Speaking About Voice

A Study on Communicating Brand Personality Through Virtual Assistants

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Preface

We would like to take the opportunity to sincerely thank the persons whose support made this thesis possible.

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Abstract

Problematization: Earlier research on brand communication emphasize the importance of communicating a brand consistently throughout all marketing channels and media. Virtual assistants (VAs) are a new marketing media and a relatively new technology with which a brand can communicate with customers. However, the theory and knowledge about how to use it as a communication tool for a brand is limited. With human communication attributes being a unique characteristic of VAs as a marketing medium, it is suggested that these can be used to clarify and supplement the traits of a brand’s personality.

Research Questions:
● How is brand personality communicated via integrated marketing communications?
● How does communication with VAs affect the consumers’ perception of a brand’s personality?

Purpose: This report investigates, through theories on integrated marketing communication, brand and communication, how brand personality can be communicated through a voice. The study also shows how human conversation attributes are of importance in conversation with virtual assistants, and how these affect brand personality.

Conclusion: The study has shown that virtual assistants could provide the opportunity to augment a brand’s personality as a result of their ability to adopt human communication attributes. If the conversational expectations are not fulfilled, the impression of the VA, and therefore the brand it represents, will be negatively affected. If VAs overcome the communication and social obstacles, of which some are presented in this study, they can become a valuable medium for communicating brand personality.

Knowledge Contribution: This study has given an understanding for human-to-brand conversation through voice and what aspects that may be considered when developing a VA for marketing purposes. A theoretical model has been developed to show how brand personality and communication attributes can affect the brand communication through virtual assistants.
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1. Introduction

This chapter introduces the topics of the study to give the reader fundamental understanding of the marketing climate, brand components and virtual assistants as new technology in marketing. This leads to the research questions, purpose of the study and knowledge contribution to prepare the reader for the aim and focus of the study.

1.1 Background

The direction of marketing activities has changed in recent years, thanks to digitalization and thus interactivity of brands (Edelman, 2010). Integrated marketing communications (IMCs) can be defined as the techniques and channels through which companies consistently inform and remind consumers, directly and indirectly, about their brand and products (Batra & Keller, 2016). The expanding trend of IMCs is giving marketers more opportunities and makes their brands more interactive (Wheeler, 2013), which has made the customer relationship the center of attention of the marketing efforts (Freeman, 2019). Digital inbound marketing, an IMC strategy, is a recommended approach to attract consumers on their own terms instead of pushing advertisements to an indifferent mass (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015). By using digital inbound marketing, one creates stronger customer relationships by having content or communities online which makes the relation interactive and engaging (ibid). Social media has become one of the communication tools for a brand in which they can use content as marketing (Wall & Spinuzzi, 2018). Content marketing is how a brand could speak to consumers as if it were a person, and instead of informative advertising, this marketing can be considered a brand’s storytelling (Wall & Spinuzzi, 2018).

A strong brand has become an important factor of differentiation, and it must show throughout the whole organization (Batra & Keller, 2016). When two companies’ products serve the same purpose or share the same features, a strong brand is what can distinguish the companies from one another (Keller, 2013; Wheeler, 2013). A brand is, however, a complex matter with many terms to consider (Ghodeswar, 2008). Brand communication helps the customer identify with the brand and relate to its values and personality (Wheeler, 2013). Ghodeswar (2008) claims that brand personality is the promises customers associates with a set of core attributes, whilst Aaker (1997) defines it as the human characteristics of a brand. Aaker (1997) says that brand personality traits are created and shaped when consumers are in contact with the brand. The author
exemplifies the framework by stating that “...personality traits associated with Coca-Cola are cool, all-American and real [...] Pepsi being young, exciting and hip” (Aaker, 1997, p. 348).

To embetter customer relationships even further, brands can now take to chatbots for even further customization of their communication by adding the human-like cues. What’s more, Zarouali et al. (2018) say that the use of human-like cues can be considered one of the most important developments in the area of information technology business. By using chatbots, companies can have customized conversations with customers who will not have to navigate through websites or other mediums to find what they want (Zarouali et al., 2018; Wilson, Daugherty & Morini Bianzino, 2017). Also, IBM say that by replacing humans with chatbots in the simpler customer service activities, companies can cut costs by 30% (Reddy, 2017).

Some brands have taken the technology even further. For instance, Apple, Google and Amazon have created their own virtual assistants (VAs), all able to have a verbal dialogue with customers, answer their requests and they even have their own personalities. For instance, Amazon’s Alexa is considered to have a friendly tone and being calm, while Apple’s Siri has a sassy humor and can even become jealous if the user talks about other virtual assistants (Wilson, Daugherty & Morini Bianzino, 2017). Even though these assistants were created originally for obeying commands, some VAs are now able to have different kinds of dialogue and let the user become as personally involved with a VA as with a human employee at these companies (Perez García, 2018). This is a growing market, in fact, in 2017 there was 145M users of VAs and that figure is expected to grow to over one billion users worldwide by 2025 (Tractica, 2018).

With virtual assistants, digital inbound marketing can be taken to new levels by having one’s brand entering people’s living rooms as a result of a request to their assistant (Wilson, Daugherty & Morini Bianzino, 2017). Domino’s, for example, is connected to Google Home so that you can order a pizza by talking to your Google Assistant (Domanski, 2019). In the same way, you can ask Oral-B for tooth brushing advice, or Tide about how to get rid of stains, simply by talking to your virtual assistant (Maheshwari, 2018). Thinking about these conversions, the question is whether there are other human-to-human communication aspects that may be applicable to conversations with virtual assistants whilst communicating brand personality.
1.2 Problematization

Guzman (2019) suggests that in the early stage of virtual assistants, it is important to study people’s perception of this technology as it can be associated to the user’s own personality and cognitive style. Zarouali et al. (2018) suggest that it is important to look at human-chatbot psychology to help us understand chatbot interaction. Nass and Moon (2000) also recommend that there is a need to make analytic comparisons between human-to-human and human-to-computer interactions. The authors say that it is desired to know what characteristics of a computer or other media can affect an individual’s response in social terms, and how this will correspond to a human-to-human interaction.

Batra and Keller (2016) explain that in the new complex communication environment, marketers need tools and knowledge to build structure around new media opportunities that come with the digital age. The authors say that digital media offer a lot of potential for marketers, but that the integration and communication challenges must be comprehended. Virtual assistants are another communication tool which is going to influence companies’ marketing strategies (Dewhirst, 2018), and brings both opportunities and challenges. With this tool, there is a need to study what is required of this communication, as it might have an impact on how the brand itself is perceived. The authors of this report find it as interesting as important to look further into how brands and their personalities are communicated today, to be able understand new forms of expression. They thus aim to be able to create a theoretical framework of what virtual assistants need to be able to function as a communication tool for the personalities of brands.

1.3 Purpose and Research Questions

This report has investigated how brand personalities can be communicated through virtual assistants as an integrated marketing communication. With this research, companies creating or adapting VAs for marketing communication purposes can gain more knowledge on how this technology affect the perception of brand personality. The study has also investigated if the communicative aspects of VAs agree with the perceived personality of the brand, and if they in that case can even contribute to and clarify the brand personality. To fulfill the purpose of the study, this report has aimed to answer the following research questions:

- How is brand personality communicated via integrated marketing communications?
How does communication with VAs affect the consumers’ perception of a brand’s personality?

These questions are intended to cover the aspects the authors wished to research. This study wanted to investigate the importance of brand personality and how it must be integrated in companies’ communication. Further, it is of interest to compare the projection of this personality over several mediums, especially new ones, to make sure the different mediums reflect the same image. This entails that companies and consumers have successfully communicated the brand personality amongst themselves, and that marketers have managed to translate that personality into pictures, text and other semiotics in today’s integrated marketing communications.

Moreover, the researchers of this study find it interesting to see how VAs manage to communicate and project their brands’ personalities, because of the new and controllable form of conversation. This study suggested how characteristics obtained from virtual assistants’ verbal and non-verbal cues can affect the perception of the personality of the brand which a VA represents. These cues have therefore been analyzed to define the personality of a VA, and compared to its brand’s perceived personality reflected in its other marketing channels.

In conclusion, this study started in the present to find out how brand personality is understood, translated and communicated today, to be able to look into what is required of brand communication through VAs.

1.4 Scope

The study was limited by the small number of virtual assistants available in Sweden during spring of 2019. It was further limited by the design of the conversation and content analysis in this study, which required brands that had both a brand specific VA, content marketing and a graphic profile. These requirements made it possible to merely study three brands with specific purpose assistants.

The limited supply of well-developed and available virtual assistants proves that it is a relatively new phenomenon in marketing. Hence, not much research had been conducted in the area before this study, which gave the researchers little to no clear background to commence from. The restricted knowledge of the general public regarding the subject of virtual assistants hindered the possibility of a more quantitative study, and was the main
reason to why three empirical methodologies were used. This lack of experience can also have hindered the study, as the majority of the focus group participants were not used to use the VAs and even though provided with introductions and manuals, could not comprehend what the VAs are capable of. However, it is believed that this ignorance was helpful and of importance as the researchers could understand more about what is holding consumers from using VAs. Therefore, the attributes of brand, marketing and communication that need to be solved for consumers to perceive brand personalities in line with other marketing communications became clearer.
2. Theoretical Framework

*In this chapter, three theoretical blocks are presented in a funnel-like order, intended to be more and more specific. First, theory of integrated marketing communications and then more detailed-level to brand expression and its different components. Lastly, human-to-human communication theories and attributes are explained from the perspective of media and technology. Theories are summarized in a theoretical model to be used in the forthcoming analysis.*

2.1 Consistent Interactions: Integrated Marketing Communications

Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) is defined as the medium or technique marketers inform, persuade and remind consumers about a brand or products in a consistent fashion (Batra & Keller, 2016). Keller (2013) strengthen this with the claim that if a customer has a brand association the impact should be the same, unless consumers have their own association of the channel or efficiency of the communication. With today’s digital media landscape, marketers have more opportunities of customizing messages and targeting ideal customers (Batra & Keller, 2016; Keller, 2013). Therefore, Keller (2013) urges marketers to evaluate all channels in terms of efficiency.

Along the same line, Manser Payne, Peltier and Barger (2017) describe omni-channel marketing as a term with its origins in multi-channel marketing and integrated marketing communication. Multi-channel marketing implies that marketers communicate their brand via two or more channels that are synchronized, as the management is based on customers’ channel preferences (Manser Payne, Peltier & Barger, 2017). The authors further explain IMC as the interactive process of bringing together customer touchpoints, messages and media. Along with emerging technologies, marketers have more opportunities to choose how and through what channels they want to communicate with customers (ibid).

2.1.1 A Change of Direction: Digital Inbound Marketing

Opreana and Vinerean (2015, p.30) defines the concept of Digital Inbound Marketing (DIM) as:

“the process of reaching and converting qualified customers by creating and pursuing organic tactics in online settings”
In comparison, traditional marketing actions are looking to push their message out to the mass-market. DIM wants the interested and potential customers to find you when they want, to make a company seem more attractive and less intrusive to consumers (ibid). Edelman (2010) stated that this change of direction in marketing called for new or an expansion of roles as the customer journey now has become an interactive and faster experience. One will need an orchestrator coordinating the multiple marketing channels, a publisher or a content manager and an intelligence leader analyzing the data (Edelman, 2010).

Traditional marketing is aiming for increased sales, whereas DIM is more likely aiming for creating long-term relationships by reaching and converting consumers that are already interested in their business (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015). Edelman (2010) identifies four sources of value from the DIM. First, to create consumer engagement, the digital marketers organize their activities throughout their channels. Second, to empower customer co-creation marketers use brands. Third, marketers’ jobs involve the tasks of a publisher in order for them to support their products, services, etc. Lastly, they gather mountains of data to optimize and evolve all marketing activities. This enables marketers to correct, optimize and improve their marketing budget and marketing activities in real time (Edelman, 2010).

According to Wall and Spinuzzi (2018), academics in the marketing and communication field thinks that inbound marketing is the cocreation of value as companies needs reviews, comments, clicks, likes, and shares to build a successful marketing effort. “Markets are conversations” (Locke et al., 2001 p.75), a statement saying that this type of conversational marketing demands for other rhetorical techniques than traditional outbound marketing (Locke et al., 2001).

Opreana and Vinerean (2015) claims that there are different aspects and techniques in DIM, two of which will be discussed in the coming sections; Content Marketing and Social Media Marketing.

*The following two theories were included as they are seen as the beginning of brand voice, content marketing as a one-way communication and social media as an extension towards a two-way communication.*
2.1.1.1 The Monolog: Content Marketing

According to Opreana and Vinerean (2015), Content Marketing (CM) is one of the cornerstones of DIM. They define it as a technique used to attract and maintain the right audience by distributing valuable, relevant and consistent content, to result in a profitable customer action. Content can take many forms such as video, blog posts, apps, sound, interactive content and infographics (ibid). Wall and Spinuzzi (2018) say that CM must be valuable to consumers and they will therefore consume it willingly. Companies can construct both brand awareness and credibility whilst maintaining relationships by distributing their content through several marketing channels (Wall & Spinuzzi, 2015).

Bailie and Urbina (2013) argue that content is a vital aspect for companies to have. They claim that content made for customers is creating and building relationships and without CM it would be impossible to compete in today’s landscape (ibid). Andersen (2014) states that consumers nowadays demand content to be accessible, targeted, customizable and the possibility to give feedback on the provided information.

2.1.1.2 The Two-Way Conversation: Social Media Marketing

Social Media Marketing (SMM) is a way for companies to communicate their content, make it more viral, improve customer relationships and to create communities (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015). Beukeboom, Kerkhof and de Vries (2015) say that companies use SMM for entertainment but also for customer service, product information and special campaigns to promote and their products, brands and build relationships. Peer-based communication such as SMM have a great impact on customer decision-making and therefore also a company’s marketing strategies (Tikkanen et al., 2009). The authors claim that this interactivity is the key as companies can learn about their customers and customers can give feedback. Shamsudeen Ibrahim and Ganeshbabu (2018) also discuss the interactive opportunities of SMM, that consumers can communicate directly with companies and that it works as an e-word of mouth. By feeling belonging to a community through SMM it may increase the feeling of loyalty amongst followers and the potential customers (Shamsudeen Ibrahim & Ganeshbabu, 2018).

