From Cost Spender to Value Provider - Using Data to Build and Sustain Brands

A qualitative study on the use of data and analytics for brand decisions in a multi-brand company

by

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May 2023

Master's Programme in International Marketing & Brand Management

Word Count: 23,755
BUSN39, Degree Project in Global Marketing - Master Level
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Abstract

Introduction: Data has revolutionized how business is conducted and presents several possibilities for companies to capitalize on, namely data-driven decision-making, Business Intelligence, and marketing. However, how it pertains to brand management has not been covered. Moreover, a recurring tension between short-term sales revenue and long-term brand-building objectives is said to be heightened by data analytics. Data can, on the one hand, improve productivity and objectivity in decision-making, but on the other hand, make the case against investments in brand management due to the short-sighted focus on sales.

Aim: Aims to provide insights into the use of data and analytics for brand decisions.

Methodology: A qualitative, embedded, single case study of the multi-brand company Essity and two of its global brands Tork and TENA was done, following an abductive and interpretivistic approach.

Data collection: The data was collected from semi-structured interviews with nine participants of managerial positions at different levels at Essity, Tork, and TENA, deemed to provide relevant insights into the subject and study.

Conclusion: Findings show various ways in which data and analytics are used in decision-making to build and sustain the brands at a multi-brand company. These were illustrated according to the three identified themes: Understanding the Customer, Visualizing and Tracking the Performance, and Convincing the Stakeholders, demonstrating efforts that ultimately provide the basis for decision-making to build and sustain brands.

Originality: Provides a new context for data, analytics, and decision-making, that of brand management, a new area of decisions based on data, those of brand decisions.

Keywords: brand management, brand building, brand sustaining, data, data analytics, Business Intelligence, data-driven decision-making, multi-brand company

Abbreviations:
BI - Business Intelligence
ROI - Return on Investment
SEO - Search Engine Optimization
KPI - Key Performance Indicator
B2C - Business-to-Consumer
B2B - Business-to-Business
CRM - Customer Relationship Management
CTR - Click-Through Rate

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we want to thank our supervisor Magnus Nilsson for the helpful guidance throughout the process of writing our thesis. In addition, our opponents and seminar groups have provided much thoughtful feedback, which we are thankful for.

Vital for this research were the managers from Essity who participated in the interviews. Therefore, we would like to communicate our utmost gratitude to you. Without you, this study would not have been possible. We are truly grateful for you taking the time and effort to meet with us and for sharing your insights.

Finally, we want to express our gratitude towards our families and friends for supporting us over these past couple of months.

Sincerely,
Louise Edlund & Sofia Steerling

Lund, 31st of May 2023

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1. Introduction

The introductory chapter presents the background of this study, which mainly entails data. Followingly, the problematization and aim are provided, as well as the research purpose and question, and finally, the outline of the thesis.

1.1 Background

Data used to be a scarce commodity, and due to its value, it has oftentimes been guarded carefully or traded expensively (Kitchin, 2014). Around 1998 digital data overtook analog, and in recent years the explosion of data has reached unprecedented levels (World Bank, 2016). The substantial increase in data is, among several factors, thanks to the digital footprints left when using digital devices that trace online actions (Higgins, 2023). This goes for both private and professional use, from social media and online shopping to emails and digitized business operations (Jacobs, 2014; Higgins, 2023). As might be expected, these footprints generate a significant surge of data that flows freely and is increasingly open and accessible (Kitchin, 2014). This is particularly relevant for marketers and brand managers as they may generate deeper insights into customers' behaviors and preferences, which opens up several possibilities of increased engagement, personalized communication, and promotions that have a higher chance to connect with customers (Kleinberg, 2023).

Furthermore, thanks to technological developments and political lobbying the costs of data are low and the infrastructures are robust and supportive (Kitchin, 2014). In the current digital economy, not utilizing the value of data limits potential progress (Toonders, 2014), as new technologies are creating remarkable possibilities for both information and transformation (UN Data Revolution, 2014). Underway is a data revolution – reshaping the production of knowledge, the conduction of business, and the enactment of governance (UN Data Revolution, 2014). Its potential can be explained as:

> Data in the 21st century is like oil in the 18th century: an immensely, untapped valuable asset. Like oil, for those who see data's fundamental value and learn to extract and use it, there will be huge rewards (Toonders, 2014).

Currently, businesses are experiencing a particularly disruptive and dynamic environment, which creates a variety of challenges for companies to meet (IBM, 2023). To survive, let alone succeed, organizations rely on their capabilities to respond to changes and discover opportunities, which can be achieved through the use of data for fast and efficient decision-making with high quality (Tripathi, Bagga & Aggarwal, 2020; Tavera Romero, Ortiz, Khalaf & Rios Prado, 2021).

With the increased complexity as well as the access and use of data, research has been dedicated to investigating how data can improve business operations. For example, Brynjolfsson, Hitt and Kim (2011) found that when organizations incorporate the use of data, they are statistically more productive. Therefore, managerial decisions are now often based on data analytics rather than instincts. In line with this, Gandhi, Bhatia and Dev (2022) state that data-driven decision-making helps and improves decision-making skills in the organization as they are based on data analysis and interpretation. Thereby, aspects such as instinct, assumptions, or perceptions that are more likely to be biased become excluded from the decisions. This shift is part of a larger trend where companies now collect and leverage data from various sources, using systems and tools such as data analytics and Business Intelligence (BI) to realize its possibilities (Brynjolfsson, Hitt & Kim, 2011; Elgendy & Elragal, 2014).

Moreover, in a time when data has the capacity to find the needs and influencing factors of consumers (Grandhi, Patwa & Saleem, 2021), the concept of data-driven decision-making is highly relevant to marketing. In fact, data-driven marketing has been found to increase both acquisition and retention of customers, in addition to improving efficiency and Return On Investments (ROI) (Grandhi, Patwa & Saleem, 2021).

1.2 Problematization and Aim

With the revolution of data, companies are provided several opportunities to tap into the potential of improving productivity and optimizing operations from data-founded insights (Mohr & Hürtgen, 2018). As the "lifeblood of decision-making and the raw material for accountability" (UN Data Revolution, 2014, p.2), high-quality data enables relevant information on the right things at the precise time it is desired. Without it, it is almost impossible to design, monitor, and evaluate effective policies (UN Data Revolution, 2014). Thanks to real-time analytics, companies are made aware of data and can take action on it as soon as it enters their system (Janani, 2022). This way, the reaction time is short and vast volumes of data can be processed quickly.

Undoubtedly, data appears promising for the velocity, knowledge, and efficiency of companies. Excelling in these areas should allow for relevant and immediate results culminating in revenue. However, the research undertaken in preparation for this thesis exposed one business area in companies where a discrepancy in data and analytics seemingly exists – marketing.

Horst and Duboff (2015) mean that a recurring tension that managers within marketing deal with is balancing between the here and now and the distant future. In essence, the short-term revenue pursuit and the long-term building of brands. Lodish and Mela (2007) similarly claim that companies become so captivated by their ability to sell in real-time that investments in the long-term health of their brands are neglected. Today, the most appealing promotions can optimize results and be customized to fit the desired target group and reach them at just the right moment, all thanks to the tremendous amount of information that can be obtained from buying patterns and transaction histories (Fulgoni, 2013; Horst & Duboff, 2015). With the data and analytics available, near-term sales can be engineered to precision (Horst & Duboff, 2015). Fulgoni (2013) argues that despite the compelling value creation provided by real-time data, it is a 'double-edged sword' since it also risks eroding brand equity in the long term due to its tendency to incentivize a short-term decision-making mindset. Hence, if defending brand investments with their faraway, indefinite, and intangible payoffs was challenging before, it is likely even more so now that the urge for short-term revenue is irresistibly easy to satisfy (Horst & Duboff, 2015).

Still, branding advocates would claim that thoroughly building brands is vital for sustaining considerable margins that allow companies to stay true to their brand promise in the long run (Horst & Duboff, 2015). Due to the ever-present tension existent between brand equity and sales promotion though, investments in brand building are threatened by the pressures of instant revenue (Horst & Duboff, 2015). Taking this tension into account, the pressure is at an all-time high, expedited and accelerated by data analytics (Horst & Duboff, 2015).

Then, as established in the background, data-driven decision-making appears to be the ultimate endeavor that companies should have undertaken by now through data analytics and Business Intelligence. However, how it pertains to marketing efforts, more specifically to support brand decisions, has seemingly not been focused upon so far, illustrating a discrepancy. Naturally, the complex environment does not exclude marketing and brand management:

> Leaders also need to be able to distinguish between a passing fad and the next big thing. Making smart bets that can drive sustainable growth starts with understanding what consumers want from the products they buy and the brands they support. (IBM, 2023, p. 5)

Moreover, as Lodish and Mela (2007) stated, there is a recurring tension in balancing short-term revenue pursuit and long-term brand building, which is further heightened by data analytics (Horst & Duboff, 2015). Here, a research opportunity is revealed. On the one hand, data can improve productivity and objectivity in decision-making. On the other hand, data can also make the case against investments in brand management due to the applied pressure on short-sighted sales focus.

Thus, it is both interesting and important to explore what happens in practice concerning data and analytics for brand management and the decisions inherent. However, when investigating what the pre-existing literature states, little to no research have been found on how data and analytics are used in the context of decision-making for brand management specifically. The intention is not to solve the ongoing tension between the short-term and long-term focus, but rather to provide insight and contribute with a fresh perspective by representing what actually happens in brand management at a company. Consequently, the findings can ignite further research to support conclusions and develop solutions. Ultimately, this study contributes to the overall understanding of the use of data and analytics for brand management, enabled through decision-making. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to provide insights into the use of data and analytics for brand decisions. To fulfill the research aim, the thesis is based on a case study of the multi-brand company Essity.

1.2.1 Case Study Company: Essity

Essity is a leading global hygiene and health company (Essity, n.d.a). Today, sales are carried out in about 150 countries under global brands such as TENA and Tork, and other strong brands such as Libero, Saba, and Libresse (n.d.b). The three business areas focused upon are 'Health & Medical', 'Consumer Goods', and 'Professional Hygiene', and some examples of Essity's products are incontinence products, wound care, napkins, diapers, pads, toilet papers, and paper hand towels (Essity, n.d.b).

Essity strives to grow both organically and through acquisitions, both within categories and closely related product areas with high profitability (Essity, n.d.b). The business is continuously transformed with the ambition to increase efficiency and digitalization, and innovations are guided by advanced customer and consumer insights that contribute to the development of successful solutions (Essity, n.d.c). A more detailed case description of Essity is found in Chapter Section 4.1.

1.3 Research Purpose and Question

The purpose of this study is to contribute to an extended understanding and knowledge of how data and analytics are used for brand decisions, here focused on efforts regarding the building and sustaining of brands.

The following question was formulated to investigate this and will provide the foundational guidance of the study:

> *In what ways do managers at a multi-brand company use data and analytics in decision-making to build and sustain their brands?*

1.4 Outline of the Thesis

After the initial introduction of the research topic, aim, and purpose, previous literature within the field that is deemed relevant and plays an integral role in this study is presented. This is what constitutes the literature review in the next chapter, where research that in some way relates to or justifies the research aim is depicted. Then follows a chapter detailing the chosen methodology and its implications on the conducted research, and a chapter dedicated to the presentation of the findings and their analysis. The results are in the succeeding chapter discussed in connection to the established gap and the previous findings laid out in the literature review. Finally, the thesis is concluded, and implications and suggestions for future research are presented.

2. Literature Review

The second chapter presents selected literature to provide a solid understanding of previous research that captures the essence of areas imperative to this research. Therefore, the first part of the chapter depicts literature on the subject of strategic brand management with the efforts it includes and how data is used in relation to this. The second part covers relevant aspects of data-driven decision-making, which are those related to making decisions, as well as systems and tools used for this, such as data analytics and Business Intelligence.

2.1 Strategic Brand Management

With brands considered assets (Temporal, 2019), brand management goes from tactical and reactive to strategic and visionary (Aaker, 2014; Iyer, Davari, Srivastava & Paswan, 2021). This makes it imperative to have a strategic brand vision that links to both current and future business strategies and provides guidance for future offerings (Aaker, 2014). Additionally, brand management becomes broader, embracing matters such as strategic market insights, growth strategies, and global brand strategies (Aaker, 2014). Hence, brand management has evolved to be pivotal for the formation and handling of business strategies, where managerial decision-making is central in determining the future performance of the company (Hunger & Wheelen, 2010).

Strategic brand management entails designing and implementing marketing programs and activities to build, measure, and manage brand equity (Keller, 2013), which is the added value that associating a brand with a product brings about, the worth of a brand itself (Farquhar, 1989). Minsky and Geva (2019) define brand equity similarly, as the value from consumers' perception of the brand's product or services, not solely from the product or service offer itself. Brand equity combines the financial concept of equity with the marketing-based notion of a brand (Kapferer, 2012), and is a fundamental reinforcement of how important the brand is in marketing strategies (Keller, 2013). Thus, it encompasses both the financial and market significance of a brand (Kapferer, 2012; Keller, 2013).

Keller (2013) describes the strategic brand management process as containing four main steps:

(1) "**Identifying and developing brand plans**" (p. 58), which means the initiating stages of gaining a clear understanding of what the brand represents and how it should be positioned to competitors.

(2) "**Designing and implementing brand marketing programs**" (p. 58) concerns building brand equity through positioning the brand properly in customers' minds and achieving brand resonance to the utmost degree. This process for knowledge-building will generally depend on three factors: (1) the choices of brand elements and their mixing and matching, (2) how the brand is integrated with marketing activities and

supporting marketing programs, and (3) the leveraging of secondary associations by the brand as a result of its linking to some other entity such as another brand or country of origin.

(3) "**Measuring and interpreting brand performance**" (p. 60), which regards that to profitably manage their brands, managers have to successfully design and implement a system for measuring brand equity. This system is a set of research procedures involving three key steps: (1) brand audits, (2) brand tracking, and (3) a brand equity management system, which is designed to yield accurate, timely, and actionable information so that optimal tactical decisions in the short run and optimal strategic decisions, in the long run, can be made.

(4) "**Growing and sustaining brand equity**" (p. 60) involves taking a broader and more diverse view of the brand's equity: understanding how branding strategies can be used to reflect corporate concerns and define brand architecture, and whether they should be adjusted over time, markets, and geographical boundaries.

Additionally, brand strategy is essential to achieve effective communication in key objectives, such as identifying the audience, market positioning, brand messaging, and tone of voice (Malinic, 2019). Continuously working with the above steps and objectives naturally involve decisions to be made, to ensure the right steps are taken for the good of the brand. Decision-making is then required throughout the management of brands.

Iyer et al. (2021) argue that with the development of brands, going from tactical to strategic, market orientation and the brand management function have become meshed together. Thus, to manage and develop brands successfully, companies now follow an outside-in methodology (Iyer et al. 2021) and also need to become active instead of reactive with changes ahead (Minsky & Geva, 2019). Put differently, in being market-oriented, organizations emphasize attending to customer wants and needs (Urde, Baumgarth & Merrilees, 2013). As such, the brand management process has become pivotal to capturing information about both customers and competitors in order to gain a competitive advantage with their brands (Iyer et al. 2021).

Furthermore, the processes of strategic brand management emphasize medium to long-term goals and decisions, aiming to establish strategies that set brand targets, create and sustain brand image and brand equity, as well as assess and allocate sufficient resources, both human and economic, for brand management (Santos-Vijande, del Río-Lanza, Suárez-Álvarez & Díaz-Martín, 2013; Iyer et al. 2021). All of these elements are fundamental in strategic management, as they lead up to making the brand a source of competitive advantage (Santos-Vijande et al. 2013).

