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Generation Z has opened the can

A qualitative case study on how nicotine brands conduct strategic communication in order to brand a regulated product toward a young consumer segment

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Abstract

This study has examined the relationship between the increase in consumption of white snus among Generation Z in Sweden and the branding strategies used by the nicotine brand LYFT. The purpose of this research has been to gain an understanding of how a brand can market a regulated product to a young consumer segment by conducting strategic communication preferred by these young individuals. The background of this study is based upon the recent increase in consumption of snus/white snus among the younger population in Sweden. The lack of tobacco in white snus facilitates the branding of the product, since the country's highly regulated tobacco law does not apply to the product. The study is written within the field of strategic communication and digital media studies and has a critical approach. Furthermore, the methods used are visual semiotic analysis of empirical material collected from Instagram. The Instagram accounts from which material has been collected, belongs to LYFT or Influencers who are publishing the content in collaboration with LYFT. The theoretical framework consists of theories within the field of strategic communication that are proven to be efficient when marketing towards a younger population, these includes: customer involvement and co-creation, symbolic consumption, word-of-mouth, inclusive marketing and influencer marketing. The result showed that LYFT's branding their product primarily towards a young segment by incorporating all of these branding strategies in their communication. The results of the analysis showed indications of a great focus on symbolic consumption in order to give the target group a sense of belonging to a crowd or lifestyle by buying and consuming their product. A possible conclusion is therefore that the images posted on Instagram focus on selling a lifestyle rather than the product itself. This is problematic as it normalizes the use of and creates a need for nicotine within the youth culture. Furthermore, the ethical dilemmas identified in the discussion can potentially affect the role of the communication professionals negatively.

Keywords: *Snus, White tobacco-free snus, Generation Z, Branding strategies, Digital marketing, Symbolic Consumption, Influencer-marketing, Lyft*

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1 Introduction

The section introduces and problematizes the increased use of snus among the young population in Sweden and provides a description of the concept of white snus. Furthermore, it defines who LYFT are followed by a presentation of the concept of marketing on a generational level. Moreover it describes the significance of the study within the field of strategic communication in the problematization. In addition, it outlines the framework of this study including the aim, research question and disposition.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Increased consumption

The proportion of young individuals who use snus is growing fast in Sweden. The survey *Stockholmsenkäten 2020* shows a clear increase among high school students who use snus.

In year 9, 15 percent of the boys and 4 percent of the girls state that they use snus, compared to the 2018 survey figures of 9 and 1 percent, respectively. In high school year 2, 25 percent of the boys and 10 percent of the girls use snus, compared with 19 and 2 percent in the previous survey (Länsstyrelsen Stockholm, 2021). A major reason for this increase is suspected to be the launch of the so-called white snus. A Non Smoking Generation's latest *Nouv survey* shows that young people (14-18 years) who answer that they have used white snus increased from 7 to 19 percent between 2019 and 2020 (A None Smoking Generation, 2020). However, the response alternative for white snus was not introduced until 2019.

The increased use of white snus among this young age group is a serious issue since the product contains nicotine which is a highly addictive substance that can lead to a number of health defects. "We suspect that the increase may be linked to the so-called tobacco-free snus becoming more popular. The snus is white and is marketed in a variety of flavours that may attract young people" says Malin Björke (Länsstyrelsen Stockholm, 2021), county coordinator for ANDTS issues at the Stockholm County Administrative Board. The tobacco and nicotine industry has many years of experience in adding different flavours to cigarettes or categorizing them under "white", "light" or "slim" etc, which makes some consumers view the product as being less harmful. Different e-cigarette brands offer different flavours which can be considered

appealing to the younger generation as they are perceived as fun, different, and less harmful (Hillstrom, 2019).

There are limited studies regarding white snus since it is a fairly new product. The survey *Stockholmsenkäten* made by Länsstyrelsen Stockholm (2020) added the answer alternative for white snus very recently in 2019. Thus, there is no published research that explains the connection between the younger generation and their increased use of white snus in particular. Furthermore, there is also a lack of statistics regarding the use of nicotine and tobacco among people in secondary school. This is due to the survey *Stockholmsenkäten* being canceled for this age group due to the pandemic of Covid-19.

1.1.2 Who are LYFT?

A snus brand that was at the forefront at the launch of this relatively new product is LYFT. The brand describes their white snus as "all-white nicotine pouches [that] are created to give you a full nicotine experience, but in a discreet format" (LYFT, 2021). Furthermore, LYFT offers a wide range of different flavours and strengths in their products.

On their own website, they also emphasize that their nicotine pouches are 100 percent tobacco-free. This is due to the tobacco being processed in several steps, which contributes to the fact that most of the aroma and taste of the original tobacco disappears, while the nicotine remains (Tobaksfakta, 2020).

Regarding their marketing, LYFT has collaborated with a number of different influencers who have promoted the products. These promotions are published on the influencers' own social media as well as on LYFT's social media accounts. A study conducted by A non Smoking Generation has shown how different brands within the tobacco industry, including LYFT, have spend a high amount of money on influencer marketing in their social media platforms¹. The survey showed that the collaboration with different Swedish influencers has generated an earned media value of \$275.000 or 2,3 M SEK, and has reached out to 1.500.000 people on Instagram (See appendix 1).

In addition, LYFT has had various PR events and sponsored three of the largest music festivals in Sweden 2019: Way Out West, Summer Burst, and Lollapalooza (LYFT, 2020).

¹ A Non Smoking Generation, Media Analysis, 1 Jan - 30 Jun 2020
<https://nonsmoking.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/rapport-om-tobak-i-media-2020.pdf>

1.1.3 Marketing on a generational level

Different generations are helping to create new demands since each generation has grown up with different attributes that have affected their lives in certain ways. As a matter of the case, age has invariably played an important factor when marketers need to design strategies tailored to a specific target audience. Age has always had an important demographic role, along with other attributes such as gender, income et cetera. Therefore it has been concluded that a certain type of behavior also matches with the best age group, and one can thus use this match to make a specific and targeted segmentation as well as positioning (Chaney, Touzani & Slimane, 2017). Despite the traditional focus on the importance of age, marketing specialists have begun to open their eyes to the fact that strategic work should be at a generational level rather than an individual level (Chaney, Touzani & Slimane, 2017).

The newest generation that is slowly taking over the world is being referred to as Generation Z. There are divided opinions about what age group that belongs to Generation Z and the framework of this study does not allow further evaluation on this topic. In order to be consistent, we have chosen to conduct this study from the standpoint that Generation Z consists of individuals that are born within the year range of 1996 to 2010 as stated by Fromm & Read (2018). Thus this is the age group where the increase of white snus has been noted. The generation is referred to as digital natives, iGeneration, or gen tech, which indicates the constant link between the generation and the internet. Since the generation is gaining more attention and has such a major influence on the world, it is essential for marketers to understand what factors influence the generations' perception of brands in order to market towards them successfully (Deep focus, 2015). In order to understand what type of marketing and branding strategies are successful among Generation Z, multiple researchers have conducted relevant studies with the aim of achieving a better understanding of the next generation of consumers (Gutfreund 2019; Jacobsen & Barnes 2020; Stachowiak-Krzyżan 2019). The field of digital marketing has been an important topic due to its relevance in today's society. Therefore, research has been conducted regarding how digital marketing can be effectively used towards Generation Z, and likewise what is not preferable within the generation. This will further be presented in the theory section.

1.1.4 Ethical aspects of promoting addictive substances

The tobacco- and nicotine market is often characterized by its many rules and regulations that companies must abide by. Sweden is known as a country where there are many rules in relation to how companies may market controversial products such as nicotine and alcohol. As the marketing of these controversial products can have a major impact on the perception of the products by different target groups, it is often necessary to develop government regulations regarding how the marketing may look like and who the tobacco companies are allowed to target (Franck, Fillion, Kimmelman, Grad & Eisenberg 2016). Furthermore, the white snus is branded as tobacco-free thus it avoids the regulated legislation that the government has established. Therefore, these products have free rein when it comes to promoting the products. The label “tobacco-free”, also acts as a strategic feature that makes it easier for consumers to look at the product and see it as less harmful compared to cigarettes. However, A Non Smoking Generation counters this statement by arguing that all nicotine products are made from tobacco and can, therefore, in their opinion, not be tobacco-free (A None Smoking Generation, 2020). Some regulations regarding the branding of tobacco products consist of limited communication regarding the product, meaning that it is only the relevant information concerning the product that is allowed to be communicated. Images of tobacco products should furthermore only be showing the product and/or the package and there should be no association that can be related to the product (Konsumentverket, 2021).

The lack of regulations regarding white snus has led tobacco and nicotine providers to use a more controversial form of branding, which consists of influencer marketing where individuals with a high amount of followers are able to promote the products to a younger target group by selling not only the product but also the lifestyle that comes along. This has been affecting the public debate on whether there should be the same regulations for white snus as other tobacco products. The current situation is, however, that brands are allowed to use traditional marketing strategies to sell these types of products (Konsumentverket, 2021).

1.2 Problematization

The general purpose of this study is to understand how a brand on the nicotine market is conducting strategic communication in order to brand their regulated products towards Generation Z. The relevance of this study is related to the massive increase in nicotine consumption among high school students in Sweden. Politicians and the organisation A Non Smoking Generation argues that this is the result of a loophole in the legislation regarding tobacco free snus (A None Smoking Generation, 2020). Thus, this study is of high relevance in relation to the field of strategic communication as it examines a controversial topic where the ethical aspects regarding the strategic communication in relation to the product, are a part of the societal discourse in Sweden. Furthermore there is limited research regarding the product in relation to strategic communication as it is a fairly new product. Therefore we believe that this study will provide new insights regarding how strategic communication is conducted in order to brand and sell a regulated product to a young consumer segment in Sweden.

