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What is beautiful content?

A qualitative study on firm-generated beauty content on Instagram

by

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Abstract

Title What is beautiful content? A qualitative study on firm-generated beauty content on Instagram

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Keywords firm-generated content, Instagram beauty content, visual communication, Swedish beauty consumers, consumer interest, semiotics, SOR-model, Instagram beauty retailers

Thesis Purpose The purpose of this study is to extend the research on Instagram content. We will look at how different types of firm-generated content created by Swedish beauty retailers on Instagram is evaluated by young female Swedish consumers in the hopes of finding which content that is perceived to be visually appealing and met with an interest.

Theoretical Perspective This study builds on the semiotic theory of Roland Barthes combined with the Stimulus-Organism-Response model. Through the combination of these theories we managed to identify the visual signs in beauty content that consumers found to be essential, but also to understand how content as a stimuli lead to various consumer emotions and responses.

Methodology The study is of qualitative nature and takes on an inductive approach, our ontological standpoint is of relativism and our epistemological position of social constructionism. Data was collected through thirteen semi-structured interviews with Swedish female beauty consumers in ages 25-34.

Empirical Findings and Analysis Our findings reveal how creating an interest in consumers through content is of great importance to beauty retail brands. The findings highlight how visually appealing content should include components such as; colours, humans, informative text, the Instagram shop button, product packaging, and product texture. Four central elements are identified to be the most important for what constitutes visually appealing content: colours, authenticity, clear communication, and information.

Discussion and Conclusion It was found that soft pastels, neutral beige and brown colours, as well as bright yellow were colours that consumers preferred. Perceived authenticity, information and, clear communication was also found to be crucial. Based on the findings from our respondents, we propose a framework of how to create visually appealing beauty content on Instagram for retailers on the Swedish market.

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Table of Contents

1	Introduction.....	1
1.1	Problematization.....	3
1.2	Purpose and research question.....	4
1.3	Delimitations.....	4
1.4	Aimed contributions.....	5
1.4	Outline of the Thesis.....	5
2	Literature Review.....	7
2.1	The power of Instagram.....	7
2.2	Visual communication through content.....	8
2.3	Creating consumer interest through content.....	10
2.4	Firm-generated content and its effect on consumer behaviour.....	11
2.4.1	Beauty brands and social media.....	12
2.5	Composition of images.....	13
2.6	Colours in visual communication.....	14
2.7	Text and messages in social media content.....	15
3	Theoretical Framework.....	17
3.1	Stimulus-Organism-Response Theory.....	17
3.2	Semiotic theory of Roland Barthes.....	19
3.3	A combination of the theories of SOR and Barthes' semiotics.....	20
4	Method.....	22
4.1	Research philosophy.....	22
4.1.1	Ontological position.....	22
4.1.2	Epistemological position.....	22
4.2	Research design.....	23
4.3	Data collection.....	25
4.3.1	Pilot study.....	25
4.3.2	Interviews.....	25
4.3.3	Interview procedure.....	27
4.3.4	Semiotic analysis procedure.....	28
4.3.5	Topic guide.....	29
4.3.6	Content as stimulus.....	30
4.3.7	Sampling strategy.....	30
4.4	Data analysis.....	31
4.5	Trustworthiness.....	33
4.6	Ethical considerations.....	35
4.7	Critical evaluation of sources.....	36
4.8	Limitations and reflections.....	37
4.8.1	Limitations.....	37
4.8.2	Reflections.....	38

5 Empirical Findings and Analysis.....	39
5.1 Content showing humans.....	39
5.1.1 Picture 2A.....	39
5.1.2 Picture 2B.....	40
5.1.3 Picture 2C.....	42
5.1.4 Analysis: Content showing humans summary.....	42
5.2 Content showing product texture.....	43
5.2.1 Picture 3A.....	44
5.2.2 Picture 3B.....	45
5.2.3 Analysis: Content showing product texture summary.....	46
5.3 Content using text in pictures.....	47
5.3.1 Picture 4A.....	47
5.3.2 Picture 4B.....	48
5.3.3 Picture 4C.....	49
5.3.4 Analysis: Content using text in pictures summary.....	50
5.4 Content focusing on the product packaging.....	51
5.4.1 Picture 5A.....	51
5.4.2 Picture 5B.....	52
5.4.3 Picture 5C.....	53
5.4.4 Analysis: Content focusing on the product packaging summary.....	54
5.5 General thoughts from respondents.....	55
5.5.1 Analysis: General thoughts from respondents summary.....	57
6 Discussion.....	58
6.1 Choice of colours.....	58
6.2 Authenticity.....	59
6.3 Clear communication with sufficient denotative signs.....	61
6.4 Easy access to information.....	63
6.5 Proposed framework.....	64
6.6 Concluding thoughts.....	66
7 Conclusion.....	67
7.1 Theoretical contributions.....	68
7.2 Managerial implications.....	69
7.3 Limitations and future research.....	70
References.....	72
Appendix 1: Topic guide and information about respondents.....	87
Appendix 2: Content showing humans.....	90
Appendix 3: Content showing product texture.....	94
Appendix 4: Content using text in pictures.....	96
Appendix 5: Content focusing on the product packaging.....	100

List of Figures

Figure 1. Illustration of the SOR theory.....	17
Figure 2. Illustration of how the theories of SOR and Barthes' semiotics are used together....	21
Figure 3: Summary of semiotic analysis of picture 2A (Appendix 2).....	39
Figure 4: Summary of semiotic analysis of picture 2B (Appendix 2).....	40
Figure 5: Summary of semiotic analysis of picture 2C (Appendix 2).....	42
Figure 6: Summary of semiotic analysis of picture 3A (Appendix 3).....	44
Figure 7: Summary of semiotic analysis of picture 3B (Appendix 3).....	45
Figure 8: Summary of semiotic analysis of picture 4A (Appendix 4).....	47
Figure 9: Summary of semiotic analysis of picture 4B (Appendix 4).....	48
Figure 10: Summary of semiotic analysis of picture 4C (Appendix 4).....	49
Figure 11: Summary of semiotic analysis of picture 5A (Appendix 5).....	51
Figure 12: Summary of semiotic analysis of picture 5B (Appendix 5).....	52
Figure 13: Summary of semiotic analysis of picture 5C (Appendix 5).....	53
Figure 14: Proposed framework of how to create visually appealing beauty content on Instagram for retailers on the Swedish market.....	65

1 Introduction

Imagine that you are scrolling through your Instagram feed, partially out of boredom and partially to see what is new, and one post grabs your attention enough to stop you from scrolling further. The vibrant colours and the product that is smeared out next to the tube catches your attention and you find the post pleasing to the eye. You want to know more, so you read the caption, maybe check out the comments, and click on the link to read more about the product. It's a moisturiser that promises light hydration and nurturing properties – with a closer thought your skin has been feeling oily and sensitive as the weather is getting warmer for the summer. Ten minutes later you receive an order confirmation. You have made a purchase that you had no intention of making when you initially opened up Instagram, but you are excited to try the new product that you just discovered.

Danziger (2019) presents how the beauty industry contributes \$532 billion annually to the world economy and is predicted to grow further and not decline in growth. The author states that one reason for this projected growth is a result of consumers' wish to pamper themselves because of the emotional lift that many get from consuming beauty products. Although both male and female consumers in various ages are contributing to this development, females in ages 18-34 are perceived to be the biggest consumers of beauty (TABS Analytics, 2016). Swedish nationals in particular consume the highest amount of cosmetic and beauty products in the EU with a 3% increase in sales in the Swedish beauty market during 2019 – compared to a 1.4% increase in all of the EU (Jansson, 2021). Yttergren (2017) further highlights how Europe is one of the largest markets for the beauty industry and that young consumers are particularly interested in beauty and cosmetics. These consumers usually turn to social media for inspiration and their interest has shifted from fashion to beauty and cosmetics, according to Yttergren (2017). Despite the large consumer interest in Sweden, and the rapidly growing beauty industry, to our knowledge, research focusing on Swedish consumers and the beauty industry is very limited.

Social media has changed the entire beauty industry and how brands compete with more cost efficient ways of marketing themselves and reaching detailed customer segments (Valentine, 2019). As of today, there are more than 25 billion business profiles on Instagram as the platform enables businesses to create enchanting visuals, attract customers and engage them with the brand (Decker, 2021). Instagram (2021a) presents how 70% of individuals interested in shopping use Instagram as their medium for discovering products and as such Instagram has even developed its own shopping function to further encourage this user behaviour and to aid businesses in s-commerce activities. Additionally, Decker (2021) presents how Instagram is an attractive social media platform to use as it can increase brand awareness, simplify the introduction of new products and motivate users to make a purchase – 80% of users that have discovered a product on Instagram have ended up making a purchase. The beauty industry is no exception, with L'Oréal (2020) presenting how one of the 2020 market drivers was digitalisation through e-commerce, in particular via social media platforms.

The introduction of shopping functions on social media platforms and the quest for what is good content indicates that social media has become an integral part of the e-commerce world and will continue to grow in importance for retail brands. In addition, De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017) conclude how today's digitalised society has made consumers avoid traditional media and advertising, as they instead use social media for inspiration. The authors further highlight how marketers are investing more of company resources on digital media and content as this has shown to be more effective in reaching their target audience and impact on their behaviours. Digital content refers to everything that is uploaded online, including images and videos, as well as any updates or copy that is posted by the company (Stokes, 2018). Furthermore, there are mainly three types of content on Instagram; user-generated content refers to content produced by users (Bahtar and Muda, 2016), sponsored content includes content produced by influencers/third party actors, and firm-generated, meaning content produced by brands (Müller and Christiandl, 2019).

Instagram Business Team (2016) provides tips for how business users should create content in order to provide an incentive for users to take action, stating that such content should: catch users' attention; incorporate branding elements such as the logo or other elements unique to the brand with a short and easy copy; and tell people what they need to know and do through a call to action (CTA). However, these recommendations are generalised and as such may not work for all types of brands, markets, or target audiences. Therefore, deeper and more specific studies on particular markets and consumers' thoughts and feelings would be preferable in order to learn about how content affects consumers as well as to provide businesses with relevant recommendations for their target market. Furthermore, because of the rise of social media, predominantly visual platforms like Instagram, the field of research within visual communication has seen growth and an increasing need for further research (Barnhurst, Vari, & Rodríguez, 2004; Russmann & Svensson (2016); and King, Racherla & Bush, 2014). Weiss (2020) reinforces the need for continuous focus on social media and states how consumer behaviour is changing along with the evolution of platform functions and how brands and marketing best-practices will need to adapt along with it. The author further discusses how Covid-19 has accelerated the development and usage of e-commerce via social media to levels that were expected to be with us earliest in 2022, and that these changes are here to stay and will only develop further.

The beauty industry in particular feels the effects of Covid-19. Gerstell, Marchessou, Schmidt and Spagnuolo (2020) present how the beauty industry has traditionally seen physical sales outlets as the main touchpoint for consumers, even the young ones, much due to the wish for consumers to touch and try out a product before a purchase. Potentially this lies in the fact that beauty products usually cannot be returned, however the closing of stores due to pandemic lockdowns are pushing the industry in a different direction. The interest for beauty products is still strong, especially in the category of at-home dermatological treatments, self-care, and pampering – areas that have all seen an upswing as people stay at home and try to find ways to take care of themselves whilst they cannot leave for a shop or salon (L'Oréal, 2020; Gerstell et al., 2020). Now, more than ever, beauty retailers must focus on producing digital content that resonates with consumers in order to facilitate sales (Gerstell et al., 2020).

With these changes and trends, beauty brands are in need of new guidelines and the marketing research world must emphasise on this issue.

1.1 Problematization

As highlighted in our introduction, social media platforms have undoubtedly changed the way brands market themselves, communicate with consumers, and how they create interest in their offerings (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). In particular Instagram is highlighted by many as particularly influential as it continues to grow and consumers' preferences move towards platforms and media with a visual focus, however, academia is lacking in paying attention to it and its users (Erkan & Evans, 2016; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Russmann & Svensson, 2016; and McQuarrie & Phillips, 2008). A majority of research on Instagram has primarily focused on sponsored content through influencers (Nurhandayani, Syarief, Najib, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017, Sheena & Sudha, 2017; Konstantopolou, Rizomyliotis, Konstantoulaki & Badahdah, 2019; Hassan, Teo, Ramayah, Al-Kumaim, 2021; and Paço & Oliveira, 2017). However a number of authors highlight the importance and power of firm-generated content, and call out for more research and recommendations within this area (Poulis, Rizomyliotis & Konstanoulaki, 2019; Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt and Füller, 2013; and Sánchez-Cobarro, Molina-Castillo & Alcazar-Caceres, 2020; De Jans, Van de Sompel, De Veirman & Hudders, 2020; Stachowiak-Krzyzan, 2016). Although these studies highlight the importance of Instagram and firm-generated content, there is still uncertainty regarding the formation of the actual content and consumers' preferences.

Authors such as Petty and Lindsey-Mullikin (2006); Järvinen and Taiminen (2016); Kee and Yazdanifard (2015); Holiman and Rowley, (2014); and Russmann and Svensson (2016) ; and Hassan, Nadzim and Shiratuddin (2015); have researched content and confirmed its power and importance when generating consumer interest at the beginning of the purchase journey. However, merely stating that content is important and powerful is not enough to understand how it affects consumer behaviour or what type of visual content consumers prefer to see. Barnhurst, Vari, and Rodríguez (2004); Russmann and Svensson (2016); Rietveld, van Dolen, Mazloom and Worrying (2020); Babic Rosario, Sotgiu, De Valck and Bijmolt (2016); and King, Racherla and Bush (2014) all stress the importance of visual communication and how we need a better understanding of how different visuals on social media appeals to consumers. Barnhurst, Vari, and Rodríguez (2004), as well as Russmann and Svensson (2016) discuss the development and increasing importance of the field of research on visual communication – especially with the rising digital age – and call out for more focus within academia on visuals, Instagram, and how these affect consumers. Part of the reason for this call out is that current research provides a conundrum where we know that content is king, and that the right content can bring positive effects to a business, but the frustration lies in not knowing how to execute this or what type of content to produce visually. As such, we identify a need to study visual content, the different elements within the content, and which elements that together comprise appealing content in the eyes of consumers – both to contribute to this field of research and to provide managers with recommendations.

In order to study this area of visual communication, we propose that it would be beneficial to focus on one type of market and consumer demographic. This is because arguably different brand offerings, cultures, and consumer demographics will vary in their evaluations, preferences, and needs. We have identified the beauty market to be a market which have not only experienced stable growth but also seen a rapid shift towards online touchpoints during the Covid-19 pandemic (Danziger, 2019; Weiss, 2020; L'Oréal, 2020; and Gerstell et al., 2020), therefore being in need of both research and recommendations. Furthermore, Swedes and young females are identified as being some of the biggest consumers within the beauty industry (Jansson, 2021.; and TABS Analytics, 2016). Meanwhile, research is lacking within this area, particularly on the Swedish market. Therefore, we identify a need to focus our study on visual content on this particular market segment.

1.2 Purpose and research question

Based on the problematization, we find prior research to be limited in terms of how various firm-generated content should be visually presented. The purpose of this study is to extend the research on visual communication and marketing, specifically on firm-generated Instagram content and which visual elements that are the most appealing. This will be done by investigating how various visual content is perceived and evaluated by consumers. For managers we also aim to provide insights into which visual elements within content that they should focus on in order to more likely be appreciated by consumers. More specifically, we will look at how different types of firm-generated content within the beauty industry on Instagram is evaluated by young female Swedsih consumers in the hopes of finding which content that will be considered the most appealing. Hence, our research question is as follows:

How can Swedish beauty retailers create content on Instagram that will be considered visually appealing by consumers?

We have developed two sub-questions in order to gain a deeper understanding of our research questions:

How do consumers evaluate and react to different visuals in content?

Are there any visual elements that generate more interest than others, if so, which?

1.3 Delimitations

This study will be limited to investigate young female consumers on the platform Instagram. This focus on Instagram is made as it is highlighted in the problematization as a timely crucial area of research. Furthermore, Instagram is presented to be one of the most popular social media platforms for women (Stokes, 2018), and one of the most popular social media platforms for advertising (Evans, Phua, Lim & Jun, 2017). Beyond that, this study is limited to examining the beauty industry as this industry is currently adapting to a rapid shift to e-commerce and online touchpoints with consumers, with a growing focus on s-commerce

(Danziger, 2019; Weiss, 2020; L'Oréal, 2020; and Gerstell et al., 2020). Both within the beauty market and Instagram, young females are highlighted as the key consumers, which is a key reason for this focus.

Furthermore, we will limit our study focus to the Swedish market since many of the past studies on content on Instagram have had an international or other country-specific focus (Huang & Su, 2018; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Djafarova and Bowes, 2021; Copeland & Zhao, 2020; and Teo, Leng & Phua, 2019), but also because of the superior interest from Swedish consumers in beauty products (Jansson, 2021). Although an international perspective can be beneficial, considering how our study focuses on a qualitative approach where individual consumers' thoughts and behaviours are studied, we see the need for a more specific area of research. Consumers will likely be affected by the values and beliefs from the society they reside within, thus providing different answers and opinions. Therefore, we argue for the importance of a focus on one region in order to minimise conflicting views from different regions, as such providing more unmitigated recommendations and contributions.

Finally, we have limited ourselves to investigate a set of four retail brand Instagram accounts to use for our study. The retail brands chosen for our study are: GLOWiD, Hudoteket, Know To Glow, and Skincity which are all popular online Swedish beauty retailers. This focus on retail brands and their firm-generated content is due to the highlighting from our problematization that firm-generated content requires more research.

1.4 Aimed contributions

Through our study we aim to contribute to the research on Instagram by providing detailed consumer insights. By adopting a qualitative approach to studying content and consumers, we aim to get a better understanding of how the audience perceives firm-generated content and if they have a preference towards certain types of visual elements in content created by brands, and if so which. Through our study, we aim to continue the discussion around how content should be visually presented as called out for by researchers such as Rietveld et al., (2020); King, Racherla and Bush, (2014); and Babic Rosario et al. (2016), as well as how it impacts on consumer behaviour. As such, our findings will contribute to the expansion of the literature on visual communication, social media marketing, and consumer behaviour. In summary, our study will try to contribute with a better understanding of a) which type of visual aspects that beauty retail brands should encompass into their content to be perceived as visually appealing, b) how different visual content is evaluated and perceived by young female consumers in Sweden, and c) how firm-generated content can impact on consumer emotions, attitudes, and behaviours.

1.5 Outline of the Thesis

In total, there are seven chapters within this study; introduction, literature review, theoretical framework, method, empirical findings and analysis, discussion, and conclusion. After introducing our area of study and research question, in order to provide more detailed information about previous and current research and trends within our area of study, this

thesis will begin with presenting a literature review. The literature review will delve deeper into Instagram, visual communication through content, firm-generated content, beauty brands on social media, as well as the colours, composition, and use of text in pictures. After the literature review, the theories used to guide our study in order to answer our research question – SOR theory and Barthes’ semiotics – are presented. More detail about how this thesis is conducted, including the research philosophy, research design, and data collection is presented in the method chapter. Thereafter, we present our findings and analyse them, followed by a discussion which presents a proposed new framework, and finishing off with a conclusion.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The power of Instagram

Instagram is a free mobile app where people can edit and upload photos and videos on their account for others to share, like, and comment on (Stokes, 2018). More women than men use the app where the key attraction is visually appealing photos and videos (Stokes, 2018) and the age group 25-34 is considered to be the largest group of users (Tankovska, 2021). With over 1 billion users, Instagram is a popular platform for businesses to reach and engage with customers – 90% of users reportedly follow at least one business account and 84% like to use the platform to discover new products (Instagram, 2021b). Instagram is undoubtedly the most liked and preferred social media app amongst young consumers and one possible explanation as to why is that young users prefer visual communication and use it as a source of gathering information (Huang & Su, 2018). As already mentioned, female users are more attracted to the platform, and in addition females notice ads on Instagram more than male users tend to do (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Huang & Su, 2018).

Huang & Su (2018) illustrate how the motives for Instagram usage largely depends on users' preference to look at posts rather than to create posts themselves. The curiosity in what others are posting on Instagram is further studied by Sheldon & Bryant (2016) who demonstrate how knowledge of others is the greatest motive for using Instagram. Instagram users see the platform as a source of inspiration and information, as it allows them to keep up with current trends as well as to gain insights and knowledge about other users and various subjects (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). This is further reinforced by Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) who reveal how Instagram users follow influencers as a source of inspiration and how the audiences' motives largely revolve around aspiring to certain lifestyles that these influencers advocate. However, in order for the audience to be inspired and influenced by brands and opinion leaders, the content must be of high quality, attractiveness, and appealing composition in order to motivate the users to follow and interact with profiles on Instagram (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

One growing branch of research looks at Instagram as a platform for e-commerce following their introduction of the shop button to developing the app further to aid social commerce (s-commerce) (Stulee, Petljak & Naletina, 2018; Kim & Park, 2013; Abdelsalam, Salim, Alias, & Husain, 2020). The area of s-commerce is growing rapidly during Covid-19 and in technologically advanced countries such as China, 12% of online sales are accounted for by s-commerce (L'Oréal, 2020). This shows how Instagram in particular is growing in importance as a platform, both for researchers and for managers, and arguably there is then a need to figure out how consumers use the app and how their behavioural intentions are affected by different content. Abed (2018), found four factors to influence people's behavioural intention to use s-commerce in the future, with social influence followed by trust being the most influential. As firms move to use Instagram as an s-commerce platform, their ability to produce attractive content becomes even more important in order to impact consumer behaviour.

The power of Instagram is further noticed by Copeland and Zhao (2020) who specify how Instagram is very influential in regards to information seeking, connecting, as well as shopping. The authors further express how Instagram, very much thanks to the nature of the platform, is a powerful marketing tool that can influence users through content uploaded by other peers. Instagram is perceived to be very influential due to the high amount of peer communication that is taking place on the platform (Delafrooz, Rahmati & Abdi, 2019; Yau & Reich, 2019; Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Erkan, 2015; and Cathelini and Sundiman, 2019). In addition, Instagram is perceived to impact on consumer behaviour which can be reflected through the increased purchase intention that users get when using Instagram and interact with various types of accounts and content (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Triwidisari, Nurkhin, Muhsin, 2017; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017; Xiang, Zheng, Lee & Zhao, 2016).