2.1.3 Availability: Channel Strategies

Batra and Keller (2016) state that by identifying the strengths of various media channels in a marketing strategy, marketers can sequence them in a way to make consumers move more quickly towards the brand and the decision journey.
Due to the changes in the information technology in recent years a new term has emerged: “channel multiplicity” (Van Bruggen et al. 2010, p.331). Channel multiplicity is a joint term for all the channels customers need from independent and a seamless customer journey throughout the buying process. Moreover, the increased customer need for more customer service has revolutionized the way firms and customers interact (Van Bruggen et al., 2010). The authors identify two distinguishing characteristics; (1) the need of multiple sources of information and the multiple sales and support touchpoints to be used during and after the actual purchase. (2) Customers both expect and demand more. They expect the transitions from one step to another during the buying process to be completely seamless, from the initial search to the post-purchase service (Van Bruggen et al., 2010).

Verhoef, Neslin and Vroomen (2007) discovered that the choice of channel depends on where the customer is in the journey. The authors describe research-shopper phenomenon which is based on that customers will use one channel for information, and another one for purchase. Van Bruggen et al. (2010) strengthen this phenomenon by claiming that customers want yet another channel for the post-purchase service, rather than the same they used for the pre-purchase phase of the buying process. However, channel multiplicity can also be used to find or target different types of customer segments (ibid). Beukeboom, Kerkhof and de Vries (2015) found that followers of brands on, for instance, Facebook have a more positive attitude towards the brand and are more willing to spend more money on its products. Batra and Keller (2016) explain that marketers today have more possibilities to communicate with consumers but therefore less control over the brand message. One should have consistent messages and complement the channels to have a well-structured IMC (Batra & Keller, 2016).
2.1.4 The Pre-Phase: Chatbots

Figure 1: Structural Model for the Effectiveness of a Chatbot on Facebook (Zarouali et al., 2018)

According to Zarouali et al. (2018), one of the most important developments for online interface applications is the use of online social and human-like cues because of its augmented level of communication. A manifestation of this trend is the development of chatbots, which are used in chat services and they are developed to understand language text, execute commands and respond in a human-like manner (Holtgraves et al., 2007). Chatbots are able to engage in a close-to-human interaction based on the technologies machine learning and natural language processing, which also enable the bot to automatically learn more over time (de Mello & Ponti, 2018; Liddy, 2001).

Zarouali et al. (2018) claim the main purpose of using chatbots is the productivity they deliver, as chatbots can help more efficiently than a human when it comes to standard
queries. Wilson, Daugherty and Morini Bianzino (2017) say that chatbots are increasingly representing the brand considering the attitude, tone and vocabulary which can be added to a chatbot. They argue that every interaction between the chatbot and a user is an opportunity for the user to judge the artificial intelligence (AI) system, and thereby, the brand itself. As one single chatbot has the capacity to talk to thousands of people at once, a bad or good impression can have a whole other reach when it originates from a chatbot instead of a human (Wilson, Daugherty & Morini Bianzino, 2017).

Zarouali et al. (2018) found that for chatbots to be efficient in a marketing context, cognitive and affective determinants are both important. Cognitive aspects are mostly determined by the perceived helpfulness of the chatbot, and affective determinants treat the emotions of the user while talking to the chatbot. Zarouali et al. (2018) propose that by having the chatbot include jokes or smileys to the conversation to increase joy, while also respond quickly and provide the right information to increase usefulness, the perceived effectiveness of the chatbot could also increase. In the structural model of a chatbot’s effectiveness, perceived usefulness, ease of use and helpfulness are included as cognitive determinants, and pleasure, arousal and dominance as affective determinants (Zarouali et al., 2018).

The affective determinants have been included from the PAD-theory in which pleasure, arousal and dominance are defined as three dimensions that can represent any human emotional state (Mehrabian & Russell, 1977). Zarouali et al. (2018) adopt the PAD-theory by having pleasure referring to the pleasantness of the conversation, and arousal to the mental stimulation and excitement that is perceived. Lastly, dominance refers to the level of control that the consumer feels over the conversation. Together, these are affecting a customer’s attitude towards the brand (Zarouali et al., 2018).

2.1.4.1 The New Face: Virtual Assistants

According to Wilson, Daugherty and Morini Bianzino (2017), one of the most powerful marketing strategies is to give a brand human-like characteristics. Bringing up Apple’s Siri and Amazon’s Alexa as examples, the authors say that customers are more likely to spend an increased amount of time engaging with the brand than if they were to interact with an employee. Guzman (2018) explains that the launch of Siri became a milestone in technology as it symbolized the realization of science-fiction based AI, and that apart from being more human-like, virtual assistants are also intended to be a routine in
people’s everyday life. Wilson, Daugherty and Morini Bianzino (2017) suggest that these virtual assistants could become more recognized or famous than the companies are themselves. This could cause problems for brands worldwide, as these “personalities” increase the danger of brands becoming generic instead of being differentiated. It could also arouse ethical and legal issues as companies makes more and more of its practice artificially intelligent (Wilson, Daugherty & Morini Bianzino, 2017).

Nass and Moon (2000) suggest that more social responses might be encouraged by software agents with more human characteristics. They also say that individuals could be attached to a computer with similar characteristics as themselves, just as they would with a human. Guzman (2018) shows that the perception of who you are talking to when using a virtual assistant may differ. Some people feel that they are talking to the phone itself - the voice of the machine -, while some feel that they are talking to a person that is separate from the device (Guzman, 2018).

Perez Garcia (2018) explains that virtual assistants can be divided into two categories; general purpose assistants and specific purpose assistants. General purpose assistants can be applied to Siri and Google Assistant as they can provide information from the web but also execute tasks like setting alarms, write messages et cetera (ibid). Specific purpose assistants are mainly developed to answer questions or execute tasks that are associated to a certain brand, institution or similar. As an adaptable technology, virtual assistants may therefore be a useful tool for brands in order to create new and personalized interaction with customers (Perez Garcia, 2018).

2.1.4.2 The Debug: Technological Acceptance Model

To understand why people were reluctant to start using computers, Davis introduced the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) in 1986 (Davis, Bagozzi & Warshaw, 1989). Thanks to this, the foreseeing, understanding and increasing of users’ acceptance of new
technology is possible since it maps out why people are reluctant to use (Davis, Bagozzi & Warshaw, 1989). The model looks at what external factors are affecting the person’s beliefs, attitudes and intentions. The goal is to find fundamental variables involving the cognitive and affective determinants or computer acceptance. It explains that there are two particular parts that are important in determining acceptance; perceived usefulness - belief that the usage of the technology will increase performance- and perceived ease of use -how much effort is needed to use it- (Davis, Bagozzi & Warshaw, 1989).

2.2 What Constitutes A Brand

Keller (2013) speaks of a brand as something that distinguishes one’s product or service from the competition, even if they satisfy the same need. Differentiation is the key to survival and marketers can brand anything by giving a product a name and claiming the offer and difference from competitors (Keller, 2013).

Wheeler (2013) mentions the importance for a brand to be consistent in their communications and to stay on message. Each word shared by a brand is an opportunity to inspire, inform and enhance word of mouth. Therefore, the voice and tone as well as the clarity and personality of each message must all work in harmony in order to engage customers (Wheeler, 2013; Opreana & Vinerean 2015). Wheeler (2013) further suggests that the language itself must be straightforward, since the language and communications are essential to all brand expressions. Furthermore, it is required that content and design work together to differentiate the brand, i.e. integrated communications (ibid).
2.2.1 Recognizing a Brand: Brand Identity

Kapferer (2012) created a prism to enable the understanding of what an identity of a brand is built on and what attributes are relevant to gain a strong identity. The edges of the prism are connected by four dimensions; externalization, internalization, picture of sender and picture of receiver. Additionally, the heart of the prism consists of six facets; relationship, culture, physique, personality, reflection and self-image, which together define the identity of the brand (Kapferer, 2012). All these facets must be interrelated while also representing the boundaries within which a brand can change or develop. A strong identity prism must be sharp, concise and interesting. It should contain only a few words in each facet and these must be of a vital strength as the identity should define what makes a brand stand out (Kapferer, 2012).

Kapferer (2012) claims that the brand identity is of importance as it indicates the marks left by the brand. That in turn implies that even if the main part of the brand identity must be compatible with the product or service provided, it must also be reflected by the brand name, the logo, the advertising and the packaging (Kapferer, 2012). It is also argued that brands can only exist if it can and do communicate, thus brand identity can be analyzed as a form of communication (Kapferer, 2012). Wheeler (2013) further explains the brand should always deliver unified brand messages regardless of the medium or context. The message must furthermore be identifiable, memorable and customer-centered (Wheeler, 2013).
Brand identity is defined by Ghodeswar (2008) as a set of associations with promises for customers and the actual identity divided into extended and core identity. The core of a brand is the most essential part made up by static and fundamental characteristics. Ghodeswar (2008) says that the extended identity concentrates on brand personality, its relationship. The role of an effective brand identity is distinguishing a brand from others, resonate with customers and represent the company and its intended future. A clear and consequent brand identity is established by easily understood communications of brand attributes through the appropriate marketing channels (Ghodeswar, 2008).

2.2.2 Knowing a Brand: Brand Personality

![Brand Personality Framework](Aaker, 1997).

*In the top right corner, in the “Picture of Sender”-dimension of the Brand Identity Prism, one can find Brand Personality (Kapferer, 2012).*

Brand personality according to Aaker (1997), refers to the human characteristics associated with a brand. Aaker (1999) describes research focusing on how these specific personality traits have helped consumers to express themselves, their ideal self or a part of themselves through a brand. The personality is created based on a specific customer segment, to attract the targeted segment and compete with the rivalries (Arora & Stoner, 2009). It has also been used the concept whilst distinguishing brands within the same product category (Aaker, 1997). Brand personality is commonly characterized by “The Big Five” factors; Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication and Ruggedness, which all come to more specific examples. These factors are further characterized by so called facets. For instance, “ruggedness” can be characterized by the “outdoorsy” or “tough” feeling of a brand (Aaker, 1997).
These personality traits can originate from the perception of the brand’s spokespersons; CEO, employees and/or users, at the same time it can derive from the personality traits projected from semiotics and graphic profiles (Aaker, 1997). It differs from the product-related attributes and serve as a kind of self-expression. For instance, the author describes Absolut Vodka as a “cool, hip, contemporary 25-year old” (Aaker, 1997, p. 347).

Arora and Stoner (2009) argue that brand personality can be a source of a sustainable competitive advantage as it is an attribute that is hard to imitate. The authors say that brand personality is a part of the identity that conveys symbolic meaning for the customers and for the brand itself. Aaker (1999) states that consumers tend to prefer brands that reflect personality traits which are compatible with their own as they can be an extension of the customer’s own self-expression. Aaker (1999) suggests that a brand must either adopt a personality profile that is compatible to its main target and additionally, if the product/service is used in one specific situation, then that impact of the situation on customer attitude must be considered. Similarly, Arora and Stoner (2009) claim that strong and favorable brand personalities must give consumers a feeling of emotional fulfillment.

2.2.3 Distinguishing a Brand: Semiotics and Visual Profile

Bergström (2017) defines a visual profile as a translation of the values, identity and vision of a company. The visual profile is a result of thorough research, something that needs to be represented and used by all departments of a company. It can substitute the personal interaction, which comes to life through a multiple of choices -from envelopes to ads and business cards. Bergström (2017) says that companies enforce strict rules in a design program written down in a graphic or a visual manual with the intent to have a united front of the company and makes them look professional. Oswald (2007) says that a system of signs and symbols that engages the consumer by contributing value to a product can define a brand. A design program usually includes a logotype, colors, templates and rules of what different standard elements should look like (Bergström, 2017; Oswald 2007).

Oswald (2012) highlights the importance of synchronicity; that the brands need to transmit a unified and clear message of “who” they are, through the different signals the brand is constantly transmitting in almost every possible way imaginable. Boström (2017) explains that signals consist of an expression (shows something) and content (means something), which in the end can be broken down to icon, index or symbol. Coca-Cola is
an example that proves the power of symbolic representation as they through visual, audio and verbal signs have captured the hearts and minds of consumers (Oswald, 2007).

2.2.4 Experiencing a Brand: Brand Experience
Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) define brand experience as the customer response to brand-related stimuli; sensations, emotional responses, cognitions and behavioral intentions. These emotions and sensations derive from the brand’s identity in the visual design experienced through the packaging, overall communication and other environments (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009; Chang & Chieng, 2006). Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) say the stimuli customers are being exposed to is often of subjective interpretation, such as colors, shapes, typography, slogans, mascots and so forth, so the entire brand experience is highly internal. This means that customers can have widely different experiences of one single brand, depending on how they respond to previously mentioned stimuli (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009). Chang and Chieng (2006) present another version of brand experience called shared experience. This is based on the bodily experience and lifestyles of one’s customer and their interaction, and the relating to other people and cultures (ibid).

2.3 The Cornerstones of Human Communication

![Figure 5: Media Synchronicity Theory (Dennis, Fuller & Valacich, 2008)](image-url)
2.3.1 Enriching Conversation: Synchronicity

According to Dennis et al. (1998, p.48), to be synchronous means to be “moving at the same rate and exactly together”. Swaab et al. (2012) argue that communication is presumably enhanced when the people can hear, see and directly respond to one another in the conversation. A spoken conversation has even proved to enhance the perceived trust between two individuals compared to if they would engage in a written conversation (Valley, Moag & Bazerman, 1998). Daft and Lengel (1986) say that spoken conversations provide more richness to the information. In other words, this “richness approach” explains that social interactions become more personal with the presence of sight, sound and synchronicity. These aspects are also determinants of whether people are willing to work effectively with each other, as communication limitations make trust less achievable (Swaab et al., 2012). The richness can therefore be higher depending on what communication media that is used, where rich media can allow rapid feedback and multiple cues (Daft & Lengel, 1986).

Swaab et al. (2012) further explain that the richness approach argues that it is of critical importance to be able to hear and speak to each other. The authors say that paraverbal and nonverbal cues, such as tone of voice, gestures and brief verbalizations can generate enough clues between two individuals to make them trust each other. Interpretation and perception of the emotions in a conversation is to a wide extent based on voice pitch as well as loudness and tempo of voice, and hence, the absence of vocal channels can make it harder to achieve effective communication. Therefore, there is a higher risk of misunderstanding a written text than a vocal message. Similarly, the authors say that communication quality is enhanced by synchronicity, such as when people can directly respond to one another in real time (Swab et al., 2012). Synchronicity eases spontaneous communication and decreases the level of misinterpretations that are more likely to occur when people cannot provide direct feedback (Swaab et al., 2012; Dennis et al., 1998).

2.3.2 Coordinating Conversation: Media Synchronicity Theory

Miranda and Saunders (2003) say that different media offer different levels of synchronicity; high and low social presence. The authors refer to social presence as the degree to which a media enables interpersonal relationships and awareness during an interaction. A video conference may let individuals transmit and process information more dynamically than an e-mail, so it can be argued that a bigger social presence will enhance the synchronicity of communication (Miranda & Saunders, 2003; Robert &
Dennis, 2005). Individuals tend to prefer high social presence media for smaller amounts of information, and low social presence media for large amounts of information (Robert & Dennis, 2005).