Furthermore, it is relevant to take previous research into account in order to gain an understanding of similar research within the same field of studies. The market for nicotine is an area that has been researched extensively, especially regarding how nicotine- and tobacco companies market their products to young individuals. A similar product to white snus is e-cigarettes and vapor products, where multiple research has been conducted as a result of an increase in the consumption among young individuals. The increased consumption was partly a result of the intense marketing that many of the providers used to target a younger generation (Hillstrom, 2019). Moreover, research of how the package design of nicotine- and tobacco products can affect the perception of the product has been made, in order to investigate if there is a link between how the appearance of the product can affect the consumers' demand for buying a product (Hoek, Gendall, Gifford, Pirikahu, McCool, Pene, Edwards & Thomson, 2012). The prior research that has been conducted can be helpful in order to understand how other nicotine and tobacco products have been branded effectively towards young consumers in the past. More specifically what strategic communication that these particular companies have used to brand their regulated products.

1.3 Aim

In order to understand how the relationship between the white snus and the generation has been developed, the study takes a closer look at the branding strategies that have proven efficient when branding towards Generation Z. By digging deeper into the strategic communication that have been developed by LYFT, a brand who has been efficient in their marketing, the study aims to analyze if there is a connection between the generations' preferred marketing and the one that has been conducted by LYFT. Lastly, the findings will be discussed and problematized using a critical approach.

1.4 Research question

Based on our aim, we find it highly relevant to gain a deeper understanding of how the nicotine market is branding their products towards Generation Z. Thus, it is crucial to understand how the brands are using strategic communication, more particularly, what branding strategies are being used. In order to examine this problem, the study will aim to answer the following research question:

How are LYFT branding a regulated product toward Generation Z?

The research question will be answered by analyzing six selected images using a visual semiotic model. This will be further explained in section 3.

1.5 Disposition

The disposition of this research is divided into five different sections, which will be further explained. The first section contains an introduction to the study, including a chapter regarding the background for the study, which are subchapters of the increased consumption of white snus, information about LYFT, an overview of marketing on a generational level and lastly a subchapter about the ethical aspects of promoting addictive substances. Moreover, the introduction outlines the scope of this study, including problematization, aim, research question and disposition.

Furthermore, the theoretical framework has been combined with previous research and consists of two main chapters, which are previous research and theories within the framework of strategic communication. The subchapters regarding previous research introduce previous

research within the field of branding and marketing restricted products in relation to young consumers as well as a subchapter regarding how to reach digital natives by conduction strategic communication. The subchapters regarding theories include theories within the field of strategic communication such as customer involvement and co-creation, inclusive marketing, word-of-mouth, symbolic consumption, generation marketing and influencer marketing. Lastly, the theories and their relevance in relation to this study is reflected upon in a summary of the theories. In the section regarding the methodological framework, a further explanation of the choices regarding the scientific approach, method of analysis and selection and data will be explained. Furthermore, a reflection regarding the methodological choices will be presented. In the analysis section, six selected images are analyzed using a visual semiotic model. Lastly, the discussion will contribute to an in-depth analysis of the findings from the visual analysis. This leads to the conclusion of the final findings from the study and lastly there will be suggestions for future research.

2 Theoretical framework & previous research

The following chapter presents and explores theories that are relevant to this study. It is divided into two main categories: Previous research and Theories. The category regarding previous research includes the subchapters marketing regulated products and reaching digital natives. The subchapters that are included under Theories consist of theories within the framework of strategic communication such as customer involvement and co-creation, inclusive marketing, word-of-mouth, symbolic consumption, generation marketing and influencer marketing.

2.1 Previous research

2.1.1 Branding and marketing regulated products

The branding and marketing of nicotine and tobacco products has always been a highly relevant topic in terms of research since many providers of these tobacco products have been using several forms of marketing strategies to target different audiences. This has therefore been discussed in terms of research due to the ethical dilemmas that can occur when controversial products are being branded the same way as regular products.

In 2019, Netflix published the documentary *Broken* tackling a vaping company called Juul, which has become the go-to product among young individuals in the US (Johansen, 2019). The company Juul used intense push-marketing, which took place on various social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Youtube (Hillstrom, 2019). The advertising that was sent out from the company was mostly photos of young people in their twenties holding or using their product. The photos were set in festive environments such as nightclubs and parties, which lead to the product becoming a symbol for these specific types of events. In addition, the company used influencer marketing and encouraged their followers to use various hashtags to share their images of the product (Hillstrom, 2019). The documentary is based on research that is relevant to this study as it examines how a nicotine product was marketed towards young individuals via social media, as well as how a controversial product can be promoted by using branding strategies that are proven to be effective towards Generation Z.

Furthermore, a study examining the symbolic consumption that lies behind the youth's consumption of tobacco products was conducted in 2012 and published by the academic journal

Qualitative Health Research. In the study, the researchers interviewed a group of young people who answered questions about the graphic design of cigarette packs and then answered the question concerning how their consumption is affected by the appearance of the packs (Hoek et al, 2012). The participants in the study were asked how they related to cigarette packs with a generic design. The answer showed that social status was degraded and deteriorated. An empty design removed symbolic elements of their identity and evoked negative perceptions of consuming tobacco products (Hoek et al., 2012). This type of research can be considered relevant as it is crucial to understand whether the packaging design of the nicotine products can influence the decision-making when purchasing tobacco and nicotine products.

2.1.2 Reaching digital natives

The field of generation marketing has gained more attention in terms of research within the field of marketing and strategic communication, and more studies are trying to understand how brands can engage with the new generation of consumers (Chaney, Touzani & Slimane, 2017).

In order to define a branding strategy, it is important to explore the brand ecology, which is based on the behavioral aspects of brand consumption (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy, & Pervan, 2015). In order to do so, the brand must understand how the consumption of their product is being integrated with wider social and cultural experiences. Generation Z's brand-related behavior differs markedly from previous generations, which is based on the fact that the generation has grown up in a digitalized world. As a result, their attitudes and preferences are different from the previous generations. As the generation has been accustomed to interacting with technology from an early age, it also means that they have a lifelong experience of using these solutions themselves (Munsch, 2021). A study regarding Generation Z responding to digital marketing showed that a message sent by an influencer, relating in less than 30 seconds, has the greatest potential to get the generation's attention (Munsch, 2021). In addition, the research showed that communication delivered through an influencer is perceived to be more relevant and authentic compared to traditional digital marketing (Munsch, 2021). Furthermore, it is recommended to have strong visual elements in order to capture the attention of these digital cheetahs (Skolos & Wedell, 2011). Research has shown that Generation Z has adapted to the visually communicative environment and is, therefore, able to process visual information faster than previous generations (Fromm & Read, 2018).

Generation Z also prefers personalized advertisements that help to entertain and provide the right information. A research study regarding mobile advertising to Generation Z has shown that the generation prefers digital marketing that is fast-responding, entertaining, gives the consumer control and provides personal benefits (Smith, 2019). Another important role is personal suggestions about new products or services. This kind of service makes it easier for the generation as it reduces the time to look for the right products (Smith, 2019). Furthermore, there are several important factors that apply when sending a message to Generation Z using digital marketing. The generation has expectations of a quick response and an immediate opportunity for call to action. Due to this impatience, it is important to have a simple experience that makes it easy and fast to navigate to the product itself or the company's website (Smith, 2019).

2.2 Theories

2.2.1 Customer involvement and co-creation

As a result of the increased use of social media, it is crucial to create an understanding of how customers can be more involved in the process. This has led to the concept of customer engagement, which has gained a great matter of importance for brands in today's society (Palmatier, Kumar & Harmeling, 2018). When reaching out to Generation Z, it is a great advantage if brands are willing to participate in an interactive process with the individuals. The generation prefers advertisements that make it possible to be part of a reciprocal process or to see what happens after they have been involved in making a decision (Southgate, 2017). This may be a result of the generation having grown up with social media where they have encountered various dynamic and swipe-able functions on a daily basis, thus, having felt involved in the process from an early stage (Southgate, 2017). The need for being involved and a part of co-creation is also shown by the generation's high demand for personalized products (Francis & Hoefel, 2018).

The customers who are highly committed also tend to be loyal customers and are thus more likely to buy a company's products repeatedly. In terms of customer engagement, it has become easier for a customer to be involved in one's favorite brand due to the context on social media, which makes it possible to have a two-way dialogue (Brand strategies for elevating love, loyalty, and engagement, 2020).

A study regarding consumers' perception of brands' customer engagement strategies on social media, shows that if a brand is interactive on social media, customers are more willing to buy the brand's product. Furthermore, they are more likely to share their experience and perception with friends and family (Bozkurt, Gligor & Babin, 2020), which results in a positive word-of-mouth (Cheung & To, 2020). In addition, customers are also more willing to enter into a mutual relationship with the brand, and to provide feedback and suggestions.

As social media creates the basis for a common dialogue, there are also great opportunities for companies to create an emotional journey for the customer, by making them feel seen and heard. When the customer becomes part of this emotional journey, there will also be an opportunity for the customer to participate in co-creation (Brand strategies for elevating love, loyalty, and engagement, 2020). Co-creation is done by satisfied customers sharing their positive experiences with others. There are several different aspects of why consumers want to engage in such processes. Some of these factors include learning and prestige (Brand strategies for elevating love, loyalty, and engagement, 2020).

2.2.2 Inclusive marketing

According to Åkestam (2017) inclusive marketing and communication is beneficial in, not only one but two meanings. In her Ph.D. thesis *Understanding Advertising Stereotypes*, she states that advertisements with inclusive messages are getting more appreciation than those only including people with features that are according to established norms, regardless of who the target group is. Furthermore, the brand gains more appreciation from working with a more inclusive approach. The other effect is that the receiver claims to experience a stronger social connection to other people and a stronger sense of empathy.

As earlier mentioned, Generation Z has different attitudes towards brand perception compared to other generations. They prefer to see brands as their friend meaning that brands should be communicating with the generation as someone they know (Fromm & Read, 2018). This also means that it is important to adapt to the same level of communication and speak the same language as the generation in order to develop a reciprocal relationship (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy & Pervan, 2015). In addition, 67 percent of Generation Z prefer to be marketed to by “real people” over celebrities (Deep Focus, 2015). They are also more critical regarding what they see or read on social media as 24 percent of Generation Z 12-15-year-olds

felt that things they saw on social media were either entirely or mostly true in comparison with the 40 percent of 12 -15-year-olds that answered in 2010 (Duffy, Shrimpton, Clemence, Thomas, Whyte-Smith & Abboud, 2018).