De Vries, Gensler and Leeflang (2012) write how social media platforms such as Instagram are primarily used by companies as a means to communicate and interact with their customers and consumers, both current and potential. Bahtar and Muda (2016) highlight how one major advantage of Instagram compared to other social media platforms is the user-friendliness that the platform provides. The authors further explain how the simplicity of the app leads to users wanting to spend more time on it to read the captions, scroll through the timeline and look for other users' comments. User interaction is characterized by liking and commenting which is also referred to as engagement (Stokes, 2018). However, it could be argued that getting a like from a user is not always as easy as it may seem, and that some brand accounts are more efficient and favored by consumers than others. For example, De Vries, Gansler and Leeflang (2012) demonstrate how content that is entertaining, but not related to the brand will have a negative effect on the number of likes. The authors further explain how a brands' following is mainly there to follow the brand, and how everything not related to the brand will have a negative impact on the audience in terms of engagement. On the contrary, hedonic benefits seem to activate the audience positively according to Coelho, Santos de Oliveira, and Severo de Almeida (2016). The authors state that brands tend to be more efficient and favored on Instagram when they provide the audience with content that emphasises on hedonic benefits rather than on commercial ones. The hedonic pleasure is also emphasised by Nedra, Hadhri, and Mezrani (2019) who present how consumers decide to interact with brands based on the perceived pleasure that the account may provide them with.

2.2 Visual communication through content

Stokes (2018) suggests how the main objective with various content is to engage followers and build the company brand online. Content marketing in itself differs from traditional marketing as brands aim to provide their target audience with relevant and useful content rather than solely selling products (Content Marketing Institute, 2021). There are various definitions of what content marketing is but the Content Marketing Institute (2021) defines it as *“a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant,*

and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience - and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action.”

Järvinen and Taiminen (2016) highlight how engaging content can be used by brands as a powerful tool in order to acquire new customers. Kee and Yazdanifard (2015) discuss the importance of content since it can guide consumers towards better purchasing decisions, stretching as far as claiming that firms who fail to produce effective content will be eliminated by consumers. Content is undoubtedly becoming increasingly important within marketing (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019), but Müller and Christiadl (2019) address how regardless of its importance, the research on content is inadequate.

Holliman and Rowley (2014) further stress the advantages of content as long as it is useful, relevant, compelling, and timely. To achieve this, the authors claim that brands need a transformation of the mind-set from “selling” to “helping” and that brands are discouraged from “salesy” messages but are instead encouraged to take on a customer-centric perspective. When done right, digital content can lead to a higher brand awareness, more engaged consumers, and enhanced loyalty (Holliman and Rowley, 2014). Furthermore, Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) explain how content is a key element in audiences’ evaluation of an Instagram account and how the visual attractiveness of the content impacts on the users’ intention to follow/not follow an account. The literature clearly highlights the importance of content marketing, but few to no articles try to map out exactly how the content should look in order to be more likely successful.

Barnhurst, Vari, and Rodríguez (2004); Russmann and Svensson (2016); Rietveld et al., (2020); Babic Rosario et al. (2016); and King, Racherla and Bush (2014) all stress the importance of visual communication and how we need a better understanding of how different visuals on social media appeals to consumers. The visual content, which is the primary feature of Instagram, has been uplifted by researchers as being superior, compared to text, when it comes to getting consumers’ attention, meaning creation, and retention (Bucher & Schumacher, 2006; Barthes, 1977; and Fahmy, Bock & Wanta, 2014). Russmann and Svensson (2016) discuss how visual communication, particularly on Instagram, is both powerful and effective when it comes to making an impact on consumer attitudes and behaviours. Fahmy, Bock and Wanta (2014) specifies that images have a superior effect when it comes to influencing how consumers view and evaluate a brand and its offerings. A number of studies look at how even details such as the choice of colours are crucial for marketing on platforms, such as Instagram, in order to gauge interest from the viewers (Yu, Xie & Wen, 2020; Jacobs, Kewon, Worthley & Ghymn, 1991; Labrecque, Patrick & Milne, 2013; Gao, Xin, Sato, Hansuebsai, Scalzo, Kajiwara, Guan, Valdeperas, Lis & Billger, 2007). This increasingly important role of visuals is also seen in traditional advertising where even magazine advertisements focus more on images, moving from assuming that consumers are mindful readers to realising that they are more casual viewers (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2008).

What type of visual content is deemed to be successful arguably varies across platforms and markets, and although some literature delves into this area, there are few studies, to our knowledge, that examine how visual content should look and subsequently provide managers with recommendations for best practices. The conundrum ends up being that researchers and managers know that content is king, and that the right content can bring positive effects to a business, but the frustration lies in not knowing how to execute this or what type of content to produce. Along these lines, Barnhurst, Vari, and Rodríguez (2004), as well as Russmann and Svensson (2016) discuss the development and increasing importance of the field of research on visual communication – especially with the rising digital age – and call out for more focus within academia on visuals, Instagram, and how these affect consumers.

2.3 Creating consumer interest through content

Richins (1997) stresses the significance of emotions within consumer behaviour and how emotions are perceived to be central when trying to anticipate how a consumer will respond towards for instance a marketing activity. Silvia (2008) clarifies how there are various theorists that include interest as a primary emotion, one of those being Izard (1977) who classifies interest as a fundamental emotion of humans. Izard (1977 p. 216) further defines interest as “... *the feeling of being engaged, caught-up, fascinated, curious. There is a feeling of wanting to investigate, become involved, or extend or expand the self by incorporating new information and having new experiences with the person or object that has stimulated the interest.*” Silvia (2001) states that interest is the crucial foundation for any course of action or activity, as without the feeling of interest a subject will not proceed with the topic or action further. Fredrickson (1998) also states how interest impacts positively on the scope of attention and enlarges the individuals thought-action repertoire which can give humans a willingness to explore. Based on this view, it could be suggested that brands could stimulate consumer interest through their content and how those who do not manage to do so will be eliminated by the customers.

A strong brand can attract customers, work as an image creator, be a seal of guarantee and brands are perceived to be crucial in consumers’ decision making process (Melin, 2002). However, in order for brands to get access to these assets, it is crucial to create a consumer interest as it in many cases determines if a consumers will desire to make a purchase in the future (Kumar, Kim & Pelton, 2009; Cham, Ng, Lim & Cheng, 2018; and Hassan, Nadzim & Shiratuddin, 2015). Hassan, Nadzim and Shiratuddin (2015) highlight how a big part of brands’ online marketing efforts revolves around creating an interest from consumers. The authors stress the importance of digital content and how good content can encourage consumers to visit the company profile and create an interest in their products and services. Additionally, Kumar, Kim and Pelton (2009) have also shown how product interest positively influences the anticipated quality as well as the emotional value for the brand.

Petty and Lindsey-Mullikin (2006) stress how brands must be personal in their marketing communication in order to attain consumers’ attention and create an interest. Digital media has arguably enabled brands to further develop these skills to reach both current and potential

consumers with brand content that can create an interest in the product as well as the brand. Agam (2017) portrays how marketing, particularly through Instagram, helps increase consumers' brand knowledge, including an interest in which latest products the brand has released. Kim and Hanssens (2017) reiterate this in their study that found marketing and advertising efforts through digital media to significantly increase consumers' interest, which subsequently led to a positive impact on initial sales. As such, it seems like the literature agrees that creating an interest is the very beginning of any brand-consumer relationship and a crucial part in the beginning of the purchasing journey. Arguably then, brand managers and marketers should focus on generating an interest through various touchpoints, such as firm-generated Instagram content, and put effort into communicating messages that can persuade a bystander into becoming a consumer with an interest in further engagement with the brand and its products.

2.4 Firm-generated content and its effect on consumer behaviour

There is definitely a wide amount of research on firms' use of influencers on Instagram as they are a proven effective way to reach target consumers and increase sales (Nurhandayani, Syarief, Najib, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017, Sheena & Sudha, 2017; Konstantopolou, Rizomyliotis, Konstantoulaki & Badahdah, 2019; Hassan, Teo, Ramayah, Al-Kumaim, 2021; and Paço & Oliveira, 2017). But there is also a significant amount of studies regarding firms' own usage of the platform. For example Poulis, Rizomyliotis and Konstanoulaki (2019); Hutter et al. (2013); and Sánchez-Cobarro, Molina-Castillo and Alcazar-Caceres (2020) talk about the effectiveness of firm-generated content. Poulis, Rizomyliotis and Konstanoulaki (2019) state that firm-generated content has a positive effect on the purchase intention and that firm-generated content is significantly more effective on Instagram than Facebook.

In regard to Instagram, Djafarova and Bowes (2021) stress how brand advertisement on Instagram is highly effective and can influence a consumer into impulse buying, even more so than popular influencers. Furthermore, De Jans et al. (2020) present how firm-generated content is perceived to be more credible than for example content produced by influencers. The authors also imply that advertising is more efficient and more positively perceived by the audience when the source is a brand account rather than an influencer. Additionally, Müller and Christiandl (2019) recommend using firm-generated content in order to have some control over the content and brand image. Kumar, Bezawada, Rishika, Janakiraman and Kannan (2016) found regular provision of receptive firm-generated content to positively affect customer spending, cross-buying and customer profitability. As such, it entails that brands can be even more effective in reaching their target audience through firm-generated content.

Firm-generated content is also deemed to be effective in regards to creating a need and increasing the time a user spends on a brand's Instagram account looking for information and inspiration (Stachowiak-Krzyzan, 2016). Furthermore, Hutter et al. (2013) investigated how

social media impacts consumers' purchase intention and emphasised the importance of creating appealing content that does not annoy the consumer, as annoyance had a negative effect on the overall purchasing process. They argue for the relevance of social media and underpin the importance of content and how brands and brand managers must be knowledgeable within the field in order to be successful on social media. In addition, Hollebeek and Macky (2019) stress that the execution of content is a determining factor to its success and potential impact on consumers. Previous research clearly argues for the importance and power of firm-generated content and implies that brands must have in-depth knowledge within content creation. However, few to no studies provide managers with insights on how to create appealing content. As such, brands are left with knowing that the content they create is impactful without knowing how to create said content in order to achieve a positive effect.

2.4.1 Beauty brands and social media

The beauty industry is arguably now more than ever before dependent on branding and retailing online. Before Covid-19, about 85% of beauty product purchases were made in stores – with even the millennials and generation Z, who are notorious for their online consumption, accounting for a significant amount of in-store purchases (Gerstell et al., 2020). The digital side of the beauty industry rises steadily and beauty brands are recommended to focus more on digital content and sales for the future, especially considering how consumers move more towards online social media shopping and shopping via retailers' websites – with the latter doubling in sales during the pandemic (Gerstell et al., 2020). The annual report of the cosmetics industry by L'Oréal (2020) also highlighted the digitalisation of the beauty industry, stressing the growing importance of digital advertising and s-commerce where brands can interact with consumers and sell their products through various social media platforms. As for Instagram, the platform is the go-to platform for consumers to connect with beauty brands and the market is experiencing increasing activity (Instagram Business Team, 2018). Nine out of the top ten accounts that beauty Instagrammers follow are accounts from beauty brands, and what attracts these users are the rich visual content – causing them to use the app with 33 daily sessions on average (Instagram Business Team, 2018).

Within the pool of research papers that focus on the beauty industry, a lot of focus is on user-generated content, influencers, and consumers' relation to or trust in said influencer (Coulter, Fick & Price, 2002; Chae, 2017; Kadekova & Holiencinova, 2018; Konstantopoulou, Rizomyliotis, Konstantoulaki & Badahdah, 2019; Zak & Hasprova, 2020; and Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). However, not many studies focus on beauty brands or beauty retailers' firm-generated content – and the ones that do, focus mostly on the area of engagement and/or Instagram as an s-commerce platform. As mentioned earlier, there are call-outs for more studies and focus on firm-generated content and Tietjen (2019) especially highlights the power that owned media has for beauty brands. Tietjen (2019) discusses how beauty retail brands' own social media platforms can generate high value and brand awareness as the brands can communicate directly with consumers and portray what goes on with their brands. As such, the author presses on the fact that beauty retail brands should not rely on influencers

but realise the power they hold in their own accounts and the author uses Sephora's Instagram as a prime example.

Britt, Hayes, Britt and Park (2020) express how important it is to study various content characteristics and what impact they might have on beauty and fashion consumers. In their study, the authors found how beauty consumers are more interested in content that provides them with beneficial information rather than affective content. Rietveld et al. (2020) also looked at different types of content and found that emotional and informative content is what drives consumer engagement on Instagram. However, contrary to the findings by Britt et al. (2020), these authors found that emotional content has a slightly more positive effect on consumer engagement than informative content. Another key finding that the authors present is how content that portrays human faces has an advantage over other types of content in regard to attracting attention.

2.5 Composition of images

Berger (2011) stresses the complexity of images and that humans cannot absorb everything they see – instead the human mind first selects which visual properties to pay attention to, such as colours, shapes, and texture, and then puts those properties together as an image. The author further explains that whatever humans identify to see tends to be influenced by their knowledge, beliefs, and wants, and as such, what we see and how we perceive what we see is very subjective. Therefore, there is no guarantee that two individuals will pay attention to and notice the same shapes, themes, or composition when looking at the same picture. Instead, the attention to and meaning attached to different shapes and colours will depend on each individual. Nonetheless, Berger (2011) stresses how shapes are essential attributes of visual communication. Although shapes can come in various sizes and forms, shapes are typically either organic or geometric (Präkel, 2006). Organic shapes tend to imitate the shapes that are present in nature, such as plants, the ocean, animals, and rocks, and they are usually irregular and asymmetric (Kietzman, 2021). Geometric shapes are those associated with various mathematical principles and are illustrated as triangles, pentagons, squares, and circles – those shapes are always identical and symmetric in their execution (Scott, 2019). Info Graphic Design Team (2019) presents how shapes in images can create emotions and influence the receivers' thought process as well as their decision making process.

As mentioned, humans view and analyse images in different ways, and arguably then, brands can consider different compositional options, such as shapes and colours, to deliver an objectively recognisable message. Clement (2007) states that humans make choices with their eyes and highlights the importance of shapes in relation to product design as visual stimuli, as it has a tremendous influence on consumer behaviour, particularly on the purchase intention. Furthermore, as humans view images differently, it is possible that they focus on parts other than the subject that is intended to be the central part of the image (Präkel, 2006). To fully ensure that the subject is the focal point, the author advocates the usage of negative spaces, meaning that the background is plain whilst the subject is central and thus the only visible point in the image. Additionally, Lin (2016) demonstrates how framing can be used to ensure

that the viewer is noticing and focusing on the subject in the image, but also to create a depth in the image. The author describes that elements such as physical objects, lines and colours are used as natural frames for the subject, creating a framing effect to highlight the subject naturally. Finally, symmetry is an element that is perceived to uplift the quality of the image significantly (Präkel, 2006) and symmetry is achieved when both sides of the image are balanced equally (Amin, 2020).

There has been a significant number of studies on content specific to Instagram and more specifically outlining the composition and type of content that draws people's attention. Teo, Leng and Phua (2019) found, through their experimental study, that higher perceived image quality affected participants' product quality perception and purchase intention. Valentini, Romenti, Murtarelli and Pizzetti (2018) provide a deeper analysis that maps out the very composition of photos for content that attracts engagement on Instagram. They found that foreground placement of a product, as well as human direct gaze in combination with high product salience positively affects users' purchase intention and digital visual engagement. Furthermore, they found that an indirect gaze combined with low product salience also increased digital visual engagement and willingness to purchase. However, shapes and overall image composition are not the only influences when it comes to consumers' understanding and evaluation of an image. Within marketing communication, colours play a particularly essential role as colours can influence consumption behaviors, create consumer preferences, and guide firms into distinguishing themselves from competitors (Aslam, 2005).

2.6 Colours in visual communication

Colour is according to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2002) a crucial resource of visual communication as every colour has a meaning and can thus create various emotions and attitudes in humans. However, the authors also stress that the meanings of colours are influenced by culture and various myths, such as the colour black representing mourning in most parts of Europe whilst it in some countries is used for wedding gowns and symbolises a new beginning. As such, the same colour can have different meanings and connotations for different individuals and arguably this is something that marketers and content creators must keep in mind. This is proven especially important as colours have been shown in many studies to have a real impact on human emotions and behaviours (Bellizzi & Hite, 1992; Fernández-Caballero, Martínez-Rodrigo, Pastor, Castillo, Lozano-Monator, López, Zangróniz, Latorre, & Fernández-Sotos, 2016; and Cimbalò, Beck & Sendziak, 1978).

Singh (2006) highlights how primarily the entertainment industry shapes the preferences of colours that we have and the associations we ascribe to them. The author identified the colour blue to remain impactful and positive within marketing and stated how neutral colours such as grey, beige, and pale brown will continue to increase in popularity. In addition, the author stresses how soft pale colours, such as pastel, will be the commanding colour palette that humans love to see. However, the author explains how colours are to be seen as very argumentative, meaning that some individuals argue that colours are stable and should be applicable to all individuals, whilst some stress colours have highly subjective meanings

depending on the setting and the individual that views the colour. In addition, implications of what is perceived to be an attractive colour and what impact it has on humans vary widely amongst scientific researchers and experts from the colour industry. Marketing managers should however still put a lot of emphasis on colours and how they may be perceived amongst consumers, as the wrong choice of colour can have a tremendously negative outcome for the product and the brand (Singh, 2006).

As have already been stated, it is important to have individuality in mind when evaluating different colours, their meanings, and associations. Despite this, Minamyer (2015) states that there are general meanings of colours and associations that are applicable to the majority of individuals. Eiseman (1998) identified various general meanings and mood implications of colours. The author presents the colour red to symbolise excitement, power and passion, whereas pink is associated with softness and innocence. Green is according to the author a representation of nature and associated with fruitfulness whilst the colour blue symbolises the ocean and sky and is associated with tranquility. Furthermore, the author presents yellow to be the colour of the sun and to be associated with joy, but also that the colour orange is linked to the sunset and associated with energy. The colour black symbolises mourning, according to the author, however, it is also associated with sophistication. Symbols of stability and nature are commonly linked to the colour brown according to the author and its associations are warmth and natural. Finally, the colour purple is associated with spirituality and is usually linked to mystique (Eiseman, 1998).

The importance of colours is not solely limited to visual communications, as Minamyer (2005) explains, colour is used as therapy, defines the environment, and is able to give definitions to various objects. The author further states how individuals interpret and react to colours based on what they represent in nature and how it is the human mind that decides the meaning of colours. Although the importance of colour is clear, as already presented, research within marketing that emphasises on investigating colours in relation to content and its visual cues is scarce.

2.7 Text and messages in social media content

An image that combines visuals and text has the opportunity to in an even more effective way communicate a message (Schill, 2012). Au-Yong-Oliveira and Ferreira (2014) discuss how text provides more detailed information, but also that visuals provide more entertaining and easily digested information, and that a combination of both is necessary to send a complete message. As discussed earlier, and shown through the many call outs from researchers, visuals on their own are powerful, important, and need designated focus in future studies. Arguably then, we could stop here and focus solely on the visual aspects of Instagram content. However, from our observations there are many beauty brands on Instagram that use elements of text in their pictures. As such, although the visual element is the key stimulating factor in this study, a bit of insight into how text is used to send messages and persuade an audience into developing preferable consumer behaviours is needed.

Kruk, Lubin, Sikka, Lin, Jurafsky and Divakaran (2019) present how using a combination of visuals and text can semiotically add both the same and divergent meanings to Instagram content. It was suggested that using a combination of visuals and text, as opposed to solely using visuals, would improve consumers' understanding and decoding of the message by 9.6% (Kruk et al., 2019). Other studies have also found that a combination of visuals and text help in learning and retention amongst receivers (Linebarger, Piotrowski & Greenwood, 2010). This indicates that although visuals are important, the presence of text could further enhance content and the message it is trying to convey. Hence, for us to understand and fully evaluate different visual content, specifically text-in-image content, we need more knowledge about in which ways text is used and its effects on recipients. Zhan, Tu and Yu (2018) found that popular messages portrayed via text on Instagram tend to have a positive tone and portray emotions of joy. On a similar note, Davies, Turner and Udell (2020) suggest that text with a positive message can influence consumers' reactions positively to an Instagram content stimulus, even more so than after exposure to solely the visuals.

However, Moran, Muzellec and Johnson (2020) also looked at the combination of visuals and text within content, and they found the visual aspect to have the greatest impact on consumer behaviour in the form of engagement. In particular, the authors found that rich media, and pictures more than videos, increased consumers' engagement with a brand. Worth noting however is that text was not found to be useless, but rather that the presence of a CTA within the content boosted consumer behaviours towards engagement (Moran, Muzellec & Johnson, 2020). Yus (2019) uses memes as one example of content that combines visuals and text. The author discusses how the image and text will vary in dominance depending on salience, but overall that the role of the text is to provide a final interpretation of the content, and that the visual's role is to amplify, illustrate, or in other ways aid in the presentation of the intended message of the content. Yus (2019) also mentions text in the notion of Barthes' semiotic theories where the text is used to anchor, in other words clarify, the fine details and meanings from the image as intended from the sender.

3 Theoretical Framework

Due to our study focusing on investigating which visual elements within content that consumers find to be appealing, we are interested in knowing how they evaluate and react to various visuals in content. Hence, our analysis will be grounded in the consumer behaviour theory of the Stimulus-Organism-Response model. Furthermore, considering our wish to analyse and map out different visual elements within Instagram content, Barthes' semiotic theory is used alongside the SOR theory to facilitate an organised and cohesive way of viewing and analysing the visual aspects.

3.1 Stimulus-Organism-Response Theory

Firstly we will use the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory and model of decision making which derives from the cognitive approach within the Consumer Behaviour theory. The theory was first invented in 1929 and introduced to the study of consumer behaviour in 1974, helping us analyse and understand how different stimuli influence people's feelings and behaviours (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Stuart, 1974). Mehrabian and Russell (1974) developed their theory as a means to isolate one variable and analyse how it impacts, independently of the surrounding environment, on consumers' decision making. The authors provide, through their SOR model (Fig. 1), a theory for analysis of a controlled stimuli and its impact on human behaviour on a detailed level. An external stimuli influences an organism, which is an individual's cognition, and this organism then analyses and interprets the stimuli which leads to an effect on the individual's attitude and behaviour (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974).