Iyer et al. (2021) mean that the process of strategic brand management involves a systematic approach that intends to harmonize influences from the external environment with internal operations to enhance the objectives of the brand. Worth noting is that these objectives are both short and long-term (Iyer et al. 2021) since brands are typically refined over a longer period of time while simultaneously managed short-term (Lodish & Mela, 2007). Typically, sales are driven by instant transactions and revenue whereas marketing emphasizes growth, perceived value, and consumer demand over longer terms (Minsky & Geva, 2019). This poses challenges as shortsighted decision-making eventually affects the value and image of brands as well as brand building (Lodish & Mela, 2007).

To accommodate these tensions, Lodish and Mela (2007) suggest developing long-term metrics and supplementing these with short-term metrics such as sales to provide a more complete picture of brand performance. In addition, they call for companies to keep longer records of data to truly understand how their brands are performing, as they found that both companies and data suppliers discard data already within 1-5 years and proceeded with an example:

> Interbrand calculates the market value of Coca-Cola brand to be $67.5 billion dollars. This brand took decades to build and it would likely be informative to analyze how the marketing mix evolved over time to lead this brand into its ascendancy. In this sense it is ironic that data investment is focused on managing brands over the short-term. (Lodish & Mela, 2007, p. 12)

Taken together, the literature depicts several elements and steps included in the processes of strategic brand management to successfully build and maintain sustainable brands. Moreover, gathering information in an era of market-oriented organizations, striving to know what customers want and need, firms should stay wary of getting too caught up in short-term data and decisions as they might miss valuable insights into the long-term brand performance.

2.1.1 Building and Sustaining the Brand

Budelmann and Kim (2019) mean that the work to build brands involves both strategic and tactical choice decisions that affect consumers' perceptions and experiences. Some decisions are easily visible, but some are more hidden and might have an even greater impact. The key thing in terms of building is holistic thinking, considering how all parts and pieces of it when combined achieve a cumulative effect (Budelmann & Kim, 2019). Brand building is a continuous endeavor, not a one-time event (Budelmann & Kim, 2019). Hence, both patience and practice are required, and so are decision-making, discipline, measuring, learning, and course correction. While working with this systemically does not guarantee success, it can increase the odds to build a strong brand.

Awareness is fundamental when building a brand since existing in people's minds is a precondition of its power (Kapferer, 2012). Brand awareness entails the ability of potential buyers to recognize or recall a brand as a member of a certain category of products (Aaker, 2009). As a powerful source of brand equity, brand awareness is, in some cases, in itself enough to create favorable responses from consumers (Keller, 2013). This is often the case for low-involvement decisions where consumers tend to make their choices simply on the basis of familiarity (Aaker, 2009; Keller, 2013). However, in most other cases, favorability, strength, and unique brand associations are critical factors in determining the differential response that adds up to brand equity (Keller, 2013).

Value is created from brand awareness by anchoring the brand to selected other associations, its familiarity, and with that liking, attributes of substance and commitment attached to the brand, as well as becoming part of consumers' consideration set when they contemplate buying in a category (Aaker, 2009). Keller (2013) explains that brand awareness consists of recognition and recall. Recognition is consumers' ability to recognize the brand as one they have already been exposed to when given the brand as a cue (Keller, 2013). Then, recall is consumers' ability to retrieve the brand from memory when they are given, for example, the product category, the needs the category fulfills, or a usage situation as a cue (Keller, 2013).

Another important aspect of brands is consistency in brand communication (Temporal, 2019). Generally, it is better to consistently get one message across to consumers than communicating a variety of messages that risk confusing the consumers and losing impact (Temporal, 2019). The structure that consistency provides gives consumers order, constraint, and comfort (Budelmann & Kim, 2019). As a foundation for standing out yet remaining consistent, some selected core elements are beneficial (Budelmann & Kim, 2019). This also includes the visual identity of a brand, that is the brand's total of its visual aesthetic, colors, comprising logos, logotypes, symbols, and so on (Slade-Brooking, 2016).

The long-term, sustainable value of the brand is dependent on its actualization, that is how a company translates brand potential into two key components: brand persistence and brand growth (Keller, 2013), both of which include strategic decisions to be made. Brand persistence entails the extent to which the current customers and their spending levels can be kept and maintained over time, because without continuous investments brands can decline in value (Keller, 2013). Since acquiring a new customer costs about 5 to 25 times more for companies than retaining an existing one, the process to keep customers is directly tied to revenue and profitability (Cudby, 2020). Retaining customers, thereby earning their loyalty, is a process of implementing clear and consistent action across the organization with several advantages, such as customers staying longer, spending more, and referring new customers (Cudby, 2020). Whether a brand persists in position and equity mainly depends on the strength and favorableness of key brand associations, the likelihood that these characteristics will be sustained, and the company's skills in developing and implementing preserving marketing programs and activities (Keller, 2013).

Proceeding, brand growth demonstrates the extent to which current customers increase their spending in combination with the extent to which new customers are attracted to the brand (Keller, 2013). In essence, it is about expanding the brand's penetration in its target market by building both the brand equity and the business itself (Kapferer, 2012). Some factors influencing and potentially hindering the proliferation of these two components are risks in the marketing environment such as shifts in the nature of competition, cultural market makeup, income levels, supply of resources, regulations, and social trends. It is then a matter of how vulnerable the brand is to these risks and how the company handles them (Keller, 2013).

To gain insight into how a brand performs, measuring becomes crucial. When it comes to measuring, brand tracking is an important step that consists of a longitudinal, ongoing study where a brand's performance is measured against its key metrics and core associations (Keller, 2013; Beverland, 2018). Moreover, values tied to the brand can be tracked against other brands within the category and then evaluated recurrently to ensure that the brand is increasingly associated with the desired values, that ownership of these values is maintained, or that the lead over competitors is increased (Beverland, 2018). Tracking is vital for assessing whether marketing programs achieve their objectives, proving the brand's expertise, indicating early if something is alarming or wrong in terms of, for example, competitors or product quality, and signaling whether performance gaps between competitors and the brand's points of difference are closing in (Beverland, 2018). Hence, tracking helps in understanding brand health and making informed decisions to increase sales, deliver ROIs, and win market share.

When making decisions regarding brands, Oh, Connerton and Kim (2019) argue that brand experience aspects should be taken into account for the management of brands to be sustainable. They mean that to build a sustainable brand, the initial step is to read and predict consumer behavior. In line with this, today's digital transformation requires technologies to be integrated and utilized with products, processes, and organizations as they form the foundation of the experiences perceived in product and consumer relationships (Oh, Connerton & Kim, 2019). Therefore, firms and brands work to create strategies that enable discovering and nurturing consumers by continuously providing experiences to them during the consumer journey and thereby retaining them for long periods.

2.1.2 Brand and Marketing Data

Presently, Oh, Connerton and Kim (2019) mean that external factors brought about by digital transformation are extremely important, which makes it necessary to identify and understand new definitions of data as well as ongoing changes. Considering factors of brand experience can contribute to shaping decision-making processes into analyzing and predicting consumer behavior to develop sustainable growth in business environments that are both experience-driven and data-driven (Oh, Connerton & Kim, 2019).

Fulgoni (2013) claims that with the real-time data available digitally today, where the Internet provides marketers with advertising capabilities that can be powerfully targeted, this must be used correctly if it is to positively impact brand health and improve marketing ROI not only today but also in the future. When used correctly, it can help to both build and maintain brand equity. The digital big data generated by the Internet is providing consumers with transparency in pricing across many categories of products, thereby making it easy to quickly find the lowest price for any given product (Fulgoni, 2013). Hence, Fulgoni (2013) argues that marketers need to avoid creating a race on price to the bottom in the digital world. Skillful marketers should, therefore, leverage their experience on how to best deploy digital advertising to powerfully and cost-effectively reach target audiences to make more informed branding and advertising decisions that build brand equity in the long term.

The breadth and depth of customer data are now heightened due to big data dramatically altering segmentation and targeting (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2021). To optimize spending on marketing, a forceful approach is to base it on consumer-level data that measure actions, such as buying behavior, and each of that behavior's key marketing drivers (Fulgoni, 2018). Tiffany (2021) means that a vital aspect of informing strategic direction is insights and understanding customers, and these insights can be gained by digging into data. It can tell companies about their behaviors, interests, needs, and wants (Tiffany, 2021). A rich profile of individual customers can be made up of various types from multiple sources (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2021; Tiffany, 2021). These include:

(1) **Social data**, that is the details social media users share, such as demographic profile, interests, and location,
(2) **Media data**, that is audience measurement for traditional media, such as print and television,
(3) **Web traffic data**, that is logs that users generate when navigating the web, such as searches, page views, and purchases,
(4) **Points-of-sale and transaction data**, that is transaction records from customers, such as credit card information, timing, amount, and location,
(5) **Internet-of-things data**, that is content collected by connected devices and sensors, such as vital signs, location, and proximity of other devices,

(6) **Engagement data**, that is direct touch points between companies and customers, such as email exchange, call center data, and chat data (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2021),
(7) **Traditional face-to-face feedback** (Tiffany, 2021).

As mentioned above, web traffic data is one of the multiple sources from which companies can gain insight into their customers (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2021). This type of data is also connected to the notion of Search Engine Optimization (SEO), which is a common undertaking within digital marketing (Yalçın & Köse, 2010). SEO includes both internal and external website optimization that focuses on, for example, keywords, web design, and links, which is done to appear on the top results of search engines, and effectively get attention from potential customers (Yalçın & Köse, 2010). In an empirical study by Bhandari and Bansal (2018), SEO was found to be linked to increased market share, improved brand equity as well as consumer insight, product awareness, and purchase persuasion, and thus have the potential to generate long-lasting effects on several marketing variables.

When conducting an analysis of gathered data, there is likely a huge amount of it (Tiffany, 2021). Therefore, marketers need to develop a plan for data collection, where every piece of data that must be acquired to achieve predetermined objectives is laid out (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2021). Strategic marketing goals should always be tied with the overall business strategy of a company, and no matter what the objective is, it is important that its set Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) can be tracked throughout, for example, campaigns (Tiffany, 2021). Besides making objectives measurable, ensuring that there is a way of measuring customers' level of interest, position within the sales funnel, and potential for conversion is needed (Tiffany, 2021).

It is then vital to turn data into actionable analytical insights (Tiffany, 2021). To bring order to data and transform it into useful insights, Tiffany (2021) sets out four steps: (1) define benchmarks that function as check-in points, (2) set objective KPIs for performance measurement, these should be quantifiable such as top traffic sources, engagement score, and conversion rate, (3) maintain consistency, it is critical that approaches to measuring performance are consistent across time for comparisons to be fair, (4) align objectives, there is a tremendous amount of data points to measure, but they need to be aligned with the objectives to highlight anything relevant and ensure that time and effort is spent on the right areas, providing valuable insights.

Tawakol (2014) states that in terms of data-driven marketing, data can stem from different parties. Placing it in the context of a company, first-party data is gathered by the company itself, hence it is both free and unique. First-party data can come from, for example, first-party cookies from the company's website being visited (Long, 2022). A marketer's competitive advantage often comes from their ability to uniquely predict and meet consumers' desires, therefore, even though first-party data is unique it is also limited in scale as there is always more to learn about consumers than a marketer alone can know (Tawakol, 2014). Tawakol (2014) elaborates that second-party data is someone else's, such as a strategic partner's, first-party data, and as it is not generally sold and accessible to everyone it still contains unique information. Finally, third-party data provides scale as it is data that is paid for, and thereby much knowledge about customers can be gained (Tawakol, 2014). With third-party cookies, marketers primarily identify and track users across domains to be able to create personalized targeting, attribute conversions to impressions and clicks across domains, and identify the preferences of users for personalized content (Long, 2022). However, as the insight this knowledge gives is technically available to all, the unique value of the information is limited (Tawakol, 2014). All in all, while marketers use first-party data combined with second-party data from marketing partners, most are dependent, many even reliant, on data from third-party sources to run initiatives (Kaykas-Wolff, 2022).

While much literature focuses on customer data in Business-to-Consumer (B2C) settings, it is important to consider Business-to-Business (B2B) as well. A notable difference between B2C and B2B is that B2B typically involves considerably fewer customers, yet larger volumes per customer, and that the relationship between the B2B supplier and customer is longer-lasting (Kotler, Pfoertsch & Michi, 2006). As such, profitable growth from existing customers is particularly important for B2B (Anderson & Narus, 2003). With that in mind, marketing in B2C uses information from demographics in terms of gender, age, geographical location, occupation, and income to segment their customer base (Stormi, Laine & Elomaa, 2018), whereas industry, size, geographical location, and performance are the corresponding 'firmographics' for B2B that marketers rely on (Weinstein, 2014). However, B2C is more prone to utilize customer relationship analytics compared to B2B (Stormi, Laine & Elomaa, 2018), and evidence is showing that B2B companies are struggling to gather and analyze data (Cortez & Johnston, 2017).

2.2 Data-Driven Decision-Making

Fundamental to the subject of strategic processes is strategic decision-making, as it concerns pivotal decisions that shape the organization (Eisenhart & Zbaracki, 1992). A strategic decision is characterized by its significance in the actions taken, resources allocated, or the precedents established (Eisenhart & Zbaracki, 1992; Mintzberg, Raisinghani & Theoret, 1976). Eisenhart and Zbaracki (1992) also describe it as occasional decisions made by high-level leaders of an organization that have a critical impact on the organization's survival and health.

The process of making strategic decisions focuses on how well decisions are integrated with the organization, and whether they have been implemented and validated effectively (Janczak, 2005). This means that factors such as history, political dynamics, and the limitations of the individuals involved in the decision-making process are all relevant to the outcome of the decisions (Janczak, 2005). Additionally, how people within the organization interact with each other, including individuals, groups, and organizational units, is equally important as the relationship between the company and its external environment (Janczak, 2005).

When striving to achieve a certain objective or goal, a decision-maker typically has more than one alternative to choose from (Bhushan & Rai, 2004). This implies that the decision is generally qualitative and subjective, not perfectly rational, as it is influenced by previous experience and intuition from the decision-maker, which may be more or less optimal (Eisenhart & Zbaracki, 1992; Bhushan & Rai, 2004). Hence, assessing the options quantitatively can support decision-making by providing a rational perspective (Bhushan & Rai, 2004).

Furthermore, with innovations and development in technology and communication, as well as the workforce being globalized, decisions can become more intricate and complicated (Tripathi, Bagga & Aggarwal, 2020). Management is now reliant upon not only the skills of the decision-maker but also on new, relevant, and reliable information delivered quickly (Tripathi, Bagga & Aggarwal, 2020). That said, data has emerged as a new way for organizations to gain a competitive advantage by leveraging its value through strategies, for example in fact-based decision-making and a deeper understanding of their business (Bento, Neto & Côrte-Real, 2022). While intuition and experience have traditionally played a significant role in decision-making, data-driven decisions often result in better decisions (McAfee & Brynjolfsson, 2012; Brynjolfsson & McElheran, 2016).

However, Fantini and Narayandas (2023) mean that there are dimensions to when the human factor is still relevant, for example, when decisions involve intuition and ambiguity resolution, humans are better, whereas when decisions require deduction, scalability, and granularity, machines are superior. With this, they divide data analytics into three categories, (1) descriptive, (2) predictive, and (3) prescriptive. Descriptive analytics is a term that is used interchangeably with Business Intelligence (BI), and involves machines used to understand historical data, that is ‘what has happened’. Typical examples of descriptive analytics, or BI, are strategic planning, investor reporting, and scenario planning, and should be applied in decisions that have an inadequate volume of data in uncertain situations that require a more hands-on approach (Fantini & Narayandas, 2023). Predictive analytics answers questions along the lines of ‘what will happen’ and is a semi-automated approach, where the machine will predict outcomes and thus support decision-making, where the managers have the final call. Examples of marketing decisions applicable to predictive analytics are demand planning, discount- and promotion management, as well as CRM (Customer Relationship Management) segmentation. Finally, prescriptive analytics entails fully automated decisions that inform managers of 'what should be done next', and are suitable for decisions regarding optimization in areas such as inventory, price, markdown, and risks (Fantini & Narayandas, 2023).

