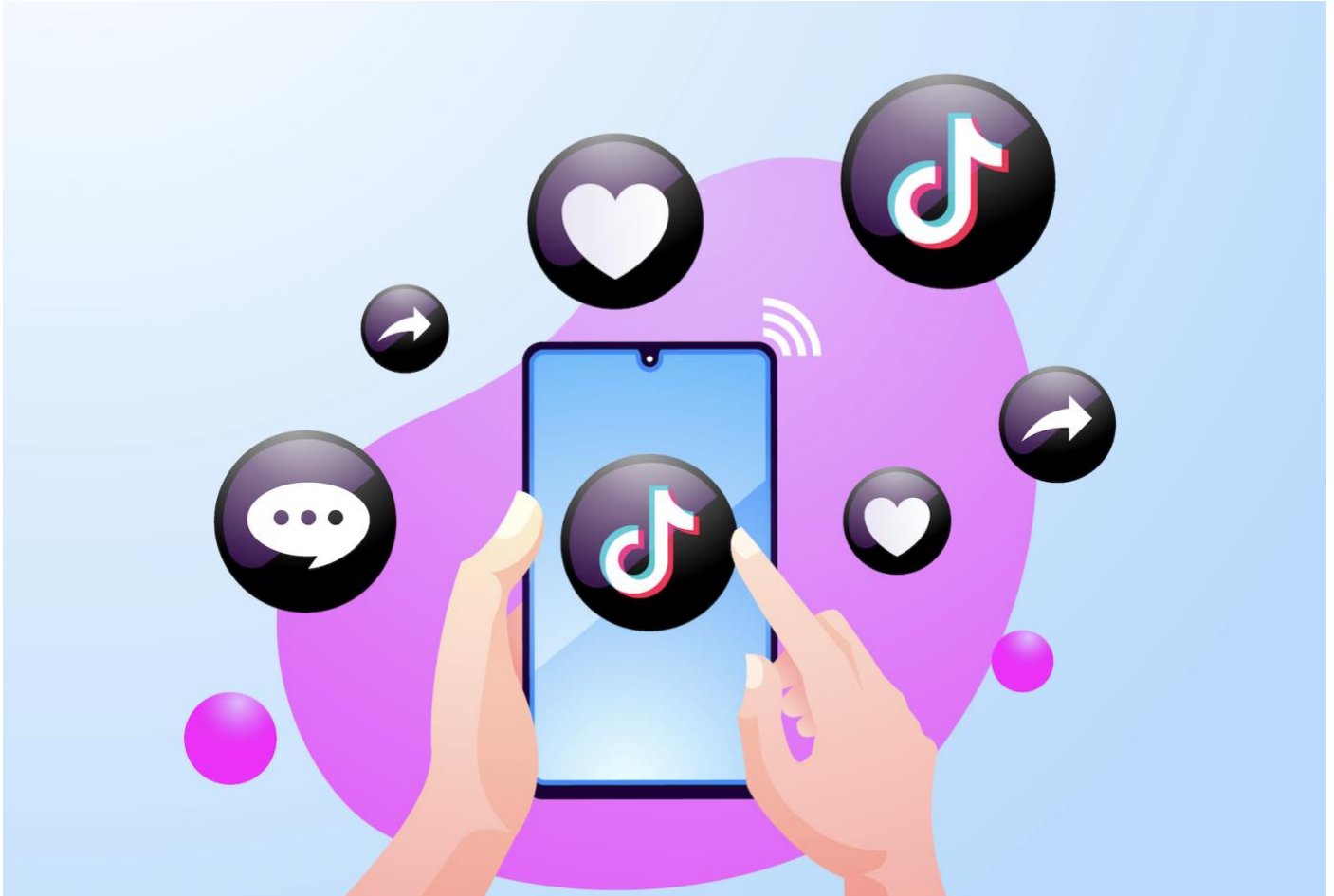


Aalborg University



EMOTIONAL BRANDING ON TIKTOK: A CASE STUDY OF GYMSHARK AND CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS

Master's Thesis
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Abstract

Given the increasing popularity of the social media platform TikTok, this thesis explores the opportunities and challenges for brands aiming to leverage TikTok as a branding tool. More specifically, it seeks to uncover how brands are using the platform as a branding tool, and how this content is then perceived by consumers. The main objective of the thesis is therefore twofold; firstly, it seeks to examine specific content in terms of how it has been created, and secondly, it seeks to examine how this content is then perceived by consumers. The focus of this study is based on a profound interest based on the desire to obtain a deep understanding of TikTok as a branding tool, and how brands may use it to connect with their consumers.

The thesis is grounded in a social constructivist perspective, drawing on the theory of emotional branding proposed by Gobé (2001). It employs a qualitative approach as the collected data has been obtained through semi-structured interviews and analysed using a thematic method of analysis. To provide specific content for the interview participants to base their perceptions on, the thesis focuses on the British retailer Gymshark, selecting three particular posts from their official TikTok account. The thesis specifically examines how Gymshark's content fosters emotional connections with consumers, resulting in both positive and negative perceptions. To explore these perceptions, the thesis includes six semi-structured interviews with Danish consumers within Gymshark's target audience. Given that Gymshark operates a single, globally-focused TikTok account, the inclusion of Danish consumers provides a broader perspective on the brand's global appeal and how its content is perceived by audiences outside the UK, where the brand is based.

Through an in-depth analysis of Danish consumers' perceptions of selected content posted on Gymshark's TikTok account, the thesis identifies several key themes that underpin the brand's emotional branding strategy. The findings emphasise that while emotional branding is a potent tool for building brand loyalty, it must be carefully managed to avoid potential pitfalls associated with overly personal or exclusive content. Additionally, the thesis found that social media platforms inherently carry meaning that influences the content posted on them. Consequently, it is crucial for brands to consider the nature of each platform when developing an emotional branding strategy, as this will guide them in creating content that is best suited for the respective platform.

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1. Introduction

Social media platforms have revolutionised the landscape of communication, commerce, and entertainment, becoming integral parts of modern society. From the early days of the internet to the widespread adoption of platforms like Facebook and Instagram, the evolution of social media has been rapid and transformative (Haenlein et al. 2020).

Among the latest additions to this ever-expanding digital sphere is TikTok; a social media platform that has gained world-wide popularity with its short-form video content (Haenlein et al. 2020). TikTok's unique blend of creativity, authenticity, and virality has made it a compelling powerhouse among younger demographics (Haenlein et al. 2020). With its user-friendly interface and algorithm-driven content distribution, TikTok has quickly become a breeding ground for trends, memes, and viral challenges, attracting millions of users worldwide (Haenlein et al. 2020). As brands and marketers strive to capitalise on the immense reach and engagement potential of TikTok, the concept of emotional branding has emerged as a key strategy for establishing meaningful connections with consumers (Wang 2024). Emotional branding harnesses the power of emotions to create memorable experiences and foster brand loyalty, making it a compelling approach for brands seeking to make an impact on TikTok (Gobé 2001).

This thesis therefore aims to delve into the realm of emotional branding on TikTok, exploring its nuances, challenges, and opportunities. In order to examine specific content and obtain a more in-depth understanding of the perception of it, the British sportswear company Gymshark will be used as a case study. This is partly based on the fact that Gymshark was one of the most popular brands worldwide on TikTok as of 2022 (appendix 1). Additionally, Gymshark's foundation lies in its identity as a sportswear company. This situates the brand within an industry that does not solely market products based on factual information and specific features such as electronic devices or cosmetics for instance. Rather, the emphasis is on selling a specific lifestyle or state of mind. This aspect would therefore be interesting to examine through the perspective of emotional branding in terms of how such content is then constructed and perceived by target consumers. Furthermore, the company currently operates in most of the world, yet they only have one unique TikTok account. This suggests that they have a global branding strategy, which, according to Steenkamp (2017), may be a favourable approach:

“You should focus on global integration—i.e., on the degree of coordination of marketing mix activities across countries. This requires a mindset that is oriented toward looking for cross-national similarities, not differences. Cross-national differences in actual behavior may disguise potential for a globally integrated approach.” (Steenkamp 2017, 77).

According to this argument, it may be more useful to approach a branding strategy with the perspective of what the target audience have in common rather than focusing on their differences. This is an interesting aspect in terms of emotional branding strategies as it suggests that the brand should focus on a general emotional desire that is shared among the target audience, and then attempt to tap into this particular desire.

Therefore, as Gymshark only has this one TikTok account that is used as a worldwide branding tool, I find it interesting to examine the perception of the content posted on this account from the minds of consumers outside of the UK where the brand is originally from. By examining the general online shopping patterns in the EU for instance, a new survey has found that an average of 53% has made an online purchase within the past 3 months of the survey (Nielsen 2022). More specifically, the study revealed that Holland and Denmark are at the top of the list with 83% and 82% respectively, which indicates that Dutch and Danish consumers are above the average consumption percentage compared to the rest of the EU (Nielsen 2022). Furthermore, there has been an increase in the share of online shopping patterns of clothes and sporting goods in Denmark, which have reached 72% as of 2023 compared to 53% in 2013 (appendix 2). Taking these statistics into account and the aim to explore consumer perceptions beyond the UK borders, this study will incorporate interviews with Danish consumers and examine the perceptions of selected content posted by Gymshark through the perspectives of Danish consumers. As a result of these considerations, the following research question has been formulated.

1.1 Research Question

How does the British retailer Gymshark brand themselves on their TikTok account and how is this content perceived by their target audience in Denmark?

2. Context of the Study

In order to provide a contextual background for this study, this section will include an introduction to the social media platform TikTok, its features and how it has influenced the digital marketing landscape. After this, the section will include an introduction to Gymshark as a company in order to provide an overview of what the company is and how they brand themselves.

2.1 TikTok

The social media platform TikTok was first established back in 2017 and has gained rapid and increasing recognition worldwide ever since (Schellewald 2023). As of 2020, TikTok had 465.7 million active users worldwide; a number which is expected to increase to 955.3 million active users worldwide during 2025 (appendix 3). The platform is built around short-form videos and has an integrated algorithm that understands what kind of content you are spending your time on watching (Schellewald 2023). Consequently, the videos featured on the app are tailored to match your past engagements, ensuring that you only encounter content aligned with your interests (Schellewald 2023). Contrary to the seemingly perfect universe of Instagram, or the personal atmosphere of Facebook, TikTok offers a new platform based on fun and entertaining content (Roose 2018). Then, during the Coronavirus pandemic, the platform quickly garnered attention for fostering a fun and entertaining environment where individuals could find fun content amidst the challenges of lockdown and separation from loved ones (Roose 2018). As author Kevin Roose from the International New York Times describes it, TikTok is considered the “[...] rarest of internet creatures: a place where people can let down their guards, act silly with their friends [...]” (Roose 2018). Particularly this aspect of acting silly has been one of the key ingredients to the widespread use of the platform as it facilitates content that is amusing and able to entertain people across borders. The type of content posted on this platform therefore also reflects a different perspective, which facilitates the creation of amusing and entertaining content in a seemingly new way.

2.2 Gymshark

As previously mentioned (see section 1), this study takes its departure in the global sportswear company Gymshark, which was originally founded in the UK back in 2012 (Gymshark, n.d.). Gymshark is a British retail company specialising in the manufacturing and sale of fitness

apparel and accessories. The brand's central objective is described as follows: "It's not our goals that unite us, but the things we do to achieve them. Because although our training grounds and end goals might be different, sweat is our sport. And we're a team of individuals who know that to go further, we go together." (Gymshark, n.d.), followed by five key values which are described as "Be human. Give a shit. Do the right thing. Find the Gymshark way. Put family first." (Gymshark, n.d.). The brand's central objective and key values are reflected in their many marketing initiatives, predominantly centred around workout routines and transformations. Particularly on their TikTok account, the brand seems to have tried to narrow their marketing initiatives and focus on some of the other perspectives surrounding the reason behind going to the gym. Specifically, they seem to tap into the diverse emotions that serve as motivations for many of their consumers to go to the gym. Therefore, their TikTok account consists of individual posts with selected images of gym facilities, background sound and written texts that describe feelings or memories that may lie behind the reason for going to the gym. According to technical digital marketing expert Berti Munro, "Gymshark's success can be attributed to their ability to connect with their audience on a deeper emotional level [...]." (Munro 2023). Since launching their brand, Gymshark has been sharing real-life success stories on their social media platforms to connect with their target audience. This strategy has fostered a community of people striving to become better versions of themselves, with the clothing they sell playing a small but significant role in this journey. Additionally, one of the founders, Ben Francis, who is a fitness enthusiast, has served as an authentic brand ambassador, reinforcing the brand's authenticity. These factors have significantly contributed to Gymshark's remarkable success as a sportswear company, as evidenced by their revenue growth from 2017 to 2023 (appendix 4).

3. Philosophy of Science

This section seeks to present and discuss the philosophy of science that forms the groundwork for this study. This includes an account for how social constructivism will affect the choices made throughout the study and the potential consequences hereof. Social constructivism has been selected as it highlights the subjective nature of reality, which is reflected in the research question of this study.

According to the social constructivist viewpoint, there is a consensus that knowledge and meanings emerge from the interactions and social connections individuals engage in (Amineh and Davatgari Asl 2015, 13). This indicates that what we perceive as real is not something that is fixed, but something that is dependent on the social context we are in, and the particular worldview we ourselves hold. For instance, the American social psychologist Kenneth Gergen (2015) argues that “whenever people describe reality [...] they are speaking from a particular standpoint or tradition of understanding.” (5). This highlights the subjective nature of social constructivism and indicates that the context in which researchers approach a text impacts how they interpret and derive meaning from it (Krippendorff 2004). This is further highlighted in the argument by Krippendorff (2013) who states that “a message does not exist without an interpreter [...] texts are read with particular intents, and data are informative relative to particular problems.” (28-29). This also suggests that the reality and truth of this study is highly influenced by the research question as this guides the way the rest of the research is read and understood. Nevertheless, this is not considered a limitation as such as this study seeks to understand a particular perspective in-depth, which means that the objective of this study is not to create a generalisation or obtain a testable trust; rather, it is to obtain a more in-depth understanding of individual perceptions towards a particular topic.

Based on the discussion of social constructivism above, it is clear that this positioning will affect the theoretical and methodological choices of this study. For instance, the theoretical framework used to explain the findings of the analysed data is emotional branding, which in itself correlates well with the principles of social constructivism. This is based on the argument that emotional branding is about creating an emotional connection with consumers and as emotions are considered subjective, especially in terms of how they are perceived, this theoretical framework follows the perspective that reality is subjective and co-created between interactions between the brand and their consumers (Gobé 2001). Furthermore, the

methodological framework of this study is also affected by the social constructivist perspective as it takes on a qualitative approach to data collection in the sense that it is based on semi-structured interviews meaning that qualitative data will be analysed (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018). This implies that when discussing the truth about the chosen content and its impact on consumers, it is not an absolute truth but rather a limited perspective. This perspective is shaped by both the included interviewees and their subjective perceptions, as well as the specific selected content on which their perceptions are founded.