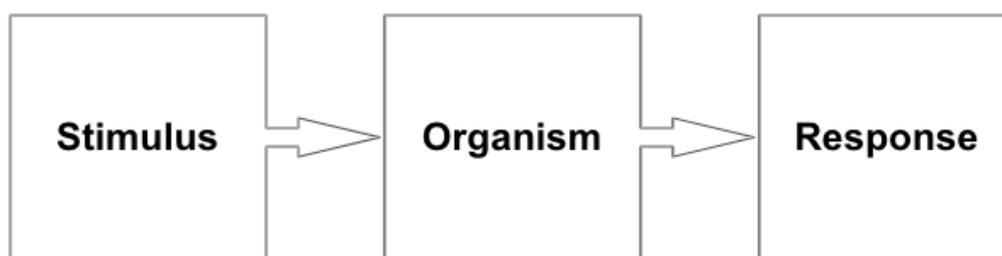


Figure 1. Illustration of the SOR theory

Stimuli (S) is an external factor, such as marketing, a picture, an event, or an action that can trigger a reaction amongst consumers (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). As presented in the literature review, there are many components that make up visual stimuli of Instagram content, such as colours, text, and other types of compositional layouts of the image. Mehrabian and Russell (1974) presented the organism (O) as consisting of three emotional dimensions: pleasure, arousal, and dominance, that together guide the emotional response an individual will have. High levels of pleasure relate to positive emotions and feelings, whereas low levels are represented by negative emotions and feelings. Arousal is evaluated on a scale

from high to low levels of mental activity and stimulation. The dimension of dominance has been discussed as to whether it is a significant factor or not (Russell & Pratt, 1980; Donovan, Rossiter & Nesdale, 1994), but regardless revolves around the level of freedom and control the individual feels. These three dimensions are triggered by the external stimuli and based on how said stimuli is interpreted and evaluated by each dimension it results in a subsequent response from the individual (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). However, these three emotional dimensions have been discussed and altered throughout the years in different research, much due to the argument presented by for example Abelson, Kinder, Peters and Fiske (1982) and Babin, Darden and Babin (1998) that the presence of positive emotions do not mean that there is an absence of negative ones. Along those lines we will adapt the organism section of the SOR theory and subsequent dimensions to contain one unipolar dimension named as *cognitive evaluation*. This is much due to the qualitative nature that this study will take where we do not seek to measure and cannot predict any specific emotions from our respondents. As such, their emotional evaluations can fail to fall into any of the categories that are predetermined in our study and model. Therefore, the single cognitive evaluation element allows for greater freedom of exploring emotions held and developed by our respondents.

Lastly, after the organism evaluation of the stimuli has taken place, individuals develop a response (R) in the form of approach and/or avoidance behaviours where approach means a desire to see and indulge further with the stimulus or the source thereof and avoidance means the opposite (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). As mentioned earlier, the qualitative adoption of this theory, in our opinion, requires a more free labeled and unipolar response category as responses may not be mutually exclusive, may not fall into the pre-labeled categories, or may not even develop at all. Hence, for the purpose of our study the respondents' final reactive behaviours will be analysed in a single responsive category named *attitudes and behaviour*. In our study, the external stimuli are the content produced by Swedish beauty retail brands and in our analysis we will use the SOR theory to analyse how this content stimulus triggers internal processes which result in an attitude and/or behaviour from the respondent towards the content they are shown. Through interviews we will aim to get an insight into how our sample responds to our chosen selection of Instagram content.

The SOR theory has been widely used in marketing and consumer research, both online and offline, as it is deemed an excellent tool to analyse how different stimuli influence consumer behaviour (Wu & Li, 2018; Chang, Eckman & Yan, 2011; Pandita, Mishra & Chib, 2021; Barros, Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; de La Martinière Petroll, Damacena & Knoppe, 2019; Leong, Jaafar & Ainin, 2018; Jang & Namkung, 2009; Xiang et al., 2016). However, as Djafarova and Bowes (2021) state, there is scarce usage of the SOR theory within research on Instagram. But as stated in our literature review, Instagram is an increasingly significant and highly influential medium (De Vries, Gensler and Leeflang, 2012; Huang & Su, 2018; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Triwidisari, Nurkhin, Muhsin, 2017; Delafrooz, Rahmati and Abdi, 2019; Yau and Reich, 2019; Brown and Tiggemann, 2016; Erkan, 2015; Cathelini and Sundiman, 2019) which thus deserves more attention and application of this proven theory in research. Furthermore, we do note however that the SOR theory is not without critique; Jacoby (2002) is often referenced for his critique stating that

SOR, along with many of the consumer behaviour theories, is too static and rigid as the different elements of the model may influence each other in a circling and non-linear way depending on which elements are put into each “box” in the theory. The author highlights how response-elements such as social reference groups, if put in the far right “box” are influential factors to the consumer behaviour process rather than end-results of a market-dominated stimuli. However, Jacoby (2002) also states that linear models, such as SOR, may fit best when a study is trying to establish categories of choices and actions by consumers. Considering how a part of our study is trying to examine how different content is evaluated by consumers, with the hope of finding categories of visual elements that lead to positive emotions and actions with consumers, the linear structure of SOR fits our study very well. Furthermore, considering the vast amount of past and modern marketing and consumer research, as referenced earlier, that use SOR for their studies, the theory is still highly relevant and useful in today’s research.

3.2 Semiotic theory of Roland Barthes

As a part of our study involves the observation and evaluation of visual entities, in the form of Instagram content, we will also include a semiotic theory to guide our analysis of the visual elements of this study. Within advertising, semiotic theories started to emerge as there was an assumption that the communication of advertisements had a persuasive purpose considering how the main objective is to persuade consumers into a purchase (Bianchi, 2011). One of the first scholars to develop a semiological theory as a means to perform rhetorical analysis of advertisements was Roland Barthes who was concerned with examining the meaning of images (Bianchi, 2011). Barthes has also been mentioned in the literature review regarding research for visual communication (Yus, 2019), with some authors stating that Barthes’ semiotic theories provided much of the foundation to this field of research (Barnhurst, Vari & Rodríguez, 2004).

The school of semiotics studies *signs*, which are said to consist of two different parts: a *signifier* and a *signified* (Chandler, 2002). A sign can be anything that can carry a meaning beyond its mere existence, such as a picture, video, event, or object (Chandler, 2002). The signifier is the physical form of the sign, what can be discovered through our senses such as vision and touch, and the signified is the associated meaning with the sign, what it mentally represents for us (Chandler, 2002). These are interconnected, and exactly what element is considered a signifier or signified depends on the level of semiotic analysis as signs can be loaded with a multitude of meanings depending on how they are shown and to whom (Barthes, 1957). According to Barthes (1957) the interconnected relationship between the signifier and the signified function on two different levels of signification. However, Barthes (1964) highlights how it is very difficult to separate the signifier and the signified, and as such the levels of signification are connected and may overlap to influence each other.

The first level of signification is that of *denotation* which is a sign made up of both a signifier and a signified, together showing the literal or obvious meaning of the sign (Barthes, 1964).

Barthes (1964) states that the denotative sign has a very objective, almost dictionary, meaning without any emotions, and that it can be understood by people from all backgrounds and cultures. The second level of signification is *connotation* which are the associative and expressive values that portray a conceptual meaning to the sign (1964). Barthes (1957) states that the connotative meaning is formed out of the inadequateness of the denotation to explain a sign, and that connotation, being very much dependent on the one analysing the sign, is context dependent. The author – in a way to organise and map out how we semiotically analyse and evaluate a sign – states that the connotation is in itself a signifier that is made out of the denotative sign with its corresponding signifier and signified. But the connotation further attaches an additional signified to the denotative sign in order to create a more conceptual meaning. As such, Barthes (1957) claims that the connotative signifier and signified together create a connotative sign which provides deeper mental associations on an individual level.

In addition, Barthes (1957) has developed this thought further to include the concept of *myth* as a part of a broader connotative sign's meaning. The author means that myths are the meanings of a sign that extends to a broader, ideological idea which an individual shares with the culture they identify with in a society. As such, the myth is a collective consciousness built from values and beliefs throughout history to become so deeply rooted amongst individuals that they identify these values and beliefs as natural and their own connotative meanings. In short, the key takeout is that when a sign is interpreted by an individual, they identify denotative (literal and obvious) meanings as well as connotative (implied and associated – made up from the individual and collectively cultural beliefs and attitudes) meanings of the sign, but that some of these connotations may have been created from their societal collective consciousness.

3.3 A combination of the theories of SOR and Barthes' semiotics

In our study, we will combine the SOR theory, which will guide our analysis of how the content stimuli is evaluated and in turn affects consumer behaviour, with the semiotic theory of Roland Barthes, which will guide the visual analysis of the Instagram content. The stimuli (S) refers to the visual content produced by brands and these pictures – as presented in the literature review – are made from and will vary in their layout and use of colours, text, and composition. The stimulus is the starting point and is thus presented to an individual who will use their visual senses to observe said stimulus. At this point, as a form of optical lens, the individual will see a denotative (literal and objective) meaning of the stimulus followed by a connotative (implied and associated) meaning of the stimulus. This connotative meaning, as we see it, flows into the following organism (O) where the individual carries out a cognitive evaluation where they identify and express their emotions arising from the stimulus, based on what they evaluate from the meanings of the sign. This in turn leads the analysis to the response (R) of the stimulus where the individual's attitudes and behaviours are presented to analyse what type of influences that different visual content stimuli have. Due to the

qualitative nature of this study, which types of emotions, attitudes, and behaviours that will emerge cannot be predicted – matter of fact there may not emerge any particular response at all. But regardless, this relationship between the two theories is illustrated in Figure 2 below.

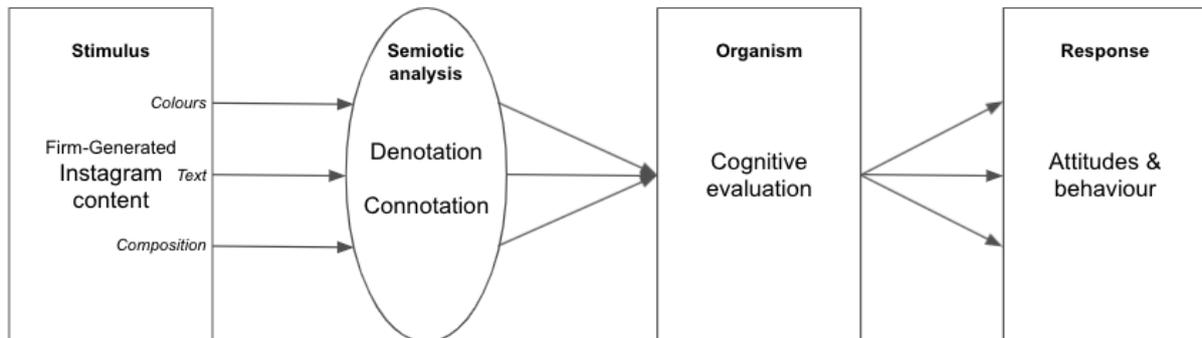


Figure 2. Illustration of how the theories of SOR and Barthes' semiotics are used together

4 Method

4.1 Research philosophy

There are many different ways in which management and business research can be planned and executed – each method with its own strengths and weaknesses (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson & Jaspersen, 2018). It is important for us as researchers to identify and discuss our own method as it will determine not only how we will conduct our research but also in what way we will analyse our data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Hence, in order to provide a higher quality research paper we will begin by discussing the ontological and epistemological standpoints that best suit our goal of responding to our research question.

4.1.1 Ontological position

Ontology refers to the very basic philosophical assumptions made by us as researchers in regard to how we view the world and what reality is (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). In other words it concerns the nature of reality and existence, and there are four different positions that divide researchers: realism, internal realism, relativism, and nominalism (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). As the focus of this study is to examine the views and opinions of consumers towards various visual elements within Instagram content, our study is reliant on the many different views and “truths” of our subjects. Hence, we have built the study on a relativist ontological view where the facts that we present will be dependent on both the opinions and views of the respondents as well as the viewpoint of us as observers (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). The relativist approach acknowledges that whatever phenomena we observe will depend on the context and perspectives of those parties who create and analyse said phenomena (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). As such, we are all co-creators of the world and reality in which we act and observe. Considering how we as researchers have – based on our observed trends and literature review – decided firstly on the area and research question to be studied, and then decided on the samples of both brands and a selection of Instagram content, we have already affected to an extent what the reality of our research findings will be. Equally, the brands that upload content to these Instagram pages, as well as the values and experiences held by our respondents will further contribute to shape their view of reality in our study. The respondents’ reactions can be affected by what they have experienced earlier in the day, the way in which we as researchers ask questions, as well as the way in which brands have created the content presented. This all contributes to the relativist view that there are many, and contextual, “truths.” Consequently, the content samples and respondents will have to be chosen with diversity in mind and to make sure to include a variety of samples from both, in order to analyse and summarise some sort of agreeable “truth.”

4.1.2 Epistemological position

Epistemology concerns the assumptions we have about what knowledge is and how it can be acquired (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). There are two opposing camps within epistemology and although few researchers will stand by one view and its aspects in full, they often choose which worldview they align most with (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Positivism, in a nutshell, sees the social world as external and hence objectively observable where researchers

are independent – irrelevant even – as they use hypotheses and deductions to measure statistical probability from a large sample in order to provide generalisable knowledge (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). On the other hand there is the social constructionism that sees the reality of the world as a result of human interference and analyses rather than as a result of external, objectifiable factors (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). As such, the social constructionist view see researchers as co-creators of what is being observed and that the study is more complex as it considers the data and many perspectives of all participating actors as well as the situations in which they interact – as such a smaller sample size is used to study the specific result of said sample and study topic (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

There is a clear link between the ontological and epistemological philosophies, and subsequently our discussed ontological standpoint of relativism lays ground for the epistemological position of social constructionism. Considering what has been discussed earlier regarding how our results will depend on our own involvement and effects as researchers along with the contexts and situations of the respondents, the social constructionist approach resonates the most with us researchers. In more detail, this is because social constructionism recognises that the reality that we see and evaluate is the result of all people involved, directly or indirectly, in this study (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). The multiple views from various respondents, to various types of content from a range of beauty brands, in combination with the reflexive analysis of two researchers will be used to consider the multiple truths and realities created by all parties involved in this study. As Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) discuss, the benefits of this is that multiple perspectives are connected to provide a more complete picture and accurate understanding of the phenomenon.

4.2 Research design

The purpose of this study is to extend the research on visual communication and marketing, specifically on firm-generated Instagram content and which visual elements that are the most appealing. For managers we also aim to provide insights into which visual elements within content that they should focus on in order to more likely be appreciated by consumers. Mainly this is done by examining how different consumers interpret and evaluate said content. Therefore, a qualitative approach is beneficial for this study as it enables us as researchers to gain deeper insights and understandings of how individuals think, interact with, and reflect about various forms of content (McCracken, 1988). Due to our study focusing on investigating which visual elements within content that consumers find to be appealing, and that we are interested in knowing how they evaluate and react to various visuals in content, a qualitative method is preferred for this purpose considering how highly personalised thoughts and emotions cannot be achieved through quantifiable methods (Gibson & Brown, 2009). Bryman and Bell (2015) describes how qualitative research usually has an inductive approach which enables researchers to reach conclusions, rules, and/or new theories based on findings from observations and data collection. This is beneficial as it coincides with one of our aims to expand on the literature and provide beauty brands on Instagram with recommendations and a theoretical framework on how to produce visually appealing content based on our

findings. Furthermore, Bryman and Bell (2015) state that an advantage of the inductive approach is that it tries to grasp and explain a phenomenon. This is beneficial for our study as we are interested in grasping what type of Instagram content that Swedish beauty consumers find to be visually appealing, and explain why these findings are of importance.

As mentioned, the inductive approach is focused around deriving new theory from observations, but that is not to say that theory is not used at the beginning of or throughout the study. As Bryman and Bell (2015) states, theory has an important role within qualitative research as a background or starting point. In our study we have used theory to set the method of data collection, meaning that the theories have provided background information about what we need to study, how to study it, what questions to ask, and what to look for. Due to the theories providing guidelines for the formation of the research structure, the data analysis and discussion are also structured along the steps presented in our theories. Hence, the theories are referred to throughout these chapters as well, purely to guide the reader as to what “step” we are referring to (such as connotation or the Organism), but not to re-shape the data in any way. With this in mind, we aimed to not become biased by our theory, making sure that it was merely used as background and structuring guidelines, in order to remain open for any new findings and instances that may arise beyond the grasp and “steps” in our theory. As such, the background theories were used to guide our research and analysis, but the concluding proposed framework was produced independently and solely based on the findings from our data.

Due to the qualitative nature of our study it will not be possible to provide certain and generalisable recommendations and contributions as there is no guarantee that another sample of respondents would provide the same answers, or that the same respondents would not answer differently if asked during a different point in time. However, as consumers are each unique individuals with their own processing and evaluation of the world, a qualitative study is deemed valuable as it will provide unique and specific insights into the minds of consumers that in the future can be potentially more widely tested and generalised by quantitative studies. Finally, as the majority of studies within content on social media have had a quantitative approach (Copeland and Zhao, 2020; Delafrooz, Rahmati & Abdi, 2019; Triwidisari, Nurkhin, Muhsin, 2017; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017; Xiang, Zheng, Lee & Zhao, 2016; Valentini, Romenti, Murtarelli and Pizzetti, 2018; Müller and Christiandl, 2019; Teo, Leng & Phua, 2019; Wu & Li, 2018; Rietveld et al., 2020), their findings are only investigating consumers from a objective view that cannot provide clues to how and why consumers behave and react in certain ways – only that they are behaving and reacting in certain ways. As such, a qualitative study will leverage new insights and declare new consumer insights that are still unknown and only possible to gain through a qualitative approach.

4.3 Data collection

For the purpose of this study, semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data as this method allowed us to collect the most useful as well as suitable data in order to answer the research question. The following section describes in detail the logic behind the pilot study, how the interviews were conducted, the development of the topic guide, and the sampling strategy of Instagram content and respondents.

4.3.1 Pilot study

A pilot study was conducted to ensure that the interview questions were designed clearly and that the chosen content could provide us with useful consumer insights. After completion of the pilot study, the respondent was asked to share her thoughts and viewpoints on the interview questions as well as the arrangement of the interview. The aim was to ensure that the respondent found the interview format to feel safe and comfortable and that she could share her opinions. The respondent did not have any negative experiences of the interview format or setting. However, the respondent informed us that the amount of questions that she had to answer made her feel overwhelmed. As such, a decision was made to reduce the amount of interview questions. Further based on her answers, we also decided to exclude a number of content examples from the study since the respondent found some of them to be repetitive and the interview overall to be too long. The respondent did not have any remarks on the visual content that she had to analyse, therefore we decided to proceed with our initial chosen content from the retailers' official Instagram accounts.

The main reason why a pilot study is of great importance is because they allow the researcher to verify the interview questions and identify those that can be perceived as leading questions. Leading questions should be avoided according to Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) since they may taint respondents' answers. The issue of potentially leading the respondent through specific questions or us as interviewers showing our emotions and biases is that the study becomes invalid (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). Furthermore, in order to increase the chances of building trust and creating an interview where respondents feel comfortable in sharing their thoughts, the interviews started off by presenting how there are no right or wrong answers and that our purpose is simply to study what consumers think of certain brand content on Instagram.

Lastly, we have decided not to include the pilot study data as a part of the final presented results as there were several questions and Instagram content that were later removed or altered from the topic guide for subsequent interviews. Hence, the data collected from the pilot study would provide potential outliers based on unequal conditions compared to the actual interviews conducted later on.

4.3.2 Interviews

Considering how we want to examine how consumers evaluate and react to various visuals in content, a one-on-one interview approach is deemed as the most appropriate. Although the qualitative method offers other alternatives for data collection, such as focus groups,

one-on-one interviews were identified as the most appropriate for our study. This is primarily motivated through our ambition to get a better understanding of our respondents' inner thoughts and opinions. As such, it is important that their thoughts and opinions are their own and not influenced by others, which according to Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) is easier to achieve through one-on-one interviews than for example focus groups sessions where respondents more freely can influence each other.

According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2018), qualitative interviews are directed conversations that stem from a planned series of questions that focus on one topic. The authors state that the aim of qualitative interviews is to gather information regarding different respondents meaning building and interpretations regarding a phenomena with an insight into the respondents' view of the world. Through a qualitative study based on interviews, it is possible for us to gain insight into how consumers think and interpret visual material and then from this sample of respondents build an inductive analysis in order to provide insights into the minds and preferences of consumers (Bryman & Bell, 2015). We do note however the challenges with this approach as there is no guarantee that people are fully aware of the emotions they feel or are not able to translate these feelings into words. As such, it can become difficult for us as researchers to collect data that represents the so-called "truth" which we seek.

The interviews were of semi-structured character with a list of key questions to be answered. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they are guided open interviews and can allow for the respondent to more freely talk about any topic, thought, or emotion that they feel more strongly about (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). By allowing for freer conversations, we were able to more accurately capture the motivation of the consumption of Instagram content and how it makes the respondents think and feel. However, providing the respondents with too much freedom poses a risk of collecting poor data with too many assumptions that talk about a topic outside of our interest (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). Hence, a topic guide with semi-structured questions was prepared before the interviews (Appendix 1).

There are various recommendations on the number of interviews that are deemed to be satisfactory enough to conduct throughout a study, according to Bryman and Bell (2015). Ahrne and Svensson (2011) recommend researchers to conduct interviews until they have reached theoretical saturation. The authors further describe how theoretical saturation is considered to be reached when the data collected from the interviews begin to coincide and essentially no further or additional information is retrieved from further interviews. As such, we will conduct interviews until no new data has been identified to be provided by our respondents.

Traditionally, interviews are often conducted in real life, but due to the restrictions during the occurring pandemic at the time of this study the interviews were conducted online. Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) present how remote interviewing offers a flexibility which is necessary in the current world situations. However, as further highlighted by the authors,

these interviews lack contextualisation, depth, and non-verbal communication as opposed to face-to-face interviews.

4.3.3 Interview procedure

We ended up conducting 13 interviews and this number was not decided prior to the start of the research, but rather a number that we ended up with after reaching theoretical saturation. The 13 interviews were 65-95 minutes long and conducted over a time period of seven days with both researchers present during each interview. Prior to the interviews we asked our respondents to sign the consent form giving us permission to use their answers in this study. Before starting the interviews, we as researchers ensured that our surroundings were neat and tidy and we put our phones on mute to minimise any risk of distraction and to try to create a comfortable environment for the respondent. We first introduced ourselves, explained the purpose of the study and their role in the study as well as their legal rights to cancel at any time. We then asked them to tell us something about themselves and their interests in order to build trust and a connection prior to the start of the interview. All the interviews were conducted in Swedish since it was the mother tongue of all respondents, as such they were able to express their feelings and thoughts more freely without any hindrance or nervousness from having to express themselves in another language. The aim was to treat each interview uniquely and follow the flow of the conversation.