Nevertheless, the argument for objective data-driven decisions is still relevant since the importance of intuition in descriptive analytics also then relies on whether decision-makers are able to mitigate their biases (Fantini & Narayandas, 2023). Otherwise, there is a tendency to pick and choose data that confirms preconceived beliefs that can result in old methods of problem-solving instead of exploring new and innovative approaches (Fantini & Narayandas, 2023).

2.2.1 Data Analytics

Provost and Fawcett (2013) explain that to make data-driven decisions, there are three main elements: data, information, and knowledge. Data refers to context-less numbers, text, or graphics, such as pictures or videos, so turning data into information involves placing data within a particular context or system. Finally, to transform information into knowledge, it must be analyzed (Provost & Fawcett, 2013).

With that, to enhance decision-making, organizations should implement big data analytics to gain useful and beneficial knowledge and insights (Elgendy & Elragal, 2014; 2016). This is done by extracting a vast amount (volume) of data that is generated rapidly (velocity) in a diverse range (variety), such as from customer interactions and data from social networks, as these contain important information and patterns (Elgendy & Elragal, 2014; 2016). Therefore, big data from both internal (sales, inventory) and external (customer behaviors, supply chains) sources is proving an increasingly valuable asset, where its influence depends on the ability to provide information and knowledge for basing decisions (Elgendy & Elragal, 2014).

As such, obtaining knowledge that proves valuable from data relies on the quantity and quality of it, to quickly and effectively support managers in making informed decisions (Marshall & De la Harpe, 2009; Delen & Demirkan, 2013; Janssen, Van Der Voort & Wahyudi, 2017). In line with this, Ranjan (2008) stresses the importance of the management of data, where filtering and transforming data into information and knowledge is crucial for business decisions and survival, and this applies no matter the amount of data that a company has available.

Data does not necessarily guarantee high quality or that it will serve the intended purpose, in which cases can present difficulties in data utilization as well as delay decision-making (Marshall & De la Harpe, 2009). As a result of poor data quality, making decisions with the help of it can become highly challenging which risks hurting the organization's bottom line by the consequential ineffective decisions made (Marshall & De la Harpe, 2009). Thus, that data are accessible, accurate, complete, understandable, consistent, relevant, and up-to-date are all aspects that constitute the quality of data and are vital to successfully utilizing its possibilities (Marshall & De la Harpe, 2009; Debbarma, Nath & Das, 2013).

Verhoef, Kooge, Walk and Wieringa (2022) argue that to create impact with data analytics, visualization is of utmost importance. This is because it tends to be easier to understand and extract value from data when it is visualized, as opposed to when looking through raw data or simple data statistics (Baig, Govindan & Shrimali, 2021; Verhoef et al. 2022). On top of that, interpreting visual data is significantly quicker (Baig, Govindan & Shrimali, 2021). Visualization can offer a powerful qualitative overview of data and analytical results, and show important relationships in the data (Verhoef et al. 2022).

In analytics, visualization is used for many purposes, but the main objectives that can be achieved are the exploration of data, making sense of and understanding data, and communicating analysis results (Verhoef et al. 2022). The first two are oftentimes parts of the process of analysis, whereas the last one is connected to creating impact during the presentation of results. Before running analyses data should be explored with visuals to help make sense of them, which can result in immediate insights that are valuable in the understanding of potential relationships in the data (Verhoef et al. 2022). Visualization in its many forms can be used wherever data results are presented, for example in marketing dashboards, presentations, and websites (Baig, Govindan & Shrimali, 2021; Verhoef et al. 2022).

2.2.1.1 Data Analytics: Business Intelligence

The development of using systems to utilize data appropriately now allows analytical capabilities that are further enhanced by the use of BI systems (Brynjolfsson, Hitt & Kim, 2011). BI is a decision-making process and technological tool which integrates and analyzes an organization's data resources and has become a fundamental resource for a variation of companies, due to information now being viewed as the most valuable company asset (Tavera Romero et al. 2021). Wani and Jabin (2018) explain that BI involves several types of analysis from large data sets with varying types of data, also called big data, to find new patterns and relations, as well as uncover relations and marketing strategies. Together, these comprise the term 'big data analytics' (Wani & Jabin, 2018).

Tavera Romero et al. (2021) argue for the impact of BI, in that "It plays an important role in business survival, in maintaining relationships with other companies, counterintelligence, goals, and both short-term and long-term objectives." (p. 3). Moreover, BI can be integrated into work practices as a tool to extract big data quickly and efficiently to make the right decisions (Lim & Teoh, 2020), and includes dimensions such as integration of data, analytical capabilities, business processes' content quality, and decision-making culture (Eidizadeh, Salehzadeh & Chitsaz Esfahani, 2017). To visualize the information and analysis generated, BI tools create dashboards that can be used to help decision-makers process information and make correct decisions at the corporate level (Gowthami & Kumar, 2017; Tavera Romero et al. 2021). Verhoef et al. (2022) argue that next to visualization in dashboards, it is also vital that results are accurately communicated to decision-makers so that they understand problems and know the required next steps. They mean that visualization can help this communication, but it is also necessary with a clear storyline in which the decision-maker is guided through the problem, outcomes of the analysis, and resulting actions.

With the contemporary business environment being described as unstable, complex, competitive, frequently fluctuating, and complicated, being able to respond to changes with quick, efficient, and high-quality decisions, as well as identify opportunities, is a must, both for survival and competitiveness (Tripathi, Bagga & Aggarwal, 2020; Tavera Romera et al. 2021). In efforts to manage these challenges, BI aids in tracking dynamic changes both internally and externally in the organization, which is highly necessary to seize opportunities (Tavera Romero et al. 2021). Tripathi, Bagga and Aggarwal (2020) add to this, stating that the business insights that BI provides can help operational efficiency and identify opportunities, as management becomes empowered with real-time decision-making. Not only does BI help companies respond to changes in the business environment, but can also support companies in acting proactively rather than reactively (Ranjan, 2008).

Beyond the decision-making capabilities, BI may ultimately generate a competitive advantage due to its positive effects on, for example, performance, efficiency, productivity, resource planning, cost reductions, profit margins, and business growth (Negro & Mesia, 2020; Tavera Romero et al. 2021). If companies are behind in implementing data analytics, organizations are at risk of suffering losses, for example, monetary losses from future investments and customers (Wani & Jabin, 2018).

The quality of decision-making when using data analytics and BI is affected by more factors than only the quality of data. For example, it also depends on the ability to manage the process transformation and integration, skill-building, experience, human resources, collaboration, exchanging knowledge, and trust-building (Janssen, Van Der Voort & Wahyudi, 2017). Connected to human resources and experience, a key objective of data analytics and BI is raising employee information and deepening their knowledge to empower timely and accurate decision-making that aligns with the organization's mission and vision (Tripathi, Bagga & Aggarwal, 2020).

2.3 Summary of Literature Review

To provide an overview of Chapter 2, key points are here highlighted in a summary.

Brand management has gone from solely tactical decisions to encompass strategic ones as well, including a broader scope that affects organizational business strategies in general (Hunger & Wheelen, 2010; Aaker, 2014; Iyer et al. 2021). Touching upon important concepts within brand management such as brand equity, brand awareness, and consistency in brand communication, these all affect the level of persistence and growth in brands which by extension leads to the long-term sustainable value of brands (Aaker, 2009; Kapferer, 2012; Keller, 2013; Temporal, 2019; Cudby, 2020). With this, measurements and brand tracking are central to evaluating and understanding brand performance (Keller, 2013; Beverland, 2018).

To encourage the building and sustaining of brands, research lifts the value of brand management processes and provides concrete examples of steps to ensure the brand is being managed properly (Keller, 2013; Santos-Vijande et al. 2013). Furthermore, with the evolution of brands, firms are adopting a market-oriented approach in an effort to meet the needs and wants of their customers (Urde, Baumgarth & Merrilees, 2013; Iyer et al. 2021). Taken together, adhering to fundamental steps of brand management processes, as well as successful information gathering about customers and competitors, are linked to procuring a competitive advantage through the company's brands (Santos-Vijande et al. 2013; Iyer et al. 2021).

Moreover, as brand management is a continuous work in progress and typically involves strategies that apply over a longer period of time, there are conflicting interests within an organization (Lodish & Mela 2007; Budelmann & Kim, 2019). For example, a sales perspective affects the time horizon of the decision-maker and may consequently hurt the long-term prospects for the brand (Lodish & Mela, 2007).

In understanding the behaviors of customers and consumers, companies rely on insights from data gathered from a multitude of sources thanks to digital transformation, that can be utilized for decision-making and sustainably managing the brand (Tawakol, 2014; Oh, Connerton & Kim, 2019; Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2021; Tiffany, 2021; Long, 2022). However, when comparing B2C and B2B, B2B is experiencing more challenges in data collection and analysis, seemingly putting these types of companies at a disadvantage (Cortez & Johnston, 2017; Stormi, Laine & Elomaa, 2018).

Nevertheless, with the amount of data available today and the systems to manage it, decision-making has evolved and research now calls for data-driven decision-making in organizations (McAfee & Brynjolfsson, 2012; Brynjolfsson & McElheran, 2016). This is because it limits the personal biases of decision-makers to influence decisions, and allows objective data to be the foundation instead of intuition or experience (McAfee & Brynjolfsson, 2012; Brynjolfsson & McElheran, 2016).

In order to enable data-driven decision-making, organizations implement data analytics to transform the data into information and knowledge (Provost & Fawcett, 2013), and visualize the insights with the help of dashboards in analytical tools such as BI (Baig, Govindan & Shrimali, 2021; Verhoef et al. 2022). Although, it is not necessarily a straightforward task for companies to integrate data and analytics into their decision-making as there are plenty of factors to account for and meet. Some examples of this include ensuring data quality, as well as capable and sufficient resources (Marshall & De la Harpe, 2009; Debbarma, Nath & Das, 2013; Janssen, Van Der Voort & Wahyudi, 2017).

To summarize, the literature review covers essential ideas and aspects of brand management, data-driven decision-making, and data analytics to provide a fruitful discussion and to answer the research question of this thesis.

3. Methodology

In this chapter, the chosen methodology for collecting and analyzing data necessary to answer the research question will be explained and argued for. Initially, the research approach is motivated, as well as the role of theory and the epistemological position. Then, the research design is depicted together with why the research aim and question justify this design. After that, a description of the data collection method follows, where the reasoning behind the selection and its processes is delineated. This is followed by the reasoning behind the chosen method for analyzing the gathered data. Lastly, an analysis of the research quality of the chosen methodology will be carried out, before finalizing Chapter 3 with an explanation of the ethical considerations that have been undertaken.

3.1 Research Approach

This research is based on abductive reasoning, which primarily shares similarities with inductive reasoning (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). With abductive reasoning, the researchers maintain active engagement with the social world to gather empirical data, and continuously interact with their pre-existing knowledge and assumptions, allowing for a dynamic interchange. This exchange between the researchers' preconceptions and the empirical data is crucial for the data to challenge their assumptions rather than validate them (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).

Given that this study expands on existing knowledge and theoretical models, instead of testing a hypothesis or developing a new theory, it primarily follows an abductive approach. Ahead of collecting primary data, a thorough amount of existing literature on the subject of decisions within brand management and data-driven decision-making with data analytics and BI has been reviewed to provide a solid understanding of what already exists to establish the research gap, but also to get guidance for the interview guide on potential topics to cover. Thus, the abductive approach allows leeway to discover new findings, while still providing some existing literature and knowledge to fall back on.

In addition to abductive reasoning, this study embodies an interpretivistic epistemology, as opposed to a positivist which is informed by an ontological position that is objectivist (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Interpretivism concerns understanding human behavior rather than explaining it (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). This entails that knowledge is recognized as context-dependent, subjective, and influenced by personal experience, which implies that the researchers' data collection, interpretation, and analysis will be influenced by their values and experiences (Ryan, 2018). Additionally, interpretive research is suitable when investigating the 'how' and the 'why' of social action, and with this comes the processes whereby things happen (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).

As the aim of this study is to provide insights into the use of data and analytics for brand decisions, there is a belief that the participating managers' understanding will not only be influenced by the values and beliefs held by the managers themselves but also by the company they work for. Potentially, since the managers come from and represent different business functions, influences may also stem from the function they are part of and its interests when using data. Adding to this, although it is continuously the ambition to be as objective as possible when conducting this research, it is deemed inevitable for the experiences and beliefs of the researchers to not influence parts of the data collection and the interpretation of data. As the intention here is not to prove any facts or suggest that the results are universally true, interpretivism is believed to best correspond to the research philosophy.

3.2 Research Design

With the intention to construct a design suitable for this research, several decisions were made when designing it. This culminated in the pursuit of a qualitative study based on an embedded single-case design, as described and reasoned for in this section.

3.2.1 Qualitative Research

Typically focusing on language instead of numerical data (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019), qualitative research is a method that is used to investigate and understand the significance that people or groups attach to a social or human issue, and relies on the ability of the researcher to interpret the study object in what they say or do (Creswell, 2014).

Since the focus of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of managers at one company on the use of data for brand decisions, a qualitative research method is deemed more relevant than quantitative research for this context. This is because qualitative methods allow more comprehensive and detailed material to be shared, which is favorable when the goal is to, for example, gain an understanding of individuals' perspectives and experiences in organizational operations (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019; Easterby-Smith, Jaspersen, Thorpe & Valizade, 2021).

Moreover, a qualitative method can capture nuanced information as researchers can study underlying values, assumptions, and beliefs, which supports them in gaining a fuller picture of the behavior in an organization (Choy, 2014). The open-ended nature of qualitative research also enables participants to raise issues they believe are most important, letting them answer more freely compared to a predetermined survey (Choy, 2014). In pursuing a research design that allows for a deeper exploration of participants' rationales and perspectives that can provide richer findings necessary to better grasp the phenomenon studied, qualitative research is reasonably favorable. Because interpretive reasoning and an abductive approach typically correspond with qualitative methods (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019), this too motivates the decision and suitability of qualitative research.

However, some strengths of qualitative research can also be argued as critiques when contrasted with quantitative research (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). For example, being that it is a more open and unstructured method it is more difficult to replicate (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019), and this inherently makes the data not objectively verifiable (Choy, 2014). Furthermore, it can be considered too subjective, relying too much on the researchers' perspectives and personal relationships with those studied (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Researchers are also limited in their ability to fully interpret the data (Choy, 2014). Finally, transparency in terms of how the research was conducted has a tendency to be lacking (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).

Despite the challenges, qualitative research is nevertheless the most useful method for this particular study. Hence, the choice to pursue a qualitative strategy here was based on the understanding that it better fulfills the purpose of this study and enables answering the stated research question to a greater degree than a quantitative research strategy would, in addition to it better corresponding to the above-mentioned research approach.

3.2.2 Case Study

Farquhar (2012) asserts that case study research enables researchers to look in-depth and gather an understanding of a phenomenon in the context where it happens. She holds that case studies provide researchers with a distinct understanding or insight into contemporary matters out of their control. Thereby, for this research, it was decided to pursue a single case study to examine the use of data for brand decisions. The study is focused on a single case, as opposed to multiple cases, both due to the scope and timeframe and with the ambition to achieve qualitative depth. As the interest here lies in going in-depth into the studied phenomenon, the possibilities for this were deemed greater when using only one case company.

