

## **Who are the haters?**

Exploring critical interactions with Dutch fitness influencers on Instagram

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# WHO ARE THE HATERS? EXPLORING CRITICAL INTERACTIONS WITH DUTCH FITNESS INFLUENCERS ON INSTAGRAM

## ABSTRACT

The fitness industry has been growing rapidly along with an increasing amount of influencers on Instagram who endorse a healthy and fit lifestyle. While the growth of fitness influencers on Instagram brings opportunities for them such as influencer marketing and collaborations, their success also makes them prone to haters. However, research towards haters and the risks of influencers marketing seems to be limited. Current research merely focusses on the effectiveness of influencer marketing. Taken the above in account the main research question that is answered in this study is: *What are the motivations of the haters of Dutch fitness influencers to engage in a negative way with their branded content on Instagram?* The aim of this research thus is to tighten the literature gap on the risks of influencer marketing by exploring the phenomenon of haters in the context of Dutch fitness influencers on Instagram. The study is based upon the literature of the social interaction utility framework, the source credibility model and disclosure language. Qualitative interviews with ten participants who were found and identified as haters through the comments on the accounts of multiple Dutch fitness influencers were held to gather data. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, based on open, axial, and selective coding. Three final themes emerged from the data; perceptions on Instagram use, utilities derived from negative engagement behavior, and aspects of the content of fitness influencers responsible for evoking negative engagement behavior.

Regarding the Instagram use of haters, it was found that haters might differ on their perception on how to use Instagram, perceiving it as a platform where it is expected to share your opinions even when they are negative or hateful. Moreover, certain haters' uses on Instagram were found to be inherently connected to their negative engagement behavior, such as using it anonymously or following disliked content creators on purpose. Based upon the social interaction utility framework, three main motivations were found to be related to the negative engagement behavior with the eWOM of fitness influencers on Instagram; concern for others, self-enhancing motivations, and venting negative feelings. Whereas self-enhancing motivations and venting negative feelings were found to be clearly related towards the definition of haters and their negative engagement behavior, the concern for others motivation indicated a need for a concept that is less related to the negative connotations around the concept of haters and more related to the negative engagement behavior as described in this study.

**KEYWORDS:** *Haters, Instagram influencers, eWOM, Negative social media engagement behavior, fitness influencers*

# Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>4</b>
1.1. The fitness industry.....	4
1.2. Dutch fitness influencers .....	4
1.3. Research problem .....	5
1.4. Research questions .....	6
1.5. Scientific relevance .....	7
1.6. Social relevance .....	8
1.7. Thesis outline .....	9
<b>2. Theoretical framework.....</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1. Defining haters.....	12
2.1.1. <i>Exploring existing definitions</i> .....	13
2.1.2. <i>Constructive and destructive criticism</i> .....	14
2.1.3. <i>Negative online engagement behavior</i> .....	15
2.2. Social interaction utility framework.....	17
2.2.1. <i>Social interaction utility theory</i> .....	17
2.2.2. <i>Defining eWOM on Instagram</i> .....	19
2.2.3. <i>Social interaction utilities and their motivations</i> .....	20
2.3. Source credibility .....	22
2.3.1. <i>Source credibility theory</i> .....	23
2.3.2. <i>Moderating factors in source credibility</i> .....	24
2.4. Disruptive social media experiences.....	25
2.4.1. <i>Disclosure language</i> .....	25
2.4.2. <i>The persuasion knowledge model</i> .....	26
<b>3. Method.....</b>	<b>29</b>
3.1. Research design .....	29
3.2. Operationalization .....	31
3.3. Sampling.....	32
3.4. Data collection and analysis.....	35
<b>4. Results.....</b>	<b>38</b>
4.1. Perceptions on Instagram use.....	38
4.1.1. <i>Perceptions of common practices on Instagram</i> .....	39
4.1.2. <i>Perceptions of negative engagement behavior on Instagram</i> .....	41
4.1.3. <i>Perceptions of self as a hater on Instagram</i> .....	46
4.2. Utilities of negative engagement behavior.....	49
4.2.1. <i>The focus-related utility</i> .....	49
4.2.2. <i>The approval utility</i> .....	51
4.2.3. <i>The homeostase utility</i> .....	54
4.3. Negative engagement behavior evoking aspects .....	57
4.3.1. <i>Deceiving content</i> .....	57
4.3.2. <i>Sexualization and objectification</i> .....	60
<b>5. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>64</b>
5.1. Theoretical and social implications.....	70
5.2. Limitations and future research.....	71
<b>References .....</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>Appendix .....</b>	<b>83</b>

# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1. The fitness industry**

The global health and fitness industry has been growing rapidly over the last decade. This is also the case for the Netherlands where a fitness craze is emerging (Van Rhee, 2017). It has been found that 69 percent of the inhabitants of Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands, work out at least once a week (Boon, 2017). This growth is the result of an increasing awareness of fitness and health, which brings more and more people to the gym ("Why The Fitness Industry Is Booming," 2018). A phenomenon that appeared together with the rise of the health and fitness industry is the increasing amount of Instagram influencers that endorse a healthy lifestyle and portray the contemporary gym culture to motivate their followers to do the same. This way social media helped the bodybuilding subculture to hit the mainstream due to "Instagram lust heroes" according to Chan (2016., para. 3). Moreover, social media enabled fitness amateurs to present themselves online and get sponsorships by building and influencing an online audience (Chan, 2016). Partly due to fitness influencers, having a gym membership, what used to be a luxury product, has now become part of peoples' everyday lifestyle ("Why The Fitness Industry Is Booming," 2018).

## **1.2. Dutch fitness influencers**

The growing fitness industry has as a result that an increasing number of young people seek for health and fitness information online in order to construct a social and personal sense of health (Jong & Drummond, 2016; Rasczyk & Stephens, 2015). Ettel, Nathanson, Ettel, Wilson, and Meola (2012) found that a significant number of young people trusted online information and modified their behavior accordingly. Social media, therefore, has become a persuasive platform to share information on health and fitness for young adults (Rasczyk & Stephens, 2015). Fitness influencers have a special role within the fitness community, often serving as a role model and health expert. While showing their idealized fit bodies, fitness influencers inspire and teach their followers in reaching their own fitness goals (Bohjalian, 2017). This has also been found to be true in the Netherlands, where following a coach on social media is one of the largest fitness trends (Van Rhee, 2017). Instagram, in particular, is an often used platform by fitness influencers due to the many

visual features (Noonan, 2018). For example, Instagram has features to place pictures and videos on timelines or post them for 24 hours in stories. Moreover, Instagram has been significantly growing in the last few years and reached a number of one billion monthly users in 2018 (Constine, 2018). Over 60% of these global Instagram users are young adults between 18 and 34 years old (Statista, 2018).

The aim of social media influencers is gaining an audience and cultivating as much attention possible by crafting an authentic personal brand using social media platforms (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). This makes influencers very attractive for collaborations and product endorsements since they have a large reach among audiences with specific interests (Jaakonmäki, Müller, & Vom Brocke, 2017). Therefore, fitness influencers often engage in influencer marketing, by endorsing brands that align with their public image and the interests of their target audience, in order to make a profit (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011). Using social media platforms, influencers represent companies through branded content which is subtly worked into the influencers' personal social media content (Glucksman, 2017). This type of branded content is also referred to as electronic Word-Of-Mouth (eWOM). eWOM is defined as any positive or negative statement made on a product or brand made available to a large number of people and institutions using the internet (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). Effective influencer marketing, thus, is the act of identifying the key decision makers amongst a target audience and encouraging these influencers to spread positive eWOM (Jaakonmäki et al., 2017). However, the effectiveness of influencers branded content depends on a number of aspects. In order for branded content to be effective, it needs to be perceived by followers as authentic, credible and interactive (Glucksman, 2017). Moreover, when the Instagram content is perceived as obviously sponsored and focused on the product it appears as pushy and can actually generate negative reactions amongst followers (Jargalsaikhan & Korotina, 2016).

### **1.3. Research problem**

The public online success of fitness influencers and their branded content make them prone to online haters. The term hater is mostly used to indicate people who post negative comments on online content (Lange, 2007b). However, research towards haters and the negative effects of them on influencer marketing is limited and a clear definition of the term hater and their actions seem to be lacking, even though the term hater is used very often in

relation to the social media environment nowadays (Brubaker, 2015). Therefore, a clear definition and understanding of the concept of a hater are necessary to make sense of the online behavior that is displayed a lot in the contemporary online social media environment. Moreover, there appears to be a literature gap in negative engagement behavior regarding influencer marketing and product endorsement. More specific academic literature fails to address influencer marketing from the perspective of haters. Therefore, the aim of this study is to address haters and their motivations to engage in a negative way with branded content of Dutch fitness influencers in order to get a more complete understanding of influencer marketing and its risks.

#### **1.4. Research questions**

Taken the above in account the main research question is formulated as follows:

*What are the motivations of the haters of Dutch fitness influencers to engage in a negative way with their branded content on Instagram?*

Three sub-questions will serve as thematic steps towards forming a final answer to the main research question:

Sub-research question 1: *How do haters of Dutch fitness influencers perceive their own use of Instagram?*

This sub-question contributes to the aim of this thesis in getting a better understanding of how haters make use of Instagram and how their uses are connected to negative online engagement behavior. In addition, even though the participants are already identified as haters, this sub-question aims to find out how they perceive their own Instagram use and if they perceive themselves as haters. The definition of haters which is established in the theoretical framework, therefore, is used as a reference to find out about the hater behavior of the participants on Instagram and whether they identify as a hater.

Sub-research question 2: *What utilities are obtained by haters of Dutch fitness influencers when engaging with branded content in a negative way?*

The second sub-question aims to find out about the different utilities that haters obtain when engaging in a negative way with the content of Dutch fitness influencers. The social interaction utility framework by Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, and Gremler (2004) serves as a base for identifying different motivations and their connected utilities from the interview data. Moreover, this sub-question contributes to the overall aim of this research by identifying different motivations and utilities that are connected to negative engagement behavior with fitness influencers.

Sub research question 3: *What aspects of branded content of Dutch fitness influencers evoke negative engagement behavior among haters?*

The third and last sub-question aims to find out what specific types of content of fitness influencers evoke negative engagement behavior among haters. Lack of source credibility and disruptive social media experiences are identified in the theoretical framework as two possible sources for evoking negative engagement behavior on the content of fitness influencers. This sub-question contributes to the overall aim of this research by providing a more clear and specific understanding of which aspects of fitness influencers and their content are prone to negative online engagement behavior and why haters of Dutch fitness influencers participate in express engagement behavior on Instagram.

### **1.5. Scientific relevance**

Previous academic studies already address the topic of influencer marketing on Instagram and in particular its benefits for marketers (Biaudet, 2017). Several studies address the impact of influencer marketing on the consumer decision process within different niche groups (Shuqair & Cragg, 2017; Sudha & Sheena, 2017). However, research on how influencers can be perceived in a negative way and the risks of influencer marketing seems to be limited even though it is an important part of the influencer profession. There has been done some research on the impact of the number of followers and the impact of credibility on consumers perceptions, which also addresses the negative side of these issues by arguing that a higher number of followers leads to less perceived credibility (De Veirman,

Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017). These studies, therefore, address a perceived lack of credibility and a high number of followers as possible sources of negative perceptions of consumers. However, these studies fail to address these issues from the perspective of influencers' haters. Overall there seems to be a literature gap in how negative perceptions are evoked and related to negative online engagement. Therefore this research aims to tighten this literature gap by a qualitative exploration of the motivations for negative engagement behavior with the content of fitness influencers.

### **1.6. Social relevance**

A clear understanding of the risks of influencer marketing contributes to the profession of marketing, advertising, and social media influencers. Influencers nowadays, especially those with a larger following are often confronted with hate messages on social media. Using sentiment analysis it has been found in a study by Mention, a social media monitoring company, that social media has become considerably more negative in the past 5 years (Whatman, 2017). Moreover, influencers increasingly come forward with videos or posts on the effects of hate messages on them personally. For example, in a recent blog post by Charlie Watson, who started the blog and the Instagram account of The Runner Beans on which she shares her running and health journey, addressed the topic of negativity and haters on social media. She wrote on how receiving negativity makes her question why she blogs and shares her life. Moreover, she said she works really hard on her blog and she gets very upset by the passive-aggressive messages she receives on social media (Watson, 2018). However, it is argued by Brubaker (2015) that haters are a natural part of the growth of any business or personal brand and the only way to avoid haters is to be on the side-lines. Nonetheless, hating nowadays has become such a problem that social media platforms, including Instagram, have begun introducing new features to limit it. Instagram, for example, introduced the function to disable comments entirely or filter comments on words that are often used by haters (Chapple, 2016). Hating thus has become a large part and problem of contemporary social media culture.

Moreover, negative perceptions on social media influencers can have harmful effects on the image of the brands they are endorsing. In a survey called Under Influence, UK consumers were asked towards their attitudes to social media influencer marketing (Prizeology, 2018). It was found that over half of their respondents thought brands are not



transparent on their use of influencer marketing whereas hiding commercial ties between brands and influencers are argued to have severe damage on the perception of the public (Fastenau, 2018). Therefore, qualitative exploration on how negative perceptions among target audiences are evoked is necessary for a better understanding of the risks of influencer marketing. Moreover, it contributes towards a deeper societal understanding of negative social media engagement behavior which is displayed very often nowadays.

### **1.7. Thesis outline**

Taken all the above in account, this thesis consist of the following parts:

## **Chapter 2. Theoretical framework**

In the theoretical framework, a literature review that is relevant to the main research question is included. Moreover, the theoretical framework contributed to defining haters and forming a participant definition. In addition, the theoretical framework guided the formulation of interview questions for the interview guide. This chapter is divided into the following four subsections that are all relevant to the motivations of haters for engaging in a negative way with branded content.

The first section of the theoretical framework aims to inform the first sub-question: *How do haters of Dutch fitness influencers perceive their own use of Instagram?* In order to do so, the concept of hater is defined based on previous studies and existing definitions. Moreover, negative social media engagement behavior or online hating is defined and the difference between destructive and constructive feedback is explained.

In the second section the social interaction utility framework of Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, and Gremler (2004) is introduced as a starting point to address possible motivations of haters to engage in a negative way with the branded content of fitness influencers. This part of the theoretical framework aims to inform the interview guide to formulate questions that are relevant to the second sub-question: *What utilities are perceived by haters of Dutch fitness influencers when engaging with their content in a negative way?*

The third section addresses the first possible characteristic for evoking negative perceptions among haters. Based on previous literature on influencer authenticity and credibility it is argued that a perceived lack of it can lead to negative perceptions on the

influencer as well as the brand that is endorsed.

In the last section, another possible characteristic of influencer content for evoking negative perceptions is introduced. Based on the habits of branded content on Instagram, disclosure language is found to have a negative effect on the perceptions of followers (Evans et al., 2017). Moreover, a disruptive social media experience in this sub-section is argued to be possibly linked to the homeostase utility.

## **Chapter 3. Method**

### **3.1. Research design**

In this section, the qualitative research design of this study is introduced. Moreover, the choice for semi-structured interviews is argued as the best method for this study to gather data. Therefore, advantages such as building rapport and flexibility of the method are argued in order to clarify the method of choice for this qualitative study.

### **3.2. Operationalization**

In the operationalization, the process of formulating the interview guide is argued and explained. Based upon the theoretical framework, and the three sub-questions, interview questions are formulated in order to ensure all relevant information of negative engagement behavior on Instagram is covered. The interview guide, therefore, follows the same structure as the theoretical framework. Moreover, a personal section for each participant is added to address the destructive comment based on which they were included in this research.

### **3.3. Sampling**

In this section, the judgment sampling method is explained. Moreover, the sampling procedure is described in detail. In order to find ten participants for this study, multiple Instagram accounts of Dutch fitness influencers are monitored on negative comments. Based on these comments possible participants are contacted via Instagram, asking if they want to participate anonymously in this study by conducting either a face-to-face or Skype interview. Due to the sensitive topic and convenience reasons, most of the participants preferred to do the interview via Skype over a personal meeting.