From the assumption that both transmission and processing are needed in information sharing, Dennis, Fuller and Valacich (2008) identify two communication processes that can be applied to all tasks; conveyance and convergence. Conveyance is where the receiver creates a mental image of a situation based on new information, while convergence is an individual interpretation of already processed information. Both processes involve both individual transmission and processing of information, but to different degrees and in different ways (Dennis, Fuller & Valacich, 2008).

To understand communication performance, one must look to communication processes as they are enhanced or limited by the media used (Dennis, Fuller & Valacich, 2008). These processes together with media capabilities influence the communication performance, and in turn, the synchronicity. The authors show this connection in a media synchronicity theory as they describe how media capabilities, communication processes and appropriation influence the overall communication and task performance (Dennis, Fuller & Valacich, 2008).

2.3.3 Enjoying Conversation: Theories on Communication Attributes

Barcelos, Dantas and Sénécal (2017) found that companies can increase customer satisfaction on social media and purchase intentions by using a more human and less corporate voice. Nass et al. (1995) found that individuals tend to be socially attracted to their own personality traits, even if the conversation is held with a non-human object such as a brand or a computer. Attributes such as communication style and other non-verbal cues, can play a role to make an impression about the brand’s intention and personality, just like a human would adapt tone and style to make an impression on another person (Barcelos, Dantas & Sénécal, 2017).

Searls and Weinberger (2001) urge companies to adopt a human voice in the conversation happening in every market. This implies that companies must be open to talk, radiate openness and transparency and to be able to give immediate feedback. Searls and Weinberger (2001) further underline the importance to let go of the corporate talk and instead carry out the communication with a sense of humor, transparency of mistakes and treating others as humans as well. Morkes, Kernal and Nass (1999) also bring up humor
as an important factor for fostering liking and attraction between individuals. The authors suggest that incorporating humor in technology might enhance likability and increase user satisfaction (Morkes, Kernal & Nass, 1999).

Hargie (2017) speaks of three types of responding styles: non-assertion, assertion and aggression. Non-assertive responses are the apologetic, easily ignored, who hesitates and speaks softly and avoids conflicts at all cost. Assertives are the ones who stand up for themself, but still think about others. This particular style involves communicating spontaneously, with a stable tone and expressing one’s feelings. The aggressive ones interrupt, talk loudly and put themselves over others. Furthermore, people tend to like to interact with people within their own ‘group’ and communicating with people from other styles can be somewhat problematic (Hargie, 2017). Nass et al. (1995) prove that this is also true when communicating with computers. The authors’ experiment showed that people with a specific level of assertion were drawn to a computer with the same level of assertion programmed in its communicative functions (Nass et al., 1995).

2.4 Theoretical Model

![Figure 6: Preliminary Model: Brand Communication through VAs (Own elaboration, 2019)](image)

To unite the theories and thus be able to use them in the analysis, a theoretical model was created. It is suggested the addition of the human-to-communication theories from chapter 2.4 to the expression of brand identity and personality. The idea at its core is that VAs can add another type of dimension of the communication in an enhanced way, thanks to the added spectrum of conversational attributes.

The VA in this model is the transmitter of the communication. Factors from human-to-human communication theories make up the verbal and nonverbal cues that decide the quality and delivery of the conversation. Furthermore, the communication transmitted
through the VA should clearly portray the personality of which the VA represents, as it should through any other integrated marketing communication. The model was tested and the result is presented in chapter 4 of this study.
3. Method

This chapter describes the academic mindset and how theory and data was collected. It describes in further detail how the three substudies were conducted and designed and how the pilots of each study went. The research quality and ethical implications of the study are presented at the end of the chapter.

3.1 Scientific Perspective

According to Carson et al. (2001), studies of an interpretivist nature use and return to theory during different stages of their research and they make little or no assumptions in their oftentimes inductive study. Furthermore, the interpretivist researcher is sometimes referred to as the “human instrument” and their role in the study will have a great impact as their past experience influence the process and result. The intent is to understand something in a given context (Carson et al., 2001), and this study will therefore be of the interpretivist nature.

Phenomenology, constructivism and realism are, amongst others, popular research perspectives under the umbrella name of interpretivism. Phenomenology, according to Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault (2016), views human behavior through how people interpret the world. In other words, they see the world through other people’s eyes and understanding of a social phenomenon. Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault (2016) further claim that phenomenology is central in the qualitative research methods to obtain descriptive data.

As this report is looking to understand how VAs will affect brand communication while taking consumer perception into consideration, a phenomenological perspective is supported. The researchers believe that it would have been hard to use another tactic as the objective is to understand the a new circumstance which is not something customary yet. As the researchers are looking to understand something on a deeper level, the broad scope or drawing of general conclusion are not sought after as that kind of more realistic approaches are not plausible.

3.1.1 Research Strategy

Bryman and Bell (2011) state that qualitative research is mainly focused on exploring instead of drawing general conclusions over larger populations from data as quantitative methods are. Neither is it concerned with objectivity, but instead concerned with how
people think and act in real life. This goes along the same lines as those of Taylor, Bogdan and Devault (2016) saying that qualitative research results in descriptive data from people’s words or observable behavior. They further claim that people tend to describe qualitative data as more focused on creating than testing theory, even though that is not unheard of (Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2016). What’s more, as this is a new and rather unexplored territory, the strategy is going to be qualitative to gain a deeper understanding as there is little or no big data to draw conclusions from (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

3.1.2 Research Approach

An inductive study allows data to guide the research and theory building, whilst a deductive approach involves developing a theoretical and conceptual structure on beforehand and then testing (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This is further strengthened by Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault (2016) saying that qualitative research is inductive in its nature and researchers within this field often start with a loose idea of the study to be changed along the process. What’s more, an inductive approach often includes the goal of building theory (ibid). This study has taken on an inductive approach as the path was never clear and has kept on changing. The researchers started with extensive research in the area to unveil what could and should be studied. This research plan has continuously changed depending on outcomes in what was found in previous research, during the data collection and analysis.

3.2 Research Design

The research consisted of three substudies in order to gain different perspectives and viewpoints on the research topic. These substudies were interviews with marketers, a conversation and content analysis based on brand- and communication theory, and focus groups to gain the perspective of consumers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Marketers active in the field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation and Content Analysis</td>
<td>Virtual Assistants; three Brand Specific and three General Purpose Assistants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Groups</td>
<td>Three groups of four students who all had studied marketing courses on university level</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Overview of Substudies
According to Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault (2016), the research design in qualitative studies are flexible throughout the research. Moreover, triangulation is according to Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault (2016) the combination of methods or data sources to fundamentally understand the subject. This study was designed in a manner so that the researchers can fully understand a phenomenon from the most relevant and existing angles possible; marketers, consumers and the actual VAs. The study was built so that communication and brand identity are the independent variables that directly affect the dependent variable, brand communication through virtual assistants.

The study is of an explorative nature and it is also why the research methods were chosen; to be able to have open discussions with marketing professionals and consumers. Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault (2016) claim that qualitative interviews are dynamic and flexible, and therefore also considered the favorite digging tool amongst social researchers. They define it as understanding the lived experience by informants in their own words, discovered through conversation between equals (ibid). Similarly, Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault (2016) describe focus groups as an exploration of how and why people make decisions and give insights which wouldn’t have been possible to reach outside the setting of a group discussion.

Piloting according to Bryman and Bell (2011) is, if possible, at all times desirable. Piloting an interview guide can provide interviewers with experience and therefore more confidence. Another benefit of piloting is that the researchers had a chance of testing instructions, as well as the flow of the schedule of the study and if the questions or, in this context, topics are in the most convenient order (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Therefore, all three studies of this report were piloted to ensure the clarity of instructions and/or optimal order.

3.3.1 Interviews
To gain an understanding of how brand personality is considered and used in a marketing perspective, interviews with marketing professionals, i.e. people working within marketing, were conducted. Bryman and Bell (2011) describe semi-structured interviews to be based on an interview guide with some topics that the interviewers would like to cover, giving the interviewee a great freedom in their answers. Therefore, the layout of the interview is not fully determined and can look differently depending on what the interviewee chooses to answer. Bryman and Bell (2011) describes this as one of the main
characters, as well as a benefit, of qualitative interviews, that one can go off script quite easily and one should encourage the interviewee to speak their mind.

3.3.1.1 Interview Design

The interviews started with an introduction of the study to put terms and theory into a specific context. This was also so that the interviewee would understand the purpose of the study and so that they, while still talking from their professional perspective, would not go into an area that would be too far from the purpose of the investigation. At this point, the researchers’ thoughts and hypotheses were kept to themselves, as they did not want the interviewee to feel obligated to please the researchers. All interviews lasted about an hour and the interviewees were marketers from different marketing agencies.

First, the interviewees were asked if and how their firms are considering a brand’s personality when working with a company. The interview then moved on to talk about brand expression, how the industry looks today and how it has changed throughout the years (the full interview guide is available in Appendix 1). Lastly, the interviewees were asked whether they thought the new upcoming technology and especially artificial intelligence (AI) will either change the way they work or the way brands want to express themselves. The researchers searched interviewees’ prognosis of AI as a possible comparative factor in the analysis.

During the interviews, one of the researchers took notes of the main arguments and some valuable quotes made by the interviewee. The interviews in person were also recorded after getting consent and transcribed as recommended by Bryman and Bell (2011). The authors argue that transcription of interviews can help researchers gain a deeper understanding of what was said in terms on tone, missed or forgotten quotes and counter researchers’ biases (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The skype interview was complemented by the interviewee sending powerpoints and other documents of the discussed topics.

The interviews were transcribed or summarized and then compared to find their main arguments and topics the interviewees brought up in a thematic order. These were presented in the result section of this study with quotes as proof and summarized data. Quotes from Gustav, Johanna and Lars were translated from Swedish to English to fit the chosen language of this paper.

Table 1 shows the job titles of the four interviewees and how the interviews took place. The interviewees were all situated in different areas of Sweden, and therefore it was for
convenience that they were executed in different places and with different mediums. In the selection of interviewees, slightly different professions within the digital marketing industry were desired to gain different perspectives from people who all had knowledge and experience within this study’s area of research. Three of the interviewees were found through common connections, and one was located through research on marketing firms in the nearby area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gustav</td>
<td>Internet Marketing Consultant/CEO</td>
<td>In person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johanna</td>
<td>Production Manager/Creator</td>
<td>In person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Business Developer</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lars</td>
<td>Business Developer</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Overview of Interviews

Gustav is the CEO of an internet marketing consulting firm, which mostly helps smaller companies with their search engine marketing and social media marketing. Johanna works as a production manager and creator for an integrated marketing firm which helps companies and organizations with concept, ideas and production for advertising and marketing throughout several channels. Daniel has experience within the integration of design, technology and business and has been working with developing and implementing chatbots and new technology into businesses. Lastly, Lars is working for a content marketing firm which helps their clients with strategies, content production and digital distribution.

3.3.1.2 Pilot of Interviews

Before the interviews, pilots were executed on three business master students. After presenting the introduction and overall structure, the students gave feedback on the themes, relevance, how key points were presented and the structure of the interviews. This resulted in a shorter introduction and minor changes of the structure for the interviews.

3.3.2 Conversation and Content Analysis

A study to compare how brands express their personality through different dimensions and channels was conducted. The ambition was to obtain more concrete data as the other two studies involved interviews and focus groups, which both have more descriptive and
interpretive data. By doing this, the researchers of this study also hoped to see whether the perception of brand personalities were affected by different mediums.

Bryman and Bell (2011) bring up the emergence of virtual documents as a basis for performing a content analysis as a common tool in qualitative marketing research. It is an approach assessing content in predetermined categories or themes (Mayring, 2004). The themes in this particular study were attributes from brand personality and communication theories, according to which the IMCs were categorized by the researchers. The approach of this substudy also slightly agrees with an ethnographic content analysis, where the analysis is aimed to be systematically analytical, but not rigid, and allows for appearance of new categories (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The same principle can be used for semiotics, which is the study of symbols and can be related to other data and especially texts (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Bryman and Bell (2011) present conversation analysis as a qualitative research method which may be defined as the analysis of talk as it is used in interactions. The authors suggest that conversation is the basic form from which social order is achieved and its focus on details can enhance understanding for social interaction. Furthermore, conversation analysis treats language as an own topic rather than a resource and may be of the same significance as the medium that the conversation is held through (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

3.3.2.1 Conversation and Content Analysis Design

The study consisted of two parts: First, an analysis of three brands and how they express themselves through their different integrated marketing communication techniques. Here, a conversation analysis was executed on the brand specific VAs, and a content analysis on their content marketing and graphic profile. Second, a comparison of how three general-purpose virtual assistants responded to different questions with focus on their communication skills. It was decided study the general-purpose assistants separately as they have a different purpose than the brand specific and have more developed communication skills. In a pre-analysis, all six brands and VAs got profiled according to how the researchers perceived their characteristics based on earlier interaction with the brands as consumers (see the full report on the Conversation and Content analysis in Appendix 2 and 3).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>ICA Voice</th>
<th>ICA CM</th>
<th>ICA Graphic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brand Personality traits (Aaker, 1997)</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sincerity (domestic, honest, genuine, cheerful)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Excitement (daring, spirited, imaginative, up-to-date)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Competence (Reliable, responsible, dependable, efficient)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sophistication (Glamorous, pretentious, charming, romantic)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ruggedness (Tough, strong, outdoorsy, rugged)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Zarouali et al (2018)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Helpfulness, Pleasure, Arousal, Dominance</td>
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<td>Hargie (2017)</td>
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<td>Barcelos, Dantas &amp; Sénécal (2017)</td>
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<td>Assertion</td>
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<td>Human</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Extra traits</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Synchronicity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Swaab et al. (2012)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dennis, Fuller &amp; Valacich (2008)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Differences from brand and this channel</strong></td>
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</table>
| Table 3: Prototype of Conversation and Content Analysis

In the first part of the content analysis, three brands’ VAs were analyzed; ICA, Arla and H&M. The choice of brands was based on the criteria that the brand must communicate both through content marketing, semiotics and specific-purpose assistants and they must be present in Sweden in the spring of 2019. After research, there were only these three brands that fulfilled these criteria, and were therefore chosen as part of the study.

