



# Handelshøyskolen BI

## BTH 32111 Bacheloroppgave - Digital markedsføring

Bachelor thesis 100% - W

### Predefinert informasjon

<b>Startdato:</b>	10-01-2022 09:00	<b>Termin:</b>	202210
<b>Sluttdato:</b>	03-06-2022 12:00	<b>Vurderingsform:</b>	Norsk 6-trinns skala (A-F)
<b>Eksamensform:</b>	D		
<b>Flowkode:</b>	202210  10372  IN11  W  D		
<b>Intern sensor:</b>	(Anonymisert)		

### Deltaker

Navn:

### Informasjon fra deltaker

<b>Undertittel *:</b>	Sustainable Marketing Online: How Do Norwegian Fashion Companies Conduct Sustainable Marketing Online and Does it Increase Brand Equity?
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**Inneholder besvarelsen**  Nei **Kan besvarelsen**  Ja  
**konfidensielt** **offentliggjøres?:**  
**materiale?:**

### Gruppe

**Gruppenavn:** (Anonymisert)  
**Gruppenummer:** 7  
**Andre medlemmer i gruppen:** Deltakeren har innlevert i en enkeltmannsgruppe

# Bachelor Thesis in Digital Marketing

## - Sustainable Marketing Online -

**How do Norwegian fashion companies measure brand equity online,  
and does the practice increase brand equity?**

Hand-in date:  
03.06.2022

Campus:  
BI Oslo

Examination code and name:  
BTH3211 Bachelor Thesis in Digital Marketing

Programme:  
Bachelor's degree in Digital Marketing

Attachments: 1 (see separate file)

*This assignment has been completed as part of the study programme at BI Norwegian Business School. This does not mean that BI Norwegian Business School endorse the methods used, the results obtained or the conclusions drawn.*

## PREFACE

This marketing management bachelor thesis is written in connection with the author's specialization in digital marketing at BI Norwegian Business School. After a semester of hard work and long writing sessions, I am proud to present my thesis. The reason for the choice of subject, is my passion for the fashion industry. After working part time in the fashion industry, I have managed to land a full-time marketing position after my studies are finished. Therefore, it was an easy decision to produce research that contributes to the industry I am going to work in for the foreseeable future. Painfully aware of the detrimental effects that fashion has on the environment, I am grateful for the opportunity to research benefits that sustainable, digital marketing has on the brand equity of fashion companies. By conducting my research in the name of BI Norwegian Business School, I was met with overwhelming cooperation and respect throughout the process of writing my thesis.

Working with my thesis has proven challenging, yet extremely educational. I have gotten the opportunity to delve deeper into a subject within an industry that I am passionate about, and as a result, I believe I have developed both as an individual and an academic. Throughout my research on the scarcely traversed subject area, I realized that my work merely scratched the surface of a large field which should be researched further. A quote from the philosopher Aristotle comes to mind:

*“The more you know, the more you realize you don't know”*

- Aristotle

Lastly, I am extremely appreciative of the guidance from my counselor Auke Hunneman who, throughout the semester, provided constructive criticism, help and support in regard to my research. These meetings have been a tremendous help. Additionally, I would like to thank the other lecturers I have had the pleasure of meeting during my tenure at BI for providing me with a valuable theoretical toolkit designed to make me a valuable asset in the business world. Lastly, fellow students have provided me with additional guidance along the way, for which I am grateful.

## SUMMARY

It is not secret that the fashion industry is widely believed to be unsustainable. In fact, the industry was responsible for 10% of global emissions in 2017.

Furthermore, the fashion is thought to be the second most polluting industries by the UN per 2019. At the same time, consumers in the markets are interested in fashion for longer parts of their lives, leading to exponential growth in the market of and belonging demand for fashion. There is little evidence that suggests a shift in these developments any time soon. As it pertains to the relationship between marketing and sustainability, a paradox reiterated by fellow academics highlights the conflict between the traditional view of marketing and sustainability in regard to sustainable consumption. Moreover, studies in the European markets show that marketing is increasingly associated with unsustainability in the form of excessive consumption.

By conducting a qualitative study with an exploratory design, in-depth interviews with the management of four leading fashion companies in Norway were conducted with the intent of answering the overarching research problem of “*How do Norwegian fashion companies conduct sustainable marketing online and does the practice increase brand equity?*”. To ensure full coverage of the subject area (high validity), a selection of research questions were developed and discussed before arriving at a conclusion.

Briefly summarized, the study found that Norwegian fashion companies conduct sustainable marketing online with an experimental approach. The effects of which are measured through parameters related to brand equity as described in the framework depicted below because the brand is perceived as the most important aspect of their business. Additionally, the study uncovered that the respondents had experienced improvements in these metrics when conducting sustainable marketing, indicating that sustainable marketing does in fact increase brand equity.

With these results, I hope to motivate Norwegian fashion companies to increase their sustainable marketing efforts by presenting documented brand- and economically related incentives for doing so. I also hope to contribute to the academic field of sustainable digital marketing by laying the foundation for

future, quantitative studies to be conducted on the correlation between brand equity and its connection to sustainable marketing.

**Key words:** Sustainability, Fashion, Digital marketing, Web analytics, Qualitative study, Brand equity

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In recent times, consumers have become interested in fashion for a longer part of their lives. As a result, researchers report increases in the market and demand for apparel. For example, it is projected that the US fashion market will increase to 473,42 billion dollars within 2022- an increase of 8,3% from 2021. (Oberlo, n.d.) Additionally, the industry is commonly accepted as one of the most prominent environmental threats: in fact, the industry contributed to 10% of global emissions in 2017 (Charpail, 2017). Furthermore, the increasing popularity of fast fashion poses additional threats to the environment. The term describes an approach to fashion characterized by mass-production of on-trend clothing with cheap labor under controversial conditions in a “race to the bottom” to serve the casual fashion consumer as fast and cheap as possible. Lastly, Sustainyourstyle.org reported the following data in regard to the environmental footprint of the fashion industry:

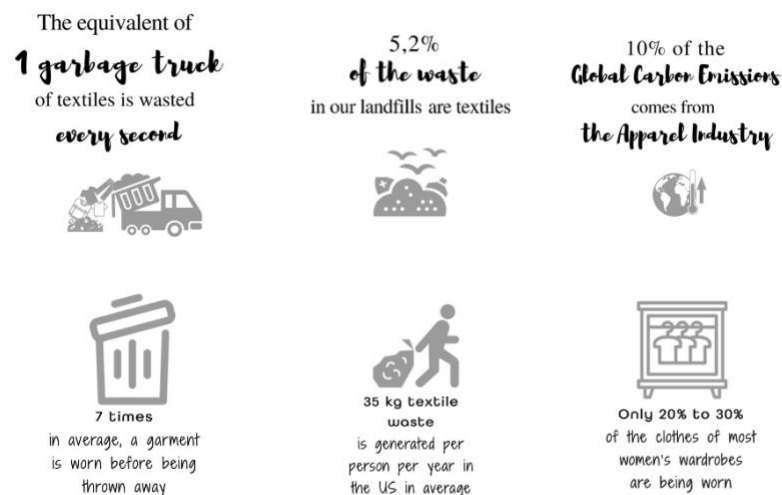


Figure 1: The impact of the fashion industry. Adapted from (Charpail, 2017).

At the same time, usage of the term “sustainable fashion” in literature has surged over the last decade according to Google Ngram Viewer, indicating high relevance and a need for further elaboration on the subject area

Through working in the fashion industry for some time, it has become apparent that decreasing the environmental impact of the fashion industry is a two-dimensional challenge. Change has to occur both internally and externally. My thesis will primarily focus on the driving forces behind internal change in fashion brands. In order to achieve organizational change, sustainable marketing efforts



need to be measurable and pose tangible economic incentives for the company. Additionally, the recent pandemic has shifted fashion purchases to be online-based. As many as 2 billion people report having purchased a product online at least once as of 2021 (Coppola, 2021). Furthermore, Norway ranked in the top 20 most sustainable country globally in Yale University's environmental performance index in 2022 (EPI, 2022), insinuating high interest for my research among Norwegian businesses.

## **RESEARCH PURPOSE**

In light of the developments above, my thesis aims to describe the phenomenon of sustainable marketing, albeit the practical implementation along with its ramifications and the measurement of these by answering the following research problem:

**“How do Norwegian fashion companies conduct sustainable marketing online, and does the practice increase brand equity?”**

By presenting brands with measurable benefits of prioritizing sustainable marketing strategies, I hope to encourage an increase of sustainability in the industry. I also wish to challenge the traditional view of the marketing role by documenting the more abstract benefits of sustainable marketing such as increased brand equity.

