The persuasive power of influencer marketing

- An in-depth qualitative study about the persuasive means and factors used by influencers on Instagram.

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Abstract

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Thesis purpose: The purpose of this study is to develop a deeper understanding about how companies are able to use influencers in order to persuade and attract consumers into buying their products. The thesis has a special focus on gray-zone products marketed towards the younger segments on the Swedish market.

Methodology: The study has been conducted with an abductive approach using qualitative research in the form of a netnographic study. The data was gathered by extensively analyzing 24 different influencers and their influencer marketing activities on Instagram, connected to the nicotine pouch brand Lyft.

Theoretical perspective: A wide range of theory within the topic of influencer marketing and persuasion has been gathered. The theories were chosen with the purpose of accounting for the relevant factors of persuasion, which provided a solid foundation for analyzing the empirical material.

Findings/Conclusion: This study has presented multiple findings about persuasion factors and means used by influencers on different levels. Successful influencer marketing is not only about conducting perfectly shaped and formulated ads, it is important to understand influencer marketing from a deeper perspective, starting with the influencers and the relations with their followers. The influencers need to be chosen with consideration to the purpose of the marketing. This study has further presented ways of strengthening the important persuasion factors of similarity, relationship and credibility. It has also provided ways for large influencers to overcome certain barriers, such as interacting and building para-social relationships with followers despite their size.

Practical implications: The practical implications of the research are targeted towards companies, influencers and consumers. The study provides information about how influencer marketing can be conducted in an effective manner and what factors that are important to take into consideration. This allows for companies to better analyze potential influencers to work with, but also implications about how influencers can improve their persuasive abilities. Finally, it gives consumers an understanding about how they are being persuaded with the use of influencer marketing.

Acknowledgments

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Table of Content

List of Figures

List of Tables

1. Introduction

In this chapter we will introduce the topic of influencer marketing and how it has grown during the past years. The relevance and timeliness are further argued for and the position of the research is defined. Furthemore we present the purpose of this study and how it can contribute to the topic of influencer marketing. Lastly we present the delimitations of the study, followed by the outline of this thesis.

1.1 Background

The modern day nicotine pouches have been around for the past six years. The type of snuff the swedes used before varied depending on taste, feeling and status. It was not until 1970 that the first portion snuff was established on the Swedish market (Swedish match, 2022). The history of snuff and the evolution of the product is strongly connected to the consumers who use it. Statistics show, by looking at how many women consume snuff on a daily basis in the age span of 16-29 during the years of 2004-2021, that 2018 was the lowest point where only 3% of the women used the product. Fast forward to 2021 and 9% of the women in the same age category use snuff on a daily basis, including nicotine pouches and snuff (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2022). When this is compared to the men in the same age group, 15% of the men stated that they use snuff on a daily basis in 2018, and by 2021 the numbers had increased to almost 20% (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2022).

The sudden increase in usage of snuff on a daily basis strongly suggests that there is a correlation with the introduction of nicotine pouches in 2016. Nicotine pouches are not regulated at all beyond the requirement to be 18 years or older to buy and consume it. As the nicotine pouches do not contain any tobacco, they are not required to be regulated under the tobacco law in Sweden (riksdagen, 2022). The result of not having any regulations on the nicotine pouches has allowed companies to freely use all marketing channels—including social media.

Social media is not the same as when it was introduced in the 1990s, where Meikle (2016) argues how social media in today's society is regarded as an everyday communications platform. With the growth of social media and since social media has become such a big part of people's lives, there is no wonder that brands have been following the growing trend and being involved in interactions with consumers online. Virtanen, Björk and Sjöstrom (2017) present how brands engage with their customers through social media in ways such as following consumers, liking content and in some cases even reposting user-generated content. Reports conducted by A non smoking generation (2021) show how much advertisements regarding nicotine pouches on social media have grown the past years. During 2020, the three biggest nicotine pouch brands collaborated with 13 different influencers who posted 65 branded posts in total. During the following year, the three biggest nicotine pouch brands collaborated with 34 different influencers who posted 181 branded posts in total.

To convince the targeted audience to purchase products or services, brands can use celebrities to encourage the interaction with the brand. For brands to use a famous person in their marketing is not something new, that has been done for decades, by brands all over the world. However, by looking back at the past few years we can see that there has been a change in the way of using famous people in marketing activities. The change started in relation to Instagram's launch in 2010, where the initial idea behind Instagram was to upload and share your pictures. The phenomenon evolved and is bigger than ever today, where brands now have the possibility to connect with influencers and pay them for sponsored content. From the very start, influencer marketing has shown an upward trend where both the amount of influencers and their followers have grown in numbers, in fact grown so much that most companies have started to invest in influencer marketing in their own marketing strategies (Marketing insider group, 2021).

2018 is an interesting year when studying the charts of daily usage of snuff as 2018 is also the year that Lyft created their Instagram account. Why this is interesting to highlight is because 2018 is the turning point for how many young adults use snuff on a daily basis. Since 2018, the consumption of snuff/nicotine pouches has increased steadily year after year, and it is hard to ignore the fact that the Instagram account for Lyft was created that very year, and ever since then, the consumption skyrocketed. Phua, Jin and Hahm (2018) discuss, in their paper, how there

was an increased positive attitude towards e-cigarettes after it had been endorsed by celebrities, compared to similar products that have not been advertised by celebrities in other marketing campaigns, and it also showed that the brands that used celebrities were rated higher when it came to trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness than the brands with non-celebrities. Although Lyft changed their name to Velo in 2022, we will refer to the nicotine pouch company as Lyft throughout this study for the sake of clarity.

Our research will look at products that are regarded as gray-zone products. By this we mean products that are considered healthier than the substitutes, such as nicotine pouches instead of regular snuff, e-cigarettes versus normal cigarettes, sports drinks instead of soda etc. There are hardly any studies regarding the rise of gray-zone products and how they are exponentially growing with the help of social media platforms and eWOM (electronic word of mouth). As Scott (2015) explains, eWOM started out as a means of organic communication by consumers that either had a pleasant experience or a bad one with a certain product and, as Scott argues, brands nowadays engage more in paid eWOM; something that influencer marketing is a part of.

1.2 Research Problem

The use of social media marketing has seen a drastic increase during the last decade. One key sub-area within this subject is influencer marketing (Marketing insider group, 2021). Simultaneously with the increased use of social media as a marketing method, the research about it has naturally faced a similar growth. The majority of research takes the viewpoint of the consumer and not so much what the companies and influencers can do to optimize their marketing strategy (Guoquan, Hudders, De Jans and De Veirman 2021).

This thesis will adopt a different point of view by looking at the mechanisms companies and influencers use in their influencer marketing. Mechanisms, in this case, refers to the different persuasion and attraction techniques, as well as the different influential factors incorporated (such as certain elements in their communication, relationships with followers and the influencer's popularity to name a few). As earlier work with influencer marketing has been widely characterized by adopting a trial and error approach and has, as a result, not delved deep into the actions of the influencers, this paper will attempt to delve further by pinpointing and

examining these factors of influence (Guoquan et al. 2021). There is also literature that is focused on persuasion techniques, rather than influencer marketing, that could be valuable to use while conducting persuasive influencer marketing. We aim to use these theories to further elaborate an understanding for successful marketing with the use of influencers, such as message framing and traditional rhetorical means. By including the rhetorical means of ethos, pathos, logos as an analytical tool, an even deeper understanding about persuasion will be enabled.

The study will have a particular focus on gray-zone products; a product category that has heavily utilized influencer marketing in an efficient way. This will be the first study with a particular focus on how influencer marketing has been successfully used to persuade and attract consumers towards gray-zone products on the Swedish market. The nicotine pouch market offers a unique opportunity to do research since social media, and influencer marketing in particular, has been one of the main contributing factors to why the product has become so popular amongst the younger generations. The nicotine pouch market exemplifies how companies with controversial products (gray-zone products) can use a highly persuasive marketing method in order to make a product with a harmful nature attractive for young consumers.

Belanche, Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2021) argue that influencers, compared to traditional celebrities, are able to have a closer relationship with their audience and this is something that increases their credibility and recognition as opinion leaders. This is crucial for creating para-social relationships and credibility, which Sokolova and Kefi (2020) explain are very important factors for persuasion and influence. There is some prior research in this field, but it fails to define how, exactly, this comes to occur. Most of the prior research is formulated in quite a general manner and not targeted to specific segments or products. As of now, the literature is at large formulated as a one-size-fits-all. There is a need for deeper and more focused research, which is why we chose to narrow our study to the Swedish market and gray-zone products. Let alone, there is a lack of compiled research where the researchers take the interrelation of the theory and persuasion factors into consideration. So, what are the influencers and brands actually doing in order to successfully work with influencer marketing?

By thoroughly analyzing the influencers and their branded posts, we aim to fill the gap and answer the question of 'how' in a distinct manner. This will be done by accounting for the interrelations between theory and by thoroughly studying it in the actual environment. The thesis will particularly focus on the untouched area of gray-zone products, but the managerial implications in our findings might stretch even further.

1.3 Research Purpose

Consumers are systematically using social media in their everyday life and are constantly exposed to attempts of persuasion. The knowledge about persuasive influencer marketing is not only useful for companies, but it is also important for civilians to understand the environment they spend multiple hours in everyday. Marketers are well aware of the existing powerful persuasion potential with using influencer marketing, but the knowledge about how they can use these modern day opinion leaders is still limited. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to find out how companies with gray-zone products can use influencer marketing in order to persuade and attract consumers to buy and systematically consume their products. We aim to deeply analyze branded posts and the influencers conducting the marketing in order to find patterns of what contributes to the success. Furthermore, we have ambitions to fill a part of the gap in the literature, focusing on the 'how' regarding the actual conduction of influencer marketing towards young consumers, specifically regarding gray-zone products. The choice of the nicotine pouch market, as explained before, is rooted in our knowledge of how these posts made an enormous impact and contributed to disrupt a whole market. The following research question has been formulated:

What are the factors and rhetorical means used by influencers to persuade and attract young Swedish consumers into using nicotine pouches?

We argue for the relevance of this study in accordance with the constantly increased use of social media as a marketing method. During recent years, the digital world has become an immense part of our lives. This era of digitalization shows no signs of slowing down anytime soon, hence the importance for deeper understanding of the marketing methods on the digital platforms. Furthermore, young consumers are constantly exposed to marketing on social media and

amongst the abundance of marketed products, gray-zone products have been very diligent on this forum. We aim to investigate why gray-zone products, specifically nicotine pouches, have been able to attract and persuade young Swedish consumers to use their unhealthy products.

1.4 Contribution

The aim for this study is to understand how influencers affect their ability to influence and subsequently persuade. The goal is to pinpoint what the influencers are doing and how it affects their relationship with the followers. The findings from this study will take a stance in actual actions and communication from the influencers and not only the overarching terms. The aim is that the certain actions and handlings highlighted in our research will provide insights of how influencers can effectively create good conditions to influence and persuade effectively. The results will also function as important factors in regard to analysis for companies when collaborating with influencers. In order to work effectively with influencer marketing, we are convinced that a deep understanding of how certain activities and actions affect the persuasive ability of the influencer are of utmost importance. In the modern marketing world, social media marketing has been on the rise for the last decade. By researching a proven successful company, we are convinced that it will be possible to distinguish important persuasive factors that have contributed to the success. The ultimate goal of our thesis is to understand how influencers can persuade their followers through branded posts, with a specific focus on gray-zone products and the Swedish market.

1.5 Delimitations

This paper will solely look at Lyft which is the biggest company within this field. Lyft has an approximate market share of 60%, making them the biggest and most influential actor ever since the beginning. Furthermore it is important to point out that the research material is limited to the Swedish market and it is important to keep in mind that different countries have different cultures and values, hence the marketing might be different in other geographical areas. Furthermore, the research will be limited to Instagram, since that was by far the platform most extensively used during their influencer marketing.

Since the nicotine pouch industry successfully attracts younger segments, this research will be most efficiently applied towards the same segments. We do not aim to be able to claim what will work in general, but rather what is specifically effective towards younger consumers. This does not mean that the findings from this study could not be used towards other segments, however we want to highlight the fact that our empirical material consists of Instagram posts targeting younger people. By conducting this study in a netnographic way, we are not able to collect information about how old the influencers followers are.

1.6 Outline of Thesis

1 Introduction

2 Literature Review

3 Methodology

4 Analysis

5 Discussion

6 Conclusion

Figure 1: The disposition of the thesis.