The interview questions were developed based on our theories used for analysis as well as the core themes of our study interest and research question. As the SOR theory and Barthes' semiotic theory are used to analyse how a stimulus is first cognitively evaluated and then leading to attitudes and behaviours from the consumer, the interviews were based on showing respondents different Instagram content as the stimulus. After an informational start and ice-breaking session, the interviews then proceeded into a deeper analysis of content where respondents were shown individual pictures, one at a time. Considering our wish to analyse and compare visual elements and our subsequent use of Barthes' semiotic theory to guide the visual analysis, whenever the respondents were prompted with a new content stimulus, the first questions asked were questions enabling a semiotic analysis. The procedure of this semiotic analysis is presented and accounted for in the upcoming section. As such, respondents were asked, in accordance with the first order of signification, to describe the picture objectively telling us what they see. Following the second order of signification, respondents were then asked to describe what associations and meanings they construct from viewing the content. The notion of myth and how respondents' mental evaluations and analysis of visual stimuli vary depending on culturally variable collective ideologies were considered in the interviews as respondents were chosen from the same nationality and age. The semiotic analysis was followed by questions that moved the analysis along the steps of the SOR theory, asking them to talk us through their evaluation of the content by telling us about what they think and feel as they view the stimulus. Then they were asked questions regarding how their attitudes and behaviours had changed or been affected by viewing and evaluating the content, looking at what types of actions they would like to take regarding the content and/or the product it portrays.

The respondents were all presented with the same set of pre-selected Instagram content in order to ensure that the respondents analyse and respond to the same stimuli. However, questions and follow-up discussions revolving around each stimulus varied between each interview depending on the responses provided. This flexibility, compared to fully structured and scripted interviews, allowed us to more naturally interact with the respondents and ask them to develop their answers where needed. In the end, the topic guide effectively helped us to collect data in order to analyse and answer our research question regarding our respondents' evaluations and reactions to different Instagram content. The topic guide is included in Appendix 1.

To minimise the challenges presented with remote interviewing, the study was conducted via synchronous interviews that include both video and sound, more specifically on Zoom and Teams. More attention has also been paid to what information is needed from the respondents, and questions were thereafter formulated beforehand to provide as much information as possible without the need for non-verbal cues. One example being the questions focusing on the respondents walking us through their thought process and thoughts. One thing that poses a limitation for the study is the assumption through interviews that people will be able to express their thoughts and feelings in words. This was tackled by asking follow-up questions to dig deeper into the minds of the respondents. However, no response can ever be guaranteed to be truthful and/or fully explaining an individual's inner thoughts and emotions and as such this poses a limitation to this research method.

4.3.4 Semiotic analysis procedure

As presented in our theoretical section and topic guide, respondents were first asked to perform a semiotic analysis of each picture, describing their denotation followed by their associated connotations. To provide a cohesive and more comprehensive semiotic analysis, the results presented are put together from the collectively gathered information from all our interviewees' responses and put into one cohesive analysis for each picture. In order to facilitate easier reading and understanding, these semiotic analyses have been summarised into figures, using keywords, together with each picture and provided in their full form towards the end of the paper in each theme's corresponding Appendix. The denotative part of each picture was the same to all respondents as the denotative parts of each image are objectively observable by all. The respondents did present what elements of the picture that they objectively noticed in different sequences, where some noticed the colour first and others the subject, but in the end the list of things noticed when they objectively described the image were the same. Further, respondents did use different wordings when describing the same elements, emotions, and attitudes, but many of the answers were synonyms or referring to the same thing. In our results, the most commonly used and understood words to describe elements are used by us to present the data. Worth noting is that consumers in general are not aware of what semiotics mean or what a semiotic analysis is, hence have no experience in conducting one. In order to keep the interviews light and engaging we avoided technical terms and instead we developed questions that guided respondents towards our intended

semiotic analysis. Respondents were continuously asked to develop their answers further during the interview in order to ensure they fully described all the elements they objectively saw in each picture. However, we do note that these denotations and following connotations may be lacking and not live up to a professional semiotic analysis due to the lack of experiences from our respondents. In the end, however, the main elements and subjects in each picture were identified by the respondents and as such the semiotic analyses are deemed good enough by us as researchers.

4.3.5 Topic guide

Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) discuss how researchers, when conducting less structured interviews, such as semi-structured interviews, should not be tied up by a series of set interview questions, but still need some sort of framework to provide them with themes and topics to address. Hence, a topic guide is presented by the authors as a loose structure of what topics to talk about and subsequent questions to ask. A topic guide does not tie the researchers to a specific layout or order of questions, but it merely provides a tool in the form of a structured checklist for which topics to cover during an interview (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). As such, order and questions can be altered to better match the flow of the interview. The topic guide allows for such freedom whilst still providing a skeleton for the interview to ensure that the respondent is not provided with too much freedom which could supply researchers with data that is not relevant or useful for their study (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

In accordance with the recommendations from Easterby-Smith et al. (2018), questions were developed to not include jargon or theoretical concepts in order to be clear and easy for our respondents to understand. Furthermore, the recommendations state that questions should be designed to promote open-ended answers and to follow up these questions with probes where the respondent is asked to develop their answer further. Our example questions and topics were developed with this in mind and considered how they can be understood and interpreted by our different respondents. Finally, Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) state that a topic guide should contain at least three sections (opening, key topic, and closing questions) as well as more conversational questions to ease in the respondent and establish a connection. Therefore, the topic guide (Appendix 1) starts with information about ethical consideration and asking for the respondent's consent, followed by transitional icebreaking questions. The second section starts off with the semiotic analysis, evaluation, and reactions to individual content stimuli, followed by a third and closing section asking the respondents for their final remarks and if they want to add anything else.

The topic guide was created based on the theories of SOR and Barthes' semiotics. This ensured that the topic guide contained relevant topics and questions based on our literature review and that they are adapted to our theory of analysis for this study. As such, for each individual content stimulus, the topic guide questions start with questions relating to the semiotic analysis topic, focusing firstly on what can be objectively visually observed, followed by more subjective associations. The following topics revolve around the

consumers' cognitive evaluation and finally the attitudes and behaviours developed from this analysis and evaluation.

4.3.6 Content as stimulus

In order to be able to conduct the visual analysis during interviews, we used a previously made presentation, showing our respondents screen shots of content from our chosen beauty retailers' Instagram accounts (@glowid @hudotoket @knowtoglow @skincitysverige). We exposed respondents to a varied selection of content and asked them questions based on our topic guide. The names of each account was further covered in the individual content screen shots. Brand names were covered in order to protect against any bias that respondents may have towards any certain brand from previous knowledge or that they may develop throughout the interview. This ensured that they did not relate the image to a previously seen one from the same brand that they liked or disliked.

In order to identify relevant content that can be used as stimulus during the interviews, we investigated our chosen beauty retailers' Instagram feeds in detail. We then identified the most recurring content on each account in order to be able to select the content that would be used as stimulus during the interviews. We chose to only include still pictures as our sample content. This was because our chosen brand accounts mainly use pictures in their feed, with one brand not using videos at all. Hence, pictures are a more fair representation amongst our four beauty retail brands. Furthermore, the composition of pictures arguably differ in their formation and complexity compared to the cinematography of videos which would make it difficult to provide a fair analysis and subsequent recommendations.

4.3.7 Sampling strategy

Since our intention is to study a specific subject demographic – Swedish females aged 25-34 – a purposive sampling was used in this study. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) a purposive sampling allows the researcher to identify those respondents who are most relevant for the aim of the study. Accordingly, the sampling strategy revolved around finding respondents that fulfilled the following four criteria: (1) the respondents had to be female; (2) they had to be Swedish citizens; (3) they had to be in the age group 25-34; and (4) they had to have an interest in beauty. Social media was used as the primary recruiting tool in order to increase the chances of finding suitable candidates that fulfill the four criteria. Instagram was identified to be the most effective social media to use for this purpose as the age group 25-34 use the app frequently. Furthermore, due to Covid-19 and current regulations, social media enabled us to minimise physical contact which is usually required when recruiting on for example a campus. We asked acquaintances with an interest in beauty who have a large following to post a story on Instagram. The Instagram story included short and general information about the study, the four criteria that had to be fulfilled, and contact information of the researchers. The interest from potential respondents was great, however, we noticed that some of our mutual friends responded showing their interest. Individuals who had personal relationships with the researchers were not chosen as subjects as it might have

impacted the study, instead we solely recruited respondents who we did not have a personal relationship with.

However, we do note that although the respondents will be chosen based on criteria that not only fit our research question, but also provide us with a wide and representative range of answers, thoughts and opinions, it will be difficult to make a certain generalisation. The factor of randomness cannot be excluded as the opinions of our respondents may unpurposely lack representation of certain groups of women, and as such any generalisations made from these interviews will be subject to further research verification or falsification through new, different, and a wider sample.

Our decision to solely investigate young Swedish females is motivated through the flourishing beauty industry in Sweden which makes the population the highest consuming of beauty products in Europe (Jansson, 2021), but also because females use Instagram to a larger degree than males (Stokes, 2018), and that age groups 25-34 are the main users of Instagram (Tankovska, 2021). Although there are no statistics available that present demographic or psychographic information regarding which individuals are the major consumers of beauty on the Swedish market, a report by TABS Analytics (2016) presents female millennials in general to be the largest buyers within beauty. Our choice to solely investigate women aged 25-34 is thus motivated by these reports and also due to the limited time frame not allowing us to investigate a wider age group.

4.4 Data analysis

During each interview, we took as detailed notes as possible on answers, non-verbal cues, and feelings that developed throughout the interview. After the completion of each interview, we used the Systematic and Reflexive Interviewing and Reporting (SRIR) method to report the content and results of the interview (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). This method was chosen as it can help minimise the already presented limitations of remote interviewing lacking non-verbal cues. Traditional transcribing takes note of literal words spoken but removes any non-verbal cues and feelings felt and expressed during the interview – whereas the SRIR method can include both (Loubere, 2017). Furthermore, the SRIR method works ideally for qualitative studies on a smaller scale and with two or more interviewers (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). Therefore, immediately after each interview, us researchers had a reflexive dialogue about the data and discussed both similar and divergent impressions and understandings from the interview. After this dialogue we wrote reports that summarise the content of our interview, including key quotes, and the following reflexive analysis. One key benefit of the SRIR method is that the reports enable the beginning process of coding and analysis. This method also enabled us to begin reducing the amount of data into more manageable chunks as well as providing an insight into potential themes. Throughout this process however, we decided to include as much data as possible and instead code and reduce the data properly once all interviews were finished. This was done to ensure that we did not leave out any information that might prove to be important and recurring once more interviews were conducted.

Additionally, we have also used the recommendations by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015) that highlight three critical steps that should be taken during the analysis phase. The steps are: sorting, reducing, and arguing (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). During the first step, sorting, we went through the data collected from our interviews multiple times in order to fully engage with and familiarise ourselves with the data. As we were going through our data we were looking for themes and codes that we could use to collectively categorise our data. Throughout the process we also used our theories that we had built the topic guide upon, and analysed our data according to the different steps present in our theories. This, along with the previously gained knowledge from our literature review, helped us identify different themes within our content and different themes within our respondents' answers and reactions, as well as coinciding codes throughout our data. These different identified themes helped us to sort the content samples into different categories that could be grouped together in order to facilitate data analysis and comparison. By identifying different codes, coinciding themes, and/or elements between our respondents' answers in our data and sorting the data accordingly, we facilitated our subsequent work and analysis in order to answer our research question.

Through the categorial reduction, it was important for us to include the most recurring categories, but also to highlight the most interesting categories that were identified. We engaged in several discussions that revolved around reducing our themes in order to streamline our study and maintain our focus on our research question and to follow the steps provided by our theories. However, we also found it to be important not to be blinded by our combined theories as it easily can lead to important findings being overlooked and missed. As such, we strived to look for clues and patterns that do not necessarily fit according to our theories in order to be able to reveal and identify key findings that we may have otherwise missed out on or overlooked. Moreover, we connected the identified themes in order to have a cohesive set of data that help us answer our research question. Due to the sheer amount of data collected from our interviews it was not possible to include all respondents' answers in full. Through our previous coding and categorisation we were now able to not only group together similar answers, but also to reduce and remove data that were unrelated to our research question, overly repetitive, or in other ways not relevant to our study. One theme that was present during our interviews, brand account overviews and first impressions, were deleted. The reason for deleting this theme was mainly that, although it provided some interesting insights, our respondents could not conduct a satisfactory semiotic analysis due to the amount of pictures and details. As such, we ended up with data that did not look at, describe, or analyse the stimuli in a detailed enough manner, as such missing out on information about the important visual signs that cause emotions and responses.

The final step, arguing, revolved around us researchers discussing our categories and data in order to properly analyse what our respondents are talking about and how they are talking about it. With our theories as a guideline we analysed our data and further identified findings that could go beyond or against the suggestions from our theories. We decided to divide our analysis according to the key content themes found in our data sorting. Beyond that, each

content theme was divided into two parts where the first part looked at and presented the respondents' answers regarding each individual stimulus, and the second part analysed the theme and responses as a whole. Through this analysis we found further codes and themes that together provided the foundation for our final discussion and proposed framework.

4.5 Trustworthiness

Bryman and Bell (2015) explain how validity and reliability are standard criteria used in research to evaluate the quality of the study. However, according to the author, these measures are more suitable for quantitative studies than qualitative. Lincoln and Guba (1985) share this view and present trustworthiness as a new criterion to evaluate qualitative studies. The trustworthiness criterion consists of four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Credibility reflects the quantitative validity and reliability criteria of validity – but touches on the conundrum that qualitative research faces, along the lines of our research philosophy, that there are multiple versions of reality and “truth” (Bryman & Bell, 2015). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility looks at to what extent the research reflects the “truths” and meanings of the respondents. The authors also stress how qualitative researchers must strive to establish trust and confidence amongst readers in their findings and that this will be crucial for the credibility and implementation of the findings. According to Bryman and Bell (2015) this entails that the researchers show that the study has been done in accordance with good practice and that respondents are informed about the writings and analyses revolving their responses in order to confirm or deny proper understanding and interpretation. Moon, Brewer, Januchowski-Hartley, Adams and Blackman (2016) describes in more detail that credibility forms in the very research purpose and is carried out throughout the study by researchers making decisions and presenting research that is consistent with this purpose. The authors further state that all aspects of the research design, including focus, sampling, and data collection, all contribute to the credibility of the study. Moon et al. (2016) also highlights the same point as Bryman and Bell (2015), that it is important to share the research findings with interview respondents to ensure that what has been written reflects their realities and “truths.” Throughout our research paper we have ensured that all decisions regarding data collection, sampling, literature review, analysis, and reflection are aligned, cohesive, and respond to our research question and purpose. Furthermore, our respondents were provided with a summary of our findings so that they could control our interpretations and translations, and all agreed with our writings. As such we argue that this paper provides credibility.

Furthermore, transferability investigates if it is possible to use the study's findings in a different context, or to the same context but in a different time (Bryman & Bell, 2015). As qualitative studies tend to depend on the context and reality that they observe, this can be hard to achieve (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Instead, researchers should strive to provide readers with detailed descriptions of their findings which will enable other researchers to decide whether or not the findings are applicable and transferable to their context or setting of interest (Bryman & Bell, 2015). As our study revolved around a specific context and

investigated a distinct set of content, the transferability of this study might be narrow. However, as our epistemological position is social constructionism, our aim is not to generalise our findings to fit other contexts. Instead, we aimed at investigating a specific context in order to provide valuable and detailed consumer insights to an undiscovered yet essential area of research. Moon et al. (2016) discuss the usefulness, transferability, of qualitative research and states how the purpose is not to generalise but to identify, and start to explain a phenomenon which then will require future hypothesis, testing, and generalisable research. Suggestively, the findings from this study could be applied within the same area and market of research, but tested with a different set of respondents and research methods. Our findings and contributions are also not presented as proofs or generalisable “truths” but rather as suggestions and identified elements based on our insights with a call-out for further quantification. Nonetheless, as our findings are described thoroughly and precisely, it enables other researchers to decide if they are transferable or not.

Bryman and Bell (2015) state how dependability is the qualitative research equivalent of the quantitative validity and reliability criteria of reliability and replication, meaning whether or not a study can be conducted in the same context and achieve the same results. It will arguably be hard to replicate the same results as our study presented as it is based on individuals’ perceptions, thoughts and experiences. In addition, factors like the respondents’ unique personalities, experiences, and interests make a replication even harder to conduct. Nonetheless, researchers are able to replicate our study as we have tried to be specific, transparent, and detail oriented throughout all stages of the research process. Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that dependability lies in researchers’ auditing approach. Bryman and Bell (2015) discuss how auditing within qualitative research is highly demanding due to the large amount of data that researchers gather and analyse, and that this is why full auditing is not prevalent throughout qualitative research as a means to provide validation. Moon et al. (2016) discuss how clear and transparent documentation of the methodology, including research design and data collection are crucial for the dependability of the study. Furthermore, the authors state how reflexivity is a key part of dependability as it reduces bias and increases transparency. Throughout our study we have accounted for and provided clear, transparent, and reflexive explanations for our choices and methods, with a clear and detailed method chapter and extensive appendices. Furthermore, our use of the SRIR method for reporting our data is by its definition reflexive and has helped us summarise all our findings and important details for proper representation and description in our study. Because of these detailed documentations throughout our method and research we argue that we provide dependability.

Finally, the last step that should be discussed is confirmability, which according to Bryman and Bell (2015) stresses the concern with objectivity in qualitative research. Although full objectivity is hard to achieve within qualitative research, researchers should not let their personal values and beliefs taint the findings (Bryman & Bell, 2015). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) confirmability revolves around to which degree readers can trust that the findings presented are a result of the statements made by respondents and not of the views and biases of the researchers. Moon et al. (2016) describes how confirmability is achieved, again, through clear and transparent methodology and data presentation – especially through

the documentation of the researchers' ontological and epistemological standpoints that help explain how the researchers' position can be expressed in the findings. The authors further state that confirmability can be achieved by clearly demonstrating a link between the findings and the conclusion where the readers can follow the process from the presentation of the data findings, to the analysis, discussion, and conclusion. Throughout this study, we have taken cautious procedures during all steps of the research process to minimise any risks of bias. During the interviews, we tried not to lead the respondent in any direction that we found to be favorable and during the interviews both researchers took separate notes which were then collectively analysed to check each other for biases. Furthermore, this study provides a clear and detailed methodology which includes our ontological and epistemological standpoints. Additionally, in the findings section we include quotes from our data to show the real words from the respondents. Finally, each used stimuli is presented with a reference code, such as 2A, which is frequently referred to throughout the analysis and discussion to demonstrate how they are all linked up until the following conclusion. Because of all this we argue that our study provides confirmability.

4.6 Ethical considerations

Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) highlight the importance of ethics within research and state how participants should be protected and respected. To ensure that we as researchers fulfill the standard requirements of ethical practises in research, requirements from the Swedish Research Council (2017) were used. Prior to conducting the interviews, the respondents were informed of the basic requirements that have been decided by the Swedish Research Council (2017). The requirements consider the following: information requirements, consent requirements, confidentiality requirements, and usage requirements.

The information requirement was fulfilled by informing our respondents about their role in the study, about the purpose of the study, how the study will be conducted, that their participation in the study is voluntary, and that they may discontinue the interview at any time. We further informed the respondents that the collected data will be used only for the purpose of this study and will not, under any circumstances, be used for any other purpose. In addition, we also informed the respondents which university and department will publish the study. The consent requirement was fulfilled by having the respondents fill in a written consent form prior to the interview and by informing them during the interview, once again, that they may discontinue their participation at any moment. The confidentiality requirement was fulfilled by informing the respondents about how the collected personal data will only be processed by the researchers. Furthermore, the respondents' names were anonymised to ensure that no personal data or information would be publicly distributed or possible to trace back to the respondents. Finally, the usage requirement is considered to be fulfilled as all respondents were informed that their comments and answers will be exclusively used for the purpose of our study.

4.7 Critical evaluation of sources

Critical evaluations of sources are crucial to have in mind as it impacts on the strengths and weaknesses of the study (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). Thurén (2013) highlights how researchers should consider four criteria when evaluating the source. The criteria are: authenticity, time frame, independence, and freedom of tendency.

We as researchers have fulfilled the criteria of authenticity and independence by basing this study on reliable and authentic sources. Thurén (2013) states how literature that has been published in international and well-known journals fulfill the criteria of authenticity and independence. In order to fulfill this criteria, we have used primary sources for our literature review and theoretical framework. A majority of the used literature are scientific studies published in credible and authentic international journals. Those sources who are not from scientific journals are from either highly accredited consulting firms, magazines, or brands within the studied industry as well as from the social media platform used in our study. In addition, the printed literature that has been used is published by credible and well-known international publishers.

The time frame of the chosen literature is the third important criterion suggested by Thurén (2013) who states that the chosen sources should be as up-to-date as possible. Our chosen literature varies across various time periods, partially because our theory and model are historical but still trusted, as well as because current research is lacking within our field of study. We have thus emphasised on the relevance of prior research rather than the time period of it. Finally, the last criterion suggested by Thurén (2013) is the freedom of tendency. The author highlights how a source should be independent from conflicts of interest such as political or economical in order to be able to provide the reader with an accurate and trustworthy reality. The primary sources used in this study do not indicate that there has been an altered version of the reality presented. However, there cannot be a guarantee that consulting firms and beauty brands do not produce industry reports to skew the view of stakeholders, that magazines do not produce articles in order to sell issues, or that researchers are not constrained by research biases or opinions from funders of their studies. Despite this concern, we argue that the sources used in this paper are of a credible degree as they are chosen from well-known and international sources approved by the research institute at which we operate. As discussed in our ontological and epistemological standpoints section, we do consider the world and reality as being shaped by the many participants and contexts in which we operate. As such, there could be a never-ending discussion regarding whether a source can be considered truly credible and independent as we cannot eliminate any bias or alternative motive unless we are the person in fact producing said source. In such, any study would be impossible to complete and therefore we see the need to regardless put certain trust into the sources chosen as they are deemed credible by many. Hence, we deem the sources and data collected in this study as credible, independent from conflicts of interest, as well as accurate and trustworthy, subsequently fulfilling Thurén's (2013) final criterion.

4.8 Limitations and reflections

4.8.1 Limitations

There are a number of limitations that come with this study which will be highlighted in this section. The first limitation is associated with the chosen qualitative method which does not allow us to generalise the findings or to truly test which content is perceived to be most influential on a national scale, whereas a quantitative study and experimental approach would have made this possible. Nonetheless, since the purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions, thoughts and experiences of individuals regarding content on Instagram, a qualitative method was deemed to be the most appropriate (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Moreover, the qualitative method made it possible for the respondents to more deeply analyse the content and to identify which visual cues they found to be essential and why, but also to elaborate on their emotions, subsequently providing us with rich data that is only accessible through qualitative methods.

The second limitation of this study concerns the amount of interviews that were conducted and the decision to only investigate Swedish consumers within the beauty market. Nonetheless, this delimitation is motivated through the flourishing beauty industry and high consumer demand within beauty in Sweden. As such, Swedish consumers' preferences were identified to be the most relevant for us to uncover. To solely use interviews may lead to some limitations as well, such as, our own opinions and views affecting the interviews but also that the use of interviews assumes that respondents are able to both identify and verbally express their thoughts and emotions. Therefore, throughout the interviews, respondents were asked to develop their answers and elaborate on their statements.

