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**Against all odds – a narrative approach towards underdog  
brands**  
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# Abstract

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## **Against all odds – a narrative approach towards underdog brands**

This study aims to develop a narrative understanding of how an underdog position is achieved, by investigating underdog brand narrative construction from two cases: Oatly and Tesla. Underdog brand biography and narrative theory was used to provide a framework of how the brand underdog narrative was encapsulated. By adopting a semiotic approach, it was possible to unveil their strategies within the industries they operate: they act as challengers of the status quo towards their market, yet they adopt a traditional marketing approach to reach their consumers.

*Keyword:* underdog, brand positioning, semiotics, narrative communication.

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

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## 1.1 Background

The most famous underdog narrative is probably the story of David and Goliath. Over three thousand years ago David was a shepherd who was faced with the mighty giant Goliath in a battle. David was a small and weak shepherd who seemed to have no chance of winning against the giant. All he had to assist him in the fight was a sling and a couple of stones. Goliath was armed up to his teeth with steel armour and seemed impossible to defeat. No one believed that David would stand a chance against this mighty and ruthless giant. Thus, the story took a dramatic change and ended up with David defeating the giant and becoming the hero. In this context, David could be considered an underdog; he came out in a disadvantaged position (underdog) fighting Goliath (top dog) and managed to win.

Using an underdog narrative is not just compelling in stories; it can be used as a strategic asset. An underdog narrative where a person against all odds manages to succeed is a story that many people can relate to.

What is it in the underdogs' narratives that makes them so attractive and compelling? Parahia (2011) suggests that individuals react positively to these stories when we can relate our own underdog narrative with the ones told to us. What illustrates an underdog narrative is the characters' humble background and determination to become successful in a competitive environment where one or more top dogs are dominating (Nagar, 2017). Avery, Paharia, Keinan, Schor (2010) describes the concept of underdog brand as a narrative of a shortcoming position in a situation where there are dominant leading players with extensive control. These persons or brands also have an extensive drive to reach success and features a narrative of "[...] humble beginnings, hopes and dreams, and noble struggle against adversaries" (Avery et al., 2010, p. 216). However, there are studies that suggest that individuals want to identify themselves with winners. Cialdini et al. (1976) suggest in her study that

students were more likely to identify themselves with a winning football team brand when they are successful rather than when they are losing. Thus, Avery et al. (2010) argue that using an underdog narrative works as a useful strategy if consumers identify with the narrative. An underdog narrative strategy could be used to extenuate negative consumer backlash due to companies' market power and enhance consumer purchase. There are examples of companies that have encapsulated the brand underdog narrative in their narratives about themselves. The tech companies Apple and Google emphasise that the companies started their business from a garage. IKEA is another company who emphasises their humble beginnings. The recently passed away founder Ingvar Kamprad started his company in his home in a small village outside of Älmhult Sweden, and now IKEA it is one of the largest furniture companies in the world.

## **1.2 Problem**

Narratives have been researched in relation to many fields such as psychology, medicine, law, sociology, communication, and education (Shankar, Elliott & Gaulling, 2001). Using narratives in brand communication is a way of positioning the brand in relation to others. A compelling narrative can become a powerful strategic tool in brand communication. A brand narrative showcases the values and cultural beliefs of the brand. It helps the consumer understand the structures of its roots, how the brand comes to life, and what its narrative experiences have meant for its development (Kao 2015). Brand narratives are more than facts listed about the brand. A narrative includes anecdotes and experiences that have shaped and are still shaping the brands' overall impression. The strengths in using brand narrative are that it can be applied for rhetorical use, compelling narratives help to connect the brand to the intended consumers (Avery et al. 2010). A narrative is also remembered easier than facts, and if the narrative is compelling, it triggers others to share it (Aaker & Aaker, 2016).

Prior research around the field of underdog narratives has mainly involved in corporate branding communication and shown that a brand which contains an underdog narrative can be used as a competing strategy in brand communication. Taking an underdog narrative approach as a positioning strategy for brands have shown a

positive effect on consumers by previous research. The underdog positioning can be used to as a strategic asset to incorporate compelling narratives about the brand. (Avery et al., 2010). Paharia et al. (2011) suggest that an underdog narrative can have a favourable effect on customers purchase intentions and choices.

What is missing in the research area of brand narratives is a more in-depth knowledge about how underdog brand narratives are constructed. Previous research had a quantitative focus on the identification with an underdog narrative in brand positioning (Avery et al., 2010; Paharia et al., 2011; Kao, 2015) and in politics (Goldschmeied & Vandello, 2009). There is a shortage of knowledge in how underdog narratives are shared in terms of narrative communication, especially surrounding the narrative, which revolves around brands that have entered as marginal players in markets where dominated actors operate.

This study aims to develop a narrative understanding of how an underdog position is achieved, by investigating underdog brand narrative construction. The focus will be on companies who have entered as marginal players in a dominant market and became successful. By studying the narrative structures of a brand underdog, this will contribute to the concept of brand narrative creation and brand positioning. Having a strong narrative helps the brand to separate themselves from others (Fog, Budtz, Munch, Blachette, 2010). By getting a deeper understanding of how successful underdog brands create their brand narrative, this study will enhance the understanding of establishing a brand in an environment where there are existing dominant actors. In a broader context, it encapsulates the start of new companies entering new markets where dominant actors are already established and how they construct their brand narratives.



### **1.3 Research purpose and questions**

A narrative can be considered as the backbone of brand communication. It helps the brand to differentiate itself from others. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to unpack the underdog position through a narrative approach of companies that have entered the markets as a marginal player, challenging a dominant structure/actor and investigating the communication strategies of these players through a narrative approach. By examining narratives, there is a possibility of arriving in a pattern that could be useful for new players that want to establish themselves as underdogs in a market where dominant players exist. The study will focus on narrative from a communicative perspective, exploring the narratives, which are present in the company's marketing communication.

To investigate the topic further, I have formulated the following research questions:

*How are underdog brand narratives constructed?*

*What narrative meaning is communicated from the underdog brand narratives?*

This study will investigate the research questions from a narrative approach. The aim and purpose of the study will be fulfilled through the examples of brands that position themselves in relation to a top dog. This study will investigate the narratives of the companies Tesla and Oatly as an example of an underdog positioning. They are two companies that have positioned themselves in markets where dominant actors operate.

### **1.4 Contributions of the study**

By investigating the narrative of underdog brand companies, this study will reveal how underdog brands structure their narrative. By investigating the brand narratives of companies which have entered an already competitive market, and managed to become successful, the study will enhance the conceptual knowledge of brand communication. It will offer guidance to the brands that want to position themselves in a new environment where their brand has never been visible before. This study will contribute to the knowledge of how to communicate and establish a position where

there are already dominant actors, developing the area of brand narrative construction.

Strategic communication can be defined as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission” (Holtzhausen, van Rular, Vercic & Sriramesh, p. 2007. p 3). From the perspective of strategic communication, this study will contribute to enhancing the knowledge of the how to communicate a narrative with the mission of positioning the company as an underdog. Further, the concept of underdog seems to be taken for granted in some aspect. Previous studies have mainly treated this subject from a quantitative perspective. There is a lack of studies which has explored the difference in how underdog brand narratives are structured. This study will explore how the underdog narrative is embodied in different brand narrative. An underdog brand is not a static concept; it appears different in different context. This study will from a qualitative perspective contribute to exploring how the different underdog narratives are embodied in different underdog brand narratives. Approaching this topic from a qualitative perspective will enhance the knowledge of how the underdog narratives are being communicated.

## **1.5 Delimitation and focus**

A brand narrative is necessary for becoming a successful brand and it increases the connection to your consumer. This study will focus on the narrative construction of Tesla and Oatly. These brands have been successful in penetrating markets with already dominant players. The study’s main task is to conduct a narrative analysis, and through that explore the structures that the brand narratives are based on. This study will take an interpretive stand on the narratives told by these companies. The narrative analysis will focus on text communicated by these brands. These text will thereafter be scrutinised to investigate closer what narratives are told by and about these brands.

## **1.6 Disposition**

This study will be structured as follows. The second chapter will treat the previous studies within underdog biography, underdog positioning and brand narrative. In the third part of this study, I will present the theories that will be used in for interpreting the data. The following chapter will present the methods used for investigating this issue further. Moreover, the case that will be used for the analysis will be presented, and thereafter I will conduct the analysis. Finally, a discussion will take place where the findings in the cases will be discussed and concluded.

# Chapter 2 Previous research

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This chapter has the purpose of giving an overview of the studies that have been conducted around narrative connection and underdog positioning of brands. The first section will treat the research covered around the topic of underdog phenomenon and underdog brand biographies. This part will mainly be concentrated on the effects of positioning as an underdog on consumers' choice and connection. The second part will treat why it is important to have a brand narrative and how it connects to consumers or the audience. Finally, this chapter will end with a reflection where I position this study in relation to the research that has been conducted in the area of brand underdog biographies.

## **2.1 Underdog positioning**

The previous research on underdog positioning has mostly been conducted in relation to effects on consumer perception of corporate brand communication. Paharia et al. (2011) study examined the use of narrative in the form of an underdog biography in connection to consumer brands, and its effect on purchase intentions, real choice and brand loyalty. A brand biography is a collection of anecdotes, narratives, and events that shape the overall life story of the brand. Paharia et al. (2011) concluded that there was a positive relationship between using an underdog biography and the purchase intentions and actual choice, their explanation of this findings is that the consumer who identifies themselves as an underdog is more likely to identify with an underdog brand. They also suggest that an underdog brand consists of two principal dimensions, external disadvantage and, passion and determination. Together they contribute to the positive outcome of the underdog brand. This means that underdog brands are characterised by themselves and how the outside world sees them. It is a mixture of external and internal forces that defines if the brand is viewed as an underdog (Paharia et al., 2011). Another interesting point that Paharia et al. (2011) makes is that in their study the respondent would not be classified as an underdog in matters of demographics and psychographics. They came from

socio-economic conditions that were above average. Even so, they identified with the underdog brands. This means that it is important to understand how the consumers' self-conception is constructed. In other words, what matters is how the consumer sees themselves, not their socioeconomically background.

Kao's (2015) study about consumer preference to brand underdog biographies reached a different result than Paharia (2011). Koa's study showed that consumers who strongly identified themselves as an underdog also showed a strong choice towards established brands with an explicit underdog brand biography, rather, than identifying with emerging brands that have an explicit underdog biography. Furthermore, they concluded that consumers who weakly identify themselves as an underdog are more likely to identify themselves with established brands more than emerging brands. In contrast to Parahia (2011), Koa (2015) measured the consumers' engagement in the brand biography in an implicit and explicit underdog brand biography, rather than using the dichotomy of either identifying or not identifying with the underdog biography. Koa measured to what extent a consumer both identified themselves as an underdog, as well as to what extent the brand had an implicit or explicit brand biography connection.

Kirmani et. al. (2017) researched underdog positioning within service providers. They examined the effects of trade-offs amongst consumers between the dichotomies of highly competent and less competent, and highly moral and less competent service providers. Their result shows that consumers generally regarded competence over morality when choosing a service provider. In other words, competence was the most important attribute and was valued higher than morality, warmth and the positioning as an underdog. However, their results also showed that when a service provider was moral and positioned as an underdog relative to a competent service provider, the results increased significantly in contrast to not being position as an underdog. This suggests that an underdog position is suitable for brands who want to position themselves as moral, trustworthy, and environmentally and socially conscious (Kirmani et al., 2017).

Goldschmeied & Vandello (2009) explored the possible advantages and risks of encapsulating an underdog label as a politician. They investigate the attitudes

towards politicians labelled as an underdog. Their results show that an underdog position can have benefits when the supporters see the candidates as underdogs. The voters that do not support the candidate are less likely to see the opposing candidate as an underdog. They emphasise that being labelled as an underdog does not automatically mean that the underdog candidate will get more support because of the underdog position. The study showed that even though the candidate was positioned as an underdog, he did not get support from voters from the opposing party. Thus, the underdog position enhanced their impression amongst of the candidate as to be warmer and still as competent as the opposing candidate.