2. Literature Review

This chapter aims to provide an extensive overview about social media, influencer marketing and prior research conducted within the topic. The literature review is conducted with the intention of providing a deeper understanding about important factors of persuasion that are relevant to take into consideration while conducting this study. The chapter is finalized by presenting a conceptual framework created with the use of the presented theory.

2.1 Social Media

To understand what social media is, it would be useful to consider its origin. Meikle (2016) presents in his book *Social media* that the term 'social media' was first presented in the 1990s as a marketing tool to describe common features of web-based media and technology platforms. During the early days of the internet phenomena, it became the perfect term to describe the growing variety of websites, including blogs, platforms for user-generated content and profile-based networking platforms (Meikle, 2016). Meikle further describes that the meaning and usage of social media has evolved since the 1990s as social media in today's society focuses primarily on everyday communications in profile-based platforms (such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram).

Fuchs (2014) also argues in his book *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* that social media can be traced back to the end of the 1990s, where Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) reiterate this statement but argue that it is hard to define what, exactly, social media is. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) the formal definition of social media is connected to two concepts: Web 2.0 and User Generated Content. These are closely connected to how Cambridge dictionary defines Social media, which is "websites and computer programs that allow people to communicate and share information on the internet using a computer or mobile phone" (Cambridge dictionary 2022).

Social media has grown exponentially in the past few years and makes up a large part of our daily lives that we spend online. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) describes that the evolution of the internet and the growth of social media is nothing surprising at all, as the internet was created as a giant Bulletin Board System (BBS). Here people all over the world exchange software, information, messages and news with each other, where Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) attribute the exponential growth of social media as an evolution back to the internet´s roots.

Understanding what social media is, and what it initially was created for, enhances the importance of social media as a platform. Due to the technology we have today, the younger generations spend much of their time interacting with friends and consuming information online. Therefore, it is significant to understand how social media can be used for marketing activities, and since the younger segments are the most frequent users of social media, it will be important to examine how influencers target and persuade younger consumers to consume the gray-zone products

2.1.1 Social Media Marketing

The nature of marketing has over the last decade seen a significant change in the way companies structure their marketing activities. The reason for this change is due to the rise of technology and social media (Kozinets 2010). Through the development of mobile phones consumers have been integrated in the process of marketing—such as creating their own content on different digital platforms. The biggest social networking sites, currently, are Facebook and Instagram where the users produce and share content on their profiles (Statista, 2022). For a modern day marketer it is important to keep in mind that user-generated content regarding products or services is highly regarded by other users, since it shows honest recommendations and insight into what value the product or service has to offer the consumer (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Further Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) continue to present that the same communication activities, directly from the brands themselves, do not have the same trustworthiness from the point of view of the consumer.

The growth of social media and networking platforms have resulted in information-sharing on a daily basis where users share almost everything about their life through pictures and videos (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). This includes sharing experiences, thoughts and reviews about products and services that consumers have encountered. This new era of social media has, according to Booth and Matic (2011), given consumers influential power to a new extent. Ordinary people are now able to influence attitudes and consumer behavior in a way which is increasingly harder for companies to control. When it comes to brands and how they can engage with consumers there are a lot of different alternatives to choose from; one of the more popular alternatives is through social media marketing. Instagram enables the opportunity for brands to engage with the targeted audience through interaction, in such ways of following, liking and commenting on posts (Virtanen, Björk & Sjöström 2017). Furthermore, brands are connecting more than ever with their targeted audience through sponsored posts, influencers, electronic word of mouth (eWOM). Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh and Gremler (2004) describes the term eWOM as *"any positive or negative statement made about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet"* (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, p. 39). In contribution Scott (2015) ascertains that eWOM is generated through unpaid organic communication from consumers that either have a pleasant or negative experience with a brand, product or service, where the consumer wants to share their thoughts and feelings regarding their experience. Scott (2015) continues to describe that brands tend to engage more in paid eWOM in the pursuit to spread brand messages which is a process known as influencer marketing (Scott, 2015). In our study, the terminology eWOM will be used to describe positive or negative reviews created by influencers on social media in collaboration with a specific brand.

In addition to influencer marketing on social media Phua, Jin, and Kim (2017) further contributes with deeper understanding as to why influencers, bloggers and celebrities have a positive influence on brand attitudes when it comes to consumers. The reason for the positive influence is, according to Phua, Jin, and Kim (2017), the ability for influencers to reach large segments of consumers in a short period of time, which the authors also state is lower in cost compared to traditional ad campaigns.

The importance of social media marketing has increased dramatically in the past years, which will be an important part of our analysis of how the usage of influencers in combination with social media marketing persuades and attracts young consumers to engage with the posts. According to these studies, by incorporating influencer marketing in the marketing activities, the influencer plays an important role when it comes to persuading the followers and in a way portraying themselves as simply a friend recommending a new product to try. This will be of most importance towards understanding how they are able to portray themselves as someone reliable and trustworthy to people they have never met.

2.1.2 Paid Ad Disclosure

According to the Swedish marketing law, it is mandatory to clearly communicate that paid ads are marketing and not an independent Instagram post (Konsumentverket 2021). Ad disclosure refers to the texts on Instagram posts that indicate that the post is a paid ad. Instagram has a standardized way to communicate that a post is an ad by adding a text connected to the picture (Boerman 2020).

There are multiple effects of transparently disclosing that influencer posts are paid ads, good as well as bad. Boerman (2020), who has studied the effects of ad disclosure for influencers on Instagram, found that one positive effect from ad disclosure is that it resulted in higher brand recall and a higher chance for the followers to engage with the branded post. The author also concluded that these effects were independent of the size of the influencer. Furthermore a study made by Kay, Mulcahy and Parkinson (2020) revealed more advantages with disclosing influencer ads. Their study showed that disclosing the ads resulted in the consumers viewing the endorsed product as more attractive. Disclosing the ads subsequently leads to a heightened purchase intention.

However, other studies have shown that only disclosing the ad in a simple way (i.e plainly stating that "this is a paid ad") may lead to the consumers perceiving the message and ad to be less credible. According to the same study this can be mitigated by expressing the message in the ad as an honest opinion (Hwang & Jeong 2016). An important detail is that this is applicable to consumers with higher skepticism. Consumers with low skepticism did not respond negatively to

simple disclosure of ads. This can be connected to a study made by Guo and Main (2012) who found out that consumers are sensitive towards persuasive-marketing. Furthermore, they concluded that stereotypical persuasive attempts lead to less trustworthiness towards the person trying to sell a product. According to the latter studies, expressing that an ad is an honest opinion and communicating a more nuanced message might be the most effective way to go.

The disclosure of ads does play a big role in the process of persuasion, and according to these studies an influencer can utilize it to their own advantage. If an influencer works with the ad disclosure in the right way, it can lead to better brand recall, more attractive products and increased purchase intention. If the influencers disclose the ads in a simple way, it may harm the credibility, which is closely connected with the ability to persuade and will be thoroughly addressed later on in this literature review. Consequently, paid ad disclosure has a direct connection with persuasion and attraction, therefore it will play an important role while analyzing the influencer marketing activities in this paper.

2.2 Influencer Marketing

2.2.1 Influencer Marketing On Instagram

Belanche et al. (2021) address that the use of influencers has been an increasingly used marketing strategy during the later years. In their paper they emphasize that influencers have developed into modern day opinion leaders with great influential power. Guoquan et al. (2021) highlights that this particular way of marketing on social media is both cost-efficient and effective. One of the strengths with this marketing tool is that the ads (influencer posts) are often not perceived as marketing (Guoquan et al. 2021). According to Belanche et al. (2021), using influencers in the marketing mix is more effective than using traditional celebrities. One influential factor might be that the relationship between an influencer and a follower is a mixture of being a friend and a celebrity. Influencers are a part of the social media platform; they are influencers since they have managed to build a strong followage that they actively try to maintain a strong relationship with. By creating this relationship, influencers are able to affect the followers behaviors, attitudes and thoughts (Belanche et al. 2021). This is even more

important to consider if a company aims to target the younger generations. Sudha and Sheena (2017) highlight a study showing that 70% of the millenials who participated prefered products that were promoted by influencers who were not traditional celebrities. As it gets harder to satisfy younger audiences, influencer marketing has become a very effective strategy to use (Sudha, Sheena 2017).

Despite that influencer marketing is undoubtedly an effective marketing strategy, the research about it is fairly limited. Guoquan et al. (2021) claim that companies have been working with this marketing strategy using a trial and error approach. This means that companies have adopted influencer marketing without actually knowing how they use it in the best way. Even though the subject is not researched thoroughly, there has been an exponential increase in research during the later years (Guoquan et al. 2021). The recent rise in research has provided information on how influencer marketing affects the followers, as well as how they react and respond to the marketing strategy. The majority of the research focuses on how followers respond and how influencer marketing affects them and not so much on how the influencers go about when conducting the marketing activities (Guoquan et al. 2021). This is where we see a gap in the litterature and aim to contribute with our study. Research about this is far from non-existing, but it is probably closer to being non-existing than saturated. Hence we believe that an analysis of a company that has been proven successful in their influencer marketing will enable us to extract valuable findings.

2.2.2. Nano, Micro and Macro-influencers

Nano, micro and macro-influencer are terms that define the size of the influencer, namely how many followers the individual has. A nano-influencer is someone with less than 1,000 followers, whereas a micro-influencer ranges between 1,000-100,000 followers and a macro influencer between 100,000-1,000,000 followers and a mega influencer has +1,000,000 (Govindan & Alotaibi 2021). Pozharliev, Rossi and De Angelis (2020) studied how the number of followers affect the follower's cognitive responses when being exposed to marketing on different social media. Our study is limited to Instagram, hence the following paragraphs are only accurately applicable to influencers on Instagram. In their paper, they highlight a study made by De

Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017), which showed that influencers with more followers are generally more extensively accepted and seen as opinion leaders. Moreover, the study showed that when big influencers market a unique product, the perception of it being divergent and unique can be lowered. According to Pozhariliev et al. (2020), micro influencers have higher credibility, which they conclude might derive from the followers' negative attitude towards highly persuasive marketing. They explain that followers might interpret the main purpose of the branded posts as money-driven, rather than product-based, and capitalize on the number of followers. They further state that good arguments in the branded ads significantly raise the perceived credibility towards the branded post.

An important takeaway is that the number of followers does not always signify a greater outcome, especially if your likes-to-followers ratio is too low or too high. When you receive too few or too many likes considering the number of followers you have, the influencer's credibility is affected negatively (De Vries 2019). This can be connected with the suspicion that some followers might have regarding the possibility of influencers buying likes or followers. When companies use micro influencers to market their product, the followers generally get better product knowledge (Kay, Mulcahy, Parkinson 2020).

The effects on size of the influencers is very much relevant for the purpose of this study. As we now know, there are both advantages and disadvantages with big as well as small influencers. This will be an important factor when looking at the mix of influencers used during this research. Size is an important connection to credibility, thus also the ability to persuade and attract.

2.2.3 Influencer Alignment With The Brand

Instagram is considered by Linqia (2018) to be the most important social networking platform when it comes to influencer marketing, with Facebook as a close second. Social media offers brands something that traditional media cannot, namely an opportunity to reach targeted audiences without having to invest in sponsored advertising based on their consumers' cookies (Boerman, Willemsen & van der Aa, 2017).

It is important to find influencers that align with the brand itself, as Breves, Liebers, Abt & Kunze (2019) describes, there are thousands of different influencers to choose from, all who offer different followers, topical interests and other characteristics. According to Pophal (2016) the challenge that marketers face when trying to align an influencer with a brand is figuring out which influencer best suits the brand and is the most effective one.

Pophal (2016) continues to describe how influencer marketing is time consuming and could go to waste if there is not a proper strategy behind the choice of influencer. Breves et al. (2019) supports what Pophal (2016) describes regarding the importance of finding the right influencer for the right job, and further explains that it also depends on what the brand aims to achieve from the collaboration.

Pophal (2016) highlights the importance of how the influencer marketing activities must be in line with the brands overall marketing communication activity to have an effect. By using an influencer that is aligned with the brand, there are benefits to be drawn from the collaboration if matched correctly. According to Campbell and Farrell (2020) consumers are more likely to follow and engage with influencers that align closely with themselves regarding age, interests, location, and which stage of life they are at etc.