Further limitations of this study concerns the content and what type of content that the respondents evaluated. We have deliberately chosen to exclude some types of content that were not representative for the accounts as the chosen content was based on the most recurring posts on a brand's profile. As such, some valuable insights might have been missed throughout the interviews as they revolved around content that we as researchers had picked out, rather than letting respondents themselves go through an account to identify the content that appeals the most to them. To ensure that our personal views did not impact on what is considered to be representative and recurring beauty content, all the respondents were asked if they agree or disagree with the representativity of chosen content – the respondents agreed on the representativity or expressed that they do not know what would be considered representative. As such, although we have excluded some content from our study, we believe that the chosen content served the purpose of this study well.

Finally, the semiotic analysis which was conducted by the respondents does not come without limitations. As none of our respondents had conducted a semiotic analysis prior to this, they had limited knowledge within the field. As such, this resulted in a very basic analysis and some important key insights might have been missed. Nonetheless, the data that was gathered was still perceived to be very useful and it provided us with valuable insights for the purpose of our study.

4.8.2 Reflections

Due to the interviews being conducted online over video call, it was sometimes difficult to conduct seamless interviews due to connection issues where the image or sound would fall out of sync. If we had done these interviews in person we would have asked our respondents to look at the content, as it is intended, live on the Instagram app through a phone. But due to the online interview format, a premade presentation with screenshots had to suffice and we felt that sometimes this did not provide the same feeling as it would have in the app. It was also difficult at times to extract information about the respondents' feelings and emotions as they sometimes responded with "I don't know." We tried to make them elaborate more on what they felt or what made them feel so indifferent, but it was a difficult task. Furthermore, we maintained to not include technical terms or jargon and as such we had to use questions that made our respondents perform semiotic analyses indirectly. Instead of asking them about the denotations we asked them to objectively describe what they see in the picture, and instead of asking for connotations we asked what they feel the picture means and what associations they get with it. However, this was sometimes difficult and we had to ask many follow-up questions to steer them towards the semiotic analysis direction, without leading them in their answers.

5 Empirical Findings and Analysis

This section presents the results from the interviews that were conducted. The respondents have been anonymised due to ethical considerations and are thus given fictitious names in the study – information about respondents’ fictitious names, ages, occupations, and time of interview are available in Appendix 1.

During the collection of empirical data, the interviews followed the structure of our chosen theories; Barthes semiotics (Barthes, 1957; 1964) and SOR (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; and Stuart, 1974). The topic guide for the interviews is available in Appendix 1. The sample content stimuli have been sorted into different core themes representing what the pictures mainly portray. The identified themes, and corresponding appendices, are as follows: content showing humans, content showing product texture, content using text in pictures, and content focusing on the product packaging. Within each theme, each picture was evaluated in accordance with our theories and topic guide. Hence, the following presented results start off with a semiotic analysis (denotation and connotation) of different content stimuli (S) followed by cognitive evaluation (O), and attitudes and behaviours (R) towards the stimulus. To facilitate easier understanding and reading, the semiotic denotations and connotations have been summarised in short and provided as figures together with the image itself, with the full versions available in each theme’s corresponding appendix. At the end of each theme there is an analysing summary of each theme, looking deeper at the interview responses and in coordination with the previously presented literature review.

5.1 Content showing humans

Full collection of pictures and semiotic analyses that are available in the theme of content showing humans is available in Appendix 2.

5.1.1 Picture 2A

	<p>Denotation Woman with dark hair and pale skin; white headband and white shirt/coat; applying green/yellow product with spatula to cheeks; forehead covered in black product</p>
	<p>Connotation Associations were: spa, self-care, multi-masking, nighttime wind-down-routine. A few associated it with messiness.</p>

Figure 3: Summary of semiotic analysis of picture 2A (Appendix 2)

Picture 2A - Cognitive evaluation

In general, the respondents felt confused when prompted with this picture. Many expressed their confusion stating that they do not understand what she is doing, what the brand is trying to show, and what the products are. Three respondents laughed when they saw the picture because they felt it looked weird and said that they did not really feel much from looking at

this picture. Many highlighted that they appreciate that they see a model without makeup who realistically applies the product, but that the execution fell short due to the messiness and lack of explanation regarding what product it is. Four respondents felt intrigued and curious about what products she is using and why she is using two different ones. However, the majority felt repelled, stating that it looked disgusting and messy – one respondent even claimed that it looked like poo. Overall, they felt that it was a weird and boring picture with unappealing colours, that it looked like an amateur created the content, and that they wish more effort had been made in how they apply the products.

“Her hair band is dirty and that’s all I can think of now [...] it looks amateurish and I don’t see the product or packaging which is important to me” – Anna

Picture 2A - Attitudes and behaviours

Three respondents stated that they felt intrigued to scroll down to see the caption and comments to get information and understand what she is doing and what products she is using. They stated that whatever the potential caption would say would be very crucial to whether they would like to proceed further or not. Two respondents stated that they were not sure whether they would like to read the caption or scroll past the post because they felt rather indifferent towards this picture. However, the majority were purely repelled by the looks of this picture so they did not want to see anything more of this account or even find out what products she is using.

“This look messy and honestly bothersome – I’d just scroll past” – Kajsa

5.1.2 Picture 2B

	<p>Denotation Woman with dark, glowy skin; holding a brown/beige/dusty pink bottle; woman is looking at the product on her shoulder; beige/grey/concrete wall/background; direct sunlight; shop button</p>
	<p>Connotation Associations were: natural beauty, summer, warmth, healthy skin. One respondent associated it with sensuality and another with traditional advertisement.</p>

Figure 4: Summary of semiotic analysis of picture 2B (Appendix 2)

Picture 2B - Cognitive evaluation

A majority of the respondents expressed very positive emotions and reactions to this picture. For six of our respondents we could clearly see their positive body language as their faces lit up and they moved closer to the screen to see the picture better. Overall, our respondents praised the composition of the picture, stating that it is a beautiful shot with beautiful colours

and overall just an aesthetically pleasing picture to look at. A lot of focus was on the model who caught our respondents' attention and they found her to be very beautiful.

“WOW! S#it, she looks SO good! I want to be her!” – Celine

“The colour scheme is so pretty, everything just matches, I love the angle, the lighting, the natural colours and it just looks so symmetrical and beautiful” – Olivia

Many respondents praised the colour tone of the picture, the lighting, and the glowy skin on the model. The words “warm,” “glowy,” and “summer” were often used to describe how they felt after looking at the picture. However, one respondent felt a bit turned off and intimidated by the model, stating that she herself does not have pretty skin like that and therefore felt a bit down and not like the product was genuine or that it was promising to achieve the impossible. Another respondent said that she felt indifferent towards this picture because she cannot relate to the skin tone of the model. On that same note however, a handful of respondents praised that they used a non-caucasian model and that it felt refreshing. Two respondents in particular stated that they feel the importance of seeing models with their own skin colour that they can relate to and that this is something that is often lacking.

“I like that they use a dark-skinned model, it's definitely important for me to relate to. There are so many pictures of white girls and foundations and it's just like, ok, but is there a shade for me? [...] I just wish they provided some text or info about the product and what it is” – Denise

Picture 2B - Attitudes and behaviours

The vast majority of the respondents showed positive emotions and subsequent curiosities and intentions to engage further with the content. Respondents stated that the beauty of the model, the colours, and overall the sheer beauty of the whole picture made them interested to see more from this account and know more about this product. One respondent felt unsure about if she would click on this or not, stating that she did not particularly love or hate this picture and that it would depend on what she had seen before and how long she had been on the app. Two respondents stated that they were not interested and would scroll past this picture because it felt too modelly and like an ad. The positive respondents stated that they would click on the shop button or google the product to find out if there is a shade that matches their skin tone.

“I would click on the shop button immediately. I want to know more about this product and what it does and what it costs. [...] Actually, can you guys send this full version to me after?” – Anna

5.1.3 Picture 2C

	<p>Denotation White woman with blonde/red/light hair; wearing makeup; applying product to cheek; turquoise/blue/green background; shop button; white product/bottle</p>
	<p>Connotation Associations were: fake messages, basic advertisement, studio image, boring and irrelevant content.</p>

Figure 5: Summary of semiotic analysis of picture 2C (Appendix 2)

Picture 2C - Cognitive evaluation

Our respondents generally reacted negatively towards this picture stating that it felt very posed and fake. Ten of our respondents stated immediately that they were annoyed that the model is clearly wearing makeup and applying this cream on top of her makeup. This condition that the model was wearing makeup appeared to be a dealbreaker for many who claimed that it was unnatural, fake, and looking like every traditional magazine ad out there.

“This is so fake, who applies moisturiser on top of their contour? And a little dot like that on the cheek with a finger? No thank you” – Lejla

One respondent laughed after looking at this picture and stated that it felt very typical and fake. Many acknowledged that the model was pretty but that it did not matter since the whole set-up felt very fake and also that they could not even see what product she was using.

Picture 2C - Attitudes and behaviours

Not a single respondent felt that they wanted to see and know more or engage further with this content. The overall feeling of this picture being fake and dishonest, particularly due to the model wearing makeup and applying the product in an unnatural way made them all reject the post. Some felt that the brand just wanted to make money and that the shot was so unnatural that they were not interested at all.

“This is such a generic product shoot, like it would’ve been better if it was more natural, but I honestly just feel like this is a fake picture and fake brand” – Sujin

5.1.4 Analysis: Content showing humans summary

It is clear that none of the respondents liked seeing disingenuous content using a human model. The model applying a product on top of her makeup in picture 2C was rejected and instead the respondents said they would prefer more “real” content. However, picture 2A was also not enjoyed because it was arguably too real and respondents wished the application of the products were done in a better way. What is clear is that beauty, albeit subjective to each respondent, is appreciated by all. When we refer to beauty we speak of both the perceived beauty of the human subject as well as the perceived beauty of the overall picture. This coincides with the findings from Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) who said that in order for

an audience to be influenced, the content must be of high quality, attractiveness, and appealing composition. Hence, our findings suggest that no matter how “real” and genuine consumers want content to be, they still want the final execution to be pretty and aesthetically pleasing. In this situation, aesthetically pleasing seems to be a realistic, but clean and tidy, application of products and a cohesive colour tone throughout the picture.

Overall, the semiotic analyses of the pictures show that all respondents saw the same denotative significations, but had different connotative associations. One example is picture 2A where some respondents associated the picture with spa and self treatments, whereas others associated it with messiness and disgusting feelings. For picture 2B however, the respondents shared very similar connotations of natural beauty, warmth, summer, and healthy skin. This supports Eiseman’s (1998) presentation of brown colours being associated with warmth and nature. Furthermore, the collective consciousness that respondents show in their connotations suggest that this type of picture correlates to certain collective connotations (myths) held by the wider community (Barthes, 1957). It could be argued that certain dominant values within the Swedish society influence our respondents to associate sunshine, tanned skin, and warmth with summer, happiness, beauty, and overall positive emotions.

Picture 2B (S) was the one that a majority of respondents evaluated positively with emotions of interest and admiration (O) and subsequently wanted to take further actions such as reading more about the product or clicking on the shop button (R). Out of the chosen stimuli this picture was clearly the favourite and it has many semiotic aspects that coincide with suggestions made in our literature review. The model’s indirect gaze and the low product salience strengthen the suggestion made by Valentini, Romenti, Murtarelli and Pizzetti (2018) that such a composition would increase engagement and willingness to purchase. The colour tone of the picture was further highly praised by our respondents and this suggests that, just like Singh (2006) proposed, neutral colours such as grey, beige, and pale brown are increasingly popular. Finally, the composition of the image uses its subjects to create various shapes as triangles can be seen between the model’s face, shoulder, and the product, and the picture also uses the technique of negative spaces with a plain background that puts the focus on the model and product. This all supports the suggestions that creating shapes and interesting compositions are important for a good picture (Präkel, 2006; Info Graphic Design Team, 2019; Clement, 2007).

5.2 Content showing product texture

Full collection of pictures and semiotic analyses that are available in the theme of content showing product texture is available in Appendix 3.

5.2.1 Picture 3A

	<p>Denotation Green/minty cream/product/goop/paint colour that is spread out; white/grey background; thick bottom, spread thin at the top; shop button; shadows</p>
	<p>Connotation Associations were: creamy, luxurious, sticky, fluffy, green tea, clay mask, and nature. One respondent associated it with messiness and disgustingness.</p>

Figure 6: Summary of semiotic analysis of picture 3A (Appendix 3)

Picture 3A - Cognitive evaluation

There were divided emotions regarding this picture with about half of the respondents feeling positive and intrigued and the other half feeling confused with one respondent feeling disgusted. The respondents with positive emotions stated that they felt that the cream looked thick and luxurious, giving off a feeling of being natural, and that they wanted to know more about what product it is. Many stated that they appreciated that they can clearly see the consistency of the product, but the vast majority highlighted that they miss some sort of text or information about what this product actually is. The other half of the respondents with negative emotions felt mainly confused as to what they were looking at. Two respondents laughed and said they did not really understand this, that it could be anything and that they only understand that it is a cream or mask because of the context of them looking at skincare in our study. One respondent stood out by stating that she felt that the product looked disgusting.

“I love this. I want to touch it. Especially since it’s green, I wonder if it’s a green tea product, which I love” – Emanuella

“I love texture shots. It’s cool to see what the product actually looks like and with texture shots I feel like I can feel the product through the screen” – Kendra

“Yeah... hmm... I can’t explain it but this is oddly inviting and interesting” – Sofia

Picture 3A - Attitudes and behaviours

Just like the emotions, our respondents’ attitudes and behaviours were split. The respondents that showed positive emotions felt curious enough and intrigued to find out more and many stated that they would click on the shop button and read the caption and comments to find out more about what it is that they are looking at. The others stated that this did nothing for them, feeling confused and uninterested and as such would not bother finding out more. Three of these respondents highlighted that it was not because they necessarily disliked the picture, just that they felt indifferent towards it.

“I really wish they’d put a text in the picture to tell me what this is, like not much, maybe just a header or name of the product. I don’t want it in the caption, I want to just be told immediately and see what it is without having to look for it... but I have to admit I love this texture, so yeah, I’d click on that shop button” – Fatima

“If I was really bored I might click on that shop button to see what it is... but nah, then I’d have to be really bored, and I’m not when I’m on Instagram” – Kajsa

5.2.2 Picture 3B

	<p>Denotation Round brown/black can/product; lid open; brown and textured product; smeared out product; brown/dusty pink background; six cubes/sugar cubes/pineapple/papaya/honey pieces</p>
	<p>Connotation Associations were: sugar, candy, food, caramel sauce, scrub, warmth, sweetness, and intriguing smell.</p>

Figure 7: Summary of semiotic analysis of picture 3B (Appendix 3)

Picture 3B - Cognitive evaluation

Out of all the pictures, this one generated the most positive emotions. All respondents gave immediate responses that were positive and curious, stating that they like or love the picture. What they mentioned to enjoy in particular were the colour scheme and the fact that you see both the packaging and the product. There was some confusion about what the cubes around the product were; seven respondents recognised them to be sugar cubes, but the rest split their guesses between pineapple, papaya, candy, or just something unidentifiable. Overall, the thoughts and emotions revolved around how much the respondents liked the colour and overall composition of the photo as well as the fact that it looks like something edible. Five respondents stated that they felt like they could smell the product through the screen and when asked what type of smell they imagined, they replied with smells such as warm sugar, candy, and caramel sauce. One respondent said that she is not a fan of brown colours and as such this picture was not her favourite colour wise, but she wanted to state that she recognises that the colours work and look good in this picture because of the matching colours of the product. Overall however, people enjoyed the colours and most importantly the fact that they clearly see and get a feel for what the product is and how it would feel on their skin.

“The consistency of the product looks very appealing. I also like that they show both the packaging and the product, like that I can see it smeared out but also in the jar. [...] It wouldn’t have been as appealing if the lid was on” – Denise

“Honestly, this looks delicious, haha. I feel like I can smell it through the screen” – Daniella

“Aesthetically this picture is really pretty. I really get a feel for what this product is and what the ingredients are. The texture, the colours, yeah I love this” – Olivia

Picture 3B - Attitudes and behaviours

Twelve out of our thirteen respondents wanted to know more about this product and click in on the brand’s profile to see more. The one respondent that did not want to engage further felt that way because she does not use physical scrubs, but she said that if it would have been a different type of product she might have felt differently. The rest stated that they would love to read more about it, maybe some reviews and read the comments to see what others are saying, check out what it costs, and two even stated that they were interested in buying it.

“I definitely want to know more. Absolutely, I’m interested. I wish this picture had that shop button so I could see immediately what it costs, but I’ll just google it” – Robin

5.2.3 Analysis: Content showing product texture summary

People seemed to find a fascination in images showing the product texture but not necessarily be able to explain why. Overall, the positive reactions stemmed from the experience that they could get a feeling of what the product would feel and smell like in real life, just by looking at the picture. This information is very useful in regard to the issue presented at the beginning of this paper where beauty retailers are struggling to adapt from a primarily in-store purchase journey to a fully online purchase experience for consumers (Gerstell et al., 2020; Weiss, 2020; and L’oréal, 2020). As even the youngest tech savvy consumers preferred physical touchpoints because they could try out and feel the product on their skin (Gerstell et al., 2020), this is a desirable feeling to replicate online. As such, the consumer insight provided by our respondents showing that images portraying product texture generates this similar feeling of being able to touch and smell the product, but online, is very useful.

Although both pictures 3A and 3B are focusing on texture, the latter was vastly more popular and included other elements as well which seemed to activate other senses such as smell and taste. This implies that product texture should be used, but also that brands must cater to a multitude of human senses. If we semiotically compare picture 3A and 3B, picture 3A only provides one denotative element; the green/minty smeared out product. Amongst the respondents the denotative sign is fairly clear, only with some different guesses about the origin of the product. However, the connotations greatly differed from luxurious to disgusting and this might be due to the lack of denotative signs. As Barthes (1957) explains, connotations develop to serve the needs of the audience as the denotative relationship between the signifier and the signifier is inadequate in providing a meaning. Arguably then this opens up for confusion and contrasting associations and interpretations. Meanwhile, picture 3B provides a multitude of signs; the product packaging, the texture, and the sugar cubes. The respondents subsequently had very unanimous connotations towards this picture, associating it with warmth, sweetness, something edible, and overall a pleasant smell. Arguably then, this shows that providing the audience with more and clearer signs helps in delivering the message you want to send.

5.3 Content using text in pictures

Full collection of pictures and semiotic analyses that are available in the theme of content using text in pictures is available in Appendix 4.

5.3.1 Picture 4A

	<p>Denotation Purple container/product; purple background; pipette; yellow/pinkish fluid product in a glass/plastic container; customer review; shop button</p>
	<p>Connotation Associations were: well-tested/documented product, credibility, softness, genuinity, warmth, dry skin, and effectiveness.</p>

Figure 8: Summary of semiotic analysis of picture 4A (Appendix 4)

Picture 4A - Cognitive evaluation

All the respondents felt positive towards the colours in the picture and they enjoyed how it all matched. When asked, no one said that they in particular like purple or have it as a favourite colour – not that they disliked purple – but in this picture it was pleasant to look at. Respondents stated that they enjoyed the overall composition of this picture and that it provided them with all the information they would wish to see: the product packaging, ingredients (Niacinamide), consistency of the product, some explanatory text (the customer review), and a shop button so they quickly could click to see how much it costs. Two respondents highlighted how much they enjoy looking at pastels and one of them said specifically that she thinks pastels work very well in skincare. One respondent said that this picture did nothing to her, that it felt bland, and that the text was too small to read. Two respondents said that they liked the picture, but that they felt very sceptical towards the customer review and that they usually feel that when a company posts a quote that it is fabricated.

“I like that there is a customer review, it feels like... like there is a real human who have used this product for real, and that feels trustworthy to me” – Kendra

“This picture is just so pretty. It has it all; packaging, I see the serum, the little review up there, and the shop button. Very nice. I like how they match the background with the colour of the product too, like the purple, it looks very nice” – Emanuella

Picture 4A - Attitudes and behaviours

All respondents but one said that they would like to engage further, even the ones that felt sceptical towards the customer review. Mostly people wanted to click on the shop button to see what it costs, others wanted to read the caption and maybe check out the brand account. One said that she would go to the comments to check if others agree or if they debunked the review in the picture. But overall, the respondents enjoyed that they could find all the

information they needed in the picture already and that made them trust the brand and they felt that it was professional – enough for them to read more information and potentially make a purchase.

“It says it’s for people with dry skin, which is not for me, so I don’t want to click to see more of the product, but I want to go to the brand page to see what more they have, and see what they have for my skin” – Denise

“I’m curious to see what it costs” – Sujin

5.3.2 Picture 4B

	<p>Denotation Green background; text header; six white circles; different product in each circle; text under each circle; shop button</p> <p>Connotation Associations were: amateurish guide, blasé, unclear, too much, and messy. Some associated it as informative, clean, and educational.</p>
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Figure 9: Summary of semiotic analysis of picture 4B (Appendix 4)

Picture 4B - Cognitive evaluation

There were mixed emotions towards this picture with the majority of respondents feeling ambivalent or indifferent and with five respondents straight up disliking it. The ones that felt positive towards this picture felt that it spoke to them since they have combination skin, that it was easy to understand what they wanted to say, and that it served them with nice suggestions for their skincare routine. The ones that disliked the picture mainly did so because of the layout of the picture. They did not enjoy all the circles, with some of them pointing out that it was poorly made, that the green colour was an eyesore to look at, and that there was too much going on with all the products, colours and amount of circles. One respondent stated that if she is to trust a recommendation for a whole skincare routine it is very important who the sender is and if the brands are well known. Respondents felt that the idea was nice, but that the execution was poor, with one respondent saying that it looked like a child had put this together. The more indifferent group of respondents said that this picture lacked a wow factor, that the colour felt too faint, and that it is too much information at once.

“I like green, but not this shade. If you’re going to do something like graphic design it should be on point, but this looks like I could’ve done it” – Kajsa

“The idea is nice, but there’s too much. I have a short attention span so just half of the steps would be enough and with more detail” – Fatima

Picture 4B - Attitudes and behaviours

Only two respondents said that they would like to see and read more about the products and the brand account. The majority however felt that they would just scroll past this because they found it either uninteresting, repulsive, or too much. Two respondents said that the only time where they would take further actions from this picture are if they either are actively looking for a specific product or if the sender is a trusted brand and/or influencer.

