The Social Media Influencer Effect on Consumers’ Behavior
A qualitative study on macro social media influencers within the cosmetic industry

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Abstract

This thesis is aiming at investigating how macro social media influencers are affecting the consumer’s behavior of an individual within the cosmetic industry, with the outlined question: How do macro social media influencers affect consumers’ behavior in the cosmetics industry? This thesis considers notions within community, social media influencers and consumers’ behavior field. An abductive qualitative research approach has been selected for this research, where data was gathered through individual semi-structured interviews, semi-structured focus groups, and semi-structured observations. Moreover, collected data from the individual and focus groups was analyzed based on the thematic coding approach, as well as in accordance with the presented analytical framework. The thesis concludes that macro social media influencers affect consumers’ behavior through their content and formed communities, to consume more and repeatedly, desire to reach a certain experience through consumption or behave in a certain manner individually or collectively.

Key words: Macro Social Media Influencer, Consumer Culture Theory, Consumer Behavior, Influence, Community, Experience, Purchase Tendency

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1.0 Introduction

The following section offers a background regarding the phenomenon of study and introduces the problem and the purpose of this research, with the help of the outlined research question.

1.1. Background

Nowadays, the social media platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok or YouTube, became a marketplace for companies to not only directly promote and sell their goods but also to collaborate with social media influencers (SMIs) (Forbes, 2016). As the internet continues to develop, three different types of SMIs have emerged, namely mega, macro and micro (Vyatkina, 2020, p. 1308). Although, the macro ones represent the SMI category with which companies tend to collaborate the most, due to their high social influential power, formed communities and increased engagement in the interaction with their audience (Kay, et al., 2020; Forbes, 2016; Bochenek, 2019, pp. 94-97). Macro SMIs are represented by normal individuals, who through their innovative online posts, attracted followers and thus, became famous and started to promote different products in collaboration with several companies (Rios, et al., 2021). One industry that engaged more extensively than others in collaborating with macro SMIs, is represented by the cosmetic one (Forbes, 2016). The cosmetic industry encompasses product categories from skin, hair, or oral care to perfumes or accessories (Lourenco-Lopes, et al., 2020), but within this thesis it was referred to include only skin and hair care products, make-up, and cosmetic accessories. In line with this, several cosmetic companies started to further promote their brand cosmetics on social media platforms through macro SMIs (Forbes, 2016), but few firms take into consideration or think about in which manner this type of SMIs can affect a consumer’s behavior towards cosmetics.

Several researchers engaged within their studies, to show that any type of SMIs have an influence over consumers’ behavior towards cosmetics (Duan, et al., 2008; Peck, et al., 2004). However, few findings from the researchers’ side were focused on investigating in which way a consumer behavior is influenced by a macro SMI when purchasing, consuming, or experiencing a cosmetic product promoted by them on social media platforms. Therefore, this thesis aims to further investigate the phenomenon of macro SMIs influence over consumers’ behavior within the cosmetic industry, by also looking at their influence through already formed communities with the use of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). CCT focuses on comprehending the collective
influence on consumers’ consumption behavior within socio-cultural context, as well as looking at the group leaders' influential power within a group (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Furthermore, consumer behavior represents more than utilitarian consumption, since it concentrates its attention also on emotions or feelings involved in an individual’s consumption or purchase process (Kotler & Keller, 2001).

1.2 Problematization Gap

Companies within the cosmetic industry choose to collaborate with various SMIs across different marketing online platforms, to better promote their products to the right target group and hence, increase sales. Thus, researchers as Peck et al. (2004), Duan et al. (2008) or Rios et al. (2021), have turned their attention into investigating different types of SMIs for marketing purposes, as well as into demonstrating that these SMIs form communities and have an influence over their followers’ consumption tendencies. Other researchers, turned their attention towards ample studies, which focus on the rise that SMIs have shown during the years (Giles, 2018), on the influential characteristics that play an important role in the engagement process with the audience (Hermanda, et al., 2019) and on understanding the relationship between SMIs and their followers (Taillon, et al., 2020). However, few findings from researchers’ side were focused on in which manner macro SMIs affect consumers’ behavior within the cosmetic industry. The lack of findings can be explained due to the phenomenon's novelty, since nowadays it is an increasing area of study within the marketing field (Kadekova & Holiencinova, 2018).

In comparison with other types of SMIs, macro SMIs engage in constantly posting attractive and innovative content on social media to keep community members engaged, but also in recommending or promoting specific brand products or services in their communities. Moreover, macro ones have a strong influential power over the behavior of their followers because they have an active present on social media platforms, form communities and continuously interact with both followers and potential followers (Bochenek, 2019, pp. 94-97). Thus, for marketers within the cosmetics industry, macro SMIs have become an important social power to collaborate with, when wanting to promote and sell cosmetics on social media platforms. To generate sales, companies in the cosmetic industry choose to collaborate with macro SMIs without thinking in which manner their actions can affect how consumers’ experience the product or consume it. Additionally, through their formed communities, macro SMIs can further
affect indirectly consumer’s perception and behavior towards a promoted brand cosmetic (Senft, 2008; Mendoza, 2010). Therefore, this thesis aims to further investigate the phenomenon of macro SMIs influence on consumers’ behavior from a “how” perspective and applied to the cosmetics industry.

1.3 Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this thesis is to look into how macro SMIs are influencing the behavior of consumers towards cosmetics through their actions and through their formed communities. Since it was already acknowledged by researchers the fact that macro SMIs do form communities on social media platforms (Senft, 2008; Mendoza, 2010), CCT will be further used to investigate not only the individual macro SMI influence on consumer behavior, but also the collective influence of macro SMIs on consumer behavior through their communities. Therefore, the following research question (RQ) was outlined: How do macro social media influencers affect consumers’ behavior in the cosmetic industry?

2. Literature Review

The following chapter presents theories collected from different sources that will support our research purpose and question. The main concepts, namely Social Media Influencers, with regards to Macro ones, Consumer Culture Theory and Consumer Behavior are explained in the following section.

2.1 Social Media Influencer

If an influencer is usually referred to as a celebrity or a well-known person, who can persuade more people to behave or decide in a certain way, a Social Media Influencer (SMI) is referred to be an ordinary person, who managed to become famous and thus, has an influence upon its group of followers on social media (Marwick, 2015). Since the SMI phenomenon has organically developed as the social media evolved, various researchers have defined them as not necessarily celebrities, but ordinary persons that became famous (Senft, 2008; Mendoza, 2010). According to (Peck, et al., 2004), SMIs are determined as third parties that through their actions can persuade or guide others to behave in a desired way towards a brand product. Duan et al. (2008) acknowledge SMIs as individuals, who have an active presence on social media platforms and can have an impact on their audience.
SMIs manage to form their own group of people or communities on social media platforms and become a voice with a powerful social pull for their group members or followers (Senft, 2008; Mendoza, 2010). Furthermore, according to Zeng and Gerritsen (2014), SMIs represent the social media users, who built a community of people that follow them, trust them, while they have a power on influencing the audience behavior and enhancing consumption practices. The overall actions and behavior of an influencer will directly affect an individual’s perception and consumption tendencies with regards to a particular brand product, since these influencers are perceived by online consumers as leading models within their communities (Langner, et al., 2013). Forsyth (2014) describes SMIs as persons who, thanks to their broad social presence or capital are perceived by their followers as social leaders, that set the tone for its members' standard values and consumption tendencies towards a specific brand (Forsyth, 2014; Langner, et al., 2013). Therefore, in this study it is referred to SMIs as third party-active-digital-opinion leaders on social media platforms, with strong social connections and influence, who build their own group of audience and possess knowledge about relevant topics. However, based on the number of followers a SMI has, they can be classified into the following categories: mega, macro and micro SMI (Vyatkina, 2020, p. 1308).

2.1.1 Macro SMI

Macro SMIs are represented by those SMIs who do not focus on a specific industry when promoting a product, have at least 100,000 followers on social media platforms and can even reach 1 million (Vyatkina, 2020, p. 1308). In comparison with mega SMIs who are usually represented by already famous persons, such as celebrities, macro SMIs are ordinary individuals who managed to achieve fame mostly as a result of their frequent involvement and activity on social media platforms (Rios, et al., 2021). Thus, to achieve influence, credibility and expand their already formed communities on social media platforms, macro SMIs employ strategic practices such as regularly posting visually appealing user-generated-content (UGC) in terms of images, videos, messages, comments or likes (Marwick, 2015).

