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# The Remarkable World of Unremarkable Advertising

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# Abstract

**Title:** The Remarkable World of Unremarkable Advertising

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**Key Words:** Unremarkable advertising, Remarkable advertising, Advertising specialties, Consumer meanings, Advertising.

**Thesis Purpose:** The purpose of this master thesis is to investigate a new phenomenon which was introduced by us, unremarkable advertising.

**Methodology:** A qualitative study with an inductive approach.

**Theoretical Perspective:** Advertising, Remarkable advertising, Unremarkable advertising, Consumer meaning: Movement of meaning.

**Empirical Data:** The empirical data consist of two focus groups with six participants in each.

**Conclusion:** Through the consumer meanings about Advertising specialties three categories were defined, (1) what makes AS unique, (2) the item and the brand, (3) brand ambassador. These are all part of showing how unremarkable advertising is perceived in relation to the remarkable advertising.

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# Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
1.1 Background .....	1
1.2 Problematization.....	3
1.3 Research purpose.....	6
1.4 Research questions .....	6
1.5 Limitations .....	7
1.6 Outline of the Thesis .....	7
2. Literature review .....	8
2.1 Meanings .....	8
2.1.1 Consumer meaning .....	8
2.2 Advertising .....	11
2.2.1 Advertising specialties.....	13
2.3 Brand Image: .....	15
2.3.1 Components of Brand Image .....	18
3. Methodology .....	22
3.1 Research philosophy .....	22
3.2 Research Approach .....	23
3.2.1 Qualitative research .....	23
3.2.2 Research reasoning - inductive approach .....	24
3.3 Research design.....	24
3.4 Data Collection.....	26
3.4.1 Focus Group .....	26
3.4.2 Focus groups conducted .....	26
3.4.3 Sampling.....	30
3.4.4 Topic guide .....	31
3.4.5 Transcribing and Recording .....	31
3.4.6 The Role of the Moderator .....	32
3.5 Analysis.....	33
3.6 Quality of research .....	34
4. Findings and Analysis.....	36
4.1 What makes AS unique .....	36
4.1.1 Intimacy .....	36

4.1.2 Active Choice .....	38
4.1.3 Consumer as Medium .....	40
4.2 The item and the brand .....	42
4.2.1 Consumer meaning in regard to physical AS items .....	42
4.2.2 Consumer meaning in regards to brands .....	46
4.3 Brand Ambassador .....	49
4.3.1 An invitation .....	49
4.3.2 An uninvited worry .....	51
5. Discussion .....	54
5.1 Discussion of findings .....	54
5.2 Practical implications .....	59
5.3 Theoretical contribution .....	60
6. Conclusion .....	61
6.1 Main conclusion .....	61
6.2 Future research .....	61
References .....	63
Appendix .....	68
Appendix 1: Focus group topic guide .....	68

# List of Tables

Table 01 Collection of Brand Image Definitions.....16-17  
Table 02 Lecture 2, BUSR31.....25  
Table 03 Composition of Focus Groups.....27-28

# List of Pictures

Picture 01 A meaning-based model of advertising experiences.....13

Picture 02 Adapted version of brand image component.....18

Picture 03 Movement of Meaning Model.....58

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

Branding, branding, branding, it has been around for quite a while now. Some of the first branding activities can be traced back to the Roman times (Roper, Fill, 2012). Branding has been defined in the following way, “*attribution of social and symbolic meaning to a product*” (Kim, 1990, cited in Roper, Fill, 2012, p. 109). By focusing on branding, brands can generate brand awareness and differentiate themselves from competitors (Keller, 2021: Berry, Lefkowitz, Clark, 1988, cited in Rooney, 1995: Rooney 1995). As explained by Roper and Fill (2012) and Gardner and Levy (1955, cited in Roper & Fill, 2012), one way of building the brand is through associations encouraged by advertising and other promotional messages.

Speaking of advertising, did you watch the Super Bowl? If you did, then you might be part of the 27% of viewers who said that the ads were their favourite part of the big event (Statista.com, 2022). The Super Bowl ads serve as an example of a concept which we would like to introduce, *remarkable advertising*. Remarkable advertising is what we categorise as both the glitter and glam of the advertising world, which allow advertising agencies to win awards, but also the not-so-award-winning-but-still-nice pieces of advertising that you often see in your social media feed, on tv, at the bus stop and in magazines. But this thesis is not going to be about remarkable advertising. Instead, we are going to explore the remarkable world of *unremarkable advertising*. Unremarkable advertising is what we categorise as your run-of-the-mill pieces of advertising that we all know, but which does not have a place in the spotlight, neither at the marketing award shows nor in the literature. To better envision unremarkable advertising, think about the advertising efforts of your local used-car dealership, pizza place or the latest conference which you attended. You might imagine advertising materials such as a plain business card or maybe a logo-imprinted pen.

Remarkable and unremarkable advertising can be viewed as being similar to two other concepts which have already been introduced in the literature, above-the-line and below-the-line advertising. Above-the-line advertising is a concept used in regard to branding activities whereas below-the-line normally is considered in regard to activities which shall boost and



increase sales (Shij & Piron, 2002). However, the purpose of the above-the-line and below-the-line concepts is to divide different types of advertising tools based on their marketing objectives (Shij & Piron, 2002). We therefore do not believe that it covers our categorisation, which is why we introduce the concepts of remarkable and unremarkable advertising in this thesis.

In the branding and advertising literature we are often presented with almost noble statements about advertising such as “*The magic of advertising is to bring abstract concepts to life in the minds of the consumer target.*” (Kotler & Keller, 2016, p. 589). Further, a quick search on any scholar database will reveal thousands of journal articles about “advertising creativity” and the importance hereof, or as one article says it “*Creativity is a mission of the entire advertising industry, its raison d’et.*” (Koslow, Sasser & Riordan, 2003, p. 96). While we understand and support the idea of creative advertising, we then feel that the search for grandiosity has led to a neglect of the less magical *unremarkable advertising* in the literature. In this thesis we are going to explore unremarkable advertising by focusing on a specific category which we believe represents it very well, namely, *Advertising Specialties*.

Logo-imprinted pens, USB dongles, beach towels and coffee cups, what do all of these have in common? All of them are heavily used as advertising specialties. Think of the amount of pens that you have ever owned. A lot of them have probably been advertising specialties from, for example, a hotel visit or a conference. Think of all the times you have scribbled down a grocery list on a branded paper block given to you from companies that you interacted with. Think of the t-shirt you wear for garden work.

Advertising specialties belong to a larger group of marketing and communication means called promotional products (Kendrick, 1998). In this thesis we will only focus on advertising specialties, which is defined as an item imprinted by a logo or message, given to the receiver for free and without any strings attached (Kendrick, 1998; Fletcher, 2002). Throughout the thesis we are going to use “AS” as the abbreviation for the phenomena advertising specialties, whereas “AS items” will refer to specific items, such as pens, USB dongles etc.

AS is not something novel, its usage is considered to have started in the United States during their colonial period. Even though AS has been around for a long time, it has not lost its relevance as it is an industry that continues to thrive (Nelson & Kanso, 2002). According to Cooke, Smith & Van Doren (1989) usage of AS has been considered as being highly efficient

as the advertiser can decide who will receive an AS item and ensure that the ones being exposed to the item are part of the intended audience.

Back in 2018, companies in the United States spent a total of 24.7 billion dollars on AS. This way of communicating was not only used by large corporations but was rather used by most kinds of companies. Even though many companies choose to implement this kind of advertising, it has been stated that it can not be taken for granted that users of these products notice the message conveyed through the item they just used (Kamleitner & Marckhgott, 2021). Despite the message not always being noticed, research has shown that people who received AS items were more likely to interact with the companys' website at a later stage (McCarthy & Fram, 2008).

In this thesis we are going to explore how the neglected unremarkable advertising, in the form of AS, is perceived in relation to remarkable advertising. This will allow us to expand the literature. We try to investigate this relation by uncovering consumer meanings about AS through a qualitative study. According to McCracken (1986) meaning is derived from the culturally constituted world, which is why we will relate our findings to his movement of meaning model.

## 1.2 Problematization

In order to understand and see that unremarkable advertising efforts have been neglected in the currently existing literature, we have to show examples where focus more or less only have been directed towards remarkable advertising. Kotler and Keller (2016, p. 610) described in relation to development of an advertising campaign the following:

*“Advertisers are always seeking ‘the big idea’ that connects with consumers rationally and emotionally, distinguishes the brand from competitors, and is broad and flexible enough to translate to different media, markets and time periods.”.*

Our perception of this quote is that it focuses mainly on what we have described as remarkable advertising and forgets that there are other advertising efforts and tools which do not have the same capabilities or thought behind it. From our own perspective and experience from AS, we do not think that AS is a part of remarkable advertising. Both of us have experienced how we

often have received an AS item in the form of a pen, which we do not experience as seeking the “big idea” described above. Another two examples of how AS and unremarkable advertising has been left out of the advertising literature is the following “*Advertising provides opportunities for dramatizing the company and its brands and products*” (Kotler & Keller, 2016, p. 596). And in the words of Kapferer (2011, p. 170) “*Let us not forget that it is advertising which writes the history of a brand, retailer or company.*” Once again, this paints a picture of advertising literature favouring remarkable advertising by comparing it to the art of dramatisation and being the authors of a brand's history. We believe that a reason for remarkable advertising being the focus of attention in the literature could be the effect of advertising creativity. For instance, a study by Dahlén, Rosengren & Törn (2008, p.400) showed that a higher degree of advertising creativity was “*taken as proof of the brands smartness and ability to solve problems and develop valuable products*” which resulted in consumers showing more interest in the brand and perceived it as being of higher quality.

While we understand and support the significance of remarkable advertising, we would like to remind the reader that, as an example, companies in the United States alone spent a total of 24.7 billion dollars on AS, in 2018 (Kamleitner & Marckhgott, 2021). Therefore, we think that it is worth exploring unremarkable advertising, by gathering consumer meanings about AS.

As we described in the introduction, what we categorise as unremarkable advertising can be seen as “*your run-of-the-mill pieces of advertising that we all know, but which does not have a place in the spotlight, neither at the marketing award shows nor in the literature*” We are using AS in order to investigate specific consumer meanings about unremarkable advertising. However, the currently existing research around AS as an advertising tool is minimal. After having searched on well-acknowledged websites for academic research, few papers were found that covered this particular topic. From what was found, all of the papers covered other aspects than this thesis is covering. Some aspects that have been investigated previously are, how incidental use of AS items affects consumer responses (Kamleitner & Marckhgott, 2021). Others have also focused more on describing what AS is (Miller & Lantos, 1987). Not only did much of the previously conducted studies cover other aspects than AS, much of the previous research was also of a more experimental nature in contrast to this thesis. In order to investigate the consumer meanings as we intend to do, it was necessary for us to use a qualitative method.

What makes our thesis stand out and interesting is the possibility to contribute something novel to the branding and advertising literature through our attempt to fill the gap on unremarkable advertising. AS as a medium has some unique characteristics, such as a high level of targetability, it is long lasting, it generates goodwill and have a high level of flexibility (Nelson & Kanso, 2002). Most other kinds of advertising are usually done in an audio/visual way and designed to be perceived by the consumers and controlled by the companies (Kotler & Keller, 2016). This indicates that advertising in the form of AS is being consumed in a different way and therefore lives under different premises than other types of advertising. By investigating unremarkable advertising through AS, we hope to contribute with new knowledge on this under-researched topic as well as come with some implications both theoretically and practically. Further, McCracken (1986) categorises advertising as being an instrument of meaning transfer in his “Meaning movement model”. Due to the unique premises which AS lives under in relation to other types of advertising, we believe that it makes sense to explore these premises through gathering consumer meanings about AS.

Cultural meanings, which this thesis is investigating, is a complex phenomenon. The process of meaning transfer for consumers which was introduced by McCracken (1986) is seemingly long. It starts in the culturally constituted world and has to go through certain stages before it ends up at the individual consumer level. In former research, consumers have often been studied in the following way “*they [consumers] are solitary subjects, without identities, who react to ads through linear stages or limited persuasion routes, for the principal purpose of judging brands*” (Buhl 1991, cited in Mick & Buhl, 1992, p. 317). We want to look at consumers and their meanings in another way. Instead of having that rather linear view on the consumers as described above, we want to contribute something new and instead look at consumer meanings which are part of the culturally constituted world as described by McCracken (1986). By looking at consumers and meanings with use of the movement of meaning model introduced by McCracken (1986), we are able to better understand that the meaning is in constant movement, instead of seeing it as something through a linear stage.

Remarkable and unremarkable advertising is a new distinction which we have introduced for the purpose of this study. There are already other distinctions made within the advertising field, one example is above-the-line and below-the-line advertising. Some examples of above-the-line tools are; radio, television, public relations and print advertising. Whereas examples of below-the-line are; personal selling, sales promotions and direct marketing (Shij & Piron,

2002). The concept of above-the-line and below-the-line is based on dividing the different tools of advertising based on their objectives, branding versus sales (Shij & Piron, 2002). While many below-the-line advertising tools might belong to efforts being *less magical* as described in 1.1 Background. We do not distinguish between remarkable and unremarkable advertising based on the intended marketing objective, this supports not using above-the-line and below-the-line as concepts in this thesis.

By following the logic of the above-the-line and below-the-line concept, AS would be categorised as the latter. In the renowned book written by Kotler and Keller (2016), AS is categorised as being a sales promotion tool for business-to-business companies, with the purpose of increasing sales. This contradicts our view of AS. Firstly, we do not support the idea that AS is only used in a business-to-business setting. Secondly, we do not view AS only as a sales promotion tool but believe that it has the capabilities of brand building activities as well. In the same book AS is generally given little attention and is mentioned only - and shortly - in a chapter regarding sales promotion instead of advertising. Since both little notice is paid to AS as well as it being described as a promotional tool and hence excluded from the advertising literature, this supports the idea that we are going to use AS as our example of unremarkable advertising in our thesis.

### 1.3 Research purpose

The purpose of this master thesis is to investigate a new phenomenon which has been introduced by us, unremarkable advertising. We feel that the focus in the literature has been on aspects relevant to remarkable advertising. This has resulted in a neglect of unremarkable advertising in the literature. In order for us to investigate this phenomenon we decided to use AS as an example of unremarkable advertising. This study will investigate unremarkable advertising and put it in relation to remarkable advertising. The relation will be explored through collecting consumer meanings about AS, which will allow us to further understand consumers' meanings and thoughts about unremarkable advertising. By doing this our hope is to contribute new knowledge to the existing literature.

