

Advertising agencies as intermediaries in a digital era

Thesis proposal

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Outline

This Thesis proposal (TP) provides an overview of the current state of my PhD project, which studies how advertising agencies, as cultural intermediaries, understand and navigate the consequences of an increasingly digital reality.

First, the TP introduces the background and context of the project and uses this to demarcate the problematization that drives my academic curiosity. From this follows the formulated overall purpose.

Second, the TP offers a preliminary review of the literature providing the backdrop for the overall PhD project. Primarily, I review academic focusing on the cultural approach to marketing, advertising and consumer research, especially its implications for our understanding of advertising agencies and their functioning. Moreover, a short review of relevant literature on consumer power and empowerment is integrated, providing important counterbalance to the preceding. Finally, a stakeholder-based approach to brand meaning is introduced as an attempt to better articulate the working context of advertising agencies.

In the following section, I present some initial findings from a preliminary study. Based on a person-person interview with an advertising professional, I demonstrate how I have tentatively opened up for a dialogue between theory and empirical material. This allows me to explore how the latter can help legitimize and develop my research agenda.

Subsequently, I offer an overview of the methodological approach chosen for the project. Its main focus is to provide clarity about how material for the project is collected and how discourse analysis comes to form the primary method of analysis.

In the penultimate section, I lay forth the proposed structure of my PhD project. This includes research questions, which operationalise the project towards the production of three separate articles intended for publication. As well, a brief introduction to the preliminary conceptualization of the proposed research articles is provided.

Lastly, I provide initial thoughts on the potential contributions of my research.

Additionally, the appendix provides a grand overview of the progress of my PhD study, as well as how secondary activities, such as study abroad, dissemination and PhD courses, are planned.

In all, the thesis proposal lays the foundation for my work going forward, and it will serve well as a platform for discussion and attainment of constructive critique.

1. Background, problematization and purpose

The field of advertising has historically undergone several great leaps of evolution that have changed its conception both as a practice and as a product of that practice. Changing consumer trends and technological advances have been two central, often interrelated, drivers of this development. Especially, today's ever-present digitalization and the sustained growth of social media remain significant re-configurators of advertising (Kumar & Gupta, 2016). Beyond many new opportunities for marketers, such as micro-targeting, the change has brought with it an entirely new and complicated communicative context, in which consumers suddenly stand at an increasingly central position.

As a result, research on the consequences of the digital era for marketing and advertising includes studies of the shift of control over marketplace meaning-making from marketers to consumers (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009). Fournier and Avery (2011) even explore how digitalization of society is in fact reconstituting marketing by rearticulating the empowerment of consumers, in an online context:

Amid the cultural conversation, most brands seem inauthentic; their presence intrusive and out of place. Brands, as much as we might wish otherwise, are uninvited crashers of the Web 2.0 party. The technology that was supposed to empower marketers has empowered consumers instead. (p. 193)

In other words, technology has afforded consumers greater influence on brand meaning, potentially surpassing that of the company. By giving consumers the ability to commune and communicate, the omni-directional nature of modern, digitally transmitted (marketing) communication also brings with it risks and unintended consequences; as the authors demonstrate: '*... the social collective is an inherently self-interested entity whose activities are not necessarily aligned with the best interests of the brand*' (p. 197).

This raises the question of how marketing practitioners understand and respond to the digitally empowered consumer and how it affects planned marketing communication. For this purpose, advertising agencies constitute a particularly relevant object of study as they often stand at the epicentre of companies' development and execution of consumer-oriented communication. Christopher Hackley (2002) argues that agencies hold a central position in the development strategic and creative communication solutions for client companies, based on their access to the lived world of the consumer:

... the reason they have been indispensable to corporations is because they generate this basic vocabulary of consumer cultural meanings from which creative advertising is crafted (...) Advertising agencies act as their window to the world. (p. 217)

Foundational to this position is the identification of advertising agencies as cultural intermediaries (Cronin, 2004; Kelly, Lawlor, & O'Donohoe, 2005) translating between companies, the culturally constituted world and consumers. This conceptualization of agencies provides the guiding lens for this PhD project, as it underlines the significant role they play, not only in the development of advertising, but, as well, as arbiters of cultural meaning and co-constructors of consumer realities.

This understanding has grown out of the cultural approach within marketing, branding, and consumer research, and it explores the culturally constitutive nature of advertising (McCracken, 1986). It diverts from the classic information-transmission model by proposing advertising as meaning-based communication (McCracken, 1987). Another important element of the cultural approach is the acknowledgement of consumers as interpretive agents:

... whose meaning-creating activities range from those that tacitly embrace the dominant representations of consumer identity and lifestyle ideals portrayed in advertising and mass media to those that consciously deviate from these ideological instructions. (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 874).

Thus, embedded in this approach is the ideation of consumers as proactively participating in the meaning creating process of advertising, parallel to marketers and agencies. It supports the notion that consumers are able and willing to utilize available communicative means to challenge the traditional centrality of marketers in the struggle over brand and marketplace meaning.

