Challenge yourself to change

A thematic and multimodal critical discourse analysis of community building in fitness online brand communities

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ABSTRACT

Existing research highlights the characteristics of brand communities, their benefits, but yet has neglected to study online community events as a tool to create and maintain communities. However, through collaborative marketing approaches such as community events hosted on social networking sites, firms can invite consumers to engage within the online brand community they have created actively. Companies commonly do this to foster co-creation, recruit new community members and engage with existing ones. This thesis addresses the key question: how do sportswear brands create and maintain their online brand communities on Instagram through community events such as #Gymshark66 and #ShreddytoRumble? A comparative study was conducted to answer this question. This study applies a semi-directed content analysis on 479 Instagram posts (feed and stories). Data were analysed using thematic analysis, multimodal critical discourse analysis and intertextuality.

Results show four overlapping themes between both brands: inclusivity, performative identities, the impact of COVID-19 and the importance of nutrition. Sales emerged as a theme only in one of the firms, suggesting a more commercial approach. Two discourses emerged from the data: (1) community as the new online family or club and (2) fitness as a driver of positive change. While the discourse on the community was similar in both brands, their approaches to fitness were different: Gymshark leaned toward pushing people to try things and have holistic goals, and Shreddy was closely related to body composition goals or weight loss.

This study concluded that sportswear brands use athletes to foster parasocial relationships with their followers by exploiting feelings of empathy, friendship, and simulated direct contact. By engaging an inclusive team of fitness influencers, the brand foster identification. With is increased by trans-mediated parasocial relationships: consumers' associations with one influencer are translated to the brand. Additionally, performative identities lead to participants becoming actors and taking a minor influencer role within the community. Furthermore, the community contributes to the brand's image by becoming a clear example of what the firm stands for (e.g., fitness, motivation, support) and exploits the family or club discourse to present the community itself as a benefit and positive influence for existing members and future adepts.

In conclusion, by creating online community events, firms can recruit more customers and participants. Through the challenge, firms aim to interact with participants to foster the community feeling, creating loyal customers. Parasocial relationships are created through the use of ambassadors, and firms share the reputation built by their ambassadors due to trans-mediated parasocial relationships.

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1. Introduction

"Gymshark is a community that also happens to sell things". – Ben Francis, CEO Gymshark

Fitness has become a buzzword in the last few years, and the sportswear industry has seen steady growth (Deshmukh & Kumar, 2019). In 2018, the global sports apparel market was valued at USD 167.7 billion and was estimated to reach USD 248.1 billion by 2026, with a predicted compound annual growth rate of 5.1% from 2019 to 2026 (Deshmukh & Kumar, 2019). The exponential growth of the fitness industry has translated to the digital market too. According to Statista's (2020) "Digital Market Outlook" on digital fitness and well-being worldwide, the global fitness apps' revenue expects to show a compound annual growth rate of 14.95%. The digital fitness and well-being segment includes two main categories (1) wearables and (2) digital fitness apps such as workout and calories trackers (Statista, 2020). The use of these digital fitness apps has enabled online fitness communities to proliferate by sharing health-related concerns (Kim et al., 2013), exercising practices (Yap & Lee, 2013), and fitness routines (Vaterlaus et al., 2015).

This worldwide trend is observable in the fitness and health industry in the United Kingdom. According to Gough's (2021) report on fitness in the UK, there are 7.2 thousand health and fitness clubs in the UK, with over 10 million members combined. Of those, half are fitness facilities that generate an annual turnover of 2 billion British pounds (Gough, 2021). One of the key players in the fitness industry in the UK is the fitness retail sector which expects to outperform all major retail sectors by 2025. It is forecasted to grow by 20.9% out to 2023 to reach 6.7 billion British pounds (Global Data UK, 2020), with an increasing consumer desire to wear sportswear not only at the gym but as casualwear (Global Data UK, 2020; Deshmukh & Kumar, 2019). While senior brands such as Adidas and Nike used to have control of the market, digital-native or digital-first retail UK-based brands such as Gymshark, and Shreddy/TALA have risen, supported by the growth of social media, influencer marketing and brand communities. These brands use community events in the form of fitness challenges to encourage community participation and interaction. Gymshark hosts one challenge a year #gymshark66, while Shreddy hosts one every two to three months.

The effort put by these companies into their social media presence and interaction with their followers implies that, within the fitness industry, brand communities are essential. *Brand communities* are a business and marketing approach in which marketers invest time to learn about, organise and facilitate their creation (McAlexander et al., 2002; Peckover, 2021; Schau et al., 2009; Zhou et al., 2012). A brand community is a group of customers that invest themselves with the brand beyond the products sold: they feel part of a group, engage with the brand, share their content, and help the brand to grow (Peckover, 2021; Karpis, 2018); in other words, a brand community consists of people who admire the brand and share a series of connections and relationships (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Having a brand community can provide several advantages to companies: it provides insights into customer perceptions on their products, maximises the number of touchpoints to attract and collaborate with their highly engaged

customers (Franke & Shah, 2003; McAlexander et al., 2002), influences their actions and consumption (Muniz & Schau, 2005), raises brand awareness and spreads information on new launches (Brown et al., 2003, Jin et al., 2009) and maintaining loyal customers engaged (McAlexander et al., 2002). With the rise of social media leading us to a "people's media" age (Fournier & Avery, 2011), online brand communities have become a low-cost, high-efficiency, high-reach opportunity for companies to experiment (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Moreover, they represent an opportunity for business and revenue growth. According to Statista (2021a), the revenue from online communities worldwide went from 171.4 million in 2012 to 393 million in 2014 and was forecasted to reach 1167.2 million in 2019, representing a 680% increase in seven years. Hence, the fitness and health sectors are profitable, but creating an online community around a brand represents a profitable opportunity from both a business and marketing standpoint. However, the question remains which strategies do companies use to create and maintain these online brand communities around the retail fitness sector?

Previous research has focused on defining and describing the distinctive characteristics of brand communities (Wiegandt, 2009; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) and has agreed on three main characteristics: consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions and a sense of moral responsibility. Furthermore, brand communities' studies explain the shift in paradigm from a traditional dyadic relation to the brand community triad (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001; Schau & Muniz 2002), which gives members of those communities a more significant role within. Recent studies on brand communities have focused on co-creation practices and its possible benefits (Priharsari et al., 2020; Weijo et al., 2019; Kamboj et al., 2018; Cova et al., 2015a). For example, brand communities can benefit the enterprise by strengthening consumer-brand relationships (Weijo et al., 2019), allowing firms to understand their customers and their needs (Priharsari et al., 2020), or can turn members into unpaid co-creators of content (Cova et al., 2015). As a result, co-creation allows value creation to be fostered within a community. Carlson et al. (2019) demonstrated that customer participation positively contributed to a brand's value creation efforts and brand building. Furthermore, Rodríguez-López (2021) study on Lego communities concluded that online communities can become a complementary tool of value co-creation. Yet, studies have neglected to study community events in the scope of brand online communities, branding and business strategies. Similarly, there is limited research on communities around sportswear, or gym training apps; mainly, wearables and health apps such as Fitbit were researched (Stragier et al., 2016). Therefore, this study points towards a significant literature gap, namely how community building helps to shape a brand which will be investigated by comparing Gymshark and Shreddy approaches to community building as a branding strategy. The research holds societal relevance because it involves several stakeholders in branding and marketing, employing a comparative study between both brands' approaches. It gives brand managers a benchmark study to rely on, gives companies valuable knowledge to add to their branding efforts and provides consumers with knowledge on how brands try to engage with them, adding to their media literacy.

This study focuses on two specific community events held by the brands: #gymshark66 and #shreddytorumble to study the strategies used to create and maintain online brand communities. These community events are fitness challenges that aim to foster customer participation and promote healthier habits. Community building will be studied in the scope of the content created for those challenges. Since influencers are predominant in the communication strategy of both brands, parasocial relationships and their possible evolution through social media will be explored. Parasocial relationships suggest an illusory experience where the person who experiences it assumes a sense of mutual awareness. (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This relationship tends to be unilateral and lacks reciprocity (Horton & Wohl, 1956). However, with the use of social networking sites, reciprocity has the potential to become narrow.

From all the social media platforms that both firms use, the researcher focused on Instagram content. Instagram not only has over one billion monthly active users (Statista, 2021b) and over 200 million business accounts (Facebook, n.d.) but as over two-thirds of total Instagram audiences are aged 24 and younger, the platform is attractive for marketers (Statista, 2021b). Additionally, Instagram is the biggest platform for influencer marketing (Fastenau, 2018); while people tend to ignore ads, they pay attention to product endorsements and sponsored content by influencers, especially if they have chosen to follow them (Ghidotti, 2017).

 Instagram holds the main advantage over other social media platforms; it allows businesses to share different types of content: text, images, videos and more. Although Instagram started as an image-based platform, in 2016, following Snapchat's lead, Instagram added 'stories' to allow users to share the things that happen during the day, not only the ones that the user wants to keep in their profile (Fondevila-Gascón et al., 2020). Stories allow the user to add pictures and videos in slideshow format, with the possibility of adding text, doodles, GIFs, stickers, location information, polls, songs, and, for accounts with over fifteen thousand followers, hyperlinks (Fondevila-Gascón et al., 2020). Photos or videos of a maximum of fifteen seconds can be posted to the user's story and disappear from the profile after twenty-four hours (Fondevila-Gascón et al., 2020). The rise of video use on the Instagram platform seems beneficial for both brands and users since videos receive almost 50% more engagement than statistic images (Michalski, 2019) and video, contrary to still images, allows people to retain 65% of the information displayed even three days after being exposed to it (Forno, 2019). Additionally, Instagram stories are used by over 500 million users every day (Newberry, 2021) and attract traffic to profiles, especially for content creators (Fondevila-Gascón et al., 2020). Thus, when comparing both brands, the content on their feeds and stories will be equally crucial for the analysis since Instagram feed posts represent what the company wants to keep in their profile permanently, and stories relate more to daily engagement.

In order to dive deeper into the topics mentioned above and provide a clear focus for this thesis, the following overarching research question was formulated:

RQ *How do sportswear brands create and maintain their online brand communities on Instagram through community events such as #Gymshark66 and #ShreddytoRumble?*

Since online brand communities consist of people who admire the brand and share a series of connections and relationships (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) who connect through the web and social media, online events represent an ideal opportunity to see how the sense of community is fostered. Since both Gymshark 66 and Shreddy to Rumble events are hosted around both brands' online presence, the consumer becomes the spectator and the brand and its ambassadors the personality; thus, the parasocial relationship created between the brand and the online community needs to be understood. Henceforth, two sub-questions will be explored to answer the research question (1) how do sportswear brands foster a parasocial relationship with the consumer, and (2) how does the community contribute to the brand's image?

This thesis has the following structure. The next chapter presents the theoretical framework on what online brand communities are and their role for a company, highlights the role of parasocial relationships in those communities, and provides an overview of previous research on fitness on social media. This theoretical framework supported the researcher going into the data analysis process. Chapter three addresses the methodological choices made while conducting this study and justifies the research design. In chapter four, the findings were discussed, and results were exemplified with visuals and quotes. Finally, in chapter five, answers to the main research question and sub-questions were formulated. Additionally, research limitations, avenues for future research and practical implications will be discussed.

2. Theoretical framework

This section aims to provide an overview and evaluation of existing theories concerning the role of communities as part of a company's branding strategy. As the central concept of this research, *online brand communities* will be examined thoroughly. Moreover, the theoretical framework will outline some aspects of fitness on social media: fitfluencers, fitspiration, fitness communities and events. Finally, an emphasis will be placed on *parasocial relationships* literature to address the particularities of this type of brand communities.

2.1 Brand communities: a space to foster identity

2.1.1 Communities and their characteristics

At its core, *communities* remain a symbolic structure defined by a concern of meaning and identity that is still discussed by philosophers nowadays (Nikolić & Skinner, 2019). Over the years, several theorists, from Durkheim et al. (1984) to Wellman (2001), have discussed communities in the scope of the western world, trying to find their intrinsic and mutable characteristics (Wiegandt, 2009). Hillery (1995) analysed 94 definitions of the term *community* and found four recurrent characteristics: a community (1) has a life of its own, (2) has a common way of living and thinking within its members, (3) supposes a shared sense of belonging and collective sense of difference from outsiders, (4) shares goals, norms and interests. Later research continued to emphasise the community's mutuality and emotional bonds as crucial characteristics (Bender, 1978). Scholars attempted to define 'communities' from a broader approach as sets for social relations (Fischer et al., 1996) with connections between individuals driven by practical matters and needs (Glynn, 1986; Wilson 1990).

