'Calm' in an Ever-Increasing Chaos

The Study of Advertising of Automotive Brands in an

Overwhelming and Highly Connective Digital World

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Abstract

In today's society, it is normalised and expected that individuals are constantly digitally connected and available. In this online space, there is a constant influx of information and a constant appeal to the consumer's senses. This is partly cultivated by advertising practices that are competing for the consumer's attention and therefore increasingly appealing to all their senses. As a result, there is a great sense of overwhelm in society, which is reflected in the growing interest in the trend towards digital disconnection.

Advertising is known for not only influencing society but also constantly adapting to it. It seems that this trend of disconnection has currently been adapted by advertising, as visuals express a greater sense of 'calm' and serenity to connect with the consumer, creating a small moment to unwind. This phenomenon has not yet been studied, but it is very influential on advertising practices as it creates an aesthetic strategy that is quickly adapted. Therefore, this study proposes the concept of 'calm advertising', which focuses on the operationalisation of the trend of digital disconnection and aims to discover what elements construct this strategy. To explore this topic, this study proposed the research question: '*How is the imaginary of calm constructed in advertisements promoting automotive brands?*'.

To answer this research question and construct the proposed concept of 'calm advertising', this study draws on a theoretical foundation established by the theories of digital disconnection, sensory calm and aesthetics. This formed the basis for the visual analysis of automotive advertising, to uncover the elements that play a role in the construction of the imaginary of 'calm'. The resulting three themes: *Visual Calm*, *Sensory Calm* and *Symbolic Calm*, express how 'calm advertising' creates a greater sense of smoothness, serenity and escapism, making aesthetic choices that appeal to different sensory layers in a less intrusive way. In all of these elements of the strategy, the car is presented as an element that fits in with a digitally disconnected lifestyle, and can even embody or assist in this process. This is in stark contrast to what the product actually embodies. Taken together, this expresses how 'calm advertising' reflects and plays with the tension between connection and disconnection in today's highly connected society and adds to an inability in society to digitally disconnect.

KEYWORDS: *'Calm Advertising', Digital Disconnection, Sensory Advertising, Aesthetics, Automotive Advertising*

1. Introduction

Being online is overwhelming. This is fuelled by the mediatisation of our society and the resulting constant pressure to remain connected to a digital space that demands much attention with audiovisual content by default. This high arousal and constant connectivity leads to feelings of anxiety, raising the question in the contemporary constantly connected society whether we can ever disconnect. This has led to an increased focus on disconnection, particularly digital disconnection, which has recently been discussed as a form of detox (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020), avoidance (Bucher, 2020), or disengagement (Treré & Natale, 2020) from digital media in a variety of research fields such as philosophy, psychology, and sociology. It has also introduced elements into debates about what constitutes a good life and what societal problems and global challenges need to be addressed. This increased interest has been driven by many factors, including the increased pace of life, the stress of modern living, and the constant bombardment of information and stimulation coming from technology and social media (Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021). Overall, this trend towards disconnection expresses a growing need for 'calm', which refers to a growing awareness of overwhelm and a desire for peace and tranquillity (Treré, et al., 2020). This creates a situation where more attention is being paid to peacefulness in both theory and practice, as digital disconnection creates a counter-movement to the overwhelming state in which the technology-dependent society finds itself. Digital disconnection presents constantly evolving theories that can help to slow down and find peace amidst the chaos.

This increase in attention has opened up a new market where products are offered to help the individual escape from a constant state of overwhelm (Pennington, 2020). Furthermore, this increased emphasis on 'calm' has been turned into a strategy to advertise products. Specifically, products that can be seen as the opposite of disconnected, operationalising disconnection theory and the void created in a highly connected society. This is the basis of this thesis. It explores the strategy that is built on the construction of this idea of 'calm' as a way to present products differently, highlighting or even creating positive aspects such as the creation of ease and serenity, and suppressing negative aspects such as technical and arousing elements. A key example of an industry that utilises this is the automotive industry. Cars are highly technical devices and key in a hectic lifestyle, where they are the means to reach a destination fast. Yet the car is more often presented as a tool for disconnection. This shows how companies and even whole industries operationalise and possibly misuse the theories of digital disconnection and society's need for disconnection.

As the example reveals, this study will focus on the automotive industry and its representation, and in particular on the element that creates a link between the brand and

the consumer: advertising. The advertising of automotive brands shows to draw strongly on the trends of digital disconnection and reuses this in the logic of connectivity and consumption. This brings car commercials that show something different, as the focus moves away from the sole intention to show technological features and relates to disconnecting elements like nature instead. These changes in car advertising show a clear loop between the connected and the disconnected as the line between the two opposites is blurred (Lorey, 2006; Hesselberth, 2018). This leaves the operationalisation of digital disconnection not only to those brands offering disconnection-related products.

Since the concept of advertising has not been linked to the topic of disconnection in literature it is of interest to continue this focus to create broader knowledge concerning the role of advertising in this process and trend. To explore how this cultural shift towards digital disconnection becomes commodified as well as operationalised, this thesis proposes the concept 'calm advertising'. Key strategies that are drawn on by 'calm advertising' include the use of a peaceful imaginary that moves away from the competitive, aggressive approach and bases on silence, softer tones, surroundings and surfaces. The objective is to create a sense of well-being and relaxation for the audience and through that create a relationship between the brand and the consumer. Because this concept is new its expressions are yet to be explored in depth, but the topic does relate to a larger societal trend surrounding disconnection, not standing on its own but fitting in a large variety of opinions and theories. In these, the coined concept is used as a centre to explore the interrelations between theories of senses, disconnection and aesthetics and relate these to the contrasting automotive industry. For this reason, the focus is on recently published advertisements and the way they show elements that fit with the current trend of digital disconnection and the resulting strategy of 'calm advertising'.

In this context, the case of the automotive industry was explored because of these contrasts. Contrasts in car advertising make it most visible how elements of nature, noise, colour and symbolism are combined into a tool that disconnects from the technological association that links to cars. Through these two opposites of 'calm' and technology, the industry appeals to the needs and wishes of the consumer within the context of digital disconnection theories. While the use of elements like colour, sound and vision differ per brand, in its operationalisation a common motive unravels. One in which these automotive brands express the intention to smoothen off the edges of their product and blur the aspects that are less appreciated and desired in today's society. These elements also show a quest in this research about the aesthetic decisions within 'calm advertising', which elaborate on the earlier theories that focus on the practices of disconnection adding a new element to the understanding of disconnection. Within the context of advertising, aesthetics strongly

entangle with commercial interests and are even considered a driving factor in advertising practices. However, like in disconnection theories they appear understudied concerning the role they play in the marketplace where aesthetics can create various experiential effects like interest, pleasure, meaning and emotional response (Krishna, 2012). With the ability to influence all of these elements involved in the sensory appeal made to the consumer, the element of aesthetics is important within 'calm advertising', where intelligent design choices make the difference between a 'calm' experience for the consumer and an intrusive one.

This sensory appeal relates to the focus of current-day advertising to use the customer's emotions, as efforts are increasingly made to shape advertisements into an experience for all senses (Hagvedt, 2022). However, these actions also contribute to the sense of overwhelm that individuals experience, which is important to link to the high degree that customer purchase behaviour is entangled with moods (Magids, et al., 2015). Altogether, this shows how the industry has operationalised the trend of digital disconnection in the shape of 'calm advertising' through the creation of the feeling that there is a way out of this constant state of connection and overwhelm. In automotive advertisements, 'calm advertising' shows a presentation of 'calm', being less intrusive and arousing, but continuing to make a great appeal to the senses, fostering overwhelm. It is thus a strategy that uses the idea of 'calm' the consumer chases, but does so through the senses and the misuse of the disconnection theories, resulting in a critical paradox to explore in this thesis. This paradox is expected to be studied well through the contrasts known by the exemplary automotive industry and predicted to explain a much larger trend suiting many industries.

All of this shows that this phenomenon of advertisers moving along with the movement of society to disconnect should be coined and can be called 'calm advertising'. A concept that will be explored through a visual analysis of the recent advertising visuals of the eleven different car brands that were selected, relating to an industry that could be considered the opposite of calm but where 'calm advertising' is very present in their commercials. Therefore making an interesting case to explore how 'calm advertising' operationalises disconnection studies at the hand of strong contrasts between the product and the design choices of the advertisement.

To conduct this research an extensive literature review was conducted where previous studies were revised after which a visual analysis was used as the method to gain more in-depth information on the specifics of the concept of 'calm advertising'. This report will address the different steps that were taken in this research and gradually build the understanding of the concept of 'calm advertising'.

1.1. Research Relevance and Aim

In relation to previously published research, the use and development of 'calm advertising' with all its complexities will create completely new understandings. Understanding and developing the concept of 'calm advertising' could contribute to research in various fields such as advertising, disconnection practices, aesthetics, or sensory advertising. All of these topics have been studied extensively on an individual level, but despite the high level of social interest, a link has not yet been established. This study will do so by combining important elements from these different theoretical understandings, like the importance of all the senses in creating the optimal customer-brand relationship from sensory theories, or the differentiating positioning of a product from aesthetic understandings. The results of this visual analysis will develop the concept of 'calm advertising', while at the same time bridging the large fields of advertising and disconnection studies. As both exist in a highly connective and technological space, there is a need to know how they might influence each other and how they coexist.

Furthermore, the results of the analysis can show what a 'calm' aesthetic in advertising looks like and the variety in which it occurs. This is an understanding that has the potential to make a strong addition to the literature on the impact of art design choices and aesthetics. For example, by adding to studies that focus on meaning-making, where elements of understanding such as the restructuring of the depicted relationship between technology and nature or other elements such as colour and sound contribute to the perception of technology (Aupers, et al., 2012). In addition, the study of a 'calm' imaginary in automotive advertising can help to understand how advertising strategies are deployed. Together, the resulting insights can enrich individual research topics and create a new combined understanding of their operationalisation within the summarising context of 'calm advertising'.

At the same time, this research and all the aspects of 'calm advertising' will raise questions. For example, about the conscious or desired translation of societal adaptations into advertising, where the ethical question can be raised about the meaning of this operationalisation of 'calm' by not so 'calm' brands and industries to society. If the possible strategy includes misuse of the theory by creating a pseudo-calm in the context of cars, this will become clear when all the elements of 'calm advertising' are revealed. These questions are valid. Therefore, it is important to introduce the existence of 'calm advertising' and create a strong basis and understanding to build on this topic in the future and discuss it with a variety of different cases.

1.2. Research Questions

To study the elements and intentions of 'calm advertising', several research questions were established. Centrally, this research aims to find an answer to the primary research question: 'How is the imaginary of calm constructed in advertisements promoting automotive brands?'. This question focuses on the discovery of elements that compose 'calm advertising' as well as how they are implemented in visual or audio-visual campaigns, intending to explore how the imaginary of 'calm' is constructed. To find an answer to this central research question a set of three supportive research questions was created. These questions will focus on specific elements of the construct of 'calm'.

Firstly, one part of this thesis will focus on the aesthetic element of 'calm'. Here the aesthetic choices and their role in the creation of 'calm advertising' will be explored with the question: 'What are the aesthetic elements that construct the sense of 'calm advertising' within the context of automotive advertising?'.

Secondly, a question is presented to explore the extent to which sensorial advertising is a part of 'calm advertising': 'How does 'calm advertising' continue to use sensory appeal as an element of its strategy to set a 'calm' stage to market the automotive product?'

Lastly, this research explores the tension between 'calm' and connectivity that is constructed within the proposed concept of 'calm advertising'. This will be investigated with the question: 'How does 'calm advertising' as an advertising strategy blur the boundaries between the desired digital disconnection of the individual and the technological connection of the promoted automotive brand?'.

All questions focus on the case study of automotive advertising. Altogether, creating an understanding of the proposed concept of 'calm advertising' and investigating how a very consciously picked set of aesthetics, sensorial elements and a certain level of blurring constructs advertising visuals that counter the overwhelm that is created by other advertisements. Together, these questions can provide a large set of new insights, which form an element in finding the final answer to the central research question. In addition, the connection between these three key elements is essential to build the understanding of 'calm advertising' as a concept and advertising strategy, where the focus is on the type of advertising that aims to promote products by appealing to the audience through the creation of images that express digital disconnection and tranquillity. This is achieved through an aesthetic of less arousal and connectivity in which the dislike of the consumer towards highly arousing visuals is countered.

Previous research has discussed the concepts of sensory advertising, aesthetics and

disconnection from a variety of perspectives. What this boils down to is that advertising and society influence one another, which can be seen in published advertising campaigns and the meaning constructed within and from them. With a society that shows a need for digital disconnection and a growing sense of overwhelm due to constant connectivity, both online and offline, this results in advertising that uses 'calm advertising' as a strategy to adapt to this trend. 'Calm advertising' is new and needs to be established from a strong theoretical basis that connects relevant theories. This theoretical approach will be explained in more detail and presented in the following chapter.

2. Theoretical Framework

Due to rapidly evolving technologies and changing consumer demands, advertisers have had to adapt their strategies to capture the attention of their target audiences. One approach that resulted is sensory advertising, which uses sensory appeal to create a connection between the brand and the consumer. However, the effectiveness of this approach has been debated. Scholars argue that it creates a greater desire for digital disconnection, as consumers become overwhelmed by the constant appeal to their senses and therefore disengage from the advertising message (Eze & Lee, 2012). This recognition, that the emphasis on sensory appeal through digital messages stands in tension with practices of disconnection that counteract this overload, is the essence of this thesis. Furthermore, the presence of sensory elements raises debate about the true nature of digital disconnection and the extent to which it can be achieved given such a heavy reliance on digital products and practices of arousal. These elements are part of the proposed concept of 'calm advertising', in light of which the tension between the contradictory concepts and how advertisers navigate this is explored.

Within 'calm advertising', 'calmness' becomes a narrative and an aesthetic strategy that plays a crucial role in capturing the consumer's attention and shaping their perceptions of and relationship with the brand. This makes 'calm advertising' a bridge that combines all three concepts of digital disconnection, sensorial advertising and aesthetics. This theoretical framework expresses a comprehensive literature review of all three concepts, their challenges and interrelations to understand the interaction and connection between the issues. This will create a strong theoretical foundation that will optimise the analysis that will be discussed in the following chapter, exploring the construct of 'calm' in advertisements.