### **3.4 Data collection and analysis**

Data collection is done face-to-face or using Skype and the interview is recorded using a recording device. Afterward, the recordings are transcribed verbatim in order to

prepare the data for analysis. The analysis is done based on the thematic analysis method which consists of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The coding process is explained in detail in this section in order to increase the transparency of this study.

#### **Chapter 4. Results**

In the results chapter the three main themes that emerged from the data are reported and discussed based on quotes from the interviews with the aim to answer the three sub-questions and together the main research question; *What are the motivations of the haters of Dutch fitness influencers to engage in a negative way with their branded content on Instagram?*”.

#### **Chapter 5. Conclusion**

Lastly, the results and overall findings are summarized and the answer to the main research question is formed. Also, the limitations of this study are discussed and suggestions for further research are mentioned.

## 2. Theoretical framework

In this chapter, existing literature on haters and their possible motivations for negative online engagement behavior are discussed. A literature review on previous research on negative online engagement behavior is introduced and the main theoretical concepts are defined. Moreover, the theoretical framework contributes to formulating interview questions and guiding the data collection. To start off, in the first section the concept of haters as well as their negative engagement behavior is defined and discussed, which contributes to formulating the participant definition. In the second section, the social interaction utility framework is introduced. This framework serves as a starting point to start exploring possible motivations and obtained utilities for negative online engagement behavior. Lastly, two aspects that possibly contribute to evoking negative engagement behavior on the content of fitness influencers are introduced; a lack of credibility and a disruptive social media experience through sponsored content. These concepts and frameworks all contribute to gaining a more in-depth understanding of haters and possible motivations for their online engagement behavior with the aim to gather valid data to formulate a final answer to the main research question: *What are the motivations of the haters of Dutch fitness influencers to engage in a negative way with their branded content on Instagram?*

### 2.1. Defining haters

Before making any assumptions on possible motivations of haters for negative online engagement behavior, a clear understanding of the concept of hater is needed. Therefore, existing definitions of haters are introduced and critically discussed in the section below. In addition, hater behavior is described and a difference between constructive and destructive criticism is established. Afterward, previous literature on negative online engagement behavior is discussed and the two forms of negative online engagement behavior; detaching and destructing are introduced. Lastly, a final definition of haters is formulated; taken all of the above in account. This definition of haters is further used throughout this study. Moreover, this definition of haters has contributed to formulating the participant definition and selecting the most suitable participants for interviewing and thus increasing the internal

validity of this study.

### *2.1.1. Exploring existing definitions*

The definition of haters is closely connected towards their displayed negative online engagement behavior. Negative online engagement is referred to in previous literature as online ‘flaming’, which is the act of intentionally violating negotiated, evolving and situated interactional norms, either successfully or unsuccessfully (O’Sullivan & Flanagan, 2003). However, a more contemporary term for social media users that engage in online flaming is ‘haters’. Haters are often defined as social media users that cannot be happy for the success of other users and therefore intentionally want to expose the flaws of these successful users. Moreover, the term is used to describe social media users that “hate for irrational reasons and more for the sake of hate itself” (Mackenzie, 2013). However, these definitions already imply that haters who engage in a negative way with online content act from jealous motivations, which is impossible to judge from the displayed behavior alone. In addition, impolite online behavior, such as hating, is largely context dependent (Lange, 2014). For example, in some context, mean critical commentary and deliberately trying to anger others can be attempts to push social conventions and serve as means to connect with other users who like to be provocative (Hardaker, 2013). In this context, disagreement is actually preferred. Moreover, in a lot of online participation platforms, such as Instagram, users are actually expected to share their feelings and opinions on topics covered in the content (Shum & Lee, 2013).

However, in a study on YouTube and online social participation by Lange (2007b), YouTube content creators are interviewed and asked for their perceptions of their haters. One content creator defined haters in this study as people who post negative comments without offering criticism or any helpful information. This is confirmed by another participant who perceives haters as people who insult content creators without offering suggestions for improvements (Lange, 2007b). Therefore, existing definitions and perceptions of haters seem to contradict one another with regards to including criticism in online hating behavior or not. While multiple, definitions exclude criticism entirely by defining haters as social media users who “hate for irrational reasons’ (Mackenzie, 2013), and offer no criticism or helpful information (Lange, 2007b). Another definition perceives haters as social media users who intentionally want to expose flaws of content creators

which actually implies that criticism is a form of hating.

### *2.1.2. Constructive and destructive criticism*

In order to gain a clear understanding of whether to include criticism as part of online hating behavior or not, it is important to establish and explore the difference between constructive criticism and destructive criticism. Constructive criticism is negative feedback that is delivered using a considerate form of communications and it contains no threats (Raver, Jensen, Lee, & O'Reilly, 2012). Moreover, the aim of constructive feedback is to improve the performance of others (Hardavella, Aamli-Gagnat, Saad, Rousalova, & Sreter, 2017). In addition, it has been argued that delivering feedback in a constructive way is actually an effective way to improve the growth and development of the person receiving the feedback (Hamid & Mahmood, 2010). Destructive feedback, on the other hand, is negative feedback delivered in an inconsiderate style with inconsiderate content (Raver et al., 2012). As mentioned by Baron (1988) destructive criticism is often expressed when a person is upset or angry. Due to those emotions, destructive criticism is typically delivered in an inconsiderate style including threats or other negative features such as using a biting or sarcastic tone. Moreover, destructive criticism is often aimed at poor performance due to internal causes, making the criticism personal to the recipient (Baron, 1988).

Destructive feedback applied to the social media environment is often aimed to deter content creators to stop posting certain content, while constructive feedback is aimed to improve the performance of the creators (Lange, 2007a). Receiving destructive feedback or hater comments can leave the recipient feeling more negative emotions in comparison towards receiving constructive feedback. Moreover, receiving destructive criticism can undermine recipients confidence or self-efficacy in regards to the discussed performances (Baron, 1988). Negative feedback or hater comments thus can have a large impact on the recipient. However, where some people might have a high tolerance and enjoy confrontational participations, others eschew it and it can even interfere with their enjoyment of participation online (Lange, 2007b). Therefore, what one might consider as online hating, might not be the same as for the other. However, in order to study haters, a clear definition of the concept is needed. Therefore, even though both types of criticism can be well-argued, destructive criticism in this study is considered to be part of online hating as

it is aimed to expose flaws of the content creator with the goal to make them stop creating online content by using an inconsiderate style of communication (Raver et al., 2012).

Constructive criticism, on the other hand, is not considered to be part of hating in this study since it is aimed to improve the performance of the content creator, using a considerate style of communication. Constructive criticism thus comes from good intentions and do not evoke as negative feelings among the content creators as destructive criticism or hater comments. Constructive criticism, therefore, is not considered to be part of hating in this study. Moreover, since the aim of this study is to find out what the motivations are for haters to engage in a negative way with the content of Dutch fitness influencers, constructive criticism is excluded in order to collect appropriate data to answer the research question.

#### *2.1.3. Negative online engagement behavior*

Despite that the concept of hater might not have the same meaning to everyone, the term is used massively on social media platforms, and the negative online behavior is displayed very often, especially on the content of successful social media users (Brubaker, 2015). An important aspect that can favor behavior such as giving destructive feedback and hateful comments in the online environment, is the level of anonymity that users experience on social media platforms (Mondal, Silva, & Benevenuto, 2017). Even though social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram try to remove anonymity by obliging users to give up their name, age, and place, users can easily bypass this by providing fake data (Hardaker, 2013). According to Keen (2007), anonymity is one of the most corrosive elements of the internet that creates an uncivil online world. This is also argued by Hardaker (2013) saying that anonymity can foster a loss of self-awareness and increases the likelihood of acting upon impulses that are normally inhibited. In addition, anonymity has found to decrease empathy for online others (Sia, Tan, & Wei, 2002). However, according to Lange (2007a), adding personal information towards social media accounts does not guarantee cordial interaction, since not all social media users perceive online hating as a problem in the same degree. Therefore, it can be argued that anonymity is not or only partly responsible for the negative online engagement behavior.

There are multiple ways for haters to negatively engage with the content of others on Instagram, however, academic literature defined two types of negative social media

engagement behavior: detaching and destructing. Detaching social media engagement behavior is the act of removing content that appears on the users home page or news feed (Dolan, Conduit, Fahy, & Goodman, 2016). According to Mai (2007), key factors in relationship detachment are the perception of quality and emotional involvement. Applied to social media influencers, detachment thus can possibly occur when followers perceive their content as low quality or have no emotional involvement with them. Followers then hide their content, unlike or unsubscribe from the social media account (Dolan et al., 2016). On Instagram detaching engagement behavior can be expressed by either unfollowing the content creator or simply scrolling the content away in their timeline without giving the content any attention. Detaching engagement behavior thus is a more hidden way of negative engagement behavior and has no impact on any of the other followers of the content creator.

Destructive social media engagement behavior goes further than detaching social media engaging behavior since it involves actively contributing to existing content. Destructive social media engagement, therefore, is the act of making active negative contributions on social media platforms (Dolan et al., 2016). The most obvious example of destructive engagement behavior on Instagram are users who post public hate comments under Instagram content. However, more hidden ways to engage in a destructive way with the content on Instagram is to either send hateful private messages to the content creator directly or send disliked content to friends in their personal direct messages with hateful comments towards the content or content creator. Users who engage in online hating, therefore, can have different levels of activity in negative engagement behavior on Instagram. They can engage in negative ways which are more passive, described above as detaching engagement behavior, or they can engage in an active way by engaging in a destructive way with Instagram content and posting negative comments.

Taken all of the above in account, a hater in this study is defined as a social media user who engages with the content of other successful users in a negative way, either detaching or destructing. Moreover, these social media users deliver feedback using an inconsiderate style of communication in the case of destructing engagement behavior. This definition thus excludes users who give constructive feedback which is aimed to improve the performance of others and uses a considerate style of communication (Hardavella et al., 2017). In addition, this definition goes further than the discussed existing definitions of



haters which only includes users who leave empty comments and threats driven by jealous motivations and therefore, includes well-argued destructive criticism as well. This definition of haters is further used throughout this study. Moreover, this definition of haters and their negative online engagement behavior contributes to forming an appropriate participant definition and selecting suitable interview participants for the aim of this study. In addition the findings above guide the interview questions on the first part of the data collection aiming to address sub-question 1: *How do haters of Dutch fitness influencers perceive their own use of Instagram?*

## **2.2. Social interaction utility framework**

In the following section, the social interaction utility framework is introduced and discussed with regards to the possible motivations of haters for negative engagement behavior. This part aims to inform the interview guide on the second part addressing sub-question 2: *What utilities are obtained by haters of Dutch fitness influencers when engaging with branded content in a negative way?* In order to understand and properly apply the social interaction utility framework in this study, first the concept of utility is introduced after which it is applied to social interaction. In addition, the social interaction utility framework which was initially proposed by Balasubramanian and Mahajan (2001) consisting of three social interaction utilities is critically discussed, after which the updated social interaction utility framework by Hennigh-Thurau et al. (2004) is proposed as the main framework for this study to base the analysis on of the possible motivations for negative engagement behavior with content of fitness influencers. Moreover, the five social interaction utilities and their related motivations for social interaction proposed by Hennigh-Thurau et al. (2004) are clearly defined and applied to negative social media engagement behavior on Instagram.

### **2.2.1. Social interaction utility theory**

The social interaction utility theory is based on the assumption that the primary reasons for individuals to engage in social interactions is because they yield direct utilities (Saffer, 2005). Utilities in the social interaction utility theory are defined as the payoffs that individuals obtain from their social interactions (Brock & Durlauf, 2001). Moreover, the social interaction utility theory argues that all social interactions are based on attempts to

maximize utilities for the self (Payne & Howes, 2013). However, it is argued by Saffer (2008) that the role of social interaction has changed since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Whereas before, social interaction often had an economic motive, such as the need for close friends and family for insurance during times of crisis, the primary utility that is derived from social interaction has changed to pleasure. (Saffer, 2008). However, the social interaction utility framework, as it was initially introduced by Balasubramanian and Mahajan in 2001 aimed to address the economic leverage of social interaction within virtual communities. Within this initial framework, Balasubramanian and Mahajan (2001) identified three main utilities that were derived from social interactions.

First of all, they identified the focus-related utility which is the utility that is obtained when an individual contributes to virtual communities. Receiving this utility is based on the belief that any contribution to the community strengthens the focus of it, thus the focus on the main subject of the community (Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001). The second utility they identified is the consumption utility, which is derived from consuming contributions of other members and whereby strengthening personal knowledge or skills. The third and last utility identified by Balasubramanian and Mahajan (2001) is the approval utility which is derived from the feeling of satisfaction when others consume and approve personal contribution. As it was mentioned above it is argued by Saffer (2008) that social interaction utilities changed from economic motivations towards motivations of pleasure. Based on this assumption it could be argued that the social interaction utility framework as initially proposed by Balasubramanian and Mahajan (2001) to study economic leverages for social interaction is outdated to use for studying contemporary social interactions.

However, Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, and Gremler (2004) have updated the initial social interaction utility framework and proposed to add two extra utilities to this framework based on the characteristics of opinion platforms and their literature review on motive-related electronic Word-Of-Mouth. They added the moderator related utility, which is derived when others make the act of complaining online easier. Moreover, they added the homeostase utility which is based upon the assumption that all individuals strive for balance in their lives. A negative experience, therefore, can be vented online in order to obtain the homeostase utility (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Due to this extension of the social interaction utility framework and its application on eWOM, the framework is still highly relevant in analyzing contemporary social interactions. Moreover, the framework is in

particular relevant when addressing possible motivations for haters to engage in a negative way with branded content on Instagram since branded content of fitness influencers is a form of eWOM. Therefore, the extended social interaction utility framework of Hennig-Thurau et. (2004) is used throughout this study to frame the discussion on motivations of haters for engaging in a negative way with branded content of fitness influencers on Instagram.

### *2.2.2. Defining eWOM on Instagram*

Before making assumptions on motivations for negative engagement with eWOM of fitness influencers, first, the concept of eWOM is in need of some clarification. As mentioned in the introduction, electronic Word-Of-Mouth is defined as any statement made on a product or brand, either positive or negative, that is made available to a large number of people and institutions using the Internet (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Therefore eWOM is the act of consumers talking amongst themselves about brands and products and thereby influencing the consumer decisions of others. Moreover, eWOM is considered to be the most influential factor in consumer decision making at all phases of the consumer decision-making process (Daugherty & Hoffman, 2014). According to Kudeshia and Kumar (2015), there are four different categories within eWOM; specialized eWOM, affiliated eWOM, social eWOM, and miscellaneous eWOM. Of these four categories, social eWOM is considered to be the most effective form of eWOM.

Social eWOM happens when consumers give or explore product-related recommendations or branded content on social networking sites. (Kudeshia & Kumar, 2015). Influencers posting branded content thus falls in the social eWOM category. In particular influencers on Instagram with a large follower base are very effective in influencing consumers, since they can reach a lot of people with their content. In addition, influencers can thrive by sharing their views and opinions on brands and products through their content, since they are considered to be regular people by their followers, and are often not affiliated with specific brands (Konstantopoulou, Rizomyliotis, Konstantoulaki, & Badahdah, 2019). It is argued by Jaakonmäki et al. (2017) that effective influencer marketing, therefore, is the act of identifying the key decision makers amongst a target audience, thus large influencers, and encouraging them to spread positive social eWOM.

### 2.2.3. Social interaction utilities and their motivations

Within the updated social interaction utility framework, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) identified eleven possible motivations for consumers to engage in eWOM. However, their identified motivations included both posting positive and negative comments. Therefore, some of the motivations are based on positive consumer experiences and not connected to negative engagement behavior. However, in order to prevent making premature assumptions and influencing the data analysis, all of them are mentioned below with regards to their connected utilities. However, those motivations that are more clearly connected towards negative engagement behavior are discussed more in-depth.