### 1.4 Research questions

Based our introduction, problematization and research purpose the following research question has been formulated:

*“How is unremarkable advertising perceived in relation to remarkable advertising?”*

## 1.5 Limitations

Even though this topic really has caught our interest and we would like to investigate every aspect of it, some limitations were necessary to make. The time and resources for this thesis has been limited and hence one of the first limitations which we had to make was to only focus on one aspect. Namely consumer meanings. Further we had to choose one example of unremarkable advertising and there our choice was to look at AS. Of course, more aspects and examples of unremarkable advertising could have been used, however we had to take into account the limited time and resources in order for us to ensure that we would be able to hand in our thesis on time. Hence these limitations were made.

## 1.6 Outline of the Thesis

In order for us to fulfil our research purpose and answer the research question the following outline has been used. After having read this first chapter, you should hopefully have gotten an understanding of the research problem which we are going to investigate. The next chapter will cover our literature review where you as a reader shall get an overview of the relevant literature for our thesis. Following that comes our methodology chapter where we present and argue for our used method and explains why it has been useful. After that comes a chapter which presents our findings and analysis, where the data which was collected will be presented and analysed. This will further be discussed in the fifth chapter called discussion, in which some useful literature will also be used and applied on our findings. Lastly in the final chapter, the reader will be introduced to our conclusion as well as future research.

## 2. Literature review

In the following chapter, we are presenting our literature review. It presents how other researchers have covered the topics that are of relevance for our thesis. We begin by presenting meanings and the subchapter consumer meaning. That is followed by a literature review on advertising and advertising specialties. The last section covers brand image and its components.

### 2.1 Meanings

For it to be possible to understand and investigate meanings, it is necessary for us as authors and you as readers to have a solid understanding of what meanings are. Hence will this topic be explained thoroughly in this section.

#### 2.1.1 Consumer meaning

One author that shall not be forgotten while writing about meanings is, Grant McCracken. In his article from 1986, he introduced a theoretical framework explaining the movement of meaning. The framework illustrates the way in which cultural meaning moves between different locations in the social world. McCracken (1986) argues that cultural meaning is located at three different places, namely the culturally constituted world, consumer goods and the individual consumers. According to McCracken (1986), the cultural meaning moves in a path of two touchpoints, from the constituted world to the consumer goods, and further from the consumer goods to the individual consumers.

The first location of meaning is the culturally constituted world. McCracken (1986, p.72) defines this as “*the world of everyday experience in which the phenomenal world presents itself to the individual's senses fully shaped and constituted by the beliefs and assumptions of his/her culture.*”. The culture forms the phenomenal world in two ways. Firstly, culture functions as a lens in which individuals perceive phenomena and establish how the phenomena should be understood. Secondly it functions as a blueprint, which affects the way we behave. To generalise, it can be seen as meaning is built up by the culture (McCracken, 1986). Further he explains that meaning can be arranged into two subcategories, cultural categories, and cultural principles

Cultural categories are a way to distinguish and organise cultural meanings in the phenomenal world. Common categories that are mentioned are: time, nature, person, and space. These

categories “create” the world in which the individual exists. It is from this world that the meaning of consumer goods is drawn (McCracken, 1986). He further explains how cultural categories are the packages that culture is divided into, then cultural principles are the mindset which determines how culture is organised, evaluated, and interpreted by the individual consumer. Cultural principles are supported by material culture and consumer goods. In turn these goods help to make up the culturally constituted world.

According to McCracken (1986) there are different ways of transferring the meaning from the culturally constituted world to the consumer goods. One of these ways is advertising. The way that advertising transfers meaning is by connecting the consumer good with the culturally constituted world through an advertising tool. The task of the practitioner is to create the advertisement in such a way that the consumers spot the symbolic similarities between the world and goods and then attribute the cultural meaning derived from the world to the goods.

The second way of transferring meaning is through the fashion system. The fashion system is a more complex way of transferring meaning, compared to the advertising system. What increases the level of complexity within the fashion system is that the process “*has more sources of meaning, agents of transfer, and media of communication.*” (McCracken, 1986, p. 76). The system consists of three different ways of meaning transfer.

The first way of meaning transfer is similar to the advertising system mentioned earlier. However, the second way of transferring meaning is through opinion leaders who “*help shape and refine existing cultural meaning, encouraging the reform of cultural categories and principles.*” (McCracken, 1986, p. 76). The opinion leaders are described as persons held in high esteem, who function as sources of meaning for their admirers (McCracken, 1986). In today's society opinion leaders can often be found in influencers, sports stars and other types of celebrities. According to McCracken (1986), opinion leaders become drivers of cultural innovation within style, attitudes, and values, which is then imitated by their admirers. The third and last way of transferring meaning within the fashion system is by the constant change that a society goes through. This is normally the case in western societies and the change is often initiated by subcultures, such as hippies, punks, and homosexuals (McCracken 1986: Blumberg, 1974; Field, 1970; Meyersohn and Katz 1957, cited in McCracken 1986). Besides the opinion leaders, the fashion system consists of many different actors. In the fashion system, journalists from newspapers, magazines and other types of media play a prominent role in the meaning transfer. One example could be:



*“the designer of new clothes for women or the designer of a new sports car will rely on the writing skills of a journalist to transfer the cultural meaning of the product to the consumers in a way that resonates with consumers.”* (Rohani, 2017)

There are often two categories of actors in the fashion system, the product designers and the journalist/opinion leaders. The two work together to transfer the intended meaning of the goods to the consumers, but this can result in issues if there is not a mutual understanding of the cultural meaning of the goods (McCracken, 1986). This can result in the wrong meaning being transferred to the consumer, which as a result can hurt the desired image of the particular goods (Rohani, 2017). Lastly, we will have to look towards the consumers as the source of meaning transfer. McCracken (1986) describe how it is important that the consumer has access to the same source of meaning as the designer in order to interpret the goods' cultural meaning in the intended way

In his article, McCracken (1986) describes four instruments of meaning transfer between a good and the consumer: Exchange rituals, Possession Rituals, Grooming Rituals and Divestment Rituals. As we deem exchange rituals and possession rituals being the only ones relevant to us, we are going to explain those further.

According to McCracken (1986) the main task of exchange rituals is to help the gift-giver bring goods with meaningful properties to the individuals whom the gift-giver believes are in need of these properties. In this ritual the gift-giver invites the receiver to take part of the properties possessed by the goods, thereby making the gift-giver an agent of meaning transfer.

One example within the exchange rituals is when someone is giving a gift. The gift-giver has chosen a certain gift because it possesses a cultural meaning that is desired. It is important to ensure that the gift represents the intended meanings and that the time and place of gift-giving is suitable (McCracken, 1986). This importance of ensuring that you give a meaningful item in the right context can be applicable to AS.

McCracken, (1986 p.81) defines possession rituals in the following way: *“Possession rituals are practised by an owner in order to retrieve a good's meaningful properties.”*. This means that the aim of the ritual is to pass on the meaningful properties of the good to the owner. However, McCracken (1986) described how it does happen that this process fails, in which a situation arises where the consumers own the goods, but do not successfully manage to claim possession, meaning that the meaningful properties do not pass on to the consumer.

When the possession rituals are successful, the consumer will be able to draw out the meaningful properties from the good and into their lives (McCracken, 1986). He states that when the meaning has been transferred to the consumer, it will allow the consumer to draw on the abilities of the goods in order to discriminate between cultural categories, which could be class, status, gender, age, occupation, and lifestyle.

## 2.2 Advertising

As this thesis is investigating AS, it is necessary to first introduce advertising and then further explain AS. Advertising is considered to be one of the eight dominant communication techniques in the marketing communication mix. The reason behind any form of marketing communication is to try to advise, persuade and act as a reminder for consumers about the brand. Through this, companies are able to build and manage relationships with customers and foster customer loyalty. Some other things that advertising can do are, link the brand with a cause, which could affect brand knowledge. It can enhance brand awareness and brand image. Advertising can also generate brand personalities, brand feelings, brand attitudes and experiences. However, Kotler & Keller, 2016; Keller, 2007 explains that advertising does not only affect brand-related aspects. Advertising can also increase sales, generate new customers as well as increase repeat purchases.

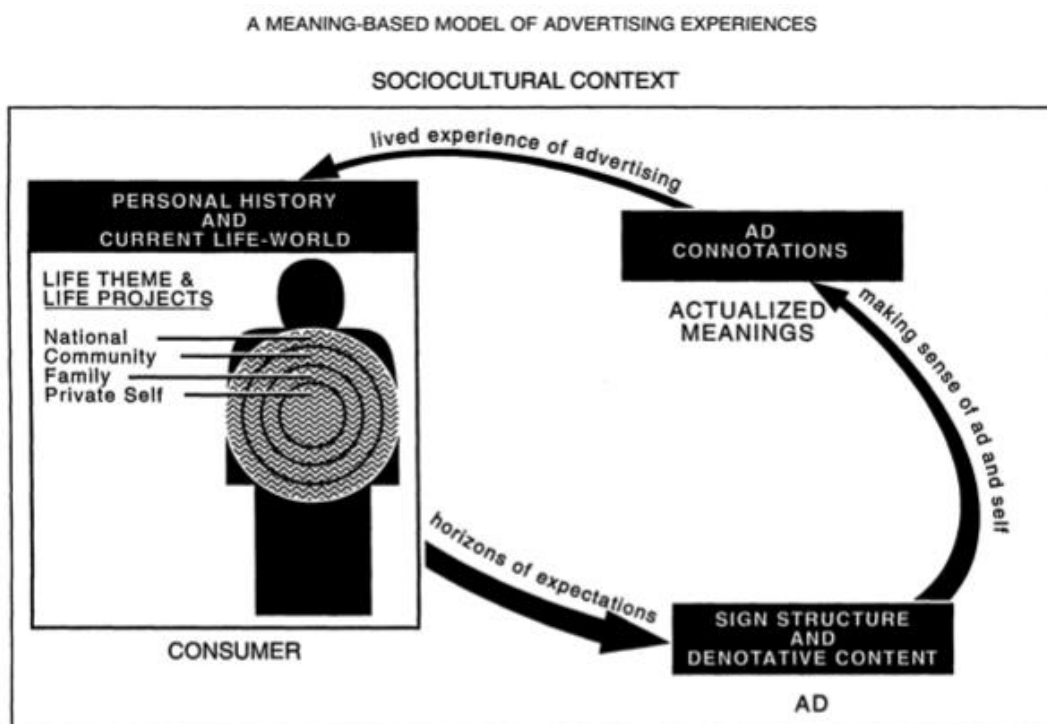
According to Kotler and Keller (2016) there are nine acknowledged key factors for effective communication. The first two of them are the parts in communication, the sender and receiver. Then comes the communications tools message and media. After this comes the communication functions, encoding, decoding, response and lastly feedback. The final part is called noise. These are all related in the following manner, a sender must be aware of whom they intend to reach and their intended response. The sender then needs to encode their message so that the receiver can decode it. The message must be transmitted through a suitable medium. Then feedback needs to be collected so responses can be measured. The last aspect, noise, regards competitors or others communication that might interfere with the sender's communication.

Attempts to explain how advertising works are often grounded in the hierarchy of effects or the Learn-Feel-Do model (Egede, 2013). A number of frameworks have been built on this model such as the AIDA model created by E. St Elmo Lewis in the early 1900s (Strong, 1925a), but

made wider recognised in the literature by Strong (1925b). The AIDA model consists of four different stages: Awareness, Interest, Desire and Action. According to the model, marketers are supposed to firstly communicate towards the consumers in order to create awareness and spark an interest in the product or brand. This should in turn create a level of desire that in the end should turn into taking action towards purchase of a product or service (Strong, 1925a). Lavidge and Steiner (1961) introduced a similar framework, namely their Hierarchy of Effects Model. The Hierarchy of Effects Model suggested that the effects of advertising happen over a longer period of time. The model suggests that a consumer must go through a number of sequential steps before purchase. The steps included in the model are Awareness, Knowledge, Liking, Preference, Conviction and Purchase. Lavidge and Steiner (1961) further divide the steps into three major functions of advertising, (1) include Awareness and Knowledge in which advertising should function as a vehicle of information or ideas, (2) includes Liking and Preference and here advertising should work towards creating favourable attitudes and feelings towards the product or brand, (3) includes conviction and Purchase and here the goal of advertising is to create action. Colley (1961) suggested a similar framework to measure the effect of advertising called DAGMAR (*Defining Advertising Goals for Measured Advertising Results*). Colley (1961) suggests that a consumer must go through four “levels of understanding”. First must the consumer become aware of the existence of the brand. Second must the consumer comprehend what the product or brand is, and what it can do for him/her. Third must the consumer be convinced to purchase the product or service and fourth must the consumer take action.

Even though these authors and models often are relevant for research within the advertising literature, we are going to use another approach to advertising and meanings. Since we are using McCracken's model introduced in 1986, we are also using his perception of advertising being an instrument of meaning transfer (McCracken, 1986). This has already been described in chapter 2.1.1. Consumer meaning. However, another view on advertising was introduced by Mick and Buhl in 1992. They introduced what they called “*Meaning-based model of advertising experiences*” (Mick & Buhl, 1992, p. 319). According to their model a consumer is part of a sociocultural context, which the consumer most likely has been a part of since birth and which has evolved over time. The life-world which the consumer is in at a specific moment, and the consumer's history compose the *personal life themes* and *life projects*. Life projects are divided into four different concentric spheres. These spheres are culturally constituted and are divided into *the national*, *community*, *family* and *private self*. Life themes are described as

being pervasive and repetitive throughout one's life. These help the consumer to select, implement and dispose of a lot of life projects (Mick & Buhl, 1992). Life themes are influenced by the consumer's socio-cultural environment as well as life-changing events (Mick & Buhl, 1992). Further, McCracken (1987) explained life projects as each individual consumer's development, fine-tuning as well as arranging certain personal concepts such as, masculinity and femininity. When it comes to advertising, Mick and Buhl (1992) argue that ads come from and are spread through the same sociocultural world which the consumer belongs to. Further the authors argue that every ad has two components in regards to semiotics, the following: “*a sign structure and denotative content.*” (Mick & Buhl, 1992, p. 320). According to this model, both one's life themes and life projects are or can be reflected in the connotative advertising meanings (Mick & Buhl, 1992).