2.1. Digitalisation and the Desire for Disconnection

The constant appeal to the individual within a highly connected society that requires constant connection led to an increased desire for disconnection. Digital disconnection is a field in research that continues to grow and explores the meaning of digital media to society and how this curates tensions and dilemmas when an impossibility to disconnect is in place (Treré, et al., 2020). The topic has gained importance in different disciplines and includes the societal development that comes from digitalization, critically assessing how an ever-intensifying media presence characterises everyday life. Critical voices come from different fields, studying digitalisation as a societal dilemma (Ytre-Arne, et al., 2020), a political movement considering lifestyle politics (Casemajor, et al., 2015) and the way to mindfully respond to the social media presence (Baym, et al., 2020). In essence, digital disconnection

is seen as a lens that seeks to fight the digital exhaustion that results from an overwhelming feed and world, creating an understanding of disconnection as a means of disengagement. In this case, to disengage from the highly overwhelming online environment, where disconnection provides an opportunity to create an outside to this constant connectivity (Hesselberth, 2018). While disconnection may sound simple, it has been found that disconnection is not a case of either/or. Rather, it is part of a dilemma of media use practices (Pennington, 2020). This section of the theoretical framework will therefore focus on several elements related to digital disconnection and discuss the opportunities, as well as the challenges, that this presents.

On the one hand, manufactured disconnection presents an opportunity for some relief from the constant overwhelm of the mentally demanding online space. Implemented in this way, manufactured disconnection diminishes the sense of a constant addition to digital exhaustion. It is a way of pushing back against the challenges of 21st-century society, where communicative norms have evolved to expect constant availability. A burden that technology companies have exploited with increased rates of anxiety (Harris, 2016), depression (Büchi, et al., 2019), restlessness (Ling, 2016), loss of focus (Reinecke, et al., 2017) and loss of productivity (Duke & Montag, 2017) as a result. This is most clearly experienced by users as a subjective feeling and a feeling of pressure due to a lack of time (Wajcman, 2015). This demonstrates that disconnection could be at the heart of helping individuals to realign the goals of technology with the social needs of users (Gregg, 2018). Digital disconnection could be a tool for individuals to find a new balance in their lifestyles, through a conscious approach to constant connectivity.

On the other hand, digital disconnection faces many challenges. One issue that recurs in the implementation of digital disconnection practices is the constant link between technology and connection, where society is found unable to weaken the power that mass connection has, as the paradox of manufactured disconnection betrays the potential of disconnection from an irresistible culture of connection (Hesselberth, 2018). It expresses the tension between connection and disconnection in a technologized society and strongly represents the core of this research, suggesting that disconnection is strongly linked to, and even conflated with digital connectedness. The use of 'calm advertising' is a poor version of disconnection that still requires active digital connectedness from the user, and only further deepens individuals' dependence on technology. Whenever people have been disconnected, they use technology as a tool for it, rather than as a contrast to it (Light, 2014). In a way, this is a phenomenon that not only shows a contrary side to the theory but also tolerance from consumers who do not realise that their disconnected practices are still very much connected. At the same time, it shows acceptance, as the essence of disconnection is not

only about what the individual is disconnecting from but more about what this disconnection expresses or works for (Gregg, 2018). This is in line with how Portwood-Stacer (2012) clearly describes that disconnection and connection are less about opposing states of communication that express proximity to mediated environments, and more about the action to reorganise power structures and relationships. In this way, the study of disconnection theory can be insightful in the case of overwhelm, offering the possibility to find alternative ways to coexist with the constant influx of digitalisation and connectivity in a less exploitative way (Gregg, 2018).

Regarding the duality within digital disconnection, it is interesting to consider the concept of digital detox. This action is arguably more about resistance to media and advocates for the balance to be found in the concept and the awareness to be raised, rather than the search for permanent disconnection (Syvertsen, 2017). This topic again raises the reinforcing paradox that individuals have to connect to disconnect, which is interesting concerning the advertising approach of this study (Hesselberth, 2018). Digital detox often involves a desire for simplicity and a move away from connection, which also highlights the two-sided nature of digital disconnection theories, as the findings can help people find balance in this multi-layered digitally demanding society, but cannot completely free them from the constant connection (Baym, et al., 2020). This is through the operationalisation of disconnection, as this thesis proposes, and because disconnection is a very fluctuating and open path.

In this context, it should be the responsibility of the individual to find the balance between connection and real disconnection, while finding out what it means to be an authentic person in the age of connectivity (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020; Madsen, 2015). This creates pressure, especially with the paradox between the wish for disconnection and the high connectivity with technology when getting influenced by an automotive advertisement involved. This translates in literature as agency that emerges paradoxically as the individual feels empowered but simultaneously becomes subject to the advertising strategy, involving a mix of freedom and persuasion (Lorey, 2006). This shows how disconnection as a movement changes something to the individual, where the essence is not about the pure dislike and complete refusal of technology but more preferably a force that holds the power for transformation by disengaging from something and demanding something new (Rossiter, 2004). Whether the lowered connection is reached through demand, detox or another way, the overall shift in society coming from the trend of disconnection changes advertising as practices and products are adapted to customer needs.

These elements of digital disconnection demonstrate the value of this research, which

focuses not only on whether or not disconnection can be achieved but also on how the idea of disconnection is constructed. The positives, negatives and dualities of digital disconnection show a discussion of the issue as an idea and a practice, which relates to the larger context of 'calm advertising'. This type of advertising contains many challenging elements, which will be presented further in the next section.

2.2. Advertising and an Overwhelm to the Senses

The tension between the attention economy and sensory advertising has shaped advertising practices. Traditional advertising focused on the idea that there is a rationale behind every decision and changed to a more experiential approach that recognised the importance to sell a product to all senses and make images fitting to the audience since they are the ones that will interpret the meaning of the visual (Williamson, 1978). As a result, advertising has become highly personalized, taking advantage of privatised consumption spaces to constantly aim for consumer attention using personal information (Malefyt, 2006). This is also part of today's consumer society where businesses thrive by matching products and services to relevant users (Wu, 2016). This means that within the highly connective attention economy, advertising practices have undergone substantial change. This happens in two ways. First, within the attention economy, advertising competes intensively for consumer attention, prompting advertisers to continuously seek innovative and unique approaches. Second, society increasingly desires to disconnect from constant connectivity, so advertising must adapt to this preference and societal shift (Liu-Thompkins, 2019). This section of the theoretical framework will explore the use of the senses in advertising and its associated challenges.

Similar to the constant requirement of connectivity, the competition for attention leads to, and in the context of connectivity even contributes to, overwhelm. In the context of the senses, overstimulation of any sense creates overwhelm. For this study of automotive advertising, these are mostly the senses of sound and sight. Franco, et al. (2017) explain this overwhelm as sound becoming noise, referring to the high level of constant sound that people live in This partly contributes to effects such as annoyance and stress that develop as the individual is unaware of the influence of this constant noise, causing the search for freedom from noise in nature and recreation (Mace, et al., 2004; Gidlöf-Gunnarsson & Öhrström, 2007). Although natural sounds have been found the most complex, when combined with a level of silence, they enhance the consumer experience (Gramman, 1999; Pijanowski, et al., 2011). At the same time, the sense of quiet creates a duality, as silence can create peace but also fear (Annerstedt, 2013). In this situation, where each type of

sensory input presents a different meaning, and where there is a need for constant awareness alongside the already expected constant connection on a digital level, overwhelming results. Similar to sounds, visuals of nature can also reduce anxiety and stress. For example, the colours of nature can be important and have positive effects, especially when compared to the colours of an urban scene, which create feelings of aggression and dominance (Guilford & Smith, 1959; Jacobs & Suess, 1975; Valdez & Mehrabian, 1994). These uses of sound as noise and negative visuals in everyday urban life result in cognitive overload, as the consumer is constantly exposed to an excessive amount of information, and the senses are stimulated in an unpeaceful way. This is compounded when additional stimuli are to be interpreted in a digital context, as advertising is constantly presented to the consumer.

Central to this cause of overwhelm is the idea that the relationship between brand and consumer is perceived by advertisers as a two-way street, using the human body as the site of interaction (Malefyt, 2006). This is linked to a wider body of knowledge about power. In this case, the understanding of overwhelm shows how technology has the power to create constant connectivity. In addition, it is suggested that technologies have the potential to change the way individuals understand themselves, making them subjects of knowledge. The only way in which the consumer has agency, in this case, is by being online or not, but in the online space, they will always be subject to advertising. In doing so, digital media have no intention of negatively affecting the user, on the contrary, negative results are a 'side effect' of the constant subjectification of the consumer. This is because advertising is not a force that constantly weighs on the consumer, but a force that constantly moves with society, producing things, inducing pleasure, creating knowledge and producing a discourse that users can very much appreciate (Foucault, 1980). In light of the case of this study, this could mean that by moving with society, the advertisements that 'calm advertising' creates are indeed appreciated by their recipients, sharing pleasurable visuals, which in this case may be less exploitative and overwhelming.

Sensorial advertising refers to the strategic use of the senses to capture consumer attention and stand out in a competitive digital space. Malefyt (2006) argues that in an age where consumer choice is central to consumption, brands need to use a range of strategies to effectively reach their audience. These include sensory strategies that combine elements to create interactivity. This can result in a wide range of effective user responses such as fear, outrage, boredom and excitement, which show effectiveness as sensory advertising aims to heighten emotional responses, increase brand recall and foster positive consumer attitudes towards the advertised product or service (Paasonen, 2018). In creating this connection by appealing to and engaging all senses to the greatest extent possible, the

hyper-engaging environment designed in digital media goes beyond informing the audience and begins to stimulate individuals' personal opinions, tolerances and worldviews (Pariser, 2011). This step can be critical and has the potential to be taken too far in the attention economy.

The growing concern focuses on the development of a contradictory outcome as audiences create a negative perception of advertising in the form of a need for 'calm', as a constant appeal to the senses is perceived as overwhelming. Combined with the highly connective and triggering environment in which these advertisements appear, this creates a set of consumers who are overwhelmed and therefore do not perceive the advertisements as beneficial. This happens because customer attention is identified as a scarce resource that is competed over in the attention economy, demanding energy and mental space from an already overwhelmed and over-connected consumer. This also leads to strong judgement in literature where current practices are described as harmful not only to individuals but to society as a whole (Harris, 2016; Lanier, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). Something that Gehl (2013) also appeals to, explaining that social media has made it a common practice to control the attention of its users through visuals that serve as standards for a social or cultural class and are used as a benchmark for those who aspire to belong.

Overall, sensory advertising is a strategy that can build a connection between the consumer and the brand through interactivity, but it is also a strategy that is difficult to integrate sustainably into an environment of overwhelmed consumers for which the strategy carries responsibility. This research explores the adaptation of advertising that could result from this realisation and will discuss parts that could also impact the creation of less 'noise' in the following section.

2.3. The Aesthetics of Disconnection

Aesthetics in advertising play a crucial role in attracting attention, evoking emotion and influencing consumer perceptions and preferences. In the current advertising landscape, where the value people place on advertising is diminishing, advertisers are constantly looking for new ways to engage their audiences. As a result, they explore all possibilities of aesthetics to create engaging and resonant experiences for consumers (Wang et al., 2002). As the topic of this research suggests, disconnection has also become one of these renewing strategies to connect with the consumer. As the paradox between connection and disconnection remains, this strategy creates a new aesthetic expression. This section of the theoretical framework explores the relevant elements of aesthetics and relates them to the literature on automotive advertising, which is a broader studied topic than the newly

proposed concept of 'calm advertising'.

First, emotional appeal plays an important role in advertising, as positive, high-arousal, and complex emotions are effective in engaging consumers (Campbell, et al., 2017). Emotions generate functional responses as they determine a consumer's position in contrast to the environment (Desmet & Hekkert, 2007). Affective responses can be categorized into five different groups, including instrumental, social, interest, aesthetic and surprise responses. In this case, the aesthetic response is important to use, relating to the emotions that are related to the potential delight the product offers (Crilly, et al., 2004). Advertisers often play with these emotions to create an impact on the consumer.

Second, building on emotional appeal, semantics also play a significant role in advertising presentations. Consumers interpret the function, mode of use, and qualities of a product based on its appearance (Crilly et al., 2004; Creusen & Schoormans, 2005). For this reason, it is interesting to consider the four different characteristics of semantics: description, expression, exhortation and identification (Crilly, et al., 2004). The last one is of most interest to this study, for its referral to the understanding to which category a product belongs using its appearance. An element of which it is proposed that advertisers tend to play with. A way in which this is done relates to the presentation of automotive vehicles in a natural environment in advertising. This strong presence of nature is called misleading, showing the car differently by ignoring the negative impacts of the car like its environmental impacts (Gunster, 2007; Li, 2013). A similar tension is at play in the operationalisation of digital disconnection within the creation of a 'calm' aesthetic, where it are the technological and overwhelming elements that are suppressed. Both show how it is normalised in advertising to play with the categorisation of a product.

Third, to explore this idea of aesthetics changing ideas further, three ways in which aesthetics can influence consumer perception have been described (Brunel & Kumar, 2007). Firstly, the fact that design can create differentiation in the marketplace and create a sense of recognition (Bloch, 1995). Secondly, it is known that many simple and initial perceptions of the consumer are based on the appearance of the product. In this way, the essence of the product can be placed in the aesthetics of the product and a message can be illustrated (Brunel & Kumar, 2007). In the case of this study, this would be a message of 'calm', offering the opportunity to relax. Aesthetics are a foundation for attachment to products, creating the opportunity to build relationships between brand and consumer (Brunel & Kumar, 2007). Finally, aesthetics are essential to the success a product can achieve where many judgements, either relevant or irrelevant, are made based on visuals and the aesthetics of the product even transfer to the perceived image consumers create of the brand (Crilly, et al.,

2004; Cruesen & Schoormans, 2005). This again shows another element of aesthetics that can change the perception of the product presented in advertising.