## **RESEARCH AREA**

My thesis is aimed at the fashion industry as it is believed to be the second most polluting industry worldwide (UN, 2019). In my research, the term Brand Equity is limited to the definition of Lemon and colleagues and their drivers of customer equity. Furthermore, the significance of brand equity in the fashion market validates the relevance of my research. The study will only account for digital marketing efforts because of the widespread digitization in the modern world, where as many as 59,5% of the population use the internet as of 2021 (Johnson, 2022). 2 billion people also report that they have purchased a product online on at least one occasion (Coppola, 2021).

Lastly, It has been discovered that a majority of Europeans believe that marketing tactics encourage them to buy more than they need (Heath & Chatzidakis, 2011, p.

662). Evidently, consumers in the European markets perceive marketing efforts as being manipulative, misleading, and related to excessive consumption (Heath, & Chatzidakis, 2011, p. 661). Though not the sole cause of the problem, it is evident that marketing is often associated with unsustainability, and that change is required. The lack of commonality between fashion brands' sustainable marketing described by Milanesi and colleagues indicates that there is no distinct method for communicating sustainability among fashion brands (Milanesi et al., 2022, p. 109). The results demonstrate a need for further research within the field of sustainable marketing.

Because the subject area is new and relatively unexplored, fashion companies likely lack the necessary knowledge to prioritize sustainable marketing activities in their digital channels. A framework is needed to present clear guidelines for and benefits of sustainable marketing. Therefore, it is necessary to place the customer equity model in a digital context to equip fashion brands with an important tool that measures sustainable marketing efforts. As this is an ambitious task, my thesis aims to lay the foundation for future research by describing current practices for sustainable marketing in the fashion industry with a focus on brand equity.

## **CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **INTRODUCTION**

First, the theoretical framework for my research elaborates on sustainable marketing and its advantages followed by a description of digital marketing and web analytics. Lastly, brand equity and its role in the customer equity term is explained before I describe the software Google Analytics and provide parameters that may serve as metrics for the brand equity effects of sustainable marketing.

### **SUSTAINABLE MARKETING**

The Brundtland report of 1987 gave the first definition of sustainability (sustainable development), explaining the term as “(...) meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (WCED, 1987, p. 41). Building upon the idea of sustainability, The UN has crafted 17 goals that serve as an urgent call for action by all its members in a

global partnership. These tend to be adopted by companies to ensure ethical and sustainable practices. Additionally, the goals serve as guidelines for how companies can contribute to the greater good.

By viewing sustainability in the context of marketing, a paradox forms: The marketer's core role is to contribute to the economic growth of the company: a task traditionally accomplished through the stimulation of sales. However, sustainable practices encourage lesser consumption. Bond and Seely reiterate this paradox in their research (Bond, & Seely, 2004, p. 256). Traditionally, marketing has focused exclusively on what happens before a purchase occurs. Sustainable marketing requires equal prioritization of pre-and post-consumption activities (Murphy, 2005, p. 190).

Thus, a definition of sustainability within the marketing field is needed to present marketers with a different and more responsible approach to marketing.

Fuller gave the first definition of sustainable marketing in the year 2000, which describes the term as "(...) a process of planning, implementing and controlling the development, price-formation, and distribution of a product in a way that guarantees adherence to the following three criteria: (1) satisfying consumer needs; (2) guaranteeing the achievement of the organization's goals; (3) the whole process being in harmony with the ecosystem" (Fuller, 2000, p.4). As it pertains to overseeing the company's goal achievement, analytics and data-tracking are essential. Digital services such as Google Analytics are thus critical instruments for evaluating and revising sustainable digital marketing strategies. To ensure that the whole process is sustainable, companies often conduct sustainability reporting. Sustainability reporting refers to the publication of non-financial information, such as Co2 emissions, to the stakeholders of the company (Erkens et al., 2015, p. 25)

Because the field is relatively unexplored, a number of problems are associated with the research of sustainability in digital marketing. Diez-martin and colleagues present four core challenges in the research of sustainability within digital marketing

Consumer orientation and value proposition	Knowing what the customers value from products and sustainable companies.
Digital consumer behavior	Which digital marketing efforts affect the purchase intentions of the customer, and what value can the purchase intention be attributed to?
Digital green marketing	How do companies work with green marketing in a digital context, and how do these efforts affect purchase intention?
Competitive advantage	Which digital marketing strategies are most effective in making sustainability a competitive advantage?
Supply chain	How can digital marketing reduce consumption in supply chains? How can technology and media improve sustainability in a specific industry?
Capabilities	How can digital marketing affect sustainable attitudes within an organization?

*Table 1: Challenges in the research of sustainable digital marketing. Adapted from (Diez-Martin, et al., 2019, p. 8-9)*

The research conducted in the thesis will tackle *digital green marketing* by exploring how fashion brands measure their sustainable marketing digitally. Furthermore, I address the *competitive advantages* of sustainable marketing by mapping these brands' experiences with and expectations of sustainable marketing on digital platforms.

### ADVANTAGES OF SUSTAINABLE MARKETING

Trivedi and colleagues describe the benefits that sustainable marketing present for a company. Their research emphasizes that the benefits of marketing mainly relates to brand differentiation, increased customer retention and brand loyalty (Trivedi et al., 2018, p. 195-196)

*Brand differentiation.* Companies that execute sustainable strategies receive better positioning against their competitors in the market. If successfully implemented, these strategies tend to result in cost-reduction and an increase efficiency. The general result is improved organizational performance. (Reutlinger, 2012, p.26) In highly competitive markets such as the fashion market, sustainability is one of the most effective differentiation tools. (Reutlinger, 2012, p.46)

*Increased customer retention and brand loyalty.* Companies that implement a sustainable approach to marketing, tend to have customers that feel valued. They are therefore prone to develop loyalty toward the brand. These same efforts also show a tendency to increase customer retention. These factors can be summarized as an increase of brand equity. Lastly, studies show that customers are willing to pay a premium for sustainable products, allowing companies to extend their price-points. (Heck & Yidan, 2013, p. 21)

Furthermore, research shows that perceived environmental performance affects the drivers of customer equity by “reinforcing the relationship between customer and company, increasing value equity and establishing a strong eco- friendly brand image.” (Sun et al., 2014, p.83). The latter is especially interesting to the research. Lastly, customers believe that the equity of a brand is enhanced when companies prioritize socially responsible activities. (Sun et al., 2014, p.83).

## **DIGITAL MARKETING**

The American Marketing Association defines the digital marketing term as «...any marketing methods conducted through electronic devices which utilize some form of a computer». (American Marketing Association, n.d.). According to the research of Key, a digital marketing strategy should aim to «...simultaneously reach, grow, and retain a substantial consumer base in record-setting time frames...» (Key, 2017, p. 27) – often through two-way communication. In a decade characterized by rapid digital innovation and constantly changing consumer needs and habits, the field is ever-evolving, and undoubtedly relevant to the marketing of fashion goods.

## **DIGITAL MARKETING IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY**

Regarding the fashion industry, few attempts have been made to define marketing to fit the peculiar practices of the fashion world. Barnes, 2013 defines fashion marketing as the marketing of garments (Barnes, 2013, p. 3). What distinguishes fashion marketing from other areas of marketing is its intrinsic nature, giving different emphasis to marketing activities. (Easey, 2009, p. 7). The fashion industry is heavily trend-based and characterized by short life cycles and dynamic customer demand. The concern of the fashion marketer therefore becomes to provide consumers with access to the garments of a fashion brand by meeting the ever-changing demands of the market. (Easey, 2009, p. 11). Logically, it is harder

to create demand for a product when the market is unaware of its existence.

Fashion marketing is therefore an integral part of keeping the textile- and fashion industries afloat by generating demand for, and knowledge of fashion products.

Due to the characteristics of the market, fashion marketing relies on the ability to analyze and forecast fashion trends to keep up with customer demand and ultimately become a trendsetter in the market. For example, digital marketing channels such as social media are an intimate part of people's lives. Social platforms therefore tend to encourage their userbases to share personal information and behavioral data. For these reasons, digital marketing is an excellent tool that allows the fashion brand to analyze the behavior and preferences of its customers to, for example, predict demand and create successful products.