Nonetheless, marketers have historically succeeded in adapting to external changes both in the shape of technological advances, legislature, consumer trends, etc. One example is brands' growing use of so-called influencers, social media content creators and celebrities, whose reach among an often quite specific audience of online followers make up a valuable platform for branded content. In this way, brands attempt to regain their central position in creating and distributing effective persuasive communication. Another example is how the increasing use of metrics, available to marketers through social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube, have been noted to exemplify, how marketers are motivated and enabled to leverage the socio-technical affordances of the internet to their purposes (Miles, 2016).

Accordingly, the new digital landscape is changing the distribution of power and opportunities in marketing communication contexts. What lacks in the literature is work dedicated to the study of how these changes are affecting the reality of advertising agencies in general and as cultural intermediaries in particular. This thesis therefore asks: if we accept that the technological advances of our society have changed the context of marketing communication, then how is it understood from an agency perspective and what opportunities and challenges does it pose for agency employees, and for planning and execution of agency services?

Based on this problematizing, the formulated purpose of the PhD project is:

To explore how advertising agencies, as cultural intermediaries, understand, engage with and operate within an increasingly complex organizational, communicative and stakeholder context advanced by new digital opportunities.

By studying the ways in which agencies engage with a challenging digital reality, the project attempts to contribute to a more developed understanding of the contemporary advertising system and the complex relationship between its actors.

2. Preliminary review of literature

In this section, a preliminary review of the theoretical field is introduced, in which the PhD project is delineated and discussed. Firstly, the review explores the foundational understanding of advertising as a cultural system, which will come to guide the discussion of the findings and the development of the theoretical contribution. The constitutive role of advertising agencies is presented and then contrasted by the concept of consumer power. Lastly, a short introduction to the ideation of brand stakeholder environments is made.

2.1. A cultural approach to advertising

The cultural approach to advertising and branding makes up the theoretical backdrop for the overall PhD project and the individual articles. It provides a fundamental understanding of the functioning of advertising, and the conceptual lens through which the object of research is studied. The following part introduces the origin of the cultural approach from consumption studies and the role of advertising as artefacts in the cultural system.

In advertising theory, the cultural approach provides an alternative understanding of the role and ideals of advertising to traditional transmission-based thinking. It is guided by radically different assumptions about consumers and the act of consumption.

In the traditional paradigm, the consumer is defined as a rational individual collecting and processing information for making informed consumer choices. This understanding of advertising is restricted both in how it *'divorces the individual from the cultural context of consumption'*, and how it *'gives no way of permitting us to see that the individual is not just the recipient of meaning but also active in its construction'* (McCracken, 1987, pp. 122-123). Instead, the meaning-based model identifies consumers as engaged in individual projects where cultural meanings are sourced and integrated, in a continued (re)production of the self. This shift of view on consumers bears consequences of the conceptualization of advertising. As consumer life projects are undertaken through the individual's *'development, refinement, and disposal of specific concepts (e.g., manliness, Americanism) from a range of culturally established alternatives'* (Mick & Buhl, 1992), advertising, along with other sources of cultural meaning, serves as an important source and vehicle for the individual to develop and communicate a self.

Shifting away from the traditional view of advertising as an information dissemination process, following the meaning-based model, consumer goods are now perceived as significant not only in terms of their utilitarian qualities, but of their *'ability to carry and communicate meaning'* (McCracken, 1986, p. 71). Advertising is thus described as *'the conduit through which meanings are constantly transferred from the culturally constituted world to the consumer good'* (McCracken, 1987). Naturally, this adds an entirely new dimension

to the role of advertising, contra the information-based model, moving beyond the mentioned restrictions of a traditional behaviourist approach to commercial communication.

Returning to McCracken (1986), his seminal paper delineates the meaning transfer process between the culturally constituted world and the consumer, and the potential role of advertisers. Figure 1 visualizes the process, in which the advertising creative draws inspiration from the culturally constituted world using advertising communication to infuse selected cultural categories and principles, which resonates with the targeted consumers. Through various integrative rituals, the consumer then moves the desired cultural meaning from the goods to him-/herself.

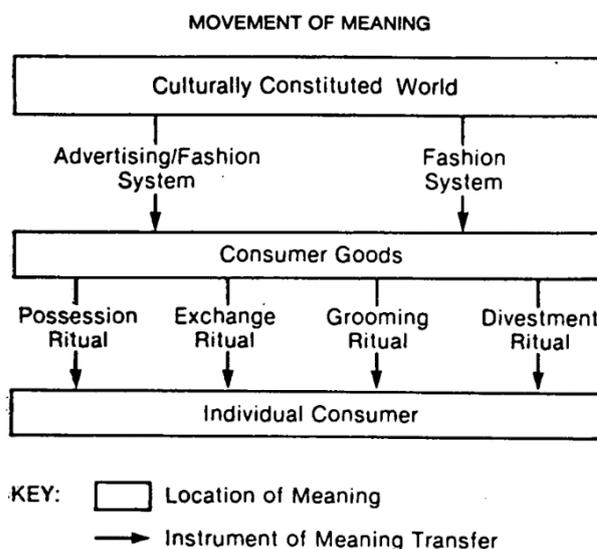


Figure 1 Movement of Meaning (McCracken, 1986)

This understanding of the advertising system underlines both the culturally constitutive power of advertisers, in particular the advertising agency, whilst simultaneously communicating the central idea of consumers as active participants, as the success of the above rests on the consumer's ability to decode and internalize the meaning encoded by the advertising agency successfully.