Fourth, it has also been added that the aesthetic value perceived with the product is something that can also create an experience of pleasure, even without using the object (Creusen & Schrootmans, 2005). Logically, from a range of products in the same price category with the same function, the most attractive and aesthetically pleasing option will be chosen. In automotive advertising, for example, the desire for escape is used to highlight the role of nature, and aesthetics are used to project the car as a symbol of purity and serenity. In this way, the car is the mode that brings people closer to their natural environment and restores their harmony (Garland, et al., 2013; Chen, 2016). The scene is different from the urban environment the audience lives in and creates the promise of escape and adventure. As nature is used as an element of storytelling, the car becomes a symbol of freedom, power and happiness (Li, 2013). In the case of presenting products as digitally disconnected, it is the move away from the digital and the created imaginary of 'calm' that reflects this element of storytelling, as the products that present an aesthetic that fits the trend of digital disconnection are the products that are sold. In both the case of the car and 'calm', the storytelling element of escape creates an experience that sells the product to the consumer.

Finally, the importance of products and their appearance, the idea they express and their ability to communicate something about the consumer's identity, both to themselves and others, is enhanced by aesthetics (Dittmar, 1992). It shows how aesthetics can reinforce the identity of the product and appeal to a specific audience. In the same way, the appearance of a product tries to present a lot about the target audience and the image the brand wants to project (Brunel & Kumar, 2007). One way in which this can be seen is in the different ways in which nature is constructed and its relationship to cars is understood in advertising imagery. Sometimes technology and nature are seen as a dualism but also presented as technology taking over nature and creating a new version of its understanding, others claim an intrinsic connection between the two elements, or technology is even portrayed for its problem to the environment (Aupers, et al., 2012). This shows how different approaches are used to appeal to different customers and change the product identity as a way to stand out to turn the product into a tool for the expression of identity. This communication of someone's identity through the purchase of certain products can be done through the symbolic qualities of self-expression and categorical meaning. The first suggests the elements that reveal something unique about the personality of the consumer, helping to define their personality and give a sense of differentiation. The second refers to the use of this given differentiation to place consumers into different groups in which the use of the product is an expression of membership and belonging (Dittmar, 1992).

Taken together, the various elements of aesthetics show that the symbolic meaning that can be attached to a product through aesthetics is becoming increasingly important in the consumer's decision-making process, as it has the power to influence opinions based on the appearance of the product and present products that reflect personal values (Creusen & Schoormans, 2005). Therefore, advertisers must continuously engage with the trends in society. Currently, this involves reflecting a sense of 'calm' and serenity, aligning with the growing desire for disconnection. 'Calm advertising' presents the importance of these semantics and relates aesthetics to digital disconnection and sensory advertising in the next section.

2.4. The Strategy of 'Calm Advertising'

By attempting to engage the audience both visually and by appealing to all other senses, current advertising techniques lead to greater challenges, creating too much noise and arousal when the consumer may be seeking silence (O'Neal & Shawn, 2016). The idea of 'calm advertising' is that accurately targeted advertising should not always create this sense of intrusiveness and can influence behaviour by changing the customer's self-perception and even have a positive impact on consumer welfare (Summers, et al., 2016). In the case of 'calm advertising', this would imply a type of advertising that is less arousing and a sense of 'calm' throughout. It can be seen as disconnection transformed into an aesthetic that aims to adapt to the headspace in society. Simply a design that resonates with the current overwhelmed state of society, through the use and perhaps even abuse of digital disconnection. For this reason, the literature on digital disconnection, sensory advertising and aesthetics is essential to provide a theoretical basis for this proposed concept. The starting point of 'calm advertising' acts as a strategic bridge between the challenges of sensory advertising and the need for disconnection, and their relationship to aesthetics in advertising. Taken together, these elements provide a better understanding of the rationale behind, and what has led to, the establishment of 'calm advertising' as a strategy. This section of the theoretical framework will briefly review these challenges and explain how they intersect in the context of 'calm advertising'.

Firstly, as society has changed and set a standard of constant digital connectivity and constant pressure to be available and provide the right persona, a trend has developed where many want to disconnect from this and find more peace of mind. In the context of this highly overwhelmed consumer, this study focuses on disconnection as an idea and a practice. Within 'calm advertising', this trend and the related literature become a strategy to stand out and connect with the consumer in the competitive landscape of the attention

economy. In the context of digital disconnection, this would make 'calm advertising' a small moment of disconnection in itself, with little focus on connectivity and digitalisation, and a general sense of 'calm' built into the presented advertisements.

Secondly, this need for digital disconnection in the context of advertising is partly fostered by an overdemanding advertising industry that has taken the tactic to appeal to all senses, too far in the hope to create a strong connection with the consumer. It shows that advertisers are challenged, where, when overdone, engagement tactics can result in the development of negative attitudes of the consumer towards the brand or products, perceiving it as unbeneficial, intrusive and annoying (Wang, 2002; Eze & Lee, 2012). Within the strategy of 'calm advertising' this would change, with a focus on a greater overall sense of ease in every element and using that as the strategy to stand out from the competition.

Both elements relate to one another in the findings of Liu-Thompkins (2019), which show a comparison between the impact of repeating the same advertisement creative with varied creatives across exposures. The results show that repetition increases recall and click intention but also perceived intrusiveness. This intrusiveness relates to the use of sensorial advertising as this is the main struggle this strategy faces, as well as digital disconnection as this intrusiveness motivates the wish for less connection. Both showcase how a strategy that presents the consumer with facts that they are strongly digitally engaged or that gives the sense that the advertisement contributes to their great sense of overwhelm can give negative results. Shortly, when it is obvious to the consumer that an advertisement or other visual contributes to their connectivity and digital exhaustion they take a negative position toward the brand or product. This problem is exactly what all elements of the aesthetic of 'calm advertising' seek to overcome as the moment of intrusion will be substituted by a moment of 'calm'.

However, as mentioned earlier 'calm advertising' is not only built on the wish for improvement of advertisement, the intention is still to continuously form a connection between the brand and consumer. This creates a basis for 'calm advertising' out of digital disconnection theory but the strategy is very strongly built on a paradox between presented disconnection and increasing connection. Technology again uses disconnection as a tool to connect with the audience, presenting how disconnection is shaping the connective culture as a force to interact rather than a simple varying communicative state (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972).

Because the aesthetic of 'calm' that is presented includes all possible elements to create a true imaginary of 'calm'. The 'calm' advertisements can be related to the practice of digital detox, which presents the practice of digital disconnection as well as sensory

advertising. Digital detox involves this desire for simplicity and disconnection and exemplifies the operationalisation of digital disconnection. This idea is interwoven with serenity and the offline in 'calm advertising', where the advertisement creates a small moment away from the digital connection. This shows how the knowledge of the trend of digital disconnection and the practice of digital detox creates a strategy that uses the imaginary of 'calm' to create a small moment of digital detox. However, the practice and presentation of these advertisements still take place in the digital space and continue to make a constant appeal to the senses of the consumer. This shows how the paradox expresses itself as both sensory advertising and digital disconnection are strongly represented in the aesthetic of 'calm advertising'.

To explain the relationship between the different factors the following figure was created.
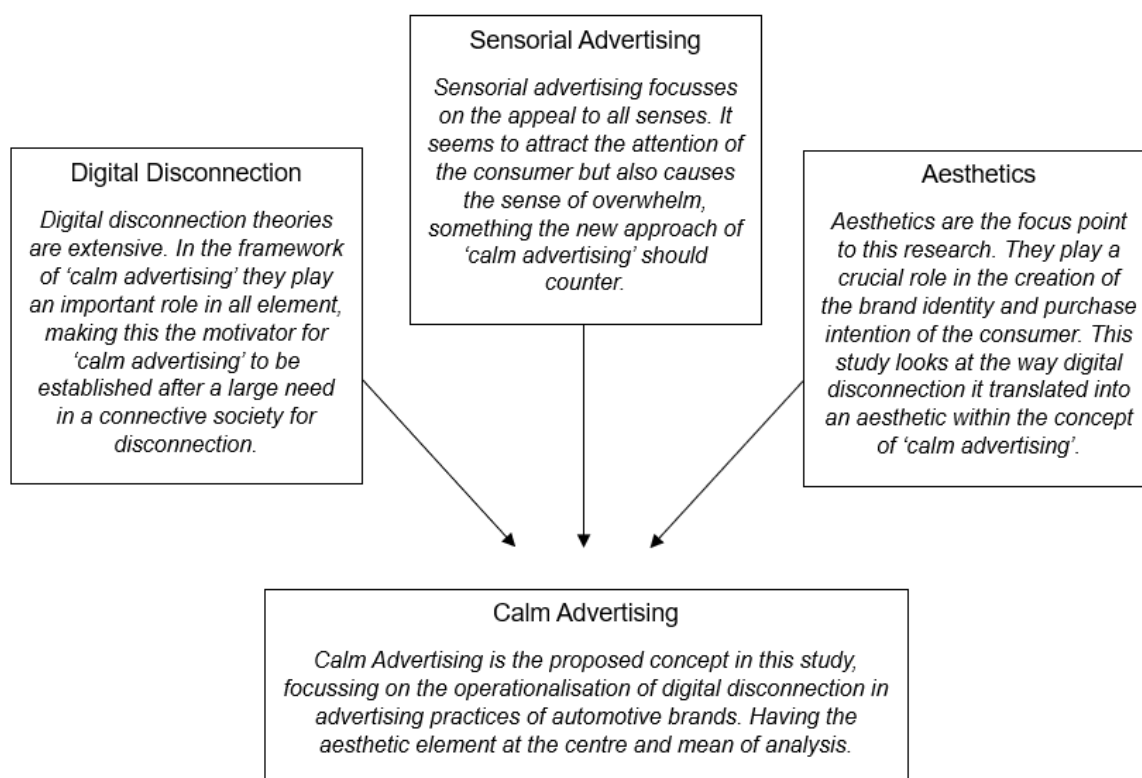

Figure 1 – Visualisation Theoretical Framework

This research will continue to build the understanding of the proposed concept of 'calm advertising' in the visual analysis, based on advertisements of well-known automotive brands present in Western Europe. The aim is to find out whether something like the aesthetics of disconnection is presented in the advertisement and how this imaginary of 'calm' is constructed. The expected outcome of the research question, based on the existing

body of knowledge on the revised themes, would be that 'calm advertising' exists, following the idea that advertising continuously adapts to societal change (Williamson, 1978). This would be combined with a countermovement to advertising practices that are perceived as intrusive, to remove the possibility for consumers to develop a negative perception towards the brand. This combination would result in the aesthetic implementation of 'calm advertising' across many advertisements with common strategic elements, which together create an advertisement that offers the individual a respite from the constant connection in the attention economy.

Based on the theoretical context established by this framework, the concept of 'calm advertising' is further explored in the following sections. The methodology that was approached for this, bringing the combination of theory and visuals come together, will be explained in detail in the following chapter.

3. Methodology

All elements of the research design were focused within the case of car advertising. This case was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, automotive advertising has already been extensively studied in relation to nature, which provides a strong base to build on and relate to, because this thesis explores a newly proposed concept (Gunster, 2007; Garland, et al., 2013; Li, 2013). Secondly, the automotive industry, with its constant technological development and environmental concerns, presents a strong contrast to nature and other expressions of serenity that relate to the strategy of 'calm advertising'. These contrasts will highlight the elements in which automotive advertising creates an altered narrative and reveal adaptation to the social context (Demeritt, 2002).

3.1. Research Design

To find the answer to the previously presented research questions, and explore the chosen case study of the automotive industry, qualitative research was considered the most appropriate. This approach was chosen because qualitative research, with its interpretive nature, can generally provide deeper meanings from data and interpret relationships (Hall, et al., 2013). Furthermore, qualitative methods are used to find the best answer to research questions that explore, explain and understand events. This is important in the scope of this research as it helps to create relations between all fields, interpret new data, and explore the coined phenomenon of 'calm advertising' that deepens the understanding of current advertising practices (Schreier, 2014).

This qualitative research was conducted in the form of visual analysis. The visual analysis looks at how visual communication shapes and is shaped by society and emphasises the notion that meaning-making, which is at the heart of the method, is so intertwined with life (Machin & Mayr, 2012b; Fairclough, 2001). This is essential to the study of 'calm advertising', which is based on the creation of narratives and the way advertising adapts to and influences society. It has even been argued that a resource strong enough to create signs should be considered a means, where the production of meaning should be further strengthened by the use of visual language (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2002). This refers to the presentation of the car as disconnected in a new 'calm' visual. The visual analysis creates the possibility to provide a more in-depth view of the interplay between language and semiotics and show the complexity of communication, especially in the context of a paradoxical narrative (Machin & Mayr, 2012a). This is of particular interest in the study of automotive advertising, which sells a product based on what it is not and needs to present a strong, appealing, credible, 'calm' and persuasive narrative that resonates (Rocci, et al.,

2013). For this reason, the importance of deconstructing and exploring all layers of a visual as part of the communicative design and analysing all implicit meanings has been widely emphasised in literature. This is exactly the approach this thesis will take, as everything that is seen in 'calm' visuals is the choice of a designer who is motivated to draw attention and express a certain meaning or imaginary (Kress, 2010).

This visual analysis was preceded by a thorough literature review which examined theories of digital disconnection, sensory advertising and aesthetics. From these articles, the relevant pieces were connected to provide a basis for this thesis and a theoretical starting point to explore 'calm advertising'. This was done to create an overall understanding of the relationships between the different themes and their relevance to this research, as presented in the theoretical framework. Following the visual analysis, all findings were analysed through a coding process and summarised into three main themes. These themes were discussed in detail in the analysis section and related to the theory, after which a final conclusion to the study was drawn. Overall, this combination of methodological steps aims to provide a better idea of the strategies used to articulate technology in relation to 'calm advertising' and how automotive advertising operationalises digital disconnection. The aim is to develop the connotations that are important in the strategy of 'calm advertising', and in doing so possibly explore the social or cultural meanings that are represented in the context of the car.

3.2. Sample and Data Collection

To answer the primary and secondary research questions a set of videos and images were collected from the selected eleven car brands and analysed to find out more about the occurrence of 'calm advertising' in car commercials, carefully grouping the findings into interesting themes. This number of advertising videos and images was chosen because advertisements are often short snippets designed to grab the full attention of the audience, and this way a large enough data set was created to find out if 'calm advertising' is indeed a widely used strategy in automotive advertising.