The rationale behind using a single case study for this thesis follows the third of Yin's (2009) single-case rationales, that is the 'representative' or 'typical' case, where "The case study may represent a typical "project" among many different projects…" (Yin, 2009, p. 48), and that "The lessons learned from these cases are assumed to be informative about the experiences of the average person or institution" (Yin, 2009, p. 48). For this particular case study, the idea is not to uncover any findings of an extreme or critical case but rather to investigate how a typical multi-brand company uses data for decisions in brand decisions. While qualitative research is not generalizable from a quantitative perspective (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019), insights from these findings may still be typical for other similar cases (Yin, 2009).

Additionally, Yin (2009) has divided single case studies into two types of designs: holistic and embedded single-case study design. The holistic design includes only one unit of analysis, whereas the embedded design involves multiple units of analysis. To fulfill the purpose of this research, Essity was chosen as the case study context for the single case with two units of analysis included, which are two of their global brands: Tork and TENA. Since Essity is a company with several brands, multiple units of analysis were reasonable to pursue in order to gain a broader insight into the organization, while still only being a single case. Thus, this thesis follows an embedded single-case design (Yin, 2009).

Essity suits this study as it is a company that uses data to inform decisions and has a brand management function for the multiple brands in its portfolio. Moreover, as contact was made with managers working with data analytics, marketing, and brand management, desired representatives and a suitable number of participants agreed to be interviewed. This was critical for the intended collection of data and with that also for the selection of Essity as a case company. Since this choice greatly affects the outcomes of this research, Essity, and its relevant background and information are presented in Chapter Section 4.1 Essity: Case Description. This is done to establish and illustrate the research setting and thereby provide a comprehensive understanding of the findings and analysis.

3.3 Data Collection Method

The main data was collected through semi-structured interviews with managers at selected departments of Essity. Given that the aim is to provide insights into the use of data and analytics for brand decisions, in-depth interviews were deemed crucial to gain an understanding from the managers and gather meaningful insights into this topic. Subsequently, the guided principles followed while conducting interviews are here explained together with how and why the interview participants were selected.

3.3.1 Interviews

Many purposes exist as to why interviews are used to collect data, namely that unique information and knowledge not possible for the researchers to observe themselves can be gathered (Stake, 2010). Adding to this, interviews can provide the researchers with a deeper understanding of the participants' interpretations of matters (Yeo, Legard, Keegan, Ward, McNaughton Nicholls & Lewis, 2014). Interviews were suitable for the research purpose of this study as the focus lay on contributing to an understanding and knowledge of the ways data are used for brand decisions, hence gathering in-depth insights was desirable.

As the participants from Essity were not in the physical vicinity of the researchers, this prompted the interviews to be conducted remotely. Therefore, the interviews were held via video calls on a business communication platform. This provided a satisfactory tool to gather information, enabling the possibility of audio recording for the purpose of transcribing and revisiting data. Furthermore, from the managers' perspective, remote interviewing is more flexible than traditional in-person interviewing as it requires less commitment, time, and hosting (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021), increasing the chances of willingness to participate.

Yeo et al. (2014) maintain that a key feature characterizing in-depth interviews is the combination of structure and flexibility offered, which enables both order and freedom for the participants to share their knowledge and experience. They moreover state that while main topics can be delineated in an interview or topic guide, it is important that the interviews are flexible enough to allow themes brought up by the participants and for them to be explained more extensively. The semi-structured approach to interviewing gives leeway for topics and discussion while having the benefit of predetermined questions from an interview guide that can help to keep the interviews on track in terms of relevancy for the study in question (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Furthermore, as participants' initial responses to stated questions tend to be surface-level, the researchers are required to listen carefully and be agile in adapting the interview to examine topics more in-depth (Yeo et al. 2014). Since the ambition is to understand in what ways managers use data for decisions to build and sustain brands, the interviews are suitably semi-structured and highly flexible.

Ultimately, semi-structured interviews were also deemed an advantageous tool for data collection given the following thematic analysis. The mentioned interview guide, where some guiding questions are outlined, can be found in Appendix A. Nonetheless, since the interviews were semi-structured they did not adhere to specific questions. Therefore, the point of the interview guide was rather to provide guidance on the main topics throughout the interviews than to limit or restrict them.

3.3.2 Purposeful Sample Selection of Interview Participants

In total, nine employees in managerial positions on different levels were interviewed for this study. What led to the amount of nine was that saturation was deemed to have been reached at that point, following the definition of saturation according to Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019). Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019) describe that, to contrary belief, saturation is not the case of déjà vu feelings for the researcher when interviewing participants. Instead, they mean that saturation is reached when new data will cease to generate new insights for evolving theories or theoretical concepts. Moreover, by limiting the number of interviews after saturation was reached, greater depth to the findings and discussions was enabled which was not considered to be possible had the interviews proceeded to an extensive amount.

As the case study regards a selected company, specific categories of managers, and multiple complex topics that all managers likely do not have insights into, it was necessary to carefully select particular participants for the interviews. The sampling technique here used, of intentionally selecting a sample most productive for answering the research question, is called purposeful sampling (Marshall, 1996). Marshall (1996) maintains that the technique behind a purposeful sample can involve establishing a framework of variables based on previous literature and the researchers' practical knowledge, which can affect individuals' contributions to the data collection. He adds that when using this technique, participants may be able to recommend potential further candidates to take part in interviews, that is a snowball sample, which is here used. When interpreting the data, it is beneficial to consider subjects with both confirming and disconfirming explanations, meaning different perspectives (Marshall, 1996). Due to this, the criteria set up for selecting participants for this study are described in the subsequent paragraph.

First off, the participants were required to have active employment at Essity and to have been working there for at least two years. This was because it was desired to gather data concerning the current company practices and utilization of data, and hence the participant needed to have worked in the organization long enough to have insight into these matters. Then, to be relevant for the research purpose, the participants had to be working with brand management and/or data analytics. Finally, as the focus was directed toward managers, the participants needed to have a managerial position at Essity. The reasoning behind this focus stems from the belief that managers generally have a broad understanding of how the organization works. Moreover, they tend to be more inclined to make strategic decisions than other employees.

Taking into account a point of criticism is the presumed desire of the participating managers to represent the company in a positive light, which might affect what they share in the interviews and how they choose to disclose it. Furthermore, since they all come from the same company, it is probable that they share similar experiences and opinions. To mitigate this, a study consisting of several perspectives gathered from different companies could prove preferable for achieving more diverse insights.

To showcase the selection of participants coming from different brands, a table is provided below.

Table 1. Participant Selection

Participant 1	Essity
Participant 2	TENA
Participant 3	Tork
Participant 4	TENA
Participant 5	TENA
Participant 6	Tork
Participant 7	Tork
Participant 8	TENA
Participant 9	Essity

3.4 Data Analysis

The method used to analyze the data collected in the interviews was thematic analysis. The thematic analysis concerns the procedure of identifying, arranging, describing, analyzing, and explaining both implicit and explicit patterns or themes within a specific set of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that a key benefit to thematic analysis is that it is a very flexible and accessible approach to analyzing, which can yield complex and deep qualitative data. They mean that theoretical freedom makes it function as a useful research tool that summarizes, organizes, and describes data sets in substantive and rich detail, making it particularly convenient for large amounts of data and offering a deeper description of the data set. It can also generate unanticipated insights and makes both social and psychological interpretations of data possible. Complementary, Guest, MacQueen and Namey (2012) argue that it is particularly suitable for team research. All together, mentioned factors constitute the reasoning behind why a thematic analysis was chosen, as it aligns best with the research design and purpose of this study.

However, flexibility is not without its challenges. It could lead to a very broad range of what can be said about the data, and this may make developing guidelines for higher-phase analysis difficult (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, this can complicate decisions as it concerns which aspects to focus on. Ultimately, thematic analysis requires a pre-established theoretical framework in which analytic claims are anchored, otherwise, its interpretative power might be limited beyond mere description.

The thematic analysis was guided by a step-by-step approach constructed by Braun and Clarke (2006). They mean that conducting a trustworthy thematic analysis requires six phases.

The first step entails the researchers familiarizing themselves with the data by organizing and reading it multiple times, as well as documenting initial ideas about potential themes. As the data was gathered through interacting with interview participants in this research, this stage began during the interviews. The second phase involves generating initial codes by systematically coding the data with interesting features and collating data relevant to the respective codes. After this, the third step is initiated, where the collated codes are sorted into potential themes, and the data relevant to the respective themes are gathered. Here, this meant arranging different parts of the participants' answers into the themes identified. The fourth phase is about reviewing themes, checking whether they are cohesive with the coded extracts and the data set in its entirety, and generating a guiding thematic framework for the analysis. At this point, some themes might be excluded due to lacking supportive data, whereas other themes may be further divided and result in more specified themes. In the following fifth stage the themes are continuously analyzed, as well as defined and named to refine their respective specifics and the general story told by the analysis, resulting in clear names and definitions for the themes. Lastly, the sixth and final stage includes the actual production of the report, meaning the last opportunity to analyze and then have it culminate in a scholarly report of the analysis.

King (2004) states that an essential component of the final report is including direct quotes from the participants. He contends that short quotes are contributing to conveying particular points or display and exemplify the presence of themes. Complementing this, longer quotes serve the purpose of giving readers insight into what the original interview looked like. Due to this, and as quotes represent the primary data of this study, quotes are used substantially in the analysis. However, these quotes need to be embedded within an analytical narrative, to create and illustrate an understanding of the meaning behind them and convince readers of their validity and merit (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.5 Research Quality

When evaluating the quality of research, definitions of quality concepts are typically associated with quantitative and positivistic research (Golafshani, 2003). Therefore, they need to be redefined to assess qualitative research appropriately which entails a more naturalistic method (Golafshani, 2003), as the quantitative definitions may not fully capture what makes qualitative research valuable (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).

To tackle this, there have been different suggestions on how research quality can be evaluated in qualitative research. For example, Bryman, Bell and Harley (2019) highlight two alternative ways to measure quality. Either one can measure what is called internal and external validity and reliability, or assess the trustworthiness of a study, which is based on four pillars: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. However, because these two different notions of quality measurements somewhat align in regards to what they entail (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019), only one will be focused on for this study, which is trustworthiness.

Credibility, which parallels internal validity, is central to reaching acceptance by other researchers (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). To achieve credibility, researchers need to follow good practices and ensure that they represent the social world of the respondents correctly (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Actions taken to provide credibility include having both researchers present during the interviews, as well as recording and transcribing all interviews to mitigate the risks of misinterpretation and faulty remembrance of participants' accounts.

Transferability, parallel to external validity, means the researchers offer in-depth and comprehensive descriptions of the culture or social world being studied (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). In doing this, it can assist others to evaluate if the findings can be applied, in other words, transferred and replicated, to other contexts (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). In an effort to pursue transferability, detailed and clear descriptions are available to more easily follow the researchers' method and structure. However, as the study is circumstantial, there is no way to ensure the results will be the same even if the study is replicated (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).

Comparable to reliability is *dependability*, which involves having thorough records of every stage of the research process accessible (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Then, peers act as auditors to ensure these stages have been executed through proper procedures (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). However, due to the extensive amount of data that qualitative research tends to generate, auditing can be challenging (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Nonetheless, an effort is made to consider dependability. In pursuing transparency, the goal is to make it easy for the reader to follow all decisions made regarding this study, including the reasoning behind them. Furthermore, this research is reviewed by peers on two occasions, where potential concerns are addressed.

The fourth and final pillar of trustworthiness is *confirmability*, which parallels objectivity (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). In business research, being completely objective is not possible, but to meet this, good faith should be demonstrated by the researchers by clearly showing that both personal and theoretical biases will not strongly influence the research and findings made (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). This is met by trying to be as reflexive and transparent as possible, considering both the research philosophy and potential biases of the interview participants. As stated, it is impossible to conduct research without any type of bias, but transparency and reflexivity raise awareness of potential influences enabling the researchers to accommodate these.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

In pursuing a commitment to high ethical standards, several ethical principles were taken into consideration during the execution of this research. For example, some of the ethical issues contemplated were informed consent, transparency, the invasion of privacy, and harm to participants.

The interview participants are anonymous to honor their integrity and privacy. Accordingly, the identities of the participants were not, and will never be, disclosed to anyone beyond the researchers. Any information that can potentially be identifiable, mainly their names, has been deleted from the archives. They were moreover informed about the research topic and aim before the interviews were conducted, and that they could decline to answer questions or topics they were not comfortable discussing and also withdraw consent. Thus, as an additional precaution, they were able to have their responses excluded from the study up to 48 hours post-interview.

The company subject to the case study, Essity, and the embedded cases of Tork and TENA, are not anonymous with the motivation that the company and brands are believed to have relevant implications to the study's results and discussion. When interpreting and analyzing the interview data, the company characteristics of Essity, such as its history, operational structure, and guidelines, are considered to be influential and thereby important. This is because approaches to working with data tend to differ among companies and many of the data-based brand decisions that Essity makes are tailored to their specific brands and markets. Furthermore, all participants were made aware that the company would not be anonymized before the interviews took place and have approved the company name being disclosed and included. These aspects are believed to be relevant for future research that may attempt to apply the results of this study in another setting or build upon its contributions to the field.

Nevertheless, this resulted in the need for several precautions to be taken when integrating quotes from the interviews into the findings and analysis. To ensure the participants' anonymity, no quotes containing identifiable information, such as names, previous employment, number of years employed, or similar, were included. The interview participants were accordingly each assigned a random number from 1 to 9. The respective numbers were then used for the quoted excerpts in the findings and analysis to separate who said what while still refraining from providing any identifiable information, thereby naming them along the exemplified structure: *Participant 1 at Essity, Tork, or TENA*.

4. Findings and Analysis

In this chapter, the case company that constitutes the context of this study is initially described to establish the setting. Then, the primary data collected in the interviews are examined to answer the posed research question. As a thematic analysis is undertaken, the analysis of the findings and identified themes is subsequently presented. To understand how managers working at a multi-brand company use data for brand decisions, answers from the participating managers are analyzed, and relevant quotes from the conducted interviews are presented to support the claims made.

4.1 Case Description: Essity

In 1929, the forest company SCA was founded in Sweden (Essity, n.d.c). For the part of the company that was later to be known as Essity, expertise in hygiene and health was initiated in 1975 when Swedish company Mölnlycke was acquired (Essity, n.d.c). Since then, the business has been focused and consolidated on wood fiber products, and the hygiene and health business has grown with acquisitions and joint ventures. Fast forward to 2017, SCA acquired medical solutions company BSN Medical, which develops products within wound care, orthopedics, and compression therapy (Essity, n.d.c). In connection with this, SCA was split and Essity was born (Essity, n.d.c). That same year, Essity was listed on Nasdaq Stockholm.

The name Essity is constructed from the words 'essentials' and necessities', and in line with this Essity offers essential and necessary products and services for everyday life (Essity, n.d.a). Essity works actively to communicate its transformation journey and build awareness of the company's brand (Essity, n.d.a). As they express it, a strong brand is considered vital to strengthen Essity's position to consumers, customers, shareholders, employees, and other stakeholders (Essity, n.d.a). Therefore, content is frequently shared via social media and digital campaigns to build awareness and relevance about the Essity-brand. Surveys are regularly conducted to provide key insights and digitalization has a key role in Essity's brand work (Essity, n.d.a).