4. The History of Branding

The concept of branding has changed significantly over time as a reflection of various fundamental changes in technology, consumer behaviour, and general market dynamics (Bastos and Levy 2012). In the early days, the understanding of branding was based on the process of marking, which covers the idea of marking an object with a particular meaning in order to describe its contents (Bastos and Levy 2012). In other words, it was based on measurable factors in terms of ownership and quality. The specific definition of a brand, and branding in general, has therefore also been subject to change over time, but one of the more traditional perspectives was the one proposed by Kotler (2000), who argued that a brand was merely considered to be “the name, associated with one or more items in the product line, that is used to identify the source of character of the item(s)” (396). This definition was a reflection of the general consensus that a brand was an entity whose meanings were simply assigned to it. Furthermore, it also seems like a clear extension of the original perspective of marking as it highlights the idea of branding as a way to describe the items being sold, and to include information about the specific contents of the product.

The competitive landscape in the marketplace was then significantly altered by the Second World War (Bastos and Levy 2012). This meant that, according to Gardner and Levy (1955), “People buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean” (118). Their argument highlights one of the new ideas of branding which contributed to a more general shift in focus in terms of how companies were to brand themselves and their products. For instance, Kapferer (1997) had formulated an argument that quite simply illustrates the actual change of behaviour that occurred following this new proposed perspective: “Companies wished to buy a producer of chocolate or pasta: after 1980, they wanted to buy KitKat or Buitoni. This distinction is very important; in the first case firms wish to buy production capacity and in the second they want to buy a place in the mind of the consumer” (23). This highlights a significant transformation in branding, shifting away from emphasis solely on trademark rights and product specifications. Instead, the focus was then on recognising that consumers are not just purchasing products for their material functions but also attaching considerable importance to the brand behind the product. This perspective further fostered a significant change in the way brands were viewed. For instance, Aaker (1997) argued that a brand can develop a personality, which she views as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (347). Following this line of thought, Fournier (1998) proposed that not only can a brand develop a personality,

it should also be considered an active participant in the relationship construction between the brand and the consumer (Fournier 1998).

This change of perspective in terms of what a brand is has naturally also been part of a fundamental change in terms of the actual branding process. For instance, Schmitt (1999) proposed a strategy called experiential branding, which “view consumers as rational and emotional human beings who are concerned with achieving pleasurable experiences.” (53). Following this perspective of consumers as emotional beings, Gobé (2001) proposed a strategy called emotional branding, where the emotional connection that a brand creates with their consumers are at the forefront of a successful branding strategy (Gobé 2001). These branding strategies remain relevant today as they centre on understanding consumer needs and how a brand can effectively address them, thereby persuading consumers to choose their products over those of competitors.

Another factor that may also have contributed to the shift in branding strategies can be traced to the evolution of media distribution channels and how these were used. Traditional ways to communicate back in time were based on mass communication techniques primarily employing a form of one-way communication, where the company informed the audience about a particular message (Mulhern 2009). This perspective was based on the affordances of the available distribution channels such as television, radio, newsletters and magazines (Mulhern 2009). Unlike the early days of media, you now have the freedom to access the online world every day, at any given moment, and from any location. Additionally, the current social media platforms carry with them meanings in themselves as people use them to be inspired and to connect with the global community (Haenlein et al. 2020). Consequently, these platforms appear more emotionally charged than previous media platforms, and the content shared on them should therefore likewise resonate with consumers on an emotional level, given that the platforms themselves facilitate such connections (Haenlein et al. 2020).

As this study seeks to investigate branding strategies on TikTok, it seems like a natural choice to examine the data through the perspective of emotional branding. This is partly in terms of the discussion above that we have moved towards this general understanding of consumers as emotional beings that are concerned with creating relationships with brands and achieving experiences through the products they purchase. It is also based on the argument that the modern social media sphere, specifically the platform TikTok which I seek to examine, is

considered to be emotionally charged meaning that the content posted on this platform should be a reflection of this. So, with this combination of consumers as being viewed as emotional beings seeking meaningful experiences and relationships in combination with an emotionally charged social media platform, it seems like a valuable choice to examine the content posted on such a platform through the eyes of emotional branding.

5. Literature Review

As discussed above, this study will be examined through the perspective of emotional branding. In order to clarify the context in which this study is situated and to obtain a better understanding of the field of emotional branding, this section seeks to review and discuss existing literature in terms of its methodologies and findings. By doing so, it aims to position this study within the field, thereby establishing a foundation for its relevance. To gain a broad overview of how emotional branding has been studied in the past decades, the following section has been divided into three overall parts. Firstly, a literature review with a focus on emotional branding in general. Secondly in relation to how it has been used in combination with the social media sphere. Thirdly, a general discussion of the overall findings in order to create a broad perspective on the use of emotional branding in general.

5.1 Emotional Branding

The concept of emotional branding has gained increasing recognition among marketing scholars since its origin in the end of the 20th century (Fournier 1998; Gobé 2001; Malär et al. 2011; Kim and Sullivan 2019; Patro and Kamakula 2019; Acharya 2019; Rietveld et al. 2022). Among the pioneering scholars who initially emphasised the importance of establishing profound connections with consumers within the realm of branding are Susan Fournier (1998) and Marc Gobé (2001).

In the article “Consumers and Their Brands: Developing Relationship Theory in Consumer Research” published in 1998, Fournier sought to examine the relational interactions between consumers and brands aiming to provide a general framework for deeper insights into the intricacies of this type of relationship. The article has garnered extensive citation from contemporary scholars as it provides the foundation for and discussion of the brand as being an active partner in the creation of a relationship between the brand itself and its consumers (Fournier 1998). In the article, Fournier (1998) argues that “What matters in the construction of brand relationships is not simply what managers intend for them, or what brand images “contain” in the culture [...], but what consumers do with brands to add meaning in their lives.” (367). This highly emphasises the emotional dimension of branding and underscores the significance of fostering profound connections with consumers through on-going interactions.

Following this line of thought, Gobé (2001) wrote a book called “Emotional Branding: The New Paradigm for Connecting Brands to People” (Gobé 2001) in which he argues that we have moved beyond transactional relationships with brands towards relationships that are based more highly on emotional connections and consumer centricity. He further highlights that

“Branding is a people to people business, not a factory to people business. A brand needs to have human qualities and emotional values - it needs to have a personality expressing corporate culture through imagery that engages people.” (Gobé 2001, 306).

This aligns with Fournier's argument that it is no longer solely enough to simply market a product based on its features and functionalities, but that it needs to be a combination that involves an emotional aspect that consumers can relate to and, in this sense, relate to and identify with the brand.

Gobé (2001) also emphasised the idea of a personified brand in the sense that a brand should exhibit qualities and characteristics similar to those of a human. By personifying the brand, it becomes more relatable and appealing to consumers, fostering stronger emotional connections and loyalty (Gobé 2001). In this way, a brand is no longer considered a stable entity that you can assign meanings to; rather, it becomes (some sort of) a person which you are then able to create a relationship with. The research conducted by these authors have been part of making significant contributions to the understanding of emotional branding and its influence in the field of marketing and branding strategies in general.

More recent research on emotional branding can be found in the research papers “Emotional Branding speaks to consumers' heart: the case of fashion brands” and “Emotional Branding as a Strategy in Promoting Customer Loyalty” by authors Kim and Sullivan (2019) and Patro and Kamakula (2019) respectively. In these articles the role of emotional branding as an integrated strategy to connect with consumers have been examined. The main objectives are based on the aim to provide valuable insights into the inner workings of emotional branding, and how the use of such strategy can create strong brand attachments and customer loyalty.

The research paper by Kim and Sullivan (2019) is divided into two parts, where the first part is created to “explore marketplace trends that support emotional branding defined by consumer experiences, authentic self, warm glow, and co-creation” (Kim and Sullivan 2019, 2). The second part focuses more on the particular strategies within emotional branding, and seeks to

“propose a model for emotional branding strategies relevant to the fashion industry in terms of sensory branding, story-telling, cause branding, and empowerment” (Kim and Sullivan 2019, 2). In this study, the authors sought to examine and discuss the importance of emotional branding within the fashion industry, and how such strategy affects the consumer-brand relationship. Their findings suggested four different strategies that can be used to increase brand loyalty and includes the following:

“First, fashion retailers can involve consumers in consumption experiences. [...]. Second, fashion retailers can provide opportunities for their consumers to personally identify with the brand's products. [...]. Third, fashion retailers can use cause-related branding strategies to emotionally connect with their target consumers. [...]. Lastly, brands can empower consumers to achieve their goals and express their identities, resulting in an emotional bond between the consumer and brand.” (Kim and Sullivan 2019, 12).

These strategies highlight the emotional dimension of branding, as they revolve around understanding the emotional needs of consumers and crafting content that deeply resonates with them, such as by involving or empowering them. Each of these strategies appears to prioritise establishing a meaningful relationship with consumers rather than merely providing information about specific products.

The article by Patro and Kamakula (2019) also focuses on the nature of emotions and how these may affect customer loyalty, but with a slightly different perspective. The first part of this article explores the tenets of emotional branding and the antecedents of customer loyalty and virtual communities in terms of emotions (Patro and Kamakula 2019). The second part then takes into account how to implement these emotions into particular strategies, where focus is on the enhancement and strengthening of customer loyalty (Patro and Kamakula 2019). The general perspective of the study builds upon the idea that “brand meanings are not controlled by managers but rather are co-created through ongoing interactions among their users” (Patro and Kamakula 2019, 185). This argument about brands as active participants in the relationship building process between brands and consumers was initially proposed by Fournier (1998) and Gobé (2001), but, as discussed in this study by Patro and Kamakula (2019), it is still a valid argument today, as they argue that it is part of the strengthening of customer loyalty.

These research papers do provide significant, albeit somewhat general, perspectives on the intricacies of emotional branding, its anticipated impact on consumer behaviour, and specific actionable strategies, however, empirical studies of their findings are required to thoroughly authenticate for instance Kim and Sullivan's (2019) model and the described insights outlined in both papers.

Like the studies conducted by Kim and Sullivan (2019) and Patro and Kamakula (2019), Acharya (2019) wrote an article that focused on the creation of brand personalities through the use of emotional branding. Her main objective was to examine how the method of customer experience management could potentially explain the emotional branding process and argues "that the brands which have lived the test of time have been those that developed an emotional bond with the customers." (Acharya 2019, 222). An argument that further highlights the importance of emotional branding in today's marketplace, and is further supported by her statement that "The values of a company should resonate with the emotions and personal values of the target audience." (Acharya 2019, 217). These arguments further suggest that successful branding and marketing efforts are rooted in the understanding and connection with the emotions and values that are significant to the target consumers of a brand. In her study, she also focused on the basic foundations of emotions and how these may be connected to brands. To examine this, she based her discussion on the assumption that there are eight primary emotions which are "anger, fear, sadness, disgust, surprise, anticipation, trust, and joy" (Acharya 2019, 218). While Acharya does emphasise that emotional states can differ based on their combination or intensity, she does not further discuss the aspect that cultural norms might influence how emotions are then expressed. Therefore, while the insights described in her research article can be used as a foundation for the general understanding of emotional branding, it may be necessary to comment on the different perceptions of emotions and how these are expressed across the world in order to draw more specific conclusions from her findings. Nevertheless, she did provide a useful exploratory study of both emotional branding in general, but also in terms of describing the different emotional states and how they may affect customer loyalty.

The key takeaways from the articles discussed above are the aspect of how the concept of emotional branding can be part of creating stronger relationships between brands and their consumers. They particularly discuss the process of emotional branding in terms of how brands can strategically implement emotional elements into their branding strategies in order to foster

identification among consumers and to obtain loyalty that goes beyond valuable product features. This is an interesting perspective as it suggests that brands should focus on creating personalities that resonate with the personality traits of their consumers, hence personifying brands in such a way that they almost become human beings selling experiences and creating relationships rather than solely selling products. That the emotional branding process is more about selling a particular way of life than it is about products.

5.2 Emotional Branding on Social Media

Following the general discussion of existing literature on emotional branding above, this section includes a literature review of emotional branding in the social media context in order to narrow down the context of the study. Therefore, the included articles in this section will examine and discuss existing research on emotional branding in relation to social media. The articles have been selected as they all examine the concept of emotional branding in terms of its usage on social media platforms or in the social media sphere in general.

One of these studies is the article “Emotional Branding on Social Media: A Cross-Cultural Discourse Analysis of Global Brands on Twitter and Weibo” conducted by Wu and Li (2018), which delves into the dynamic interplay between cultural influence, social media, and branding strategies by directing their focus on the discursive practices employed by selected global brands on two prominent platforms, Twitter and Weibo (Wu and Li 2018). Specifically, the research focuses on how these brands may leverage emotional branding techniques within their communication on the selected platforms in order to explain how cultural influences are constructed, negotiated, and disseminated in the digital sphere (Wu and Li 2018). The study found that emotional branding appeals, which are representations of different stages of branding, are universally present and employed by brands on both Twitter and Weibo, which, according to Wu and Li (2018), suggests a convergence in branding strategies across diverse digital platforms highlighting the global nature of emotional branding techniques in contemporary marketing practices (Wu and Li 2018).

A different study conducted by Dwivedi, Johnson, Wilkie, Araujo-Gil (2019) sought to investigate the relationship between consumers' emotional attachment to social media platforms and consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) from a brand perspective. Their primary focus was to understand how emotional connections with social media platforms influence consumers' perceptions of brand equity, highlighting the significance of emotions in shaping

consumer-brand relationships within the context of social media (Dwivedi, Johnson, Wilkie, Araujo-Gil 2019). In order to examine this, they conducted an online survey, where they gathered information from 340 social media consumers from Australia. In summary, the findings of their study suggest that emotional brand attachment (EBA) significantly influences social media consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) through two main pathways: via consumer perceptions of brand credibility and consumer satisfaction (Dwivedi, Johnson, Wilkie, Araujo-Gil 2019). According to the authors, these pathways indicate that consumers view brands as relational partners and that emotional connections with brands affect CBBE through a chain of effects involving brand credibility and satisfaction (Dwivedi, Johnson, Wilkie, Araujo-Gil 2019, 1194). They further suggest that their study unifies various previously observed relationships and provides theoretical insights into how emotional attachments translate into CBBE, and that both pathways, mediated by brand credibility and consumer satisfaction, are found to be similarly strong (Dwivedi, Johnson, Wilkie, Araujo-Gil 2019). This therefore signifies that both trust and satisfaction play significant roles in shaping CBBE through emotional attachments.

On a different note, a study conducted by Rietveld et al. (2022) sought to analyse Instagram posts by extracting emotional and informative appeals using machine learning models. The rationale behind this study was based on the assessment that much prior scholarly research was based on examining textual content and its influence on engaging consumers, so this study sought to build upon this and examine visual content and its impact instead. To do so, it utilised a negative binomial model to understand and explain customer engagement based on the extracted emotional and informative features of 46.9 thousand Instagram posts from 59 brands and across six sectors (Rietveld et al. 2022). The study is quantitative in nature because it involves the use of statistical models, such as the negative binomial model, to analyse numerical data derived from the Instagram posts (Rietveld et al. 2022). The emphasis was therefore on identifying the specific factors that drive brand engagement through visual content, particularly through emotional or informative appeals. The study found that “emotional appeals are important for customer engagement and should be considered on both arousal and valence dimensions. Informative appeals matter less and have a predominantly dampening effect on customer engagement [...]” (Rietveld et al. 2022, 36). The findings of this study indicate that emotional appeals play a crucial role in engaging consumers on Instagram. However, it is essential to understand that the study relies on the quantity of comments and likes garnered by the extracted Instagram posts. This implies that the results are derived from

a quantitative assessment, offering a broad view of consumer engagement on Instagram. However, it does not delve into subjective interpretations of why individuals engage with certain content through likes or comments compared to others.