The UGC or otherwise called as electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Bahtar & Muda, 2016, p. 338), is regarded as an important factor in influencing the behavior of consumers, since it represents any type of content produced by individuals rather than companies and hence perceived to be more reliable (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010). Therefore, content generated by an
ordinary person, such as in the case of macro SMI, is perceived by a consumer to be more trustworthy than content generated by a brand or a celebrity (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). Additionally, macro SMIs tend to collaborate with several companies and promote brand products within their communities, but they transform branded content into UGC by posting images or videos of themselves, while using the respective product, sharing product-related information or even sharing their personal experience and beliefs while using the product (Cwynar-Horta, 2016).

Compared to other SMIs, macro ones not only tend to share more often product-related content within their communities, but also personal information, beliefs or daily practices due to their high engagement and interaction within their communities (Kay, et al., 2020). Therefore, in the case of macro SMIs, being regularly active and maintaining their social media accounts with new appealing UGC, has turned into a full-time career for them. In addition, due to their frequent presence on social media platforms, macro SMIs have a greater impact on consumers’ behavior than mega SMIs, who are considered by the audience to be more popular than influential (Bochenek, 2019, pp. 94-97). Furthermore, macro SMIs have been referred to as “opinion leaders” since they aim to obtain online authority, gain further credibility and become a leading model in the eyes of their followers (Lin, et al., 2018). According to Buttle (1998), opinion leaders are described as strategically placed persons within a social context, who possess a power of influence in multiple topics. Thus, macro SMIs are knowledge leaders in several topics for their followers, as well as credible recommendation sources when buying a new brand product for the first time. In other words, recommendations or product promotions made by macro influencers reduce the risk of buying an inefficient or low-quality product in the minds of consumers and encourages consumers to try new brand products (Hsu, et al., 2013).

2.2 Consumer Culture Theory

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is concerned with the process of examining and understanding how an individual’s consumption behavior is shaped within a social and cultural context (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Although, from its introduction CCT has been a target of criticism amongst scholars due to its interpretive approach and focus on experiential phenomena, nowadays it is acknowledged as a sub-discipline within the area of consumer behavior (MacInnis & Folkes, 2010, p. 907). Compared to other studies, CCT focuses on understanding as true-to-
life as possible, how a real consumer behaves or consumes within a sociocultural context, as well as the experiential and symbolic characteristics of consumption behavior (Arnould, et al., 2019). For investigating the consumption behavior of an individual within a group of people or a community, CCT takes into consideration four different dimensions within a cultural context, namely sociocultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological, but focuses especially on the sociocultural and experiential one (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Additionally, over the years CCT area of research has expanded and incorporated, also studies at individual level which aim to explore how consumer identity projects are developed within a group of people or a community (Arnould, et al., 2019).

2.2.1 Sociocultural dimension

The sociocultural dimension consists of two components, the social and cultural one. If the cultural part is embodied by an individual, the social component is defined by a collective, a group of people or a community (Bates & Bacon, 1972). Within the sociocultural dimension, the focal point of CCT is to explore in which manner a social system can affect an individual's consumption behavior. From the CCT point of view, a social system is acknowledged to be represented by a community, group of individuals or even a household and can affect the cultural part’s consumption behavior regarding a specific brand product (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). If in the past a community was perceived as a homogeneous group of people, nowadays it is acknowledged that a community is composed of heterogeneous actors which together share common beliefs, norms, attitudes, lifestyle or even consumption practices (Thomas, et al., 2013). A community gives to its members a sense of personal fulfilment, since within these communities, individuals tend not only to share similar interests or beliefs, but also experiences and even a common responsibility for personal development (Thomas, et al., 2013). Furthermore, in these communities, certain members are responsible to maintain the others engaged in the group’s daily practices and routines, through daily interaction and communication with them. A community is made up of several members, who may have different statutes, depending on their power of influence over the group, their commitment for the community or their expertise in a particular field. Therefore, community members with a high status are perceived by others as opinion leaders, responsible for guiding others in specific community practices (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).
Opinion leaders have a strong influential power over other members because they are seen as an authority, who dispossess and further share useful knowledge in a certain field, get involved in the daily practices of the community or influence others attitudes, consumption behavior and experience towards a specific brand product (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). In other words, the shared ideas or recommendations of an opinion leader can influence the rest of the community to act or behave in a desired way. Further, community members with a lower status are key actors in supporting the ideas, recommendations or decisions of opinion leaders, as well as in enhancing their adoration amongst group members (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Nonetheless, researchers as Thompson et al. (1989) have acknowledged that the experiential dimension of a consumer does emerge within sociocultural backgrounds.

2.2.2 Experiential Dimension

The experiential dimension refers to the aspect of providing a better view of the consumption under the context of the lived worlds of consumers, underlying experiences, processes, and structures (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). CCT highlights that in many cases consumers’ lives are formed around several realities, and consumption is the way to experience them (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Moreover, the experiential dimension could also foster collective identifications which are based in shared beliefs, meanings, mythologies, rituals, social practices (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Experiences can be produced and shared by individuals and that gives the opportunity to people that do not have the chance to live the experience directly, to live it through other people (Eroglu, 2019). Since consumption has experimental aspects (Verhoef, et al., 2009) and opinion leaders have the strength of influencing and affecting people, they can also influence their whole experience. To be more specific, opinion leaders produce experiences and share their experience regarding a product or a service with other people, and this could allow and give the opportunity to other people to live the experience through the opinion leaders (Eroglu, 2019). Therefore, the experiential dimension of a consumer is more likely to be influenced by an opinion leader.

2.2.3 Consumer Identity Project

The identity project is a concept within CCT, which refers to the idea that consumers are frequently concerned with the development, improvement or preservation of a sense of
belonging or identity (Larsen & Patterson, 2018). Within CCT, consumers are even described as identity-seekers because through consumption they look for a sense of identity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) and it is acknowledged that a consumer sense of belonging is linked to both consumption practices and products (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Moreover, CCT recognizes that an individual’s both self, as well as collective identity, are shaped throughout consumption and within a community (Christiansen, 2000; Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Within the social constructionism field, identity is acknowledged to be created and modified within a group (Christiansen, 2000). In other words, the identity of an individual is born by interacting with other people and can be altered through interaction in a collective, group or community. A further study emphasizes that identity can be acquired in a sociocultural context by interacting with other group members and it also highlights that identity “is not something fixed”, since it can be shaped or altered within a community (Larsen & Patterson, 2018).

### 2.3 Consumer Behavior

Consumers are acknowledged by Hirschman (1984), to be consumption and experiential seekers, to consume in order to satisfy their needs. However, each individual is unique, since it has a certain culture, lifestyle, buying habits or lives in a specific environment. These factors are accountable for creating a context and hence, produce a unique experience when consuming a product (Waqas, et al., 2021). Thus, researchers such as Kotler and Keller (2001), concluded that consumer behavior does not only refer to the consumption behavior of an individual, but also includes experiential consumption, the emotional or behavioral reactions of a consumer. Moreover, each individual is influenced by several and different factors within a social and cultural context that further shape the individual consumer behavior (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

According to Valaskova et al. (2015), consumer behavior refers to a consumer’s decision-making process of finding, acquiring, utilizing, evaluating, and discarding tangible products and services. Therefore, the study of consumer behavior does not stop when a consumer acquires the desired product, but continues also after the purchase, looking into how individuals interact with the product or evaluate it (Blackwell, et al., 2001). Furthermore, consumer behavior study was recognized by Solomon (2004) to entail more than investigating what people buy, since it tries to further understand how people make decisions and how that influences their purchasing habits.
Samuelson and Nordhaus (2010) acknowledged that consumers tend to behave in a certain way when deciding to consume products, frequently acquiring the one which is perceived by them to have maximal utility. When deciding to buy a product, consumers seek to receive the highest amount of satisfaction from their financial decisions and a pleasant product experience (Samuelson & Nordhaus, 2010). In addition, individuals tend to repurchase products which bring them a sufficient level of satisfaction. According to Hoyer (1984), consumers seek to engage in a repetitive purchase of the same product, not necessarily because it represents the optimal option for them, but because individuals seek to meet their needs, while reducing cognitive efforts.