Generation Z has helped to create a more progressive growth in relation to discrimination and equality, and today the generation is for example much less restrictive in relation to the traditional gender roles (Duffy et al., 2018). Generation Z has also changed the norms in relation to gender neutrality, which today has become less strict among young individuals (Duffy et al., 2018). Furthermore, Generation Z seems to be less interested in buying gendered products (Duffy et al., 2018). Brands must therefore adapt their marketing to the changing values of their target group. The generation's attitudes towards equality can be reflected in the constant development that takes place in society. This is of great importance to brands, and it is important to take into account generational expectations regarding diversity and inclusion.

2.2.3 Word-of-mouth

Research has shown that word-of-mouth marketing is one of the most preferred methods among marketers. It is often stated that positive word-of-mouth can be a marketer's most valuable tool since a recommendation from a trusted family member or friend has an important role in a consumer's decision-making process (Buttle & Groeger, 2017). The use of word-of-mouth between consumers is often brought to life when there is a need to reduce a consumption risk and thereby seeking information regarding a product or service, for example, what restaurant to visit (Buttle & Groeger, 2017). One of the benefits of word-of-mouth marketing is its lower cost and the fast delivery that comes along with the strategy (Trusov, Bucklin & Pauwels, 2009).

One of the reasons why word-of-mouth is considered to be one of the most legitimate and effective marketing strategies is that the consumer gets the feeling that an assessment of a product has been reviewed by people who look like and behave like themselves (Allsop, Bassett & Hoskins, 2007). This can be an effective way for the customers to gain trust regarding the decision of buying a product if someone who is trusted and familiar to them suggests the product. Furthermore, this is a relevant marketing strategy to include in this study as Generation Z is more influenced by their real-life friends than anyone else. The difference from the previous generations is that the validation does not come from their immediate circle and is communicated via social media (Fromm & Read, 2018).

2.2.4 Symbolic consumption

One of the most striking features of Generation Z is their constant hunt for constructing an identity. Due to the great need to constantly construct one's own identity, consumption becomes an important part of the individual's self-expression (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy, & Pervan, 2015). This is shown by consuming based on how one wants to be seen in social contexts, which helps to create the social-symbolism identity.

When talking about the symbolic meaning between a brand and a consumer, one depicts between two different directions. The first is about social symbolism, which means that one identifies with a particular brand or product, which has an important significance for an individual's identity formation in relation to how one will appear to other people in a social environment (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy & Pervan, 2015). The second direction is about self-symbolism, which is a narrative used to communicate who we are or how we wish to be perceived by others (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy & Pervan, 2015). Furthermore, when brands are creating a specific type of image regarding a product, it becomes a type of personality in which a particular type of consumer can identify themselves with (Beasley & Danesi, 2010).

According to Belks (1998), the extended self is a concept of identity which is about the way the individual uses consumption to create an identity. The theory suggests that one constructs one's identity through the possessions one buys, and in this encounter one uses the possessions that are bought to ascribe certain attributes to the self. In addition, Belks' theory regarding the extended self (1998) explains that if an individual is asked how they would define themselves, the usual answer is based on what things they own. The possessions one owns, therefore, become an important element in the individual's identity creation, and in this way individuals attribute a certain identity based on what they buy (Belks, 1988).

One of the great examples of creating symbolic meaning is Edward Bernays, who created a campaign in 1929 that became world-famous as "torches of freedom", where the cigarette became a symbol for women's freedom since the cigarette exclusively was a habit that belonged to men (Leal, Freire Filho & Rocha, 2016). Fast forward a hundred years and e-cigarettes have been gaining popularity on a global level among young individuals as the product itself became a symbol for the average teen (Nedelman, Selig & Azad, 2018).

2.2.5 Influencer marketing

An influencer is a person who has gained popularity and engagement on a social media platform and is, therefore, able to influence and share content with a larger audience (Haenlein, Anadol, Farnsworth, Hugo, Hunichen & Welte, 2020). With an increasing amount of platforms and high speed, it is getting harder for brands to buy their way into the consumer's minds. According to Fromm & Read (2018), the key to target Generation Z is authenticity, therefore a preferred strategy is to humanize the brand. Influencer marketing is a way of humanizing a brand as it gives the audience someone to relate to (Fromm & Read, 2018).

The field of influencer marketing has grown tremendously during the last years, and influencers are now considered among some of the most influential people in the branding industry. Thus, influencer marketing has become an important part of the branding culture and many brands have prioritized using influencers as their main type of advertising for their products, especially brands working with a business-to-consumer strategy (Haenlein et al., 2020). Traditional paid advertising is no longer engaging compared to earlier, so it is important for marketers to understand how to choose the right social media platforms and methods in order to gain the attention of the target audience (Quesenberry, 2018).

The shift on new social media platforms such as Instagram and Tiktok has resulted in a new development when it comes to branding, and it has become more attractive to promote a product by making influencers be the voice for a brand (Haenlein et al., 2020). It is also important to mention that it is crucial for a brand to collaborate with an influencer that shares the same values as the brand itself. Therefore, it is important for a brand to ensure that they are identifying the right influencers who are able to reach out to a relevant segment and furthermore have legitimately to use the product that they are promoting (Haenlein et al., 2020).

2.2.6 Summary of the theoretical framework

The theoretical framework applied to this study consists of customer involvement and co-creation, inclusive marketing, word-of-mouth, symbolic consumption and influencer marketing. The chosen theoretical framework is of high relevance to this study since these particular branding strategies can be applied to the ones that are used by brands on the nicotine market. Furthermore, the theoretical framework is linked to the strategic communication that is proven to be effective towards Generation Z.

The theoretical framework regarding customer involvement and co-creation can be applied in order to understand how brands are communicating in order to engage with their customers as a response to Generation Z high demand for personalized products and involvement. Furthermore, the field of inclusive marketing has gained popularity due to the younger generations' demand for a more transparent approach towards diversity and inclusivity in companies' branding and advertising material. In addition, it is of high importance to use the theories regarding inclusive marketing to understand how a more diverse approach in branding material could be a way of trying to be more efficient towards Generation Z. Moreover, word-of-mouth is a theory that is often discussed due to its great effectiveness. The younger generations are using social media platforms to share and discuss products. Thus the theory regarding word-of-mouth can be applied to this study in order to explore how a brand can engage its customer by inspiring the consumers to spread the word regarding the products to one another. Additionally, symbolic consumption theory suggests that one consumes based on who we are or how we wish to be perceived by others, or as a way to construct one's identity. In regard to this study, symbolic consumption is a theory of high relevance since it can be used to understand what particular symbolic values that are being communicated in the material. These values can contribute to creating certain values that can attract the target audience's perception of the products.

Lastly, influencer marketing is one of the most effective marketing strategies in today's society (Haenlein et al., 2020). Research shows that Generation Z prefers to be marketed to by real people instead of companies (Deep Focus, 2015). Thus it is of importance to understand how this branding strategy works and therefore will this study focus on gathering material posted by influencers promoting white snus.

3 Methodological framework

The following section consists of a description of the scientific approach and methodology that will be used in the research study. Furthermore, an explanation of the analysis method will be provided followed by a justification of selection and data. Lastly, a chapter regarding methodological reflection is included.

3.1 Scientific approach

This study will be operated by a qualitative research method since the aim of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon instead of explaining it. A qualitative research method is relevant in a research study where the purpose is to produce in-depth information within a specific area (Boyle & Schmierback, 2015).

Furthermore, the study has an inductive approach since the research is based on observations regarding an increased use of white snus among Generation Z. Thus, we will focus on developing a theoretical understanding of LYFT's branding and the connection towards the generation of young consumers. The inductive approach is relevant in a research paper where the aim is not to test hypotheses or theories but rather begin with observations that later can be used in part of developing theories (Boyle & Schmierback, 2015).

The ontological perspective is constructed from a social constructivist point of view with a critical stand, meaning that reality is created in a social context. The social constructivist perspective argues that all individuals create their own social reality (Wennerberg, 2010). Furthermore, the paper will be conducted with an explanatory research method from a critical perspective, due to the desire to understand the connection between LYFT's branding and the increased use of white snus among young consumers. An explanatory research design is relevant due to the limited research regarding the field of why the use of white snus has increased, meaning that we as researchers will have to find possible explanations by exploring the case of LYFT and the branding material (Boyle & Schmierback, 2015).

3.2 Method of analysis

The study is based on a qualitative method using empirical material gathered from different digital communication media used by LYFT in order to brand and market themselves. After gathering material a visual-semiotic analysis will be conducted. In order to conduct a visual-semiotic analysis successfully, a guideline consisting of two questions regarding what the observable signifiers of the ads are as well as the signifieds that they suggest will be followed. As earlier mentioned, this study is conducted from a social-constructivist perspective, meaning the results will be influenced by the author's perception of reality. However, we do strive to stay objective in our roles as researchers. Therefore we have conducted the analysis separately in order to not influence each other. After the separate analysis, we combined our individual reflections in order to answer the two questions of the guideline.

3.2.1 Visual semiotics

The term sign is one of the most important tools in modern semiology. The sign's relevance descends from Ferdinand de Saussure, who developed a systematic and universal understanding of how language works (Rose, 2016). The main point was that the sign plays an important role in the formation of the language. According to Bergström (2016), a sign can be a letter, a series of letters, or an image. Moreover, Bergström (2016) states that all kinds of communication, except for audible and body language, are based on these signs. The sign consists of two parts; first, it is the signified which consists of an object or a kind of concept. The second part consists of the signifier, which is a sound or an image that belongs to a signified. It is also important to point out that there does not necessarily have to be a real relationship between the signifier and the signified, but they can appear as independent components (Rose, 2016). Furthermore, the stability that is connected towards the signified and a signifier are not necessarily inherent and further connected, but can instead be connected towards the relationship between a particular sign and others (Rose, 2016). Lastly, these signs are a part of the semiotic triangle, which consists of the sign, the object, and the interpreter (Bergström, 2016).