While the articles above have examined the role of emotional branding in marketing strategies and its effects on customer engagement and loyalty, Thompson, Rindfleisch and Arsel (2006) have written a research article called “Emotional branding and the Strategic Value of the Doppelgänger Brand Image” which examines some of the risks associated with the use of an emotional branding strategy in terms of its risk of creating a so-called “doppelganger brand image” (62). In their study they argue that the use of an emotional branding strategy can present a paradox for brands (Thompson, Rindfleisch and Arsel 2006). On one hand, it requires managers to maintain a consistent brand image and on the other hand, it also highlights a strong need for managers to be updated on current trends in order to stay relevant for their consumers (Thompson, Rindfleisch and Arsel 2006). This suggests that while emotional branding requires consistency in terms of external communication, it also requires adaptability and responsiveness to changes in consumer trends and general market dynamics. Based on this paradox, they pose the question of how a brand can stay consistent in its communication of a stable brand image while at the same time stay updated on fluctuant and current trends (Thompson, Rindfleisch and Arsel 2006). To answer this question, their study found that “consumers avoid brands when their emotional-branding promises are viewed as inauthentic and, conversely, that emotional-branding strategies succeed when they can function as an authenticating narrative for consumers' identity projects” (Thompson, Rindfleisch and Arsel 2006, 63).

This therefore suggests that the success of an emotional branding strategy might depend more on the genuineness of the message rather than the stability of the overall brand image. That is not to say that a consistent brand image is not important; rather, it implies that one of the key ways to connect with your consumers through an emotional branding strategy is by being authentic in your communication.

In order to then create a structure of emotional branding, Zhang, Tu, Zhao and He (2022) conducted a study called “Design of emotional branding communication model based on system dynamics in social media environment and its influence on new product sales” (Zhang, Tu, Zhao and He 2022). In this study they sought to create a model that may be useful when employing an emotional branding strategy within the social media sphere (Zhang, Tu, Zhao

and He 2022). According to the researchers, the model should reflect a combination of the interactivity offered by social media platforms and previous research on emotional branding that suggests that the branding of a product should evoke an emotional connection that is relevant to the consumer's everyday life (Zhang, Tu, Zhao and He 2022, 10-11). They further argue that emotional content must align with both the overall brand principles and the particular product details simultaneously as emotional messaging that are inconsistent with or deviates from the overall brand identity could detrimentally influence how the brand is perceived as it could potentially create confusion among consumers (Zhang, Tu, Zhao, and He, 2022).

5.2.1 Emotional Branding on TikTok

This last part of the literature review of emotional branding on social media will be narrowed down to only examine and discuss existing literature that focuses on emotional branding in relation to the social media platform TikTok. However, previous research with this focus is rather scarce, possibly due to the novelty of TikTok as a branding platform. Some of the main areas of research in relation to branding through emotions on TikTok have been in terms of emotional connections with the perspective of attachment theory (Wang 2023), brand storytelling (Quesenberry and Coolsen 2023) and how different types of content posted on TikTok may influence consumer engagement (Wahid et al. 2023). As the first two perspectives slightly deviate from the particular research objective of this study, the following section will only include a review of the last article as this examines content on TikTok with focus on emotional and informational characteristics in relation to how this may affect consumer engagement.

As mentioned above, the article "Becoming TikTok Famous: Strategies for Global Brands to Engage Consumers in an Emerging Market" by Wahid et al. (2023) sought to investigate how various factors such as informational and emotional content in combination with verbal and non-verbal cues are influencing social media engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments (Wahid et al. 2023). To examine this, the authors adopted a quantitative approach analysing a comprehensive dataset comprising 680 TikTok posts. The interesting part about this research paper is that they found that "informational content mainly generates higher SME than emotional content" (Wahid et al. 2023, 106). This stands in contrast to the general consensus among marketing scholars that emotional content is of higher relevance in today's ever-changing and fluctuant marketplace (Kim and Sullivan 2019; Patro and Kamakula 2019;

Acharya 2019; Rietveld et al. 2022). However, the content analysed in this study was posted by global smartphone brands promoting various smartphones. Since the decision to purchase a new smartphone typically revolves around its functionality, specifications, or performance, the results of the study might align more closely with past research on emotional branding than initially anticipated. Contrary to this, if the product being promoted had been clothing or anything fashion-related, consumers may be more receptive to emotional branding strategies that focus on evoking certain feelings associated with the brand or product. This is based on the assumption that the way you dress is more often tied to some kind of personal expression or identity, making emotional appeals potentially more effective in creating a connection with your consumers (Kim and Sullivan 2019). The findings of this study therefore highlight the importance of considering the nature of the product being sold and the preferences of your target audience before adopting an emotional branding strategy.

The key takeaways from the articles discussed above highlights the nature of social media platforms and how they themselves carry meanings that inevitably affect the content posted on the platforms. Particularly the aspect that these platforms are part of the construction of messages as they have affordances that allow for more emotional content and for the ability to interact with your consumers on a deeper and more direct level. This is an interesting aspect in terms of this study as it highlights the essential aspect of understanding the social media platform used to convey a message before analysing the content posted on it. The article above therefore contributes to a more general understanding of the inner workings of social media platforms and how these are part of the shaping of brand communication in terms of their affordances and interactive nature.

5.3 General Discussion of Existing Literature

This final section will now seek to summarise the overall findings from the aforementioned articles in order to provide a more general overview of the existing literature on emotional branding.

Based on the discussed articles above, it is possible to argue that previous research on emotional branding have been predominantly exploratory studies that have relied solely on quantitative research with the aim to examine possible effects and consequences of the use of an emotional branding strategy. This seems to be paradoxical considering the subjective and emotional

nature of such branding strategy. One may therefore question how it is possible to discuss emotional connections and the effects of them if these very emotions have not been studied in depth in relation to it. As is evident in the articles above, the majority of existing literature has not included qualitative studies with in-depth interviews that are able to tap into these very emotions; rather, the research has been more about discussing the importance of emotions and the ways in which they can be used in branding. As Acharya (2019) argues, emotions are subjective states of mind, so one can argue that in order to examine these emotions, and to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of them, one must include subjective attitudes towards specific research questions. Furthermore, even though Acharya (2019) did discuss the various universal emotional states, highlighting their potential differences in combination and intensity, there was a notable absence of recognition regarding how these emotional states might then manifest differently across different countries. When a brand aims to resonate with its consumers by evoking feelings of joy, it is essential to recognise that the expression of joy can vary depending on the specific product being promoted and the cultural context of the target country. This observation does not imply a dismissal of the importance or relevance of existing literature; rather, it serves as the groundwork for justifying the relevance of this study. Moreover, it is important to recognise that while other research papers may have acknowledged the importance of emotions in branding, the scarcity of studies on emotional branding on TikTok could be attributed to the platform's relative novelty, having first emerged in 2016 (Anderson 2020).

As previously mentioned, the research articles above also indicate that the effectiveness or implementation of an emotional branding strategy is highly influenced by the specific industry sector, as this determines the extent of emotional significance consumers may associate with a product or brand (Kim and Sullivan 2019). For example, when searching for new clothing items, it is not solely about their functional material, but also how they align with our perceived or ideal self-image. When buying a new jacket, it is often not just about staying warm; it also symbolises a persona you want others to think about when they see you. Hence, adopting an emotional branding strategy within this sector could be advantageous, given that people are already associating emotional attributes with the products (Kim and Sullivan 2019).

Contrary to this aspect, certain sectors demand more product information prior to purchase. An example of this could be in terms of smartphones as mentioned earlier. However, it is important to note that an iPhone, Apple for instance, is not typically bought solely for its functions; factors

such as brand, design, and the emotional connection Apple cultivates also play a significant role (Dissanayake and Amarasuriya 2015). Nevertheless, most consumers do seek basic information about a phone before making a purchase, such as specifications, size, and colour options, as it is not only used for symbolic reasons but also for its specific functions.

This aspect of how to best brand a product to the target audience, specifically on TikTok, in combination with the argument that “In this ocean of offerings, all fighting for the same consumer dollar, the emotional connection is what makes that all-important, essential difference” (Gobé 2001, xxvi) has led to an interest in studying the use of emotional branding on this new social media platform. To examine a case study on a specific company, this study will take its departure in Gymshark, a British sportswear retailer. Their notable success in social media marketing indicates a strong understanding of online strategies, making them a compelling subject for analysis. According to the digital consultant and marketer, Berti Munro (2023), “Gymshark's success can be attributed to their ability to connect with their audience on a deeper emotional level, harness the power of social media [...]” (Munro 2023). This aligns with the previously established argument highlighting the emotionally charged nature of modern social media platforms, such as TikTok, underscoring the importance of aligning content with this emotional context (Haenlein et al. 2020).

Therefore, it seems natural to combine the theory of emotional branding with empirical data consisting of selected TikTok posts by the fitness retail company Gymshark in combination with in-depth interviews with selected participants that fit their target audience. This approach facilitates an exploration of how consumers interpret emotional content on the social media platform TikTok and its impact on shaping brand identity. Through interviews, valuable insights into subjective attitudes can be explored, offering a deeper comprehension of emotional branding dynamics on TikTok. As the data will be examined through the perspective of emotional branding, the theoretical framework will be based on the theory initially proposed by Gobé (2001).

6. Theoretical Framework

As discussed above, the theoretical framework of this study is based on the theory of emotional branding as proposed by marketing scholar Marc Gobé (2001). This section will therefore describe and discuss the foundation of this theory in combination with a general discussion of its validity and relevance in modern times.

Marc Gobé (2001), a prominent marketing scholar renowned in the branding domain, claims that branding has experienced a significant shift in focus. Previously centred around industry as the primary market force, branding now relies more on the understanding of consumer needs as consumers are now being recognised as the primary drivers behind marketplace trends and product branding strategies (Gobé 2001, xiii).

Following this new way of thinking about the relationship between brands and their consumers (Fournier 1998), Gobé (2001) proposed the theory of emotional branding as a tool to create a unique and emotional bond between the brand and their consumers, where the focus was now more about the emotional state of the consumer rather than the perspective of selling a product based on its particular features (Gobé 2001). According to Gobé (2001), this new theory sought to focus “on the most compelling aspect of the human character; the desire to transcend material satisfaction, and experience emotional fulfilment.” (xv). The foundation of emotional branding was, according to Gobé (2001), based on the need for a more in-depth understanding of consumers following an increasingly saturated marketplace, where brands were becoming homogeneous as they all pursued the same strategy of offering high-quality products at competitive prices (Gobé 2001). As a result of this need, he argued that

“Corporations must take definitive steps toward building stronger *connections* and *relationships* which recognise their customers as partners. Industry today needs to bring people the products they desire, exactly when they want them, through venues that are both inspiring and intimately responsive to their needs.” (Gobé 2001, xiv-xv).

This highlights the emotional nature of branding and how the most important part of it is no longer considered to be the aspect of having a high-quality product with a competitive price, but that it is now more about the particular connection a consumer has with the brand as this will be the determining factor behind the actual purchase of a particular product. This distinctive perspective underscores the transformative power of brands, which extends beyond

fulfilling mere functional needs to enhancing the consumer experience through addressing profound emotional desires (Gobé 2001). By connecting with the aspirational motivations that drive human behaviour, brands can become catalysts for emotional fulfilment, transcending the conventional boundaries of products and services (Gobé 2001).

Furthermore, as previously established, one of the core arguments within the theory of emotional branding is the perspective and assumption that

“Branding is a people to people business, not a factory to people business. A brand needs to have human qualities and emotional values - it needs to have a personality expressing corporate culture through imagery that engages people.” (Gobé 2001, 306).

This perspective further aligns with the argument proposed by Fournier (1998), that brand meanings are not stable and uniform entities; rather they are formulated and managed through ongoing interactions between the brands and their consumers. It is a way to establish a unique relationship between the two parts that can be used to foster brand loyalty and emotional attachment.

This perspective of emotional branding as a way to create customer loyalty is further highlighted in the argument that “How much a product is known does not make it relevant to a market, nor esteemed or preferred by customers.” (Gobé 2001, 206). This suggests that emotional branding entails more than just gaining recognition and visibility among consumers. The brand needs to offer value beyond product attributes and cultivate an emotional resonance that aligns with the aspirations of the target audience, thereby creating a distinctive association with the product or brand.

6.1 The Pillars of Emotional Branding

To create a structure of the components within the emotional branding theory, Gobé (2001) states that the process is based upon four fundamental pillars: relationship, sensory experiences, imagination, and vision (Gobé, 2001, xxxii). These pillars are intricately interconnected, forming integral components within the framework of a successful emotional branding strategy. The following section will therefore present and discuss these four pillars and their part in the emotional branding strategy.

6.1.1 Relationship

The first of the four pillars is the relationship pillar, which “is about being profoundly in touch with and showing respect for who your consumers really are and giving them the emotional experience they really want.” (Gobé 2001, xxxii). In essence, this pillar highlights the significance of building authentic and meaningful connections with customers based on empathy and understanding. The pillar further highlights the interactive role of the brand as being an active participant in the relationship building process and the perspective that consumers are unique and complex individuals. Additionally, the pillar emphasises the importance of understanding your target audience thoroughly, including their interests and aspirations, to establish an emotional connection effectively. Only by knowing your audience can you identify the most impactful emotions and engage them at a point that is most meaningful to them (Gobé 2001).

6.1.2 Sensory Experiences

The second pillar is concerned with sensory experiences and is considered to be a key element in creating “the kind of memorable emotional brand contact that will establish brand preference and create loyalty.” (Gobé 2001, xxxii). This part of the emotional branding process focuses on the symbolic associations that consumers may attribute a product or brand, and how such associations may be created. In relation to this, Gobé (2001) argues that “although consumers generally do value products’ tangible qualities, the lifestyle and image of a product should never be neglected.” (69). This emphasises the very nature of emotional branding in the sense that we have moved beyond tangible specifications towards the creation of a particular feeling that should be felt when seeing the product. It underscores the idea that consumers aspire to a certain lifestyle through their purchases. Therefore, by establishing particular associations with a product, a brand can offer the desired experience or lifestyle sought by the consumer (Gobé 2001).

6.1.3 Imagination

The third pillar is about imagination and how the brand is then able to establish these emotional connections that should evoke certain associations. It covers the aspect of how to design the brand elements, such as product designs and web site design, in order to best connect with your consumers in creative and relevant ways (Gobé 2001, xxxii). The pillar further highlights the aspect of being innovative and creative as a main asset in terms of standing out of the crowd

both in terms of the traditional tangible assets such as logo and product packaging, but also in terms of the overall brand identity and personality (Gobé 2001).

6.1.4 Vision

The fourth and last pillar is vision and is concerned with the adoption of a strong and clear vision for the future, that, at the same time, is able to adapt to new marketplace trends and needs in consumer culture (Gobé 2001). This pillar is important as “Brands evolve through a natural life cycle within the marketplace and in order to create and maintain an edge in today’s marketplace, brands must be poised to reinvent themselves constantly.” (Gobé 2001, xxxii). This pillar is highly influenced by the pillar of imagination in the sense that the brand must have a clear vision for the future before they are able to create current content.