Firstly, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) argued that the focus-related utility as established by Balasubramanian and Mahajan (2001), is based on the assumption of adding value to the community. According to this assumption individuals who post comments on Instagram thus have the feeling that they add value with their contributions to the overall community in which they are participating. Under the focus-related utility, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) identified four possible motivations for engagement with eWOM and labeled them as *concern for other consumers*, *helping the company*, *social benefit*, and *exertion of collective power over companies*. The concern for other consumers motivation is argued by the authors to be closely related to the concept of altruism, which is often described using the word selfishness (Wilson, 1992). Applied to negative engagement behavior on Instagram, users can post negative or hateful comments motivated by their concern for other consumers. This motivation thus can lead to Instagram users exposing fitness influencers who endorse bad products or promote unhealthy exercises for example. Sharing their own knowledge about subjects, Instagram users then aim to inform and prevent other users from buying bad products and engaging in unhealthy behaviors.

Social benefit is the motivation of users to participate in online communities in order to identify and integrate with them. Participating thus creates a sense of belonging to online communities (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Posting comments on the content of fitness influencers then can create a sense of belonging to the fitness community on Instagram. However, posting negative or hateful comments might actually lessen the belonging of haters to the fitness community. Therefore, it might be that negative engagement behavior is related to another type of Instagram community of which haters can obtain social benefits from by their negative engagement behavior. Another possible reason to post negative

comments based on the social benefits motivation is to expose flaws or misconceptions of fitness influencers, hereby demonstrating personal expertise. Exposing flaws in this context in this context could strengthen the belonging to the fitness community on Instagram. Lastly, the exertion of collective power over companies is related to the way eWOM shifts power from companies to consumers. In the case of negative experiences, consumers can articulate their experiences online in order to exert their power over the company and influence the decision of other consumers. Especially when consumers articulate negative experiences simultaneously they are very influential (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Based on the exertion of collective power motivation, Instagram users can post negative comments based on negative experiences on the eWOM of fitness influencers with the aim to influence the consumer decision of others.

Regarding the second utility, the consumption utility, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) identified *post-purchase advice-seeking* as a possible motivation for consumers to engage with eWOM. After purchasing, consumers can be motivated to search for online reviews and ask online others for their experiences and advice with the specific product, since asking delivers more relevant information than reading reviews. On Instagram, users, therefore, can post negative comments based on post-purchase advice-seeking motivations. In the case of a negative consumer experience, sharing it on eWOM can help users getting advice from others on how to use certain products in a different way to make it more effective.

Third, under the approval utility Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) identified *the self-enhancement motivation*, which is driven by the desire of people to receive positive recognition of others, and the *economic rewards motivation* when money or other economic rewards motivate them to engage in eWOM. Instagram provides several functions to establish self-enhancement for its users. For example, users can like pictures or comments of others, hereby expressing their agreement or appreciation. Moreover, users can comment on pictures or other comments under posts to verbally express their agreement or appreciation. When Instagram users thus post negative or hateful comments they can receive self-enhancing responses of other users who like their comments or comment back on them to express their agreement. Posting negative or hateful comments, therefore, can possibly be a way for Instagram users to find out if others think the same way about certain content whereby receiving the approval utility.

The fourth utility, moderator-related utility, is related to the motivations that address

*convenience* and *problem-solving support*. *Convenience* is a motivation that can drive consumers to engage with eWOM when it is more convenient for them to engage with this content than to actually contact the brand. Posting negative comments on eWOM of fitness influencers on Instagram thus can be a more convenient way for Instagram users to express their negative experiences than to contact the brand directly. *Problem-solving support* is the motivation that drives consumers to engage with eWOM while hoping that the platform operator will serve as a moderator (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). With regards to Instagram, users can report eWOM of fitness influencers which does not explicitly display commercial ties or feels inappropriate towards them.

Lastly, under the homeostase utility Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) identified the *expressing positive emotions* and *venting negative feelings* as motivations for consumers to engage with eWOM. Venting negative feelings thus can be a motivation for Instagram users to post negative or hateful comments in order to restore their balance. Negative feelings can be based on a negative consumer experience or be evoked by different aspects of the content of fitness influencers. The following sub-chapters discuss two of these possible aspects more in-depth. However, negative feelings among Instagram users thus can result in hateful or negative comments of them on the disliked content of fitness influencers with the aim to receive the homeostase utility.

Overall, the social interaction utility framework and in particular the extensions of Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) and their identified motivations serves as a frame for the discussion of possible motivations for haters to engage in a negative way with the content of Dutch fitness influencers. In addition, the framework contributes to analyzing the gathered data and recognizing the possible motivations of haters that are addressed in the interviews. Therefore, the social interaction utility framework helps in making sense of the data and making conclusions on motivations for haters to engage in a negative way with branded content.

### **2.3. Source credibility**

In this section, source credibility theory is introduced together with its three dimensions of expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Moreover, the lack of source credibility or one of its three dimensions is discussed as a possible aspect responsible for evoking negative engagement behavior. Therefore, it is argued how a lack of credibility can

motivate haters to engage with branded content with regards to the social interaction utility framework. Overall, this section contributes to forming relevant questions for the interview guide, in order to address possible aspects of branded content of Dutch fitness influencers which evoke negative engagement behavior of haters on Instagram aiming to answer sub-question 3: *What aspects of branded content of Dutch fitness influencers evoke negative engagement behavior among haters?*

### *2.3.1. Source credibility theory*

Source credibility is a term that is mainly used to indicate positive characteristics of a communicative source which contribute to persuading an audience (Amelina & Zhu, 2016). Therefore, the source credibility theory argues that audiences are easier persuaded when the source is perceived as credible (Samarasinghe, 2018). Moreover, source credibility is argued to consist of three sub-dimensions; expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Amelina & Zhu, 2016; Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011). Expertise hereby refers to the level of knowledge an audience perceives the source to possess about the discussed topic (Spry et al., 2011). Expertise is related to concepts such as knowledge, skills, qualification, and experience (Amelina & Zhu, 2016). Trustworthiness is related to the perception of the audience on their endorsement motivations. Therefore trustworthiness is closely related to the concept of authenticity which is further discussed in the following paragraph. Lastly, the dimension of attractiveness is related to the findings that physical attractive sources have a positive impact on consumer attitudes (Spry et al., 2011). Previous studies already established that a positive perception on the credibility of a communication source can have positive effects on consumer attitudes and buying behavior (Amelina & Zhu, 2016; Samarasinghe, 2018; Spry et al., 2011). The three dimensions, however, are interrelated and have an effect on each other. Thus when a source is perceived as low in expertise, their trustworthiness also becomes questionable.

Micro-celebrity, such as Instagram influencers, is often the result of an online persona that feels authentic to readers (Abidin & Ots, 2016). Authentic and unique content gives Instagram users a reason to engage with an influencer and as a result, contribute to helping the influencers grow. However, more consumers are becoming aware of the reality behind inspirational posts as being sponsored messages and advertisements. As it is argued by Khamis, Ang and Welling (2017) the perception of authenticity creates room for

influencers that is exploitable by engaging in commercial arrangements. Therefore, the influencer community is getting a lot of negative attention from the media and Instagram users themselves (Schreuder, 2017). When haters are calling influencers fake, they are often indicating towards one or multiple aspects that are related to the perceived authenticity and credibility of an influencer. Authenticity in the traditional sense is based on intrinsic motivations which value uniqueness, original expression and independence from the market (Khamis et al., 2017). Therefore, authenticity is closely related to the trustworthiness dimension of the source credibility model which is based on the perceptions of the audience of the intrinsic motivations of an influencer to engage in endorsements (Samarasinghe, 2018). When consumers thus perceive influencers as being dependent on brands they collaborate with, the perception of the authenticity and trustworthiness of the influencers gets harmed.

### *2.3.2. Moderating factors in source credibility*

There are several Instagram features that are moderating factors in assessing the credibility of Instagram influencers. Firstly, the number of followers of Instagram influencers is a moderating factor for consumers in assessing the trustworthiness of an Instagram influencer. Larger influencers are often assessed as less authentic and when they promote products, they are perceived as rather common instead of unique (De Veirman et al., 2017). Moreover, it is found that larger influencers are perceived as less trustworthy than smaller influencers or micro influencers (Bijen, 2017). Besides the ratio of followers and followees is an important indicator for followers to assess whether an Instagram Influencer is authentic or not. It is argued that when influencers follow more accounts than they have followers themselves, it can be perceived as an attempt to be followed back by a lot of people (De Veirman et al., 2017). Consumers then perceive the influencer as less authentic and assess their intrinsic motivations in a negative way, by perceiving them as people who want to grow and have more followers, instead of being authentic and independent of the market. Therefore in order to get more engagement, it is important for social media influencers to know what their users are interested in and what they would like to see (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

An often used strategy by influencers is to compare themselves towards their competitors and see what content of them is performing well (O'Connor, 2017). Even though



this can be helpful in creating better performing content, the risk of imitating well-performing content can be that it is perceived as unauthentic, not original and thus fake by followers. Moreover, with regards to the social interaction utility framework, engaging with branded content that is perceived as unreliable can help haters to gain the focus-related utility. When users are affiliated with an online community, engaging with content can help consumers to participate and belong to online communities and in return receive the focus utility from this community membership (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Therefore, when users are affiliated with the fitness community on Instagram, social benefits can be a motivation for them to engage with unreliable branded content and expose flaws, in order to strengthen their belonging to the fitness community on Instagram.

Using literature on influencer authenticity and credibility, questions on assessing when haters perceive influencers as fake or lacking credibility are formulated for the interview guide. These questions are forming a starting point for evoking a conversation on possible aspects of the content of fitness influencers which are related to negative engagement behavior of haters on Instagram.

## **2.4. Disruptive social media experiences**

In this section, disruptive social media experiences are introduced as an aspect of branded content of fitness influencers which could contribute to evoking negative responses of haters. In addition, it is explained how branded content of fitness influencers falls in the category of native advertising and how EU regulations prevent native advertising to become covert advertising through obliging disclosure language. Moreover, in this section, it is argued that disclosure language can lead to an increased disruptive social media experience and explained how encountering branded content on Instagram can possibly lead to negative responses of haters. Lastly, the persuasion knowledge model is introduced to illustrate how disclosure language can lead to negative responses of haters on the branded content of fitness influencers.

### ***2.4.1. Disclosure language***

A possible source of evoking negative engagement behavior of haters is a disruptive social media experience. Social media as a marketing and advertising tool has been growing significantly in the last decade and one of the reasons that many marketers are interested in

social media platforms is that it can be used for native advertising, which is a type of advertising that is designed to blend in the content of the media platform (Manic, 2015). It has already been found that Interruptive marketing messages can lead to negative reactions (Barnes, 2002). Interruptive marketing messages are advertising which interrupts from activities such as reading a magazine (Petty, 2000). Using social media platforms, however, and adjusting the messages to the style and characteristics of the platform and blend in with the other content can decrease the level of perceived interruption. Influencer marketing on Instagram thus is designed to decrease the disruption between regular feed and marketing messages which has been found to be a very effective marketing tool (Freberg et al., 2011; Jaakonmäki et al., 2017).

However, marketing attempts that expose consumers to brands by embedding them into platforms that are not typically considered to be for advertising are also defined as covert marketing, which is a form of hidden marketing (Wei, Fischer, & Main, 2008). Native marketing, and thus adapting marketing messages to the style and habits of the used platform is allowed. However, covert advertising of which consumers are not aware of is not allowed in the EU. EU regulations on influencer marketing state that commercial communications on social media need to be clearly identifiable as such and that the brand on whose behalf the commercial content is made needs to be clearly identifiable as well in order to prevent covert or misleading advertising (Gürkaynak, Kama, & Ergün, 2018). Therefore, the audiences should be explicitly informed when editorial content contains some form of commercial content, in order to guarantee fair communication and avoid persuasion without the awareness of the audience (Boerman, van Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2012). However, following these regulations and disclosing commercial relationships on Instagram increases advertisement recognition as well as the feeling of disruption that Instagram users can experience from it.

#### *2.4.2. The persuasion knowledge model*

It is argued above that disclosure language on Instagram is positively related to advertising recognition which in turn has a negative impact on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions (Evans et al., 2017). This finding aligns with the persuasion knowledge model, which was developed by Friestad and Wright (1994). The model describes how consumers develop knowledge about persuasion and how this knowledge is used to

evaluate, interpret and react towards persuasion attempts (Boerman et al., 2012). Moreover, the model argues that people tend to react in a negative way when they are aware of a persuasion attempt, which can result in emotional responses such as mocking or expressing strong feelings on the persuasion attempt (Friestad & Wright, 1994).

Rozendaal, Lapierre, van Reijmersdal and Buijzen (2011) argued that persuasion knowledge should be divided into two different aspects: conceptual persuasion knowledge and attitudinal persuasion knowledge. Conceptual persuasion knowledge involves recognizing branded content and understanding the persuasive intent (Boerman et al., 2012). The main goal of disclosure language, therefore, is to support audiences in recognizing branded content and activating the conceptual persuasion knowledge. Attitudinal persuasion knowledge is a mechanism that is activated when recognizing persuasion attempts and can serve as a defense towards persuasion attempts (Rozendaal et al., 2011). Attitudinal persuasion knowledge encompasses critical attitudes towards branded content. Therefore, disclosure language can affect attitudinal persuasion knowledge by activating the conceptual persuasion knowledge (Boerman et al., 2012). Since people tend to react in a negative way to persuasion attempts (Friestad & Wright, 1994), disclosure language can affect the overall effectiveness of branded content of fitness influencers. Moreover, the model explains how recognizing persuasion attempts can activate the attitudinal persuasion knowledge mechanism and thus result in negative responses of haters on branded content. Therefore, negative engagement behavior of haters on branded content is possibly linked to the homeostasis utility, which is obtained when the balance after a negative experience is restored. After a disruptive social media experience, venting can be a motivation for haters to help them to receive the homeostasis utility and restore their balance.

In conclusion, the theory on the effects of disclosure language and the persuasion knowledge model contributes to formulating relevant questions for the interview guide. Addressing disruptive marketing messages within the interviews contributes to broadening the conversation of possible motivations for haters to engage in a negative way with the branded content of fitness influencers. In particular, addressing the perceived disruptiveness of branded content contributes to identifying aspects of branded content of fitness influencers that can possibly evoke negative responses of haters. Identifying these aspects is relevant for professionals in the field of influencer marketing, as they can use this knowledge

to develop strategies for limiting negative responses as much as possible. Overall this theoretical framework serves as a frame for guiding the discussion on possible motivations for haters to engage in negative ways with branded content. The social interaction utility framework, in particular, is a useful guide in addressing and identifying possible motivations of haters for negative engagement and the utilities they gain by engaging in a negative way with branded content. In addition, using the theoretical framework, a valid participant sample is selected and a relevant interview guide is formed with the aim to answer the main research question: *What are the motivations of the haters of fitness influencers to negatively engage with their eWOM?*

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Research design

In order to answer the exploratory research question: “*What are the motivations of the haters of Dutch fitness influencers to engage in a negative way with their branded content on Instagram?*” qualitative research methods are being used. Qualitative research methods aim to provide meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, and descriptions of social and cultural relevant phenomena (Hillebrand & Berg, 2006). In addition, qualitative research usually relies on the inductive reasoning process which involves interpreting and structuring meanings that are obtained through qualitative data (Thorne, 2000). Inductive research thus starts with data and uses it to generate ideas or theories from it. This inductive reasoning process makes qualitative research in particular suitable for understanding new phenomena. Moreover, qualitative research methods are most suitable when the research question asks for an in-depth understanding of social practices and concepts (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005). As the purpose of this research is to gain an in-depth understanding of the relatively new social practice of online hating and motivations for engaging in this behavior, qualitative methods are most suitable to reach this.