Picture 01: A meaning-based model of advertising experiences (Mick & Buhl, 1992, p. 319)

## 2.2.1 Advertising specialties

Since this master thesis is using AS to investigate unremarkable advertising, it is important to introduce what AS are and when and why it is used. AS belongs to a larger group of marketing or communication means called promotional products (Kendrick, 1998). Beside AS other examples of promotional products include business gifts, awards and commemoratives. Specific examples of AS items are cups, pens and calendars, all being imprinted with a brand's

logo or a message (Liu, LeBlanc, Kanso & Nelson, 2022). Arens (1999, cited in Cooper, 2008) described AS as merchandise that are perceived as useful or decorative imprinted with a message, logo or the advertiser's identification. Further did Arens in the same article describe how AS have all features needed to be regarded as an advertising medium. AS are a means of communication that are used by advertisers for a variety of reasons, to send a message or information, to persuade customers and non-customers and generate awareness.

To ensure a total understanding of what AS are, some definitions will be presented here. The first definition is:

*“Advertising specialties, are items imprinted with the sponsor's logo and sometimes a brief message, and are used as reminders, as tokens of goodwill or in conjunction with other media messages which together accomplish the marketing and promotional objectives of the advertiser.”* (Kendrick, 1998, p. 313).

Another definition of AS is an item given to a customer or potential customer without any underlying conditions, this item can have the logo of the company printed on it (Fletcher, 2002). Bagley (1979, cited in Miller & Lantos 1987) described AS as having three typical characteristics, they should have a message either promotional or advertising. Further should this message be placed on a useful item and lastly this item should be given without any strings attached (Bagley, 1979, cited in Miller & Lantos 1987). In the same line as the other authors, Nelson and Kanso (2002) described AS as something being distributed for free and without obligations. The Specialty Advertising Association International (1983, cited in Liu et al. 2022), defined AS as something that is given at no cost or without any obligation toward the company. There have been different opinions regarding whether AS should be considered as advertising or sales promotion. In their paper, Nelson and Kanso (2002) explained that AS should be considered to be advertising.

There are some acknowledged strengths of AS as a group of marketing activities. The first strength is targetability, the advertiser decides to whom they want to give the items. The second strength is called lasting ability, AS items have the ability of lasting for a long time and being seen by many. The third strength is called creative impact, the involvement that these can generate combined with proper targeting and creative customization of the items strengthen the use of them. The fourth strength is defined as goodwill, receiving these free items can in the

long-run end up in repeated purchases, customer loyalty as well as recommendation from one customer to another. The last strength is called application flexibility and refers to the vast amount of marketing opportunities that these can achieve. According to Nelson and Kanso (2002, p.16) there are 6 steps to achieve the most from AS:

*“(1) define a specific objective, (2) clarify the audience to be reached, (3) determine a workable distribution plan, (4) create a central theme for the promotion, (5) develop a message to support the theme, and (6) select an appropriate ‘adcentive,’ preferably one that bears a natural relationship to the communication theme.”*

Nelson and Kanso (2002) elaborates by stating that no matter the marketing objective the most advantageous usage of AS is for those who manage to target and reach their intended audiences.

## 2.3 Brand Image:

While brand image is an established term within the branding literature, then one of the issues with the term itself is that it is so very difficult to define. Dobni and Zinkham (1990) argue that scholars agree that it is not only tangible parameters that drive consumers’ choice and preference, but also dimensions of intangibility.

The work of Dobni & Zinkham (1990) resulted in an extensive list of definitions of “Brand Image” and synonymous terms. We have later in the paper included table 01, illustrating a selection of these definitions, divided into their original five categories. We continue by shortly defining the five categories below.

(1) *Blanket statements*, which are definitions of the broadest nature and do not help significantly in the search for a clear definition.

(2) *Emphasis on Symbolism*, these are the definitions which implies that social or personal value must be attached to the product which therefore will work as symbols. These definitions imply that symbols only will be used if they somehow enhance the consumers' self-concept.

(3) *Emphasis on meanings and messages*. This category contains the definitions which see products in the same product category as being rather similar in function and therefore suggest that source of differentiation should be what the product or brand “means” to the consumers.

However, the “meaning” of the product or brand differs within this category, for instance, Durgee & Stuart (1987) are talking about “meaning profile” which is a collection of what the product or brand means symbolically in the eyes of consumers, whereas Swartz (1983) suggested that “meaning” was derived from communication coming from the brand which was interpreted by the persons exposed to the messages. However, this view on meanings is not used by us in this thesis, as we are using the cultural meaning as described earlier.

(4) *Emphasis on Personification.* These definitions of brand image circles around the concept of personification of the brand itself. But even this category is split into two different perspectives. The first perspective looks at the brand as it was a human of flesh and blood and that the brand therefore has a distinct personality of its own. The second perspective is focused on associating the personality of the consumer with the image of the brand. According to Dobni & Zinkham, (1990) there are however complications with measuring and defining personality. This consequently leads to a vague definition of this type of brand image.

(5) *Emphasis on Cognitive or Psychological Elements.* These definitions focus on brand image being a mental effect by including words such as “expectations”, “feelings”, “attitudes” and so forth.

Categories	Sources	“Definition” of Brand Image
<b>Blanket definitions</b>	Dichter (1985)	Not individual traits or qualities, but the sum of impressions in the mind of others.
<b>Emphasis on Symbolism</b>	Levy (1973)	People buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean and symbolise.

<p><b>Emphasis on Meaning and Messages</b></p>	<p>Swartz (1983)</p> <p><i>Grubb &amp; Gratwohl (1967)</i></p>	<p>Products as “messages” or “nonverbal communication” transmitted by the user/owner. Differentiating the message the product sends as a marketing strategy.</p> <p><i>The psychic or symbolic value of goods purchased in the marketplace.</i></p>
<p><b>Emphasis on Personification</b></p>	<p>Sirgy (1985)</p>	<p>Products are assumed to have a personality image, just as people do. Images are not determined by the physical characteristics of the products alone, but by a host of other factors such as advertising, price, user stereotype and other marketing and psychological associations.</p>
<p><b>Emphasis on Cognitive or Psychological Elements</b></p>	<p>Bullmore (1984)</p> <p><i>Gardner &amp; Levy (1955)</i></p>	<p>A brand's image is what people think and feel about it – The image lies in the mind of the beholder.</p> <p><i>The ideas, feelings and attitudes that consumers have about brands.</i></p>

Table 01: Collection of Brand Image definitions

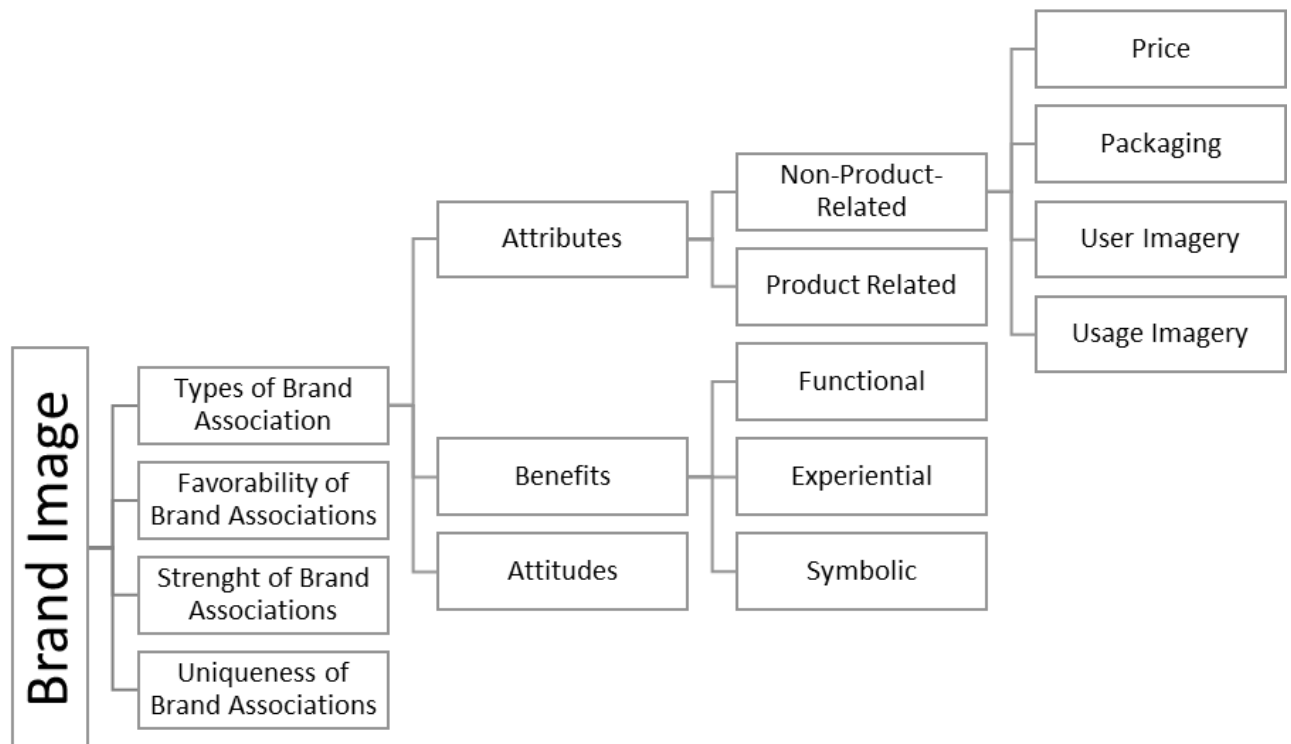
Brand Image is a term which has been heavily used and researched, as can be seen from the above examination of different definitions. Brand image is however, still a term which is non-particular, yet still with commonalities between the different definitions. This thesis is going to use the brand image definition provided by Dobni & Zinkham (1990, p.118) who suggested that brand image should be considered as being *“The concept of a brand that is held by the*



consumer” which is “largely a subjective and perceptual phenomenon that is formed through consumer interpretation, whether reasoned or emotional”. We find that this definition paints a picture of brand image which represents both the concrete and yet abstract qualities of the term.

### 2.3.1 Components of Brand Image

One of the issues with having a plenitude of brand image definitions, is of course to uncover which components that are a part of creating it. In order to overcome this obstacle, we will be following the framework suggested by Keller (1993). The framework is based on different types of brand associations and their favourability, strength, and uniqueness. The framework will be explained briefly in the following section and additionally an illustrated version of the framework will be available in Picture 02.



Picture 02: Adapted version of brand image components (Keller, 1993)

Keller (1993) named the first headline in the framework as “Types of Brand Associations” which consists of several sub-headings, with the first one being *Attributes*. Attributes are defined by Keller as the features which characterise the product or service and includes the consumers thoughts of what the product or service is and has, as well as what the process of consumption includes. Attributes are further divided into two sub-categories, *product-related attributes*, and *non-product-related attributes*. Product-related attributes are the attributes

necessary for the product or service to function. As an example, this could include a product's physical component such as size and colour.

The non-product-related attributes focus on the attributes which are related to the buying or consumption process of the product or service. Keller (1993) further divides non-product-related attributes into the following four main categories. (1) Price, (2) Packaging, (3) User imagery and (4) Usage imagery. Both price and packaging does not directly relate to the product performance or service function but represents necessary steps in the purchase process. Keller's claim in regard to price is further supported by the work of Blattberg & Wisniewski (1989) who states that consumers often have strong beliefs about the price/value relationship and will use price tiers as a way of classifying brands.

The last two categories, user and usage imagery, can be formed by direct encounters with the brand users, as well as through indirect sources of information such as advertising, public media, word-of-mouth and so forth. The associations connected to a typical brand user might include demographics such as sex and age as well as psychographics such as lifestyle, political views and interests. Typical usage might be defined by the time of usage (day, night, weekends, etc.) as well as the location and type of activity where the product or service is used. According to the work of Plummer (1985) both user and usage imagery are also two of the main drivers in creating brand personality traits among consumers. These human-like traits are often articulated as personality traits such as friendly, honest, or adventurous.

The next type of brand association is called *Benefits*. Keller (1993, p. 4) defines benefits as "*The personal value consumers attach to the product or service attributes - that is, what consumers think the product or service can do for them*". Keller further divides benefits into three categories, (1) Functional benefits, (2) Experiential benefits and (3) Symbolic benefits. This is supported by the work of Park, Jaworski & Macinnis (1986). Functional benefits are defined as being the more basic advantages of a product or service and does often correlate with the product-related attributes. The Experiential benefits does also correlate with the product-related attributes but does in a higher degree relate to how it feels to use the product or service and hence are fulfilling more experiential needs. Lastly, we have the Symbolic benefits. The symbolic benefits oftentimes correlate with the non-product-related attributes and are often driven by the need for social approval or personal expression.

The last type of brand associations is *Brand attitudes*. Keller (1993 p.4) use the following definition for brand attitudes: “*Consumers' overall evaluations of a brand*” and continue by suggesting that brand attitudes are created on the basis of, firstly, the attributes and benefits which the consumer associate the brand with and, secondly, the consumers evaluation of those attributes and benefits (i.e., how favourable/unfavourable is the attribute or benefit in the eyes of the consumer.) However, Keller (1993) does admit that the human decision-making process might not always be as straightforward as suggested. Chaiken (1987) therefore suggests that it is essential that brand attitudes are not only viewed as a logical thought process, but also a heuristic approach.

Having touched upon the different types of brand associations, which together work as the components creating brand image, it is now time to go over the three remaining headlines of the framework. The first of the remaining three headlines is *Favourability of brand associations*. As the headline suggests this part of the framework is all about how favourable the consumers believes that the attributes and benefits of the brand is. This means that the consumers think that the attributes and benefits of the brand fulfils their needs and wants in such positive terms that it creates an overall brand attitude. However, it is not just any attribute or benefit which impacts favourability. According to Mackenzie (1986) it is not likely that consumers will pay attention to whether or not a brand's attributes or benefits are either good or bad, if the attribute or benefits is not deemed important by the consumer. Further does Miller and Ginter (1979) argue that the favourability of brand attributes and benefits may be affected by different situations and contexts, for instance, whether or not the consumer is in a hurry or not, may affect whether or not speed of service is considered important.

The two remaining headlines are *Strength of brand associations* and *Uniqueness of Brand associations*. Keller (1993) explains Strength of brand associations as the level, or the strength, of connection to the brand node. This will be determined by the way in which the association becomes a part of the consumer's memory in terms of quantity and quality. This means that the more thought (in terms of quantity) and the perceived level of importance (quality) that a consumer puts towards information about a product or service, at the time of receiving the information, has an impact on how strong the brand association is likely to become.