The four pillars are all part of creating an emotional branding strategy and as they represent different aspects within the process, they should all be carefully considered before the adoption of such strategy. However, the pillars are rather broad in their essence, which means that there are various ways to approach them depending on the particular brand and their products. Nevertheless, they do function as guiding principles and when carefully used in combination with each other, they are able to create a somewhat particular framework that can be used as the base for an emotional branding strategy.

6.2 Theoretical Considerations

The theory of emotional branding was originally developed in 2001, a period when the internet was just beginning to gain significance in the terms of online commerce. Therefore, the theory does not account for the nuances of social media as it exists today, nor does it acknowledge the specific characteristics or meanings associated with these new communication platforms. As a result of this, discussions in the book may overlook the unique characteristics and impact of platforms like TikTok, as these discussions primarily view the internet as a whole and as a new communication tool. This gap is significant to acknowledge, especially given that this study focuses on emotional branding on TikTok, a platform that has emerged more recently in the social media landscape. Particularly the aspect of how modern social media platforms carry meanings in themselves, which facilitates certain types of content. These platforms are emotional in nature in the sense that they are used as a tool to connect with friends, family and

the wider community, both locally but also on a global scale. These new platforms have made it possible to stay informed about the life of someone who is living on the other side of the world, and in a way where you are able to see and experience what they are at the same time.

Nevertheless, having considered these points, the theoretical framework of emotional branding is still valid today. This is partly based on its formulation as a broad and abstract theory, which, paradoxically, serves as both its weakness and its strength. The theory is built around the four pillars discussed above, which serves as guiding principles for how to implement an emotional branding strategy. However, these principles are in themselves rather broad in the sense that they cover the aspect of building a relationship between the brand and the consumers, creating a strong vision with the use of a creative imagination and the implementation of sensory experiences. While Gobé (2001) offers specific cases to support his arguments and demonstrate the application of these pillars, he does not provide actionable steps that may be outdated in contemporary contexts. Establishing a connection between the brand and the consumer, alongside fostering a strong vision and sensory experiences, remains paramount. Nonetheless, the approach to achieving these goals may differ due to the interactive nature and unique affordances of the modern social media landscape.

In essence, while the media landscape has evolved significantly since the original formulation of the emotional branding theory, its core principles of understanding a brand's target audience, connecting with them on an emotional level remain timeless and applicable across different mediums and contexts. For instance, a report on emotions in relation to customer experience from the Harvard Business Review states that "Fully connected customers are 52% more valuable, on average, than those who are just highly satisfied." (Magids, Zorfas and Leemon 2015). This further highlights the relevance of the theory today as focus remains on the aspect of connecting with consumers in order to obtain customer loyalty and satisfaction.

7. Research Design

As has been established in the introduction (see section 1), the objective of this study is based on the following research question: “How does the British retailer Gymshark brand themselves on their TikTok account and how is this content perceived by their target audience in Denmark?”. As is evident in the second part of this question, one of the key objectives of this study is to examine consumer perceptions about particular content. Therefore, this study takes on a qualitative approach, which seeks “to understand and make sense of phenomena from the participant’s perspective” (Merriam 2002, 6). This means that qualitative research seeks to examine subjective attitudes about a particular phenomenon, which is then interpreted by the researcher based on the objective of the study (Faulkner and Atkinson 2023). Based on this, criticism has been raised regarding the validity and reliability of qualitative research due to its reliance on subjective attitudes and the subsequent interpretation of these attitudes by the researcher (Faulkner and Atkinson 2023).

According to Brinckmann and Kvale (2018) “Validity refers in ordinary language to the truth, the correctness and the strength of a statement” (142). In terms of this, criticism has centred on the researcher's role as an active interpreter of data, as the subjective attitudes of the researcher may potentially influence those of the participants (Faulkner and Atkinson 2023). To address this concern it is essential to note that the method of data collection in this study employed semi-structured interviews, which adhered to a predefined interview guide formulated according to the theoretical framework. Hence, the questions were not subjectively formulated during the interviews but were theoretically grounded, thereby reducing the potential for researcher bias and enhancing validity (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018).

In terms of reliability, Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) argue that this aspect “pertains to the consistency and trustworthiness of research findings; it is often treated in relation to the issue of whether a finding is reproducible at other times and by other researchers.” (142). In terms of this, it is important to note that this study does not seek to obtain a generalisable truth about Gymshark’s branding strategies and a general perception of these among consumers; rather, the objective is to study selected content and how this is perceived by a limited number of consumers in order to obtain an in-depth understanding of emotional branding on TikTok and its influence on consumer behaviour. Therefore, I acknowledge that the content might be interpreted differently by other consumers, and the perceptions could have varied if alternative

content were chosen. However, as the objective of qualitative research is to obtain an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon from a specific perspective, the reliability of a qualitative study is more reliant on a clear description of the particular research process itself (Faulkner and Atkinson 2023). This will therefore be obtained through a clear and transparent description of the various methodological steps involved in both the process of data collection, but also in terms of the method of analysis. This research process will therefore be presented and elaborated in the following sections.

7.1 Methodology

As described above, this study seeks to examine how the British retailer Gymshark brand themselves on their TikTok account and how this content is then perceived by their target audience in Denmark. Therefore, in order to obtain an understanding of the subjective perceptions of the content, this study will conduct six different interviews with Danish consumers that are within Gymshark's target audience. This is based on the argument that the best way to understand what people think and feel is through conversation, which is facilitated through a research interview that "is an inter-view where knowledge is constructed in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee." (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018, 2).

This also correlates with the foundation of this study being based on a social constructivist perspective which perceives knowledge as being co-created in interaction among individuals, and where reality is considered to be a subjective construct (see section 3). The data obtained from these interviews will then be coded and analysed through a thematic method of analysis.

The following is therefore divided into two sections, where the first will include a description of the data and how it has been collected. The second will then include a presentation of what thematic coding is and how it will be used to code and analyse the obtained data.

7.2 Empirical Data

7.2.1 The Participants

As mentioned above, the data consists of interviews with six individuals who are considered part of Gymshark's target audience in Denmark and who are within the selection criteria discussed below. To provide an overview of the selected participants, they are briefly presented

in the following table (see table 1). The specific selection criteria will be described in detail further below.

Table 1: The Participants

Participant number	Age	Nationality	Sex	Fitness member
Participant 1	25	Danish	Female	Yes
Participant 2	25	Danish	Female	Yes
Participant 3	22	Danish	Male	Yes
Participant 4	26	Danish	Male	No
Participant 5	25	Danish	Female	No
Participant 6	27	Danish	Male	Yes

(appendix 5)

7.2.2 Selected TikTok Posts by Gymshark

This study is based on a case study of Gymshark, whose TikTok account is currently followed by 5.4 million users worldwide (Gymshark 2024). From this original account, three different posts have been selected, and will be presented as the case to the participants in the interviews. These posts have been chosen both because their content mirrors that of the other posts on their TikTok account, thus serving as a representative sample of the account's overall content, and because they have some of the highest view counts. View counts signify the number of individuals who have viewed each post. Additionally, the selected posts have high numbers of likes, comments and shares, indicating substantial engagement with the content. This indicates that the content resonates with the audience and has captured their attention. The following section will therefore present the selected posts and describe their contents.

The first video was posted on 22 February 2024, and has reached 3.3 million views, 488.4 thousand likes, 2.060 thousand comments, 59.6 thousand saved the post and 3.142 thousand have shared it with friends (appendix 6). The second video was posted on 25 February 2024, and has reached 2.3 million views, 400.3 thousand likes, 1.450 thousand comments, 47.3 thousand saved the post and 3.301 thousand have shared it with friends (appendix 7). The third

video was posted on 27 February 2024, and has reached 1.5 million views, 284 thousand likes, 1.214 thousand comments, 37.6 thousand saved the post and 3.234 thousand have shared it with friends (appendix 8).

All three videos, like most of the content posted on Gymshark's official TikTok account, have been created as a carousel post, meaning that it consists of several pictures in one post. All of them share the same visual set up in terms of colour, background music and short parts of written text. The pictures included in the posts are dark toned photos of different places in a fitness centre accompanied by slow instrumental music.

The first post includes four different images of fitness equipment and each image has a short text placed in the centre of the frame. The text on the images is written in the following order: "behind every weight lifted", "every meal eaten", "every night spent alone in the gym", "was someone who only wanted to prove they were enough." (appendix 6).

The second post includes three different images, also of fitness equipment, and each image has likewise a short text placed in the centre of the frame. The text on the images is written in the following order: "one more rep", "one more set", "remember why they left you." (appendix 7).

The third and last post also includes three different images of fitness equipment with short text placed in the centre of the frame. The text on the images is written in the following order: "training until healthy", "training until failure", "training until I forget everything about them. every moment, every promise and every single memory of them." (appendix 8).

7.3 Selection Criteria

In determining the specific number of interviewees to be included in this study, the rationale behind the decision was based on the argument made by Brinkmann and Kvale (2018), who emphasise that "The number of subjects necessary depends on the purpose of a study." (49). As this study seeks to examine how selected content posted by the British retailer Gymshark is perceived by their consumers, the number of interviewees selected were guided by the desire to study a few subjective perceptions in-depth rather than obtaining a more general understanding. Therefore, the number of participants included is six in total. This is also based on the intention to include both male and female participants, individuals with and without a

fitness membership and individuals in different age groups. The importance, and therefore the inclusion, of these three perspectives will be elaborated below.

According to Cook (2020), the primary target group of Gymshark are male and female consumers in the age of 18-25 (Cook 2020). As male and female consumers are likely to interpret the message of the selected content differently, the inclusion of both may be able to contribute with more nuanced insights and different perspectives on how content is perceived. This is also based on the argument that male consumers “look directly at the primary message of a given advertisement (e.g., “buy this beer”). Women not only evaluate the primary message, but they also pick up multiple clues from the message and weave together threads to intuit and infer the inner meaning of the message” (Sheehan 2013, 90). This highlights a significant contrast between these two types of consumers and indicates that the most successful marketing approach for a product highly depends on who the target audience is. This is an interesting perspective as the branding strategy deployed by Gymshark does not differ; rather, it makes use of a uniform strategy that is meant to reach and influence everyone within their target audience.

In terms of the specific age group of the selected participants in the interviews, it is essential to factor in both the context of the study and the target audience of Gymshark. As mentioned above, the primary target group of Gymshark is males and females in the age of 18-25. In addition, this study is focusing on content posted by the brand on the social media platform TikTok, with a primary audience comprising both males and females aged 18-34 (appendix 9). Thus, the interview participants should be within this age range. Another consideration in the selection criteria pertains to Gymshark's industry niche. Given their status as a retail company specialising in fitness apparel, it is imperative that a portion of the participants are active members of fitness centres. However, since Gymshark targets both existing and potential customers, it is also essential to include individuals without memberships to capture insights from prospective buyers. The decision to include individuals without fitness memberships is also influenced by the growing social trend known as 'athleisure' (Lipson, Stewart and Griffiths 2020). This trend involves individuals integrating fitness attire into their daily outfits, regardless of whether they plan to participate in physical exercise (Lipson, Stewart and Griffiths 2020). The trend may be influenced by an increasing social desire to appear fit and healthy (Salpini 2018). This then aligns with the idea that our clothing choices are closely tied to how we wish to be perceived by others, implying that clothing holds symbolic significance

(Entwistle, 2000). Hence, it is possible that many individuals are buying fitness clothing for everyday wear as a means of self-expression and in order to project a fit appearance.

Lastly, it has been previously established that the study aims to explore the perspectives of Danish consumers, necessitating that participants are Danish nationals. This requirement aligns with the study's focus on investigating the impact of a uniform marketing strategy deployed to engage consumers globally.

Based on the discussion above, the selection criteria of the participants are as follows:

- The interview participants should include both male and female individuals
- The interview participants must be within the age group of 18-34
- The interview participants should include both individuals with a fitness membership and without a fitness membership
- The interview participants should be Danish nationals

7.4 Data Collection

Prior to the interviews, each participant has verbally provided the permission to record the interview and use it as part of the empirical foundation for this study. The interviews have been conducted individually and online with the use of the video program Zoom. The rationale for conducting individual interviews rather than group interviews is based on the desire to examine subjective and emotional attitudes. In a group setting, responses may be influenced by other participants, potentially minimising the expression of individual perspectives (Kruger et al. 2019). Furthermore, since the interview questions were based on emotional perceptions, the participants' identities were anonymised to create a safe environment for answering them (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018).

As mentioned above, the interviews have been conducted online, which is based on the assumption that an online environment may foster a more relaxed and open atmosphere, where participants can safely discuss vulnerable topics (Shapka et al. 2016). For some, it may be intimidating to be sitting face to face and discussing emotional feelings, so in order to decrease this pressure, the decision was to make the interviews online. However, I do acknowledge that the digital interface may exclude the possibility to closely observe the body language and facial expressions of the participants, which would otherwise have been possible in face-to-face

interviews (Shapka et al. 2016). However, the interviews have been conducted through the platform Zoom, which allows for an on-camera interview. In this way, it enables the possibility to observe the participants' body language and facial expressions. While it does not replicate the exact dynamics of a face-to-face interview conducted in the same room, it does offer the opportunity to closely observe participants.

Furthermore, the interviews have been conducted in English in order to limit potential translation errors. I do acknowledge that conducting interviews in English may pose challenges for the interviewees, as they are Danish nationals and English is their second language, which could potentially limit their ability to express abstract ideas. However, the use of a semi-structured interview may be able to guide the conversation as it allows for a dialogue to expand upon responses if the interviewee struggles to articulate their thoughts fully (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018). Furthermore, by conducting the interviews in English, the specific words expressed during the interviews are the ones being analysed. Conducting the interviews in Danish could potentially result in some nuances being lost in translation if translated word-for-word. Additionally, certain meanings may be conveyed through specific Danish phrasings that do not directly translate to English. This could lead to my subjective interpretation of the content, as I may interpret the words in a manner, I perceive to be correct, which may not align with the intended interpretation of the participants (Brinkmann & Kvale 2018).

Lastly, when conducting interviews it is important to acknowledge that there is a certain power relation between the interviewer and the interviewee. This is based on the argument that “The interviewer is in a power position and sets the stage by determining the topic of the interchange: it is the interviewer who asks and the interviewee who answers.” (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018, 3). This suggests that the interviewer may also assist in the construction of meaning during the interview. Therefore, in order to decrease this power distance and minimise the interviewer's subjective biases, a structured interview guide has been developed, rooted in the study's theoretical framework. This ensures that questions are formulated in alignment with the theory, thereby reducing their subjectivity.

7.5 Semi-Structured Interviews

As previously mentioned, the interviews conducted in this study are categorised as semi-structured, which covers the idea of “an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions

of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena.” (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018, 9). In this way, you benefit from having both a structure in terms of a predetermined interview guide with questions while still allowing flexibility to delve deeper into a question or seek clarification from the interviewee whenever necessary (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018). The predetermined interview guide serves as a framework for the interviews, yet it remains open to exploration beyond the premade questions (Daymon and Holloway 2011). This flexibility is particularly valuable given the emotionally charged nature of the topics to be discussed. There may arise moments during the interview where the interviewee's emotions necessitate further exploration and articulation of their feelings. For instance in terms of expressing themselves in English, as mentioned above, or if they mention a particular type of emotion without further explanation of how this particular emotion is felt by them.