The study was based on advertising visuals published online, available on the brands' Youtube and Instagram accounts and showing signs of a 'calm' aesthetic approach. Through both channels, the visuals were widely distributed and available to a targeted audience. As this study explores a new concept, the data was selected through purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method that selects visuals based on a set of criteria (Adams, et al., 2007). According to the criteria, the advertisements should: 1. Belong to a well-known modern car brand, 2. Demonstrate active engagement in ongoing online advertising, 3. Be relevant to the individuals approached in the personal environment, 4. Have a high degree of

empirical diversity, 5. Have a release date between January 2022 and April 2023. In addition, a brand must at least three 'calm' videos on Youtube and elements of 'calm' in visuals on Instagram, to be considered in the further analysis. Based on these criteria, the over 300 visuals and sixteen brands that were initially analysed were narrowed down to the final 62 videos and 980 images. These visuals came from eleven brands that were considered to have characteristics of 'calm advertising' and therefore selected: Audi, BWM, Citroën, Hyundai, Mercedes-Benz, Peugeot, Polestar, Porsche, Renault, Volkswagen & Volvo. It is important to note that not all brands shared the same division between videos and images due to their different approaches and strategies. Overall, this dataset formed the basis of this study and the starting point for further exploration of the expressions of 'calm advertising'.

YouTube was chosen as the platform for data collection because it provides a good overview of all advertisements an automotive brand has released in the last period. In addition, it is an easy way for anyone to access all these visuals, as well as being a platform used by brands to engage with their consumers. The advertisements here were considered the most usable because these were often the campaigns that, with some minor adaptations, appealed to multiple markets and were therefore distributed widely (Cheong, et al., 2010). The other part of the advertisements were taken from Instagram. On this platform, static images and expressions of the main objective of each image were presented. In this way, the results would be stronger, giving an idea of a brand's advertising practices on two platforms with two different approaches and audiences.

3.3. Data Analysis

After collecting the videos the advertisements were evaluated, paying particular attention to the use of 'calm' elements and elements of disconnection relating to nature, silence, and refraining from technology. After evaluation, there was worked according to the steps of visual analysis (Machin & Mayr, 2012a). First, denotations and connotations were considered. Denotations, where the actual who and what depicted in the clips are viewed on a descriptive level, reviewing elements like colours, subjects and movements. Connotations move beyond this and consider the underlying communicated values, viewing everything presented on a more symbolic level, focusing on the suggestion of 'calm' and disconnection (Barthes, 1977). Secondly, the role played by the car in the visuals and the ideas and values communicated by this object were examined. Thirdly, the setting was analysed focusing on the environments or sounds that are used and the context in which characters are positioned to create a discourse. Finally, salience in the images was considered focusing on how features in the composition are made to stand out using features characteristics like position,

size, colour, tone, focus, foregrounding or overlapping (Machin & Mayr, 2012a).

To note this process down, and create final themes for analysis, the data was coded. The technique used was open coding, where the relevant notes from the data were divided into fragments and categorised into groups. This coding was mostly inductive, sometimes reinforced by a deductive approach. The second step in the coding process was axial coding, where connections were made between the different categories that emerged from the open coding. The purpose of this is to see the important and less important categories and reduce the data set by combining mutually exclusive categories. The final step was selective coding, where the codes were again linked together into larger codes to get a clear sense of what is happening in the data (Boeije, 2010b). This approach ensures that the final themes capture all the nuances within the data and capture an element that is consistently found in the data set and is illustrated in *Figure 2* (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Rosenberry & Vicker, 2009). Three themes emerged from this study: 'visual calm', 'sensory calm' and 'symbolic calm'. The first theme 'visual calm' explores the aesthetic choices that create a 'calm' advertisement. The second theme, 'sensory calm', shows how sensory elements such as sound are still very much present in advertising and even very important in creating a 'calm' scene. The third theme, 'symbolic calm', explains how advertisers make choices that play with the presentation of the car. These themes were all supported by a set of two or three subthemes that further explained the key characteristics of the main themes.

3.4. Reliability and Validity

In qualitative research, two factors need to be considered concerning its credibility, namely reliability and validity. Firstly, reliability refers to the 'soundness' of the methods, focusing on the consistency of the approach of the thesis (Boeije, 2010a). To achieve this, the research attempts to be fully transparent in all the steps taken by describing the research design and data analysis, as well as sharing the different steps by including the dataset and coding tree. It also meant keeping interference in the description of the themes to a minimum, which was done by keeping personal ideology, background, age and gender out as much as possible. Secondly, validity refers to the 'soundness' of the results, considering the accuracy of the findings (Boeije, 2010a). Therefore, the most appropriate theoretical structure was used to provide a theoretical basis for this research and constant comparison of data was applied. In addition, the validity of the findings was ensured by cross-referencing the two different platforms and checking if the final findings were not platform specific. Finally, a very recent timeframe was chosen to cover the adaptation of advertising to the contemporary trend of digital disconnection.

In its totality, this section has extensively explained all the steps taken in this study. The right combination of data and analytical interpretation provided interesting data and results. These were analysed and compared according to the research design and the final results are described in the next section.

4. Analysis

The following section presents the results of this research. To explain these findings, three different themes that emerged from the analysis will be explored. All themes explain their part of the presentation and visual remarks within automotive advertisements. The first theme to be presented is *Visual Calm*. This will be followed by the second theme, *Sensory Calm*. Finally, there is the theme of *Symbolic Calm*. Taken together, these themes show features that play a role in constructing the understanding of the proposed concept of 'calm advertising'. These themes will be further elaborated by their own set of subthemes. For the first theme, the subthemes *Colour Coordination* and *Smoothness* will elaborate on the main elements by presenting strong visual elements that are crucial in a 'calm' presentation. The second theme is supported by the subthemes *Slow Sounds*, *Peaceful Silence* and *Empty Urban*, which focus on the different layers in which sound plays a role in advertising visuals. The final theme is further explored through the subthemes *Natural Grounding*, *Escapist Experience* and *Human Connection*. These elements show the 'calm' or disconnected underlying story that is presented in automotive advertising. Taken together, these three themes and corresponding subthemes highlight the operationalisation of the aesthetics of digital disconnection through advertising by explaining strategic elements that work on different levels of interpretation, which when combined, present a strong representation of 'calm' in automotive advertising.
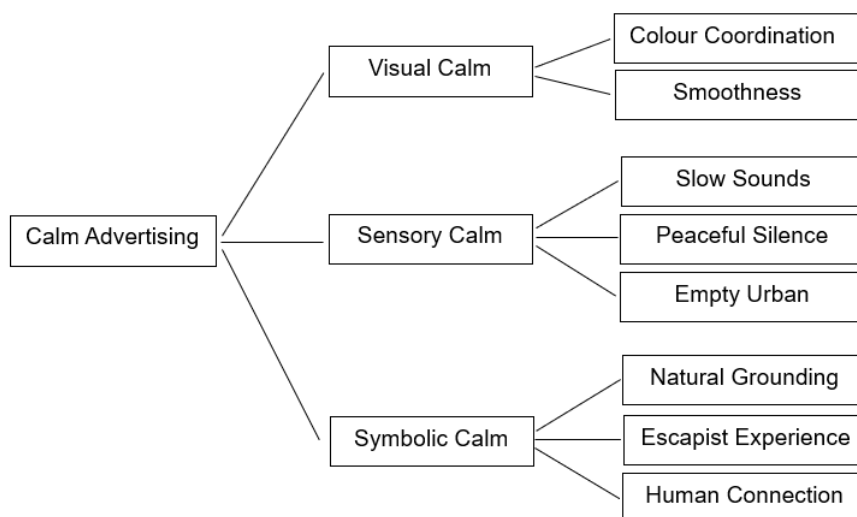

Figure 2 - Condensed Coding Tree

4.1. Visual Calm

All analysed brands showed elements that explain more about the visual aesthetic elements that construct the 'calm advertising' strategy. What this looks like is reflected in the first theme, *Visual Calm.* All videos foregrounded a greater visual sense of 'calm', connecting different elements that create this aesthetic. In this way, the analysis of advertisements shows how brands move with literary knowledge reflecting society as well as trying to stand out (Malefyt, 2006). Stand out by being the one brand that creates visuals that are comfortable and most importantly not too overwhelming in exposure (Bloch, 1995). Keeping the overload of advertisements presented to the consumer daily in mind.

This section explains how the essence of the product lies in its aesthetics (Brunel & Kumar, 2007). Visually, this is strongly demonstrated by the fact that the communication of the product starts from the element of 'calm', making the visuals easy to follow through the use of colour and camera work, and suggesting a relationship with nature through smooth connections between elements. It makes 'calm' the essence of the product presented, bearing in mind that consumers judge the product based on this 'calm' visual appearance (Crilly, et al., 2004; Creusen & Schoormans, 2005). All the means used to achieve this build a relationship between the brand and the consumer, as the message is easier to follow and the consumer feels heard when the visual elements of 'calm advertising' now align the advertisement with their social needs (Brunel & Kumar, 2007; Gregg, 2018). It shows the first examples of how aesthetics are used as the tool to play with the identification of a product and present 'calm' as the association with the car instead of overwhelm (Crilly, et al., 2004; Creusen & Schoormans, 2005).

Visual Calm relates to the research question of the aesthetic elements within 'calm advertising'. It refers to the elements that, taken together, construct an image or even an imaginary of 'calm' that operationalises the desire for digital disconnection. The most obvious elements relating to the creation of an overall smoothness between and throughout the visuals will be explored further in this analysis, with examples and a detailed description of each subtheme and aesthetic element. The first subtheme, *Colour Coordination*, focuses on the conscious use of colour. This is followed by further visual elements in the subtheme of *Smoothness*, showing how sizing, repetition and camera work are crucial 'calm' elements to create an overall peaceful presentation. Both elements are related to the theory presented with *Visual Calm*. Taken together, the themes that constitute *Visual Calm* highlight the operationalisation of the aesthetics of digital disconnection theory through advertising.

4.1.1. Colour Coordination – How Technology Becomes Optically 'Calm' and Transfers onto Nature

The first element that presents itself in the visual strategy of 'calm advertising' and aims to create a calmer look is the effective use of specific colours. In the first subtheme *Colour Coordination,* smart and conscious colour decisions and matches are central to create part of the imaginary of 'calm' in the 'calm advertising' strategy. It is an element that is very visible in and throughout all of the visuals, where the way all colours match, overflow and express feeling was considered. Within 'calm' advertisements this is often expressed through the use of soft and toned-down colours that fit with colour categories like pastels, earth tones, and variations of white and beige. This creates an effect where technology and the surroundings connect and become less opposing states in communication (Portwood-Stacer, 2012). Drawing on one exemplary video and two images all three elements of *Colour Coordination* as a filter, mean to connect, and suggestion of nature will be explained in the following section.

Figure 3 – 'Blush Pink Desert' (Mercedes-Benz, 2022)

The video *'Pink Blush Desert'* (Mercedes-Benz, 2022) exemplifies multiple advertisements that use a coordinated colour palette throughout. The visual begins with a view of dunes as the sun rises, illuminating the tops of each dune and revealing the shape of the landscape with a woman in the middle. All three elements, the woman, the sky and the sand, share the same presence of pink towards beige. This set of colours is used as a 'filter'

over the different shots, creating the effect of a seamless transition between the different scenes. This creates a lower sense of arousal from different scenes, elements and shapes that cross the eye, deviating from the high connective demand that creates the opposite of this ease (Campbell, et al., 2017). The choice of pink shows that although there is a wide variety of colours in nature, this is not the case in automotive advertising. Careful consideration is given to the implementation of colour in each visual, and colours with no connection to the advertised product, have no place in the visual. This plays to the desire for simplicity within the practice of digital separation as presented by Baym, et al. (2020). An example that illustrates this strategy of filtering even more deliberately can be seen in *Figure 4* (Audi, 2022). The use of fog creates the effect in the image where all colours have the same muted effect. The car at the centre of the image is the main focus. With its muted green colour, the car forms a focal point between the beige sky, the road in front, and the grass beside. This makes the picture easy to look at and 'calm', emphasising the power of simplicity and bringing the image down to a single colour base (Baym, et al., 2020). This strategy of interweaving scenes, as well as subjects and their environment, through colour, recurs and shares the first way in which aesthetic elements are crucial in advertising.

Figure 4 – Car Blending with Nature (Audi, 2022)   *Figure 5 – Car as Mediator (Porsche, 2023)*

This suggestion of continuity between elements through the use of colour is regularly used to connect different elements. As shown in *Figure 5* (Porsche, 2023), the suggestion can develop and create a connection as a deeper meaning is implemented in the image through the continuous colour matching of the subject, product and environment. In this case, the beige of the car relates to the sandy road in front of it, the skin tone of the model

and the light brown patches in the grass behind her. All share the same tone which creates an interconnection between very different elements. Similarly, the model's green jumpsuit matches the green stripe on the car and the forest and grass in the background. In the same way, all of the colours related to the model match somewhere in the car and in the background, and all of the car's colours match in the background, as explained in the previous argument. This expresses many different underlying assumptions, such as the representation of the three elements as one, which suggests the idea that nature, cars and people are connected. Through the shared colours, the image even suggests that nature and technology are both 'part' of the human, or that the car is a mode to restore the connection between nature and the individual, as suggested by Garland, et al. (2013). Here, advertisers play with colours to find a balance in the visual, helping the individual find a balance in a multi-layered, digitally demanding society, while shaping the relevance of the car to the consumer through connecting colours (Wu, 2016; Baym, et al, 2020).