Uniqueness of brand associations is, as the name implies, all about how unique the brand associations are for the particular brand. According to Aaker and Shansby (1982) a brand consists of many different associations, which need to be managed by the brand management

through selecting which associations that should be emphasised, and which that should be removed. Aaker and Shansby (1982) further explains that the positioning of the brand through managing associations often plays a central role in consumers' perception of a brand, as well as their choice of brand in a purchase situation. Keller (1993) and Aaker and Shansby (1982) agrees that superior and unique associations are critical to the success of a brand, but acknowledges that competing brands, in a broad measure, often will share associations. Shared associations can be attached to product categories, meaning that consumers hold overarching associations to the industry at large, which affect the individual brand. Both Keller (1993) and Aaker and Shansby (1982) give examples of this type of industry-wide associations by mentioning the banking sector, which according to the authors might be seen as being “Bad” or “Unfriendly”. Further does Keller (1993) argue that not only should a brand compare the uniqueness of its associations with immediate competitors, but also indirect competitors serving the same consumer needs. For instance, if you run a bus service, you should compare your brand associations with the associations connected to other means of transportation, such as trains and taxis. Therefore, it is important to view the uniqueness of a brand's associations, in relation to not only the immediate competition but also the industry at large, as well as indirect competition in order to determine whether or not the associations are unique.

## 3. Methodology

The following chapter presents the methodological approach of this thesis. It begins with our research philosophy and is followed by the research approach. Within the research approach, the following themes are covered, qualitative research, research reasoning. Followed by this our research design is presented. After that our data collection is presented and divided into the following subsections: Focus group, focus group conducted, Sampling, Topic guide, Transcribing and recording and The role of the moderator. After that our way of analysing is presented. Lastly, the quality of our research is presented.

### 3.1 Research philosophy

It has been stated that there are four reasons why we as researchers need to understand the existing philosophical issues (Easterby-Smith, Jaspersen, Thorpe & Valizade, 2021). The first reason deals with the need for researchers to understand the philosophical underpinnings of their research so that they can understand the role those are playing in their research methods. The second reason why it is of importance to understand the philosophical issues of the research is the need to clarify the research design. The third reason is that an understanding of the philosophy can help researchers to choose the most appropriate research design. Lastly, the fourth reason regards that an understanding of the philosophical issues can help researchers try to conduct their research in new ways.

The process of how a research design is developed can be described with a tree as a metaphor. In this metaphor, the roots of a tree symbolises the possible research traditions, realist, nominalist and various third ways. These different traditions are part of informing the choice of philosophical stances or positions. The tree trunk represents the main parts of a research design, which are all linked together. Imagining a tree trunk in cross-section, then the inner ring represents the ontology. Ontology has been described by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021, p. 71) as, “*Philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality*”. In this case the second ring represents the epistemology, which is described as “*A general set of assumptions about ways of inquiring into the nature of the world*”, (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021, p. 71). The third ring of the trunk represents the methodology of the research project. This is described as “*A combination of methods used to enquire into a specific situation*”, (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021, p. 71). The last part of the tree trunk is representing the methods and techniques. This part is

described in the following way, “*Individual techniques for data collection, analysis, etc.*”, (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021, p.71). Then the leaves on the tree represent the collection and analysis of data whereas the fruit from the tree represents the research output.

Regarding our ontological position there are four possible positions to have: realism, internal realism, relativism, and nominalism. However, as this master thesis belongs to the social science field it is only the last three that are relevant for us. In social science people’s behaviour is what is of interest in contrast to natural science. Out of those three, this master thesis has taken a relativist standpoint. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), with this standpoint we argue that it is not possible to find a single reality, instead it is possible to find different perspectives. According to Collins (stated in Easterby-Smith et al. 2021) different observed truths can be found by different observers as a result of differences in time and place. Since our Master thesis aims to investigate consumers' meanings, we do deem this ontological position to be relevant. We are aiming to uncover different meanings held by consumers and hence it will not be possible to find one single truth, but instead different perceptions shall be revealed.

After having decided our ontological position, we also have to decide our epistemological position. As with the ontology there are different views, here the views are *positivism* and *social constructionism*. Social constructionism has been described by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021, p. 77) as “*The idea that ‘reality’ is determined by people rather than by objective and external factors, and hence it is most important to appreciate the way people make sense of their experience*”. As this thesis is investigating consumer meanings around AS, we deem this to be the most relevant epistemological position.

## 3.2 Research Approach

### 3.2.1 Qualitative research

When conducting a research project like this one, the researchers need to decide which kind of methodology they are going to use. There are two types available, either quantitative or qualitative research. As this thesis is using a qualitative research method that is the one that will be explained. The ontological and epistemological positions that this thesis has are informing which methodology that fits best. Qualitative data has been described by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021, p. 189) as: “*Qualitative data are pieces of information gathered in a non-*

*numeric form.*”. Based on this, a qualitative research methodology has been chosen. Some of the guiding characteristics of qualitative research will be outlined here, focus is on words rather than on numbers in regards to collection, presentation and analysis of data. In qualitative research, we as researchers are not of interest, only the opinions from our respondents are of interest. Further are we as researchers closely involved in the data collection to ensure all data is understood correctly and nothing is missed. Another characteristic of qualitative research is that it does not look for generalizable answers, instead focus is on understanding things such as behaviour, values and beliefs (Bryman, 2012). Based on our research question as well as our research purpose, the qualitative research approach was deemed to be the most appropriate for this thesis.

### 3.2.2 Research reasoning - inductive approach

In qualitative research there are three possible ways of reasoning while conducting an analysis, deductive, inductive and abductive ways of reasoning. The way that is relevant for our research is inductive reasoning, which is the most common way within qualitative research. While using inductive reasoning we as researchers look for commonalities in the collected data and from the same data either principles or theories are generated (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). As focus groups are the way that we have chosen to collect our data, we believe that we will be able to find patterns in the responses that we get from our discussions. Hopefully it will be possible for us to draw certain principles, guidelines or theories from the collected data.

## 3.3 Research design

In this part of the thesis our research design will elaborately be described. By that we refer to how our data has been collected and argumentation for why our choices have been made as well as how the data will be analysed. As previously described this thesis has taken a relativist position in regards to ontology and a social constructionism position in regard to epistemology. As explained by Easterby-Smith et al (2021) both the ontology and epistemology are part in forming the research design used.

During the second lecture of the course BUSR31 Qualitative Research Methods, Nilsson explained to process that forms a research design which starts from a research question. It was illustrated by a similar template to the one below in table 02, that has been applied to our thesis.

As our research question is stated as follows “*How is unremarkable advertising perceived in relation to remarkable advertising*”

RQ	What data?	How to collect?	From where?
How is unremarkable advertising perceived in relation to remarkable advertising?	Stories from consumers regarding AS	Focus groups	General consumers and current students

Table 02 - (Lecture 2, BUSR31)

It was crucial for us to capture the consumer meanings revolving around AS. We realised that in order for us to capture these, we had to sit down with consumers and talk to them regarding their meanings. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) the most usual data collection method within qualitative research is qualitative interviews. These have been defined as: “*Qualitative interviews are directed conversations evolving around specific questions and answers about a certain topic*” (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021, p. 194). This data gathering method was firstly discussed and considered by us. We thought that qualitative interviews would be suitable for our research question and could help us answer the question. However, as we tried to discuss the topic together, we realised that just the two of us had seemingly different opinions regarding the topic. Hence, we thought that this might also be the case for the ones that we would interview. Based on this, we wanted to give our respondents the opportunity to discuss the topic together with others as we thought it could generate some fruitful discussions. Therefore, the decision was made to use focus groups as our data collection method.

Not only the data that has been collected from the focus groups are going to be used when conducting the analysis. Besides that data, we are also going to use the relevant theoretical concepts that are covered in the literature review. The literature review is considered to be secondary textual data. This type of data is described in the following way: “*Secondary textual data are written sources of information produced for a purpose other than research but with some relevance to a given research project.*” (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021, p.190). So, by using the collected data from the focus groups together with the literature review we are hopefully able to answer the research question.



## 3.4 Data Collection

### 3.4.1 Focus Group

Focus groups as a method is essentially a form of group interview with several respondents, discussing a defined topic with the goal being group interaction and joint construction of meaning (Bryman, 2012). The focus group method allows for discussion about the topic in a group-related manner as opposed to only capturing the views of the individual. Unlike one-on-one interviews, it is possible for the participants to challenge and enrich each other's replies, which in return can help the researcher obtain more realistic results since participants will have to revise their views and statements (Bryman, 2012). Carson, Gilmore, Perry & Gronhaug, (2001) described focus groups as trying to facilitate discussions about certain phenomena in order to uncover understanding of them. This is done through discussions, exchange of opinions and comparisons of different opinions.

During the last couple of years, the world has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. This has formerly forced researchers to conduct much data collection digitally. However, as the Covid-19 pandemic is diminishing at the moment, we decided to conduct the focus groups physically in a group room at Lund University School of Economics and Management. By conducting the focus group face-to-face, we facilitated a more accurate opportunity for engagement. Even though conducting the focus groups online comes with certain advantages, the disadvantages may not be forgotten. Despite that many have gotten used to online forms of communication such as Teams and Zoom and these have improved, technical issues might still arise. Other issues that mentioned by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) are that there is little knowledge about how online collection methods affect respondents and their answers. Carson et al. (2001) explained how the physical setting of a focus group is important for it to be successful. By using a group room, we found a solution which was free from distractions and seemingly relaxed, which is in line with what Carson et al. (2001) expressed.

### 3.4.2 Focus groups conducted

As mentioned above, the decision was made by us to conduct focus groups instead of conducting interviews. In total 2 focus groups were held to discuss the questions that had been formulated. The first focus group was held on 2nd of May 2022, with 6 participants. All of them were at the time Masters students at Lund University School of Economics and

Management. Three of them were studying the Master in International Marketing and Brand Management and the other three were studying the Master in International Strategic Management. In this thesis, the main focus is on consumer meanings and hence it was important that all of the participants could be defined as consumers which is the case here. The first focus group lasted for 56 minutes and 20 seconds. Our second focus group was conducted on 4th of May 2022 with 6 participants, all were students at the Master in International Marketing and Brand Management. The second focus group lasted for a bit longer than the first did, in total it lasted for 1 hour, 22 minutes and 46 seconds.

One thing that we had to consider before conducting the focus group was the size of the groups. It was discussed by the two of us but also with our supervisor. We decided that a suitable amount of participants per focus group would be six. This amount of participants are also in line with what Morgan (1998a, cited in Bryman, 2012) stated. Further he states that smaller groups are suitable for topics where it is anticipated that a lot of opinions will be given. As we thought that the topic could consist of a lot of opinions and viewpoints, we deemed it to be suitable to have smaller groups. Further, the amount of participants is also in-line with what Carson et al. (2001) deemed to be the contemporary view of a suitable amount of respondents. Table 03 Illustrates the composition of focus groups with pseudonyms of the participants, their field of study and for how long the focus groups lasted.

Focus group and length	Name (Pseudonym)	Field of study
<b>Focus group 1 (56 minutes and 20 seconds)</b>	Peter	International Marketing and Brand Management
	Jack	International Marketing and Brand Management
	Ray	International Marketing and Brand Management

	Katie	International Strategic Management
	Tilly	International Strategic Management
	Josh	International Strategic Management
<b>Focus group 2 (1 hour and 22 minutes and 46 seconds)</b>		
	Jasper	International Marketing and Brand Management
	Ellie	International Marketing and Brand Management
	Margret	International Marketing and Brand Management
	Ashton	International Marketing and Brand Management
	Richard	International Marketing and Brand Management
	Hans	International Marketing and Brand Management

*Table 03: Composition of Focus Groups*

To enhance the quality of a focus group it is important to focus on the composition, according to Tracy (2020, cited in Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). According to the same author, it is harder to lead the focus groups if the participants do not have anything in common with each other, such as an experience or reference point. A similar point was described by Carson et al (2001), it is not unusual that researchers use participants with some sort of homogeneity. In order to

get views that have some sort of common ground between the participants. It is also stated that the more homogeneous the groups are the fewer focus groups are needed to be conducted (Carson et al. 2001). Therefore we felt it was important to try to compose our focus groups so that they had something in common in order to facilitate a fruitful discussion. However, we tried to invite people from different educational backgrounds within Lund University. The reason why we strived to get people with different educational backgrounds was since we wanted to get varied perspectives on the subject. Unfortunately, mainly people from the Masters programme in International Marketing and Brand Management were willing to participate. It is a known problem that to convince people to participate in a focus group is seemingly hard (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Another aspect that might make it difficult to get participants, is if they have to travel far to take part in the focus group (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). The majority of participants lived in Lund and since the focus groups were conducted there it was not a large problem.

Another factor that might affect the answers given by the participants negatively is social pressures (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). According to the same authors the social pressure might make respondents less prone to express their thoughts or make them shy. In order for us to diminish these feelings during the focus groups, we took some actions on purpose. Firstly, we got a written consent that we were allowed to use their quotes anonymously. Then we introduced the topics that they were going to discuss and also included an ice-breaking discussion, all in-line with Carson et al. (2001). We also brought real examples of AS so our discussion became more tangible and made it easier for the participants to express themselves. Most of the participants were familiar with each other, which we believe made them a bit more comfortable to express their thoughts. Carson et al. (2001) describes it as being usual that participants are offered something to drink and some snacks, which we also did. By doing all of these things the atmosphere in the room got a bit more relaxed and from what we believe it also made the participants feel more comfortable.

Kitzinger (1994, cited in Bryman 2012) explained two kinds of interaction in focus groups: complementary as well as argumentative. Complementary interactions emphasise parts of the social world which provides the participants of a focus group with their own structure of understanding. With this type of interaction, consensus is often reached by the participants. Argumentative interactions are as revealing as complementary interactions, however the moderator plays a bigger role in investigating the differences in opinions (Kitzinger, 1994 cited

in Bryman 2012). Some of the distinctive features of focus groups are that they might foster interaction and disagreement between the participants in comparison to individual interviews. Disagreement often gives the participants the possibility to reconsider their opinions (Bryman 2012). This was one of the reasons behind choosing to conduct focus groups as we wanted to see how the participants would interact and see if any disagreeing meanings would arise.