#### WEB ANALYTICS – BIG DATA

According to research, analytics and tracking should be the start of any successful digital marketing strategy because it allows for strategically accurate and measurable marketing decisions within the firm (Almeida, 2017, p.16). To craft efficient digital marketing strategies, marketers need to gain insight into the digital habits of their company's customers. Big data refers to enormous amounts of unstructured data gathered from high-performance applications such as websites. (Cuzzocrea et al., 2011, p.101). The term is commonly characterized by the five Vs (Almeida, 2017, p. 12)

**Volume.** The quantity of data that can be stored and managed

**Velocity.** The speed of calculation needed to process the data relative to the rate of change in the data.

**Variety.** The number of different formats of data

**Veracity.** The trustworthiness and tidiness of the gathered data

**Value.** The value placed upon access to the data by companies and organizations. The research of this thesis prioritizes this dimension of big data.

#### BENEFITS OF BIG DATA

Strategic marketing that utilizes big data allows for more precise, assertive, and measurable decisions. Given the customer-centric nature of marketing, big data

provides the marketer with effective methods of identifying the customer profile and thus increase the impact of marketing substantially by providing advertisements with the right approach at the right time (Almeida, 2017, p.16). Furthermore, studies show that companies that implement big data as a differentiation strategy are twice as likely to be a top performers in the segment market. (LaValle et al., 2011, p. 22). The thorough insight into customer needs and demands also provides a new approach to customer involvement in product design: accurate recommendations can be given throughout the design process, increasing the potential for a product's commercial success (Zhan et al., 2018, p. 590). This development in product design may even have the ability to reduce textile waste and the environmental impact of the fashion industry to a certain extent.

Although beneficial, the usage of big data does not come without limitations. As the value of big data becomes more apparent and popularized, personal privacy is a growing concern among consumers. Even though the utility of the data is to produce more accurate and relevant communication, people care about how their personal information is used, especially if it could be disadvantageous or harmful to them (Oguntimilehin & Ademola, 2014, p.436). More practical implications revolve around the scale of the data and the challenges of keeping up with the increasing size of the data sets. (Oguntimilehin & Ademola, 2014, p.436-437).

What follows the unstructured nature of big data is a demand for efficient analytical tools. Google Analytics is a free-to-use service by Google that categorizes and generates detailed statistical information about the visitors of a website. The tool has swiftly become the global industry standard for digital marketers. To ensure applicability and relevance to the research, google analytics will be the only software taken into account in the research.

## **CUSTOMER EQUITY**

The concept of customer equity was first introduced by Blattberg & Deighton in 1996, who found that the customer as any other financial asset should be measured, managed and maximized by companies and organizations. (Blattberg & Deighton, 1996, p.138). It was not until 2000 that Rust and colleagues elaborated on the term and provided the definition of customer equity as "(...) the total of the

discounted lifetime values of all of the customers of a company” (Rust et al., 2004, p. 110). The researchers stressed the importance of understanding customer equity to understand the business of the firm based on “(...) the key asset that separates one firm in an industry from another- its customers” (Rust et al., 2004, p. 110). The marketer’s role then becomes to increase the customer equity of the firm – a task accomplished through synergy among the three drivers of customer equity.

### THE DRIVERS OF CUSTOMER EQUITY

Building upon their framework for customer equity from 2000, Lemon and colleagues introduced three drivers that still serve as the norm for measuring customer equity (Lemon et al., 2001, p. 1-2).

*Value equity* illustrates the customers’ objective assessment of brand utility. This assessment is often based on what the customer receives in terms of quality, price, convenience, etc. (Lemon et al., 2001, p. 1-2). With the emergence of fast fashion, the average consumer has become increasingly price sensitive. It is plausible to consider price as the dominant utility for these customers. Brands therefore continue to reinvent themselves as a way to increase their perceived value to compete with the industry giants of fast fashion.

*Relationship equity* bases itself on “(...) the tendency of the customer to stick with the brand, above and beyond the customer’s objective and subjective assessments of the brand.” (Lemon et al., 2001. p. 2). Due to high competition in the fashion industry, Great brand- and value equity may not always be sufficient to retain the customer. A tool is needed to grow the relationship between the brand and the customer. Relationship equity serves this purpose. Often, the dimension of relationship equity is closely related to identification with a brand. (Lemon et al., 2001. p. 2).

The thesis will primarily focus on *brand equity*, elaborated upon in the following paragraphs.

### **BRAND EQUITY**

In an industry characterized by high competition and technically (production, quality, etc.) homogenous products, the brand becomes crucial to a fashion



company's commercial success. Brand equity relates to the customer's evaluation of- and preference for a specific brand and consists of brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. (Lemon et al., 2001. p. 2). Research claims that brand equity matters most (1) for low-involvement purchases with simple decision processes, (2) when the usage of the product is visible to others, and (3) when experiences associated with the product can be passed from one individual to another (Lemon et al., 2001, p. 3-4). The characteristics of fashion are congruent with these prerequisites. Zeithaml's classification of further confirms the importance of brand equity in the fashion industry by defining fashion garments as "search goods": The attributes of which can be evaluated before a purchase occurs by inspecting the product with relatively low involvement (Zeithaml, 1981, p. 186). The result is a high threat from substitutes and low switching costs for the consumer, conditions which are combated by a high brand equity (Samuelsen et al., 2019, p. 74).

#### THE BENEFITS OF BRAND EQUITY

A number of benefits can be obtained from having a high brand equity when it is important for the industry at hand. For example, Tharmi & Senthilnathan found that brand equity is positively correlated with purchase intention. (Tharmi, & Senthilnathan, 2012, p. 15). Furthermore, Samuelsen and colleagues present numerous benefits related to brand equity in the book *Merkevareledelse*. First and foremost, they distinguish between customer- and company benefits. For companies, the benefits of high brand equity are closely related to those of the customer. Therefore, an elaboration on the benefits of the customer is required to understand advantages on the business side. Most relevant for the customers of fashion are:

*Faster information processing:* In short, strong brands often help consumers to make swift, low-involvement decisions in system 1. The result is that the "cost" of search decreases, allowing consumers to save their limited cognitive resources. Choosing a strong brand is rational to consumers in situations with a restricted ability or motivation to make slow and calculated decisions (Samuelsen et al., 2019, p. 77). However, having a strong brand in markets characterized by high-effort processing in system 2 is also beneficial because active reflection causes the consumer to repeat brand information throughout the evaluation process

(Samuelsen et al., 2019, p. 79). In fashion, consumers have vastly different needs ranging from functional to social. As a result, customer involvement in the purchasing process of apparel is varying. Either way, the brand plays an important role.

*Risk reduction:* Generally, most consumers are risk-averse: they seek to eliminate as much risk as possible when making purchase decisions in their day-to-day lives (Samuelsen et al., 2019, p. 71). As a result, they tend to opt for solutions that minimize risk. Strong brands serve as one such solution because they have high knowledge in the market, and what is familiar is often associated with safety (Samuelsen et al., 2019, p. 71). Furthermore, consumers typically have many associations with a strong brand. It becomes easier to evaluate whether or not consuming the brand's products satisfies a given need (Samuelsen et al., 2019, p. 72). Lastly, consumers tend to have experience with strong brands (Samuelsen et al., 2019, p. 72). The barrier to trying a new brand is significantly higher than choosing a familiar one. Fashion brands must tackle the financial, social, and psychological risks associated with a fashion purchase. As demonstrated above, high brand equity is best suited for this purpose.

*Increased customer satisfaction:* Over time, strong brands are likely to satisfy consumers' needs better than weak ones. Consumers tend to notice this and be more satisfied with strong brands than weaker ones. An explanation for this is that strong brands yield more advanced association structures and often satisfy multiple needs simultaneously (Samuelsen et al., 2019, p. 80). Strong brands are often able to charge premium prices for their products, providing more resources that can be used for market research (Samuelsen et al., 2019, p. 80). Certain strong brands also play a key role in consumers' lives. These consumers tend to identify and establish a relationship with the brand (Samuelsen et al., 2019, p. 81). Lastly, consumers tend to believe that strong brands have higher quality (Samuelsen et al., 2019, p. 82).

On the business side, the foregoing customer benefits funnel into one of the core advantages of brand equity: More satisfied customers and faster information processing is linked to *Increased customer loyalty*. (Samuelsen et al., 2019, p. 91).

Additionally, strong brands can charge their customers premium prices, *increasing their potential revenue* because they satisfy customer needs better (Samuelsen et al., 2019, p. 89). Furthermore, *the marketing of strong brand is more efficient* than weaker ones because strong brands are able to achieve a similar effect at a lower cost by building upon associations and knowledge of the brand already present in the market (Samuelsen et al., 2019, p. 95-96).

### MEASURING BRAND EQUITY

Traditionally, brand equity has been measured with help from the multidimensional brand equity (MBE) Model, introduced by (Yoo & Donthu 2001, p.10) The model conceptualizes brand equity and states that it consists of (1) perceived quality, (2) Brand loyalty, (3) Brand awareness and (4) Brand associations. (Washburn, & Plank, 2002, p. 48). The model has undergone rigorous validity testing from fellow researchers and, to this day, has stood the test of time.