The two elements of colour as a filter and as a connector presented earlier become even more productive in the combination between nature and technology that scholars have repeatedly used (Garland, et al., 2013; Li, 2013). Firstly, the colour 'filter' already showed a relationship with natural effects such as the effect of fog to connect all colours in *Figure 4* (Audi, 2022), smoothing the surfaces and making lines between subjects less hard. This example is still based on greens and earth tones, but the effective natural 'filter' can be even more powerful, as shown in *Figure 5* (Porsche, 2023). It is clear that this image was taken at sunset, this timing gives all colours in the shot the same warm undertone that brings the elements together. In addition, the sunset or sunrise element is often used when there is decided to use colours that do not seem to fit into the natural colour palette, such as purples, pinks and oranges. When mixed with light blue, yellow or beige, as in the visual *'Blush Pink Desert'* (Mercedes-Benz, 2022), the colours that could be intrusive now fit into the construction of 'calm' by pulling the whole image together through colour. Secondly, colours are also used to create a connection, this time suggesting a natural fit between the car and nature. For example, the *'Blush Pink Desert'* (Mercedes-Benz, 2022) shows the crème-white and sand-brown interior of the car, these colours relate to the beiges and browns of the dunes that surround the vehicle, linking the technical interior with the natural exterior. By seamlessly integrating the vehicle into the landscape, this strategy goes beyond connecting elements and suggests an ordinary fit between technology and the environment. These two elements show how natural features have a strong presence in the construction of the imaginary of 'calm' in automotive advertising. What the scenes approach differently from before is that they now seamlessly integrate the two opposites of technology and nature, changing the nature of the car from being presented in a natural setting to presenting the car

as indistinguishable from nature (Brunel & Kumar, 2007). It shows how visuals can be misleading, as suggested by Gunster (2007) and Li (2013), where this time it is not the environmental problems of the car that are left aside, but the full technological and arousing aspects of the vehicle.

These examples show the practice of conscious colour use, explaining that coordinating a variety of colours creates a more gentle visual, as the eye is smoothly taken from one place to the next. Colour makes all the elements in the image coherent, for example, the steel of the car feels like a complete match with the background, appearing as soft as a dancing field of grass or flowing desert. In this sense, colour coordination is the red line through all images that influences the presentation and interpretation of the video or image. It exemplifies what Aupers, et al. (2012) presented as the changing relationships between nature and technology. Where the use of colour suggests an intrinsic connection between the two, creating the idea of the car as part of nature. This representation of technology alters the idea of nature by strengthening its role in disconnection, and at the same time alters the idea that is presented of technology. This overall increased sense of smoothness in the visuals associated with these suggestions will be explored further in the following section.

4.1.2. Smoothness – How Guidance of the Eye and Familiarity Decrease the Level of Overwhelm

The desired level of serenity to create a 'calm' visual cannot be achieved by conscious colour choices alone. These colours and the visual elements in which they are contained also need to be created and presented in the right way. The approach to this style of presentation and the elements that play a role in the construction of the idea of a low-arousal advertisement is expressed in the second sub-theme. The subtheme of *Smoothness* refers to the role literally slowing down the pace of the visual plays in creating a smooth visual with a certain balance and symmetry to make the advertisement easy to follow. Using two exemplary videos, all three elements: repetition, slow pacing, and interrelating harmony, of *Smoothness* will be explained.

Part of the coherence within visuals is created by a sense of harmony. This can be reached through the repetition of elements like the sizing of subjects or frames. The video *'The Language of Attraction'* (Peugeot, 2023), exemplifies a way in which many advertisements express a sense of repetition. In this case, it shows the power of harmony in the sizing of subjects. The introductory scene begins with a woman, portrayed from behind, in a white modern city. This image changes to a man, again filmed from behind, watching

over a natural landscape. This is followed by another woman, this time looking at a work of art in a white building. The scene changes again, this time to a man standing in a living room, looking at the stars shimmering in the night. This shows how the individual changes, as does the entire environment, but the shot remains the same with the same angle, focus and size. This creates a visual with smooth transitions, where even though all the elements are changing, there is no overwhelming feeling that one might expect from constantly changing visuals. This particular example shows how visuals use continuity in the visual elements and size is the red line throughout the video. In this proposal, the senses remain the means of interaction between brand and consumer, but in a less exploitative way than presented by authors such as Malefyt (2006), as simplicity is again implemented through repetition, coherence and a slower pace to guide the eye. In this situation, agency comes from the guidance of the eye, which takes the user's attention exactly where it wants to go (Gehl, 2013). This guiding of the eye is also done through smooth connections and a different pace.
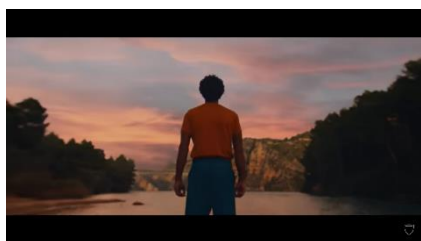

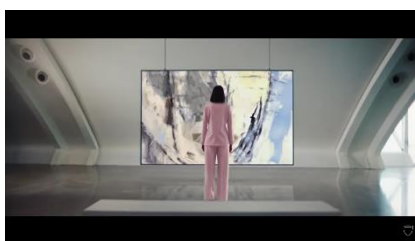*Figure 6 – Harmony Person 1 (Peugeot, 2023)*
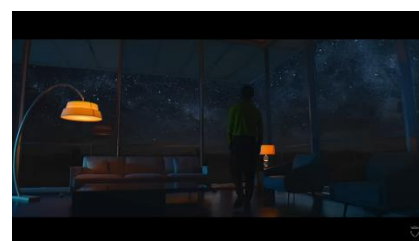
Figure 7 – Harmony Person 2 (Peugeot, 2023)

Figure 8 – Harmony Person 3 (Peugeot, 2023)

The smoothness of visuals also leads to the smoothness of camera use. As this suggests, between the connections between the visuals that construct the idea of 'calm', this connection is also more slow-paced, with an emphasis on smooth-flowing and overflowing visuals. A wide variety of 'calm' shots are used, with a deliberate slowing down of the camera speed, longer shots, a slow pace for zooming in, and horizontal positioning. The video *'Pure Design'* (Polestar, 2022) exemplifies a variety of these 'calm' shots. An opening shot in this advertisement follows the car as it drives slowly, the camera moves with the vehicle at a similar speed to smoothly take the eye along. Similarly, the camera is a guide when light enters the visual. As the vehicle is shown from behind, as in *Figure 9* (Polestar, 2022), a large hangar door opens. This movement brightens the room from left to right. The camera responds by moving from left to right, reinforcing the sense of serenity through the absence of conflicting movement. In the case of a close-up, this advertisement shows the car standing still and the camera zooms in, making the image slightly dynamic but again not overwhelming. Secondly, an element from the visual *'Pink Blush Desert'* (Mercedes-Benz, 2022) exemplifies serenity and smoothness as a slow movement not only of the camera but also of the subjects in the visual. In this case, when the advertised car is introduced in the

visual, the vehicle touches the sand, but it does so in such a soft way, almost like a feather, that it does not affect the 'calm' stage that was set previously. Finally, the slow movement also means a smooth movement in the editing of the visuals. Different scenes or elements in 'calm' advertisements follow each other at a slow pace. The editing ensures that there is no sense of hurry by making sure that the scenes come in due time and are shown for a reasonable length of time. The elements of this car commercial show how 'calm' camerawork is a tactic where all shots are carefully considered and only one type of camera movement is used per shot, one that enhances other elements in the visual, like the use of light or colour.

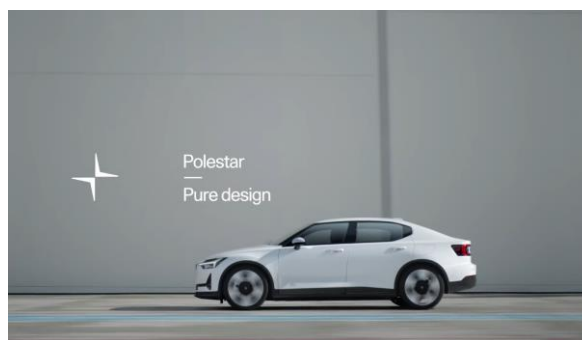*Figure 9 – Collaboration between Camera and Light (Polestar, 2022)*

Figure 10 – Collaboration between Camera and Light (Polestar, 2022)

Finally, a coherent and serene visual is created not only within the visuals, but also between the different visuals of a campaign or even an entire automotive brand. This is done by creating similar structures within the visuals, which results in a sense of commonality. This makes these advertising visuals less demanding because fewer new elements need to be absorbed by the consumer, countering the judgement on advertising that visuals require too much energy and mental space (Harris, 2016; Lanier,2018; Zuboff, 2019). One element that structures this is the closing scene, where the advertised car is highlighted and the focus is on the exterior design as some specifics are presented. This is presented in many advertisements, such as the visual *'Pure Design'* (Polestar, 2022) discussed earlier. This closing scene shows the car from the side, driving slowly as the camera moves along from right to left, making sure that the car is always in the centre of the shot and that no part of the car is cut off. Zooming out from the individual example, the larger idea of 'smoothness' is also constructed through the combination of different visuals that share visual elements. An example of this is the Instagram 'feed' shown in *Figure 11* (Audi, 2023a-j), where the visuals share the same colours, style and general feel. This harmony the visuals share with each other increases the potential of the visual, as the individual can interpret the different visuals as one. In this case, the findings of Liu-Thompkins (2019) are countered as the repetition of aesthetic choices becomes a strategy for engagement, creating an element of 'calm' and ease of connection, rather than an intrusion.
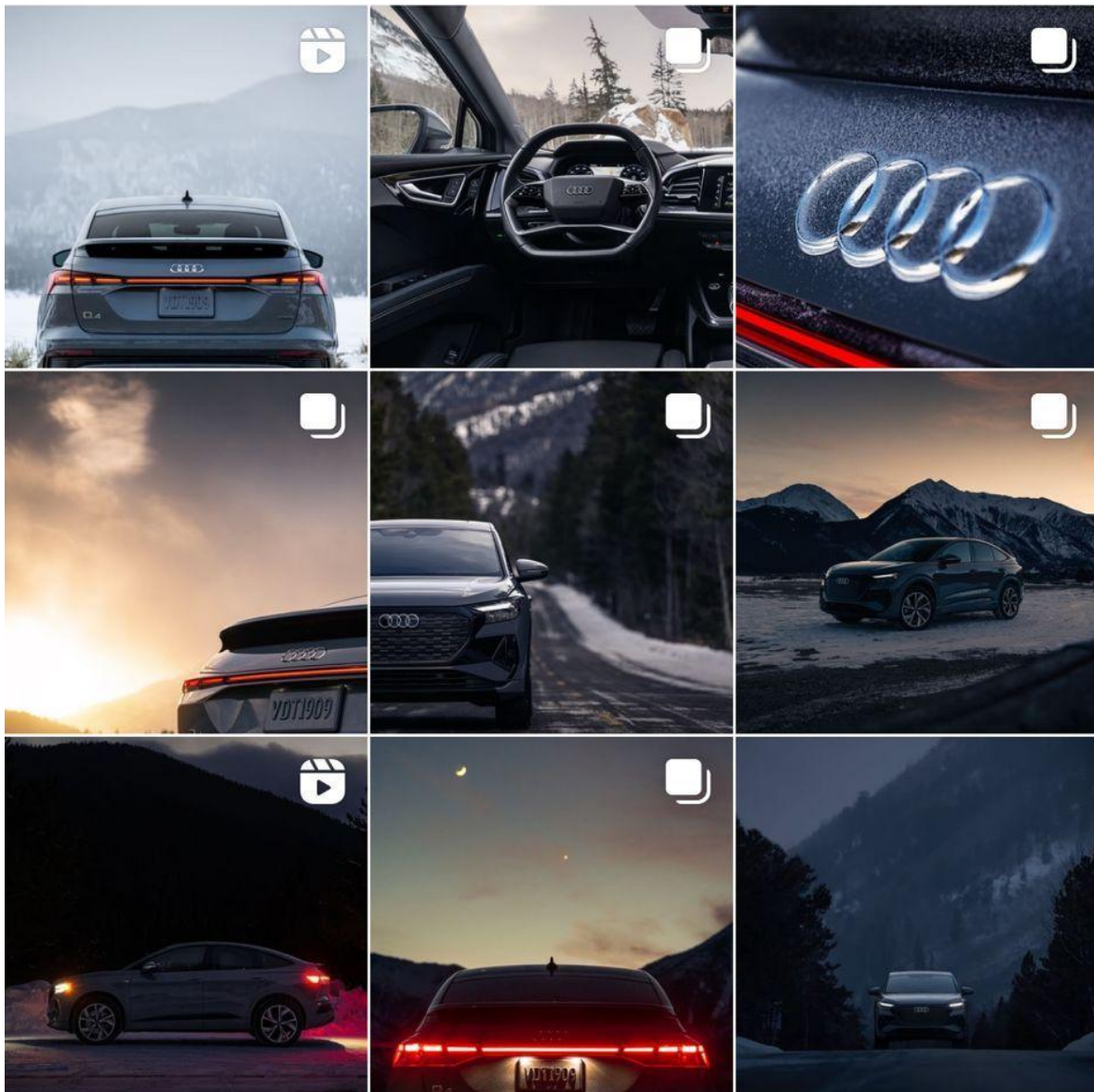
Figure 11 – Between-Advertisement Coherence (Audi, 2023a-j)

These examples show an overall idea of 'smoothness', achieved by the fact that all the elements in the visual remain coherent with each other, making it easier for the consumer to interpret each individual visual or an entire video. Taken together, these three elements show how aesthetic choices can change the demand the advertisement makes on the consumer's senses. In this way, the 'smoothness' of the visuals may create an advertisement that is simpler, but this is how these advertisements stand out. The aesthetics adapt to customer insights and create visuals that express the balance related to technology that Syvertsen (2017) suggests (Malefyt, 2006).

4.1.3. Conclusion Visual Calm

The exploration of the theme *Visual Calm* explains how different visual elements create a greater overall sense of 'calm' within the visuals and even between visuals. This construction of 'calm' is constantly related to the car where the visual elements like the surroundings are constantly matched with elements like the colour or pace of the camera, making the portrayed elements coherent and smooth. However, the discovery of conscious colour use and a smooth image work are not the only aesthetic elements that construct 'calm advertising'. In the next theme *Sensory Calm* a different layer is explained that enhances the effect of these 'calm' visuals even further.

4.2. Sensory Calm

In the same way that the visual elements create a 'calm' look, the use of auditory elements is also influential. The use of these sensory elements is presented in the theme *Sensory Calm*. This theme aims to show how more layers than just the visual, like sound, need to be included in order to counteract the creation of noise (Franco, et al., 2017). Sounds are powerful in conveying a message and enhancing feelings. This can mean no sound, soft sound, music or a narrator. The focus is on the non-visual elements that reinforce the presentation of the underlying motive, showing the car as a place of serenity. To explore this further, the subthemes of this theme will elaborate on the use of *Slow Sounds* to create a greater sense of serenity as well as underlying meanings. These sounds and their matching visuals are explored in the subthemes *Peaceful Silence* and *Empty Urban*.