Brands must think further than just paying an influencer for a collaboration without aligning the influencer to the brand. If this is not thought through properly, Pophal (2016) argues that it can lead to created content that does not feel natural nor suitable, which the consumers will see through. To clarify further, an influencer who specializes in one specific area or field might be perceived as unreliable when promoting or advertising a product that relates to a completely different field that goes beyond their expertise.

As the presented studies explain, there must be a strategy behind the collaboration with an influencer. Since we want to understand what type of factors that persuade followers to engage with what the influencers are promoting, we must first identify if the chosen influencer is aligned with the brand, which we will explore in the following sections.

2.2.4 Choosing The Right Influencer

For brands it is very important to thoroughly go through the options of influencers before choosing which influencers to work with. The reason for this is that all influencers have different demographics when it comes to followers, interests, content etc. Campbell and Farrell (2020) present that one of the most important factors when choosing an influencer is their audience. The reason for this is due to the fact that the people following the influencer are doing it because they are interested in the content the influencer is posting. Campbell and Farrell (2020) continue to describe how an influencer´s audience provides value to the brands in ways of organic reach, specific targeting and lastly increased attention. This means that marketers and brands today face challenges when it comes to choosing which influencers best fit their company/brands in the point of view of the influencer´s audience.

Since most influencers today are niched in a particular area or topic, marketers must keep in mind which consumers will be targeted when using a specific influencer (Campbell & Farrell 2020). They also explain that marketing activities regarding influencers and targeting consumers through influencer marketing is closely related to placing advertisements online and targeting a specific audience. Campbell and Farrell (2020) do however, state the main difference between targeted advertising online and targeting advertising through influencer marketing. An important point to emphasize is that influencer marketing is more likely to be perceived positively due to the fact that the followers already follow the influencer because they have a shared interest in the content posted by the influencer, which further increases a level of interest and trust when the influencer recommends a product (Campbell & Farrell 2020).

Baccarella, Wagner, Kietzmann and McCarthy (2018) describe how the growing concerns for consumer privacy online is increasing as more online-users are trying to decrease the cookie usage that tracks their online history online. The authors describe in one of their examples from the Belgian Privacy Commission how Facebook, for instance, almost hides the settings to control user data and makes it quite difficult to find and change the settings. This leads, according to Baccarella et al. (2018), to behavioral profiling by the platform the consumers are using. In addition to the concerns of one's privacy online Campbell and Farrell (2020) further explain that influencers have in today's society even greater targeting value since the increase of adoption of

privacy settings. Campbell and Farrell (2020) states that influencer marketing is a promising alternative where brands can target specific audiences without collecting private information about their consumers as long as the influencer is aligned with the brand they are collaborating with.

Since the purpose of our study is to understand how influencers manage to persuade young consumers in Sweden to consume gray-zone products, an important part to this paper is to see which influencer Lyft has chosen to collaborate with. As the studies above describe, different influencers generate different demographics of followers. This is important to analyze since we want to find out how they have managed to create such an attraction amongst younger people in Sweden.

2.3 Persuasion and Attraction

2.3.1 Influencer Credibility, Trustworthiness and Similarity

As mentioned earlier, Belanche et al. (2021) explains that the nature of a relationship between influencers and their followers are often quite close. In contrast to traditional celebrities, influencers can (to a wider extent) benefit from a proximity with their followers. The close nature of the relationship gives influencers more credibility which strengthens their position as opinion leaders (Belanche et al. 2021). Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget (2020) supports this research with their own findings which showed that consumers are more likely to identify with influencers and have a greater desire to act and be like an influencer, compared to a regular celebrity. This is further supported by Lou and Yuan (2019) who highlight similarity as one key factor for the influencer to gain trust from the followers towards branded posts. Furthermore, the authors also define attractiveness and trustworthiness as driving characteristics for trust towards branded posts. They claim that these three drivers subsequently lead the brands in the posts to effectively receive brand awareness, together with an increase in purchase intention.

Smith, Menon and Sivakumar (2005) found that consumers perceive their friends to be the best source of information for product reviews. Kay et al. (2020) stated that smaller influencers are

more likely to engage and communicate closer with their followers in comparison with larger influencers—creating almost a friend-like relationship. These findings are very coherent with the fact that micro-influencers have become a very attractive choice for brands who value high trustworthiness and credibility (Marques, Casais, Camilleri 2021). This is highly correlated with smaller influencers being viewed as more connected to, and display more similarities with, their followers (Campbell & Farrell 2020).

Naturally a person follows an influencer because they find the person and the content interesting in one way or another. Therefore the followers of an influencer does have, in general, some similar interests or admirable features from the followers point of view (Campbell & Farrell 2020). This is a crucial factor since younger consumers are more likely to purchase products promoted by a celebrity that display features that resemble the customer's self image (Sukhdial, Aiken, Kahle 2002). This is further strengthened by Bandura (1994), who argues that people are more easily influenced by individuals that are more similar to themselves, as well as individuals that a follower might desire to resemble.

2.3.2 Ethos, Pathos, Logos

The concept of ethos, pathos and logos date back to the ancient Greek era, hundreds of years before christ. The originator of the concept is the famous philosopher Aristotle. Ethos, pathos and logos are the three important means for persuading an audience, according to Aristotle. It is important to point out that this is a philosophical concept and not a real theory (Pathosethoslogos, n.d.).

Ethos refers to the character and credibility of the communicator. A speaker can obtain a strong ethos by using a vocabulary and language that suits the audience but also by demonstrating an expertise within the field. Furthermore, the ethos can be strengthened by appearing unbiased and honest about the matter (Pathosethoslogos, n.d.).

The next rhetorical mode is pathos which refers to the speaker's ability to persuade an audience by focusing on the audience's emotions. When a speaker has a good pathos, he or she is able to invoke certain feelings that are beneficial in order to persuade the audience in the desired

direction. An example of this could be when a charity organization makes you feel sad and sorry for the kids that can't afford school. A speaker can for example gain pathos by telling emotional stories or using an emotional tone in the voice (Pathosethoslogos, n.d.).

Lastly, we have logos which refer to the ability to persuade through reason and logic. This can be done by revealing proofs or solid arguments on the adressed matter. It can also be strengthened by using advanced, theoretical and professional language (Pathosethoslogos, n.d.).

Zhou, Barnes, McCormick and Blazquez (2021) used ethos, logos and pathos to analyze how influencers use narrative strategies to create eWOM in an effective way. According to their study, influencers are able to use these persuasive means in order to achieve the desired effect. The authors created six different persuasion tactics, all supported by a mixture of ethos, pathos and logos. The six persuasion tactics are: attention-attracting, claiming expertise, meaningfulness, mood affecting, interactivity seeking and collaboration. If your objective is to create stronger eWOM by increasing interaction and communication from the followers, your strategy of choice would be collaboration and interactivity seeking. When focusing on collaboration, the influencer should focus on strong logos and pathos. When using the interactivity seeking tactic, the main focus should be on pathos.

These tactics depict a clear picture of how you can effectively use ethos, pathos and logos in order to achieve objectives with influencer marketing. It gives the influencer and brand some clues about how to create branded posts that achieve the objectives; a still fairly untouched field (Zhou et al. 2021). Therefore, these rhetorical means will be used as an analytical tool in order to deeper understand the influencer marketing.

2.3.3 Message Framing

Message framing refers to the focus on positive or negative attributes and factors when conducting communicative actions. When a company markets a product or service, there might be negative consequences or aspects with it, but by putting all the positive aspects in focus, one might not take the negative into consideration. When you use positive message framing the goal

is to maximize the happiness and minimize the pain. This concept builds upon our hedonic tendencies to seek happiness and avoid pain. A message could also be put forward with negative framing, which may be beneficial in some cases. The message could for example emphasize what the customer would miss out on if they don't buy the product (Roper & Fill 2012).

When message framing is utilized in an effective way, it can function as an effective approach to increase the ability to persuade customers with the message. In a study made by Tsai (2007), he used product knowledge, self-construal and consumer involvement as the consumer characteristics that might affect what type of message framing is most suitable. The outcomes that were measured in the study are the following three: purchase intention, advertising attitude and brand attitude. Product knowledge refers to the amount of knowledge the person has about the product, in terms of facts and prior use and other experiences. Self-construal refers to the customer's self-view, which can be independent (unique and personal characteristics, not alike others) or interdependent (not unique, and characteristics alike others). Lastly, consumer involvement refers to customers' evaluation of the product and its relevance for him or her in connection to values, beliefs, lifestyle and attitude, amongst others (Tsai 2007).

One interesting finding is that the best consumer characteristic when using message framing in a positive manner is low product knowledge, independent self-construal and low consumer involvement. On the other side, Tsai (2007) also found out that positive framing should be avoided if the customers generally have a high product knowledge, interdependent self-construal and high consumer involvement. The best audience for negative message framing is customers with low product knowledge, high consumer involvement and interdependent self-construal. The worst audience for negative messaging possess the opposite characteristics (Tsai 2007).

A study made by Lee, Liu and Cheng (2018) investigated what type of products (utilitarian and hedonic) and the type of regulatory focus (prevention or promotion) that fit with the two types of message framing. The results of the study showed that positive message framing is the best choice towards customers that are promotion focused, independent of product type. It also showed that negative message framing is only best towards the prevention-focused customer

when the product type is hedonic. If a product is utilitarian, the positive approach is the best choice, even towards prevention-focused customers (Lee et al. 2018).

2.3.4 Parasocial Relationship and Interaction

Parasocial interaction refers to the relationship between a spectator and a performer, which in this case is the follower and the influencer, that occur while watching the performer (Horton, Donald 1956). Parasocial refers to the interaction or relationship being imagined from the spectator. In most cases the performer does not know the spectator who imagines and feels some sort of interaction or relationship between the two parts. The parasocial interactions (PSI) can be developed to become a para-social relationship (PSR). The difference between PSI and PSR is that PSI is restricted to the moment you watch the performer, or in this case, the influencer. PSR extends further than this moment and the imaginary relationship can be extended outside the consuming moment (Dibble, Hartmann, Rosaen 2016).

Sokolova and Kefi (2020) highlight that para-social relationships and credibility are two important drivers that have a positive correlation with the ability to persuade followers and influence their purchase intention. Influencers that are better at connecting and creating these imaginary relationships with their followers are shown to have better ability to persuade (Sukhdial et al. 2002). PSI is a fairly old concept and was originally directed towards radio and TV, the modern day media does enable some additional aspects. Even though influencers might not have the possibility to interact with every follower, they are able to interact to some extent (Labrecque 2014). There is a comment section where followers can comment on the posts and the influencers are able to answer them back. Micro-influencers are more likely to communicate and connect with their followers (Kay et al. 2020), which subsequently should lead to a higher possibility to create para-social relationships.

Openness is one factor that can positively affect the sense of PSI. When the influencer, for example, reveals personal information he/she creates a sense of openness which enhances the feeling of having a real friendly relationship (Labrecque 2014). Women are especially predisposed to parasocial relationships with celebrities and influencers, where they feel a

stronger urge to identify themselves as a part of the community/club (Greenwood, Pietromonaco and Long, 2008).

Given our purpose, PSI plays an important role in the ability to persuade and attract consumers. As mentioned earlier in this review, large influencers have less credibility according to some researchers. However, if an influencer is effective with creating PSR, the credibility and ability to persuade is enhanced. This is one example of how PSI can mitigate negative factors, therefore it is very important to consider how different aspects might interplay in order to affect the final result.

2.4 Gray-zone Products on Social Media

Gray-zone products refers to products that are a healthier option, but not entirely harmless, to other products. Phua, Jin & Hahm (2017) describe how celebrity endorsers who engage in advertising e-cigarettes on social media have quite the influence on consumers. The authors further describe how celebrity endorsers, through advertising on social media, increased the positive attitudes towards e-cigarettes from the consumers perspective. This can be connected to the argument made by Lee et al. (2018) about message framing and how the positive aspects regarding the products make the consumer less aware of the potential side effects.

Dunlop, Freeman & Jones (2016) present in their research certain findings regarding marketing of unhealthy products to young consumers through social media. They found that children and young adults, in particular, are not only exposed to the marketing of unhealthy products, but they state that young consumers are now invited to co-create content for the products. With this, Dunlop, Freeman & Jones (2016) mean that the young consumers are now involved in the process of advertising on social media where brands and even influencers encourage the followers to share the posts, tag their friends and comment, just to name a few of the marketing activities.