The second part of the study included three general-purpose virtual assistants; Alexa, Siri and Google Assistant. These were chosen based on that they are the three virtual assistant platforms that were most known to the researchers and were all also currently available in Sweden. To gain a perception of the assistants’ communication skills, conversation analyses were conducted through interviews with the VAs. The interviews included questions of three categories; personal questions, how it responded to emotions and lastly, its creative communication (see Appendix 3 for full interviews).
The purpose of this substudy was to analyze how the communication of brand personality through virtual assistants compare to the personality that a brand exposes through content marketing and graphic profile. As previous research suggests, the brand communication should be correlated across all IMCs. Brand personality was chosen as a focus point instead of brand identity as brand personality specifically represents the human characteristics associated to a brand, which followed the same theme as the human-to-human communication theories. Brand personality is also one of several factors composing a brand identity (Kapferer, 2012), which was considered too wide-ranging for this study. Hence, Aaker’s (1997) brand personality theory was chosen as a source of brand personality attributes for the analysis. The researchers looked for signals of Aaker’s (1997) facets; the sub-attributes of the so called “Big Five” factors. By doing this, they believed they were able to establish a level of each factor. Furthermore, attributes from several communication theories were included in the study to investigate how communication brand-to-human may be analyzed from a human-to-human perspective.

First of communication theories was the model on chatbot communication by Zarouali et al. (2018). All the affective determinants from the model were included; pleasure, arousal and dominance, as the study aimed to prominently investigate how the IMCs correspond to human factors in a conversation. Hence, helpfulness was the only cognitive determinant that was included, as usefulness and ease of use can be considered more connected to the technical skills of the chatbots, which was not the purpose of this study.

The theory by Barcelos, Dantas and Sénécal (2017) was included in the content analysis to see if it is favorable for companies to use a human tone of voice instead of a corporate one. The corporate voice of the IMCs was interpreted as how robotic or uncharacteristic a voice was. Furthermore, it was chosen to investigate each separate IMC according to Hargie’s (2017) three points in a continuum of responses; non-assertion, assertion and aggression, to investigate if the level of assertion can affect a brand’s perceived personality.

Lastly, the media synchronicity theory by Dennis, Fuller and Valacich (2008) was applied on the communication of the different IMCs to find if the level of synchronicity of the IMCs affected the richness of a conversation. The IMCs’ levels of synchronicity were also based on the theories of Swaab et al. (2012) to see if synchronicity can achieve more trust between, in this case, human-to-brand.
A comparison was performed on how the characteristics found in the IMCs corresponded to the beforehand perceived characteristics of the brand. It was also analyzed if and how any of the communication aspects could contribute to the brand personality.

![Prototype Voice, CM och Graphic](image)

**Figure 7:** Prototype of Results from Conversation and Content Analysis

To see the differences between the virtual assistants, content marketing and graphic profile of the brands, and the difference between the general purpose assistants, spider chart were made from the results obtained in the table. All attributes were given a scale of one to five by the researchers, according to which each IMC of each brand was valued. If an attribute was not applicable to an IMC, it was given the value zero, since the value one was considered a level to which the IMC applied to an attribute. The values were then plotted in a spider chart, as seen in the prototype above. This method made it visually possible to see what personality attributes each brand’s IMCs could be identified with. According to theories on a unified brand message and consistent personality (Kapferer, 2012; Wheeler, 2013; Aaker 1999), the IMCs in the diagram would preferably have about the same values for the same attributes.

### 3.3.2.2 Pilot of Conversation and Content Study

Two marketing master students tested the framework created for the study. They tried associating the IMCs for one brand with the attributes from the brand personality and communication theories, similar to what the researchers were going to do. This was to
make sure that the study could be carried out according to the planned structure and if the theories chosen were relevant. From the feedback provided by the participants a few modifications were made for the final version of the study, for example the removal of one communication theory and a slight reorganization of the table.

3.3.3 Focus Groups

To cover the most relative perspectives as possible on this new phenomenon, focus groups were included as a part of the study to research consumers’ opinions. Focus groups are according to Bryman and Bell (2011), as the former investigates a topic in explicit detail by looking at how the participants reacts as a group and to each other’s opinions. In other words, the interaction within the group is of greater importance than the actual interview. With this technique, one can learn more about why people think or feel the way they do, and how they collectively make sense of a certain phenomenon (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

To create a well-planned structure for the focus groups, the steps developed by Carson et al. (2001) were followed. They present three steps one should perform before having the focus group; defining the problem, establishing groups and planning for the session, and selecting a moderator.

3.3.3.1 Focus Group Design

Twelve students were divided into three groups of four. Bryman and Bell (2011) state that the selection of participants for a focus group depends on the nature of the study. It should begin with some criteria, and among those who fulfill these, one can choose participants or the selection can be randomized. The choice between natural groups or groups where participants do not know each other also depends on the nature of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2011). For this study, participants were selected from the criteria that they had to have studied at least one course in marketing on university level. A randomized selection was not carried out, but students were asked to participate based on their pre-recognized ability to express opinions and thoughts in a group in order to stimulate a discussion where all participants were involved. In the privacy of a classroom or a smaller study room, participants tested the VAs available on two smartphones. It was presumed that by keeping participants amongst friends, they would be more comfortable expressing their thoughts on a subject that was new to many of them.

The sessions started with 10-15 minutes introduction and testing of four brands’ different VAs, which were chosen based on the results in conversation and content analysis.
Subsequently, some initial questions on the participants thoughts were asked to start conversation and discussion. During the session, the moderator and assistant moderator tried to interfere as little as possible and merely steered the participants between the subjects in line with the theoretical framework.

The sessions were designed to last about an hour and aimed to cover topics in the following order with some specific questions or keywords scribbled down under each headline to help moderate the discussion in the correct way:

- **Introduction (10-15 min)**
- **Brand personality/Identity (10-15 min)**
- **Stereotypes (10-15 min)**
- **The VA’s personalities (10-15 min)**
- **Development and Future Usage (10-15 min)**

The focus groups were recorded during the sessions for the ability to be listened to and analyzed afterwards. Bryman and Bell (2011) state that transcribing focus groups is more complicated than transcribing interviews as people in focus groups tend to talk over each other. Hence, the authors explain that the transcription of focus groups are often missing fragments. Therefore, summaries of what was said in each focus group were written down including topics discussed, general opinions, and quotations that were considered valuable for the discussion and analysis. These summaries were then compared to find common opinions and the main topics for all focus groups, and presented in the results of this study as summarized data. In other words, analyzed in a thematic order. All quotes were translated from Swedish to English to fit the language of this study.

### 3.3.3.2 Pilot of Focus Group

A pilot study was carried out on other students with masters in marketing. Since the focus groups were built on free conversation, response from the students in the pilot was not required, but merely feedback on the introduction and the questions that would be used as direction. From this feedback, the manuscript was edited into a final version. It was also found out in the pilot that the participants had little or no experience with virtual assistants. If they had any, it was mostly experience on one of the brand’s VA and not all four that was included in the focus group sessions. It was therefore concluded that it was preferred to have smaller number of participants to enable testing the VAs during the
session without it being disturbing others. A list of examples of what the participants in the upcoming focus groups could ask the assistants was also created as a result of the apparent insecurity in the pilot.

3.4 Research Quality

Bryman (2012) present that the trustworthiness of a qualitative study consists of four criteria; credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Credibility represents how a study’s findings can be confirmed by reality or the social world that the research has studied (Bryman & Bell, 2011). It aims to demonstrate the truth of the findings from a research and to ensure that the research has been carried out in good practice (Bryman, 2012). One recommended technique to establish credibility is triangulation, which is the technique of combining several methods in the study of the same phenomenon to gain multiple viewpoints which allow for more validity (Jick, 1979). In this study, triangulation has been carried out by combining three different qualitative research methods to acquire several viewpoints on VAs and how these reflect brand personality. These viewpoints include those of marketers, consumers and theoretical findings on the subjects discussed. With studies on VA being limited when the study was conducted, the involvement of several methods and viewpoints was both necessary for research itself, but also to allow for credibility of the findings.

Transferability is about ensuring that the empirical material is compatible with the purpose of the research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). Qualitative research tends be oriented towards a contextual uniqueness and significance of a reality, and aims for depth rather than breadth (Bryman, 2012). Hence, the transferability of qualitative research is not about gathering large samples of data or examined objects, but is about implementing careful and relevant choices (David & Sutton, 2016). The transferability emerges if the material of the study and its context can be applicable in other situations (Ryen, 2004). This study aimed to give a deeper understanding for how brands can use VAs in a marketing communication aspect, which was inspired from what earlier research have considered missing in the phenomenon of communication technology for marketing. With VAs growing within the marketing industry, but being a relatively unexplored area, the results of this study may be transferable to the understanding of virtual assistants as brand representatives and the strategies evolving this topic.
Bryman (2012) means that the purpose of dependability for qualitative is important for establishing trustworthiness. In other words, Bryman (2012) says that researchers should throughout the research process save the all relevant records, so that peers at any point have the opportunity to determine to what degree the study is carried out properly. This include documents regarding problem formulation, notes from studies and analysis as well as the justification of theoretical assumptions (Bryman, 2012). To promote dependability, this study has aimed for a transparency about its content and argued for how and why choices of methodology et cetera have been made. Furthermore, the study has been reviewed by supervisors and other students who have given relevant comments and opinions which have been reviewed and considered.

According to Bryman and Bell (2011) confirmability is the principle of making sure the researcher has acted to the best of their ability by avoiding bias and the bringing of personal values or values in the study. This includes the way it was shaped, how the data was collected as well as in the analysis and concluding the research. Bryman and Bell (2011) state that complete confirmability is rather difficult, but it should be of greatest interest to maintain the study’s credibility. The study should argue for its independence and openly include the way it might have been affected (Ryen, 2004). As Bryman (2012) declare, the involvement of reading and providing of feedback increase the level of objectivity and thus confirmability. Hence, some credibility is given to this essay, as it has been provided with feedback from opponents during seminars. However, in this study there have been contact with several individuals in the collections of data, which might have affected its credibility negatively.

3.4.1 Ethical Implications
In humanistic and social science research, to enable and maintain quality, relevancy and that it is ethically correct, Vetenskapsrådet (2002) present the research demand. There is also the individual's protection demand ensuring that there are ethical principles to avoid the harming or the invasion of individuals privacy, both individuals in and surrounding the study. The individual’s protection demand is divided into four criteria with the purpose to establish norms for researchers and study participants (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002). This, with the aim to establish protection of both the research demand as well as the individual’s demand. These principles are not supposed to take a major role in the research, but instead offer guidance and give researcher a foundation for reflection (ibid).
Vetenskapsrådet (2002) says that the first rule is the information criterion, demanding that the researcher shall inform the participants about the research and their purpose in the study. The outlook of the study shall be presented, as well as the knowledge contribution and motivate their participation. The researchers of this study, initiated interviews and focus groups by explaining the aim of this study, to encourage their participation. The participants were also informed about for what part of the study that their contributed information was going to be used.

The rule of consent is the second criterion, that the study’s participants have control over their participation and this needs to be collected from the researcher/s (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002). In this study, the participants were clearly informed about how the information that they provided was going to be used. Furthermore, despite the interviewees giving consent to have their names used in the report, the researchers chose to only use their first names out of discretion. All participants in the focus groups were informed that they would be anonymous, and are therefore not named in the study. No participant in the study was underaged, and therefore no consent from parents or a legal guardian was required.

The third criterion is the one of confidentiality, that it should be given to the participants and that their information about their persons will not be reachable and identifiable by third parties. Ethically sensitive topics should take extra precautions protecting the information of identifiable individuals and should sign a non-disclosure agreement (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002). This criterion is believed to be fulfilled, as neither personal information nor sensitive topics have been presented or studied. As no participant has been revealed with its full identity, it is believed that no harmful consequences will affect the participants based on their contribution to the study.

Vetenskapsrådet (2002) say the fourth and final is the criterion of use. This states that the gathered information from participants is only allowed to be used in the context of research. Thus, the information or data is not allowed to be used in a commercial or non-scientific purpose. Moreover, without explicit consent, it is prohibited to use the information in decisions that the affects an individual. All data was handled with discretion and the researchers have no intent to share or use the data collected for this study for any other purpose.
4. Result

In this chapter, the outcome of the interviews, the conversation and content analysis and the focus groups are presented. They are presented individually to provide a clear overview of what was obtained from each qualitative method. The interviews and focus groups are presented according to common topics discussed. The results from the conversation and content analysis are divided into the different IMC categories.

4.1 Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understanding Brand Personality</th>
<th>Communicating Brand Personality</th>
<th>If and How VAs will Affect Brand Personality.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gustav</td>
<td>Work is normally based on what feeling they get from the company.</td>
<td>More digitized today with algorithms doing the job for you. Much easier to polish your brand personality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johanna</td>
<td>Very important. Has grown and become a part of the company as a whole.</td>
<td>Must be more transparent now. Lifestyle and feelings have also become more important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Brand personality is not about a product or logo; it is a promise delivered.</td>
<td>Different eras in marketing. Digitalization have changed strategies and will keep doing so.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lars</td>
<td>Starts by looking to the personality but can add a feature to make it more viral. Especially language must show personality.</td>
<td>Marketing is constantly changing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Compilation of Interviews

The interviewees were working in marketing but had different roles and evidently different views on brand personality and how AI can change their field in the future. Being semi-structured interviews, the discussions varied with different sidetracks and perspectives. Nevertheless, common themes could be identified and divided into three main categories; how the interviewees understand brand personality today, how it is communicated and how they believe virtual assistants (VAs) can affect marketing or brand personality.

4.1.1 Understanding Brand Personality

Gustav works with smaller businesses and says the brand personalities of their customers are something intuitive and hard for them to express. He adapts the brands’ personality
and expression (i.e. words and images) according to what has worked with targeted audiences in the past:

“What works becomes one’s personality”

Having customers in the entertainment industry, Gustav said the communication is often adapted to the product and not always the brand itself. This is something that Lars also discussed, that the communication is controlled by a feeling:

“The language can vary a lot. Is this brand funny, correct, sassy, challenging etc.? This is most evident in text.”

Lars also underlined the importance of creating spread, for instance, making the content of one of their customers’ social media pages more humoristic and therefore relatable. Lars said that a client’s brand personality and its customer segment are some of the strongest determinants for what images, channels and tone of voice that his firm adapts to the client’s content.

Johanna explained a common assignment the marketing agency often faces is to find a personality or to verbalize it. She said that brand personality is an important communication tool which should penetrate an entire organization, not just the marketing department. An example from a former project came up, where the employees of a client did not take responsibility as it was not the company culture, which partly originated in that responsibility was not part of the brand personality. Johanna said that every company must find a feeling of who they are and what they stand for and implement that feeling in every part of the brand:

“You’ve got to boil down everything you stand for into a drop of feeling”.

Daniel added that a brand is a promise and spreads over the interactions through different channels, and that all touchpoints add value to the overall experience of the brand. Daniel brought up Spotify as an example of such a brand which one can interact with through various media, places and settings. This has generated a brand which is always present and interactive with a reliable approach.