As communities evolved in time, new characteristics came to light. Algesheimer (2004) added three new aspects: interactivity, level of influence and specified timeframe. Additionally, clashes between community and individualism arose. Cova (1997) claimed that individuals tried to differentiate from others to be free from bonds of social constructs, which caused a decline of the sense of community on a macro scale. Society was therefore affected by extreme individuals and social re-composition (Cova & Cova, 2002), which created new groups and alternative social arrangements (Moore et al., 1996). Consequently, in the scope of this paper, a community will be considered as an alternative social network with (1) a constant and continuous interaction around a common goal or shared interest, (2) a developed sense of belonging through a common way of living and thinking, (3) a collective sense of difference from outsiders, (4) the capacity to influence each other on a specific timeframe.

2.1.2 When a community goes online

The internet made a transition possible from traditional communities to online ones. Several scholars have attempted to define the characteristics of *online communities*: (1) they are open collectives (Ivaturi & Chua, 2019), (2) individuals are dispersed and often unacquainted (Ivaturi & Chua, 2019), (3) they are

communication communities (Porter, 2015), (4) use social networking sites (SNS) to grow (Porter, 2015), and need active user engagement (Ivature & Chua, 2019).

These characteristics present several advantages over traditional communities. First, since online communities are open collectives, not limited by space, time, or social characteristics, contact between physically distant people is not bound to dense community structures (Wellman et al., 1996). Thus, people that were once isolated or limited to the community can now reach further social connections and support networks (Uslaner, 2000). Second, since individuals are often unacquainted, it gives them the possibility of anonymity that was not possible before with traditional communities. Third, since communication is at the core of these communities, they fulfil a social function rather than an exclusive information exchange (Porter, 2015). Knowledge sharing, knowledge construction through collaboration, and knowledge consumption constitute social processes that are observed within online communities (Ivaturi & Chua, 2019). Fourth, despite the initial concern that technology in society would destroy the sense of community (Putnam, 1995; 2000), Obst et al. (2002) argue that technological progress does the opposite; it enables communities to exist without being constricted to a physical place.

Communities constantly evolve and adopt technological and societal trends to survive across time and space (Obst et al., 2002). The current decade holds the highest levels of interconnectivity, making the social costs for participation in online communities low (Wellman, 2000). With platforms like Instagram and tools like hashtags, unity between members is fostered (Pfortmüller, 2017). If a group of individuals uses the same hashtag, they become part of a movement bigger than themselves; hence the sense of belonging increases. Therefore, while traditional communities focus on shared values such as origin, strong bonds, reciprocity, and trust, virtual communities focus on a combination of values and individual needs (Wiegandt, 2009).

The most crucial aspect of online communities seems to be active user engagement. Online communities only exist through people's imagined bonds (Kendall, 2011). Hence, every individual needs to assume and is aware of their performance, goals and role in forming and continuing the community (Pearson, 2009). Active user engagement is a solid indicator of success as the discussion can further the community agenda and shows that individuals are playing their part within the community. Furthermore, individual contribution and participation are positively impacted by a solid social identity within the community. Subsequently, performative identities play a significant role in online communities: individuals become actors who construct their identities, selectively choosing what to show and connect with the audience.

As a result, in the scope of this paper, it can be argued that online communication technologies have enabled communities to surpass geographical and societal roadblocks as they are equipped with tools to reach and attract individuals across the globe from several target groups with less bias. Furthermore, online communities represent a social process space where individuals interact and are committed to fulfilling their role within the community.

2.1.3 Community as a marketing tool: brand communities

A *brand community* is considered by marketing experts nowadays as a group of customers that are invested with the brand beyond what is being sold: they feel part of a group, engage with the brand, share their content, and help it to grow (Peckover, 2021; Karpis, 2018). However, Muniz and O'Guinn, (2001), the first scholars to coin the term *brand community,* describe it as a community that is not bound by geography and is based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand, the focus is on the shared interest in the brand between its members. Therefore, a brand community can be commercial if initiated by the firm or non-commercial if initiated by the consumers (Wiegandt, 2009). Since brand communities are built upon creating a social identity facilitated by the internet and new technologies, firms can see an advantage or even a business approach in communities. Interest is justified due to the high emotional attachment that brands generate in individuals, allowing firms to play a significant role in creating communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) which, powered by the internet, can now reach followers and consumers without frontiers. With interconnectivity, new technologies, and marketing developments, the importance of brand communities for firms has increased (Wiegandt, 2009). Thus, while products or services remain in the centre of a brand community, participants also participate in the surrounding culture's ideology. Online communities created around brands influence social capital by enabling the combination of abstract online relations with real-world offline relations.

Over the years, several marketing scholars have investigated brand relationships and brand communities. According to Wiegandt (2009), it can be divided into three stages: descriptive studies focused on brand communities' characteristics (e.g., McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), testing the relevance of brand communities, and finally diving deeper in several aspects of brand communities. Scholars like Cova (2003) have focused on clarifying the concept for future research by defining the difference between brand communities, subcultures of consumption, customer tribes, etcetera. Others like Algesheimer et al. (2005), McAlexander et al. (2003) or Loewenfeld (2006) were concerned with the effects that belongingness to a brand community has on a company's goals and would recommend firms to create their brand community (Cova et al., 2015a, 2015b, Cova & Cova 2002; Atkin 2004).

Brand communities are complex and have their own cultures, rituals, traditions, and codes of behaviour (Wiegandt, 2009; Schau & Muniz, 2002). Since members create part of their identity from their interaction and membership, brand communities foster a relationship between firm and consumer. This relationship plays a role in the brand's legacy and more significant social construction, thus strengthening the enterprise (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Moreover, if the relationship is internalised as part of the customer's life experience, the customer will feel part of the community and be more loyal (McAlexander et al., 2002). A brand community has three shared characteristics, some of which overlap with Hillery's (1955) characteristics of a traditional community: consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. The *consciousness of kind* (Gusfield, 1978) implies an intrinsic connection between members that differentiates between the in-group and the out-group. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001)

explain that within a brand community, 'true' members will identify each other. *Shared rituals and traditions* are the social processes that the group experiences together to transmit the values of the community. These include celebrating the history of the brand and sharing brand-related stories. By ensuring that everyone in the community knows the history, members can differentiate between 'true' members and opportunistic ones (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). By sharing their brand-related stories, individuals can reinforce the idea of being surrounded by like-minded people when experiencing similar or familiar stories (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). The *sense of moral responsibility* refers to the duty and obligation that participants feel towards the company. As one of the drives for collective action, a shared sense of moral responsibility will make individuals defend the brand and allow group cohesion. By assisting in the correct use of an enterprise, the sense of moral responsibility retains current members and integrates new ones (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Therefore, if a firm wants to foster identity within the brand community, these three characteristics must be fulfilled to an extent across their communication channels.

In a traditional dyadic relation, brands and customers communicate following a simple model: interaction happens only between the two. Nonetheless, the sense of responsibility and morality fosters a new model: the brand community triad. In this model, the firm keeps its interaction with customers; however, the interaction between customers arises. Furthermore, because of the consciousness of kind, the shared rituals and traditions, and the sense of morality that bring individuals together, members of a brand community feel an essential connection to the brand but an even stronger connection to its members (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001; Schau & Muniz 2002). Hence, it can be implied that a firms' mission is not limited to getting closer to its consumers but to fostering a space of interaction for connections between members to form.

In recent years, a higher focus was placed on brand community studies that delve into co-creation practices (Priharsari et al., 2020; Weijo et al., 2019; Kamboj et al., 2018; Cova et al., 2015a) and value creation (Rodríguez-López, 2021; Carlson et al., 2019; Sorensen & Drennan, 2017; Cova et al., 2015a) inside brand communities. Co-creation practices are of interest because the successful alignment of co-creative practices between brand communities and marketers can benefit the enterprise by strengthening consumer-brand relationships (Weijo et al., 2019) and generating value (Priharsari et al., 2020). Co-creation is a collaborative marketing approach inside brand communities that sees its manifestation when brands encourage people to share their content and tag the enterprise. Co-creation allows companies to engage and understand their customers and needs (Priharsari et al., 2020). One of the benefits of brand co-creation is *brand volunteering:* brands promote and organise co-creation with unpaid consumers (Cova et al., 2015). Companies invite consumers to provide unpaid contributions that they willingly do, committed to providing unpaid work for the exclusive benefit of being part of the brand community (Cova et al., 2015). These brand volunteers are members of the brand community that navigate from exploitation and emancipation through the building of compromise (Cova et al., 2015). Another benefit is the influence that co-creation can have within brands on social media. Kamboj et al. (2018) examined through a survey study the SNS's motivation influence on customer participation in

brand communities on SNS and the correlations between brand trust, brand loyalty, and brand co-creation. Findings revealed that SNSs' participation motivations positively influenced customer participation, which significantly affects brand trust and brand loyalty. Consequently, brand trust and brand loyalty positively influence branding co-creation within brand communities on social media. Therefore, co-creation as a collaborative marketing approach inside brand communities sees its manifestation when companies ask people to share their content and tag the brand. Hence, this concept is essential to understand the communication type, motivation and intentions brands had when coding their messages.

Co-creation allows for value co-creation. Carlson et al. (2019) investigated co-creation in the scope of customer participation in social media brand communities. Empirical results of the study confirm that customer participation influences functional value, emotional value and relational value, which translates to brand relationship performance outcomes in the retail sector (Carlson et al., 2019). Hence, customer participation positively contributes to a brands' value creation efforts and contributes to brand building. Furthermore, Rodríguez-López (2021) considers online communities a complementary tool of value co-creation. By the study of seven Lego virtual communities, Rodríguez-López (2021) found that online communities enhance members' performance by constituting a system of value co-creation. Additionally, the researcher found that online brand communities can help firms achieve better adjustments in their strategies and decision-making process related to SNS use. Scholars such as Christensen et al. (2017) have also argued on the informational value of brand communities: firms can pick up suggestions and solutions for their product offerings directly from participants (i.e., social listening). Thus, online brand communities represent a platform for communication and promotion and a pool of innovative ideas, which can boost the innovation and performance of the firm (Christensen et al., 2017).

Brand communities are at the core of this study and will be evaluated as a marketing tool that favours identity, influences brand shaping, fosters co-creation and value, provides knowledge, information, and social benefits to its members. By considering all dimensions of brand communities, the researcher aims to dive deeper into how these aspects translate into social media content.

2.2 Fitness on social media

2.2.1 Fitspiration: the aspirational aspect

With over 28 million results on Instagram under #fitspiration or #fitspo, *fitspiration* was an online trend designed to inspire viewers towards a healthier lifestyle by promoting exercise and healthy food (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016). 'Fitspiration' is the amalgamation of the words 'fitness' and 'inspiration'. When exploring the posts under this hashtag, images trying to motivate people to exercise and pursue a healthier lifestyle appear. With the growth of fitness content on social media, and the proliferation of fitness communities (e.g., Kayla Itsines' Bikini Body Guide, James Smith Academy), making a difference

between fitness movements and what they promote is crucial. Fitspiration promotes health and well-being through healthy eating, exercise and self-care (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016). What makes fitspiration different from previous fitness social media buzzwords like *thinspiration* is the overall philosophy of empowerment and strength, rather than promoting thinness and weight loss (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016). Thinspiration is a movement to inspire others to lose weight, which has been found to promote an eating disorder lifestyle (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015). Correlation studies (Harper et al., 2008) and experimental studies (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007) have demonstrated that exposure to thinspiration content negatively affects body image.