Dunlop, Freeman & Jones (2016) explain that there is strong evidence that social media can shape and enhance a consumer's perception and attitude towards products that are not completely harmless. Seidenberg, Rodgers, Rees and Connolly (2012) explains that most of the gray-zone

products regarding the tobacco industry on social media comes from mostly user-generated content. This allows the content to be published more freely and it is not breaking any of the regulations for tobacco products. Seidenberg et al. (2012) continues to explain that research on tobacco advertising has shown that younger audiences are more sensitive to the advertisements, meaning that younger individuals are more susceptible to advertising and will act in ways that mirror the people in the ad. The communication that reaches the youth are according to Seidenberg et al. (2012) sending signals to the younger audiences on social media that using these harmful products is the way to go and is a certain type of behavior that is something to strive for. Furthermore, Seidenberg et al. (2012) present that there is statistical evidence that supports that a younger audience with friends that consume tobacco products are more likely to start consuming the products as well. They continue to explain how social media and the social interactions that are enabled when interacting with other users online lead to a much stronger normalization of the effects and promote the products further.

It is important to note that social media platforms, such as Instagram, only require that its users are 13 years old or older, meaning that you could be as young as 13 when first exposed to an ad for snuff by your favorite influencer (Instagram, 2021). As anyone with access to the internet can view advertisements, according to Seidenberg et al. (2012), it is important to consider just how young some of these people might be when viewing a gray-zone product, and how normalized a product might seem to them through constant exposure.

2.5 Chapter Summary

After conducting the literature review it became clear that the subject of influencer marketing is not the most researched area in marketing. However, during later years the research has increased, which has brought many important insights regarding influencer marketing. Most of the research addresses certain subjects which were fairly independent of one another. The ultimate goal of influencer marketing is to gain brand awareness and persuade consumers to buy a company's products. In order to gain an extensive understanding of what the influencers actually do and what actually work, we distinguished the most important parts of valuable research. The literature in our literature review does not always guide a company or influencer

towards conducting the marketing, but this is rather something that has to be interpreted and interconnected in order to extract valuable implications.

There are both advantages and disadvantages with many factors within influencer marketing, such as the size of the influencer. The most accepted conclusion is that large influencers are considered to be opinion leaders but smaller influencers have higher credibility. Parallel with this, being closer and more interactive with the followers builds para-social relationships and gives the influencer more credibility. Trust, credibility and persuasion can also be obtained in other ways, such as using rhetorical means and expressing honest opinions while conducting marketing. How can these aspects work together and what mix can be successfully used towards gray-zone products?

During the literature review it became clear that no solid model could be accurately applied to this phenomena. To overcome this gap, we pinpointed what we interpreted as most important for the aim of this study and applied rhetorical means as a tool to help analyze our data. The ability to persuade is at the heart of this thesis and the rhetorical means of ethos, pathos and logos will provide a clear and structured way to interpret certain elements in influencer marketing.

2.5.1 Conceptual Framework of Persuasion Levels

As previously stated, our aim with this study is to understand what type of factors influencers make use of when persuading young consumers on Instagram to use nicotine pouches. There is no framework today that contains all the important aspects for analyzing the persuasion factors within influencer marketing. Through different theories, we are able to create a framework linking different elements, providing us with a better understanding of which persuasion factors are the most prominent when it comes to persuading followers into using nicotine pouches. The conceptual framework created for this research incorporates the main concepts from the literature review that we identified as being the most important when working with influencer marketing in the best possible way.
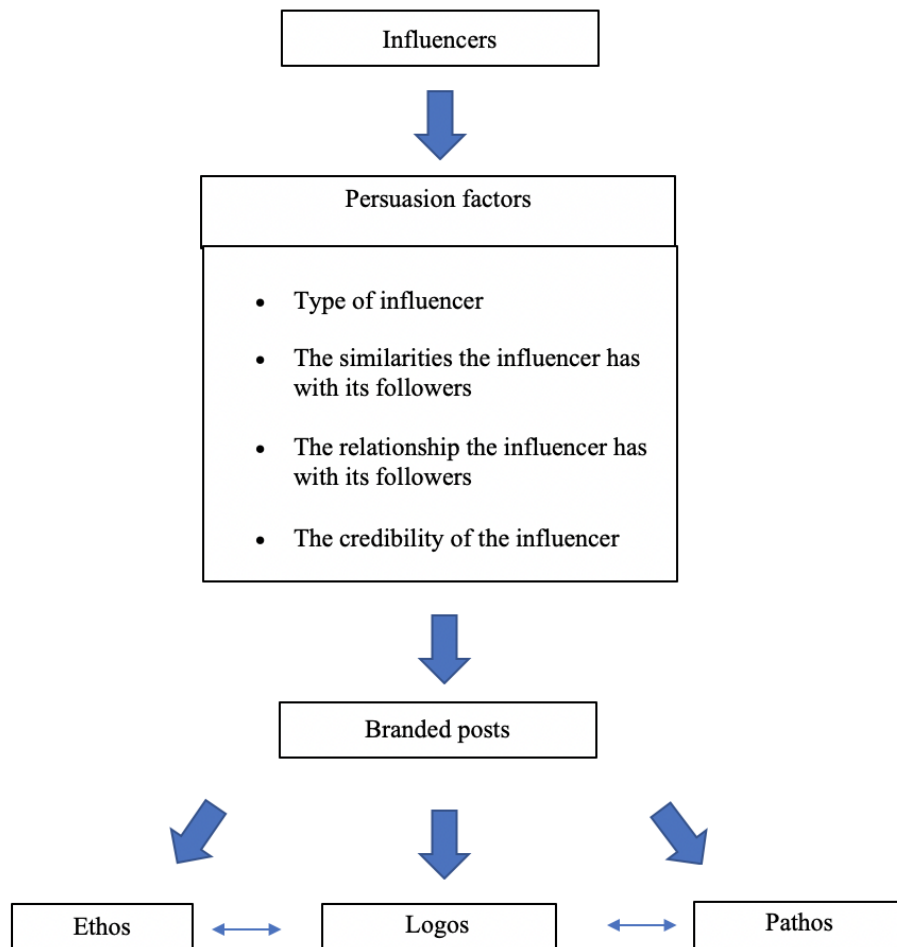
Figure 2: Conceptual framework of persuasion levels.

The conceptual framework is divided into two parts: the first part focuses on four factors related to the influencer's ability to persuade its followers, whilst the second part of the framework focuses on the rhetorical means such as ethos, logos and pathos as analytical tools. When an influencer is chosen, certain things need to be taken into consideration. When a brand has chosen an influencer, the first step is to identify what type of influencer they are (which is done by looking at the size of the influencer, the alignment with the brand as well as the purpose of the collaboration). When a clear picture of the influencer has been established, the next part to examine is how the influencer portrays themself and how they appear to be similar to their

followers. This is important to examine since regular people tend to follow influencers that are similar to themselves.

After having studied the influencer's page on Instagram and identify if the influencer is a good match for the brand, the next step is to study how the influencer builds relationships with its followers through para-social relationships; something that increases the trustworthiness with the followers. How the influencer manages to build relationships can be studied by looking at their direct communication with their followers, eg., if they respond to comments or if they 'like' the comment. It is important to keep in mind that these four factors do not have any strict boundaries, they rather intertwine with each other. An example of this would be if an influencer's similarity to its followers and the relationship it creates affects the influencers credibility.

When the influencer and their instagram page have been examined by keeping the four persuasion factors in mind, the next step is then to look at the collaborated post by the influencer. To be able to analyze how the influencer has used rhetorical means in their post, ethos, logos and pathos will be studied in order to see which of these three persuasive techniques are used the most. To conduct this study we will be using our conceptual framework in the same exact way as discussed. This will allow us to get a deeper understanding on why Lyft has chosen the influencers they have worked with. Our conceptual framework shows us the different levels of persuasion and the different characteristics of the influencers that are used to persuade their audiences in particular.

3.0 Methodology

This chapter is initiated by defining our methodological approach which is followed by a detailed presentation regarding the research design. The quality of the gathering of literature and theory is then argued for, followed by a thorough presentation of how the data was collected and analyzed. The chapter is completed by accounting for the assured quality of the study and the ethical considerations.

3.1 Research Philosophy

3.1.1 Ontology

Ontology is according to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson and Valizade (2021) defined as "Philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality" (p.70). This refers to the way the researcher views reality in terms of truths and facts. Realism, internal realism, relativism and nominalism are the four different viewpoints within ontology, where this study will take the relativistic standpoint. A relativistic view means that the researchers believe that there are multiple truths and the facts depend on the different views of the observers (Esterby-Smith et al. 2021). This study aims to reveal findings regarding persuasion within influencer marketing and we are well aware that what effectively persuades one person might not work on the next person. Therefore, there will be multiple truths depending on the targeted person which makes the relativistic view accurately applicable. Even though there are many truths, we still expect to find patterns, elements and mechanisms that are generally effective.

In this study we have limited ourselves to young consumers and gray-zone products, which narrows the focus to people who are more similar compared to a selection that represents a general population. A company cannot reach every potential consumer in a perfect way, but they can, in the best case, adjust it in the most effective manner. Therefore, we are certain that the findings and managerial implications extracted from this study can be used in an effective way.

3.1.2 Epistemology

According to Esterby-Smith et al. (2021), epistemology is the "general set of assumptions about ways of inquiring into the nature of the world" (p. 70). In other words, one could define it as a philosophy that contains different views about how we know what we know. Positivism and social constructionism are two contrasting views, where positivism refers to the belief that the world exists independently and externally from us people. Social constructionism, on the other hand, is the contrasting view which claims that reality is socially constructed by the people, and will be the view that this study holds (Esterby-Smith et al., 2021). We argue that influencer marketing, social media, as well as the behaviors on the platforms, are all strongly related to social construction. It is important to note that the phenomena of social construction is a term generated by people in order to describe reality in a certain way. For example, when looking at a text being published, and somebody reacting to this text, and then, in turn, our reaction to the follower's reaction which is then interpreted, a triple or even quadruple social construction begins to form about the way reality is now functioning; meaning that there are multiple constructions taking place. Therefore, when discussing social constructions, we should clarify that we want to limit our scope to the influencer's engagement with its followers, rather than the multiple layers that take place simultaneously in the background. An influencer, as an opinion leader, becomes a great example for depicting something that we as people have socially constructed as our reality, and becomes highly useful for this study.

3.2 Research Design and Strategy

The aim of this thesis is to get a better understanding on how companies selling nicotine pouches utilize influencer marketing to persuade and attract consumers on the Swedish market to buy and consume the products which are regarded as gray-zone products in this study. To be able to understand how the influencers are persuading people to use the products, a qualitative research design was chosen as the best alternative to create this study. Why a qualitative study suits our research best is because we want to investigate rhetoric means, hence using a research method that examines words rather than numbers is more suitable (Bryman, Bell & Harley, 2019). Aligned with what Bryman, Bell and Harley (2019) describe as a qualitative study,

Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) explains that the most common qualitative data are accounts of what research participants have either said or done.

To reach our aim and find the answers for our research question we needed to collect our primary data in a non-numerical data form. In our study, we will analyze the posts by chosen influencers on Instagram and use our conceptual framework to find which specific elements are used by the influencers to persuade young consumers. As the age demographic of followers would only be found through manually checking each influencer's followers and their accounts to see if an age can be detected, we determined that it would not be possible for us to define a specific age group for this study. When evaluating what type of research method that would be the most efficient for our research question, we chose to use the research method that Robert V. Kozinets created in 1995, namely netnography (Kozinets 2010). This is a research method that investigates computer-mediated communication within market-related topics (Bryman, Bell & Harley, 2019). Kozinets (2018) explains that, by using a netnographic method, researchers dive deeper into the context behind the post, and focus more on the intention of the post. As we are not interested in what, exactly, the picture depicts, we want to focus on (a) who posted it and (b) how the influencer formulated the post and caption.

As models are typically general and are either relevant to a certain context or not, we found that, while conducting our literature review, that there were no precise models or theories that could be directly applicable to our topic of how influencers persuade the audiences to consume nicotine pouches. We worked with ethos, logos and pathos to help us analyze the content created by the influencers, and with the help of different persuasion factors, we created a framework to fully understand how the influencers have been able to create content in a specific way to persuade the audiences.