### 2.3.1 Experiential Consumption

In accordance with Bennett (1995), consumer behavior can also be defined as the dynamic interaction of affect and cognition, behavioral and environmental events by which human beings conduct the exchange aspects of their lives (Bennett, 1995, p. 40). Since consumer behavior also explores emotions, further researchers such as Kotler and Keller (2001), have highlighted the fact that consumer behavior also investigates the emotional and behavioral experiences or reactions of an individual around the product. Additionally, according to Wang et al. (2020), even if quality is commonly thought to be a rational assessment when deciding to buy a product, consumers are more influenced by emotional responses or feelings that a product can deliver when bought. Thus, the shift from utilitarian to hedonic or experiential consumption among consumers, was emphasized by Lofman (1991), where hedonic consumption is a part of consumer behavior that investigates sensory experiences and hedonic or euphoric gains, which consumers may receive from a product interaction. In comparison with utilitarian one, hedonic consumption entails a higher emotional involvement from consumers' side, since it is not about consuming rationally, but consuming to attain a state of feeling good or to receive a certain experience (Lofman, 1991). Therefore, since consumers are human beings that have emotions, they cannot remain truly rational, but rather comprehend information both cognitively and emotionally when deciding to buy or consume a certain product. Furthermore, the emotional participation of a consumer, in terms of sharing personal product related experiences with others in a collective, generates a meaning for consumers to join and engage in brand community practices (Wang, et al., 2020).
Furthermore, another researcher such as Gajjar (2013) has recognized that consumer behavior has also come to explain why and how individuals within a group are consuming and experiencing the product. Moreover, communities or reference groups can have an impact on forming consumers’ attitudes and shaping their consumption practices, since consumers tend to look at community members as a point of comparison (Dibb, et al., 2005). Seeing individuals within a collective consuming and worshiping specific products, convinces consumers to seek to get the same experience through consumption, while the interaction with these members leads to a unification of values and behaviors within the community (Dibb, et al., 2005). Moreover, depending on members’ status, level of engagement or interaction within the community, they can further influence consumers’ consumption tendencies or even in which manner the product is experienced by them (Bigne, et al., 2001). Therefore, it has been acknowledged that community members have the ability to influence each other strongly on product and brand choices, as well as to encourage individuals to consume more (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

2.4 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework is composed of three concepts, namely Macro Social Media Influencers, Consumer Culture Theory and Consumer Behavior. The interconnection between these concepts is presented as following:

![Figure 1: Influence of Macro Social Media Influencers over Consumers’ Behavior](image)

The macro SMIs represent a specific category of SMIs, which engage in forming their own communities on social media platforms and use their social power to influence consumers’ behavior (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014; Mendoza, 2010; Senft, 2008). Further, the arrow was used to highlight the fact that macro SMIs can affect the consumers’ behavior in different ways. The phenomenon regarding SMIs affecting consumers’ behavior has already been researched and acknowledged by several researchers such as Peck et al. (2004), Duan and Whinston (2008) or...
Zeng and Gerritsen (2014), since any type of SMIs are described as third parties, capable through their actions and formed communities to influence the behavior of consumers.

The CCT circle was placed above the arrow because the concept will be used to analyze and understand how macro SMIs, through their formed communities, influence the consumers’ behavior. CCT was chosen in this model because CCT aims to answer especially to ‘how’ type of questions and investigates how an individual’s consumption behavior is shaped within a community (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Arnould, et al., 2019). Moreover, in this analytical model it is indicated that consumer behavior is influenced by macro SMIs. Consumer behavior was chosen because it includes processes used by consumers when choosing or consuming a brand product, but also their behavioral reactions in terms of feelings, thoughts, actions or experiences (Kotler & Keller, 2001). Therefore, analytical model Figure 1, describes the three concepts that will be used for answering the already stated RQ and shows how these concepts are related to each other.

3. Methodology
This chapter describes the thesis research method by providing information about Philosophy of Science, Research Design, Empirical Setting, Data Collection, Data Analysis, Ethical Considerations, Reliability and Validity, Critique and Methodological Limitations.

3.1 Philosophy of Science

Within the philosophy field, ontology focuses on identifying social entities’ nature, to better understand their reality and investigates what is their realities (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 20). Therefore, it represents the study that takes into consideration whether the reality of a social entity should be regarded from the objectivism or constructivism position (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 20). The ontological position represented by objectivism, refers to the existence of an individual’s objective reality, unrelated to social actors (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 21). On the other hand, constructivism emphasizes that the reality of an individual is subjective, continually revised by social actors (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp. 21-22). Thus, the reality of an individual is changeable, experienced differently and influenced by social actors (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 22). Within this study the aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the investigated phenomenon through the eyes of those who are experiencing it and acknowledges that the reality of each
participant involved in the study is subjective (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 22). Moreover, this study recognizes that individual classifications have different meanings that are produced in and via interaction with social actors, thus the constructivism ontological position was adopted (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 22).

Furthermore, epistemology is concerned with how reality or knowledge about the reality is examined, as well as how an individual knows reality (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 15). For examining the reality, two different ontological positions can be adopted within a research and, namely positivism and interpretivism (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp. 15-16). Positivism has its roots within natural sciences and focuses on an objective study of reality and knowledge, where hypotheses can be tested (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp. 15-16). In contrast, interpretivism acknowledges that knowledge or reality is subjective, since it is presented based on individuals’ interpretative understandings (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 16). Thus, a social phenomenon which is based on people's subjective interpretations is hard to be tested (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp. 16-17). Taking into account that our study aims to understand the phenomenon of study as it is perceived or experienced by individuals and to recognize differences between individuals' subjective interpretation of realities, the interpretivist epistemological position was adopted within this study (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 18).

3.2 Research Design
This study aims to investigate how consumer behavior is influenced by a macro SMI within the cosmetic industry. Since there are few findings from the researchers’ regarding this specific phenomenon and the goal of this research paper is to further explore it, an exploratory qualitative research design was adopted. The exploratory approach aims to better fulfill a researcher’s objectives within a qualitative study since it focuses on exploring and generating theory rather than testing it (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 35). Thus, since this study pursues to explore a specific phenomenon and not to test theory, an exploratory approach was adopted.

A qualitative research design is considered to be appropriate especially when wanting to answer a “why” or “how” question and gain a deeper understanding of meanings in the context or about an individual’s personal experiences or behavior (DeCarlo, 2018, p. 37). This research design focuses on finding and understanding certain words, themes and key concepts as explained from the viewpoint of the concerned participants (Silverman, 2014). Moreover, a qualitative research
design also provides an in-depth understanding of phenomena, processes, and contexts, from the participants’ perspective (Bell, et al., 2018, pp. 391-395), since it allows the researcher to describe events as seen or experienced by the participants. The chosen research design is helpful when applied in the study, due to the fact that researchers acquire a clearer view on people's perception and that leads to an easier understanding of their behavior (Krathwohl, 1998, p. 230). Therefore, the qualitative research design helped us to further explore the concepts presented in the analytical model, as well as to understand them in a natural context and from the population.

3.3 Research Approach

In order to analyze the collected data, an abductive approach was used in this study. According to Lukka and Modell (2010), an abductive approach is important to be used in qualitative studies because it allows researchers to better understand or discover new processes or phenomena. The abductive approach is referred to as a scientific inference, which also includes profound understandings in order to allow generating new knowledge about a specific phenomenon under study (Reichert, 2010). Therefore, it allows the researcher to make interpretations about the collected data, to combine and interpret it in order to provide a better explanation of the studied phenomenon (Reichert, 2010). Furthermore, the abductive approach uses both empirical and theoretical dimensions, since it combines both deductive and inductive approaches (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Thus, when collecting or analyzing the empirical data and building the framework, an abductive approach allows the researcher to move back and forth between these and to systematically combine them (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The systematic combining permits findings to be linked to an original theory, but also to further develop their understandings (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Therefore, since the goal of our study is to gain a profound understanding of how consumers’ behavior is influenced by macro SMIs within the cosmetic industry, an abductive approach was adopted to allow the authors to make interpretations when combining and analyzing the empirical data. Additionally, the abductive approach was chosen because it permitted the authors to move alternatively between theory and empirical data, combine them, interpret and thus, expose a better understanding of the phenomenon under study (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).
3.4 Empirical Setting - The Cosmetic Industry

The empirical setting for this study was chosen with the aim of helping the authors to better capture the phenomenon under study (Denrell & Kovacs, 2008). In other words, within this study the empirical setting, namely the cosmetic industry, was chosen because it is representative of the studied phenomenon. Consumers’ interest in following cosmetic related recommendations made by macro SMIs on social media platforms has increased, as well as their tendency to consume specific brand cosmetic products based on third-party recommendations (Kay, et al., 2020). Thus, collaborating with macro SMIs on social media platforms to further influence consumers’ cosmetic product experience, purchase decision or tendency, has become a standard practice within the cosmetic sector (Forbes, 2016; Kay, et al., 2020). In line with this, the authors chose the cosmetic industry because it provides an appropriate setting within this study and it is representative for our studied phenomenon (Denrell & Kovacs, 2008).