Essity is a market leader in hygiene and health (Essity, n.d.a), present in around 150 countries with both strong local brands, for example, Libresse, Libero, and Saba, and global brands such as Tork and TENA (Essity, n.d.b). Their business areas include Health & Medical, Consumer Goods, and Professional Hygiene. Essity has approximately 48,000 employees worldwide and in 2022, their net sales reached over 156 million SEK with a sales growth of 17.7% (Essity, 2023). Moreover, Essity strives to grow both organically and through acquisitions, both within categories and within closely related product areas with high profitability (Essity, n.d.b).

Essity's proclaimed purpose is to break barriers to well-being, where hygiene and health are central (Essity, 2023). Therefore Essity aspires to improve well-being all over the world by being a positive force to change and break these barriers (Essity, 2023). Moreover, they want to address taboos in society, and the TENA brand is a peculiar example of how Essity does so. Due to the history of incontinence being something that is not talked about, whether it concerns women or men, they work actively with their communication and branding to break these stigmas and taboos surrounding incontinence (Essity, n.d.d).

The pace of digitalization is rapid in the world today, affecting all parts of the operations of Essity (Essity, 2023). Therefore, Essity is actively working to improve efficiency, service, quality, profitability, and sales. This is done through digitizing administration, logistics, and production. Adding to this, Essity is developing digital solutions for its consumers and customers and has a strong presence on social media and in e-commerce sales. Essity means that the starting point of their operations is consumer and customer insights (Essity, 2023). Through interacting digitally with consumers and customers, they gain a better understanding of their expectations, as well as their daily needs and challenges (Essity, 2023). Data analysis is then used for more effective control of planning and flows and for better decision data.

The vast majority of the managers that were interviewed work for one of Essity's global brands Tork or TENA. Tork is a premium brand within the Professional Hygiene area, available in 110 markets across the world (Tork, n.d.). Tork is also the market leader in Europe, being almost three times bigger than the second-largest brand in its category (Essity, 2023). With product categories such as 'Tissue', 'Services & Solutions', 'Wiping & Cleaning', and 'Soaps & Sanitizers', Tork's products and services are sold to a vast array of customers, ranging from offices to healthcare facilities, universities, restaurants, hotels, industries, and more (Essity, 2023).

Meanwhile, the TENA brand goes under Essity's business area Health & Medical (Essity, 2023), with over 60 years of experience in incontinence care and active in over 90 markets (TENA, n.d.). To healthcare professionals, family caregivers, and individuals, TENA provides a wide selection of products from absorbent skin care products, washing gloves, and wet wipes, to digital solutions with sensor technology (Essity, 2023).

4.2 Understanding the Customers

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that data is used at Essity in many regards related to decision-making for brands. Participant 5 at TENA describes the unanimous perception that "*There is a lot of data that sits behind every decision we make.*". With this, a recurring topic was the various ways in which Essity uses data to understand its customers and consumers, which resultingly have effects on brand decisions.

To understand consumers, data is used at Essity to track the interaction with marketing efforts, such as communication, brand awareness, and perception. Primarily focusing on the data generated from customers, digital platforms have made it significantly easier for Essity to collect this data and keep track, as described by Participant 2 at TENA: "*We can watch remotely how people interact with digital tools. And we can see where people get stuck and where they kind of continue through flawlessly.*".

In monitoring the behavior of customers online, Essity uses a combination of data from different sources, all with the end goal to understand consumers as described by Participant 8 at TENA: "*So we can understand what are our own consumers [and] competition's similar users who are not using anything right now, how they all perceive the brand.*". To gain this comprehensive knowledge, Participant 8 continued to explain that Essity collects data directly from its own sources such as websites, social media, and webshops (first-party data), and second-party data from other actors or websites, such as Amazon reviews, that are relatively easy to collect. In addition, they gather third-party data from agencies' market research that tracks consumers in their market segments, whether they are users of Essity products or not. Thus, it appears that while first and second-party data help in comprehending Essity's own customers, third-party data from agencies' market research puts Essity's brands into context with competitors. This provides Essity with insights to apply in decision-making, both for sustaining the brand through brand persistence as well as reaching new customers and building brands.

Several participants elaborated on the types of behaviors that data from digital touchpoints can bring knowledge of. For example, these include consumer interaction with the websites, Click-Through Rates (CTR), views, how much time is spent on reading their articles, search volume on brand terms, and more – all of which help Essity understand what consumers react to and find interesting:

> *So from the different digital touchpoints, just considering the consumer journey, one of the most important touchpoints is a website. [...] What buttons are they clicking on? Or how much time they spend reading our articles? Do they order a sample or add an order they download are some of the information that we have*

for our B2B especially. So you know, understanding the consumer behavior on the website. But for social media, I mean, we've got different activities going on. So it could be Facebook, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Instagram, all of that. For it, we have email marketing. So there are different tools that are being used. (Participant 1, Essity)

With this, brand awareness was a frequently mentioned concept in the interviews, seemingly making it a highly valued KPI (Key Performance Indicator) to strategize and work with operationally. One of the examples to increase brand awareness was to drive both potential and existing consumers to the websites of Essity's brands with the help of Search Engine Optimization (SEO):

What are the keywords that are related, that will contribute to our brand awareness, that could generate traffic? And what could Tork Online do to maximize on that traffic once it's arrived there? So how can we get them from just "Yeah, now we've achieved awareness" - how can we convert them to actually being an engaged user to then a retaining user? And in the long-term, an end customer. (Participant 7, Tork)

As such, data analytics is used for SEO and informs which keywords generate traffic, but also which ones generate conversions tracked with for example CTR and search volume. Hence, in understanding the customers through SEO, decision-makers learn what entices and triggers consumers into discovering the brands and purchasing from them, contributing to sales.

Moving on, another noteworthy aspect of understanding the consumers that arose was the distinction between Business-to-Consumer (B2C) and Business-to-Business (B2B) markets, where the different markets have different access to data. As described by Participant 3 at Tork: "*... for B2B [...] you don't get as accurate data as in B2C*.", and is also corroborated by a colleague:

In B2C there's more data like you have more users, more buyers, and you can conduct market research easy, websites have more visitors. But on the other hand, in B2B, each kind of data point matters even more, because you can really nurture it. Like this one person with a website, can sign a million contract with you. So it's worth looking into the single data points. (Participant 9, Essity)

Thus, there is a notable disadvantage for B2B in comparison to B2C regarding the access and accuracy of data to obtain the same level of insights as B2C. The professional hygiene brand Tork is especially familiar with the importance of understanding its end customer. Because they are a B2B brand that provides its products both directly to other businesses and via distributors, they are inherently affected by the limited, in comparison to B2C, data. In addition, since Tork is a premium brand that provides low-involvement products they are significantly reliant on understanding what their end-customers find important in order to motivate a higher price point:

> *We also need to take into consideration what is important from the end consumer, which is tricky because ordering professional hygiene products is a very low-involvement category. There's a very low level of excitement moving in professional hygiene products. (Participant 6, Tork)*

Gathered from this, a B2B brand such as Tork is both extra reliant on understanding their customers with the help of data due to the product category and premium position, while simultaneously experiencing difficult conditions to truly utilize the possibilities of data and analytics due to accessibility and accuracy issues. As a result of this, decision-making becomes noticeably reliant on factors other than digital data:

> *I'm putting a lot of weight on conversations I have with sales managers, key account managers, and country managers on what they're seeing in the market as well. That is really hard to structure into a dataset and quantify, but it's really important and I think that's quite specific for B2B. (Participant 3, Tork)*

As such, it appears that data is used to the best of its abilities, in particular for B2B, to support the understanding of customers and sales. Relying on local managers may provide more and better information to represent current states. However, while this solution is reasonably better than no or false information, the risk of subjectivity influencing decision-making increases. Consequently, it may affect the long-term sustaining and building of Tork, or any other B2B brand for that matter. This is because without sufficient data to drive decisions, thereby forcing decision-makers to rely more on intuition, they may to a greater degree be motivated by individual experience. While this is not necessarily a bad thing, some caution is needed in allowing personal biases to intervene in the decision.

While TENA adheres to both customers and businesses, the quote below is connected to their brand efforts regarding B2C primarily. In one of the interviews, it was highlighted that TENA too is heavily reliant on customer data, especially in their current phase of changing the face of the brand in an effort to make it more attractive for women who are new to the category. In addition to acquiring new customers with data and analytics, it is also central to maintaining existing customers – ensuring brand persistence:

> *Once they are into the brand fold, to retain them, because they, these are women that, you know, in their life stage, they don't want to let go of that feminine feeling.*

So to ensure that we are retaining them, we have to keep providing those discreet, stylish, attractive products. So, that is one example of how we use the insights and analytics to kind of cover multiple objectives of recruitment, and also for retention. (Participant 8, TENA)

Applicable to both B2B and B2C at Essity are the possibilities of retargeting potential customers thanks to data from digital touchpoints, as they become aware of movements and behaviors to act upon:

And then specifically what we can do also, especially in digital, is to follow people who we have reached with our message. So once we make people aware, then we try to kind of retarget them again with messages to bring them lower down the funnel to have them visit our website to sign up. (Participant 9, Essity)

Evident is that Essity values both customer growth and retention across the organization down to individual brands. A brand such as TENA which operates in both B2B and B2C has the advantage of more data available for their B2C customers. However, they are likely to struggle in a similar manner as Tork with their B2B customers, as these professional relationships differ from private consumption and thus rely on other information. Nevertheless, data available from digital activities is one way to try and gather as much useful information as possible in B2B, to drive leads or conversions when access to data is not sufficient.

In general, analyzing data from diverse sources and in various contexts provides Essity with a comprehensive understanding of both their markets and customers, whether it is within B2C or B2B. With these insights, decision-makers have a substantial basis for their decisions to benefit the brands to an optimal extent, something that is of utmost importance for the company’s success:

I would just like to add that Business Intelligence, insight, data, is the key differentiator between good companies and average companies. If you look at the star performance in stock markets, you know, the likes of Unilever, Procter & Gamble [...] these are all companies which are based on, or their history is based on strong consumer insights, relevant consumer insights. They spend a huge amount of money to understand what consumers are saying about their brand, the trends in consumer insights, and stuff like that. So these are all data-driven organizations which use data to build strong brands. And that I think will be the kind of key discriminator going forward in terms of which companies succeed and build more value to shareholders, versus which companies are willing to do moderately, or fail, at the stock market. So something which is intangible doesn't *get a lot of limelight. It kind of stays under the radar, so to speak. It's one of the key differentiators of good companies versus the poor ones. (Participant 8, TENA)*

The participant firmly believes that data-driven decision-making and BI are a must to successfully deliver to stakeholders, especially when considering the financial value of the company from a shareholders' perspective. Looking at well-known brands in the consumer goods market, comprehensive consumer insights are seemingly a key characteristic of long-term success both brand-wise and financially. Data and analytics appear to be non-negotiable capabilities, fundamental for companies and brands to even have a chance at prospering. Ultimately, it is depicted as what takes companies from average to above.

4.3 Visualizing and Tracking the Performance

Data was highlighted to be used in data analytics tools to establish tracking and visualization of performance. This helps decision-makers at Essity to reach conclusions that concern their brands. Participant 1 at Essity explained that "*The most important part is analyzing the data, gathering insights, and recommending for actions.*". To be able to utilize data for actionable recommendations, there are several steps going from data to insights. Initially, a business objective is stated in order to know what data that needs to be collected. It is also important to understand the business requirements to sufficiently report and visualize the data through dashboards:

Starting from understanding the business objective and gathering the business requirements, we take that and translate that into tracking, concept, or website. So we translate it into variables that we need to collect. Once we define this tracking concept, then it's implemented [...] then it's about gathering the data, how to report on it, what kind of visualizations do we need to make a dashboard? (Participant 1, Essity)

Hence, there is an ongoing collaboration between different business units, ensuring that data analysts and decision-makers within brand management and marketing are striving toward the same goal. The data analysts help in knowing what data is needed to generate information and knowledge for stakeholders, as well as translate and visualize the content to accurately support brand decisions. To profitably build and sustain their brands, managers need to successfully implement systems of measurement. These measurements offer vital information in forming the basis on which decisions are subsequently made. Within the continuous process of brand tracking, the brand's performance is measured against something else, such as key metrics:

When it comes to building brand awareness and perception, you know, if you look at engagement rates, or click-through rates, or video completion rates, or time on site, […] okay, people like your content, they are engaging with you, but is it really resulting in an increase in brand awareness and perception? To get to that conclusion, you need to have brand tracking going on. (Participant 6, Tork)

A fundamental aspect of building brands is to make sure consumers are aware of their existence, and with that, it is essential to measure brand awareness. While data and analytics allow understanding of customers to make decisions to reach better metrics and upload appreciated content, mentioned above is that it does not necessarily guarantee that the brand is reaching targeted awareness or perception. Resultingly, if marketing efforts to improve these metrics do not result in higher brand awareness, it might trickle down and affect revenue. This is something that Participant 6 at Tork continues on, stating that concepts such as brand awareness and brand equity typically indicate better prospects for sales: "*We know from research that brand awareness, brand equity, goes hand in hand with sales. So it's also capitalizing on data that's available.*". Thus, to mitigate the risk, brand tracking is one way to derive data from marketing efforts to generate brand awareness and by extension sales. As one of the most frequently mentioned KPIs informing decisions in the interviews, brand awareness creates responses from consumers. Thereby, relevant data on brand-related metrics are gathered from consumers:

When you talk more about brand building, it is also highly related to metrics coming from our consumers. So we do a regular market research with market research providers, and then we have specific brand metrics that we always measure. So it's basically like, is the brand in top of mind awareness? So if people think about specific categories, like incontinence, do they name our brand first or other competition? And then, there are kind of set questions that we always ask consumers, where we gather data on specific brand-related metrics, where our brand would like to stand for, and kind of income measures over time. (Participant 9, Essity)

In this quote, brand awareness is exemplified with recall, that is whether consumers are able to retrieve the brand from memory when given product categories or the need the category fulfills, a straightforward brand awareness metric. As Essity works across multiple channels, it is not equally as straightforward throughout all of them:

I think usually the difficulty is to measure brand awareness on one particular channel. You know, like what is one channel contributing to the brand awareness? And the bigger picture? (Participant 7, Tork)

In the pursuit to gain a bigger picture of brand awareness, it is not only a matter of particular channels and their respective contributions, but also of the frequency by which metrics are undertaken:

> *It depends on the frequency that you measure it also, if you do it once a year, it's gonna be difficult to really evaluate the impact, because it may dip. But if you do it after, if you've done big kind of impact activation campaigns or whatever, set a benchmark and then measure after, and so you can measure the impact, it'd be easier to kind of learn to define and understand the impact of brand awareness. So I think it's more about frequency and how you choose to measure it. That's important to consider. (Participant 7, Tork)*

This participant stresses the importance of benchmarking, of evaluating metrics in relation to something to see how they compare. Moreover, the participant speaks on the impact of campaigns on awareness. Likely, the timing of which the measuring is done affects its outcome. To get an understanding of whether the awareness, especially top-of-mind awareness, persists, and whether campaigns are impactful or not, measuring needs to happen frequently. With greater frequency, a more representative picture of brands' performance becomes visible. When measuring the performance of brands, it is relevant to define important elements:

> *We need to understand how our brands are performing, right? And we have different elements on how we want to evaluate that, so first it's okay how do you even measure brand performance? [...] One thing is that we need to be distinctive, so how do you define distinctiveness in a website? Or how do you define that with your social media ads? Or how do you define if you are available, you know, you want to be available and you want to be seen and visible? How do you define that? So that's one of the main struggles when it comes to measuring, you need to be able to really define that well.* (*Participant 1, Essity*)

When the time comes for presenting an overview of how brands are performing, and gain an all-round comprehension and visualization, data can be used through analytical tools that present different KPIs in a dashboard:

> *We have a lot of dashboards and Power BI:s, which we use to look at different KPIs. So our market share, volume share distribution, stuff like that [...] it is uploaded on a dashboard, which is quite interactive. [...] It's a far cry from Powerpoints and Word documents, which used to be the case, I would say, five, six years ago. From there, we are moving more and more towards Power BI automated dashboard. (Participant 8, TENA)*

Indicated in the above quote are movements toward greater use of analytical tools and progress seems to have been happening in recent years. Gathered from the interviews was that both the quick overview and the in-detail information that BI dashboards of KPIs can give were considered convenient. When KPIs are uploaded on a dashboard, visible also to those not taking part in the meetings where Powerpoints were presented before, an overview of vital indicators is more accessible and graspable. However, a common conception is that another dashboard will find the reason why KPIs are looking the way they do, but this is not the case in reality:

> *A dashboard will never give you the why behind the data, it will never give you the context or tell you the story. That's one important point to consider. And I think organizations generally miss that part. And they expect that once you have a dashboard, then you have all your answers. That's actually not the case. So a dashboard can tell you the status quo, it can tell you which country is selling more, which product is sold more, but it doesn't tell you why. You know, and that's where analysts need to come in, and then they go and dig the data and then come up with that. (Participant 1, Essity)*

In other words, when data and the information derived from analytics paint a story that highlights potential gaps or problems, the only way to understand *why* is through 'human analysis'. Worth noting is that the limitation is not necessarily in the data itself, but rather in the technical tools, so as long as there are human resources in the company that can further investigate reasons, data is also used to answer the 'whys'. Thus, to truly capitalize on the use and insights from data, where dashboards help to visualize and support decision-making for the brands, Essity and companies alike do not solely rely on systems and tools to quickly identify the internal and external status quo, but also on the people using them.