*Perceived quality* relates to “the consumer’s overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given.” (Zeithaml, 1988, p. 14). The benefits of a high perceived quality are closely related to aforementioned increase of customer satisfaction and the potential for increased revenues in [The benefits of brand equity](#). Measuring of perceived quality is traditionally operationalized by measuring the following statements:

- “The brand is of a high quality”
- “The likely quality of the brand is extremely high”
- “The likelihood that the brand would be functional is very high”
- “The Likelihood that the brand is reliable is very high”

*Brand loyalty* describes repeat purchases as a function of psychological processes (Jacoby & Kyner, 1971, p.2). The behavior is not random, but in fact the result of psychological, emotional or situational factors. As previously mentioned, strong brands serve a psychological purpose by minimizing risk and aiding in the processing of information. Additionally, strong brands serve an emotional purpose by establishing relationships with the consumers in a market. Lastly, strong brands serve a situational purpose by easing the processing of information by helping consumers make rapid decisions in low-involvement situations and

thorough decisions in high-involvement purchases. In the MBE Model, brand loyalty is operationalized by measuring the following statements: (Washburn, & Plank, 2002, p. 48).

- “I consider myself to be loyal to the brand”
- “The brand would be my first choice”
- “I will not buy other brands if the brand is available at the store”

*Brand awareness* revolves around the likelihood that any kind of signal (cognitive or situational) will result in the recognition or evocation of the brand by the customer. Because brand awareness is the first step in the decision-making journey of the customer (Samuelsen et al., 2019, p. 155), it is crucial for the brand to be included in the customers knowledge when a need occurs to increase the chances of being evaluated and ultimately purchased. In the MBE model, brand awareness is operationalized as: (Washburn, & Plank, 2002, p. 48).

- “I know what the brand looks like”
- “I can recognize the brand among other competing brands”
- “I am aware of the brand”

*Brand associations* are the psychological connections made by a customer between a brand and a number of factors such as the concept, experience etc. The associations need to be positive, unique and strong in order to be beneficial to a brand (Samuelsen et al., 2019, p. 185). These associations make up the foundation for the customer’s perception of the brand and are a determining factor in the purchase evaluation (Samuelsen et al., 2019, p. 171). The MBE model measures brand associations through the following statements:

- “Some characteristics of the brand come to my mind quickly”
- “I can quickly recall the symbol or logo of the brand”
- “I have difficulty imagining the brand in my mind”

Lastly, the dimensions of brand equity in the MBE model funnel into OBE (overall brand equity), and consists of the following statements: (Washburn, & Plank, 2002, p. 48).

- “It makes sense to buy the brand instead of any other brand, even if they are the same”
- “I would prefer to buy the brand.”

- “If there is another brand as good as the brand, I prefer to buy the brand”
- “If another brand is not different from the brand in any way, it seems smarter to purchase the brand”

Although the subject has been heavily researched, significantly few attempts have been made to place the framework for measuring brand equity in a digital context to increase its relevance and applicability in the business world of today. My research will therefore lay the foundation for this to occur.

The tool *Google Analytics* presents the marketer with a plethora of data groupings, also called “metrics”. Building upon the traditional measuring methods (MBE) of brand equity and the author’s own knowledge of Google Analytics, it is proposed that the following metrics are interesting for the marketer when measuring brand equity online:

Dimension	Metrics
Perceived quality	<b>Customer retention:</b> Retuning visitors, Repurchase rate, Average Session duration, Bounce rate, Organic searches, Keywords
Brand loyalty	<b>Customer retention:</b> Retuning visitors, Repurchase rate, Average Session duration, Bounce rate, Organic searches, Keywords
Brand Awareness	<b>Customer Acquisition:</b> New visitors/ New visitor %, Traffic channels, Region, Language, Organic searches, Keywords
Brand association	<b>Traffic sources:</b> Keywords

*Table 2: Suggested metrics for brand equity in Google Analytics*

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### INTRODUCTION

The chapter of methodology is modelled after the four stages of the research process described by Gripsrud, 2021. First, the *research objective* and belonging *research questions* are presented before the *design of the research* is discussed and established. Afterward, a description of the *data collection* process and an *analysis of these data* is provided before the results are ultimately *reported*.



Figure 2: The research process. Adapted from (Gripsrud et al., 2021, p. 61)

### RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The aim of my thesis is to describe how fashion companies conduct sustainable marketing and its effects. As a result, I hope to provide economic incentives for fashion brands to increase their sustainable marketing. This will be accomplished through a qualitative study consisting of four face-to-face interviews with leading companies in the Norwegian fashion industry.

Based on the purpose of my research, I propose the following research problem:

**“How do Norwegian fashion companies conduct sustainable marketing online, and does the practice increase brand equity?”**

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To solve the problem, the following research questions will be answered in the study:

RQ1: What is the role of digital marketing in the fashion industry?

RQ2: What is the role of brand equity in the fashion industry?

RQ2 1: Is branding important in the fashion industry?

RQ2 2: Which variables are used to measure brand equity in the fashion industry?

RQ3: How do fashion companies conduct sustainable marketing?

RQ3 1: Do fashion brands prioritize sustainability?

RQ3 2: How do fashion companies measure the effect of sustainable marketing online?

RQ4: Does sustainable marketing increase brand equity?

RQ5: What is required to increase the sustainable marketing efforts of the fashion industry?

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

(Gripsrud et al., 2021, p. 69) mentions three different research designs an empirical study can adopt: Exploratory, Explanatory or Descriptive. An exploratory design is often utilized when the researcher has limited knowledge of a subject area. Therefore, the research goal is often to primarily understand and interpret the phenomenon at hand. (Gripsrud et al., 2021, p. 69). In order to investigate causal explanations, the researcher is dependent on an explanatory research design. When utilizing such a design, the research aims to determine that an event (X) causes another event (Y) (Gripsrud et al., 2021, p. 76). Lastly, the purpose of descriptive research designs is to describe a situation in a particular manor, albeit the level of a singular variable or the relationship between two or more variables that the researcher wants to map (Gripsrud et al., 2021, p. 72).

As previously established in the theoretical framework, literature searches in google scholar have found few empirical studies on measuring brand equity benefits harvested from sustainable marketing efforts in fashion brands' digital channels. Therefore, my research will possess an exploratory design by describing current practices for conducting and measuring sustainable marketing in the fashion industry. The study will achieve this by comparing data derived from interviews with four leading companies in the Norwegian fashion industry. Furthermore, the purpose of my thesis is to achieve a better understanding of how sustainable marketing can be measured in the digital marketing field. Saunders and colleagues suggest that exploratory studies are useful when clarification of a problem is needed (Saunders et al., 2009, p.139-140). It is apparent that the study should follow an exploratory design because the primary focus of my research is to describe the current practices for sustainable marketing and its effects.

Secondly, the aim of my research is to contribute to the digital marketing field by establishing a foundation for the brand-equity dimension of customer equity in sustainable marketing.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

Based on the research design discussed above, the methodology of my research is qualitative. Defining qualitative research has proven difficult, since it does not possess theory or a paradigm nor a set of methods that are specific to itself (Denzin, & Lincoln, 2011, p.6). For example, Strauss and Corbin defined qualitative research as “(...) any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification.” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 11). The author of this thesis accepts this definition and lays it as a foundation for the methodology. According to Saunders and colleagues, Qualitative research provides a deeper understanding of a specific field and/or area (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 139). Furthermore, the method can be used to uncover problems that needs further, quantitative research. In the case of my research, this area is sustainable digital marketing in the fashion industry. Furthermore, Gaille states that qualitative methods can provide insights specific to an industry (Gaille, 2018) – which is the aim of this study. In other words, qualitative research is suitable for understanding respondents’ views and attitude towards a specific subject in a manor not achievable with quantitative methods. When conducting a qualitative study, the researcher is commonly presented with seven techniques (Observation, Ethnography, Field research, Focus groups, Case studies, Structured interviews and In-depth interviews). (Queirós et al., 2017, p. 378-379).

It is also important to highlight the limitations of qualitative research. Generally, Radu, 2019 states that qualitative research is *time consuming* and thus *labor intensive*. The type of research is open-ended, which places the control over the collected data in the hands of the respondents. Therefore, the results of qualitative research are *unable to be verified*. Additionally, there is no way of analyzing the obtained data mathematically because the type of research is based on opinion and judgement rather than results. Consequently, it is *difficult to investigate causality* and the results are *not statistically representative*. (Radu, 2019)



Based on the previous information and discussions, an overall assessment concluded in favor of adopting *a qualitative research approach* using *in-depth interviews* as it is most suitable for the research area and problem. In the case of my research, the benefits of qualitative research outweigh its restrictions.