The cosmetic industry is concerned with the production and distribution of cosmetic products (Lourenco-Lopes, et al., 2020). According to Lourenco-Lopes et al. (2020), the cosmetic industry encompasses product categories such as skincare, hair care, make-up, fragrances, toiletries and deodorants, oral cosmetics, and cosmetic accessories. However, within this study, the cosmetic industry was restricted to encompass skincare products, make-up, hair care products and cosmetic accessories, since the participants referred only to these product categories. Furthermore, the cosmetic industry represents a dynamic industry where the need for innovative products and marketing strategies is critical to the business success (Kumar, et al., 2006). Therefore, several brand cosmetic companies engaged in promoting their products on social media through macro SMIs, since nowadays it represents an innovative and efficient marketing strategy in influencing consumers’ behavior towards cosmetics (Kumar, et al., 2006).

3.5 Data Collection
3.5.1 Selection of participants
The process of selecting the respondents was based on a purposive sampling, meaning that the authors selected only individuals, who could provide a better understating of the researched phenomenon (Bernard, 2002). In general, a purposive sampling aims to concentrate on individuals, who own specific characteristics and knowledge in the field of research (Etikan, et al., 2016). However, a critique upon purposive sampling is that it can be difficult to justify the
sample's representativeness and generalize assumptions (Suri, 2011). Therefore, the purpose of the research is to better understand opinions, thoughts, and attitudes of people regarding macro SMIs in the cosmetic industry and not to generalize the conclusions. Nonetheless, the purposive sampling method helps the authors in further capturing an individual’s personal experience with macro SMIs and their promoted brand cosmetic products, since the selection of the participants includes only individuals who are proficient and well-informed with the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Clark, 2011).

3.5.2 Description of participants
The choice of the participants was conducted under specific criteria in order to achieve higher levels of accuracy. Therefore, since the study focuses on the cosmetic industry and involves macro SMIs within it, eight semi-structured individual interviews and two focus groups with four people in each, were conducted with young women. Only women were chosen for this study because they possess more knowledge related to cosmetics than men, are more passionate to engage in cosmetic related problems and tend to purchase cosmetics frequently (Silverstein & Sayre, 2009).

Furthermore, only young women between the age of 19 and 30, were selected for the study because youngsters engage more in interacting with macro SMIs or their framed communities on social media platforms and hence, are more prone to get influenced by them (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). However, this study does not focus on a specific country, since it rather wants to capture a global phenomenon. The chosen female participants had to follow specific criteria that were set up before the selection began: to follow at least one macro SMI, who promotes brand cosmetics, to have purchased at least one cosmetic product promoted or recommended by a macro SMI on social media platforms. Nevertheless, these participants were approached by means of Facebook or Instagram and afterwards a short discussion on the phone took place with them, to make sure they truly met the selection criteria.

3.5.3 Semi-structured interviews
To gather data, the authors have primarily conducted semi-structured interviews, both individually and focus groups as it is presented in the Appendix 2-Table 1. All interviews were digitally conducted in English and took place at different times, based on participants’ availability. Semi-structured interviews with predetermined and open-ended questions were
constructed to give the authors the opportunity to have an informal discussion with the interviewees. Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer to gain insights about experiences, thoughts, opinions, feelings, or motives in relation to the phenomena under investigation (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). All questions from the interview guide in Appendix 1, were asked with follow-up questions in case authors wanted to investigate more in-depth a specific topic. Moreover, semi-structured interviews enable reciprocity between the researcher and the interviewees (Galletta, 2013, pp. 45-50), and give the opportunity to the interviewers to present follow-up questions, to gain a better understanding on participants' answers (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Hardon, et al., 2004; Polit & Beck, 2017).

To be able to better capture and understand in which manner the consumer behavior regarding cosmetics is influenced by a macro SMI, individual interviews with each participant were conducted. Each individual interview was recorded and ranged in time from 11 to 50 minutes on Zoom, with the camera on, where both authors were present. To avoid possible difficulties of electronic devices, it was necessary to create a test-group before the interviews were conducted. While one author was leading the discussion, the other one was observing the interviewee with the camera turned off. By conducting all the interviews digitally, both authors and participants had the opportunity to overcome challenges regarding the location and provided flexibility in scheduling them (Zwaanswijk & Dulmen, 2014). Nevertheless, all participants were informed prior to the interviews about the distinction between a SMI and a macro SMI, namely who is a normal person and not a celebrity and has a minimum of 100,000 social media followers and reaches even 1 million (Vyatkina, 2020, p. 1308). Furthermore, individual interviews were firstly conducted in order for the authors to avoid receiving biased answers from participants.

3.5.4 Focus Groups

In addition to the individual semi-structured interviews, two semi-structured focus groups were conducted. According to Bryman and Bell (2011), focus groups are referred to as focused interviews within a group setting, that involve participants who possess knowledge in a particular topic and the emphasis is on group interaction and collaborative sense formation. Further, focus groups allow the researcher to investigate how people collectively perceive, interpret or develop meanings regarding a specific phenomenon (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 504). Additionally, the interaction between the participants within focus groups, provides the chance for the researcher
to have an in-depth discussion regarding differences or similarities of participants’ points of view (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008).

Within this study, two focus groups of four were formed with the same participants involved in the study, in order to capture the collective view with regards to macro SMIs who promote cosmetic products and their influence towards consumers’ behavior. The duration of both focus groups and their distribution in each focus group, were presented within Appendix 2-Table 1. Since the focus groups took place virtually on Zoom, with the camera turned on and were recorded as the semi-structured interviews, the authors behaved in the same manner, namely one leading and one observing with the camera turned off. However, focus groups were conducted within this study because the authors wanted to further bring out participants’ collective behaviors, feelings, beliefs, or experiences and to capture perspectives and emotions within a group context (Gibbs, 1997). Additionally, focus groups were chosen to provide not only rich details of collective experiences, but also the collective view regarding the reasoning behind these actions (Gibbs, 1997). Nevertheless, integrating focus groups and individual interviews provided an advantage to the authors, since further exploration and complementary views on how participants’ behavior is influenced by macro SMIs within the cosmetic industry were added (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008).

3.5.5 Interview guide
The interview guide, as shown in Appendix 1, is a technique that is considered appropriate to be used for semi-structured interviews because it aims to provide direction and guidance (Bell, et al., 2018; Saunders, et al., 2015). The interview guide helps researchers to remain focused on the main concepts under investigation that need to be covered and offers a structure for the discussion (Kallio, et al., 2016). Additionally, it contributes to collecting data that will address the purpose of the study (Baumbusch, 2010), which is to investigate how the consumption behavior of an individual is affected by macro SMIs with regards to cosmetic products. However, it is not necessary to follow the interview guide strictly, since it includes besides the structured questions also potential follow-up ones, which further give the authors the opportunity to have a deeper understanding of participants' thoughts (Taylor, 2005). Nevertheless, the authors focused on omitting leading questions in the interview guide, in order to avoid receiving biased answers (Saunders, et al., 2009).
3.5.6 Observations
To collect secondary data, the authors have conducted semi-structured observations. In qualitative research designs observations represent a fundamental methodology technique, which involves gathering data through the use of one's senses, such as listening and looking, in a methodical manner (Smit & Onwuegbuzie, 2018). Further, researchers such as Adler and Adler (1994) described observations to be an essential foundation of many research methodologies within both social and behavioral disciplines, to further evaluate findings. Therefore, semi-structured observations, both during and outside interviews, were conducted to further quantify the findings and investigate the interviewees’ actual behavior (Kawulich, 2005).