Hence, the cultural approach provides a more nuanced understanding of advertising valuable to this PhD project in as far as it enables a more informed discussion of relationship and interaction between actors in the advertising system. The following sections explore further research undertaken on the, sometimes conflicting, influence asserted by advertising agencies and consumers respectively.

2.2. Advertising agencies as cultural intermediaries

Building on top of the consumer consumption approach, forwarded by McCracken (1986, 1987), is research focusing specifically on the culturally constitutive functioning of advertising agencies. It breaks down the processes within the advertising agency to provide knowledge on how meaning is derived from the culturally constituted world, inscribed into advertising, which in turn comes to influence consumer realities.

The culturally constituted world plays a central role as a primary source for cultural resources to be drawn on in advertising production. Christopher Hackley (2002) represents a cornerstone in the author's application of the panoptic metaphor, derived from the thinking of Foucault (1979), for the purpose of describing *'the gathering and interpretation of consumer research in advertising agencies'* (p. 217). Likewise, empirical studies have been undertaken to explore this process within agencies. Kelly et al. (2005) demonstrate how advertising creatives articulate the process of drawing on their own cultural knowledge, 'soaked up' through research as well as music, movies etc., all of which is fed into the production of creative advertising.

Further studies in advertising agencies as cultural intermediaries include Cronin (2004), who argues that *'practitioners can be considered "cultural intermediaries" only when employing an expanded and nuanced*

definition of mediation that attends to their heterogeneous commercial practices' (p. 352). Importantly, this includes consideration of the mediation that exists in the relationship between the agency and its clients.

However, the foundational work of Christopher Hackley (2002) rests on a critical approach, as denoted by the application of Foucault's panoptic metaphor. In his article, un-codified informal interpretive consumer research provides disciplinary power as *'this knowledge is used to reproduce structures of ideological domination in the corporate interest'* re-producing preferred consumer subjectivities (p. 218). This is central to this PhD project because it highlights and problematizes the aforementioned constitutive potential of advertising agencies, and the processes through which they maintain control over the advertising system and influence consumer realities.

2.3. Consumer power and empowerment

As the project investigates how digitalization of the context and materiality of advertising influences advertising agency realities, the concept of consumer power emerges as a central one, especially as it stands in opposition to the constitutive potential of agencies, as discussed above.

According to Denegri-Knott, Zwick, and Schroeder (2006), consumer power and empowerment are concepts that are not easily defined. The authors identify instead three strands of research: consumer sovereignty, cultural power and discursive power. Naturally, this project draws primarily on the thinking surmised in the second strand, as it represents an extension of the approach to advertising discussed above. Traditionally, consumer power and empowerment have focused on consumers' inherent or given ability to exert power over the marketplace through their exertion of choice (Wathieu et al., 2002). This understanding has continued support within the field of ethical consumption, in which the voting metaphor has been used to describe consumers' willingness to communicate approval/disapproval of corporate behaviour using their wallets (Shaw, Newholm, & Dickinson 2006).

From a cultural power approach, however, marketplace power includes consideration for the culturally disciplining power companies hold over the consumer and consumers' ability to resist this oppression (Denegri-Knott et al., 2006). Centrally, Thompson and Haytko (1997) propose an understanding of consumers' appropriation of cultural meaning that expands on McCracken (1986). He suggests *'that the meaning transfer process is a diffuse, transformative, and consumer-centered undertaking'* (p. 38). As illustrated in figure 2, it repositions the focus from marketers and advertising agencies to consumers as meaning-producers. Consumers are identified as empowered interpretive agents who

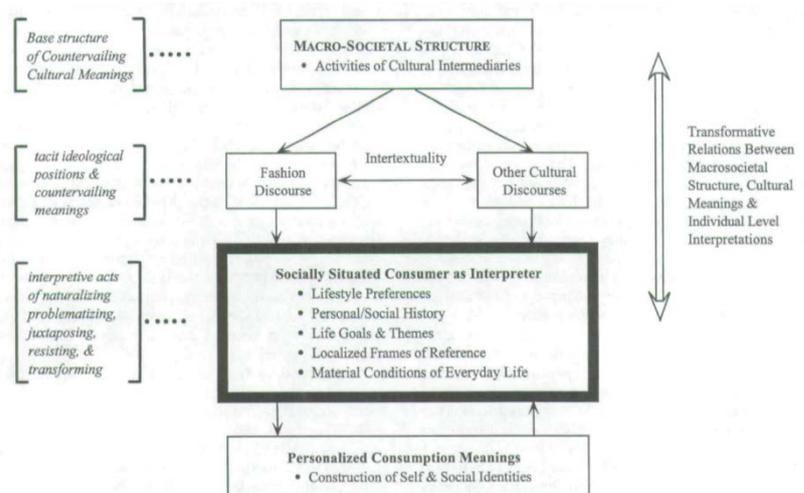


Figure 2 A dialogical model of consumers' appropriation of countervailing cultural meaning (Thompson, 1997)

As illustrated in figure 2, it repositions the focus from marketers and advertising agencies to consumers as meaning-producers. Consumers are identified as empowered interpretive agents who

utilize ‘... the conflicts and contradictions among culturally available hegemonic meanings – rather than being oppressed by a monolithic ideological system’ (p. 37).