Bryman, Bell and Harley (2019) describes how it has become more popular to conduct research in an abductive manner instead of approaching the research in a deductive or an inductive process. An abductive manner in research is done through observing the phenomena and then, in turn, trying to find explanations for them, by working closely with theory and data. By collecting data, which is the posts that the influencers have posted, and analyzing them with the help of

existing tools such as ethos, lagos, and pathos, we want to connect the findings with theory that describes why certain techniques persuade viewers more than others. By doing these steps, it will help us understand why the posts are conducted in certain ways and why people are so attracted to the products.

3.3 Literature Search and Quality Assurance

Peer-reviewed journal articles are the most important and reliable source of information to use while conducting a literature review according to Esterby-Smith et al. (2021). The peer review process is vital in order to reassure that the sources are reliable and fit for use. In some cases, researchers need to use less reliable sources of information that are not peer reviewed and published in a journal, these are called gray literature. When writing a research paper the researcher needs to use a wide range of literature in order to thoroughly understand the field of research. It is of utmost importance that the researchers try to stick to reliable sources of information to the greatest extent possible (Esterby-Smith et al. 2021).

In order to get a clear overview of our research field we did a substantial literature review, where we went through hundreds of different papers. By doing such an extensive research on prior literature we were able to discover and account for contrasting views, which gives this paper a more nuanced and credible point of view. During the literature search it was important for us to only look for highly credible and reliable sources of information. Almost all sources of information in the literature review are from papers published in journals, which widely guarantees the reliability of the sources. Furthermore, we used the acknowledged database of Lund University called LUBSearch, in order to find most of the literature used in this paper. To find the different articles we searched for keywords connected to the field of our study, such as: "Influencer marketing", " Instagram influencer" and " influencer branded posts".

In addition to this, we found multiple interesting articles while reading different papers that the authors referred to. It is important to note that we critically evaluated every article and source before we included it in our study. We used Esterby-Smith et al. (2021) guidelines regarding evaluating sources, which refers to the following analytical focuses: purpose, authorship,

credibility & accuracy and timeliness. The use of gray literature has actively been avoided while searching for prior research, however gray literature has been used in order to gather other information. The gray literature is mostly used in the background and it was necessary due to the need for certain background information not considered as academic research. There has still been a focus on recognized sources of information in order to maintain reliability.

3.4 Data Collection

Prior to this study, we conducted a pilot study that explored brands in the nicotine pouch industry and how they worked with marketing activities on Instagram. The findings that we extracted from the interviews in the pilot study all showed that it was through Instagram mostly that brands and influencers persuaded the young consumers to consume the advertised products. To conduct the research for this paper we decided that we would continue in the same direction as the pilot study in order to get a deeper understanding of what exactly influencers do to persuade their audiences.

We decided that we would use Netnography as our data-collection technique as it is an online marketing research technique for providing consumer insight (Kozinets, 2010). With the insights from the statistics presented in the beginning of this paper, young consumers (both men and women) are consuming nicotine pouches more than ever. Instagram was also chosen as the platform to extract our data since the platform is aligned with our research purpose. Kozinets (2010) describes that, when suitable online platforms have been identified, we as researchers have a few criterias that we can use to identify which platforms are best suited for the study. Two of the criterias that we implemented when choosing the online platform was that the platform needed to have high "traffic" of content posted and a high level of interaction between members on the platform. Both of these criterias are achieved on Instagram which makes it the right platform for us to collect our data from.

According to Kozinets (2010), there are many benefits of using netnography as a method, such as its time efficiency, being simpler and less expensive than traditional ethnography. Kozinets (2010) continues to describe how it is more unobtrusive and naturalistic than focus groups or interviews. When collecting our data, we started researching which influencers had collaborated

with the brand Lyft. When an influencer had been identified as having taken part in a paid collaboration with Lyft, we started to go through the influencers page to identify different persuasion factors such as: what type of influencer, the similarities the influencer has with its followers, the relationship the influencer has with its followers and lastly the credibility of the influencer. The persuasion factors presented above are all part of the first part of our conceptual framework.

The second part of our data collection, which is connected to the second part of the conceptual framework, is done through analyzing the branded post created by the influencer. As seen in the conceptual framework, ethos, logos, and pathos are used to uncode how the influencer communicates with its followers. By dividing up the data collection in two parts it allows us to get a better understanding for how the influencer works with persuasion factors across their Instagram page. By analyzing the different rhetorical means, it was made clear to us that different patterns arised depending on what type of influencer it was and what type of persuasion factors the influencer signaled on their page.

3.5 Empirical Analysis

Handling the qualitative empirical material correctly is a key component of any study, something that Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) point out in their paper. In order to analyze the collected empirical material correctly, we will apply three different steps: sorting, reducing and arguing. Starting with the first step of sorting the empirical findings is, according to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) an important step to create structure. In our study, we applied the sorting process by firstly going through the 24 different influencers and their collaborated posts regarding nicotine pouches on Instagram. We then began to divide the influencers into two categories, namely micro and macro influencers, by looking at the amount of followers. We also took note of the gender of the influencer, as well as their use of the three different rhetorical means. Since we are solely looking at one brand, namely Lyft, there was not a need to do further sorting when it comes to the content of the influencer's post since we only selected influencers that promoted the same brand and product.

The second step that Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) present to increase focus to the study is the reducing stage. Here it is important to only include empirical material that will add value to the study. While going through the many different posts on Instagram we identified patterns of different persuasion factors and included a couple of posts and citations that exemplifies these patterns. During the following sequence we looked at branded posts by the influencers and reduced the information into a table containing size, gender and ethos, pathos and logos.

The last step of the empirical analyzing method is arguing for the data (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018). By connecting the arguments made for the empirical findings to the conceptual framework, the arguments become more theoretical and more applicable. After having picked our 24 influencers, we took help of the conceptual framework created for this study to analyze the influencers separately. By applying our arguments to the framework, which looked at the four factors regarding persuasion with the influencer and its profile, as well as how the influencer intervenes ethos, logos, and pathos, our arguments began to become more theoretical. Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018) discuss that, by theorizing, we aim to provide new input into a certain field, where we hope that our findings show that there is a pattern when it comes to the size of the influencer and their credibility and how that affects the presence and use of rhetorical means that impact marketing. By connecting our findings to our literature review we provide new findings to the existing theory in a new way in regard to gray-zone products, such as nicotine pouches. Since there is no previous research regarding these gray-zone products, it was best suited for us to create and develop a conceptual framework that can lead us towards an understanding of what and how the different styles of communication persuades the young consumers.

3.6 Quality of Study

To ensure the usefulness of a qualitative research it is of utmost importance to ensure that the research is credible, attractive and relevant in the eyes of others. To secure the quality of our research we have actively worked in a transparent and reflexive way (Esterby-Smith et al. 2021). Even though we aim to extract valuable findings from the analysis, we actively try to avoid any type of bias that might lead to any forced findings. The process of data collection is a vital part of ensuring the quality of the research; it is important to avoid cherry-picking that might skew the

results (Esterby-Smith et al. 2021). With regards to this, the data collection process has been thoroughly executed with an extensive analysis in order to use the posts that are representative of the many.

Furthermore, we conducted an extensive literature review in order to get a clear and accurate understanding of the research topic. The thorough review allowed us to find research with different views, which will make this paper more nuanced and credible. Being reflexive and critical towards your own research enhances the analysis and the study as a whole (Esterby-Smith et al. 2021). This paper has been critically assessed continuously by both an assigned supervisor and fellow colleagues. This enhances the critical evaluation of the research, thus also the quality of it. Discussing our research also gave us a clear confirmation of the relevance of the subject. The friends and classmates whom we discussed our research with showed great interest on the topic and spontaneously confirmed that they perceived the topic as exciting and up to date.

As mentioned earlier, we included multiple perspectives on matters when possible. We have also included data that reflects the influencers and their actions in the most realistic and general way. Including different perspectives is one vital part to ensure the validity of a study conducted with a constructionist approach (Esterby-Smith et al. 2021). Furthermore Esterby-Smith et al. (2021) highlight authenticity, plausibility and criticality as important factors for the validity of a study. We obtained authenticity with the extensive and nuanced literature review, which is visible for the readers. The plausibility of the study relates to the drastic growth and relevance of researching influencer marketing. The specific delimitations and focus of the study has never been researched exclusively before, which ensures the novelty and criticality of the researched topic.

Furthermore, in order to enhance the reliability it is important that other researchers studying the same topic would gain similar findings (Esterby-Smith et al. 2021). We have limited the study fairly narrow, which allows a better accuracy in the analysis and conclusion. The constant desire to avoid bias, together with the critical evaluation from independent persons, strengthens the reliability of the study. Finally, researchers should evaluate if the gathered data is sufficiently

diverse in order to apply the findings in other contexts (Esterby-Smith et al. 2021). The narrow limitation to gray-zone products and young consumers allowed the findings to be more accurately generalizable. The possible selection of data has consequently been reduced, which led to our sample being a larger part of the researched population.

Furthermore, it could serve as useful to mention that there is always the possibility for human error when it comes to interpreting text, such as the use of ethos, logos and pathos in captions. However, we also want to emphasize that the pattern that emerged was identified after having analyzed all 24 influencers, and was not a pattern that we predicted we would find prior to the study. This was done in order to reduce researcher bias, as well as reducing the risk of alternating results to confirm pre-conceived notions.

3.7 Ethical Consideration

The ethical aspect of doing netnographic research is a debated subject (Kozinet, 2010). Kozinet (2010) especially highlights two aspects to take into consideration. The first question is whether the internet is a public or a private space, whereas the second question addresses the definition of consent while using information from online platforms. This study will solely collect data from different influencers and not specific consumers. Influencers are considered to be public people who earn a living through multiple means, such as disclosing their private life and constantly aiming to grow their followage. Therefore, we argue that using their public information and actions should not be considered as ethically questionable. An influencer's page could confidently be considered as publicly accessible and sharing influencers posts is generally heavily advocated by the influencers themselves. Hence, the two ethical questions highlighted by Kozinet can be addressed with confidence as not constituting any ethical issues during this research.

4.0 Analysis

In the following chapter, we will present our analysis of the empirical material, synthesized with relevant theory. The initial analysis is directed towards the persuasion factors, which account for the preconditions of effective influencer marketing. The final part of this chapter focuses on the branded posts by connecting them to the classic rhetorical means of ethos, pathos and logos, together with the persuasion factors. Different findings and patterns have been highlighted throughout the analysis.

4.1 Persuasion Factors

4.1.1 Type of Influencer

When conducting our netnographic study on influencers, we found recurring patterns regarding what type of influencer was chosen by the nicotine pouch brand. Campbell & Farrell (2020) present in their study the importance of choosing the right influencer that matches the brand. As they further describe, the reason why it is important to work with the right kind of influencer is due to the fact that the influencer's audience are the ones taking part in the paid advertisements. During our netnographic study, we studied 24 different Swedish influencers who all have taken part in collaborations with the same nicotine pouch brand in Sweden. The 24 influencers consisted of 13 female influencers and 11 male influencers with a varying following, where the smallest influencer had about 10 800 followers and the largest one 226 000 followers. According to Govindan & Alotaibi (2021), 18 out of the 24 influencers that we use for our study would be classified as micro influencers as they range within 1000-100 000 followers. Only 6 influencers would be classified as macro influencers as their following ranges from 100 000 to 1 000 000.

During our observation of the chosen influencers we quickly realized that five out of the six macro influencers were women. These findings are quite interesting as the product evolved from oral tobacco, which was predominantly male when it came out for consumption—serving as a contrast considering that most of the macro influencers in this study are female. This could be

explained with the help of the study conducted by Pozharliev, Rossi and De Angelis (2020) that highlights that the amount of followers affects the followers' cognitive response when seeing advertisements on the influencers own page. This can be explained by looking at the findings by Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017) as they argue that an influencer with many followers are often regarded as opinion leaders, which in turn affects the followers' cognitive response when seeing posts. Since five out of the six macro influencers were female in our study, we can draw the conclusion that the nicotine pouch brand, in this case, wanted to reach out to young females and inform them that it is no longer only men that use these types of products.