Although both concepts are part of the fitness realm, and that fitspiration could enclose progress such as weight loss or fat loss, achieving these goals differs from the thinspiration principles. However, although the concept had the potential for a positive social influence, observation shows that images still display thin, toned-figured women that fit current beauty ideals (Krane et al., 2001). Fitspiration content displays objectifying features, poses, clothing and focus on specific body parts. Therefore, attention to both concepts is needed to understand the repercussions of these movements. Some studies have been conducted (e.g., Boepple et al., 2016; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016) to understand the differences and impact between the fitspiration and thinspiration movements. Boepple et al. (2016) coded the textual elements of 50 thinspiration and 50 fitspiration general websites, looking for dysfunctional messages indicating eating disorders. They found that thinspiration sites featured more content on losing weight or fat, praised thinness, showed a thin pose and provided food guilt messages than fitspiration. Although fitspiration should promote a healthier lifestyle, it includes content that objectifies thin, muscular women and encourages exercise for appearance rather than health. Risks of fitspiration lie in normalising compulsive exercise and contributing to poor body image (Boepple et al., 2016).

Although not directly examined through the research questions, fitspiration and thinspiration are movements in the fitness social media ecosystem that can easily be found on fitness content. As this paper focuses on the fitness content created by fitness brands and discourses that are influenced by pop culture (Machin & Mayr, 2012), the researcher deemed it essential to recognise both movements, and their differences, since some features could appear in the data collected.

2.2.2 Fitfluencers: the digital celebrities

Influencers are content creators, specifically popular social media users (Wellman, 2020), who use an account on social networking sites for online exposure that can be commodifiable (Stollfuß, 2020). Influencers are opinion leaders who can charge from co-created or sponsored value with firms (Stollfuß, 2020) to promote products or services to their online audiences (Wellman, 2020). Thus, *fitfluencers* is the amalgamation of the words' fitness' and 'influencers'. Fitfluencers have become a big part of fitness on social media, taking over the place once reserved for TV personalities, having gained the status of digital celebrities in the fitness niche. Hwag and Zhang (2018) claim that parasocial relationships, especially with digital celebrities, affect consumers' purchase and electronic word of mouth intentions and have effects of

empathy, loneliness, and low social self-esteem, linking it to the uses and gratification theory. The researchers conclude that digital celebrities have become "influential opinion leaders in an era of online or social media power" (p.164), thus indicating a shift from traditional celebrities, media and advertising and fostering a new media dynamic advertising and diversified model.

      Although the research questions do not focus directly on fitfluencers, the researcher deemed it crucial to define and briefly explore relevant literature on the topic for two reasons. First, part of the criteria to select the brands for the study was that they needed to use influencers. Since the company's creation, Gymshark's marketing strategy has been characterized by Gymshark athletes. Gymshark athletes are fitfluencers recruited by the brand for their authenticity and ability to inspire others (Gymshark, n.d.-a). Likewise, Shreddy was founded by a fitfluencer, making fitness influencer marketing at the brand's core. Second, since influencers are considered digital celebrities, they fit into parasocial relationships, which is explicitly explored in this study.

2.2.3 Fitness challenges: social interaction with exercise motivation

There is limited scientific literature corresponding to fitness challenges. Since this study focuses on community events in the form of community challenges, literature on the gamification of fitness was deemed relevant. Goodwin and Ramjaun (2017) conducted a qualitative exploratory study on generation Y's motivations and attitudes towards mobile health and fitness apps, including gamification. Goodwin and Ramjaun (2017) found that intrinsic rewards are the foundation of customer loyalty. The Fitbit app exemplifies these intrinsic rewards, where users gain badges based on their accomplishment, achieve positive reinforcement, and encourage behavioural change (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011). Conversely to Burke (2014), where social integration was an essential amplifier for motivation, Goodwin and Ramjaun (2017) concluded that the social component of mobile gamification only has a positive impact on engagement if the user sees a clear purpose. Moreover, brands need to develop apps that include a competition to ignite social comparison (Goodwin & Ramjaun, 2017).

2.2.4 Online health and fitness communities

Health and fitness communities were held traditionally offline. Usually, individuals were linked geographically to a gym, sports court, or workout space. Traditional health and fitness communities fit the four overarching characteristics of communities: they are an alternative social network with constant and continuous interaction around a common goal or shared interest (i.e., fitness goals), with a developed sense of belonging through a common way of living and thinking (i.e., investing time in fitness and healthy lifestyle), a collective sense of difference from outsiders (i.e., not fitness enthusiasts), and the capacity to influence each other on a specific timeframe. However, with the web 2.0 technologies, these communities moved to an online setting giving individuals the opportunity for virtual social interaction and access to health and fitness (Hampton, 2015).

Online health and fitness communities fit in the four main characteristics of online fitness communities found on Ivatury and Chua (2019) and Porter (2015). Online health and fitness communities are open collectives not limited to a gym, sports court or workout space where individuals are dispersed and often unacquainted but in constant communication and actively engaged through social networking sites to share knowledge and experiences around fitness. In this type of community, individual members desire to improve their physical and mental well-being and join the community for motivation or inspiration to start their fitness journeys.

Due to their intrinsic characteristics, online health and fitness communities are reported to be beneficial. First, Leahey et al.'s (2012) research showed that individuals with access to a group of peers with shared values and identity would be more motivated to achieve goals. When individuals have access to a supportive environment, their levels of exercise increase significantly (Zhang et al., 2016) and are more likely to influence each other's weight outcomes (Shakya, 2015). However, it has also been shown that when individuals feel exposed, or their anonymity cannot be ensured, people might limit themselves from participating because of fear of embarrassment (Donath, 1999) and social factors could affect the quality of interactions (Nagel & Frith, 2015).

Second, social media allows documenting a fitness journey, interacting, exchanging videos, photos, motivation and support by peer comparison and competition. Users of online fitness programs are usually encouraged to share a post with their progress and tag the community doing it together. Since individuals are more likely to adopt health and fitness behaviours when they have social reinforcement (Centola, 2010), sharing progress online and creating fitness accounts foster that reinforcement. Having a fitness account leads the individual to engage in a performative identity (Leahey, 2012). The individual participating in a fitness community becomes an actor: an example for others of what can be achieved by following a program. On one side, the individual feels more inclined and motivated to perform and work out. On the other side, the individual demonstrates that achieving their goals is possible if they participate within the community. Although community members adopt and are conscious that others adopt performative attitudes, they value authenticity in content and interactions.

Third, the relative similarity between users and featured people on the images can be a powerful motivator (Johnston, 2019). Moreover, individuals will be less motivated if exposed to professional athletes or extremely fit individuals since identification is necessary. Additionally, less fit or overweight individuals can get more motivated by social media content since they recognise themselves as similar to others within the community (Johnston, 2019). Communities that emphasise social comparison among members can effectively motivate desirable behaviours (Zhang, 2016).

Therefore, online health and fitness communities present themselves as the digital upgrade of traditional health and fitness communities. In the scope of this study, understanding the benefits of online health and fitness communities (e.g., motivation to achieve goals, documentation and peer and peer comparison, and relative similarity) gave the researcher an overview of the potential of online health fitness communities that could be encoded in the messages created by the firms.

2.3 Parasocial relationships

Parasocial interaction is a concept that has risen in popularity with mass media. Dibble et al. (2015) define parasocial interaction as a "media user's reaction to a media performer such that the media user perceives the performer as an intimate conversational partner". Initial studies by Horton and Wohl's (1956) and previous research done by Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) mentioned by the researchers concentrated on the exposure to mass media communication celebrities such as TV presenters; we can infer that nowadays; this phenomenon also sees the light in social media. Parasocial relationships suggest an illusory experience where the person experiences it and assumes a sense of mutual awareness. Nonetheless, those studies showed that the relationship was unilateral and lacked reciprocity. Individuals were exposed to the media persona and experienced a sense of intimacy, perceived friendship, and identification; however, they could not express those sentiments to the actor (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

With the proliferation of communication technologies, accessibility, and high usage rates, parasocial relationships have changed. Three aspects are crucial for this research. First, recent studies have shown that different types of motivation are central to parasocial relationships (Yun et al., 2016), leading to various communication choices and behaviours (Rubin & Step, 2000). Therefore, the types of parasocial relationships that a brand looks to foster within their community might influence their communication style and message.

Second, parasocial relationships are not limited to celebrities in the mass media but extended to social media influencers (Wellman, 2020). Few studies have examined parasocial relationships in the context of celebrity endorsement (Knoll et al., 2015; Yuan et al., 2016). However, scholars have explored parasocial relationships and influencers (Wellman, 2020, Stollfuß, 2020). Using a netnographic approach, Wellman (2020) researched the influencer-follower connection inside the private Facebook group of health social media influencer Sarah's Day. Her study concluded that an illusion of intimacy was built as members felt a growing connection with the influencer by sharing intimate personal narratives on the group, despite Sarah's lack of interaction and participation on the posts (Wellman, 2020), implying and siding with Hillery (1955) that the community has a life of its own. Wellman coined the term *trans-mediated* parasocial relationship to refer to this phenomenon. Wellman (2020) implies that if a parasocial relationship has been created in platform A where the influencer is constantly present, it can translate to platform B, where the influencer is barely involved. The trans-mediated parasocial relationship is an interesting phenomenon to consider in the scope of this paper since brands tend to collaborate with fitness influencers and feature them on their channels. Those influencers have fostered solid parasocial relationships in their social media accounts; however, by being featured on the firms' social media, the parasocial relationship persists even if direct interaction with them is limited.

Third, social media interactions have the potential to foster stronger parasocial relationships (Chung & Cho, 2017). The interconnectivity that characterises social media reduces the lack of reciprocity and unilateral communication that used to characterise parasocial relationships in the past. Influencers have the power to interact and connect with their followers more easily by liking or answering their

comments, giving shoutouts on their stories or replying to their direct messages. This new perceived proximity and reciprocity could explain why social media users feel closer to influencers and digital celebrities. This new type of stronger parasocial relationship has been proven to have a significant marketing value since it leads to higher levels of source trustworthiness, and in turn, has a positive association with purchase intentions via brand credibility (Chung & Cho, 2017). In 2015, Tsiotsou found that an increased focus on parasocial behaviours could assist marketers in building and maintaining loyalty among consumers and Hwang and Zhang (2018) found that digital celebrities are influential opinion leaders whose advertising power and effectiveness is increased by parasocial relationships. Thus, firms could rely on celebrity endorsers who have an established parasocial relationship with their followers to promote their products and services while gaining market share and profiting from a competitive advantage (Kim et al., 2015). In their study, Yun et al. (2016) evidence that parasocial relationships strongly influence customer equity and improve customer lifetime value. Hence, marketers need to manage parasocial relationships and customise their brands to build customer relationships in social media as the potential to maximise the lifetime value of their most profitable customers is given. It can be implied that customers with maximised lifetime value will also help recruit new community members, favouring the brand community. Moreover, since brand communities created by firms hold commercial interest, building strong parasocial relationships that can increase purchase intentions and brand credibility can become an essential tool for marketers. Firms may take advantage of the trustworthiness created around the brand community to promote products and services, and these intentions could be encoded in their social media content.

Other studies have tried to identify the dimensionality of parasocial relationships (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000; Rubin & Perse, 1987; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). Different scales were tested, and dimensions beyond Horton and Woll's (1956) were explored, such as levels of intimacy, wishful identification, problem-solving, companionship, friendship, interaction, understanding and empathy. Additionally, mutual intimacy and liking were perceived in parasocial relationships as friendship (Tukachinsky, 2010), which is facilitated by the frequency of contact (Fehr, 1996). These characteristics of parasocial relationships are deemed important in the scope of this paper: they give the researcher an overview of the possible factors that can favour parasocial relationships. Thus, while evaluating the content created by the firms, these elements could be hidden in the data. For example, Sun & Wu (2012) did a quantitative study on the personality traits that influence sports celebrities' parasocial relationships. They concluded that materialism –the need for body resources and main trait– and interest in sports spectatorship –situational traits– affected the relationship positively, while low self-esteem afflicted it. However, Hwang and Zhang's (2018) quantitative study on the characteristics that digital celebrities need to foster or influence parasocial relationships found that low-self-esteem individuals will fill their deficiency in social acceptance with social media, thus looking to interact with celebrities. Hwang and Zhang (2018) also found that empathy was a facilitator for parasocial relationships, positively affects purchase intention and word of mouth intention, and mitigates the harmful effects of persuasion

knowledge due to the empathy and closeness that the individuals feel towards the celebrity. Since sports marketers draw on star power and use celebrity endorsement to create emotional ties between the athlete and the consumer, the characteristics of the message and its effects need to be considered in the scope of this paper.