The feature with focus groups that have been described as the most important one is that focus groups have the capability to explain complex behaviour and reasons that arise from the interaction in the group. The interactions between participants in the form of questioning and explaining to each other makes focus groups stand out compared to opinions gathered from one-to-one interviews (Carson et al. 2001). This was something that we experienced in our focus groups.

### 3.4.3 Sampling

Regarding the sampling design of our participants for the focus group, it belongs to the *Non-probability samplings designs*. The characteristics of these designs have been described as: “*That it is not possible to state the probability of any member of the population being sampled.*” (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021, p. 118). This means that it is harder for us to apply our claims about our respondents to the vast majority.

Within the non-probability sampling designs there are a variety of different forms such as, convenience sampling, quota sampling and snowball sampling (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). It can be stated that we have used two of the ones mentioned here, namely snowball sampling and convenience sampling. The former one has been described in the following way “*Snowball sampling starts with someone who meets the criteria for inclusion in a study, who is then asked to name others who would also be eligible.*” (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021, p. 119). Whereas the latter has been described in the following manner: “*Convenience sampling involves selecting sample units on the basis of how easily accessible they are, hence, the term ‘convenience sampling’.*” (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021, p. 118). As mentioned above, we have used both snowball sampling and convenience sampling. When we gathered participants that did not study the same as we did, we started off by contacting people who we knew and knew were eligible to participate. We then asked them to mention someone that they knew would fit in as well. Then with regards to the convenience sampling, we decided to send out a message in our

class chat at WhatsApp to ask if anyone wanted to participate, and that was how we found participants from the same class as we are in.

#### 3.4.4 Topic guide

Prior to our collection of data, we had considerations of how to do it and what we wanted to achieve with it. In order to plan our focus groups a topic guide was crafted, as suggested by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021). A topic guide can bring some structure to the questions that are going to be asked during the focus group. However, it is important to remember that this structure is seemingly loose and during the focus groups the order of questions can be rearranged to enhance the discussions (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021; Carson et al. 2001). This was the case during our first focus group. We had created a topic guide to use, however as the discussions progressed, we realised that our intended second question in fact was more suitable as our final question. Hence, without talking to each other during the focus group that question was used as our final question in both sessions.

It is important to ensure that the questions that you ask your respondents can be answered in a spontaneous way. Further should the topic guide be built upon three parts: opening questions, questions revolving around the main topics and closing questions (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). We made sure to create questions which covered all three parts of the topic guide and were easy for the participants to answer. Our focus groups started with an icebreaker activity that all participants were asked to think about prior to the focus group. Then our questions started out quite broadly and then they became narrower as the focus groups progressed.

#### 3.4.5 Transcribing and Recording

As the first point of the agenda, the focus group participants were informed about the subject of discussion and that the findings from the focus group would be used in our thesis. Further they were informed that the session was being audio recorded and the participants were asked to sign a written permission, which can be viewed upon request.

To avoid disrupting the flow of the conversation in the focus group, we choose to audio record the session, as opposed to taking written notes. Audio recording also makes it easier to later check who said what and uncover any group dynamics which might have an effect on the session (Bryman, 2012). Due to the qualitative nature of the focus group, it is of course

important to take note of not only what the participants are saying, but also how they say it. For this, audio recordings are considered more reliable than written notes (Bryman, 2012). As suggested by Bryman (2012) we equipped the room in which we held the focus group with a high-quality microphone able to record in 360 degrees. By using high quality audio equipment, we were able to more easily distinguish between the different voices in the recording as well as minimise the risk of missing parts of the interview due to a lack of audibility (Bryman, 2012). For the actual transcription of the focus group session, we used the tool Otter.ai, which is an online-based transcription tool based on artificial intelligence technology. Otter.ai assisted us in the initial speech-to-text task by automatically generating the initial transcript of the audio recording. While the tool is well-developed and did an impressive job at both identifying the right words and the right speakers, it was necessary that we manually went through the recording and the transcript, in order to perfect the final transcription.

#### 3.4.6 The Role of the Moderator

The main goal of our focus groups was to discover the meanings of our participants, in regard to AS. In cases like this, Bryman (2012) suggests that the moderator takes an approach which avoids being too intrusive and structured and allows for a rather wide subject of discussion among participants. Bryman (2012) argues that while the initial wide-spanning discussions might initially seem irrelevant for the research question, then it has the possibility to reveal what the participants find interesting and important. However, when allowing participants to discuss the subject in a wide sense, it is still important that the moderator stays alert and is prepared to change the direction of discussion, should it spin too much off topic (Bryman, 2012). The moderator can guide the discussion through several ways. If a participant presents a point which is of particular interest for the research, but the point is not being picked-up by other participants, then the moderator can nudge the discussion, by asking the participant to elaborate on their point. Should the discussion either turn off topic or reach a point of saturation, the moderator can ask a new question from the topic guide as a way of rebooting the discussion (Bryman, 2012). One of the most important skills that the moderator needs to have is to balance the opinions during the focus group. As a focus group consists of different people, different personalities will be part of the discussion. Some are very extroverted and take more place whereas others are more introverted and might be shy (Carson et al. 2001). In our focus groups there were rather different personalities and hence different participants expressed themselves to a varying extent. The important skill that a moderator needs to have and which our moderator

had during the focus groups, is to handle these different personalities. The moderator needs to control the extroverted ones and include the introverted ones without making them uncomfortable, as both personalities can contribute with interesting viewpoints (Carson et al. 2001). Even though our moderator did his best to include all participants, our thesis might have been affected by uneven participation, since some of the participants talked more than others.

When conducting the focus groups for this thesis, one of the authors was appointed moderator. In the preparation for the focus group, it was decided that the moderator would follow the suggestion of Bryman (2012) and allow the participants to discuss the subject in a wide sense before intervening. This did lead to parts of the discussion being irrelevant to the thesis's particular research question, but we believe that it nurtured the participants' willingness to discuss among each other. Throughout the two focus groups it was the sole responsibility of the moderator to decide when participants should be asked follow-up questions. The moderator did so by asking participants to develop on "why" they made a particular point, and sometimes "what" they meant by a point, as a way of clarification. Further, the moderator also played a role in the practicalities of the discussion, by making sure that all participants got the opportunity to speak and making sure that the audio-recording was not corrupted by participants talking at the same time. Carson et al (2001) also raised the importance of having an assistant moderator. Hence did we also use that, and the main task for the one having this role was to ensure that some notes were taken during both focus groups.

### 3.5 Analysis

In order for us to conduct our analysis and discuss what had been found we had to work with our empirical data. In total both our focus groups ended up in roughly 55 pages of transcription. Naturally all this data could not be used and hence needed to be sorted. There are numerous ways of sorting the material, the way in which we sorted our material is based on "what's and how's". We also focused on topics that recurred as these can be of interest (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Initially to begin looking at what is talked about generated seemingly many categories. These were labelled in the following manner: "Positive toward advertising", "Negative towards advertising", "Personalised", "Important features of advertising", "Feeling / Personal aspects of AS", "Brand connection - AS", "AS brand meaning" and lastly "What is different about AS". It is common that labels are generated by certain words used in the collected data (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). We tried to avoid this from the beginning in



order to try to interpret what was being talked about directly. In order for us to make even more sense of what the respondents were talking about, we also looked into how they talked about the various topics as recommended by Gubrium and Holstein (1997 cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). As mentioned, the initial sorting was divided into eight categories, and in order for us to divide them we colourized each category in different colours. After having done that a first time, we reread the quotes that we had categorised and created some notes. As described by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), we did some re-sorting by altering the initial categorization; we realised that some quotes fitted better in other categories than the initial ones.

After having conducted the first sorting we still had a lot of data that could be considered relevant. However, as described by Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018), the sorting process created too many alternatives to write about. Therefore, a reduction was needed. This process is often carried out by reducing both the categories as well as the quotes within them. Our eight initial categories were reduced to three and within these some subcategories were chosen. According to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), there are various ways of reducing your data and the way that we choose to use is called *Categorical reduction*. This is described as when researchers choose to use some categories and exclude others, in order to “*create a more manageable and theoretically interesting set of data.*” (p. 109 Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

The final necessary step is called *Arguing* according to (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). One way of arguing is through theorizing. Which can be made through different ways, one is through the process of sorting and reducing as just described. When addressing quotes to different categories it can be perceived as we are theorizing (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). By doing so we defined what the respondents were talking about. Sorting the data is perceived as both being theorizing and argumentative. Whereas the reduction depends more on the data and is more argumentative by nature (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). We tried to show what is different about AS and uncover consumer meanings around these in order to make a theoretical contribution

### 3.6 Quality of research

As a final step in this chapter, we will try to measure the quality of the research that we have conducted. This task needs to be carried out differently than how quantitative research does.

Guba and Lincoln (1985 & 1994, cited in Bryman 2012) recommend two ways to assess the quality of qualitative research, *Trustworthiness* and *Authenticity*. The one that we decided to use was trustworthiness, which includes four subcategories: *Credibility*, *Transferability*, *Dependability* and *Confirmability* (Bryman, 2012). The measures described by Guba and Lincoln are also deemed to be of relevance since they are critical to the realist point of view, and they believe that there is more than one possible truth.

Credibility refers to the truth of the data, for instance whether there is a fit between the researchers observation and the respondents views (Bryman, 2012: Tobin & Begley, 2004) In order to heighten the credibility of our research, we made sure to follow up on statements given by our focus group participants. This allowed us to make sure that we understood their views correctly. The focus group as a method did also provide our research with an extra layer of respondent validation. This was obtained through the discussions between participants about their individual point of view. As an additional level of credibility, we made sure to have the contact information of our participants available and received permission to contact them, should any uncertainty occur when analysing their statements. However, this was never needed.

Transferability refers to “*the degree to which findings can be generalised across social settings*” (Bryman, 2012). However, since our research does not intend to make generalisations about AS, but rather study the subject within the unique context of our research, then we do not consider this essential to our thesis. Nevertheless, we have included what Geertz (1973, cited in Bryman 2012) calls thick descriptions of our findings, so that the ones who wish to transfer the findings, can themselves judge transferability.

Dependability refers to the degree of which a study can be replicated (Bryman, 2012) This is however difficult to reach in a qualitative study. As an attempt to heighten the level of dependability we have included well-explained descriptions of the process undergone when conducting our research. Confirmability refers to the fact that it should be clear that the research and findings are not overtly tainted by the personal values of the researcher (Bryman, 2012). Our first way of dealing with confirmability was by always having two researchers present during the focus groups, thereby minimising the risk of tainting the data. Secondly, we have made sure to show examples of all findings, by including quotes directly from the collected data.

## 4. Findings and Analysis

The fourth chapter presents our findings from the focus groups conducted as well as our analysis of the data. The chapters are the same as the categories that we came up with after coding our data. Initially we present “What makes AS unique” and the following subcategories: “Intimacy”, “Active choice”, “Consumer as medium”. This is followed by our second category “The item and the brand” and the following subcategories: “Consumer meanings in regard to physical AS items” and “Consumer meaning in regards to brands”. The last category that is presented is called “Brand ambassador” containing the following subcategories: “An invitation” and “An uninvited worry”.

### 4.1 What makes AS unique

In our focus groups we wanted to uncover whether or not the participants found AS to be differentiated from other types of advertising. We did so by both asking indirect questions about the participants' general views of advertising, as well as directly asking the participants, at the end of each session, if they saw any differences between AS and other types of advertising.

#### 4.1.1 Intimacy

As just mentioned, this part covers the answers given to questions regarding if the participants found any difference between AS and other types of advertising. One of the first subcategories that we created, we chose to label *Intimacy*. Intimacy refers to the participants' experience of a more intimate relationship, both physically and psychologically, with the piece of advertising.

One of the participants in the second focus group, Margret, expressed it in the following manner:

*“I think it's a part of advertising, but it feels a bit closer to the consumer, because they kind of take the items into their daily lives, and you get to be closer to them for a longer period of time as well because you tend to use like the water bottles for months, I guess. And if I only see a commercial for 15 seconds, I might not think about the company. And then the water bottle gets kind of incorporated into my daily life, and I take it to school every day or to work every day. So I guess it's a bit closer to the consumer in a sense.”* (Margret)

What we see from the quote above is that Margret feels that AS differs in terms of how close the piece of advertising gets to the receiver. She expresses that, because the consumers incorporate the AS into their daily life, the piece of advertising gets to be with the consumer for a longer period of time, compared to a 15-second commercial. She gives an example of her bringing an AS water bottle with her to school or work every day and hence sees it as becoming closer to the consumer.

Peter, one of the participants in the first focus group expressed himself in regards to the question in the following manner:

*“I think it's really important to remember that when I watch an ad, I have to see it, it's temporary, it's not really part of me. But when I receive something, and I get the item, it all of a sudden becomes part of me and my identity, and it should fit. So I'm not gonna wear it or use it or so if it doesn't fit with my identity and my personality. I think that's important. That's what's so different as well. It a becomes part of you”* (Peter)

Once again, in this quote emphasis is put on that the item you receive becomes a part of you and your identity. However, what is expressed here in contrast to Margret is that the item should fit with your identity and personality. If it would not fit, Peter expresses that he would not use the item he received.

Another participant of the first focus group, Jack, emphasised some other aspects in relation to the topic. He expressed it in this way:

*“Yeah, the point of conduct is also different like ads you just receive to like on your phone. This one is actually like someone from the company giving it to you. So it's more intimate as well. And also more important in a more important but like it just a more rare situation you can like actually get contact with the customers in a sense. So totally different.”* (Jack)

Instead of focusing on how the item becomes a part of the receiver's identity or daily life, he focused on the giving of the item. According to Jack, what was different was that AS is more intimate as you have an interaction with the company and get the item in person.

In each focus group we had one individual who mentioned intimacy but offered a different angle. Both Jasper and Ray mentioned that the tangibility of AS as a piece of advertising allowed it to become a part of their daily life.

*“And so beside it advertising is not usable for me like, has not has no utility. And the product has a lot of can have a lot of utility, you can touch it and you can use in your daily like life. So for me, it's the big difference between these two things.”* (Jasper)

*“I would say it's different. Because it's not like well, the format is different. Like if you compare all of these, then I guess it's the same but like 90% of the time when we see ads, they're just like, audiovisual. Right? And this is something physical, and I think it's in its own kind of League of how it should be done. Rather than like a typical commercial of you know, it should like capture attention and stuff. I think it's a completely different thing.”* (Ray)

To sum it all up, what we have seen in this first subcategory is that the meanings around whether AS is different from other advertising means are seemingly united. It has been expressed that these are closer to the consumers both in terms of usage and a feeling of intimacy. At the same time it was expressed by Peter that the item had to fit with him in order for the item to actually be used. This reasoning from Peter, is in line with what McCracken (1986) described around the exchange ritual in the form of gift giving. It was stated that the giver should select a gift that possesses a certain desired meaning. Jack described how he felt that the moment of giving made AS becoming more intimate. The moment of gifting is seen as an exchange ritual according to McCracken (1986) and hence is his meaning about AS being more intimate also in-line with what McCracken (1986) expressed. Further it was expressed that AS are more tangible compared to other means of advertising which can strengthen the personal feeling.