The qualitative research technique that is used in this study to gather data is in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews involve gathering data by conducting individual, intensive interviews with a small number of participants with the aim to find out how they perceive certain social practices and behaviors (Boyce & Neal, 2006). Qualitative research using in-depth interviews, therefore is again, in particular, used to explore new issues and generate detailed information about a person’s thoughts and behaviors (Boyce & Neal, 2006). Given the academic novelty of the topic of possible motivations of haters for engaging in negative ways with branded content, qualitative interviews are the most appropriate method to generate detailed information on this. The qualitative interviews used for data gathering are semi-structured, meaning that the interview is based upon a loose structure of open-ended questions formulated in an interview guide which define the area that needs to be explored (Britten, 1995). However, the interviewer and the participant can diverge from this structure when they want to explore responses and ideas in more detail. Semi-structured interviews thus allow the researcher to go in-depth with follow-up questions which are, again, useful in

exploring new social practices and behaviors (Boyce & Neal, 2006). In addition, semi-structured interviews have as an advantage that questions can be rephrased, since not every word has the same meaning to every respondent (Barriball & Alison, 1994). Semi-structured interviewing, therefore, allows for some flexibility and reciprocity (Britten, 1995).

Reciprocity between the interviewer and the participants is one of the main advantages of semi-structured interviews and contributes to establishing rapport (Elmir, Schmied, Jackson, & Wilkes, 2011; Galletta, 2013). Reciprocity involves the mutual exchange of information and is based on a universal social norm which involves repaying in kind what has been received (Elmir et al., 2011; Goodman-Delahunty & Howes, 2016). Having reciprocity during interviews enables researchers to obtain more detailed information on the research area than which can be obtained by other data collection methods (Boyce & Neal, 2006). In addition, building rapport with participants is an essential part of successful in-depth interviewing on potentially sensitive topics and can lead to participants enhancing the access of the researcher to valuable and potentially sensitive information (Elmir et al., 2011). Rapport with regards to in-depth interviewing has been described as an interpersonal dynamic of trust and openness between people (Goodman-Delahunty & Howes, 2016). Even though building rapport is essential for a successful qualitative interview, it can be a challenge to reach this and get the participant to cooperate. Therefore, several techniques are used to increase trust between the participant and the interviewer in order to get access to more sensitive information. First and foremost, complete anonymity and confidentiality are afforded to the participants based on a written confidentiality statement. The protective cloak of anonymity is found to increase the willingness of participants to share what they truly feel and think (Opdenakker, 2006).

In addition, reciprocity can be used as a technique for building rapport through self-disclosure of the researcher. Self-disclosure can enhance interviews and contribute to creating a less intimidating environment for the participant (Elmir et al., 2011). Moreover, based on the universal social norm of repaying in kind what has been received, self-disclosure can increase the willingness of participants to exchange information with the researcher (Goodman-Delahunty & Howes, 2016). However, self-disclosure can also potentially lead to confusion on the role of the researcher (Elmir et al., 2011). Therefore, the self-disclosure of the researcher in this study is limited to a small introduction and explanation of the personal interest in the topic at the beginning of the interview.

However, one of the limitations of in-depth interviews is that it is prone to confirmation bias when a researcher is already searching for a specific outcome of the study (Boyce & Neal, 2006). As a result, participants might notice what the interests of the researcher are, and respond accordingly to the opinions and understandings of the researcher. This response effect can be reduced by assuring participants at the beginning of the interview that there are no right or wrong answers (Marginson, 2007). Therefore, based on the literature discussed above, a statement on the beginning of the interview is included in the interview guide (Appendix A) in order to reduce confirmation bias and establishing rapport between the interviewer and the participant with the aim to increase the validity and quality of the data.

### **3.2. Operationalization**

Using semi-structured interviews as a research technique requires some previous knowledge on the topic of interest, in order to base the structure of the interview and interview questions on (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016). The overall structure and the formulated interview questions in the interview guide, therefore, are informed by the theoretical framework. Based on the theoretical framework the interview guide consists of three main topics, addressing the three sub-questions (Appendix A).

The interview guide starts with addressing haters and their personal negative online engagement behavior on Instagram with fitness influencers with the aim to answer the first sub-question: *How do haters of Dutch fitness influencers perceive their own use of Instagram?* Based on theoretical findings, questions on detaching and destructive social media engagement behavior are formed in order to explore the intensity of the negative online engagement behavior of the participant in relation to fitness influencers. Moreover, the first part of the interview guide includes a personal section for each participant based upon the hate comment through which they were found and contacted on. Questions on the reason for posting this comment contribute to finding out what motivations and utilities are related to the hate comment. This part, therefore, aims to answer the second sub-question: *What utilities are obtained by haters of Dutch fitness influencers when engaging with branded content in a negative way?*

The second part aims to start a discussion on the possible motivations of haters, by introducing a lack of source credibility and its three main dimensions of attractiveness,

trustworthiness, and expertise as a possible aspect for evoking negative responses. In addition, two posts of Dutch fitness influencers are shown as material probes to the participants in order to make the discussion on a lack of source credibility in relation to negative online engagement behavior more specific. Questions on motivations for negative engagement behavior in relation towards these posts are asked, with the overall aim to link them to the social interaction utility framework and gain deeper insights in the motivations for haters' negative engagement behavior. Moreover, this part serves as a starting point for discussing aspects of branded content that evokes negative engagement behavior among the participants. Therefore, the material probes also aim to answer the third sub-question: *What aspects of branded content of Dutch fitness influencers evoke negative engagement behavior among haters?*

Lastly, the third part addresses the disruptiveness of branded content of fitness influencers. Again a post of a Dutch fitness influencer featuring branded content is shown in order to start a discussion on disruptive social media experiences. Moreover, questions on negative engagement behavior with this type of content are asked with the aim to relate possible motivations towards the social interaction utility framework as proposed by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004). As mentioned before, semi-structured interviews give room to go in-depth on certain topics or diverge to other topics (Boyce & Neal, 2006). Therefore, by discussing these two possible sources of negative engagement behavior for haters of fitness influencers, other sources can also emerge and be discussed during the interview that is relevant to answering sub-question three. However, the interview guide contributes during the interview in helping the interviewer to address all the topics of study as well as giving the participant guidance on what to talk about (Kallio et al., 2016).

### **3.3. Sampling**

To find out what the motivations of haters of fitness influencers are for engaging in a negative way with their branded content, most of the participants were selected using judgment sampling. When sampling participants within a certain specific domain such as haters on Instagram, the aim is to reduce randomness as much as possible, which makes non-probability sampling approaches the most appropriate. Non-probability sampling consists of various sampling types such as convenience sampling and more purposive methods of sampling (Feild, Pruchno, Bewley, Lemay, & Levinsky, 2006). For this study, the



judgment sampling technique was used to select an appropriate sample of haters of fitness influencers to interview. The judgment sampling technique involves the researcher actively selecting the most productive sample with the aim to answer the research question (M. Marshall, 1996). There are different ways to select a judgment sample, however, in this study, the aim was to find participants who have specific experiences, which is known as a critical case sample (M. Marshall, 1996).

Therefore based upon the following participant definition that is formulated according to the findings on haters in the theoretical framework, ten participants were included in this research; *Instagram followers who engage in a negative way with the branded content of successful Dutch fitness influencers, either detaching or destructing, using an inconsiderate style of communication.* This participant definition thus excluded constructive feedback which is aimed to improve the performance of others, with the aim to reach an appropriate sample of participants who engage in negative engagement behavior with the content of fitness influencers on Instagram. Judgment sampling is very effective for an exploratory research design as this enables the researcher to actively select the most appropriate participants (Flick, 2011). However, the sampling method is prone to researcher bias in selecting the sample and thus can influence the results (Taherdoost, 2018). The participant definition, therefore, is a tool that limits this bias, since it provides a clear overview of who can and who can't be included in the study based on previous theoretical findings.

Searching for participants was initially based upon the monitoring of three Instagram accounts of Dutch fitness influencers who regularly engage in collaboration with brands. First, the account of Tavi Castro was selected, which is one of the largest fitness influencers of the Netherlands with an amount of 2.7 million followers and often collaborates with gyms and protein brands. The second account that was selected is the account of Lindsey van der Hoeven who has 83.900 followers and collaborates with Body Engineers, which is a fitness fashion brand. The third account that was selected is the account of Sandra Prikker who has 3.3 million followers and she recently started to collaborate with Body en Fit Shop which is a Dutch fitness supplements brand. Lastly, during the interviews, the Instagram accounts of two other Dutch fitness influencers, Joel Beukers and Gaby Blaaser kept coming up. Joel Beukers has an amount of 215.000 followers and heavily promotes his own brand of pre-workout powders. Gaby Blaaser has an amount of 242.000 followers and is a Body Engineers

athlete and regularly engages in promotions for Body Engineers. Therefore the accounts of Joel Beukers and Gaby Blaaser were used to find the last two participants. Based on the five Instagram accounts of the fitness influencers mentioned above, a number of 8 participants agreed to participate in this study. One of the remaining participants was encountered through the personal Instagram feed of the researcher, with a hateful comment on the content of a friend. The remaining participant was selected using snowball sampling through participant one.

In order to provide some insights into the participants, a detailed overview of their demographics and their comments on which participation in this study is based is included in Appendix C. Even though differences in the demographics of age, nationality, and gender are not taken into account in this research, this information is provided, since it gives relevant information on whom the findings of the study apply to. Therefore, detailed participants characteristics provide some insight on the generalizability of the findings and possible limitations of it (Prieler, 2019). The demographics of studies or type of job wasn't specifically asked for in the interview, however, it is added to the participants' demographics when it came up during the interview and seems relevant to this study.

It is often argued that research using small samples has as a disadvantage that the sample is not representative of the entire population and thus decreases the validity of the research. This is related to quantitative research, which often sees representation as the ultimate goal of all good research (M. Marshall, 1996). However, the aim of qualitative research using non-probability sampling is not to generalize to the wider population from a smaller sample, instead, it aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the social practices and behaviors of the participants (Holdaway, 2012). Therefore, taking limited resources into account, exploratory and concept-generating studies can actually benefit from having a relatively small number of participants since it permits the researcher to have repeated contact and greater involvement with the participants, which is beneficial for the validity and reliability of the research (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). In addition, the appropriate sample size for qualitative interviewing is argued to be when data saturation occurs (M. Marshall, 1996). Qualitative researchers thus should keep expanding their sample size until no new themes or findings emerge from the data. Moreover, ignoring theoretical saturation, and conduct research with a too small sample, can result into theories and findings that are based on inadequate development of patterns and themes and thus affect the reliability and

validity of the research. It is argued by Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, and Fontenot (2013) that saturation often occurs between 10 and 30 interviews, however, that several interviews past the point of saturation should be conducted to indicate that the data is indeed becoming redundant.

### **3.4. Data collection and analysis**

The data collection was done by conducting interviews with ten participants who suited the participant definition. The interviews were held face-to-face or using the online video calling software of Skype if face-to-face interviewing was not possible. Skype was used due to its screen sharing function which enabled the researcher to share material probes during the interview. Online video calling software was used for the convenience of both the researcher and the participant if the travel distance was too far. In addition, offering the option for doing the interview using video calling software might make participating more accessible for possible participants, since it is free and eliminates travel expenses (Hay-Gibson, 2010). Therefore, using video calling software is considered to be a valid method with great potential for conducting qualitative in-depth interviews (Bertrand & Bourdeau, 2010; Hay-Gibson, 2010). However, if the participants agreed to meet for a face-to-face interview, this was preferred, since it has found to be easier to build rapport with the participant in the physical presence (Bertrand & Bourdeau, 2010). In addition, it can be harder to assure participants of confidentiality using video calling software, which might limit the access of the researcher to sensitive information (Bertrand & Bourdeau, 2010). In order to reduce this, it was stated very clearly at the beginning of the interview that only the audio will be recorded and all data is processed anonymously. Moreover, an informed consent form was given or sent to the participants before conducting the interview. Eventually, four of the ten participants agreed to do the interview face-to-face whereas the remaining six were conducted using Skype.

To make the generated data of the interviews suited for analysis, all the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Therefore, everything that is said as well as non-verbal sounds such as laughter and pauses are written in the transcript (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2006). However, as five participants indicated they were not fluent in English, they were conducted in Dutch and translated to English in the transcription.

All of the transcriptions then were analyzed based on the thematic analysis method, which is the process of identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2014). The two main advantages of thematic analysis are that it is accessible and flexible since it can be conducted in multiple different ways (Braun & Clarke, 2012). However, since this is an explorative research design an inductive analysis approach was chosen to discover main themes through the coding process.

The coding process is divided by Boeije (2004) into three different phases. At first, the transcribed material is broken down and categorized into data, which is called open coding. Open coding is especially relevant for an inductive study since it involves coding any piece of data that might be relevant from a wide range of different perspectives, whereas, deductive studies often have an established coding frame based on previous theory (Gale, Heath, Cameron, Rashid, & Redwood, 2013). Open coding is followed by axial coding which is the process of putting the data back together in new ways by making connections between the open codes. In other words, categories emerge from the open coding process which forms more precise and complete explanations of the open codes (Blair, 2015). Axial coding thus involves searching for indicators and characteristics of concepts and behaviors with the aim to define them (Boeije, 2002). Lastly, selective coding or thematic coding is applied, which involves looking for connections or main themes between the categories. Themes capture important aspects from the data that is relevant to the research question and represent patterned responses or meaning within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Selective coding thus is the most abstract level of coding and is aimed to answer the main research question by identifying themes in the data (Cheek, 2004).

Using the steps above, three final themes emerged from the coding process; perceptions on Instagram use, obtained utilities for negative engagement behavior, and aspects of the content of fitness influencers on Instagram that evoke negative engagement behavior. These final themes are all relevant in answering one of the three sub-questions, which is presented in detail in the results chapter. The coding process is done using the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti which is a useful tool to document analytic decisions in a transparent, reflexive, rigorous and systematic way (Paulus & Lester, 2016). Especially transparency is an important concept when assessing the quality of qualitative research. Transparency is the principle that every scientist should make essential components of the study visible. Therefore, transparency consists of three dimensions; data,

analytic and production transparency (Moravcsik, 2014). Data transparency refers to the amount of access that readers have to the data which is used to support arguments. Analytic transparency refers to information available about the data analysis, and production transparency refers to the information available about the methods by which certain pieces of evidence is selected from the entire data (Moravcsik, 2014). In order to reach transparency in this study, thick descriptions are provided in this chapter on the research design, participant definition, the method, and the data analysis. Taken all the above in account, these methodological steps were followed to select a sample, gather and analyze valid data, with the aim to gain a more complete understanding of the risks of influencer marketing by exploring the motivations of haters to engage in a negative way with the branded content of Dutch fitness influencers.

## 4. Results

This chapter draws upon the three main themes and overall findings that were selected from the interviews with ten haters of fitness influencers during the coding process. The ten interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. During the transcription and open coding process similarities and differences between the participants already became noticeable within the data. In total eight tentative labels emerged from the data, among which relationships and patterns of meanings were identified as three main themes (See Appendix D for code tree). Three final themes thus were derived from the axial codes and divided according to their relevance towards the three sub-questions, hereby following the structure of the theoretical framework. Therefore, in the first part, the perception of the participants on their Instagram use as a final theme is discussed. Among this first part, three axial codes are included to explain the Instagram use of the participants; *perception of common practices on Instagram*, *perception of negative engagement behavior on Instagram*, and *perceptions of self as a hater on Instagram*.