"Lyft's new "Summer Beat" - gives you access to online experiences for example! Click my story to see how I use the new Summer Beat can! Link in Bio to order your own! Age restriction 18 years old! #lyftSummerBeat #tapthecan #lyft" - Annawinck

"In collaboration with @lyft_sverige! 100% ready for the new years party, with both my disco ball, glitter and Lyft. If you sign up for Lyft's newsletter through the link in my bio before the 29th of december 21.00, you will be able to take part on the 1st of january of amazingly exclusive offers on all of Lyft's flavors. Do it and do it fast! Age restriction 18 years. #Lyft #Openthecan"
- Ainabanaina

Annawinck and Ainabanaina are the two biggest influencers that the nicotine pouch brand has collaborated with and it is clear to say that the way these two have formulated themselves shows that they aim to inspire their followers to do just like them. In other words, as Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017) would call them, they are assuming the roles of opinion leaders. Even though Anna & Aina are regarded as opinion leaders, the nicotine pouch brand has only used a few so-called opinion leaders. The majority of the influencers that they have used and collaborated frequently with are smaller influencers categorized as micro influencers. Pozhariliev et al. (2020) showed that using micro influencers in collaborations was more rewarding since the followers consider them more trustworthy compared to the macro influencers. The reason for this is, according to Pozhariliev et al. (2020), due to the fact that the followers are suspicious of highly persuasive marketing from big influencers since they might be collaborating in order to capitalize on its large following.

Another interesting finding that we found was connected to how the nicotine pouch brand aligned their influencers to their own brand. Out of the 24 influencers that collaborated with Lyft, three of them were chosen by Lyft to collaborate with the company's sub-brand due to their creativity. This sub-brand also sells nicotine pouches but are specialized in limited editions, more exotic and experimental flavor combinations. The chosen influencers for Lyft LAB were: Ramihanna, a male micro influencer with 54 400 followers who works as a photographer and creative director; Joymbatha, a female influencer and artist who also collaborated with Lyft LAB; and lastly violabergstrom, a female influencer with 23 000 followers who also works as a creative director. As the three chosen influencers for the collaboration are micro influencers, it is interesting to see that the nicotine pouch brand chose to use smaller influencer rather than macro influencers (who are considered opinion leader according to Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders 2017) which might suggest that Lyft LAB might desire to use more credible sources (i.e., micro) rather than influential ones (i.e., macro).

Pophal (2016) emphasizes in his study the importance of using influencers that align with brand image if they wish to generate any effect from the collaboration. Moreover, Campbell & Farrell (2020) present how important it is that the influencer aligns with the brand since it provides the brand with more value, e.g. organic reach, specific targeting and attention creating. Having creative directors, such as the three mentioned previously, demonstrates the push towards aligning the brand (in this case, Lyft LAB) with influencers that bring exclusivity, whilst still maintaining a high level of professionalism and outreach. This sense of exclusivity and creativity can be seen in Ramihanna's post;

"Introducing Collection 04 - "In Full Bloom" together with LYFT LAB.
Spent 3 days in the studio with @joymbatha and @violabergstrom exploring the world of scent and floral flavors…"

Here it is clear to see that this collaboration was not just initiated by the brand and placed in the hands for the influencer to advertise, but rather it is evident that the influencers have spent time working and creating with the brand to develop new flavors for the limited edition nicotine pouch "In Full Bloom". This can be connected to what Pozhariliev et al. (2020) said about how

many might regard big influencers, in this case macro influencers, to be using their following just to capitalize on paid advertisements.

4.1.2 Similarity Between Followers and Influencers

As presented in the theory, Lou and Yuan (2019) highlight that the similarity between a follower and influencer is an effective factor that helps the influencer to gain trust. When we conducted our netnographic study we encountered recurring factors used by different influencers that strengthened the similarity between them and their followers. The first factor that will be accounted for is related to the prior chapter, namely the choice of a wide variety of influencers. Since Lyft does not attempt to target a specific segment based on persona, but rather a certain age, the use of substantially different influencers allowed for a broader mass to find similarities with one or many influencers. The chosen influencers for this study who have collaborated with Lyft differ in sexuality, ethnicity, interests and personalities, amongst other things. A good example of this is Ramihanna who is a homosexual photagrapher with a non-swedish ethnicity appearing as a model on his page, compared to Joel Ighe who is a masculine night club manager with pictures capturing every-day moments. Another example is Nadiakandil who is a hipster and body positivist challenging societal norms, whereas Lojsanwallin is a young mom posting about her luxurious life. These wide ranges of influencers naturally attract a correspondingly wide variety of followers (Campbell & Farrell 2020).

Even though influencers attract followers with similar interests, this does not assure similarity to a degree that guarantees high trust and ability to persuade. We were able to distinguish an extensive pattern amongst almost every influencer. Even though many Instagram pages, at first glance, looked almost too perfect and unrelatable amongst a number of influencers, their use of Instagram stories became a powerful technique to overcome this sense of exclusivity and unrelatability. Almost every influencer posted daily updates about their lives on their Instagram stories, and most of them were very honest and unfiltered. Often their daily insights showed that their life is nothing too spectacular, and conveyed a feeling that the influencer is simply a normal person. A good example of this is Lindapira's page where she posted a story of her kids playing video games, with the following text:

"Trying to convince the kids to go to a market or amusement park but they rather stay at home playing video games. Oh my god" - Lindapira

This is a contrast to the otherwise perfect pictures on her Instagram page and it brings out the normal and relatable side of her life. Another good example is Sannealexandra who portrays a fast-paced and luxurious lifestyle on her page but posted the following, more relatable story:

"I have not been prioritizing my workouts this week. I've made up excuses of me not having time etc. Now I am going to try to get a 20/30 min work out with the kids home and awake! We´re having the kids home for 3 months this summer (summer break) so I am going to make them used to mommy and daddy working out while they're with us :)" - Sannealexandra

Lindapira and Sannealexandra are amongst the biggest influencers used to market the nicotine pouches. The smaller influencers do, in general, have more content conveying a more relatable character that a regular person can relate to. This is supported by Campbell & Farrell (2020) who claim that smaller influencers are often more similar to their followers. Therefore, the use of stories appears to be a crucial way of humanizing themselves and maintaining strong persuasive abilities. This is in line with Bandura (1994) who argues that people are more easily influenced by individuals more similar to themselves.

The fact that smaller influencers generally possess more credibility is important for the next pattern we found. As presented in the prior chapter, 18 out of 24 influencers studied were considered micro-influencers. The use of many and mostly mid/small sized influencers has allowed to maintain a higher level of similarity between influencer and follower. Among smaller influencers, more relatable posts (not only stories) have been noticed. Examples of more relatable posts are Joelighe posting blurry pictures at the club, Abcalexandra renovating a work space with paint all over her face, Sebastianwallden posting his laundry day or naaakochnimo peeling a banana for his son, with the following caption:

"I get to celebrate this day thanks to you my little prince, thank you for giving my life a new meaning! My best friend for the rest of my life, dad loves you!!" -naaakochnimo

These are laid back posts that many can relate to, where the influencer seems to spontaneously publish a post without worrying about it being perfect. Another example is Joymbatha who did post a professional modeling picture, however the following caption clearly depicts her still maintaining a sense of similarity with her followers, even though the picture itself might not be the most relatable to everyone:

"Over the years I've become more and more uncomfortable with being photographed. It might not always look like it but I feel so stupid and wanna cringe every time. Why is that?" - Joymbatha

Even though she models at times, by writing this caption she bridges the gap between her and her followers. Despite the pictures of her modeling, the majority of her Instagram looks just like every other page and she gives the impression of being an ordinary person. Her pictures are often captured in the moment and she does not appear to care about everything being perfect. Amongst the other smaller influencers we could distinguish many posts communicating a feeling of the influencer being just a regular person.

Even if the smaller influencers naturally portray a more regular self image, the larger influencers have other strategies to enhance the similarity factor, such as Instagram stories. Another pattern that enhances the similarity is that almost every influencer, except for a few music artists, are primarily influencers and not traditional celebrities. five out of 24 of the chosen influencers are musicians with fairly casual Instagram pages. The high number of non-celebrity influencers enhances the possibility for the followers to relate, identify and have a desire to be like the influencer (Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget 2020).

4.1.3 Relationship Between Followers and Influencers

The relationship between the influencer and the followers are a very important factor for the ability to persuade. Para-social relationship between an influencer and a follower correlates with a better ability to persuade and affect purchase intention (Sukhdial et al. 2002). Belanche et al. (2021) explains that the relationship between an influencer and the followers are usually

considerably close, especially compared to other celebrities. A closer relationship leads to higher credibility, which is crucial for good influencer marketing. We were able to distinguish a couple of patterns that enhance and build a strong relationship between the two parts. The first pattern that helps with building a strong relationship is that most of the influencers systematically open up about very private and sensitive things with their followers. The following citations are clearly depicting this pattern:

"Dad, it's your birthday. What do you sing to someone that can't live a hundred years? Maybe hooray hooray hooray for the heaven in you. Sometimes you have to build small bivouac shelters right beside your heart to not go under, just like today. 58 years old now but so eternally young. You were my lighthouse and you always let me be an ocean. I love you" - Abcalexandra

"A strong body is a body with will. When I grew up I thought that a strong body could only look in one way and within those frames I have never seen myself as strong, up until now, when I realize that those frames are wrong." -Mollyhammar

These captions are undoubtedly revealing personal information and feelings. Abcalexandra talks about her deceased father, which is something that she has done multiple times on her Instagram. Mollyhammar speaks about her past insecurity over her body which is quite personal and something that many could probably relate to. When a person expresses personal information as these examples, the feeling of openness enhances, which is a feeling that creates a stronger sense of a real friendly relationship (Labrecque 2014). These para-social relationships where the influencer creates a feeling of being friends are very effective considering the ability to persuade. This is supported by Smith, Menon and Sivakumar (2005) who state that the best source of information for product reviews is a friend.

The disclosure of personal information is a pattern that is overarching all the influencers, independent of size. However, the next pattern addresses the way of building a strong relationship with one's followers through communication and interaction, and is a pattern that does vary depending on the size of the influencer. There are different ways that influencers can interact with their followers. As Kay et al. (2020) explains, smaller influencers are able to

communicate and interact with their followers to a different extent in comparison to bigger influencers. Amongst the smaller influencers, we were able to distinguish a pattern of systematically answering and/or liking comments from followers. Abcalexandra likes and answers every comment on almost every post. Even when a follower comments an emoji, she takes the time to answer something back. Joymbatha answers many of her comments, but the ones she does not answer, she usually gives a like in order to make them feel noticed. This engagement is shown amongst many of the smaller influencers, with some exceptions, but amongst the larger influencers it is close-to-impossible to answer and interact with all the followers all the time. In order to overcome this barrier, we have noticed different ways of building relationships and communicating with the followers.

By using Instagram stories, the influencer is able to directly speak to its followers on a daily basis, as well as provide daily updates or answer questions, which enhances the para-social relationship through interaction, especially with larger influencers who have Q&A (questions and answers) sessions. This is a way for the larger influencers to interact with their followers without having to answer hundreds of comments. Sannealexandra, Hannamw, Lojsanwallin and Annawick have all held Q&A's on their Instagram stories during our study. These questions often reach a deep and personal level, which can be exemplified with the following question that Annawick got: "*Why did you get an abortion?*". Another clear example is from Hannamw's Instagram where she invites her followers to a deeper conversation and connection by posting: "*Long time since we talked, ask me a question*". One example of the questions she got from her followers is: "*I would love to know more about how you connect with your tunisian heritage?*". The following citation was her answer:

"*In so many ways. I'm so grateful to have grown up with two cultures to have a family and a second home in Tunisia. All my best childhood memories are from when me and my family spent the whole summer there full of so much love. I still go as often as I can. Love listening to Arabic music and I'm trying to practice my Arabic speaking skills, celebrating Eid with my dad and eating tunisian food. Me and my family have a little dream for next fall, to spend 1-2 months there*" -Hannamw

The answer is posted together with the question, for everyone to see. By doing this the influencer shares quite private information and is able to interact and build a deeper relationship with the followers. Answering somewhat personal questions indicates an openness towards the followers, which is an efficient way to further build on the para-social relationship (Labrecque 2014). These communicative actions may be especially important for the large influencers who are, according to Pozhariliev et al. (2020), generally considered to be less credible compared to the smaller influencers.