Circling back to KPIs, one of those most frequently brought up and given weight in the interviews was market share, lifted by Participant 8 at TENA: *"How the market share of the brand is developing, that's the fundamental measure"*. One participant was somewhat critical of metrics other than fundamental ones, contemplating whether they are truly necessary:

> *I actually think that we can sometimes be wasting our time a little bit on trying to find brand metrics. Instead, we should just be comfortable with sort of basic brand awareness measures based on market research. And then go to say "Okay, this is how my market is growing on net sales". (Participant 3, Tork)*

Expressed as significant is the growth of markets, closely related to market share. Since market share measures the percentage of the sales held by a company in a market the benchmarking attributes of this KPI, how it stands in relation to competitors, is apparent. The competition was a topic discussed by several of the participants in terms of metrics:

> *We look at how much we activate versus competition. Then we look at counter data, which is data about how consumers perceive the brand, so it's more the brand power and the brand equity. How strong are we at different drivers? So those buckets of data plus, of course, the sales data that we have, is the source of knowledge for us when we make decisions. (Participant 5, TENA)*

Here, data and dashboards are vital tools to keep up with competitors, since BI and data analytics facilitate keeping track of their activities and success. Some examples of this that were elaborated on include competitors' initiatives such as new launches, price cuts, promotions, and media, all essential to be wary of in protecting the positions of Essity's brands. In addition to the competition, brand perception, and sales are other factors depicted to be part of the data used in decision-making. Suggested here is that Essity to some degree are market-oriented in that they take customer wants into account and are influenced by market knowledge. Given the many markets Essity's brands are spanning, this data is likely vital to be able to make decisions that are working locally but also are consistent globally. To make sure of this, Participant 4 at TENA explains that *"We follow up the global consistency. [...] And we are approximately 85% on-brand when it comes to our different activations and touchpoints globally"*.

With the global nature and differences in markets, emphasis is put on consistency for a unified image portrayed of the brands. Keeping marketing activities and interactions on-brand contribute to this. Hence, besides market share, several additional measures are useful, particularly for a global company by the likes of Essity. Due to the global nature, the need for alignment is prompted. Alignment in measurements between markets is important, especially as it concerns the global brands Tork and TENA:

> *If every market does their own stuff in terms of how they activate the brand and how they measure the brand, that will end up with a very different view of the brand in different markets. So one of the big challenges we have globally is to ensure that every market that is activating TENA does in a globally harmonized way. [...] Because as the saying goes that unless and until you can measure how your brand is doing, you cannot improve. It's very important that we have good frameworks of measuring how the brand is performing. (Participant 8, TENA)*

It is here touched upon the very essence of why it is bothered to carry out metrics and tracking – if a company cannot measure how its brands are doing, it cannot improve. Without measuring and the data utilized for it, it is harder to get an overview of current conditions and to track actions to understand where the brand is at. On top of that, the information that data provides informs both direction and guidance for future actions concerning the brands. As Participant 8 at TENA puts it: "*We look at market shares, value shares, volume shares, brand equity, share of new entrants. Then things like brand consideration and product superiority, so it's a huge, holistic reporting framework that we have"*. Thus, this holistic picture can provide informative insights on, for example, performance gaps to continuously build and sustain the brands. In addition, another mentioned benefit of metrics and tracking is the opportunity to see correlations:

> *Whenever we have a campaign, we can go in and optimize it based on performance. And having real-time brand tracking [...] allows you to look for correlations, which is and that's the key thing for me, I always try and look for correlations, depending on what it is. (Participant 6, Tork)*

Finding correlations is made possible by real-time brand tracking where developments can be seen when they are actually taking place, which opens up for correctional measures throughout campaign processes. If some actions do not deliver the desired results then modifications can be done, thereby limiting the risk of spending resources on non-rewarding endeavors. Hence, performance can be optimized in real time, and thanks to the significant amount of data available correlations are made visible. From these correlations, lessons can be learned and leveraged moving forward and in future campaigns. Adding to this, Participant 5 at TENA explains how BI is used for real-time information: *"[BI lets us know] what is happening now in the market sending us reports on 'Just now, Kimberly Clark launched a new product in South America'"*. The real-time aspect gives the brands at Essity the chance to respond efficiently with decisions that might have been delayed without the tool to inform managers, in this example of competitors' actions.

Ultimately, data in terms of metrics and tracking relevant to marketing and brands can provide an overview, consistency, actionable information, and real-time updates to use for decision-making in the building and sustaining of brands. In visualizing and becoming aware of how the brand is performing both internally and externally through dashboards, decision-makers can react and respond with objective information as the basis for motivating a response.

4.4 Convincing the Stakeholders

Data analytics has contributed to and accelerated the tension between short-term revenue pursuit and long-term brand building. Thanks to data, near-term sales promotions can be both timely and customized. Therefore, defending brand investments, with their distant, intangible returns, can be challenging today. As Participant 2 at TENA explained: "*I'm trying to sell something which is not short-term profitable, but something that is long-term making sense for the brand because it will give the brand an uplift over time. But it has no payback within a reasonable time".* In the tension between revenue pursuit and brand building, somewhat of a clash appears due to differing interests between sales and marketing:

> *It's always going to be the fight between long-term and short-term, or the fight between marketing and sales. Because salespeople always want to see short-term results, which is really important. While marketing people like trying to cater for the fact that we have a strong brand 5-10 years from now that's going to bring holistic value and cater for sales down the road. (Participant 6, Tork)*

The long-term aspect of brands was something that was recurrently brought up throughout the interviews, how the payoffs regarding brand investments take time. Similarly, this was described to occur as a challenge when speaking in favor of brand investments to senior management and other stakeholders. Because of this, several participants detailed the importance of presenting numbers when making the case for brand investments:

> *We all know, if we activate and we get our brand out there with reasonable content, we're gonna grow awareness, and that's gonna grow our sales and strengthen our company in the long run. However, I've never been able to convince a vice president or a CEO to increase the A&P [Advertising & Promotion] based on my fancy sales pitch. Like they need to see it in numbers, they need to see the net sales grow for them to invest more money in A&P and enable the brand to grow. So, the only measure that really matters is your net sales and your profit on that level when you're asking for, if you go in and ask extra money on your A&P, you're only going to get that if you can say "I'm going to grow you X Euros on your net sales", and then you need all those numbers to match. (Participant 3, Tork)*

Indicated in the above quote is pressure for sales. What can be gathered is that the participant feels that on a basic level, marketers need to present numbers demonstrating sales and growth, this is a prerequisite that needs to be fulfilled before the pursuit of what marketers truly want to achieve, that is enabling the growth of the brand, is even possible. After this, there is a need to back up claims for further investments in brands. Motivating investments is essential and part of this is the authority that titles and experience provide. However, to strengthen claims further data can provide a convincing picture:

> *When it comes to brand building there's going to be a lot of strategic decisions that's going to be long-term because it takes time to build the brand. So it's all about having to use as much data as you can, but also your experience [...] on what brand equity is going to be important for driving purchasing decisions 5-10 years from now. (Participant 6, Tork)*

The balancing of experience and data was touched upon several times, especially by higher-leveled managers. The experience was many times depicted as similar to 'gut feeling', something that many managers rely on and take comfort in trusting. For the self-confidence of managers when making decisions this is both necessary and beneficial, given the titles they have earned and the authority they bring it is surely justified. Although, as this is not perceived by external parties, striking a balance between gut feeling and data is pivotal. As expressed by Participant 5 at TENA: "*The gut instinct is there but we base decisions on data, otherwise it's very difficult to motivate big investments without having the data as a backup"*. Seemingly, data is increasingly part of decision-making at Essity. This is partly to remove influence from individuals, and due to difficulty in going back to the source when experience or intuition-based decision-making is not documented:

> *We don't want people to make a decision based on gut feeling because, you know, there is a risk that it might go wrong [...] then a lot of blame game happens, and why did we take the decision? Why was there no risk mitigation and stuff like that? [...] And it is usually the opinion of the highest-paid member in the team [that wins], so we try to avoid that as much as possible. (Participant 8, TENA)*

To avoid the 'blame game' and democratize decision-making, solely using gut feeling or experience is not desired. Here, data offers opportunities to remove unwanted human factors. Moreover, when it comes to visualization in terms of painting a picture to stakeholders, data opens up more possibilities:

> *It is quite data-driven, that we can say, take our brand awareness in Sweden, say it's 50 %. And then it's going to cost us a million Euros to get a sufficient brand awareness campaign. And then we go to France, and maybe we've got 20% brand awareness and it's actually going to cost us twice as much because maybe it's a much bigger country, more population. So there's a lot of data going into the discussions. (Participant 3, Tork)*

Stressed again is the incorporation of data into discussions and subsequent decision-making. Data helps visualize the brand, what it is today, and what it can be in the future. Participant 8 at TENA means that: "*The ultimate aim is to give our stakeholders as much meat on the bone as possible to understand, you know, what the brand currently is, and where the brand is heading"*. However, this is an end goal that is not instantly reached. Because, as Participant 6 at Tork says: "*Key is to be able to convert data into insights"*. When it comes to extracting insight and knowledge from data, the managers once again come into play. Data provides numbers and visualization and removes bias, for this it is helpful. With the help of BI tools, it can also provide direction:

> *When it's about bringing the message across to the business, I think it's still helpful to kind of take your own spin on it. So Business Intelligence doesn't immediately take away your own ability to do the analysis to dig deeper, but it really helps to pinpoint you where you should go and helps to specify certain things. But when you find them, I think what you still need to do is to create a good data storytelling around that, around that so so this is then where you can bring into the business. (Participant 9, Essity)*

Many participants argued that people are still needed for the deeper-leveled analysis of data. Additionally, for storytelling, data lays the foundation yet requires managers for the pitch itself. Data can complement marketers and managers alike, and help them in decision-making regarding brands. Rather than perceiving data as pressure or something that prevents investments in brands, it can be viewed as complementary to marketing and brand managers and their expertise as it can give them gained ground in both building and sustaining brands by backing up claims and convincing with numbers and visualizations. Data alleviates the process of measuring the value of marketing and its brands:

> *In the past marketing was always kind of this big line in the financial sheet of a company where you spend money on it, it doesn't bring any value. At least that's what the financial people say every time. But when you do it with databased, then you can prove the value of your marketing and basically really measure, we did this and this, this impact. And this helps marketing a lot because it's not a black box anymore where you guess and you cross fingers that it works or that it have some impact, you can really prove it, you can test it before, you can even test it afterward while you're live with the company, you can see the changes and measure these changes on that you've done. So making marketing more measurable will be a big benefit of it taking marketing out as a cost spender but more like as a value provider, which is great. (Participant 9, Essity)*

Depicted here is a shift that is made possible by data, where marketing is not simply viewed as a cost for companies, but rather as a provider of value. This shift demonstrates another way of viewing brands, where they are seen as assets of more strategic value. With greater strategic value comes greater impact, resulting in added substance to claims for investments.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

In this concluding chapter, the analyzed findings are discussed. To add to the overall understanding of the topics, the presented insights are discussed in relation to relevant previous research and literature outlined in Chapter 2. Followingly, the research question is addressed based on what was gathered. Lastly, the theoretical contributions and practical implications of this research are detailed, as well as its limitations and suggestions for future research.

5.1 Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this study was to contribute to an extended understanding and knowledge of how data and analytics are used for brand decisions, focusing on efforts regarding the building and sustaining of brands.

In the pursuit to understand their customers, such as what they need, like, and want, as well as their behaviors online (Tiffany, 2021), Essity works by keeping track of digital data from online channels. In line with this, an initial step in the building of sustainable brands is reading and predicting consumer behavior (Oh, Connerton & Kim, 2019). This is a vital source to inform strategic direction and decision-making, as digging into data can provide fruitful insights (Tiffany, 2021) and paint a rich profile of customers and target audiences (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2021). In accordance with Fulgoni (2018), using consumer-level data like this, that is looking at customers' buying behaviors and their attached key marketing drivers, is a powerful way for Essity to optimize its spending on marketing, thereby building brands. Hence, from afar, much can be learned in terms of getting to know the customers with the help of different-leveled party data. It was found that Essity works with first-party data (Tawakol, 2014; Long, 2022) from its websites' cookies and social media. This can provide valuable insights to further Essity's ability to predict and meet customers' wants and needs (Tawakol, 2014). Moreover, Essity puts efforts into SEO to increase, for example, their brand awareness, namely to create familiarity with and appreciation for their brands (Aaker, 2009), a crucial factor to build brands. Here, data analytics offer information on keywords generating traffic, CTR, and conversions (Yalçın & Köse, 2010). Similar to what was found by Bhandari and Bansal (2018), SEO at Essity leads to improved consumer insight and purchase persuasion. With that, a possibility opens up for long-lasting effects on marketing variables in general, improved brand equity in specific (Bhandari & Bansal, 2018), in its extension sustaining brands.

A clear emphasis is put on consumer insights at Essity to keep track of consumer wants and needs, following Urde, Baumgarth and Merrilees's (2013) market-oriented approach. As brand management seeks insights into customers and competitors, this contributes to a competitive advantage through the brands at Essity (Iyer et al. 2021). In one of the findings, the differences between ‘poor’ and ‘good’ companies are delineated, with the perception that being focused on insights with the help of BI is fundamental to succeed long-term when looking at stock market performance for well-known brands in consumer goods. As stated by Wani and Jabin (2018), falling behind on the implementation of data analytics puts companies at risk for both customer and monetary losses, and this perception is visibly shared at Essity. Hence, a domino effect appears where leveraging consumer insights builds on brand equity, resulting in improved financial value visible in stock market performance (Kapferer, 2012; Keller, 2013), and becoming an important part of strategic brand management (Santos-Vijande et al. 2013).