In the second part, the theme of obtained utilities for negative engagement behavior is discussed. Three utilities arose from the data as axial codes; *the focus-related utility*, *the approval utility*, and *the homeostase utility*. The utilities are discussed in this section with regards to the motivations of the participants to engage in a negative way with fitness influencers' content. In the third part, aspects of the branded content of fitness influencers that evoked the participants to respond in a negative way are discussed. Two axial codes were related to this theme are discussed in this section. The axial codes include *deceiving content*, and *sexualization and objectification*. All together these three themes with their axial codes and the answers to the three sub-questions aim at providing a final conclusion on the main research question; *"What are the motivations of the haters of Dutch fitness influencers to engage in a negative way with their branded content on Instagram?"*

### 4.1. Perceptions on Instagram use

The first final theme that was selected from three axial codes was the theme perceptions on Instagram use. This theme is related to the first sub-question that is guiding the research towards answering the main research question. The sub-question was

formulated as follows: *“How do haters of Dutch fitness influencers perceive their own use of Instagram?”* The theme ‘perceptions of Instagram use’ was selected based on three axial codes that emerged from the data: *Perception on common practices on Instagram*, *perception on negative engagement behavior on Instagram* and *perceptions of self as a hater on Instagram*. Together these axial codes provide a clear overview of how the participants display negative engagement behavior on Instagram. Moreover, it is discussed how the participants perceive themselves as haters, and whether the participants felt as if the label of hater was suiting for them and their own negative engagement behavior.

#### *4.1.1. Perceptions of common practices on Instagram*

In order to assess how haters make use of Instagram, general questions on common practices on Instagram use were asked to the participants. Participants provided several general reasons for using Instagram, however, a few were clearly related towards hater behavior on Instagram. The first finding that stood out on Instagram use of haters was that posting comments was a daily habit for one of the participants regarding his use of Instagram. This is illustrated with the following quote which is his answer to the question of whether he posts comments on Instagram often:

*Uhm, well I like to give my opinion [laughter] yeah and I like it a lot too, from my perspective, well I wouldn't call it a professional opinion but it's my vision on their styles and what I think about it. (Participant 6).*

Even though other participants did not mention as specific on how often they posted comments, multiple participants did mention that Instagram as a social media platform was meant for people to voice their opinions. Moreover, they argued that negative and hateful comments are inherently part of social media. This finding is illustrated with the following quotes:

*Uhm, but I was just like this is social media, everyone is allowed to say whatever they want. And... If I post something negative, it doesn't have to mean I hate her or think she's bad that I'm a bad person. (Participant 3).*

*I mean that's something you can expect because you put something of yourself on Instagram, fine. But then you also have to expect that there are people who don't like it at all or can do it better or would have done it differently. (Participant 6).*

So multiple participants indicated that posting negative comments and voicing your opinion is just part of using social media. This perception of the participants on common practices on Instagram illustrates the findings of Lange, (2007b) who argues that some people might have higher tolerances for confrontational participations and perceive hating behavior in a different way than others. These findings, therefore, might explain why some Instagram users engage in online hating more often whereas others don't. Haters on Instagram thus might differ in their perception on how to use Instagram than others, by perceiving it as a platform where it is allowed to voice your opinions, even when they are critical or hateful. Moreover, this different perception on Instagram use might result in displaying negative engagement behavior more often compared to other Instagram users. Another interesting finding that was related to the Instagram use of haters was that two participants mentioned they actually liked to follow content creators they disagree with or dislike:

*Yeah, it's just, uhm there are certain types of people I can't stand and whom I do follow, and I kind of like it to cringe on their content. Like this feeling that it's really weird I think that's sometimes, uhm I don't mind that. And then I can forward it to my friends and say like look at this. (Participant 2).*

*Uhm, I'm not sure if people have experienced this but uhm there are times that I follow people that I hate to just satisfy my anger I guess. That's why I uhm would continue to follow people even if I don't really like them or that I dislike them a lot. (Participant 8).*

When participants thus regularly encounter disliked content, it is probably connected towards posting more negative comments than other Instagram users. Whereas other Instagram users might just not follow or detach themselves from disliked content, haters might actually like to follow disliked content leading to more negative engagement behavior



with the content. The last finding related to the axial code of perception on common practices on Instagram which might be related to more negative engagement behavior was that multiple participants indicated they had more than one Instagram account:

*I have two, so I have one for private and one regular, with regular pictures.  
(Participant 7).*

*I myself, I have two accounts, one with photography and one with fitness and it is the ultimate way to be seen and yeah to exchange good ideas and that kind of stuff.  
(Participant 6).*

The main reasons for the participants to have multiple Instagram accounts, based upon the quotes above, seems to be separating private accounts and topic related accounts. Even though the participants did not mention it, having multiple Instagram accounts might enable haters to engage in a negative way with Instagram content more easily. Especially when other Instagram accounts are used anonymously, which is discussed more in-depth in the following axial theme. However, based upon the findings above the perception of haters on Instagram and how to make use of it seems to be inherently connected towards their negative engagement behavior on Instagram. Therefore, these findings indicate that social media platforms who are struggling with a large amount of negative engagement behavior on it might benefit from addressing the differing perceptions of haters of the platform and how to use it, by providing them with a detailed description on social and civil behavior on the platform. However, these findings can serve as a starting point to address this issue but further research is necessary in order to come up with working and effective solutions to decrease hater behavior on social media.

#### *4.1.2. Perceptions of negative engagement behavior on Instagram*

The second axial code that is relevant to the selective theme of 'perceptions of Instagram use' and answering the first sub-question is the perceptions of haters on negative engagement behavior on Instagram. As mentioned within the theoretical framework, the level of anonymity has been argued by several authors to be one of the most corrosive elements of the internet that creates an uncivil online world. Anonymity can foster a loss of

self-awareness which in turn increase the likelihood of acting upon impulses that are normally inhibited (Hardaker, 2013; Keen, 2007). However, only three out of the ten participants indicated that they did not mention their own name on their Instagram account. The reasons why the participants wanted to use Instagram anonymously are illustrated with the quotes below:

*Yeah, I think it's actually a weird idea that when you google someone you can find everything about that person's life. So I'm like it's fine if people follow me, it's a public profile but I wouldn't like it if people are just looking at my profile when they typed my name in at Google. (Participant 3)*

*It's more personal and then Instagram is more, yeah my Instagram is more open. So everyone can see it and I don't really want people to know my real name, because it's I mean it's not a common name so they can easily find my stuff there and I don't like that so. That's why. (Participant 6).*

*I follow a lot of friends on who are like who I game with so they have Instagram as well, but I follow them as well. And I mean it's not necessary for them to know who I am. So... Like them to know my face and stuff. Like that. (Participant 9).*

Since only three participants mentioned they used Instagram anonymously, there was not a lot of evidence that anonymous use leads towards more hateful comments than others on Instagram. Nonetheless, the findings of the three participants above did align with the findings of Mondal, Silva and Benevenuto (2017) who argue that the level of anonymity that is experienced by the users can favor negative online engagement behavior. However, an interesting addition to this finding is that multiple participants mentioned they also experienced some level of anonymity due to the number of comments that a post has on it. How the participants experienced this anonymity is illustrated with the quotes below:

*Yeah, because when there are only a few followers, you get more in the spotlight or something like that. So I don't really like that. And I was thinking like oh he has enough followers so it's not like I really stand out when I post something critical.*

*(Participant 3).*

*Yeah, I think it does because it's more anonymous and you don't get criticized by everyone who likes him. So they start hating on you while you say just one thing about him. (Participant 9).*

The findings above clarify how participants who do not use a fake name or nickname on their account can still feel anonymous enough to post negative comments without expecting it to have consequences for them personally. However, not all of the participants needed to experience anonymity on Instagram in order for them to display negative engagement behavior:

*No I'm not trying to hide there, like I just said if she was sitting here next to me I would say the same. (Participant 4).*

*I always think face-to-face is the best way, but because these people are famous, you will probably never meet them and they do expose themselves on the internet. You have the right to be honest and say something to them so... Yes. (Participant 10).*

Both of the participants above have Instagram accounts using their personal full name. Therefore, this finding agrees with the research of Lange (2007a) who found that adding personal information on social media accounts does not guarantee cordial interaction since not all social media users perceive online hating as a problem in the same degree. Moreover, the finding above indicates that even when Instagram would succeed in reducing the anonymity of their users, online hating would probably still occur due to differing perceptions of their users on hating and negative engagement behavior. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, negative engagement behavior consists of two types: detaching- and destructive engagement behavior. Since all of the participants were selected based upon a destructive comment, all of them did at least once engage in a destructive hateful way with the content of successful Dutch fitness influencers. The destructive engagement behavior of the participants is illustrated within the following quotes:

*And he has a pretty good body and then I just dislike the way he took the picture and his feet. So I commented and tagged a friend and I was like what is wrong with him, why did he took a picture like that. So yeah... not proud of it [laughter]. (Participant 5).*

*Because I have quite a bit of knowledge about the anatomy of people and muscles so I know for example from my own experience and my experience with other people that certain exercises don't work. So yeah then I type like dude this is just an exercise you that doesn't give you any effects at all (Participant 6).*

Thus, all of the participants have at least once posted a destructive comment on the content of a Dutch fitness influencer which made them fit the participant definition: *Instagram followers who engage in a negative way with the branded content of successful Dutch fitness influencers, either detaching or destructing, using an inconsiderate style of communication.* The participants thus were selected based upon public destructive engagement behavior. However, a less public way of destructive engagement behavior came forward in the data as well:

*Yeah, it looks really fake, very posed and yeah I shared it with my friends. Like who, what the fuck is she doing. Like that, yeah (Participant 4).*

Since destructive social media engagement behavior is defined as the act of making active negative contributions on social media platforms (Dolan et al., 2016), sending negative comments on fitness influencers to friends in direct messages are also part of it. Hating on Instagram thus can be done in a public way by putting comments under disliked content or in a more private way by sending direct messages to either the content creator or friends about the disliked content. However, the largest part of the participants actually indicated a preference towards detaching social media engagement behavior over posting a destructive comment on it. Detaching engagement behavior was defined as the act of removing content that appears on the users home page or news feed (Dolan et al., 2016). Detaching social media, therefore, is illustrated within the quotes below:

*I follow around 800 people and I have the idea that I miss out on a lot, so every time I see a post and I think like what's this, then I click on the profile to see what kind of profile it is and if I don't like it anymore I unfollow. (Participant 3).*

*Every once in a while I go down my timeline and my follower list and then I click on unfollow because I'm thinking that's a lot of shit and I don't need that anymore. Uhm, it may sound a bit savage when I call people shit, but uhm. Yeah, they don't have any value for me anymore. And I don't have to let them know because that's my opinion and there are a lot of people who do appreciate it. (Participant 2)*

Therefore, these findings also agree with the findings of Mai (2007), who argued that key factors in relationship detachment are the perception of quality and emotional involvement. Bad content and weak emotional ties with fitness influencers, therefore, might be one of the reasons for haters to detach themselves from fitness influencers by unfollowing them. However, another way of detaching engagement behavior that all of the participants mentioned to display often was just scrolling away from the disliked content of fitness influencers;

*No, it's your own choice, you can just click it away or scroll. (Participant 10).*

*If it's indeed, that's the beauty of Instagram, if you don't like it you just keep on scrolling. (Participant 6).*

*I scroll it away, like whoop, bye! (Participant 4).*

So based upon the findings above, an experienced level of anonymity does play a role in negative engagement behavior, however, is not solely responsible for it. The perceptions of users on the social media platform and how to make use of it plays a large role in it as well. Moreover, Instagram users can display destructive social media engagement behavior in multiple ways, either posting a destructive comment directly on the post, sending it forward towards their friends with a destructive comment or sending destructive comments to the content creator directly. Sending destructive comments directly towards friends is

interrelated with the approval utility which is discussed in section 4.2.2. In addition, most participants showed a preference for detaching social media engagement behavior over destructive social media engagement behavior. They mentioned that it was less of an effort to just click unfollow or just scroll disliked content away. Especially scrolling disliked content away was mentioned by all of the participants as an easy and effortless way of detaching from disliked content.

#### *4.1.3. Perceptions of self as a hater on Instagram*

The third axial code that is relevant to the theme of Instagram use of haters is how the participants perceived themselves as haters on Instagram. In order to find out about their perceptions of themselves as haters, first, they were asked towards their perception of haters on social media in general. When asking them how they perceived haters, all of the participants defined haters as being very negative on social media and acting aggressive, jealous or as bullies. This general perception of haters is illustrated with the following quotes:

*I think the main difference is that a hater will just be really personal on what they call, in what they say, and also be more aggressive about it. So like, so be more like a bully. (Participant 1).*

*Uhm, hating, hating is people who make fake Instagram accounts and they are not confident enough or how do you, how do you say that... They are just pussies. They really are the lamest people ever. They create a fake profile and post hate. And then I'm really thinking like yeah you know you really got no balls I think. But then you do, it's really bullying it's really bullying other people. (Participant 4).*

The definitions that the participants provided on haters are closely connected towards the findings in the theoretical framework and the definition of haters which is used in this research as *'a social media user who engages with the content of other successful users in a negative way, either detaching or destructing. Moreover, these social media users deliver feedback using an inconsiderate style of communication in the case of destructing engagement behavior.'* However, none of the definitions that the participants provided

included detaching social media behavior as part of hating, nor did they include engaging in destructive engagement behavior in a more private way. Moreover, even though all of the participants were selected based on a public destructive comment, none of the participants fully identified themselves as a hater. This is illustrated within the following quotes:

*A hater does it because they wanna get people down or something, out of jealousy. But I don't do it out of jealousy, I'm not jealous at those people. I don't wanna, I don't wanna be those people at all no. [laughter]. It's more that yeah. This Instagram world it's crazy, yeah, it's more like that. (Participant 4)*

*No, but I think there is a difference between posting critical comments or, you see a lot of cursing in the comments and the only thing I do is saying that I sometimes do think different about something with a tag to one of my friends. Like yeah bro you know, don't do this shit. Or uhm, well uhm, this is such bullshit. Or like this comment over there, it's not that I'm hating or something, or I'm saying she's entirely wrong (Participant 2).*

*I was doubting to delete the comment but I was just thinking like I hope the.. uhm that it won't get any attention further on. So I don't look like a hater or something like that. Uhm, but I was just like this is social media, everyone is allowed to say whatever they want. And... If I post something negative, it doesn't have to mean I hate her or think she's bad that I'm a bad person. (Participant 3).*

Moreover, instead of perceiving their own behavior as hating, multiple participants pointed out that others online are so sensitive and nowadays you can't say anything anymore:

*Yeah, nowadays you have to be careful with what you're saying because people are so sensitive. (Participant 6).*

*And nowadays people are very uhm, how do you say that, uhm how do you say it. They're very sensitive like everything is racist, everything is this, everything is that.*

*(Participant 5)*

As mentioned before not all social media users perceive online hating as a problem in the same degree (Lange, 2007a). Therefore, by calling online others as sensitive, haters might justify their own negative online engagement behavior which they don't perceive as problematic as others. Therefore none of the participants did perceive themselves as haters nor their negative engagement behavior as a problem, even when some of them have been called out as a hater by others:

*Uhm well, it was just a friend of mine because I commented on something in a negative way and she was like your just being a hater like you're just jealous or whatsoever... And she's kinda right. [laughter]. (Participant 5).*

*Nah, of course, I see why people think I'm a hater, the things I say are not always nice but... In my opinion, it's the truth. Yeah. (Participant 4).*

*It wasn't necessarily like a hater but probably like a nag or something like that. Yeah, that they didn't really get why I said those things. (Participant 6).*

Since none of the participants perceived themselves as a hater, they were asked how they would perceive themselves and their negative behavior on Instagram. Multiple participants mentioned they felt more comfortable with the label of fitness influencer critic as illustrated with the following quote:

*Yeah, I would call myself a critic because I would people, I want people to be conscious about what they look at, what they think, what they see, what it does to you. Consciousness is really important in every single way. (Participant 10).*

Overall to answer the first sub-question; “How do haters of Dutch fitness influencers perceive their own use of Instagram?” none of the participants perceived their own use of Instagram as hating, even though they did define hating as posting hateful comments and they were all selected to participate in this research based upon a hateful comment.



Moreover, they justify their behavior by saying online others are so sensitive nowadays and posting negative comments is inherently part of using Instagram. Therefore, the participants perceived it to be okay to voice negative or hateful opinions on it. Posting negative or hateful comments, therefore, might be the result of a higher tolerance for confrontational interactions or a different perception on how to use Instagram compared to other users. However, the majority of the participants did indicate they rather engage with disliked content in a detaching way by unfollowing or scrolling past the disliked content then posting a negative comment on it. These findings could be the results of a social desirability response bias during the sampling and the interviewing. Moreover, the definitions that the participants provided on haters did not include private destructive social media engagement nor detaching social media engagement as part of hating. Therefore, these findings indicate that there is a need for a concept which is less strongly associated with haters as jealous online bullies and is more descriptive for the negative online engagement behavior, either public or private, as displayed by the participants and other Instagram users.