“It’s neither good nor terrible, but it’s uninteresting and unclear, so I’d move on”
– Daniella

5.3.3 Picture 4C

	<p>Denotation Purple/pink/violet background; purple/violet/grey text header; bottle product; yellow and black label; small text with connecting lines around the product</p> <p>Connotation Associations were: informative, educational, and scientific. Some associated it with messy, too much text, and dullness.</p>
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Figure 10: Summary of semiotic analysis of picture 4C (Appendix 4)

Picture 4C - Cognitive evaluation

All respondents expressed their appreciation for how informative this picture was, however only half of them evaluated the picture in a positive manner. They stated that they liked the amount of detailed and summarised text about what the product actually does. The amount of information provided them with a feeling of professionalism, made them view the brand as trustworthy, and made them curious to see more. However, some respondents implied how the amount of text was overwhelming which made them not wanting to see more or read the text. Many also said that the colours and lack of contrast between the text and the background was uncomfortable to look at.

“I would never read so much text, I think this is too much. Generally I want to know what the product does, but not through this amount of text – what is it that you want to say kind of” – Lejla

Others, as already mentioned, expressed how they appreciated this post which can be reflected through the following comments:

“I don’t need to do any research, it’s all there” – Sujin

“Only one thing missing here and that’s the shopping icon” – Kendra

Picture 4C - Attitudes and behaviours

The responses to this picture were split in half and correlated with the emotions expressed during the evaluation of the picture. The respondents that felt positively towards the picture were interested in finding out more about the product and/or checking out the brand's page to see which other products they provided similar information about. One respondent was not sure whether she liked it or not and replied that any potential actions or lack thereof would depend on how she felt. The ones that felt negatively towards the picture felt that they would just scroll past this, mainly due to the feeling of being overwhelmed from the amount of text.

“I don't like the colour, and there's too much text – I'd move on” – Anna

5.3.4 Analysis: content using text in pictures summary

Overall, the element of text in pictures was much appreciated by our respondents as they felt both that it provided them with more detailed information and that it was convenient to not have to look at a caption or external website, but rather being fed everything from one source. This correlates to answers provided from our respondents regarding other types of content where they liked the picture, but called out for some more information, at least in the form of the name of the product being displayed. These findings all support the claims made by Schill (2012); Oliveira and Ferreira (2014); and Kruk et al. (2019) that visuals combined with text act complementary and are more effective in delivering a message than pure visuals or pure text. This does not mean that text is superior or an element that will transform an ok picture into a great one. As stated by Moran, Muzellec and Johnson (2020), and proven by our respondents, the visual aspects such as colours, compositions and shapes are very much important to the impression of the image. One example is picture 4B which provided explanatory texts, but still was poorly received and evaluated amongst respondents. This suggests that creating an aesthetically and visually pleasing picture is still key, and that the text is complimentary. Regarding the visuals it is clear that the choice of colour, and especially the shade of the colour is of great importance. Both picture 4A and 4C use purple colours, but 4A generated positive responses whereas 4C was met with displeasure. The notable difference is the shade of purple these pictures use where 4A has a softer tone. This is in line with the statement that marketers do not only have to consider colours (Aslam, 2005; and Singh, 2006) but also put great emphasis on shades and that soft pale colours are the ones that humans love to see (Singh, 2006).

Picture 4A which was well liked amongst respondents provided them with pleasing visuals through its matching purple tones, interesting details through the display of the product texture, and a text in the form of a customer review to provide additional information beyond what is readable from the product packaging. This supports the statement by Yus (2019) that texts are, in the notion of Barthes' semiotics, used as clarifying anchors to provide more details about the message you are trying to send. From these findings it appears that text in pictures can provide an element that helps the content (S) to deliver informational and detailed signs in order to increase chances of correct and coherent evaluations amongst respondents (O), hopefully leading to the desired responses in the end (R). In general, our

respondents provided answers that indicate that the presence of complimentary text to an aesthetically pleasing picture more likely lead to feelings of interest and curiosity, with subsequent actions to engage further with the content.

5.4 Content focusing on the product packaging

Full collection of pictures and semiotic analyses that are available in the theme of content focusing on the product packaging is available in Appendix 5.

5.4.1 Picture 5A

	<p>Denotation Three different products/packagings laying on beige/sand coloured fabric/tablecloth/bed linen; shop button</p>
	<p>Connotation Associations were: amateur content, user-generated, dull, uninspiring, the beach, and influencer review</p>

Figure 11: Summary of semiotic analysis of picture 5A (Appendix 5)

Picture 5A - Cognitive evaluation

The main emotion expressed when our respondents viewed this picture was indifference as they felt the picture was very bland. Overall, they felt that the picture was very boring, that it did not grab their attention, and that it looked very low production or amateurish. The majority noted that the brand names were visible and clear which was a positive feature, however, they were also unfamiliar with those brands and therefore uninterested. There was visible confusion amongst the respondents as they were trying to figure out what this post was about – two respondents even chuckled. A couple of respondents pointed out that they would need a header or some sort of text to understand this picture, but that it was so boring that they might not stop scrolling to read it. Overall, many respondents experienced this picture to be messy, even though it was a very simple and clean picture. This was mainly due to the product packaging being confusing as there were too many elements attached such as different colours, shapes, and typographies. Furthermore, one respondent stated how she would have been interested if this post came from a trusted influencer source, but completely uninterested if it came from a brand account.

“It looks like someone put three products on their crinkly bed covers and took a picture. It looks sloppy” – Sofia

“This is so boring, just a plain picture of some products, like... ok?” – Robin

Picture 5A - Attitudes and behaviours

No one expressed any desire to take further actions from this picture, with the majority of respondents stating it was so bland it would not catch their attention and as such they would

just scroll by. The main issue was that these brands were unfamiliar, combined with the picture being perceived to be unprofessional and aesthetically unpleasing. Four respondents said that they might click on the shop button to figure out what products these are, but as one respondent said, it would require a very catchy first line in the caption for her to do so.

“I would’ve just moved on from this picture and not spend any time on it” – Denise

5.4.2 Picture 5B

	<p>Denotation Lemons; clear bottle; white and holographic label; shadows; white/grey/dusty pink background; shop button</p>
	<p>Connotation Associations were: freshness, nice smell, nature, warmth, vitamin C, bright skin, and citrus smell</p>

Figure 12: Summary of semiotic analysis of picture 5B (Appendix 5)

Picture 5B - Cognitive evaluation

All the respondents liked how the picture looked, but there were divided emotions regarding the meaning of the picture and the value it provided to our respondents. The nine respondents who liked the picture stated that it felt very warm and fresh, and that it showed a vitamin C serum. Three respondents complimented the picture on its resolution, colours, depth, and contrasts. What was interesting was that the overall positive evaluation of this picture seemed to correlate with the ability to identify the product as a vitamin C product, thus potentially showing a correlation with deeper knowledge about skincare. These respondents showed deeper interest and uplifting emotions towards the picture and complimented the colours, bright lighting, and overall composition of the picture. The others who were more visibly confused as to what product this was or what benefits it would bring them, stated that although it was a pretty picture it did not do much for them.

“The picture is really pretty and I can feel the smell of the product, but I don’t think this picture gives me anything more than that” – Emanuella

“I get a warm feeling and I assume it’s something with vitamin C because of all the lemons” – Sofia

“I am sold when I see fruit, it feels fresh, I see the product, I see what it is, nice, I like it” –Anna

Picture 5B - Attitudes and behaviours

The resulting responses from the cognitive evaluation were split almost in half. Seven respondents said that they wanted to either click on the shop button, read more in the comments to see what others thought, or google the product to find out more. The rest said

that although the picture was nice, it did not bring them any interest in the product and as such they would just continue scrolling. One respondent took a pause and another laughed, stating that they were not quite sure how to react or what they would do with this picture.

“These types of pictures all look the same, I see maybe ten of these per day on Instagram, so it would not catch my attention and I’d just scroll” – Sujin

“I know that I would love this product because it probably smells like citrus, which I totally love so I’d click on the shop button to see the price” – Anna

5.4.3 Picture 5C

	<p>Denotation Two transparent laboratory flasks; brown product packaging; white product label; table/box/shelf; faded white/beige/brown background</p>
	<p>Connotation Associations were: science, advanced product, active ingredients, clinical, medicine, and trustworthy</p>

Figure 13: Summary of semiotic analysis of picture 5C (Appendix 5)

Picture 5C - Cognitive evaluation

Overall, the connotations of science and laboratory testing made our respondents feel that this is an advanced product and a trusted brand. The majority expressed that they felt positive towards this picture and expressed an interest in the brand and a curiosity towards what this product actually does. Respondents said that it felt clinical and like the product will have active ingredients and deliver results. Many also highlighted how they liked how simple yet effective this picture was and that they enjoyed the soft and beige colour scheme. A number of respondents further stated that it felt real and that they trusted this picture more than the other ones. However, two respondents developed negative and sceptical emotions towards this picture, also because of the laboratory flasks. These two respondents stated that it felt a bit too much and like the brand is trying to compensate or force a connotation that otherwise would not be there.

“I like the sciencey vibe, I get really curious about the ingredients” – Denise

“I’m super interested in this product. It feels like this product really works because they have worked in a lab with this one” – Kajsa

“Is this labwashing? Like greenwashing, but labwashing. It feels fake, but at the same time it feels credible – labwashing” – Celine

Picture 5C - Attitudes and behaviours

The clinical and laboratory connotations generated both trust and interest in the content and as such a majority of our respondents expressed attitudes towards further engagement. Many wanted to read the caption, potentially visit the brand page, and read more about this product. However, four of them stated that they wished the post had a shop button which would have enabled them to act immediately and see both the name and the price of the product. Two respondents said that they would want to receive more information about what the product does and one respondent said that if she was looking for a product like this, she would even consider the possibility of buying it. One respondent explained how she found the picture to be visually pleasing, however, she also stated that she perceived this image to be too much and how the brand wants the receiver to believe that there is much more science behind their products compared to other brands. This made her very skeptical and resulted in her wanting to not engage with this picture.

“I really like the ombré effect and the scientific feeling, it makes me interested in the product and I want to google it asap” – Olivia

“A bit too much, like, I get it, you have researched in a lab, just like all beauty brands actually do [...] I would just scroll by” – Sujin

5.4.4 Analysis: Content focusing on the product packaging summary

One interesting insight from this set of pictures is the effect that different colours had on our respondents. As stated, all of the respondents liked the visuals of picture 5B with its bright coloured lemons. It is evident that Eiseman's (1998) claims that yellow is associated with the sun and joy was confirmed by our respondents who described feelings of warmth, sunshine, and freshness, even without visibly being able to see any proof of sunlight in the picture. Another colour that was widely discussed in this section was beige. As mentioned, Singh (2016) stated that neutral colours like grey, beige, and pale brown colours would be dominant in marketing. Although this would be proved true by the positive responses to picture 5C and its beige colour scheme, picture 5A with a predominantly beige background was disliked and described as dull. This implies that this popular colour scheme is not a guaranteed success and that the overall image composition needs to be more thought through and attention grabbing. A noticeable difference is that picture 5A uses a very static and flawed background, whereas picture 5C uses a more dynamic background in the same tone. Both pictures used negative spaces, which according to Präkel (2016), should prove beneficial as the product becomes the focal point. However, picture 5A was perceived to be unattractive, partially because of the crinkles on the fabric. This suggests that negative spaces must be flawless and without distractions that instead attract the viewer's attention towards other parts in the image than the subject.

In addition, what picture 5A and 5C show is that with an unknown brand, a plain and uninteresting picture without any anchoring text (Yus, 2019) or information about the product, will not develop an interest with consumers. This reinforces Melin's (2002)

statement that strong brands are needed to attract customers and it implies that unless you have these strong brands as signs in your picture, a lot more attention needs to be put into producing an aesthetically pleasing picture. Furthermore, these two pictures received comments regarding the product packaging, with 5A being described as messy and 5C as professional. Although beauty retailers have no control over other brands' product packaging, the product design seemed to play a crucial role in consumers' evaluation of the content and behavioural intentions, which is in line with the findings of Clement (2007). This implies that although the packaging is out of their control, they should focus on creating a picture that matches or reinforces the packaging in order to create a more interesting picture.

Picture 5A provides a good example of how attention-grabbing Instagram content must be and what will happen if it is too bland. With this picture (S), the stimulus only generated very weak and brief emotions with a complete lack of interest (O), and subsequently purely avoidance and rejection attitudes and behaviours (R). The signs in the form of the product packaging were prominent enough that the respondents could see what brands and products were portrayed, but these brand names were not well known and as such did not provide clear enough denotations in order to facilitate the desired connotations. Likewise, the colour scheme was made from a popular colour, but did not provide enough stimulation for the respondents' eyes and as such failed to provide positive emotions, evaluations, and reactions.

However, picture 5B and 5C both reinforce the findings by Valentini, Romenti, Murtarelli and Pizzetti (2018) that a foreground placement of a product would positively affect consumers. They also provide examples, in contrast to picture 5A, that perceived image quality affects viewers' perception of product quality and subsequent positive emotions – well along the lines of Teo, Leng and Phua's (2019) suggestions. Furthermore, as shown previously in picture 3B and reinforced with picture 5B, the inclusion of signs that the audience already recognise with their other senses, such as the smell and taste of edible elements, helps to connect with and relay a realistic feeling through the screen. This would suggest that the inclusion of such elements can help beauty brands to create positive online shopping experiences, which was a concern highlighted by Gerstell et al. (2020) and L'Oréal (2020), as beauty brands have been forced to shift rapidly to online touchpoints due to Covid-19.

5.5 General thoughts from respondents

During part 3 and topic 5 in the topic guide (Appendix 1) we asked the respondents to provide us with some concluding thoughts and their own recommendations. When asked what the respondents found to be most appealing in regards to beauty content on Instagram, the majority replied that it was colours. Natural, brown, beige, light, as well as pastel colours were the dominant colours that the respondents found to be appealing. One reason why these colour palettes were identified as the most appealing was due to their ability to give an impression of freshness, which according to our respondents was a critical feeling that they wanted to get from beauty content.

“I like when it’s colourful and fresh [...] pastelly and bright colours feel clean” – Sujin

“Natural colours such as beige, greige and lightly toned colours gets me everytime”
– Emanuella

“I love earthy shades like brown, greige, green and white because they feel less salesy and more natural” – Celine

Many stated that diversity was of importance – both in regard to the varying types of content a page uploads, but also in regard to the human subjects used in the pictures. Additionally, five respondents stressed that content had to be informative and how this could be achieved through graphics and text that explains what the benefits of the product are. Respondents expressed that they want information to be readily available and that they should be able to find the information they need without having to put effort into it or switch apps, giving examples of text in pictures or the presence of the shop button. They further explained how core ingredients of the product should be highlighted, and exemplified how this could be done through either text or objects, such as fruits, and referred to pictures 3B and 4A as good examples. Moreover, they also enjoyed seeing content with humans but stressed how important it was to have a diversity of models as our respondents want to be able to identify with the subject in the picture.

“I love when they push on the ingredients and show me why I need this” – Fatima

“You want to be able to relate to the person showing off the product [...] everyone is not white and with perfect bone structure and skin” – Sofia

When asked what picture they liked the most and least out of all that we have shown them during the interview, a majority responded that their favorite picture was 3B. This was motivated through the colour palette, the ability to see the product packaging as well as the texture of the product. It was also clear that the sugar cubes, which were also identified as various dried fruits, contributed to the overall impression of the picture as they stimulated respondents’ senses. The respondents expressed that they enjoyed how they could see both the packaging and the texture of the product, and that the overall tone and composition was what made this picture memorable. Pictures 4A and 5B were also mentioned by many as favourites, by four respondents these were their top picks and for the others they were close runner-ups. Picture 4A was enjoyed because of the colour tone and its usage of text in the picture, and picture 5B was liked because of its bright colours and use of lemons.

“Definitely the brownish, the scrub, I live for that picture, it had it all” – Kendra

The picture that was voted as the most disliked was picture 4C. Although the majority expressed how they truly appreciate informative content and text in content, this picture overdid it with the amount of text. Additionally, the colours did not match and were experienced as being irritating for the eyes.

“The eye-killing purple picture with all the text, ain’t nobody got time for that”
– Denise

“The snail product, it did not pop out at all. It was plain, the colours didn’t match, too much text and it wasn’t even 3D” - Robin

Picture 4A was mentioned as a close second amongst the least favourite pictures for very similar reasons as picture 4C; the colour was unpleasant to look at and there was too much going on in the picture. Furthermore, picture 2C was named as the very least favourite by two respondents and as the next to least favourite by many others, much due to the lack of authenticity where the model was wearing makeup and putting on the product in a fake way. Finally, when the respondents were asked if the content that they have been exposed to during the interview was representative for what type of beauty content that is reoccurring on Instagram, they all agreed that it was or stated that they would not know what is representative.

5.5.1 Analysis: General thoughts from respondents summary

Looking at our respondents’ answers it is possible to see the importance of colours. In particular, natural, soft browns and pastels were mentioned as preferable when our respondents view content in general. This provides further insights and potential evidence to Singh’s (2006) statement that these colours are what humans are and will continue to enjoy. Moreover, respondents’ statements that they value diversity are of crucial importance, especially since this was highlighted from respondents of various ethnic backgrounds, including those over represented in today’s media. Arguably, this value lies in the Swedish collective consciousness as diversity and inclusion is highly regarded in the Swedish society. This aligns with the findings by Hutter et al. (2013) who said that consumers who find content annoying and unappealing will develop negative responses. If diversity is an important element for Swedish beauty consumers, brands could arguably then experience negative effects if they fail to provide diversity.

Overall, there was a clear preference towards information. Our respondents stressed the importance of informative content, giving examples of customer reviews, text that explains the benefits of the product, text or props such as fruits that illustrate the ingredients of the product. This provides empirical evidence towards Copeland and Zhao’s (2020) statement that Instagram is very influential in regards to information seeking as well as Sheldon & Bryant’s (2016) statement that Instagram users see the platform as a source of inspiration and information. Finally, it is clear that the respondents did not enjoy being presented with too many or too exaggerated signs. This is because they stated that the pictures that used too intense and irritating colours, too much text, and too staged and styled models, were their least favourites. Arguably, these insights strengthen the claims that careful consideration of composition and high quality is of importance for Instagram content (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Teo, Leng & Phua, 2019; and Präkel, 2006).

6 Discussion

In this discussion we will reflect on and discuss the findings from our interviews and compare it to previous research. From our findings there were four key elements within content that were found to be very important amongst our respondents to consider content visually appealing: choice of colours, authenticity, clear communication with sufficient denotative signs, and easy access to information.

6.1 Choice of colours

Our study suggests that colours are vital elements of visual communication and that they can create emotions as well as impact on the attitudes of humans, as stated by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2002). Out of all the tangible elements in a picture, colour seemed to be one of the important elements to have in mind when creating beauty content. The preference for colour is very subjective and it is therefore impossible to state that one colour will appeal to all. However, our study reveals valuable and consistent findings on colour preferences that are identified as interest-capturing and visually appealing in beauty content. Light colours, which are primarily identified as soft pale/pastel and bright yellow were very much appreciated by the majority of respondents. Additionally, neutral and natural colours which can be identified as shades of brown, beige, and grey was a dominant colour palette that created a large interest in consumers. These results are very much in line with Singh (2006) who demonstrated that neutral browns and soft pale/pastels would be the dominating colours, even though her study was conducted 15 years ago. Colours that according to our findings should be avoided by beauty brands on Instagram were much harder to reveal. Our respondents did not highlight any particular colour as non-appealing, but instead they discussed the intensity and tone of the colours. For example, whilst the colour purple was very much liked, it was also disliked if the shade of the purple was too loud and intense. The exception is the colour yellow, which benefited from being intense. Additionally, the overall matching composition of colours within a picture was identified as essential to whether a colour was found to be appealing or not.

Worth noting was that the majority of respondents shared the same interpretations of colours, although their ages, personalities and backgrounds varied. This can best be explained through Barthes' (1957) statement about the collective consciousness shared amongst members of the same society. It can be suggested that the reason why the majority found soft pastels and neutral tones to be most appealing within beauty content has to do with the connotative myth that our respondents share as members of the Swedish society. What we argue is that individuals' colour preferences largely depend on the values of the society they live in (Minamyer, 2015; Berger, 2011; Singh, 2006; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2002). Sweden's taste for minimalism can arguably be reflected through the entire society, including fashion, interior design, and to a certain extent architecture. Generally speaking, the preference for minimalism can also be reflected through the colours that are usually dominating the Swedish society – neutral and soft pale colours. Furthermore, as Instagram users primarily use the platform because of curiosity in others, information seeking, and inspiration (Sheldon &

Bryant, 2016; Djafarova & Rushworth), users arguably form a collective consciousness based on what is dominant on the platform. Through our observations on Instagram, it is very clear to see that neutral, soft pale and pastel colours are very much overly represented amongst various Swedish beauty, lifestyle, and fashion accounts on Instagram. Conclusions that can be drawn, or at least proposed, are that our respondents showed preference towards colour palettes that are deeply rooted in their society and further reinforced through their interactions with various content on Instagram which shapes their preferences of what visually appealing content should look like.

6.2 Authenticity

Our results provided interesting insights into the levels at which different elements were appreciated. One example is the content that showed humans. Picture 2C is a picture with rather high production value, with a clearly thought out and planned set-up, with a professionally styled model, and a carefully placed pose. It also used very bright, fresh, and saturated colours, which according to writers Yu, Xie and Wen (2020); Jacobs et al. (1991); Labrecque, Patrick and Milne (2013); and Gao et al. (2007) creates the most interest amongst consumers. As such, this picture arguably offers high quality and appealing compositions which Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) and Teo, Leng and Phua (2019) mentioned as key factors for creating motivation and an interest amongst consumers. Arguably then, this picture would be expected to be highly appreciated amongst our respondents. However, it was received with a lot of negative emotions, avoidance behaviours, and it was even mentioned by a number of respondents as being their least favourite picture amongst the sample. The reason for this negative evaluation was because our respondents felt that the picture was fake due to the way the product was applied but mainly because of the makeup the model was wearing. It is a very understandable reaction as, to our understanding based on our findings, people do not appreciate unrealistic content, and a model applying a moisturiser on top of a full face of makeup is rather unrealistic.

This speaks for the claim made by Petty and Lindsey-Mullikin (2006) who said that brands must be personal in their marketing to catch customer attention and create interest. With this in mind, picture 2A would arguably be a very appreciated picture. The image shows a woman who does not appear to be a model and she is applying the product in a very realistic manner like regular people would apply their products at home. Considering the strong dislike to the staged and fake picture (2C) this picture should be popular instead. However, picture 2A was disliked because of how sloppy and amateurish the picture looked as the woman applied two face masks to her bare face. Our respondents expressed a dislike towards how messy the masks looked and a few even expressed disgust. This response was slightly surprising to us as researchers as we would have expected, especially from our literature review, but also from the reactions of our respondents towards picture 2C, that realness would be appreciated. As such, it appears that too real content is also disliked and this provides a suggestion that consumers want to be fed content that appears to be real but still that it is perceived to be of high quality and that it is aesthetically pleasing to look at.