Consequentially, this perspective articulates consumer agency in the process of identity construction, which stands in contrast to the functioning described in the sections above. Further, research within this area spans consumer activism (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004) and the ideation of a postmodern consumer as a (pro)active agent of meaning production (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Together, this literature embodies a marketplace meaning making perspective, in which consumers’ are empowered beyond the mere adoption or rejection of marketer proposed meaning. Lastly, Holt (2002) contributes valuable complexity to the concept of market power by arguing that consumer resistance and brand-marketing communication strategies are in fact intertwined in a dialectical relationship where the former drives the development of the latter. Thus, the author challenges preceding theory on consumer resistance, in exploring the dynamics between consumer culture and the emergence of new brand paradigms:

‘Since the market feeds off of the constant production of difference, the most creative, unorthodox, singularizing consumer sovereignty practices are the most productive for the system. They serve as grist for the branding mill that is ever in search of new cultural materials.’ (Ibid, p. 88)

The literature on cultural power, including its frameworks, concepts and vocabulary, will enable discussions of the empirical findings of the PhD projects in terms of where agency professionals identify or anticipate marketplace-meaning conflicts and opportunities facilitating the discussion of their actions. Furthermore, it may provide a significant source of inspiration and guidance in the process of theorizing.

2.4. Authors of a brand

As the above sections demonstrate, a brand meaning is affected by both advertising agencies carefully constructing marketing communication and advertising campaigns for commercial purposes, and consumers accepting and rejecting marketer-meaning propositions.

Lastly, this review will consider the conceptualization of brand meaning as a multicultural entity with a wide range of authors, covering the entire brand stakeholder environment.

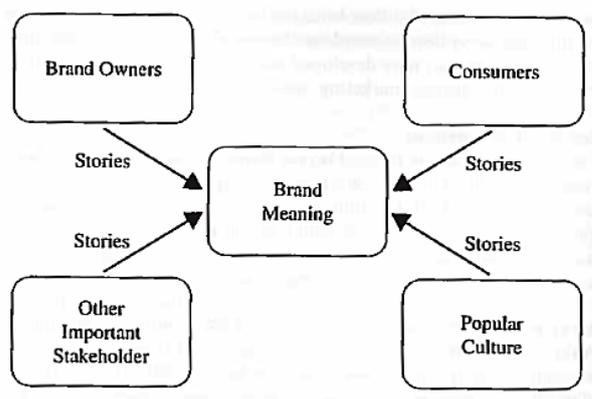


Figure 3 The authors of a brand (Belk, 2006)

Bengtsson and Ostberg (2006) provides an adapted model of the cultural production of brands forwarded by Holt (2004) (figure 3). In congruence with the theory discussed above, it retires the idea of companies’ ability to solely dictate brand meaning and instead recognizes the variety of actors in brand meaning production including: consumers, competitors, retailers, legislators, popular culture such as TV programs, etc. Further, it also acknowledges that ‘the culture that develops within each group of authors is not homogenous but differs

from that of other authors. Thus, there exists not just one brand meaning. Instead, understandings of a particular brand will differ according to what perspective is taken.

Importantly, this conceptualization of brand meaning construction will help guide the PhD project by emphasizing the complexity of the process, in which advertising agencies take part. It introduces a range of stakeholders whose actions and intentions may influence the practices of agencies.

3. Preliminary study

A pilot study was conducted in January 2018 exploring the theoretical problematization, presented in the introduction, empirically, in an attempt to develop findings that *'can't easily be accounted for by available theory'* (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p. 1270). The goal was to identify potentially interesting *breakdowns*, which can further develop the PhD project and drive the collection and analysis of material that lies ahead.

A person-person interview was conducted using a semi-structured interview guide around the themes: consumer-brand interactivity and agency-client relationships. The interviewee, Adam, is a Strategic Planner and co-founder of a small advertising agency in Aarhus. As he explains in the beginning of the interview, the agency spans across B2B, B2C, government and NGO clients.