#### 4.1.2 Active Choice

The second subcategory, we labelled as *Active Choice*. In this context Active Choice refers to the participants actively choosing to incorporate a piece of advertising, in the form of AS, in their daily life. The interesting aspect of the active choice subcategory should be viewed as a contrast to participants' expressed views on other types of advertising. The participants described other types of advertising as being “annoying” and “intrusive” and being something they would like to avoid. As shown in the quotes from Katie, Jasper and Ashton below.

*“I think it's become more overwhelming with time. Because social media wasn't. The ads weren't as present on social media when we started using them as they are now. All the sponsored ads and what not, then on TV, I mean, if it was between a movie, you always just went to the bathroom. So you kind of skipped it.”* (Katie)

*“I have a point like regarding it, I was watching YouTube, like I've been watching, like every day almost. And recently, I noticed that they are inserting more commercials like in the videos. And I was like, oh, it's becoming annoying right now. So I think it's the same like, Okay, if you wait 20 minutes to watch one, but now they're putting like every five minutes, or something like that. So it's pretty annoying.”* (Jasper)

*“Yeah, sure, um, regarding the target ads that you were talking about Ellie, I think that they can be very sort of intrusive, in a way. But also nice, like, if they are, like really good, targeted, I mean, sometimes you can appreciate it like, Okay, I'm going for this product or whatever. So, so why not, but if I think sometimes the algorithm sort of has it wrong. Like they, it feels like they've targeted me, but they've done it on the wrong premise. So they sort of it's like, the algorithm doesn't understand me and that annoys me.”* (Ashton)

In addition, Margret, Richard, Ray and Ellie stated that AS are different to what was stated above, and had a more positive outlook on advertising, in the form of AS. The four of them were keener to keep AS and actively use it compared to the other advertising mediums.

*“I guess so because I choose to have this bottle and I choose to take it every day. And of course, if I see commercials on TV, I could switch channels maybe or just look away or something. But I still purposely choose a tote bag from a specific company to take to the supermarket or something. So I guess it's more you make the decision, in a sense a bit more yourself as a consumer.”* (Margret)

*“Yeah, I think you consume them in different ways as well. These products, obviously you can, you can use in your daily life, as we've been talking about.”* (Richard)

*“Because for example “Beer brand” have these like round glasses and they're awesome. Like if I got one I would use it for everything.”* (Ray)

*“But you walk around with your bag [Tote bag, given as AS], and everyone, just like, has a glans you know like, oh, I've seen this logo, I've seen this brand on your bag every single day. So people in your surrounding are more aware of the brand that you wear and you become almost I don't want to say brand ambassador, but kind of a brand ambassador, because you. Like Margret said you actively choose to show the brand to the public. Whereas with a commercial, it's the brand that has to make sure that the commercial is seen by people. (Ellie)*

What we find to be interesting within this subcategory, is that the participants articulated a somewhat negative attitude towards advertising when asked about their overall view of the subject. However, what we found later was that many of the participants used AS on a regular basis and consequently invited a piece of advertising into their daily life, thereby making an active choice.

With regards to the negative meanings around advertising in general and positive meanings around AS, it is interesting to see where this comes from. One explanation might come from the cultural constituted world as described by McCracken (1986), which describes how consumer meanings evolve from the cultural constituted world. It might be the fact that users are interrupted by general advertising which might frustrate them. Whereas AS are viewed more as a gift and hence associated with positive aspects.

#### 4.1.3 Consumer as Medium

This subcategory was created after some of the participants had expressed thoughts on how they as consumers became an advertising medium for the companies while using an AS item. The discussion about the participants becoming a medium for the companies started spontaneously as Ellie expressed herself in the following way:

*“Actually like what you just said, you just it popped instantly into my head. We become an advertising channel for the company if we use the products. And if we only watch the commercials, we consume other advertising channels. So it's the product that because you're asked if we think that the product is part of the advertising? Yes, it is. And if we consume the product, we become part of that advertising channel as well, in my opinion.” (Ellie)*

Ellie clearly expressed how she felt that consumers become a part of the advertising channel when they use the AS items. She also described how she felt that there is a difference between commercials and AS as we are more actively engaged with AS. Further Ellie elaborated on her thought and Jasper had a similar thought regarding consumers becoming a channel for the companies and expressed it in the following manner:

*“Maybe you become a channel for the company. I believe like for advertising or something like that. (...) So for me, it's the big difference between these two things.”* (Jasper).

*I also think that with a product that you wear, are you one of those promotional products, you spread the brand awareness for the company. Whereas if you consume a commercial, it's the brand awareness created within yourself. And it's not something you walk around, you go to school, like, Oh, my God, have you seen this new commercial, let me show you and you show it to the entire class.* (Ellie)

Ashton offered a similar but different point of view, he explained that he agrees with the premise of consumers becoming advertising channels through the use of AS. However, he believes that it is not a unique feature, but something which occurs with all kinds of products, he explains it like this:

*It's interesting also because we talked about being channels for advertising as but for the promotional brands or products, but this is what we do with every product that we have. So I mean, it's not really big difference compared to I'm sitting here with VitaminWell [softdrink] it's the same thing as this one. Accenture [Refers to an AS-bottle used by another participant].* (Ashton).

Once again, our participants explained how they felt there being a difference between AS and other means of advertising. As mentioned above, something that was interesting with this subcategory is that the discussion arose spontaneously. These participants expressed how they felt that they had a part in the advertising process and explained that as being a difference to other means of advertising.



## 4.2 The item and the brand

Our second category covers the more explicitly expressed consumer meanings about AS. The first subcategory revolves around consumer meanings about AS items. The second subcategory focuses on consumer meanings about the relationship between an AS item and a company's brand. In both focus groups, real examples of these items were used to facilitate an easier discussion.

### 4.2.1 Consumer meaning in regard to physical AS items

In this subcategory we are extracting the meaning held by the focus group participants about the physical items used as AS. We begin this section of the text by uncovering some of the most explicitly negative views of AS items. The first quote is made by the participant Peter who expresses his view in a clear manner:

*“Yeah, I mean, most of it is crap, I would say. But sure, there are some things that I would probably use, for instance, I will probably use this one. [a lighter].” (Peter)*

Besides Peter, Ellie also had a number of viewpoints of the AS items:

*“Also just looking at them [AS items] like, yes, you see, they're all produced kind of in the same factory it is just a different logo and I don't really care about the brand, or the logo at all. As long as the pen works and it has it's it's a blue color, and I'm good.” (Ellie)*

*“Yes. And others are really cheaply made. You [the brand] went for the cheapest one. Because that's why I was getting two or three of them. Because if I like if I end up liking them, I just go through them like instantly.” (Ellie)*

*“And also from a sustainable aspect. It's what's the point of putting your logo on everything, and just handing out to people and instantly gets thrown away.” (Ellie)*

As can be seen here, Ellie had a lot of negative meanings around AS items. She meant that the quality of them often felt cheap and it felt as if the companies did not put much effort into producing them. Further she raised another interesting aspect regarding sustainability and even questioning the point of handing the AS items out.

During both focus groups, quite interesting discussions came up regarding their meanings around AS items. The first box contains the discussion that arose during the first focus group, whereas the second box contains the conversation that arose during the second focus group:

**Peter:** *“No one uses it [An AS keychain] and it's just waste, I think.”*

**Katie:** *“Yeah, yeah. I agree, I think also”*

**Peter:** *“absolutely brings negative value. I have to carry it.”*

**Katie:** *“Yeah, and also no one uses that anymore. That's not a thing anymore. No, I would say”*

**Tilly:** *“When we were 12, maybe”*

**Katie:** *“Exactly when we were 12. And I would also honestly say, pens are out. Like, there are just so many, every single company gives out pens, find something different. It is so boring. To get a pen from every single company.”*

**Hans:** *“I think some like promotional products are like, outdated or like, I think the stress balls have been a promotional product for like, forever. So everyone [companies] just they just do them still. And like the key chains, too. It's like, no one needs more keychains. But the companies are really slow to change because it's they're easy to give out and like”*

**Ellie:** *“They are cheap.”*

**Ashton:** *“Especially the stress ball I think I mean I said it before but it makes no sense at all. I don't know, have you guys seen someone use a stress ball ever?”*

**Hans:** *“No. And I think I feel like branded um, fidget spinners were a thing for a few years. I don't know that it was like one of those things we're like, it was cool, like the first year and then I was like, why are we still doing?”*

**Margret:** *“I have never thought about outdated products in that way. But I think it makes a*

*lot of sense when you think about it, all those keychains I think I've seen them for like 10 years, I've never taken one. And they still are around. So I guess they are quite outdated, at least some items”*

In total, many meanings were expressed about AS items during both focus groups. Words such as “crap”, “waste”, “negative value” and “outdated” were used among others to describe how they felt about the AS items. The words used are seemingly negative and hence did we feel that the consumer meanings that were expressed were rather negative. Even though negative meanings were expressed around AS items, positive meanings were expressed as well. The participants also indicated that they were willing to use AS items, exemplified here by Jack, Ashton, Ellie, Richard and Tilly:

*“I mean, right now, I would love to get like if I would be at a fair or something. I would love to get like a frisbee or like a volleyball ball or something like that. Because it's summer is coming. You can use it will last for maybe the next summer as well, if it's good quality. So, just to set that as a test to be like in the right setting as well, I think always.”* (Jack)

*“I don't really care for the pens really. But I think that the tote bags make more sense. I think they're more useful both for me and I would guess that it's more useful for the companies or brands as well since they get more sort of exposure and especially since they started this plastic bag tax in Sweden, I think people are using tote bags even more. So I think it's it's very useful.”* (Ashton)

*“I agree, I think a nice product would be in general something that is functional, and the product is actually out there in the market, and you have to purchase it. So if you get that for free, it makes a huge difference, then I would be willing to use it more, even if there's a bigger brand sign the logo on it, for example, you know, those tiny coolers you can take with like it is like isolated, you could just put a few beers in it for like six or eight beers. Those I would definitely use you know, you go to the beach, or to the park with friends, and you have that with you.”* (Ellie).

*“I would say I have plenty of them [AS pens] at home as well, maybe not 200, but plenty. I would I think I still would grab a pen on a fair or something. Because I think that while I might need this, maybe I can put this one in this bag [points at his personal bag], rather than just*

*keeping it in, like by the desk at home. So I would still accept or grab a pen if it was offered to me. But yeah, I mean, most of the stuff here I would say in one way or another I would consider actually using at least once. Maybe except for this key ring band.”(Richard)*

*“And I guess it also depends on the functionality of the promotional product you receive because I know when I go to ICA [Supermarket], for example, I grab one of the "Brand" tote bags and like pack my groceries in that. So yeah, I found the way to use it.” (Tilly)*

From these last quotes, the meanings changed to become more positive about AS items. Some reasons behind this were expressed such as the AS items offering functionality and relevancy for the participants. Some of the participants went further into the discussion and argued that the AS items fulfilled their needs in certain product categories:

*“So I think that it might be something that's speaking for the pens because I think very little of us actually ever go out of the house go actively to the supermarket to buy, you know, pencils, but we use them say every second day and maybe once a day, twice a day. I don't know how often you write something? Yeah, I used to do grocery lists all the time. I never went to buy pencils, and then I just write it down.” (Josh)*

*“I think all these products are also like very low involvement products. So you're not really it doesn't really matter to you, because you just use them on a daily basis. But you're not involved like, oh, how much you want to pay for a tote bag? Do I want to pay 200? Or 300? No, I don't want to pay anything because I can get them for free.” (Ellie)*

*“I think the problem for me is that I would consider it unnecessary to buy one of these bags [AS totebag]. And so I rather use one that was given to me and that is satisfactory to me to use. I don't need to buy a neutral one or one that is more fashionable than at least in terms of this specific product. Maybe that is different for me, just as it is for anyone else. But for me. I, I would use that one over a neutral if I had to pay for that product.” (Richard)*

To summarise the findings in this subcategory, we can say that the focus group participants shared negative meanings attached to the AS items. The participants expressed themselves through words like “crap”, “waste”, “negative value” and “outdated”. However, in both focus groups we also found many positive meanings about AS items. The positive meanings were often grounded in the AS items functionality and relevancy for the participants. Some

participants also explained that they considered AS items as a way of fulfilling their needs in certain product categories.

In regard to functionality, we see that some participants are mentioning the lack of functionality as a negative meaning of AS items, while others mention the existence of functionality as a positive. We consider these different meanings as the participants expressing the same view, but in different ways. However, while the focus groups in some cases reached a level of consensus in regard to the functionality of certain AS items, then it was also apparent that the individual participants showed unique preferences. If we look at the quotes through McCrackens cultural lens, then it makes sense that the culturally constituted world and the cultural categories of the individual participants are affecting their view of what type of AS items that they consider offering functionality or not.

#### 4.2.2 Consumer meaning in regards to brands

The following subcategory revolves around consumer meanings about the relationship between an AS item and a company's brand. The AS items which the participants used in these discussions were attributed certain meanings by the participants. One example was a pack of growing pencils, which is a combination of a normal pencil but which you also could plant and grow basil. The participants expressed themselves in the following manner:

*“But if an oil company would give me the growing pen [A pencil which can grow into a plant], I would not be super pleased. I mean, still about the pen, of course, but it's kind of a strange feeling because it doesn't match the company or the vibes that I have from the company”*  
(Margret)

*“What I was trying to say before about mismatched like, for example, if [oil company] would do this, like being sustainable, I mean like, come on you are not. See, like stop this shit.”* (Jack)

**Katie:** *It has to be genuine somehow like you said. It is like a brand that we all know is like [oil company] like, you don't do you like what your entire business is not about being sustainable? Well, then that just feels like they're just trying to up their image artificially or something.*

**Ray:** *Yeah, that would probably have the opposite effect. Wouldn't it?*

Margret, Jack, Katie and Ray are clearly expressing their meanings about “the oil company” as being non-sustainable. The participants are outspoken about the fact that a mismatch between the meaning which they attach to the AS item and the company would be viewed as negative. Another participant, Hans, shared a story with a similar narrative. However, Hans explained that he experienced a mismatch between what he believed about his earlier employer and the message he believed they were sending through their AS items. Ashton later agreed with Hans.