3.2.2 Semiotic approach to advertising

A relevant method when applying a semiotic approach to advertising is the Barthesian visual-semiotics model. After publishing the work *Mythologies* in 1957, Barthes paved the way for the development of a new branch of research in semiotics, focusing on how advertising generates its meaning (Beasley & Danesi, 2002). The Barthesian visual-semiotics focus on the image itself as well as the contemporary cultural context it exists in. This is also referred to as a “surface” level and an “underlying” one. The aim of semiotics in the study of advertising is to unmask the hidden meanings in the underlying level. Therefore this will be an appropriate method for analyzing advertising as it allows in-depth critical readings of both verbal and visual language. When it comes to analyzing the sign's meaning in relation to advertisements, the main point is to analyze the signified meanings and their connection to the advertisement signifiers. In addition, the aim is to investigate the way in which the signifiers and signified are attached or detached from or to each other (Rose, 2016).

When performing a semiotic analysis, one can study the relationship between the signifiers and signifieds in brand descriptions, advertisements and brand design by following a series of questions that can help to understand the relationship between the symbolic meanings (Beasley & Danesi, 2002). In order to successfully analyze the meaning and symbols behind the content of LYFT's branding, a specific guideline will be followed during the analysis. This guideline consists of two different questions which are suggested in the book *Persuasive Signs* (Beasley & Danesi, 2010). The authors suggest that asking what the observable signifiers of the ads are as well as the signifieds that they suggest are relevant when conducting a semiotic analysis based on advertising material. Furthermore, in order to conduct the analysis, we will also focus on components that are suggested by Bergström (2016) when using a visual semiotic model. These components are composition, colours and the cooperation between text and image.

3.3 Selection and data

The data material used in this study consists of material found on LYFT's Instagram account as well as material posted by influencers sponsored by LYFT. We have chosen to use the material on these platforms, as it is clear that LYFT is the direct or indirect sender.

In order to examine how LYFT has created a brand for Generation Z, it is relevant to select data from the brand's social media platforms. As the brand is active on various social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, it is relevant to look at the content that is published. Since LYFT is currently having a higher amount of followers on their Instagram account compared to their Facebook site, it is of higher relevance to analyze the material that can be found on LYFT's Instagram profile. In addition, Instagram is the preferable platform since it is easier to catch Generation Z's attention by showing visual images instead of text-related material (Fromm, 2018). This study is also based on a brand perspective, and not a consumer perspective, as the goal is to examine how LYFT has created a brand for Generation Z. We have therefore limited the study to understand the branding that LYFT itself has published, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the strategic communication that the brand has chosen to work with.

A selection of a total of six images published by LYFT as well as influencers that LYFT is collaborating with has been chosen in order to conduct a semiotic analysis. In order to achieve a deeper understanding of the meaning behind the branding material, an analysis will be conducted by taking a deeper look into the content that is published by LYFT and the influencers who are collaborating with the brand. Due to the limitations of the study, the amount of data has been limited to six images in order to conduct an in-depth analysis of each of the images. Furthermore, a criteria when choosing the images posted by the influencers is that the image must be marked as a sponsored collaboration with LYFT. The influencers are chosen randomly from the top 50 influencers who have used the hashtag #openthecan. After randomly picking a name, a randomization of their content in collaboration with LYFT from the past two years made the decision as objective as possible.

3.4 Methodological reflection

The study has been conducted by using a qualitative research method, which is useful when the researcher aspires to gain a deeper understanding of phenomena. However, there are some aspects that are important to be aware of when conducting this type of research. A qualitative research method is made by a researcher's own interpretation of a specific problem, meaning that it is not a universal statement that is recognizable by a larger sample of a population (Esaiasson, 2017). This study is conducted by two young female students from Nordic countries. As mentioned in the method of analysis chapter, our perception and connotations in the analysis are subjective, thus hard to replicate and generalize, which affects the validity of the study. Furthermore, it could be argued that the authors do belong to the target group for the marketing ads due to age and gender, meaning that it can affect our interpretation of the study. The first intention of this study was to get an inside perspective from LYFT in order to gain information about the actual target group and strategies. After several attempts to contact the marketing manager of LYFT with no answer, we came to the conclusion that this would not be possible due to the time frame. This will affect the reliability of the study as we do not have a first-hand source to confirm that the branding strategies identified by the authors are intentional (Esaiasson, 2017). Lastly, the pronoun “they” will be used when referring to a person whose gender expression may not follow stereotypical gender norms such as female or masculine.

4 Analysis

In this chapter a visual semiotic analysis will be conducted of the empirical material which consists of six images published by LYFT or by influencers sponsored by LYFT. The analysis will first determine the signifier and possible signifieds of the images. Furthermore, the findings will be summarized and reflected upon in relation to each other.

4.1 A semiotic analysis of images from LYFT's Instagram profile

4.1.1 Analysis of image 1



Ej under 18 år. Denna produkt innehåller nikotin som är ett mycket beroendeframkallande ämne.



Synes godt om fra sthlm.tobak og andre

lyft_sverige Doften av nyrostat kaffe tillsammans med krämiga noter av hasselnöt får oss att tro att det är morgon hela dagen. Upptäck Blonde Roast du också! #LYFT #OpenTheCan

Image 1: Retrieved 26 April 2021 from Instagram account @lyft_sverige

What are the observable signifiers of the ads?

The picture consists of a woman in her 20's sitting at a table. She smiles with her teeth and looks into the camera that is in front of her. Her hair is slicked back and the photo is cropped at approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of her forehead. She is wearing a top with a zipper that has been opened up enough to indicate that she has a few tattoos under it. In addition to these, she has also got one tattoo just above her collarbone saying "HEJ" which is the Swedish word for "Hello". Her elbows are pointing out from her body with her arms resting on the table.

In the foreground, we see five objects that have been placed on the wooden board. Closest to her is a white porcelain cup and a glass bowl containing a smoothie and granola. A bit further away we see a bouquet of different coloured dried blossoms in a vase with a hand-made look and a candle in a brass chandelier. Closest to the camera and furthest away from her is a package of LYFT which is out of focus and therefore a bit blurry.

The light brown colour of the woman's top, the blush colour of the smoothie, and the blossoms are coherent with the colour of LYFT's logo and other graphic elements on the packaging. The caption explains the following text "The aroma of freshly roasted coffee together with creamy notes of hazelnut makes us believe that it is morning all day. Discover Blonde Roast You Too! #LYFT #openthecan" (Image 1).

Lastly, the image contains a footer with a warning text "Not under 18 years. This product contains nicotine which is a highly addictive substance."

What are the signifieds that these signifiers suggest?

The facial expression, which is what caught the viewer's immediate attention (Bergström, 2016), can be interpreted in a way that consuming the product will lead to positive emotions as well as a positive experience. Based on the information we are given in the caption, the LYFT product is of the flavour "blonde roast" which they describe as coffee and hazelnut. We can only assume that there is coffee in the cup and that LYFT is suggesting that this particular flavour goes well with coffee. This image is based on the assumption that the brand-related behavior for this product is consumed as a treat together with coffee, maybe after a meal. This creates a sense of the brand ecology (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy & Pervan, 2015). The smoothie bowl adds healthy effects to the context which indicates that this is coherent with a healthy lifestyle.

One could argue that her smile and the tattoo of the Swedish word “hello” in handwriting font indicate that she is an easy-going and laid-back person. Furthermore, the camera angle gives the viewer a point of view as if they are to sit on the opposite side of the table with her. This creates an inviting feeling that suggests that the viewer and the model are having a nice time over some coffee. The placement of the product also indicates that it is placed in the middle of the table suggesting that it is being shared between viewer and model.

The objects on the table also reinforce this light and friendly feeling as they are not placed in any particular or noticeable order. The hand-made vase brings a touch of wabi sabi to the picture, meaning it is aesthetically pleasing because of its human imperfection. This gives the image an organic look. If we divide the picture into three pieces according to the “rules of thirds” (Bergström, 2016) we can see that the top third consists of her gaze which draws attention. And the bottom third consists of the LYFT product. This constellation with a foreground creates a depth that draws the viewer in. Her elbows pointing outwards opens up her body and the picture. The image also consists of colourful blossoms that add a romantic feeling to the situation as well as the warm colour palette. The coherent colour palette creates a harmony that “whispers” to the audience (Bergström, 2016). Even though there are a few different objects to observe, the perception of this image is still, warm and calm because of its coherent colours tying it all together. Furthermore, the model’s skin may reflect on LYFT using an inclusive marketing strategy and proving to their audience that they are aware of the need for representation and diversity within advertising (Åkestam, 2017).

The caption describes the scent of freshly roasted coffee and creamy notes of hazelnut. It goes on to describe the connotations of this scent as to it being morning. This gives the image a new context as it gives it a timestamp, suggesting the woman in the image is having breakfast. Her smile indicates that she is excited about the day ahead. This suggests that consuming LYFT will give you a good start of the day, a pick-me-up or a “lift” which in Swedish translates to “LYFT”. The name “blonde roast” invokes the connotation of roasted coffee beans. Blonde roast might be lighter and softer, as the taste of coffee with milk. This connects back to the colour palette consisting of warm brown colours that could be compared to the colour of coffee with milk.

4.1.2 Analysis of image 2



Image 2: Retrieved 26 April 2021 from Instagram account @lyft_sverige

What are the observable signifiers of the ads?

The observable signifiers firstly consist of two people in their early twenties who are posing in front of a green brick wall. The person to the left is a blonde caucasian and the person to the right is a female with long black hair and Asian facial features. The blonde, who is centered to the left side of the image, is standing in a relaxed pose, resting their weight on one hip and head tilted slightly from the camera. They have one of LYFT's products in their right hand that is placed by their hip while looking directly into the camera. The photo is taken from below, making them look down at it. They are dressed in a retro-looking, clear blue windbreaker with a red stripe, a dark green flannel shirt underneath, and blue jeans.