Additional to observations during interviews, two participants, as shown in Appendix 2, Table 1, and Table 2, volunteered to be observed by one of the authors, when going in the store to purchase or repurchase a cosmetic product recommended by a macro SMI. In this case, the observer had to follow a schedule in order to conduct both individual observations, since the two participants were observed separately and on different days. Moreover, in both cases, the process of observation began from the meeting with the participants and focused especially in the store, from which the participants chose to buy the cosmetic product. The in-store observations focused on the context, how participants behave and interact with both the cosmetic product and other people around them. The store names and the duration of the observations are shown in Appendix 2- Table 2. Likewise, to avoid biased responses from the participants, the author observed from a distance without involving in participants’ in-store behavior. Data was collected through visual observations and by taking notes, since special equipment in terms of video cameras or recorders, was not allowed to be used due to ethical considerations and store policies.

3.6 Data Analysis
In this study, the process of analysis started by watching the recordings, transcribing all the interviews, and then reading, coding, and understanding in depth the transcriptions and observation notes. Next, since all the recordings were transcribed, thematic coding was used with the principal aim to find similar themes representative for our phenomenon of study and differences that could help in addressing the research. Thematic coding has been applied as a method of analysis within the individual interviews and focus groups, to examine and identify common themes within collected data (Boyatzis, 1998). Further, apart from the thematic coding,
the observations were collected from the author’s notes, as well as based on the author’s narration, to serve as complementary data for the individual interviews and focus groups. The collected data from observations was investigated by both authors in accordance with data gathered during the interviews, looking at behavioral similarities or differences, to further support the findings.

3.6.1 Coding Process
The process of data analysis is illustrated in Appendix 2-Figure 2 and was structured based on two coding approaches, namely open coding, and axial coding. In a qualitative research analysis, open coding represents the initial stage, where raw collected data is labeled and coded (Brown, et al., 2002). Thus, through QDA Miner software, we uploaded the interview transcripts, started to label and code data, with the aim of finding juxtapositions, similarities, or differences in a similar context. Further, the second stage of coding is referred to as axial coding, where relationships codes are generated (Babchuk, 1997). Therefore, axial coding was further used to further organize the codes into five categories, namely View on macro SMIs, Sense of community, Experience, Group Identification and Purchase tendency. Within the analysis section, the empirical data that was coded based on the five categories, was further analyzed based on the analytical framework concepts, namely Macro SMIs, CCT and Consumer Behavior. Thus, the empirical data was evaluated and reported in accordance with the presented analytical framework.

3.7 Ethical Considerations
Since the research involves the participation of individuals for interviews, the protection of their personal information is an important factor within this study (Orb, et al., 2001). Due to ethical considerations, the following aspects were taken into consideration for the study. Firstly, the respondents and authors agreed upon a voluntary participation in confidentiality and anonymity within this study (Wiles, et al., 2008). Participants were informed about the process of the interview and were asked for permission to record the discussion, as material for further scrutiny and using the answers as empirical data for the thesis’ analysis (Arifin, 2018). Secondly, participants had the right to not include unwanted personal information in the transcript and to withdraw their participation at any time during the interview. In the study, the real names of all participants were not stated, but a nickname was given for identification purposes. The
nicknames of the respondents, their age, nationality, and the focus group they belong to, are presented above within Appendix 2-Table 1. Nevertheless, all the data will be disposed of when they are no longer needed (Arifin, 2018).

3.8 Reliability and Validity
In qualitative studies, reliability is referred to as the accuracy or consistency of the used analytical techniques and includes personal or research procedure biases that could have impacted the results (Noble & Smith, 2015). Moreover, researchers as Saunders et al. (2015), argued that when a dynamic or complex phenomenon is investigated through the use of semi-structured interviews such as behaviors, reliability is difficult to demonstrate, especially by a novice. In the same line, Rolfe (2006) emphasized that, since there is no widely acknowledged consensus on the standards by which qualitative research should be examined, it can be difficult for a novice scholar to demonstrate consistency when conducting a qualitative research. Although it is hard to be demonstrated when using semi-structured interviews or observations, reliability can be overcome when researchers take into account personal biases that could have affected the results, recognize biases in data collection processes and avoid them (Noble & Smith, 2015). However, within qualitative studies, reliability can be improved when extensive field notes, recordings or transcripts are conducted by the researcher (Noble & Smith, 2015). Therefore, to avoid personal biases in our study during the interviews and focus groups, both authors avoided to state any personal opinions, feelings or mention anything regarding a sense of community. Further, biases in the data collection process was avoided since both authors individually transcribed the interviews, coded, and compared the results to ensure that the findings and analysis is reliable.

Validity, in the case of qualitative studies, refers to the correctness and veracity of scientific results, since a valid qualitative research study shall disclose the phenomenon accurately, as it exists or is presented (Cypress, 2017). Additionally, Leininger (1985) defines validity in qualitative research as acquiring knowledge and obtaining an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation as precisely as possible. As reliability, validity within qualitative studies are difficult to demonstrate due to the integration of subjectivity, creativity, and thoroughness, throughout the course of research (Cypress, 2017). Therefore, in order to avoid biases within
scientific results of this study, the viewpoints of the participants were accurately and clearly reflected within the empirical findings without altering their meaning.

3.9 Critique and Methodological limitations
A critique of the study is the use of CCT because it is not yet acknowledged to be a theory but rather a continuing study (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). However, it was included in the marketing study field and is taught at various universities and within the marketing field (MacInnis & Folkes, 2010, p. 907). Moreover, researchers from different fields of study are still contributing in further developing the study to be recognized as a theory (Askegaard, 2015). Additionally, a methodological limitation is represented by the online environment, where technical complications may appear during the data collection process and could lead to losing or missing several useful collected data. In addition to that, another limitation is represented by being hard to truly capture how people react and behave in a community, and to observe the context and that is the reason why in-depth interviews were conducted.

4. Findings

Within this section, the findings are structured around central concepts relevant for the already stated research question, such as View on Macro SMIs, Sense of Community, Group Identification, Experiences and Purchase Tendency. Additionally, a distinct section was dedicated to observations.

4.1 View on macro SMIs

The findings showed that even if all interviewees stated that macro SMIs are “normal persons”, they have been further characterized as “a friend” or “a teacher”, with whom participants can “feel more personal”. Macro SMIs were also described as someone who formed a carrier based on their shared opinions or recommendations, while is passionate and has an expertise in specific topics and thus individuals look to them for guidance and to get inspiration from them:

“Someone who sort of has made a carrier from their opinions, because they are usually very good at something whether it’s like make-up or cars or photography. And so, people see that they are passionate about this and know quite a lot about it. So, people turn to them for advice and inspiration sort of.” Isabella
Additionally, it was found that some participants explore less by themselves, since beginning to follow macro SMIs who promote cosmetics on social media platforms. They are predisposed to turn to macro SMIs opinions when wanting to see if a cosmetic product is worth buying:

“Actually, I explore less by myself... But right now, if I sort of turn to the micro influencers first, I can sort of get their opinion if the product is even worth buying.” Isabella

In line with this, Phoebe recalled:

“Well I think I look less for cosmetics yeah because I look at macro influencers and they tell me if is even efficient or ok to buy it.” Phoebe

In addition, the analysis showed that some interviewees stated about the importance of good content in keeping them engaged to follow a macro SMI on social media platforms. One particular participant explained that a good or fun and informative content creates a whole experience:

“...influencers are really good at, like I said, like creating content around it. This keeps me engaged so if the content is good like fun and informative. Because I think sometimes through a video you can see everything like how it works. And like the music makes it look really good. So, then you can have the whole experience not just, oh, I recommend this mascara...Yeah. because when you integrate, like video, music, you know, they are very good at content, but they're good at creating the whole experience”’ Sophia

Further, it was disclosed how several participants seek cosmetic recommendations from a macro SMI, who is similar to them, have the same “skin color”, “skin type” or has experienced a similar dermatological problem:

” So usually, there was one influencer who I follow and makes like daily vlogs and she also was talking about how she also has quite acne prone skin. And she is also a colored person as well. So, I cannot usually use all kinds of cosmetic products that everybody else is using due to pigmentation and everything. So, I try to find this type of people that are like me, kind of have the same things as me” Maria
Furthermore, Sara even stated that she avoids following macro SMIs who promote cosmetics, but try to sell on a certain lifestyle inaccessible for her or for most of other ordinary people:

’’She lost many many followers and I didn't follow her because she's this kind of woman who will try to sell a glamorous lifestyle that it's impossible for us or for most people who have to work or have responsibilities’’ Sara