This section explains the second in the range of strategies that are used to create 'calm' and more effectively engage with the audience by not engaging with them as obviously (Malefyt, 2006). This section on the auditory sense focuses on the wish for silence as advertisers create too much noise (O'Neal & Shawn, 2016). Together with visuals this approach moves away from a created feeling of intrusiveness and overwhelm, which would positively affect consumer welfare according to Summers, et al. (2016). In its totality this element of the 'calm advertising' approach would create a stronger brand-consumer relationship by creating fewer feelings of noise and intrusiveness (Wang, 2002; Eze & Lee, 2012 & Summers, et al., 2016).

Sensory Calm elaborates on the research question that focuses on the use of sensory appeal within the strategy of 'calm advertising'. It shows how practices of 'calm advertising', with the intention to be 'calm' and less arousing, continue to make extensive use of sensory elements. In particular, the auditory sense creates silence and slowness to counteract overwhelm. The most obvious elements relating to the creation of serenity

through the structured use of sensory elements will be further explored in this second theme, with examples and a detailed description of each individual subtheme and sensory element. This means that the first subtheme, *Slow Sounds*, focuses on the use of silence to construct an idea of 'calm' associated with the car. This is followed by further sensory elements in the subtheme *Peaceful Silence*, which shows how the car's tranquillity creates an image of peace. Finally, the third subtheme, *Empty Urban*, relates to the idea of disconnection through elements of no excitement, where the power of silence shows what disconnection from the car might feel like. All of the themes are related to the theory presented regarding *Sensory Calm*, and give examples. Taken together, the themes constituting *Sensory Calm* highlight the continued use of a wide range of sensory elements to create an imaginary 'calm' advertising.

4.2.1. Slow Sounds – How Calm Sounds Counter and Overwhelmed Brain

　　　The important element of sound that is crucial to the creation of a scene and feeling in advertisements will be explored in the following subtheme *Slow Sounds*. 'Calm' advertisements often use gentle sound effects to set the scene and further enhance the relaxed and serene atmosphere that the visuals intend to express. This takes the form of soft and slow sounds that do not demand too much attention from the brain, again an element to reduce the level of arousal in sensory advertising. These sounds can be quiet classical music, choir songs, slow and calm style music or light tones. The latter can be the sound of the wind blowing, waves crashing on the shore or a light element of tyres touching the surface. The *Slow Sounds* subtheme explores the presentation of these different sounds and their effects through three exemplary videos.

　　　A video that shows how natural and classical sounds can tell a story in a serene way is the video *'Waves'* (Hyundai, 2022). The video begins with a wide shot of a coastline where a car is driving past the ocean. As the sound of waves crashing against the shore begins, a visual shows the waves breaking and flowing. Classical music mixes with the sound of the ocean and takes over. It emphasises an increased focus when a combination of quiet and natural sounds is presented (Pijanowski, et al., 2011; Gramann, 1999). A girl sits in the backseat of the car overlooking the shore and makes wavy movements with her hands. This connects image and sound. The girl and the man in the driver's seat make hand movements to speak to each other, as if in sign language. This sets the scene, where silence and serenity reign. As the classical music continues, the scene changes completely to a robot delivering a parcel to an elderly woman. This is where the power of sound really comes in, as the viewer's focus is on the woman's smiling face, with almost no emphasis on the actual

element of technology. To have part of the video about technology, but not draw any attention to it, shows how the socially constructed link between natural silence and serenity expresses its powers, creating a great focus on 'calm' and disconnection.

Besides natural and musical 'calm' sounds, silence is something very rare in the daily lives that unfold themselves in the attention economy and therefore creates a strong tool to create a construct of 'calm'. It is interesting to consider this as a strong tool to enhance the experience as Annerstedt, et al., (2013) explored the duality of silence with peace and fear, of which the last one should not and does not have any place in the construction of 'calm'. A visual that shows the use of silence with a peaceful intention is the video *'We Ride Together'* (Citroën, 2022). In this advertisement, shots show the slow movements of a car as an introduction where it is dark and no other sounds are heard than the tires of the car moving over the surface. Accentuating the total silence that exists in the natural setting of the night. It emphasises the extreme aesthetic elements that are used to create an idea of 'calm', contrasting criticised earlier advertising practices that exploit the opportunities of the digital space. In combination with all other aesthetic elements, silence creates a strong sense of relief from the burden that the attention economy can be as the advertisement becomes an expression of desired serenity (Harris, 2016).

The video *'Destination Charging – Air in the Soul'* (Porsche, 2022) takes a different approach to sound revealing the 'calm' context a narrating voice can create. The video starts by showing a car driving over an empty road in a landscape of green hills. In the beginning, there is no sound. As the scenes change from simple shots of elements in nature to a woman driving a car or a modern house on a hill, the silence is broken and a soft voice begins to tell a story, like a poem with an easy pace. As the scenes change, the sound of a car exhaust breaks the silence but quickly gives way to music. Music that at first appears to be arousing, but turns out not to be when the same notes are repeated over and over again and not much attention is needed to follow the sounds. This creates ease, which becomes even greater when the music stops and the narrator returns, presenting powerful serenity. The video ends with a shot that zooms out to show the coast, where the landscape of hills becomes a beach and flows into the sea. Soft tones of music create a 'quiet' and definitive end to the video, where the focus can slowly fade away. Overall, the video shows the peace that an absence of noise can bring and presents the vehicle as a very 'calm' and specifically silent object, one that supports the ability to be personally silent.

This subtheme explains how sound connects the serene elements in the advertisements, enhancing visual effects, and creating an even greater sense of 'calm' as no unnecessary noise is created. It expresses the interconnectedness between all aesthetic

elements and thus the necessity to carry out the intention of 'calm' throughout all of them, to present the car and the environment in which the vehicle moves as one expression of serenity.

4.2.2. Peaceful Silence – How Silence Creates a Space of Productivity and Imagination

An element that builds on this first subtheme focusing on sound is explored in the second subtheme, *Peaceful Silence*. This theme focuses on elements where sound is strongly used and feels present in advertising. The setting of the car as a place to slow down is reinforced by sound, combining sound with act. This similar pattern of sound and visuals throughout the dataset presents the idea of the car as a completely 'calm' space. In the advertisements, the car is no longer presented as a simple means of getting somewhere but also has the ability to create this place of peace itself. The car is the place of disconnection. This subtheme explores the presentation of the car as a place to unwind and a place to reconnect with the mind, using two visuals that illustrate this.

The presentation of the car as a space in which the noise of the surroundings can be escaped is exemplified in the video *'Metaverse Designer'* (Hyundai, 2022) which underline the element of the car as a place to find silence by the presentation of the big contrasts between high connection and the possibilities for disconnection. The video starts by showcasing a man behind a large number of computer screens, narrating about his job which is very digitally connected as the title suggests. After this, several shots present this same man driving in a car where also a technical screen within the vehicle is shown. This does not seem so disconnected, but that changes. Music takes over and no sounds of a driving car disturb this. At this point, the car comes to a standstill and is presented as the perfect workspace. A space that requires focus and of silence. A laptop opens and the video ends with the quote 'awaken your world', referring to the wide variety of possibilities that the car could create. In a way, this visual jumps right into the issue that Wajcman (2015) describes as society feeling the pressure of less time. As the car becomes a place to work, recharge and get from one place to another, it is the perfect outcome to do all the activities that are expected of the busy consumer with ease. This emphasises a greater sense of serenity through silence and takes away the feeling of stress.

Another way presents the car also as this place of silence but more in the sense that it creates a space where the passenger can be alone in the car. The absence of arousing factors in this space opens up the opportunity for the passenger to make room for creative thinking. The visual *'Space for the Imagination'* (Renault, 2023) presents an example of this approach. The video starts in silence, where a person comes up from underwater, moving

towards the sun, creating a very strong sense of peace within nature. As the car is introduced a very slowly flowing version of the song 'pure imagination' is played. The car is shown to make a U-turn, the music continues and the road turns into a place out of which the fins of sharks arise that swim with the vehicle. In the same idea, scenes show jellyfish moving through the sky, a tunnel turning into a track of a swimming pool and the car must stop for angel-like figures to cross the street. The song makes place for big classical tones as the car is presented to drive in a natural setting. This again makes this link between nature and greater silence and also makes space for the viewer to think and reflect on what they have seen before. No fantastical figures are shown anymore. This can be related to the imagination and dream that society has to disconnect and get into nature, this time that is the dream that is seen from the car. In a sense, this video could even relate to a childish state of the brain, in which no overload is going on yet and there is space to daydream as not too much constant digital arousing or stress disturbs this. Where the car makes daydreaming about what life could look like possible again.

These two different ways show how the idea of low arousal which has also been presented earlier is taken further. Both visuals are the first examples in this analysis section that do not completely derive from the element of digital connection to create a serene visual. This time the car is presented very prominently when as the car doors close, almost complete silence falls. It exemplifies what Light (2014) shares as technology as a tool for disconnection rather than a contrast. This time the car is presented as a place to get away from the constant noise of the surrounding and find a moment to focus or unwind. In which the same play exists between technology and disconnection, emphasising once again how the disconnection is not only about what is being disconnected from but about the expression this disconnection functions for. How Gregg (2018) words this is very productive regarding this case, presenting how, within the subtheme of *Peaceful Silence*, it is not necessarily the disconnection that is mentioned but more so the final existence of silence and absence of noise. This summarises the core of this theme, where the car is the place to tune out.

4.2.3. Empty Urban – How a Location of Low Arousal Creates and Image of Personal Peace
The last subtheme of this dimension is the theme of *Empty Urban*, exploring the effect of silence and quiet as a setting. This subtheme shows how also other contexts aside from the natural one that is discussed in earlier literature can make a strong setting that creates a basis for the storyline in the advertisement. Again, a combination of visuals and sounds is used to explore the concept of silence in relation to the automotive vehicle but now within the context of the city. Where wherever the car moves peace arises and ambient sounds that

relate to the presentation of a hectic city are left aside. This theme presents the new element of calm appearing cities in advertising, where the car and driver are presented as being alone in this world. A new setting to literature but one that suggests 'calm advertising' very strongly in relation to automotive brands by the presentation of a very rare phenomenon in today's society. This idea of the *Empty Urban* is explained further in the following section and again exemplified by a visual.

As this already suggests the setting that uses an empty city presents a modified situation, more obviously so than in other settings like natural ones. In the 'empty urban' a situation is presented where silence rules in the city, using elements of peace and disconnection to create a great feeling of serenity. This is a scene that would seldom occur in reality. The car is shown driving through an empty city where there are no overwhelming sounds that present the hectic state of a city, the contrast appears as again all noise is suppressed and only for example the sound of the tires moving over the surface is heard. There are no other cars and only a causal individual will be presented walking on sidewalks or crossing crossroads. Generally, there is close to nothing happening in the close surrounding of the vehicle. All this silence is accentuated by the cities that share the same light colour palette throughout and a consistency of building style where the buildings are tall, square, and in a modern or painted style. These smooth visuals enhance the feeling of serenity that is created by the absence of noise even further, suggesting serenity like in nature. However, it does show a very different result in the urban context than before, where (Guilford & Smith, 1959; Jacobs & Suess, 1975; Valdez & Mehrabian, 1994) mention urban colour palettes as aggressive and dominant. Showing a completely renewing positive association that connection between the visual and auditory elements of 'calm advertising' present.

In relation to this, the empty city is also presented as a setting that collides with nature to emphasise the serenity and silence in the city that is comparable to the natural environment. This shows how advertisers use a mix between the nature and city to enhance the empty and grounding feeling of a setting. An advertisement that showcases this element of the empty city at first and later moves on to the natural setting is to be found in the advertisement *'For that Extra Mile of Freedom'* (Volkswagen, 2023). In this advertisement, the car is first depicted driving through the city, a city where the occasional individual is walking over the sidewalk this time, but no other car or other vehicle takes part in traffic. This creates a visual with no surrounding noises and no possible moments of stress or distraction to create the true environment for pure disconnection. In a way, this proposes that in relation to the car the urban environment can be just as much of a space to relieve from overwhelm as nature could be. As the visual moves on, a bridge is depicted that takes the setting out of

the city and into nature. This bridge is an often returning element in many visuals that creates a literal boundary between the city and nature. Later, the car is shown in different natural settings. This exemplifies how both settings of the 'empty urban' and nature are incorporated in one visual to strengthen the presentation of serenity. In this case, there is always either started or ended with the one and started or ended with the other or both settings alternate each other. This can be in equal parts but often it is seen that in a nature-oriented visual, there will only be a small beginning or end incorporating the city setting often showcasing the car design. Whereas the city-oriented ones will also decide to incorporate a considerable part of the natural setting, taking into account at least one full set of scenes in a larger video. This possibly relates to the relaxing essence that is often already assigned to nature and for the 'empty' city this suggestion still has to be created in the advertisement. Where nature and recreation are spaces with freedom from noise, to which the empty city and silent car have now been added (Gidlöf-Gunnarsson & Öhrström, 2007).
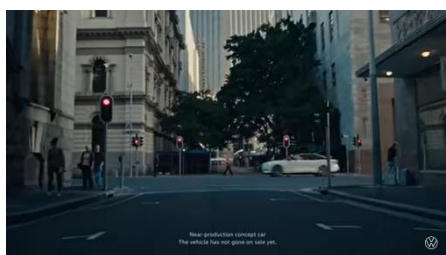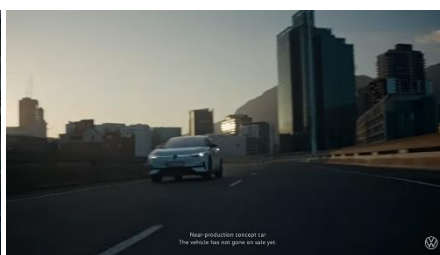

Figure 12 – The Empty City
(Volkswagen, 2023)

Figure 13 – The Border of Connection
(Volkswagen 2023)

Figure 14 – Nature (Volkswagen, 2023)

As presented earlier on there is often already little arousal going on around the car in the analysed advertisements, like no other vehicles on the roads the car crosses or almost nothing happening in the cities that the vehicle drives through. Besides that, the auditory element of silence and small sounds that would otherwise never be heard creates the final sense of serenity within the normally noisy context of the city.