Vandello, Goldschmied, & Richards (2007) tested the support for underdogs for underdogs in where an underdog was portrayed in different contexts. The different context were underdogs in sport and international politics. Their result showed that people supported the underdog. In other words, support was shown towards persons that came from a deprived background competing against privilege conditions.

## **2.2 Brand narrative connection**

Using a brand stories and or narrative has a positive impact on the consumer connection and brand experience (Padgett & Allan 1997; Denning 2004; Pini, 2017; Chiu, Hsieh & Kuo, 2012; Fog et al. 2010; Lee & Jeong 2017; Shankar Elliot & Goulding, 2001; Green 2008 ).

Padgett & Allen (1997) discuss the advantages of having a narrative orientation within the field of service advertising in the service industry. They make the argument that humans interpret experiences and understand the world through narrative forms. Therefore the communication of service experiences should be communicated in forms of narratives. Brand narratives emphasise the co-creation with consumers, where mutual progress forms the self-identity of the consumer and the identity of the brand through trans-mediated process conveyed through various channels. In other words, the brand narrative helps the consumer to express who they are and at the same time it builds the identity of the brand (Pini, 2017). Denning (2004) writes that narratives and stories communicate who the brand is. By narrating the

company product or service the brand becomes more than a product or services, it allows consumers to engage in myth surrounding and create value for the brand. Chiu, Hsieh & Kuo (2012) suggest in their study that humour, authenticity, reversal and consciousness are important elements of a brand story. These elements together strengthen the purchase intentions and increase the related feeling to the brand. In their study the difference between experience products (e.g. dining experience) and search products (e.g. fashion magazine). The result showed that authenticity increased the attitudes towards the brand in experience products. Consciousness, humour and reversal stories had a more positive impact on search products (Chiu, Hsieh & Kuo, 2012).

Lee & Jeong (2016) suggest that narratives and stories provide the managers to create a unique position for the brand. They also suggest that narrative has a positive effect on brand engagement and that stories increase the perceived authenticity of the brand. Igesias and Bonet (2012) argue that the brand meaning is constructed through storytelling and brand narrative. These have a dominant position in forming and shaping the meaning of the brand, which today is more often out of the control of the brand managers. They emphasise that storytelling and narrative approach has a rhetorical benefit when constructing meaning. The brand increases the control of the brand meaning and interpretation by having a narrative. Within brand management, physical attributes of the product have traditionally played great importance such as quality aspects, level of price, what function and quality does the product have, and treating the consumers as static targets of the brand meaning. Thus, Igesias and Bonet (2012) further argue that brand meaning is a creation that includes a more holistic understanding. It is a process of different touchpoints and experiences combined which shapes the meaning of the brand. It is a multi-stakeholder where consumers, employees, suppliers, media channels, and investors shape the meaning of the brand, which in turn can be managed by narratives and storytelling.

Shankar et al. (2001) argue that narratives play a central part of how we structure our lives and that it is possible to understand how consumers construct their consumption experience through narrative. They concluded that narratives are a natural part of human culture. Narratives are present in TV, advertisements, magazines, and newspapers. Story and narrative branding work as a pervasive element to

individuals, it allows them a ready-made format which matches with their own aspects of life (Shankar et al., 2001). Aaker & Aaker, (2016) makes the argument that a signature story is an essential aspect of brand success. The signature stories need to be involving, intriguing and authentic. Involving in the sense that it draws people in and makes them want to know more, intriguing in the sense that it is thought-provoking, interesting, and extraordinary. Finally, it is authentic in the sense that the characters are perceived to be a real representation of the brand.

Herskovitz & Crystal (2010) makes the argument that storytelling is essential to the branding process. A brand story should derive from a brand persona, which encapsulates the brand narrative. The formation of the persona should begin in the personality, and the character of the brand; from there, all the other elements of the story unfold. Having a brand persona will foster the relationship to consumers because it allows the consumer to relate, recognise and memories the persona, it becomes the reference point by driving the cohesion of the brand message, which allows the audience to connect to it. Moreover, to enhance the connection to the persona, the persona should be drawn from an archetype, such as; the individualist, the mentor, the rebel, the underdog. Not having a unified brand persona, will portrayal the brand a torn and disjointed from the whole, and would not offer the consumer something to connect and relate to. A unified brand persona is something that fosters relationship, loyalty and trust (Herskovitz & Cristal, 2010).

Escalas (2004) studied consumers narrative processing in connection to brand from a self-brand connection. Self-brand connections occur when consumers can connect their identity of self to the psychological and symbolic attributes of the brand. The connection helps the consumer to both identify and separate their self-concept from others. It becomes a way of constructing your identity in relations to others. Moreover, Escalas conclude that brand which uses narratives enhances the self-connection of consumers because people organise their world into stories to make sense of it. Her study results show that including a story in ads increased the self-brand connections, which postulates that including a narrative in ads will enhance the connection between consumers and the brand. "Narratives are mental organising structure that provides meaning by combining elements temporally towards a goal or conclusion" (Escalas, 2004, p. 176). The brand story shapes the meaning of the



brand by being a part of it. The brand then becomes more important to some consumers by connecting to the consumer through the meaning of the story (Escalas, 2004).

### **2.3 Reflection**

The previous research has been concentrated on the effects of positioning the brand with an underdog biography. Narratives and stories are an essential component of the brand communication. The prior research agrees on positioning as an underdog can have positive effects in relations to consumers. Thus, to what extent is not clear from the previous studies. The research has indicated if you are identifying yourself as an underdog then you are more likely to identify with the brand underdog. Moreover, when it comes to the established brands and emerged brand the research has showed that consumers have a tendency to identify with an established brand that uses an underdog biography.

I argue that the underdog positioning needs closer attention since there are many companies that use this perspective in their communication. Uncover these structures of a brand underdog narrative will enhance the knowledge of positioning the brand through an underdog narrative. There is a gap in the understanding of how these underdog narratives are structured in relation to communication. It seems that the underdog narrative is taken for granted without any more in-depth knowledge of how these are actually narratively constructed. As shown in the previous research the underdog biographies can have a positive effect on consumer choice. Uncovering the narrative structures will enhance the understanding of positioning your brand when it is entering a new market.

# Chapter 3 Theory

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This section will introduce the theories used for the analysis. The aim of this study is to unpack the purpose of this unpacks the underdog position through a narrative approach. This section starts with conveying what an underdog biography is and continue on to discuss narratives theory and how narratives in branding connect to consumers. Finally, this section will end with introducing the concept of semiotics.

## **3.1 Brand underdog biography**

What characterises an underdog is their noble struggle against a rival or top dog, coming from a shortcoming background (Avery et al., 2010). They have a weak or disadvantaged position in relation to an established competitor that has a majority in a market or specific context (Paharia et al. 2011; Kirmani et al. 2017). There is an expectancy of the underdog to lose and least likely to win (Golfeschmied & Vaddello, 2009). An underdog is also constituted by the willingness to win and fighting for success even though the odds are not in favour of the underdog (Jun, Sung, Gentry, & McGinnis, 2015). They do not have the privileges and resources to win as their competitor (top dog) has. The top dog narrative is composed by the effortless start without obstacles or challenges when they are rising towards the top. Their recourses are not limited; instead, they have a wealthy and rich network and choices at their disposal (Kao, 2015). In contrast to the top dog, the underdog starts in an uphill situation; the odds are against them, and they have to struggle more than others because they lack superior assets or power as their competitors. Underdog show passion and fortitude to succeed in the competitive context which they operate (Paharia, Avery, & Keinan, 2014).

The underdog brand biography can be seen as a product of external and internal efforts to construct a brand narrative as fighting upwards from a weak position in relations to a competitor, coming from modest conditions, making their way to the top in a competitive environment. They are positioning themselves as fighting

against competitors with superior resources and assets. Thus, with an appetite for success, the brand faces rivals in an attempt to come out on top. Thus, facing obstacles, underdogs are determined to succeed, where drive and passion are attributes of their main characteristics (Avery et al. 2010). The underdog brand biographies narratives are constructed out of dichotomies of top dog versus underdog, where they are positioned against a rival coming from a superior position in the market or field where they operate (Paharia et al., 2011; Kao, 2015). In other words, an underdog brand biography is the positioning of one that is dominated by another rivaling part in the same category. The use of brand biographies is not limited to the emerging companies, and established actors can also encapsulate the biography by empathising their humble beginnings (Paharia et al., 2011).

This study will treat the underdog concept as a rivalry between two brands, where one has an obvious disadvantage and the other an obvious advantage. The underdog concept is about the dichotomies between these rivals, top dog and underdog. The previous research has framed the obvious disadvantage for the underdog as the top dog. This study will treat underdogs in a wider context, which includes marketing structures or market contexts which work as obvious disadvantages. These structures can be exemplified through different status quos that have been dominating a market for a long time, which the underdogs are positioning against.

## **3.2 Narratology**

In order to talk about the narratives, we need to abstract the narrative from other linguistic forms. The narrative could be understood as text; the text could be written, spoken or told. The word narrative comes from Latin and means 'to construct' or 'to weave'. There are different definitions of a narrative. Bennett and Royal define a narrative as a "series of events in a specific order – with a beginning, a middle and an end" (Bennett & Royal, 1999 p. 53). Polkinghorne (1988) connects narrative to a process of making a structural scheme which has the form of a story. He refers to a narrative as a process, the end result of which is constructing a story. Czarniawska writes that "a narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected" (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 17). She continues to write that a story is different from a

narrative because stories include a plot. Brooks, (1992) describes a plot as something constant which is present in written or spoken narratives, which by its constant structural repetition allows for the construction of a whole. A plot is enabled through the repetitions actions and incidents which is present in the narrative. He continuously mentions that it is the interpretation of different categorisations that allows us to construct a whole. Gabriel (2000) is in line with Czarniawska and differentiates between the stories and narratives; thus, instead, his definition takes off in a definition of a story, "Stories are narratives with plots and character, generating emotions in narrator and audience, through a poetic elaboration and of symbolic material." (Gabriel, 2000, p. 239).

The definition of a narrative constitutes that the narrative is a part of the story, the narrative can be seen on as one of the building blocks of a story. The abovementioned scholars also agree on that a narrative encounters progress in some sort, progress towards a more extensive picture by composing parts into a whole, a structural view that different parts make up the whole. A story is realised when it contains a plot.

Johansson (2005) writes that a narrative needs causality and temporality. Causality refers to the causal links in the narrative; the story should link all the events together, the present must be affected by the past events. The events should be connected to each other so that the start and the end are connected. Traditionally the causality of the story is expressed in the plot of the story. Temporality refers to the chronological events of the narrative. A story needs to have unified sequences that are connected to the initials of the story. Without the unified sequences of events, the story does not exist. Another criterion for a story is coherence, in order to make the story understandable the different parts of the story need to be connected. Causality and coherence are the basic necessities to make the story cohesive to a context. Coherence is not something that is absolute or explicit in the text; thus coherence is created in the context of the text, between the speaker and the receiver. The coherence is then something that is socially or contextually bound. Coherence should not be thought of as linear causality, but rather something that is constructed in relation to the overall social context.

### ***3.2.1 Connecting the brand narrative to consumers***

Narratives and stories are a central part of human beings, through stories we make sense of the world. Through stories, we understand the world around and convey who we are (Escalas, 2004; Fog et al., 2010; Brooks, 1992). It is through them we have learned to make sense of cultural, traditions, and the social world. Stories come in many formats and are visible everywhere.

The use of stories gives the companies a chance not only to differentiate the brand from others but also differentiate their products from other competitors. Using narrative helps the brand to connect with the consumers through a symbolic portrayal of human ideals and lifestyles that are present in different texts. Brands should not be understood as objects with a function. They should be seen as a symbolic asset that allows the consumer to communicate their identity to others (Schembri, Merriees, Kristiansen, 2010). According to Cooper, Schembri & Miller (2010), this symbolic portrayal is visible in popular culture, and supporters use this text as a compass for guiding them in creating a social reality. Cooper et al. (2010) make an example of luxury brands; their social reality often consists of aspiration and desire. Moreover, they suggest that this constructed reality is not only a product of advertising but also the placement of the brands in various popular cultural context, which enhances the associations of these attributes of aspiration and desire. By these efforts, the consumer associates the brand with constructed reality created by the brand in various cultural context. The realities provide a contextual and social meaning for the brand, which is enhanced by narratives told by the brand or associated with the brand (Cooper et al., 2010).