The female is resting her body on a pole that is covered in graffiti tags. She is gazing towards the right top corner of the image. She is also dressed in a retro-looking windbreaker, but of the colour brown. Her trousers are dark and she wears a black and white dogtooth patterned bucket hat. The caption that belongs to the image says “Enjoy a fresh Easy Mint in good company! Who are you sharing with?” (Image 2). Lastly, the caption includes two calls to action as it asks the audience to visit their website and use a discount code and with the hashtag #openthecan.

Lastly, Image 2 also contains a footer with a warning text “Not under 18 years. This product contains nicotine which is a highly addictive substance”.

What are the signifieds that these signifiers suggest?

The two people that appear in the picture posted by LYFT, consist of several signifiers that can be interpreted as young, authentic, and underground inspired circumstances. This can be observed at, among other things, the location, which consists of green tiles, bricks, and graffiti, giving the image an urban look. In addition to this, their garments and overall style can be classified as alternative as it does not necessarily follow current fashion trends. The fact that some of the garments have a retro look suggests that they could be thrifted, which is a sustainable way of consuming. This indicates that the two people in the picture are conscious when consuming. Their similar fashion styles indicate that they both share this conscious way of thinking about consumption which leads us to think that they are friends.

This image also shows diversion in ethnicity and perhaps even in gender identification as the blonde has a look that could be interpreted as gender-neutral. The diversity in this image in combination with the indication of their friendship suggests that they are inclusive and conscious people. Furthermore, the camera angle is giving us the impression of power as they have to look down on us (Bergström, 2016).

There are a few different functions of the colours that can be identified. According to Bergström (2016) red is a signal colour. The red stripe on the windbreaker worn by the blonde is calling for attention. The blonde hair and the white packaging design of the LYFT product are also standing out from the green background. The female to the right is not meeting our gaze and wearing colours that harmonize with the rest of the picture. As faces and eyes are the components of an image that draws the most attention (Bergström, 2016), it is clear that the

focus in this image is on the blonde as they are looking straight into the camera. Their eyes and bright coloured clothes are leading us to the product in their hand, without them having to showcase it with an unnatural pose.

Lastly, the caption that belongs to the picture says that one should enjoy the product in good company. This reinforces the signified that the two people in the image are, in fact, friends. In addition to this, a question is asked about who to share the experience with. This suggests that you are part of a social convention when consuming the product and that it should be a shared experience. The casual way of showing off the product invokes connotations of a friend who just offered the viewer a taste of the product. This, in combination with the caption encouraging sharing the product, creates a sense of being invited into the image. As mentioned in the theory, turning a brand into a friend is a strategy that has proved to be successful when targeting Generation Z (Fromm & Read, 2018). Furthermore, the caption explicitly encourages the viewer to buy and consume the product and offers a discount code. The hashtag #openthecan suggests that one should open the can of snus in order to consume it. It could also be interpreted that one should “open the can” once and for all, thus start consuming the product. Furthermore, it could be interpreted as a way of encouraging sharing the product with a friend as it has a linguistic likeness to “open up your home [to someone]”.

4.1.3 Analysis of image 3



Image 3: Retrieved 12 August 2021 from Instagram account @lyft_sverige

What are the observable signifiers of the ads?

The image introduces the Swedish music duo Klara & Jag consisting of the two women Klara (right) and Johanna (left). The females are posing sitting down on a staircase and the camera is placed in front of them. Johanna is dressed in a red shirt and blue jeans and Klara is wearing a white blouse, white trousers and black leather boots. They are both wearing sunglasses. Johanna is holding a can of LYFT with one hand and points with her other hand on an iPhone screen that Klara is holding up right next to the can. Their faces are turned down and inwards towards these objects. The position of their heads and their sunglasses results in their faces being mostly covered, but their gazes seem to be turned towards the screen and Klara's mouth is slightly open as if she is speaking. Their bodies create a frame of which the objects are the center.

Furthermore, their gazes and the pointing finger create a natural way for the viewer to find the focus of the image.

The caption reads “Enrich your late summer with music from the pop duo Klara & Jag. Through your midsummer Night box, you get access to a unique cover of these two stars on one of our most popular songs #LYFT #TapTheCan #LYFTDayAndNight”.

Lastly the image has a footer with the warning “Not under 18 years. This product contains nicotine which is a highly addictive substance.”

What are the signifieds that these signifiers suggest?

Unlike the previous two images posted by LYFT that are included in this analysis, this image consists of two artists, mentioned by name, instead of models that are not mentioned by name. This could be a strategic way of instantly catching the viewer’s attention and awakening their curiosity. Klara & Jag has been number one on Spotify’s most viral songs in Sweden and the genre is Swedish pop.

Furthermore, the composition and the poses in the image indicate that the photo is spontaneously taken in a relaxed environment where the two artists are casually sitting down on a staircase. Their garments suggest that they are dressed for a festive occasion and the cool material indicates that it is summertime. Johanna’s pointed finger and Klaras slightly opened mouth suggests that they are having a conversation about something regarding the objects in their hands. Since they are two individuals who are holding one of LYFT’s products and are trying to engage in the campaign, it could indicate that it is a shared social experience.

The campaign called Tap the Can is a limited edition campaign that has been developed on the Swedish market. The purpose of the campaign is to create consumer engagement, by giving the consumers the opportunity to receive awards, discover different experiences and also receive music that is personally designed for a limited selection of the products, by tapping the can (Packaging Europe, 2020). The campaign is a strategic way of letting the consumers receive personalized features, and also by letting them be a part of a co-creation process. The caption urges the viewer to join the artists in taking part in this campaign that will allow the viewer to share a unique experience, which is a cover by Klara & Jag on one of Sweden's most loved songs. The fact that the title of the song is left out could also be a way of intrigue the viewer into joining the campaign.

4.1.4 Results of the analysis of images from LYFT's Instagram profile

The images posted by LYFT showed similarities in how the caption and image cooperate as the brand ecology has been integrated into text and image in all three of the images. Thus, there has been a great focus on establishing brand-related behavior in relation to consuming the products. This behavior could be understood when LYFT uses different symbolic cognitions to communicate different values. These cognitions included, among other things, a specific behavior such as expressing a positive attitude which could be interpreted as consuming the product will lead to being a part of a delighted experience. Theory regarding Generation Z suggests that 67 percent of Generation Z prefer to be marketed to by “real people” over celebrities (Deep Focus, 2015). This can be applied in the context of Image 1, which is an example of an everyday scenario of a morning including coffee and breakfast. This behaviour was then reinforced by LYFT in their captions explicitly stating that one should consume their product over a cup of coffee in Image 1. Furthermore, this sort of statement could also be found in the caption of Image 2 when encouraging the consumer to consume the product in the company of a friend. Furthermore, the latter statement could generate other branding strategies such as word-of-mouth by asking the consumers who they would like to share the product with.

Image 1 has a calming voice with a harmonizing warm colour palette and a model that communicates happiness and satisfaction. Image 2 has an urban and authentic voice with serious models and a darker colour palette consisting of colder hues. Lastly, Image 3 has a more happy, festive voice with bright colors and festive clothes. Thus, the images are different in colours and composition. The visual discrepancy between the images is remarkable as they are from the same sender, but have completely different visual expressions. This could be due to Generation Z's demand for authenticity (Duffy et al., 2018). If LYFT's Instagram page would consist homogeneously of smiles, warm colors and festive clothes it may not be interpreted as authentic. Thus, Image 2 provides a touch of aesthetic roughness that gives it a sense of authenticity. Furthermore, the images can be ought to represent a diversity that may be reflected on their target group the generation consists of. It is also stated by Duffy et al. (2018) that Generation Z prefers branding that consists of a wide range of representatives.

Image 3 is an advertisement for the campaign named Tap the Can where LYFT are allowing the consumers to be a part of a consumer involvement process. The campaign encourages the consumers to scan the can, and hereby discovering multiple entertaining features.

The campaign is limited edition, and each can provides different features which create a sense of exclusivity since every feature is created towards a specific can. The theory regarding customer involvement and co-creation showed that the younger generation prefers to be a part of an interactive process with brands (Southgate, 2017). Furthermore, these individuals also prefer to engage with brands that offer personalized products, which is a result of the high demand of being a part of co-creation and customer involvement (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). The images also have a small text that is located under the image, which communicates that the product is not allowed for people under the age of 18 and that the product contains nicotine which can be an addictive substance.

The differences in the composition of the images have one exception as Image 1 and Image 2 both put the model in the centrum and let the product exist in the periphery. This could be a way of indicating that all focus should be on the individuals in the image instead of the product itself. Moreover, Image 3 puts the product in the center and lets the persons in the picture form a sort of frame around the product.

Adding the three images into a contextual perspective provides knowledge on how LYFT is using strategic communication to communicate inclusivity and diversity in the content that is being produced. Although the three images differ from each other, similarities between them occur when they are put together. The images include four models with different ethnical features, which indicate that LYFT is fixated on conceiving a diverse and inclusive atmosphere in their branding material. Their appearance in the content can therefore be of high relevance to Generation Z as it enables an inclusive approach to communication.

4.2 A semiotic analysis of images published by influencers sponsored by LYFT

4.2.1 Analysis of image 4



Image 4: Retrieved 26 April 2021 from Instagram account @roshi.hoss

What are the observable signifiers of the ads?