## **INTERVIEW GUIDE**

An interview is a procedure designed to obtain information from a person (interviewee) through an oral exchange (conversation) (iEduNote, n.d.). As previously stated, Qualitative interviews are best suited for understanding the practices for sustainable marketing and measuring of its effects as a phenomenon. The interviews conducted in the research are of an in-depth nature.

In-depth interviews are unstructured, direct and personal. They provide elaborate information about the subject area and allow the interviewer to ask follow-up questions, probe additional information, justify previous answers, and establish a connection between several topics. (Queirós et al., 2017, p. 378).

The interview guide (see attachment file) was formed on the basis of the research problem and operated as a guideline for the interviews. The questions in the guide were carefully formulated with the intention of being open-ended to relieve pressure and allow fulfilling answers that made the respondents feel like their opinions were appreciated. To ensure consistency throughout the interview, and to prevent respondents from going off-topic, the questions were closely related and built upon each other to a certain extent.

The interview guide consists of three parts. First, an introduction of the interviewer and the purpose of the study was included to provide the interviewees with necessary information and context surrounding the study. Thereafter, a general section with demographic and psychographic questions gathered important background information about the respondent's and their respective companies. Lastly, the specific section included questions about sustainability in the fashion industry, its perceived benefits and how the companies measure their sustainable marketing efforts. The questions in the specific section of the guide were crafted specifically to explore the topics and theories discussed in the theoretical framework.

## DATA COLLECTION

Due to a limited time frame to conduct the interviews and collect the data, a non-probable sampling method was used. More specifically, convenience sampling was used by taking advantage of the author's network to acquire access to the management in four Norwegian fashion companies. Although this form of sampling may lead to biased results, it is deemed necessary in order to fulfill the purpose of the research.

Additionally, the interviewees all worked for Norwegian fashion brands as the author resides in the country and has connections within the national fashion scene. This allowed the author to produce credible and industry-relevant data from hands-on leaders in the Norwegian fashion industry.

In total, the in-depth interviews generated four data sets from fast- moderate- and slow fashion companies. The interviewees were categorized as respondents (R) 1-4. *R1* operates in the fast fashion segment of the market and has been doing so for over 20 years. On the other hand, *R2* has a position somewhere between luxury and fast fashion: moderate fashion. The clothing brand is relatively new but has experienced exponential growth throughout the last five years. *R3* is a small yet emerging Norwegian clothing brand positioned as a sustainable brand in the luxury segment, providing "slow fashion" to its customer base. Despite the brand's youth and small size, they have high competitive ability in the market. Lastly, *R4* represents a long-standing clothing brand operating in the fast fashion segment. Although their respective business models were not of interest to the study, a total coverage of the segments in the Norwegian markets was prioritized to ensure validity, elaborated upon in [Quality criteria](#).

The interview questions were open-ended. As a result, some of the respondents provided answers outside the boundaries of the interview guide. In a qualitative study, this is considered beneficial to the data. The interviews were in-depth interviews, the benefits of which are discussed in the [Interview guide](#).

## DATA ANALYSIS

Because the collected data is not numerical, data analysis in qualitative research is challenging. To tackle this challenge, the researcher is presented with a number of

approaches to data analysis. Relevant to this study is grounded theory, which can be seen as a general approach to qualitative research as well as a set of techniques to develop theory through data analysis (Birks & Mills, 2015, p. 2) The purpose of grounded theory is to “explain a process or scheme associated with a phenomenon” (Birks & Mills, 2015, p. 13) by using data derived from interviews, observations, etc. In the case of the study, this phenomenon is sustainable marketing.

The advantages of grounded theory are pointed out by (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p.6-7). First, they state that the systematic and sequential collection of data is advantageous because it “(...) enables the research process to capture all potentially relevant aspects of the topic as soon as they are perceived, this process is a major source of the effectiveness of the grounded theory approach.” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p.6). Secondly, they state that it hinders interference from the researcher because the concepts used in the study needs to be proven as relevant for the object of study during the inspection, and the researcher needs to abandon it no matter his preferences if it does not fulfill this requirement.

In common for most qualitative analyses, is four key steps the data analysis process needs to follow as described by (Graue, 2016, p. 11-12): *Data collection* is conducted through interviews, observations etc. The amount of data can therefore be overwhelming to the researcher. *Data reduction*, by categorization or coding of the data are ways of organizing the data, making it usable to the analysis. When coding the collected data, it is crucial to ensure that observations and resulting conclusions are reliable. *Data display*. When displaying the data to the reader, it needs to be comprehensive and clear. The *conclusion* of the analysis should contain information about the credibility of the interviewee and whether statements were made impulsively or not. *Data reduction* was conducted by audio recording the interviews and taking notes from each of the interviews afterward. The notes were then merged together and *displayed* in a list depicting all the respondents answers to the interview questions (see attached file). Lastly, a discussion of the validity and reliability of my research was conducted before the results were ultimately presented in the conclusion.

## QUALITY CRITERIA

Crucial to any study, is an assessment of its credibility. Commonly, this assessment requires an evaluation of the study's *validity* and *reliability*. Gripsrud and colleagues describe validity and reliability as terms that are used to determine how well topics have been measured by an instrument (Gripsrud et al., 2021, p.151). It is especially important to highlight that the ways validity and reliability are measured in qualitative research differ from that of quantitative methods. (Brink, 1993, p.35)

Validity describes the relevance and factual soundness of the study. The purpose of validity is to evaluate how well the study measures the intended topics and how authentic its results are (Gripsrud et al., 2021, p.151). Furthermore, there are two types of validity: Internal and external. Internal validity refers to the extent that the data is a reflection or representation of reality. (Brink, 1993, p.35). On the other hand, External validity addresses whether or not these reflections or representations are applicable across groups. (Brink, 1993, p.35). To achieve internal validity, interview objects were chosen from companies of varying size, business practice and sustainability approach. Because the study consisted of interviewees from fashion brands of varying size and business practices (slow-, moderate- and fast- fashion), the results may be applicable to other fashion companies. Although the study fulfills the requirement for external validity, it is important to note that all of the interviewees were from Norwegian fashion companies. It is therefore unlikely that the results have international application.

Reliability revolves around the trustworthiness and accuracy of the results (Gripsrud et al., 2021, p 154). The essence of reliability is consistency, informational stability of and the study's ability to yield the same results over repeated testing periods (Brink, 1993, p.35). To ensure a high degree of reliability, the interviews were audio-recorded to allow rewinding during the note-taking process that occurred immediately after each interview.

Lastly, although commonly a part of quantitative studies, a pretest was conducted by interviewing a Norwegian fashion company that shared the characteristics of the subjects to reveal potential ambiguities and shortcomings in the study (Gripsrud et al., 2021, p. 173). The pretest uncovered that several questions did

not satisfy the open-ended criteria because the received answers were too brief and concise. Changes were made accordingly. As a result, the pretest further ensured validity of the study. The participant of the pretest did not partake in the final study.

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Throughout the entire study, I have consciously taken ethical considerations by prioritizing research ethics as described by The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committee (hereby referred to as NNREC). Research ethics are standards for research-practices that describe ethical norms that researchers should follow. A study generally needs to follow four norms: *the truth norm* (honesty), *methodological norms* (factuality, transparency and accountability) and *institutional norms* (accessibility, independence and criticism) (NNREC, 2022). Furthermore, more *general norms* that account for human rights such as equality, freedom and free will need to be taken into account in an ethical study (NNREC, 2022).

Additionally, consent from the participants in compliance with guidelines from the National Research Ethics Committee of Norway was prioritized. Consent should, according to the ethics committee, be (1) voluntary, (2) informed, (3) easy to understand and (4) documented (NNREC, 2022). These requirements were met by crafting a consent form (see attached file). The form was signed by the participants before the interviews were conducted.

## **PART 4: RESULTS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In this part of the thesis, I present the results of the qualitative study conducted with four participants from large companies in the Norwegian fashion industry before connecting the findings to relevant theory. Thereafter, the results are discussed in light of theory presented in the [theoretical framework](#) of the thesis. The interview notes can be accessed in the attachment of the thesis.

### **FINDINGS**

#### **1. «Does your company utilize digital marketing?»**

When asked about their usage of digital approaches in their marketing, The respondents unanimously stated that they actively practice digital marketing to

promote their clothing brands. **R1** states that digital marketing is “(...) *the only way to do marketing these days*”, a statement which is echoed by **R3** who claims that digital marketing “(...) *is the industry standard nowadays*”. **R2** and **R4** also claimed to be eager users of digital marketing. These replies support the indicators that digital marketing has reached a point of being the industry standard to fashion companies.