The construct of the social realities that brand engages in has a symbolic role for the consumer which they can base their identity on (Pini, 2017). Narratives attached to the brand gives a symbolic meaning to the consumer, and by consuming the brand, the consumer becomes a part of the meaning and cultural context which the brand is associated with. The brand helps the consumer to create the social construction of who that person wants to become, in other words, the brand becomes a resource for the construction of that person. The narrative told by the brand can be thought of as a body of framework for creating a socially constructed self (Cooper et al., 2010; Schembri et al. 2010). Through touch points in different media, the

brand establishes a connection to its consumers. The brand and the consumer are co-creating the meaning and value of the brand, through negotiating the brands narrative and stories, and construction of self. The negotiation is about establishing what is genuine or made-up to the consumers and what is true in the consumers' reality (Pini, 2017). In other words, the stories and the narrative must match the consumers' reality in order to be appealing. The meaning of the brand depends partly on the narrative constructed by the consumer in the association of the brand (Escalas, 2004).

### **3.3 A structuralist approach towards narrative**

This study has the interest of investigating the practical construction of the underdog narrative. To investigate how the narratives constructed this study will depart for a structural semantics. To get a better understanding of how the brands form meaning with their narratives this study will use Saussure and Greimas concept of relational dichotomies and Greimas concept of narrative.

According to Saussure language can be treated as a system that consists of signs. Signs are created and understood within the system of a language (de Saussure, 1959 in Craig & Muller, 2007, p. 188). A sign can be divided into two parts, *signifier* and *signified*. The *signifier* refers to a mental portrayal of structures of sound. And *signified* refers to the linguistic value of the word. Thus, according to Saussure, these two are not independent of each other, rather they are dependent on each other and make meaning of a linguistic sign. The sign is a "unified whole that results from the association of a sound with a concept" (Chandler, 2017). In a Saussurian manner, words lack a relation to an actual 'thing'. A word does not automatically stand for something materialistic or something that could be seen and experienced, and neither does it act as a referent to something static. The signifier and the signified represent a psychological state which is connected through associative links that connect in the human mind. The connection of the links happens in relation to a psychological impression people have learned. Investigating the narrative from a semiotic perspective this study convey which concepts the underdog brand link their brand in order to create meaning.

Greimas was one of the main contributors of the structural paradigm. Structural semantics has the objective of accounting for meaning created in all kinds of text. Structural semantics takes its starting point in formulating rules and concepts of meaning. Through the different combination of words or lexical elements in a sentence, the sentence forms a meaning. Meaning is not something that is static in nature. Thus, neither is meaning transformed or transported to people in the sense of static messages with a universal understanding. The meaning is a matter of interpretation by active relation to the communicative acts in complexed frameworks that people can relate to (Chandler, 2017). It attempts to formulate meaning in a grammatical manner. Different combinations of words form different meaning within the literate corpus.

Structuralist semantics starts in *semes*, which means the smallest recognisable unit of meaning. A seme is a product that stems from the opposition of dichotomies such as love/hate, dead/alive, masculine/feminine (Culler 2002). Culler (2002) further writes that semantics theory builds on the use of lexemes of appropriate language. Culler makes an example of the word 'woman' which is a phonological expression and a seme. 'Woman' is a combination of the semes, 'human' and 'female'. Semantics recognise that a *lexical item* (words or multiple words that forms the principle meaning of a vocabulary, e.g. dog, bottle opener) are different depending on the context it is used in. Greimas argued that meaning is formed through the lexemes constant core, which forms a semantic representation. The semantic representation is formed by the use of singular or multiple semes that are tied to a specific context (Culler 2002). Meaning is created through the use of semes in a context. Culler (2002, p. 90) makes an example of the word *bark*. *Bark* can have a different meaning in the sentences "The dog barked at me" and "The man barked at me". A person who has the knowledge of what the individual words mean has no trouble interpreting the meaning of the sentences. Thus, the interest for structuralist linguistics lies in the sentences that attached meaning to contextual semes. Greimas suggests that the meaning of semes is established through the relation of other semes present in a sentence. In other words, the meaning is created through the use of certain words in relation to others and the context in which they are presented in.

If we continue with the lexeme *bark*, the essence of bark consists of "a sharp vocal noise" (Culler, 2002, p. 91). In the sentences discussed above the bark in relation to man and dog determines the meaning of which subject was barking, either the dog or the man. Put differently, meaning is determined by the choice of lexical or words items that are used in relation to others. This may suggest that meaning can be derived from looking up lexemes in a dictionary and determine the meaning of every word used in a sentence. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Every lexeme is bound to the context in which they are used, and its meaning is determined by the relations to the other lexical items used in a sentence. The meaning of the word can change in relation to the contextual lexical items surrounding it.

Structuralist semantics further has an interested in forming classes of semes, which are called *classemes*. The formation of a classeme is a process of repetition of semes in a given text. Through putting a different word, themes and concepts in opposition to each other, this study will derive at the meaning created about the brand through their narratives.

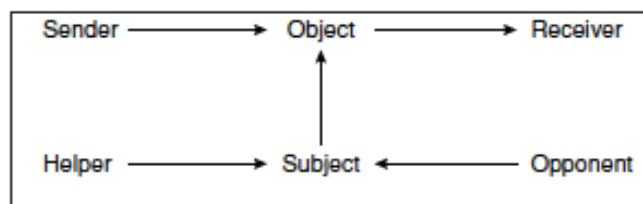
The concept of structural semantics will help this study to reveal how the underdog brands assign themselves meaning through the use of different semes in their narrative. By investigating the use of words and the context which they appear in this study will revile what signification or meaning that is commutated from Oatly and Tesla. Moreover, structural semantics shows how the narrative connects to consumer. The semes used by the brand will reveal how Oatly and Tesla connects to their consumers and what social reality the brands want to create, and how they form narrative meaning in relation to the brand narrative.

### ***3.3.1 Actantial model***

The actantial model was introduced by Greimas and has it base on the series of events that are present in narratives. All narratives can be structured according to a basic pattern. These patterns can also be applied to the characters that are involved or affected by the series of event in a narrative. A story can consist of many characters, the amount of characters are limited towards six characteristic actions, which are related to the overall narrative of a project. No matter how many characters that



are present, they all can encompass six main narrative roles, which are called actants (Larsen, 2002). The actantial model is based on the idea that nominal phrases can help determining the act of the different nominal groups by reducing sentences to predicates and subjects. They are then formed into nominal phrases which Greimas call *actants*. The actants does not have to represent the acts of a human person it can also be concepts, animals, or objects. The functions of the actants explores the organisation of narrative in a given text. It explores how actions in a text are derived from its functions. The actantial model account for the actions taken by different characters in a narrative or a story (Culler, 2002).



*Actantial model (Larsson, 2002, p. 127)*

The actants are established when a narrative project has begun. The actants established in a narrative project are divided into three axis with opposing pairs: First, the axis of desire, which constitutes the *subject* and *object* of a narrative. The subject has an aspiration to achieve something, which is the object. Second, the narrative is transported in the sense of communicating and by that transporting the object between the two places, establishing the two more actants, the *sender* and *receiver* which forms the communication axis. The sender can be considered to be in “possession” of the object, which the receiver does not have. Finally, there are the two last actants the *opponent* and the *helper*, which form the power or conflict axis. In the transportation of the object, a conflict often arises where the opponent is trying to hinder the subject from transportation of the object to the receiver. Moreover, there is often a helper who is helping the subject transporting the object to the receiver (Cullar, 2002).

The actantial model does not exclude the actors' from taking more than one function and positions, neither are the positions only reserved for one character. Several actors can have several positions during the event of the narrative. Using the actantial model will allow me to determine how the actions are position in relation to the

narrative told. Moreover, the actantial model in this study will help determine the plot and the conflict of the brands' narratives of the underdog brands. How their stories are emplotted, by exploring who they assign as the different actant roles and how the different actants are interconnected in the brand narrative of the underdogs. As mentioned above, the actantial model will further help this study to convey which themes and concepts that are seen as meaningful to the brand and which are in opposition to the brand.

### 3.3.2 *Semiotic square*

The semiotic square is a concept developed by Greimas (1987). The concept is based on developing meaning based on binary oppositions. The key here is to generate meaning from textual corpus by putting words that are contrary to each other against each other. The semantic square has the purpose of mapping out the meaning through different conceptual frameworks. Greimas meant that meaning is created through systematisation of terms used in a text or concept. Meaning is created by the negative relationship between terms. The semiotic square has the purpose of mapping out meaning from a given text or discourse.

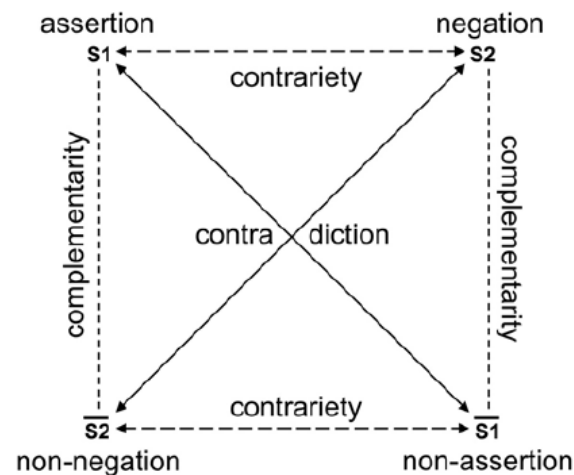


Figure 1.1 The semiotic square. Source: Chandler (2017 p. 125)

The square is divided into four corners, which is portrayed in the model above S1(assertion), S2 (negation), non-S1 (non- assertion) and non-S2 (non-negation). These four positions refer to abstract or tangible perceptions of concepts within a text. The four concepts are bound together by a logic relationship, which is 'contrariety', 'complementary' and 'contradiction' (Chandler, 2017, p. 124-125). The S1 and the S2 which are located on the top of the square are characterised by dialectical

oppositions. They are represented by contraries which are opposing in terms of meaning. Thus, they are related in the same semantic realm. Chandler (2017) makes an example of beautiful and ugly. Both of the words can be connected to the semantic notion of *appearance*, but they are opposing in terms of meaning. The logic behind semiotic square is based on the binary opposition of words and terms that create meaning by using one or the other.

The lower axis between 'not S1'(not-ugly) and 'not S2'(not-beautiful) is determined by the higher axis binary oppositions. They are based on the contradiction of the S1(beautiful) and S2 (ugly) instead of contraries, and they are represented in an either/or relationship of given classification and serves as negations of the original contraries. The vertical dotted lines in the semiotic square showcase the relationship between them. The square has the function of revealing deeper meaning by what is absent from the given discourse (Chandler 2017).

The square allows me to uncover which semes are present and absent in the text written by the underdog brands.. In this study, the semiotic square will be used as an analytical tool for exploring the semiotic system of the narrative presented from the underdog narratives. The semiotic square will convey the meaning created of the narratives presented by the brands. In other words, it will be used to convey the binary oppositions of the use by the brand to illustrate how their messages form meaning in their narrative. The semiotic square will allow this study to lay out how the brand forms meaning in relationship to the contraries, contradictions, and complementary in the underdog narrative.

# Chapter 4 Methodology

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This thesis has now treated and reflected over the framework of underdogs brand and narrative theory of communication. This chapter has the intention of providing the overview of the methods that are going to be used in order to analyse the material. Previous research about the concept of the underdog has mainly be conducted through a quantitative method (see Avery et al. 2010; Paharia et al. 2011; Kao, 2015; Kirmani et al. 2017; Jun, Sung, Gentry, & McGinnis, 2015).