According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2018), the research interview is made up of seven stages; thematising, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analysing, verifying, reporting (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018). The first stage is concerned with the actual purpose of the study and is found in the presented research question in the beginning of the study (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018). The second stage is concerned with the design of the interview (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018) and is based on the theoretical framework of the study, that is, the concept of emotional branding, in combination with the aspect of emotional branding on TikTok. The last five stages will then be part of the remainder of this study as the interviews will be conducted, analysed and discussed in the later sections.

7.6 Interview Guide

This section will now present the specific interview guide and how it has been constructed. The questions included in this guide are reflections of the primary themes derived from the theoretical framework (see section 6). These themes have been inserted as ‘Research Questions’ in the interview guide and serve as the overall theme for the specific interview questions.

The interview questions have been constructed to provide insights into the perceptions of the consumers within each of the overall themes. The interview guide has been divided into four overall parts, each with a particular theme to be addressed. The first is concerned with TikTok

and the interviewee's personal use of this social media platform. The second part is concerned with the element of emotional engagement in terms of how Gymshark makes use of emotional appeals in order to establish a connection with their audience. The third part is concerned with the aspect of brand perception and examines how consumers perceive the content in terms of Gymshark's brand identity and values. The fourth and last part is then concerned with the perspective of consumer behaviour and examines how the content is influencing consumer attitudes, behaviours and purchase intentions. The framework for the interview guide is illustrated in the table below (see table 2).

Table 2: Interview Guide

Research questions	Interview questions
TikTok as a platform This part examines the participants use of the platform and their motivations behind it.	1. How often do you use TikTok? 2. What do you use it for? 3. What kind of content do you look for? 4. Do you follow any brands on TikTok? 5. What attracts you to engage with content posted by these brands on TikTok?
The selected content is shown here	
Emotional engagement This theme examines how GymShark makes use of emotional appeals in their TikTok content to connect with their audience.	6. After viewing the three GymShark TikTok posts, what are your initial impressions? 7. Do you find GymShark's TikTok content relatable to your lifestyle or interests? 8. How likely are you to engage with these posts (like, comment, share) based on their content? 9. Did any of the TikTok posts evoke any specific emotions or feelings in you? If so, what emotions did you experience? 10. Are there any elements within the posts that particularly stood out to you in terms of emotional impact?
Brand perception This theme covers how consumers perceive GymShark's brand identity and values based on the selected TikTok content.	11. How do these TikTok posts influence your perception of GymShark as a brand? 12. What values or messages do you associate with GymShark after viewing these posts? 13. Do you feel these posts reflect the way GymShark wants to be perceived?
Consumer behaviour This theme is concerned with how GymShark's TikTok content influence consumer attitudes, behaviors, and purchase intentions among the Danish audience.	14. Has GymShark's TikTok content influenced your perception of their brand or products? 15. Would you consider making a purchase from them based on what you have seen on their TikTok account? 16. How do you think GymShark could improve their TikTok strategy to better engage with the Danish audience?

(appendix 10)

7.7 Method of Data Analysis

In order to analyse the obtained data from the conducted interviews, this study employs a thematic method of analysis (TA). This section will therefore outline the process of thematic analysis and its application in coding and analysing the obtained data.

7.7.1 Thematic Method of Analysis

As part of the research question of this study is focusing on how specific content is perceived by consumers, the thematic method of analysis is a favourable approach as it

“can be used to identify patterns within and *across* data in relation to participants' lived experience, views and perspectives, and behavior and practices; ‘experiential’ research which seeks to understand what participants’ think, feel, and do.” (Clarke and Braun 2017, 297).

The use of this method of analysis will be beneficial in terms of examining these perceptions and will help in the facilitation of a general overview of the recurring themes that are present in the data. By employing a thematic method of analysis, it is possible to delve into the depth of participants' experiences and uncover underlying themes that may inform understanding and interpretation in terms of the focus of this study (Clarke and Braun 2017). Furthermore, though thematic analysis is not bound to a particular theoretical framework or method it does align with the overall philosophy of science employed in this study (Clarke and Braun 2017). This is based on the assumption that thematic analysis has the potential to analyse “the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society.” (Braun and Clarke 2006, 9). In this way, it is possible to examine the perceptions of the consumers while recognising their socially constructed nature, which stems not only from broader societal influences but also from the dynamic interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Another reason behind the adoption of a thematic method of analysis is based on its flexible nature as it “allows the researcher to focus on the data in numerous different ways” (Braun and Clarke 2012, 58), which allows the researcher to “legitimately focus on analyzing meaning across the entire data set, or [...] examine one particular aspect of a phenomenon in- depth” (Braun and Clarke 2012, 58). In this way, it is possible to highlight relevant themes across the

interviews and to discuss these in relation to each other in order to construct a valid argument that is able to answer the research question of this study.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the process of a thematic method of analysis is recursive, which means that it is an ongoing process where you need to go back and forth between the phases of analysis (16). However, they do provide a framework that can be used as a guideline when adopting a thematic method of analysis, and this framework consists of what they refer to as the six phases of analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). These are presented below (Braun and Clarke 2006, 16-23) and will be further elaborated in the following section:

- Phase 1: familiarising yourself with your data
- Phase 2: generating initial codes
- Phase 3: searching for themes
- Phase 4: reviewing themes
- Phase 5: defining and naming themes
- Phase 6: producing the report

7.7.2 The Six Phases of Thematic Analysis

The first phase is “familiarising yourself with your data” (Braun and Clarke 2006, 16) and is concerned with the aspect of getting to know your data in a clear and in-depth way. This process “involves ‘repeated reading’ of the data, and reading the data in an active way - searching for meanings, patterns and so on.” (Braun and Clarke 2006, 16). This first phase also involves the active process of transcribing the obtained data from the interviews, which is a process that is also known as an interpretative way to understand your data in the sense that you are not only just writing down the words that are being said, but you are also becoming familiar with the content of the interviews and the meanings that are being expressed (Braun and Clarke 2006). This will also allow you to write down ideas about potential codes and will aid in the general understanding of the contents of your data.

The actual coding process is then part of the second phase, which is referred to as “generating initial codes” (Braun and Clarke 2006, 16). According to Braun and Clarke (2006) “codes identify a feature of the data (semantic content or latent) that appears interesting to the analyst” (18). This means that in this phase, you start to categorise the content of your data into smaller groups of meaning, which can then be used as the elements that make up the larger themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). The essential part of this phase is that you code as much relevant

information as possible in order to ensure that you do not leave out any content that may be interesting later on. In other words, you must code “enough codes to capture both the diversity, and the patterns, within the data, and codes should appear across more than one data item” (Braun and Clarke 2012, 63). This is important as the codes are part of the process in which the overall themes are created, so if you leave out certain codes, then this may affect the creation of the overall themes present in the data.

The third phase is then concerned with these overall themes and is referred to as the process of “searching for themes” (Braun and Clarke 2006, 19). This phase is therefore where “you are starting to analyse your codes, and consider how different codes may combine to form an overarching theme.” (Braun and Clarke 2006, 19). According to Braun and Clarke (2006) a theme in this sense is defined as an entity that “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (82). The themes emerge from the interpretations of meanings extracted from the diverse codes, highlighting that this process revolves around interpreting the significance of these codes (Braun and Clarke 2012). In order to generate themes that are relevant to the focus of this study it is essential to generate themes that are able to reflect arguments that can be used to answer the research question of this study. This indicates that the themes will be generated based on the meanings that have been identified and interpreted from the codes (Braun and Clarke 2012). Furthermore, at this phase, Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that there may be themes which prove irrelevant in terms of the overall focus of the study and that the disregard of these is essentially part of the process. However, they do argue that the goal of qualitative research is to only present the part of the data which are relevant to the objective of a study, which suggests that these themes may then just be removed based on their irrelevance to the research objective (Braun and Clarke 2006, 19).

The fourth phase is then referred to as “reviewing themes” (Braun and Clarke 2006, 20) and is concerned with the evaluation of the created themes. In this phase, Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasise that the “Data within themes should cohere together meaningfully, while there should be clear and identifiable distinctions between themes.” (20). Therefore, the themes that were created in phase 3 should now be critically examined in terms of their relevance to the study and in terms of their unique contribution. The review of these themes will therefore be based on the following questions that can aid in the examination of whether or not these themes

are relevant and able to contribute meaningfully to the study. The questions are based on arguments formulated by Braun and Clarke (2006, 20-21):

1. Is there enough data to consider this a theme or is it just a code?
2. Is this theme able to tell you something meaningful about the data that can be used to answer the research question?
3. Is the theme unique in itself or is it too close to another theme?

After revising and modifying the themes, you should end up with distinctive themes that accurately represent the data's content in a meaningful manner and that enable you to effectively address your research question (Braun and Clarke 2012). The aim of this phase is therefore “to have a fairly good idea of what your different themes are, how they fit together, and the overall story they tell about the data.” (Braun and Clarke 2006, 21).

The next phase is then referred to as “defining and naming themes” (Braun and Clarke 2006, 22). The first part, where you need to define your themes, is about “identifying the ‘essence’ of what each theme is about (as well as the themes overall), and determining what aspect of the data each theme captures” (Braun and Clarke 2006, 22). In this part you need to account for the overall meaning of the themes and why this is interesting in terms of the objective of the study (Braun and Clarke 2006). In other words, you need to make a clear argument as to why you have chosen to include this particular theme, what it means and how it can be useful in the analysis. It is therefore also essential that you compare the selected themes to each other in order to ensure that they do not overlap, and that they are able to relate to each other in order to fit into the broader perspective of the study (Braun and Clarke 2006). The second part is concerned with the naming of the themes, which should be used during the analysis of the data. In this part, Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that the “Names need to be concise, punchy, and immediately give the reader a sense of what the theme is about.” (23). It is therefore important that the names of the themes reflect the particular meaning that the themes are used to articulate. In this way, the reader is able to immediately understand the context in which the data is analysed during the analysis (Braun and Clarke 2012, 69).

The sixth and last phase is then referred to as “producing the report” (Braun and Clarke 2006) and concerns the actual analysis of the themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2012) it is essential to have a clear structure of the way the themes are being analysed in the analysis as the “themes should connect logically and meaningfully and, if relevant, should build on

previous themes to tell a coherent story about the data.” (69). It is within this part that the themes are being analysed in relation to the overall research question of the study, and it should therefore include specific references from the data in order to validate the points being made during the analysis. In other words,

“Extracts need to be embedded within an analytic narrative that compellingly illustrates the story that you are telling about your data, and your analytic narrative needs to go beyond description of the data, and make an argument in relation to your research question“ (Braun and Clarke 2006, 23).

The objective of this section is to establish connections between the themes, linking them not only to each other but also to the overarching research question. This approach aims to generate arguments that effectively address the specific research question (Braun and Clarke 2006).

7.8 Structure of Analysis

The following analysis will be divided into three overall sections, where each section will examine and analyse themes relevant to the overall topic. The three sections will each contribute with reflections of ways to answer the research question of this study. The sections will analyse relevant themes derived from the interview data, which will centre around the overall topic of each section. The last part of the analysis will then summarise the key findings and their relation to each other in terms of the overall objective of this study. The three sections are referred to as ‘TikTok Usage’, ‘Emotional Connections with the Content’ and ‘Perceived Brand Image of Gymshark’ and will be examined and analysed in this order. Each of the six interviews will therefore not be analysed individually; rather, relevant themes will be derived from all of them and analysed in combination with each other and in relation to the overall section/topic.

8. Analysis

As established in the introduction (see section 1), the aim of this study is to examine how selected content posted by Gymshark on their TikTok account is perceived by their target audience in Denmark. The following analysis section will therefore focus on the perceptions of the six interviewees regarding this chosen content. As previously mentioned (see section 7.8), the structure of the analysis follows three overall sections, where the themes included and analysed in each have been derived from the interview data.

8.1 TikTok Usage

The first section is 'TikTok Usage', which covers the aspect of how much the interview participants are using the platform and for which reasons. This part of the analysis will be able to reflect patterns of TikTok usage and uncover some of the reasons behind consumers using it. Understanding these motivations facilitates a clearer interpretation of content perception as these perceptions may often be shaped by the initial reasons for using the platform.

The first part of the interview therefore asked the participants about their use of the social media platform TikTok, why they use it and what kind of content they were looking for. In terms of the first part, the amount of time used on the platform, the answers varied across the participants. However, there was a broad consensus that they used it at least once a day:

"I just keep on watching for like, it can be like four hours has just passed, so I would say like, approximately like every day" (appendix 11, page 8, participant 1), "normally I would use TikTok in the evening before I'm going to bed, so maybe 20 minutes or so" (appendix 12, page 14, participant 2), "it's more like four times an hour actually" (appendix 13, page 19, participant 3), "multiple times a day. Definitely about, I don't know if I can pull a number on it, but at least 10 times a day" (appendix 15, page 30, participant 5), "at least once a day" (appendix 16, page 37, participant 6).

This suggests a pattern that TikTok is a platform that is used by consumers on a regular basis and that they are spending a substantial amount of time on it. This further indicates that TikTok is a big part of consumers' everyday lives and therefore seems to be a platform worth acknowledging when targeting new or existing consumers.

Furthermore, in terms of why the participants are then using the platform, the most salient themes are that of 'entertainment' and 'inspiration' as several of the participants responded that they mostly used the platform as a sort of inspirational source and a place to be entertained:

“to see fun videos, to have a laugh, to be, have something that interests me when I don't have any series or movies to watch and I'm home alone and have nothing to do. I just seek to like, TikTok to not get bored” (appendix 11, page 8, participant 1), “Mainly just to view funny videos and different types of content that interest me” (appendix 14, page 25, participant 4), “just like when I'm bored and just, you know, waste time” (appendix 15, page 30, participant 5), “I always use it for inspiration” (appendix 16, page 37, participant 6).

This information can be useful for companies in terms of the actual content creation and determining what form of content they should make. The answers provided above indicate that TikTok is a platform that facilitates a place where consumers seek to be inspired and are actively searching for content that is considered to be amusing and entertaining. The style of content that brands should create should therefore, according to the statements above, reflect everyday activities in a fun and inspirational manner, and be created in an informal way. This aspect aligns with the theoretical assumption that brands should seek to create an experience around their products that their target audience can tap into and use as some sort of escape from everyday life (Gobé 2001). The assumption that it is not about product functionality; rather, it is concerned with the experience associated with the product and how it may aid you in the process of becoming your ideal self (Gobé 2001). This further aligns with the notion of TikTok as being a platform for inspirational and amusing content as it differs from traditional informational content about specific product features (see section 2.1). However, in some instances it may be possible to creatively create an amusing video that includes product specifications, so it is essential to point out that the former does not exclude the latter.

The last part of this section is concerned with the particular type of content that the participants were seeking when using TikTok. In this part, the answers varied across the interviews as they were mainly based on personal interests. However, the answers did have the theme 'amusing' in common in many instances and reflects that this is one of the most salient themes found in the type of content that the participants are seeking on TikTok:

“comedian kind of videos [...] it's fashion, it's beauty, it's, uhm it's both English and Danish” (appendix 11, page 8, participant 1), “most of it would be recipes, travels, but also training videos, doing exercises in the gym” (appendix 12, page 14, participant 2),

“Mostly it's gym videos, also quite a bit of like military, like almost propaganda. And it's also memes and stuff like that. A little bit of everything” (appendix 13, page 19, participant 3), “primarily sports and comedy videos” (appendix 14, page 25, participant 4), “fashion content in particular, but also just like funny videos of like animals and little kids” (appendix 15, page 30, participant 5), “fun content that can make me laugh and make me, I would say, happy for the short term, feel of happiness. But also content that can inspire me and where I can gain some knowledge on, for example, the city that I'm going to visit or another subject” (appendix 16, page 38, participant 6).