3.1. Reciprocity and the risk of consumer resistance

A central purpose for this preliminary study was to explore how advertising professionals talk about the phenomenon of digitally empowered consumers, in relation to the traditional ideal of marketer control. Does it constitute a threat and/or an opportunity, and what are the means used to balance these? During the interview, the interviewee continuously demonstrates an ambivalent understanding of facilitated consumer influence in the context of a campaign:

Adam: *The cool thing is, you can say, that if you want to move someone, as a company or as a campaign, then it is really important that people have the opportunity to reciprocate and say something. But you have to be prepared.*

'To move someone...' stands as a colourful stand-in for a successful communicative outcome, traditionally defined in economic terms. Thus, consumers' ability to engage in a bi-directional relationship with the marketer is articulated as not only an opportunity, but as a necessity for the fulfilment of the purpose of communication campaign. However, the reciprocal nature of the interaction is clearly demarcated in the last sentence claiming that *'to move someone...'* is a process potentially linked with risk. Adam continues talking about the implication of this ability of the consumers to reciprocate:

Adam: *It makes the work many-faceted [...] and sometimes it requires steady nerves, because anything can happen. You see the immediate reaction from those you target, if they like it or not.*

HSM: *How do you navigate this?*

Adam: *Well, the best thing is a strategy [...] You need guidelines, action plans: 'if this and this happens, then you do this...'*

Here Adam further explores the meaning of being prepared. He draws on a traditional marketing management repertoire, which dictates the strategic planning of communication in formulated plans, where every foreseeable contingency is accounted for. This stands in contrast to the initial ideal of facilitating consumers' ability to reciprocate since reactions are immediate and not predictable, and thus it represents a potential conflict of discourses. What might be the experienced need for reassuring clients of agency capabilities, in terms of securing results, collides with a more contemporary ideal of consumer-brand interaction.

In line with the overall theoretical foundation explored above, these findings could be considered in relation to the conceptualization of advertising agencies as cultural intermediaries and the complex advertising system, resting on a constant meaning negotiation between marketers and consumers. The scene for brand-meaning negotiation is perhaps idealized as a conversation between brand and consumer, however, when explored further a pragmatic understanding emerges. The key to retaining a favourable brand image would then rely on the ability to control the potentially problematic influence of consumers. In this sense, the agency comes to enact a constraining effort on the otherwise idealized understanding of brand communication as bidirectional and co-constructive.

Naturally, these are only tentative speculations, as the preliminary study does not allow for a more granular understanding of considerations. However, it may be suggested that the careful attention to clients' relation to risk may be a driving force. Adam comments on this topic demonstrating awareness of this construct:

Adam: *(...) when a client comes and tells us "we want something edgy" (...) And in the beginning we delivered. We didn't hold back. And they didn't want it because they did not dare in the end. They were afraid someone wouldn't like it.*

Some say that the best work of agencies is still in the drawers.

Attentiveness to risk among clients could thus present a part explanation of why Adam articulates a control-oriented agenda for engaging reciprocally with consumers on behalf of clients. The initial findings suggest that two or more significant ideologies of what it means to be an advertising agency, in the context of the brand stakeholder environment, may be colliding, as agencies attempt to navigate expectations and opportunities in relation to a reciprocating consumer. Further research could focus on investigating whether this is an observation that gains more salience as more material is collected and analysed.

3.2. Agency expertise in digital transformation

In this section below, Adam provides a case narrative in which he discusses the risks clients run in a modern marketing context. In doing so, he articulates a particular distribution of competence and knowledge between the agency and the particular company:

Adam: *We had an issue with (client name)¹ (.) We had created the strategy for their Facebook. And we had an awful example where a kid had cut him-/herself on a badge on one of the bags. There was a picture of a children's finger with a hole in it and a (client name) bag on the social media. It said, "It is infuriating and blah, blah, blah." And then someone replied: "We are on holiday and will get back to you after Easter". This was not a good answer. We sort of tried to help (.) get in, to identify, what do we do, and where we sort of attempted to correct it. But it was simple things that needed to be done: Answer if someone writes, recognize the customers' problems, and make the things that are important for the customer important for you.*

Value-laden language such as *'it was simple things that needed to be done'* and *'that was not a good answer'*, both expressed in a critical tone, suggests a wish for the interviewee to position the agency as central in the problem-solving process, relative to the client. Clearly, the agency emerges as the competent actor who knows how to navigate these, for the client, seemingly obscure waters. By leaning on theory that conceptualizes advertising agencies as key arbiters between clients and consumers, in terms of generating creative communication, Adam recaptures the narrative of agencies' expert position in a new context. In both cases, this consultancy position builds on the agency' access to consumer knowledge (Christopher Hackley, 2002).

Adam talks about the agency as having specialized itself within consulting on digital services, such as social media marketing and community management. Further research could investigate whether this is a positioning constructed across other clients and/or in other agencies. Moreover, these stories of agency-client interactions could be developed to explore in more detail how this context of interacting consumers are influencing the various processes and practices within agencies, as well as how they affect identity constructions among agency professionals.

3.3. Continuing the study

The findings above provide insights into agencies approach to working with targets audiences who are not merely recipients of marketer initiatives, and they reflect on how such understandings of the digitally empowered consumer affect the agency's interaction with clients. It provides an interesting platform for the further development of the research project and beckons for collection of more empirical data. Hence, the findings have naturally guided the formulation of the research design and research agendas, presented below.

4. Research design

As an academic field advertising is a patchwork of research from interrelated areas such as organisational studies, consumer research, communication, branding and marketing theory. As suggested by the literature review above, the overall project aims to contribute to the scientific communities that spans across marketing theory and consumer research. Methodologically, however, inspiration is drawn from organisational studies in that it utilizes the opportunity to study advertising agency practitioner discourse, which is further explored below. Philosophically, advertising studies spans wide as well across both positivist and interpretivist research.