The picture consists of a young female standing on a sundeck with a beach in the background. She poses centrally in the picture, resting her body weight on one hip which gives a natural and relaxed impression. The camera angle is at eye level. The garment the woman is wearing can be categorized as chic and elegant, which among other things is evident in her sunglasses and the hat that she is wearing. Her trousers are high-waisted and flared which means that they are tight around the waist and thighs but wide by the ankles. She is using a silk scarf as a top. Her arms

are lightly stretched out from her sides, resting on the fence of the sundeck. She has turned her head to her left, away from the camera, and has a natural look on her face. On her left side lays her purse, casually thrown on a plank that also serves as the fence. Closer to the camera, in the foreground and out of focus, is a can of LYFT. The background consists of multiple palm trees that give the image a tropical look. Furthermore, there are luxurious sunbeds and at the far end, a strip of the sea is visible. The sky and sea are grey and the palm trees and the curtains indicate that it might be quite windy. The caption reads “I’m having the vacation days of my LIFE here at @kallisvisby. GOODBYEEEE IT IS SO GOOD HERE AND DON’T YOU THINK I LOOK HOT? #openthecan #lyft” (Image 4). The tag proves that she is not in a tropical environment as the location is Kallis Visby, which is in Sweden.

What are the signifieds that these signifiers suggest?

The female in this picture is the PR consultant, musician, actress, and influencer Roshi Hoss. She is based in Stockholm and is frequently posting photos from glamorous parties with celebrities and expensive travels. Her relaxed posture with the windy background invokes the connotation of her being calm in the storm. Her sunglasses and hat are covering most of her face, taking focus away from her facial expression. She is turned to her left, with her left arm creating a way for the eye to wander down to the product in the right bottom corner.

The placement of the product, casually thrown down next to the purse suggests that it belongs inside the purse. This indicates that it is small enough to bring everywhere. Thus, it is a product that fits a jet-set lifestyle when you travel and need a quick kick which sets the framework for the brand-related behavior for this particular product. Furthermore, the purse itself is of the brand Fendi, which is a luxury fashion brand costing approximately \$3,500.00 - \$4,000.00. (Fendi, 2021). This reinforces the chic and elegant impression that she is communicating through her garment. Thus the product is a fashion statement/ or an accessory that belongs to a glamorous lifestyle. The whole atmosphere of being an elegant young woman in a tropical climate can help to create a certain imagination and mood for consumers. Thus, the image gives them a sense of being a part of this lifestyle by consuming LYFT's products as they construct their identity through consumption (Beasley & Danesi, 2010).

Furthermore, the caption in Swedish suggests that she is talking to a Swedish audience. The use of capital letters invokes the sense of her screaming which creates a discrepancy from

her calm impression in the image. “DON’T YOU THINK I LOOK HOT?” can be interpreted as a rhetorical question stating that she is a self-confident woman. Lastly, the caption does not mention the product itself, only LYFT by the hashtag “#lyft”.

4.2.2 Analysis of image 5



Image 5: Retrieved 26 April 2021 from Instagram account @ramihanna

What are the observable signifiers of the ads?

Rami Hanna is standing in the center of the image, surrounded by blossoms. Hanna is looking into the camera that is located at his eye level. His posture is relaxed with his arms hanging down his sides. In his right hand, he is holding a can of LYFT between his thumb and forefinger, at the front side towards the camera. His face has got a natural expression and he is wearing black garments, including a black leather coat, and silver necklaces. The sleeves of his leather coat are

long, almost covering all of his left hand. The sleeve on his right arm appears to be slightly tucked up, showing more of the right hand holding the product.

The blossoms surrounding Hanna are covering the bottom half of the picture. It is a constellation of different sorts and colours, although yellow and pink appear to be the most frequently occurring ones. The background of the top half consists of high grass and reed. Behind the reed is a window covered by sheer, white textiles that let the light shine through. A dark filter has been added to the image. Lastly, the caption says “In collaboration with @lyft_sverige Introducing Collection 04 - ‘In Full Bloom’ together with LYFT LAB” (Image 5).

What are the signifieds that these signifiers suggest?

Rami’s gaze is drawing the audience into the picture, taking them on a visual journey through the flowers surrounding him. There are a few visual discrepancies in this image: black clothes against the colourful background. His calmness against the lively constellation of blossoms. The sheer textile against the black leather. The white can of LYFT against the black garments. These all create a contrast that could become very “loud” in the image (Berström, 2016). The dark filter is making the colour's exposure more dull, thus giving a calmer impression, invoking connotations of the light at dawn.

This image is posted on Rami Hanna’s personal Instagram account, which leads us to the assumption that it is mainly his followers that will see it. His followers will have certain connotations related to Rami as a person. He is a photographer and creative director who works in fashion. He is also openly gay and does not have typical ethnic Swedish features. As LYFT chose him as an ambassador for their brand they are making a conscious choice. With that said, his sexual orientation and ethical background might not be what LYFT based their decision on, but it is who he is as a person, which they chose to associate with and therefore prove that they are inclusive towards, in his case, the LGBTQ-community. The blossoms in the picture invoke connotations of life and beauty. Furthermore, the caption presents the new product line as “Collection 04 - in full bloom” which associates back the blossoms in the picture. This puts the blossoms into a new context, making them a symbol for the floral taste of the snus.

4.2.3 Analysis of image 6

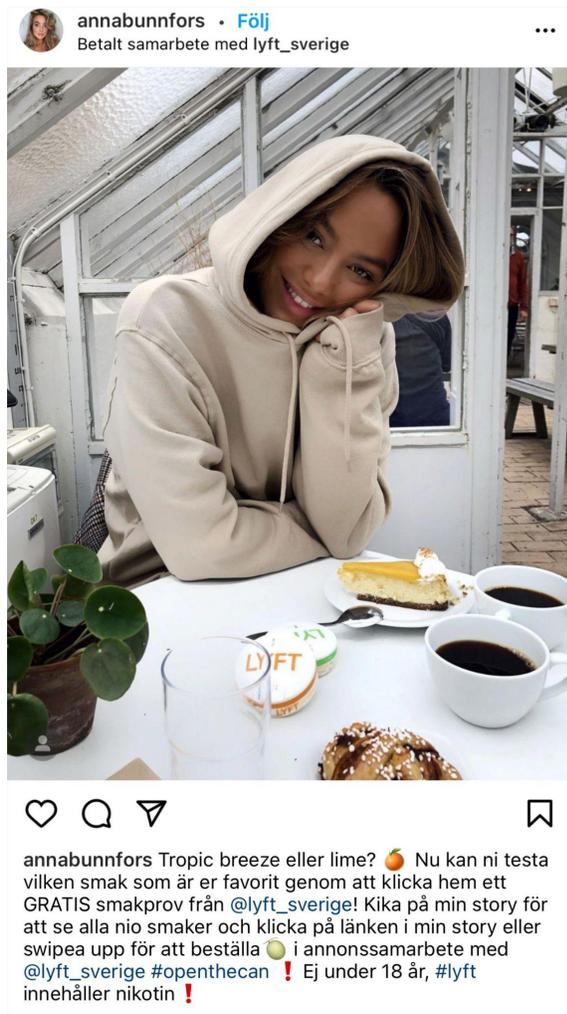


Image 6: Retrieved 12 August 2021 from Instagram account @annabunnfors

What are the observable signifiers of the ads?

The image consists of the influencer Anna Bunnfors, who is located at a location that looks like a glasshouse. Bunnfors is sitting at a table, with two cups of coffee, a cinnamon bun and a piece of cake in front of her. Moreover, there are two cans of white snus located in the middle of the table. Anna Bunnfors is wearing a beige oversized hoodie with the hood pulled up. Her posture is relaxed with both elbows resting on the table and her head resting in her hand. Her facial expression consists of a warm smile while looking directly into the camera in front of her. The signifiers that occur in the image give an impression of coziness and warmth, which can be explained by the location that gives an impression of a romantic glasshouse-inspired setting. Since there are two cups of coffee and two plates of cakes as well as two cans of white snus on

the table, indicates that Bunnfors is sharing her experience with someone on the opposite side of the table. The caption in the image is saying “Tropic Breeze or lime? Now you can test which taste is your favorite by clicking home a FREE tasting from @lyft_sverige! Look at my story to see all nine flavors and click on the link in my story or swipe up to order. Collaboration with @lyft_sverige #openthecan. Not under 18, #lyft, contains nicotine” (Image 6). The caption is hereby explaining that LYFT is offering an opportunity to try out free samples for free by following the link on Anna Bunnfors Instagram story.

What are the signifieds that these signifiers suggest?

The two cans of white snus are placed at a table next to two cups of coffee and two pieces of cake, which could indicate that the product goes along with that type of occasion. Moreover, it could also indicate that the product goes along well in regard to social circumstances. Furthermore, the caption is communicating regarding the new flavours that LYFT has developed. The caption also states that you can try out a free sample by following the link on Anna Bunnfors’s story. By offering free samples of newly developed products could indicate that the company is not only trying to reach people who are already familiar with the product, but also new customers who have not tried the product before. Therefore, they will be offered an opportunity to try out the product for free in order to try out the flavour they prefer the most.

Bunnfors has posted this image on her personal Instagram account, thus the receiver will most likely be a follower of hers. As a follower of Bunnfors account there is a high possibility of one being aware of the influencer’s medical studies as a nursing student as she mentions this frequently on her Instagram.

4.2.4 Results of the analysis of images posted published by influencers sponsored by LYFT

Image 5 differs from Image 4 and Image 6 since Hanna is promoting more artistic attributes which are explained on behalf of the whole appearance in the image, as well as his professional background as a fashion photographer and creative director. For this reason, there is a greater visual connection between Image 2 published by LYFT and the one posted by Rami Hanna, as they present values that exist within the same category which would be cool, young and alternative. On the behalf of this conclusion, Rami Hanna is therefore performing as some sort of

bridge between the other influencers and LYFT, which otherwise, are attributing different symbolic values.