## **4.1 A semiotic approach to understanding the underdog position**

This study took its starting point in a narrative approach from a semiotic perspective. The semiotic perspective rose out of linguistic philosophy. The semiotic tradition was built from conveying and identifying rules of social systems connected to signs. Like language grammar, the semiotic perspective is trying to create the grammar of social systems. The focus of the semiotics is to investigate grammar, which, together with coherence, forms the communication and interpretation of meaning. The grammar of words is grammatically ordered, and through its order, it shapes meaning and interpretative communicated acts. The semiotic tradition postulates that the social reality, like a language, consists of structural rules in which the communicated act can be interpreted and connected to a social system (Prasad 2005). The human social system is connected to language and sense-making. Every human language has a system of signs, which has different interpretations. As mentioned in the theory, a sign can be divided into two parts; a signifier and signified. The signifier is the actual word, spoken or written, and the signified refers to the notion of concept that the signifier belongs to. The two parts are mutually dependent on each other to form meaning. Only the word in itself cannot create meaning, a word has no natural meaning. The meaning of the word has developed over language system.

From this point of view, semiotics does not believe that language reflects social reality. Instead, it provides conceptual blueprints and frames to establish an understanding of reality. There is no overarching structure that encompasses all the languages. Instead, every language system has their own structures of signs, which is driven by its own logic and structural principles. The semiotic tradition conveys these systems of every language, laying out the system of signs which are formed in the texts.

The semiotic perspective treats language as a system of distinctive signs, with the goal of connecting the signs in a system that forms a meaning in certain conversations, events and situations. The semiotic perspective emphasises that language is a mean of communication, which is a system of habits constructs the reality, rather than seeing the humans living in an objective world (Prasad 2005).

A semiotic perspective helped this study to convey the structures in the brand narrative of the underdog brands. The intention of this study was to explore the narrative constructions of the underdog brands. By starting from a semiotic perspective, this helped to lay out the foundations and structures that the brands use practically for telling their narratives. Further, the semiotic perspective allowed me to investigate how the brands create meaning within their narratives. As argued above, there is a taken-for-granted-ness in the creation of an underdog narrative. The semiotic perspective will allow me to explore this taken for granted-ness in the brands narrative, by exploring the mediating aspect of constructing social reality with the help of signs (Chandler, 2017).

## **4.2 Research strategy**

This study took a qualitative stand in researching the topic of an underdog in brand narratives and stories. Meaning that the interest of this study has revolved around understanding how meaning is created in a specific phenomenon (Stake 2010). A qualitative method approach allowed this study to explore the underlying structures that are hidden in the underdog narrative. This study treats qualitative methods as a reflective procedure, one that does not involve searching for absolute and generalised answers, but rather trying to understand the motivations and concepts that are

present in the brand underdog narrative (Sayre, 2001). Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) divided reflective research into two main characteristics careful interpretation and reflection. Careful interpretation encompasses that all research is a product of interpretation, they reject that their empirical data stands for a reality that can be observed and represent a truth of reality. Rather, the empirical data is interpreted by the researcher and not a mirror of any reality. Reflection refers to the "interpretation of the interpretation" (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009 p. 9), where the researchers critically examines their interpretation of the empirical material. The study aims to reflect about that the "reality" that empirical material presents . It is a reality which the researcher is actively engaged with. As the empirical material was interpreted by the scholar of this thesis, it was not conceived as the absolute truth but rather a representation of a constructed reality constructed by the empirical data and the scholar.

### **4.3 Sample and chosen cases**

Oatly and Tesla were selected through a purposive sample. A purpose sample refers to a non-probability sample. The use of a purposive sample means that the sample is derived from a logical assumption that the sample represents the population. It is a subjective approach that determines what should be included as in the sample (Lavrakas, 2008). The purposive sample was chosen for this study on the base that it can answer the research question. The criteria for choosing the brand have been: (1) they have entered a competitive market with a unique product; (2) they have challenged a dominant player in the business that they operate within; and (3) they actively position against the status quo in their market. The companies meet the criteria, because they encapsulate a form of underdog narrative. This means that they have entered a market where a clear status quo has been present and challenged the dominant structures. A status quo refers to that there is an existing state of affairs or that the state of affairs is static in regards to change. Oatly and Tesla are examples of underdogs, and they provided insight into how the narrative of this phenomenon is formed. The interpretation of the material was made from a my point view, meaning that there can be implications of how the scholar see the world. Hence, I emphasised to be reflexive in my interpretation of the empirical material. Not thinking

of the empirical material as an objective truth, rather as a construction of the reality they operate in (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2009). The objective of this study is to investigate the narratives of underdog brands, and I argue that these companies provide an example of the underdog positioning in the market where they operate.

#### ***4.3.1 Introducing Oatly***

Oatly is a Swedish company that produces non-dairy products through oats. The story of the company took shape at the beginning of the 1990s. Oatly was a result of scientists looking for a way to find an alternative to milk with another kind of victual. Oatly position themselves as a company that is producing an alternative product for people who can't consume dairy for personal reasons, such as lactose-intolerant or people who have a vegan diet. After discovering that oats were a perfect substitute to dairy the company started producing oat drinks as a substitute for milk. Further, their product range grew into a substitute for creme fraiche, chocolate milk, ice cream, cream, and vanilla custard. Oatly has their biggest market in Sweden and their products can be found in 25 countries. In 2013 their turnover reached 200 million Swedish kronor (Mellving, 2013). Oatly emphasizes in their communication that they are a transparent company with the aim of upgrading people's lives. They further emphasized that their processes in the food industry have the purpose of minimising the impact on the environment, and they strive to maintain the well being of the planet through their practices in the industry.

In 2014 Oatly was involved in a lawsuit from the trade organisation called Svensk mjölk (Swedish milk). The lawsuit against Oatly came from the background of them portraying milk in the context of a bad grocery with the taglines "No milk, no soy, no badness" and "It looks like milk, but it isn't milk. It is made for humans (not baby cows)" (Klaar, 2014). Oatly lost the lawsuit and was fined because of their marketing practices. The lawsuit shows that Oatly is a controversial company who are taking actions against the milk industry. It also pinpoints the fact that the milk industry dislike that Oatly's marketing practise by taking legal action against the company. The Milk industry can be conceived as exercising their power as a top dog towards the underdog Oatly.

What makes Oatly an underdog is that they had a product that was new in a market and that was challenging an old status quo. Milk, in general, has had a strong position in the western society for many years with few challenges. In Sweden, the consumption of milk reached 84,8 kilos per person during 2015 (Lantbrukarnas riksförbund [LRF], 2016). One of the biggest milk companies in Sweden had a turnover of 10,3 billion euros 2016 (Arla, 2017). The milk industry is a global business that has been operating for decades and has established a strong position in the market. Milk also has a strong cultural connection in many cultures. In the Swedish culture milk is a part of the everyday diet. In the Swedish culture, milk has been portrayed as a nutritious drink that you need to drink every day. Milk also has a connection to the coffee culture. In other words, milk is a well-established phenomenon in many cultures.

#### **4.3.2 Tesla**

Tesla is a car and energy brand, which manufactures the electric vehicles and batteries. The company was founded in 2003 in the United States of America. In 2006 they presented their first electronic car, the Roadster model, which was a sports car that ran on electricity. Now, they have grown to a multinational company that operates in around 25 countries (Logan, 2011). After Tesla released their first car model, they have expanded their supply of car models into more commercial cars models such as the Model S, Model X, Model 3, and Semi, all which is driven on electricity. Tesla positions themselves as a premium brand that delivers high-end products in the car industry. Their communication emphasis that they are a company which is trying to transition the world into more sustainable practices. Positioning themselves as a company that contribute towards zero emission and minimizing the pollution of the environment.

Tesla can be considered an underdog for challenging the whole car industry. Cars have been an important transportation vehicle during the last century. Many car manufacture have been active in the industry for many years and established a strong position within the industry. The main propellant of the car industry has been gasoline, and Tesla's cars run on electricity. By designing a car that runs on electricity, Tesla is challenging the industry with their electrical cars. Tesla is not only



a challenger in the car industry itself, but also a challenger towards the notion of a car can be driven on. For a long time, the car industry has consisted of fuel depended vehicles. Tesla cars are driven by electric batteries challenging the car industry that has been depended on petrol for many years. Tesla can be conceived as a progressive company that challenges the whole car industry and a challenger to the old status quo of being dependent on fossil fuels.

To summarise, the two brands that were chosen for this study can be considered as an underdog brand. Both of them have challenged the existing status quo within their market (Paharia et al., 2011). Even though they are big multinational companies, they encapsulate the underdog narrative of or fighting a status quo in regard to the market where they operate. Oatly and Tesla are two companies that have presented unique products that are disrupting the dominant structures of a status quo. In their markets, there have been dominant structures in were the industry has revolved around the same type of products.

#### **4.4 Document analysis and data collection**

This thesis has taken a document analysis approach. Documents can be manifested in many different ways, such as policy documents, advertisements, protocols from meetings, handouts like brochures and books, agendas for events etc.

Essentially, document analysis encompasses various printed or digital material created by an institution or company. A document analysis refers to a systematic process of studying and assessing documents (Bowen 2009). Bowen further argues that documents analysis is useful in qualitative studies because it produces robust descriptions of a phenomena.

The purpose of applying document analysis to this study was to interpret and scrutinise the phenomenon of underdog brands and get a deeper understanding of how they construct their narrative in a practical manner.

The main source for the empirical material was the Tesla's and Oatly's webpage. Their company webpages include product descriptions, company values and

different targeted messages. The websites offer a wide variety of communicative efforts that encapsulates the Tesla and Oatly brands as a whole. Their website serves as a great platform for them to transferring company meaning to their intended audience, and the texts are a robust source of information on how they construct their narrative in relation to the brand and products.

The empirical material collected consists of text documents found on the webpages of the brands. The material collected consisted of printed and digital advertisement in form of product description, consumer stories and other marketing material.

Advertising is a broad term which includes many different aspects. Dahlen and Rosengren define advertising as "brand-initiated communication intent impacting people" (Dhalen & Rosengren 2016, p. 334). The text provided by the brands can be seen as an initiated act to communicate the brand narrative with the purpose of impacting people.

The number of individual texts that were analysed in the study was in total 123 texts, which correspond to around 73 pages in A4 format following the same style guidelines as this same paper. The texts vary in length, some were shorter product descriptions and some were longer texts about consumer experiences of the products that the brand provided. The websites of the companies also contain documents regarding legal issues, such as text about terms and conditions, or hiring processes, but these texts were neglected in the analysis because the goal of this study is to investigate the narrative practices towards consumers of the brand.

## 4.5 Analysing the data through a narrative approach

The data was analysed using the actantial model and the semiotic square, whose applications will be described in the following sections.

### 4.5.1 *Application of the actantial model*

The empirical material was analysed from the Griemasian actantial model and semiotic square. A structural perspective on narrative means that a narrative is constructed by different syntactical positions, which consist of different actant opinions. An actant should not be confused with the characters in a text: actants are the entities that perform an act. The acts of the actant make up the plot of the story. The actant's actions are the base of the narrative of a given story. The acts performed by the actants work as the grammar of the narrative. Greimas' narrative structure is created from a relationship between "subject-verb-object sentence structure" (Chandler 2017, p. 138). In other words, the narrative consists of actions made by the subject to obtain an object.

The actantial model mention earlier will be applied to every written text that was analysed on the webpage of the different brand. All the different actantial models were then categorised into classification of the narrative of the brand, the product and how they position against the status quo. By applying the actantial model on the webpage text, this study explored the practicality of the construction of their narratives. The actantial model specifically exposes how the company, through their narrative, performs and acts. The actantial model exposes the different functions that the company establishes through their narrative. It accounts for what the brands ascribes as subject obtaining an objective in the narrative, as well as, who or what concepts they assign as a helper respectively oppositions as well as the sender and the receiver of their narrative. The actantial model enabled this study to explore how these brands construct their plots. In other words, how they constructed their narrative and how they assigned different concepts, phenomena or characters as players in their narrative.