¹ Client produces children school backpacks.

Following the rather consistent epistemology of the theory discussed above, this project builds on a social constructionist grounding.

4.1. A social constructionist approach

According to Burr (1995) social constructionism is not easily defined as different understandings exist under the same heading, an argument seconded by C. E. Hackley (1998). Both authors, however, agree that defining characteristics exist. Burr frames it well: *'What links them all together is a kind of "family resemblance"'* (1995, p. 2). In essence, it proposes the rejection of a realist approach to research, encouraging the study of subjects' experiences and the social construction of meaning, emphasising the historical and cultural context and the performative role of language in social interaction (Burr, 1995).

Centrally, the approach supports an understanding of the production of advertising as a social process, in which language and discourse play a constitutive role and thus become significant objects of study (C. E. Hackley, 1998). Kelly et al. (2005, p. 521) explores the complexity of this understanding by emphasising how the discursive interactions of agency professionals is directed by the differing guiding ideologies and agendas among various functional groups. Hence, the process itself and the outcome are formed by the discursive interaction between art directors, client directors and other agency professionals, as well as clients.

Second, organizational discourse analysis (ODA), which forms the central analytical framework for the PhD project (see below), *'is grounded in a strong social constructionist epistemology'* (Phillips & Oswick, 2012, p. 445). The social constructionist foundation, according to the authors, promotes special attentiveness to how discourses produces and sustains organizational and inter-organizational phenomena.

4.2. Research design and methods

The overall PhD project draws on organizational studies as a means of contributing to theory on advertising agencies. In particular, the study follows the tradition of studying text and talk in organizations for generating insights. However, the linguistic turn in organizational studies entails a focus on language that goes beyond analysis of language as representational, studying instead language as a constitutive interaction (Deetz, 2003). However, this contemporary understanding of the linguistic turn also emphasises the importance of recognizing the limitations of purely language-oriented studies.

4.2.1. Organizational discourse analysis

Discourse analysis, in a general context, entails the study of language, primarily based on the social constructionist foundation, where language is studied not as a channel through which information flows, but instead as *'a "machine" that generates, and as a result constitutes, the social world'* (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 9), including identities and relations.

Discourse analysis as a method is experiencing a sustained interest among researchers within management studies, including marketing and consumer research. Importantly, it allows for a two-level investigation of marketing: *'Discourse analysis offers a particular means of not only investigating marketing and consumption phenomena but also broaden the realm of enquiry to the level of subject of marketing itself'* (Fitchett & Caruana, 2015, p. 2). This position also embraces discourse analysis as a potent tool for doing research on advertising as an artefact and a process, including its production within advertising agencies.

As the PhD project focuses on discourse in an organizational context, and in acknowledging the risk of over-valuing the aforementioned potency, the particular approach to discourse analysis proposed by Alvesson and Kärreman (2000b, 2011) becomes valuable for this PhD project. It stresses that, when studying organizational discourse, the tactic of including concern for *'the interface between discourse and (non-discursive) action is of particular interest'* (p. 1124). In other words, the study of text and talk in organizations must acknowledge that talk and texts are not entirely constitutive of organisational reality, as non-discursive sources, such as action and culture, must be considered in parallel. How this is to be accomplished is yet to be defined.

As to the specific methodological attentiveness to language in the organizations studied, the project draws on techniques and approaches from across different discourse analytic traditions. This will among others include identification of *interpretative repertoires*, which *'are systematically related sets of terms, often used with stylistic and grammatical coherences, and often organized around one or more central metaphors'* (Potter, 1996, pp. 115-116). Also, the study participants' discursive construction of different subject positions is central to the overall analytical strategy of the project (Davies & Harré, 1990). A close attention to the value of narratives, as explored in the preliminary study, is as well a key analytical approach for the project.

These last considerations are, however, only tentative framings, as further methodological structuring depends on the empirical material collected. Altogether, the approach acknowledges the strengths of discourse analysis while at the same time respecting the boundaries of the methods, which in turn should help secure a greater quality of work.

4.2.2. Construction of empirical material

In recognizing the methodological consequences of organizational discourse analysis (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a), the process of *constructing text* for analysis becomes a central perspective in the formulation of research design. The aim is to *"construct illuminating and manageable portions of the realities at hand in fieldwork situation"* (p. 147).

The first step of this process was undertaken in the preliminary study explored above. This was processed as an explorative move towards further developing the research purpose and agendas through the facilitation of dialogue between theory and practice. In addition, it helped direct the proceeding collection of more empirical material. An example of this is how the work has developed to accommodate the researchers wish to approach advertising practice as a social process. This entails the inclusion of respondents representing a broad range of functional roles within agencies.

A research stay at a Danish advertising agency has recently been undertaken, where the focus was on the construction of text through further interviews, collection of observational material and recording of interactions during meetings. The interviews were conducted among a wide range of professions including more recent ones working with social media, influencers, digital services, etc. The need for collecting additional material will be assessed after the initial analysis, in following the guiding principle of saturation in determining when enough is compiled.