4.2.4. Conclusion Sensory Calm

This exploration of the theme *Sensory Calm* shows the impact that the senses can make and how the senses can enhance the presented feeling of a story in different ways. All the different uses of 'calm' sounds that were presented in this section present a serene framing, in which no rush is presented and silence carries the advertisements. This counters the advertising practices that resulted in overwhelm but still shows that also 'calm' automotive advertising continues to use sensory appeal as a large element in its engagement strategy. Therefore, for now the advertisements are much calmer but advertisers have to be careful that , in due time, 'calm advertising' does not change into

noise (Franco, et al., 2017). How the visuals and sound eventually come together to present the car as the carrier of this expression of 'calm' is explored in the next theme of *Symbolic Calm.*

4.3. Symbolic Calm

The final theme presented is *Symbolic Calm.* This theme adds the next dimension to the construction of 'calm' by presenting the combination of all the sensory and aesthetic elements that come together to sell a story of escape from technology and personal reconnection. This theme explains how the symbolic element is strongly woven into all the 'calm' visuals through the presentation of a disconnected story. In this practice of storytelling, the car is presented in combination with a specific lifestyle, countering constant connection and therefore appealing to the overwhelmed consumer. Symbolism is used to create a tool for identification with the product. This is a representation of how Casemajor et al. (2015) present the theory of digital disconnection as lifestyle politics. This section exemplifies how people want to be part of a trend towards a disconnected lifestyle, which the car is suggested to provide.

Symbolic Calm shows an operationalisation of what Pariser (2011) describes as digital media that goes beyond simply informing the audience and instead stimulates personal opinions, tolerance and worldviews. 'Calm advertising' creates a story that emotionally engages the consumer and creates an experience where the consumer sees the pleasure the product could bring without using it (Creusen & Schoormans, 2005). The theme shows the recognition that advertising stories depend on the consumer's interpretation, resulting in a mix of freedom and persuasion, as Lorey (2006) presents it, by taking away the obvious constant subjectification of the consumer but continuing to compete for their attention (Williamson, 1978). Together, the elements in this theme show how the car is presented as an expression of the values of the consumer who wants to be digitally disconnected (Creusen & Schoormans, 2005).

The theme of *Symbolic Calm* links to the research question that focuses on the element of 'calm advertising', which blurs the lines between digital disconnection and technological connection. This shows from the presentation of the automotive vehicle as a means for disconnection and escapism and the creation of situations in which the meaning of the car is altered by symbolism. The most evident elements relating to the creation of this idea of escapism and the car as the ultimate solution to find personal reconnection is explored in this last theme, with examples and an in-depth description of every individual subtheme to explore the manufactured disconnection out of symbolic meaning. The first

subtheme *Natural Grounding* focuses on the use of nature and the presentation of the car as a mediating factor to get in touch with nature to create an idea of disconnection. After, further elements are explained in the subtheme *Escapist Experience* where it is shown the car can facilitate escapism from a very connective lifestyle and get into a different scenery and mindset. Last, the third subtheme *Human Connection* relates to the idea of disconnection as a basis to find personal grounding and reconnection. Reconnection with the self but also reconnection to others where digital disconnection is achieved. All themes are related to the theory that relates to this symbolic layer. Taken together, the themes that constitute the *Symbolic Calm* show how a story is built where the car is non-technical and shapes a new beginning through the facilitation of digital disconnection.

4.3.1. Natural Grounding – How the Natural Setting Creates a Story of Escape and Disconnection

        The first subtheme of this last theme is *Natural Grounding*. This theme goes beyond the natural elements of colour and sound, and focuses on nature as a backdrop in which automotive advertising often appears. In this case, natural settings often show the serenity and beauty of nature in relation to personal grounding and serenity. The car is the only vehicle on an empty road in a natural setting, not creating any arousing feelings that break the peace of this place. In addition, these shots in nature often present the idea of driving without a destination, suggesting a certain sense of escapism that the car would facilitate (Gunster, 2007). There are also shots in which the car moves away from society like the empty urban setting, into the middle of nowhere, arriving at houses on the top of a mountain or at a campfire in the woods. In this theme, the variety of ways in which nature is represented is illustrated by three exemplary images.

        As described above, cars are regularly shown in a natural setting, but the backgrounds vary. It could be a smooth desert, rocky mountains or fresh snow, but nature is always involved, as shown strongly in *Figure 15* (Polestar, 2023b) and *Figure 16* (Polestar, 2023a). If the advertising images are not in a completely natural setting, they are in a modern location overlooking a natural area, still strongly representing and even reinforcing nature. A radical form of this is exemplified in *Figure 17* (Polestar, 2022). In this visual, the car is placed in a modern, straight, all-white, simple box. This does not fit with the view over a beautiful lake. The opening of the box towards the lake creates a symbolic visual where the car, or in this case the driver together with the new car, is encouraged to experience nature. It becomes one of the few visuals in the dataset that suggests an opposing argument to that of Portwood-Stacer (2012), as modernity, associated with connection, and nature, associated

with disconnection, are suggested as two very opposing communicative states. This presented dualism reinforces the idea that the car can be a tool to achieve disconnection, strengthening the appeal of the car by using the positives associated with nature in the context of digital disconnection (Aupers, et al., 2012).

Figure 15 – Alone in the Valley
(Polestar, 2023b)

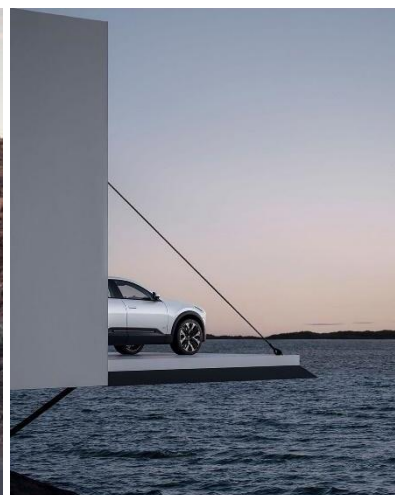Figure 16 – Soft Rocks
(Polestar, 2023a)

Figure 17 – Out of the Box
(Polestar, 2022)

This subtheme shortly exemplifies the variety in which the long-established relationship between the car and nature is expressed in the context of disconnection. The car is detached from all its technological associations and presented as ordinary in the natural environment. The vehicle becomes an important construct to move away from the constant connection in daily life and find the 'calm' most strongly projected in nature (Liu-Thompkins, 2019).

4.3.2. Escapist Experience – How the Car takes the Individual Anywhere and Creates any Desired Mindset

The following subtheme, *Escapist Experience*, focuses on the experience that advertising creates about the promoted product. Here the car is no longer a simple means of transport, but a digital disconnect that creates an experience based on the consumer's emotions, desires and aspirations. This creates a visual that tells a story that the consumer wants to be a part of, refraining from the technical and cutting-edge features that make a new car special. This suggests that in 'calm advertising' it is not necessarily the status that comes from owning an expensive and new car, but the status that comes from being able to digitally disconnect by using the car to do so. The car is associated with a new lifestyle of digital disconnection and the power of reconnecting with nature. Here, as in Li's (2013) research, the car becomes a symbol of freedom, power and happiness, selling the promise of escape.

This portrays the car as a means of escapism and a tool for disconnection, both of which will be illustrated by visuals and explained in more detail in this section.

First, the creation of the car as an escapist experience by itself is exemplified in the visual *'A Rebel Unleashed'* (Porsche, 2023). Here, the viewer's attention is held by classical and natural sounds, interspersed with the loud sound of the exhaust. The shots show the car speeding through the mountains, the backlights draw in the darkness, embodying a means of escape. Later, the sun rises and more of the landscape and road the is driving through is revealed, showing the strong duality between light and dark. This emphasises the sense of escape where the car is a space to experience this at any time, day or night (Chen, 2016). As the car speeds into a foggy shot of the car standing still on a rocky mountain, an individual is portrayed watching over the cliff in front, where there is no sound or movement to disturb. It reinforces the positive relationship presented between the car and the driver, and shows the disconnection, looking over nothing but desert. Although not always in the most 'calm' way, this visual is a strong representation of how the car is presented as versatile and able to adapt to any situation, where the vehicle is an embodiment of escapism through its speed, disappearance into the night and individuality. The car, in combination with escape, becomes the practice of disconnection and in this way embodies what Hesselberth (2018) has noted as the way out of a highly attentive society. However, escape is not the only way in which the car is represented in the power form of disconnection.

In addition, the car is often related to an experience in which the vehicle paves the way to disconnection and reconnect with the surroundings. The visual *'Electrify your Dreams'* (BMW, 2022) exemplifies this idea. This advertisement starts off showing the car drive through a city, fastly moving around every corner but then coming to a halt. A marathon blocks the road and becomes an obstacle to reach nature. At this moment, the road opens up in front of the car. The vehicle follows this road into a tunnel, which in turn disappears with a simple touch of the codriver's hand, to become an empty mountain road. This road moves into a road that leads to the waterfront, but this is not the final stop. A wooden bridge emerges from the water and the car drives over it, after which the visual ends with a shot of the car driving through a forest road and ending up at an open campfire in the woods. In this way, the car in this video is the facilitator to access nature. This space for reconnection is opened up by the car, which paves the way. The advertisement exemplifies all elements of this subtheme, entailing a lot of symbolism, speaking to the emotions of the customer and creating the pathway to digital disconnection, personal grounding and reconnection. Both the car and the consumer are empowered to achieve digital disconnection at any time and overcome any hurdle.
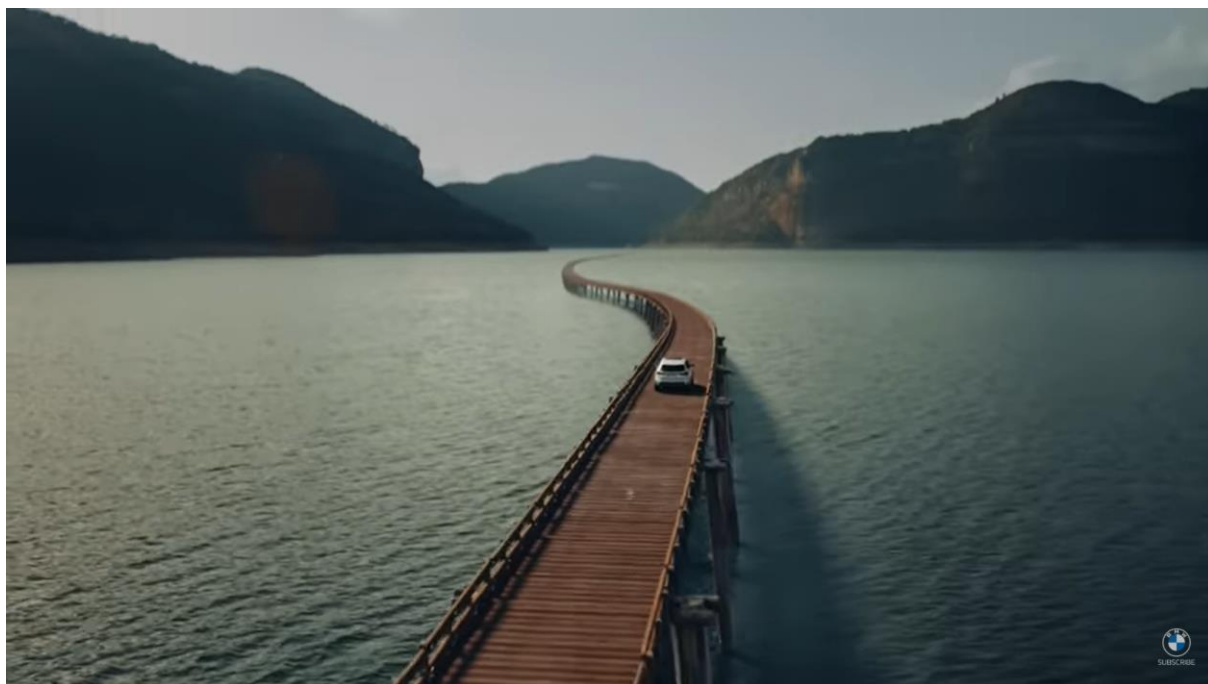
Figure 18 – Car Paving the Road to Disconnection (BMW, 2022)

In presentations of the car as the embodiment of escapism and the car as a facilitator to reach a disconnected space, the car is presented with the power to give the consumer the desired disconnection. The advertisements do not reject technology, but also do not centralise it, relating arousal only to elements of the city. This creates a fitting image for the desire to disconnect.

4.3.3. Human Connection – How the Car Sustains and Strengthens Relationships

Finally, advertisements often emphasise the importance of human connection and the value of face-to-face interaction, either in the context of the experience described above or on their own. Many visuals include people who have a social relationship with each other and are together in the car. This coexistence in the car and the creation of a shared feeling or experience is often used by advertisers to create visuals with an idea of reconnection. These visuals suggest the absence of digital connection as a basis for interpersonal connection, which fits the aspirations within the digital disconnection trend. The final subtheme, *Human Connection*, illustrates how the car is both a space for and a means of human and personal reconnection, supported by two 'calm' visuals.

This element focuses on different groups of people with different social relationships who use the car to go on their outdoor adventures. It shows how the car is a means of getting to a desired place to unwind together, but also how the journey to the destination is already a shared experience. For example, *'Branded'* (Hyundai, 2022b) exemplifies the

typical scenes of a car driving through nature, with an insert of a family sitting in the car. They will end their journey at a house on top of a mountain, where silence reigns. This moment of digital disconnection creates a heightened sense of togetherness. The car is once again the facilitator of freedom and shared experiences.