## **2. «Why does your company market itself digitally?»**

When asked about why they market themselves digitally, the collected data revealed two common motives. All of the respondents stated that they deemed digital marketing necessary to remain competitive in the Norwegian fashion market. The respondents all gave different iterations of **R2s** response, who claimed that “(...) *it's the only way to keep up with the competition of the fashion industry*”. The respondents also brought up the fact that they use digital marketing to combat the increasing advertising fatigue. **R4** stated that “(...) *the increase in advertising fatigue has made us find new ways of reaching our customers, which digital marketing allows for.*” The responses of **R2** and **R3** echoed this statement. Interestingly, **R1s** response differed from the others by emphasizing that digital marketing allows their company to “(..) *measure the effects and increase the efficiency*” of their various campaigns.

## **3. “What are the benefits of utilizing digital marketing instead of traditional marketing?”**

To probe the responses to the question of why the respondents utilize digital marketing, they were asked the follow-up question of “what are the benefits of utilizing digital marketing instead of traditional marketing?”. The purpose of this question was to explore the theory on the benefits of big data as described in the [Theoretical framework](#).

**R1** claimed to have seen an “(...) *enormous increase in the effectiveness*” of their company’s marketing, crediting this to being able to “(...) *more accurately reach our different target audiences with tailored marketing*”. They also highlighted an increased commercial success rate for their product as a result of “(...) *combining information from the elite in Italy with big data.*”. As a result, the aforementioned

factors have *“(...) snowballed into an increase in economic performance, which has led to a strong position in the market.”*

At the same time, **R2** echoed the first statement of R1, confirming that they, too, had experienced an increase in their marketing efficiency. They used the word *“(...) considerably”* to describe the extent of this effect. R2 credits these developments to digital tools such as Google Analytics, with their abilities to *“(...) allow us to target our marketing on exactly the target audience we desire”*. Furthermore, the company has been able to make more informed and calculated decisions in their product design process, increasing their commercial success rate.

**R3** pointed out that they have developed a set of characteristics in collaboration with some of their customers that they feel encompass their customer base. This has allowed them to target their marketing *“(...)specifically towards these people”*, increasing their sales *“considerably.”* This seems to support the two previous respondent’s claims of increased marketing efficiency.

Lastly, **R4** Highlighted that digital marketing had allowed them to *“(...) differentiate from the increasing competition of the Norwegian fashion industry”*. Like the previous respondents, they claim that digital marketing has allowed the company to increase the efficiency of their marketing by *“(...) targeting pre-defined target audiences”*. Furthermore, R4 also stated that digital marketing has allowed their company to make more informed and measurable decisions in their product designs.

#### **4. “What are the challenges of digital marketing and big data?”**

When asked about the limitations of digital marketing and big data, the respondents unanimously expressed challenges related to personal privacy. **R2** explained that they had received *“(...) numerous inquiries about the legality of our usage of big data.”* However, they proposed that the criticism they had received was largely due to *“(...) a lack of knowledge on the customer side of things”*. Meanwhile, **R1** echoed the problem by stating that their company had *“(...) been under scrutiny from certain customers that are especially interested in privacy”*. **R3** stated that *“(...) there is an understandable skepticism to digital*

*marketing in the market in regard to privacy*". Lastly, **R4** even claimed to have been reported to the Norwegian Data Protection Authorities on one occasion, *"(...) without probable cause, of course."*

##### **5. "What aspect of your company do you think is the most important to your customers?"**

When presented with the question of "What aspect of your company do you think is the most important to your customers?" The respondents all concluded with the brand being the most important aspect of their company.

In order to probe the response of brand equity being important, the respondents were presented with the question of "why is your brand the most important aspect of your business?". This question was intentionally crafted to explore the findings of (Lemon et al., 2001, p. 3-4), (Tharmi & Senthilnathan, 2011, p. 15) and (Zeithaml, 1981, p. 186).

In common for all respondents, is the importance of providing the casual fashion consumer with a reason for choosing their brand specifically. They all claim that an intense competition in the market combined with low switching costs for the casual fashion consumer, makes their brand crucial to their operations. **R1** captures this predicament well by stating that *"due to strong competition, many options and low switching costs, our brand differentiates us in the market and justifies our position to the customer"*. **R3** and **R4** echoes the problem with the large number of options in the market. At the same time, **R2** and **R4** emphasize the uninvolved nature of their casual consumers. **R2** claims that *"(...) the average fashion consumer is oblivious to production processes and such that may increase our price points."* A point which **R4** reiterates by stating that *"(...) the casual fashion consumer is often unaware of material specifications and production methods that may lead to higher prices."*

Furthermore, **R1**, **R2** and **R3** highlight the visual aspect of fashion, by claiming to have made brand communities which their customers want to signal to the world that they belong to. **R3** claims that their strong brand has led to their customers feeling that *"(...) they signal to the world that they care about our planet"*.



## **6. “How does your company measure brand equity in google analytics?”**

Starting off, the respondents were asked about how they measure brand equity online in google analytics. The purpose of this question was to explore the relevance of the MBE model in a digital landscape. Additionally, the proposed metrics for measuring brand equity online was tested.

Upon answering the question at hand, I found that the management of all companies were heavily involved in the marketing of their respective brands. All of the respondents expressed that they worked closely with their marketing departments to develop a set of parameters in Google Analytics that capture brand equity.

**R1** measures their brand equity through “(...) *New and returning customers, Repurchase rate, Traffic generated from organic searches, average session duration and keywords associated with the brand.*”

**R2** uses “(...) *New and returning customers, Bounce rate, Organic traffic sources, Repurchase rate, Keywords and demographic variables such as Region and Language* ” to measure brand equity.

**R3** states that their focus is on brand loyalty and brand associations when measuring brand equity online. Therefore, they look at “(...) *Returning customers, Conversion- and Repurchase rate, Average session duration, Different sources of organic traffic and Keywords associated with our brand.*”

Through trial and error, **R4** claims to have arrived at the following parameters that measure brand equity in Google Analytics: “(...) *conversion- and repurchase rate, new and returning customers, Organic traffic sources, Average session duration, Bounce rate, Demographic parameters and last, but not least, Keywords associated with our brand*”

## **7. «Which advantages has your company experienced from having a strong brand online?»**

The purpose of asking this question was to explore the benefits of brand equity as described by (Tharmi, & Senthilnathan, 2011, p. 15) and Samuelsen & colleagues in the book *merkevareledelse*.

Upon analyzing the sets of data, it is apparent that the companies experience similar advantages from high brand equity. High brand equity has yielded more loyal customers for **R1**, **R2**, **R3** and **R4**.

Furthermore, **Respondents 1,2** and **4** all describe an ability to decrease their advertisement spending as a result of a high brand equity. **R2** attributes this to having “(...) *achieved high brand awareness in the market*”. **R1** also claims to have the same advantage, claiming that their company has “(...) *high awareness in the market*”. **R4** has also been able to “(...) *cut advertising costs*” because they are “(...) *pretty well known in the market at this point*”.

Lastly, The respondents all express that they have experienced that their economic performance has increased “(...) *in tandem with*” their brand equity, as **R4** accurately puts it. **R1** states that “*From having a strong brand, we have mainly been able to differentiate ourselves from our many competitors. At the same time, we have seen an improvement in our economic performance due to increased customer loyalty as a result of our high brand equity.*”. The same is reiterated by **R2**. However, **R3** does not seem to have experienced this same increase.

#### **8. “How do you view the relationship between marketing and sustainability in your company?”**

When exploring sustainable marketing in the Norwegian fashion industry, I first wanted to explore how the companies themselves viewed the relationship between marketing and sustainability.

The respondents seemed to acknowledge the presence of a paradox between marketing and sustainability. However, they had different perspectives on the practical implications of the predicament.

**R1** stated that they “(...) *do realize that there is a fundamental conflict between the role of marketing: to increase sales, and sustainability*”. However, the

company believes that change is more urgent in other parts of their supply chain, “(...) for example in the factories used by our suppliers and such.” **R4** provided a similar response, claiming to be aware of the conflict between marketing and sustainability, and that making changes in other parts of their supply chain is “(...) much better documented than the benefits of sustainable marketing”

Furthermore, **R2** expressed awareness of the paradox between marketing and sustainability. While talking about the trend of overconsumption, they stated that “We realize that we have a responsibility when it comes to stopping this trend”. They claimed to practice sustainability but stressed the importance of seeing results on their sustainable activities. **R3** demonstrated extensive knowledge on the paradox of marketing and sustainability. They also stated that it “(...) absolutely needs to be explored thoroughly”.