#### **4.2. Utilities of negative engagement behavior**

The second sub-question which serves as a stepping stone to answering the main research question was formulated as follows: *What utilities are obtained by haters of Dutch fitness influencers by engaging with their content in a negative way?* Three of the five utilities as proposed by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) were found in the data and identified as axial codes. Therefore the three axial codes that are relevant to this sub-question are the focus-related utility, the approval utility, and the homeostase utility. Some of the utilities were more present than others, however, all three of the utilities came up when discussing why the participants displayed negative online engagement behavior on Instagram with the content of fitness influencers. Therefore the utilities are discussed below with the aim to gain a clear picture on the motivations of haters for and the utilities they derive from engaging in a negative way with the content of Dutch fitness influencers on Instagram.

##### **4.2.1. The focus-related utility**

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, the focus-related utility is based on the assumption of adding value to the community (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). According to this assumption individuals who post comments on Instagram thus have the feeling they add

value with their contributions to the overall community in which they are participating. The focus-related utility existed of four proposed motivations for online engagement as proposed by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004); concern for others, helping the company, social benefit, and exertion of collective power over companies. However, only the concern for others motivation arose from the data. This concern for others as a motivation for posting negative comments in order to receive the focus-related utility is illustrated with the following quotes of the participants on why they posted the hater comment on which their inclusion in this study was based:

*Uhm, to educate the person that posted it and also maybe others that see it.  
(Participant 1).*

*So but it was something like maybe she sees it, maybe it comes across her or maybe others will see it and read it and they will research it instead of believing the very first thing Sandra Prikker is saying. (Participant 2).*

*Because you only make the world a better place when you start with yourself. So and if this means to point something out to others then I'm fine with that. (Participant 3).*

The findings above demonstrate that in particular wrong information or content that was perceived as fake lead to five of the participants posting a comment based on their concern for others. With concern for others, not only concern for other followers of a particular influencer is meant but also the influencer itself. Comments that are based upon the concern for others motivation, however, might also be perceived as constructive feedback, since the aim of constructive feedback is to improve the knowledge of others, instead of stopping the content creator from making content (Hardavella et al., 2017; Lange, 2007a). When haters on Instagram thus post a comment that comes from altruist motivations to inform other followers on wrong or misleading content, it might be intended by them as constructive feedback, aiming to improve the knowledge of others. However, in this study, their comments were perceived as hater comments since they delivered destructive feedback, which is defined as negative feedback delivered in an inconsiderate style with inconsiderate content (Raver et al., 2012). Their inconsiderate style of

communication thus resulted in them being included in this research.

As mentioned in the discussion of the first theme, none of the participants did perceive themselves as haters, which might be related to the altruist concern for other motivation based on which they posted their negative comment. Therefore, these findings indicate again that there is a need for a concept which covers negative online engagement behavior in less of an extreme form as online bullies with fake profiles which have been found to be the perception on haters of the participants. Even though the participants did fit the definition of haters in this research the findings indicate that the participants did not feel like the concept suited their own behavior and perceptions. Moreover, these findings on altruist motivations for posting negative comments support the lack of the participants of perceiving themselves as haters.

#### *4.2.2. The approval utility*

The approval utility turned out to be a very strong motivator for the participants to post negative comments on the content of Dutch fitness influencers. As mentioned in the theory the approval utility is derived from the feeling of satisfaction when others consume and approve personal contributions (Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001). Under the approval utility, the self-enhancing motivation for engaging with eWOM was identified by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) and defined as the desire of people to receive positive recognition of others (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). While this might not be the first motivation that comes to mind when posting hateful comments, the participants did indicate that they like to post controversial comments to see whether others agree with them:

*And, it's not that I always comment on these things, but at the times I'm thinking like this really is about nothing, and I'm seeing other people who actually go against it and go like yeah you're right and this Demi Bielaski shouldn't wine like this then yeah I'm the one who comments on that like, guys what's this, and I see if I'm people agree with me or if I'm crazy to have this kind of thoughts. (Participant 2).*

*I didn't really have this idea like I'm going to post annoying comments on anything to*

*get likes on it or something. But I think I like it to know I'm not the only one who thinks about it like that. (Participant 3).*

*Yeah, I wanted to ask if she, well my intention was to hear other opinions of other people I think. What they thought about it. (Participant 7).*

Thus participants posted negative comments from self-enhancing motivations with the aim to get positive responses. This is related to the finding of Hardaker (2013) who argued that in some context, mean critical commentary and deliberately trying to anger others can serve as a mean to connect with other users who like to be provocative. Haters on Instagram thus might be driven by the self-enhancement motivation to post critical or mean comments in order to obtain the approval utility of others who agree with them. Moreover, one of the participants mentioned she also engaged in supporting other controversial or hater comments in order to give approval to others on Instagram:

*Yeah, I wanna support all the people who agree with me of the fakeness. And I'm like yes I'm with you guys, yeah. (Participant 4).*

As illustrated with the quote above giving approval to others on social media is related to the motivation of social benefits. This motivation is defined by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) as the motivation to participate in online communities in order to identify and integrate with them. The participation as described with the quote above thus creates a sense of belonging for the participant to the online community which was criticizing the photoshopped content of an influencer. In the theoretical framework, the social benefits motivation is argued to be part of the focus-related utility, which is obtained by users through the sense of adding value to online communities by their contributions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). However, as demonstrated above, the social benefits motivation seems to be closely related to approval utility. By giving positive responses to others, and receiving positive responses from others, social media users thus can experience a sense of belonging towards an online community. The social interaction utilities, therefore, seem to be interrelated to each other.

Overall, getting likes and positive responses on, and giving them to hater comments thus appear to be an important part of negative online engagement behavior. Moreover, the majority of the participants explicitly said that it actually felt good when they got likes and positive responses from others:

*I often get a lot of likes for it. But yeah this did stand out to me then I get a notification of likes and I'm thinking yeah so I was right about this, and that's quite uhm... Yeah, but it is often really paid for or arrogant. But then it's also a good confirmation that you have more knowledge on the right things. (Participant 2).*

*Yeah, quite positive. And it wasn't like I'm going to post negative comments on anything now, but it was like I'm not the only one who thinks about it like this so I'm happy with that. That I'm not looking weird up there. (Participant 3).*

*Yeah, I think so because I mean they, I feel like they are on, that I was right, kind of. (Participant 5).*

Positive responses on the comments of haters, therefore, gives them a feeling of expertise, assures them on their knowledge and assures them they are not the only one with these controversial or differing opinions. Therefore, positive responses to hater comments might reinforce haters on Instagram to keep posting negative comments from self-enhancing motivations. In addition, aiming to increase the chances of receiving the approval utility, the participants mentioned they often tag friends in their comments, as illustrated within the following quotes:

*No, but I think there is a difference between posting critical comments or, you see a lot of cursing in the comments and the only thing I do is saying that I sometimes do think different about something with a tag to one of my friends. Like yeah bro you know, don't to this shit.. (Participant 2).*

*So I commented and tagged a friend and I was like what is wrong with him, why did*

*he took a picture like that. So yeah... not proud of it [laughter]. (Participant 5).*

The participants mentioned their friends often agree with them on their controversial or hateful opinions either on public comments or private messages. The findings on the approval utility, therefore, are also related to a less public way of destructive engagement behavior, by sending disliked content towards friends in direct messages:

*Yeah, it looks really fake, very posed and yeah I shared it with my friends. Like who, what the fuck is she doing. Like that, yeah. (Participant 4).*

*Yeah, it's just, uhm there are certain types of people I can't stand and whom I do follow, and I kind of like it to cringe on their content. Like this feeling that it's really weird I think that's sometimes, uhm I don't mind that. And then I can forward it to my friends and say like look at this. For example like Nicky Bos and uhm. No not Nicky Bos, people like Sandra Prikker. (Participant 2).*

As mentioned before in the theoretical framework on negative engagement behavior, forwarding disliked content in DM's is a more private way of online hating. However, this private way of destructive engagement behavior actually increases the chances for the haters to get self-enhancing responses back from their friends. Overall, haters also appear to receive self-enhancing responses on public hateful comments from strangers, hereby receiving the positive feeling of the approval utility through likes and positive comments on their hateful comment. Receiving the approval utility, therefore, might be a large part of the reason why haters on Instagram post public negative comments on the content of successful influencers.

#### *4.2.3. The homeostase utility*

Lastly, the homeostase utility was found to be related to the negative engagement behavior of the participant. As mentioned in the theory, the homeostase utility is based upon the assumption that all individuals strive for balance in their lives. The venting negative feelings motivation was identified by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) as a reason for consumers

to engage with eWOM with the aim to restore their balance. According to Hennig-Thureau et al. (2004), venting negative feelings can help in reducing the discontent which is associated with the negative emotions of the participant. The venting negative feelings motivation, therefore, is the most related to existing definitions of haters as explored within the theoretical framework. Existing definitions perceive haters as social media users who cannot be happy for the success of others. Moreover, haters are perceived as users who “hate for irrational reasons and more for the sake of hate itself” (Mackenzie, 2013). Therefore, existing definitions already imply that haters act from jealous motivations, which is related to the motivation of venting negative feelings for restoring balance. However, previous findings already proved that haters and their motivations for negative engagement behavior with the content of fitness influencers on Instagram go further than this.

Nonetheless, venting negative feelings was also found to be part of negative engagement behavior. Three of the participants did indicate that they were sooner to post a negative comment on the content of Dutch fitness influencers on Instagram when they were experiencing negative feelings. This is illustrated within the following quotes:

*I don't really know, I also had quite a bad day at my work and then I saw this picture and I just thought why? (Participant 2).*

*No, I think I may if I feel a little bit bad I would maybe tag a friend in it and be like this is clearly advertisement and like you know call it out (Participant 5 on picture 2, Appendix B).*

*No, if I'm really in a bad mood I could say don't overreact like that. (Participant 6 on picture 3, Appendix B).*

Therefore, the three participants above indicate that they are more likely to post a negative comment when experiencing a bad day or having a bad mood, which agrees with the existing definitions of haters. Moreover, participants indicated they were also more likely to comment when the content itself was evoking negative feelings. Especially feeling annoyed was often mentioned by the participant as a reason to post a comment:

*I just saw this picture and I just posted this comment because it annoyed me and I thought like why do they have to do this over and over again. (Participant 3).*

*Anthony! Kruijver! Yeah, he just got really annoying. (Participant 2).*

*Really annoying. It's yeah it's really uhm this, yeah it's annoying. I don't like it. (Participant 5).*

The different aspects of the content of fitness influencers that are responsible for evoking this feeling of annoyance are further discussed in the following part. However, annoyance seems to be related to the negative engagement behavior of haters on Instagram based upon the findings above. So overall the three main utilities which were derived by the participants by posting negative comments online are the focus related utility, from the concern for others motivation, the approval utility from the self-enhancing motivation and the homeostase utility from the venting negative feelings motivation. Therefore, these findings prove that hating and their negative engagement behavior goes further than existing definitions of haters which imply that haters mainly act out of jealousy. Especially the self-enhancing motivation was indicated to be a large part of posting negative comments by the participants. As mentioned before, the approval utility might not be the first one that comes to mind when discussing motivations of haters to post negative comments, however, this finding might indicate that haters actually aim to strengthen their ties with certain sub-communities on Instagram using the conflict and disagreement with other communities. These sub-communities might exist of friends, whom haters aim to receive approval from by disagreeing or ridiculing content on Instagram, or strangers who share the same opinion on certain matters.

Whereas the approval utility and the homeostase utility are more clearly related towards the definition of haters, the focus-related utility with the concern for others motivation to post negative comments might seem a bit out of place. Especially since those type of hater comments are posted from altruist motivations, aiming to improve the knowledge of others and protect them from making bad decisions. Moreover, since these participants did not perceive themselves as haters, these findings indicate that there is a need for a concept that covers their negative online engagement behavior and is perceived



less extreme than haters, which defined by the participants as someone who uses fake accounts to bully others online.

#### **4.3. Negative engagement behavior evoking aspects**

The third and the last theme goes more in-depth on what aspects of the content of Dutch fitness influencers evoke negative engagement behavior among the participants. Therefore this part aims to answer the third sub-question: *What aspects of branded content of Dutch fitness influencers evoke negative engagement behavior among haters?* Two axial codes emerged from the data as aspects of the content of fitness influencers which evoked negative engagement behavior: source credibility, and sexualization and objectification. The overall theme and the axial codes of which it emerged from are discussed in detail in the following two sections.

##### **4.3.1. Deceiving content**

Deceiving content turned out to be an important aspect of the content of Dutch influencers for evoking negative engagement behavior. Especially fake content was found to evoke annoying feelings among the participants. However, the participants had some differing perceptions of fake content. Three of the participants used the concept of 'fake content' for both photoshopped and overly posed content, whereas two others used 'fake content' mainly for influencers who undergone plastic surgery. Nonetheless, how perceived fake content served as a source for evoking negative engagement behavior is illustrated with the following quotes:

*And uhm, it was obvious very photoshopped. So the whole world raged on the girl that it was super photoshopped and I did it as well. I was like no this is this is weird, this is photoshop it's not... You know, because I wanna make people aware that the children or other people who are like oh my god, she is so, she is so perfect. No bitch, she's not perfect. She's it's just the photo, it's photoshopped, you know. (Participant 4).*

*And also, maybe also, because it frustrates me when people post fake photos like that, and they give a wrong image of what is possible. Uhm and then, in this case, I*

*could respond because I knew him (Participant 1).*

*Hmm, yeah [laughter] yeah a little, okay a little bit bad and also good because I feel like I, I called them out and that I got it out that they're, they're too posing or too fake. (Participant 5).*

Therefore, despite the differing definitions of face content, when content was perceived as fake by the participants it leads to more negative comments on it. In particular content that strived to portray an ideal body image, however, faked it by using either photoshop, weird poses or plastic surgery was perceived as annoying, unauthentic and misleading. However, besides their content, influencers themselves were also being perceived as fake by the participants based on their intrinsic motivations for placing certain content. Instead of posting unique, original and independent content, which was found to be the definition of authentic by Khamis et al. (2017), the participants addressed influencers as fake when they post content based on commercial motivations. Therefore, how the intrinsic motivations of fitness influencers are perceived by the participants is illustrated with the following quotes:

*No, I don't see her as honest, I just see it as promotions and everything she does I see it as an attempt to make advertisements for media stunts then... (Participant 2 about picture 3, Appendix B).*

*Yeah, yeah... She is, she's the same. I mean she's a pretty girl of course. It's all about the uhm yeah. She uhm. It's all about the likes, it's all about the followers. (Participant 4).*

*Oh, I really hate that. Just like Laura, she does korfbal and at first, I liked her but when she became one big billboard I unfollowed her. (Participant 7).*

These findings thus agree with the findings of Khamis et al. (2017) saying when consumers perceive influencers as being dependent on the brands they endorse, their perception of authenticity gets harmed. This harmed perception of authenticity thus can

lead to more negative engagement behavior either destructive or detaching. Overall, deceiving content can have severe effects on the credibility of fitness influencers, harming their perceived authenticity, and trustworthiness. Advertisement recognition thus can lead to negative perceptions of the intrinsic motivations of fitness influencers. However, as it is argued within the theoretical framework, advertisement recognition was also found to be related to disruptive social media experiences. Sponsored content thus using disclosure language was found to increase the level of disruptiveness experienced on social media platforms (Evans et al., 2017). Therefore, it was expected that sponsored content in this study would lead to more negative engagement responses. However, the participants indicated that they did not mind seeing sponsored posts of fitness influencers as long as it's not too often:

*Yeah, they really try to sell something you know, so then I know they also get paid to offer a certain service. Yeah and basically 9 out of 10 times I don't go into that but then still the quality of the pictures can be really good, so then I do push the like button to say so. (Participant 6).*

*No, no I wouldn't comment on this because it's their good right to earn money with Instagram. It happens a lot nowadays, and they surely should do it. (Participant 2).*

*Then I don't mind, well as at least when it's not like 100% ads, and then it's fine. Of course, the people that make content also makes have to make money, to make content. (Participant 1).*

Multiple participants thus did not mind seeing some sponsored content, however, they did mention that they would sooner unfollow them if it becomes too much. Therefore, as mentioned in the theoretical framework Evans et al. (2017) argue that disclosure language is positively related to advertisement recognition and in turn has a negative impact on consumer attitudes. However, the participants in this research actually said they appreciated disclosure language and it leads to them having a more genuine and credible perception of the influencers:

*Oh, it's awesome! Yeah, it's great, yeah. Because now you know if they really use it, they really bought it with their own money or they get stuff sent you know like they get stuff sent to them. So I think it's great! (Participant 4).*

*Yeah. Yeah. being honest about it, when it's an ad, or when you're sponsored, or this is really important. (Participant 1).*

*Yeah covert and then I disagree with that but if they are being honest about it then I would really be like oh it's advertisement but it's clear also so I just... (Participant 5).*

Overall these findings above suggest that a lack of source credibility can lead to more negative online engagement behavior. However, instead of what was expected according to theory, disclosure language did not decrease the consumer attitude towards the influencers, instead, they perceived influencers who did use disclosure language as more transparent and honest. Therefore, increasing the advertisement recognition among their followers could positively contribute to their follower's perception of them as being honest and transparent and thus more credible sources on Instagram.