5. Dissertation structure

This section presents the three interconnected research agendas, as well as a brief introduction to the individual studies, which make up the PhD project. The research questions are preliminary and thus open to further development.

By studying the ways in which agencies engage with and operate within a challenging new reality, the project attempts to contribute a more developed understanding of the contemporary advertising system and the complex relationship between its actors, with agencies at the centre. Furthermore, the project will attempt to propose suggestions for advertising agency management.

The choice of focusing on advertising professionals is based on the centrality of these in the advertising system and their role as cultural mediators between marketers (clients) and consumers. By approaching the field of advertising from a cultural approach, it seeks to go beyond a limited transmission understanding of commercial communication. Further, through the study of agencies as a unique organizational *habitus* (Alvesson, 1994), using a discourse analytical approach, it responds to earlier calls for further in depth research on ad-agencies as cultural intermediaries (Cronin, 2004).

The purpose of the PhD project is presently operationalized through the following research agendas:

1. *To study how the distribution of marketer control and consumer empowerment, in a digital era, is perceived and articulated by agency professionals, and how it affects the role, structure and organization of the advertising agency.*
2. *To explore how the complexities of digitalized brand stakeholder environments influence strategizing, planning and execution of marketing communication and advertising in advertising agencies.*
3. *To explore how the complexities of digitalized brand stakeholder environments influence identity construction in advertising agencies.*

Each agenda guides a separate research article. All three articles are connected through the empirical material, detailed in section 4, and together they discuss the contemporary conceptualization of the advertising agency as mediator between clients and consumers. The interconnected nature of the three articles, as well as the manner in which they contribute to the overall research

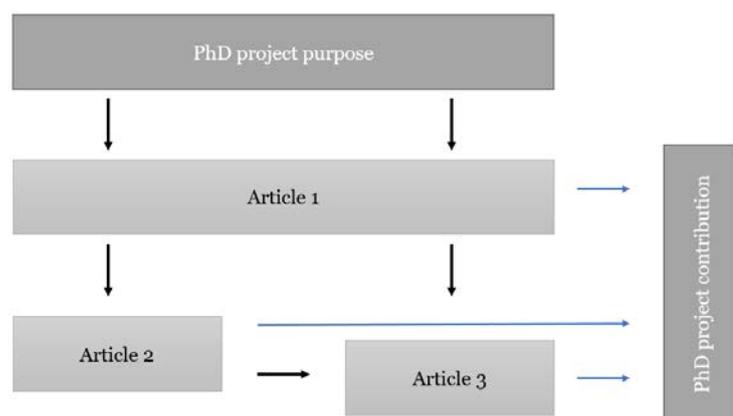


Figure 4 Structure of PhD project

purpose together and individually, is illustrated in figure 4 below. Article 1 is thus to be considered as a founding platform for article 2 and 3.

In the following, the three proposed articles will be further delineated in order to demonstrate more clearly how they individually contribute towards answering the overall research statement of the PhD project.

5.1. Article 1

As stated, the first article studies *how the distribution of marketer control and consumer empowerment, in a digital era, is perceived and articulated by agency professionals, and how it affects the role, structure and organization of the advertising agency*. If the brand stakeholder environment (Bengtsson & Ostberg, 2006) has changed in a digital context, driven especially by the empowerment of consumers as suggested by Fournier (1998), it is relevant to provide new insights into how this reality is understood and navigated from an advertising agency perspective. As established in the introduction, advertisers and advertising agencies are traditionally creative and strategic in their effort to retain control over the advertising process. Thus, an effort should be made to clarify how this challenge to marketer control, reflected in the wider brand stakeholder environment, is perceived by advertising agencies, and how they approach it.

The study will be developed based on empirical material collected in advertising agencies, primarily in the form of person-person interviews collated with field notes. Interviews span across traditional agency functions, such as planning, client services, creative, and newer roles from social media and influencer departments. In doing so, the study recognizes advertising production as an inherently social process, which is deeply relying on the cooperation of various agency employees with different functional backgrounds, ideologies and goals.

The research question will be answered through a discourse analytical approach focusing on how respondents use language to construct such aspects as brand-consumer interaction, agency-client cooperation and their role as intermediaries. This insight will be discussed in order to explore how digitalization is affecting agency professionals' structural understanding of the advertising system, in which they play a central role, and how they ideologically bridge between diverging interest, demands and influences of various stakeholders.

5.2. Article 2

The second article continues the exploration of the data collected for the first paper. This time, however, the focus is on agency practices: The article aims to *how the complexities of digitalized brand stakeholder environments influence strategizing, planning and execution of marketing communication and advertising in advertising agencies*. It will extend the discussion raised in the previous article by exploring how specific practices, associated with the work of advertising agencies, are influenced by various tensions in the brand stakeholder environment of today.

This calls for an analysis of how the attentiveness to consumers, clients, competitors, media agencies, legislators etc. is influencing agency professionals' discursive articulation of their work processes, across all stages towards delivering effective marketing communication and advertising campaigns. Again, the digital era, and its influence on marketplace control, is the backdrop guiding the analysis.