Additionally, **R2-R4** expressed a need and desire for more research on the area of sustainable marketing, indicating that there is a need for more extensive research on the topic of sustainable marketing among Norwegian fashion brands.

### **9. “How does your company market itself, and what does the marketing focus on?”**

When asked about how they market their companies, and what their marketing focuses on, the following responses were produced:

**R1**s company markets itself digitally. They also utilize traditional channels to cover all of their segments. As it pertains to the messaging in their marketing, it “(...) aims to inspire our customers and inform them about trends. We also try to motivate them to buy our products.” They state that the main purpose of its marketing is to generate sales. **R1** states that the reason for this is because their company produces “(...) in large volumes with a high tempo, something that requires us to maintain a high rotation speed in our warehouses.”.

**R2** also markets their brand digitally. Their communication “(...) aims to motivate and inspire our customers to purchase our products”. Additionally, they try to promote a long-term view of fashion in an effort to reduce the environmental impact of their company.

**R3** expresses a passion for sustainability by stating that *“Because we have built our brand on sustainability, it permeates through all of our actions – also digital marketing”*. Their company promotes sustainable consumption, the versatility of their products, repairing destroyed clothes and *“(...) everything else related to sustainability”*. Furthermore, their marketing focuses on inspiring their customers by *“(...) tapping into the good feeling of being sustainable”*.

Similar to **R1**, **R4** utilizes a combination of digital marketing and traditional marketing in order to cover the entirety of their customer segments. Regarding their digital marketing activities, they claim to *“(...) use the latest techniques and software for digital marketing and AI and see good results from this.”* Due to their size, and high marketing activity, **R4** states that they are able to prioritize sustainability in better than their competitors in their marketing. Furthermore, they focus on sustainable marketing in their digital channels *“(...) because this is where our younger customer segments can be reached. These are the segments that we aim to reach with our sustainable marketing.”* **R4**, aims to *“(...) inspire their customers to dress well and at the same time act sustainable”*. They have also launched some campaigns with *“(...) more abstract marketing”*, focusing on transparency.

#### **10. “What is sustainability to your company?”**

In order to prepare the interviewees for the next line of questioning regarding sustainable marketing, they were first asked to describe their associations with the term.

Most relevant to the scope of the study, was the common view of sustainable marketing as a branding tool among all the respondents (**R1-R4**). Although brief and concise, the responses to the question provided valuable insights into the fundamental approach to sustainable marketing and their motives for conducting it.

#### **11. “Why does/ does not your company focus on sustainable marketing?”**

Furthermore, the question of why the firms focus on sustainable marketing was asked to probe the answers to the foregoing question. **R1**, **R3** and **R4** all

emphasized the branding capabilities of sustainable marketing. **R4** stated that they “(...) *can't deny the branding capabilities of this sustainable focus*”. Moreover, **R2-R4** expressed a calling or “(...) *duty to do our part*” as respondent 4 put it. **R1**, however, did not share this concern. Instead, the respondent highlighted a desire to be on the “(...) *good side*” of their customers.

## **12. “How does your company measure the effects of sustainable marketing online?”**

Upon posing this question, I sought to confirm the proposed framework for measuring sustainable marketing online. The question yielded the following responses:

Collectively, the respondents focused on brand related parameters in google analytics when measuring the effects of sustainable marketing. **R2** promptly explained their reasoning for this as “(...) *a lack of research on the area*”, an understanding which was shared by all respondents. As a result, the same parameters as mentioned by the respondents in question 6 were reiterated when answering this question.

## **13. «What benefits does sustainable marketing yield for your company? Feel free to discuss all of them: economic and more abstract.**

I proposed this question intending to investigate the theory of sustainable marketing and its benefits. These benefits are especially relevant to the research due to the similarities between the proposed advantages of brand equity and sustainable marketing uncovered in the theoretical framework.

**R1** claimed to have experienced “(...) *an increase in new and returning customers, which has resulted in increased sales.*” They did, however, preface that they had not conducted enough projects to confidently claim these as “(...) *a direct result of sustainable marketing.*” Furthermore, they claimed to have experienced that their brand has begun to be **associated with an increasing number of sustainable keywords** in google searches. In the long term, “(...) *this effect has helped differentiate our brand in the market.*” Furthermore, they had experienced improvements in all of their google analytics parameters.

First, **R2** expressed having experienced an increase in “(...) *new and returning customers*”. Secondly, they stated that it would seem as though “(...) *sustainability has an increasing effect on our brand equity by increasing awareness of and loyalty to our brand.*” Lastly, they had seen hints of a “(...) *green shift in our brand associations*” by appearing in more sustainability themed searches. They also pointed out the differentiation effects of their newfound brand associations. **R2**, too, did have reservations against crediting sustainable marketing as the sole reason for these effects.

**R3** also expressed having experienced brand related advantages such as “(...) *a tremendous customer loyalty due to a high amount of returning customers.*” Additionally, they claimed that sustainable marketing had “(...) *undoubtedly strengthened our brand associations in the direction of sustainability and brand equity substantially, differentiating our brand in the market.*”

Lastly, **R4** had also seen a positive effect on their brand-related parameters in google analytics. For example, the company had seen a “(...) *steep increase*” in their customer loyalty, revenue and keywords that drive traffic. According to **R4**, these effects indicate an increase in brand awareness and -loyalty. Furthermore, they claimed to have gained a more sustainability themed brand association structure.

It is important to note that all respondents reported improvements in the parameters they used to measure brand equity online. They did, however, not provide elaborate responses on the matter.

#### **14. «What is required to increase your firm’s sustainable marketing efforts?»**

To round off the interviews, the respondents were asked about what they required to increase their sustainable marketing efforts. The purpose of this question was to explore the need for further research on sustainability in the field of digital marketing.

The responses to this question were surprisingly unanimous. The respondents all expressed a need and desire for documented economic benefits for increasing their sustainable marketing efforts. The more sustainably oriented companies (**R2**, **R3**

and R4) pointed out the fact that the sustainability term also encompasses providing for their employees, using this as an argument for the necessity of profitability. The consensus among the respondents was a willingness to increase their efforts if it yielded economic benefits, and therefore “(...) *makes sense*” as stated by R3.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **RQ1: What is the role of digital marketing in the fashion industry?**

As it pertains to the theory presented on the subject of digital marketing and its benefits, the data seems to support the research of Almeida, 2017 who state that big data has the ability to increase the impact of marketing substantially by using tailored marketing (Almeida, 2017, p.16). Furthermore, R1, R2 and R4 all claim to have experienced an increase of revenue as a result of implementing digital marketing. Although not explicitly, the data suggests that the claim that companies that use big data in their marketing are twice as likely to be top performers in the market (LaValle et al., 2011, p. 22) is partially supported. Lastly, a majority of the respondents alluded to the fact that big data has provided a new approach to their development of new products, increasing their commercial success rate, a finding which supports the research of (Zhan et al., 2018, p. 590). Although beneficial, the companies also expressed concerns about the personal privacy of their customers in regard to digital marketing, claiming to have received numerous complaints over the years. Therefore, the challenge of personal privacy as described by (Oguntimilehin & Ademola, 2014, p.436) is supported. Concerns for other factors such as the size of the data did not achieve support from the study.

Digital marketing therefore plays an important role in the fashion industry by increasing the effect of the marketing of Norwegian fashion companies, their revenue and improving their product design process. It does however, face challenges related to personal privacy.

### **RQ2: What is the role of brand equity in the fashion industry?**

**RQ2 1:** The theoretical implications of study is partial support for the research of Lemon and colleagues, who state that brand equity matters most (1) for low-involvement purchases with simple decision processes, (2) when the usage of the

product is visible to others, and (3) when experiences associated with the product can be passed from one individual to another (Lemon et al., 2001, p. 3-4). The support is partial because the data does not comment on the third characteristic. Brand equity appears to be important in the fashion industry. The respondents' descriptions of their consumer's behavior in situations of purchase indicate support for the classification of fashion products as "search goods" with low involvement (Zeithaml, 1981, p. 186), for which brand equity is important (Samuelsen et al., 2019, p.74). this theory is also supported.

**RQ 2 2:** In regard to theory on the benefits of brand equity, The collected data supports several of the advantages of brand equity as described by Samuelsen and colleagues. The data shows that high brand equity has, congruent with the theory of (Samuelsen et al., 2019, p. 91), increased the customer loyalty of the participating fashion companies. Additionally, the majority of the respondents have been able to decrease their advertisement spending as a result of an increased efficiency of their marketing, supporting the theories of (Samuelsen et al., 2019, p. 95-96) and (Almeida, 2017, p.16). Lastly, the majority of respondents have also increased their revenue by having high brand equity, supporting (Samuelsen et al., 2019, p. 89). The data does, however, *not* support the research of (Tharmi, & Senthilnathan, 2011, p. 15), who state that high brand equity is positively correlated with purchase intention.