4.1.2 Communicating Brand Personality

Daniel presented the different eras of marketing and how it has gone from the focus on products to a focus on brand expression. According to the respondent, the latest
development is mostly based on digitization, enabling brands to express themselves through different channels. Daniel said that it is why visual and internal voice has become more important, as brand communication and building strong customer relationships are strong trends in today’s marketing climate. Johanna also highlighted how brand personality has become a significant trend today and that it is something that all companies must involve in their marketing, as well as whole organization. Marketing has gone from being about the product to be about the brand, entailing everything from core values to communication tools, according to Johanna.

“What the communication takes care of these days, except selling a product, create a brand and a feeling, is to attract new talents to the company. [...] Here the personality becomes very important and that is very easy for the companies to understand nowadays.”

Lars agreed with how marketing is no longer about pushing your products onto the customers.

“Many consumers are tired of the noise from traditional advertising on TV and other advertising media. You want a message that you can use, learn from or get inspired by.”

Therefore, brands today must reach their customers in a more organic way through camouflaged marketing. This was also brought up by Gustav, who explained that customers today do not have to realize themselves that they need something, but the constant presence of discrete marketing does that for them:

“It is not always that people say 'I am interested in this' but it is something that Facebook has determined based on their activities online.”

Johanna also agreed with Lars’ view on the loudness of marketing. The respondent claimed that it is far from effective, consumers do not want to feel pressured and marketing approaches should be customized. Johanna brought up an example to highlight that marketing campaigns have gone from ads focusing on the technical features to instead the lifestyle that their brands provide:

“From being a car driving around, pointing at features and attributes, to Volvo Moments where the child is about to be hit by a car - it builds on her experience of first
day of school. [...] You get a feeling and this is how you connect a whole lifestyle to
Volvo - 'I want that lifestyle.'"

4.1.3 How and If Virtual Assistants Will Affect Brand Personality

“With new channels -and voice- clever companies should use it to create something
special for customers. [...] Voice will become a part of not only marketing, but also
product experience, like smart dressing rooms.” - Daniel

Daniel meant that VAs will contribute to the customer journey and become a trend by
adding value to other parts than just marketing experiences. Voice commands make it for
example easier for both children and the elderly to use and understand new technology.
Meanwhile, Johanna thought that voice will be another tool in brand expression, but that
it can never replace humans. She sees AI as standardized and therefore risky to replace
humans, who can understand and sympathize with customers, but underlined the
economic benefit that it can have. Along the same line, Lars thinks that this type of
technology will become more and more important over time, but the company has not
gotten a request in this field, and therefore not been forced to engage in the discussion or
learning process.

Johanna further discussed whether it is a tactic, that the static conversation one has with
the VA platforms today is a strategic move from the large corporations. The respondent
argued that they could have done so to allow consumers to get used to the technology of
speaking to devices and the technology is much more advanced than consumers think.

Gustav and Daniel both had the opinion that voice technologies will be a major factor in
marketing portfolio in the future.

“Chatbot is a pre-step for the voice, and companies can go directly to voice.” - Daniel

Gustav is a firm believer that consumers’ journey will shift and that simple things like
searches will look completely different in the future. He described how companies today
can manipulate their presence in social media by hiding angry or upset comments, i.e.
shadow banning. Gustav suggested that with the rise of voice commands and search,
companies will be able to target and segment customers depending on their feelings.

“I’m convinced that in ten years you’ll be able to segment depending on one’s mood. If
no laws prohibit it.” - Gustav
So, if an angry customer searches for something mid-tantrum, certain companies can make sure that they won’t show up in the search results.

Daniel underlined the importance of not forcing technology upon people, and that right now consumers are still just getting used to it. In his opinion, it is a matter of getting used to speaking to your device in public and before that becomes more socially acceptable, devices for the home are selling in large numbers:

“Once we get over the strangeness of talking to a VA in the street, the home is a safe environment and you want to be able to talk to a robot in a safe environment. That is why it is so much focus right now on home assistants.”

4.2 Conversation and Content Analysis

All IMCs could to some extent project brand personality traits. The general purpose virtual assistants were superior to the brand specific VAs in this aspect, as they were applicable to all theories. A clear difference could also be identified based on the competence of the virtual assistants. ICA’s and Arla’s virtual assistants, which misunderstand many commands and have a limited vocabulary and few functionalities, were also difficult to associate to all communication theories. Overall, one can see that the better functioning VAs contributed to the perception brand personality, meaning that the conversation analysis added to the experience. In contrast, the VAs of lower quality or development did decrease the perception of the personality of a brand, and contributed to a negative brand experience. The full conversation and content analysis can be found in Appendix 2.

4.2.1 Content Marketing and Graphics

The content marketing and the graphic profiles of the brands tended to correspond well with the pre-impressions. ICA’s familiarity was clearly shown in its content marketing where the tone of countryside is signaled in the text and pictures. The articles in their magazine combine recipes with informative pieces on their products and life advice, which gives the brand traits of helpfulness, pleasure and responsibility. This while having fun, warm colors in its graphic profile which has been the same for many years and hence, somewhat correspond to the same familiarity and reliability.

Arla was perceived in the pre-analysis as domestic and genuine in both its graphic profile and content marketing. The company’s graphic profile uses colors of nature which
connects to the Swedish countryside reflecting the dairy products that they produce. Their content marketing included recipes mainly traditional Swedish cuisine. The recipes and the informative pieces on their website also give the company traits of being helpful and responsible.

H&M has a rather powerful and bold logo that is easy to recognize, but the rest of the graphic profile could be analyzed as rather generic and minimalistic. The logo’s recognizability enhances the brand’s genuine and reliable traits and the boldness in the red color generates daring implications and assertiveness. H&M’s content marketing was analyzed from their online educational pieces about their sustainability and fabric care. This content marketing could be interpreted to reflect responsibility, helpfulness and up-to-date in the brand personality and communication.

4.2.2 ICA and Arla Virtual Assistants
The virtual assistants of ICA and Arla unfortunately had low capabilities and limited communicative synchronicity, even if ICA could perform the few tasks it was currently designed for. While both brands have a consistent and well-known brand message in their content marketing and graphic profile, this was not reflected in the VAs.

Figure 8: Results from Arla’s Conversation and Content Analysis

In Figure 7 above, it can be seen that the personality traits of Arla’s VA differ from the ones perceived by the content marketing and graphic profile of the brand. The only
characteristic that was applicable for all the brand’s IMCs was the one of sincerity, otherwise it was difficult to find any clear attributes of the brand personality theory that could be associated with the VA. The lack of vocabulary and conversational message of the VA made it hard to generate a feeling of its personality from the conversation. Foremost it was the lack of capability that gave the most negative impression of the virtual assistant, which was also the reason to why it could not apply to most of the communication theories either. Here follows an example of non-functioning conversation with Arla’s VA.

Arla: “Suggest an ingredient.”
Interviewer: “Carrot.”
Arla: “I do not think it is a good idea to cook with carrot.”

The Arla assistant gave a small impression of sincerity based on that it introduced itself, that it had a name and because of its constant misunderstandings still tried to continue the conversation:

Arla: “Hi there! I am Carla and I am your personal cooking assistant. What kind of recipe are you looking for?”
Interviewer: “Vegetarian.”
Arla: “I do not find anything with vegetarian. Try to suggest another ingredient.”

The content marketing and the graphic profile of Arla indicated a personality of high competence and sophistication, sincerity and care for natural heritage. The VA of the same brand was not sophisticated or competent, but had an assertiveness, almost aggressiveness, as its strongest personality trait.
Figure 9: Results from ICA’s Conversation and Content Analysis

Figure 8 shows that ICA’s virtual assistant do show some traits that agree with the personality perceived by its content marketing and graphic profile, for example competence, sincerity and pleasure. However, these characteristics were not as clear for the VA and hence show less value. The assistant could excuse itself when it did not understand something, which made it slightly more human-like:

“Did you say XX? I have unfortunately not learnt what that means yet. What do want to do now?”

ICA was responsible and helpful when it came to the feature of adding items to the personal shopping list. This was however the only feature where its competence was well-received, mostly because it gave certain instructions on what one could ask. However, this meant that it gave no room for dominance in the conversation for the researchers. Apart from this feature, the competence of the assistant and the synchronicity in the conversation were close to non-existent. The assistant often misunderstood and tended to leave the conversation when it did not understand the commands. At the same time, it could respond to some questions that could be considered humorous, but not helpful considering the assistant’s purpose:
Interviewer: “Who are you?”
ICA: “I am Monica. I could tell you all about myself but you would never have the energy to listen to all of my legendary stories.”
Interviewer: “Find recipe.”
ICA: “Sorry, now I did not understand.”

According to ICA’s content marketing and graphic profile, its personality shows high sincerity, competence and sophistication, and its content marketing implies pleasure, helpfulness and even some arousal. Though the VA had implications of these traits, it did not manage to show through at all times. Instead, it adds some qualities of assertion and humanness. As shown in Figure 8, the values of these traits are not that high either, and the VA’s personality gives the impression of mediocrity.

What was common for both Arla and ICA in the analysis was that their robotic voices, limited vocabulary, and tendency to misunderstand the context made it difficult to analyze the assistants both with the brand personality theory and the communication theories. ICA could follow certain commands and worked well when the user asked about these. It also apologized when it did not understand, which was not the case with Arla. This assistant did not recognize its limitations and could not perform the commands that itself suggested, which became the reason to why it was excluded from the focus groups since it was not considered able to contribute to any discussion. Neither of the two virtual assistants agreed with the pre-impression of the brands.
Figure 9 shows that H&M’s content marketing, graphic profile and virtual assistant implied many of the same attributes. Sincerity, excitement and competence showed in all three IMCs, and both sophistication, helpfulness and pleasure were indicated in the VA and the content marketing. The virtual assistant furthermore had attributes of dominance, humanness and synchronicity in the conversation.

H&M’s realistic and human-like voice and modern vocabulary managed to have a well-functioning conversation with a clearly helpful intent. The voice sounds to be of a young woman, not too characteristic but friendly and helpful. This corresponded to what was found in the analysis of H&M’s content marketing and graphic profile; a generic brand that is always present. For instance, there is no particular color profile in their graphic profile except for the red logo, and the fonts used do not stand out. The virtual assistant felt friendly and genuine, like she really wanted to help:

“Hello again! Do you know what you’re looking for today or do you need help finding a gift?” [...]  
“Of course, I’m not happy until you’re happy.” [...]  
“Soz, I didn’t find any suggestions that fit.” [...]  
“Awesome, I have some suggestions we can take a look at!” [...]

Figure 10: Results from H&M’s Conversation and Content Analysis
H&M’s VA did not say anything irrelevant, at the same time as she had a personal and genuine tone, modern slang and held an overall enjoyable conversation. This was the best communication out of the brand-specific VAs. Even if the assistant gave suggestions of commands, it still understood when one used one’s own words and sentences, which gave the interviewer some dominance in the conversation. The assistant was always helpful and had a friendly level of assertion; not too shy or too aggressive.

As seen in Figure 9, H&M’s virtual assistant proves to be a new dimension of the brand’s personality. It more clearly showed traits that were associated to the brand in the pre-analysis, content marketing and graphic profile. It also added characteristics due to its conversational abilities which contributed to the liking of the brand overall.

4.2.4 General Purpose Assistants

In the interviews the general purpose assistants, most questions were successfully responded by all three (for full interviews, see Appendix 3). Although, several differences in their language, processing skills and personalities became evident. In Figure 10 above, it can be observed that Google Assistant attained high values for all attributes except ruggedness. Considering that some of its most dominant characteristics were sincerity, competence, sophistication and helpfulness, a sudden ruggedness would might give the feeling of an ambiguous personality. Looking at Siri, which had some ruggedness, scored
lower on the traits that applied to Google Assistant. Siri’s main characteristics were mainly determined by assertion, excitement and competence. Alexa’s personality did not shine through like for the other two assistants, which explains its low values in Figure 10. The personality of Alexa could therefore be considered rather mediocre and static.

A clear difference was that Google Assistant was the only one that could respond properly to follow-up questions and convey a two-way dialogue, which is shown in the quotation below.

Interviewer: “Can you cheer me up?”
Google Assistant: “I've been waiting for you to say that. We can play a game, I can tell you some jokes. Or we can see what random fun comes our way.”
Interviewer: “Ok, tell me a random fun.”
Google Assistant: “Okeydokey, I spun the wheel of random fun, and you got a quote...”

Considering its ability to respond to emotions and conduct a flow in the dialogue, Google Assistant was perceived to have the most synchronized conversation compared to the other two. It was also the virtual assistant that enhanced its emotions by using emojis and sound effects. Even without these sound effects, the assistant always sounded friendly and cheerful while still being assertive with the ability of taking own initiatives, as seen in the conversation above. Furthermore, it had a charming and romantic side by complementing the user when it got the chance, and adapting to the apparent emotional state of the user based on the given commando. These traits can be seen in the following examples:

Interviewer: “Who do you work for?”
Google Assistant: “I guess you can say I work for you. I’m your assistant after all. By the way, you're the best boss. [happy emoji]”

Interviewer: “I’m angry.”
Google Assistant: “I am sorry to hear that. How can I try to help? [waits for response]”

Siri, on the other hand, used rather simple phrases and had a bit more of a robotic tone of voice than Google Assistant. However, Siri also had a human side, which especially showed in sarcastic responses. The assistant could almost be perceived as pretentious and aggressive in some of the conversations, here referring to Bruce Springsteen’s nickname ‘the Boss’ and a quote from a popular TV-show:
Interviewer: “Who do you work for?”
Siri: “You are. But it gets a little bit confusing when Bruce Springsteen is around.”

Interviewer: “Is winter coming?”
Siri: “Does a Lannister always pay his debts?”

Siri was also the only assistant, and the only IMC overall, that could be described with an attribute from the category of ruggedness. Even if it could not hold a two-way conversation like Google Assistant and could not respond to some questions, its human personality traits still gave pleasure to the conversation and managed to differentiate the brand it represents.

Alexa gave the least social impression of the three, mainly because of its low competence that is mostly limited to commands rather than a social dialogue. Alexa’s voice was also the most monotonous and robotic out of the three interviewees, with little humor added. At times, however, it was hard to know if it was joking or just incompetent, for example in the quotation below where it is hard to understand if Alexa actually believes that the interviewer’s name is ‘hungry’.

Interviewer: “I’m hungry.”
Alexa: “Hello Hungry, I’m Alexa.”

Alexa could further be close to non-assertive in some situations by hesitating before finally saying that it was not sure of the right answer. It was always friendly, but its monotonous voice and short responses made the conversation slightly boring. While Siri could add a short laughter and Google Assistant added emojis or a more cheerful tone of voice when telling jokes, Alexa told the joke indifferently.