On one hand, the urban lifestyle identified in Image 2 is based more on an environmentally conscious lifestyle compared to the other expensive and glamorous lifestyle in Image 5. The reason why there is a distinction between the values that are being represented by LYFT and the influencers could be explained as a result of trying to engage a wider target group. Generation marketing suggests that a certain type of behavior can be consistent with a similar age group, which can be used to make a specific and targeted segmentation of consumers (Chaney, Touzani & Slimane, 2017). Thus, it can be interpreted as LYFT are conducting their strategic work on a generational level rather than an individual level when targeting such a wide range of different values (Chaney, Touzani & Slimane, 2017). Collaborating with the influencer Roshni Hoss could also be a way of integrating a more feministic approach to the brand since she is a business woman which can be a symbol of female independence. This is reinforced by her caption that communicates a high level of self-esteem. These sorts of values are something that Generation Z agrees with. However, the consequences that may arise when targeting such a wide range of individuals, is that it can be problematic to create a link between the brand values LYFT is trying to create, and the ones that have actually emerged among the consumers. For example, the audience appealed by the conscious values communicated in Image 2 might be repelled by the luxurious jet-set lifestyle that Roshni Hoss is communicating. However, they may be able to unite due to Roshni Hoss's feministic approach, since they may share the same values regarding feminism on a generational level.

In addition, Rami Hanna and LYFT are using a similar language when promoting the products. They are both describing the product by attributes such as flavours, and it is clear that Rami Hanna is promoting one of LYFT's products. This could indicate that Rami Hanna is having a more transparent and authentic approach towards promoting LYFT's products. Moreover, discrepancies occur due to the lack of relatable context in Rami Hanna's caption and image. He is announcing the launch without expressing personal opinions about it. Furthermore, the brand-related behaviour expressed in his image is to stand in the middle of a floral constellation. It could however also be linked to Rami Hanna's background as a fashion photographer, where he is more accustomed to relying all focus on the garment instead of the model. This could explain his objective description of the product as he may be of the opinion

that the product shall speak for itself. Image 6 occurs differently compared to the other images, since there is a greater focus on promoting the product by putting them more in focus and also by writing a more detailed description of the product in the caption. But the focus however is not only on the products but also on the other objects in the image as well as the influencer herself since her gaze is directed towards the camera which catches the viewer's attention instantly Bergström, B. (2016).

Furthermore, the composition of the images of the influencers is similar, as they are all centered in the middle of the image with exciting surroundings. Due to their position, the attention is also aimed at the influencers and not the product itself.

Image 3 is communicating different values compared to image 1 and 2. These values give an overall impression of coziness and warmth. An interesting remark of the three pictures is that Anna Bunnfors is the only one who has mentioned in the description that the product is not allowed for people under 18 years of age and that the product contains nicotine. However, the caption consists of a more inviting statement by sharing an opportunity to receive free LYFT products. The word free is written with large signs meaning that there has been a thought behind wanting to highlight the viewers attention to that specific word.

Moreover, an indication of a possible pattern was identified in the analyzed images, which is that the product is never visually in focus. The product is more hidden and is displayed either in a corner of the image or placed discreetly in someone's hand. There can be a whole range of different strategic factors behind this decision. Firstly, it could be based on the fact that the products contain nicotine, where LYFT has to make the product less visible for the sake of minors who might be exposed to the content. It can also be due to the influencers focusing on selling a certain image or lifestyle. *Who* you become when using the product is considered to be of higher value than the actual product. The product is reduced to a small piece of the entirety in order to have the “right” image.

5 Discussion

The following section will discuss the findings from the conducted visual semiotic analysis in a larger social context from a critical point of view. Furthermore, it will problematize the use of strategic communication in order to target a young age group when promoting a highly addictive substance. Lastly, it will present the conclusions based on the discussion as well as suggestions for further research within the field of strategic communication and regulated products.

This study has examined how the nicotine company and producer of white snus LYFT has branded an addictive nicotine product towards Generation Z by using branding strategies such as influencer marketing, customer involvement and co-creation, word-of-mouth, inclusive marketing and symbolic consumption. Due to the lenient regulations regarding white snus on the Swedish market, the providers of the product have a freer race in regard to branding the product compared to snus containing tobacco. This has led to the brand using strategic communication in order to market and push their product openly on their social media, and also in other social media channels by using influencers.

Using influencer marketing is a great strategic way of targeting the youth on social media. Several theories have concluded that the younger generation has a great trust in influencers who promote products for brands (Munsch, 2021). This means that it is beneficial for a brand like LYFT to use influencers to promote their products, as it helps to make the products more acceptable among people who already consume the product as well as future consumers. The influencers present the product as an integrated part of their lifestyle by showing off the product in either every day inspired settings or a setting that is a bit more extraordinary and thereby making it more glamorous. Thus they are creating a specific type of image regarding the product which becomes a type of personality, personified by the influencer, in which their consumer can identify themselves with, in line with the theory of symbolic consumption (Beasley & Danesi, 2010). Based on the images that have been analyzed, it can be concluded that LYFT manages to capture different moments that can most likely be recognizable to the consumers. This sends the message that the product can have a very natural place in an everyday environment, thus there is always and a time and a place to consume the product. This could lead

to higher consumption as it normalizes having snus along with breakfast, sharing it with your friends, or as an alternative snack when you have a cup of coffee. According to one image it is even important to bring the product when on vacation. Thus it creates a need for the product in order to reach and maintain a certain lifestyle attractive to the younger generation.

Moreover, the use of influencers to promote this type of product is problematic in the sense that many of their young followers highly trust the products that an influencer promotes (Munsch, 2021). They are also promoting the product in a way that is preferable to the young generation as they prefer being targeted with suggestions instead of researching their purchases themselves (Smith, 2019). This can overshadow the actual potential health issues that can come along with consuming the product as the consumer does not research the product before a purchase. The product becomes equivalent to buying the same purse as an influencer as snus is merely an accessory in the influencers' pictures. There is also a risk that the promotion of the product by influencers are normalizing this type of controversial market internally among influencers, as the ones who would originally not agree to promote such a controversial product may be more likely to do it when a large number of their colleagues are doing it. One example of this is Anna Bunnfors who is communicating openly about her nursing studies while also promoting a highly addictive product. As a student of science and medicine, she brings a sense of validation that this product is not as harmful as it, in fact, is.

Furthermore, it is impossible for the brand to control every aspect of the influencers' communication in relation to the product. One example of this is the results from the analysis that shows that only one out of three influencers did include a warning text, prohibiting anyone under the age of 18 from using the product. This leads to unstructured rules regarding the aspects of communication when promoting the product. Moreover, the banners with a warning text on the images posted by LYFT are problematic in the sense that they are a part of the image and not the caption. This means that this is not accessible to visually impaired viewers using digital visual interpretation tools as they only translate text into audio. Thus the warning is not accessible to everyone who reads the caption.

Other branding strategies that were identified were consumer involvement through the campaign "Tap the Can" that involves letting the consumers be part of a unique experience. Furthermore, this campaign has the potential to generate word-of-mouth as the consumer might appreciate the experience and want to share it with their friends. As mentioned in the theory

Generation Z is more influenced by their real-life friends than anyone else (Fromm & Read, 2018). Furthermore, this campaign is a way of being a part of youth culture by giving them cultural experiences with relevant artists. Instead of having their logo broadcasted all over large music festivals, they are bringing a music concert to the consumers phone during the pandemic. This is a way of integrating the product as a part of the cultural experience and therefore creating a need for the product in a certain context. Thus, people who do not consume nicotine might start doing it as a way of participating in the cultural experience. As nicotine is a highly addictive substance there is a risk that this behavior potentially leads to an addiction further on.

One more aspect that was identified in the analysis was the link to a free sample that one influencer offered. This is in line with the younger generation's preference for digital marketing that is fast-responding and provides personal benefits (Smith, 2019). Furthermore, it is also preferable to Generation Z as it suggests a new product and offers an immediate opportunity for call to action (Smith, 2019). As earlier mentioned this offer indicates that the company is not only trying to reach people who are already familiar with the product, but also new customers who have not tried the product before. Therefore, they will be offered an opportunity to try out the product for free. An ethical dilemma occurs as the young followers of the influencer get access to a link to free nicotine without any form of identification necessary. Furthermore, it is an opportunity for the young and financially unstable followers of the influencer to try a new flavour for free, with the risk of becoming addicted to something they may have not spent their money on prior to trying the sample. Some followers might try the product merely because it is free rather than a genuine interest in the product.

Furthermore, inclusive marketing is another important aspect of the branding that has been identified in the analysis of the images. In terms of inclusivity and diversity, a wider range of ethnicities is becoming the faces of the brand. As mentioned in the theory, Generation Z prefers brands that take on a social approach and are holistic towards all different types of individuals (Duffy et al., 2018). The way of integrating a more diverse group of people when promoting their products could therefore be a beneficial strategic move to engage with a wider target group on a generational level. Furthermore, it could be interpreted as a political statement to include a wide range of ethnicities and people with different gender expressions and sexual orientations. Moreover, a discrepancy between the product and the values that are being tried to mediate occurs in the analysis. The discrepancy arises on the basis of the analysis of the thriftd

garments in Image 2. This indicates a conscious way of consuming which communicates that the brand would like to appear as a brand that is conscious. However, the product itself can contradict these symbolic related values. As the product container is made out of plastic, this can lead to it being thrown out and ending up in nature, thus causing damage to the environment. Snus is also often a product that can be spotted lying on the streets of Sweden, as it is not uncommon for its consumers to spit out the product instead of throwing it in a garbage bin. This observation may therefore raise questions about LYFT's great focus on implementing symbolic values that indicates that they stand for conscious choices. Furthermore, this could affect their sense of authenticity of the brand as well as the communication professionals who develop the strategic communication for these particular products. Moreover, this ethical dilemma can be applied to all the aspects of conduction strategic communication when promoting highly addictive substances. Even though it is a market where there are unstructured regulations regarding the branding, some might argue that there is free competition in terms of how to strategically design the communication to brand these types of products. However, it can also be discussed that the communicator itself must bear some responsibility around ethical aspects of designing this type of strategic communication that are constructed in order to target a young target group. Furthermore, it could be discussed that the internal market for strategic communication providers could be in need of more ethical boundaries regarding the promotion of regulated products. This can further lead to a discussion of questioning a communicator's ethical agenda from a larger social context.