Strategies based on insights to nurture consumers with experiences in their customer journey encourage long-term retention and brand persistence (Keller, 2013; Oh, Connerton & Kim, 2019). With retention being directly tied to revenue and profitability, and the cost of acquiring new customers being significantly more expensive (Cudby, 2020), it is evident that using analytics for insights is valuable both financially and for building and sustaining a stronger brand long-term. A concrete example of where analytics and insights have been and continue to be essential in decision-making was found in the case of TENA’s project to change its brand image, wanting to make it more palatable for women. Here, they have realized that the feminine feeling is important to consider in addressing the stigmas of incontinence issues. By tapping into the wants and needs, first, TENA makes itself an attractive option among the products available (Aaker, 2009). Second, they are at better odds to retain customers when meeting their wants, thus improving brand persistence and creating sustainable brand value (Keller, 2013). By extension, this retention has a spill-over effect to increased spending and positive customer referrals (Cudby, 2020).

It was found that a difference in data availability and accessibility between B2C and B2B brands is experienced by the managers at Essity. Corroborating Kotler, Pfoertsch and Michi (2006), B2B involves larger sums per customer which accentuates the value per customer (Anderson & Narus, 2003). Struggling to gain the same understanding of their customers as B2C (Stormi, Laine & Elomaa, 2018) given the fewer data points to comprehend B2B customers, they become even more important with the potential revenue involved. Thus, a distinction needs to be made between B2C and B2B brands in a multi-brand company that caters to both, as the conditions to use data and analytics for decision-making in building and sustaining the brands are different (Cortez & Johnston, 2017).

Even if data is the foundation for many brand decisions made at Essity, there were instances of inconsistency. At times when data was depicted as untrustworthy and limited, other resources had to fill in the blanks. An example of when factors apart from data became involved in decision-making was found in the case of experience. Then, the tendency to rely on personal intuition was increasingly more likely, which may be suboptimal according to

Eisenhart and Zbaracki (1992) and Bhushan and Rai (2004), as well as by the managers at Essity. As described by Fantini and Narayandas (2023), when using descriptive analytics, commonly called BI, the human factor is more present. While certain instances, typically more complex ones, require a manual approach, the risk of human influence is more prevalent to intervene and affect the outcome of decision-making (Fantini & Narayandas, 2023). The findings showed that Essity is aware of the risks of allowing too much instinct to influence decisions, but is at times struggling to embrace data-driven decision-making as the data does not hold the required quality for managers to completely trust the analytics and insights.

A trade-off between relying more on subjective knowledge from people versus trusting the data was found to be lingering at Essity, where both alternatives come with their own risks. On the one hand, history, political dynamics, and personal agendas may influence decision-making negatively, and thereby make them miss out on opportunities that objective data and analytics would reveal (Janczak, 2005; Fantini & Narayandas, 2023). On the other hand, data that is flawed may lead to faulty decision-making and hurt the bottom line of Essity's brands (Marshall & De la Harpe, 2009). Ultimately, information needs to be delivered quickly and accurately to enable decision-making for brands in the current complex and competitive business environment (Marshall & De la Harpe, 2009; Delen & Demirkan, 2013; Janssen, Van Der Voort & Wahyudi, 2017; Tripathi, Bagga & Aggarwal, 2020). As data-driven decisions are proven to result in better decisions (McAfee & Brynjolfsson, 2012; Brynjolfsson & McElheran, 2016), this puts into question how much human input should be allowed. With continuous efforts to progress data quality, Essity's conditions to implement analytics improve. However, it needs to always be kept in mind that the complexity of the decision determines the degree to which it can be data-driven (Fantini & Narayandas, 2023). In addition, when using data analytics and BI for quality decisions, factors such as experience, collaboration, exchanging knowledge, skill-building, and instilling trust are vital (Janssen, Van Der Voort & Wahyudi, 2017). In other words, the employee's capabilities also matter to facilitate timely and accurate decision-making (Tripathi, Bagga & Aggarwal, 2020). Nevertheless, despite some challenges to fully implementing analytics into decision-making at Essity, the managers were found to be trying, to the best of their abilities, to use data as they are aware and agree with the positive aspects of data-driven decision-making.

As an example, the utilization of data and analytics was visible in Essity's efforts to measure and track its brands' performances, where they use a plethora of different metrics and measurements central to assessing their work (Keller, 2013; Beverland, 2018). To bring true value to these measurements, it is vital that they are consistently executed over time to reveal accurate comparisons (Tiffany, 2021), agreed upon by the managers at Essity. Solely relying on annual measurements of key metrics does not provide the full picture necessary to understand how a brand is performing. With frequent tracking, brands can draw better inferences about what marketing efforts work, and see correlations between campaigns and the results of metrics. As such, they are more likely to harmonize internal operations with the external environment (Iyer et al. 2021) as they stay consistently aware of what actions yield positive results to achieve brand persistence and growth (Keller, 2013; Negro & Mesia, 2020; Tavera Romero et al. 2021). Without these insights from analytics, decision-making can be delayed, and the discovery of important opportunities may be missed (Tripathi, Bagga & Aggarwal, 2020; Tavera Romera et al. 2021).

The brand building at Essity was found to be highly related to metrics coming from their consumers, prompting regular market research. Ergo, the starting point for building brands is its consumers, and the regularity of market research is important in that, as Budelmann and Kim (2019) argue, brand building is not a one-time event but a continuous endeavor that requires decision-making, measuring, and learning. Here, much can be gathered from learning about the consumers. In this case, the relevant metric mainly focuses on brand awareness, which greatly contributes to brand equity (Keller, 2013). Value is created from brand awareness when the brand becomes part of consumers' consideration set, as one that is recognized and comes to mind (Keller, 2013) when they contemplate buying in a category (Aaker, 2009). Moreover, it was also found that an intricacy to brand awareness is tracing it back to its source, as the brands at Essity work across many different channels. This makes it challenging to truly understand what the respective channels contribute. With that comes the attached challenge of how to allocate the budget to gain the greatest returns. Together, the different channels are all pieces of the puzzle that is brand building (Budelmann & Kim, 2019). When successfully combined, a cumulative effect is achieved (Budelmann & Kim, 2019).

While visualization in BI-generated dashboards of KPIs can communicate an overview of data and analytical results that help to make interpretation and understanding of them both easier and faster (Ranjan, 2008; Gowthami & Kumar, 2017; Baig, Govindan & Shrimali, 2021; Tavera Romero et al. 2021; Verhoef et al. 2022), this is not the end all be all. Because, it was found that a common conception is that dashboards will also provide the reasons why KPIs look the way they do, but this is not the case in reality as dashboards never provide the story or context. This validates Verhoef et al.'s (2022) argument that it is pivotal to provide a clear storyline that is accurately communicated to decision-makers. This is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the outcomes of the analysis and know the required next steps and resulting actions (Verhoef et al. 2022). Hence, here presented is a scenario where the human factor is relevant to resolve ambiguity (Fantini & Narayandas, 2023). Ergo, marketing dashboards are dependent on the people 'translating' them to the rest of the organization to be valuable. For dashboards to live up to their potential, namely providing an overview contributing with real-time updates and actionable information that can be leveraged for the sustainment of brands, they require analysis. Without analysis, they merely offer a snapshot without context.

To sustain the brands at Essity, the findings demonstrated that data is used to control and maintain that the brands are on track in endeavors such as their activations and touchpoints. As such, brand consistency is an important metric at Essity. Present in markets worldwide, their global brands need to be managed similarly in order to avoid confusion and loss of impact in their communication (Temporal, 2019). Hence, in the case of Essity, a vital aspect of consistency was found to be alignment across markets. From a consumer perspective, consistency provides them with order and comfort, and the structure from it is therefore commonly appreciated (Budelmann & Kim, 2019). Thus, the goal of this KPI is to protect the brands' meaning and identity long-term to make sure they move in the same direction jointly across markets. With this, emphasis is placed on actions and different touchpoints globally staying 'on-brand', spanning from communication to visual identity (Slade-Brooking, 2016; Temporal, 2019).

Real-time data was found to be something that is frequently used at Essity, especially in terms of tracking and optimizing based on performance. There is power in the possibilities of real-time data. However, Fulgoni (2013) holds that marketers should avoid creating a price race, which is the 'easy' thing to do when it is conceivable to see how price decreases affect sales in real time. Essentially, to get captivated by the ability to sell in real-time (Lodish & Mela, 2007). By extension, this redirects focus and threatens the long-term health and equity of brands (Fulgoni, 2013; Lodish & Mela, 2007). On the flip side, when real-time data is used correctly it can affect brand health positively and improve marketing ROI also in the future (Fulgoni, 2013). That is, it can help sustain brands over time, which was a reasoning that the managers generally agreed with. To achieve this, Lodish and Mela (2007) argue that long-term metrics should be developed and complemented with short-term metrics, such as sales, for a more complete picture contributing to performance. This stresses the importance of Keller's (2013) fourth step in the strategic brand management process, taking a broader view of brands and considering whether they need to be adjusted, for example, over time. Skilled marketing and brand managers, therefore, have to leverage their experience to get the most out of real-time data by reaching the desired audiences and making more informed brand decisions based on it, building the brands and their equity long-term (Fulgoni, 2013).

Finally, a positive attitude was found among the participating managers regarding the use of data in backing up arguments for investments, something they claimed had been historically difficult due to these types of investments not immediately contributing to revenue but rather building brands in the long term. This aligns with what Horst and Duboff (2015) argued was a challenge in defending brand investments, that the payoffs are distant and intangible. Both Fulgoni (2013) and Horst and Duboff (2015) highlighted that data analytics of today incentivizes a short-term decision-making mindset and urge for revenue. However, some managers meant that data could be leveraged to defend brand investments as it can paint a convincing picture to stakeholders and investment decision-makers, strengthening managers' claims. A parallel can here be drawn to what Tripathi, Bagga and Aggarwal (2020) mean, that management is now not only reliant upon skillful decision-makers but also on relevant and reliable information. With that, data can complement the managerial experience and create a greater impact by providing a rational perspective and quantitatively supporting decision-making (Bhushan & Rai, 2004) for investments in brand building.

5.2 Addressing the Research Question

Scrutinizing how data-driven decision-making pertains to marketing efforts, in specific to support brand decisions, reveals a discrepancy. Then, companies face a recurring tension in balancing short-term revenue pursuit and long-term brand building, heightened by data analytics. A research opportunity was here revealed, where, on the one hand, data can improve productivity and objectivity in decision-making, while, on the other hand, data can make the case against investments in brand management due to applied pressure on sales revenue.

Therefore, this thesis's aim was to provide insights into the use of data and analytics for brand decisions. Followingly, this research was guided by its purpose to contribute to an extended understanding and knowledge of how data and analytics are used for brand decisions, here focused on efforts regarding the building and sustaining of brands. To investigate this, the subsequent research question was formulated:

> *In what ways do managers at a multi-brand company use data and analytics in decision-making to build and sustain their brands?*

To answer this question, data was collected by conducting in-depth interviews with managers at a multi-brand company, namely Essity. As the findings from these interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis, three main themes were identified that contributed to the answering of the research question. These three themes' titles: Understanding the Customers, Visualizing and Tracking the Performance, and Convincing the Stakeholders, themselves cover briefly in what ways managers at a multi-brand company, here Essity, use data and analytics in decision-making to build and sustain their brands. The findings were then discussed in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

En masse, this culminates in the construction of a figure (1), where data and analytics are organized according to the identified themes illustrating in what ways they are used in efforts that provide the basis for decision-making to build and sustain brands.

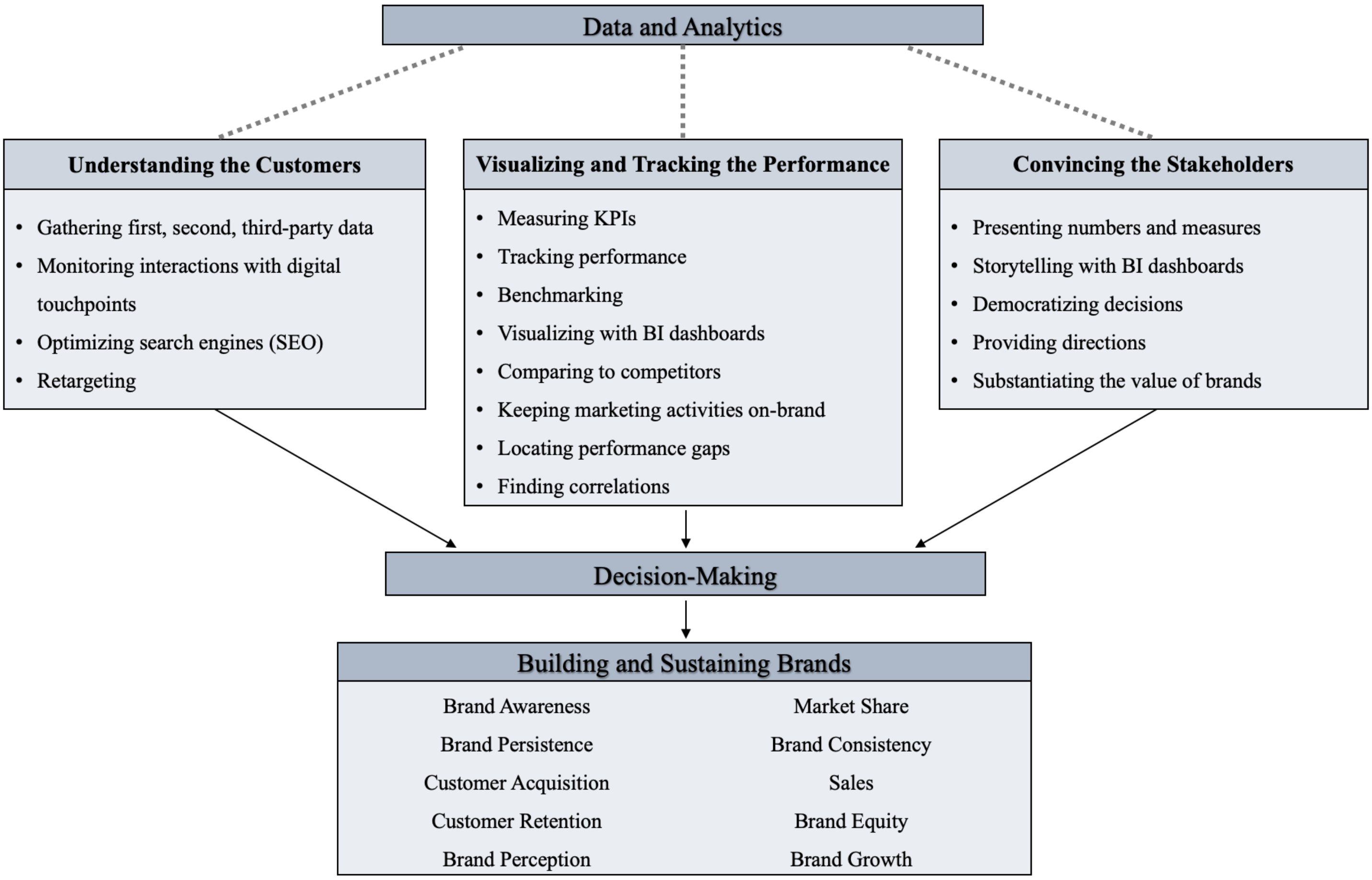

Figure 1. Addressing the research question

To conclude the figure with text, data and analytics are in the case of a multi-brand company, here Essity, used in multiple ways, as depicted. Firstly, data and analytics are used to understand the customers as a basis for decision-making to build and sustain the brands optimally. In line with this, Essity reads, predicts, and tracks digital data from online channels to both acquire new customers and retain existing ones. Moreover, they collect first-party data from their own websites, social media, and webshops, and second and third-party data from other actors and market research. Data from digital touchpoints brings knowledge of consumer interaction with websites, Click-Through Rates, and views. Data analytics is also used for SEO and informs about search volume and which keywords generate traffic and conversions, where decision-makers learn what consumers appreciate and react to, and what entices them to discover brands and purchase from them. Lastly, with data from digital touchpoints customers are retargeted, mainly through messages.