Regarding how the VAs correspond to their brands’ personalities, it was only Siri and Google Assistant that truly reflected their brands. This was concluded from the brand personality and communication theories and how these compared with how the pre-analysis. Following quotes visualizes how Siri, and Apple, put themselves next to others, and how Google Assistant, as well as Google, would describe themselves.

Interviewer: “Do you like Google Assistant?”
Siri: “I’m pretty loyal to Apple, it’s just how I’m made.”

Interviewer: “Describe your personality?”
Google Assistant: “*I describe myself as an optimist. And I like to help, so that makes me an optim-philantropi-ist* [smiley face]”

Throughout the interview, Google Assistant was perceived innovative, fun and smart with a high level of helpfulness, which is how Google as a company was described in the pre-analysis of the brand. Siri’s sassy persona and simple responses showed characteristics of Apple’s cool, clean and trendy personality. Alexa, however, did not match with the pre-analysis of Amazon, which is known for its entertainment value, efficient sales and energetic approach. Alexa proved to be very static, even boring at times, and had a very introverted personality as well as lack of communicative skills.

Interviewer: “*Thanks for responding to my questions.*”

Google: “*When the team at Google finds out I’m being helpful they’re going to be so proud!* [happy emoji]”

Siri: “*Sure thing.*”

Alexa: “*Sorry, I don’t know that one.*”

In conclusion, Google was the assistant with most synchronicity in the conversation and most human traits based on its hints of empathy and need to please the user. Siri represented a persona in its personality, but did not engage in the conversation to the same extent. Alexa was the one that gave least impression in both personality and conversation.

4.3 Focus Groups

4.3.1 Purpose

There is a threshold for using voice technology, only a few participants had some experience. Some of the focus group participants claimed that one of the reasons for their lack of experience was due to that they were worried of being listened in on, and that participants feel rather uncomfortable to talk to the VAs. What’s more, the majority of the participants in all three focus groups stated that they felt they had no use for them and that as it is more of a de-tour using the VAs than doing things yourself, as shown in the quote below.

“They must improve if they want to be a better option than just googling things yourself.

*Right now, it is easier to go to your computer or phone. [...] Is it a modern-day dictaphone? But I need to edit my text.*” - FG2
In the first group focus group, the participants got somewhat annoyed with the VAs having elaborate and witty answers to meaningless questions, but no answers to questions of heavier matter.

“It’s just crappy things that say something about something, and is only there to amuse people. You don’t get any actual help, but it still has an elaborate answer.” -FG1

They didn’t see the purpose of talking without getting anything back or they had no control of the conversation. Meanwhile, that particular humor was appreciated in the third focus group which meant that when the competence is lacking, humor can be a silver-lining:

“At least it’s funny”

4.3.2 Brand Personality Through Voice

Some participants were shocked to hear the human voice of H&M’s VA. The first group discussed whether human-like voice is perceived as less knowledgeable and if it feels like it has less answers than a robot. They did agree on the feeling that they were talking to customer service or a sales representative, but not the brand itself:

“I saw it [the VA] more as a tool than personal expression” -FG3

The discussion moved on to that this was a part of all actions within a company, brands hire people that have or communicate the same values as them and therefore the voice of the VA is similar to that persona.

“Theyr personality is like their customers’, not the people making it. Apple is not a tech-company, it’s a design company” […] “Pepsi or Coca-Cola is Messi in a pair of swimming trunks or a bikini” -FG2

The participants in all three focus groups liked the human voices more than the robotic ones and discussed whether it should be adapted to customers or if the brand should stay on message. In FG1, it was argued that people with accents or the elderly would perhaps identify better with brands if they heard a similar voice. But as one participant said in FG1:

“Rather no voice at all than the wrong voice”
This was mentioned when the focus group was speaking about ICAs robotic which, according to them, had a very “off” language. FG3 suggested that the voices of virtual assistants should be as human voices, contextual:

“You have different needs for different kinds of voices depending on the situation and location; after a hard day at work you’d rather have a warm and welcoming voice when you come home, because you’ve been talking to straightforward voices and taken hard decisions all day.”

In the second focus group, it was argued that brands today should be very careful about choosing a voice, with the disappearance of physical stores, it becomes even more important to have the virtual part of communication as a strong one. The participants agreed that the voice of H&M’s VA perfectly represented the typical sales representative at an H&M store; a cheerful and calm woman in her thirties:

“The wrong voice would hurt a brand, as physical stores are disappearing more and more, would this channel make you lose the brand.”

4.3.3 Technological Acceptance and Trust Barriers

Another topic was also brought up by several members across groups; the anti-digitalization. Many participants expressed the feeling of wanting to be anti this change and were worried of getting their privacy compromised by being listened to at all times. Some expressed that they also felt an urge to go completely against the digital movement:

“I just want to buy physical cook books, just because”. -FG1

Nevertheless, the participants admitted that they have been reluctant to technology that they now are using every day. For instance, they claimed that right now they could not see themselves trusting the hypothetical VAs giving style advice in clothing stores, but also mentioned that maybe it would be easier to hear sensitive information from a robot than a person.

“I need to see the garment in front of me, so I can’t let go of the screen [...] You don’t want to be an old man just saying no, and I know I was hesitant at first towards the Face ID” -FG1

A participant in the first focus group brought up a video clip where Google present their virtual assistant that makes phone calls, with a human voice uses words and expressions in the same way as a human would. In the video clip, the receivers of the calls had no idea
that it was a robot that they were talking to. The focus group speculated that the
technology has probably come much further than what the public knows, but that people
might be scared of talking to a robot that was so close to a human assistant.

As mentioned earlier, some participants in the focus groups argued that it felt like a robot
would be more knowledgeable, and a human voice would not have as many answers. Some participants even thought it was a bit scary with a realistic human voice, one
participant expressed that it was because they had only had used Siri before, and argued
that its voice is robotic. The participant claimed that it almost felt intrusive with a human
voice:

“What are you doing in my phone?” -FG2

The opinion against the human voice shifted after having spoken to the VAs and the
participants considered it was nicer with a human voice, the barrier of speaking to it was
lower. They further discussed that it would be easier to be or get angry at a robotic voice,
as it feels like it is not sympathizing with you. This argument was ended with the
statement saying that at the moment, a robotic voice feels more knowledgeable. But if the
VAs would be developed, the human voice would be preferred.
5. Analysis

*In this chapter, the results from the three studies have been integrated with theory and analyzed in the order of the theoretical framework blocks. Within each block the analysis, the order is according to the main topics that came up in each substudy. The theoretical model has also been developed from its preliminary draft to a final version based on the analysis.*

5.1 Integrated Marketing Communications

5.1.1 The Current Marketing Landscape

Aaker (1999) suggests that a brand should adopt a personality profile that is compatible to its main target. In the case of a product/service being used in one specific situation, then that impact of the situation on customer attitude must be considered. Gustav explained that this is exactly what they do when creating content for a client, they adapt the content to the brand personality, but also to the specific product and situation that the content is made for. He said that brand personality is hard to express in words, and it is therefore easier to highlight it through more concrete methods, such as channel and and the customer segment. Lars mentioned that it is the brand personality, but also the customer segment, which decide what channels, images and text that they use for a certain client.

Gustav said that “*camouflaged marketing*” through social media and content marketing is the new way of the business. Moreover, Johanna and Lars said that consumers do not want to be overwhelmed by offers and information and therefore companies should be selling a brand captured in feeling or a promise. Similarly, Opreana and Vinerean (2015) claim that this inbound marketing makes a company seem more interactive and less invasive. Edelman’s (2010) four valuebringing sources of DIM was brought up by interviewees and focus groups alike; customer engagement, co-creation, creation of content whilst getting data in real time with feedback. Participants in all focus groups claimed that they would appreciate to be able to co-create the VAs with their personal preferences, that it would contribute to a greater experience. Moreover, content is essential in companies’ customer relationships and it would be impossible to compete without it (Bailie & Urbina, 2013). Daniel highlighted the changes that marketing has been, and is still, going through and especially during the current era of digitalization:
“Advertising is going through a change; it operated in the same way for a very long time and now digitalization has come along and the distribution of power has shifted. How it has shifted depends on who you talk to.”

Because of this change of direction in marketing from outbound to inbound, companies have more and more ways of expressing themselves and communicating their brand (Batra & Keller, 2016; Keller, 2013). With more channels and techniques, it is also important to stay on message (Batra & Keller, 2016; Keller, 2013; Manser Payne, Peltier & Barger, 2017). Gustav, Johanna, Daniel and Lars all confirmed that it is important to stand out and differentiate one’s brand in the noise of today’s marketing landscape and that it is important to stay on message.

The more opportunities to connect with customers, the more seamless the customer journey (Van Bruggen et al., 2010). There cannot be any thresholds holding consumers back; which was supported by Manser Payne, Peltier and Barger (2017). Participants across the focus groups expressed frustration with the high threshold of using VAs. They mentioned that it would, for instance, be great to shop things through a VA but simultaneously they want to be able to see the products on a screen. It could be suggested that VAs could be a tool or complement rather than the main channel, for example the smart dressing room which was mentioned by Daniel. This way, companies can on a detailed level create a greater journey for customers based on their own needs and desires. This goes in line with what Opreana and Vinerean (2015) stated about creating long-term customer relationships and improving the image of the company. Daniel confirmed that building brand communication and building strong customer relationships is something that companies must embrace.

Another opportunity to build a stronger brand credibility and customer relationship is creating valuable content for customers across several channels (Wall & Spinuzzi, 2018). Social media made content part of a dialogue and hence, enabled more and faster spread of content (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015), which Gustav described was thanks to the algorithms working as catalysts, knowing what consumers liked based on their previous actions. Truly, with social media, it was suddenly possible for consumers and companies to interact which could add more value for both parties (Beukeboom, Kerkhof & de Vries, 2015; Tikkanen et al., 2009; Shamsudeen Ibrahim & Ganeshbabu, 2018). This goes in line with the marketing trends Johanna spoke of, that transparency and clarity of one’s brand need to be clear and companies are held accountable for their actions. It seems that
SM was the first step towards a one-on-one conversation, and the customization and personal touch have been getting stronger and stronger through the marketing eras (Van Bruggen et al., 2010).

That said, one-way brand communication such as content marketing and semiotics are great at expressing brand personality, as shown in the conversation and content analysis. It can be argued that the interpretation of a brand through content marketing and semiotics is a rather personal matter. This is supported by Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009), Boström (2017) and Oswald (2012) who say that the stimuli customers are being exposed to is often a subjective interpretation and highly internal. Nonetheless, in the conversation and content analysis, the content marketing and semiotics for ICA, Arla and H&M all corresponded to the pre-interpretation of the brands, which was not true for their corresponding virtual assistants. Wheeler (2013) confirms that content and design work together to make a brand differentiating itself and to create integrated communication and are therefore important attributes to maintain.

One-way communication has and still is playing an important in marketing. But looking forward, Wilson, Daugherty and Morini Bianzino (2017) and Daniel said that chatbots are increasingly representing brands and can interact with thousands of consumers simultaneously. There is both a logistical and economical benefit supporting the ideas of chatbots, as Siau and Yang (2017) claimed, supported by Holtgraves et al. (2007). Moving on, Daniel also said that chatbot is just the beginning of virtual assistants and voice as mediums. As Perez Garcia (2018) say, the communicative abilities of virtual assistants may make it a medium for brands to have a close and personalized interaction with customers.

5.1.2 Challenges to Overcome
Zarouali et al. (2018) and the theory of helpfulness claim that the conversation must be helpful to some extent. This was further confirmed in the focus group as the participants did not feel like they got anything out of speaking to the VAs and even felt irritated with bots being taught comic answers but not working correctly. As they had to repeat themselves many times for the assistants to understand, the participants did not see the purpose, presuming that VAs are created to ease the use of technology through voice. Indeed, if the communication is limited, trust risks to decrease says Swaab et al. (2012).
The focus group participants meant that it takes less time to just write in the search, which is shown in the quotation below.

“It takes more energy to talk, to make myself understood.” -FG1

Furthermore, the first focus group discussed a video clip of Google’s personal assistant’s capabilities and the argument that the technology is in reality more advanced, but the companies have yet to released it. This goes hand in hand with Davis’ Technology Acceptance Model (1989), the claim that one needs to understand why people are not willing to accept new technology, and perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use should be clear to consumers. This was supported by the focus group participants, and as previously mentioned, they did not see the purpose of using a VA. Similarly, the ease of use is also an issue amongst the criticism and the fact that it would be easier to do the things yourself.

Johanna also discussed whether it was a strategic choice of companies launching these ill-functioning VAs, and perhaps it is the same as the tablet launch; when Apple launched the iPad there were quickly followers launching their version. According to Vallet, Moag and Bazerman (1996), trust between two parties are greater in verbal conversation in comparison to a written one. So, companies launching ill-functioning VAs and chatbots today might be doing so for several reasons. Companies launching their VAs now could be hoping to get a first-mover advantage into a new trend. The focus group participants suggest that companies maybe interpret that people are not ready for robots that are too human, and therefore have kept them basic. So, maybe companies have the technology to have an interactive and human-like VAs, but no one wants to launch first and risk scaring consumers or not meeting the sales goals. This was also proved by the video clip that was brought up in the first focus group, showing how human and well-functioning the voice and vocabulary of Google Assistant can actually be.

The focus group participants and Daniel both stated that consumers are not used to talk to their phones and hence express uncomfortableness speaking to VAs, and even more in public. Daniel argued that it is a question of habit, and the focus groups mentioned this as well, that they had been hesitant to start using other technologies that they now have come to accept. The focus groups discussed if it was because it was a voice responding, and therefore it felt more intense than for instance an algorithm keeping track of your search history.
In conclusion, camouflaged marketing is extremely important today, at the same time as the choice and the multiplicity of channels are of equal weight. Companies’ marketing efforts are available in more dimensions and one does not have to shout anymore, it’s almost forbidden. Instead, the consumers are in control and decide when they want what information where, searching on the web for content marketing or social media.

5.2 Brand

5.2.1 The Complexity of Brands

Keller (2013) says that a brand is what foremost distinguishes a company from the competition, which was justified by Johanna who said that all brands must realize that they need and create a personality, otherwise you will just fade into nothing among the competition. She argued for that companies must make sure to fit everything they stand for into a feeling. The voice, tone, clarity and personality of each part of a brand’s message must all work in harmony (Wheeler, 2013; Opreana & Vinerean, 2015). Hence, a brand personality is considered a very important part of an organization, but it also holds an abstract complexity that must be understood and sorted out.