5.2 Conclusion

This study has examined the relationship between the increase in consumption of white snus among Generation Z in Sweden and the nicotine brand LYFT's strategic communication. The purpose of this research has been to gain an understanding of how a brand can market a regulated product to a young consumer segment by conducting strategic communication proven to be effective to these young individuals. In order to answer the study's research question, a visual semiotic analysis was conducted. The empirical material was gathered from LYFT's Instagram account and Instagram accounts of influencers sponsored by LYFT. The analysis of the collected material showed that the brand is using several branding strategies such as influencer marketing, inclusive marketing, symbolic consumption and word-of-mouth. Thus the brand has integrated strategic communication that is of preference to the young generation, when promoting their product on social media.

The conclusion based on our study is that a brand can create an interest for a regulated product by creating a need when making the product a part of youth culture by placing the product in contexts familiar and attractive to the young generation. Furthermore, a number of ethical dilemmas in regard to the use of strategic communication when promoting nicotine products to a younger generation were identified. There is not enough evidence to examine a correlation between the increased consumption of snus among the younger generation and the strategic communication used in this case study. All though, the ethical dilemmas identified indicate the need for further research on this topic in order to establish if more regulations regarding branding and marketing on the nicotine market would result in a decrease in the consumption among the younger generation. If national regulations do not come into force, then we believe that there is a need for an internal discussion among communication professionals regarding the ethical aspects of conducting strategic communication to promote products containing nicotine.

5.3 Future research

For future research, it could be relevant to expand this study by examining young individuals' behavior in relation to LYFT's products, by conducting interviews that can provide a more in-depth answer to the reasoning behind the purchasing decisions. The interview would also provide an additional perception of LYFT's branding material and the ethical dilemmas regarding it. Furthermore, this study should be extended to include a quantitative approach in order to be able to confirm statistical correlations between the increased consumption of snus and the launch of white snus. These particular types of interviews would allow the study to be expanded towards a consumer perspective, with the aim of demonstrating how the consumers act and think towards the strategic communication that are conducted by nicotine and tobacco providers.

Moreover, earlier research regarding nicotine consumption among the young generation has shown how e-cigarettes have gained popularity among these individuals. Therefore, it could be of interest to conduct further research if this increased use of snus and e-cigarette consumption can be linked. It could for example be explained by its easy availability that allows its users to consume the product where a smoking ban exists.

LYFT has also gained earned media on the social media platform TikTok, and it could therefore be of high relevance to dig deeper into how the younger generation are communicating regarding the product on that specific platform. We highly recommend conducting research on TikTok as it is a social media platform that is gaining massive popularity among this age group.

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Appendix

Appendix 1

LYFT - Nyckeltal

Introduktion

Syftet med denna kampanjanslys är att visa LYFTs reklamsamarbeten med influencers i Sverige på Instagram.

Nyckeltal

57

Antal inlägg

104 300*
Engagemang

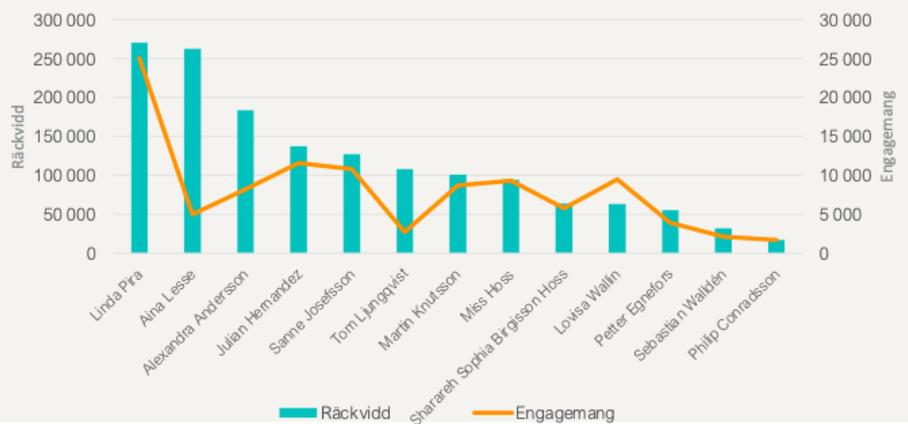
1 500 000
Räckvidd

\$275 000
2,3 M SEK*
EMV (Earned Media Value)

*Engagemang inkluderar likes och kommentarer.
*EMV visar kampanjsamarbetenas annonsvärde.

*Notera att valuta omvandlingen från USD till SEK gjordes enligt växelkursen den 18 dec 2020

Stapeldiagrammet visar influencers i Sverige på Instagram som har gjort reklamsamarbeten med LYFT. Staplarna visar antalet visningar av influencers kampanjinlägg. Linjen visar engagemanget som influencers kampanjinlägg har genererat.



A Non Smoking Generation. (2020). *Medieanalys* [pdf]. Retrieved 13 April 2021, from <https://nonsmoking.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/rapport-om-tobak-i-media-2020.pdf>

Appendix 2



lyft_sverige • Følg



Ej under 18 år. Denna produkt innehåller nikotin som är ett mycket beroendeframkallande ämne.



Synes godt om fra sthlm.tobak og andre

lyft_sverige Doften av nyrostat kaffe tillsammans med krämiga noter av hasselnöt får oss att tro att det är morgon hela dagen. Upptäck Blonde Roast du också! #LYFT #OpenTheCan

Image 1: Retrieved 26 April 2021 from Instagram account @lyft_sverige

Appendix 3



lyft_sverige • Følg



Ej under 18 år. Denna produkt innehåller nikotin som är ett mycket beroendeframkallande ämne.



Synes godt om fra sthlm.tobak og andre

lyft_sverige Njut av en frisk Easy Mint i gott sällskap! Vem delar du med? Och du, ange koden "NEWYEAR" på golyft.se och köp ett 10-pack för endast 350 kr. Gäller t.o.m. 30/12. #LYFT #OpenTheCan

Image 2: Retrieved 26 April 2021 from Instagram account @lyft_sverige

Appendix 4



Image 3: Retrieved 26 April 2021 from Instagram account @ramihanna

Appendix 5



roshi.hoss

Betalt partnerskab med lyft_sverige



Synes godt om fra lisafredrik og andre

roshi.hoss Jag har LIVETS semesterdagar på @kallisvisby
HEJDÅÅÅÅÅ VA BRA DET ÄR HÄR OCH VISST ÄR JAG
SNYGG? #openthecan #lyft

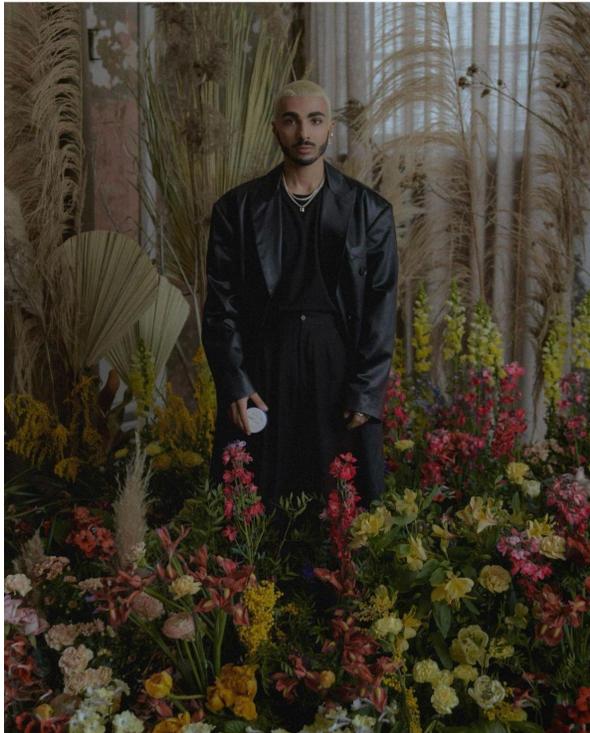
Image 4: Retrieved 26 April 2021 from Instagram account @roshi.hoss

Appendix 6



ramihanna

Betalt partnerskab med lyft_sverige



Synes godt om fra roshi.hoss og andre

ramihanna I samarbejde med [@lyft_sverige](#)

Introducing Collection 04 - "In Full Bloom" together with LYFT LAB.

Image 5: Retrieved 26 April 2021 from Instagram account @ramihanna

Appendix 7

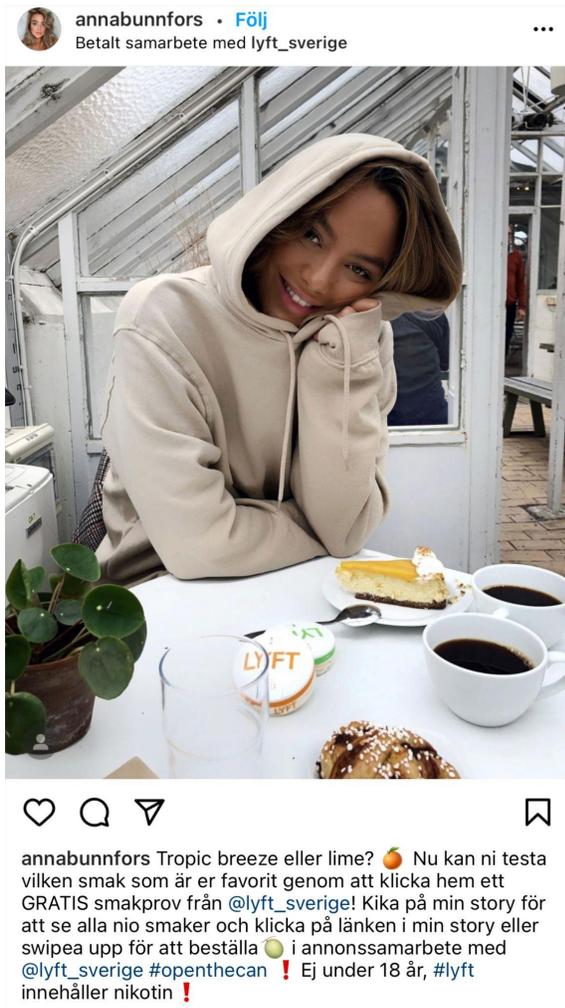


Image 6: Retrieved 26 April 2021 from Instagram account @ramihanna