Agency professionals' talk is analysed to explore interviewees' accounts of their daily practices and narrative presentation of successful and non-successful projects. It will include considerations for the discursive construction of the various actors and their individual roles within these processes.

The article builds on the understanding of the complex tensions influencing agency reality, as established in the preceding study, and it will inform on how the digital era and its consequences play a role in shaping agency production processes.

5.3. Article 3

The final article is still tentative in its formulation and awaits a more thorough review of literature. However, already collected material has opened up for a further investigation of identity construction in advertising agencies. As stated above, it aims *to explore how the complexities of digitalized brand stakeholder environments influence identity construction in advertising agencies.*

As delineated in Phillips and Oswick (2012), identity is one of the areas in which organizational discourse analysis has contributed significantly, and from an empirical perspective much research has already been done on the study of identity in advertising agencies (Alvesson, 1994, 1998; Chan, 2017; Chris Hackley & Kover, 2007). However, the material collected so far differs as it includes talk from employees working with newer business areas, such as social media and influencer marketing, as well as talk from more established professional groupings about these new colleagues and services. A potentially interesting mystery, which could warrant *'further theoretical and empirical study'* (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p. 1271) is emerging around how the internal digital transformation is affecting identity construction in agencies.

In keeping with the overall purpose of the PhD project, it might be interesting to focus on how the tensions of the broader brand stakeholder environment, as discussed above, interfere with this process. This latter point demonstrate how article 1, and to some extent article 2, could come to feed into this third one, as illustrated in figure 4.

6. Contributions

The three proposed articles contribute to studies of advertising agencies, and thus the interrelated fields of marketing and consumer research, by providing knowledge about how the most significant driver of change, in contemporary marketing theory and practice, is influencing marketing communication and advertising production.

The contribution resides on three levels. First, on a structural and organizational level studying the changed context of marketing communication from an advertising agency perspective. Second, on a communicative level, where the focus is on how the changing power relationships, external pressures, expectations and opportunities, emerging from a new digital reality, influences planning, strategizing and execution of marketing communication and advertising in agencies. Third, on a micro-analytical level, focusing on how employees experience and navigate in the new organizational and contextual reality, focusing on employee identity construction.

Further, the project will contribute to the study of advertising agencies as cultural mediators, within the complex system of brand meaning making. Lastly, in following the suggested methods, the project will attempt to provide further demonstration of the application of organizational discourse analysis.

The overall aim is to contribute to the theory that explain the functioning of this complex type of organization, which hold a particularly central role in both the accomplishment of commercial success and construction of consumer realities.

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8. Appendices

8.1. Plan for research

The following provides an overview of the planned research activities including courses, conferences and research stay.

<p>Semester 1 (Fall 2018)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Further developing research proposal and working on preliminary literature review <p>PhD Courses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Information Retrieval & Reference Management (0 ECTS) AU Library
<p>Semester 2 (Spring 2018)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Undertaking preliminary study to explore my theoretical problematization in an empirical context• Collection of empirical material: Two week stay at Danish advertising agency• Writing Thesis Proposal <p>PhD Courses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduction to Planning, Presentation Technique and Teaching (0 ECTS) Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL)• Introduction to Analysis in Qualitative Research (5 ECTS) Aarhus BSS (Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences)
<p>Semester 3 (Fall 2018)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collection of empirical material: Interviewing in one or more advertising agencies• Start writing article 1 <p>PhD courses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Research Process and the Role of Theory in Business Research (5 ECTS) Aarhus BSS (Department of Management)
<p>Semester 4 (Spring 2019)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collection of empirical material: Interviewing in one or more advertising agencies• Submitting article 1• Start writing article 2 and 3 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Visiting PhD: Nottingham Business School, Marketing Division 1 March – 31 May (planning in progress)

<p>PhD courses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative Methods, 1 module (2,5 ECTS) Aarhus BSS (Department of Management)
<p>Semester 5 (Fall 2019)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submitting article 2 • For PhD thesis: Write theoretical framework and research design • Conference with paper (TBD) <p>PhD courses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perspectives on Communication, Organization, and Culture (5 ECTS) CBS • Applied Quantitative Methods (5 ECTS) Aarhus BSS (Department of Management)
<p>Semester 6 (Spring 2020)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submitting article 3 • For PhD thesis: Write discussion and conclusion + write up and proof reading • Handing in August 31. <p>PhD courses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative Methods, 3 modules (7,5 ECTS) Aarhus BSS (Department of Management)

8.2. Plan for dissemination

The following list the activities planned for the fulfillment of the dissemination requirements. (567.5 hours)

Semester	Activity
Semester 1 (Fall 2018)	<p>Communication Planning and Measurement <i>Tutorials, seminars and exam grading</i></p> <p>Project-based Internship within Corp. Com. <i>Internal censor (DK + ENG)</i></p>
Semester 2 (Spring 2018)	<p>BA thesis <i>Supervision and grading</i></p>

Semester 3 (Fall 2018)	<p>Communication Planning and Measurement <i>Tutorials, seminars and examination</i></p> <p>Communication in a Marketing Perspective <i>Tutorials, seminars/study café and exam grading</i></p> <p>Qualitative Methods <i>Exam grading</i></p>
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