*“It depends on the product itself. Like and like what it's tied to so like. The company I used to work for was sponsoring an event. And we, I wasn't going but they like, send an email in the company. And they're like we are, we're committing to like, being like this green convention or something. But then the company was sponsoring the like sleeves, you put it on coffee cups, and it had like our logo on it. And all I could think was like, why are we sponsoring a piece of cardboard that's gonna immediately get thrown out? If we're trying to be, like, greener with these people. So to me, it's like, the promotional products. I don't mind the promotional product, usually. But it's I do question like, what's the what are you, if you're tying it to something else that better match the sentiment. Whereas like that [Consulting firm], stress ball or whatever, but like, I don't know, they'd like give those out. And that's like, Fine, like, they're not trying to claim some sort of, like moral position with that.” (Hans)*

*“I think that the example that Hans gave before about when there's an obvious mismatch between the value and the product. That's the sort of only time I would think about it, really. So yeah” (Ashton)*

Ellie expressed a contrasting view to those just presented. She did not consider the company's values in regard to the AS items that she received. She considered the item to be most important:

*“I don't ever associate the company with the promotional product. And when we talked about the quality of the product, I just, it's just one thought that comes to my mind in the beginning, like, okay, the pen is not the best quality, but I still keep it. But I don't associate the values of the product with the brand that I get it from.” (Ellie)*

In the above quote, Ellie also mentions the quality of the AS item, in this case a pen, as not being *the best*. In this case *the best* refers to the AS item being of lower quality. Ellie further

expresses that she is still going to keep it. In our focus groups we spoke with the participants about the relationship between quality of the AS item and the brand. Hans and Katie expressed themselves in the following way when talking about AS items of low quality:

*“Yeah, I'm just disappointed that it's a bad pen. But I'm not putting shame on [Consulting firm] for buying bad pens? It is just ah they have a bad pen.”* (Hans)

*“I will say I'm only looking at a pen, probably because I also don't know enough about the company itself to make that kind of judgement. So it's mostly just about the pen. But if it's the only one laying around, and I need it, I'll use it.”* (Katie)

In the above two quotes it is apparent that Hans and Katie do not express any connection between the low quality of an AS item and the brand. Just as Ellie mentioned, they focus on the AS item only. While talking about quality other participants shared stories and point of views about what they categorised as high quality AS items:

*“Like at home for example, we I didn't I don't know if he brought it but we have this pen from a five star hotel in Copenhagen called [Hotel brand]. And when you take up the pen, you can feel that, you know, it's heavy and it kind of reflects the image that the hotel wants to give. So, you know, I when we received that for free, it was kind of like, Okay, this one we're going to keep you know, some of the other ones we throw away occasionally but there you could really feel like okay, it's nice quality. Yeah,”* (Tilly)

*“I actually have another example that comes to my mind instantly. When I used to travel and stay in hotels, there were a few hotel brands I would most likely stay in, and you enter the room. And there's a small like Notepad and the branded pen with it. And certain hotel brands have a high-quality notebook, and I would love to stay in the rooms and be like, “Oh yes”, because, on the way back, I can just take it. And I associate the high quality of the notebook and, and the pen with the quality of and the value as well of the hotel brand because it used to be a more, let's say, luxury hotel, because I used to travel with my parents, if I would just travel by myself and stay at a low budget hotel or hostel, you would never find those things there. So that's kind of like this add on that I get. And it's it brings me joy when I enter the room and I see this notepad I say oh, at the end of this I can I can take this notebook with me and I have this amazing memory where I got this notebook from. So that's also”* (Ellie)

*“It kind of reminds me of one specific pen I got from [Jewellery company] I think and it's quite heavy and high quality and it's very nice and that's my favourite pen. And I even brought it to Sweden when I moved so I think I associate [Jewellery company] with higher quality as well and then the pen kind of mimics your image in a good way so I think I also connect the pen to the company, in a sense.” (Margret)*

In the above quotes, Tilly, Ellie and Margret express that they associate - what they deem as being high quality AS items - to the quality of the brand. We find that it is the contrast of the different quotes about AS items and the levels of quality, which is interesting.

To sum up this subcategory, we found that some of our focus group participants found it “strange” and “artificial” if there was a mismatch between the meaning which they attach to the AS item and the meaning they attach to the brand. We further found that when presented with - what they perceived as - low quality AS items, some participants expressed that they would not connect the low-quality, to the brand, but only to the AS item itself. Other participants explicitly expressed that when receiving high-quality AS items, they would associate the quality with the brand.

### 4.3 Brand Ambassador

Our third category is based on our participants' thoughts and stories about actually using AS. The category has been divided into two subcategories. The first subcategory is called “*An invitation*” and the second is called “*An uninvited worry*”.

#### 4.3.1 An invitation

This subcategory contains mainly stories and viewpoints given from the participants regarding pieces of AS that they have invited into their life and used. Stories about different types of AS and occasions when the participants received them were told. One story was told by Hans about a water bottle AS that he received 10 years ago:

*“I got a water bottle from a promotions thing, like 10 years ago, and I broke it like two weeks ago, I like dropped it and the inner layer and the outer layer broke apart. And I like the thing so much. I actually went out and bought superglue to fix it. Because it was just like it just like popped on the seem. It wasn't it like still functioned. And I was like I'm keeping this as long as I can.” (Hans)*



Hans told us this story that shows how much a piece of advertising, in the form of AS, came to mean to him. Even though the water bottle was 10 years old, and he had received it for free, he did not want to lose it and hence went out to buy superglue to fix it. We see this as an example of how an AS item can become a part of a consumer's life.

*“It feels a bit closer to the consumer, because they kind of take the items into their daily lives, and you get to be closer to them for a longer period of time as well because you tend to use like the water bottles for months, I guess. And if I only see a commercial for 15 seconds, I might not think about the company. And then the water bottle gets kind of incorporated into my daily life, and I take it to school every day or to work every day. So I guess it's a bit closer to the consumer in a sense.”* (Margret)

*“I agree because it kind of reminds me of one specific pen I got from [Jewellery company] I think and it's quite heavy and high quality and it's very nice and that's my favourite pen. And I even brought it to Sweden when I moved so I think I associate [Jewellery company] with higher quality as well and then the pen kind of mimics your image in a good way so I think I also connect the pen to the company, in a sense.”* (Margret)

Margret expressed in two different quotes how she owns two different AS items and that she has incorporated them into her daily life. Similar to the story that Hans told us. The pen can especially be understood as meaning a lot to her since she decided to bring it with her when she moved to another country and mentioned it as her *favourite*. Ellie and Richard also shared the following stories:

*“When a hotel or spa has like nice slippers, I just take them home because they know I can reuse them it's not just a one use product. Then if I have guests over to my to my home I always have a pair of slippers for them. So I have different brands I have [Hotel brand] I have others and it's always fun because my friends they have their designated slippers whenever they come they're like oh I want this one because they know like it's the most comfortable one. So it's it's a nice memory to bring those but only if the quality is good and it reminds me of the high quality stay that I had or the memory in general”* (Ellie)

*“A couple of months ago, my mom had her birthday. We celebrated her by going to a spa hotel near where I grew up in [County in Sweden] a few hours from here. In this region they are famous for glass sculptures, creating dining glasses and so on as well. But in the hotel room, when we got there was this small figure. It was like a glass head kind of a sculpture. And they*

*clearly stated that this was a gift from them and it was a message from the decorator as well. And that actually ended up being, it's still in our apartment. Maybe it's not the most impressive thing that we have on the shelf, perhaps but we still have it there among the rest of the stuff as a decorative thing. It doesn't really say that it's you can't really see that it's from the hotel, or it's branded in, in a sense. But to me, when I see it, I remembered the celebration of my mom's birthday and that was just something that came to my mind now.” (Richard)*

The stories told by Ellie and Richard include rich descriptions of situations and experiences which have been enabled by AS. We find it interesting that a piece of advertising, in the form of AS becomes a focal point of stories including fond memories of friends and family. In Ellie’s story, she tells us that even her friends partake in the narrative about the AS items, by having *designated slippers* when they visit her. In Richard’s story, the AS item becomes a symbol of the celebration of his mother’s birthday. What is also interesting in Richard’s story is that he chooses to decorate his apartment with a piece of advertising, in the form of AS.

What we can see from the quotes used in this subcategory is that some of our participants actively decide to invite AS items into their daily life. For some, it was not only a matter of their usage, but also their friends' usage. We even had participants expressing how AS, a piece of advertising, became a symbol of certain memories.

#### 4.3.2 An uninvited worry

Despite what we found in the previous subcategory (4.3.1) regarding how the participants actively chose to use the AS items in their life. We also got some comments from the participants being worried about becoming an involuntary brand ambassador as they used the AS items. Ellie, Jasper and Margret had the following conversation about this:

**Ellie:** *“I also think that with a product that you wear, you are one of those promotional products, you spread the brand awareness for the company. Whereas if you consume a commercial, it's the brand awareness created within yourself. And it's not something you walk around, you go to school, like, Oh, my God, have you seen this new commercial, let me show you and you show it to the entire class. But you walk around with your bag, and everyone, just like, has a glans you know like, oh, I've seen this logo, I've seen this brand on your bag every single day. So people in your surrounding are more aware of the brand that you wear and you become almost, I don't want to say brand ambassador, but kind of a brand ambassador, because you. Like Margret said you actively choose to show the brand*

*to the public. Whereas with a commercial, it's the brand who has to make sure that the commercial is seen by people. (...)*

**Jasper:** *"Maybe you become a channel for the company. I believe like for advertising or something like that. (...)"*

**Ellie:** *"Actually like what you just said, you just it popped instantly into my head. We become an advertising channel for the company if we use the products. And if we only watch the commercials, we consume other advertising channels. So it's the product that because you asked if we think that the product is part of the advertising? Yes, it is and if we consume the product, we become part of that advertising channel as well, in my opinion."*

**Margret:** *"That's a good point, yeah I agree"*

**Moderator:** *"And how does that feel?"*

**Ellie:** *"Not good. I don't want to be an advertising channel for other companies"*

The conversation between the three participants illustrates how they create a consensus about AS, by making them part of a brand's advertising channel, when they are using the AS items. When the moderator of the focus group asked Ellie how it makes her feel, she answers *"Not good"* since she does not want to become an advertising channel. Peter shared this view, but explained it as the AS item becoming a part of his identity:

*"I think it's really important to remember that when I watch an ad, I have to see it, it's temporary, it's not really part of me. But when I receive something, and I get the item, it all of a sudden becomes part of me and my identity, and it should fit. So I'm not gonna wear it or use it or so if it doesn't fit with my identity and my personality. I think that's important."* (Peter)

Peter expands on his point of view by saying that he believes that the AS should fit with his identity and personality. The same reasoning is used by Josh when he explains why he would not use the AS from "the oil company":

*"Let's stick with the [Oil company] example. I wouldn't want to run around with one of these around my neck [keychain] that says [oil company] on it. That just seems wrong. Just like with a beach ball. I'd be like, Okay, I have this now and I would probably not bring it to the beach anyway. So it's again, with the values representing ourselves as well, I think,"* (Josh)

Jack expressed that for him, it would be difficult to use an AS item, and thereby advertise the brand, if he did not support the brand's value:

*“Because like, if you really don't stand behind the values [of the brand] you even like, even if you get a super nice power bank, you might feel it's strange to actually use it. Because like, it really depends on like, could you support it? Or couldn't you support it, because like, if you just take all the products they give to you and you make, like, advertise them, like, at the beach. So it used to be easier. Now it's more difficult, because you have like, you're really like aware about stuff about sustainability about like, how a company actually like acts and stuff like this.”*

(Jack)

We thought this subcategory was interesting as a continuation of the previous one as some participants told stories about how they actively used certain AS items. In this subcategory the participants however expressed a worry about becoming an involuntary brand ambassador while using AS items. The worry could either be based upon the participants generally not wanting to be an advertising channel or because they did not agree with the company's' value.

## 5. Discussion

In the fifth chapter called discussion we start off by discussing the findings and analysis presented in the chapter before. This is done by help of some of the literature streams presented in the second chapter called “Literature review” as well as our own interpretation. After our first subchapter we present our practical implications followed by our theoretical contributions.

### 5.1 Discussion of findings

A major finding from our research is the uniqueness of AS, in the eyes of our focus group participants. To clarify the finding we choose to further subdivide the quotes about uniqueness into three distinct subcategories. The first subcategory was labelled *intimacy* and included quotes which refers to the participants' experience of a more intimate relationship, both physically and psychologically with a piece of advertising, in the form of AS. The relationship with AS was described by the participants as more intimate because they bring the AS item into their daily lives. Some participants mentioned that this also calls for a fit between the AS item and their [the participants] identity. According to some of the participants, the intimacy of AS is seen in contrast to audio/visual advertising, such as tv commercials, which does not offer the same tangibility. We also found that some participants viewed the process of receiving the AS item as more intimate, because it often was through direct contact with the sender/brand that the AS was received.

The second subcategory within the uniqueness of AS was labelled *Active Choice*. Active Choice refers to the participants actively choosing to incorporate a piece of advertising, in the form of AS, in their daily life. The interesting aspect of the active choice subcategory should be viewed as a contrast to participants' expressed views on other types of advertising which were mentioned as being “annoying” and “intrusive”. It was expressed by some participants that they were keener to keep AS items and actively use it, compared to the other advertising mediums.

The third subcategory within the uniqueness of AS we choose to call *Consumer as Medium*. This subcategory was created on the basis of a discussion initiated spontaneously by some of the participants and revolved around how they as consumers felt they became an advertising

medium for the companies while using the AS items. Some of the participants expressed that they felt that this was unique to AS compared to other types of advertising.