Secondly, data and analytics are used in visualizing and tracking the performance of Essity's brands for decision-making to build and sustain them. In this regard, data and analytics are used to measure KPIs, such as market share, the share of new entrants, global consistency, brand awareness, and brand equity, which are then used to track Essity and its brands' performances. The KPIs can be benchmarked in relation to key metrics or associations to see how they compare, for example internally to track progress or externally to keep up with competitors. To be able to draw accurate inferences and achieve brand growth and brand persistence, tracking and measuring need to be done frequently. Subsequently, this is all visualized with BI dashboards, providing an overview to be able to utilize data and act on it, supporting decision-making. With the visualization of dashboards, managers are able to apprehend the data and information in a more comprehensible manner, which helps them locate performance gaps and find correlations, as well as keep marketing activities and actions globally on-brand and consistent.

Thirdly, data and analytics are used to convince the stakeholders of Essity's brands for decision-making to build and sustain the brands. Brand managers now have a way to better prove the worth of brands with numbers and measures, which previously has been more challenging to accomplish. With the help of dashboards, numbers and measures that substantiate claims are presented and a story can be told about the KPIs to provide direction for both managers and executives. This helps brand managers to secure sufficient budgeting for marketing to build the brands and their equity. Finally, data and analytics are leveraged to democratize decision-making for brands, limiting influences of experience and intuition where the highest-paid employee historically held the most power. With that, decisions can now be made more objectively.

5.3 Theoretical Contributions

In the problematization, several authors' reasonings about the balancing of short-term revenue pursuit and long-term brand building were featured. Horst and Duboff (2015) mean that marketing managers recurringly face tension in balancing between the here and now and the distant future. Lodish and Mela (2007) claim that companies become captivated by the ability to sell in real-time at the expense of long-term brand health. And Fulgoni (2013) argues that despite real-time data's compelling value it is a double-edged sword in that it also contains the risk of eroding brand equity long-term due to its incentive for a short-term decision-making mindset. Horst and Duboff (2015) elaborated that this balancing tension is expedited and accelerated by data analytics, taking the pressure to an all-time high. The findings of this study challenged this by adding an extra layer. Because found among the interviewed managers was a perception that data can help them make their case by backing up their claims when they speak in favor of brand investments. Data and analytics can also help marketing and brand management go from being seen as a cost spender to a contributor of value as it makes something as intangible as brand equity tangible. Hence, demonstrated here is that data does not solely risk hurting brand building, health, and equity. On the contrary, how it can be leveraged to motivate brand investments can help to build and sustain brands in the longer term by substantiating brand investment claims, thereby contributing to existent literature.

Another theoretical contribution from this research is data analytics and BI's ability to improve brand KPIs. While previous research has highlighted BI's positive effects on performance, efficiency, productivity, resource planning, cost reductions, profit margins, and business growth (Negro & Mesia, 2020; Tripathi, Bagga & Aggarwal 2020; Tavera Romero et al. 2021), how it involves brands lacked theoretical coverage. This study shows that BI is used in various ways to improve marketing and brand KPIs, among them brand equity. Previous literature proves the value of brand equity thanks to its market and financial significance (Kapferer, 2012; Keller, 2013), stressing that it should therefore be included in the overall strategic management of companies (Santos-Vijande et al. 2013). Hence, current strategic brand management processes and elements highlight brand equity as a vital part (Keller, 2013; Santos-Vijande et al. 2013). Contributing to this, the findings in this study showed that analytical and BI-generated consumer insights are tied to brand equity, described by participating managers as key discriminators for long-term success. As such, this study elaborates on existing literature with aspects of customer insights and data analytics that are here urged to be considered and added to steps and elements of strategic brand management processes.

A final theoretical contribution provided by this research is its context. When researching relevant topics in preparation for this study and deep-diving into pre-existing literature for the Literature Review in Chapter 2, a substantive theoretical basis was found on the topic of data and analytics in decision-making and on the topic of data, mainly consumer data, in marketing and brand management. However, this was not the case for the topics combined – that is how data and analytics are used for brand decisions. Hence, this research adds to the existing literature with a new context for data-driven decision-making, that of brand management, and with a new area of decisions based on data, those of brand decisions.

5.4 Managerial Implications

The insights gathered in this study can be useful for both top management and brand managers of various levels to gain a clearer picture of how data analytics, decision-making, and brand management interconnect. In big companies, it is practical to get an overview and more easily identify and determine what activities are done. By mapping it out as is done here, potential areas that should be included or improved are highlighted. For example, as the findings show, inconsistencies in the use of data for decision-making in the context of brand management exist. In becoming aware of these, correctional actions can be taken in an effort to accommodate and improve. This study encourages getting to the bottom of it, as data-driven decisions are ultimately worth striving for. Adding to this, the participating managers at Essity share the view that data, analytics, and data-driven decision-making will increasingly be the determining factor between failure and success for brands. Not jumping on the train likely means falling behind (Wani & Jabin, 2018). Hence, this culminates in a general implication for managers to embrace and thoroughly incorporate the use of data and analytics in decision-making and brand management for the prosperity of their organization and brands.

A key takeaway with managerial implications from this study is to consider the importance of resources to successfully use data and analytics. The findings emphasized the need for human abilities to understand the data when insights demand further explanation. Most of the time, human 'translation' is needed for analytical insights to provide value (Verhoef et al. 2022). While data may improve processes both for decision-making and brand management, it is, for now, not up to a standard sufficient enough to rely fully on data. Hence, organizations are reliant on capable employees to make sense of the insights and data when necessary. However, organizations are also dependent on the ability of their employees to ignore interfering personal biases (Fantini & Narayandas, 2023) in order to make qualitative decisions (Van Der Voort & Wahyudi, 2017; Tripathi, Bagga & Aggarwal, 2020). So, an implication for managers is to ensure that adequate training and capable employees are in place for data and analytics to live up to their full potential.

Another managerial implication highlighted here is the need for frequency in measuring and tracking performance. Several managers stressed the importance of undertaking metrics continuously and often in order to receive accurate and representative information to act upon. As the current business environment is ever-changing, complex, and competitive (Tripathi, Bagga & Aggarwal, 2020; IBM, 2023), frequent information gathering and portrayal through BI is required to stay up to date and to harmonize internal and external elements (Iyer et al. 2021; Tavera Romero et al. 2021). Thus, metrics can not be carried out sporadically if they are to provide value. Therefore, managers should here be informed of the need for frequency in the utilization of BI tools for metrics, for the sake of accuracy and timeliness.

Then, a new business function and area of application for data-driven decision-making were here highlighted – brand management. As an implication for brand managers, taking on a holistic perspective is beneficial (Budelmann & Kim, 2019), a perspective where, as presented in Figure 1, brand and marketing efforts are improved by data and analytics. When combined they culminate in a rich foundation for the building and sustaining of brands. This is helpful for managers working with multiple brands to get a visual of how individual efforts make up an entirety resulting in value for the company. Also, for managers at a global house of brands, where different brands might be siloed, this visualization of data and analytics has implications for the maintenance of consistency throughout the organization. Data and analytics can efficiently and conveniently alleviate consistency and alignment across brands and markets, as well as in their decision-making.

Finally, exemplified in the case study of this research is a global multi-brand company with managers that prioritize the incorporation of data in their organization and view this as the future. Brand managers within both of the featured business areas B2C and B2B, mainly within consumer goods, can gain inspiration from this study in general, and Essity in specific, to truly grasp the importance of using data and analytics, which was here also testified to by the participating managers.

5.5 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While this research has contributed to an extended understanding and knowledge of how data and analytics are used for brand decisions, there are limitations to this study.

Since the aim was here to gather in-depth insights into ways managers at a multi-brand company use data and analytics for decision-making to build and sustain brands, there have been restrictions on what company to focus on. Emphasis was placed on the company in question having functions devoted to and significant resources allocated to data, analytics, and brand management. While many multi-brand companies would, with smaller moderations, fit the scope of the stated research question, the focal point was one multi-brand company that fulfilled the requirements deemed relevant in favor of enabling deeper insights. Hence, the findings can not be guaranteed to apply in other multi-brand companies due to the limitations of it being a single case study. For this, additional research is necessary to compare this study to others and validate the findings.

Furthermore, while the sample size of participants reached saturation to effectively answer the research question, an increased sample size might have yielded different results. Moreover, this study did not include a majority of the brands in the case company's considerable brand portfolio. Instead, the focus was put on gaining a deeper understanding of two of its global brands in addition to Essity as the mother brand, resulting in an embedded case study of two cases. As such, this study did not investigate whether differences between local and global brands prevail in the use of data for decision-making in brand decisions, an insight that may generate another theoretical and practical dimension.

Included in this study were only managers working with a few areas of Essity's operations, namely data analytics and brand management. Due to this, the perception of the use of data in decision-making might have been different had the managers worked within other business functions. Also, thanks to the participants holding managerial positions their insight into the use of data in decision-making was relatively extensive. Had employees at other levels of the organization, with more or less decision-making power, been interviewed the findings could have looked different.

In terms of future research, an interesting topic that arose in the interviews but was only briefly commented on, due to this study's scope, was the difference between B2B and B2C brands, as the conditions to leverage data and analytics for building and sustaining brands are unequal. However, this could be further examined in a separate study to find solutions on how to mitigate this disadvantage for B2B, as data is by many regarded as the future of conducting business and managing brands.

Finally, it would be interesting to scope future research to follow another research design in an effort to gain other perspectives, for example through ethnography. As the responses from participants cannot be corroborated other than by comparing the answers from the different interviews, it would be rewarding to follow a multi-brand company in its settings. Similarly, a quantitative study could show the correlation between the use of data and analytics and the long-term building and sustaining of brands. If so, an interesting area of research would be to look into whether relying too heavily on data and analytical tools affects the brand. An additional qualitative study could investigate whether this has implications for the perceived meaningfulness or authenticity of the brand.

Overall, the thesis has provided a fresh perspective into the use of data and analytics in a multi-brand company, and there are plenty of ways to contribute to the findings which are welcomed.

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Please tell us a bit about your role and what you do.

- B2C and/or B2B, what brand(s)?

What types of decisions are you responsible for as a manager?

What do you consider strategic (more prominent) decisions in your work?

- Please tell us about the process of making these decisions / an example of one

Can you tell us about the challenges or obstacles you see in decision-making at Essity?

Would you say decision-making is based more on gut feeling or more so data-driven?

Does your business function cooperate with other functions?

- Which ones? How?

How do you collect data? / Where do you get your data from?

How do you transform data into insights?

Are there any challenges in terms of data?

In what ways do you work with business intelligence?

- Can you provide an example of what it may look like?

Can you tell us a bit about how you work with data in regard to brands?

What information/basis do you typically use and work with?

In your work, do you look at the consumers: their behavior, opinions, etc.?

- Can you elaborate and provide an example?

When working with consumer insights, do you consider how the brand will be experienced by consumers and the consumer journey?

In what ways do you work with data to increase brand awareness?

How do you work to keep and retain current consumers?

Do you measure brands' performance in some way?

Do you have anything more that you would like to add? Is there anything essential that we have not covered?

Appendix B: Tables

Table 1.

Participant 1	Essity
Participant 2	TENA
Participant 3	Tork
Participant 4	TENA
Participant 5	TENA
Participant 6	Tork
Participant 7	Tork
Participant 8	TENA
Participant 9	Essity

Appendix C: Figures

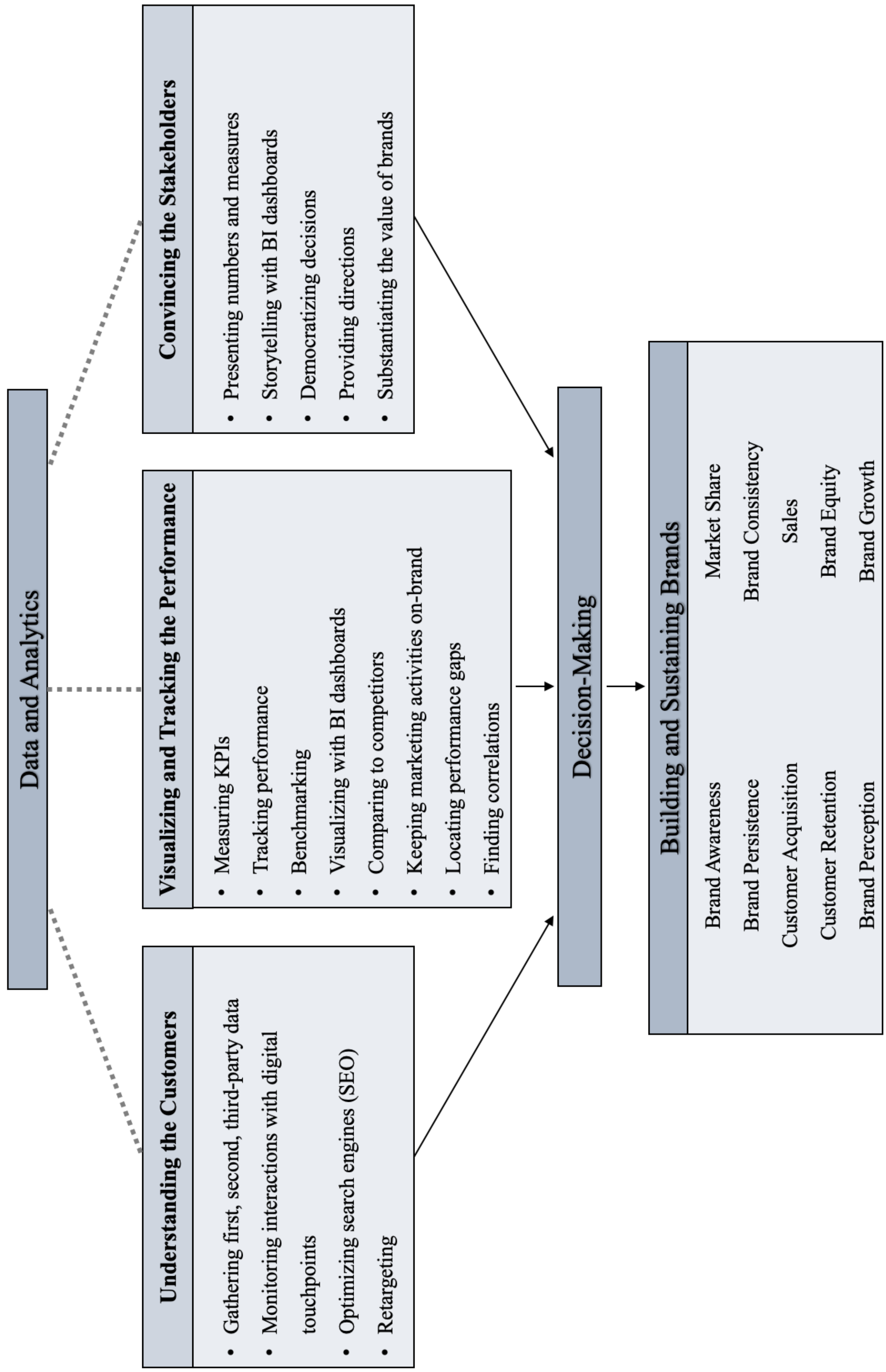

Figure 1.

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