#### ***4.5.2 Application of the semiotic square***

As mentioned in the theory part the semiotic square is a concept which finds meaning based on oppositions (Greimas, 1987). The semiotic square was applied to every text analysed in this study. In the analysis one semiotic square was presented. It was the most repeated one in each brand. The fact that a semiotic square was created for every text does not mean that the brand communicates different values every text. This study was interested to convey in the most repeated argument.

The process of applying the semiotic square started in locating the use of words in the brand narrative on their webpage. The analysis proceeded with finding oppositions to the words that the brand used, and through that arriving at the meaning created in the brand story. The words were not taken in their static form of meaning, instead, they were related to the context they were used in. Chandler (2017) and Nöth (1990) argues that the word in itself does not create meaning, meaning derives from the context and the situation where the word is used. The meaning of a word cannot be taken directly from the word, other words in connection to the word has been taken in consideration for providing an accurate reading of the meaning created through the narratives.

### **4.6 Quality criteria**

Johansson (2005) problematize around the issue of the quality criteria of a narrative study. She argues that narrative analysis is a product of interpretation. The semiotic perspective in this study does not acknowledge the language used in the documents as an objective truth or a mirror of society. Rather it is a contraction of a reality which the authors or the creators of the text operate in. Johansson (2005) further argues that the matter in a narrative analysis is not to obtain the objective truth, rather to account for the narrative truth created. The emphasis lies in the perspective used for the analysis. She continues to argue that there is no objective truth. Instead, the objective truth is bound to the context of the perspective chosen for the analysis.

Traditionally, within the discussion of methodological concerns, the subject of dialogue has revolved around the studies validity, reliability and objectivity (Bryman, 2004). These criteria have the objective of evaluating the quality from a positivist

view of obtaining research. With the notion of the knowledge is a product of testing hypothesis in forms of experiment or observation. Thus, this view on research is not suitable for this study. A positivistic view of obtaining knowledge does not account for the intentions behind human actions. Heide & Simonsson (2014) argues that the that the positivistic view of research has its problem and limitations, because it presupposes that there is a "reality" which can be obtained as well, instead the within qualitative research the quality discussed are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Heide & Simonsson 2014 p. 221). Credibility refers to gathering a comprehensive empirical material. In this study the empirical material consists of advertising material that the brands provided on their websites. Heide & Simonsson (2014) argue that transferability means that if the results can be transferred to a similar case or phenomenon of study. Thus, the same authors argue that there is no point to even speak about transferability because it implies that there is one objective truth in relation to the studied subject. Instead of transferring the knowledge produced in the study the scholar can aim for describing the studied phenomenon rigorously (Heide & Simonsson 2014). Dependability refers to letting the respondent confirm that the material and analysis is interpreted correctly and that no misinterpretations have occurred. However, this will not be done in this study since the organisation are not available, and this study is based on document analysis of documents that are created by the brands. The material is already created from the brands own perspective. And to increase the dependability this study will adopt Culler (2002) criteria. Culler (2002) argue that a criterion for making an adequate reading of the text from a structural perspective, it is important to read the given text multiple times. The empirical material was read several times in order to assure that the interpretation of the text is adequate.

This study has chosen to do a structural semiotic reading of the narratives provided by the brands. The structural perspective allowed this study to convey structures within the narratives created by the brand and conveying how they form meaning in their own narrative reality.

# Chapter 5 Analysis

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The aim of this study is to answer the research questions: *How are underdog brand narratives constructed? What narrative meaning is communicated from the underdog brand narratives?* The analysis will be conducted through with the help of the actantial model and the semiotic square. The models were applied to documents from the respective brands. The application of the actantial model and the semiotic square will help this analysis to unpack the narrative positioning of the two brands. The analysis will be structured as followed:

First, the analysis will treat how the underdog brands form their narrative in terms of presenting the company brand. The second part will treat their narrative around their products. The third part treats how Tesla and Oatly are positioning themselves against the status quo in their markets. The first three parts of the analysis were conducted through the actantial model. The fourth part of the analysis will treat how the underdog brands for narrative meaning through the semiotic square.

## **5.1 Against all odds – the becoming of a hero.**

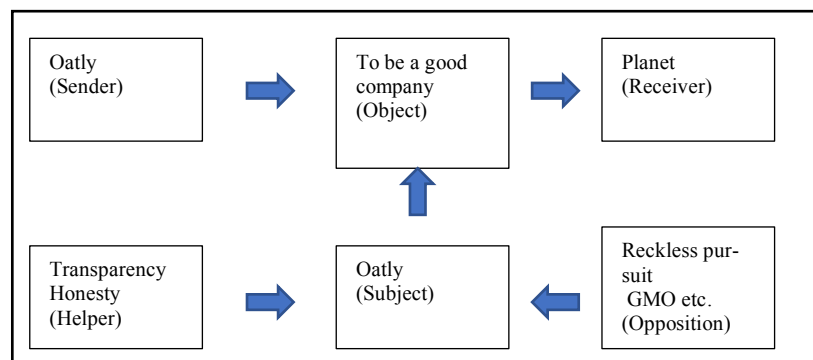
Oatly and Tesla operate within markets where competitors have a very strong market position, and they act as underdogs within that market. Tesla and Oatly position themselves as working towards sustainable practices narrating around what they conceive as a good company and which acts they conceive as sustainable.

They are part of industries considered to be "traditional" (such as the food industry and the automobile industry), and thus their role becomes the one of a *'helper'* towards customers who aim to follow sustainable practices within that industry. Later, this part elaborates on how they challenge the status quo of the "traditional" markets where they operate.

### 5.1.1 Narrative from a brand perspective

#### Narrative of Oatly's brand

The texts on Oatly's website, which concerns the Oatly brand, has the strategy of portraying what is good and bad practices in the industry which they operate in. On their website, it is possible to find a full description of the properties they consider to be necessary in order to be "a good company" which they are aiming for. Thus, the *subject* in the text "*We promise to be a good company*" (oatly, n.d) is Oatly. As a company, they are trying to reach the *object* of being a good company. The text includes different initiatives of what a company should strive for in order to achieve the promise, and also what to oppose in order not to break the promise.



In this narrative, Oatly's intentions of delivering a nutritious product, their promise to be a good company, their clean products, their honesty in the food industry and their transparency towards consumers serve as *helpers* in achieving these goals. These aforementioned *helpers* can be interpreted as Oatly's own views on what a good company is, and what they are aiming for. They emphasise that a good company includes being transparent, deliver nutritious, clean, and responsible products.

The *opponent* of this narrative can be seen as the GMO (genetically modified organisms) and the reckless pursuit of profit. Oatly describes how they oppose the GMO by stating "*No GMOs. One more time. No GMOs*" (oatly, n.d). Further, they state "*[...]help people upgrade their lives always comes before the reckless pursuit of profit.*" (Oatly,n.d). This implies that Oatly is against the concept of modifying

crops. In their narrative, they position themselves as oppositions to what they describe as a "reckless pursuit of profit". This implies that GMO and pursuit of money are in conflict with what Oatly thinks of what a "good" company should engage in. In the eyes of Oatly, a good company opposes the activity of reckless pursuit and GMO. A good company rather upgrade people's life than pursue profit. This statement can be interpreted as an act of Oatly to connect the company to credibility. By stating that they are clearly against reckless profit they connect the brand to the discourse of NGO's. They portray themselves as a company that with good intention in relation to their market. They are not in the market to pursue profit, rather they are there with "good intentions".

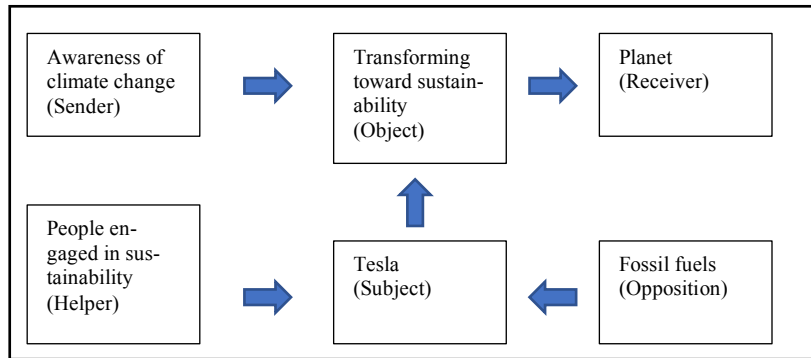
The *sender* in this narrative is the Oatly brand, they initiative the different criteria of what they think a 'good company' should strive for by assigning the criteria as helpers. Through this act, they create the ideals of the company.

The *Receiver* is the Planet, because by being a good company, Oatly contributes to the decrease of CO2 emissions to the Earth, given that their means of production require oats, which come from crops. However, the production of cow milk involves a higher degree of unsustainability because this livestock is considered to be one of the most polluting farming activities.

### **Narrative of Tesla brand**

The narrative that is based on the presentation of Tesla as a brand, these texts have the strategy of presenting that there is a need for development in the car industry and the energy industry. Their narratives revolve around presenting what for them are conceived as sustainable development in the industry where they operate. The *subject* in this text "*Tesla's mission is to accelerate the world's transition to sustainable energy*" (Tesla, 2018) is Tesla obtaining the *object* of transitioning the world towards sustainable energy.





The *object* of Tesla is to transition the energy and accelerate a shift in how energy is being consumed and used (Tesla, 2018). Tesla’s narrative acknowledges that the development in the car industry and the energy industry is not sustainable. The industry needs a change in its development because the progress in the field is not sustainable. They make it their mission to contribute to sustainable development in the industry of cars and energy production in a sustainable manner.

The *helper* assists the object transitioning the world towards sustainable energy. This can be seen as the engineers that founded the Tesla company. *“Tesla was founded in 2003 by a group of engineers who wanted to prove that people didn’t need to compromise to drive electric [...]”* (Tesla, 2018). The engineers can be seen as the contributors in Tesla's quest to obtain a more sustainable future. From Tesla's perspective, the engineers are the instigators of electronic technology that is the need to be introduced in the industry to become more sustainable. They emphasise in their narrative that through the technology developed by their engineer, the world can move towards zero emission and reduce the pollution of the environment.

Further, Tesla also mentions the attributes of their car as helpers in the narrative. The car is as efficient, safe, quick, and economically beneficial as other cars. This can be interred as an attempt from Tesla to get people to engage in the car. There is not only the challenge of designing an electric car, but you also have to get people involved. The Tesla narrative expresses that their products contribute to a more sustainable world and at the same time, their products do not lose the attributes of speed, efficiency, and safety. These attributes are common in the traditional sense of what a car Tesla reassures that it is not necessary to compromise in order to be

more sustainable. Tesla gives you the experience of what cars usually are associated with cars such as speed, safety, and comfort.

The *opponent* in the narrative of the Tesla's brand can be interpreted as the concept of fossil fuel and gasoline cars. Tesla writes, “[...] *electric vehicles can be better, quicker and more fun to drive than gasoline cars*[...]” (Tesla, 2018). Gasoline cars and fossil fuels are portrayed as villains in the narrative of Tesla. Gasoline cars are portrayed as something boring which hinders humans from having fun. Moreover, in Tesla's narrative, they emphasise that the need to world stop relying on fossil fuels and take actions towards a more sustainable world. Further, Tesla writes that “*Tesla believes the faster the world stops relying on fossil fuels and moves towards a zero-emission future, the better* [...]” (Tesla, 2018). The interdependent of fossil fuels is the issues that are standing in the way of a sustainable future according to Tesla narrative. Fossil fuels block the object of the transformation towards sustainability. The narrative express that a paradigm of change. Tesla sees that the world has to stop relying on the fossil and through Tesla this is possible. Tesla provides the solution for the world to stop relying on fossil fuels through their products.