4.2 Sense of community

Our findings showed that more respondents mentioned a feeling of belonging to a group, when interacting about cosmetics with others in the comment section of a macro SMI social media page. The possibility to interact with these persons, who follow the same macro SMI and share the same enthusiasm for cosmetics, was acknowledged by several participants to create the feeling of not being “on your own”, “being close with the others” and “being a part of a community”. One participant stated that it feels like a community when people share their cosmetic related stories or recommendations in the comment section:

’’You kind of get like, or it feels kind of like a community sometimes...and then you can recommend things and like, through that there is also like a comment sections, of course, go down and scroll, what are the peoples have said about it... like is the community you get very influenced by what people write in a comment section, you go down, you read everything. And if people like it, I think it gets very affected” Sophia

The findings showed that through others’ stories or recommendations in the comment section of a macro SMI social media page, it is possible to have a better view of the cosmetic product. One participant also mentioned that the more she interacts with these persons, who have tried the cosmetic product before, the more she can convince herself to try it:

’’You can see more sides of the product and to see if to check actually, if that macro influencer has right or not, I mean, it can be like a rule or something that product can either know do good or be as good as that macro influencer says, and I think the more you interact and the more you know about from the people who actually tested it and buy it, the more you can convince yourself if you want to try it or not, I mean, the more the better.”’’ Bella
In line with Bella, thinks a cosmetic promoted by a macro SMI is good and wants to buy it, when the community supports the macro SMI recommendation, whether negative product evaluations appear:

“And, you know, there were some other things that you mentioned that maybe people were like, I tried, it didn't work for me or whatever. And also, because her community kind of backed up what she said about it, that made me like, Okay, this is probably good. So, I'll go buy it.” Anna

4.2.1 Group Identification

Findings revealed that various respondents mentioned feeling good when seeing on social media platforms of a macro SMI that also other people are doing the same as them. For instance, noticing other individuals excessively buying make-up products as she does, makes Anna feel good that she is not alone:

“If you would feel bad about buying five eyeshadow palettes this month, you won't feel so bad. If you see that 20 other people in the community are also doing the same thing as you, or anything like that you just feel like this is normal. And you can kind of justify it more to like, make bigger purchases and buy more things...I think it also kind of makes you feel better about your own purchases, you kind of feel like, it's not excessive...because you can feel like, you know, you're in a community that other people are doing the same, you're not alone.” Anna

4.2.2 Experiences

The focus groups findings revealed that several participants agreed upon having “actually really good” experiences with cosmetic products bought based on macro SMIs’ recommendations. Further, Sophia mentioned that she informs herself from macro SMIs when wanting to buy a cosmetic product so that she can know in advance how the experience will be:

“So, I go through YouTube often and watch like, influencers that recommend products and how to use them and everything. So, I know when I get that product home, how it will be how, the experience will be instead of just going to the store and grabbing something that you don't know about.” Sophia
The interviewees stated that they also experienced the cosmetics differently when these are bought and used based on the recommendation made by a macro SMI. One participant stated that she feels amazing now when doing her skin care routine in the morning thanks to a face sculpting roller promoted by a macro SMI:

“Let's say skincare regime, literally every influencer has been advertising those facial rollers And I bought it cause of an influencer. So, but it's actually good. I've been using it for almost like three months now. And I actually liked it. So yeah, that's my morning routine. I put it in the fridge. And in the morning, I put my products and then use the thing and I even feel amazing.” Maria

Additionally, participants mentioned that when the community is sharing the experience regarding a product promoted by a macro SMI, it is perceived as a real experience:

“When people in the community tell me that they tested that brand and it had a positive effect, then I really feel like I'm interacting and helping other people too. And I mean, that's the real experience, the beauty of it. Actually, that is not like I'm buying something and then I go and never return. It's like a process actually when you share with people cosmetic stories, the problems you had or not.” Bella

4.3 Purchase tendency

The findings revealed that after starting to follow a macro SMI who promotes cosmetics on social media platforms, some interviewees started to buy more and to add more steps to their regular skin care or make-up procedures. One participant even admitted starting to purchase more cosmetics that she never would have considered to consume, before a macro SMI recommended to her:

“’ Well, honestly, I started to buy more cosmetics, like the skin serums or creams or I don't know, things for my skin. Yeah, if I think about it now, I really did start to buy a lot more things. Some did workout. Some did not. But they didn’t do harm to my skin. Like they just did nothing. So, I guess it’s okay. But yeah, they really, I could say that they influenced me to buy more. And some things I didn’t even know I need them, like things like that ‘’ Emily
Furthermore, some interviewees mentioned trying out and discovering unknown cosmetic brands due to macro SMIs. One respondent even mentioned that the promoted unknown cosmetic product was not even a necessity for her:

“First I saw a macro influencer using these and did not know about them like it was a product to be used before the shampoo for wavy hair and the brand was unknown to me. So, I thought oh interesting, let's try it but this wasn't necessary until you know somebody well the macro influencer sold this necessity to me you know.” Sara

The participants stated that when a cosmetic product recommended by a macro SMI tackles a certain problem they were dealing with for a longer period of time, respondents keep choosing again the specific product. One participant admitted that she will continue to buy and use a cosmetic product recommended by a macro SMI that helped her, until it will no longer exists:

“I felt helpless because I never thought that I would find a product that would give me the solution to the problem I had... I will keep consuming this one until it will disappear from this world” Bella

Further, findings showed that some respondents started to avoid consuming cosmetics that may contain chemicals, parfum or are not good for the environment.

“For example, I started to pay more attention to harmful ingredients or chemicals thanks to scientific facts posted by communities. Because you know you see people in the comment section on a macro influencer page talking about cosmetics containing this and that and harms your skin so definitely I started to avoid consuming any cosmetic that has those chemicals or parfum.” Sophia

In line with this Maria stated:

“Well, I think probably mainly I'm interested in natural basis stuff because I've just read in the comment section that it's better for your skin and the environment of course and nowadays our generation is also more like in touch with the earth and everything like we want to make it a better place, so we consume cruelty-free products” Maria
4.4 Observations

Apart from the five different categories, the individual in-store observations showed that when Bella could not find the specific brand cosmetic product recommended by the macro SMI, she decided to drive to another store and buy it. The store promoter tried to show Bella other alternatives, but she turned the store promoter down and decided to go to another store. Further, when finding the wanted cosmetic product in the second store, she exhaled and started smiling, saying she is happy now. In addition, in the case of Emily when going to repurchase a product recommended by the macro SMI, the in-store observations revealed that she went directly to the brand store section, without checking other cosmetic brands. When grabbing the product from the shelf, she made no grimace or expressed any feelings, but after the purchase she claimed to be happy to find the cosmetic product. Moreover, when she saw in the store another individual being undecided on which mascara to buy, Emily approached the individual and started to tell, based on macro SMIs recommendations, which mascara to choose.

5. Analysis

This section will be divided into three parts, namely Macro Social Media Influencers, Consumer Culture Theory and Consumer Behavior, in accordance with the already presented analytical framework.

5.1 Macro SMI

The results revealed that participants perceive macro SMIs as individuals with whom they can “feel more personal” when searching for cosmetic related products, information or opinions. Since macro SMIs are perceived as ordinary individuals, who through their own work and passion acquired social influence on social media platforms, they represent a trustworthy source for consumers when looking for cosmetics (Marwick, 2015). Moreover, interviewees further recognized a macro SMI as an opinion leader, an individual who possesses useful knowledge regarding cosmetic products and further shares this knowledge with other people who are following them on social media platforms (Lin, et al., 2018). Due to a high level of expertise about cosmetic products and their already lived experiences with these through testing, macro SMIs opinions and recommendations regarding cosmetics are seeked by consumers in the online environment. In addition to that, the observations further revealed that one participant when
trying to find a cosmetic product that was promoted by a macro SMI and the store did not have it, she decided to visit another store without taking into consideration alternatives from other competitors. Furthermore, macro SMIs help participants to explore less by themselves when desiring to purchase cosmetic products, since individuals are more willing to reach out to them rather than perform their own cosmetic research. In other words, consumers tend to rely on macro SMIs to do the research for them and recommend quality brand cosmetics worth consuming.