This part indicates that the content consumers are looking for on TikTok is highly influenced by subjective interests, but that the main area of interests are reflections of leisure activities. It seems that most of the participants are engaging with content that resonates with the leisure activities they would normally be interested in. However, regardless of the specific interests, amusing content appears to be popular across the participants indicating a general tendency among them. This further aligns with the fundamental affordances of TikTok as it is considered a platform that is used as an escape from reality and a place to feel good (Schellewald 2023).

8.2 Emotional Connections with the Content

The second section is concerned with the aspect of ‘Emotional Connections with the Content’, which seeks to examine how the content resonates with consumers and the emotional connections it may evoke. This is based on the specific perceptions obtained from showing the selected content and how the participants are perceiving these posts in terms of how well it resonates with their personal experiences.

The most salient themes in this part of the interview are that of “relatable feelings”, “the uncomfortable truth”, “depressing vibe” and “sense of community”. The first theme was mostly evident in the first interview in terms of positive relatable feelings and can be derived from a response to whether the content resonates with the participant's personal interests and lifestyle:

“I think that inspires me more because it, like, I know the feeling, I can identify with what is being said. [...] it doesn't really inspire me like these fitness brands who just post videos of like these like big, muscular like fitness girls wearing the fitness like clothes” (appendix 11, page 10, participant 1).

Following this, the participant described that it would “be very likely” (appendix 11, page 11, participant 1) that she engaged with the content. This was followed by an explanatory statement which describes the reason behind:

“I got like emotional when I read that, not because I'm like in that state of mind right now in my life, but like I have been and like it's just like a fitness journey is just emotional” (appendix 11, page 10, participant 1).

Based on this, the theme of relatability is highlighted and creates a unique connection between the content and the participant in the sense that she is emotionally affected by it. The participant further elaborates on the way she was influenced by the relatability to her own life and her own perception of what it means to go to the gym. The description below is a response to what particular emotions were evoked by the content:

“Tearful. Not sad, not happy [...] maybe happy that like yeah, a brand or just someone in general are like acknowledging like feelings at all. [...] I think that a lot of people don't know that if you don't go to the gym and you're not a gym rat, you don't know that it is emotional. [...] you have so many feelings and it's a way of processing those feelings. [...] tearful and happy that someone acknowledges that it's more than just wanting to have a great body.” (appendix 11, page 11, participant 1).

In this quotation, the participant highlights the emotional aspect of going to the gym and how she is able to relate to the quotes as she herself is part of this emotional process. Based on her own personal fitness journey, she establishes a connection with the content as it resembles the feelings, she has felt herself and mirrors the perspective she personally has on fitness and the fitness journey in general. The last sentence in the quotation further highlights an interesting perspective that Gymshark is presumably trying to tap into; the belief that going to the gym is more than just a matter of becoming physically strong.

Though the theme of relatability is not as significant as in the first interview, it is also evident across the other interviews, where the participants are describing that

“You can kind of see yourself in the messages” (appendix 13, page 21, participant 3), “I think everybody in some way, shape or form can relate to the fact that they maybe feel as though they could work a little harder in some aspect of their life” (appendix 14, page 26, participant 4), “I feel like this would be like these couple of videos that I saw would appeal to people that like go through a breakup. [...] so in that sense, I could

possibly relate” (appendix 15, page 32, participant 5), “I definitely can relate to the mindset of not feeling as if you're enough and then trying to project that energy” (appendix 16, page 40, participant 6).

Some of these statements reflect a relatability that stems from the aspect of a guilty conscience. The written text on the posts seem to evoke a well-known feeling of wanting to do more and to work harder that most of the participants are familiar with. In this way, these statements indicate that there is a broad consensus among the participants that the written text on the posts have a strong sense of relatability as they tap into feelings that most people have felt not just in terms of going to the gym, but also in a broader aspect of life. As a result, Gymshark has succeeded in evoking particular feelings through their content that consumers are able to relate to. However, as the feelings are somewhat personal and for some, rather uncomfortable, it may lead to negative perceptions about the content even though it is relatable. This is reflected in the second theme, which is “the uncomfortable truth”. While this theme shares similarities with the earlier statements regarding relatability and a guilty conscience, it diverges in its focus on articulating challenging emotions, particularly highlighting the discomfort some may feel when confronted with them directly on social media. This theme is particularly evident in interview 3, where the participant explains that

“I think there's some truth to it, but it's like the uncomfortable truth that you don't really tell anyone about. It's not like something you would say to just about anyone. [...] I would probably not share this with anyone I knew.” (appendix 13, page 20, participant 3).

This quotation is a response to the question of what the initial impression of the three posts were, and based on this response, it seems that particularly the written text has had an impact on the participant. In this quotation he clarifies that though he is able to relate to the written content, it taps into some emotions that are very personal and therefore not something that he would want to share with anyone either in real life or on social media. It seems that the emotions that the written text on the posts have evoked are of such private nature that it may cause discomfort for some if shared in a forum not intended for such discussions. It also suggests a preference for handling these emotions privately, rather than engaging with them on a platform typically filled with amusing and inspirational content. Later in the interview, he further elaborates on this aspect of the written text being an uncomfortable truth as he describes that

“you wouldn't want a brand as a Gymshark being that close to you. And especially because it's so big while trying to, like, it's impossible to cater to everyone. So, once they try to go a bit too specific, it gets a little bit uncomfortable because you don't know me. You don't know who I am.” (appendix 13, page 21, participant 3).

In this quotation it becomes clear that the participant feels that Gymshark has crossed the border in terms of how personal a brand can be. It indicates that the strategy of being a brand that seems interested in their consumers becomes damaged as the participant seems well aware of the fact that it is a large corporation that essentially strives to sell a product. This perception of it as being uncomfortable is also evident in interview 6, where the participant states that

“I'm always trying to forward some posts or stuff to my, my buddies, if I think it's funny or relevant or something, but I don't know if it's part of being a male from Aalborg, the culture we don't really, I don't think we share sensitive stuff like that” (appendix 16, page 40, participant 6).

These statements suggest that even though content may be relatable to personal interests, the way they relate is more important in terms of how the content is perceived overall. In this case, the content is perceived as relatable, but as it taps into some more personal and private feelings, it creates a distance between the participants and the content rather than a connection. As the quotes indicate, this is partly based on the fact that the content is posted by a brand and not a person, so it is not perceived as conventional that a brand should appeal to feelings that are this personal. This results in a rather negative perception as the participants feel like the brand is getting too close to their comfort zone and personal lives. It may also be partly based on the affordances of TikTok as a platform as it has previously been established as being a place where consumers seek to feel entertained and inspired. In this way, it taps into different feelings that many consumers may not associate with the use of the platform, and it therefore becomes unfamiliar and something that they do not want to experience during their time on the platform.

These negative connotations are also found in the perceptions of the specific content, where the theme “depressing vibe” is derived from. This theme is the most salient when the participants are asked about their initial impressions of the content:

“after these videos I'm just like, who hurt you bro. They are kind of like very depressing.” (appendix 13, page 22, participant 3), “They were very depressive, I would say, and very real in some depressing way also.” (appendix 16, page 39, participant 6),

“The videos are really dark lighting. [...] but kind of sad” (appendix 12, page 15, participant 2), “this seems very dark and very serious” (appendix 15, page 32, participant 5).

These quotations indicate that the tone of voice of the content is seemingly depressive and sad, which does not align with the aforementioned affordances of TikTok as being a platform for entertainment and fun. This may also be the reason behind the perceptions as the participants may have expected more uplifting content considering that it was posted on TikTok.

The perceptions described above are based on the particular combination of content visible in the selected posts. The explanation of these three salient themes may therefore be based on this very combination of imagery, sound and text as there was a broad consensus among the participants that the combination of the different elements made the content seem dark and sad:

“The specific lighting and stuff like that puts, I think the messages a little bit toxic.” (appendix 13, page 21, participant 3), “I also find the tone very down. So maybe if there were a little more upbeat, I would maybe be more inclined to like them. [...] I found that to be a lot of negativity on the tones in the posts. [...] So primarily I think it was the text that stood out to me.” (appendix 14, page 26, participant 4), “I would definitely say it like, it had like a dark and sad kind of vibe [...] even the lighting, how they like edited the lighting of the photos they used. It was like very low contrast and dark. [...] the music for sure played a big part. [...] I would say I like noticed the music first and I was like, well, that's like kind of dark. [...] So I would definitely say the music for sure plays a big part in like how I perceived that.” (appendix 15, page 33, participant 5).

These statements suggest that the combination of imagery, sound and text can have a strong impact on the emotional tone or perception of content. In this case, the participants perceived the content to be dark and sad due to specific elements present within it, such as lighting, tone of text, and background sound. This indicates that brands should be mindful of how different elements interact to shape the emotional response of their audience. It also highlights the importance of considering the overall impression and impact of content beyond just its individual components. Furthermore, the way the dark colours are perceived as depressing and sad aligns with Gobé's (2001) theory about sensory experiences, where he argues that "the associations of color enable identification and prompt particular images and emotions." (77). The fact that the colours on the posts are dark may therefore influence the participants to associate it with depressing and sad connotations.

Furthermore, in the first interview it was the very combination of elements that stood out to the participant and created this emotional connection with her. However, contrary to the statements above, this participant was influenced in a positive way. In the quotation below, the participant describes how the combination of elements tapped into a particular mindset, which then evoked certain emotions in her:

“I would definitely say that the music plays a role in like setting the scene and like giving a specific state of mind. And if it was happy music, it would, you would read the words differently. [...] it touches me, like, but specifically like the music while reading sets the scene and the state of mind. And it really guides you to where like it wants you to like end up at like the scene of like your feelings” (appendix 11, page 11, participant 1).

This statement highlights the power of sounds and how a particular sound is able to create specific connotations among the listener that guides the person to think about specific moments in their life. This is again in alignment with the aforementioned sensory experiences as described by Gobé (2001). In terms of sound, he argues that this element in particular is a useful method when wanting to evoke particular feelings as it “has an immediate and, to a large extent, cognitively unmediated effect on recall and emotions.” (Gobé 2001, 71). The combination of these elements may therefore evoke emotions in the participants which relate to a deeper and more dark side of them, which then explains their negative perceptions of the content. For instance, participant 3 mentioned that “You can kind of see yourself in the messages. But at the same time, it's like you want to pack it away somewhat.” (appendix 13, page 21, participant 3). This suggests that Gymshark has been successful in creating an emotional connection with these participants as most of them are able to relate to the content they have shared. However, the associations they have with these feelings are somewhat negative which seem to influence their overall perception of the content as being negative as well.

Despite the many negative perceptions of the content, some of the participants mentioned that the content may also foster a sense of community, which is the fourth and last salient theme in this section. This is derived from direct mentions, where one of the participants stated that “I think maybe you could get a sort of sense of community by seeing that other people also struggle with these problems. And they have dealt with it in this type of way. Maybe I can too.” (appendix 14, page 28, participant 4). This statement suggests a different aspect to the perception of the content in a way that fosters a sense of community among individuals, which

may be further enhanced through the affordances of TikTok as a platform. As mentioned in section 2.1, TikTok is a platform that enables community building and can be used as a creative and fun way to engage with your audience in a different manner than other platforms. For instance, as participant 5 mentions,

“It feels like a brand that sort of tries to, or at least values that like, community within fitness that tries to create that sense of community within the people that wear them, or that use their products [...]. [...] the whole sort of motivational part of the videos that we watched, it feels like a brand that wants to create that sense of community with its customers.” (appendix 15, page 34, participant 5).

This quotation highlights the power of the selected quotes that Gymshark has written on their content and how they tap into a particular community among people who are going to the gym. Despite the fact that the written text does not mention anything about community, the words used and the setup of them has still managed to create this feeling among the participants. In this way, their strategy of connecting with their consumers is successful as they manage to induce feelings of community and the aspect that you are not alone, that they are here if no one else is. This aspect is further elaborated by participant 1 who describes that

“I would say that we've all been there. It's okay. Like you're not alone. And you might not go to the gym just to be lean or to be strong or to be healthy, but also to like physically, but also to like be healthy and be in a great state of mind like mentally.” (appendix 11, page 12, participant 1).

As is the case with many of the modern social media platforms, they enable users to create multimodal content that includes text, music, sounds, imagery, videos and more, which can create a more in-depth feeling that people can relate to. If the images that Gymshark has posted did not contain any written text it may not have guided the viewer into the mindset that Gymshark seeks to tap into. Likewise, if the background sound was different, it may have led to a different perception of it. Nevertheless, it seems that for some of the participants, the combination of the elements found in the selected posts highlights a sense of community feeling that builds on the idea that these somewhat sad or depressing feelings are not uncommon and are some that most people have experienced. Therefore, though it may at first create negative connotations, it may also create a community feeling that consumers will remember despite the negativity perceived at first.

8.3 Perceived Brand Image of Gymshark

Now that the particular emotional connections with the content have been analysed, this last section will examine and analyse how these connections are then influencing the overall perception of Gymshark's brand image. In this section, the most salient themes found are that of "caring", "too personal" and "a serious brand". These will therefore be analysed in the following paragraphs.

8.3.1 Caring

The first of the three most salient themes in this part is "caring" which is derived from responses that focus on the way Gymshark is trying to both shape a community but also in terms of their way of addressing mental health. For instance, in the first interview, the participant describes how her perception of Gymshark is enhanced based on their attempt to address the different sides of going to the gym:

"I just thought that they might be like everyone else just posting like content of fitness girls and guys and gym clothes or maybe funny memes from the gym and stuff like that. But it really does change my perception because it shows that it's more than just like selling clothes. It's also like selling the idea that they know what we're going through and it's not easy always. And it's also okay to feel like that. [...] I would say that my perception of them is like slightly enhanced, more towards like the positive than before." (appendix 11, page 11, participant 1).

This quotation highlights the multifaceted nature of going to the gym. It suggests that many of these facets lean towards the enjoyable aspects or futuristic elements. It implies that much of the focus is on showcasing the potential physical transformation that consistent gym attendance can bring about for both oneself and others. By seeing that a brand articulates and focuses on a different side of it has in this case been the reason behind a more positive perception of them. It seems to have created a feeling within the participant that they care and that they understand what she is going through. This aspect is also described by participant 2, who states that

"[...] maybe that they're more about not only the clothing, but also the personal aspects that everyone can wear us. Everyone, it doesn't matter where in your progress you are with your fitness journey. You don't have to be buff or bikini fitness. You can be who you are and there's a way where you one day will achieve your goal if you're consistent.

So, I think it's their way of saying that they're diverse and that they can put themselves in people's places.” (appendix 12, page 16, participant 2).