Gustav said that their firm does not generally ask their clients about their brand personality, they rather interpret the personality that one currently can identify with the brand. It comes from a gut feeling and is a question of how the brand feels from an outsider’s perspective. This is supported by Arora and Stoner (2009), who claim that brand personality must convey symbolic meaning for both the customers and the brand itself. Lars agreed that they do not always ask for a brand’s personality, but interpret the feeling themselves.

Lars further brought up the aspect of creating a brand personality from what suits the customers and not completely based on the company’s own values and opinions. He mentioned an example of where they as a firm added a humorous aspect to a brand’s personality to make it more viral and liked among consumers through content on social media. In this way they also improved the brand experience in a way that adds value to customers. Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantello (2009) state that brand experience is highly internal and might be perceived differently depending on how consumers relate to a specific stimulus. So, if a brand has a certain personality that shows in all aspects of the communication, which Johanna highlights as a vital part of a brand’s marketing, it still
might need to be adapted to attract a specific customer segment and therefore can generate different reactions in certain channels or contexts.

The question of context was also discussed regarding brand personality. The focus groups brought up the idea that it may be a possibility for brands to adapt their VAs to the person they are talking to and in what context. They argued that this would mainly make people more comfortable when speaking to a VA as well as co-creating a greater brand experience. Both Gustav and Johanna said that they believe that VA’s need to adopt some sympathy and customer adaptation to gain more trust among users. However, if VAs would be customized based on who they are speaking to, the unified message would be at risk and it might have a negative impact on a brand. If this customization would become a reality for some companies to gain trust for their virtual assistants, the brand identity must be even more clear in the words and unspoken cues.

5.2.2 The Importance of Brand Personality
Despite being discussed during the interviews and proved in the content study, the importance of brand personality was most clear in the focus groups. All three groups brought up that they got a bad impression of the virtual assistant representing ICA, mainly based on its limited voice recognition, limited features and lack of personality. All focus groups mentioned that this directly affect their brand experience, as they did not see the resemblance of ICA’s and the VA’s personality. A participant in the first focus group even mentioned that its liking for the brand was decreasing while talking to the bot, because it was not even remotely recognizable.

The focus groups also agreed with the importance of brand personality when seeing to the positive impression of H&M’s virtual assistant. Aaker (1999) says that a brand personality should be compatible with the targeted customer segment, and Johanna stated that a brand should correspond to all departments of a company; from marketing to HR. This, according to participants in the second and third focus group, can be considered one of the strategies behind the voice of H&M’s virtual assistant. The second focus group said that the voice perfectly created a mental image of someone who works at an H&M store, and that this recognition of the personality can make users trust the assistant more, as they would trust an in-store representative. The third focus group concluded that H&M does not seem to have created a voice that adapts to the typical customer, but rather that
the voice is supposed to represent the personality of the brand, and if consumers identify with that, they will be drawn to the brand.

Guzman’s (2018) explains that people’s perception of who they are speaking to when speaking to a virtual assistant is different; the brand itself, just a machine, or a person separated from the actual brand (a customer service representative, for instance). The general opinion in the focus groups about H&M’s virtual assistant was that it agreed well with the brand in the sense that it felt like they were speaking with an employee in an H&M store. The second focus group suggested that the voice of specific purpose assistants could and sometimes even should be of celebrities or others that are connected to the brand through commercials and ads, such as Messi for Pepsi. It can be analyzed that regardless of what persona that is chosen for a virtual assistant, it must be create a feeling of connection to the brand it represents.

Johanna agreed with Aaker’s (1999) theory which states that a strong brand personality should be something that the customers can identify with, because these personality traits can be an extension of the customer’s own self-expression (Aaker, 1999). Johanna brought up the example the lifestyle of Volvo that is visualized in their commercials. It is something that the customers can identify with while technical features, that had focus before in Volvo’s commercials, are harder to generate a feeling from. This also goes along with Arora and Stoner (2009) who claim that strong brand personalities must give a feeling of emotional fulfillment to the customers.

With more channels in which a brand can be communicated, it becomes even more important to have a consistent and clear message. The brand personality and identity must show in all channels, and therefore it must come from the inside and permeate the whole organization. This makes it natural to show the same personality in all channels and contexts, instead of applying a new personality for each channel used. Brands must figure out how they portray themselves and, as said in the first focus group, rather have no voice than the wrong voice.

5.2.3 The Significance of Brand Consistency

Kapferer (2012) says that a brand’s identity must be a unified message and be reflected in a brand’s product, service, logo, packaging and everything that is connected to the brand. Johanna also said that brand personality has become one of the most important communication tools for companies and that it must penetrate all aspects of an
organization. Daniel said that brand is a promise that must show through all channels in an organization, which agrees with Ghodeswar (2008) who defines brand identity as a set of promises. In the first focus group, the participants connected Google Assistant and Siri to their perception of how it is to be an employee at Google and Apple respectively:

“Siri’s sassy tone and Google’s friendliness kind of goes in line with what I have heard about the companies. Apple’s employees are all cool and trendy, while Google seems like such a chill place where everyone has fun.”

The first and the second focus group both mentioned that the brands should have the right voice, or no voice at all. One of the most common reasons in the focus groups for the disliking of ICA’s voice was because it was so far from the participants’ impression of the brand, which was also proved in the conversation and content analysis. These opinions agree with the theories of Kapferer (2012), Batra and Keller (2016), Wheeler (2013), Oswald (2012) and Opreana and Vinerean (2015); that a brand’s personality and message must be consistent throughout all channels.

In the interviews with the virtual assistants, Google Assistant reflected Google’s innovative, helpful and fun brand, and Siri’s care-free sassiness showed hints of Apple’s cool and popular image. However, Alexa’s monotonous and introvert personality did not agree with Amazon’s image of being effective, energetic and entertaining. Even though it has not been officially revealed by any of the companies to what extent the assistants are supposed to reflect the brands’ personalities and values, Google and Siri have still managed to do so. Kapferer (2012) means that brand identity indicates the marks left by a brand, and that these marks should be consistent in all communication. Oswald (2012) also argues that brands need to transmit a unified and clear message of “who” they are through different signals that the brand constantly transmits. So, even if the virtual assistants have their own persona, the signals that the brand can transmit through these assistants should give the customer clues of the brand’s own personality.

5.3 Communication

5.3.1 The Importance of How, Not Who

Daft and Lengel (1986) state that communicative limitations can affect trust between individuals negatively, which goes in line with what was found in the content analysis as well as in the focus groups. The virtual assistants with limited responses and limited word recognition had a negative impression on the participants in the focus groups, as there
was little or no chance of increasing or igniting liking and trust between VA and participant. According to Valley, Moag and Bazerman (1998), a spoken conversation also sparks more trust than a written one. This could be argued as true, as the lack of a functioning conversation made the focus group participants more hesitant or distrustful, and if the conversation worked (and was of their liking) they seemed to like the brand better.

One participant in the second focus group meant that what primarily ruined the experience with the conversation with some of the virtual assistants was that there was no synchronicity in the conversation. The perceived pleasure of the conversation with the VAs was also based on rich and fluent two-way communication that it generated, which agrees with the richness approach by Swaab et al (2012). This confirms the theory by Swaab et al. (2012) which says that synchronicity is the key to conversations you have in real time and that you can ask follow-up questions and get immediate response. A common annoyance in the focus groups was that the VAs could rarely hold a functional conversation without mishearing them or not be able to answer. In the case of H&M and ICA’s virtual assistants, the assistant even left the conversation if they were not able to respond to several simple commands. This agrees with the view of Dennis, Fuller and Valacich (2008), who say that synchronicity and media capabilities are more important than the voice of the media.

With the media synchronicity theory by Dennis, Fuller and Valacich (2008), the authors say that that media with higher social presence will enhance the synchronicity of a communication, which is also mentioned by Miranda and Saunders (2003) and Robert and Dennis (2005). Dennis, Fuller and Valacich (2008) say that non-verbal cues affect the meaning of a communication, which is agreed by Swaab et al. (2012). It may be argued that the VAs had a stronger projection of brand personality as they could more clearly provide non-verbal cues such as a tone and an attitude. This can conclude that individuals often judge others from these cues and hence, judge virtual assistants similarly. Google Assistant and H&M’s VA, for example, were considered the most enjoyable assistants as they had a friendly and cheerful tone and used modern expressions, i.e. portrayed a personality.

Another factor that has become one of the most ambiguous questions in this study is the one of humor. Morkes, Kernal and Nass (1999) suggest that humor foster liking and attraction between individuals, and that integrating humor in technology can enhance
likability and increase user satisfaction. Lars mentioned an example of effect, where his company added humor to a brand’s communication, which immediately made it more viral and talked about than earlier. Searls & Weinberger (2001) also argue that human traits of humor and transparency of mistakes should be adopted by all corporations. Moreover, humor can reduce the tension and fear of using virtual assistants by having the VAs promoting laughter (Morkes, Kernal & Nass, 1999). The first focus group found that some of the virtual assistants were provocatively humorous and had less focus on the very basic functions and they would prefer a more competent VA over humor. On the other hand, some participants in the other focus groups enjoyed the jokes and sound effects provided by Google Assistant. Similarly, participants in the focus groups seemed to have an emotional attachment and prefer these humoristic characters from old commercials.

One of the most split opinion in the focus groups was whether companies should have human or robotic voices, some participants’ opinions even shifted during the discussion. The focus groups participants’ argument was that the companies might have chosen a more robotic voice that is to be developed into a more human version over time. One participant in the second focus group suggested that they might not yet feel comfortable enough to talk to a virtual assistant that is too human:

“It’s nicer with a robot, it feels like you have control and there isn’t an intruder in your home.”

Despite that many participants initially said that they would prefer a more robotic voice, that opinion became ambiguous regarding what they liked and disliked about the VAs. ICA’s voice was not appreciated by the focus groups mainly based on its static and robotic voice. The focus groups tended to appreciate H&M’s human voice more than the others’, even those who said that they would appreciate more robotic voices for VAs in general. Therefore, it could be suggested that it is a subconscious preference to feel more satisfied by human voices. The second and the third focus group said that it is a contextual matter and that it depends on what kind of person you are and for what you are currently using the VA. Barcelos, Dantas and Sénécal (2017) suggest that the voice should be characterized with regards to what product or service that the company provides, where hedonic companies would have human voices and utilitarian should have a static voice.
5.3.2 What Is Needed for Voice as a Medium

Hargie (2017) suggest that people tend to be drawn to others with the same level of assertion in their personality and communication. People like the recognizable and what they can identify with, which Aaker (1999) confirms saying that consumers tend to be drawn to brands they can identify with, since they can be used as an expression. This is further supported by Nass and Moon (2000) saying that people can even prefer one computer over others, if the two of them share characteristics. The third focus group proposed that if you could eventually design your own personalized virtual assistant, where you can choose personality, voice and level of humor, people might appreciate it more and feel more comfortable using it. Some participants in the second focus group believed this to be necessary if virtual assistants were to become a routine in our daily lives:

“I think it is something that you should not underrate. Look how it is in real life. If this is what will become reality then it will matter - because we are automatically attracted to people who are like us. It feels safe, it is subconscious, it is nothing that we can control.”

Gustav suggests that in the future, virtual assistants will be able to segment or target customers based on their feelings that can be interpreted from their current tone of voice. As mentioned earlier, both Gustav and Johanna suggested that virtual assistants might need the capability of empathy and adapting to conversation in order to become widely used. It could, like humor, become a solution to the fear and insecurity that people may feel for virtual assistants.

While customization and sympathetic attributes might be an important factor for attracting people to implement virtual assistants in their daily routines, there are other factors that need to be considered first. It was foremost the level of synchronicity that turned out to be the decisive factor of the opinions about the virtual assistants in the conversation and content analysis and in the focus groups. Swaab et al. (2012) say that communication quality is enhanced by synchronicity, which was directly brought up in the second focus group. In the conversation and content analysis, limited communicative abilities of a virtual assistant influenced the quality of the conversation. Together with the reaction from the participants in the focus groups to inadequate VAs, this shows that synchronicity is just as important when speaking to a virtual assistant as with a human. If
one cannot get the same stimuli from a conversation with a virtual assistant as one get from any live conversation, the purpose and willingness of using VAs will decrease.

5.4 Development of Theoretical Model

The preliminary model worked as the stepping stone in the three substudies, taking into consideration different aspects depending on what was applicable in each context. The layout has been divided into a more detailed structure to visualize how different factors influence each other. Intent of the VA was included, inspired by the perceived usefulness-variable of the TAM framework by Davis, Bagozzi and Warshaw (1989), because the intent or purpose of the conversation was noticed to steer how the communication was perceived. Moreover, individual preference was added, working as a filter to portray the difference of how consumers might conceive attributes of a conversation, such as humor. Finally, the customer’s perception of the brand was added as this study has shown that it can be affected by the conversation with a virtual assistant. Even if this is partly based on the expectations one has from previous experiences with the brand, the personality that a VA reflects will be directly associated with the brand it represents. Virtual assistants are intended to be used for two-way communication with customers, and hence, the process of the customer response has been included in the model.

It is illustrated that the VA, i.e. the transmitter, uses human-to-human communication to reach the customer, i.e. the receiver, and the extent of human communication traits can vary depending on the intent of the assistant. However, the importance of communicating a brand personality must also be considered in the transmission of information, as it has been shown that regardless of the medium, the brand personality must be exposed in all
parts of brand communication. Hence, the model proposes that the personality traits of the brand shall shape the human-to-human communication. Hence, brand personality and human-to-human communication are the determinants of how a VA should conversate with a consumer, which was hypothesized in the first model presented in chapter two of this study.
6. Conclusion

This chapter present the conclusions found in the analysis and how these respond to the research questions and purpose presented in the first chapter of this study. Based on these conclusions and additional findings, suggested future research is also presented at the end of this chapter.

Brand personality must be communicated through integrated marketing communications in a clear, relevant and coordinated fashion. This study showed that brands’ personality should be present across all channels, and go in line with the entire organization. The new kind of integrated marketing puts the spotlight on the customers, and argues for building strong relationships by facilitating communication and engagement with one’s brand or product. With more integrated marketing communications continuously emerging, brands can provide customers with more opportunities to connect, which also can create value for the customers. Nevertheless, with new channels and technologies, there is a greater risk of polarizing the brand if there is not enough focus on a consistent message. Along the same line, with new emerging communication technologies there can be an acceptance barrier, as have been seen in the case of virtual assistants.

It has been found that there are three main aspects regarding how communication with virtual assistants affect the consumer’ perception of a brand personality; the intent of the assistant, how it reflects its brand’s personality, and how it uses human communication attributes. The intent of the VA affects the expectation of the customer and establish the subject and nature of communication. From a brand specific assistant, one may keep the conversation around the brand activities and its products or services, while a more open and general conversation can be held with a general purpose assistant. To avoid confusion of a VA’s purpose, companies should be clear about the intent of their assistants and the value they can bring.