Furthermore, recent research on parasocial relationships found a gap in previous research on celebrity endorsement about understanding the factors and processes that affect how consumers perceive, understand, identify with, and build relationships with celebrity endorsers (Yuan et al., 2021). In their most recent quantitative study, Yuan et al. (2021) try to bridge that gap and understand the effectiveness of this influence on consumers. The researchers demonstrated that celebrity endorsers' attributes positively affect parasocial relationships. They tested four attributes: leverage, fashionability, affinity, and popularity. While the study showed that popularity had no positive effect on the parasocial relationship, the influencers topicality and influence, their aesthetics, and how close their content is to public life had a positive effect. In turn, parasocial relationships on the fashion web positively affected customer equity (value equity + brand equity + relationship equity), reinforcing the idea that parasocial relationships are of interest for marketers.

In the scope of this paper, the researcher will aim to detect the dimensions of parasocial relationships within the content studied (e.g., intimacy, wishful identification, problem-solving, companionship, friendship, interaction, understanding and empathy), the trans-mediated parasocial relationship that happens between influencers' accounts and the firms' accounts, and the marketing focus given by the brands.

3. Methodology

Through social media (e.g., Instagram), brands recruit participants and promote their events. Therefore, analysing the social media content produced by fitness companies to understand how they create and build their online brand communities through community events is essential for this research. In the scope of this paper, social media content is considered *text*. Hall (1975) defined *texts* as "literary and visual constructs, employing symbolic means, shaped by rules, and traditions intrinsic to the use of language in its widest sense" (p.17). Hall implied that analysing social artefacts unveils the construction of meaning. To understand each community, the researcher needs to know how communities were formed, how participants joined, the steps taken to keep participants engaged during the challenge, and the rewards at the end of the participants' journeys. It is crucial to analyse the meanings (the) hosts (i.e., the producer) convey in their campaigns. Furthermore, by performing a qualitative analysis of the selected texts, the intrinsic meaning that the producer wants to convey will be illuminated. A multimodal approach will be applied to understand the host perspectives in-depth, combining multimodal critical discourse analysis, semi-directed content analysis and intertextuality.

As mentioned in the introduction, the researcher aims to answer three questions. Consequently, this chapter outlines the methodological approach of this study which will answer the aforementioned questions. The first section of this chapter presents the research design with an explanation and justification of the selected methods and an introduction of the two companies used for this study. The second section provides an in-depth description of the data collection process, and the third section delves into the data analysis process. The fourth section discusses the validity and reliability of the research. Finally, the researcher outlined a reflection of their role in this study. In the conclusion of this paper, the researcher addressed the strengths and limitations of the chosen method.

3.1 Research design

This study will perform semi-directed comparative content analysis and use multimodal critical discourse analysis and thematic analysis for diving into the collected data. The researcher chose both methods of analysis due to their potential to complement each other. Thematic analysis illuminated the main topics surrounding online brand fitness communities, community events and parasocial relationships; and multimodal critical discourse illuminated each brand's discourses and positioning strategies. Consequently, the use of both methods, thematic and multimodal critical discourses analyses, were proven to be the most suitable approach.

Since this research aims to identify how the parasocial relationship is created between companies and consumers and how it contributes to the brand image, studying the message encoded by each company is crucial. Considering, Instagram content combines both audiovisual features and text in both feed posts and stories, the combination of methods permitted an analysis of all elements needed to interpret the results from a holistic perspective. By using a content analysis approach, the researcher considered the analysis process of audio, visual, verbal, and textual data and had the freedom to analyse

still images, videos, and textual content found in each brand's Instagram accounts (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Specifically, this paper followed a semi-directed content analysis approach. Since previous theories and research on parasocial relationships are limited to influencers and celebrities, and studies are quantitative, some concepts could be extracted and used as preliminary codes; however, no primary or predominant theory could guide the study. Therefore, the researcher considered several aspects and characteristics of previous research on parasocial relationships to guide the analysis but did not limit the codes to those aspects.

By applying *thematic analysis* (TA), the researcher identified, analysed, and reported patterns or themes within data in a minimalistic and detailed manner (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Constant reflection and high immersion in the data, from observing the challenge real-time to going back on the data during the collection period, were necessary throughout the whole process. The flexibility of thematic analysis fits with the aim of this paper. Since content analysis follows a semi-direct approach, the procedure was characterised by a mix of deductive and inductive approaches, meaning that the coding is both data and theoretically driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

By applying *multimodal critical discourse analysis* (MCDA), the researcher was able to identify observable dimensions and the frequency with which visual features appear in the period studied and within the brands used for comparison (Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). Moreover, this method analysis gave the researcher the tools to identify the interrelationships between language, power, and ideology, which illuminated the hidden messages of the Instagram content studied (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Through discourse analysis, the researcher identified the fitness-related language and its role in constructing social reality. The framework applied during this research was the one proposed by Machin and Mayr (2012), as it provides a solid, comprehensive framework for the systematic application of visual and linguistic elements. Additionally, according to Machin and Mayr (2012), visual communication shapes and is shaped by society by contemplating the encoding and decoding of texts, hence MCDA also focuses on power relations instead of only on visual semiotic choices.

According to Barnham (2015), brands, just as people, are defined by their relationships with others; they only possess meaning and values because of the competitive set surrounding them. The researcher chose two cases to study: two sportswear brands that used community events to foster their online brand communities (see section 3.2). By holding a comparative content analysis, the researcher favoured an in-depth understanding of brands and the meanings and values attached to each in the encoded message. Due to the comparative nature of this study, semiotic intertextuality was needed during the application of both methods. First, intertextuality "emphasises the fluidity of meaning" (O'Donohoe, 1997, p. 234) which is consciously and unconsciously used in one text of material. Second, intertextuality enhances the potential of advertising or promotional materials to be consumed independently of the brands promoted (O'Donohoe, 1997). Third, visual intertextuality within advertising represents a channel that perpetuates archetypes, which Crăciunescu (2021) classifies in two types: (a) myths and archetypes in pure form and (b) present trends, generated by images from a mass culture containing collectively accepted objects of

meaning. Thus, since the fitness world has its language, intertextuality helped to understand how codes and meaning were created within brands. Lastly, because texts do not function as closed systems (Worton & Still, 1990): the encoding and decoding processes heavily influenced texts. Not only texts are shaped by their authors, meaning that texts are tainted by past and contemporary references, quotations, or influences, but also by their readers, making them co-producers of the texts (O'Donohoe, 1997). Since the focus of the study is the encoding of meaning by companies on their Instagram content, and the researcher will decode the message, intertextuality needs to be addressed both for analysis and reflexivity (see section 3.5).

This study follows a qualitative research approach, allowing an in-depth investigation into online brand communities and aiming to answer the research questions and sub-questions. Several reasons justify this choice. First, qualitative research has an interpretive and naturalistic approach to the world and studies a topic by interpreting or making sense of the studied phenomena and the meanings people attach to them (Barnham, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Understanding the meanings attached to both events is crucial since this study aims to understand how community events contribute to a brand's image, precisely, how companies foster parasocial relationships. Second, the nature of the questions and the lack of previous research on fitness marketing and community creation require this study to be exploratory, inductive, and interpretative (Boeije, 2009). Third, qualitative research allows finding empirical patterns and builds the understanding of the social world from a constructionist perspective since people's interactions and communications shape social reality (Boeije, 2009; Flick, 2011). Fourth, this study needed the flexibility and subjectivity of qualitative research. According to Flick (2011), qualitative research allows the researcher to go beyond a text's explicit meaning and identify the concealed interpretations since it captures subjectivity. In this study, subjectivity is part of how each brand presents itself and the type of content they deliver on their social media channels. All these characteristics confirm that a qualitative approach is the most suitable.

3.2 Data collection

To hold a comparative analysis, the researcher selected two brands of the sportswear industry. The criteria followed for this selection was the following: both brands needed to (a) have an online brand community, (b) host a fitness-related community event in 2021, (c) use Instagram in their communication strategy, and (d) use influencers in their campaign. Therefore, Gymshark and Shreddy were selected to hold valuable comparative analyses of community building as part of a branding strategy in the fitness and sportswear niche since they met the essential criteria and shared several similarities. First, they are digital-native brands which means they are vision led-brands with a high level of business model readiness for operation and mastery of digital technologies (Signifiyed, 2019; Tekic & Koreteev, 2019). Second, they share similar demographic targets, price points and are UK-based brands. Additionally, they were created by young entrepreneurs featured in Forbes 30 under 30 – Europe – Retail and Ecommerce (Bertoni & Brown, 2018; Sternlicht & Falk, 2020).

Gymshark is currently the fastest-growing sportswear brand in the UK and recently achieved *unicorn status* by being valued at 1.4 billion-plus USD in August 2020; their primary strategy is working with fitness influencers and selling the brand on social media (Sternlicht, 2020). Ben Francis, Gymshark's founder and current CEO, argues that young people only want to buy community-led brands that align with their values and claims that Gymshark is "a community that also happens to sell things" (Sternlicht, 2020). During the last eight years, employing influencer and content marketing, Gymshark managed to create a community that highly engages with the brand and consistently buys its products (Sternlicht, 2020). Gymshark sells sportswear and fitness accessories, has its own fitness app, and will soon venture into nutrition supplements (Gymshark, n.d.-b). Since 2018, Gymshark has annually hosted #gymshark66 during the first 66 days of the year: a community event designed to promote the creation of healthy habits (Gymshark, 2018).

Conversely, Shreddy represents a newcomer in the sportswear market. Founded in 2017 by Grace Beverley, ex-Gymshark athlete, Shreddy collaborates with TALA to achieve the same goals and provide the same products and services as Gymshark but with one evident add-on: a focus on sustainability. Fitness accessories, a fitness and nutrition app and nutrition supplements are provided under the brand Shreddy, and sportswear is provided under TALA. Beverley achieved a revenue of over six million pounds in her first year of business (Manavis, 2020), showing a promising future for her both brands. Shreddy has hosted several challenges designed to recruit new subscribers and engage the existing ones into making healthier choices and moving more since 2019. In 2021, Shreddy launched #ShreddyToRumble, in the middle of the several COVID-19 lockdowns to promote a reset of healthy habits at the beginning of the year (Shreddy, 2021).

3.2.1 Sampling

No data was created exclusively for this study; therefore, the researcher only conducted secondary data analysis (Flick, 2011). This study examined data on Instagram posts, specifically visual material artefacts, text and hashtags. Data collection was done through Instagram. Posts were located using the researcher's personal Instagram account since the algorithm could not influence the display of posts retrieved directly from the profiles. Instagram was screened to find the brands' official accounts (Table 1). Based on the number of followers, both brands reach a considerable number of users worldwide. These six accounts are deemed active as daily content is uploaded either in posts on feed or stories.

Brand	Instagram account	Number of followers
Gymshark	@gymshark	5.4 million
	@gymsharkwomen	3.1 million
	@gymsharktrain	1 million
	@shreddy	201 thousand

| Shreddy/TALA | @shreddyclub | 154 thousand |
| | @wearetala | 269 thousand |

Table 1. Overview of the accounts from Gymshark and Shreddy/TALA.

After locating the accounts for the study, a selection of posts for this study was made. The most relevant data was chosen to provide significant insights and answer the research question and sub-question (Emmel, 2014). The relevant posts were selected through purposive criterion (Palinkas et al., 2013). The posts needed to adhere to the following criteria: the images or videos (a) were posted on any of the six accounts in Table 1, (b) used their respective branded challenge hashtag (#gymshark66 or #shreddytorumble) or made direct reference to the challenges, (c) were created and posted between December 2020 and April 2021, and (d) contain elements in the English language. As the focus of the research is each brand's community event, the dates of the challenges were the primary time constraint. Gymshark's community event #Gymshark66 started on January 1st 2021, and lasted sixty-six days, while #ShreddyToRumble started on January 11th and lasted eight weeks, consequently making both challenges end on the same date, March 7th, 2021. However, the researcher deemed it essential that the challenges were studied from a holistic view considering (a) the promotion and recruitment period, (b) the challenge itself and (c) the aftercare, hence why an extra month was considered at the beginning and end of the challenges.

Both feed and stories were considered because of the different nature and use of content in the same platform. The researcher did not aim to attain an equal number of posts per brand since the frequency and the total number of texts created per brand was deemed relevant for the overall interpretation of the results.