The perception that Gymshark cares about their consumers and are trying to articulate a certain discourse about the action of going to the gym is shared among the participants. For instance, participant 6 describes that

“I would say that based on these videos, I definitely get a feeling that they're thinking about their consumers. They're aware of their consumers and the different segments that they have, you know, of course there's consumers who just love going to the gym and doing it on a healthy scale, so to speak. And I think these posts just show that they're also aware that maybe there's another segment of their consumers or customers that aren't going to the gym for healthy reasons.” (appendix 16, page 41, participant 6).

This part further highlights that the participants seem to be aware of the fact that going to the gym is multifaceted and that the reason why people are going to the gym are very different. The quotations above indicate that the participants are interpreting the posts in a positive way where they perceive Gymshark to be a brand that acknowledges these differences and tries to create a space, where everyone is welcome and where everyone is understood no matter what kind of reason, they have for going to the gym. The perceptions of Gymshark derived from the participants above therefore seems to be positive in the sense that they perceive Gymshark to be different from other sportswear companies who are simply trying to articulate the fun part of going to the gym.

The perception that Gymshark is different from other sportswear brands in the sense that they are trying to focus more on mental health is also evident in the last interview where participant 6 states that “[...] I would say health is probably the word that just comes to mind now because it's not about only feeling healthy, you know, physical health is one thing, but mental health is another.” (appendix 16, page 41, participant 6). This part is a response to the question of what values or messages the participants associate with Gymshark after viewing the selected posts. Here, it becomes clear that the participant perceives Gymshark to be a brand that acknowledges the different aspects of going to the gym, which seems to foster a positive perception of them. Furthermore, as a response to the question of whether the participants feel like these posts reflect the way Gymshark wants to be perceived as a brand, participant 5 described that “So I would say that they want to maybe promote themselves as a sort of community where working

hard is a virtue and going to the gym, working on yourself is a virtue.” (appendix 15, page 28, participant 5). This response indicates that not only does Gymshark manage to create a community feeling among the participants, they also manage to create a feeling among the participants that going to the gym is not just about lifting weights, but about personal growth and health.

8.3.2 Too Personal

Following the analysis of the first theme of Gymshark as being a caring brand, the following part will now analyse the second of the three most salient themes in this part, which is “too personal”. This theme provides a contrast to the first theme as it includes perceptions that indicate that even though the content may reflect Gymshark as a caring brand, the content also seems to be a bit too personal. The theme is based on two perspectives derived from the interviews. The first is in terms of descriptions that indicate that the content is tapping into feelings that are deemed private and should therefore not be articulated by a large brand. The second is in terms of the perceived target group of the content as it is perceived to be too narrow and specific.

In terms of the first perspective, participant 3 states the following as a response to the question of how the selected TikTok post influences his perception of Gymshark as a brand:

“[...] I think like it can get a bit too personal, a bit too uncomfortable, and like that's not coming anything good out of it. [...] Because for me, seeing a brand like Gymshark doing stuff like this is a bit too radical [...]. [...]. And I think the reason why it's a bad thing is because it's a company and not a person who's doing this. If it's a person, it might be like a really famous person, but at least it's someone with a base you can connect yourself to.” (appendix 13, page 22, participant 3).

This quotation indicates that the reason the content is perceived as being too personal is because it has been posted by a large brand. For many people, emotions like those experienced during a breakup or when struggling with feelings of inadequacy are deeply personal. They may be feelings that one prefers to navigate privately. Consequently, when a major brand addresses these emotions, it can be uncomfortable. It is not typically expected for a brand to delve into such intimate matters or to become so intimately connected with individuals. This may therefore result in negative perceptions of the brand such as the one stated in the quotation

above. Additionally, the participant highlights the distinction between connecting with content written by a renowned individual versus a brand. Here, he suggests that connecting with the identity of a famous person would have been easier than with that of a brand. One potential solution could involve featuring a representative of the brand on social media. This approach might facilitate a stronger connection between consumers and the brand's identity.

Furthermore, when asked how likely the participants were to engage with the selected posts based on their content, participant 6 stated that

“I'm always trying to forward some posts or stuff to my, my buddies, if I think it's funny or relevant or something, but I don't know if it's part of being a male from Aalborg, the culture we don't really, I don't think we share sensitive stuff like that [...]” (appendix 16, page 40, participant 6).

This corresponds with the statement above, suggesting that the emotions depicted in the posts are too personal to share openly. While the written content may resonate with many, it is not the type of material people typically feel comfortable sharing or engaging with on social media. This reluctance could potentially limit engagement on the posts compared to content that is more light-hearted and relatable in an entertaining manner.

In terms of the second perspective, which is concerned with the perception that the content is meant for a very specific target group, participant 3 and 5 states that “[...] this is more like for the depressed people” (appendix 13, page 23, participant 3), and “It's very much based on the notion that it's for someone who just got broken up with or who got fired at work or maybe he didn't have a great result in something” (appendix 14, page 27, participant 4). These observations suggest that the content is tailored for a specific target group, one that the participants do not necessarily identify with. Nonetheless, Gymshark's strategy might be intentional, aiming to foster stronger connections with consumers by targeting a specific niche or group of people. Consequently, while the content may resonate and inspire some individuals, it could potentially evoke feelings of sadness or disconnection in others who do not fit within that targeted group. This aspect is also evident in the following statement, which is a response to the question of if the participants would consider making a purchase from Gymshark based on what they have seen on their TikTok account:

“[...] I think Gymshark is a relatively well-known brand, so maybe when they're exposed to them again on TikTok and they see sort of these relatable TikToks, maybe

then you would say, oh, maybe I could buy something from Gymshark.” (appendix 14, page 29, participant 4).

This statement illustrates the participant's comprehension of the rationale behind producing such specific content. Gymshark, being an established brand, appears to be extending beyond its conventional identity as a sportswear company by crafting content with a narrower focus. This approach allows them to cultivate an additional identity that may resonate with a different demographic than their original target audience.

8.3.3 A Serious Brand

The last of the three most salient themes are “a serious brand”, which will now be analysed in the following section. This theme is mostly evident in the second and fifth interview, but based on the many responses that focus on the perception of Gymshark as being a professional brand within these interviews, it has been included as a salient theme. This theme can be interpreted and analysed in two ways based on the responses derived from the interviews. The first way is in terms of how they appear professional by not showcasing any people wearing their clothes, whereas the second way is in terms of the perceived quality of their products.

In terms of the first way, this part is evident in the following statement, where the participant describes the effects, it has on her that the posts do not showcase people wearing the clothes. The statement is a response to the question of what values or messages she associates with Gymshark after viewing the selected posts:

“I also think that it's really smart of them not putting people in them, because typically when you're looking at an advertisement for especially fitness clothes, if you see the person wearing it, you're thinking that they are the right figure for wearing the type of clothes. So, I actually think that you might take them more as a professional company because they're not showing people in the clothes, but that you should wear it as you are and that is how the clothes should sit on you.” (appendix 12, page 16, participant 2).

This statement indicates that it may be beneficial for clothing companies to create content that does not show the clothes on a particular type of person as the consumer may then get the impression that you need to look a certain way in order to wear the clothes. However, there is

a dual perspective to consider: showcasing the clothes on a specific body type might also serve as a motivating factor for some individuals making a purchase. This is derived from the following statements by participant 3 and participant 2, which are responses to the question of whether they would consider making a purchase from Gymshark based on what they have seen on their TikTok account:

“Well, at least for these three TikToks, I would probably not. [...]. So if I see like an influencer like they usually do, presenting their products, I would be more likely to buy that product. Instead of like these messages, I don't think like they're good for anyone. It certainly does not like inspire me to buy anything.” (appendix 13, page 23, participant 3), “[...] I think what they're doing is really great that they don't use models for the videos, but I think that I'm the type of person who needs to see the clothes on someone.” (appendix 12, page 17, participant 2).

This aspect of including people who are wearing the clothes into the strategy is also shared by participants 4 and 5. When asked how Gymshark could improve their TikTok strategy to better engage with the Danish audience, participant 5 states that “[...] personally I like to see like more of the product itself and specifically like people using the product and wearing the product.” (appendix 15, page 36, participant 5). As a response to the same question, participant 4 agrees with this perspective and elaborates on the rationale behind this desire:

“[...] but I also feel like maybe showing more of the products, as I said, maybe showing people in it, I think always helps. Different age groups. [...]. But mainly, I would want to see some people in the TikToks because I also feel like on TikTok, it's very fast-paced, and I feel like I have a tendency to just scroll through if I don't see anyone in the videos. So I think people would definitely help.” (appendix 14, page 29, participant 4).

These quotations indicate that even though it may be beneficial to not include a particular type of person when showcasing the clothes, it seems that it is necessary to have a presenter of the clothes when posting the content on TikTok. This is based on the argument in the statement above, highlighting TikTok's rapid nature as a social media platform where attention spans may be shorter compared to others. Consequently, content shared on TikTok must swiftly capture viewers' attention within the first few seconds. As articulated by participants 4 and 5, achieving this may entail featuring individuals either wearing the clothing or simply presenting it.

Additionally, regarding the second way to interpret and analyse this theme, the following will explore the theme in relation to the perceived quality of their products and how this influences the overall perception of them as a brand. This part is based on responses by participant 5, who states the following when asked about how the selected TikTok posts influence her perception of Gymshark as a brand:

“No funny business. I'd be like, this is a serious brand. [...] if I didn't know this brand already, I would assume that it's all about quality.” (appendix 15, participant 5), “[...] it feels like a brand that cares about making things that last.” (appendix 15, page 33, participant 5).

This perception is based on the dark nature of the selected posts, and how they are presenting a more serious side of going to the gym. Following these statements, the participant is asked if she feels like these posts reflect the way Gymshark wants to be perceived to which she describes the following:

“I feel like they definitely are trying to be perceived as like a serious business company that like cares about fitness. [...]. Cause I feel like sometimes with like funny content, even as much as I enjoy watching it, I'm like, I don't really take that person seriously. And the same thing goes for like brands, you know, it's like, why take that brand seriously.” (appendix 15, page 34, participant 5).

This statement presents a dual perspective on the content brands should share on TikTok. On one hand, it must be engaging and entertaining to capture viewers' interest, yet on the other hand, it should also convey a sense of seriousness for consumers to perceive the brand as credible. However, in this case, though the content does not include the amusing and entertaining elements, the participant was influenced in a way that changed her perception of the brand in a positive way. When directly asked if Gymshark's TikTok content has influenced her perception of their brand or products, she describes

“That has changed my perception of them a little bit because I feel like before they just they cared a lot about like trying to like piggyback off those big influences and like those names. Whereas these videos feel like they're trying to make a name for themselves.” (appendix 15, page 35, participant 5).

This suggests that authenticity should be a primary focus for brands when sharing content on TikTok, emphasising the importance of creating original content that reflects their identity.

This view is also shared by participant 1 who stated the following when asked if Gymshark's TikTok content had influenced her perception of their brand or products:

“I would say, yeah, because there's so many people or so many brands out there who does the same, who sell the same product to the same price, the same colors, the logo is slightly different, but like it's the same. It's all the same. So, where they can differentiate from each other is like basically on like their identity and like what they are communicating and how they are communicating it and their values and stuff.” (appendix 11, page 12, participant 1).

This argument aligns with the one proposed by Gobé (2001) in terms of the imagination pillar, where he argues that

“We are constantly looking for brands that know what we want and we are constantly considering in what ways we may want to associate ourselves with brand personalities that possess charisma. We sometimes desire labels to express who we are (or rather who we want to be) to others [...]” (Gobé 2001, 143).

Thus, a key component in establishing an emotional connection with consumers on TikTok appears to be a blend of factors, comprising entertaining content that resonates with the brand's identity in an authentic and engaging manner.

This element of a brand that knows what consumers want and one that tries to understand them is also one of the key elements that influenced the perception described by participant 1. When asked if she would consider making a purchase from Gymshark based on what she had seen on their TikTok account, she described the following:

“Yeah, I would, because now I'm just like buying from this one place because they have great like leggings and stuff, but like every, it's all the same again. So, it would be nice to like actually support and be loyal towards a brand where you like where the like message and the identity of what they're doing and why they're doing it like coheres with my own like identity and what I can identify with.” (appendix 11, page 13, participant 1).

Participant 5 also touches upon the notion of supporting a brand that aligns with personal identity and beliefs, albeit from a different angle. Contrary to participant 1, participant 5 places more emphasis on the importance of product quality. While both statements share a common desire for alignment between personal and brand identity, their expressions and priorities

diverge. As participant 5 describes as a response to the question of if she would consider making a purchase from Gymshark based on what she had seen on their TikTok account:

“[...] if I was in a market for sportswear, I probably would consider it. [...]. Based on like, I just have this like idea of Gymshark that they, that they like care about the quality of like their products and like the fabrics they use. [...]. I care, like, I usually buy from brands that and the price doesn't really matter because I want something that's going to last and I want something that's not going to be like pilling and the cloth and it's like thick material and like the stitching is good and you can squat in them without your underwear showing. And I feel like Gymshark cares about stuff like that too.” (appendix 15, page 35, participant 5).

These statements therefore highlight the importance of a clear brand identity that resonates, at least to some degree, with the target audience, as this is essential in terms of creating an emotional connection. This is therefore also in alignment with the core argument by Gobé (2001) presented above, which emphasises the importance of a distinct and relatable brand identity.

8.4 Summary

The following section will now provide a summary of the key findings derived from the analysis above in order to create a broader overview of the perceptions of the content.

The first section of the analysis focused on TikTok usage, including how often participants use the platform and for what reasons. This information helps understand the motivations behind using TikTok and how they shape content perception. Participants were asked about their TikTok usage, and while the amount of time varied, there was a consensus that they used it at least once a day. This indicates that TikTok is a platform regularly used by consumers for a significant amount of time, suggesting it is worth considering when targeting new or existing consumers. Regarding the reasons for using TikTok, entertainment and inspiration were the most prominent themes among participants. The majority of the participants use the platform to find inspiration and be entertained, seeking fun and amusing content. This information is valuable for companies when creating content, as it suggests that brands should create content that reflects everyday activities in a fun and inspirational manner. This aligns with the idea that brands should create experiences around their products that resonate with their target audience.

and provide an escape from everyday life (Gobé 2001). In terms of the specific type of content participants sought on TikTok, it varied based on personal interests. However, amusing content was a common theme, reflecting participants' desire for content that was entertaining. Regardless of individual interests, amusing and entertaining content seemed to be popular among participants, aligning with TikTok's role as a platform for escapism and feeling good (Schellewald 2023). Overall, this section highlights TikTok's significance as a platform for regular usage, entertaining content, and inspiration. Understanding these usage patterns and motivations can help companies tailor their content creation strategies to effectively engage with TikTok users.

The second section of the analysis focused on the emotional connections with the content and examines how the content resonates with consumers and evokes emotional connections. The most salient themes in this part of the interview were "relatable feelings," "the uncomfortable truth," "depressing vibe," and "sense of community". The first theme of "relatable feelings" was evident in the interviews, where participants described how the content resonated with their personal experiences, eliciting emotional responses. For example, one participant felt emotional and tearful when reading the content, highlighting the relatability of the fitness journey and the acknowledgement of emotional aspects of going to the gym. The second theme, "the uncomfortable truth," reflected the discomfort some participants felt when faced with challenging emotions directly on social media. They expressed discomfort with the personal nature of the content and felt that the brand was getting too close to their personal lives. The third theme, "depressing vibe," emerged from the participants' perceptions of the content as depressive and sad, not aligning with the platform's usual tone of entertainment and fun. The combination of imagery, sound, and text in the content created a dark and sad impression, leading to negative perceptions. Despite these negative perceptions, some participants also mentioned that the content fostered a sense of community. They felt that the content made them feel like they were not alone in their struggles and created a sense of community among individuals going to the gym. Overall, the content was successful in evoking emotional responses from the participants, but the negative perceptions of it being too personal, depressive, and sad also emerged. Nevertheless, the content also fostered a sense of community among some participants, indicating the complexity of emotional connections with the content and its impact on consumer perceptions.