In order to create a deeper interpretation of our findings in the uniqueness of AS category, it makes sense to look at the context in which the findings occurred. Some of the participants express seemingly negative views on other types of advertising, which in itself is interesting, but what we consider even more interesting, is the way in which the discussion among the participants developed. We, in the function of researchers and moderators, asked the focus groups an open question about their view on advertising in general. The conversation quickly ended up being about the participants' individual meanings about advertising on social media platforms, even though every type of advertising was supposed to be the subject of discussion. We interpret this as a view into the participants' culturally constituted world as described by McCracken (1986). Our belief is that the advertising on social media may represent a cultural category which bears a higher significance in many of the participants. We are under the impression that the participants' background within business and marketing could be a potential reason why they instantly turn towards the specifics of social media advertising when asked about advertising in general, as this subject seems to be widely discussed in their area of study. When looking further at the findings within the uniqueness of AS, we believe that the subcategories of Intimacy and active choice may be fuelled by the act of gift-giving which is supported by the exchange rituals as described by McCracken (1986). The fact that some participants expressed that AS should fit their identity, we choose to see as a potential sign of participants wanting to take possession of the AS item and partake in the meaningful properties that the AS item possesses.

We further interpret the participants' thoughts regarding consumers becoming an advertising channel or medium for the companies, when using their AS, as different from what has been stated regarding advertising in general. For example, the key factors presented by Kotler and Keller (2016) explain how there has to be a specific sender and receiver, however according to the participants they suddenly become an advertising channel. In a way, the first receiver of a piece of AS suddenly becomes both a receiver as well as a sender. Which differs from other types of advertising where the receiver only is to decode the message and respond to it.

Possible implications of the consumer becoming a medium may be that the brand loses control when encoding a message into a piece of advertising. The message will be influenced by the

cultural categories in which the individual who acts as medium of the AS is situated, which ultimately will have an effect on how other consumers decode the message (McCracken, 1986: Kotler & Keller, 2016: Keller, 1993). This might be interesting to keep in mind when designing AS items.

The second category in our analysis was labelled as *The item and the brand*. It was divided into two subcategories, *Consumer meaning in regards to physical AS items* and *Consumer meaning in regard to brands*. The first subcategory covered explicit consumer meanings about AS items. The participants expressed their meanings regarding how they felt that some AS items were *crap* and *outdated*. Despite this, some other participants expressed how they felt that aspects such as *relevancy* and *functionality* could alter their meaning toward more positive ones.

Words such as *crap* and *outdated* which the participants used when expressing their meanings about AS were used in a rather negative way. What made them express such words after having seen and thought about AS items can possibly be related to their culturally constituted world. These meanings that some participants expressed can be based on what they normally define as *crap* and *outdated*. McCracken (1986) argues that culture shapes the phenomenal world in two ways, through a lens and through a blueprint. The lens is part of how we perceive a phenomenon and how we make sense of it. So according to this, one explanation to why some participants described AS with the negative connotation is that they are viewing them through their lens and comparing them with other items.

With regard to those who expressed that functionality and relevancy of the AS items would make them more positive towards using it, we found that they were giving examples of AS items that would fulfil some kind of need for them. In relation to McCracken (1986), it can be perceived as they view the AS items more as a consumer good, instead of a piece of advertising. Consumer goods are a location of cultural meaning, this might be the reason why they emphasise the aspects of functionality and relevancy as being important to them.

The second subcategory within this category was labelled as *Consumer meaning in regard to brands*. This category covered the meanings that consumers expressed in regard to the relationship between an AS item and the brand behind it. Some participants expressed how they felt that it gave them a strange feeling if a company that they felt represented something specific handed out AS items that did not correlate with their feeling. It was described as a

mismatch, if e.g., an oil company would produce sustainable AS items. This kind of mismatch gave some of the participants what they described as some sort of strange feeling. This feeling might be a result of their individual cultural lens (McCracken, 1986). Their individual cultural lens might foster this strange feeling when, what they called a mismatch, occurs. However, we also found participants who expressed that they did not consider the brand while using an AS item. In contrast to this, some of the participants expressed that they associated a high quality AS item with the brands that they received it from.

The third and last category was labelled as *Brand Ambassador*, it consists of the following two subcategories: *An invitation* and *An uninvited worry*. The former covered the stories told by some participants of how they have some AS items that they purposely chose to use and incorporate in their daily life. Some examples that were given were, a water bottle, hotel slippers and a pen. In this subcategory the participants included rich descriptions of situations and experiences which have been enabled by AS. We find it especially interesting that a piece of advertising, in the form of AS, becomes a focal point of stories including fond memories of friends and family.

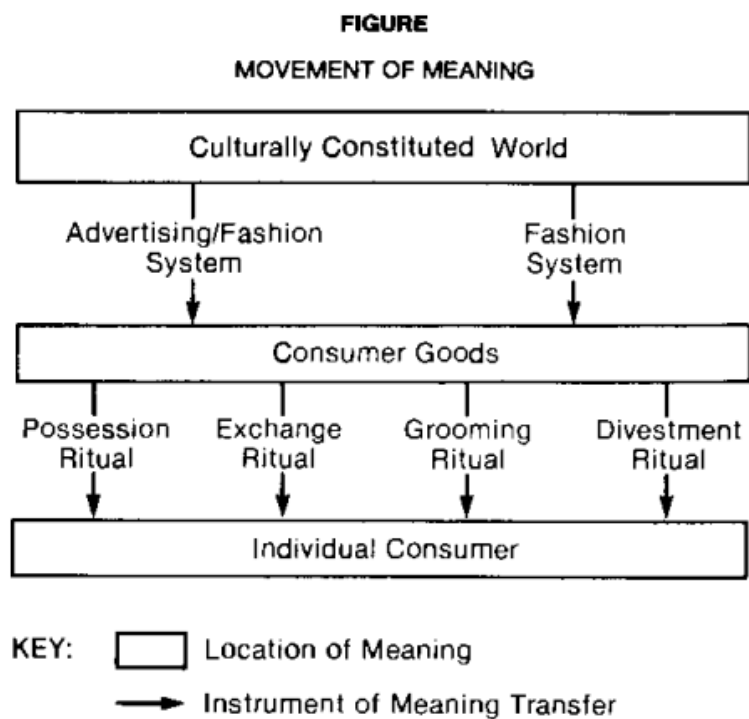
The second subcategory within Brand ambassador, contains the expressed worried feelings about becoming a brand ambassador for a brand through usage of AS. Both general feelings that the participants did not want to become brand ambassadors were expressed. As well as more elaborate expressions that they felt that the AS item had to fit with their values in order for them to use it, otherwise they did not want to advertise the brand behind. What we interpret in this final subcategory is that AS items have played a part in some of the participants' lives which has resulted in memories shared with the focus groups as detail-rich stories. This goes hand-in-hand with the possession ritual as presented by McCracken (1986) where the consumer takes possession of the meaningful properties found in the consumer goods.

Before finalising our interpretation of the findings, we would like to remind the reader of the definition of AS:

*“Advertising specialties, are items imprinted with the sponsor’s logo and sometimes a brief message, and are used as reminders, as tokens of goodwill or in conjunction with other media messages which together accomplish the marketing and promotional objectives of the advertiser.”* (Kendrick, 1998, p. 313)



In short, this helps us remember that AS is a piece of advertisement. The definition of AS is important to remember when we now are going to shift our focus to one of our major findings. This finding originates in the “Movement of Meaning model” by McCracken (1986) as presented in picture 03.



Picture 03: Movement of Meaning Model (McCracken, 1986, p. 72)

In the movement of meaning model the function of advertising is normally to function as an *instrument of meanings transfer*, between the culturally constituted world and the consumer goods (McCracken, 1986). However, we believe that our findings may show that AS has the possibility to transform from being a tool of advertising, and therefore an instrument of meaning transfer, into becoming a consumer good and therefore a *Location of Meaning*. We have mentioned earlier in the discussion that we interpret several of the stories told by our focus group participants as indications of “rituals”, such as the exchange and possession rituals. These rituals are according to McCracken (1986) the instrument used to transfer meaning from the consumer goods to the individual consumer. We therefore interpret this as indications that AS has the potential to transform into something “more” than just a piece of advertising. We further believe that this potentially could offer an explanation as to why some of our participants have shared profound stories including friends and families, with pieces of advertising, in the form of AS, being the focal point.

After having presented the data, analysis, and discussion the time has come to answer our research question. We start by reminding the reader about the question: *“How is unremarkable advertising perceived in relation to remarkable advertising?”*

In the first chapter, we explained how we were investigating unremarkable advertising through consumer meanings of AS. The AS items were perceived as being more intimate in relation to other means of advertising, especially remarkable advertising in the form of tv commercials and social media ads. Both social media ads and tv commercials, which are part of remarkable advertising, were described as being “annoying” and “intrusive” and something the consumers actively tried to avoid. On the other hand, our participants made the active choice of including and using AS items in their daily lives. We believe this shows a clear contrast in the way which unremarkable advertising is perceived in relation to remarkable advertising. Lastly, our participants articulated that they perceived one of the unique features of AS being that they themselves became an advertising medium for the brand through the use of AS items. Whereas on the other hand, with remarkable advertising, they were passively consuming advertising.

As a closing remark on this part of the discussion, we would like to present our final thoughts. We find it very interesting that through our focus groups, we have found examples of profound stories, based around a piece of advertisement, in the form AS, which people have invited into their homes and daily life and even shared with friends and family. We believe that the findings in this study indicates that unremarkable advertising indeed can become remarkable.

## 5.2 Practical implications

Our study has shown indications of consumers being annoyed by remarkable advertising, and how they try to avoid it. As opposed to this, we have seen indications of consumers being positive towards AS, which suggest that practitioners should consider including AS in their communication mix. However, according to our participants, there are features which the AS item should fulfil. These features were mentioned as relevancy and functionality. This means that the practitioner needs to make sure that he/she design AS items which are relevant for the intended target audience and fulfil a functional need that is of importance to said audience. As an extension to this, some participants expressed how a mismatch between the AS item and the brand was perceived as something undesirable. This also serves as a practical implication since practitioners can use this knowledge when crafting AS items and avoid mismatches.

### 5.3 Theoretical contribution

Our main theoretical contribution comes from us introducing the two new categorisations, Remarkable and Unremarkable advertising. These categories have not been covered before but extends the theoretical understanding of advertising in the literature. There is an already made distinction between Above-the-line and below-the-line advertising, however this is limited by categorising based on intended marketing objectives. We believe our contribution opens up for a wider understanding of the different advertising tools and adds new knowledge about unremarkable advertising, which has been neglected in the existing literature.

Our specific example of unremarkable advertising, AS, is also part of our theoretical contribution. This specific advertising tool has formerly been limited covered in the literature and hence this thesis contributes with new knowledge about it. Our thesis also strengthens the argumentation that AS should be considered as an advertising tool. In regard to this and McCrackens movement of meaning model, our thesis also contributes with a new and challenging view. From our participants point of view, we have seen that AS should not solely be seen as an advertising tool and hence an instrument of meaning transfer. It could also be seen as a consumer good which has the potential to possess cultural meaning.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1 Main conclusion

The purpose of this master thesis was to investigate a new phenomenon which was introduced by us, unremarkable advertising. We investigated this by gathering consumer meanings about AS, which functions as an example of unremarkable advertising. These meanings were collected through two focus groups. Our main findings suggested that our focus group participants considered AS as being of a more intimate nature, both physically and psychologically, compared to other types of advertising. Further we found that our participants felt that they took on a more active role when consuming advertising in the form of AS. This includes the active choice of using the AS item as well as becoming a medium of advertising themselves. The notion that the participants became mediums of advertising, or involuntary brand ambassadors, did awake negative feelings in some participants. Opposed to the negative feelings, some participants did as well share stories of fond memories of using AS items. Our thesis did also reveal participants' point-of-views of a more practical nature. Relevancy and functionality were mentioned as important features of the AS items. Based on our discussion of all these aspects, we were able to in the previous chapter show how unremarkable advertising is perceived in relation to remarkable advertising.

### 6.2 Future research

As unremarkable and remarkable advertising are two new categories which we have introduced, there are many things which can be researched upon in the future. Firstly, we would like to give the suggestion to incorporate more examples of unremarkable advertising in a research project. This would be interesting in order to make more generalizable conclusions about the categories. Another example would be to investigate the categories in a quantitative study. By doing this, a researcher could investigate the relationship between unremarkable advertising and remarkable advertising on other premises than we have done. Since we also have used AS as our specific example and this advertising tool caught our interest, we would like to give some suggestions on future research upon that subject.

We believe that the potential transformation of AS from being an advertising tool to becoming a consumer good may open up to questions and discussions in relation to the development of brand image which have not been explored in this thesis. For instance, if we look at the brand

image components by Keller (1993) then we cannot help but wonder what relation, if any, there would be between AS as a consumer good and the *user imagery* component. For example, should it include the AS users or only the user of the main product or service? And what about the *usage imagery*? How would the meaning change if there was a discrepancy between the typical usage of the product or service and the usage of the AS?

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# Appendix

## Appendix 1: Focus group topic guide

**Icebreaker:** Prior to the actual focus group meetings we are asking the participants to think about their favourite / least favourite piece of promotion (any kind of advertising, tv ad, print, product placement etc.) and the reason why they like it / do not like it. They are then asked to share it with the rest of the group.

Stage	Questions / Action
1. Welcome by Chris & Casper	Chris & Casper inform the focus group about the agenda (what are we going to discuss today, advertising etc.)
2. Intro to Focus Group (They present themselves)	a. Name b. Field of Study c. Participants share their icebreaker ad.
3. Then we segway into asking the focus group about their views on advertising in general (start an open discussion among participants)	Will come naturally as an extension of the Icebreaker.
4. We then change the focus towards advertising specialty and ask about participants' views on these.	Casper & Chris show examples of advertising specialty (promotional products) and ask the following questions:  <b><u>“Participants view on why “AS” is different, than other types of advertising?”</u></b> - <b><u>If no one mention anything about AS being different, ask them about if they thing in the context of directness, targeting, personal in some way.</u></b>  <i>How do the participants feel about advertising specialty? (Here we want to uncover the participants initial attitude towards AS).</i>  <b><i>Give us an example of an advertising</i></b>

	<p><i>specialty that you own, use and enjoy. / or do not use it?</i></p> <p><i>Would participants use the advertising speciality? - Ex: Would you use the totebag in public? Why / Why not? (Alternative = Mention a scenario when you would use a Promotional product in public)</i></p> <p><i>Thought experiment: Participants are asked to imagine their “perfect” advertising speciality - They decide the brand and product themselves and are asked to explain why they think it is “perfect”.</i></p> <p><i>- Could also be a “Worst Case Scenario” type of question, the worst Promotional product you could imagine.</i></p> <p><i>If you experience a good/bad advertising specialty, could this affect your perception of the brand.</i></p>
2. Thanks and bye!	