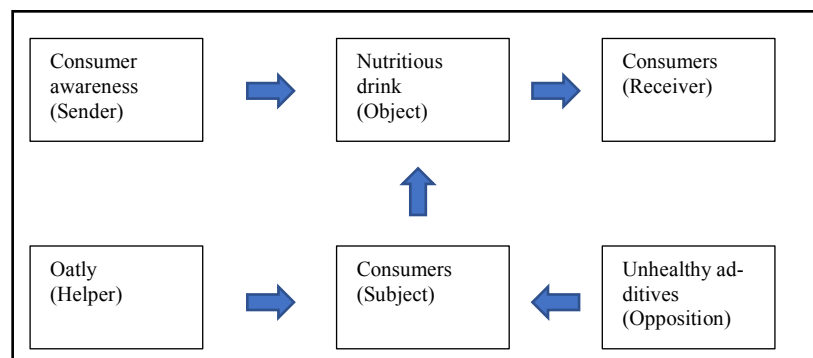
The *sender* of the narrative is Tesla, Tesla is the ones that initiate and communicate the object of a transformation to a more sustainable world without fossil fuels, they undertake the act of communicating the object. This can be interpreted as Tesla assign the transformation towards a more sustainable world as an important issue. In the narrative of Tesla, they are the ones that take actions on this issue.

The *receiver* in this narrative can be interpreted as the planet that we live on. Tesla is taking initiatives through their engineers and the CEO to transition the world towards sustainability. The technologies of the engineers are contributing to a sustainable society. This can be conceived as that Tesla is a part of a bigger agenda. Throughout their narrative, they want to connect to the discourse of environmentally cautious actions. By making the planet a receiver and fossil fuels the opposition, Tesla is trying to raise awareness of the environmental impact of fossil fuels.

### 5.1.2 Products in an underdog narrative

#### Narrative of Oatly's products

Oatly's narrative is not always centred around having the company as a subject, it also counts on the consumer as a subject of their narrative. For example, the consumer becomes the subject who aims for a nutritious product, and Oatly is the helper that enables the subject to obtain such drink. When Oatly narrates about their products this often occur.



The *subject* in their narrative that surrounds Oatly's products can be interpreted as the consumer of Oatly product. The consumer is obtaining the object of getting a nutritious drink. This strategy follows a more traditional communicative approach by big corporations, by which it is explicitly stated that the consumer (as the subject) lacks something that the company (the helper) can provide them with.

The *helper* in the narrative surrounding products can be interpreted as Oatly. They help the consumer obtaining a nutritious drink. The narrative also implies that the product ingredients work as a helper in this narrative. The product is made of oats, and oats serve nutritious ingredient that helps the consumer to get a nutritious drink. The narrative states "*It is a great go to product for just about everything and is loaded with a nutritional balance protein, carbs, fibres and healthy fat [...]*" (oatly, 2018). This can be interpreted as that the oats in the Oatly narrative contribute to becoming healthier and the consumers can obtain healthy fat, carbs, protein and fibres by consuming Oatly products.

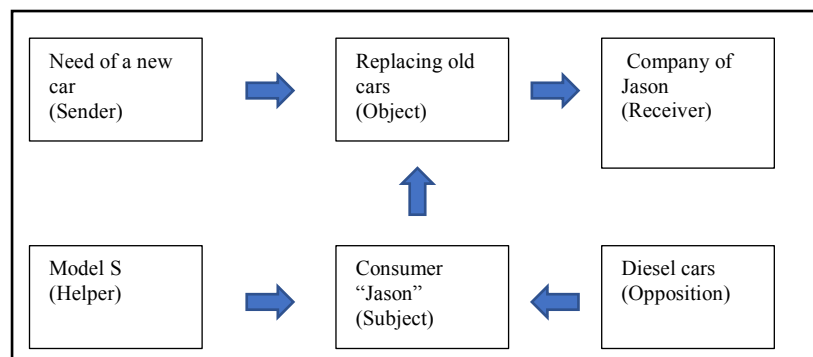
In the narrative of Oatly's products, the *opposition* revolves around the additives saturated fat, and sugar. These additives have been heavily debated for their negative impact on human's health and the environment. For example, saturated fat and sugar have been debated to have a negative impact on human's health. Saturated fats have been known to increase heart diseases and sugar consumption has revolved around the risk of diabetes. By opposing these elements, Oatly enhances the image of themselves as a healthy company.

The *sender* in this narrative is consumer awareness. From Oatly's perspective, this can be seen as an attempt to communicating consumer awareness about what is healthy and what is not. Oatly tries to establish that their products are a part of the healthy discourse. According to Oatly healthy consumerism includes proteins, carbs, and healthy fat in opposition to sugar and saturated fat.

The *receiver* can be interpreted as the consumers because they are the ones that benefit from the healthy products that Oatly provides them with.

### Narrative of Tesla's products

The following analysis derives from the text about Tesla's consumer stories. The name of the text is "Tesla's cars are not the future, they should be everyone's present" (Yap, 2018). The text is based on Tesla's consumer experience of Tesla's products and encapsulate the narrative of Tesla's their products. The product in this text is one of Tesla's car models, the Model S.



The *subject* of this narrative is Jason, who describes himself as a person who always had an interest in cars. The narrative expresses that Jason's company is in need of a new car.

He is obtaining the *object* of replacing the old company car with a Tesla car and share his experience with it.

The *helper* in this narrative is Tesla's product (Model S). The features that the Model S offers help the *subject* Jason to replace the old car with a new Tesla car. The features which the Tesla car offers are performance and speed, as well as range, technology, space and financial benefits, helped him choose a Tesla car.

The *opponent* in the narrative is diesel cars. The diesel cars are described as being depended on oil companies. The oil companies in return, are portrayed as charging too much money for toxic liquid that diesel cars are running on, therefore Jason chooses a Tesla car instead of a diesel car. By describing the diesel as a toxic liquid, Tesla can be said to connect to a broader agenda, the agenda of pollution of the environment. The discourse around cars emission has in recent years been a widely discussed topic. The emission of diesel cars and gasoline cars has been proven to be a health hazard in the bigger cities around the world. Tesla is trying to connect their cars to the discourse of zero emission and environmentally friendly practices. By making diesel cars the opponent in their narrative, they actively take stands on the effects that fossil fuels contribute to. Tesla's strategy revolves around portraying themselves as a brand which makes the world more sustainable. Their products are not something that contributes to the pollution of the environment. Instead, their products contribute to the "well-being" of the planet.

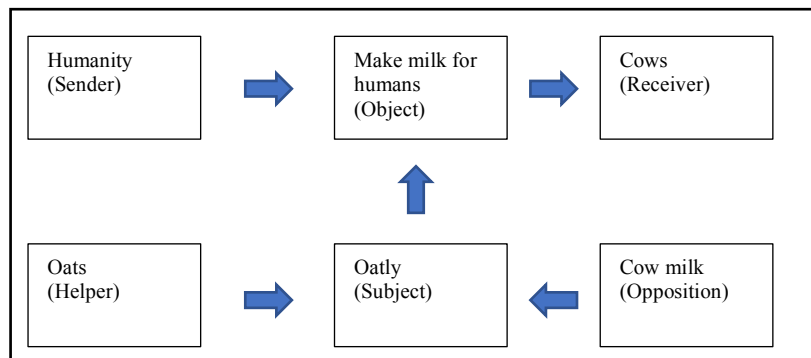
The *sender* of the text is Jason's need of a new car. The need for a new car is what makes the connection happen between the object of exchanging the car for Jason. Tesla narrates about that Jason got the opportunity to exchange his vehicles at work.

The *receiver* of the text is the company that Jason is working for, as they are the ones benefiting from the Tesla car Model S. Which implies that a Tesla is suitable for companies that have to exchange their cars.

### 5.1.3 A positioning against the status quo.

#### Oatly's narrative against the status quo

On one of Oatly's milk carton, they write the the tagline "It's like milk but made for humans" and "wow! no cow!". The narrative narrates around the process of making a drink for humans. In order to see the carton you can press [here](#).



The *subject* in this narrative can be interpreted as Oatly, which want to obtain the *object* of designing a drink for humans.

The *helper* in this narrative is the oats because they enable the drink to be produced, without the oats the product is not possible to manufacture. On their product packaging, they state that the sun is shining on the oats which helps the oats to grow and give them what Oatly refers to as “goodness”. Thus, the sun can also be considered as a *helper* in the narrative of Oatly.

The *opposition* in the narrative is cow milk. Cow's milk is seen as something that is not made for humans but for baby cows. Oalty opposes the idea of taking milk from a baby cow and give it to humans. It is depicted as an idea that belonged to the past and not a process which is part of humanity. Humanity should not take the milk from another species. Oatly opposes the process of having the cow as a form of intermediary in the production of a drink. Oatly implies that this is an unnecessary process in the production of a drink. Instead, in the production of the drink, it is better to skip the intermediary and use the source directly. Humanity should grow crops (in this case oats) to produce their own “milk” and not letting another animal produce it.

Another opposition is soy: on the front cover of the packaged, it states "No milk. No soy no badness". Soy can be interpreted as being in hindrance for humans to obtain a nutritious drink. Soy is portrayed as a drink which human should not drink. Soy can be conceived as no good since it is associated with GMO, which Oatly opposes as a company.

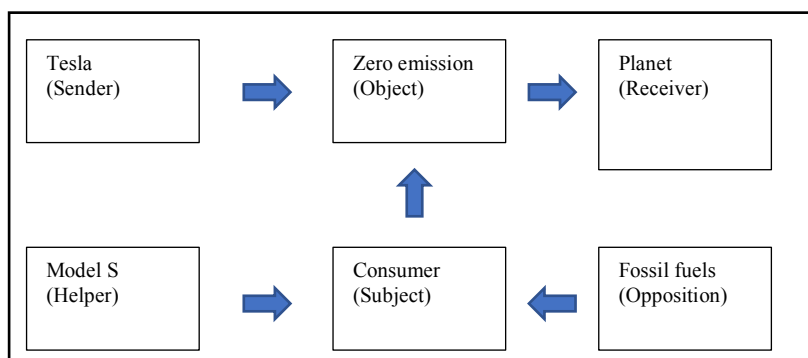
The *sender* in this narrative can be conceived as humanity showing compassion towards animals. By designing a drink for humans, humans do not need to drink the milk from another species. This can be interpreted as Oatly is trying to show that it has been missing a drink for humans. Cow milk which has existed in the human culture for many decades is portrayed as a drink which humans should not drink. Humans shall grow their own "milk" through agricultural practices and not steal it from the one who really needs it, such as baby cows.

The *receiver* in this narrative is cows. Oatly is trying to communicate that humanity is better off from not drinking cow milk. Humans should not engage in taking the milk from the cow. Cows benefit from humans making their own drinks, rather than stealing from cows. Oatly is communicating that cow's milk is something that lacks logic and that humans should not drink the milk of other species we should grow our own drinks.

In the bigger picture, this can be interpreted as an attempt by Oatly to connect to a discourse of veganism and animal right. By making cows the receiver, Oatly is trying to raise compassion towards animals. Raising this issue together with stating that they want to make the food industry a better more honest place implies that the milk industry has been a cruel and bad industry.

## Tesla's narrative against the status quo

“My model shares my values” (Monk 2016) is a text from Tesla's consumer stories. The text is based on Tesla's consumer experience of Tesla's products. The product in this text is one of Tesla's car models, the Model S.



The *subject* in the narrative is the author (Thom Monk) of the text which achieves the *object* of finding a car that aligns with his values. His values revolve around not leaving any emission footprints.

In this narrative, the *helper* is the Tesla Model S and its features. The Model S car model has features of reducing emission footprints, Tesla's vision, the vertical ecosystem of the battery cheap and renewable energy, the battery which the Model S runs on, the vegan interior, faux leather, super-charging of the battery assists the subject in finding a car that goes in line with his values. According to the narrative, the subject expresses that he has 200 miles work commute and the subject is pleased over the Model S reduces his footprints. This implies that the Model S is a contributor to reducing emissions and a more sustainable option that a car which is runs of fossil fuels. Further, another helper in obtaining the object of finding a car which corresponds with the subjects' values is the vision of Tesla. The narrative expresses that the subject was amazed by the fact that the vision of Tesla corresponded with his values of zero-emission footprint and vegan ideal. Moreover, the vertical ecosystem of battery innovation serves as a helper. The ecosystem suggests that Tesla invests their money into bringing cheaper car models to the public and the reuses of old batteries correspond to the values of the subject. Further, the customisation



of Tesla serves as a helper in the narrative of Tesla. This suggests that Tesla is a company where you can get preferences fulfilled. Tesla is a company that can adapt to the demands of the consumers. In addition, the possibility of making the car vegan is another contributor to the objective of the narrative. In the narrative, the "vegan version" of a car paints the picture of Tesla as a company which offers a version of the Model S which is very specific and corresponds with the values of the subject Thom. The charging of the car is also a helper in this narrative. The charging is described as an easy, cheap, sustainable, and convenient process that aligns with the values of the subject. The charging is not of the car is not something that is that takes an effort from the subject. The Model S is a convenient product that is easy to handle and does not include any difficulties. Further, the car is described as a stress-free, practical, safe and a state of the art engineering, which is something that helps the subject obtaining the object of in finding a car which corresponds with his values.