This conundrum was also found through our other sets of pictures, for example the pictures using text. A strong majority of respondents said that they appreciate, sometimes even called out for more, information in the form of text in pictures. As presented in our results and analyses, the presence of informational text in picture 4C and the customer review in picture 4A provided information that made the respondents feel that the content and brand were professional and trustworthy. This provides empirical evidence to Abed's (2018) claim that trust is one of the top influential factors for consumer's likelihood to use s-commerce platforms such as Instagram. Personally, both of us researchers agree that the inclusion of detailed information such as text explaining a product's benefits, and especially a customer review that proves that an actual human has used and appreciated a product, strongly helps in providing trust towards a brand and the content. This notion of trust was also discussed in regard to picture 5C where the presence of the laboratory flasks provided signs that supported connotations of science, effectiveness, and trust. However, the conundrum showed itself as a number of respondents expressed scepticism towards both the customer review and the laboratory flasks, stating that it felt unreal, forced, and like the brand was trying to overcompensate. This is very interesting as it, just like with the content showing humans, shows an indication of how consumers appreciate realness, but still highly values high quality and made up content.

As we mentioned early on in our paper, it is important to investigate consumer behaviour within certain regions as individuals may provide different insights due to the varying values and beliefs depending on the region they are from. Likewise, the semiotic theory by Barthes that was used throughout this study presented how certain connotations are made from a collective consciousness shared amongst members of a certain society (Barthes, 1957; 1964). There are certain elements of the Swedish culture that are difficult to see from the outside, and rather difficult to explain, but that we as researchers who are raised in Sweden clearly know and recognise. The societal values we are thinking of here are the fact that Swedes tend to prefer something that is called "lagom." It is a word that cannot be directly translated to English but which means that something is neither too much nor too little, and there is a collective understanding amongst members of the Swedish society what this measurement of lagom is. What we see from many of our respondents' reactions is that they are drawn to this lagom amount in content. As such, we argue that the responses and connotations provided that lean towards a preference of lagom are in fact myths and a collective consciousness of our Swedish respondents that they may not be aware of themselves but that feel natural to them. This was also shown as many respondents expressed that they found some stimuli pleasant to look at but at the same time that it did not generate enough interest for them to take action. This reinforces that interest must be created in order for consumers to take actions (Kumar, Kim & Pelton, 2009; Cham, Ng, Lim & Cheng, 2018; and Hassan, Nadzim & Shiratuddin, 2015). These findings also prove our argument that the Organism and Response steps in the SOR theory are best analysed through unipolar sections where a multitude of emotions and reactions are able to coexist simultaneously. Throughout the study, a number of respondents expressed thoughts and feelings that would not fit in either a positive/high or negative/low box, but rather that are dynamic and a bit ambiguous. Hence,

we argue for how consumer behaviour research should continue on this unipolar view when examining qualitative elements.

To conclude, our respondents showed a clear preference for authentic content. They want to see models and pictures that do not feel fake, and they appreciate customer reviews and facts that provide a feeling of truth and trust. However, the key aspect is that in order to create interest amongst our respondents, the content still has to be of perceived high quality and aesthetically pleasing. This insight suggests that consumers want to see real-life, and diverse, people use and display products, but that the overall composition has to be appealing and the product application still has to look slightly staged. Likewise, customer reviews, facts, and signs showing quality and science are appreciated as long as they are not pushed too much to the point where it feels like an unauthentic smoke curtain. As such, brands wanting to appeal to and create interest amongst Swedish consumers should ensure that the content they produce feels real and authentic. But they should still put a significant effort into making it look pleasing to the eyes, in a way to make it look effortlessly beautiful – or as we in Sweden would say, *lagom*.

6.3 Clear communication with sufficient denotative signs

Our study revealed how important it is for brands to communicate clearly, as unclear messages confused and made our respondents uninterested in the content. For example, picture 3A was evaluated by some as pleasing and interesting to watch, but overall it did not generate a lot of further actions as respondents were visibly confused as to what they were viewing. The issue with this picture is arguably that, although consumers enjoy seeing the texture of a product, the green/minty texture is also the only and main sign of this picture apart from the plain background – both signs that do not provide any denotations or clues as to what message is being sent. Arguably then, to be able to communicate clearly, brands should include a minimum of two denotative signs, such as text or props, that help in delivering the message they want to send. One example of this is that respondents appreciated picture 3B which included a minimum of two signs – product texture, product packaging, and props in the form of sugar cubes. These signs, when combined, enabled the respondents to put together the denotative signs and develop proper connotations.

As Weiss (2020); Gerstell, Marchessou, Schmidt and Spagnuolo (2020); and L'Oréal (2020) highlighted, a main concern for retail brands now that the beauty industry has been rapidly pushed towards purely online touchpoints is how they will be able to connect with consumers and deliver the same experience that they were with their physical touchpoints – the ability to portray smells, textures, and overall feels of a product. Our interviews provide insight into which elements and signs in a picture that arguably help brands provide consumers with this experience. The respondents were always positive towards signs that showed the texture of a product and they stated that it made them get an idea of how the product would feel to touch. Another sign that was highly appreciated were props that portrayed the ingredients of the product. Examples are pictures 3B which used sugar cubes and picture 5B which used

lemons. When exposed to these stimuli, our respondents stated that they felt that they could imagine how the product would be in real life, that it would be sweet and grainy (3B), or that it would smell fresh and provide a lot of vitamin C (5B). This suggests that, when possible, brands should use denotative signs that both show the actual texture of the product as well as props that provide connotations towards the real life characteristics of a product, such as the consistency, touch, or smell. Such signs in pictures are easy for consumers to develop connotations and emotions towards as they are elements that they already recognise with their senses from real life. These types of signs can arguably help brands with their concern regarding how they move their physical stores online whilst providing a similar shopping experience for consumers.

However, these signs of physical attributes are not enough to generate an interest and subsequent actions. Our respondents highlighted how they need content to provide them with all the information that they need so that they do not have to spend time and energy finding out this information on their own. The presence of text was highlighted as being important for our respondents to understand what they were looking at. This is arguably especially true for content showing products whose ingredients and attributes cannot be represented by props that people know from real life and can relate to with their senses. Worth noting is that our respondents did not appreciate an overflow in information, but just enough information so that they are fed with what they need to know. Examples of elements that they liked, or called out for in content where it was missing, were the shop button showing the product name and price, a header stating what the picture portrays, a customer review, or text highlighting different product benefits. These insights provide further evidence to the research made by for example Yus (2019) and Davies, Turner and Udell (2020), that non-visual elements, such as text, clarifies and anchors the message intended from the sender and provides more detailed meanings and understandings from a picture.

Nevertheless, as clearly shown from our findings, the purely visual aspects of content, such as colours, texture, product packaging, lighting, and overall composition are very much important. This argues for and reinforces the statements made by Schill (2012); Au-Yong-Oliveira and Ferreira (2014); Kruk et al. (2019); and Linebarger, Piotrowski and Greenwood (2010), that a combination of visuals and text in visual communication on Instagram is to be recommended. That is because this combination improves consumers' understanding and has a greater impact on emotions, attitudes, and behaviours – where the visual aspect is more entertaining and easily digested information, and the text is more informational and practical. However, we would also like to argue that if enough signs are provided in a picture, such as picture 3B, text in the picture is not required to appeal to and reach consumers, but that the shop button can suffice to provide that extra detailed information about the product name and price.

To conclude, what these findings show us is that consumers want to be presented with all the information they need, or did not even know that they needed. They simply do not want to have to spend their time having to search for this information themselves, potentially even having to switch platforms. If they are not met with sufficient information, regardless of

whether they find the picture beautiful or interesting, they will ignore it and continue to scroll. Based on our findings, brands can ensure this does not happen by producing content with at least two denotative signs such as product packaging, product texture, customer reviews, text explaining benefits/ingredients of the product, a header, props portraying physical aspects of a product, and most importantly the Instagram shop button. This is all to ensure that the effect of a stimulus is more likely to portray the connotations that a sender wants to illustrate, subsequently generating positive and engaging cognitive evaluations, attitudes, and behaviours amongst consumers.

6.4 Easy access to information

What was clear from our interviews was that our respondents tend to prefer content that provides them with easy access to information. A lot of the times when there was a lack of interest was either when respondents found the visual communication to be displeasing to the eye, when they were confused as to what they were looking at, or unable to understand what message the picture was trying to send. As discussed earlier, consumers appear to prefer content that provides them with all the information they need immediately so that they do not have to work for or put effort into finding out more. Our respondents expressed that they wanted to be presented immediately in the content with everything they would need to take further action or gain the knowledge they look for – examples of this are, but not limited to, text in pictures, descriptive captions, signs providing deeper connotations, and the access to the shop button. These findings provide empirical evidence towards Moran, Muzellec and Johnson's (2020) claim that the presence of a CTA within the content boosts consumer behaviours towards engagement.

The Instagram shop button was mentioned as either something that our respondents were lacking in some pictures or the element that they would engage with once an interest was developed. According to our respondents, the presence of the shop button enables them to find out what the name of the product is and its price – information that was highly regarded. This shows that consumers want to be able to do as little work as possible and that they prefer a very seamless and easy-access shopping journey. Arguably then, the absence of appreciated elements such as the shop button could cause a brand to lose a potential customer that would prefer to continue scrolling rather than having to put effort into finding out the information they seek on their own. What this shows is that our respondents confirm the claim by Copeland and Zhao (2020) who said that Instagram is very influential in regards to information seeking, connecting, as well as shopping. Furthermore, these findings support the discussions presented by Stulee, Petljak and Naletina (2018); Kim and Park (2013); and Abdelsalam et al. (2020) regarding how Instagram's development of the platform, such as the shop button, for continuous focus on s-commerce is of high importance and requires more research and recommendations.

A very interesting part of our findings are the insights about what benefits our respondents prefer. Coelho, Santos de Oliveira, and Severo de Almeida (2016) as well as Copeland and Zhao (2020) discussed how hedonic benefits are preferred and what encourages consumers to

engage with a brand. This would suggest that content that focuses on providing entertainment, pleasure, and overall enjoyment would be the main trigger for consumer interest. Although this is in a sense true considering how picture 3B was picked as the favourite picture by a majority of respondents, a lot of their answers pointed towards a preference towards utilitarian benefits. Things such as shopping convenience, quality, and price were often mentioned when respondents were asked to explain what created an interest or why they would (not) proceed to take any further actions. Although this does not prove, and we do not seek to claim, that utilitarian benefits are the main driver for interest and engagement, it does provide evidence against the claims of the previously mentioned authors. Arguably, Swedish young beauty consumers prefer a combination of hedonic and utilitarian benefits when they view content on Instagram.

Looking at the stages of the SOR theory, in many instances pictures were able to develop an interest or overall positive emotions in the cognitive evaluation stage. However, surprisingly often this positive evaluation did not lead to positive attitudes and behaviours, but rather respondents decided to scroll past the post. Our respondents said that they found the picture to be pretty or aesthetically pleasing and that they enjoyed watching it, but it was clearly not always enough for them to take action. Arguably then, the presence of utilitarian benefits – such as informative text, signs providing deeper connotations, and the shop button that shows product name and price, are what pushes a consumer further beyond an interest. This finding is central as it explicitly highlights the importance of getting a consumer interested, which is very much in line with prior research (Fredrickson, 1998; Kumar, Kim & Pelton, 2009; Cham, Ng, Lim & Cheng, 2018; and Hassan, Nadzim & Shiratuddin, 2015). But it also highlights how merely creating an interest will not be enough, and that brands need to serve consumers in their purchasing journey and provide them with all the information, links, and options to take action and engage further with a brand and its offerings.

6.5 Proposed framework

As presented in our discussion there are four key areas that were highlighted from our findings as being important for our respondents when evaluating content. In order for content to be appealing, and as such generating an interest, our findings suggest that the following four elements are key for beauty retail brands when creating content towards young female Swedish consumers: colours, authenticity, clear communication, and information. Brands are as such recommended to include all four elements in their content, using a combination of the subcategories for each element, in a way that best represents their brand and reflects the message they wish to send. The proposed framework is presented with an illustration in Figure 14. Although it could be discussed what visually appealing content is, and that it arguably is very subjective, we argue that our insights provide a basic foundation to which elements to include within beauty content. The qualitative nature of our study has provided us with unique insights into the minds of young female Swedish consumers and allowed us to map out the elements that our respondents find to be crucial for appealing content. This provides further information for the visual communications, marketing, and consumer behaviour research fields, as well as recommendations for managers. Worth noting however

is that this study, due to its qualitative nature, only can provide initial findings that would further need to be quantified in order to be nation-wide generalisable.

What we do propose with this framework is that these four elements, when used efficiently together, have the possibility to generate an interest in consumers' minds. As discussed in our literature review, interest is the very key first step in a consumer's purchase journey and something that brands should strive to generate if they want to increase chances of further relationship building and engagement (Izard, 1977; Silvia, 2001; and Hassan, Nadzim & Shiratuddin, 2015). Overall, these elements work together to provide a seamless interaction between the consumer and the brand offering where consumers are fed all the information they need, the visuals that are pleasing for their eyes, and the tools to engage further without having to spend time and/or energy on switching platforms or having to look up information themselves. To our knowledge, this study provides one of the first detailed insights into the preferences amongst young female Swedish consumers in regard to visual communication on Instagram.

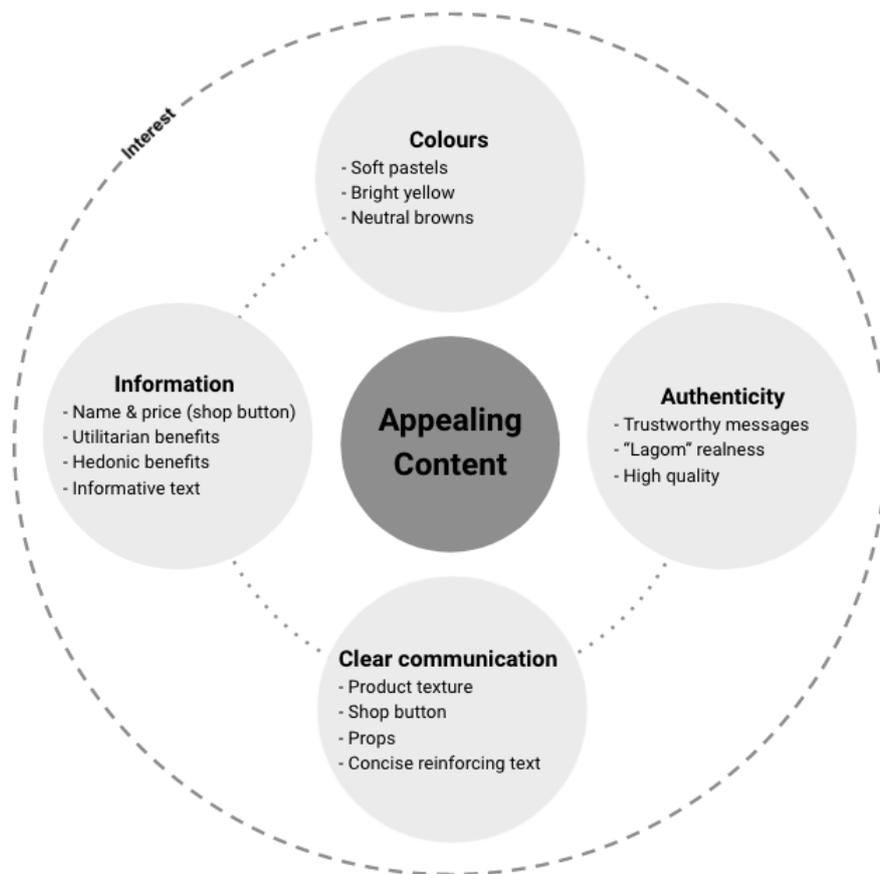


Figure 14: Proposed framework of how to create visually appealing beauty content on Instagram for retailers on the Swedish market.

6.6 Concluding thoughts

We were not surprised to find that soft pastels and product texture were strongly liked amongst consumers, however we did find their strong preferences towards utilitarian benefits and factual content to be surprising. We expected that our respondents would focus mainly on the visuals and hedonic benefits due to the visual and entertaining nature of Instagram, regardless of whether consumers use the platform for information seeking or not. Furthermore, it was interesting to see how the Swedish collective value of “lagom” potentially can be reflected in the values amongst our respondents. Although not surprising that unachievable and fakeness were disliked, such as with picture 2B, the disliking of the overly realistic picture 2A were more surprising. However, when looking at the findings all together they do make sense to us as researchers and members of the Swedish society as the fairly neutral colour tones, the mix of utilitarian and hedonic benefits, the providence of efficiency, and overall avoidance of exaggeration, reflects what in general is portrayed and preferred in Sweden.

7 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to extend the research on visual communication and marketing, specifically on firm-generated Instagram content and which visual elements that are the most appealing. This was done by investigating how various visual content is perceived and evaluated by Swedish female beauty consumers. For managers we also aimed to provide insights into which visual elements within content that they should focus on in order to more likely be appreciated by consumers. In order to fulfill our purpose and answer our research question “*How can Swedish beauty retailers create content on Instagram that will be considered visually appealing by consumers?*” semi-structured interviews were used to gain insights into the minds and evaluations of consumers. The purpose of looking at the visual aspects of content was met by firstly using Barthes’ semiotic theory, which looked at how different Instagram content from four different beauty retailers created various connotations through their denotative signs. Then, using the Stimulus Organism Response theory it was analysed how these visual content stimuli generated emotions through our respondents’ cognitive evaluation and subsequent responses in the form of attitudes and behaviours.

To gain insight that could answer our research question and the following sub-question of “*How do consumers evaluate and react to different visuals in content?*” thirteen Swedish female consumers aged 25-34 were interviewed and presented with different Instagram content. They were asked to answer questions regarding what denotations and connotations they found in each picture, as well as questions regarding their emotions, evaluations, and potential wish to engage further or see more of the content. Through our presentation and analysis of our empirical findings we provided detailed information about how our respondents evaluated and reacted to different visuals.

It was found that soft pastels, neutral beige and brown colours, as well as bright yellow were colours that were preferred and met with positive reactions amongst the respondents. Perceived authenticity was also found to be crucial as consumers were appalled by exaggerating and fake content, but simultaneously not attracted to overly realistic content. Hence, realistically attainable but high quality and aesthetically pleasing content was preferred. The young consumers also stressed the importance of clear communication where they want to be fed with all the crucial information they would need, including but not limited to; product texture, the Instagram shop button, props reflecting real life characteristics of a product, and concise but reinforcing text providing essential information. Furthermore, consumers highly regarded easy access to information where they were provided with content portraying both utilitarian and hedonic benefits as well as information and tools, such as links, to find out more and proceed without having to spend time switching apps or researching information themselves.

Based on the findings above, we could further answer our second sub-question: “*Are there any visual elements that generate more interest than others, if so, which?*”. We can conclude that there are four critical elements with associated subcategories that could be used by beauty brands in order to create visually appealing content that has the possibility of

generating consumer interest. Those four elements that make up the proposed framework (Figure 14) for appealing content are: colours, authenticity, clear communication, and information. Brands are as such recommended to include all four elements in their content, using a combination of the subcategories for each element, in a way that best represents their brand and reflects the message they wish to send. By providing readers with a framework that lists the specific visual elements that our respondents found crucial for visually appealing content, this study provides qualitative insights into the fields of visual communication, marketing, and consumer behaviour, as well as tangible recommendations of what visual elements that could be included in firm-generated beauty content on Instagram, for the Swedish market.

7.1 Theoretical contributions

Mainly our study provides further insights and developments within the research fields of visual communication, marketing, and consumer behaviour. As Barnhurst, Vari, and Rodríguez (2004); Russmann and Svensson (2016); Rietveld et al. (2020); Babic Rosario et al. (2016); King, Racherla and Bush (2014); and Huang and Su (2018) discussed, the emerging research area of visual communication is of high importance, much due to the increasing digitalization and shift towards visually dominated platforms such as Instagram. Our study answers these many call-outs for further research focusing on the visual aspects of communication and content on social media as well as the rising focus on Instagram. Furthermore, our findings support and provide empirical examples to the research on different meanings and associations of different colours (Aslam, 2005; Singh, 2006; and Eiseman, 1998) as well the research regarding the interplay between and effectiveness of visuals and text (Schill, 2012; Au-Yong-Oliveira & Ferreira, 2014; Kruk et al., 2019, and Linebarger, Piotrowski & Greenwood, 2010). Moreover, our findings reveal essential elements of firm-generated content and the importance of generating consumer interest. Thus contributing to the research stating the foundational importance of interest creation (Silvia, 2008; Izard, 1977; Silvia, 2001; and Hassan, Nadzim & Shiratuddin, 2015) as well as the research claiming the importance of firm-generated content (Poulis, Rizomytiotis & Konstanoulaki, 2019; Hutter et al., 2013; Sánchez-Cobarro, Molina-Castillo & Alcazar-Caceres, 2020; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; and De Jans et al., 2020).

To our knowledge, this is the first study aiming to map out what elements make up visually appealing Instagram content in the eyes of consumers and suggesting how it can generate different attitudes and behaviours. Furthermore, the study provides a unique focus on firm-generated content as well as a timely important and interesting market of research, namely the Swedish beauty market. Through our focus we put a spotlight on and contribute with new knowledge and consumer insights towards the research areas of Instagram and firm-generated content. The detailed visual analyses bring a qualitative insight and consumer preferences into the fields of visual communication and marketing, the meanings and associations of colours, and the interplay between and effectiveness of visuals and text. Additionally, our empirical findings contribute with further knowledge on the basic emotion of interest as we highlight how failing to create consumer interest through content negatively

impacts the brand as consumers simply scroll by. Moreover, we propose, based on our empirical findings, a framework (Figure 14) that suggests visual elements that are connected to consumer interest.

From our collected data we were able to draw conclusions that bring out proposed themes from our findings which can contribute to the field of visual communication and marketing. Through our proposed framework (Figure 14) we provide detailed theoretical suggestions towards the study of which visual elements that are considered appealing in an image, using the beauty industry on the Swedish market as an example. By looking at what consumers value and how they evaluate different visual elements within content, this study begins to identify consumer preferences by suggesting four main categories of visual elements. The framework contributes to the call-outs for research and detailed recommendations on what content should actually look like. To our knowledge, this framework is one of the first that attempts to do so, especially on the Swedish market. Although these suggestions are not generalisable they provide the research field with initial insights and rich descriptions of findings that other researchers can build upon, or even try to put in another context.