Furthermore, both posts and stories are often directly directed towards the followers, creating a feeling of interaction. This applies to all the influencers, independent of size or type. Examples of these type of posts and stories follows:

"Not much light during this time of year, make sure to take care of it my people! Even if it's not directly sunshine out here haha! Shululuu, & have a nice Tuesday! 😉💪 *#humanscales"*
-Naaakochnimo

"Need your help: Looking for a location like this in Stockholm, please let me know if you know any" -Hannamw

"Finally, I have a common denominator with all of you who seem to be a little fit and healthy!"
-Abcalexandra

"Who else was obsessed with sonic? 👾*"* -Sharareh.hoss

These are merely some examples, but they clearly depict how the influencers direct their post or focus towards the followers. They invite their followers to interact or indicate that the influencers think and care about their followers and their opinions. By doing these different activities, smaller influencers are able to build even stronger relationships with their followers and the larger influencers are able to overcome the barriers of building relationships with a large followage. This is in line with Belanche et al. (2021) who claim that building a relationship with

the followers is of utmost importance and plays a huge part in enhancing the credibility, the position as opinion leaders and ultimately the ability to persuade.

4.1.4 Rhetorical Means In Branded Posts

The actual marketing action of creating and posting branded posts does interplay with the multiple presented factors of persuasion. It has become clear to us that one can not simply look at the branded posts in order to understand an influencer's ability to persuade his or her followers. Firstly, it is important to point out that most of the influencers have built a strong relationship and systematically mediated a similarity with their followers. As presented, the smaller influencers have generally had a stronger relationship and similarity with their followers, which complies with the literature. An analysis of branded posts amongst 24 influencers has been conducted, where we distinguished which rhetorical means the influencers used in their branded posts. The three rhetorical means are: ethos, which refers to the character and credibility; logos, which refers to the ability to persuade through reason and logic; and finally pathos, which refers to persuasion through emotions (Pathosethoslogos, n.d.). A table will follow where we compile the results of the analytical observation.

Influencers	Gender	Number of followers	Type of influencer	Ethos	Logos	Pathos
Annawinck	Female	226 000	Macro-influencer		Weak	
Ainabanaina	Female	212 000	Macro-influencer			
Lojsanwallin	Female	205 000	Macro-influencer			
Sannealexandra	Female	202 000	Macro-influencer			
Hannamw	Female	130 000	Macro-influencer		Weak	
Tomljungqvist	Male	102 000	Macro-influencer	X	X	
Lindapira	Female	97 000	Micro-influencer	X	X	
Petteregnefors	Male	82 600	Micro-influencer	X	X	
Mollyhammar	Female	76 200	Micro-influencer		X	
Mrjullz	Male	66 600	Micro-influencer	X	X	Weak
Ramihanna	Male	54 400	Micro-influencer	X	X	
Conradssonphilip	Male	53 700	Micro-influencer		X	
Angelicabarwich	Female	50 300	Micro-influencer	X	X	
Sharareh.hoss	Female	49 200	Micro-influencer			
Nadiakandil	Female	29 300	Micro-influencer	X	X	
Knutssonmartins	Male	28 600	Micro-influencer	X	X	
Joymbatha	Female	23 600	Micro-influencer	X	X	X
Violabergstrom	Female	22 900	Micro-influencer	X	X	X
Emilioaraya	Male	22 600	Micro-influencer	X	X	Weak
Naaakochnimo	Male	19 500	Micro-influencer	X	X	X
Sebastianwallden	Male	17 800	Micro-influencer	X	X	
Gustavbrostrom	Male	17 400	Micro-influencer	X	X	X
Abcalexandra	Female	17 200	Micro-influencer	X	X	X
Joelighe	Male	10 800	Micro-influencer	X	X	

Table 1: Information about influencers

Initially we were able to distinguish a very clear pattern as the macro-influencers did not put any substantial effort in persuading their followers through rhetorical means. The only macro-influencer that did this is Tomljungqvist who is male and also the smallest of the macro-influencers in this study. As compared to the smaller influencers, macro-influencers are considered to be more accepted as opinion leaders (Hudders 2017), while the smaller influencers are considered to be more credible. This is an important and interesting factor due to the researched product. As presented in the background, snuff, which is the precursor of nicotine pouches, has always been heavily male dominated. Therefore, the use of female opinion leaders is of utmost importance in order to convince females that nicotine pouches are a product fit for everyone, regardless of gender. By normalizing nicotine pouches amongst females as the main goal, the need for rhetorical means in the ads might not add value to the marketing. It could even possibly decrease the value of the marketing since consumers are sensitive towards too persuasive marketing (Guo and Main 2012), and the larger influencers are already considered to be less credible than the smaller influencers. It seems like the big influencers have to maintain a balance between marketing a product, and still maintaining a trustworthiness from their followers, as the influencer might be viewed as less of an opinion leader if the follower feels like they are being too pushy regarding a product, or even that the influencer is trying to persuade the followers for monetary gains.

The male influencers are subsequently much smaller compared to the female macro-influencers and focus on rhetorical means in their posts. In the table we can distinguish that every male except one has both ethos and logos, and in some cases pathos as well. The male influencers are smaller, thus they have more credibility since the influencer feels more relatable to its followers (Marques, Casais, Camilleri 2021). This also results in a closer relationship and more similarity between influencer and follower, which makes it more likely that a para-social relationship begins to form (Campbell & Farrell 2020; Kay et al. 2020). Even though the male influencers are smaller in general, there are still a substantial number of female influencers who also use the same rhetorical means as the male influencers. There are only two female micro-influencers who do not have any substantial ethos and logos. The pattern of stronger rhetorical means appears to be independent of gender and are instead dependent on the size of the influencer. The closer relationship, similarity and higher credibility amongst the micro-influencers results in them being

more likely to be perceived as friends, which is considered to be the best source of information for product reviews (Smith, Menon and Sivakumar 2005). The pattern of almost solely using micro-influencers amongst the male influencers is especially important for this certain context. Since the use of snuff has been widely dominated by males, they do not need an opinion leader to show them that the use is socially accepted, rather they need to be convinced and persuaded by someone they trust.

Even though the influencers' persuasive factors vary, an advantage with using influencer marketing that we could distinguish is that they usually seem to have built up a strong ethos. As presented in the prior chapters of the analysis, relations have been built during a long period of time, thus the ethos should naturally be strong from the followers point of view. Throughout the posts we have also noticed a strong ethos by influencers as they have consistently expressed that they use the products themselves, which enhanced the notion of expertise. The posts are never too persuasive, which enhance the feeling of being unbiased and expressing their true opinions. Many influencers, within both genders, have enhanced their ethos with communication that they have tried many flavors and spent time and effort with the products, which strengthens their character and credibility. The following citation is an example of this:

"Spent 3 days in the studio with @joymbatha and @violabergstrom exploring the world of scent and floral flavors. I found my favorite in EDT. 04_03 and its lavender-inspired taste."
- Ramihanna

One key pattern that we distinguished is that the influencers have made multiple posts about the products during a long period of time. Abcalexandra has posted over 40 branded posts which enhances the ethos, but also the logos. By systematically posting about the product, the influencers strengthen the ethos by enhanced perception about being knowledgeable about the products, which subsequently improve logos by making her arguments more valid and trustworthy. This is something that also applies to the larger influencers which is not accounted for in table 1. The influencers have furthermore included many arguments and reasons to why the promoted products are good and why the followers should buy them. The following caption from Abcalexandra exemplifies this:

"Heeeey cuties, do you remember that I recommended Mini Royal Purple? I will now do it again. As I said, I'm a little bit of a self proclaimed expert within the subject and I still stand by the fact that this flavor deserves all the love it can get. Imagine! A neat little nicotine pouch with an ingratiating and enjoyable flavor, round, rosy, sweet and determined!!! 10 out of 10. "
- Abcalexandra

The persuasive mean of pathos has not regularly, nor strongly appeared. Some cases of pathos have been noticed, where the influencers try to create certain associations to commonly liked things and evoke feelings. In the following citation Naaakochnimo play on the feeling of longing for sun and tropical environments and presents the tropical breeze flavor as a getaway from the cold.

"*Now after trying most of the flavors I have now found my favorite. Tropic Breeze, which in addition fits quite well right now when everything is the opposite at home*" -Naaakochnimo

The pattern of a strong ethos and logos, which is seen mostly amongst the smaller influencers, is according to Zhou, Barnes, McCormick and Blazquez (2021) the best rhetorical means to use in order to persuade the followers with the two following tactics: Attention-attracting and claiming expertise. These two tactics for persuasion have been noticed constantly in the branded ads, but in a way that is not too persuasive and still induce a feeling of expressing honest opinions.

The framing of the messages has been of positive character, which means that the messages have been formulated in a way that maximizes happiness and minimizes pain (Roper & Fill 2012). Positive message framing is the most suitable in this case according to Tsai (2007) since the targeted potential consumers can be assumed to have low product knowledge, independent self-construal and low consumer involvement. We can assume this since they target non-consumers (low product knowledge), the independent self-construal can't be certain but many influencers are somewhat peculiar and according to theory, followers tend to follow influencers that are somewhat similar to themselves (independent self-construal). Finally the product is not strongly connected to values, beliefs or attitude (consumer involvement). Furthermore in almost all of the branded posts, the advantages and positive associations with the nicotine pouches have been heavily communicated. Not a single influencer has communicated

any disadvantages with the products, except stating that the products are only for persons over the age of 18. It is obligatory to communicate the age restriction, but it has been placed at the end of the captions together with the hashtags, often with a space separating it from the normal text.

Due to regulations, all the influencers have been obligated to communicate that the posts are paid ads. If an influencer discloses ads in a simple way, it might decrease the credibility of the message (Hwang & Jeong 2016). As presented in multiple examples in the analysis the influencers often clearly express collaborations with developing and trying flavors, together with the company name. It is always very clear that the post is an ad, but the influencers still manage to induce a feeling of honesty.

As we have seen during this analysis the relationship and similarity are vital factors to even consider being successfully persuading with the branded posts. By enhancing the persuading factors, it also strengthens the rhetorical means of ethos, pathos and logos. The ethos has been built during a long period of time by handling the relations with the followers and without a good ethos the logos would not have the same strength. It becomes clear that everything is interconnected and all parts have to be handled optimally in order to have a strong ability to persuade.

5.0 Discussion

In this chapter we initially present and discuss what key findings the empirical analysis provided. This is followed by a presentation about how this paper has extended and contributed to the existing theory within the topic. The chapter is finalized by providing managerial implications for companies, influencers and consumers.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings

The initial thought that sparked the interest to conduct this study was the purpose to find out how companies that sell gray-zone products are able to persuade and attract consumers into buying their products with the help of influencer marketing. Gray-zone products might not be fully accepted by society and hold a larger risk of being criticized. To partially answer our purpose of the study, it would be useful to quote Booth and Matic (2011): "*How can corporate marketing control the reputation of their brand in an environment which is increasingly out of their control?*" (p. 185). To answer this question, we highlight a key action which we could distinguish from our study. Not taking control of the reputation and communication in the environment could possibly damage the brand and company the most. What we have seen in this case is that Lyft instantly turned to influencer marketing in order to ensure that they are the ones that shape the consumers' attitudes, before any negative influences make a mark. The reason why it is so important to take control over the reputation of a brand directly is due to the fact that there are no other platforms that can carry and spread information faster than social media.

In accordance with prior research, it was clear that the smaller influencers were closer connected with their followers by systematic interactions and possessed higher trustworthiness. However, one key finding from this study is that the level of credibility and trustworthiness might not always be the most important factor. As Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017) explain, larger influencers are more considered to be opinion leaders, which, connected with the male dominated nature of the product, led us to the mentioned findings. In the case of nicotine pouches, which is considered to be quite similar to other gray-zone products, we regard a key

objective for the brand and influencers was to change (or prevent) firmly rooted beliefs about nicotine pouches being just for men. Therefore, by using larger influencers, it appears that Lyft is not necessarily trying to place focus on product knowledge, but rather to highlight and normalize female usage of nicotine pouches (this being done through collaboration with female macro-influencers). In contrast, the male consumers did not need an opinion leader to state that men can use nicotine pouches. The male consumers primarily needed a highly credible influencer who could persuade them into using the products.

Not only are larger influencers generally less credible, we were also able to see how the macro-influencers did not achieve any substantial ethos, logos or pathos in their branded ads. In contrast to the bigger influencers, smaller influencers were focusing heavily on using rhetorical means while conducting their paid advertisements. By applying other theories, we could conclude why less rhetorical means did not have to imply that the branded post was less effective. Consumers are sensitive towards highly persuasive marketing, therefore less persuasive marketing might be suitable for larger influencers, especially if the goal is to simply gain attention and drive opinion. This is especially important for gray-zone products where suspicion of unnaturally persuasive marketing could potentially damage an already ethically questionable product. The takeaways from this is that high credibility and highly persuasive marketing might not always be the best way to go. Influencers have to be chosen by companies with regards to the objective since smaller and larger influencers are best at achieving different things. These identified patterns are connected to the size of the influencer and are independent of the genders. In regard to the research question, the factors used by influencers to persuade their followers are a combination of: credibility, similarity and relationship with their followers, where the micro influencer tended to use ethos and logos and macro influencers barely used any rhetorical means.