Additionally, the analysis of individual interviews further showed that it is important for the interviewees in which way macro SMIs publicly present their cosmetic opinion and recommendations through their content. Moreover, “good” cosmetic content, which was referred to as attractive and informative content by participants, keeps consumers engaged in following them. The “good” content or UGC, creates a whole fun experience for consumers around the cosmetic product, when it integrates visual and audio elements, in terms of videos and music (Marwick, 2015), when macro SMIs promote a cosmetic product. Further, the frequent engagement and active presence of macro SMIs on social media platforms was described by participants to keep them updated about new releases of cosmetic brands or to provide inspiration for new makeup looks and skin care practices. Therefore, it can be asserted that through an appealing and quality UGC, macro SMIs affect in which manner consumers experience the product and their choices towards a specific brand cosmetic (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010).

The results further indicated that when searching for cosmetic recommendations, participants are looking for a macro SMI with whom they can firstly visually identify with, based on their physical appearance and characteristics. Four of the participants stated that when searching for cosmetics recommendations they are looking for a macro SMI that has a similar appearance with them. Having the same type of skin or skin color, are important factors that participants take into consideration when listening to cosmetic recommendations from macro SMIs, because individuals believe that those cosmetic products will also be effective in their case. For instance, interviewees listen to cosmetic recommendations only from macro SMIs who have the same skin color as her, since she knows that some cosmetic products recommended by caucasian macro SMIs may not be effective for her. In line with this, it can be argued that individuals tend to
identify with macro SMIs that have a similar appearance or skin condition as them and thus, are more prone to follow their advice and consume the same brand cosmetics as they do. The physical characteristics and appearance are not the only factors that are important for the participants to identify with. Based on the analysis of the collected empirical data, participants are looking for recommended products from macro SMIs, who seem to have the same lifestyle as them and behave like them. Showing a way of living that is not in accordance with an ordinary person, who works and has responsibilities, prevents the participants from following or seeking their cosmetic recommendations. For instance, one participant avoided following a macro SMI that was promoting a luxury lifestyle and high-end cosmetics, since it does not relate to her real lifestyle. Therefore, it can be argued that individuals are inclined to identify with macro SMIs that have similar lifestyles as them and hence are predisposed to consume the same cosmetic products as them.

5.2 Consumer Culture theory

The analysis of the individual interviews revealed that six participants acknowledged to experience the feeling of a community, when being present on a macro SMI social media page and going through cosmetic related comments of other individuals. Seeing others sharing their personal cosmetic related experiences or recommendations in the comment section of a macro SMI social media page, creates the community feeling. Moreover, the possibility to interact on social media platforms with other people, who follow the same macro SMI and share the same passion for cosmetics, was acknowledged especially by one participant, to create the feeling of not being “on your own”, but “being a part of a community”.

Therefore, the social media page of a macro SMI creates the sociocultural context, where the cultural part is represented by the macro SMI, while the social part is represented by their followers (Bates & Bacon, 1972). The analysis revealed that in a sociocultural context, the cultural part perceives different community members to have distinct influential power over their consumption behavior. On one hand, a participant acknowledged that the macro SMI has more influence in convincing her to purchase a new cosmetic product, namely a mascara, than the people within the community, due to macro SMI’s expertise. Thus, it can be emphasized that due to a vast knowledge in cosmetics, the macro SMI is perceived as a member of the community with a high status, an opinion leader, which influences individuals’ consumption behavior.
towards cosmetics by teaching them what and how to consume (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Furthermore, when community members supported the cosmetic recommendation made by the macro SMI due to bad reviews, it convinced the participant to “go and buy” the mascara. Thus, it can be concluded that the community can play a role in influencing consumers’ decision-making process towards a cosmetic product recommended by a macro SMI, when supporting the opinion leader’s ideas (Bigne, et al., 2001; Kotler & Keller, 2016). On the other hand, for one participant the voice of the community possesses a higher influential power than the macro SMI, when deciding to buy a promoted cosmetic product. Since she engaged in a deeper interaction with community members over time, she tends to buy cosmetics based on community recommendations. In this case, the opinion leader is perceived to be the community and not the macro SMI. The collective is considered to transparently describe the entire cosmetic product experience and hence the consumer can know in advance what experience will receive before purchasing it (Eroglu, 2019).

Furthermore, it was revealed that when individuals engage in a frequent interaction with community members on a macro SMI social media page, they end up experiencing the consumption of certain cosmetic products much more profusely (Bigne, et al., 2001). The ability to share within a community, personal cosmetic stories, experiences or even complications, after using the product promoted by a macro SMI, creates a fun and captivating experience around the product. For instance, one interviewee acknowledged that the “real experience” she receives from buying an efficient cosmetic product promoted by a macro SMI, is the possibility to afterwards engage and help others by sharing her personal experience. Moreover, sharing personal positive experiences or opinions about a certain cosmetic product within the community, is perceived by the participant as an act of helping others to guide and receive a similar experience. Since community members behave in the same manner, namely share cosmetic related personal experiences and advice after testing, individuals who engage in interacting with them, seek to behave similarly to them (Thomas, et al., 2013). Hence, it can be noticed that in the case of some individuals, a macro SMI formed community creates the experience around the promoted cosmetic product and influences consumers to seek and behave uniformly with the group (Thomas, et al., 2013; Arnould & Thompson, 2005).
Nonetheless, the search for a sense of identity within a community and through consumption was highlighted in the case of Lauryn. She experienced a feeling of gratification when finding community members that buy make-up excessively as her and share the same passion for cosmetics. The interaction with community members shaped her identity into a “normal person”, who likes to overly buy make-up products (Christiansen, 2000; Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Therefore, seeing within a community, individuals behaving and consuming in the same manner as her, changed the state of guilt she felt into one of happiness and made her identify as they do (Larsen & Patterson, 2018; Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Moreover, the excessive purchasing habits contribute to her sense of identity within a collective, since the community influenced her to make larger cosmetic purchases than before. Through the interaction with other people in the community, she is not only identified as a normal person, but was also influenced by the community to consume more without feeling bad about it (Larsen & Patterson, 2018; Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Christiansen, 2000).

5.3 Consumer behavior

The analysis revealed that various individuals tend to experience the cosmetic product in a joyful way, when these are bought and used in accordance with macro SMIs recommendations. Consumers tend to look in advance at macro SMIs how they frequently use the cosmetic product in their daily lives and experience it before buying it, to receive an overview about the whole cosmetic product experience (Eroglu, 2019). One particular participant expressed her positive feelings after purchasing a face roller promoted by macro SMIs and hence these feelings formed further a positive experience when using it (Lofman, 1991). She learned how to use the face sculpting roller together with skin care cosmetics from a macro SMI post and now follows this routine every morning. Likewise, her behavioral experience was changed into a cheerful one, by adding this cosmetic item in her daily skin care routine. In other words, consumers tend to imitate and consume cosmetic products in the same manner as the macro SMI does, in order to receive the same experience (Wang, et al., 2020; Lofman, 1991). Additionally, macro SMIs play an important role in delivering a pleasant experience to the consumer when using the cosmetic products recommended by them. Through the UGC a macro SMI is able to share with consumers in which manner cosmetic products should be consumed as well as experienced and hence influence consumers to seek to behave in the same manner.
The analysis of the individual interviews and focus groups further showed that UGC contributes to the tendency of participants to purchase more cosmetic products promoted by macro SMIs. Through the UGC, macro SMIs frequently provide more recommendations with details regarding a cosmetic product. Since participants are trying to find the right one for their problem or skin type, they follow these recommendations and it leads to not only adding more steps in their routine, but also to consume more cosmetics. For instance, one participant started consuming more products that she had not even realized she needed, after listening to macro SMIs recommendations. On the other hand, several participants mentioned that when a product recommendation by macro SMI solves their dermatological problems or meets their needs, they tend to choose buying the same brand cosmetic product repeatedly. While looking for a cosmetic product efficient for participants’ dermatological problem, a cosmetic recommendation by macro SMIs seems to be the solution. Further, if the recommended cosmetic product is efficient and satisfies their necessities, individuals not only buy it once, but keep consuming it (Samuelson & Nordhaus, 2010), as one participant stated, “until it will disappear from this world”. Besides, the observational findings additionally revealed that when one participant went in the store to repurchase a cosmetic product recommended by a macro SMI, she avoided checking other cosmetic product substitutes from competitors. Therefore, it can be argued that a positive cosmetic product recommendation from a macro SMI that will further meet individuals’ needs, can influence their choices in keeping to consume the same cosmetic brand of product over an extended period and not switching to other rivals in the market (Hoyer, 1984).