#### *4.3.2 Sexualization and objectification*

Another aspect of the content of fitness influencers that emerged from the data for evoking negative engagement behavior was sexualized content and the objectification of women. Out of the 10 participants 6 did mention they annoyed themselves on sexualized content which shows almost naked women. For two of them, this type of content actually lead to posting a negative comment, and the others mentioned they did annoy themselves on and sometimes detached themselves from this type of content. The annoyance of the participants on sexualized and objectified content is illustrated within the following quotes:

*And then he does these weird shoots on how he stands behind this chick in a sexual way and that got me thinking like yeah... Is this what I am looking for, no not really. I am watching because I want to see exercises and how to implement them and yeah... Yeah, and if you want to see these kinds of things then you should start looking for porn so to speak. Yeah [laughter] that's not why you follow a fitness influencer for. So*

*yeah, that was the thing that got me thinking like, okay I'm going to unfollow him.*  
(Participant 2).

*And she had a nice feed. Uhm, and it wasn't all about like hey look at my tight abs or something like that so I started following her. Uhm and then this one time again it was like this stupid picture in which women just serve as a sex object. And I did post a negative comment on that as well.* (Participant 3).

*Uhm yeah, they say sex sells you know? And that's actually what they are trying here, they are actually trying to get the attention with this picture by using a lot of skin.*  
(Participant 6 on picture 1, Appendix B).

Therefore, sexualized and objectified content seems not to be the reason for the participants to follow fitness influencers. Moreover, it evokes annoyance resulting in negative engagement behavior, either destructive or detaching. However, when asking a bit further why the content evoked annoying feelings in relation to their own body image, multiple participants mentioned they did get insecure due to the content of fitness influencers and the ideal body image they represent. This is illustrated with the following quotes:

*But uhm you know, it's like I don't count anymore. If I don't have these abs like they have, it's like oh so this is how we all need to be in this world. And if you're don't have these abs or these size boobs, or whatever, I am, I'm not sexy anymore or whatever you know? It's like this is what I need to be, and that's the world we live in and that's what I really hate. Yeah, I really hate that.* (Participant 4).

*Because I mean when you look at like, it's the point of Instagram. You look at uhm, well not the point of Instagram but when you look constantly look at the success of others and you just look at your own success and just see that you like well then you think you are unsuccessful because you don't have two golden cars or you don't have muscles like that guy or uhm... Yeah.* (Participant 9).

*I would like them to share that uhm their lifestyle is their choice and their body type is their choice and if you look any other way, that's okay too. And uhm, of course, they can promote a healthy lifestyle as long as it's legit. And uhm I just don't want them to uhm give girls insecurities and bulimia and anorexia and other scary stuff and a really bad self-image. It's just really bad. (Participant 10).*

Therefore, even though it was not anticipated, sexualized content and objectification seems to be a large part of the Instagram fitness culture. Moreover, this type of content seems to have severe effects on Instagram users in terms of harming their body image. Therefore, sexualized and objectified content on ideal body images might be a large aspect of the content of fitness influencers which evokes annoyance and in turn results in negative engagement behavior. Even the participants who did not into their own body insecurities did mention they annoyed themselves on this type of content since it is not the reason for which they follow fitness influencers. Therefore sexualized content of fitness influencers seems to evoke negative engagement behavior in the form of destructive comments and detaching behavior.

Based upon all the findings above the final answer towards the main research question “*What are the motivations of the haters of Dutch fitness influencers to engage in a negative way with their branded content on Instagram?*” is connected to multiple aspects of the social media platform and the content of fitness influencers. First, the type of content that is commented most on by the participants is often perceived as either fake or sexualized. These type of content evoke negative engagement behavior and the participants post comments or engage in another negative way with the content from different motivations. The motivations that are found in this research to be connected with negative engagement behavior are the concern for others motivation, the self-enhancing motivation and the venting negative feelings motivation. Driven by these three motivations, participants post a comment whereby they either obtain the focus-related utility, the approval utility or the homeostase utility. Often are these utilities interrelated with each other, when for example a participant posted from the motivation to vent negative feelings and perceived the homeostase utility, but also the approval utility when others gave positive responses. The motivations and utilities, therefore, seem to be interrelated with each other. However, concern for others, self-enhancement and venting negative feelings are found to be the

main motivations for destructive engagement behavior with the content of Dutch fitness influencers.

## 5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of haters and their negative engagement behavior on social media. The topic was framed around the motivations of haters for engaging in a negative way with the content of Dutch fitness influencers. Investigating this topic, this study aimed to tighten the literature gap on the risks of influencers marketing and exploring the phenomenon of haters and their negative engagement behavior with branded content. The study is based upon several theories regarding negative engagement behavior; the social interaction utility framework, source credibility theory and the persuasion knowledge model as presented in the theoretical chapter. However, of these theories, the social interaction utility framework and its related motivations for engaging with eWOM as identified by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) served as the main framework to discuss the motivations for haters to engage in a negative way with the content of Dutch fitness influencers. Three of its' five utilities were found to be connected to negative engagement behavior on Instagram: the focus-related utility, the approval utility and the homeostase utility. These three utilities and their related motivations are discussed in-depth later on in this conclusion.

Some previous studies explored online flaming and negative online engagement behavior on social media (Lange, 2007b, 2014; O'Sullivan & Flanagan, 2003), however, this is one of the few existing studies exploring the phenomenon of haters from a qualitative approach, using semi-structured in-depth interviews with ten Instagram users who were identified as haters. Using thematic analysis and following the coding process as divided by Boeije (2002) into open, axial, and selective coding, three final themes emerged from the data; perceptions on Instagram use, utilities of negative engagement behavior, and negative engagement behavior evoking aspects of the content of Dutch fitness influencers. Together these findings adequately provided an answer onto the main research question: *What are the motivations of the haters of Dutch fitness influencers to engage in a negative way with their branded content on Instagram?* and the three sub-questions which served as stepping stones towards a final conclusion as demonstrated within the following paragraphs.

The first sub-question addressed the definition of haters and their negative engagement behavior on Instagram. The question was formulated as follows: *How do haters of Dutch fitness influencers perceive their own use of Instagram?* According to the findings,



there are a few particular ways in which haters make use of Instagram that results in negative engagement behavior with the content on the platform. First and foremost, it was found that haters might differ in their overall perception of Instagram and how to make use of it, seeing Instagram as a platform where it is okay and even expected to share opinions and thoughts even if they are critical, negative or hateful. Moreover, it was mentioned by a few participants they actually liked to follow content creators they didn't agree with in order to satisfy their need for conflict. This type of Instagram use, therefore, is inherently connected with an increased amount of negative engagement behavior on the platform. However, another important practice on Instagram by haters which is closely related to their negative engagement behaviors is using it anonymously. Even though not all participants did use fake names or nicknames on their Instagram account, multiple participants mentioned they preferred using Instagram anonymously, so others would not know who they are. This finding thus aligns with the findings of Mondal, Silva and Benevenuto (2017) who argue that the level of anonymity that is experienced by the users can favor negative online engagement behavior. However, an interesting addition to this finding in this study is that participants who did not use Instagram anonymously argued they still experience some level of anonymity due to a large number of comments under the posts of successful fitness influencers, making them feel more comfortable with posting a negative or hateful comment.

Haters on Instagram are found to display negative online engagement behavior in either destructive or detaching ways. Destructive engagement behavior on Instagram is done by publicly posting negative comments on the content of content creators or more private by sending either the content creator or friends destructive comments on the content in private direct messages. Especially sending destructive comments to friends was found to happen often, and is strongly related towards the approval utility as discussed among the second sub-question. Detaching engagement behavior on Instagram is found to happen by either unfollowing or just clicking or scrolling away from the content. In particular clicking or scrolling away was mentioned by the participants as an easy way to detach themselves from disliked content without it having much effect on them. While all of these negative engagement behaviors were argued to be part of hating in this research, the participants mainly perceived public destructive engagement behavior as part of online hating. However, even though all of the participants were selected based upon this type of

negative engagement behavior, none of them identified themselves as being a hater, not even when they have been called out as one. They justified themselves saying people online are so sensitive nowadays. These findings align with the findings of Lange (2007a) saying not all social media users perceive online hating as a problem in the same degree. Therefore based upon the findings above, haters on Instagram might have a different perception on Instagram and how to make use of it, resulting in negative engagement behavior on the platform.

The findings above contribute to better identifying negative engagement behavior and haters on social media. The findings are based upon a theoretical framework which has established interdisciplinary links between media studies and behavioral psychology, using literature on online engagement behavior and links it with communication sciences using literature on destructive and constructive feedback. These interdisciplinary links, therefore, enable us in more accurately identifying negative engagement behavior and haters on social media. Moreover, using sociology and media literature, the social interaction utility framework is applied to the findings which contributes to a better understanding of the motivations behind this type of negative engagement behavior on social media. Altogether these findings and interdisciplinary links result in a better understanding of negative engagement behavior with eWOM. Three utilities were found to be related to the defined negative engagement behavior and are discussed in-depth in the paragraph below.

Regarding the second sub-question: *What utilities are obtained by haters of Dutch fitness influencers when engaging with branded content in a negative way?* Three of the five utilities of the social interaction utility framework by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) were found to be related to negative engagement behavior on Instagram. First, the focus-related utility, which is based upon the assumption of users that they add value to the community with their contributions, was found to be related to negative engagement behavior on Instagram. More specific, negative engagement behavior that was related to the focus-related utility was found to come from the altruist motivation of concern for others, as identified by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004). Negative engagement behavior, therefore, based upon altruist motivations to improve the knowledge of others and prevent them from buying bad products, might also be perceived as some form of constructive feedback. Constructive feedback was defined in the theoretical framework as negative feedback delivered using a considerate form of communication, containing no threats and aiming to improve the

performance of others (Hardavella et al., 2017; Raver et al., 2012). Therefore, when the comment comes from altruist motivations and concern for others aiming to improve the knowledge as others, it can be perceived as constructive feedback. Moreover, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, none of the participants did perceive themselves as haters. Therefore, these findings indicate the need for a concept which is less associated with haters as online bullies and more related to the negative engagement behavior motivated by the reasons as mentioned above. The label of fitness influencer critic was proposed towards the participants who engaged in a negative way with content from the motivation of concern for others, and they felt more comfortable with this label. However, since the participants used an inconsiderate style of communication, they were still included in this research as haters and might still be perceived as haters by other users and content creators on Instagram.

The second utility which was found to be strongly related to negative engagement behavior was the approval utility. This utility comes from the feeling of satisfaction that is derived when others consume and approve personal contributions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Self-enhancing motivations thus can drive Instagram haters to post controversial comments with the aim to find out whether others approve and agree with them. This is related to the findings of Hardaker (2013) who argued that in a specific context, mean critical commentary and deliberately trying to anger others can serve as a mean to connect with other users who like to be provocative. Posting negative comments on Instagram thus might be a means for Instagram users to connect with specific communities. This was found to be true in for one participant in particular who mentioned she also posted positive responses on other hateful comments on Instagram. This finding is related to the social benefit motivation, which drives social media users to participate and gain a sense of belonging with online communities. However, since the social benefits motivation was argued to be part of the focus-related utility by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) this finding also indicates that social interaction utilities, such as the focus-related and the approval utilities and their identified motivations can be interrelated when engaging in a negative way with content on Instagram. Haters on Instagram, therefore, can be driven by the self-enhancement motivation to post hateful comments with the aim to receive the approval utility of other Instagram users who agree with them. It was found that a common practice on Instagram is to tag friends in hateful public comments or sending hateful comments on content to friends in their direct messages in order to increase the chances of receiving the

approval utility.

The third social interaction utility, the homeostase utility was found to be the most related towards existing definitions of haters on Instagram. Within existing definitions, haters are perceived as social media users who can't be happy for the success of other social media users, which makes them intentionally want to expose flaws of successful users (Mackenzie, 2013). Existing definitions, therefore, already assume that haters act from jealous motivations and negative feelings. However, the findings above proved that the concept of haters goes further than this and negative engagement behavior can also be displayed from self-enhancing motivations and concern for others. Nonetheless, the homeostase utility is based upon the assumption that all individuals strive for balance in their lives. Venting negative feelings were identified as a motivation by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) to receive the homeostase utility. Venting negative feelings, therefore, can help in reducing discontent that is associated with the negative feelings of the online users. This utility, therefore, is the most related towards existing definitions of haters on Instagram which assume that they act from jealous motivations. Jealousy was indeed mentioned by some of the participants as a reason for posting hateful comments, however other aspects of the content of fitness influencers also evoked negative feelings of which in particular the feeling of annoyance was mentioned very often. Aspects of the content of fitness influencers which are responsible for evoking negative feelings are discussed in detail in the following paragraph.

Lastly regarding the third sub-question: *What aspects of branded content of Dutch fitness influencers evoke negative engagement behavior among haters?* two main aspects emerged from the data: deceiving content and sexualized and objectified content. First, deceiving content was found to evoke annoyance and negative engagement behavior among the participants. The participants also referred to deceiving content as fake content, hereby meaning different types of deceiving content such as photoshopped content, overly posed content and content portraying plastic surgery. Fake content thus is in particular related towards fitness influencers portraying an ideal body, however faking it by using photoshop, weird poses or plastic surgery. Deceiving content thus is strongly related to the trustworthiness dimension of the source credibility model. Moreover, a lack of trustworthiness of fitness influencers on Instagram was found to be related to increased destructive engagement behavior. Haters on Instagram thus might be annoyed by deceiving

content portraying a fake ideal body and post negative comments in order to vent their negative feelings or expose fake content from their concern for others.

Another type of content which was found to be closely related to the trustworthiness dimension of the source credibility model was sponsored content. In particular, the perceived intrinsic motivations of influencers for posting sponsored content were found to be related to negative engagement behavior. When influencers continuously post sponsored content of all types of products, the participants perceived their intrinsic motivations as being based on making as much money as possible at the expense of their own honesty about products. Too much of sponsored content, therefore, was found to be related towards detaching engagement behavior on Instagram, by unfollowing the influencer or simply clicking or scrolling the content away. However, the participants mentioned they did not mind when influencers posted some sponsored content as long as it's not too much. Multiple participants mentioned influencers also had to make money and live from their job as an influencer by making sponsored content. Especially when influencers were honest about being sponsored and used disclosure language in their content, participants actually perceived them as more trustworthy. These findings contradict with the theory on disclosure language and the persuasion knowledge model, arguing that disclosure language increases advertisement recognition and in turn results in negative responses on the persuasion attempt (Boerman et al., 2012; Friestad & Wright, 1994; Rozendaal et al., 2011). However, according to the findings of this study, the overall credibility of social media influencers can benefit a lot from using disclosure language in combination with only posting sponsored content occasionally.