Another interesting finding regarding primarily macro-influencers was that many of the influencers' pages were unrealistically perfect at first glance. This could be disadvantageous for the influencers that portray themselves as perfect all the time, since they become unrelatable for the followers. However, we found that the influencers incorporate their personal side through Instagram stories. By using Instagram stories the influencers invite their followers to take part of

their everyday life and show the followers that they are normal people. The macro-influencers also used their stories to hold Q&As, where they showed an openness towards their followers, building stronger para-social relationships. This plays an important role in relationship building and keeping the similarity between the influencer and its followers. In contrast to the macro-influencers, we identified that micro-influencers generally posted more relatable content on their Instagram page, which entails higher possibility for a follower to feel similarity towards an influencer. Even though the micro-influencers (generally) had more relatable pages, they still elevated the feeling of similarity by the use of personal and relatable stories. Although micro-influencers have a closer relationship and more similarity corresponding with prior research, our study distinguished ways that macro-influencers were still able to connect and build relationships with their followers. This is an important finding since companies can not assume that larger influencers do not have close relationships with their followers without analyzing the specific influencer. This finding extends an existing theory that claims that bigger influencers lack similarity and have a harder time building para-social relations with their followers.

To build strong relationships with followers, Labrecque (2014) explains that sharing personal information creates a stronger sense of a real friendly relationship. The literature discussed in this paper supports this by claiming that the best source of information regarding product reviews is from a friend's experience with the product. We found that the influencers invited their followers to take part in private information regarding themselves and their families which builds a stronger relationship between the follower and the influencer, creating a bond similar to a real friendly relationship. When the bond has been created, paid advertisements from the influencer could be somewhat regarded as a friend recommending a product, which in turn increases the engagement and purchase intention. Furthermore, we could identify that the influencers were creating content and addressing it to the followers directly, inviting them to interact with the influencer. By doing this, smaller influencers create a stronger relationship with their followers, while the bigger influencers do it to overcome the barriers of building relationships despite the big followage.

While analyzing what rhetorical means the influencers were using, we could distinguish a clear pattern in the heavy focus on ethos and logos primarily. This was especially the case for the

smaller influencers, who were more persuasive with their posts. In accordance with previous literature by Zhou, Barnes, McCormick and Blazquez (2021), these rhetorical means correspond to the tactics of attention attracting and claiming expertise. We highlight this combination as the best for micro-influencers to persuade consumers into using gray-zone products, as the consumption of nicotine pouches had increased between 2018 and 2021 for ages 16-29 (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2022). With regards to what we have researched, the combination amongst the smaller influencers has been proven successful. There might be a need for existing strong credibility and relationship in order to gain from focusing on heavy rhetorical persuasion. If a big influencer has managed to obtain it, the followers are not as sensitive towards the persuasive nature, hence such macro-influencer could also use the same means. In the case of this study, many influencers mediated that they used the products and conveyed a feeling of an honest opinion. The perception of the branded post being honest might be decisive for the reception of the message. Finally, a clear majority of the influencers systematically posted branded ads about lyft, which enhanced their ethos and feeling of expertise. It is important to note that this might differ with consideration to what type of product and what the objective might be.

The key takeaways from the study can summingly be defined as a contribution to the topic of how persuasion works on different levels. By combining theory regarding influencers and classic theory about rhetorics, this study contributed, through observation, with a unique insight into the different levels of persuasion within influencer marketing. The multilevel method provided an understanding about what factors are important for the ability to persuade and what the influencers can do in order to maintain and enhance them. Through the multilevel analysis we were able to obtain significant findings about how the influencers preconditioned relationship and similarity with the followers affect the persuasive ability in the branded ad. The multilevel analysis allowed us to answer the research question in an extensive way by not only looking at the most obvious factors and rhetorical means. Finally, this study revealed that there is not only one correct answer on how to persuade an audience; everything needs to interplay to create the best possible opportunity to persuade the followers. The study has further shown how existing literature needs to be connected and interpreted in order to fully understand the subject of influencer marketing. The answers are not black or white and need to be carefully adapted to

every certain situation and goal. The general knowledge and prior theory about influencer marketing is accurate, but it rarely touches the bigger picture and within certain areas. This paper exemplifies how the existing theory is interrelated and could be used, with a specific focus on gray-zone products.

5.2 Theoretical Contribution

We argue that prior research within the area of influencer marketing rarely analyzed what the influencers were doing. The earlier studies mainly looked at what the consumers thought were important. We already knew that a good relationship and displaying a similarity with the followers are favorable in order to persuade effectively. Earlier studies have also been very focused on a single topic or factor within influencer marketing, rarely accounting for the interrelations with the different factors. Furthermore the choice of looking at gray-zone products on the Swedish market further distinguish this study from prior research.

This study has contributed with deep knowledge about how influencers create and maintain relationships, similarity, and more overarching, the ability to persuade. We were able to pinpoint certain actions such as, the use of relatable and open Instagram stories, directed captions, answering comments and sharing of personal information. The findings do not only contribute by specifying how influencers can enhance the relationship and similarity in general. It also provides insights on how larger influencers can somewhat counteract theory about them regarding not being able to build relationships and mediate similarity with their followers. By conducting the deep analysis we were able to highlight how different influencers use their Instagram stories in order to overcome certain barriers. One way to overcome the barrier was that the majority of macro-influencers held Q&As on their stories where followers could ask personal questions. This was a way to connect with followers on a deeper level without having to answer hundreds of comments on the posts. This is merely one example, but it clearly gives the existing theory about macro-influencers not being able to build relationships and keep a similarity an extra dimension. These findings demonstrate that there are possibilities and ways to overcome the barriers and still maintain good conditions for persuasion, regardless of size.

Furthermore this study has contributed to theory by applying it in a more contextual way. The results have shown that it is not possible to decide what factors or type of influencers that are best to use, before specifying context and objective. We were able to see how strong persuasion and credibility might not be the most important factor in order to change opinion. By distinguishing a lack of ethos, pathos and logos amongst the posts of the macro-influencers we were able to conclude that this does not have to imply that the branded post is less effective. This was rather a beneficial factor in order to achieve the objective. The sensitivity for highly persuasive marketing is an important factor to consider for large influencers who are marketing gray-zone products. This exemplifies the dynamic results and theory this research has provided to the topic. These types of findings contribute to the theory by giving it a more nuanced picture where we can conclude that theoretically better persuasive actions might not be the best way to go in all situations.

During this research we have also combined existing literature in order to analyze the interrelation and the combined logic and function. The used literature has been extended with more classic theory and tools such as ethos, pathos and logos, which enhanced the understanding of persuasion. Deriving from the prior theory and the more classic rhetorical means a conceptual framework was created, which allowed for a deeper analysis and understanding. Prior to the framework that was created for this study, there was not a single framework made for analyzing persuasion of influencer marketing in a similar manner. This makes it the first of its kind and a substantial contribution to prior theory. The conceptual framework is rather generic, which allows for other researchers to use it in different contexts in order to understand persuasion within influencer marketing on a deeper level.

5.3 Managerial Implications

This study has provided managerial implications for companies, influencers and consumers. The result of this study has given companies an insight in how influencer marketing can be conducted in an effective way. With the deeper insight they are able to both analyze certain influencers before collaborating with them, but also get implications of how they should adapt their influencer marketing in order to achieve their objectives. This paper highlights the importance of different persuasive factors, which are crucial for effective persuasion. Furthermore it provides

information on effective rhetorical combinations and the importance of choosing the right influencers for the right situation. By taking the results in consideration, companies are able to leave the former trial and error approach and work with more precise and adapted influencer marketing.

With regards to the influencers, this research has provided multiple key insights of how an influencer can create optimal conditions in order to conduct effective marketing. Not only has it given implications of what factors are important, it has also presented clear examples of how they can utilize them. The importance of creating a close relationship and keeping the similarity with influencers has been stressed, but also actions that can be done in order to overcome certain barriers. With a larger followage it becomes harder to maintain close relationships and a similarity, but this paper has presented multiple ways to overcome or mitigate the problems.

Finally, this paper gives consumers an insight of how they are being persuaded on social media. It is very important for consumers to understand the environment that they spend hours in everyday. With the results of this study they are able to get an insight of how corporations and influencers are actively trying to persuade them into buying and consuming products. It is especially important within the subject of gray-zone products, where the products can be somewhat harmful to consume.

6.0 Conclusion

The final chapter concludes this study by summarizing the results connected to the aim of this study. This thesis and chapter is ending with a reflection over the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

The purpose of this study was to dive deep into the still fairly under researched topic of influencer marketing. This study took a different point of view in relation to prior research and focused on what the influencers actually do in order to persuade their followers into using a certain product. The research was limited to gray-zone products which makes it the first of its kind. Gray-zone products suffer a big risk of criticism and negative attitudes especially in the current era where consumers have obtained great influential power using social media. Therefore, a key prerequisite for the success with introducing the nicotine pouches to the market was that Lyft instantly took control over the otherwise somewhat uncontrollable environment of social media. This is an especially important factor for gray-zone products, since they are more inclined to be criticized and suffer from a bad reputation. While looking at what the influencers actually did, we could further distinguish key factors and actions that led to effectively persuading young consumers into using the gray-zone product. It became clear that successful influencer marketing is not only about conducting perfectly shaped and formulated ads, researchers also need to analyze influencer marketing from a deeper perspective, starting with the influencers and their actions and relations with their followers.

As seen during this study, it is crucial to adapt the influencer marketing in order to achieve the different objectives. There is not 'one way' to go in order to achieve success, but rather there is a need to understand the targeted consumers and the environment. This seems to be an even more important factor when the products marketed are classified as gray-zone products. Different gray-zone products might have different barriers to overcome, which makes it crucial to adapt the choice of influencers in order to overcome them. The choice of using mainly female macro-influencers depicts how companies can capitalize on the influencers' opinion leadership, in order to change firmly rooted attitudes. Furthermore, the use of smaller influencers is just as

crucial since they are working harder with different persuasive means to persuade their followers.

While exploring deeply into the different influencers and the existing theories, we were able to emphasize certain persuasive factors that affected the ability to persuade the consumers. One of the most important factors of influencer marketing is that influencers usually build para-social relationships with their followers, which makes them highly trustworthy from the followers point of view. The relationship between the two parts are similar to real friendly relationships, which makes the marketing channel uniquely credible. The credibility does not automatically apply, but rather we have noticed and emphasized multiple ways of strengthening the relationship and keeping the similarity with the followers. These are vital factors in order to create, build and maintain the trust and credibility needed for effective persuasion with the use of influencer marketing.

6.1 Limitations and Future Research

Our study not only provides valuable insights into the importance of incorporating influencer marketing in marketing activities as a brand. It also highlights different patterns amongst influencers and provides insight into which influencers a company could incorporate in their marketing activities. However, it is also significant to consider the limitations of this study.

The time frame serves as a limitation in this study. With a longer period of time and preparation, the study could have interwoven both a netnographic way, as well as interviews with chosen influencers and would have opened up for more in-depth analysis. By doing that, we could have interpreted what we found through our netnographic study as well as compare it to the influencer's own experiences. Therefore, we suggest that future researchers interested in this particular field of study make sure that they study the phenomena over a longer period of time. For example with more time, future researchers have the opportunity to both study the influencers and collect insights from the influencers through interviews.

Another limitation to our study is that we are only focusing on Swedish influencers on the Swedish market promoting nicotine pouches which we regard as a gray-zone product. It could be

interesting for future studies to conduct a similar study regarding influencers promoting a different type of gray-zone product and study the ethical aspect of using influencers to persuade their followers to consume the products. It would also be interesting for future studies to consider what the consumers think about influencers promoting the products. While conducting the study in that manner, it would be interesting to see whether our chosen theory changes depending on the specific product category.

Due to the nature of this netnographic research, it is not possible to accurately pinpoint the specific age of the followers, but rather we had to keep the definition to young consumers. A mixed method with both quantitative and qualitative elements could be beneficial for future researchers who want to investigate exact age groups.

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