#Gymshark66		#ShreddyToRumble	
Instagram account	**Number of posts**	**Instagram account**	**Number of posts**
@gymshark	10	@shreddy	7
@gymsharkwomen	0	@shreddyclub	85
@gymsharktrain	132	@wearetala	0

Table 2. Overview of posts on feed by challenge and accounts.

For Instagram posts on feed, a total of 234 posts were part of the sample. The accounts @gymsharkwomen and @wearetala had no posts that referred to the community event during the selected timeframe. Gymshark had a total of 142 posts referring to the challenge, 132 of them located in their @gymsharktrain account instead of the main one. Shreddy had a total of 92 posts referring to Shreddy to Rumble, 85 of them located in their @shreddyclub account.

#Gymshark66			#ShreddyToRumble		
Instagram account	Highlight	Number of stories	Instagram account	Highlight	Number of stories
@gymshark	#Gymshark66	99	@shreddy	STR	12
	GS Family	35			
@gymsharkwomen	Not available		@shreddyclub	STR	99
@gymsharktrain	Not available		@wearetala	Not available	

Table 3. Overview of stories and highlights, per challenge and accounts.

For Instagram stories, a total of 245 stories were part of the sample. The accounts @gymsharkwomen, @gymsharktrain and @wearetala had no highlights that referred to the community events during the selected timeframe. Gymshark had 134 stories located in their main account. However, this number was higher since highlights only show posts added by the brand. Stories posted between weeks 5 and 9 are missing but were observed by the researcher when the event occurred. Shreddy had a total of 111 posts referring to #ShreddyToRumble, 99 of them located in their @shreddyclub account.

3.3 Data analysis

Multimodal critical discourse analysis, thematic analysis and intertextuality were applied to fully understand the messages encoded by the brand, and the creation and maintenance of a community through community events. The following paragraphs detail the exact process followed by the researcher when applying both methods and how intertextuality was used in both analyses.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework was used for thematic analysis, and Machin and Mayr (2012) toolkit was used for multimodal critical discourse analysis. The first step of both methods overlapped: investigation of the data by collection and immersion (see section 3.2). In this stage and to facilitate further analysis, texts were first coded by overall content category: still images, video, or graphics. Texts were later classified based on the phase of the challenge (i.e., promotional phase, challenge, after-care) and later by their primary goal (e.g., workout video, advertisement, testimonial, motivation, giveaway, product placement). Texts featuring people were subjected to more detailed analysis. First, they were coded based on the number and gender of the individuals shown. Second, the body shape of the individual was coded to note adiposity and muscularity. Third, images were coded for individuals engaging outdoors, indoors, and the type of sport.

In the scope of thematic analysis, this initial categorisation of the texts facilitated step two: the creation of initial codes. The researcher focused on visual and textual information, and all relevant items were coded (i.e., still images, videos, graphics, emojis, hashtags and captions). The researcher described the visuals in these initial codes, quoted relevant parts of the captions, and considered other hashtags used. During the third step, the researcher organised all initial codes per brand. Initial themes such as 'before and after' and 'memes' appeared for Shreddy/TALA, while 'motivation' and 'resources'

appeared for Gymshark (see Appendix A). In step four, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, the researcher took an overview of both brands, unveiled the overlapping topics, categories and subcategories, and re-evaluated the initial codes and the data set as a whole. In step five, through the analysis of intertextuality of the results and previous research, the researcher refined and defined the main themes. As a final step, the researcher reported the results (see Chapter 4).

In the scope of multimodal critical discourse and after the initial categorisation of the texts, the researcher identified the denotations (manifest items) and connotations (latent meanings) by observing objects and attributes in the texts. The third step of MCDA consisted in describing the settings. The fourth step of the analysis concerned the salience, in other words, how certain items were made to attract the observer's attention. The fifth step concerned the definition of the message or discourse found on the post or story. Next, all preliminary codes and discourses were revised. Finally, the researcher analysed the intertextuality of the discourses per brand and between brands.

After examining the posts and stories within the sample, the results were cross-examined with previous literature and research on online brand communities, fitness on social media and parasocial relationships (Chapter 4). Previous literature has led to an understanding of parasocial relationships, especially the characteristics that influencers or celebrities need to have to foster this type of relationship (see Chapter 2). As this concept is at the core of online brand communities and community events, its inclusion in the analysis phase was necessary to determine if Gymshark and Shreddy were using parasocial relationships to their advantage in their content creation. The analysis outcomes will be derived from the dataset but will consider the previous theory, as content analysis will follow a semi-directed approach.

3.4 Validity, reliability, and ethical concerns

Validity and reliability were aspects to keep in mind during the study (Gilbert, 2008; Kirk & Miller, 2011). While validity is concerned with the degree to which the findings are interpreted correctly, reliability is concerned with the degree to which the findings are independent of accidental circumstances (Kirk & Miller, 2011). Several steps were taken to ensure the validity of the research, from ensuring internal validity by having the proper structure and solidity of the results; to ensuring external validity by not limiting the research to newcomer or senior brands but comparing companies at different business stages but with similar production standards. The researcher made a conscious effort of documenting the relevant context of observation in a detailed manner (Kirk and Miller, 2011), seeking to increase the reliability of the study. The strengths regarding validity and reliability will be addressed in the discussion (see Chapter 5).

As for ethical concerns, since there was no production of primary data, most of the ethical concerns lie in how much the researcher's subjectivity could have influenced the study. Preferences or feelings towards the brands could bias the analysis. Therefore, the researcher paid particular attention to this, was critical of their position, avoided favouritism and analysed the data exhaustively. Additionally,

the use of sensitive or personal information found in the texts was limited to data strictly necessary for the analysis.

3.5 Reflexibility

Korstjens and Moser (2018) explain that reflexivity is the process of critical self-reflection that the researcher needs to address its own biases, preferences, and pre-conceptions. Thus, the researcher's reflexivity process is essential since qualitative research is constructed from the researcher's interpretation of the data. Although a reflexivity process was followed during this study, since the research process required immersion in the data and a subjective interpretation of the results, the researcher's background may influence the results.

To ensure the transparency of this paper, the researcher acknowledged their role in this research. First, my background and eight years of practical work experience in audiovisual communication and digital marketing have given me solid foundations and understanding of how digital marketing and social media work and how to create and maintain online brand communities. Second, as a master's student, my knowledge of academic research and specific interest in the marketing and storytelling of the fitness industry drove my interest in continuing academic literature related to fitness branding. Third, as a fitness enthusiast myself, I have purchased from the two brands used for this study and engaged with both brands' social media and their respective online communities. Thus, a reflexivity process was conducted to minimise the personal perception of the challenges, the communities, and the brands.

To sum up, background, education, interests, and affinities, have provided the researcher with an advantage to conduct this study from different perspectives: master student, digital marketeer, audiovisual communicator, and fitness enthusiast. The iterative process, which was conducted with awareness of these factors, allowed us to critically assess the pre-understanding of the topic and make an in-depth analysis of both challenges.

4. Results

First, this chapter will give an overview of the data based on format, content type and distribution, tone of communication and emojis and hashtags. Second, this chapter will present the thematic analysis and discourse analysis results for Instagram posts and Instagram stories. The results will be divided into two sections: thematic analysis and discourse analysis. In the first section, the themes that emerge from both brands' analysis will be discussed and accompanied with images and quotes. Themes that will be presented include overarching topics such as *diversity of people and sports, performative identities, the impact of COVID-19*. In the case of Shreddy, two more themes emerged *nutrition* and *sales*. In the second section, the researcher will present first the prevalent discourses identified in both brands, then the discourse adopted by Gymshark, and the discourse adopted by Shreddy.

4.1 Overview of the data

4.1.1 Content format

Forno (2019) has stated that video content is more memorable for consumers, thus seeing the preferable content format used by brands provides a first insight into the communication strategies in the scope of the challenge. Shreddy has a hybrid approach, with photos being their dominant format (38%), followed by graphics (33.7%) and video (28.3%). While @shreddyclub follows fits with this percentual division and ranking, their main account @shreddy, with only seven posts referencing the challenge, uses videos as their primary format (n=4). They also rely on self-standing posts (65.2%) instead of carrousels (29.3%) or carrousels (5.4%). Gymshark has an approach aligned with Forno (2019): most of its content is in video format (85.9%), followed by photos (9.2%) and graphics (4.9%). Both accounts content during the challenge corresponds to this percentual division and ranking. Gymshark relies on carrousels (90.1%) being their preferred way of displaying the content related to the challenge, over individual posts (9.2%) and reels (0.7%)

Stories concern the texts that go to the user's story feature and stay there for 24 hours before disappearing unless the brand indexes them on a highlight. Shreddy's stories approach aligns with Forno (2019), with video being the preferred format (53.2%), followed by graphics (34.2%) and photos (12.6%). The intrinsic video characteristic of stories makes the chosen format logical and expected. Gymshark has opted for graphics as their primary content format on stories (70.1%) while reducing video to 29.9%. Although photos were not used as the main content format for stories, the graphic category in stories presents an evolution of content design and a mixed formats approach. While 62.7% of the graphic content progressed from entirely still graphics to slightly animated ones during the challenge, 37.2% of stories mixed the graphic-visual approach with pictures sent by participants.

4.1.2 Content type and distribution

#ShreddyToRumble

Shreddy hosted several fitness challenges in 2020; the last one was hosted till December 2020. Hence, the promotion phase for #shreddytorumble started at the end of the year, on December 26th, alluding to a new challenge but without disclosing any other information. Their promotion period ended on January 17th, overlapping with the first week of the challenge period. During the promotion, most feed posts concerned the open enrolment for the challenge, except for the occasional post to promote the sale or restock of fitness accessories or supplements from the brand (n=2), which was still tagged under the challenge hashtag. Enrollment opened officially on January 4th and was communicated on the feed and stories. Stories were limited to the steps to download the app and sign up for the challenge, which was paired with a 50% discount for new users to increase the recruitment of new members. The promo on stories was first held on the main @shreddy account, however, during weeks of overlap between promotion and challenge, @shreddy stopped publishing stories related to the challenge, and @shreddyclub took over that function.

The challenge period started on January 11th up to March 7th, 2021. @shreddyclub became the central platform for all posts (feed and stories) related to Shreddy to Rumble during this period. Only three posts related to the challenge were made on the main @shreddy account; all other posts did not reference the challenge or had the hashtag but concentrated on other aspects of the Shreddy business: the app, the supplements and the fitness accessories. However, since there was no direct mention of the challenge, those posts were not analysed in-depth. During that period, an average of one post on feed a day was made on the @shreddyclub account, and several weekly stories were shared. Stories followed a recurring pattern: a question linked to the weekly challenge paired with the poll function, an explanation on how to participate in the weekly challenge, the prize they could win, and stories showcasing the weekly winner. This last type of story consisted of a written presentation of the winner giving information on who she was, her motivation to join and how she had been experiencing the challenge, after which the winner did a takeover and talked a bit in-depth on the previously disclosed information. This sequence was repeated week every week until the end of the challenge. On the feed, the strategy was different. It showed several types of content: before and after pictures paired with testimonials, motivational quotes, gym and home workout videos, memes, user-generated content (food pictures and selfies), product promotion (supplements and accessories) and even recipes.

On Sunday, March 7th, 2021, Shreddy posted that the challenge was over on their feed. They made a recap of the achievements made by the community in those eight weeks. This post marked the beginning of the after-care period. However, this period was shorter than expected since a second post was made the same day to emphasise the end of the challenge and start to create expectative for the upcoming challenge. Winners of the challenge were not communicated on the main or training feed. Stories concerning an overall winner of the challenge could also not be found on the story highlight analysed.

#Gymshark66

Gymshark hosts #gymsshark66 once a year. Existing community members are already expecting the challenge to be promoted, hence creating expectative is limited to new members. Additionally, they can promote themselves early without being constrained by a previous competition. Their promotion period started quite early; the first post was on December 8th. Gymshark launched their promotional period with an advertisement, where they presented the focus of 2021 and all the relevant information to participate. The promotional period ended on December 31st; participants could sign up by taking a pledge up to the last day. During this period, five posts on the @gymshark feed alluded to the challenge. The GS Family highlight had six stories consisting of a graphic template paired with a participant's picture. Each picture showed participants holding the pledge for the challenge. The Gymshark66 highlight had nine stories linked to the promotional period, corresponding to graphic content with all the information about the challenge and a link to the website for more information.