Furthermore, the analysis showed that since following macro SMIs on social media platforms who promote cosmetic products, participants not only tend to repetitively buy the same cosmetic product, but also to easily engage in consuming new cosmetic products (Hsu, et al., 2013). The daily attractive UGC posted by macro SMIs regarding newly released cosmetic products, influences consumers to try out and discover more brands of cosmetic products. Frequently seeing a macro SMI personally using and praising new cosmetic products, as well as sharing their personal product related beliefs after testing it, affects consumers to be more willing to test and buy cosmetic products from lesser-known or even unknown brands. Additionally, the analysis revealed that some participants are also influenced through a macro SMI formed community on social media platforms, to behave in a certain manner, when consuming cosmetic products. Within a group of individuals or in a community, individuals seek through
consumption to commonly experience a product and behave in the same manner as other community members do, to achieve group unification (Dibb, et al., 2005).

The community voice of a macro SMI has a further impact on consumers’ cosmetic product and brand preferences (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Therefore, consumers are more likely to pay attention to what cosmetics they consume when other ordinary people publicly discuss in the comment section not only their own experiences with the product, but also post "scientific facts" regarding chemicals that some cosmetic brands may contain. Seeing community individuals engaging in the comment section to share scientific evidence regarding harmful chemicals, animal testing, unethical conditions, or environmental concerns in which some brand cosmetics are produced, affects consumers to start consuming more natural or ethical cosmetic products.

Additionally, customers are more likely to acquire cosmetic items as a result of how they made other people feel and experience the product. The emotional appeal of a cosmetic product expressed by a macro SMI or through their formed communities on social media platforms, affects individuals' desire to experience the same positive feelings through consumption (Dibb, et al., 2005). One interviewee even stated that the expressed opinion of the community is like a ‘‘real experience’’ for her, due to the emotions she feels while going through all the posted information. In addition to that, the participant admitted she wanted to buy the particular cosmetic product that was discussed positively within the community and live the same experience through consumption. Her emotional responses in that situation represented her need for hedonic consumption and her need to behave and experience the cosmetic product as community members do (Bigne, et al., 2001). Thus, it can be argued that a macro SMI community can further influence consumers to look for receiving a certain type of experience through cosmetic consumption.

6. Conclusion

The conclusions regarding the outlined research question are presented within this section, as well as the managerial implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

The purpose of this thesis was to investigate how macro SMIs influence the consumption behavior of consumers towards cosmetics, with the outlined question: How do macro social
media influencers affect consumers' behavior in the cosmetics industry? We can conclude from the findings and the analysis that macro SMIs affect the consumption behavior directly but also through their formed communities in different ways. The findings have shown that consumers are more prone to listen to cosmetic related recommendations from macro SMIs that look similar to them or follow a certain lifestyle as they do. Furthermore, it can be concluded that through the use of a joyful and informative UGC, macro SMIs not only affect consumers' desire to buy and test more cosmetic products, but also positively influences consumers' experiences towards cosmetics. Through an appealing UGC, macro SMIs present to consumers in advance in which way the promoted product should be used in order to receive a pleasant experience and hence, influences individuals to seek to identically behave and consume cosmetic products to obtain the same experience. Additionally, the high engagement of a macro SMI in interacting and sharing cosmetic related knowledge through UGC, influences consumers to consume cosmetic products more consciously and avoid certain chemicals, as well as to start consuming cosmetics from emerging brands to the extent of others. Nevertheless, when macro SMIs recommend to individuals an efficient brand cosmetic product for solving a dermatological problem, consumers tend to stick with that brand and repurchase the same cosmetic product over a long period of time.

Moreover, through formed communities on social media platforms macro SMIs additionally influence consumers’ consumption behavior. The analysis has revealed that through the communities’ opinions that are shared in the comment section, individuals tend to behave in the same manner. Therefore, due to communities’ shared recommendations, consumers tend to be more aware and avoid consuming unethical cosmetic brand products that include harmful ingredients or animal testing. Additionally, based on communities’ positive comments and their shared cosmetic experiences, consumers are influenced to desire to consume similar cosmetic products in order to receive a similar and pleasant experience.

6.1 Managerial Implications

The findings within this study entail managerial implications especially for cosmetics company managers, who seek to further understand and benefit from the influence of macro SMIs over consumers’ behavior towards cosmetics. Thus, this thesis provides a deeper understanding for these managers, since it focuses on investigating meanings, reasons, and processes behind macro
SMIs influence from the point of view of consumers. A managerial suggestion based on our findings is for marketing managers, within the cosmetic industry, to promote cosmetic products through macro SMIs, that create both a fun and an informative cosmetic related UGC for their audience. By doing so, it will lead to creating a pleasant and joyful experience around the promoted cosmetic product for consumers and hence, positively influencing their experiential behavior and purchase tendency. Additionally, managers within the cosmetic industry should keep in mind that a macro SMIs physical appearance is an important factor for consumers when deciding to look for cosmetic related information or buy cosmetic products. Thus, a cosmetic firm that offers products for both Caucasians and persons of color, might benefit in terms of increasing sales or attracting new customers, by working with various macro SMIs with different skin pigmentation.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research
Taking into account that eight semi-structured individual interviews and two focus groups were conducted, a limitation within this thesis is represented by the difficulty to extrapolate the findings within a broader population. Due to the use of purposive sampling, the representative participants for this study were young women between ages of 19 and 30, but it has to be considered that findings from a sample that involve also young men, might generate distinct results. Moreover, due to COVID-19 the conducted observations were limited to two in-store ones within the same country since pandemic applied restrictions and rules differ in each country. It represents a limitation within this study because by conducting only two observations, it is hard to generalize the findings. Nonetheless, the selected industry, namely cosmetic one, confines the findings to a single industry that is representative for our phenomenon under study, which may not be the same in other industry areas.

A suggestion for further research could be to conduct the same research but applied in a different industry to investigate if macro SMIs within the other industries have the same influence on individuals and in what manner. A further interesting aspect to explore might be to include men in the study and thus to increase gender variety within the study and observe if and what gender distinctions exist. Additionally, a similar study conducted with a quantitative research design will provide statistically significant conclusions about a population and test the results based on the numerous data (Lowhorn, 2007).
Bibliography


[40]


Appendix 1- Interview Guide

Individual interviews

Name:                Age:                Country:

1. How would you describe a macro SMI in a few words?
2. Why did you start consuming cosmetic products promoted by a macro SMI?
3. Why are you following recommendations from a macro SMI when buying cosmetics?

4. Could you describe a personal experience with a brand cosmetic product recommended by a macro SMI?
5. How the interaction with a macro SMI or the group of people that follows and supports them, affects your choices regarding a cosmetic product?
   - Why do you think that?

6. How do you feel when interacting with other people from a macro SMI Instagram, Facebook, YouTube page?
   - Why?
   - How do you interact?
   - If they mention ‘’communities’’ – How do you feel being part of the community

7. Could you explain to us how your behavior regarding cosmetics changed after you started to follow a macro SMI?
8. How do you feel when purchasing a brand cosmetic product promoted by a macro SMI? Why?
9. In what way do you think your daily practices get influenced by a macro SMI who promotes cosmetics?
Focus Groups interviews

Name:  Age:  Country:

1. How do you feel about the fact that a macro SMI promotes besides cosmetics, also other categories of products?
   - Why?

2. How confident are you in the claimed benefits of cosmetics promoted by a macro SMI?
   - Why?

3. How do you feel when the product promoted by a macro SMI is also backed up by his/her already formed group of followers?
   - Why you feel like that?

4. In what ways does the interaction with a macro SMI already formed group of followers, affect the way you think of the product?

5. How did your experiences change towards cosmetics after starting to follow a macro SMI who promotes them?

6. When following a macro SMI, what are the motives which influence your purchase/consumption behavior towards cosmetics and why?

7. Do you share more of your opinion regarding a cosmetic product since you started to follow a macro social media influencer who promotes cosmetics?

8. Do you tend to share cosmetic related information with your friends provided by SMIs who promote cosmetics?
   - Why?

9. Could you share with us your experience after purchasing a cosmetic product recommended by a macro SMI?
Appendix 2- Tables and Figures

Table 1: Participants of the study

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Nickname</th>
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<th>Dates</th>
<th>Digital Focus Group</th>
<th>Duration of focus groups</th>
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<tr>
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Table 2: In-store observations

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Figure 2: Data structure process