The second aspect of the content of fitness influencers that was found to evoke negative feelings was sexualized and objectified content. Multiple participants annoyed themselves on this type of content since it's not the reason for them to follow fitness influencers. Moreover, these negative feelings about the content were found to be related to the body image of the participants. Sexualized and objectified content were found to make the participants feel insecure or even unworthy about their own body. Haters on Instagram thus might act from insecurities, or body image issues and vent these negative feelings by engaging in a negative way with the content of fitness influencers. Even the participants who did not get into their own body image issues did annoy themselves on this type of content because it was not related to the reason for them to follow fitness

influencers. Sexualized and objectified content, therefore, seems to be an important aspect for evoking negative engagement behavior in the form of destructive comments or detaching behavior

### **5.1. Theoretical and social implications**

Overall, the current research provides answers about the motivations of haters for negative engagement behavior on Instagram with the sponsored content of fitness influencers. The research was conducted through the scope of theories regarding negative engagement behavior, social interaction utility theory, source credibility theory, and the persuasion knowledge model. The scope, therefore, is based upon academic disciplines such as media studies, communication research, sociology, and psychology. Using media theory negative online engagement was found to be done in an either detaching or destructive way Dolan et al. (2016). By linking these findings to communication literature on destructive feedback as being negative feedback delivered in an inconsiderate style aiming at a poor performance (Baron, 1988; Raver et al., 2012), a more in-depth understanding of public destructive engagement behavior was reached. Therefore, these linkages contributed to identifying haters on Instagram, and their negative uses on the platform. Previous studies already identified anonymity as an important use of favoring negative engagement behavior on social media (Keen, 2007). However, this study established a relationship between an experienced level of anonymity of social media users and the number of comments on social media content, contributing to identifying haters and their negative uses of social media. However, the social interaction utility framework was used to gain an understanding of the motivations for the negative engagement behavior with eWOM, resulting in a more complete understanding of the concept of haters and the risks of influencer marketing. Therefore, the current research offers valuable insights into the social phenomenon of online haters and tightens the literature gap on the risks of influencer marketing.

However, as the study contributes to a more in-depth understanding of the risks of influencer marketing, it can also benefit social media influencers who engage in this practice on Instagram. The findings of this research can contribute to their understanding of haters and motivations for negative engagement behavior with their branded content. Awareness on the motivations for negative engagement behavior can give them guidance in preventing this type of engagement behavior with their content to some extent. Based upon the

theoretical framework on the source credibility model and the findings of the current research, social media influencers can increase their overall credibility by using clear and honest disclosure language and only collaborate with products they actually use or perceive as healthy and beneficial for their users. While previous literature argued that disclosure language on Instagram is positively related to advertising recognition and in turn has a negative impact on consumer attitudes (Evans et al., 2017), the current research suggests that Instagram users actually appreciate disclosure language and it has a positive relation to the trustworthiness dimension. Using disclosure language, therefore, can contribute to decreasing the risks of influencer marketing and negative engagement behavior with sponsored content.

However, disclosure language is only effective when the amount of sponsored content is limited since too much of it was found to be related towards lower perceived trustworthiness of the influencers and detachment from their content. In addition, sexualized and objectified content of women should be limited since it's found to annoy their followers as it is not their main reason to follow fitness influencers. In addition, fitness influencers, in particular, should be aware of what portraying their ideal body does to the body image of their followers, since it could potentially harm the body image of their followers. Therefore, it's important for fitness influencers to be supportive, inclusive and most importantly real, since content that is perceived as fake using photoshop, weird poses or plastic surgery, are more likely to get destructive comments of haters.

## **5.2. Limitations and future research**

There are a few limitations within this research of which most of them are connected towards the sampling process of the participants and the interviewing methods. As mentioned in detail within the methods chapter, participants were found and approached by monitoring the Instagram accounts of five Dutch fitness influencers on hateful comments. However, a large number of haters who were approached did not respond back or were not willing to participate in this study face-to-face. Considering the sensitive topic of the study it might be that a non-response bias is present. Therefore, individuals who did not agree to participate in this study might differ from the individuals who did participate in this study. In order to address this issue, potential participants were approached in a non-threatening way without using the word hater when describing the research aim. Moreover, participants who

were interested were invited to do the interview face-to-face or using Skype in order to lower the threshold for the participants to participate. Besides, the potential participants were assured of anonymous participation. Taking these efforts into account the sample consisted of mainly young Dutch Instagram users, however, they differ in their type of hateful comment as well as their motivations to post them. Nonetheless, it is possible that due to a non-response bias a certain type of haters on Instagram is not included within this research. Further research, therefore, is necessary to support the arguments and findings of this research and make sure there are no missing parts on the information about haters on Instagram.

Even though face-to-face interviewing was preferred due to the advantages of building rapport easier and having the possibility to sit in a quiet room without distractions, multiple participants preferred to do the interview using Skype. Considering the sensitive topic and the difficulty to find participants, it was agreed upon using Skype. Even though the effort was taken to increase the quality of the interview, by asking the participants to sit in a quiet room and have a good internet connection, some incidents and distractions happened. In particular, the interview with participant 7 was hard to do due to several distractions during the interview as well as connection loss. The connection was broken twice, after which I could not reach the participant again, resulting in a loss of potential data about the third part of the research. Another interview which potentially suffered from distractions was the interview with participant 4. She agreed to do the interview face-to-face, however on the condition that it was in a public environment. Again, considering the sensitive topic and the wishes of the participants, it was agreed upon meeting in a relatively quiet lunchroom. However, several distractions and disruptions within the public environment happened, which could potentially have affected the data. However, since all of the data was comprehensible and the topics were discussed in detail, the interview was still perceived as valuable for this study.

Another potential bias which occurred in this research is the social desirability bias, defined as the tendency of respondents to give socially acceptable answers instead of correct answers (Fisher, 1993). Again given the sensitivity of the topic of hating and negative engagement behavior, social desirability bias might be the reason why none of the participants perceived themselves as a hater, even though their own destructive comments did confirm their own definitions of haters. Furthermore, due to the sensitivity of the topic,



it might be that participants were not willing to share certain information, despite the efforts of the interviewer to build rapport with the participants. Several participants, therefore, mentioned they did not remember certain negative comments they posted or they only posted the negative comment on which their inclusion in this study was based. Also, fitness influencers were chosen in order to frame the study around their sponsored content and ideal body portrayal, however, it may be hard to generalize the findings onto all the haters of different types of influencers on Instagram since they differ in content and behavior. However, this study serves as a starting point to study possible motivations for haters and their negative engagement behaviors, going further than solely jealous motivations.

Therefore, this current study serves as a starting point for plenty of opportunities for future research. First, as mentioned above the focus of this research was on fitness influencers on Instagram, however, haters exist on other types of social media as well such as YouTube and Facebook. Even though this research can serve as a starting point to address haters and their motivations, other types of influencers such as lifestyle or fashion influencers can also be the subject of hate and negative engagement behavior. Therefore, qualitative studies can further develop the motivations of haters for negative engagement by applying the social interaction utility framework onto other types of influencers on different social media channels, in order to make sure all the relevant utilities are included when developing a final framework for haters and their motivations for negative engagement behavior on social media. Moreover, as this is a qualitative study, the topic might benefit from quantitative research towards it in order to generalize the findings on haters and their motivations to engage with certain types of content in a negative way on social media. Moreover, qualitative research could potentially assess which types of content are most likely to evoke negative engagement behavior in a quantitative way, thereby contributing to the profession of influencer marketing.

Lastly, this study did not take nationality, educational level or age into account when researching haters on Instagram. Therefore, future research might compare negative engagement behavior on social media based upon age, nationality or educational level since the topic of risks of influencer marketing and negative engagement behavior through the scope of these demographics could be interesting towards academic literature and the profession of influencer marketing.

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## **Appendix**

### **Appendix A: Interview guide**

Welcome to this interview on critical perceptions of fitness influencers. I am doing this research for my Master's Thesis, and the purpose of this research is to find out what the motivations are for people to post critical comments on fitness influencers on Instagram. I would like to tell you again that your participation is completely anonymous. Only the audio will be recorded and be used to transcribe the interview in order to be able to analyze it. Moreover, the transcription will only be used for this study. So thank you for participating and to start off this interview would you state your age and your nationality?

#### **Part 1: Negative online engagement behavior**

I would first like to ask you on your Instagram use.

1. Why do you make use of Instagram?

- Do you have multiple accounts/ why?
- Do you refer to your own name in your Instagram account?
- If not, can you explain?

2. Why do you comment on content?

What type of content do you comment on most?

- Is this usually positive or critical?

When do you critically comment on content?

What is your last critical comment about?

- why did you post this comment?

3. Which fitness influencers do you follow on Instagram?

What do you comment on the content of fitness influencers?

Did you ever unfollow a fitness influencer and why did you do this?

**(personal comment part)**

4. So I found you through a comment on the profile of....

What was your first thought when you saw this picture?

- Why did you post the comment?
- Do you think the influencer saw the comment?
- What do you think others think about your comment?
- Did you get any responses on your comment?
- How did these responses make you feel?

5. Have you ever been called a hater/why?

- What do you think is the difference between haters and critics?

**Part 2: Lack of credibility and authenticity**

One of the strengths of influencer marketing is opinions on brands and products are often perceived as authentic and true.

**Show picture 1.**

6. what do you think of this content?

- How would you engage with this content? Why?
- Do you think the influencer actually uses this product?
- Do you think that this influencer is dependent on the brand that is endorsed, thus paid, why do you think so?

7. If you had to comment on this, what would you write?

- What would be your main goal with this comment?
- What do you think others think about your comment?
- What do you think that the influencer thinks about your comment?
- How would you feel after posting this comment on this post?
- What do you think about the way these fitness influencers portray themselves in this picture?

**Show picture 2.**

8. what do you think of this content?

- How would you engage with this content? Why?
- Do you think this influencer actually uses this product?
- Do you think that this influencer is dependent on the brand that is endorsed, thus paid, why do you think so?

9. If you had to comment on this, what would you write?

- What would be your main goal with this comment?
- What do you think others think about your comment?
- What do you think that the influencer thinks about your comment?
- How would you feel after posting this comment on this post?

### **Part 3: Disruptive social media experiences**

Another strength of influencer marketing is that branded content often is woven between personal content. Branded content, therefore, is often perceived as regular content of the fitness influencer. However, EU regulations state that collaborations need to be disclosed clearly using, for example, the #sponsored.

10. How do you feel about branded content in your timeline?

- What would you comment on this type of content?
- Would you keep following the content creator?

### **Show picture 3**

11. What do you think about the disclosure language of fitness influencers?

- Do you appreciate it?
- What do you think of the content of this post in general?
- How would you feel when you saw this post in your timeline?
- Would it feel like it disrupts you from your Instagram activities?
- What would you comment on this post?
- How would you feel after posting a comment on this post?

12. What do you think others think about your comment?

- Do you think your comment adds value to this post?
- What do you think about the way this fitness influencer portrays herself?

13. What do you think about the number of advertisements on Instagram?

- Do you ever engage with them?
- Would you post a negative comment on it?
- Does it feel like it disrupts you from your Instagram activities?

14. Do you have anything else that you want to share in relation to fitness influencers and posting critical comments?

Thank you for participating, again your participation is completely anonymous and the audio recording will only be used for this specific study.

## Appendix B: Interview guide attachments

Picture 1 (Castro, 2019)



Picture 2 (Van der Hoeven, 2019)



**Picture 3** (Prikker, 2019)



**Appendix C: Participant overview:**

Participant	Demographics	Sample Method	Comment	Interview setting
1	Age: 27 Nationality: Dutch Gender: Male	Judgment sampling: Comment on a post of @joostye95, encountered through the personal Instagram feed of the researcher	Original in Dutch, translated to English: <i>"Nice job photoshopping the fence is so warped"</i>	Face to face, in a quiet room. Interview language in English.
2	Age:19 Nationality: Dutch Gender: Male Work: Fitness trainer	Judgment sampling: Comment on a post of @sandrapijker where she is selling Body en Fit creatine	Original in Dutch, translated to English: <i>"You keep more water, which results in a difference in size"</i>	Skype video call, according to the wishes of the participant. Interview language in Dutch, transcription translated into



				English.
3	Age: 22 Nationality: Dutch Gender: Male Studies: Communication graduate	Judgment sampling: Comment on a post of @tavicastro where he explains how he shoots his own photos and the photos on @bodyengineers	<i>"it's ridiculous to post a picture of 2 women almost naked to get your followers satisfied, it has nothing to do with your channel and so is the description of this picture."</i>	Face-to-face, in a quiet room. Interview language in Dutch, transcription translated into English
4	Age: 27 Nationality: Dutch Gender: Female	Judgment sampling: Comment on a post of @linnebel showing herself with a friend.	<i>"You really bring out the worst in each other"</i>	Face-to-face, in a public space according to the wishes of the participant. The interview is mainly in English, some parts in Dutch are translated into English
5	Age: 29 Nationality: Aruban Gender: Male	Judgment sampling: Comment on a post of @tavicastro showing his Body Engineers work out clothes with 2 other guys	<i>"You're just showing off"</i>	Face-to-face, in a quiet room. The interview is mainly in English, some parts in Dutch are translated into English.
6	Age: 29 Nationality: Dutch Gender: Male Work: Nutrition expert	Snowball sampling through participant 1	<i>"dude this is just an exercise you that doesn't give you any effects at all"</i>	Skype video call, according to the wishes of the participant. Interview language in Dutch, transcription translated into

				English.
<b>7</b>	Age: 20 Nationality: Dutch Gender: Female	Judgment sampling: Comment on a post of @linnebel showing a Body Engineers workout suit	Original in Dutch translated to English: <i>"I bought the outfit but it's not comfortable at all"</i>	Skype video call, according to the wishes of the participant. Interview language in Dutch, transcription translated to English.
<b>8</b>	Age: 25 Nationality: Half Dutch, half Filipino Gender: Male Work: influencer industry	Judgment sampling: Comment on a post of @tavicaastro visiting poor countries and playing with malnourished kids.	<i>"I'm disgusted to see how someone with so much influence on this world is so fake and makes people around him feel so small"</i>	Skype video call, according to the wishes of the participant.
<b>9</b>	Age: 17 Nationality: Dutch Gender: Male	Judgment sampling: Comment on a post of @joelbeukers standing with his two golden cars	<i>"always bragging with your gold cars"</i>	Skype video call, according to the wishes of the participant.
<b>10</b>	Age: 29 Nationality: Dutch Gender: Female	Judgment sampling: Comment on a post of @gabyblaaser	Original in Dutch, translated to English: <i>"Do you have ambitions for the red lights district or something..."</i>	Skype video call, according to the wishes of the participant.

**Appendix D:** Code tree:

Selective codes	Axial codes	Selection of open codes
Perceptions on Instagram use	Perceptions of common practices on Instagram	- comments on Instagram, - following disliked content - a number of comments. - multiple accounts.
	Perceptions of negative engagement behavior on Instagram	- anonymity - destructive social media engagement behavior - detaching social media engagement behavior.
	Perceptions of self as a hater on Instagram	- perceptions on haters, - perceptions of self - perceptions of others on self
Utilities obtained for negative engagement behavior	The focus-related utility	- concern for others
	The approval utility	- self-enhancing motivation, - getting positive responses - tagging friends
	The homeostase utility	- venting negative feelings - annoyance
Aspects of content responsible for evoking negative engagement behavior	sexualization and objectification	- sexualized content - body image
	Deceiving content	- fake content, - intrinsic motivations, - advertisement recognition - disclosure language.