Finally, the combined use of Barthes' semiotic theory (Barthes 1957; 1964) and the SOR theory (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; and Stuart, 1974) throughout this study provides suggestions regarding how these two theories could be used together within marketing and visual communication research. Our study shows how external Stimuli could be analysed in more detail via a semiotic analysis in order to, potentially more effectively, map out the specific signs that generate different implications on consumers' Organism and Response. Furthermore, our study contributes to the arguments that consumer behaviour research, using theories such as the SOR theory, should use unipolar views of qualitative measurements (Abelson et al., 1982; and Babin, Darden & Babin, 1998) as consumers expressed emotions and responses that would not fit in either a high/positive or low/negative box.

7.2 Managerial implications

As Danzinger (2019) and L'Oréal (2020) wrote, the beauty industry is one of the industries that is growing most consistently and as highlighted by Jansson (2021), the Swedish market is particularly booming. Furthermore, given the recent and rather rapid shift within the beauty industry towards online touchpoints and sales during Covid-19 (Gerstell et al., 2020; L'Oréal, 2020; Yttergren, 2017; and Weiss, 2020), beauty brands are in need of recommendations to adapt to this change. This is because even the youngest, most tech-savvy, of beauty consumers preferred to shop in physical stores before the pandemic (Gerstell et al., 2020). Our study and its proposed framework provides brands with a set of elements that they can include in their online content in order to connect with and attract consumers as the industry moves online.

Our study reinforces the importance for beauty brands to focus on their own firm-generated content by providing insights into how consumers show interest and willingness to interact more with the brand after viewing certain content. The findings in this study provide insights

into the minds and preferences amongst young female Swedish consumers. As such, our study provides tangible recommendations regarding which components that Swedish beauty retailers should focus on when they wish to produce visually appealing content. Through detailed insights and a proposed framework, managers are offered information and an easily implementable list of elements that they can combine in different ways to best portray their brand and send their desired message. It is proposed that brands should focus on: soft pastel, neutral brown, or bright yellow colours; creating realistic, but still high quality and trustworthy, authentic content; communicating their message and offering clearly by using elements such as product texture, props reflecting real life characteristics of the product, or short but informative text; and providing easy access to information that supplies consumers with a mix of hedonic and utilitarian benefits as well as informative text and the Instagram shop button.

These findings and elements are presented in a proposed framework (Figure 14) which can be used by managers during their content creation. All four elements should be present in each image, but the subcategories under each element can be combined to different degrees and variations as long as consumers are met with enough information (denotative signs) to clearly decode the message and develop the desired connotations. Our framework can provide insights into how brands can create content that will be considered visually appealing by young female Swedish beauty consumers and potentially aid in generating consumer interest and subsequent further engagement with the brand and its offerings.

7.3 Limitations and Future Research

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, our findings are subjective and limited to the opinions of our thirteen respondents. The study only investigates Swedish consumers, specifically females aged 25-34, and as such the findings and recommendations may not apply to other demographics and nationalities. Furthermore, the study focuses on the beauty retail industry which provides a further limitation as consumers may have different preferences when viewing content from other markets. Additionally, there is a sole focus on firm-generated content and thereby these findings might have differed if user generated or sponsored content were included. For the purpose of focusing on the visual communication and avoiding potential biases, the retailers' brand names were excluded and this provides a limitation as potential brand image is not considered in consumers' evaluation of Instagram content. Finally, the amount of content samples provides a limitation as other researchers and study focuses may find other samples more representative, as well as the potential that future changes in trends will change the representativeness of our samples.

Furthermore, results suggest that it is of importance to research and consider societal differences between consumers as there were certain connotative myths that appeared to be related to the collective consciousness amongst respondents within the Swedish society. For future research it is thus recommended to investigate other nationalities in order to be able to discover other visual elements that may be of importance for beauty retailers operating in that region. Regional areas that could be prioritised by future studies are for example Europe, to

see if the values of Swedish consumers correlate to the values of other nationals in the European trade union, or China, due to its flourishing economy, rich culture and, as mentioned in our literature review, high adaptation of s-commerce. Other demographic samples within Sweden could also be researched to investigate whether there are differences within Sweden.

In regard to the chosen content and brand samples, a wider brand sample or a mix of firm- and user generated content could provide interesting future research. Likewise it would be beneficial to examine different types of media on Instagram, such as videos and stories, which could provide further insights. Additionally, our findings could be repeated and tested in a different market and investigate if our findings are applicable for other industries as well. Finally, future studies could benefit from different research methods. Through a quantitative study, our findings of the four key elements could be tested and potentially generalisable. Furthermore, an experimental study could provide interesting research examining whether there is a real difference in content containing our four mentioned elements compared to content lacking these.

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Appendix 1: Topic guide and information about respondents

Note: The topic guide has been translated from Swedish to English.

Part 1

1. Introduction

Introduce ourselves and provide a brief explanation of the research topic. Thank the respondent for participating and explain how this interview will be used, how the interview will be structured, and estimated duration.

2. Ethical consideration and consent

Inform the respondent about their role in the study and how it will be conducted, that they can stop the interview at any time, that their answers will be strictly anonymous and only used by us in this study, and double check if they are ok with us using their answers in our study.

3. Transition

Icebreaker time: Ask the respondent to tell us about themselves and who they are. Show interest in their answers and make sure the respondent feels comfortable and in a good mood.

Part 2

Topic 1: Overview of the accounts

Example of questions:

- How would you describe your overall first impression of the account?
- What emotions do you feel when you look at this account?
- Does this overview make you want to take an action, such as looking more at it or scrolling away from it?

Topic 2: Semiotic analysis of each picture (denotation and connotation)

Example of questions:

- Can you describe in detail what you objectively see in this picture, e.g. colours, objects, shapes, text and other visually identifiable elements? (Guide the respondent to develop their answer)
- What does the picture symbolise? Or, what do you associate with the picture?
- What central signs do you identify that creates those associations?

Topic 3: Organism (cognitive evaluation of the picture)

Example of questions:

- What emotions do you get from looking at this picture?
- What do you like/dislike the most with this picture?

Topic 4: Response (attitudes and behaviours after looking at the picture)

Example of questions:

- Does this picture make you want to take any actions? Such as, seeing more of this account and/or product, reading more about the product or testing it?

Part 3

Topic 5: Final questions/Closing remarks

Example of questions:

- What visual aspects, according to you, are the most appealing to you when looking at beauty related content?
- Would you agree or disagree that the content you have observed is representative for beauty content on Instagram?
- What picture do you like/dislike the most out of those that you have seen? Why?
- Do you find the content that you have seen to be representative of what type of beauty content that is dominating on Instagram? Agree/Disagree and elaborate.
- Is there anything else you want to add?

Thank the respondent for participating in this interview and make sure they have our contact details if they have any questions in the future.

Information about respondents

Respondent	Age	Occupation	Date
Kendra	28	Student	10/5 – 2021
Denise	27	Consultant	10/5 – 2021
Celine	34	Advisor	11/5 – 2021
Olivia	25	Therapist	11/5 – 2021
Anna	28	Marketing assistant	12/5 – 2021
Sujin	27	Social worker	12/5 – 2021
Lejla	25	Student	12/5 – 2021
Kajsa	28	Communicator	13/5 – 2021
Robin	26	Teacher	13/5 – 2021
Emanuella	33	Dancer	14/5 – 2021
Fatima	31	PR Coordinator	15/5 – 2021
Sofia	30	Sales assistant	15/5 – 2021
Daniella	28	Medical nurse	16/5 – 2021

Appendix 2: Content showing humans



Picture 2A

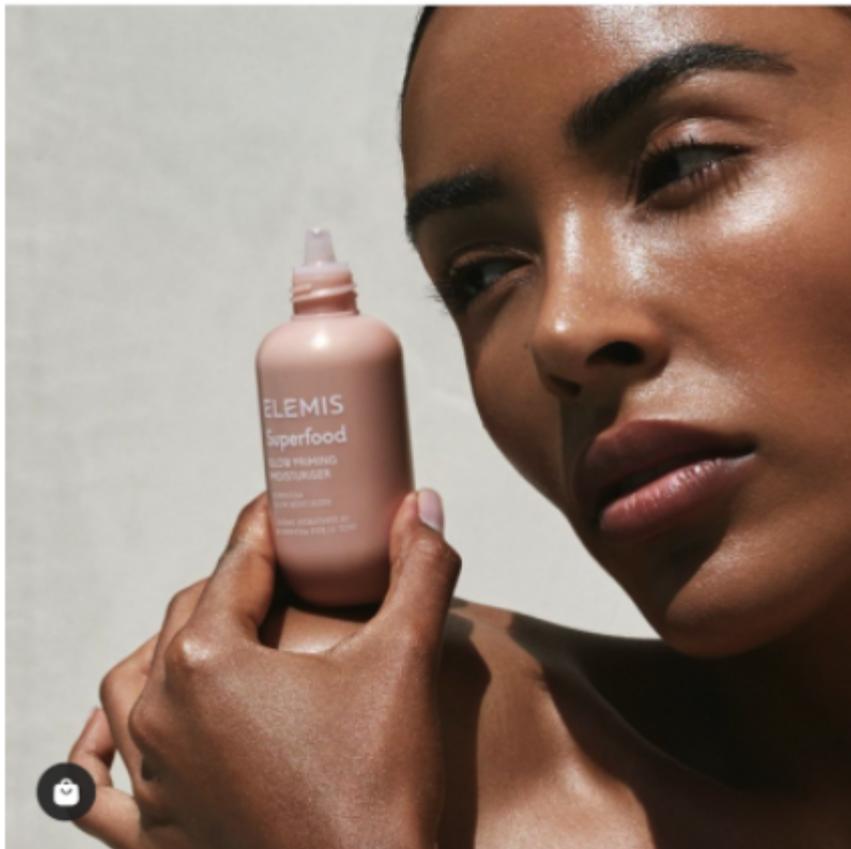
Source: Skincity. (2021). *Instagram*. Available at: [instagram.com/skincitysverige](https://www.instagram.com/skincitysverige) (Accessed 10 May 2021)

Picture 2A - Denotation

The picture shows a woman with fair skin and green/brown eyes and dark hair. Her hair is held back by a white headband and she appears to be wearing a white shirt/coat. She is standing in front of a dark grey/blue wall and her skin is very glowy. She is applying a green/yellow product to her cheeks using a spatula, and her forehead is covered in a black/brown coloured product. The woman is looking down towards the corner of the picture and her lips are shaped in a slight smile (not noticeable for all respondents). Furthermore, some respondents identified the woman's birth mark placed on her right cheek and that her white headband had gotten dirty from the black/brown coloured product.

Picture 2A - Connotation

Because of central signs identified by the respondents, such as the headband the woman is wearing, her bare skin, and the fact that she is applying face masks, the respondents felt that the meaning of and associations with the picture were: spa, self-care, multi-masking, nighttime wind-down routine, trouble skin, treatments, tutorials, and combination skin. A few respondents saw the dirt on her headband and the way the products were applied and associated it with messiness and disgusting feelings.



Picture 2B

Source: Hudoteket. (2021). *Instagram*. Available at: [instagram.com/hudoteket](https://www.instagram.com/hudoteket) (Accessed 10 May 2021)

Picture 2B - Denotation

The picture shows a close-up of a dark skinned woman who appears to not be wearing clothes. She has very glowy/natural skin with some respondents identifying it as she is standing in direct sunlight. She is holding a brown/beige/dusty pink bottled product that it says “Elemis Superfood” on with more text on the bottle in a small font. Moreover, some respondents identified that the product was placed on the woman’s shoulder. The woman is looking towards the product with her red/brown/dark red mouth slightly open and her brows are very defined/sharp. She is standing in front of a beige/grey/concrete wall/background. In the bottom left corner of the picture there is also a shop button.

Picture 2B - Connotation

The respondents identified central signs, such as the flawless skin of the model, the lighting, and the overall colour tone of the skin and picture, that led them to mostly associate this picture with: natural beauty, summer, warmth, healthy skin. One respondent further associated this picture with portraying sensuality because of the nakedness and pose of the model, and another respondent associated this with traditional advertisements, again because of the pose of the model with the product.



Picture 2C

Source: Glowid. (2021). *Instagram*. Available at: [instagram.com/glowid](https://www.instagram.com/glowid). (Accessed 10 May 2021)

Picture 2C - Denotation

The picture shows a white woman with blonde/red/light hair who is applying a product/cream on her face/cheek. The woman is wearing make-up and applies the product on top of the make-up. She is also holding the bottle/product and her eyes are almost closed but looking at the product. The bottle/product is long and round, white, and with a blue/turquoise/green line. On the product there is a percentage sign and more text that is too small to read. Her lips appear to be in a slight smile and her nails are light pink/grey (not noticeable by all respondents). She is standing in front of a turquoise/blue/green wall/background/backdrop

which, as noticed by almost half of the respondents, is matching the colour on the bottle/product. The woman appears to not be wearing clothes and some respondents also noticed her earring. Finally, the shop button at the bottom left was noticed by a majority of the respondents.

Picture 2C - Connotation

The central signs that are identified by respondents are a face full of make-up, the pose of the hand, facial expression, clear and colourful background, and product. Because of these signs, the respondents mostly associated this picture with: fake messages, basic advertisement, studio image, boring and irrelevant content, and a brand trying to just make money.

Appendix 3: Content showing product texture



Picture 3A

Source: Glowid. (2020). *Instagram*. Available at: [instagram.com/glowid](https://www.instagram.com/glowid) (Accessed 10 May 2021)

Picture 3A - Denotation

This picture shows some green/minty cream/product/goop/paint colour that is spread out. The background is plain, identified by most respondents as white/grey and by three as being light green/in the same colour nuance as the subject. The texture is thicker in the bottom and spread out thin at the top. There are also shadows from the cream/product/goop/paint colour. At the bottom left there is a shop button.

Picture 3A - Connotation

The central sign that was found by the respondents is the green/minty smeared dot/cream. The respondents mostly associated this picture with: creamy, luxurious, sticky, fluffy, green tea, clay mask, and nature. One respondent associated it with messiness and felt it looked disgusting.



Picture 3B

Source: Glowid. (2019). *Instagram*. Available at: [instagram.com/glowid](https://www.instagram.com/glowid) (Accessed 10 May 2021)

Picture 3B - Denotation

This picture shows a round can/product/scrub that is brown/black/dark with the lid open and resting on the back of the can/product/scrub and you can see the product in the can. On the white/grey/beige label there says Klairs and more text in a small font that is too small to read. In front of the packaging the product/scrub is smeared out. The product is brown and shiny with some small pieces in it. Around the product there are (six) cubes/things/sugar cubes/pineapple pieces/papaya cubes/pieces of honey. The background is brown/dusty pink/rose/beige/greige and a couple of respondents identified that the background is made of glass. Some also noted the shadows from the subjects in the picture.

Picture 3B - Connotation

The central signs that were identified by the respondents are natural colours, creamy texture and cubes. Therefore, the respondents mostly associated this picture with: something edible like sugar, candy, food, and caramel sauce. Furthermore, the respondents also associated this image with scrub, warmth, sweetness, and how this image made them imagine a pleasant and intriguing smell.

Appendix 4: Content using text in pictures



Picture 4A

Source: Skincity. (2021). *Instagram*. Available at: [instagram.com/skincitysverige](https://www.instagram.com/skincitysverige) (Accessed 10 May 2021)

Picture 4A - Denotation

The overall picture is purple, including the background, and there is a round and transparent/clear plate/container where the product/serum is dripping from a pipette that lies on the plate/container. The consistency of the product/serum is transparent/fluid/light/watery and its colour is yellow/pink/baby pink/salmon. Some respondents also identified the shadow from the pipette as well as the product packaging. The pipette is transparent, has a white handle and traces from the product/serum left in it. On the right side of the plate/container lies the product packaging from Paula's Choice that is purple/dark purple/aubergine purple and not fully visible as the right corner of the packaging is cut off. On the round/oblong/cylinder packaging it says, in white/grey text, "Niacinamide 20% Treatment" and more text which is too small to read. On the side in purple/red it also says "clinical." On the top left corner of the image there is a black/grey text with a customer review about the product and a quotation mark behind the text. On the bottom left there is a shop button. As highlighted by most respondents, the top right corner also shows a 1/2 sign.

Picture 4A - Connotation

Respondents identified the colour purple, the customer review, the product packaging, the pipette and the product/serum that lies on the plate/container to be the central signs for this image. The respondents mostly associated this picture with: science and a well-tested and documented product, the customer review made the image credible, and other general associations were softness, genuinity, warmth, dry skin, and effectiveness.



Picture 4B

Source: KnowToGlow. (2021). *Instagram*. Available at: [instagram.com/knowtoglow](https://www.instagram.com/knowtoglow) (Accessed 10 May 2021)

Picture 4B - Denotation

The picture is overall green, accompanied by the text “skincare for combination skin”, which by some respondents were identified as 3D-text. The text, which is in colours green/dark green/moss green and black, is placed on the top of the image. Furthermore there are six circles/windows in the center of the green picture, the circles/windows are laid out in a symmetrical first and second row including three circles/windows per row. Furthermore the circles/windows include the product packaging and a white background. Below each circle/window is the name of the product and the text is green/grey. Each circle/window has a green and yellow inner circle, a white background and the product is centered in the middle of the circle/window. The products vary in shapes and colours, some are colourful and others are neutral. The first product, the cleanser, is a container with a pump and is white, beige, yellow, and blue. The second product, the toner, is a tall bottle which is

white/transparent/glass and the label is black and yellow. The third product, the day cream, is a round container with a lid and it is white/concrete with brown/beige freckles – identified by two respondents as looking like recycled concrete/cardboard/paper. The fourth product, the treatment mask, is an orange tube with black and yellow text. The fifth product, the moisture serum, is a brown bottle with a black cap and blue text. The sixth and final product, the night cream, is a round jar with a golden lid and with a white and green/minty label with black text. Finally, there is a shop button on the bottom left.

Picture 4B - Connotation

Respondents identified the green colour, the headline text, the round circles/windows and the products within them to be the most central for this image. The respondents mostly associated this picture with: amateurish guide, blasé, unclear, too much, and messy. Mostly this had to do with respondents thinking back a couple of years and visualising how content started to look this way when influencers became a big thing. However, other respondents associated it with being informative, clean, and educational because of the headline, the very clear layout and the text below it.



Picture 4C

Source: KnowToGlow. (2021). *Instagram*. Available at: [instagram.com/knowtoglow](https://www.instagram.com/knowtoglow) (Accessed 10 May 2021)

Picture 4C - Denotation

This picture shows a product in front of a purple/pink/violet background. The bottle is white/plastic/glass and has both a black bottom and top cap. In the middle of the packaging there is a label which is black and yellow with black and yellow text. At the top of the picture there is a dark purple/violet/grey text in capital letters saying “advanced snail radiance dual essence” and on both sides of the product there are smaller texts stating different advantages, benefits, and expected results from the product. Between each set of text and the product there are lines in the same colour as the text. In total there are eight sets of text and lines.

Picture 4C - Connotation

The central signs that were identified for this picture are the background colours purple/pink/violet, the product packaging and the text; both the headline as well as the descriptions of what the product does. The respondents mostly associated this picture with: being very informative, educational, and scientific. However, not everyone agreed as some associated this picture with being messy due to the amount of text and their overall impression of the picture was dullness.

Appendix 5: Content focusing on the product packaging



Picture 5A

Source: KnowToGlow. (2020). *Instagram*. Available at: [instagram.com/knowtoglow](https://www.instagram.com/knowtoglow) (Accessed 10 May 2021)

Picture 5A - Denotation

In this picture there are three products laying on a beige/sand coloured background which respondents identified as a piece of fabric/tablecloth/bed linen. On the lower left is a shop button. Some respondents identified the order in which the products are organised to be an upside-down pyramid. The product to the left is a cylinder pump bottle with green/beige/grey content and a white pump with a clear cap. The product also has a white label with black, yellow/beige, and green/grey/beige circles, orange/brown lines, a black box, and black text. The product in the middle is a round jar/can with pink, green, blue, and mint coloured leaves. In the middle there is a white label with black and light blue text. The product to the right is a white tube with a turquoise/blue label with white text. Above the label there is also a turquoise/blue and back text with a green/yellow symbol to the right showing three leaves, some text, and a ring around it.

Picture 5A - Connotation

The central signs identified by the respondents are beige/sand coloured fabric/tablecloth/bed linen that is crinkly, the three product packagings, the visual design of the packaging, and the shopping button on the bottom left. The respondents mostly associated this picture with: amateur content/user-generated content, influencer review, tropical climate, the beach, and dull and uninspiring content.



Picture 5B

Source: Glowid. (2019). *Instagram*. Available at: [instagram.com/glowid](https://www.instagram.com/glowid) (Accessed 10 May 2021)

Picture 5B - Denotation

This picture shows a product/bottle/serum lying on top of a bunch of lemons on a plain white/grey/dusty pink background/table. Some of the yellow lemons are sliced up but most of them are whole. The product is a glass/plastic bottle with a silver and white cap. The content appears to be a clear liquid and the label is white with black text and silver/holographic details. The text clearly reads “Klairs” with the rest of the text being too small to read. A couple of respondents also identified the strong light and following shadows from the lemons and the product in the picture. Finally, at the bottom left corner there is a black/grey shop button.

Picture 5B - Connotation

The three central signs that were identified in this picture were the lemons, the product packaging and the white/light background, whereas the lemons were the most central and impactful signs. The respondents mostly associated this picture with: freshness, health, nice smell, nature, warmth, citrus fruit, and vitamin C. Overall the respondents visualised a clean, fresh, and intriguing environment where they could feel the citrusy smell of the product. A few respondents even stated that they could visualise the benefits of a brighter skin as a result from using the product.



Picture 5C

Source: Hudoteket. (2021). *Instagram*. Available at: [instagram.com/hudoteket](https://www.instagram.com/hudoteket) (Accessed 10 May 2021)

Picture 5C - Denotation

This picture illustrates two transparent laboratory flasks, the flask to the right is filled with water/liquid and has a glass stick in it belonging to the laboratory flask. The beauty product is placed in front of the two laboratory flasks. The beauty product is brown/brick coloured, has a black cap attached to it and is considerably smaller than the two laboratory flasks. It has a white label with black and blue text on it where the brand name “SkinCeuticals” is visible but the rest of the text is too small to read. The product and flasks are standing on top of a

table/box/shelf and the background is faded between a white middle and a beige/brown outer part. At the top right corner there is also a ½ sign which is black/dark grey.

Picture 5C - Connotation

The central signs that the respondents identified were the two laboratory flasks, the product packaging, and the overall brownish tone of the picture. The respondents mostly associated this picture with: a laboratory/chemistry room where the product is made and tested. Associations included: knowledge, science, advanced product, active ingredients, scientific formulas, clinical, medicine, effective product, and trustworthy brand. Overall, the respondents agreed that this picture wants to say that this is an scientific and advanced product that promises good results. They also stated that this had to do with the two laboratory flasks and how the majority of their associations were built on them. Therefore, the laboratory flasks represent the core central sign in this picture.