The challenge period started on January 1st, 2021 and was set to last 66 days, up to March 7th. During this period, the main @gymshark feed saw five posts with specific goals: (1) to mark the first day of the challenge, (2) a workout video as an extra challenge, (3) a giveaway, (4) a second workout video, and (5) a testimonial of an athlete that was doing the challenge with the community. Gymshark used their training account @gymsharktrain to post daily during the challenge. An average of two posts per day was found in the @gymsharktrain account. Most of them followed the same pattern: video carrousels with a workout routine to follow, either at the gym or at home. Rarely, a motivational quote was posted paired with a graphic design or with a picture that featured one of the Gymshark athletes. For stories, the strategy was different. Stories were only found on the main Gymshark account under two different highlights. One was alluding to the GS Family, and one directly linked to the challenge. The GS Family highlight had 29 stories consisting of a graphic template paired with a picture of a participant wearing Gymshark sportswear. The Gymshark66 highlight consisted of 90 stories following a recurring pattern: the explanation of the weekly challenge and how to participate, educational or informative stories to help participants succeed, and at least one athlete takeover linked to the challenge of the week. A couple of stories did not follow the pattern. They were part of an advertisement campaign for Amazon's Alexa skill. The highlight only displays the content shared up to week 4, making it impossible for the researcher to evaluate all the material until day 66. However, it is expected that the content of the following weeks had undergone the same pattern.

On Sunday, March 7th, 2021, the challenge came to an end. No posts were found on the main @gymshark feed, and no stories are available on highlights. The only accessible content related to the end of the challenge was the last post on March 7th on the @gymsharktrain feed. With a motivational quote, the graphic post invites the participants to reflect on their journey and remember where they started on day 1. Winners of the challenge nor weekly winners were communicated on the main or training feeds. Stories concerning winners of the challenge and weekly challenges could also not be found on the story

highlight analysed. The research had to visit the website page dedicated to the challenge to access that information.

4.1.3 Tone of communication, emojis and hashtags

Setting the right voice and tone of communication is essential for firms (Forrester, 2020). The *brand tone* is part of the brand identity and its unique persona: it concerns how the message is conveyed and how it sounds (Forrester, 2020). Moreover, brand tone can help the audience get to know the firm and understand it better (Forrester, 2020). Brand tone can and should be adjusted based on context and chosen channel. Throughout the data analysis, the tone of communication used by both brands appeared to be colloquial and friendly. Both aimed to interact with their communities and be with them during their journeys providing information, support and motivation. The fitness jargon is part of both communities, with lots of references to types of workouts (e.g., leg day, booty workout, HIIT, full-blast body workout), exercises and movements (e.g., fire hydrants, squats, leg press, shoulder later raise), and niche words such as "gym buddy", "shoulder boulders", "ultimate burn" or "serious pump". However, differences in brand tone were found. Shreddy seemed to use a more juvenile and fun approach by the use of memes and puns. For example, the name of the challenge plays with the sentence "are you ready to rumble?" and swipes the world ready for Shreddy because of their phonetic similarities. The way they communicated through social media during the weekly challenges followed that playful approach. Their message had an aspirational tone: they invited people to join the challenge to be their best selves. Conversely, Gymshark seemed to have different brand tones on stories and feed. While their feed was playful and juvenile, their stories followed a sober approach, emphasising the quality of content shared (e.g., education content, workout plans, athletes' testimonials). By keeping it simple, Gymshark aimed to focus their community's attention on what they deemed most important: the content.

Emojis were consistent within each brand. Sometimes used to complement the fitness jargon with emojis like 🍑, 🐂 or 💪 and sometimes adding clarification on the brand tone (McSweeney, 2020). The systematic use of emojis kept the tone of communication in a light and playful tone. However, there were specific differences between the firms. Gymshark uses emojis in both @gymshark and @gymsharktrain accounts. Every post has at least one emoji. The most common ones were always paired to fitness concepts: the fire emoji to mark the intensity of a workout, peach emoji for glute workouts, biceps, lifting or running emojis to symbolise exercise, the shark emoji to link back to the brand, the link emoji to remind people to go to the website for more information and the hands up when something needed to be celebrated. However, they decided to keep a more sober image and exclude emojis when it comes to stories. It can be assumed that the focus for stories was on the value of the content shared and the people displayed rather than visually representing the brand tone.

On the other hand, Shreddy maximised the use of emojis both on the captions of feed pots and on the stories. The systematic use of colourful emojis (McSweeney, 2020) exacerbates the brand tone and breaks down Shreddy captions in small digestible points, making them easy to read. The most recurrent

emojis could be linked to concepts of affection: hearted eyes, sparkles and sparkly hearts. Other emojis were similar to the ones used by Gymshark and paired to fitness concepts. To communicate brand tone on stories, Shreddy also included emojis, making them visually appealing (McSweeney, 2020). Moreover, by using specific emojis such as the dollar-eyed emoji when presenting certain prizes, Shreddy visually represented certain mindsets or emotions (McSweeney, 2020). Shreddy actively used Instagram tools to interact with their followers, especially the emoji bar rating tool that allows users to answer based on the emotion conveyed by the emoji.

The use of the branded hashtags was overall consistent within each brand. However, certain irregularities were worth noting. Consistency reigns in the case of Gymshark. On the posts on the feed, besides the official hashtag of the challenge #gymshark66, the other hashtag used was the official hashtag of the brand #gymshark. Once only was a different hashtag used on a post. The hashtag #raisethebar was used on the giveaway post because it is the branded hashtag of the giveaway partner Eleiko. On stories, hashtags were a little bit different since weekly hashtags were released to track weekly participation. Hence, participants were encouraged to use the weekly hashtags to win the weekly prizes, making the weekly hashtag necessary to interact in the community.

In the case of Shreddy, several hashtags were used, but inconsistency was noticeable. The prominent four hashtags the brand kept on reusing in the analysed data were their branded hashtag #shreddy, their two branded community hashtags #shreddyclub and #teamshreddy, and last, the official hashtag of the challenge #shreddytorumble. Shreddy held more irregularities with the use of hashtags and included other ones that, in contrast with the literature presented on the concepts of thinspiration and fitspiration, may result threatening. For example, the hashtags #homefatloss and #fatloss were used once each during the promotional period, paired with before and after pictures. The hashtags may refer to the names of the programs in the Shreddy app; however, reference to fat loss, paired with before and after pictures of women in underwear, suggest attention to certain aspects previously linked to the thinspiration and fitspiration movements. Another hashtag that appeared was #getshreddywithit, alluding to a previous challenge and creating expectations.

The researcher observed a clear difference between both brands' communicational tones by the type of content they chose to share, the way they wrote down their captions, how emojis were used and how hashtags were integrated. The special attention put by each brand in clearly defining their brand tone and pair it with the appropriate visual representation, gave visibility to the brands' unique persona (Forrester, 2020). By appealing to empathy and feelings of friendship in their communication tone, both brands seem to be fostering parasocial relationships, not necessarily with an influencer but directly with the brand's unique persona. Gymshark tried to foster parasocial relationships by keeping a sober communication tone that puts the brand as a knowledge provider and motivational partner. In contrast, Shreddy tried to foster parasocial relationships by focusing on showing affection for their community.

4.2 Emerging themes

Several themes emerged from the thematic analysis conducted on the collected data. Some themes overlapped with certain discourses that will be explained in the next section. From the analysis of both data sets the following themes emerged: *inclusivity, performative identities, the impact of COVID-19, nutrition.* From the Shreddy data set two more themes emerged: *sales.*

4.2.1 Inclusivity

With the exemption of most graphic posts and food-related posts, images and videos content have at least one person featured on them. This person is either an ambassador or a participant. Although both brands are in the niche of health and fitness, both have fitness apps and are directly or indirectly linked to sportswear retail. Hence, they showed certain commonalities in the representation of the actors of the posts and the activities but also had specific differences worth noting. Inclusivity will be explored as an overarching theme and its links to diverse representation. Mukherjee (2020) states that inclusivity is an existential imperative rather than personal and organisational ethics, meaning that businesses and leaders should strive for inclusivity as a crucial part of their model. To understand inclusivity, the researcher will dive into the four types of diversity observed in the data: internal diversity, external diversity, organisational diversity and worldview diversity (Alliant International University, n.d.).

Internal diversity

Internal diversity was clearly observable in both brands. Therefore, the brands strived to be inclusive in terms of ethnicity, sex, age and physical abilities that individuals were born into (Alliant International University, n.d.).

Shreddy opted for different angles when tackling internal diversity and its display on its social media content. For instance, the first noticeable aspect is the diversity of women displayed on the pictures and videos; however, it is limited to one sex since the app is female-exclusive. Women from different ethnicities are constantly included in videos which translates visually to seeing models with different hair colours, skin colour and facial features. Upon a quick inspection of the Shreddy athletes and ambassadors tagged on the relevant posts, most of them are based in the UK; hence, ambassadors are limited geographically and expose a lack of diversity.

In the case of Gymshark, diversity was especially observable on the @gymsharktrain page. Every day during the challenge, two posts on the feed were made. Generally, one post would feature a woman and the following post a man. Furthermore, athletes of different ethnicities were showcased. Since Gymshark has athletes all over the world, diversity is also ensured by showing people from other nationalities and countries. By extension, and in both challenges, since participation is enabled by web 2.0 technologies, hence not limited geographically to a place, they show more diversity when members' pictures are shared. Age-wise, both brands have neglected to be more inclusive; however, this exclusion by age certainly aligns with their brand's target. Lastly, Gymshark succeeds to address physical disabilities and inclusion. For example, they shared the story of two of their disabled athletes participating in the

challenge. Additionally, they gave visibility for disability on the weekly challenge #educateyourself66 and invited a personal trainer that communicates through British sign language (BSL) which her deaf clients.

External diversity

External diversity was also observable, especially in Shreddy's content. External diversity can be observed through personal interests, education, appearance, socio-economic status; it concerns aspects of an individual that have been acquired (Alliant International University, n.d.).

The contestants' stage of education was displayed when promoting and sharing the weekly winners' profiles. In that way, participants are more relatable and show that the challenge can be followed by everyone and still find a balance. The diversity approach did not translate to appearance factors such as body composition, adiposity and muscularity. Although Shreddy's sister brand TALA stands for body diversity, this does not translate to the posts during the challenge. Standard images of fit and slim women and fit and muscular men (only on Gymshark) were predominant for both brands. A fit physic was expected since the people featured on posts are mostly fitness models, trainers or athletes. The participants that took part in the stories' takeovers during the Shreddy challenge or the re-shared pictures on @shreddyclub were the only ones falling out of a preferred slim and fit body type persistent in the women seeing in the posts. Based on the principle of relative similarity (Johnston, 2019), seeing people with similar body types may help with identification and motivation. In contrast, excessively fit people can cause rejection or low self-esteem (Johnston, 2019).

For personal interests, especially in the fitness niche, a link with sports and preferred fitness activities was made. Personal fitness interests displayed in the Shreddy community are linked to weightlifting, cardio and stretching; most of Shreddy's content is gym or home gym-related. Conversely, Gymshark takes a broader approach to sports, showcasing workouts from other disciplines, and focusing on other areas besides lifting and cardio, such as mobility, flexibility, yoga, running, gymnastics or general sports. Therefore, for Gymshark, fitness is not limited to the gym or gym like workouts but includes the whole spectrum of disciplines.

Organisational diversity

Organisational diversity refers to the role that a person plays within an organisation (Alliant International University, n.d.). In the scope of fitness online brand communities, analysing the roles that get exposure on the social media content was deemed relevant since both brands have different approaches. On one hand, Shreddy has given more exposure to the participants of the challenge, hence showcasing members as the main assets of the community. Shreddy has limited their use of ambassadors on their posts to instructional workout videos or the occasional product placement. On the other, Gymshark has given more exposure to their athletes during the challenge. Athletes are part of most Gymshark posts, excluding graphic posts. Furthermore, the challenge participants are rarely reshared on the feed unless there are

previous winners with athlete status or on day 1 of the challenge. By mainly showcasing participants on stories, Gymshark makes their temporary.

Worldview diversity

Worldview concerns specific topics or postures people can align with (Alliant International University, n.d.). While Gymshark did not show any worldview diversity during the length of the challenge and in the sample studied, the business model of Shreddy taints the social media content with a sustainability scope. Shreddy present itself as an alternative for better products. Their fitness accessories and supplements are vegan, and their app's meal plan section includes vegetarian and vegan individuals.