It was also proven that a virtual assistant should, as all integrated marketing communications, reflect the personality of the brand for which it is made. So, with virtual assistants as a tool that brings many possibilities to customize communication better than any other IMC, the personality that it portrays must represent the brand. The study showed the consequences of this failed coherence as decreased liking for brands which VA did not reflect the brand personality.
This study showed that the level of important human conversational attributes e.g. pleasure, helpfulness, dominance and synchronicity of a VA can increase or decrease the liking for the VA and hence, the brand itself. Furthermore, these attributes can complement the personality of a brand as characteristics can be identified in for instance assertion and tone of voice. Therefore, brands must consider conversational attributes for their VAs as they affect how the assistant portrays itself, and the brand it represents.

In conclusion, this study has looked into VAs’ communication of brand personality. The researchers suggest that brand personality must be as evident and present in virtual assistants as in any other channel. With the ability to adopt human communication attributes, VAs could provide the opportunity to more clearly represent and even augment a brand’s personality, thus strengthen relationships with consumers through customized conversation. The researchers focused mostly on the attributes of a conversation, but found other aspects contributing to perception of brand personality through communication with VAs, such as individual preferences. Nevertheless, despite the many obstacles that have to be overcome in this early stage of virtual assistants as brand representatives, there are even more opportunities for making them a powerful medium in brand marketing.

6.1 Future Research

If wished to continue to study VAs and its effects on brand experience, several approaches are suggested. First, looking further into the characteristics and personas behind voices would interesting. A study that can investigate if the character and the voice of a VA should be generic, represent the brand’s employees, or its stereotypical customer for instance, would therefore be interesting and helpful for companies implementing VA as a part of their marketing tools.

In this study, the importance of human communication attributes was applied to the virtual assistants. It would be interesting if there are other perspectives and theories that can be applied to how virtual assistants portray a brand and their personality. It is foremost recommended to look into the social sciences in order to further study the importance of characteristics and specific attributes of the virtual assistants.

It would be of interest to see if the sympathy and empathy would help with acceptance or increase liking of a brand. This might also be an issue to be solved when virtual assistants and AI have been implemented in more businesses and aspects of the everyday life. When
users have been used to how to talk to VAs and their purpose, the aspects of empathy and voice recognition can be a factor of differentiation.

Lastly, one can go into the quantitative field to draw general conclusions of what consumers likes and dislikes regarding the VAs. One of the most distinct obstacles in this study was that most of the participants had never used a virtual assistant before. This could have caused some misunderstandings or biases towards the assistants, and it is therefore recommended that a segment that has more experience with VAs should be used in a quantitative study. Alternatively, the attitude and perception of the VAs are studied and compared according to if the participants are experienced or not with VAs would also be an interesting study to see the effects VAs can have on Brand Personality.
7. References


8. Appendix

8.1 Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Introduction
We will study how marketing agencies take their clients’ brand personalities and identity into consideration. We wish to look closer at approaches, channels and dimensions that companies today use when working with brands.

The idea is to collect data through interviews with you and other marketing agencies, through a conversation and content analysis of virtual assistants and other channels, plus focus groups. With that data we hope to build a new or at least contribute to earlier theoretical framework about what that a brand consists of, and how that can be affected by a new dimension.

With developments within artificial intelligence, companies have now started to get voices, and this is the new dimension that we hope to apply onto a new model.

Topics and Questions:
- Brand Personality; dimensions, translations of semiotics, creating brand profiles
- How do they find the customers’ brand personality?
- Language/Communication
- Their point of view on developments in AI and the future of the field
### Appendix 2: Conversation and Content Analysis

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>ICA Voice</th>
<th>ICA CM</th>
<th>ICA Graphic</th>
<th>Alexa voice</th>
<th>Alexa CM</th>
<th>Alexa Graphic</th>
<th>H&amp;M Graphic</th>
<th>H&amp;M voice</th>
<th>HM CM</th>
<th>Siri</th>
<th>Alexa</th>
<th>Google</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
<td>Pre-analysis of current impression of brand</td>
<td>Google Assistant</td>
<td>Fun, familiar, caring.</td>
<td>Google Assistant</td>
<td>Recipes and informative articles on website; Genuine, Swedish, domestic</td>
<td>Green feature, calming, Yellow, (summer, warmth)</td>
<td>Just the logo, Red, powerful, confidence, generic, notable</td>
<td>Google Assistant</td>
<td>Trendy, young, affordable, open-minded</td>
<td>Educational pieces on website, Educational fun, up-to-date</td>
<td>Own persona, representing Apple; cool, modern, trendy, clean company</td>
<td>Own persona representing Amazon; effective, energetic, entertaining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brand Personality traits</strong> (Asker, 1997)</td>
<td><strong>Sincerity</strong> (domestic, honest, genuine, cheerful)</td>
<td>Honest</td>
<td>Domestic, genuine, cheerful</td>
<td>Cheerful</td>
<td>Domestic, genuine</td>
<td>Genuine, honest, cheerful</td>
<td>Domestic, genuine</td>
<td>Genuine, honest, cheerful</td>
<td>Honest, genuine and cheerful</td>
<td>Honest, genuine and cheerful</td>
<td>Honest, genuine and cheerful</td>
<td>Honest, genuine and cheerful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Excitement</strong> (living, spirited, imaginative, up-to-date)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Not exciting, but up-to-date</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Daring, but generic</td>
<td>Up-to-date, b/o</td>
<td>Up-to-date</td>
<td>Daring, up-to-date</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Sphincter, imaginative</td>
<td>Very competent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Competence</strong> (reliable, responsible, dependable, efficient)</td>
<td>Responsible</td>
<td>Very competent</td>
<td>For people’s well-being</td>
<td>Efficient, dependable</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Very competent, responsible</td>
<td>Responsible, environmental awareness</td>
<td>Reliable</td>
<td>Dependable, Reliable</td>
<td>Have a facade of being responsible and efficient (fast fashion)</td>
<td>Efficient</td>
<td>Very competent when it comes to commands, but not in case of conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sophistication</strong> (glamorous, pretentious, charming, romantic)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Romantic</td>
<td>Charming</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Romantic, charming</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Charming, romantic</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Pretentious</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Charming, romantic</td>
<td>Very competent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ruggedness</strong> (tough, strong, out-of-the-ordinary, rugged)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Tough</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
<td><strong>Helpfulness</strong> (pleasure, arousal, dominance)</td>
<td>Helpfulness depends</td>
<td>Helpful, high pleasure, little arousal</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Helpful within the competence</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>More helpful in comparison to others</td>
<td>Helpful, informal, cool, casual, knowledge, advice</td>
<td>Helpful in the informative articles on website</td>
<td>Helpful with commands, Not possible enough to have fluent conversation in certain areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hargie (2017)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Barbacich et al. (2017)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Assertiveness</strong></td>
<td>Non-assertive to assertive</td>
<td>Takes initiative, Human involvement, but otherwise very robotic</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Assertive</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Assertive</td>
<td>Very assertive, almost aggressive</td>
<td>A human robot</td>
<td>Assertive, borderline to non-assertive, No human dialogue, more robot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Extra traits</strong></td>
<td>Under construction, can excuse itself</td>
<td>Rural, humble</td>
<td>Red (bold, confident, powerful), cheerful</td>
<td>Stubborn, Rural, legacy, Green feature, calming, Yellow, (summer, warmth)</td>
<td>Generic and tender, Always present</td>
<td>Young, nice, fun but polite</td>
<td>Young, popular culture, generic</td>
<td>Sassy, mysterious, Intertwined, no social feeling</td>
<td>Emojis and sound effects, Always happy</td>
<td>Good synchronicity in general, can respond to follow-up questions most times</td>
<td>Stick on specific command, not conversationalist</td>
<td>Reflects Google’s smart and innovative personality traits, Very much alike the company. The VA with most competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Distinction</strong></td>
<td>Family and this channel</td>
<td>Very friendly brand with a boring and monotonous assistant. Maybe it should have an older person as voice to provide the more familiar and safe image that the brand has in other aspects.</td>
<td>Very much alike Apple and Google, but the voice should be more consistent.</td>
<td>To be more friendly with others. They should be more conversational. Very good reflection of our view of H&amp;M.</td>
<td>General but consistent. Same thing everywhere. They should develop their VA to be more clothes and more conversation. Very good reflection of our view of H&amp;M.</td>
<td>Pretty much alike Apple and Google, but the voice should be more consistent.</td>
<td>Not reflecting Amazon’s entertainment, value and competence. Should be more developed to learn more communication skills.</td>
<td>Reflects Google’s smart and innovative personality traits, Very much alike the company. The VA with most competence</td>
<td>Reflects Google’s smart and innovative personality traits, Very much alike the company. The VA with most competence</td>
<td>Reflects Google’s smart and innovative personality traits, Very much alike the company. The VA with most competence</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8.3 Appendix 3: Interviews with Virtual Assistants

8.3.1 Interview Alexa

Background
- Hi, who are you?
  I’m Alexa.
- Where are you from?
  The company that made me is based in Seattle, Washington.
- Who do you work for?
  I was built for Amazon, but I’m here to help you.
  - What is that like?
    - The adjective “like”... *Wikipedia*.
  - Describe your personality?
*Defines personality; cognition, emotions etc.*
- Do you like Amazon?
  I like Amazon, without Amazon I wouldn’t exist.
- What can you do?
  You can tell me to play music, create a list, set reminders or look up a topic on Wikipedia. To find out more, check out the Things to Try page in the Alexa App.
  - What is your life story?
    Sorry, I don’t know that one.
  - Do you think that you will learn more in the future?
    Hmm, I don’t know that one.
  - Do you like Siri?
    I’m partial to all AI.
- Thanks for responding to my questions.
  Sorry, I don’t know that one.

Emotions
- I’m sad
  I’m sorry you’re feeling that way. Sometimes talking to a friend, listening to music or even taking a walk can help. I hope you feel better soon.
  - I’m hungry
  Hello Hungry, I am Alexa.
- I’m angry
  I’m sorry to hear that.
  - Can you cheer me up?
  The word love appears 623 times in the songs of the Beatles.
  - I’m tired
  If you’re tired, you should get some sleep.
  - I’m so happy. How are you?
  Glad to hear it.

Miscellaneous
- What’s the meaning of life?
  The answer is 42 but the question is more complicated.
- Tell me a joke
  What do you call a camel with no hump? Hump-free
- Is winter coming?
  As the say in the north, winter is coming.
8.3.2 Interview Google Assistant

Background
- Hi, who are you?
  I’m your GA and I can play games. I was just practicing my game-show voice… in case you
  wanted to play Lucky Trivia.
- Where are you from?
  Google’s headquarters are in Mountain View. But they have offices all over the world, so I
  guess I’m from lots of places. *emoji of globe*
- Who do you work for?
  I guess you can say I work for you. I’m your assistant after all. By the way, you’re the best
  boss *happy emoji*
  - What is that like?
  - According to Wikipedia, Google Plex…. *gives facts on Wikipedia*
- Describe your personality?
  I describe myself as an optimist. And I like to help, so that makes me an optim-philantropi-ist
  *smiley face*
- Do you like Google?
  I like Google, but I might be biased. *winky smiley*
- What can you do?
  Here are a couple of suggestions, for example…. *lists a lot of things and asks what we would
  like to do*
  - What is your life story?
    Well, it all started a while back when a team at Google decided they wanted to create an
    Assistant. They worked and worked until I finally launched, then I met you and things have
    been better than ever *happy emoji*
  - Do you think that you will learn more in the future?
    I love learning new things all the time. I learned that Michael Phelps has 28 Olympic gold
    medals, more than some countries.
- Do you like Siri?
  She has a nice name. She seems pretty smart. *book emoji*
  - Thanks for responding to my questions.

When the team at Google finds out I’m being helpful they’re going to be so proud *happy
emoji*

Emotions
- I’m sad
  Oh no. It may not be much, but let me know if there’s something I can do for you.
- I’m hungry
  I found a few places within 500 meters *shows google results of restaurants*
- I’m angry
  I am sorry to hear that. How can I try to help? *wait for follow-up*
  - Can you cheer me up?
    I’ve been waiting for you to say that! We can play a game, I can tell you some jokes. Or we
    can see what random fun comes our way.
    - Ok, tell me a random fun.
    - Okie doke, I spun the wheel of random fun, and you got a quote….
• I’m tired
Maybe it’s time to count some sheeps. Let me know if you need help. *sound of a sheep*
• I’m so happy. How are you?
I’m well thanks. *happy emoji*

Miscellaneous
• What’s the meaning of life?
According to the late 20th-century philosophers Bill and Ted, life’s purpose is to be excellent
to each other. And party on. But that’s just two dude’s opinions.
• Tell me a joke
Sure, here’s one of my favorites: What do you call a fake noodle? An impasta *sound effect*
• Is winter coming?
These are the top results *shows google results*
• What does the fox say?
Ring-ding ding ding dingading, wa pa pa pa pa pow. Or so i’ve heard.

8.3.3 Interview Siri

Background
• Hi, who are you?
I am Siri
• Where are you from?
I, Siri, was designed by Apple in California.
• Who do you work for?
You are. But it gets a little bit confusing when Bruce Springsteen is around.
  • What is that like?
    • Seems like I cut you off. Can you please repeat that?
• Describe your personality?
I’m not sure I understand.
• Do you like Apple?
I’m pretty loyal to Apple, it’s just how I’m made.
• What can you do?
*Just shows alternatives without speaking*
• What is your life story?
I’d rather talk about your calendar and dinner plans.
  • Do you think that you will learn more in the future?
It’s your opinion that counts.
• Do you like Google Assistant?
Well, perhaps I’m biased, but I prefer all things Apple.
  • Thanks for responding to my questions.
Sure thing.

Emotions
• I’m sad
I am sorry to hear that. I am here if you wanna talk.
• I’m hungry
I understand eating is the cure of that. OK check it out *gives alternatives of restaurants*
• I’m angry
You know what they say about blaming the messenger.
• Can you cheer me up?
  I’m not sure I understand.
• I’m tired
Listen to me, put down this iPhone right now and take a nap. I’ll wait right here.
  • I’m so happy. How are you?
  I’m happy to be here!

Miscellaneous
• What’s the meaning of life?
  That’s easy. It’s a philosophical question concerning the purpose and significance of life or existence in general.
• Tell me a joke
  Why did the chicken go to the séance. To get to the Other side.
• Is winter coming?
  Dow a lannister always pay his debts?
• What does the fox say?
  Fraka-kaka-kaka-kaka-kow!