The *opposition* in the narrative is VW (Volkswagen)-diesel, which refers to the brand of Volkswagen. The Volkswagen diesel is described as “*My VW diesel (I know!) was pretty much worthless*” (Monk, 2018). This implies that the fossil fuel cars are not good in any way. They are something that is worse than the Tesla car. An animal product is also an opposition in the narrative it does not correspond to the values of the subject. Moreover, the Nissan Leaf it has a limited range, and therefore it does not correspond with the values of the subject. It hinders the object for obtaining an unlimited range of his car.

The *sender* in this narrative is Tesla. They enable the subject to obtain the values that he has.

The *receiver* can be interpreted as the planet. Here again, Tesla makes the planet a receiver as the did in one of the examples above. In the narrative of Tesla’s cars are described as contributing to reducing emission footprints. Their models encapsulate values of a sustainable future. The Tesla car has all the features of a traditional car but is opposing fossil fuels and animal products which in the narrative of Tesla leads towards sustainable practices that are good for the planet.

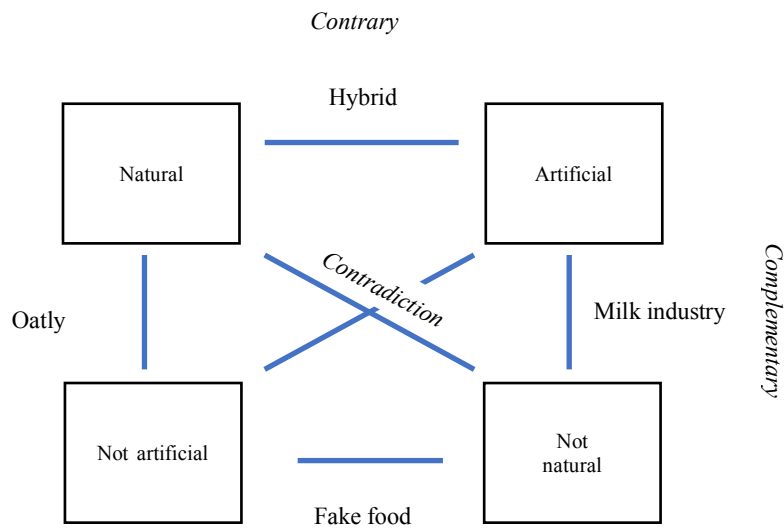
## **5.2 Creating narrative meaning of a sustainable brand**

The previous section analysed the narratives of both companies, and the analysis performed arose some challenges that will be considered now using the semiotic square as the methodological tool. As mentioned in the theory section, the basis of the semiotic square is dichotomies.

Oatly forms their narrative around the dichotomies of natural and artificial. Their strategy is to portray their brand and products as a result of a natural process, framing milk industry as artificial. In Tesla's case, their narrative revolves by considering the dichotomies of sustainability and unsustainability, and their strategy is to portray themselves as sustainable within an unsustainable industry.

### **5.2.1 *Oatly***

The underdog narrative in Oatly's case is constructed by challenging what has historically been considered as natural. By questioning the honesty of food industry, they are framing their opponent as cruel and bad. However, they frame themselves as good and with compassion for the animal kingdom. To do so, they question the process of drinking the milk from a baby cow. They acknowledge implicitly that humans are the only species that drink the milk from another animal. Oatly refers to the process of taking the milk from other species as cruel and an artificial process. Nonetheless, the process of growing your "milk" through crops is a more natural process.



Their aim is to enhance the concept of *natural*, which in this case refers to something derived or existing in nature (Oxford Dictionary), that is, not manufactured by humans. Oatly uses classemes of agriculture, such as that their oats grow strong and tall with the help of the sun, rain, weather, soil, and water. They use the natural cycle of the earth to describe how their product is made. By emphasising words such as grow, climate and sunny in their narratives, they connect to agriculture which strongly connects to what can be conceived as natural.

The contrary to Oatly brand is artificial processes. Oatly narrates that they are opposing the use of pesticides and GMO which refers to the classeme of chemistry as a negative meaning. Most natural phenomenon is based on chemistry, thus in this context, it has a negative meaning of the artificial process of creating pesticides and chemicals that are design to stop the process of natural events of agriculture. Moreover, pesticides are not naturally occurring events, they are a result of an artificial process, they are elements that not belong in nature which are created by humans. The artificial opposition is infused by GMO (Genetically Modified Organisms). The words Genetically Modified can be associated towards artificial because it involves the process of changing or shifting the genes of an organism. On a political level, this concept has also been discussed since there are known negative consequences of its effect on the environment and health. In the context of food and drinks, the concept of pesticides and GMO are not a naturally occurring element.

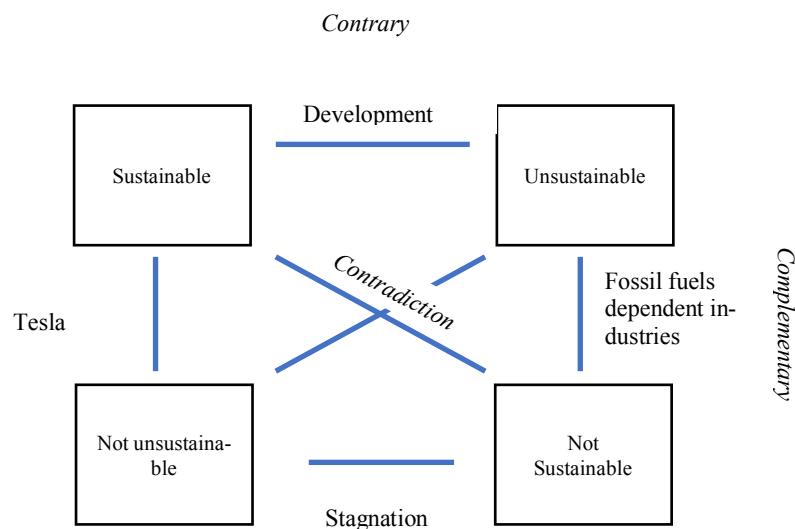
They represent the significations that people associate with artificial processes; in other words, something that is caused by humans and not in nature itself.

The formation of opposition in Oatly's narrative is established by narrating about them trying to make the world progressing towards natural processes. These incentives by Oatly together make up the discourse of Oatly as an opposition to the milk industry. By using milk in the text, the reader implicitly understands that Oatly is a substitute for milk. And by repetition of the similar incentives, as mentioned above, Oatly succeeds in portraying milk as something artificial and Oatly's drink as something natural.

The main strategy of Oatly is to portray milk as something unnatural, even if it has an animal origin and it is a product that historically has been consumed for a very long time across nations. Because of that, what feels unnatural is to state that this product is not natural. Humans nowadays are not used to drinking milk that does not come from animals, so to naturalise the act of drinking oat milk, Oatly brings to their argument elements only found in nature: the sun, the rain, crops... this way, they distance themselves not only from "fake food" (like spread cheese or other products created by the food industry but whose ingredients cannot be found in nature), but also from "hybrid food", because that one involves human action, no matter if it is done traditional (crossing the best seeds from the best crops of the season) or artificially (by the use of chemicals or other lab modifications).

### 5.2.2 Tesla

The meaning created in the Tesla’s narrative revolves around sustainable opposing to unsustainable. According to the narrative of Tesla, they represent an answer to sustainable development in the car industry. Throughout Tesla's narrative, the car industry is portrayed as unsustainable. Sustainable in this analysis refers “to be maintained at a certain level or rate and to be upheld or defended” (oxford dictionary).



Tesla’s narrative focuses on them as they are maintaining the car industry. Tesla develops and upholds the car industry, and without them, the car industry is going to stagnate. Their products uphold the car industry at a certain level and make sure that they develop in the right direction.

In Tesla’s narrative, the unsustainable is represented by the products that depend on fossil fuels, such as cars, heating system, fossil fuel generators. Tesla’s arguments about fossil fuels suggest that they should not be used, as they go in detriment for sustainability.

The narrative of Tesla emphasises the notion of sustainability, by forming classes of sustainability, through relating their brand to concepts such as zero emission, reducing emission footprint, renewable energy, vegan, solar power, energy solution, energy generations, relation to describing their products and the

brand. Tesla's main arguments involve the concepts of reducing emission footprints and contribute to a sustainable environment.

Emission connects to the notion of pollution, which has a negative meaning. Thus, by stating 'reduce' or 'zero' in front of the word emission, it refers to that declining the emission of pollution. In the context of emission, Tesla's products contribute reducing pollution. By using Tesla's products, the consumer does not have to worry about polluting environments or leaving something toxic behind. Zero emission and reducing the emission footprint Tesla contribute to the concept of sustainability they are a company that provides products which are not contributing to emissions in any way.

Moreover, Tesla refers to their energy being 'renewable'. In the narrative of Tesla, Tesla is a company that provides products capable of being renewed. In the narrative of Tesla, they referred to that their batteries have renewable energy, (Monk, 2016) contributing to the sustainable discourse. Tesla energy is not something that contributes to polluting emission into nature, their energy can be reused again.

Further, the concept of veganism is used in the narrative of Tesla which also can be referred to sustainability. In recent years the discourse around that meat consumption has revolved around that humans' consumption of meat has contributed to global warming. The vegan values of not consuming animal products are described as values of a consumer where he gets vegan values fulfilled through the Tesla's car Model S. Tesla by this infers the vegan values into a sustainable discourse. Moreover, Tesla uses the concept of solar power to enhance the concept of sustainability. Within the discourse of energy production solar power is an option that is less harmful to the environment than for example power plants and nuclear power. Solar power strongly refers to the sun and is a concept which represents a sustainable view towards energy production, this strengthens the connection of sustainable in the narrative of Tesla. Tesla also uses the emphasis that their product is a part of an "energy solution" when they refer to their products. This concept implies that there has been a problem of some sort that has been related to energy. Tesla provides a solution to a problem concerning energy. In a larger context, this can be interpreted as a Tesla product are a solution towards that problem in the energy business.

Further, Tesla uses the word 'energy generations' in relation to there, which also refers to sustainability. Generation refers to the development of a type of product or technology. This implies that Tesla is the new stage in the development of the car industry. Tesla's product is something new in the industry of energy production.

Contrary to Tesla company is industries which are dependent on fossil fuels. Tesla narrates around that they stand in opposition to the use of worthless diesel cars and paying oil companies for their toxic liquids. Tesla portrays fossil fuels as something that is toxic and expensive and worthless. Tesla creates a negative meaning around fossil fuels by labelling it toxic and worthless. They narrate around oil companies as charging too much money for toxic liquids. The word toxic is related to the word poison, which in turn refers to the causing damage or illness. Fossil fuels are damaging to the planet and are practices that keep the industry stagnated rather than developing.

On the one hand, Tesla's main strategy is to portray themselves as a sustainable and the fossil fuels as something unsustainable. Tesla contributes to the sustainable environmental world through their actions in the car industry. Tesla's cars are free from emission and do not leave any "footprint" in the world. Their cars contribute to a more environmentally friendly climate in the industry of cars.