Diversity in its different levels allows the participants to experience identification, henceforth fostering identification with the community.

4.2.2 Performative identities

Parasocial relationships and online communities have one concept in common: the content producer is considered a performer. Since content creators and influencers create and curate the content, they choose to share (Stollfuß, 2020) and interact with their followers through social networking sites; their communication model mimics the parasocial relationship model by Horton & Wohl (1956). In this context, influencers become the mass media celebrity and customers, or online community participants become the spectators.

In online communities, every individual assumes and is aware of their performance and role within the community (Pearson, 2009). As mentioned in the previous theme, the roles inside a community are crucial in understanding a community's interactions and modus operandi. In both brands, the leading performers are the athletes or ambassadors showcased in the videos and pictures. Ambassadors and athletes perform as trainers on the posts shared in the feed. However, in the case of Gymshark, when athletes did the takeovers on stories, athletes played the role of participants of the challenge, a friend, a member of the Gymshark fam. As stated by Tukachinsky (2010), friendship and empathy are the core of parasocial relationships. However, performative identities play a significant role: ambassadors become actors and construct their identities by choosing which aspects to show to connect to the audience. Ambassadors-as-participants is a phenomenon not seen on Shreddy, who had no ambassadors talking to people on stories or sharing their experience with the challenge. However, through the winners' takeovers and the tagged members' accounts, community members became actors who constructed their identities as part of a community, as winners, and as examples of success within the community (Leahey, 2012). By interacting on social media, especially with fitness accounts, ambassadors and participants are projecting a performative identity (Leahey, 2012). Hence, by taking an active role within the community, the feelings of belongingness increase, co-creation is fostered, and value is created.

4.2.3 Impact of COVID-19

Although the COVID-19 situation was initially outside of the scope of this study, after the data collection and analysis, it is a topic worth mentioning since the content created by both brands were affected by this situation. Although both brand communities have a worldwide reach and have ambassadors outside the UK, they are still based there. Thus, the start of the challenges coincided with several lockdowns happening in the world, and it also coincided with the third lockdown announced by Boris Johnson in the UK.

Manifestations of COVID-19 were present in the content rolled out during the challenges and were mainly found on the feed posts rather than in stories. In the case of Gymshark, since they have athletes worldwide, social distancing sooner or later began to be noticeable in the background of gym workout videos; preference was given to home workouts or workouts with minimum equipment. Branded Gymshark masks appeared on some of the posts shared. Comments referring to going outdoors only if safe and allusions to seeing workout partners in the future were also present.

In the case of Shreddy, the adaptation to the COVID-19 situation was even more prominent. Since the primary business focus of Shreddy is the workout app, the workout programs released needed to be adapted to do at home since access to gyms was restricted in most countries due to the pandemic. Comments referring to going outdoors only if safe and allusions to seeing workout partners in the future were also found. However, no masks were shown. Additionally, since Shreddy gave the weekly winner a takeover feature to talk about their journey on stories, some participants chose to disclose the current and previous lockdowns as the motivation to join the app.

This adaptation to the situation and to the needs of their community members show that brands accorded high importance in providing value to their communities, showing themselves as helpful and flexible, but also as a support group in times of need.

4.2.4 Nutrition

Nutrition was a small topic that derived mainly from Shreddy data and one specific week of Gymshark66. Nutrition is a critical aspect of the fitness journey of an individual. Myths suggest that one can change their body composition or lose weight only by training. However, science has shown that to lose weight, the roadblock to tackle is nutrition. Since Gymshark's overarching goal during the challenge is related to creating healthy habits, it makes sense to find nutrition as an emerging topic. However, as evidenced by the data, the emphasis on nutrition was limited to one week only, when the weekly challenge was #healthyswaps66. Gymshark approached this challenge by sharing healthy recipes with their community in stories and with a link to their blog. No other mention of nutrition was made on feed or stories.

Conversely, Shreddy has a more extensive agenda on the nutritional topic, which ties up with their meal plans as part of their fitness application. Shreddy has nine posts on the feed that showcase nutritious food, some of which have the recipe in the caption, and some are just compilations of pictures of

Shreddy recipes where the brand was tagged. Additionally to the food pictures, supplements like protein, vitamins and BCAAs are showcased on the feed. These posts are characterised by a caption outlining the product's health benefits and their "amazing" flavour. Moreover, Shreddy takes a stance as a platform that offers vegan and vegetarian alternatives. Although they have meat alternatives on their app, even for the regular plan, the ingest of meat is lower than most fitness diets would suggest.

4.2.5 Sales

Product placements and pushing a marketing agenda were the sub-themes that emerged from the Shreddy database, and that the researcher decided to group as sales. While Gymshark also has a business model that requires them to drive consumers to the website to buy sportswear and fitness accessories, they do not directly push sales on content linked to the challenge. Gymshark has a more conservative approach to product placement: they do not need to advertise products on challenge posts. Instead, they make sure that people in their pictures and videos wear at least one piece of Gymshark clothes and use their equipment. Gymshark seems to use product placement to show that wearing Gymshark makes people part of the group, it is almost a uniform. Therefore, product placement is always there, but it is seamless and does not actively direct people to shop.

In contrast, one of Shreddy's main content drivers is pushing their marketing agenda for their three ranges: fitness accessories, supplements and the training app. Most posts end with a reminder of how cheap a subscription to Shreddy is and how it is an all-in-one fitness solution. Other posts refer to how their fitness accessories such as bands, dumbbells and sliders will enhance their progress during the challenge by making the exercises more challenging.

4.3 Emerging discourses

Several discourses emerged from the MCDA analysis conducted on the collected data. From the analysis of both data sets, the following four discourses emerged. First, the *community, the new online family or club* discourse was equally present on both brands, with slight variations. Second, the results of *fitness as a driver of positive change* were identified in Shreddy and Gymshark at different levels.

4.3.1 Community: the new online family or club

The community as the new online family discourse was identified as predominant in the social media content investigated. Within this discourse, brand online communities around Shreddy and Gymshark are compared to a family or club. This family association or heightened sense of belonging is consistent with previous statements by scholars, including Muniz and O'Guinn (2011) and Hillery (1955), who have studied and defined the characteristics of an online brand community.

In the case of Shreddy, the social media content posted during the challenge fostered consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions and a sense of moral responsibility. Members of the Shreddy community were able to differentiate themselves from others outside the group by more than

just a branded hashtag. First, it is a female-exclusive community since men are cannot sign in. 'True members', as Muniz and O'Guinn (2011) called them, will be able to identify each other by recognising Shreddy as a movement of women empowerment through fitness. The expressions "community of women" and "girls supporting girls" are common across the posts. Although there is no implicit use of words such as 'family', 'sisters' or 'sorority', the way the community is described and how participants have described it in their testimonials aligns with those concepts. Shreddy uses the word "club", "team", and "community" to refer to its subscribers through the use of branded hashtags such as #teamshreddy and #shreddyclub.

Second, the main challenge and the weekly challenges represent the social process the group experienced together to transmit the value of the community. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) pointed out that members will celebrate the history of the brand. The posts that had testimonials as a caption and the stories' takeovers had participants recognising the importance of the brand, how Shreddy has become part of their fitness journey and, in turn, part of their stories. Since the only way to fully experience the community is by subscribing to the app protected by a paywall, 'true members' can differentiate from opportunistic ones that only use the related hashtag for exposure. Additionally, members can reach out inside the app, making it even easier to only socialise within the community.

Third, participants feel a sense of duty and obligation towards the brand. Several posts emphasise that one of the best benefits of Shreddy is the support and motivation that the community exhibits. This constant support serves as an attractive benefit for new members and, at the same time, encourages them to partake in that behaviour once inside, thus favouring group cohesion. To foster closeness and a sense of belonging, Shreddy shares user-generated content, celebrates their progress and, even aligns its prizes with fostering friendships. For example, some weekly challenges had a Shreddy subscription for "you and two friends" as a prize. The brand shows that they care about friendship at the core of their community by taking this approach.

Gymshark presents a similar landscape, with a few discrepancies. Conversely to Shreddy, Gymshark is a broader community without an exclusivity factor. Members can identify each other by recognising Gymshark as a community of visionaries. The Gymshark community was built over a sportswear company, but their brand culture aims to make people be part of something greater. However, the critical identifier between a 'true member' and an opportunistic one is Gymshark clothing. From all the pictures and videos featuring individuals, every person on the frame wore at least one Gymshark item. Although owning Gymshark is not a prerequisite to participating in the challenge, it works as an identifier of genuine community members since people unfamiliar with the brand might want to join for the prizes. The expression "fam" alludes to a closer relationship than Shreddy suggested and is used for members, athletes, and people in the company. For example, Gymshark refers to its community as "fam" in the promotional phase while wondering "what the fam achieves this year". Creating a space where people feel like they belong was crucial, hence why Gymshark highlighted GS Fam. During the challenge, this

highlight was used to share participants pledges and posts. Participants were encouraged to send their pictures for a repost.

The main challenge and weekly challenges represented the social process the group experienced together to transmit the values of the community. In the case of Gymshark, this is exacerbated since they choose to encourage good habits with this challenge. Therefore, the values of the community go beyond appearance and dive deeper into health and lifestyle. Since participants are encouraged to share their journey publicly on social media and post two times a week to be eligible for the overall price, participants engage with rituals and traditions of the brand. Athletes' takeovers and the type of weekly challenges chosen demand participants to actively integrate the challenge into their lives, thus fostering the community. Here, differentiating between 'true members' and opportunistic ones relies on the level of participation and interaction between participants.

The sense of duty and obligation was less evident on the Gymshark social media content than Shreddy's since they did not have many testimonials or participants takeovers. The duty and obligation can be seen as part of the overall promotional campaign. Gymshark wants people to try to change, to commit to doing something for sixty-six days. The signed pledge at the beginning and the end of the challenge represents every participant's commitment to the brand and themselves. Hence, the challenge's design and the public display of the pledge fosters a sense of duty towards the brand. The sixty-six possible winners during the promo of the challenge gave people more motivation since more chances to be validated by the community arose.

Furthermore, the proximity and identification with the group through the use of the word 'fam' is not limited to social content created by the firm. Gymshark athletes use this term too. For example, in the video takeovers made by the Gymshark athletes during the weekly challenges, athletes saluted people, referring to them as "gymshark fam". A clear link with parasocial relationships can be drawn: athletes talk to the camera as if they were talking to a friend and call them 'fam' during athletes' takeovers.

4.3.2 Fitness as a driver of positive change

Fitness as a driver of positive change was identified as predominant in the social media content investigated. Both brands, in every post, either directly or indirectly communicated a positive association between health and fitness and taking action. Based on previous research on the influence of communities on fitness, online fitness communities have been shown to favour the participants' goals and journey since shared values and identity fosters motivation (Leahey et al., 2012) by providing a supportive environment (Zhang et al., 2016).

In both communities, fitness is at the core of their identification process. They are all together for a cause, and that overlapping cause between Shreddy and Gymshark is how fitness can be a driver for change. For starters, the design of the challenge itself shows fitness as a driver of positive change. Both brands chose to start the year with a fitness challenge to start the year right. This discourse fits into the social expectations and traditions of setting new goals for the new year, a moment of the year when most

people have overindulged and passively enjoyed the holiday parties and food. However, with the uncertainty of COVID-19, the overindulgence had also translated into young people moving less and getting depressed.

Community, as one of the main benefits of the brands' online presence, fosters the creation of shared values and goals. Fitness is one of those shared values. Participants have a similar pre-conceived goal and can have individual goals too; however, identification makes them adapt the primary goal (participating in challenge) as their social connection to others. While identification can be subjected to purchase like Shreddy, it can be subjected to a broader philosophy that can indirectly lead the individual to purchase later.

Fitness is related to "motivation", "routine", and "consistency". Participating in a challenge like #gymshark66 or #shreddytorumble, follows the principles of SMART goals. The individuals set a specific goal that will be measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound; thus, influencing positively on people life. The support of others and the sense of belonging to a community are extra benefits.