However, the car is suggested to be capable of much more in advertising, becoming a space where emotional connections are built and maintained. The exemplary visual *'Scenic Vision'* (Renault, 2022) underlines the idea that many types and states of human relationships take place within the context of the car. First, a little boy is depicted running after his mother's car as she drives away, sadly waving goodbye. Next, a grandfather and grandson are shown laughing and driving in the sun. A man and a woman are then shown running through the rain and jumping into their car. This cuts to a scene of a man and woman making love in the back of the car. After, three children are shown fighting in the back seat. This moves to a shot of a mother in the car with a baby in her arms, and a boy sleeping on a girl's shoulder. The advertisement then shows a woman madly honking and crying, and a girl on her father's lap marvelling at the car wash they move through. Finally, a group of friends are shown singing and shouting with their heads out of the window. These are ordinary scenes, depicting all stages of relationships and life, creating a sense of familiarity for the consumer. The car is the common denominator and portrayed as a guide through life, interpersonal relationships and personal development. This element of 'calm' shows relationships in which interpersonal connections between friends and family are strong. The car becomes a place of membership and belonging, where all individuals are close together in the small space provided by the car, emphasising the sense of being present together (Dittmar, 1992). This represents the car as a place to reach the core of digital disconnection, a personal space to reconnect with the social environment and make time for face-to-face interaction.

Figure 19 – Human Connection 1 (Renault, 2022)   *Figure 20 - Human Connection 2 (Renault, 2022)*   *Figure 21 - Human Connection 3 (Renault, 2022)*

The people in these two examples share emotions, have conversations, and sing along to music. This story of relationships, created in the visuals shows a life that is aspired to by those who are looking to digitally disconnect. This theme exemplifies that this is a very

personal journey. First, in a digital and technological sense, the relationship between man and car fits with how Deleuze and Guattarri (1972) present disconnection as the shaping of connective culture and the forcing of new interaction, referring to this as a simple varying communicative state. It refers to the impossibility of disconnecting while at the same time sharing that this is a given that is accepted. Second, it is a journey of personal grounding as well as a situation where the car would be the facilitator of interactions again. Technology may still be present but human reconnection is prioritised. This is part of the challenge of digital disconnection, where individuals have to figure out how to be truly authentic people in an overload of connectivity (Syvertsen & Eli, 2020; Madsen, 2015). In this case, conscious digital disconnection with a large element of conscious connection becomes the default lifestyle. The vehicle is a space where the core of disconnection is reached and emotional connections are built and sustained in any possible way, reflecting the many social interactions that appear in the advertisements.

4.3.4. Conclusion Symbolic Calm

The theme *Symbolic Calm* how advertising visuals can catch the attention of the consumer when they communicate something about the consumer's identity to themselves and others (Dittmar, 1992). This is the essence of symbolism in advertising as rightly combined elements create a final product that matches the consumer's state of mind. This presents the car as a way out and crafting a desired social lifestyle, resonating with the desire to achieve serenity, grounding, and social reconnection. It suggests personal transformation by breaking away from the digitally connected lifestyle and moving to something new (Rossiter, 2004). This theme clearly expresses the blurring of the lines between connection and disconnection. The car is presented to create the ability to disconnect and create a space where people can be completely alone or connect in a hectic lifestyle. However, it also highlights how this disconnection cannot relieve the consumer of constant digital connection since there is a need to connect with the technological car first (Hesselberth, 2018; Baym, et al., 2020).

4.4. Summarising 'Calm Advertising'

All themes show aesthetic approaches that play a role in the construction of 'calm'. Overall, this strategy combines all the elements of visual, sensory and symbolic calm to construct an overall imaginary of 'calm' within automotive advertising. One visual that illustrates how all these different elements come together in the aesthetic strategy is *'Space Will Always be a True Luxury'* (Renault, 2023b). This visual exemplifies the visual effects

where all colours are coordinated and a connection is made between the car and the environment. In addition, the movements of the people and the shots are slow, and a similar shot of modern dancers in nature recurs. This group of people continues to grow as the scenes change, suggesting how the car can bring people together. The music that ties all of these visual elements together is quiet and enhances the serene feeling that is presented, whiles the visuals match the tones of the sound. Altogether, this visual exemplifies the strategy of 'calm advertising' that operationalises knowledge about sensory advertising and digital disconnection theories to present the aesthetic of 'calm', relating to this concept even more strongly using the quote 'True Luxury Will Always Be Space' (Renault, 2023b). However, as depicted in the elements of the three themes these advertisements still connect with the consumer on every level. This expresses the conclusion of the theoretical framework, where 'calm advertising' was compared to a digital detox (Syvertsen, 2017), as the strategy constructs advertisements by a symbolic moment of peace that create positive emotions but uses this as a minute to connect with all of the senses.
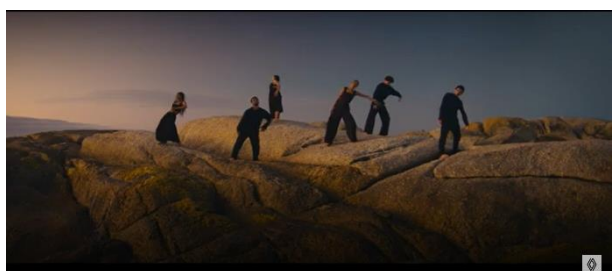

Figure 22 – 'Calm' Human Connection (Renault, 2023b)

Figure 23– Connection between Nature and Technology (Renault, 2023b)

'Calm advertising' is an aesthetic based on an imaginary and shows strong adaptation to a changing society in multiple layers, presenting a new way in which advertisers explore all aesthetic possibilities to connect with the consumer (Williamson, 1978; Wang, et al., 2002). In this exploration, the imaginary of 'calm' continues to be constructed by connecting with all of the consumer's senses, but there is less constant interpretation. It highlights how this operationalisation of consumer adaptation creates a moment of 'calm' but still contributes to the consumer's inability to digitally disconnect by presenting a very technologically connected product as the element to achieve disconnection. Consumers are attracted to a lifestyle as presented in the Symbolic Calm and they need the break from constant connectivity that the Visual and Sensorial Calm provide. However, in their way, the themes show how this raises the impossibility of actually achieving the digital disconnection that the automotive advertisement sells, leaving aside too many essential and digitally connected aspects of the actual product.

How these findings relate to the main goal of this thesis will be discussed in the following chapter. Here all elements of this explorative thesis are combined in a concluding remark, that unveils how the imaginary of 'calm' is constructed within the automotive industry.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to uncover the construction of the newly proposed concept 'calm advertising'. This concept acts as a bridge to bring three widely covered theoretical fields into dialogue through the exemplary case study of contemporary automotive advertising, which showed a strong interrelationship between the concepts and their combined ability to create a great understanding of current practices. 'Calm Advertising' is a concept that is shown to open up a new avenue for exploring advertising, through the lens of digital disconnection theory, sensory advertising practices and aesthetics.

The research shows how 'calm advertising' is the presentation of an imaginary of 'calm' that reflects and plays with the strong tensions between connection and disconnection in a highly digitalised society. The findings show how automotive advertising implements the theory of digital disconnection for its popularity and sensory advertising practices to continue to connect with the consumer. Both contradictory fields are combined in the aesthetic of disconnection, which is constructed by implementing changes on the visual, sensory and symbolic level. This creates a narrative of 'calm', used by the automotive industry as a strategy to connect with an overwhelmed consumer and an aesthetic to stand out in the competitive attention economy. At the same time, this construct of 'calm' is something that emerges from the data because it is so contrary to the idea of the car as a very technical and arousing element. These are features that remain untold in the narrative of 'calm advertising'. In doing so, these ads play with emotions and identification to construct a narrative in which the car becomes the solution to an over-connected state of society, but most likely it is not. This encompasses the challenge of the paradox between connection and disconnection that exists within 'calm advertising', and highlights that the operationalisation of a societal desire for less digital exhaustion and more personal connectedness has, to date, only contributed to an increasing reliance on technology.

5.1. Limitations

In any piece of research, there are limitations to the study that need to be taken into account because they may have influenced the presented results. Firstly, there is the fact that the findings are dataset-specific. The findings depend on the sample coming from Instagram and YouTube in 2022 and early 2023. A different platform, such as broadcast advertising, or a different period, could have led to different findings about the existence and construction of 'calm advertising'. Secondly, the aim was to make the theoretical basis of this exploratory research as strong and comprehensive as possible. However, the question of the influence and existence of 'calm advertising' knows many aspects that make it complex to

examine all the literature in the fields of digital disconnection, sensory advertising and aesthetics that relate to this. As the connection between these three topics is new and relevant to 'calm advertising', it was decided to focus on those statements and articles that fit with the creation of a basis for further exploration of this concept. Therefore, not all previously published literary works on the three topics could be reviewed in the theoretical basis of this study. Finally, the thesis focused on automotive advertising because of its contradictory relationship with the construct of digital disconnection and 'calm'. This contradiction has created the opportunity to obtain clear and relevant results regarding the use of 'calm advertising', but could be nuanced if the research was conducted within a different case.

5.2. Future Research

  In research with an exploratory basis like this one, it is always good to continue to create and expand the understanding of the new concept 'calm advertising'. First, the research is currently based on a very fixed timeframe. An elaboration of the findings could be achieved in a comparative study where different points in time are reviewed and the appearance of different elements of 'calm advertising' can be traced back. Second, this research has created a strong basis for the understanding of the new concept of 'calm advertising' and its practices within the automotive industry. This industry was chosen because of its productive contradictions to 'calm' that function as a starting point to investigate the paradox within 'calm advertising'. If the study would test the concept through different lenses and in different industries, the findings might be nuanced as less complete opposing states between the constructed narrative and the product are in place. Finally, further development of the concept of 'calm advertising' could be achieved by adding the experience of the audience and their perception towards the strategy. It could therefore be interesting to interview the target audience of different automotive brands and investigate what the effect of 'calm' advertisements is on them and if they perceive the visuals in the 'calm advertising' strategy as intended.

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Appendix I – Coding Tree

Selective Code	Axial Code	Open Code	Note/Example
Visual Calm	Colour Coordination	Similar, toned-down colours	Blend the different colours in one video, like grey,orange, black or green,blue and white
		Colour as connection	Connection between human, car and nature
		Car as 'natural' fit	Not presented as very technical
			Car exact same colours as environment
		'filter' of natural effect	Sunset for pink/ orange
			Fog for green/beige
	Smoothness	Camera moves with product	The car moves forward the camera does too
		Camera moves with light	If light reveals car or setting from left to right camera also moves from left to right
		Slow-paced camera movements	Only a slight zoom in that takes a few seconds to only change the shot slightly
		Smooth connection of visuals (editing)	The changing shots run over in one another with

			speed, subject size and colour
		Harmony	Subject, environment, car fit together with the shot size and camera pace. It is all coherent
		Similar 'feel' in sets of 'feed'	All visuals in a line of 3/6/9 posts have the same feel and show the car in different shots
		Repetition of shot	Same shot of different faces being shown repeatedly in portret style
	Slow Sounds	Natural sounds	Waves, wind, birds
		Classical music	Either musical or more manichal, but simple and slow
		Poetry	Calm voice narrating slow tempo of storytelling
		Narration	As storytelling or a meditative state like 'breath in, ….'
		Silence	Complete silence or only hearing the sound of the tires that move
		Repeating long tones	Background music is constructed of a repeated set of

			tones to create calmth
Sensory Calm	Peaceful Silence	Car as silent in and outside	No noises come from the car when the outside is shown only tires moving
		Car as place to focus	Inside the car it is silent and it is a place where you could work
		Car to escape from noisy environment	Inside the car it is silent, in the case that outside the car there is a lot of noise presented from working and traffic the car is the place to escape this
		Imagination/Daydreaming	Car is a space to fall asleep and dream or imaging beautiful dreams like faitytale figures on the road of the car as a space ship
		Closing doors means silence	An often returning scene is the car door that closes which starts the emphasis on silence within and noise outside
		City is modified to empty	No traffic, no people, alone in this city

		No traffic	Only a single individual sometimes that blends in with the surrounding
	Empty Urban	Similar building style throughout, medium hight	Beige, white toned buildings that are not skyscraper hight but also not family house. Somewhat inbetween
		Light asphalt roads	No black black but grey and smooth
		Light plastered buildings	All similar beige or white or orange tones throughout one visual to give an idea of continuity as the walls are the setting for the car
		Slow speed	Not a normal speed you would drive in the city but one where the tires can be seen moving but the surroundings and the car do not slash away in front of the camera
		Suggests city as serene as nature	Smooth overflow of an urban shot to a natural shot, it is just as silent in both
		Bridge from empty city to nature	Over water as a symbolic

			connection between the two but also a bridge the car makes you able to cross
		Empty city as intro/outro moment to natural setting	In the case of a natural setting in the visual there is often a little intro scene where the car moves out of the city to nature or an outro scene where the car returns to the city out of nature
Symbolic Calm	Natural Grounding	Natural setting	Nature is still one of the most used settings to show the serenity of the car
		Nature as ordinary place for the car	The car and the natural setting match and there is no idea of the car as intruding or harming nature
		Organic shapes	Waves, mountains, grass and trees are organically shaped and reflect in the organic shapes of the car making this fit in
		Variety of Landscapes	The car can be presented at any time (snow, sun, fog) and in any landscape (coast, beach,

			desert, forest)
		Scenic view	The car often drives a cliff or coastal road with a view over a big open space or a lake or sea
		Nature as small element in almost every visual	In the case of a city setting for a visual there are always small scener that relate the car to nature or threes in the city are put in the shot
		Nature embodies disconnection	For example, nature is calm and quiet and presented as disconnection by a shot of the hectic city first and showing the peace in nature right after.
	Escapist Experience	Car to quickly disappear	Car can move fast and blend in with the environment
		Day and night	Disappear in the dark or enjoy the peace at sunrise.
		Get to a place of serenity and disconnection	Car is the mean to get to the outdoors remote
		Escapism within the car	The car itself is also silent and a place to unwind
		Car overcoming obstacles	Car paves the way to disconnection

			opening up new roads to get to the final destination in nature
		Car to be seen with	Passing by, people follow the car with their eyes.
	Human Connection	Car for family and friends	People come together and are closely together in the small space
		Conversations	People have conversations good or bad
		Singing together	Shots show fun as signing and laughing
		Struggle between people	Kids often sit on the back seat and fight a bit with one another
		Love between people	The car is a place where connections are build between, family, friends, and lovers
		Growing up in life there is the car	Car as an element that is connected to growing up and different stages in life
		Car brings people to a destination outdoors	Car moves through nature to get to an outdoor house or camp together

		Human reconnection without digital	Car is presented as an element in the social interaction where people have the time for face- to- face interaction