The last part of the analysis focused on the perceived brand image of Gymshark and examined three salient themes which were “caring”, “a serious brand” and “too personal”. The first theme in the analysis focused on the perception of Gymshark as a caring brand that aims to address mental health and create a welcoming community. Participants expressed positive perceptions of the brand, believing that Gymshark cares about their consumers and strives to articulate a nuanced discourse about going to the gym that goes beyond the physical aspect. The participants appreciated the brand's efforts to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of gym attendance and create an inclusive space for everyone, regardless of their reasons for going to the gym. They also noted that Gymshark distinguishes themselves from other sportswear brands by prioritising mental health. This perception was reinforced by the participants' beliefs that Gymshark promotes a culture of hard work and personal growth, elevating the meaning of going to the gym beyond physical fitness.

The analysis also revealed a contrasting theme of content being "too personal," as voiced by some participants. They felt uncomfortable with the brand addressing deeply personal emotions, such as those experienced during a breakup or feelings of inadequacy, as they believed these emotions should remain private. Additionally, participants expressed concerns that the content targeted a specific group of people, potentially excluding those who did not identify with the emotional themes presented. However, some participants recognised Gymshark's deliberate strategy to connect with specific niche groups, acknowledging that the brand's content may resonate with certain individuals while potentially alienating others.

The second salient theme pertains to the absence of people wearing Gymshark apparel in the TikTok posts. Participants had varying opinions on this aspect, with some believing that not showcasing the clothes on a specific type of person was beneficial as it prevented the perception that a certain appearance is required to wear the brand's clothes. However, other participants expressed a preference for seeing the apparel on individuals, stating that it helped them envision how the clothes would look on themselves and emphasising the importance of having presenters in the posts. There was also an analysis of the perceived quality of Gymshark's products, with one participant associating the serious and authentic nature of the posts with the brand's commitment to quality. Participants valued authenticity and believed in supporting brands that aligned with their personal identity and beliefs, highlighting the significance of a relatable brand identity. Overall, the analysis revealed a positive perception of Gymshark as a brand that prioritises mental health and fosters a sense of community while also addressing

concerns about the potential alienation of certain target groups and the need for a relatable brand identity. The participants' feedback underscored the importance of authentic, engaging content and the brand's commitment to quality in influencing their perceptions and potential purchasing decisions.

9. Discussion

Having analysed the six interviews, this section will provide a general discussion of the findings in relation to the theoretical framework employed in this study. As previously established (see section 1), the objective of this study is to examine how the British retailer Gymshark brands themselves on their TikTok account and how this content is then perceived by their target audience in Denmark. This discussion therefore seeks to discuss how the selected content is perceived by consumers in Denmark, identifying both what resonates well and what the brand could be mindful of in the future.

As previously described, the theory of emotional branding as proposed by Gobé (2001) is based upon four essential pillars referred to as “relationship”, “sensory experiences”, “imagination” and “vision” (xxxii). Though the pillars are independently important, the relationship pillar is integrated into one of the key arguments within the emotional branding theory as it is based on the following assumption: “Get to know who your consumers really are, what really matters to them, and show them that you feel the same way.” (Gobé 2001). Though it may seem rather simple at first, this argument is complex, which has also been exemplified through the findings derived from the analysis. For instance, one of the main points derived from the analysis above is that even if you know your target audience, who they are and what they think, it may not be sufficient enough to make them like you as a brand. This is based on the finding that though the participants interviewed in this study did relate to the content posted by Gymshark, it was a relation that did not foster positive perceptions as it was based on feelings that are deemed private. Therefore, rather than creating an emotional connection with the content based on this relatability, it created an emotional distance. This may lead one to wonder if perhaps the reason why the participants did not perceive the selected content as being positive is because they use TikTok for inspiration rather than to connect closely with friends. As this study has found, Gymshark creates content on their TikTok account that fosters an emotional bond, almost as if they were friends with their consumers, sharing personal experiences. Yet, the type of emotions evoked in the participants did not seem to be ones that they felt comfortable discussing with anyone and certainly not a large company on a social media platform. Furthermore, this may be influenced by the nature of TikTok as a platform, where users primarily seek entertaining and inspirational content. When consumers encounter sad or highly emotional content on TikTok, it may lead them to view the brand or content negatively, as they do not expect to

encounter such material on this platform. This suggests that in order to foster positive emotional connections with your consumers the brand not only needs to know who they are, how they think and what they want, they also need to take into account the type of platform they are trying to reach the consumers through. What kind of affordances does this type of platform offer and what are the consumers expecting to see when browsing through this platform? These seem to be essential questions to consider before the content creation part as the content may be perceived very differently depending on what type of platform it has been posted on.

However, as participant 1 mentioned several times, the content does align with the type of people who are going through tough times, for instance a break up. These individuals may seek motivation and the reassurance that others are going through similar challenges which may then help them feel less alone. The aspect that if others can do it then so can you. The rationale behind Gymshark's approach can thus be seen as a deliberate effort to create a place that prioritises community building over traditional product marketing. Considering their presence on other social media platforms, their use of TikTok seems primarily aimed at fostering connections with people. However, the analysis suggests that Gymshark's marketing strategy on TikTok is overly focused, catering too narrowly to a specific segment of their broad consumer base. While this approach might strengthen emotional bonds with existing consumers, it risks alienating potential new customers by appearing overly dark and depressing. Based on the analysis above, it might be advantageous for Gymshark to explore alternative ways of addressing these emotions to appeal to a broader target audience. The participants did connect with the feelings expressed in the content, but the use of sad background music and dark imagery made the presentation too personal. Given the consensus among participants that real people should be featured in the content, Gymshark could effectively use brand ambassadors to convey their messages. For instance, having brand ambassadors discuss their feelings or motivations for going to the gym could create a more positive and relatable connection with a wider audience. This approach would allow consumers to identify with specific individuals rather than a large brand with a primary goal of selling products.

Though the second and third pillars, sensory experiences and imagination, are mainly focusing on the elements present in brick-and-mortar stores, the actual product design or the shape, colour and form of a logo, the fundamental ideas within these pillars are still relevant in terms of online branding strategies. For instance, Gobé (2001) argues that certain sounds or colours

can subconsciously evoke certain associations among consumers, which are able to direct the consumer into a particular state of mind. The power of sounds and colours are also highlighted in the findings derived from the analysis, as it indicates that these elements play a vital role in how the content is perceived. As previously described in the analysis (see section 8), the participants noted that the sad instrumental background music and dark images evoked a specific emotional state, influencing how they interpreted the accompanying text. These findings, along with the theoretical reasoning, raise the question of whether a large brand could address such personal feelings in a more motivational manner. By creating content that makes consumers feel like they are part of something bigger, the brand could potentially inspire them to purchase the clothes and join the movement.

In sum, it is all built around the last pillar, vision, which according to Gobé (2001) seems to be the core element that brings the pillars together. As previously established, the core vision of Gymshark is based on the assumption that “It's not our goals that unite us, but the things we do to achieve them. Because although our training grounds and end goals might be different, sweat is our sport. And we're a team of individuals who know that to go further, we go together.” (Gymshark. n.d.). This vision seems to be highly integrated into the content posted on their TikTok account as the content does not portray certain types of people; rather, it focuses on the very reason why some people may go to the gym. In this way, their content resonates with their overall objective, which may also be the reason why all of the participants are able to relate to the content. Despite the negative connotations towards the creation of it, all of the participants were familiar with the feelings described. This suggests that Gymshark understands their consumers on a deeper level, however, the affordances of TikTok places the content in a context that is not suitable for such a relation. This suggests that though TikTok may be a place where brands are able to post content that are different from other social media platforms, they should still be mindful of what content consumers are actually looking for as this will influence how they perceive the content posted on the platform.

Additionally, the findings derived from the analysis serves as an interesting perspective to the previously established argument that TikTok is a place where users are seeking fun, entertaining and inspirational content. If this assumption remains valid, it prompts the question: How can a brand create content that is both engaging and light-hearted, yet not overly so that consumers perceive it as unserious? Moreover, is it imperative for a brand to be perceived as serious in order for consumers to consider purchasing their products? While Gobé (2001)

argues that one of the core elements of branding should be to create an emotional bond with consumers, there is a certain neglect of the fact that an emotion may be interpreted very differently depending on the audience. This is also highlighted in the analysis as it shows that though the participants do relate to the content posted by Gymshark, the emotions the content evokes does not have the effect that they want to purchase something from the brand. Rather, it creates a distance between the participants and the brand as they feel like it is inappropriate that a brand of this size is trying to connect with them through such private feelings.

Nevertheless, despite the more negative perceptions of Gymshark revealed in this study, it is important to acknowledge the brand's massive social media following. This suggests that they are producing content that resonates with many consumers, as evidenced by their posts receiving millions of views and thousands of likes and comments. Although the participants in this study did not reflect this positive reception, it appears that Gymshark has cultivated a community that relates to and supports their content. The consistent style of their TikTok posts indicates a clear vision for how they want to be portrayed and the effect they aim to have on viewers. This aligns with their core objective, which emphasises the journey to success rather than the end goal.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the application of emotional branding on TikTok, focusing on the challenges and opportunities brands might face when utilising the platform as a branding tool. Specifically, the thesis examined how the British retailer Gymshark brands themselves on their TikTok account and how this content is perceived by their target audience in Denmark.

The analysis revealed that TikTok is a platform used daily by Danish consumers, primarily seeking entertaining and inspirational content. It further showed that the motivation behind using the platform significantly influenced how content was perceived. For instance, the analysis found that participants strongly related to the selected content; however, as the content touched on feelings considered private, it did not generate positive perceptions. Instead of creating emotional connections, it created an emotional distance, leading to negative perceptions of the brand. The reason behind this was that the participants felt it was inappropriate for a large brand to discuss such personal feelings, especially on this particular social media platform. However, the participants suggest that one of the ways to avoid this was to include brand ambassadors as the brands' spokesperson. In this way, consumers would be able to identify with the particular person behind, which could potentially help forge a stronger connection between consumers and the brand's identity.

Furthermore, the analysis revealed that while most participants interviewed for this thesis felt the posts evoked inappropriately sad and depressive feelings for a brand to address, one participant had a different perspective. According to her, the posts indicated that the brand understood her perspective, recognising that going to the gym is not just about building a strong body but also about maintaining strong mental health. This suggests that Gymshark's content is tailored to a very specific target audience. Although most participants were not inclined to purchase products from the brand based on the selected posts, they acknowledged that the posts might appear motivational and inclusive to certain individuals. As noted, one participant felt this way, suggesting that she represents the type of person Gymshark aims to reach through their TikTok content.

Based on the analysis and discussion, it is evident that emotional branding on TikTok is far from simple. This thesis has shown that Gymshark aims to reach a very specific target audience through their TikTok content to foster deep emotional connections with these individuals. According to the analysis, this strategy may be successful with the intended target group, but

it might alienate consumers outside of this group who do not relate to such personal content from a large brand.

Lastly, this thesis has found that TikTok is considered a social media platform that is used as an escape from everyday life, so consumers are using it to become uplifted, entertained and inspired. Thus, the content posted on this platform should reflect these motivations in order to capture the attention of consumers and create a connection with them. Furthermore, the study found that emotional branding on TikTok involves not only the emotions being targeted but also how they are conveyed. The choice of images or videos and the accompanying music play a crucial role in this process. This aligns well with the theoretical framework of this thesis, which suggests that the colours, sounds, and images used inherently carry their own meanings. Consequently, the message being conveyed is inevitably influenced by these individual elements.

The theory of emotional branding is more than 20 years old, yet its core principles still remain relevant today. Although it does not address the new social media landscape or how to leverage emotions within it, its four pillars can still serve as a foundation for a contemporary emotional branding strategy. Based on the findings derived from the analysis and the discussion of them, this study suggests an area for improvement in the original theory: it is not enough to create emotionally resonant content; the content must also be tailored to the specific social media platform on which it will be shared. This consideration arises from the argument that platforms themselves carry inherent meanings, which inevitably influence how consumers perceive the content even before they engage with it. Thus, it is essential for brands to take their target audience into account in terms of who they are, what they want and how they want it in combination with the affordances of the particular social media platform that will be used.

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Reflection Paper

Reflecting on my first day at Aalborg University, which feels like it was just yesterday but is actually nearly five years ago, it is evident how much I have grown both academically and personally. This journey, though challenging to capture in just a few pages, will be explored in this reflection paper, focusing on key areas of transformation and personal development.

Problem-Oriented Competencies

Over the past five years, I have acquired various valuable competencies. One of the key skills I have developed is the ability to critically assess a problem. This involves identifying the crucial aspects of a problem, understanding its relevance to the course, and determining how it can be examined. I have learned to refine these aspects into a specific research question that guides the entire project. Additionally, I have gained the ability to navigate different methods and select the most appropriate one for examining the research question effectively. This experience has enhanced my capability to address real-life problems, critically analyse complex issues, and develop solutions applicable in real-world scenarios.

Interpersonal Competencies

Another key competence I developed during my time at Aalborg University is the ability to work effectively in groups. This experience has deepened my understanding of the importance of diverse perspectives and how to collaborate by leveraging everyone's strengths for optimal results. This experience has also provided me with a deeper understanding and respect for the diverse backgrounds people come from, recognising that different worldviews lead to varied approaches and unique competencies that complement my own. One key skill I developed is effective communication with co-workers, appreciating that our different educational backgrounds result in diverse perspectives and priorities on the same assignment. The competencies I gained from group projects at the university help me adapt my communication based on who I am working with. For example, I understand that the sales team views marketing initiatives differently from the graphic designer or the SEO copywriter, and I can adjust my approach accordingly.

Structural Competencies

Reflecting on the structural competencies I have developed; it is clear that I have gained extensive experience and knowledge in organising both my own time and that of others. I have

learned to create comprehensive overviews, identify key elements, determine their content, and allocate the necessary time for their completion. These coordination skills are crucial as they enable me to optimise my work schedule, efficiently plan tasks, and estimate the time required for each. Additionally, managing large projects has equipped me with the ability to understand all components of a project and how they integrate to achieve the overall objective. This involves assessing their complementary roles and assembling them in a logical manner aligned with the study's focus. Ultimately, I have obtained the ability to discern what is important and what is not.

Metacognitive Competencies

Lastly, I have gained competencies that enable me to critically assess my own work. While working in a group setting has provided valuable insights, working alone has also been highly beneficial. For instance, I have developed the ability to step back and view my work objectively, critically evaluate my arguments, and broaden my perspective on a topic. Working independently requires the discipline to meet self-imposed deadlines, as there is no one else to ensure their completion. It has provided me with several key competencies, including the ability to assess my own work, reflect critically, and communicate effectively by justifying my points in a well-argued and structured manner. Additionally, I have developed strong time management skills, enabling me to prioritise tasks and meet deadlines efficiently.