Shreddy

Nevertheless, each brand tackles fitness as a driver of positive change from a different angle. Shreddy's discourse on fitness as a driver for positive change focuses on their participants achieving real results in real-time, indirectly criticising the thinspiration and dieting communities. For results to be sustainable over time, they need to be achieved within a reasonable timeframe. Shreddy does not stand for quick fixes but for a long-lasting change in their participants' fitness approach that needs to be time-efficient, engaging and straightforward.

With the challenge's launch, Shreddy made a point of setting clear that 2020 was a year full of "setbacks" impacted by COVID-19, where rooms became gyms, and people lived in uncertainty. References to '"kickstarting your fitness journey" by enrolling in to challenge were made several times. To showcase results, Shreddy preferred type of post are before and after collages. These collages are primarily concerned with weight loss, show women's bodies in underwear and lack a visible face attached to the bodies. Although these collages tend to seem to objectify, the captions mention that weight loss was not necessarily the goal and that the most noticeable changes are related to mental health, strength or self-confidence. However, it remains paradoxical that if the focus was not fat loss, the image paired to caption shows just that.

Testimonials are paired with how long the member has participated in the community, the workouts they have completed, and levels of consistency. Extreme or fast changes are not promoted, and the emphasis lies on consistency and time. Even when subscription sales go live, newcomers are encouraged to opt for at least a 3-month subscription to have time for results to start being visible. Consequently, while Shreddy focuses on encouraging active user engagement, it also pushes sales in its content.

Gymshark

For Gymshark, having fitness as a driver of positive change meant it was time to 'try'. The slogan "the year of the trier" tainted the discourse across the length of the challenge. In the scope of COVID-19, of a preceding year full of negative implications and low motivation, Gymshark understood that their community needed a boost. While previous #gymshark66 challenges focused on purely fitness goals and achievements, the 2021 challenge was crafted around an ideal instead of a product. In contrast to Shreddy, who started the promotion of the challenge by realising new products and offering a sale on their fitness app, Gymshark66 leading motivation is not sales. Although the brand gained exposure by the user-generated content and constant use of hashtags, sales were not the main driver for this event; the community was: a community that needed a boost of motivation after a year of pandemic and numerous lockdowns. Hence, expecting people to set ambitious fitness goals was not realistic.

For 2021, Gymshark presented the concept: the year of the trier. It meant that the bare minimum that people could do to change was to try. Individuals did not need to set crazy goals; all they needed to do was try and keep trying for 66 days. The focus was not on the result but on the journey, and fitness was not the primary goal but the excuse to make a change. Gymshark gave the community three options: trying something new, trying something harder, or trying something now. The challenge was easily explained and accessible for everyone. On their social content, Gymshark made sure to keep this discourse. Every post that included a workout video had a call-to-action to save the workout, try it out, share with a friend who needed to try it and share their experience. Moreover, Gymshark created weekly challenges to engage with their community in trying different things every week and keep the interest up. These weekly challenges were not necessarily related to fitness but to a holistic approach to health: eating better, moving more, educating oneself, taking time to rest and recover, etcetera.

5. Discussion

This section aims to answer the research questions of this study, briefly discuss the strengths and limitations of the method chosen and finally explore opportunities for further research.

5.1 Discussion of findings and answer to RQs

The first sub-question of this study aimed to understand how sportswear brands foster a parasocial relationship with the consumer. Findings revealed that both sportswear brands rely on parasocial relationships (Yun et al., 2016; Horton & Wohl, 1956) and trans-mediated parasocial relationships (Wellman, 2020). By the recurrent use of fitfluencers as ambassadors or athletes, brands aim to foster feelings of empathy and friendship (Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Tukachinsky, 2010). The effort to foster empathy and friendship is observable in the brand tone used by Gymshark and Shreddy, which fosters participation with the brand and the fitfluencers. Videos of ambassadors talking directly to the camera foster a one-on-one engagement that mimics the parasocial relationships that appeared with mass media. Furthermore, as stated by Wellman (2020), trans-mediate parasocial relationships were found in both brands. However, this did not happen from a brand's platform to another, but from the influencers' platform to the brands' platform. Although the influencers were not there permanently, its short features in the brands' Instagram pages allowed for trans-mediated parasocial relationships, translating the already created feelings of trust and empathy from the influencers to the brand.

Performative identities (Pearson, 2009) played an important role, not only on an ambassador and participant level but also as the brand persona found visibility through the brand tone and interaction (Forrester, 2020). By displays of inclusivity and diversity, identification was fostered within the community, increasing the sense of belongingness and closeness to the people giving testimonials or sharing their experience, indistinctively from the role in the community. Finally, the family or club discourse solidifies the parasocial relationship between the participants and the brand by clearly stating a bond of proximity and familiarity between them. Sportwear brands want to be seen as key players on their community members fitness and health journeys: be a friend, a gym buddy, a source of knowledge and a motivator.

The second sub-question focused on how the community contributes to the brand's image. If the community is perceived as a strong community, it will strengthen the brand's image. Therefore, the start point is for brands to have a strong foundation. First, both brand communities had constant and continuous interactions (Algesheimer, 2004; Wellman, 2001; Bender, 1978; Hillery, 1995) which was observable in their frequency of posting, their engaging captions fostering participation and videos directly connecting to the audience. Second, both brand communities had a developed sense of belonging through a common way of living and thinking (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Hillery, 1995). This aspect was observable on both communities having a common goal to work forward and the collective challenges that they experienced together. Third, the collective sense of difference from outsiders (Hillery, 1995) was observable by the use of the firms' clothes and fitness accessories as a common identifier. Additionally,

specific words to the fitness niche, hashtags (Pfortmüller, 2017) and brand tone (Forrester, 2020) served as differentiators from outsiders. Fourth, the capacity to influencer each other on a specific timeframe (Algesheimer, 2004) was observable on how fitfluencers joined the challenge, participants' testimonials and the brands' efforts to keep weekly challenges available to influence the participants as much as possible. Furthermore, both communities showed flexibility and adaptability in the scope of COVID-19. The communities held together through difficulties, showing that they will adapt and stay together no matter the situation. This strong sense of belongingness and duty to the brand which is essential on brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) strengthens the brand image in the eyes of non-community members and community members. The sense of belongingness and duty, combined with the phenomenon of performative identities (Pearson, 2009) give brands a perfect setting to gain brand volunteers (Cova et al., 2015) that create and engage with their content for free, fostering co-creation and adding value to the brand (Priharsari et al., 2020). Therefore, by having a strong and engaged community, the image of the brand is strengthen by the production of content and value co-creation (Rodríguez-López, 2021; Carlson et al., 2019). Finally, by sharing rituals such as participating in these challenges together, the brand finds unity, identity and solidification and becomes an added value that may benefit new adepts.

By answering these sub-questions, the researcher was able to answer the main research question: *how do sportswear brands create and maintain their online brand communities through community events such as #Gymshark66 and #ShreddytoRumble?* Both brands used these events to foster the community by promoting active engagement from their participants, leading to brand-consumer co-creation and creating value for the firm. This observable phenomenon in the sportswear brands studied agrees with previous literature (Rodríguez-López, 2021; Priharsari et al., 2020, Carlson et al., 2019, Cova et al., 2015). By co-creating, any individual that looks for the branded hashtag of the challenges can see the ethos held by the community: their high interaction and unconditional support. By keeping a highly engaged community, the firms can build up their relationship with their consumers and lead them to become loyal customers (McAlexander et al., 2002) that can later be activated to spread information on the brand or new launches (Jin et al., 2009;Brown et al., 2003). The shared values, such as fitness as a driver for change, community as a family or club, and rituals such as #gymshark66 and #shreddytorumble are at the core of creating and maintaining the online brand communities. The findings of this study invite us to reflect on community events as consumer identity projects which are considered goal-driven and derive from consumer culture theory and market place cultures (Arnold & Thompson, 2005). Arnold & Thompson (2005) suggest that in these types of projects, consumers are seen as culture producers and forge feelings of solidarity withing the community. While some brands might be driven by commercial purposes such as Shreddy, and other brands by a purpose, such as Gymshark, the final goal is to create a safe space for interaction between its members, which makes them feel included. In the end, the main goal of both brands is to be the friend that enables change in people by pushing them to change.

5.2 Limitations, suggestions for future research, practical implications

Theoretical, practical implications and suggestions for future research

The findings of this study have provided insights on how community events are a business and marketing strategy that can help sportswear firms to create, establish and maintain brand communities. It has also provided new insights on trans-mediated parasocial relationships. While Wellman (2020) explored that trans-mediated parasocial relationships can happen between the same community in different platform, this study has shown that a similar phenomenon can occur between platforms of different communities, as long as the same influencer is present on both. Although the interaction of fitfluencers with the brands' communities was limited (Gymshark), almost inexistent (Shreddy) and unilateral (both), by having influencers on their challenges performing as participants, brands gain credibility and strengthen the parasocial relationship created with their audience. These findings could lead to future research focused on the receptor of the message or community members since they are decoding the message and experiencing the effects of parasocial relationship. Hence, the participants view on how they joined the community, their reasons to stay o leave the challenge, their feelings, their experiences and how they perceived the effects of the community on their goals and the trans-mediated characteristics of influencers to a brand should be studied.

Moreover, this study hints at how parasocial relationships can be built between a brand and an audience, without the brand being a person. This phenomenon could be related the brand unique persona or personification of the brand (Forrester, 2020). However, further research on brand personification and brand image with information directly from the producers and firms would be needed. Since the researcher was limited to a content analysis of the data and analysing the encoded messages, futures studies should pay attention to gathering insider information. For example, interviews inside companies could be held, where experts could explain from their experience what works and does not work when creating a community, and how a parasocial relationship between the brand as a persona and the community is build. This type of research will hold societal relevance since it would provide tangible data on how firms plan and execute the creation and maintenance of their communities.

Additionally, this study provides practical implications for marketers. First, sportswear firms benefit from hosting online community events to create and maintain their communities, since besides the brand itself, health and fitness is already an overarching common goal. Firms need to focus their communication on establishing identification between participants beyond the brand. Participants on the events need to be able to feel part of a group in which they feel supported and accepted, where individuals are working on their individual goals and, at the same time, working towards a common goal: participating in the challenge. Second, parasocial relationships are important to provide credibility to the community. Firms need to use influencers with diverse and inclusive backgrounds in their strategy to show newcomers and existing members that everyone is welcome to join them. Since previous research has shown that relative similarity is important to achieve fitness goals (Johnston, 2019), by having a

diverse community and diverse influencers, identification, motivation and success are facilitated. Third, firms should invest time and assets into building these communities and planning these events, since communities become a valuable asset of co-creation that creates value for a firm.

Strengths and limitations

The polysemic nature of this analysis implies that the researcher's observations of the producer message encoding could be inaccurate, or subjectivity could come into play during the analysis of the encoding process. To limit the effects of inaccuracy, the researcher was constantly aware that the analysis is from what the producer or brand perspective aims to encode and what the consumer decodes. However, replication of the study would need to be held with brands holding a similar community event to see if themes and discourses persist.

This research design allowed triangulation of methods and sources, in turn favouring higher reliability and validity. While validity is concerned with the degree to which the findings are interpreted correctly (Kirk & Miller, 2011). Several steps were taken to ensure the validity of the research. First, the researcher ensured that the research design had the proper structure to answer the main question and the sub-questions (Leung, 2015). Second, since trustworthiness is associated with validity, the researcher constantly compared the coded themes and discourses amongst each other (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Third, Silvermann (2011) states that validity can be found in the solidity of the results; thus, a detailed description of the themes and discourses' coding process was ensured. Additionally, sufficient data that reflects the requirements increase the validity of a study by allowing an in-depth understanding of the topic (Silvermann, 2011). By reaching saturation of data, validity is ensured. Finally, the external validity of the research increases since it is not limited to newcomers or senior brands but compares two sportswear brands at different business stages but with similar production standards.

To improve the reliability of this study, the researcher made a conscious effort of documenting the relevant context of observation in a detailed manner (Kirk and Miller, 2011); that way, the study could be replicated by other researchers following the same methodology (Silvermann, 2011). Although perfect reliability cannot be obtained in qualitative research since the research is the instrument of interpretation of data, consistency and transparency of data was ensured by providing detailed information of the research design, method, data collection and data analysis. Furthermore, this paper only uses secondary data, which implies that the researcher would not produce data; therefore, bias during the data collection will be reduced, improving reliability. Additionally, reflexivity should be applied, and all work must be continually evaluated critically.

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