As it pertains to the measuring of sustainable marketing, a lack of empirical studies on the subject, prompted a suggestive framework for measuring brand equity to be generated by combining the author's own knowledge of Google Analytics with the MBE model, as described by (Yoo & Donthu 2001, p.10). The purpose of this question was therefore to explore the validity of this framework. Specifically, support was obtained for the usage of "New visitors", "Returning visitors", "Organic searches", "Repurchase rate", "Average session duration", "Bounce rate", "Keywords" that drive traffic and demographic variables such as "Language" and "Region". The new and revised suggestive framework thus becomes:



Dimension	Metrics
Perceived quality	<b>Customer retention:</b> Returning visitors, Repurchase rate, Average Session duration, Bounce rate, Organic searches, Keywords
Brand loyalty	<b>Customer retention:</b> Returning visitors, Repurchase rate, Average Session duration, Bounce rate, Organic searches, Keywords
Brand Awareness	<b>Customer Acquisition:</b> New visitors, Traffic channels, Region, Language, Organic searches, Keywords
Brand association	<b>Traffic sources:</b> Keywords

*Table 3: Suggested metrics for brand equity in Google Analytics (revised)*

To answer RQ2, the data indicates that the brand plays a central role in the fashion market. In fact, the findings support the majority of the criteria for when brand equity matters most. Furthermore, the study also found that the characteristics of fashion goods are congruent with those of search goods, for which brand equity is crucial in order to be purchased by consumers. High brand equity in the fashion industry yields fruitful benefits to the company such as increased customer loyalty, marketing efficiency and increased revenue. Online, these benefits are measured through the metrics described in table 3.

### **RQ3: How do fashion companies conduct sustainable marketing?**

**RQ3 1:** The data indicate support for the marketing paradox presented in (Bond, & Seely, 2004, p. 256). However, none of the respondents expressed that the focus of marketing has to change toward post-consumption to increase its sustainability (Murphy, 2005, p. 190). In other words, the latter theory is not supported. However, when asked about how they conduct sustainable marketing, the respondents interestingly expressed an experimental approach to the phenomenon. The respondents were eager to point out the branding effects of a

sustainable focus in their marketing, although they had strong reservations against attributing their perceived benefits to sustainable marketing due to a lack of experience with conducting sustainable marketing. Sustainability *is* therefore prioritized among Norwegian fashion brands albeit experimentally rather than as a serious approach that challenges the paradox of sustainable marketing.

**RQ3 2:** Although motivated by ethical and environmental considerations, the study revealed a shared perception of sustainable marketing as a branding tool among Norwegian fashion brands. As it pertains to their methods of measuring the effects of the practice, the companies utilize the same sets of parameters as they do for brand equity, likely due to a shared perception of sustainable marketing as a branding tool. Table 3 therefore obtains further support from the collected data. Although not explicitly mentioned, these results allude to a potential support for the competitive advantages of sustainable marketing as described by (Trivedi et al., 2018, p. 195-196).

To answer RQ3, Norwegian fashion companies prioritize sustainable marketing, to a certain extent because they acknowledge a perceived effect on branding from the practice. However, the companies are reluctant to attribute these benefits directly to sustainable marketing. Due to its perceived branding effects the parameters related to brand equity as described in table 3 are used to measure the effects of sustainable marketing

**RQ4: Does sustainable marketing increase brand equity?**

The collected data revealed support for the benefits of sustainable marketing as described by (Trivedi et al., 2018, p. 195-196). The respondents claimed to have experienced better positioning in the market as a result of marketing themselves more sustainable, *differentiating their brand*. Furthermore, the companies reported increases in all of their branding-related parameters in Google Analytics upon their implementation of sustainable marketing. A majority of these parameters are related to customer loyalty, or customer retention as the digital marketing field describes the term, supporting the benefit of *increased customer retention and -loyalty* as described by Trivedi and colleagues.

Interestingly, the advantage of increased customer retention and -loyalty relates itself to the traditional model of measuring brand equity, the MBE model by (Yoo & Donthu 2001, p.10). For example, the MBE model accounts for Brand loyalty, for which sustainable marketing has proven beneficial by this study. Additionally, the support of the metrics in table 3 seem to further support the MBE model's applicability in the landscape of digital marketing.

To answer the research question, the collected data shows that sustainable marketing increases brand equity.

#### **RQ5: What is required to increase the sustainable marketing efforts of the fashion industry?**

My findings on the last question of the study surprisingly produced the same findings across all respondents. R1-R4 all expressed a need and desire for documented, economic benefits to justify an increase in their sustainable marketing efforts. The findings seem to support my claims that the benefits of sustainable marketing need to be tangible, measurable and documented in order to increase the sustainable marketing efforts of Norwegian fashion companies.

### **PART 5: CONCLUSION**

The conclusion aims to answer the research problem. To answer the overarching research problem of "*How do Norwegian fashion companies conduct sustainable marketing online, and does the practice increase brand equity?*", the previous chapter discussed the data derived from the in-depth interviews in the context of the empirical data presented in the theoretical framework. In order to ensure that the question was sufficiently covered, the research questions developed in chapter 3 were addressed individually. These discussions lay the foundation for the conclusion presented in the following paragraphs.

First, and crucial to the relevance of my research, the data derived from the study confirms that digital marketing plays a key role in the Norwegian fashion industry. Not only has the practice become industry standard, but it also yields tangible economic benefits for fashion companies in Norway as suggested by theory on the subject. The companies therefore conduct their sustainable marketing efforts online.

Secondly, the study obtained support for branding, more specifically brand equity, as the most important aspect of the fashion companies as it pertains to competitiveness in the market as the empirical evidence suggests. Analysis of the gathered data also found that brand equity is measured using the variables proposed in table 3 in the software Google Analytics. These findings are congruent with the measuring of brand equity in the MBE model.

The qualitative data also indicates a positive connection between sustainable marketing and brand equity. This is evident by the usage of parameters related to brand equity when measuring sustainable marketing among Norwegian fashion companies and reported improvements in these. Furthermore, The study supports the benefits of sustainable marketing as described by Trivedi and colleagues. These are closely related to the advantages of brand equity as described by Samuelsen and colleagues which the study also supports.

In conclusion, Norwegian fashion companies conduct sustainable marketing online with an experimental approach. The effects of which are measured through parameters related to brand equity as described in the suggestive framework depicted in table 3 because the brand is perceived as the most important aspect of their business. The data finds that the respondents have experienced increases/improvements in these metrics as a result of their sustainable marketing efforts, indicating that sustainable marketing does in fact increase brand equity.

### **CRITICISM**

For the reader, it is important to note that convenience sampling was utilized in the data collection process due to limited time and resources. By taking advantage of their own network, the author managed to gain access to and interview four leaders from leading fashion companies in Norway. Although the sampling method may lead to biased results, it was deemed necessary in order to conduct the study.

Furthermore, the number of respondents in the study may be subject to criticism. Although four is a relatively small number of respondents in a qualitative study, it is important to highlight the roles of these individuals. These respondents are leaders of their respective companies, and the line of questioning was aimed at

describing the practices of these companies, not the individuals. The respondents therefore represent four major fashion companies in Norway which increases the impact of their responses.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge the narrow scope of the study. Due to the newness of the subject area and lack of empirical studies, the research area had to be limited to the exploration of the effects of sustainable marketing on brand equity. Additionally, the formal requirements of a bachelor thesis does not allow for such an extensive study to occur.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

As a result of my findings, future researchers are presented with two main avenues for their future work:

First and foremost, future research on the correlation between sustainable marketing and brand equity should aim to include global fashion companies from all over the world to ensure the international applicability of their research findings. Additionally, the subject area would benefit from a quantitative investigation of this correlation.

Secondly, the support of the proposed metrics for brand equity in google analytics indicates that there *are* practices in place for measuring brand equity digitally in the Norwegian fashion industry. My research, therefore, lays the foundation for future research to build upon these metrics by conducting a quantitative study on the correlation between the parameters described in table 3 and brand equity. As my research indicates that there appears to be a correlation between sustainable marketing and brand equity, broader research opportunities revolve around the possibility of investigating the connection between sustainable marketing and value equity and relationship equity. Furthermore, I recommend conducting a quantitative study exploring the relationship between sustainability and customer equity.

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