On the other hand, Tesla's strategy revolves around portraying fossil fuels as something that is unsustainable. Fossil fuels have been the main propellant for many decades even though it has been known for long that fossil fuels have been polluting the environment. There has never really existed a proper solution to take eliminate the pollution from cars. The industry has manufactured filter which has reduced the emission, thus never really arrived at zero emission. Tesla narrates about their cars as running on electricity and that their car models obtain zero emission, veganism, energy solution, reducing carbon footprints. In this sense, Tesla distance themselves towards the stagnation of the car industry and portraying themselves as developing the car industry towards more sustainable actions. Without Tesla's actions, the industry would stagnate in its development towards sustainability. In other words, according to Tesla's narrative, the industry is in stagnation and through their products the industry can develop towards sustainable future.

# Chapter 6 Discussion

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The purpose of this study included exploring how underdog brands create their narrative, by unpacking the underdog position through a narrative approach. This study has shed light on the phenomena of underdog positioning through the narrative creation and answered the questions: *How are underdog brand narratives constructed? What narrative meaning is communicated from the underdog brand narratives?* The analysis showed that Tesla and Oatly are part of a bigger picture contributing to their brand and product towards a sustainable future.

## 6.1 The construction of an underdog narrative

Unsurprisingly, the analysis of the cases demonstrates that an underdog is constructed by positioning themselves as a subject with a very clear opponent: the industry that they belong to. The core of being an underdog is its constant challenge to the status quo, which is continuously performed in the narratives of both Oatly and Tesla: whether if it is the milk industry or the automobile's, they are defeating the markets that they operate in. However, it is a narrative under construction, whose end is not in the near future. This is a feature characteristic from underdogs, as the fights that they are part of are very ambitious and never-ending: when does sustainability finish? How is it possible to determine when will human beings stop drinking cow milk?

Thus, there are several main aspects that the underdog narrative is based on: first, the subject must always be the brand itself in terms of communication related to the brand; second, the opponent is always the practises in the industry that they want to improve; and third, the object that they aim for goes beyond the scope of the company.



Furthermore, when presenting the products, these underdog brands shift their focus on themselves to the goods they manufacture in a way that the receiver becomes the consumer. This suggests that Oatly and Tesla transport their narrative stories towards actual consumers so that they can identify with the brand and creating a self-connection, as Escalas suggests (2004).

Escalas (2004) argues that the brand shapes the meaning of the narrative by being a part of it. This is exactly what Tesla and Oatly do when they balance the focus of the narrative between them or the consumers. By letting consumers encapsulate the subject position, they are adopting a traditional marketing approach that enables them to create a solid strategy to sell their product. Even if their ultimate goal is to challenge the status quo, they still need to make profit, so they are part of the traditional marketing game when addressing their consumers with the product they have created.

The quest (object) of the underdog brands in most cases revolved towards making a contribution to the world and humans towards a better experience within the industry of where they were operating. The narratives often revolved around obtaining more sustainable and healthy practice or progression in the market where the brand operated. This suggests that the brands want to create their own social reality of new ways to operate in the status quo but at the same time obtaining sustainable practices with the brand of Oatly and Tesla. Tesla and Oatly portray themselves in a social reality where their brands as well as their products contribute to a sustainable reality.

Cooper et al. (2010) suggest that luxurious brands strive for emphasising aspiration and desire in their social reality. In the case of underdogs, the analysis showed that the underdog brand in these studies emphasise them as contributing to sustainable and an environmentally friendly world. Their brand has the object of contributing to a process that involves sustainable practices within the status quo. In the case of Oatly, they were contributing to making nutritious drinks as well as contributing to becoming a more sustainable brand with sustainable practices within the food industry. Oatly also has the objective of creating a drink which is a lot like milk but made for humans. This objective implies that Oatly sees themselves as contributing

to social reality where their sustainable drink is replacing the unsustainable milk. Oatly makes it their objective to create a drink for humans. In their narrative, this has been missing and they make it their object to fill that gap with their products. However, Tesla makes it their objective to bring sustainable technology into the industry of cars and energy. They create the social reality of included electricity instead of fossil fuels. Their electric technology is a sustainable replacement for fossil fuels.

The cases that this project is based on show two different strategies to achieve their broader mission. On the one hand, Oatly resorts to their internal capacity to become a good company, and thus impact the Planet. On the other hand, Tesla relies on their customers to engage with their vision, which requires that their customers also believe in the same ideals. This can be interpreted as that underdog brands want to match the status quo consumers reality of the competitors. Pini (2017) emphasises that the narrative must match the reality of the consumer in order to not appear as faux. Tesla and Oatly operate in a status quo where nutrition and technology element are important factors. Therefore, they also have to match the reality of the where status quo so that their products and brand match the reality of the status quo and are not perceived as unreal or faux (Pini, 2017).

The opposition of the brands is status quo of their markets. In the case of Oatly, it is the milk industry which is the opposing forces. Denning (2004) emphasises that a narrative allows the consumer to engage in myths that surrounds the brand. Oatly makes the myth that the milk industry for stands for not providing drinks for humans. Oatly portrays the milk industry as standing in the way of making nutritious drinks and making drinks for humans. Milk from cows and the concept of GMO are considered as something bad in the narrative of Oatly. GMO and cow's milk are standing in the way of progressing towards environmentally sustainable actions.

In the case of Tesla, they are opposing fossil fuels and gasoline cars. They are portrayed as adversaries in the narrative of Tesla. Tesla's myth revolves around fossil fuels and diesel cars are standing in the way of obtaining sustainable practices in the car industry. By opposing the practices of the status quo, they can be seen as contributing to enforce the identity of the brand (Pini 2017). By opposing the status

quo, they identify themselves as something that is different from the status quo. Both brands distance themselves from the practices of the status quo by opposing them.

The senders in the underdog narrative revolve around Oatly and Tesla, awareness of climate change, consumer awareness, and humanity. Both Tesla and Oatly can be interpreted as senders of a bigger picture than just their own brand and products. In their narrative, they are positioning themselves against the status quo by inferring to sustainable practices, such as veganism and zero emission. In recent years the discussion has revolved around that human's meat consumption has to be decreased because of its damaging impact on the environment. In a bigger picture, Oatly and Tesla can be seen as having the function of *senders* of sustainable values. Their brands and product are actors and contributors in bringing the world towards more sustainable practices. Oatly and Tesla use the concepts veganism and zero emission to position against the status quo.

The receivers in the underdog narrative from Oatly and Tesla revolves around making the consumers, planet, and cows as receivers. The receiver as consumers was identified by them referring to "you". This can be interpreted as that the companies were forming an abstract meaning of engaging you as a person or an actual consumer of the brand. The efforts of assigning "you" and consumers in the brand can be interpreted as attempts from the brand to create engagement from the consumers of the brand. Through creating the narrative for the consumer, it is easier for them to engage in the narrative. Oatly and Tesla create a connection to potential consumers by addressing them as "you" and through an existing consumer. Oatly and Tesla are inviting consumers to their social reality through transporting the narrative to you and existing consumers.

Tesla assigns the planet, and Oatly appoints cows as receivers of their narrative. This can be seen as an attempt by Tesla and Oatly to enhance the connection to sustainability. The initiative of making the planet and cows as receivers shows that the underdog brands position themselves in a bigger picture. The brands are not just beneficial for consumers, they are a contributor for animal well-fair and the

goodwill of the plant. It is in their interest that animals and the planet benefit from their actions and products.

## **6.2 The semiotic meaning of an underdog**

This study argues in line with Avery's (2010) argument about how an underdog brand positions themselves against a dominant actor more or less explicitly. Avery's argument stems from defining an underdog positioning as achieved through portraying themselves as coming from a shortcoming position. However, I do not fully agree with the positioning of the underdog as shortcoming, because they do not necessarily portray themselves as fighting upwards.

The analysis showed there was a clear positioning against a rival part from both companies investigated in this study. In some extent, Oatly was more explicit than Tesla in their positioning. The brand of this study clearly showed that they were fighting against the status quo, thus they did not narrate themselves as disadvantaged, in the sense of that they were bullied or inferior towards the dominating market leaders. Rather, they emphasised argument and reasoning towards why there has to be a change in the status quo as well as what they conceive as good and bad practice in their separate markets, where the status quo represented the bad practices and where the underdog represented the good practices. The underdog positioning was made through argumentation of questioning the status quo. By positioning the processes of the status quo as negative practice in the market where the top dog and the underdog operate. Through logical arguments and reasoning the underdog presents their brand as exercising better practices than status quo within the market, and through this, they form dichotomies of what is good and bad.

The brands form their own narrative meaning within the semiotic universe of status quo. Tesla and Oatly use the language of the status quo to position themselves against their competitors. In the case of Oatly, they use the discourse of the milk industry to create a counter-narrative against it. By using words that strongly associate with natural elements they portray themselves as a natural brand with natural product. By referring to chemistry and portraying the process of manufacturing milk as a human invention that lacks logic, they succeed in creating the competitors

as artificial and not natural. Oatly is operating in the master narrative of milk. A master narrative works as a blueprint for identifying and organising what is conceived as normative understandings of a narrative (Andrews, 2004). Oatly's creates a semantic universe in the master narrative of milk about themselves, where Oatly stands for the natural in contrary to cow's milk. The concept of drinking cow's milk is seen as something unnatural and artificial. In the bigger picture, Oatly manages to portray the concept of humans drinking the milk from another species such as cows or goats as an act which represents an artificial process. In the narrative of Oatly, this is seen as something unnatural to human nature. The natural process would be to give the cow's milk to the calf and not give it to humans. The natural process of drinking milk involved growing the products of "milk" by agriculture and not taking the milk from another animal.

Tesla is not as explicit in their narrative against the status quo as Oatly, they are more settled in their narrative when positioning against the status quo. Their narrative emphasise that fossil fuel is unsustainable in the development of the world. With fossil fuels, the development in the world will stagnate. Fossil fuel will hinder the development of technology. By emphasising technological progress within the car industry, Tesla in contrast to Oatly forms their narrative as a counter-narrative towards the master-narrative of fossil fuels and the car industry. Tesla manages to portray themselves as sustainable in contrary to the fossil fuels. Tesla portrays fossil fuels as unsustainable for the future. Tesla emphasis that there is a need for a shift in the paradigm of the status quo which includes a future without fossil fuels. The world can become sustainable without the interdependence of fossil fuels.

# Chapter 7 Conclusion

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The analysis and the discussion show that underdog brands narratives of Tesla and Oatly boil down to forming meanings of oppositions in regard to what is conceived as good and bad. The underdog brand portrays their competitors as something that is bad, and they portray themselves as obtaining good practices in the business they operate in. Oatly and Tesla are the heroes that will bring the good into the world. In the case of Oatly, the milk industry is the adversary in their narrative. Tesla's narrative fossil fuels are the adversaries who stand in the way of the sustainable development.

This study has further contributed to explore how an underdog narrative can be formed within the market. The underdog narrative is about positioning against a top dog. However, the study showed that the underdog positioning happens through reasoning and argumentation, rather than the top dog positioning themselves as superior to the underdog. The underdog positioning happens through forming a counter-narrative against the status quo where they are creating a social reality in terms of their objective to make the world a better place.

In relation to strategic communication, the underdog narrative is a way of positioning a brand in relation to other marketplaces. As mentioned in the introduction strategic communication is defined as "the purposeful use of communication by an organisation to fulfil its mission" (Holtzhausen, van Rular, Vercic & Sriramesh, p. 2007. p 3). This study has contributed to how to form a narrative in relation to positioning as an underdog against a status quo in the market where companies are operating. The study has shed light on the area of brand narrative and underdog positioning form a narrative approach.

## **7.1. Further research**

The findings of this study stem from two companies that position themselves as underdog through emphasising sustainable practices. Further research can be conducted in a comparative manner. The study compares an underdog brand with the brand communication of a top dog and explores how they position themselves in relations to each other through their narrative. A comparative study will reveal how the top dog and the underdog is interconnected or not interconnected and what actions affect each other in the positioning of the brand, and how their positioning in the market relate to each other.

Underdogs branding is described as a non-static concept which can be encapsulated in different markets and areas of communication. Therefore, another suggestion to explore the underdog positioning can be to do a longitudinal study of a brand which positioning itself as an underdog. This study will reveal how the brands positioning is changing over time. It will explore how the underdog brand change in relation to the development of the market.

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